

Stand-To

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Abstract

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Abstract: Stand-To is an autobiographical piece composed of prose, poetry, and artwork. It reflects a soldier's story during the Iraq war. The work also examines the effects of war on the soldier, their families and the people of the country where the war is fought. The piece is separated into three distinct sections, pre-deployment, deployment and homecoming. The intent of this piece is to illustrate the overreaching destructive effects war has on individuals and their families.

Poetics Statement

It has been a decade since I left Iraq, and it has taken at least that long to find the words to write about my experiences. Why write about war, after unsuccessfully spending years trying to forget about it? Time has helped me realize that war begs witness. Not witness from the media or from someone writing a history from the outside, but a closer, more personal account. When it comes to war you were either there or you were not.

Wilfred Owen summed up my intentions perfectly when he wrote. "Above all, this book is not concerned with Poetry. The subject of it is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity."¹ My piece is about war. The totality of war and its effects on everything it touches from the obvious to the subtle. This is not an autobiography nor is it a history, since histories tend to be written by others removed from the events they write about. Instead I have chosen to mix poetry and prose. In my opinion, war writing is best when it is classified as fiction. Though claiming a work as *fiction* does not necessarily mean what is written is not true. What matters most is intentionality. As Michael Hoffman pointed out about Gertrude Stein's piece, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, "Stein was not testifying before a jury; she was telling a story and creating a consciousness."² Likewise my intent is to create a consciousness of war for the reader.

This piece has no story line. This is a continuous line of events that follow one another with no rhyme or reason. This is the unpredictable life at war. War narrative is a recollection that resists explanation. Cathy Caruth writes, "I would propose that it is here, in this equally widespread and bewildering encounter with

trauma – both in its occurrence and in the attempt to understand it – that we can begin to recognize the possibility of the history that is no longer straightforwardly referential (that is, no longer based on simple models of experience and reference).”³ Familiarity tells me that no matter how an event happened there will be countless, different recollections. Reference frames matter and everyone’s reference frame is different. No one’s memories seem to agree, but everyone’s internalization of the experience is valid. It would be unfair and disrespectful for me to claim my account as authoritative. I can only claim authority over my own experiences and perceptions, fears and terrors, worries and nightmares. The reader must accept them for what they are, and from them take what they will. Others’ accounts may very well conflict with my own; agreement will come only in the fact that something happened and it was violent and traumatic.

In some forms of trauma there is the returning of traumatic dreams or flashbacks. The recurrence of the nightmare perplexed Freud, “because, it cannot be understood in terms of any wish or unconscious meaning, but is, purely and inexplicably, the literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits.”⁴ In my writing I wish to openly confront that which *inhabits* me. I want to bring into the light the memories that have long gone unexamined.

I went into war thinking I would keep a journal of everything I saw and did. In the end, my journal was filled with unremarkable entries. Lillian Hellman, who kept detailed diaries during World War II, was also disappointed when she realized that they did not include, “what had been important to me, or what the passing years have made important.”⁵ Any events I did record were simple and

unremarkable. I believe this was because I was unable to engage the feelings and emotions that were hidden deep within me. Traumatic events resisted meaningful recording in a journal.

Obviously my experiences were internalized. No matter how much I tried to erase them from memory they seemed to resurface. For a year after returning from the war I wanted nothing to do with these memories. My journal as well as numerous memorial programs remained locked away in my deployment chest. I sealed the chest when we departed Iraq, and it remained sealed, collecting dust in my garage, for well over a year before I opened it and threw most of its contents away, including the journal. I threw away tangible remembrances of the war, but could not shake my memories. My traumatic experiences continued to come back in dreams and daydreams.

War dreams are hyper-realistic. Sight, sound and smell, are represented perfectly within the dream. These dreams resist explanation and evoke strong physical responses from the body that persist like an unwanted hangover. But they are dreams nonetheless. As I write I confront my dreams, gradually coaxing them into the present.

Caruth postulates that because someone does not truly “know the threat of death in the past, the survivor is forced, continually, to confront it over and over again.”⁶ For me writing about my experiences in war is a form of confrontation. My writing reflects the realization that death, the dark veil, is tattered and torn in war; and though you still can’t see what lies on the other side, much of the mystery involved in getting there has been removed.

It is difficult to sort out incredibly confused details in order to craft them into a coherent narrative. This is ultimately a *re-living* of the trauma, but I also believe it is a productive and healthy way to sort through these difficult encounters. These occurrences that have remained internalized for so long, they have no choice but to be forced out into the light. The writing process is helpful to bring meaning to these traumatic events.

I am an artist who is unqualified and uninterested in writing a historical perspective. I was not able to see the war objectively. My imagination remained active and continually shaped my vision of the war as it unfolded before me, and this is reflected in my choice of structure for this piece. For the longest time, I struggled with how to best represent my war experiences. How do you contain what resists containment? How do you record an experience that defies definition in words? For me a mixture of short prose and poetry was the best answer.

One reason I enjoy transitioning from poetry to prose is to leave room for the reader's own imagination to negotiate the text. The mixing of poetry with short prose forces me to think about how each memory and emotion best works within each mode of representation.

Short prose is like a memory, a snapshot in time. The terseness of writing, quick and violent like war, strikes the reader, leaving them in wonder, as the scene and circumstance quickly dissipates before moving off to the next tragedy. The short vignette, encompassing a blurred violent memory, seemed to be appropriate. There are more details for sure, but I wrote the features that struck me the most. In a way the passages are a reflection of the Army writing style, short and concise.

Some may find my writing a far departure from poetry and more akin to violent journalism. There is a difference in poetry written of war that glamorizes war and emphasizes heroics over the horror. But the glamour of war fades quickly. War is a violent consistent slog. If I have moments of escape in my writing, descriptions of the simple pleasures that soldiers seem to be able to find in the midst of chaos, these are only included to remind the reader that these are real people trapped in an unreal situation. Soldiers will always attempt to try and grab a bit of normalcy, to take some personal control in an environment that constantly reminds them of how little control they actually have. There seemed to me to be more violence in war than anything else. Human beings have been hardwired to focus on the terrible as a tool for survival.

Adorno writes, "My thesis is that the lyric work is always the subjective expression of a social antagonism."⁷ But Adorno goes on to argue a point I find fascinating and important, that those without *privilege*, those that have been objectified or degraded, have the "same right, or a greater right"⁸ to the power of the lyric. Poetry enables the voice of those on the margins to be heard. The forms of which can be brutal and unpolished, raw in its social discourse. These works would be antagonistic in nature, for they transcend art that functions within the mainstream of society. Is this rogue lyric or just rare, different, exciting, erotic, or violent art with words? Does this mean the subject must be taboo? Or is it simply the hearing of a voice that has been neglected? Most important to me is that it pushes against societal structures and norms.

I believe my own work challenges the heroic image of war, pushing against the idealized glamor and mystique of the warrior. This voice comes from the margins of society and goes against the sentimentalized renditions of war. I wish to call into question the violence and suffering, the death and destruction that lie under the surface, hidden from public view. It is compelling for me to interrogate the legitimization and glamorization of war, to be the *antagonist* of social awareness and hopefully effect change.

Poetry is able to transcend outward appearances and illuminate deeper feelings and emotions. Poetry can fluctuate from the shockingly obvious to the beautifully sublime. This wide range of possibilities fits well within my war writing. War takes place in the natural world within all its beauty and ugliness. War demands a wide range of emotions ranging from deep love and longing to sorrow to intense fear and hatred. For me it seems appropriate to utilize poetry, for it can properly leave space for emotions to operate.

I recognize that the first person in poetry does not stand alone; it is multi-dimensional. It moves past the “I” and conveys an experience that is personal but at the same time universal. I believe the use of “I” can move the reader to contemplate self. For me, it is important to transport the reader to a place where they can evaluate their own reactions and feelings towards the text as they explore and contemplate the emotions the text stirs within them. As Barthes says, “The pleasure of the text is that moment when my body peruses its own ideas – for my body does not have the same ideas I do.”⁹ This presentation moves us past the “I” to a place within ourselves, and it provides for a much more personal and visceral encounter.

By mixing prose with poetry I hope to pass the anxiety of war on to the reader, without the death and destruction war brings. I want the reader to encounter the text within the safety of his or her own awareness. This text exists outside and after the trauma it describes, “This belatedness is properly the structure of a traumatic history, a history we cannot possess the “meaning” of, for it possesses *us*.”¹⁰ This possession permits the “I” a safe passage to the reader. It is my hope that the mixing of prose and poetry will allow for a fuller, more personal encounter with the text. The mixture of vignettes and poetry does what other genres of writing may be able to, but with more impact. It is a kinetic work that shares the energy of emotion and experience with the reader. The intention of the “I” is to present, “that bit of neuroses necessary for the seduction of the readers: These terrible texts are *all the same* flirtatious text.”¹¹

My writing is about war and the effects of war on humanity. Politics are present in my work; I don’t believe I can work *outside* of my politics. Historically, poetry can influence the feelings, emotions and politics of a population. Plato feared the power of poetry and the artist so much that he suggested that poets be banned from the republic.¹² It is the ability of words to contradict the general rule, which Plato feared. Plato writes that if “epic and lyric verse” are allowed into the state, “not law and the reason of mankind.... but pleasure and pain will be the rulers in our state.”¹³ This ability of poetry attracts me.

How can one be sympathetic to the soldier that has faced war without having experienced their *pain*, even if it is in an abstract way? Sympathy begs understanding. The *pain* and *suffering* of war should garner our attention. I hope my

work places emotional demands on the reader, forcing them to explore the implications that operate beneath the text. When encountered by an open mind, implication can lead to understanding.

Understanding the emotional and human costs of war is important if we ever wish to eradicate it. A public that more fully understands these costs is less likely to support war. Creative works can bring about opposition to the state. In my opinion, Plato fails to recognize that states are fallible. When it comes to a state's willingness to engage in violence against its neighbor, pure *reason* leaves too much unexamined. The consideration of war should also include a consideration of the *pain* of war, and its long-term consequences on the psyche. The poet can provide the voice for this scrutiny. As Wilfred Owen wrote,

““Yet these elegies are not to this generation,

This is in no sense consolatory.

They may be to the next.

All the poet can do to-day is to warn.”¹⁴

Poetry can generate discourse that is important. It can inform the public beyond mere *reason* and remind them of the much more lasting and human costs. The poet illuminates the hidden pain of war hidden and brings about a questioning necessary within society. The liberal arts can keep us from teetering into despotism and endless war. It is for this reason we see a continual attack today by some politicians on the liberal arts and their study. Their attack often focuses on labeling the arts as being *unproductive*, a *threat* to established *order*. The poet asks what the intentions

of that order might be. The poet causes us to question intention, to explore more fully and deeply not only what confronted me, but also what confronts us.

¹ *Complete Works of Wilfred Owen*. Hasstings, East Sussex: Delphi Poets Series, 2015. Page 35.

² Adams, Timothy Dow. *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990. Page 18.

³ Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. Page 11.

⁴ Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. Page 59.

⁵ Fussell, Paul. *The Great War and Modern Memory*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. Page 317.

⁶ Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. Page 62.

⁷ Jackson, Virginia Walker, and Yopie Prins. *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*. Page 344.

⁸ Jackson, Virginia Walker, and Yopie Prins. *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*. Page 344

⁹ *The Pleasure of the Text*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1975. Page 17.

¹⁰ Blasing, Mutlu Konuk. *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and Pleasure of Words*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007. Page 16.

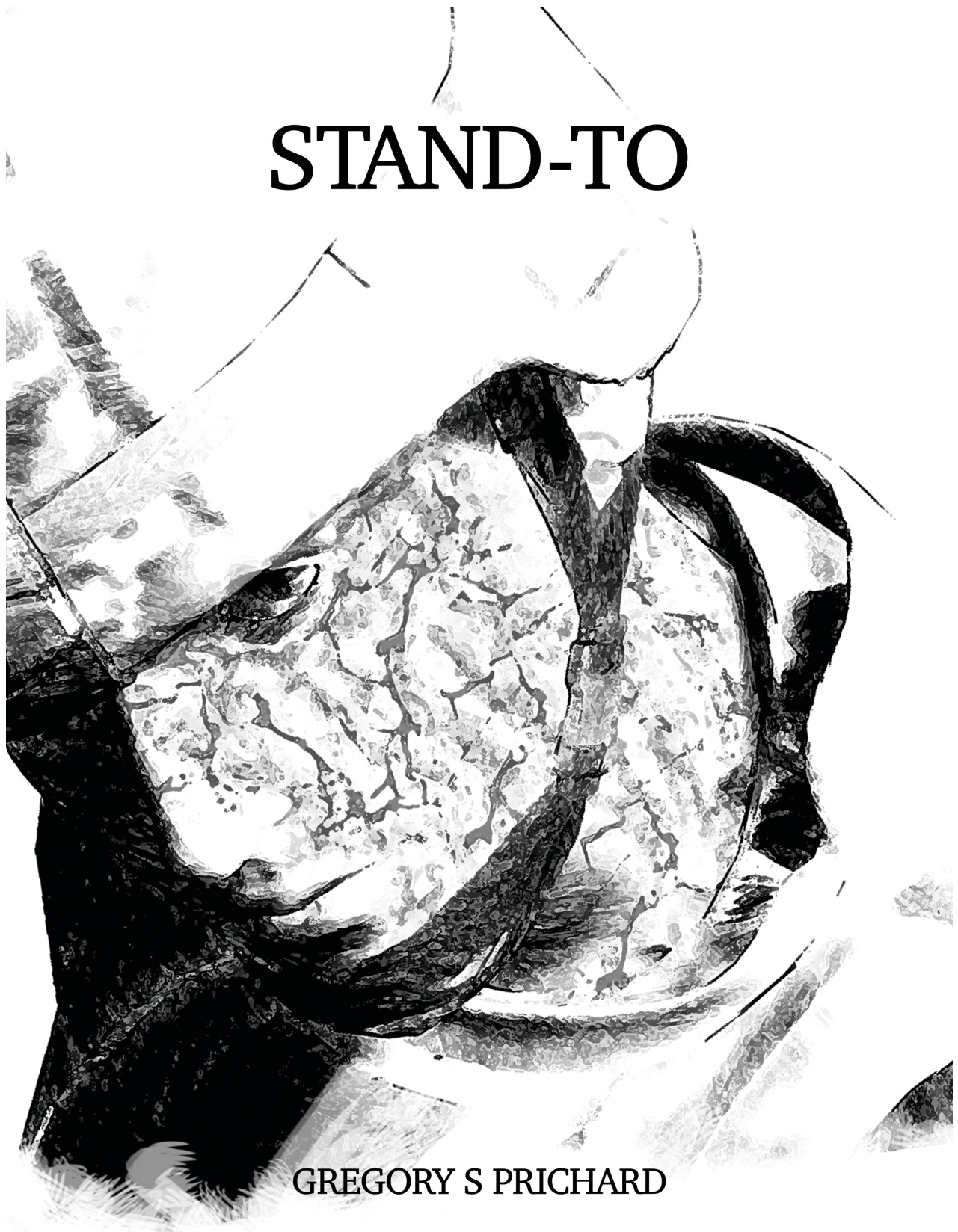
¹¹ *The Pleasure of the Text*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1975. Page 6.

¹² Blasing, Mutlu Konuk. *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and Pleasure of Words*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007. Introduction, Page 1.

¹³ Blasing, Mutlu Konuk. *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and Pleasure of Words*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007. Introduction, Page 1.

¹⁴ *Complete Works of Wilfred Owen*. Hasstings, East Sussex: Delphi Poets Series, 2015. Page 36.

STAND-TO



GREGORY S PRICHARD

Dedication

To my family, who has seen the war through me
To my fellow soldiers, who served and continue to serve
To my Iraqi friends, suffering still
To the hope of peace

Stand-To

Noun

1. The state of readiness for action or attack.
2. The formal start to a day of military operations.



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I. PRE-DEPLOYMENT

I saw my first war in the former Yugoslavia as a young man. Snipers and land mines were everywhere and bullets rained from the sky. I told my men if I step on a mine to shoot me.

My bravado was mixed with ignorance and immaturity.

I had problems sleeping when I got home.

A few years later I fell in love. My wife married me during her first year of college and soon she was off to see the world as an Army spouse. Our first permanent change of station was to the 25th Infantry Division, Hawaii.

I took her from the small town in Missouri she had known her whole life to a place a half a world away in the middle of the Pacific.

It was her first time on a plane.

She was scared and excited.

I told her no matter what happens we will always have each other.

My cell phone rang while we were home with my parents. I was on PCS leave from the 25th Infantry in Hawaii in route to Fort Benning, Georgia. Stupidly, I answered.

“Hey, just letting you know when you get here we are deploying to Iraq in a few months. Enjoy your time with your family and be ready to go when you get here.”

My heart began to beat faster. “Okay I’ll be ready. Thanks. Bye.”

How do I tell my family?

Every day counting down, watching the clock.

Arriving at the front gate of post, the long road framed with green fields and rifle ranges opens up to an expanse of old white buildings. The structures are sterile, plain and practical, their exteriors dating back to World War II.

We are looking for the post hotel, a modern building.

It seems we have been traveling for months. Our family has become a group of vagrants. The children are restless and their complaints add to the tensions. We have too much to do and no time to do it in. In a few months I will be off to war and our family will be barely settled. This is the norm for an Army family.

You get good at setting down and at pulling up roots.

I meet an old friend from my drill sergeant days by the physical fitness track. He is giving a Ranger an IV. We made small talk and caught up.

His unit had just returned from Iraq.

I tell him we are getting ready to go.

He tells me it was enough for him to want to get out of the Army. It was the worst experience of his life, total hell.

He sounds like a parent giving advice impossible to understand until you experience it for yourself.

I don't know what hell is like.

After twenty years of training for pretend wars, here is the real test. I don't want to go to war but how could I sit it out? I have soldiered my whole adult life.

If I requested retirement, would that make me a selfish coward? I feel my responsibility in my gut.

But feelings are conflicted.

A new house and two newly adopted sons tug at my conscience. When fall comes I will be on my way to Iraq.

My wife will be wrestling with a new job. She will be alone to run the show.

There is so much tension in the house.

Old bonds are breaking and new ones are forming. We are all angry and anxious.

I am distracted by the approaching deployment. Everyone needs my attention and I am unable to respond.

I want to give in.

The day will come and we will go. The Army is great at moving people from one place to another.

I can't help but think about what the deployment will be like.

Back at the unit we all wonder about what is coming.

For some, this is their third tour. They seem unable to remember anything except for the worst.

Many hope this tour will be different. Besides, every time you go it is to another place, another experience.



The smell of bleeding grass
The summer heat in Georgia, thick and heavy
Damp, hot air holds you
Oppressive like the unknown
Like your thoughts

Barbeques
Fire pits
Cold beers
Late night talks
Pretending tomorrow won't come

Someone higher up, who was not deploying with us, decided we needed a field exercise a week before we deployed.

I called it a “bright idea cook off.”

When you are entering a room you cook off the grenade so the enemy can't throw it back at you.

The spoon flips off the grenade and the fuse burns.

One – Two – Three – throw! (Vigorously)

Cooking things off is dangerous and usually hurts in the end.

When I told my wife we were going to the field for ten days and wouldn't be back until four days before we deployed she looked at me dumbfounded. After the shock wore off, her dismay turned to anger.

How is this possible she asked? Why? Her face turned red. The Army gets you for a year and can't leave you alone for two weeks before you leave?

I told her it would be all right.

In the field every soldier was given a casualty card, which they placed in their first aid pouch. You are not supposed to look at it. During a mission if an Observer Controller designates you as a casualty, your buddies pull the card from your first aid pouch, read the card and render the appropriate first aid for the injury.

Someone from the Observer Controller group thought it would be funny to give out casualty cards that only listed STD's as injuries. I told one of the Observer Controls we didn't need a casualty collection point. We needed Planned Parenthood.

While in the field, after being up all night, I stood out in the cool air and looked at the stars, perfect against the silken darkness. The world was quiet. The crisp coolness of the night mingled with cigarette smoke. The smoke drifted with my thoughts. I couldn't think of war or training for war. I could only think of home, just four hours away.

I found the cell phone sweet spot and called my wife to tell her I loved her.

My wife asks me if I am killed do I want her to play "Nothing Else Matters" by Metallica at my memorial.

I'm startled.

What will it mean for those left behind?

Things will still matter to them.

We are together, laughing, not thinking about the coming deployment.
Some patriotic country song comes over the radio, "Letters from home." My heart
drops to the floor.

Soon this will end.

What does this song mean to someone not having to go?

My wife changes the station. She can see the emotion on my face.

She wants to stop what is coming, so we can stay in the dream.



Part of deployment is preparing a will. I brought it home and placed it with my life insurance policy.

I tell my wife, pointing to the binder on the bookcase –

If anything happens. Here is the folder with my will and life insurance policy.

She doesn't answer.

The house is quiet.

Quiet as death.

On my way home from the unit I stop by the store. Several people come up to me to thank me for my service.

In the past I would always say, No problem, and think to myself, I haven't done anything yet.

But this time I'm going to Iraq.

I say, Thank you, and smile.

The fall comes and everything dies
Dark skies and short days
Dead leaves collect in piles

My fall is approaching
Duffle bags wait by the door

I said to my wife that if I had to shoot someone, I would. I said, I was coming back.

It was not for her peace of mind, but more a feeble attempt to convince myself that killing might be necessary.

I don't want to kill anyone.

I have the courage to face danger.

I'm a coward when it comes to killing.

We meet at the post auditorium for our “going away” speech.

The general sits in the front row, but doesn’t speak.

After the ceremony he calls a few of us over.

We circle around the old Vietnam veteran waiting for words of wisdom.

He asks where we are going.

FOB Rustamiyah, in southeast Bagdad we respond.

He looks at the floor for a second and says, You guys are going to be totally fucked up when you get back.

We watch in silence as he walks away shaking his head.

I always hated packing bags for training missions.

It is the precursor to goodbye.

But packing for war is different, more permanent. You know you might not come back.

My wife helped me. I'm too distracted to pack on my own.

Feelings I couldn't explain began to surface.

Like the first day of school kind of feelings but more powerful.

I'm thinking – This can't be undone.

Day of departure arrived. Goodbye is stuck in the back of my throat.

I've jumped off the high dive and suddenly realized the pool is empty.

We are missing a soldier. He is found hiding under his bed in the barracks. No one laughs at him.

A soldier's wife cries, Bring my husband home! Mascara-stained tears creep across her cheeks. You must bring my husband home!

My kids grab my legs, my wife my arm. Everyone is pulling me.

I ask for some aspirin.

Nothing will ever be the same again.



II. DEPLOYMENT

To remember yourself at your very best

Young cattle to the slaughter

Before the sinews turn soft

The term “theater of war” always struck me as odd. *What is theater, what happens at theater?*

Theater:

1. A building or outdoors area in which plays and other dramatic performances are given.
2. (often **the theater**) The activity or profession of acting in, producing, directing, or writing plays.
3. A play or other activity or presentation considered in terms of its dramatic quality.
4. A room or hall for lectures, etc., with seats in tiers.
5. The area in which something happens.

The place where something happens is appropriate. War is definitely dramatic. Maybe it is meant to describe where the fighting will take place?

Theater seems to convey a hope to keep war in a defined space and time.

That seems impossible.

People come in and out of theaters and take their experiences with them.

War cannot be contained in a theater.

When we got to Kuwait we had to watch a video.

The general stared into the camera and said:

The chance of being hit by a roadside bomb in Iraq is the same as being hit by a car while crossing the street in America.

We were hit four times.

Winter arrived in the desert.

Death in a place fully dead passed without notice.

There are no trees without leaves.

No winter winds.

Only dry air that smells of dirt.

I remember when we were in Kuwait, before deploying to Iraq. It was Christmas and the division commander, a general, was serving dinner.

He looked very serious, almost pissed-off, staring down at the line shoveling mashed potatoes onto plates.

I handed him my plate and with a cheery and loud voice wished him, Merry Christmas!

He looked up from the serving line surprised and with a half smile that seemed to hurt he said, Merry Christmas.

I decide to start filling out the blue 3 X 5 Kellogg Brown and Root comment cards at the numerous facilities around the FOB. KBR has most if not all of the war contracts to provide support services to the troops. Rumor is these contracts are worth \$39.5 billion. Dick Cheney used to be on the board of Halliburton and KBR is one of their holdings. I wonder if the vice president will hear my voice? He never answers my letters telling him how the war is going. I fill out KBR comment cards in an effort to appeal to his more, business, related concerns.

A black and white illustration of a hand holding a rectangular piece of paper. The hand is rendered with detailed shading and texture, appearing to be made of a rough material like paper or cardboard. The paper is held between the thumb and index finger, with the rest of the hand supporting it from below. The background is plain white.

KBR

"Serving Those Who Serve"

TELL US HOW WE'RE DOING.

YOUR INPUT MATTERS.

Dear KBR, Thanks for Christmas dinner. Everyone liked the cardboard Santa and paper-mache bells. Do you think the long dessert table makes us forget how much everything sucks here? I guess for a moment. I'll take what I can get.

We spiral down through the darkness. Our faces lit by the faint glow of red light. Tucked in the belly of the plane, one hundred and eighty nine souls. This is a combat landing, not the gentle glide and descent of a commercial flight, but rather a quickly falling spiral. I feel the descent in my teeth and stomach.

The aircraft crew chief puts on body armor, we have worn ours the entire flight.

A young lieutenant clutches his laptop to his chest as he dozes. The plane begins to jerk wildly back and forth. The crew chief runs to a small window under the wing and then up a flight of stairs towards the cockpit. The sudden violent movement dislodges the lieutenant's laptop from his grasp and it falls to the deck with a slap.

The crew chief comes back down the stairs cussing, Fuck this shit! I'm done with it! You can't pay me enough to do this crap anymore!

Apparently something has come up from the ground towards the plane causing the jerking. The crew chief curses and the engines whine.

I look back over my shoulder at the rows of soldiers crammed together, illuminated by a dim crimson light. The thick shadows accentuate their expressions. There is no panic, no look of surprise. No one calls out with horror. The soldiers – angelic almost, reserved and at peace, stare forward into nothingness.

The lieutenant undoes his seat belt, retrieves his laptop from the deck and returns it to the safety of his chest. Then he closes his eyes.

More wild maneuvers as the laptop comes loose again, tumbling through the air falling again with a crack. I reach down and return it to him.

The plane steadies, drops, and then bounces off the tarmac as we land in Baghdad. The engines wind down and the rushing mechanical wind disappears as we slow to a stop.

I breathe out.

The Army taught me what war was like with well-orchestrated field training exercises that had predictable results. They used artillery simulators and blank ammunition to imitate the sounds of war. Soldiers from sister units dressed in civilian clothes and acted as insurgent forces. Observer controllers, who made sure the scripted scenario for the exercise was followed, escorted the opposing forces. We fought within the task, conditions, and standards. After each scenario we would circle around and conduct AARs¹. Smoke them if you 've got them and let's talk about what went well and what we could have done better.

I thought I knew what to expect. I was confident. After I got to Baghdad, I realized I knew nothing.

War was not what the army had taught me. War was not predictable. Outcomes are never known. Real artillery and roadside bombs sound and feel different than simulators. You very seldom see the enemy in war, bright flashes and smoke seem to be the only visible cues to their presence.

In war you have to be a quick learner. Most casualties occur in the first 90 days of deployment.

The pressure to figure it out is intense.

Your life depends on it.

We landed in Baghdad in the middle of the night. The airport is blacked out. I have taken light for granted. A long dark, jagged train of soldiers bobbed up and down passing us on their way to the "freedom flight". From the darkness came words of encouragement. Ghosts whispered to us, "You're Fucked," "Welcome to Hell," and "Suckers."

We said nothing.



Everyone at home wears blindfolds.

When we got to Baghdad they took our blindfolds off.

You can't survive in combat wearing a blindfold.

Eyes take a while to get used to the light.

We stumbled around half blind.

Shooting at shadows.



Plastic bags are blown by dessert winds
Caught by barbed wire
The perimeter becomes a spectacle of trash
The bags wave violently in the breeze
They reflect the sun and sparkle
Blue, bleached by the environment
Color bled out, everything becoming pale



It had been days since I had had a chance to talk to my wife. She tells me the boys are continually sick. One needs his tonsils out and the other, tubes in his ears. The school calls continually asking her to pick them up.

After he heard I was deploying her boss told her not too worry.

He said he understood.

Now she tells me when she asked for some time off to care for the children that he is threatening to fire her if she can't find a way to "fix this problem."

I am stunned.

"Support the troops," as long as it requires no sacrifice.

I had only been gone a month but it seemed like forever.

A black and white illustration of a hand holding a piece of paper. The hand is rendered with detailed shading and texture, appearing to be made of a rough, stone-like material. The paper is held between the thumb and fingers, and it contains several lines of text. The background is plain white.

KBR

"Serving Those Who Serve"

TELL US HOW WE'RE DOING.

YOUR INPUT MATTERS.

Dear KBR, everyone loves steak night. Why do you only serve the steaks well done? Do you think the sight of blood will ruin our appetites? I haven't seen any blood yet and like my steaks medium rare. The Indian man behind the counter doesn't speak English. He always throws a well done steak on my plate.

First mission in Baghdad is to go on a joint patrol with the unit we are replacing. I put on my body armor with a friend. We fasten each other's Velcro and snaps. It's a quiet, almost intimate experience.

He asks if I'm okay.

Sure, I say. Really, though, I'm scared to death. I feel like I have to piss. My legs are shaking.

Just have to take a piss before we go.

Yeah me too, he says.

Last bit of Velcro fastened, weapons checks and slaps on the shoulder.

Let's go!

The bolts of our rifles slam forward chambering rounds with staccato snaps.

He tells me that if we are hit he hopes he dies instantly.

We are riding with a reserve unit. They seem totally out of control, flying down the streets like banshees, weaving in and out of traffic, driving on the wrong side of the road. I hear through the combat earplugs the roar of the engine and the yelling of the gunner:

Get the fuck out of the way! Fucking Iraqis! Fucking Iraqis!

They toss water bottles full of piss at stopped and startled drivers.

The tension is infectious. It's hard to breathe. My heart tries to escape from my chest.

Hatred is contagious. Their year is up and they have become comfortable with their disease.

I think, we cannot become like them.

I don't know.

I can't understand.

A black and white illustration of a hand holding a piece of paper. The hand is rendered with detailed shading and texture, appearing to be made of a rough, stone-like material. The paper is held between the thumb and index finger, with the rest of the hand supporting it from below. The paper has a slightly irregular, torn edge on the right side.

KBR

"Serving Those Who Serve"
TELL US HOW WE'RE DOING.
YOUR INPUT MATTERS.

Dear KBR, could you please make a special meal on the day we are conducting a memorial service? There is a memorial after dinner for a couple of soldiers killed a few days ago. Everyone is sitting around staring at their food. Maybe a soft serve ice cream machine will cheer us up?

We meet in the chapel. Not a chapel as you might imagine from back home, more of a large room in a metal shack with a dirty carpet and picnic table bench pews. It is winter and everything is covered with mud. The sewage treatment plant next to the camp spews out rancid odors that waft through the room. The corpses of a thousand flies hang from paper rolls attached to the rafters. Tonight the memorial service is for a young soldier killed by a roadside bomb. He is from the reserve unit we rode with only a few days before. The general that served me mashed potatoes at Christmas is here. His countenance is the same, stern and focused. Memorial services are difficult but reserve unit memorials are extra brutal. These soldiers all come from the same community. They are connected by the lives they lead back home, some knowing each other since grade school. They join the reserves as friends, after graduating from high school.

Their commander gets up to talk, a lawyer back in the world. He starts off strong but quickly fades. His voice shakes and eyes swell. He tries to hold back the tears. This is not a generic, pre-packed eulogy. It is as if he is talking about his son. He falters, stutters, and pauses, looking down at the podium. He breaks down and openly cries. The room is silent except for his weeping.

I hope someone will rescue him. Why won't someone rescue him?

The general looks on unflinching, he is a veteran of memorial services.

The service has come to a halt. The chaplain approaches the podium wrapping his arms around the captain, then he shuffles him to a chair in the shadows on the side of the stage.

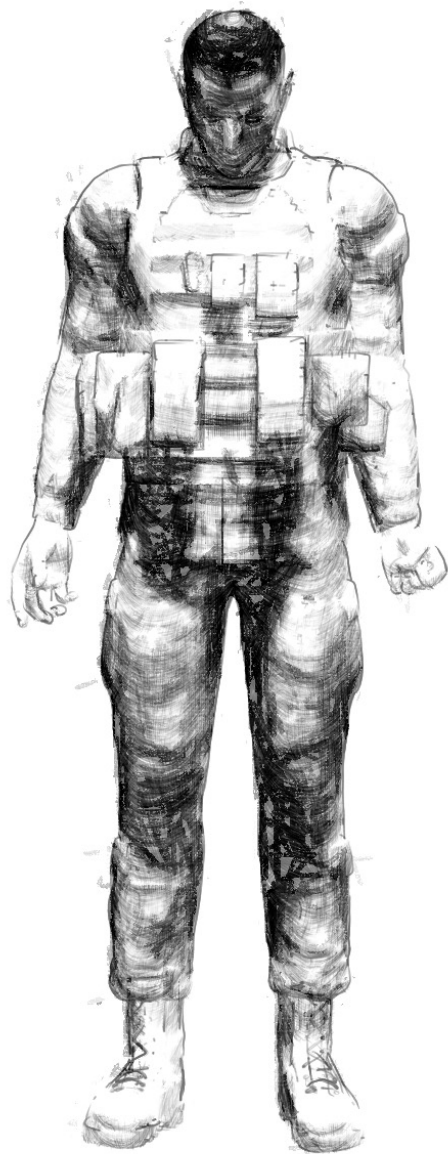
Someone whispers under their breath. Got to hate it when you have a break down in front of the commanding general.

I'm distracted, thinking. The captain knows the kid's parents. They are rotating home in a few weeks and he will feel this family's pain up close.

Memorial services are rehearsed events. This one has gone astray. The first sergeant takes over and ends the service.

We pass by the pair of boots, rifle, and helmet. There is a picture of the soldier and a Purple Heart between the boots. We salute and place a unit coinⁱⁱ next to the picture and file by to shake the general's hand.

We walk in silence through the mud, back to the TOC. I place the memorial pamphlet in my deployment chest with all of my... personal things.



We are fighting against insurgents. The definition of the enemy has always been confusing. What is an insurgent and what do they look like?

In the Dictionary:

Insurgent (n.)ⁱⁱⁱ

1. a person who rises in forcible opposition to lawful authority, especially a person who engages in armed resistance to a government or to the execution of its laws; rebel.
2. a member of a section of a political party that revolts against the methods or policies of the party.

Is the Iraqi government lawful or imposed by us through force?

The mantra from the top is, "We are bringing them freedom."

Senior leaders continually boast we have instituted, "secular democracy."

I am skeptical. Here, there is no such thing as separation between church and state. To impose secular democracy is to disregard their culture.

Either we are naive or lying to ourselves. My confidence wanes. Are we fighting for a lie?

The word insurgent doesn't seem right to me.

The siren wail comes day and night

Two for outgoing
One for incoming

Either sound ends with an explosion.

Counter battery?

We dive to the ground and cover our heads.
The reaction becomes routine, like scratching an itch.

I wonder what this will mean when we return home.

When unexpected loud noises no longer require us to duck and cover.

The battle update brief takes place at night after dinner. The commander is growing more frustrated with every passing slide.

A group of Shia militiamen walked into a hospital looking for Sunnis to kill.

Men, women, children, all sick and infirmed, dragged off and shot in the head; some just suffocated with pillows, their lives not worth the cost of a bullet.

Fingers are pointed across the table.
You have to stop this, the officer says.

How, the captain asks?

It is an impossible order. We didn't kill these people – did we? How can we stop what is everywhere?

Sunni police surround a Shia mosque to protect Sunni militiamen while they kill everyone inside.

We call them Al-Qaeda.

That makes it seem, not so bad.

The commander takes a sip of his coffee.

Next slide.

I am beginning to think that no one at the big and fancy forward operating bases actually knows a real Iraqi. I live with real Iraqis and interact with them every day.

They are poor and suffering.

They have no electricity and use propane to cook their food.

They wait in long lines to get the necessities of life only to have some asshole drive a car laden with explosives into them.

Their family members are kidnapped and held for ransom during the night.

We wrench them out of the Tigris River bolted and mutilated, their hands bound by flexi cuffs.

They are stopped at checkpoints, segregated by their religion and shot.

We find them in neat rows on the side of the road, their bodies covered with flies.

E, my interpreter, worries constantly about his family. He is always with me and never sees them anymore. He tells me his fears. I hug him and pat his back. I whisper in his ear, I'm sorry, my friend.

I'm sorry.

Breathe out and during your natural pause pull the slack from the trigger. The next few moments cannot be taken back. The target is fuzzy in the sites. It moves, not stationary like on the training range. A moment of pause, the pad of my index finger throbs. Breathe in – relax. Sweat arching across my brow, dripping from the tip of my nose. I can hear my breathing. It seems as if I am the only one left on the earth. The tension on the trigger provides a moment of reflection. If you pull past it you take someone's future and make them forever part of your past.

The target has a family.

They will hate me without knowing me.

The American soldier that killed their loved one.



I watch a young lieutenant shotgun an entire six-pack of near beer like he was back in a college dorm room. We cheer him on and laugh as he punches a hole in the bottom of the can while tugging at the pull-tab. He chugs the beer down in seconds, slamming the can down on the table, collapsing it under his hand.

He says with a foamy smile that he feels a slight buzz.

Nyquil works better someone says.

I think, nothing could help me escape this place.

Late one night, on patrol, there is a family in a small shack.

A disheveled and dirty man, surrounded by stair-step toddlers, waves feverishly from the jagged edges of a candle lit doorway. His wife is having a baby. She labors on a few tattered rugs thrown over the dirt.

The medic assists with the delivery.

Her husband repeatedly places his hands over his chest as a sign of thanks. His fatigued smile of missing teeth shows his relief and gratitude.

He points to another shack down the road. He tells the interpreter there are Iranians close by.

They are the ones mortaring us every night.

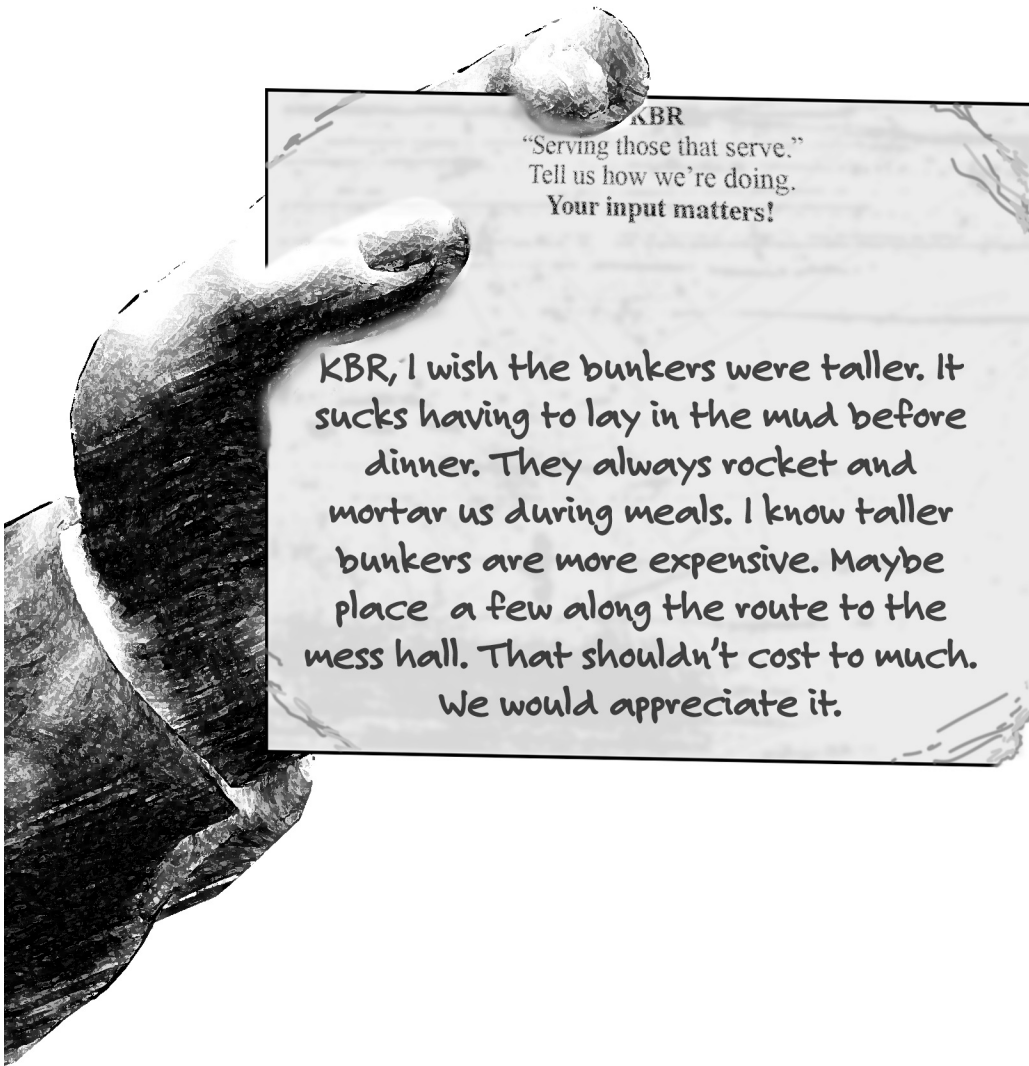
The man excitedly motions us to follow him. We walk through a field of trash. The soft moonlight reveals mortar registration lines scratched deep into the soil. They point directly towards the sparkling lights of the FOB.

The coordinates are taken. Some digital photos and a spot report to higher.

Return to base.

Someone else will take down the target.

We wait, while being mortared. A week passes and the mortar attacks continue nightly.



KBR

“Serving those that serve.”
Tell us how we’re doing.
Your input matters!

KBR, I wish the bunkers were taller. It sucks having to lay in the mud before dinner. They always rocket and mortar us during meals. I know taller bunkers are more expensive. Maybe place a few along the route to the mess hall. That shouldn't cost too much. We would appreciate it.

My throat is dry. When I wake up in the morning I look for the cat that shit in my mouth. There is so much dirt in the air it collects through the night at the corners of my lips.

I wonder if I have ever seen a cat in Iraq?

I realize I have not.

The only things close to a pet I've seen are wild dogs scrounging for food in the piles of trash that are everywhere. The Iraqis carry out slum dog massacres to eliminate the roving gangs of dogs. Iraqis aren't big pet lovers.

These facts enforce my sense of hopelessness.

A squad moves in a four-vehicle convoy towards an Iraqi police checkpoint. The two men behind the concrete barrier suddenly duck down. "What the hell are they doing?" someone yells over the intercom.

Then comes the explosion.

An Iraqi policeman riding a bike next to the convoy is sprayed all over the side of a truck. A shoe next to the wheel is all that is left.

He must not have been "in the know."

The second vehicle in the convoy bursts into flames. It is a total loss. Thankfully everyone gets out in time with only ruptured eardrums and shattered nerves.

The two Iraqi policeman claim they didn't know. The squad leader deserves a medal for not allowing his soldiers to gun them down instantly. The policemen are held for a couple of weeks, judged innocent and released.

We see them later at another checkpoint. They smile and wave as we pass.

We endure eight straight days of indirect fire attacks. On the first night I see a medic injured by a piece of shrapnel in the leg. How strange, he is up walking around and then suddenly he is on the ground, screaming, with blood running out through his fingers. I stand there and stare, while his buddy packs the wound.

My brain can't process what my eyes are seeing. This can't be real. I take too much time distilling what is happening. I feel useless. This is the reason your chances of becoming a casualty are greatest at the beginning of your tour.

A round passes overhead. The rocket motor expended, embers pouring out like sparklers. It hits a shower trailer with a loud crack but fails to explode. Naked men run out in all directions.

I decide to take my showers in the morning.

There are so many casualties that someone devises a format for a memorial pamphlet so we can fill in the blanks.

(Rank and name) was a great soldier. A native of (Insert home of record) He/She was a loving (sister, brother, daughter, son, mother, wife, husband, father) that everybody loved. He/She was a joy to work with and will be sorely missed by all he/she touched. (Rank and name) was a soldier that placed his or her countries' needs before his or her own, a model of selfless service. (Rank and name) is a true hero who gave his or her life in service to the Nation.

At the conclusion of the service the first sergeant will call roll. A few soldiers will sound off with, "Here, first sergeant." The dead soldier's name will be called three times.

No one will answer.

Then play taps.

The chaplain has taps on his iPod.

An explosively formed projectile or EFP looks like a paint can with a copper lid. They go through armor like butter and pepper the inside of the vehicle with pieces of hot metal.

I begin to look into these deadly weapons. I hypothesize, if we can find the machinery needed to make these explosives we could eliminate the problem.

The answer I get is troubling. I'm told the specialized machinery to manufacture them does not exist in Iraq.

We invaded on the premise that they possessed the ability to manufacture weapons of mass destruction yet they lack the technology to produce these roadside bombs?

Where are they coming from?

Iran or maybe Lebanon.

Sunni Al Qaeda members are using weapons made by Shiites in Iran or Lebanon?

No, the Sunnis get theirs from Saudi Arabia, or maybe Syria. We're not sure.

The command is sponsoring a competition to figure out a way to defeat EFPs. This seems a bit desperate to me. I wonder what the alternative motive is. Are they trying to give us the illusion of control? We are told to come up with imaginative ways to mitigate the fatal results of these explosives.

I see this as a problem of physics. The amount of kinetic force focused to the small point of the copper stream is too much for the tensile strength of the armor. Figure out the average force based upon the size of the explosive charge and you can determine the armor needed to defeat it.

No one has thought of that yet?

This is not a new weapon; it was first used against the Israelis. I decide it is a useless exercise, a ruse.

Some soldiers suggest – drive faster.

The copper jet is traveling at over 3,000 feet a second.

Someone comes up with an extra plate to put over the door, full of sand and water.

This will leave dirty stale water and sand in your wounds, killing you later.

Another suggestion is a cooler of ice water between passengers.

I like that one the best.

It means coolers for every vehicle filled with ice and cold water, a useful solution to an unsolvable problem.

A week later we got 100 blue coolers.

A policeman at a checkpoint before the patrol smiles and says, "As-salaamu 'alaykum." Which means, "I come in peace." He pats his chest above his heart and flashes a big smile under a bushy black mustache.

With his other hand he pulls out a pistol and shoots the team leader in the face, killing him instantly.

I remember his hair and face the most. Dark, shoulder length hair, like licorice, with a soft sheen, framing a narrow face with chiseled cheeks of stone. His lips were a pallid wrinkled rice paper, transparent and tight. He was calm, unexpectedly calm, lying on the pale gray concrete. I remember everything as being anemic, his cream colored shirt, a light tan vest, white towels.

White towels?

White towels wrapped around his mangled leg, white towels with a tinge of pastel pink. His friend, a short older man with a week's worth of peppered grey razor stubble waved his hands in front of my face. I don't understand him. I can't hear him. My knuckles turn white on the hand guards of my rifle. I look past the rim of my helmet towards the young man on the ground. He is beginning to blend in with the concrete.

Haaaaaaa, his breath is low and raspy, slowing. He looks at me as I stand above him. We share empathetic glances. Thoughts run wild through my head, rumbling, unidentifiable, like a train rolling down a long unlit tunnel towards an unknown outlet.

He breathes out

And it's over.

The older man turns silent, kneeling down next to his friend as I walk away.

The Command wanted us to expand our operations south of Baghdad. While reconning an area to set up camp I came across an old penny in the dirt. It was dated 1966, the year I was born.

What was the chance of finding a penny in a deserted patch of sand in Iraq with my birthyear on it?

I taped it to the front chest plate of my body armor, over my heart, next to the picture of my dead son.

Soldiers become superstitious in war.

A sniper team is sent out to cover a stretch of road that has seen an abundance of roadside bombings. The stretch of road cuts through the desert in a straight line disappearing into the heat. To the east of the road are meekly framed patches of land with crops no one seems to give a shit about. The west side of the road stretches off to nothing, full of small dead brush that appears to serve no purpose other than multi colored trash collecting.

A man begins walking toward the road from an adjacent field. He is wearing a dirty thawb^{iv} and carrying a shovel and cotton duct bag. Whatever is in the bag is heavy. He struggles with the weight, dropping the shovel and stopping to rest several times.

What do we have here? The spotter whispers, even though they are so far away the man could not possibly hear them.

The shooter begins to sight him in through the hazy heat. "Got him. Call it in."

The spotter calls the TOC and reports their observation. They are told to stand by. The man drops the bag and begins to dig a hole on the side of the road. The TOC calls back with instructions.

If you can positively identify an explosive you can take the shot.

Roger, clear to take the shot if we can positively identify an IED.

Roger...out.

The man stops digging and reaches into the bag pulling out a water bottle and takes a seat by the side of the road.

You'd think the guy is on a fucking outing, the spotter whispers.

The shooter says nothing as he adjusts his scope. There is no significant wind today.

The man throws the bottle down leaving it to be collected by a shrub latter.

We should shoot the fucker for littering, the spotter says.

The man digs a bit more and then throws the shovel down, wipes his brow, looks up and down the empty road.

Here comes the money shot, the observer say.

The man bends down and pulls out a bundle of three mortar rounds duct taped together. He places them in the hole and bends over to pick up the shovel. A loud

crack echoes across the desert. The man looks in the direction of the sound, drops the shovel and begins to run back towards a small collection of shacks.

You fucking missed him!

I know, I know, there must have been a gust of wind.

They call it in. Their position is compromised, mission over.

A squad recovers the bomb and terrified man. He has five hundred American dollars on him. More money than this poor farmer will see in a lifetime. His filthy hands shake as he tells the patrol two men paid him to dig the hole and place the bomb.

They weren't from his village.

No one is surprised.

We live in twelve-foot by seven-foot cans
We eat out of cans
We live amongst ammo cans
We shit, shower and shave in a can

When we die—

They send us home in a can.

During Shiite pilgrimages we were told to secure the routes from the border with Iran to the sacred Shiite city of Karbala. After the pilgrimage was over, roadside bomb attacks increased tenfold. I said to the operations officer, Doesn't the empirical data suggest that securing pilgrimage routes is a bad idea?

He replied, maybe, but it briefs well.

We are standing around looking at a vehicle just recovered that had been blown to pieces. The interior is a smattering of blood and bits of flesh and bone. The bone looks pure compared to everything else. It catches my eye.

Someone says, only one of the occupants died instantly.

That surprises me. I take a drag from my cigarette.

Yeah, but the others will probably die later. They breathed in hot gases that fried their lungs.

A good soldier holds their breath right before they get blown up.

I'm no longer afraid of being killed. I can't do anything about it anyway.

The only thing that is relevant is the countdown numbers marked on a cheap calendar, a countdown by weeks and days; 52 weeks and 365 days. Looking at the weeks makes me feel better. The months run out and they are torn off and thrown in the trash. In the beginning the calendar was so thick, almost too heavy to lift. As the months pass, the calendar becomes lighter and easier to deal with. Sometimes I peek hopefully at the last page. The block of dates marked off as our possible departure window. Possible because you never really know when you're going home.

Rumors abound about units that will be held over for the upcoming surge. What will I do if we are extended past December? How will I count the days?

E, my interpreter is not getting paid. He tells me about the suffering of his family. I feel responsible. We are all responsible no matter how hard we try to explain it away. Often, in discussing the anarchy that surrounds us, someone will say that they are better off without Saddam. Every day my observations lead me to believe we are only a new demon in a long list of devils.

I go to the contracting officer to plead E's case. I don't know this man, a civilian that comes down from Baghdad once a month. I argue for his pay as the man pounds away on his laptop. I finish and wait for a response.

He looks up and says, What do you care? He is just an Iraqi.

I am taken aback by his response. I blink, and collect my thoughts.

I step up close to the desk.

He gets paid today, I say in a low gruff voice.

The contracting officer looks down at his laptop avoiding confrontation. He waves his hand dismissively and sighs.

All right, bring him in.

I feel no sense of accomplishment, only shame. E lets it pass. He is glad to be able to feed his family and pay the rent. I quietly promise him I won't let it happen again.

And we get on with the war.

Pluto is a stretch of road on the east side of Baghdad that runs north to south in a predominantly Shia part of the city. To the east of Pluto is Sadar city, the infamous Shiite slums built by Saddam Hussein. It sits on the map like a huge square, a camp or maybe a fortress. The route is usually off limits, certain death. It is littered with too many roadside bombs and EFPs.

Once, while on a mission in southern Baghdad, I notice while looking over the shoulder of the team leader that the navigational display had frozen. Having tracked our progress with the old school method of a map, I knew where we were.

I nudged my friend sitting next to me and pointed to the screen.

He smiled back at me and then tapped the team leader on the shoulder, yelling over the roar of the engine.

Where are we?

The team leader held an open pack of cigarettes over his left shoulder, real American cigarettes, not the knock off Iraqi kind.

No, no, he shouted as we both took a smoke. Where are we?

The team leader looked down at the screen realizing it was frozen. He paused for a moment and yelled – Pluto!

We yelled back in unison certain death! Certain death!

We laughed, as the team leader tried to reset the frozen navigational display.

A new private is driving today. He is replacing our usual driver, home on his two-week leave. We are the second vehicle in a four vehicle convoy, traveling on a long stretch of road south of Baghdad. The new tactic for blowing us up is to place explosives in the decaying carcasses of animals. They position them on the side of the road and watch them from a concealed position, waiting for us to arrive. The mere fact that bloated dead animals scattered along the side of the road does not look out of place says a lot.

We are traveling in the middle of the night when all the bad guys are tucked in their beds sleeping. The long straight roads seem to stretch on forever through the desert. There is no moon tonight and the grimy ribbon appears quickly through the dirty haze of the headlights. Suddenly the carcass of a small dead rabbit appears in the middle of the lane, much too small to hide anything of consequence. They usually use cows or donkeys, something big enough to hide a charge to defeat our armor.

Apparently the young driver feels otherwise and jerks the wheel to the right, swerving into the oncoming lane.

Everything is happening too quickly to do anything about it. The up-armored vehicle is incredibly top heavy. The reason we do roll over drill before every mission. I feel the wheels coming off the road as the vehicle lists to the right.

I am in the back seat, behind the driver, and grab the legs of the gunner who is standing in the turret. I try to pull him down into the vehicle as the passenger side tires begin to scream under the pressure of the sudden maneuver. The vehicle seems to be suspended in mid air. Time stops. Violently we list back to the left. I lose my grasp on the Gunner's legs as the side of my helmet bounces off the door window. No one is saying anything. The vehicle is doing all the talking, popping and screaming as it jostles about, the suspension laboring under the momentum of sudden movement. The vehicle is too slow and heavy to react to the quickness of the driver's input. My body is tossed about forward then backwards and abruptly we come to a stop in the middle of the road. A thick blanket of white smoke encases us.

A long silence – our senses catch up.

The team leader speaks first,

What the fuck! What the fuck! he screams.

The driver says nothing, still clutching the wheel and staring off into the distance. The radio comes alive with panicked questions. The team leader picks up the mic and explains that we need to do a security halt while we swap out drivers. I take the team leader's seat, he takes the driver's seat and the private takes my seat in the back. I tell the kid I am going to rip up his license. He pleads that there was a dead animal in the road. My adrenaline is so amped up I want to punch him in the face.

There is no time for beatings. Sitting stationary is too dangerous. We continue on through the night, chain-smoking cigarettes, surrounded by the roar of the engine. The sun is hinting to its arrival as we arrive at camp and head off to our cans to catch a few hours of sleep.

Later the next morning I stumble out of my can partially blinded by the sun and step on a white, stuffed bunny left in front of my door.

Red air today. Helicopter engines and blades don't do well in driving sand storms that nick and tear their parts. A field grade officer must approve all flights in red air, even medical evacuations. We are dangerously far away from the large hospital in Baghdad. If we leave the wire and something happens while under red air, the delay in getting evacuated could mean the difference between life and death. Weather conditions have to be calculated into missions and if the air is red, as far as I am concerned, there will be no mission. The medical lifeline is compromised and a medic can only do so much in the field. I have learned this lesson well.

An engineer was wounded while clearing a route north of us. The air was red and we were stuck in a small FOB, which at least had a small hospital tent and brigade surgeon present. The wounded engineer was stuck there also. He is caught in the blowing red and ochre air. An air that sneaks in through every crack and cranny of your being, mingling with your skin so that walking, indeed any movement at all, feels like sandpaper. The engineer's tears of pain wash his face. Three men crowd around him and try to provide some comfort. I can see them hunched over him in the dark tent. The engineer's blood looks almost fluorescent against the gloom of the storm. His leg is horribly mangled and the brigade surgeon is having a hard time stopping the bleeding. The young man passes out, or maybe mercifully they put him to sleep. They close the tent flap and amputate his leg to save his life, at least for the time being. The next day the storm lifts and he is flown out.

Red air lifted, we now plan our mission farther south.

Before we leave, I over hear one of the medical team members say that the soldier took it surprisingly well when they told him his leg was gone.

Maybe he has not had time to sort through how drastically his life has changed. The whole incident is still exterior, what is buried deep inside has yet to bubble to the surface, to haunt his dreams, like my experiences haunt mine.

Every night I try and write a letter home to my wife. They hide the daily goings on here. They say things like –

Your love covers me like a soft, warm blanket from my youth.

If I am your rock then surely you are the flowing meadow of flowers on which I lay.

I know my letters take weeks to get to her and that every letter I write could be my last. This realization adds a sense of importance to the crafting of every word.

To know I could be dead while my letters continue to arrive, like kisses from the grave.

A roadside bomb strikes a group of engineers clearing a route south of our camp. The bomb penetrates the armor ripping off both butt cheeks of the front passenger. We bring him to our camp awaiting air medevac. It will take a while. The flight time to us and then back to the combat support hospital is almost outside the "Golden Hour."

He is bleeding badly, so we use chemical dressings to try and cauterize the wounds. Just add water and they fizzle and burn. The bubbling chemical smell of burning blood and tissue fills the air.

It doesn't seem to help.

Someone comes up with the bright idea to use rolls of toilet paper to pack the wounds. We place the rolls into the large gaping holes and wrap 100 mile an hour tape around his waist to hold them in place.

The soldier is incredibly calm and quiet.

We apply pressure and wait for the sound of the chopper.

The medic gives him morphine.

I never took the time to get his name and we never found out if he survived.

A squad is conducting a security patrol a few blocks away from the FOB and stops to give a toy to a shoeless child. Soon a crowd of children surrounds the truck. The gunner calls down from the turret for more toys as he lofts them in a gentle arc into an ocean of wide white smiles and frothy laughter. Little hands with outstretched fingers reach out to the sky. The forming crowd jumps with excitement. The gunner tosses out a soccer ball, a prized toy and then a small teddy bear to a young girl near the fender. Another, larger child, wrests it away from her in the excitement. The gunner gives the offender a stern look and then bends down inside the vehicle calling for another teddy bear to right the sudden wrong.

A man quickly drives his car into the crowd running over several children. He slams into the truck and detonates his bomb. The hood of the truck is blown skyward in a billowing ball of smoke. The vehicle rises up and then back down, groaning as its fluids leak out into the cracked and broken pavement. The frame of the car lays bent and open exposing its belly and its black engine block heart. A bit of burnt stuffing outlined with embers gently glides downward. The automobile leaves a murky crater and emanating from the depression are long greasy black points like a dead star. At the end of a point a concave remnant of a soccer ball rocks back and forth.

The soldiers, with ruptured eardrums, take inventory of their parts. The deafening blast echoes throughout the neighborhood. There is a moment of sublime silence and then the shrill of shattered eardrums mixes with the wailing cries of mothers.

I saw a little girl on the side of the road during a mission south of Baghdad. She was very cute, very dirty and very poor. I decided to write about her and posted the piece on a web site back home for writing critique.

The next day Daisy37 wrote, "You're a murderer!"

I replied –

Thank you for the thoughtful critique of my work.

Back home on post there are the big military bands. They play when you leave and come home.

Well, most of the time, they failed to show up for our departure.

Bands are part of military tradition. The drum keeps the beat in time for marching soldiers. The low thud of the base drum signals the left foot forward in time. The trumpet sounds the signal to salute, come to attention, parade rest and pass in review.

In Iraq we listened to "Bodies" by Drowning Pool and "Rockstar" by Nickelback on our iPods, anything to wake you up before a mission or to escape with afterwards.

The band pulls perimeter guard now. They pull it without the trumpet player for he is in high demand. He is needed to play taps at memorial services on the big FOBs.

We never get the trumpet player.

We circle around each other after returning from a mission. Inevitably someone will pull out a bundle of cigars. "Let's burn one" is the chant, as we pass them around. One by one faces take on a warm, red glow, illuminated by the burning ends of "fat ones." Stories and laughs mingle with the thick tendrils of smoke. We celebrate the moment, the simple pleasure of being alive. Fears are released in wispy puffs of smoke that collect like crowns around our heads. Everyone tells their recollection of the mission, jibes and prodding abound. There is no shame in admitting your fear. Sooner or later someone will mention the next day's mission. The group will quiet as the embers die out. "I'll bring the stogies tomorrow," someone says. We break up, dissipating into the darkness back to our cans.

The mud on my boots begins to thaw with the coming of spring
I taste the heat to come
Tears turn to sludge
Spring is mute

I cover my mouth
The desert suffocates me
A pocket full of mints and hand sanitizer
To chase away what is everywhere

I share with friends
The wasteland always wins

Arriving in Atlanta for EML^v fire trucks spray water over us as we pull into the terminal. I've been in Iraq for almost eight months and fail to notice the spectacle until some one next to me points it out. I am dirty and sweaty after traveling nonstop for days. I am still in uniform and my dirty rucksack that was damaged when a roadside bomb ripped through the back of one of our trucks is the only bag I carry. It contains a shaving kit, towel, and dirty underwear. We all stink.

Someone meets us at the terminal, signing us out on leave and gives us instructions for our departure flight fourteen days from now.

I should be excited but I feel overwhelmed, out of my element, confused. They usher us to a subway to take us to the main terminal. We pack in tightly with civilian travelers.

A man in a nice suit and Ray Ban sunglasses notices my blood type on the back of my rucksack and laughs, saying B-.

I look over my shoulder at him.

He stops snickering.

I want to choke him and he knows it.

There is a long tunnel with a walking escalator leading from the airport subway system to the main terminal. It ends at the foot of more escalators leading upward towards the light of day. It is late summer and the light is almost blinding. Stepping on the escalator and looking up I see my wife jumping up and down like a giddy schoolgirl. Her hair is golden like the sun. Her smile, wide and bright. I feel like Zarathustra walking out of a long cave into the world of enlightenment.

She hugs and kisses me. It is dreamy and surreal.

Old veterans understandingly wait and watch for their chance to welcome me home. Are they remembering what it was like when they returned from war? Maybe for a second they become young again. They hand me a flag and with broad smiles – thank me for my service.

I thank them in return.

They know what service means.

Mars drops below the horizon at mid tour. I go home an angry zombie.

Coming home on mid tour leave is two weeks of teasing and misery. I watch the news and think about Iraq. My wife turns off the TV. She wants me to forget and come home. I can't. Home feels strange, I feel strange, uncomfortable, frustrated, angry.

"What do you want to do tonight?"

"Nothing." I say.

I am numb and watch the clock as my leave ticks away.

When I get back to Iraq, I am told a roadside bomb hit one of our squads. I feel like a loser, guilty. Maybe if I were there it never would have happen.

But no –

I was at home while everyone in Iraq was covered in shit.

When we go out on mission we are covered from head to toe. The cheeks are the only skin exposed to the sun. We move from one place to another in armored vehicles with blacked out windows. No one stands around in the open, unless you want to get shot. We learned quickly not to remain in one location for very long. After mission you are in the TOC or in your can trying to cool off and recover before the next mission or attack.

I went to visit the rear detachment while home on mid tour leave.

A senior officer asked me how it was going.

Busy, Sir. We are on mission every day, I said.

His eyes squinted as he looked me up and down.

I don't think so. You don't look very tan.

He gave me a dismissive laugh and walked off.

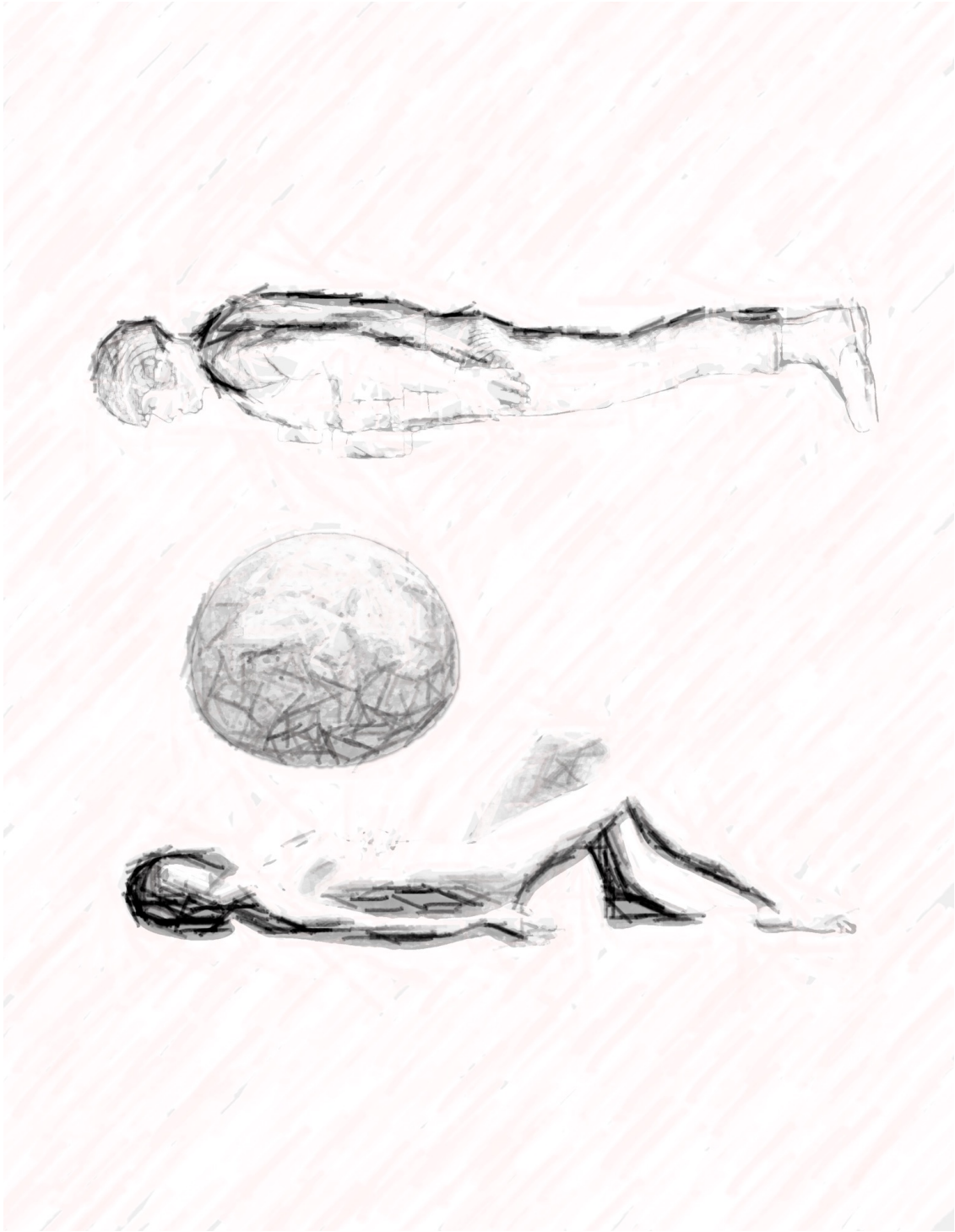
I guess everyone is the enemy now.

I look at the moon. It makes me feel connected to home. The moon, the sky is the only thing about this place that seems familiar. When I am alone I talk to the moon, to home. I imagine my words bouncing off it. The light is the string that connects us. The moon a tin can. I relish the brief moments of connection even if it is an illusion.

I wonder if my wife is at home staring at the ceiling. Wondering where I am and what I'm doing. Trying to keep terrible thoughts from creeping in.

I worry that one night people in dress uniforms will come knocking on her door.

If she refuses to answer, does that mean I'm still alive?



War contractors buzz around the large forward operating bases with assortments of new technology designed to “improve survivability.” We convoy up to receive the latest upgrades, hoping to survive the three-hour trip. The soldiers see it as a chance to go to the big post exchange or eat at the large mess halls, see a movie and have some soft serve ice cream. We have brought a list of items to pick up for the troops left at camp since we don’t have a PX, useful things like soap and toothpaste. We plan the combat mission back, weighted down with new exotic gadgets and bags of necessities.

He called himself the Jackal. We called him the shooter. He loved to post videos of his killings. He placed his shots surgically, between the bottom edge of the helmet and the top plate of the body armor. He said, "Allah Akbar, Allah Akbar." before he pulled the trigger. After the shot, "Allah Akbar, Allah Akbar." *God is great. God is great.*

Before life set me straight, I thought I could sense what God wanted me to do. That he spoke to me. I told a Lutheran Pastor that once. He raised an eyebrow. *God only talks to prophets.* I calmed his fears and explained to him that I didn't hear God's voice, there was no burning bush. I thought I could feel His gentle touch guiding me. He always seemed to guide me in the right direction. The pastor smiled with relief, he wouldn't have to have me committed after all.

I don't hear God's voice anymore. The eighty pounds of body armor and ammunition make me too heavy to feel His touch.

We watch a video of one of the Jackal's shootings in Baghdad. A soldier stands at a checkpoint. He begins his chant, "Allah Akbar, Allah Akbar." The soldier looks right at him. The shooter pulls the trigger and a cloud of blood appears below the soldier's chin. He collapses to the ground like a rag doll. His battle buddy begins looking around for the shooter. It's like a scary movie, we yell at him to get down. He runs out to grab his friend. "Allah Akbar, Allah Akbar." the shooter gets him right underneath the ear and he falls on top of the other soldier. The film ends.

He kills a few more soldiers but his confidence has made him sloppy. We begin to hunt him. It is only a matter of time now. His arrogance will be his undoing.

Across from a checkpoint near an alley there is a yellow taxi bus parked with its taillights facing out. A soldier calls it in. The shooter makes his fatal mistake.

We receive a call of distress from a private security team. They claim they have been hit by a roadside bomb and are under attack. We mobilized to give them support. We arrive at a scene of total chaos. Two contractors are shooting at their vehicle. Bullets are ricocheting everywhere. Iraqis stand around the incident watching with curiosity. A bullet ricochets off the truck hitting a young man in the leg.

We yell at them, "Cease-fire, cease-fire!" Their suburban is riddled with holes and the right front tire is blown out.

"What the hell?" we ask.

One of the men excitedly exclaims, "We were hit by a roadside bomb and were shooting at the vehicle to destroy it!" Sweat drips off his nose. His pupils looked wide and dark. His buddy waves his rifle back and forth in quick jerky motions. I'm nervous just watching them.

"Put your weapons down. We are in charge of the scene now." we order.

A cursory look at the vehicle makes it clear they had blown a tire. There was nothing to indicate a bomb had caused the damage. We saw no cratering. No shrapnel marks. And most telling of all, as close as they were to us we never heard an explosion.

We called the tactical operations center and asked for a recovery team. The young man shot in the leg was the son of a local mayor. This complicates things. We tell the contractors we are holding their vehicle pending investigation.

They went from being scared to indignant.

There is an old myth that you can place a tree over a grave to keep evil from coming back.

Trees are hard to find in the desert.

We collect the tail cones of mortar rounds after we are attacked.

The markings tell us they are made in Iran.

The Iranians are killing us.

The Shiite Iraqi Police tell us the ones attacking us nightly are Al-Qaeda Sunnis.

With Shiite Iranian rounds?

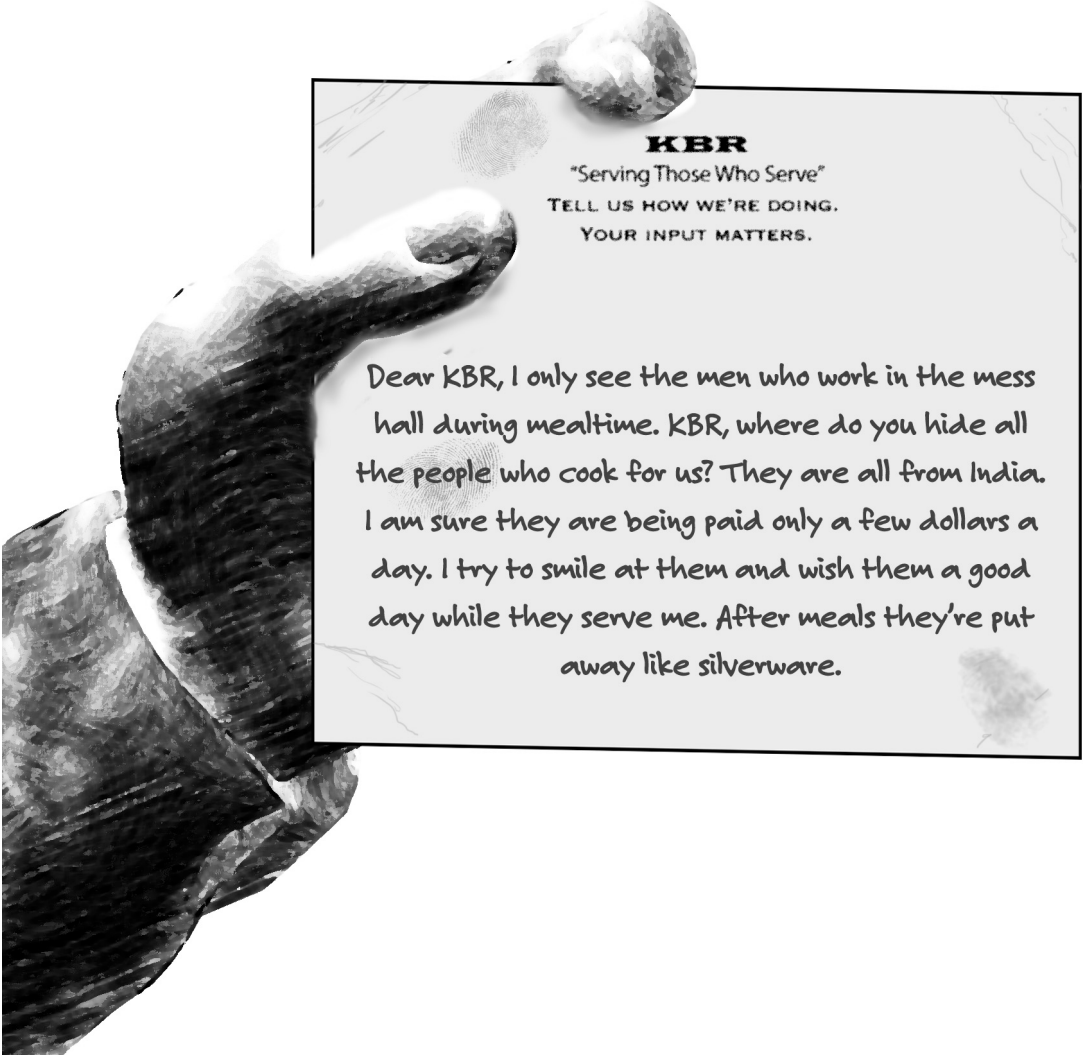
We are stuck in the middle surrounded by lies.

Wa-whoop, the earth lifts and falls violently. You fall to the undulating surface of the cool floor. The rumbling breathes in and out, hot rancid breath full of sulphur. Wa-whoop, coming down and then out, lifting the ground up into the air and scattering it about again. Realizing your legs and arms are exposed you try to tuck them in, under the trunk covered with armor. Strong hail falls on the roof and sides of the can, cracks and snaps in short succession of tumbling debris and bits of steel.

You have to make a decision to stay put or make a run for the bunker. If you run the wrong way you could be caught in the open, ripped to shreds by flying metal and chipped stone. The closest bunker is not always the best choice. Wa-whoop, you run out of the door and into the night, blinded by sudden darkness and shapes obscured by gliding, smoky haze. The sliding gravel gives way under foot, crunching and cracking along with the deafness of sound.

You run to the bunker. It is full of souls. You crouch down just inside the entrance near the dark grey of a towering T-wall, barely able to make out the twisted bodies inside. The bunker moves with dark rustling silhouettes. The anxiety is thick.

It is silent, except for a distant, quiet sob.



President Bush won't allow the media to cover the return of remains from the war. The bodies come home in aluminum cans draped with flags. A chaplain, who sees them off, tells me he thinks he is getting PTSD from the lines of caskets. He has yet to become numb, he cares too much for the dead.

The dead end up on commercial flights dispersed across the nation towards their homes. Every once in a while someone catches a glimpse of them as they are transferred to the belly of the plane. They take pictures with their cell phones and post them on social media.

Combat locks are thick pieces of metal. When engaged they hold the doors shut and are impossible to undo from the outside without a special tool. These locks come in handy when in crowded streets. No one wants to see a door suddenly opened as a grenade is tossed into the crowded compartment. So the rule is, keep them locked. Checking the doors is one of the last pre-combat checks we do before departing.

While on convoy a vehicle is struck by a roadside bomb. The truck rolls to a slow stop and immediately begins smoking. The gunner slumps over in the turret, dead or unconscious. The smoke quickly becomes dark and thick. Flames lick the undercarriage. A hand reaches up through the turret. Soldiers run to the locked doors. The door handles are so hot their gloves melt to their hands. They give up and form a perimeter to wait for the flames to die down. Everyone flinches as rounds cook off inside the truck.

They tow the truck back to camp and used the special tool to recover the five charred remains of friends.

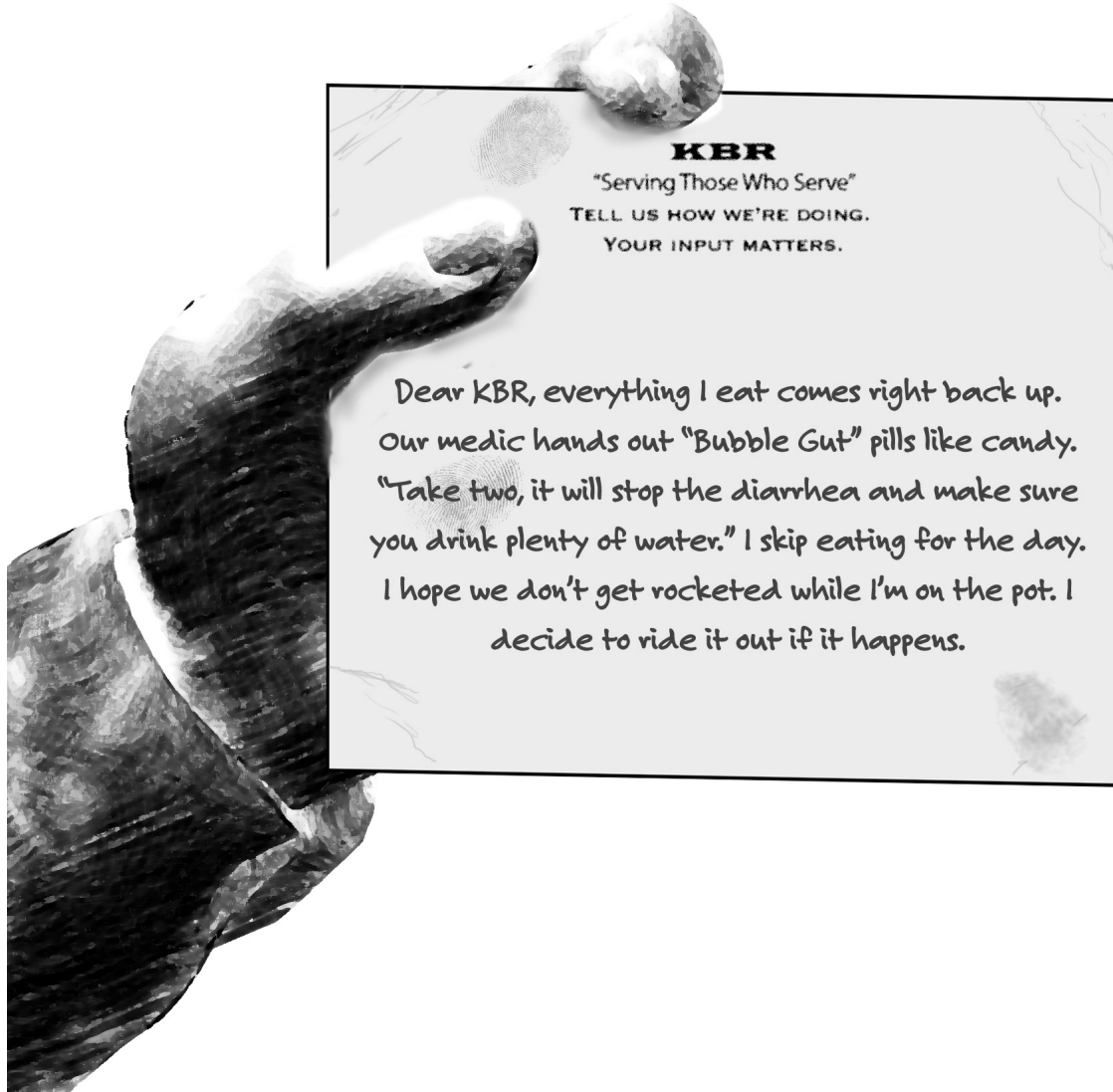
A distressed young man tells me that his wife has sold everything and disappeared with another man.

I pull him from mission to protect everyone from his pain.

I hold him close.

We work out a plan with the rear detachment to send him back. Another soldier volunteers his leave slot so we can get him on a flight. I have no words of wisdom to make him feel any better.

War seems able to destroy everything.



KBR

"Serving Those Who Serve"

TELL US HOW WE'RE DOING.

YOUR INPUT MATTERS.

Dear KBR, everything I eat comes right back up.
Our medic hands out "Bubble Gut" pills like candy.
"Take two, it will stop the diarrhea and make sure
you drink plenty of water." I skip eating for the day.
I hope we don't get rocketed while I'm on the pot. I
decide to ride it out if it happens.

In war you learn to deal with your problems through violence. If someone is not cooperating with the plan they are the enemy, so shoot them. There are no nuances to negotiations when you are the invader looking down the barrel of a gun. After months of being in that environment all normal thoughts of social interactions become strange, unpracticed.

A young soldier walks into the camp of a female soldier. She is hanging out with someone else. She gives him the cold shoulder.

He shoots and kills her and then shoots himself.

I'm texting on my computer when we come under attack. I grab my body armor and lay down on the floor. The rounds are close. I look up at the computer screen.

My wife wrote – Hello?

I quickly typed – undr atk.

I grabbed my rifle and ran to the bunker.

After the smoke cleared. We had three wounded.

I went back to my can.

My wife had written – be safe.

A few soldiers left at an outpost without proper support were taken hostage one day. This is a soldier's greatest fear. An entire task force was organized to look for them. It took a week or two to figure out where they were. A mission was organized to recover them. The entire village was booby-trapped. The soldiers were dead. Their bodies rigged with explosives. They looked like they had been horribly tortured with burn holes all over their bodies, eyes poked out, their penises cut off and stuffed inside their mouths. Three soldiers were killed while trying to recover the remains.

Anger and hatred welled up inside me. Anger can be corrosive, like an old battery whose acid has begun to leak. I was burning up from within, coming apart, losing my humanity.

Someone asked me what I thought we should do.

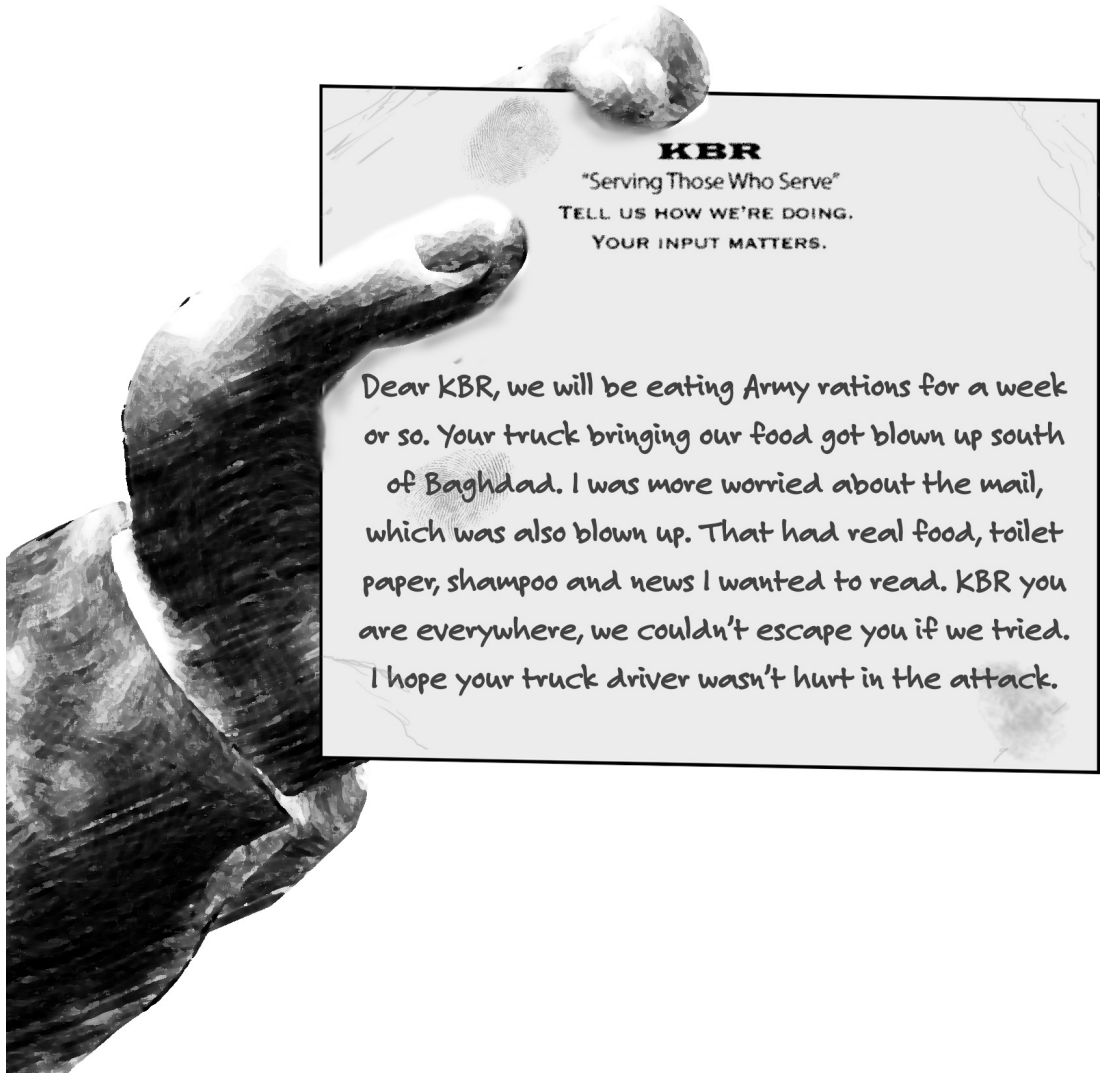
Bulldoze the entire village! Make them refugees! They all knew! They are all guilty!

My interpreter gave me a quick look of shock. He convicted me with his eyes.

Later I realized what a savage the war had made me.

"Bulldoze the village," kept coming back to me in my dreams.

There was a major in the TOC who liked to remind everyone that his dick was bigger than everyone else's. He spent his days tapping his West Point ring on the side of his plywood desk while making Power Point slides. As his tour came to a close he realized he had not earned his Combat Action Badge. To earn the badge you must engage or be engaged by the enemy. He became a CAB hunter, and decided he would go out on a mission that looked like "a sure thing." We were supporting a Special Forces raid to capture a high value target in a densely populated area. When we got there no one was home. Neighbors shot at us from their roofs while the major hid underneath his vehicle. He reminded me of a little boy just stepping out of a cold shower.



KBR
"Serving Those Who Serve"
TELL US HOW WE'RE DOING.
YOUR INPUT MATTERS.

Dear KBR, we will be eating Army rations for a week or so. Your truck bringing our food got blown up south of Baghdad. I was more worried about the mail, which was also blown up. That had real food, toilet paper, shampoo and news I wanted to read. KBR you are everywhere, we couldn't escape you if we tried. I hope your truck driver wasn't hurt in the attack.

Any time you left the wire it was a combat mission. Everyone outside the gate was the enemy. They all wanted you dead. To assume otherwise was to invite disaster.

Sometimes we would receive orders to pick up supplies or to go to a location to hear someone give a briefing.

I always wondered what would we write the loved ones back home if someone gets killed?

Your loved one died picking up toilet paper?



We receive a call one night that a mortar team was setting up to shell our camp. The lieutenant colonel decides to send out a patrol to check it out. I think it's a set up. Muslims don't tell on Muslims. No one wants to burn in hell forever. He says he trusts the caller and sends a squad out.

We place a squad on alert.

I check on my soldiers. They sit on the hoods of their trucks, smoking cigarettes, talking and laughing, oblivious to the war. Soon an explosion is followed by the crack of the radio. The lieutenant colonel wants us to recover the pieces of his men.

We cover the vehicle with a blue tarp to hide the gore. The blown out tires make it scream and moan as we drag it along.

The blood runs out through the floorboards and marks the path back to camp.

We park the vehicle in the bone yard near the gate. The bloody blue tarp and broken vehicle is the last thing we see when we leave and the first thing we see when we return.

We hold memorial services in the dirt by the truck. It continually reminds me of the lieutenant colonel's sin.

I hate it but say nothing.

The colonel will have to write the letters home.

The rocket's insides pour out across the night sky as gravity tugs it downward past my sleeping head and over the tactical operations center. It tears through the canvas roof of the moral, welfare and recreation tent crashing through the wood floor.

Awake now, like a heart attack. Why must my friend always slam his door? Fucker, I think as I stare at the ceiling waiting for my heart to calm, releasing the grasp on my body armor staged on a chair next to the bed.

The first round was a dud.

The next three were not.

EOD said they could not remove the unexploded rocket from the floor. So they poured some cement over it and told us not to worry.

So much for MWR.

A guy drives a car loaded with artillery rounds into the back of an M1 Abrams tank. For whatever reason the car fails to explode. The front of the car is stuck under the back of the tank. The rear suspension of the car is buckled under the weight of the explosives in the trunk. Explosives ordinance and demolition shows up and drives a robot up to the car. A young Iraq man stares at the robot. He is wearing a dirty wife beater t-shirt, his right wrist handcuffed to the steering wheel.

Why is he handcuffed to the steering wheel?

He looks at the camera and shakes his head, like a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar. He appears innocent. The tank drives off and he is left in the middle of the road alone.

The command contemplates the next move. Are they going to extract him from the vehicle?

He might be able to provide valuable information.

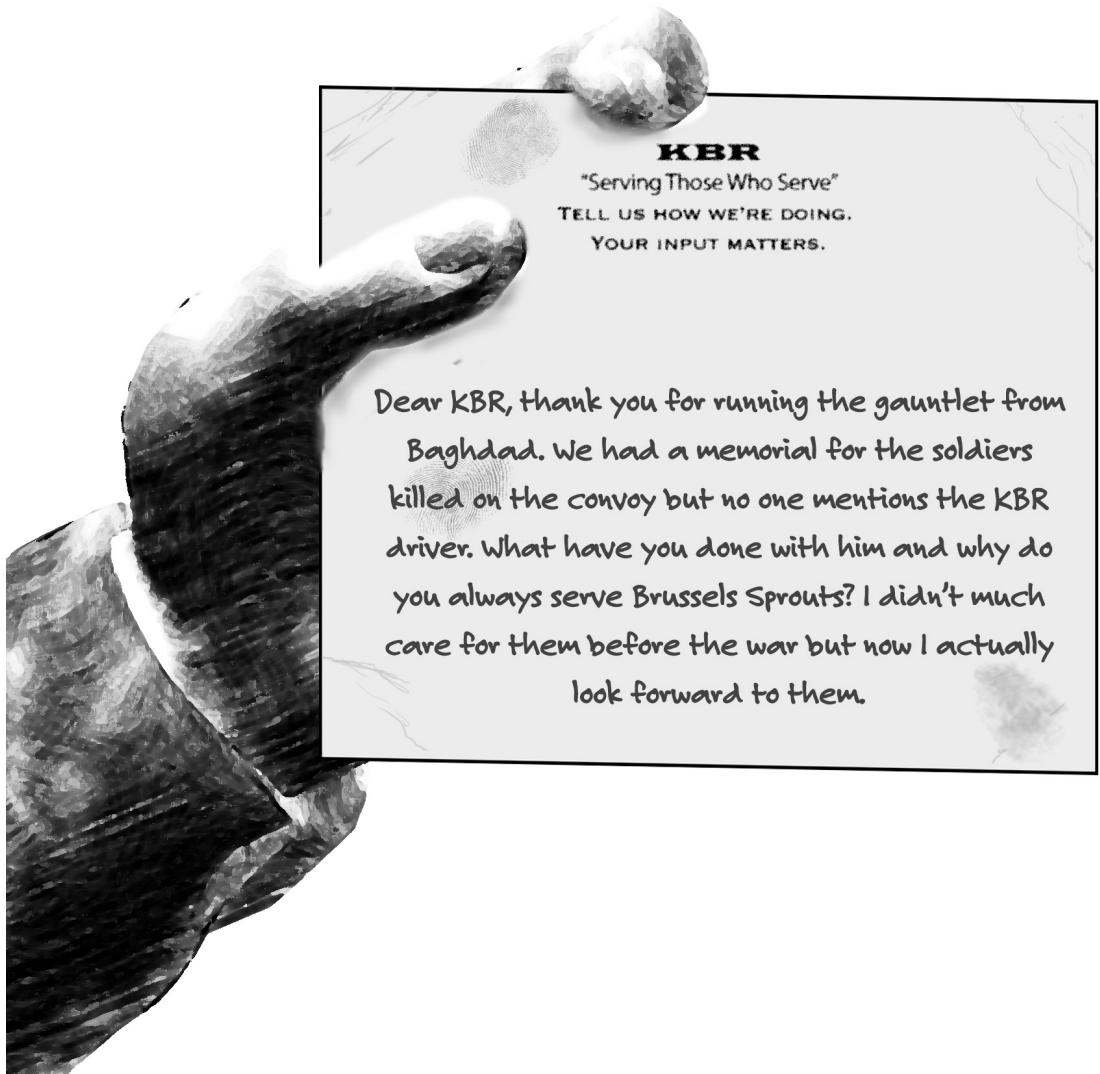
Who is going to go out and get him? No one volunteers. No one wants to be his ticket to heaven.

The tanker says, Not one fucking soldier's life is worth recovering this asshole.

He has taken it personally.

Everyone nods in agreement.

They shoot the vehicle with a HEAT^{vi} round.



KBR

"Serving Those Who Serve"

TELL US HOW WE'RE DOING.

YOUR INPUT MATTERS.

Dear KBR, thank you for running the gauntlet from Baghdad. We had a memorial for the soldiers killed on the convoy but no one mentions the KBR driver. What have you done with him and why do you always serve Brussels Sprouts? I didn't much care for them before the war but now I actually look forward to them.

Hunched over with the weight of body armor. The sweat rolling down my face collects on the tip of my nose and chin as I stare down at my dirty hands.

The stinging sweat falls like a slow rain onto my hands. Drops form silhouettes in the dirt. The sweat washes away the silky desert soil. The cracks in my skin, the lines of texture, are full of dark metallic gunpowder. Nothing seems to be able to wash these stains away.

I have sold my body to the government and the taxpayer wants war.

But I always thought I owned the deeper me. I owned my dreams, my imagination, my thoughts and humanity, my love and hatred. These dark lines are much deeper marks that won't go away. I start to doubt what I thought I owned, what I thought I had kept for myself, separate from the commodity I had sold.

Staring at my hands I can remember when the dirt was easy to wash away. I had come home from many deployments and washed myself clean. I left the dirt on the edge of the tub.

The dark lines seem so permanent. I scrub at them, but they get darker every day.

War requires total commitment, total commitment beyond the body. I have spent months trying to resist that obligation.

Sitting here staring at my hands I realize that I am failing. The dark cracks of the war seep through.

I am afraid. I can never wash them away.



Convoys on crowded streets are dangerous. The more you do, the more amped up you become. We are on convoy every day. The pressure builds up and has nowhere to go. Eventually something gives.

On the backs of our trucks are large white signs tied down over the spare tires. The red letters in Arabic say, STAY BACK 100 METERS OR YOU WILL BE SHOT. We call this the security bubble. Everyone protects the bubble, but the main responsibility falls to the 19 and 20-year-old men and women in the turrets. The rest of the squad is buttoned up behind an iron veil. The gunners describe the world they are seeing through headsets to the rest of the squad tucked beneath them.

A young private at the back of the convoy comes over the head set. "Vehicle approaching from the rear at high speed." There is stress in his voice. "He is not slowing down, looks like three people in the vehicle!" He is screaming now. "He's not stopping. He's not stopping!"

Everyone is screaming back at him, "Warning shot! Warning shot!"

There is a loud report, then three more. We are required to use a rifle for warning shots; he uses the 50-caliber machine gun. "He yells over the radio, "Vehicle down. Vehicle down!"

The security team heads to the back of the convoy. The car is smoking in the middle of the road. Every panel of the car seems to be a different color. The hood is up. His first shot must have hit the engine block. They walk to the side of the vehicle. All the windows are blown out. A man, a pregnant woman and a young girl occupy the vehicle. They are all dead.

No one knows their story, so they make one up. She was in labor. He was rushing to get her to the hospital. The air smells like blood and radiator fluid.

The gunner yells down from the turret, "Calling EOD?"

"No, we don't need EOD."

The gunner looks confused, "Why not? Why not!" He sounds frantic like before.

"They were civilians."

He looks puzzled, disbelieving, then the adrenaline begins to ease and reality creeps in. It is lonely up in the turret. He looks around for someone to console him. All he finds is the desert.

The squad leader goes back to the truck to call in murder.

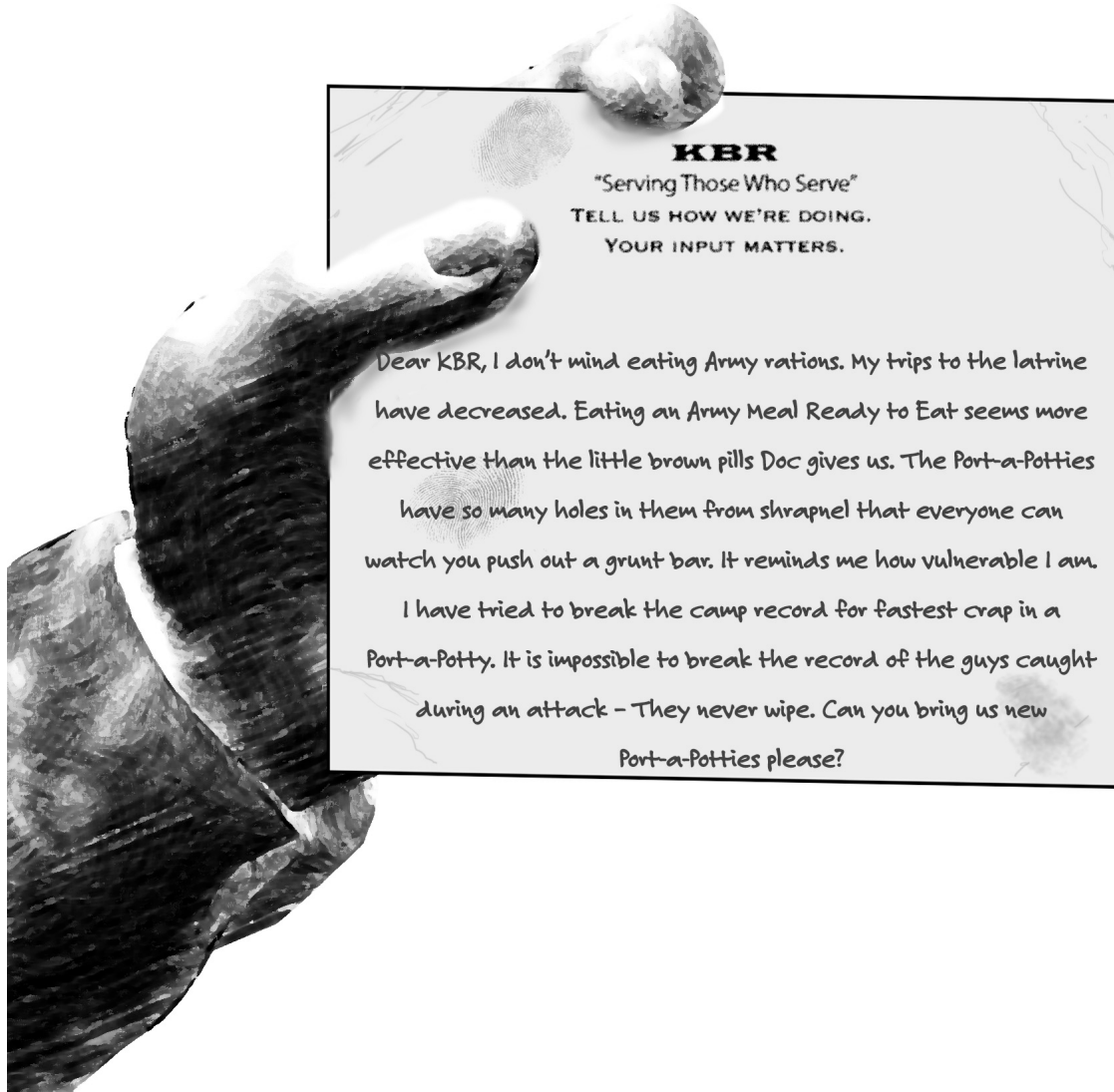


A captain from Public Affairs^{vii} was on a convoy to Baghdad International Airport, going home after a year. Halfway to Baghdad he was hit by a roadside bomb. The explosion was large and a black cloud enveloped the vehicle. The vehicle exited out of the cloud and careened across the median into oncoming traffic, hitting a bongo truck head on. Everyone in the truck was messed up. He kept asking about the other men. We lied to him and told him they were fine. The captain passed out. He woke up and asked again. We lied again.

That night while we were eating chow and watching CNN, someone pointed up to the TV. The news ticker at the bottom of the screen said, "Three soldiers die in Baghdad." The only way we could relate to the news was when one of us died. All the "real" stories they ran were propaganda fed to them by the Army. Only the deaths in the news ticker were real.

We would watch as the ticker said, "One soldier dies from a road side bomb today in Baghdad." We know there were four soldiers in the truck. All terribly burnt, arms and legs missing, many dying a few weeks or months later. We had recovered many trucks and used fire hoses to clean out the remains.

The captain made it to Germany, minus two legs, and died of infection a week later. His "after death" didn't make it on to the CNN ticker tape.



When I first met the SWAT team commander he was everything I imagined he would be. He exhibited an air of confidence that seemed almost reckless to me. I thought I would warn him with a parable. I told him, “ Even a lion is vulnerable in his den.” He laughed and his arrogance poured out. “You must catch the lion sleeping,” he said with a smile, “I never sleep.” His men chuckled and everyone went back to eating and sharing light talk.

A few weeks later we heard a loud explosion.^{viii} The radio reported it was at the SWAT headquarters. When a squad arrived to survey the scene they almost tripped over his arm. His teeth and part of his skull were stuck in the door jam.

When it rains we run to our concrete pits and wrap ourselves in rusty rebar. Here we form our covenant by the dim light of a glow stick. The rain sparkles and flashes, curious, spectacular and treacherous. Our vehicles hemorrhage from the jagged flying metal, the smell of diesel fuel mixed with cordite drifts through the air. Fire silhouettes the tall smoky clouds passing overhead, full, boiling clouds, deep and silky dark, their edges outlined in warm metallic crimson. We draw each other nearer and count heads, listening for screams amidst the thuds and sharp cracks. Mist hugs the ground. The cold concrete gives way to the storm. Hot winds touch our faces. Dust and dirt fall from the sky and bounce along the path between our hovels. We pass the time in thoughtless silence. We have endured too many tempests to imagine reasoning with it. We stare into nothingness and wait. Our familiarity with carnage leaves us only to question the length of the storm's rage. Our guest is impossible to uninvite, like the relative that drinks too much at a Christmas party. And so we endure and listen for silence. Time passes quickly. Hours become seconds as everything burns to the ground around us. We leave our pits and rub our eyes. Walking from here to there surveying the damage without contemplation. We stumble about, until we head back to bed, resting our heads in numb exhaustion on pillows stained with sweat.

We did all the heavy lifting, catching Saddam and then holding him in a secret jail below one of the large Forward Operating Bases. We turned him over to the Iraqis for the public spectacle, but we were never far away. We couldn't risk the chance of him escaping. Of course they found him guilty and sentenced him to death. We took him to the execution chamber and handed him over. Still not too far away, only hidden behind the thick chamber door.

We heard his feet kicking. One of the Iraqi guards filmed the botched execution with his cell phone, posting it for the world to see.^{ix}

KBR, Inc. Corporate Office & Headquarters
601 Jefferson St. Ste. 3400
Houston, TX 77002

Dear KBR,

I am writing you a letter because this won't fit on a comment card.

We left a small camp outside of Najaf because it had become untenable. Why did you have to have the gravel we had been walking on recovered? We organized a combat mission to escort your dump truck. No one from KBR volunteered to go with us but thank you for supplying a guy from India to drive the truck.

We got your gravel but on the way back a roadside bomb destroyed the lead vehicle.

The lieutenant was killed instantly. She was a great person that made everyone laugh.^x

The gunner lost both his legs. He is nineteen.

The driver, a young father, lost an arm and a leg.

The Iraqi interpreter lost all his limbs on the left side. He will also lose his job. The Army doesn't need crippled interpreters.

You got your gravel back.

Can you write the letters home to tell the families how much that gravel meant to you? I can't seem to find the words to tell them.

Sincerely,

A solid black rectangular redaction box covering the signature of the sender.

The first night rockets overshot us. Some soldiers laughed and joked about it. I could hear them through the wall of the barracks as I ran to the bunker, their bravado a sign of their newness.

The next night, at the same time, the rockets came again. They hit their target. A young soldier who had been joking the night before took a piece of shrapnel to the throat. He clutched at his neck as he died, drowning in his own blood.

There was no more joking during rocket attacks. The soldiers were no longer new.

You step over bodies that are nothing but bags of meat. They have no names, no histories, no one has ever loved them – nor could they. These bodies are exotic, foreign, un-owned.

We take pictures of them.

They become digital war trophies.

The rounds came in.

I found myself lying in the dirt looking at a young man who had been hit in the side of the head by a piece of shrapnel. His eye was pushed out of its socket. A young medic attended to him. Her hair was down. Why was her hair down?

The rounds came in.

Someone walked past me holding his side. Pink bubbles blew out between his fingers.

The rounds came in.

A man sat outside the bunker clutching his chest. The blood ran down his arm and dripped off his elbow.

The rounds came in.

Someone grabbed my buddy strap and pulled me into the bunker.

The rounds stopped.



We travel north, for some reason I have forgotten now, and stop at one of the larger FOB unit coffee shops. You would not call it a proper shop. The building's windows are blown out and the walls are made of dark, pitted gray concrete. Black stains travel along the walls and out the broken windows. The ceiling is a pool of soot. The place smells of soot and coffee. It is an unremarkable place except for its dankness. You cannot help but notice one spot of light, a clock from a proper bar, sent from home, neon, gaudy, misplaced, a reminder of what you are missing and can't have. The Iraqi man behind the counter offers you coffee or chia, maybe a Red Bull or pack of fake American cigarettes.

You want coffee or chia, sedigh^{xi}?

You hand him a couple of dollars and take your coffee. It swirls around in an old chipped cup, a relic from the British occupation, the rings of previous drinks still left on the lip. You find a place to sit and smoke your cigarette. On ripped torn furniture rescued from another building not as badly burnt but reeking of bad air and sweat, you sit and listen. Your friend has tea in a small glass cup. A misty sugar cloud floats at the bottom of the glass.

Two soldiers talk of another's bad luck. Wounded by a roadside bomb and then while in another convoy to the hospital, hit again. Two in one day, they laugh, unluckiest bastard in Iraq. But he lived, and his command was able to pin a Purple Heart to his chest before he left and tell him how they wished for his speedy return. That is if he is able to keep his leg, but they leave that part out.

He says he will get better and be back soon. He apologizes for his misfortune, and asks for his iPod. A good soldier to the last.

Lucky bastard, off to Landstuhl, with clean sheets and army nurses, the soldiers laugh. Maybe he will drink a beer for us, or maybe he is too fucked up and will be off to the states? Back home on free leave. Lucky bum.

They only see a way out of the war, and fail to realize he might lose a limb. Leaving has become a greater prize than an arm or a leg. It won't be that easy. The war will follow him home. He will be back in his dreams. His luck will still haunt him when a loud sound causes him to piss his pants or he sweats in a crowded room. He might get angry at just being, while he gets drunk and stares at his Purple Heart. Soon its luster will wear off and it will go in a drawer for safe keeping with the rest of his sacrifices and memories. But those memories will eventually creep out of their hiding place.

And then someone asked,

What was his name again?

I wrote a Lutheran pastor and told him I was having a hard time finding God in Iraq. I asked whether or not he could be present during war. We had been conversing on and off through email for several months. After I sent him my message I never heard from him again. I was all right with the silence.

What could I expect him to say?

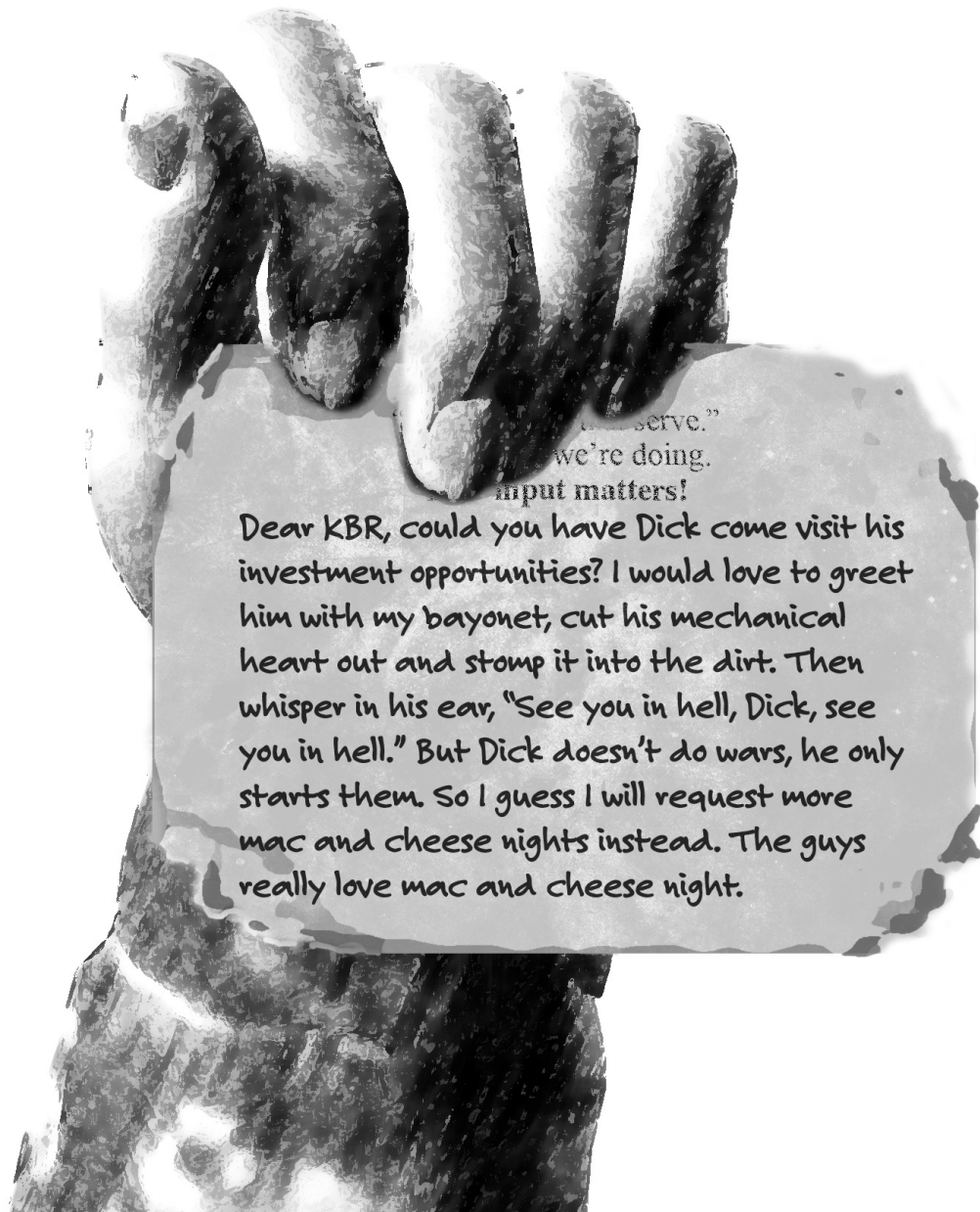
God where are you?

Why have you left me here alone?

The new guys show up to relieve us. They ask us about setting up collection points for ferrying pilgrims up to Karbala. We tell them that the pilgrimage business never turns out well for anyone. They want to contain them with barbed wire. We tell them of a fuel truck driving into a crowd of Iraqis looking for police jobs. Over a hundred were killed. Thankfully there was no barbed wire confining them or many more would have been killed. They looked at us like we were crazy.

We rotate home. A week later I saw a story of pilgrims being killed when Sunni's wearing suicide vests detonated themselves in the tightly packed crowds of Shiites waiting for buses to Karbala.

The article said they were trapped in barbed wire.



III Homecoming



First thing my son asks me when I got home was, "Did you kill anyone?"

How do you answer that?

No son, and I'm glad I didn't have to.

He seemed disappointed.

I received many wounds while I was in Iraq but was too busy, distracted or exhausted to notice.

It was only after I got home that I began to bleed to death.

When we got home –

A soldier killed his six-year-old son. Two soldiers were arrested for drunk driving. One sergeant went to jail for beating someone up at a bar. One pissed hot for meth and three were arrested for drug use. Two others attempted suicide. A soldier's wife shot herself in the head. Divorces ran rampant.

The chain of command hinted it was a case of "poor leadership".

They came home broken.

Their bits and pieces packed away in orderly rows of olive drab body bags.

They found refuge under freeway underpasses and used the bags as tents to shelter themselves from the rain.

Later the coroner reports said they died of self-inflicted wounds.

In combat time stands still.

You place your life on hold to go to war but everyone back home carries on without you.

Loved ones end up swept away by the current.

We went to Pet Smart. A beautiful black lab puppy was sitting at the end of the cage away from his brothers and sisters. He looked so solitary with dark fur and drooping ears. He watched us with round brown eyes.

My wife asked to hold him. I knew he would be going home with us. I watched her cradle him in her arms, her smiling gaze passing from him to me.

I didn't care.

I couldn't love myself anymore.

She named him Jack.

I read that Roman soldiers enlisted for ten years and that the common foot soldier was not allowed to marry and have a family. They lived for each other. They lived to fight.

It scared me when I came to the realization that these rules make perfect sense. We would be better off if we were more like the Romans.

I feel lost at home, lost to time. All of me has been reshaped by the war. The old me will never return.

At war is where I see myself, where I belong.



When I first got home I thought I could drink myself to sleep. It had always worked in the past; a few beers and off I went. I was hesitant, having not been able to drink for the last year while in Iraq. As the days and nights passed the thought of drinking became more alluring.

Nights were spent staring at the ceiling, I knew its every feature and I hated it.

My son says, "Dad you must really like beer. You drink it all the time."

I grind my teeth. I want to lash out at him.

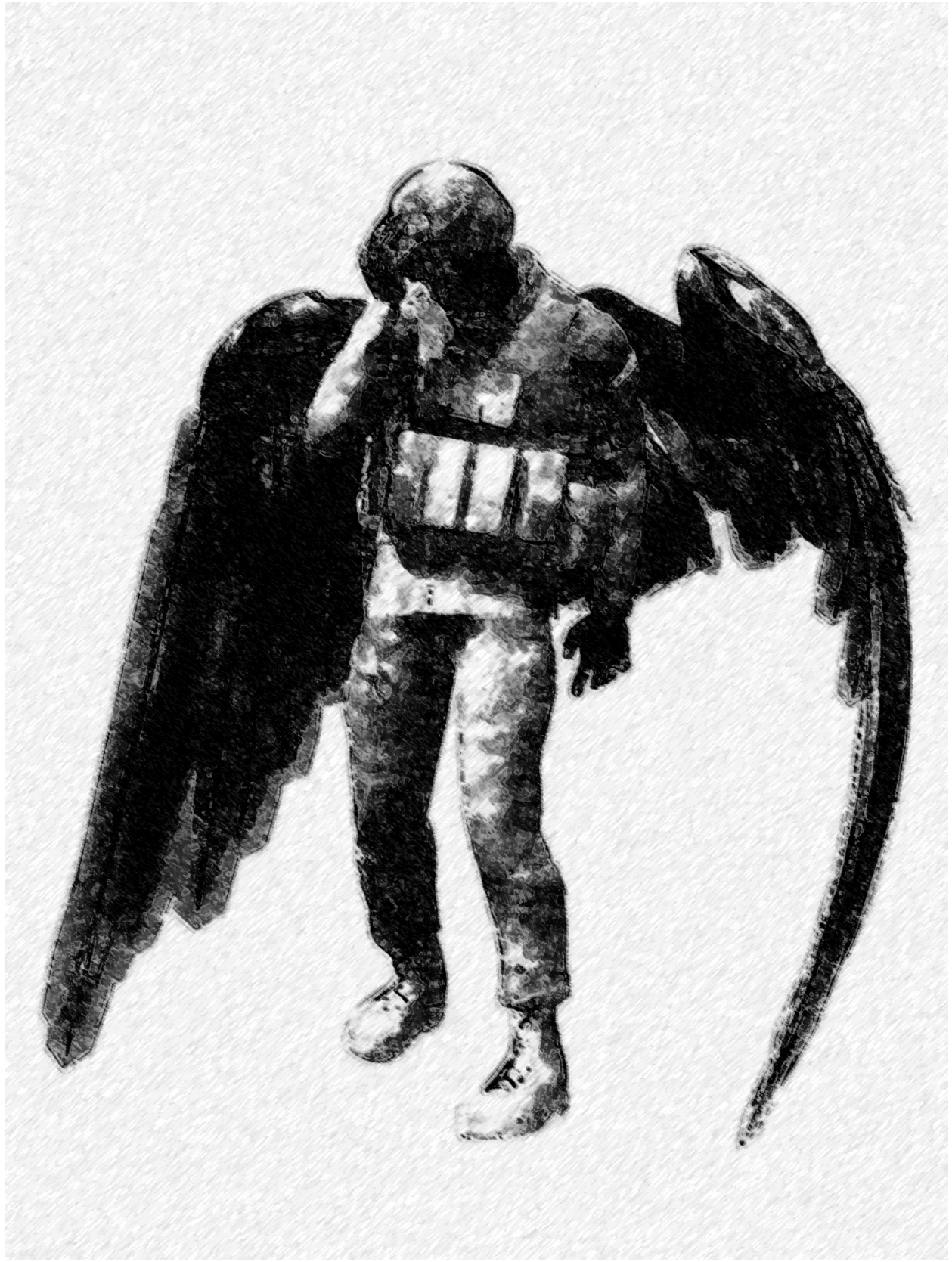
I take a deep breath. "Yep." I say as I hand him an empty beer can. "Now get me another one."

First weekend back from post deployment block leave they tell us we will be re-deploying back to Iraq in nine months. That weekend I receive a phone call late at night that one of my soldiers has been arrested off post for drunk driving. Later that week I am told that I need to bring her up to see the post command sergeant major. He did not go to war with us and had no idea what we did or saw there. I think he wants to give her a talking to.

Instead he used the time to dress me down.

He explained to me that if I had been a better leader this never would have happened. For an hour he attacked and insulted me. He then informed me he would provide the leadership she needs. He is going to make her his personal assistant. I tell him I don't think she joined the Army to be a secretary. He accuses me of "raising up" on him.

She is attractive.



He told me his story.

When he was done I pulled the blankets over his stumps.

He smiled.

I felt embarrassed with my misplaced empathy.

I couldn't understand.

He was at peace with his missing self.

We volunteered for nightmares.

A car bomb exploded, my whole body sunburned, hair pulled out by its roots, eyes punched in.

During a mortar attack, my teeth fell to the ground like Chicklets.

I see the faces of the wounded.

Some are stoic and some are not.

I don't know their names.

Because I didn't want to know them.
Now I can't forget them.

At times there is blood everywhere.
It runs down the walls.
Burnt flesh and hair.

I sat in a blacked out bunker and heard someone cry.

I told them to shut up.

I shook one of my soldiers when he lost his nerve.
We never talked about it.

So it never happened.

In the beginning of your tour the experience is unreal,
in the end it becomes routine.

The last 90 days I became bulletproof.

After coming home I felt awkward.
How I felt when we first arrived in Baghdad.

I couldn't trust anyone who hadn't gone to war.

I went from hero to a zero in 48 hours.

When people said, "Thank you for your service."

I felt sad, sometimes I cried.

Alone

Survival is more powerful than domestic bliss – but not very relaxing.

Once I woke up to my wife screaming.
Stop it!

I was punching her.
I wanted to die afterwards.

Everyone at home was a threat so I made a bunker.

I provisioned it with beer
Held myself hostage with a .357 magnum.

When my son spilled his milk.

I exploded.

A Christmas nativity made me –

sweat and shake.

I told my wife I was going to throw up.

We went home.

I got drunk.

Every day I was -----

----- farther away.

At the company I locked the bathroom door and slept on the tile floor.

I ran red lights.

Never saw them and didn't care.

No one obeys traffic signals in combat.

People do stupid things back in the world,

paying bills, waiting at red lights.

I wanted to go back to war to feel normal again

– without feelings.

My wife wanted me to come home.

She didn't like sleeping with a stranger.

I fell in love with Ambien and Hydrocodone.

They chase away the dreams.

I told myself –

When you volunteer for madness you deserve no pity.

A young officer just out of school told me he is excited to deploy to Iraq. I cautioned him. There is nothing exciting about war once you know it.

He smiled and assured me he was ready – ready to do his duty.

He was glowing.

Six months later I saw him in a wheelchair outside the Army hospital.

He was disfigured, crippled by a bomb hidden in a trashcan outside of a police station in Iraq.

His light had gone out.

I held his hand and asked if there was anything I could do for him.

No, he said as he turned his head and began to cry.

I look in the mirror
The pupils of my eyes have pushed away the color
Deep dark wells
The leftovers of the war

I tell myself
Drink the war away
Drink myself away

Red and grey skies
The leftovers of the desert on my skin

I want to return to myself
The way things used to be

I tell myself
Look harder
I must be there
Mirrors refuse to answer
My hair turns grey before my eyes
Every day is becoming harder to lift
And so I do nothing

One night I had a meltdown. On my knees crying with my arms wrapped around Jack's neck, fingers dug deep into his fur. My wife looked on in dismay.

All I have in this whole world is this dog!

This dog is all I have!

Can you understand this?

I would be alone if it wasn't for Jack!

But I wasn't alone. I had a family.

My father had labeled me, "anti-social."

I lived in the dark while everyone else was sleeping.

I liked the empty streets.

The quiet.

Jack is dark like the night.

He never left me.



I run out of sleeping pills. After a week of staring at the ceiling I made an appointment to get some more. My wife says she is coming with me. I tell the doctor my sleep cycle is still disrupted. I know all the buzzwords to get the drugs I want. He renews my prescription, but only for thirty days. Anything else, he asks?

No, I say.

Yes, my wife interrupts.

She tells him how I hide in the house and my outbursts of anger. How she is beginning to resent me. As she speaks, my façade begins to unravel. The doctor listens intently to her and glances my way. My hands begin to shake. The tremors begin to spread through my body. I need to escape. Sitting on the examination table made me feel trapped.

My wife finishes and the doctor turns to me. He speaks from the shadows. The light is so bright that the peripheries of the room are dark. He tells me he is adding another medication to my prescription.

He tells me I must talk to someone.
I tell him I can't.

If I seek help on post, someone will see me and everyone will know. I'm ashamed at my weakness. I begin to cry. The doctor stares at me and blinks. My wife reaches up to take my trembling hand. The room is silent. I try to hold back my tears with shallow gasps. The doctor leaves us alone. We say nothing. I can hear the wind blowing through the ducts. Everything appears grey. The room is a sterile wind. My emotion is too much for the space.

The doctor comes back. The sound of the opening door startles me. He hands me a paper prescription explaining I can fill it off post and a card.

Call the number on the card for confidential help, he tells me. He turns to my wife. Make sure he does this.

I stumble out to the car for the drive home.

I'm at the dinner table with my family when I hear President Obama come on the TV and announce that combat operations in Iraq are over.

I sit there for a moment quietly surveying the table.

Everyone continues to eat without pause.

My emotions swirl about as I excuse myself.

Jack follows me into the small half bath.

I feel even smaller.

My eyes fill with tears.

My wife bangs on the locked door, "Are you okay?"

"Yes I am fine."

Combat operations are not over for me.

I always dreamed about combat. It was real, or seemed real. I would awaken sweating and breathing hard. Sometimes I would wake up and find myself out of bed, stumbling around, looking for my body armor, helmet and rifle. My wife would tell me it was all right and urge me to come back to bed. She would never touch me, she was afraid of me.

This made me feel guilty and depressed.

I couldn't sleep after that.

Not really sleep.

The war continued in my dreams.



I hurt all over. I am sore all the time. My body is coming apart.

I go to the doctors and they look at me curiously. Eventually they order tests to justify their diagnosis that there is nothing wrong with me.

I think they are torturing me to prove a point.

My heart beats hard in my chest. It is a constant distraction.

My left hand continually jerks and twitches. I don't know why. The doctors notice it.

But refuse to address it.

They tell me I have a good support system and I will be all right.

One doctor asked me in a condescending tone if I was looking for disability.

I stop going to the doctors.

I inserted the muzzle of the pistol into my mouth. Something didn't seem right. I was not satisfied with the angle.

I was worried about making a mess and leaving myself alive.

I pushed the muzzle to the side of my head, pressed it hard against my temple until it hurt.

I knew it was there now.

These are the final seconds of my life.

The pressing barrel stressed the finality of what I was about to do.

Jack watching me, nudged my leg.

He whimpered.

I wept.



I am tired of patriot parades
Of marching soldiers as living gravestones
Waving flags and rousing music
Hiding terror and murder
Speeches of freedom
Justifying occupation
I am wide awake now
The sleep has fallen from my eyes

One night I had a dream.

An officer came into the room where we were stacked on top of each other in neat rows

He yelled and screamed at us to muster for a mission

I was sore and tired
My head buzzed

Younger soldiers rushed about getting ready

I moved slowly
Giving up
Lying back down on a scratchy wool blanket

My will to fight was gone

The younger soldiers scampered outside

I was left with my silence and myself

I stayed in bed. I grew my hair out

Slept for a week and dreamed

Awake now

Awake

I grew a beard

And I wrote.



Notes:

¹ AAR: After Action Review

ⁱⁱ Unit coins, also known as "Challenge Coins" are usually the size of a half dollar and have the unit heraldry as well as its motto engraved on them. When someone "challenges you" tradition dictates you present the coin. Failure to present the coin carries with it a minor punishment like buying drinks or push-ups. When presented at a memorial they are collected up and sent to the dead Soldier's family. They are given as a sign of sympathy and respect to the family.

ⁱⁱⁱ **Etymology: insurgent (n.)**

"one who rises in revolt," 1765, from Latin *insurgentem* (nominative *insurgens*), present participle of *insurgere* "rise up, rise against, revolt," from *in-* "against," or perhaps merely intensive, + *surgere* "to rise" (see **surge**). An obsolete verb *insurge* "to rise in opposition or insurrection" is attested from 1530s.

^{iv} Thawb: Long loosely fitting garment often worn by Iraqi men.

^v EML: Environmental Moral Leave. Every soldier got 14 days during their year in Iraq. Every Soldier was required to take it. We rotated Soldiers out after being there a couple of months and continued to rotate them out up to a couple of months before departure. I took mine about four months before we left.

^{vi} HEAT: High Explosive Anti-Tank

^{vii} "Fallen Heroes of Operation Iraqi Freedom." Fallen Heroes Memorial: Army Capt. Shane R. Mahaffee. 36, of Alexandria, Virginia. Mahaffee died in Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, Landstuhl, Germany, of injuries sustained on May 5, 2006, when an improvised explosive device detonated near his HMMWV during combat patrol operations in Al Hillah, Iraq. He was assigned to the Army Reserve's 489th Civil Affairs Battalion, Knoxville, Tennessee. Died on May 15, 2006.

^{viii} "Respected Leader of Iraqi Police Unit Killed in Bombing.

Al-Mamuri's comparative evenhandedness enforcing the law may have earned him an enemy within his own sect, the Shiites. Interior Minister Jawad al-Bolani called it a "possibility and a probability" that the assassination was at least in part an inside job, because the killer gained access to al-Mamuri's office to plant the bomb.

It was rumored that the Prime Minister wanted him dead because he didn't support the Shia Militias. The Iraqis claimed it was Al-Qaeda.

^{ix} "Bush: Saddam Hanging Botched - USATODAY.com." January 17, 2007. President Bush on Tuesday criticized the handling of Saddam Hussein's execution, saying it

looked like "kind of a revenge killing" that had eroded the American public's faith in the Iraqi government.

^x "West Point Mourns a Font Of Energy, Laid to Rest by War." Washington Post. September 27, 2006.

^{xi} Sedigh: Friend in Arabic