

2019

No Man's Land

Jesse Daniel Durovey

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Durovey, Jesse Daniel, "No Man's Land" (2019). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 11364.
<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/11364>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

NO MAN'S LAND

By

JESSE DANIEL DUROVEY

Bachelor of Arts, St. Mary's University, San Antonio, Texas, 2016
Associate of Arts, Northwest Vista College, San Antonio, Texas, 2014

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Arts
in Creative Writing, Fiction

The University of Montana
Missoula, MT

Official Graduation Date May 2019

Approved by:

Scott Whittenburg, Dean of The Graduate School
Graduate School

Deirdre McNamer, Chair
English

Kevin Canty
English

Tobin Addington
Media Arts

For my father.

Shrapnel

I can't remember his real name, but I met Stump in the summer of 2008, during the height of the Haqqani-network's activity in Southern Afghanistan. Stump probably can't remember his real name either, after so many years rotting in the Guantanamo Bay detention facility. That summer, an Apache gunship caught Stump and a group of about 50 military-aged males crossing the Af-Pak border. The Apache lit up the whole group with its rotary guns. Mansour sent me the video clip the next morning, then he walked across the makeshift operations floor to watch it with me.

"Pew-pew!" Mansour said, pointing his index finger at the images on the screen.

"Grow up," I said, as Mansour blew imaginary smoke off his imaginary gun.

"Can't grow up, Sarge," Mansour said. "What I've got is terminal."

"You can say that again," I said, without taking my eyes off the screen.

The images there were surreal. The Apache's thermal camera washed out the rocky terrain, painting everything an antiseptic gray. Except the people. They glowed as if they were radioactive, though the gunship soon took care of that. The bodies cooled quickly, the camera making it seem so sanitary—flicking off a switch. Except Stump wasn't ready to be turned off. Amid the dead and dying, lying on the blood-stained earth, his left arm torn to shreds, Stump's struggle to survive played out before my eyes.

"Looks like one made it. Is he coming our way?"

"You guessed it," Mansour said. "The video is a couple weeks old. QRF picked him up a few minutes after the Apache lit them up. They found a cache down the trail containing weapons and some Paki Inter-Services Intelligence IDs. They think this guy might be the real deal."

"No shit?"

“No shit,” Mansour said. “They’re calling him ‘Stump.’”

At that time, Pakistan was our sworn ally in this global war on terror. They let us fly drones along the contested border region, albeit begrudgingly. Whenever a Hellfire missile killed a few back-country tribespeople, the Pakistani government kept their complaints to a minimum. They generally supported our stated goals of a free and democratic Afghanistan. However, as the war trudged along and more players stepped onto the field, Pakistan's cooperation with the United States was beginning to cost them with their neighboring allies. CIA briefings warned of a Pakistani ISI presence in the Haqqani network, that the Pakistanis were devoting time and money toward training and equipping Taliban fighters. Their specialty was infiltrating the Afghan Army and attacking US bases. If Stump was ISI or could point directly to their involvement, it would change the war—though the question of "how?" was a bit above my pay grade.

Mansour and I left the plywood ops building and walked to the smoke pit out back. Dawn was just beginning to color the horizon. The clouds were bruised and purpling, and the rocky landscape was bathed in a tepid half-light. I was an Army interrogator and Pashto linguist working for ISAF, the International Security Assistance Force, in Afghanistan. Though, technically, I was working for a much more clandestine outfit not quite under ISAF’s purview. It was my job to try to get intel out of high-value targets, to try to break down men who had survived decades of strife and war. It wasn’t easy.

Mansour worked as an analyst. He was fluent in Arabic, Farsi, and Pashto, and was probably the smartest, most irreverent son of a bitch I’d ever met. His antics kept us sane during the long days and nights as we waited for the mortars to drop like long-distance Russian roulette. Most shifts, we just tried to stay awake by bullshitting—trading jokes or talking about girls back

home, maybe even watching a movie or browsing some porn from the task force's share-drive. Whatever helped to pass the time. Seven months in Afghanistan and war was beginning to feel like some sick, extended version of Groundhog Day, only with more shooting.

I lit a cigarette and breathed in deeply.

Mansour took a pack of smokes from his shoulder pocket. "Hey, Sarge, my lighter's dead—can I get a monkey fuck?"

I nodded and held out my lit butt so he could use it to fire up his cigarette. He took a drag, and I saw him wrinkle his nose as the smell of burning feces and garbage wafted toward us.

"Who the fuck burns the latrines out before the officers take their morning enemas?" Mansour said.

"No one knows how to throw a party like the US Army."

"You telling me that you don't you burn your shit at home?" Mansour said.

"Only if I've been eating your mom's cooking."

It was seldom truly quiet in our little corner of the war. Every few nights the incoming fire alarm would go off, triggered by some bored Taliban fighters shooting into the base with mortars or rocket-propelled grenades. Like as not, they wouldn't hit anything, but sometimes they'd get lucky. The attacks never seemed like some cunning enemy probing our strength. At most, the occasional collapsed hooch or Green Beans coffee shop seemed like the result of lucky potshots, and seldom was anybody hurt or killed. Still, it made me feel like a deer in the crosshairs of a hunter's scope, or like the ant beneath a kid's magnifying glass.

As we smoked, a battered white Mercedes van crunched across the gravel behind the smoke shack. I turned to look and saw a soldier—probably a new guard here for the duration—

exit the van wearing a rucksack, followed by a prisoner in chains. Two more soldiers exited the van, shoving the prisoner toward the detention facility.

I squinted to look past the glare from the van's headlights. The prisoner was short, a bit thick through the middle, but his shoulders looked powerful—at least the one that was still there. He wore a black bag over his head, and the left sleeve of his jumpsuit was rolled inside to keep it from flopping loose. His right arm was handcuffed to a tight chain, which was attached to another set of manacles on his right leg. When he walked, it was in a hunched, off-centered shuffle, like he was doing the Monster Mash.

One of the guards shoved the prisoner hard, and the hooded man stumbled over the gravel on his blind march to the cells below the ops building. “Let’s move, motherfucker,” the guard said, breathing heavily.

Mansour nudged my shoulder. "Is that the guest of honor?"

"Yep. That's gotta be Stump."

I watched Stump shuffle awkwardly into the building. I wondered if he was connected to the Pakistani ISI documents, or if he was just some poor asshole in the wrong place at the wrong time, unaware that he had a date with an Apache gunship in his future. What a future it was too. Any chance at hugging his family or enjoying a hot cup of chai had disappeared the instant the helicopter had strafed that mountaintop with rockets and automatic gunfire—a group of hard, unforgiving men fast-roping from a Black Hawk helicopter and tearing his world apart with rough hands. I wondered if he had committed some offense, or if his world was simply swallowed up by our counter-terrorism task force for something as simple as a wrong number in his cell phone’s call log.

I turned to see the new soldier with the rucksack walking toward us, digging in his pocket for his smokes.

“How’s it going?” I said as I field stripped my cigarette and placed the butt in the overflowing ash can.

“Not too bad,” the soldier said. “My name’s Specialist Erickson. I just flew in from Bagram. I’m the new guard.”

“Welcome to Salerno. I’m Sergeant Hart, and this is Specialist Mansour,” I said and then shook his hand. “You’ll want to report to Staff Sergeant Wheeler. He’s in charge of the guard rotations. They’ve been working double-duty here since Private Gonzales broke his leg.”

“I’m ready to go, Sarge,” Erickson said, his eyes wide and red-rimmed, like he’d just taken a hit of amphetamines. “I mean, I’m a fucking sheepdog, Sarge. I swear I was just wired to run toward the sound of gunfire. Hell, that’s why I signed up. I just wish we’d get more kinetic on these Hajji assholes. I’m ready to kill some of these GAPO-smelling motherfuckers, you know?”

The silence after Erickson's words wrapped the three of us in its awkward embrace. His enthusiasm seemed like caffeine-fueled, stress-induced jitters, but I also considered that he just might be an asshole. I looked at him out of the corner of my eyes. He was a good-looking kid—or would be if he didn’t have such a cruel mouth and hard eyes. He seemed to perpetually smirk, even when he lit up a menthol cigarette and blew the smoke out of the corner of his mouth.

“Yeah, you’re a goddamn hero,” Mansour said, finally breaking the silence.

“What’s that?” Erickson glanced at Mansour in the smoke shack but couldn’t hold the analyst’s dark gaze.

“Staff Sergeant Wheeler would probably like to know that you’re here, Specialist. You should finish your smoke and go see him ASAP,” I said.

“You bet, Sarge,” Erickson said, putting his head down and scuffing his boot against the gravel. He crushed his cigarette against one of the smoke shack’s wooden posts, then he shouldered his rucksack and walked toward the guard tower entrance.

Mansour glared darkly at Erickson’s retreating figure. I wondered what my friend was thinking, but, instead of asking, I waved and said goodnight. I wanted to be there for Stump's in-processing, to get a look at the man who might shift international strategy with his mere presence.

I walked into the guard shack, down the stairs to the small cell block, and into a small office full of computer screens. On the monitors, I watched the live feed as the guards removed the handcuffs from Stump's wrist and ankle and stripped off his jumpsuit. Stump tried to cover his genitals awkwardly with his one hand. One of the guards said something, and Stump put his hand by his side. They photographed his body, cataloguing his many scars and blemishes, the small tattoo of a woman’s name on his left hip.

I looked at Stump's face, which was small and blurry in the camera feed, but I could make out a wide, pale face obscured by a tangle of thick black hair. His beard sprouted heavily, leaving a small patch of skin at his mouth and eyes. He looked old. He looked tired.

Next on the agenda, Stump would be doused with cold water and lice powder, then stuffed into a new jumpsuit and allowed 12-or-so hours to decompress—whatever the fuck that meant. It was just the first step in breaking men down. The isolation and fear had been effective strategies in Iraq and had netted a lot of great intel. Afghans were different, though, and so was

the war here. These people took their secrets to the grave. They'd learned their lessons from the Soviets. We hadn't.

I left the ops building and walked into the darkness. Salerno operated under strict light discipline to help fend off the looming threat of mortar attacks. Keeping the base as dark as possible—just a few perimeter lights shining out into the rocky terrain—made the Taliban fighters effectively blind. They would have no idea if they were aiming at a bunkhouse or tent full of troops or an empty supply shed. It was eighty-four paces to my hooch, darkness or shine. I opened the door and sat on my bunk. From the back of the room, behind the makeshift curtain that separated my bunk from Mansour's, I could see the dull glow of an alarm clock.

I was exhausted, and I just wanted some sleep before I started reading the briefings on Stump's capture and field interrogation. I flopped down on my bunk and kicked off my boots. I could feel sleep weighing heavily on my eyelids, but I kept thinking about Erickson's bravado, about Mansour's dark look, and about Stump's missing arm. Erickson might believe he was a sheepdog, but Afghanistan had taught me that there was no such thing as harmless sheep. Everyone had teeth. One wrong move and you'd get bit.

The sun was just beginning to peak through the hastily sealed windows of my hooch when I fell asleep.

*

A few hours later, I woke in the stifling heat of my plywood hooch. I looked at my watch: nearly 1400 hours. If I hurried, I could still grab a smoke and then eat lunch before the chow hall closed. I washed up with a few baby wipes; a shower would have to wait until after I ate. I opened the door to my hooch into the oppressive sunlight. Here, everything reflected heat

and light, and it was easy to go snow blind without a sturdy pair of sunglasses. Even with my Oakleys on, I still had to squint and keep my eyes to the shadows.

Mansour joined me outside, lit a cigarette with a new Bic he had retrieved from his stash and smirked at me through the filter clamped into his mouth. “Kill anyone yet?” he said.

“Nah, I need some of that sweet nectar from the chow hall before I let 'er rip,” I said.

“Let’s go live dangerously, then,” Mansour said.

“I just have one question,” I said, as we walked in the direction of the dining facility.

“What the hell is GAPO?”

Mansour burst out laughing. “Gorilla armpit odor.”

The dining facility was small, forcing a line of soldiers and civilian personnel to loop serpentine around the front of the building. We braved the line, got our food and sat at an empty table against the far wall, a group of Rangers eating loudly and trading jokes sat to our front. A handful of Navy SEALs sat in the corner to our left, chewing slowly and without regard for the crumbs that gathered in their long red and black beards.

When we finished eating, Mansour leaned toward me. “So, I have this theory. You ever notice how all these Spec-Ops dudes look alike?” he said.

I shrugged and smiled as he continued whispering.

“I mean, the Rangers all look like kids, right?” he whispered.

“Yeah, if kids eat protein shakes and steroids every other meal,” I said.

“No doubt. Look at those SEALs—that one looks like the love-child of an Irishman and a Grizzly bear,” Mansour said, covertly pointing out a Chief Petty Officer with small, dark eyes above the line of his beard.

I almost choked on my food.

He had a point. The SEALs were badasses, sure, but I didn't think they were all that scary to look at. I reserved that judgment for the Delta operators and the civilian blacker-than-black ops who viewed warzones as well-paid, tax-free incentivized vacations. They walked around wearing their khakis and beards, their faces as expressionless as wax sculptures behind their blackout sunglasses. We hadn't seen any of the D-boys in Salerno yet, but we'd worked with them in Iraq. We'd accompanied them "behind the wire" to capture and kill high-value targets, or HVTs. The mission was physically and emotionally draining, but sometimes it seemed worthwhile. Other times it left me pale and shaking as if I'd been awakened from a fever dream to find the room on fire. We'd seen grown men using children as human shields while opening up with AK-47s, and we'd seen the aftermath of suicide bombers in a crowded Baghdad marketplace—the patina of blood and viscera that dotted the edge of the smoking craters would haunt my Ambien-shrouded dreams forever.

"So," Mansour said as he peeled an orange, "guess who I ran into at the Green Bean this morning?"

"Hold on a second, you never finished telling me your theory." I glanced at him over the rim of my coffee cup and took a sip of the scalding brew.

"Forget that theory, because I happened to see a certain Captain Margot Crozier, looking quite resplendent in her scrubs—only a few spatters of blood," Mansour said.

"Oh, yeah? What did she have to say?"

"Just that she was ready to handle your proctology exam. She said she was going to make you look like a camouflage-colored hand puppet," he said.

"Fuck off," I said.

“Come on—are you finally going to admit that you two were fooling around?” Mansour asked.

“Never. Besides, that would be fraternization,” I said and winked.

Some things I wouldn't discuss, not even with Mansour. Margot and I had a long history stretched out over many deployments. Still, we never seemed to find each other in the same place for more than a few months. She was great. Really funny, lots of fun in the sack, but it just never seemed to work out between us. It'd been a year since the last time we'd seen each other, after which the emails and calls tapered off. That's probably why I didn't have a clue she was coming to Salerno.

Mansour threw a bit of orange peel at me. “Please. She left your heart looking like a manatee at a boat race. You're probably going to cut off your toe just to visit the clinic.”

“If anything, I'm going to sew your lips shut then escort you over to the clinic so Margot can make the operation permanent—”

“Hey, Sarge,” An already too familiar voice called from across the crowded chow hall.

I heard Mansour groan into his coffee cup as Erickson approached with a tray filled with baked chicken, broccoli, and red potatoes. He sat next to me and proceeded to shovel food into his mouth, washing it all down with gulps of Gatorade.

“You sure you're okay sitting at the same table as a brown guy, hero?” Mansour asked.

Erickson looked up, a smear of ketchup at the corner of his mouth. “What do you mean by that?” he said.

Erickson's hair was buzzed so short that I could see the pink flesh of his scalp. His head was long and angular with a prominent nose and wide-set eyes as hard and sharp as jade stones.

“Don’t mind him, Erickson. Mansour is just a little belt-fed before he finishes his coffee,” I said, shooting Mansour a stern look.

“This your first deployment, Specialist Erickson?” I said.

He nodded, sucking food away from his gums. “Yes, Sergeant. I was up at Bagram for the past month—mostly pulling guard duty and running errands. I really wish I could get behind the wire and kill some of these fuckin’ hajjis instead of sitting in a guard shack all day.”

Mansour shook the table as he stood. Erickson stared at him, a wad of food bulging against his cheek.

“Grow the fuck up, Erickson,” Mansour said, then he marched away, hurling his food rubbish into the trash cans by the exit sign.

Erickson and I watched Mansour until he shoved against the crash bar and marched into the blazing afternoon. When Erickson turned back to me, he still had a lump of food swimming inside his jaw.

“What the hell is his problem?” Erickson asked.

“I’m sure your commentary had nothing to do with it. Mansour just isn’t fond of the suggestion that Muslim equals bad guy,” I said.

Erickson looked at me blankly. “Then who are we here to fight?”

Stump's arrival had made my own thoughts in that area murkier than I would like. I didn’t know what else to say. I shook my head and turned my attention back to my coffee cup, wishing that caffeine could solve all of war’s complexities.

*

I grabbed a shower and changed into green Dickies and a collared shirt. Current SOPs stated that interrogators should wear civilian clothes during interrogations to ensure prisoners

stayed ignorant of name, rank, and unit. I walked to the ops building, stopping at my desk to spend a few minutes to read up on Stump—what little info there was—before heading down to the interrogation room.

I stopped at the video monitoring room. Sergeant Weems, a brunette from Missouri with a small star tattooed behind her left ear, and Erickson were inside going over a few of the field manuals.

"Hey, guys," I said. "Any changes with Stump?"

"Hey, Sarge," Weems said, snapping her gum. "Not much to report. He's pretty much been lying on his bunk since he finished in-processing."

"Yeah, I think he was jerking his dick beneath the covers a while ago," Erickson said, rolling his wrist around obscenely.

"Good to know," I said, glancing at the monitor. I saw Weems make a face out of the corner of my eye.

Stump was there on the tiny mattress: a misshapen blob beneath the wool blanket, just a cap of dark hair that looked like a nesting tarantula emerging from beneath the covers. The psychological interrogation process was multi-faceted. The prisoners' cells were monitored 24/7, and the lights were never turned off. The only true privacy any of them got were the ten-minute, twice-daily latrine breaks. I could always tell when a prisoner had used the portable toilet before me because the toilet paper roll would be missing—like as not thrown down into the foul stew of piss and shit at the bottom of the latrine. The guards all thought it was hilarious that Afghans didn't seem to understand the concept of toilet paper.

"Can you get him set up in the interrogation room?" I said.

"No problem," Weems said. "It'll give me the chance to train Erickson on interrogation room procedures."

"Thanks, guys," I said, walking to the break room to grab some tea.

When I walked into the small interrogation room, a space not much bigger than a broom closet, Stump was sitting on the wooden bench. He looked like a balloon a few days after a birthday party, deflated and sinking toward the floor. His jumpsuit hung loose, his hair and beard were in disarray, and the bags under his eyes were a deep purple. I didn't believe that he'd slept since his capture.

I grabbed the folding chair from against the wall and sat close to him. That was one of the hardest things to get used to when interrogating—or even speaking to—Afghans, though the same held true with people from Iraq and Pakistan. Personal space was sacred to Americans but, to Afghans, being physically close meant trust, security, and understanding. Sitting there, my knee touching his, close enough that I could smell his body odor, was just another interrogation tactic.

"Hello," I said in Pashto.

Stump refused to look at me. He just kept his eyes on the floor and leaned away from me.

"Maybe we should try English. ISI still makes sure you guys are fluent, right?"

He kept his eyes on the floor, but his lips formed into a tight smile.

"Have you ever seen *Star Wars*?" I said. "If you cooperate, we could get you a top of the line prosthetic, just like Luke Skywalker."

Stump laughed. "Is this where you ask me to join the dark side?"

"Not so much, but I do want to know what you know about Afghan soldiers attacking American bases," I said.

“I don’t know anything about that,” Stump said, avoiding my eye contact and scooting his leg away from me.

Despite my training, I was growing impatient. So much was at stake to get this asshole to talk, and he just kept smirking down at the floor.

“This doesn’t have to be difficult,” I said as I squeezed his shoulder, “If you cooperate you can be moved to a more comfortable cell, spend some time outside, maybe get you some more frequent medical attention for that arm.”

Then, he looked at me, and I could see tiny, red veins threaded through the whites of his eyes. In clear, unbroken English, he said, “You can’t buy me off, but come back and see me tomorrow. We’ll talk more *Star Wars*, then.”

I could feel his eyes following me as I left the interrogation room.

*

I pushed open the door to the clinic and stepped into the small, plywood foyer. A high shelf stood against the wall, filled with blue plastic tubs, the contents labeled in black permanent marker. Like any military treatment facility, the clinic kept all the stuff soldiers wanted but didn’t need an appointment to get: Tylenol, mouthguards, low-dose NSAIDs, cotton swabs and Q-tips. At eye-level, condoms and hand sanitizer were given a place of honor. I’d once heard it said that an army marched on its stomach, but that the top priority, after food, for keeping up morale was getting the troops their mail. I supposed there was truth to that, but the medical staff knew they had to prioritize safe sex and sanitation above all else. Margot had once told me—her idea of pillow talk—that more soldiers leave the battlefield because of pregnancy, STDs, and infectious diseases than any other reasons, including gunshots and explosions.

I was standing there, trying to decide what to do, when the curtain separating the foyer from the clinic floor moved and Margot walked out. She was dressed in a pair of green scrubs, her hair shaped into a bun behind her head. Her dark-framed glasses accentuated her large, blue eyes, the corners of which crinkled up when she saw me.

"Hey," Margot said.

"Hey yourself."

"I just got off my shift," she said. "Want to walk me home?"

"You bet."

I held the door open and walked in step with her. It was getting dark, the western horizon striped with sun-spangled clouds and wispy contrails. Margot walked close to me, so close I could feel the warmth radiating from her arm.

Margot's hooch was a few hundred feet down the gravel road from the clinic. She stopped by the door and turned to face me. "Well," she said, "this is me."

I nodded. "It's been awhile, huh?"

"Yes, it has. Looks like you're doing well," she said. "They've even got you in big boy clothes, now." She made a show of looking at me from head to toe.

"You like?"

"You know that I normally like a man in uniform, but it's nice to see you dressing yourself for a change," Margot said.

"You seeing anybody?"

She shrugged. "Sort of. Not really. I don't know. Things are always so crazy-busy, you know?"

"I know just what you mean."

“I see you, right now, if that helps,” she said, and punched me gently in the ribs.

I couldn't look her in the eyes any longer. All the uncertainty—of the war, the soldiers around me, that feeling like Afghanistan was a separate fucking universe—piled on top of me. I wanted answers—clear-cut and unfiltered. I wanted to put my feet up on my coffee table and drink a beer. I wanted to go home.

Margot nudged me with her foot. “You still there?”

I looked at her and caught the last glare of the setting sun reflecting off her glasses. As she pulled me inside her hooch, I couldn't help but think that there was still some beauty here—if you knew where to look.

*

Later, I found Mansour by the smoke pit. He lifted his hand in greeting, the smoke from his cigarette drifting upward like incense.

"You all right?" I said.

"Yeah, yeah. I shouldn't have yelled at the kid in the chow hall. I'm sure he doesn't mean anything by it. I took a shit and read some *Mein Kampf* so I could understand his worldview," Mansour said.

"That bad, huh?" I said.

He shrugged, closed his eyes and pulled on his cigarette.

“On a positive note, the book doubles as toilet paper,” Mansour said.

"The lines shouldn't get this blurry," I said.

"Maybe it's good that they're blurry," Mansour said, "Keeps us on our toes."

I reached over and grabbed his cigarette. "You want me to talk to Erickson—tell him to chill the fuck out?" I took a drag and handed the smoke back to Mansour.

"Nah. It's not like this is the first time I've dealt with this bullshit. It seems like every redneck out there believes that just because I own a Koran and have brown skin, then I must be trying to get my pilot license and planning trips to New York."

I looked at Mansour as he smoked. I knew I would never understand his burden. I had felt scorn and fear emanating from the eyes of Afghan men and women as we patrolled their villages. Felt their dread and anger when their children clambered after our vehicles begging for candy and MREs. Mansour carried that same weight of their fear and hate, yet he also dealt with jeers and insults from his fellow soldiers because of his skin, his name, and his god.

"Besides," Mansour said, "I know that Erickson, as douche as he is, wouldn't hesitate to take a bullet for me. He might be an ignorant son of a bitch, but he's still a battle buddy."

"How about you? Would you take a bullet for him?" I said.

Mansour pursed his lips at me, blowing smoke out of his nostrils. "Do you really have to ask me that?"

*

That evening, I sat in a camp chair against the side of my hooch and looked up at the Afghan sky. Mansour had a Skype call scheduled with his family in the small internet café near the Green Bean, and I was alone. I heard the haunting and melodic *Azan*, the Muslim call to *Isha'a*, or nightly prayers. The quavering call filled the valley, barely audible but seeming to come from everywhere at once. I had never believed in anything—not God, Allah, or even healing magnets—but I did believe that the *Azan* was one of the most beautiful and soul-wrenching calls I had ever heard. Especially within the solitude of the Afghan darkness.

My uncertainty would not leave me, even as I fell asleep on my bunk. My father visited me in my dreams, his face ruddy, full-fleshed and healthy—like he was before the cancer that

had riddled his body. His eyes beamed at me, and they carried no scars from the horrors he had witnessed during the Tet Offensive in Vietnam. He was watching me graduate from boot camp, and I saw pride in his eyes as we marched in the parade to the beat of the Army band. Yet, as he watched me salute the Post Commander, I thought I saw his eyes cloud with grief—or maybe it was just the sun in his eyes. My father rose to his feet and shouted at me, but his voice came out in muffled coughs and barks beneath the brass ensemble. The band continued to play, but the music grew discordant, turning to a piercing wail in my ears.

I woke to the sound of the indirect fire alarm and Mansour kicking my bunk. I rolled to my feet and scrambled into my clothes—not even bothering to lace my boots. I strapped on my 9mm pistol while Mansour shoved my M4 carbine into my chest. We ran out the door past the HESCO barriers as a voice came over the base loudspeakers telling base personnel to shelter in place and put on their body armor.

I saw a rocket impact just outside of the enclosure of our camp, striking a hut and collapsing the roof with a flash of light and dust. Small arms fire peppered the night, and muzzle flashes winked like fireflies to the west. I saw a gout of flame erupt from a guard tower as a soldier with a Squad Automatic Weapon fired into the darkness.

We found cover at the edge of the base and returned fire. I saw Erickson by himself near the guard tower, firing blindly from behind a berm. He wasn't looking in the direction he was shooting, and I thought I saw tears streaming down his face in the light of the muzzle flashes and explosions. I screamed at him to fire to the west but, with the ringing in my ears, I wasn't sure he heard. He didn't even look in my direction.

There was no warning when the attackers breached the perimeter. The fighting only grew closer and more chaotic. A man wearing a tunic and bandoliers charged at me, bulldozing me to

the ground and knocking my rifle away. I grabbed him by the beard and drove my combat knife under his armpit over and over again. His bearded face stared at me in shock. His final, fetid breath caressed my face and neck as he died on top of me.

I struggled to push the body off me, and I saw Mansour on his feet, walking forward as he fired his rifle. I think his rifle must have jammed, because he stopped shooting, threw his rifle to the ground, and sprinted directly at an insurgent who was running toward our position.

The heat and noise of the explosion sucked all the words from my throat, and my scream died with Mansour as he tackled the insurgent. My face and chest felt scraped raw, and my world shrank to the size of a pinhole as the concussion of the blast made me momentarily black out.

I came to as Black Hawk helicopters roared overhead, their mini-guns tearing into the Taliban positions still outside our perimeter, the 7.62 mm rounds grinding the attackers to hamburger. I kneeled in the dirt, bleeding and covered in gore, listening to the thunder of four thousand rounds per minute.

It was Erickson who found me and helped me to my feet. For once, he didn't have anything to say. He simply put his arm around me and we shuffled toward the clinic.

At the clinic, Margot removes twenty fragments from my left shoulder, my chest, and my face. Margot refused to tell me how many of the shards were pieces of Mansour's skull, but I saw the gleam of white bone within the metal basin that sat on her operating table.

Margot said I was lucky. It wasn't quite the word I would have used, but I knew what she meant. The Taliban fighter had only been wearing a bandolier of grenades that he had daisy-chained together and detonated. Given the distance and Mansour taking the brunt of the explosion—as well as the body of the insurgent I had stabbed covering me—my wounds weren't that bad. I would live.

Behind her dark-framed glasses, Margot's eyes looked as blue as cornflowers. She took off one of her surgical gloves and briefly touched my undamaged cheek with her bare hand.

"It's crazy out there," she said and hitched a thumb toward the waiting area. "Come see me tomorrow. OK?"

I nodded, and she left the room to find her next patient.

Come see me tomorrow.

"Motherfucker." I stood up so fast I nearly fell. I had to catch myself on the curtain, which tore free of the rings holding it to the ceiling. I stormed out of the clinic and down the road toward the ops building.

My face felt like raw meat, and I was woozy from the pain medication. I walked into the ops building and descended into the holding center. Erickson was at the desk reading a comic book. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him do a double-take as I waved my badge over the card reader, unlocking the door.

"Sarge?" Erickson said as I stalked toward the cell door.

I unlocked Stump's cell. I saw the grim smile on his face, a smile which turned to a grimace as I picked him up by the collar of his jumpsuit and slammed him against the wall. My shoulder burned as I held him there. I felt the stitches in my shoulder give way, releasing a trickle of warm blood down my arm.

"You motherfucker," I screamed in his face, "You knew they were coming and didn't tell us!"

Stump just laughed. He continued laughing as I dropped him to the concrete floor and kicked him hard in the ribs. I steadied myself against the wall to kick him again before Erickson

put me in a bear hug, dragging me back and pinning me against the far wall where I stood panting with pain and exertion.

“Easy, Sarge,” Erickson said. “He isn’t worth it.”

Stump leveled his shaggy head, his eyes dark and purple from sleep deprivation. “You’re like me now,” he said, pointing his finger at my shoulder, now dripping blood onto the concrete floor. “You’ve been marked by this war too.”

“I’m nothing like you.”

Stump shrugged. “Maybe so. I will die in your Guantanamo Bay. I will die knowing I’m a captive, and that my government will deny me at every turn. Your government will abandon you too, in its own way, but you’ll carry your ignorance to your grave.”

I wanted to reply, to scream my hatred at him, but my throat felt scorched and tight as if I had swallowed hot cinders.

“Let’s go, Sarge,” Erickson said, pulling me out the door. “Let’s get you cleaned up.”

*

I left, not just the cell, but Afghanistan and the Army too. Still, the memory has stuck with me, even though it's been more than ten years.

Margot emailed me the other day. She didn’t write anything, the body of her email simply a red emoji heart followed by her signature block. Beneath her signature was an official press release of US Army KIAs. She had highlighted Erickson’s name. His cause of death: a vehicle-borne IED crashed into the Kandahar Forward Operating Base where Erickson was pulling guard duty. I wondered if they had recovered enough of his body to give him a proper burial. I wondered how much of him had been left behind, how much of his blood had soaked

into the dusty street—if, in death, he would become a part of Afghanistan, just like Mansour had become a part of me.

Dust-Up

Command reports that Kirkuk was taken last night. The officers and their staff have already moved on, pushing toward Baghdad, the bleeding heart of Iraq. The reserve units straggle behind trying to clean up the mess—which bridges to salvage, which oil wells to burn. All the while, they itch to get their feet wet, to kill, to become men. This empire, built on the ancient bones of countless civilizations, is a new Garden of Eden, and the young Marines are dying to eat the fruit.

High steppes tower over the Marines, and the summer wind teases a grove of willows near the serpentine lines of the Greater Zab. The river slides away, leeching the blood of the slain from the soil and carrying it away like a secret. The sun is high and hot, teasing the Marines with distant mirages, of phantasmal battles that they will never fight. Behind them, mortuary affairs deliver the dead US servicemembers home in flag-draped caskets. The enemy dead are stacked in mass graves, wrapped in sheets and sprinkled with lime—a weak gesture that will do nothing to stop the spread of disease among the civilian population in the coming months. Mother Nature is the world's greatest killer—she even puts Marines to shame.

Late that night, Hauser's unit arrives in Kirkuk, and they throw their sleeping bags into the dirt under the rumbling diesel trucks. A few minutes before, Hauser could barely keep his eyes open; now, staring up at the chassis and listening to the engine tick, he feels too wired to sleep. The adrenaline and jet lag like a hot knife against his neck. If he were lying in his own bed, half a world away, he'd hear his wife's soft breathing, the mewling of their young son nursing at her breast. But he's not at home. Iraq is a different fucking planet.

Hauser rolls out from under the truck and walks into the schoolhouse that his unit is borrowing as an operations center. Jackson guards the door, shivering in the night air and

smoking a cigarette. Jackson holds out his fist and Hauser taps knuckles with him before walking past.

It's dark and quiet on the ops floor, a solitary laptop glowing in the darkness and Yun snoring in front of the radio. Stars shine through a hole in the roof, and Hauser wanders out the back door into a narrow alleyway. The brick wall is perforated with bullet holes; broken glass and splintered wood—thrown haphazardly from the impact of bombs and mortars—clutter the ground. A crumpled can of Rip-It lays at Hauser's feet and he kicks it down the dark corridor. It rattles into the collapsed wall of a small home, disappearing.

He lights a cigarette, the flash killing his night vision. He hears a faint sob coming from behind the crumbling mortar. Hauser drops the cigarette and crushes it beneath his boot. He takes the headlamp out of his cargo pocket, turns the LED beam on low, and walks toward the noise, his hand on the butt of his service pistol.

Hauser rounds the corner and finds a woman in a bloody hijab kneeling over three small children. The children are huddled together, unmoving—a trough of dirty water at their backs. The oldest can't be older than six, the youngest less than a year old. They're covered with a damp, stained sheet, which the woman clutches to her face to muffle her sobs. She looks up at Hauser, her eyes wide in the beam from the headlamp. She scrambles on her hands and knees, putting her back to the wall. Hauser's light reflects off the blood on her arms, the shard of glass she clutches in her hand.

“*Ogif!*” Hauser says, butchering the word for stop, and he pulls his sidearm and levels it at the woman.

She holds the broken, bloodied glass out to him, an offering. Her eyes plead with him, and she mutters words he cannot understand.

“I need help,” Hauser shouts over his shoulder, hoping someone in the ops center can hear him, then he turns back to the woman. “Don’t move.”

Yun and Jackson stumble into the alleyway with their carbines at the low-ready. Jackson goes to inspect the bodies, his flashlight playing across the rubble. Yun tells the woman to drop the shiv and to put her hands behind her head.

The woman drops the glass, but as she lifts her arms, she collapses. Yun grabs the bandages from his first aid kit and applies pressure to the woman’s bleeding wrists as she continues to mutter into the dirt.

Jackson walks toward Hauser, his face flat and bloodless. “Those kids are dead, man,” he says. “Looks like she drowned them in that washtub.”

Yun helps the woman to her feet and escorts her back to the Ops Center, where Captain Handler will decide what to do with her. As Yun guides the woman past Hauser, she reaches out her hand and grabs his wrist—something he doesn’t expect—and she pleads with him. Hauser can see this from her eyes, deep and brown and pained, though he can’t understand her words. Yun pulls her away, and they disappear inside the building, leaving Jackson and Hauser in the haunted alley.

Jackson crouches down over the children and covers their faces with the soiled blanket. “Fuckin’ shame, man,” he says. “You got a smoke?”

Hauser retrieves two cigarettes and hands one to Jackson. Even with the blanket covering their serene faces, he can’t take his eyes off the children.

“You know the language better than me. What was that woman saying?” Hauser asks, fiddling with the unlit cigarette.

“She was asking you a question,” Jackson says.

“What did she say?”

Jackson lights his cigarette, takes a long, thoughtful breath, then exhales. “She said, ‘I’m a good mother, aren’t I?’” he says, and smoke swirls through the light of their headlamps like an apparition.

Once Upon a Firefight

There's a blowup on the old logging road, so we try to box it in between the seldom-used track and the fork of the river, hoping it will burn itself out. I take my team in, still weary and dragging from yesterday's burns and we begin cutting a firebreak perpendicular to the river. We start chopping roots and scraping away old pine needles with our Pulaskis. I put Billy on the big logging chainsaw, and he starts shredding the fallen logs and breaking up the new growth pine.

Things start to go bad when Werner tries to move a fallen Lodgepole with our portable winch. The motor chugs away, moaning as the log starts to straighten and glide up the incline, then the cable snaps. The jagged end of the wire hits Werner in the face. He falls down, clutching his eye, and there's blood and clear fluid running down his ruined cheek. The log breaks free and clips Sonny, and we all hear the snap of his shin breaking. Then the log rolls clear over Mayberry, a broken branch spearing into his rib cage. I can tell that he probably won't make it.

Doc, a smear of ash and sweat darkening his face, rushes to Mayberry, turning the gasping man onto his back and tearing away his bloody jacket. "Get on the damn radio and get that chopper in the air," he yells at me.

Billy steps close to me, his dark eyes peering into mine. "It's smoky as hell out here, boss, but you can't be letting these guys get all bunched up. Get your shit together."

I give Billy a weak thumbs up and he punches me on the shoulder.

I get on the radio and tell them to send in a helicopter to pick up the wounded and to bring in reinforcements. The forest is alive with noise and movement, the sounds of fear and flight, of death and survival. Squirrels and martens race through the trees, forgetting their respective places on the food chain and simply trying to survive the oncoming blaze. The forest floor moves in waves as small rodents and insects flee before the fire that evaporates the oil from

my skin, turns my tongue into a dried-up husk between my teeth. I still can't see the fire, but the air is alive with its presence.

Doc does what he can to help the injured men, splinting their breaks, plugging up their holes. There's not much to do except to make them comfortable until help arrives. And to keep working, we always keep working.

The day before, we'd been busy clearing some old brush a few hours to the north. Afterward, stinking, dirty, and tired, we rolled into a bar full of miners and cowboys. They didn't like our long hair, our beards, our earthy, primitive smell of wood smoke and sweat. Two large-bodied men in canvas work coats cornered Billy in the men's room and the fight spilled out into the main room, Billy screaming a battle-cry and pushing one of the men's faces into the clumpy, sawdust floor.

The rest of us joined in with Billy, fighting with our fists and whatever we could get ahold of. A bald man in a red shirt kicked Billy through the front door, sending him somersaulting into the smoky night air, with a torn, flannel-shirt sleeve clutched in his hands. One of the fat rednecks put my head in a vise grip, and a red veil crept into the small, hot place behind my eyes. I wrapped my hands around his waist and dragged him to the floor. I lifted my fists and crashed them into his face until my fingers turned numb and the redneck crawled under the shelter of a broken table.

An old miner with a handlebar mustache exploded a chair against my back and shoulders and I fell onto the floor. I rolled onto my back, lifting my arm to stare at a splinter, nearly a foot long, that jutted from my skin like a broken bone. Through all the noise and violent haze, I hear a commotion by the door, the whiny growl of a two-stroke motor, and Billy walked back into the bar with one of our logging chainsaws. He pressed the throttle, and the saw chugged out oily

smog as he ripped the oak bar in two like Moses splitting the Red Sea. Then he offered to redecorate the rest of the place unless everyone left us the fuck alone.

In the forest, Billy hollers, breaking me from my trance, and points at a large black bear not fifty yards from where we stand. It lumbers through the firebreak and stands to get a better look at us. It looks like a man encased in a suit of wicker and hair. Billy throws a pine cone at the bear. It hunkers down, takes an awkward shit in the pine needles, and lopes away.

“Too bad I don't have my tire iron—eh, Dutch?” Billy says.

“I think he’s more scared of the fire than of your crazy ass,” I say.

I'd driven the old trails with Billy. In the spring, when the snow began to thaw and animals began emerging from their winter naps lean and hungry, Billy's energy would change too. He was nervous, as tightly wound as the trigger of the M60 machine gun he humped in the jungles of Laos and Cambodia. Billy could sense when bears were nearby. I had seen Billy kill them.

Billy would find a bear crossing the road, maybe looking for dinner, and he'd slam on the brakes, getting out and chasing the bear on foot, cursing and waving a tire iron like a lunatic. He'd call the bear all sorts of awful names, pounding on rocks with the tire iron, until the bear would climb up into a tree. From there, Billy would stand at the bottom of the tree, still yelling at the bear, beating the trunk with the curved length of iron, while the bear climbed higher and higher until the branches became too small and it would finally lose its footing. Billy was pretty good at dodging falling bears too. He claimed to be the only man strong enough or crazy enough to hit a bear with a planet.

A battered, blue pickup truck comes tearing up the hill where our firebreak intersects the logging road, but the log that sidelined Sonny and Mayberry is still laying across the track,

blocking any exit. Billy waves his arms and yells, trying to flag down the driver before he hits the log. The truck skids to a stop and two burly men in grease-stained canvas jackets spill out—the same assholes we’d gotten into a bar fight with the night before—yelling that the fire is getting close, begging us to help them get out of the woods.

“What the hell are you assholes doing out here?” I say.

The driver, who looks to be about thirty, with a small, sweaty upper lip and wearing a filthy, red cap, sniffs and wipes at his nose. “We were camping, that’s all,” he says, his eyes sliding toward the pickup.

Billy walks to the pickup and digs beneath a canvas tarp. He lifts a bloody cape, the fresh skin of a giant Grizzly bear. He looks at the men and clicks his tongue. “It’s not bear season, is it, Dutch?” Billy says.

“I don’t think it’s been Grizzly season for a couple years,” I say.

“We got a permit for that,” Red Hat says.

“Sure, you do,” Billy says.

“Listen,” I say, “we’ve got a chopper coming in for some of our hurt guys. If you sit down, shut up, and stay the fuck out of our way, you can hitch a ride.”

We hear the helicopter coming in. The hot air from the fire creates a maelstrom of wind, but Hawkins’ landing is smooth and clean as a summer breeze. He brings the chopper in so close that the rotors are smoking and covered in soot. I ask Hawkins where my reinforcements are, but he just shrugs and says that there was no one that could help. We load up Werner, Sonny, and Mayberry, then tell the poachers to get in on the skids. We watch the chopper fly into the ashen sky. We started that morning with eight men in my team. Now there are only five.

We go back down the firebreak and clear the fallen tree without further complications. We check the line for any debris, any errant root that the fire could use to jump the barrier. Billy is staring at something on the ground in front of him. His long black hair is coming loose from beneath his helmet, and there are thick flakes of ash melting in the sweat on his upper lip.

“It's a fucking cougar,” I say.

I stare at the dead mountain lion, a big male, half its supple body blackened by flame. Between the war and fighting fires, I know my whole crew has a rolodex of bad memories, easily recalled by the slightest of triggers. My own nightmares brush and massage the back of my mind, smoky and lurking just below the surface.

“Are you thinking about your step-dad?” Billy says.

I nod.

Back in '68, during our time in the war, I had told Billy about growing up just off the reservation with my step-father, Hal, a hard-drinking miner who used his fists on my mom and a heavy leather belt on me and the rest of her children. It was monsoon season, and Billy and I were crouched in the bottom of a foxhole, our jungle boots covered in six-inches of filthy water, praying that the rain would let up or we'd get orders to move. I told Billy about my old tomcat, Zeb, getting sick—I must've been seven or eight years old at the time. The cat was old—maybe twelve—and sick, shitting itself and retching on the front stoop, mewling and biting at its legs.

We didn't have money, not to take a farm cat to the vet, so my step-dad warmed up some milk on the stove, put it in a bowl and carried it out to where Zeb was curled up, sleeping fitfully on the porch. Once Zeb started lapping up the milk, purring like a sonofabitch, my step-dad shot him behind the ear with the Luger he brought home from the war in Europe.

My step-dad started a fire in our burn barrel and told me to get the shovel. Then he told me to pick Zeb up and throw him into the fire. I went to slide the shovel underneath the dead cat—I can still hear the sound of the spade grating against the cement stoop—and Zeb lifted his head and looked right at me.

I was standing there, the shovel hanging from my hands, not sure what to do, when my step-dad grabbed the shovel from me and hit Zeb—twice was all it took—with the sharp edge of the shovel. When my step-dad put Zeb in that hot burn barrel, the cat sizzled and popped like a grease fire. I couldn't look away. I kept expecting Zeb to lift his head again, even as the old cat was wreathed in flame and falling to pieces. In the end, there was nothing left of Zeb, not even bones. When I close my eyes, I can still see the cat lifting its head and cutting right into my soul with those burning, yellow eyes.

Other nightmares feature men in black pajamas, old women and naked children—all of them cloaked in fire, my own men dripping with liquid napalm, melting like wax because of a danger-close airstrike that was a little too dangerous, a little too close. I chased those nightmares halfway around the world, only to end up back here, to where I fight fires with chainsaws and hand tools.

I was no longer sure who was doing the running.

“You okay, Dutch?” Billy asks.

“Hell if I know, Billy,” I say. “Hell if I know.”

The fire boils up over the ridge. We can hear it crackling in the treetops, flaming pine cones and branches rain down on the other side of the firebreak from us. The heat hits us like a wall, a living force that sucks all the moisture from my skin, my mouth, my eyes. I tell my guys

to hump it back to the rally point, but just across the firebreak a tree trunk explodes, showering us with splinters of flame. The fire jumps the break and we're in the thick of it.

I tell my guys to drop their tools, their saws, and their packs, and I lead them in a dead run toward a rocky clearing of high grass near the river. The smoke is pouring through the trees like fog, and I'm almost to the grassy meadow when my foot gets tangled in an exposed root and I feel my ankle crack like a dry twig. I'm lying on the ground, unable to see from the smoke, and I figure I'm dead one way or the other.

Then Billy is on top of me. He has the flayed bear skin draped over his shoulders and he pulls me up, throwing his arm around me and helping me limp to the clearing. We keep running.

My men are splashing in the shallows of the river. They turn toward us, yelling and waving for us to hurry, but we know we won't reach the water before the grass all around us turns into a sea of flame. Billy stops and helps me to lie prone in the tall grass. He tells me not to move, to trust him no matter what. Then he covers me with the bear's bloody hide. I can taste the hot, stinking flesh, and I hear the fire roaring closer. Billy holds me down, clasps the skin on top of me even as the wind and flame shake us against the ground. Billy is screaming. I bury my face into the rocks and grass below me and I scream too. The fire sweeps over us.

I am under the bear's skin for an eternity. The tall grass burns hot but quickly, and the bear's skin keeps me safe from the brunt of the fire and smoke. An eon of struggling with heat and flame, and I wonder if this is what it's like to burn to death, to feel unending heat and thirst, and loneliness made all-consuming by thick, black smoke and flames. I smell scorched hair, the rich, sickeningly sweet smell of burning human flesh—a smell which will cling to my soul for years to come. Soon, my screams turn to weeping as the noise and heat of the fire fade away. The

bear skin over top of me is hot, singed on the edges, but I am alive. I am scorched and blistered but still breathing. I am alive and I know, without needing to look, that my friend Billy is dead.

The air is still thick with smoke—my lungs heaving and sore. I hear my men shouting, calling for us. Though the forest is still burning through the distant trees, the grass fire that poured over Billy and me is nothing but hot stones and ash. There's a circle of dying grass beneath my body, nearly untouched by the fire, but I feel raw—my skin scrubbed away, soft as a newborn. I wonder if Billy and I would've just stayed in that shitty redneck bar, gotten drunk and nursed our hangovers, would he still be alive? None of the million different futures I could imagine for my friend would make a bit of fucking difference—because he's gone, and I'm marked by the flame of his passing.

When I come out from beneath my cocoon, I am as hot and red and gore-covered as the moment I emerged squalling from my mother's womb.

Serenity

Les has a ninety-day sobriety chip in his pocket and a job interview across town when Nguyen picks him up in the Camaro he bought when they got back from their second tour. Nguyen pulls away from the curb, the tires chirping when he hits the gas. The westside traffic is backed up for miles, but at the interstate Nguyen leans into the gas, the car responding with a heart-heaving rumble that presses us into the seats and makes Les claw at the Jesus handle.

The job is at one of those Brazilian steakhouses where the guys wear leather aprons and baggy pants and walk around with carving knives and skewers of meat. The manager is a 25-year-old marketing student who hires Les on the spot. He says he likes his résumé: *responsible for the successful execution of 18 high-priority projects*. He claps Les on the back so hard that he leaves behind the imprint of his hand.

All through Les's first eight-hour shift, his leg throbs. He's limping by the time he walks down the loading dock to where Nguyen is waiting in the matte-black Camaro with the veteran's plates. The alley smells like rotten produce, sweet and hot in the late afternoon sun. Nguyen starts the ignition, flicks the headlights on, and reaches across the seat to open the passenger-side door.

"How was work, honey," Nguyen says.

"Fucking great. I need some weed and a deep-tissue massage," Les says as he slides into the passenger seat. He pulls his white undershirt away from his skin.

Nguyen lights a cigarette and passes it to Les. "How about you smoke on that and shut the hell up."

Les takes a long drag from the cigarette and cracks the window. He exhales and watches the smoke swirl and eddy. "We still meeting the girls?"

“That’s the plan, but we’re already running late,” Nguyen says. “We don’t have time for you to shower, but there should be a couple cleanish shirts in the backseat.”

“I’ll take the shirt, but I already gave myself a scrub-down in the bathroom at work.” Les unbuckles and rummages through the backseat.

“Ah, a good old field wash or, as Sergeant Crallie used to call it, a whore’s bath,” Nguyen says. “He once told me—when we were over in the Box—that the best age in the world to be is thirty-six years old, because you can legally fuck someone half your age.”

“He always was a classy guy,” Les says, sniffing a shirt. That one hasn’t been cleanish in a while.

“I heard he got blown up.”

Les freezes. “No shit?”

Red-and-blue lights strobe through the Camaro. Nguyen curses, flips on his emergency flashers and pulls over to the shoulder of the road.

The cop is older, with salt-and-pepper hair and a heavy gait. He walks up to Nguyen’s window and, in the dying light of the afternoon, shines a high-beam flashlight into their faces, on Les’s bare chest, and curls his lip.

“Your ... friend here isn’t wearing his seatbelt, and you didn’t signal when changing lanes back there,” the cop says. “But I’m guessing that happens a lot with you two.”

“Excuse me, officer?” Nguyen says, and there’s a small blue artery ticking in his throat.

The cop, his nametag reads “McCaffrey,” pushes his aviators down and looks down at Nguyen. “Don’t get mouthy with me, son.”

Les puts his hand on Nguyen’s shoulder. “Officer McCaffrey, my friend here used to drive in military convoys—he just forgets to signal every now and then.”

“Les ...” Nguyen sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose.

“So, you soldiers think that you should get a break—some special treatment?”

“I’m not asking for anything except maybe some good will,” Les says.

McCaffrey tears the ticket from his notebook and hands it to Nguyen. “How’s that for good will? Congratulations on your Purple Heart.”

Les has to put Nguyen in a chokehold to keep him from jumping out of the car.

*

They get to the bar just as April is finishing her shift. She’s still behind the bar, chatting with her boss and nursing a beer, when the two men walk in the door. She sees them and waves as they walk over. April puts her arm around Les’s waist and kisses him. “You’re late,” she says. Les can taste the beer on her lips, and he kisses her again.

“We got pulled over by some asshole cop,” Les says.

April pours him a Sprite and slides it in front of him.

“Motherfucker better hope I never catch him without that uniform on,” Nguyen says, reaching over the bar for a bottle of beer. He twists the cap off and drinks half of it in one pull. Les sips his soda, but it tastes like carbonated dishwater. It’s not even cold.

“I was the one not wearing a seatbelt,” Les says. “I’ll pay you back as soon as I get my first check.”

“Don’t worry about it, Les,” Nguyen says. He belches quietly into his hand and cranes his neck around the room. “Hey, April—where’s Liza?”

April shrugs. “Haven’t seen her all night. Did she text?”

Nguyen shakes his head. “Nah. Honestly, I don’t really think it’s going anywhere.” He finishes his beer and grabs another.

Les feels drained from the long shift on his feet; his knee throbs. April puts her arms around his neck and whispers in his ear. Nguyen, his face closed and tight, turns to look over the crowded barroom.

Les put his hand on Nguyen's shoulder and leans toward him, says, "We're going to go upstairs to the apartment. You going to be OK?"

He waves his hand at Les. "You kids go on—have fun."

"Don't drive anywhere. Take an Uber."

Nguyen nods and takes a pull from his beer. April takes Les's hand and guides him up the back stairs, to where she rents an apartment on the cheap. He falls asleep on the bed while April goes to the bathroom with the door cracked, casting a beam of light on Les's sleeping face. She comes out of the bathroom in her underwear, tugs Les's shoes off, and lies down next to him, her head on his shoulder.

*

Les's phone rings early the next morning. It's his mom: "Les, you and April need to come to the house, right now."

"Mom?" Les says and rubs sleep from his eyes. April sits up on the bed, blinking in the morning sunlight.

"Les—Nguyen jumped from the 10th Avenue overpass last night," his mother says, her voice breaking. "He's dead."

Her voice fades, clipping in and out, the room growing small and tight, and Les is eighteen years old again, a yoke of blood and muscle as Nguyen carries him on wiry shoulders through machine-gun fire.

April drives them in her shit-box of a car, double-clutching with bare feet and weaving through lanes. The traffic is backed up for miles, and Les can feel the pressure building behind his eyes with each lurching stop of the car.

He rests his head on the passenger-side window, the smell of ozone and vulcanized rubber thick in his nostrils.

April squeezes his arm. "I'm so sorry, babe."

"I wish you'd stop saying that," Les says.

"I know, but I don't know what else to say," she says.

"He saved my life, you know?" Les says. "After the mine exploded, he carried me across 100-yards of open terrain, held me down and strapped a tourniquet to my leg."

"I'm sorry, Les."

"It's just that fucking place, you know?" he says. "It gets under your skin. It lives inside you like some bad smell you can't get rid of."

April stares at him, and he feels her silence building a wall between them as fast as his own words.

"I've never seen a country so barren—no crops, zero agriculture," Les says. "Not unless you count the poppy fields. All those people must eat something besides goat, but I never saw anything coming out of the ground except land mines, IEDs, and those fucking flowers."

"I don't like it when you talk like that, Les."

They slowly pass emergency vehicles. Out the window, they see a foreign car so crumpled that it looks like it's been through a trash compactor. Nearby, a quad-cab pickup truck with the bumper smashed in rests on the median. In a certain light, Les thinks the urban sprawl of middle America isn't so different from Afghanistan. The same people, all hurrying from place to

place, searching for a glimmer of happiness, hopeful for a future they may never see. The dangers are different than Afghanistan, less commonplace. But no place is ever truly safe.

Mercifully, the traffic starts to open up.

Les closes his eyes, just for a moment, but he can see Nguyen's face, like an image from a PowerPoint presentation. Nguyen is upside-down, standing over Les; dragging him through brambles to the relative safety of a low rock wall. In his vision, Les can hear the gunshots, smell the sweat and the blood, and Les sees his own mangled leg bouncing flaccidly along the ground—his trouser leg a deep crimson from thigh to ankle. Les can't comprehend why Nguyen fought so hard to get back here just to kill himself. It's easier to see his friend as he was, the carefree, smiling warrior who cheated at cards and called his mother after every mission to let her know he was all right.

Les opens his eyes in time to see April run a red light, drivers honking their protests in her rearview. They don't even see the cop until his lights are reflecting off the sideview mirror. April pulls into a Wal-Mart parking lot and they sit there, the engine idling and Les's hands shaking in his lap.

April rolls her window down and gets her license and registration ready. Les watches the cops get out of their late-model Charger. One is a female—cute, he thinks, in a butch sort of way. The other is an older guy with a heavy gait and gray hair at his temples. They split off and the female walks over to April's window, the older guy to Les's.

He taps the window and motions for Les to roll it down. He does, and the cop tells him to hand over his driver's license.

"Nice to see you again, Mr. Greene," McCaffrey says, looking over Les's license.

"Always a passenger, I see, but at least you're wearing a shirt this time."

Les doesn't want the officer to see the tears in his eyes, so he keeps looking at the road.

"Morning, officer."

April leans past Les and says, "Officer, he wasn't driving—do you really need his license?"

McCaffrey points a finger at April. "Mind your damn business, Miss."

Les's throat feels tight and constricted. He has to swallow twice before he can speak. "Is that necessary?" He feels his eyes drawn to the cop's sidearm, the Glock pulling him in and doubling his vision like an optical illusion.

"Have you been drinking, sir?" The cop says.

"What? No."

"Could you step out of the car, Mr. Greene?" he says, and his hand follows Les's gaze to rest on the butt of the pistol.

Les opens the door, and he can just barely hear April trying to defend him. He steps out of the car, moving stiffly. McCaffrey and he are nose-to-nose, and Les can smell the cop's breath, hear him clicking his gum between his teeth. Les feels a red veil creep behind his eyes.

"Fuck you," Les whispers, their lips inches from touching.

McCaffrey smiles, and Les watches, as if from outside his own body, as the cop grabs his arm and wrestles Les to the ground, smashing his face into parking-lot concrete; his mouth pressed against a wadded-up napkin that smells like battery acid and vomit. Les tries to roll, tries to fight, his arm flailing out, but the cop's knee is deep in the middle of his back.

Les doesn't hear words anymore, just voices. The cop's voice. April's voice. He hears the blood churning in his ears as the cop cuffs his hands behind his back and starts searching him. When he gets to Les's legs, McCaffrey pauses, then jerks his prosthetic off with a grunt.

*

Later, in the holding cell, Les stares at the stained concrete floor. There's a tightness in his chest like someone has wrapped his heart in a metal band and is twisting the ends tighter and tighter. His prosthetic leg is sitting on the desk of a tubby cop with a horseshoe of hair growing around his bald head.

"Hey, buddy?" the desk sergeant stares at Les and points at his leg. "Afghanistan or Iraq?"

"Afghanistan," Les says, "Helmand Province."

"Hooah," the sergeant says. "My brother was an MP. Did two tours in Afghanistan and one in Iraq."

Les nods, but he can't take his eyes off the large stain on the concrete floor.

"You'll be okay, buddy. My brother came back last year. He used to watch footage from the war on YouTube for like twelve hours a day. Then he got a job working for the VA and he's getting married," the sergeant says.

"He's living the fucking dream, huh?" Les says.

That's when April and Les's mother walk in. His mother is wearing faded jeans and a dirty collared shirt that once belonged to his dad. They post his bond, and Les hops over to the door, holding the bars in one hand. When the door opens, his mother and April wrap Les in a hug.

Les sits down on a metal bench while April helps him get the prosthetic leg back on. He can feel the eyes of the sergeant and the two drunks in the first cell watching him. His face blazes with heat, and he just wants to get the hell out of this place. They go out to the parking lot, and Les's mother drives them to her house.

April goes inside the house to get them all some sweet tea, and Les sees where his mother's been digging up the rose bushes underneath the big tree in the front yard. The roses look brown, splotchy, and dry.

"You getting rid of the roses Dad planted for you?"

"Not exactly," she says. "Your dad and I had been trying to get something to take under this tree out here for years now, but everything keeps dying. Finally, Mrs. Graves from down the street told me that our tree, here, is a Black Walnut, and its sap poisons the soil. It won't let anything flourish in its dripline."

"You ever try poppies?"

"What?" she says, her eyes crinkling at the corners.

"Nothing, Mom," Les says. "So, what are you going to do?"

"Les, you and I are going to build some elevated beds with new soil. The support will hopefully keep the flowers safe from the tree's sap."

"You ever think about cutting the thing down?" Les says.

She looks at the tree for a long while, and tears well up in her dark brown eyes. "No." she says. "This tree's been here for more years than your dad and I lived in this house together, more years than we were married, more years than your father was alive. We had some of our best years under the shade of this tree. If the flowers don't take in the raised beds, I'll just put the damn rosebushes by the house. No reason they need to be over here anyway."

Les nods. He tries to see the tree and the yard it occupies as his mother does. Yes, the tree is lovely to look at. Its trunk is wide and thick and the color of charcoal. Its branches sweep into a high canopy, offering shade to the yard and the flowering dogwood which grows along the fence.

He glances toward the house and sees April. She smiles at him as she walks out the front door and sets a pitcher of tea on the small patio table. Her soft face is framed by curls which catch the light of the afternoon sun and shimmer like a heat mirage. Les wants to believe that he never journeys back to the war, that he never lets himself drift into the past. But he doesn't know if the love of family and friends can save him from his memories, which are warped by muzzle flashes and the concussive shock of roadside blasts.

He thinks about Nguyen. Leaving Afghanistan didn't help his friend, but then again, maybe Nguyen never really left at all.

*

Les takes an Uber to Nguyen's apartment late that night while April and his mother sleep in the house he grew up in. He tells himself that he's there for the spare keys to Nguyen's Camaro, not for the pint bottle of whiskey he keeps—kept—in the freezer. Les walks into the kitchen, his face flushed, the air thick and close. He opens the freezer, just to feel the cold air against his face. He takes a handful of ice and takes Nguyen's "World's Best Dad" mug off the hook on the wall. He places the ice in the mug and grabs the bottle of whiskey, as an afterthought.

He sits in the dark of Nguyen's apartment and pours two fingers of whiskey into the mug. He digs his sobriety chip out of his pocket and turn it over in my hands.

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change.

Les lifts the mug to his nose and inhales, the sweetness of the mash and the pungent smoke rush through his sinuses, and he feels lightheaded.

God ... I cannot change.

He drains the mug in two swallows as the light of the full moon filters through the window. Then he lifts the bottle and drinks, his throat tightening with each pull. He sits back heavily, his chest on fire. He takes a whiskey-soaked ice cube from the mug and holds it, melting, against his forehead.

I cannot change.

Somewhere in the darkness, the phone rings, but Les doesn't want to talk right now.

I cannot change.

Because some days Les can still feel the hollow numbness of his leg flopping uselessly as they run through a barren field, Nguyen's bony shoulder stabbing into his gut; all the pain and fear and adrenaline collecting in Les's throat as he wails, "is my dick still there?" into Nguyen's ear. Afghanistan is a nightmare, a cosmic broken promise, but it's the coming home that's hell.

The Hunting Camp

There are deer in the forest. At night they circle around our fire, their eyes luminous, reflecting the flickering light in eerie yellows and greens. My brother and I sit up in the dark, our sleeping bags clutched tightly around us, and we watch them. We hear their grunted calls and shiver. I think they come to our camp to escape the noise from the bit mine. Its machines give off a deep, bass drone like a murmur from another room.

This place hasn't been the same since Mama was taken from us and Daddy went after her. My brother, Micah, and I huddle by the campfire with old Army-issue wool blankets draped over our shoulders, prickling our necks. Our bellies grumble. Since we've been on our own, we've had nothing to eat but roots, canned beans, and the occasional meager, deformed trout. Uncle Shakes promised he would come by later and bring us some meat.

Daddy was out making a delivery when the soldiers in the plastic suits came for Mom. She'd shaken us awake and told us to hide in the hollowed-out tree. The wind whipped at our blankets as we ran, bright flashes of light from the black helicopters chasing and nipping at our heels. When we turned to look for her, Mom was being lifted up into the sky by a long, black rope. The next day, we told Daddy what happened. He grabbed the rifle and dipped himself a canteen full of murky liquid from the old bathtub, where he keeps the nitro he uses to dig into the mountain. He told us that Uncle Shakes would come by to look after us, and that we shouldn't let Uncle Shakes anywhere near the old bathtub and the precious fluid inside it.

In the morning, Uncle Shakes drives up on his four-wheeler. There's something wrong with the motor—it clucks and burbles like a flock of turkeys. The four-wheeler coughs and dies, and Uncle Shakes stumbles toward us with a brace of rabbits clutched in his hairy fist. I put down the rusty hatchet I've been using to chop kindling. Uncle Shakes has pale blue eyes that are

wet and flecked with red wire. He gives Micah the rabbits. My brother grabs them, their tiny heads flopping on broken necks. Micah pokes at their glassy eyes with a long stick, rubs his fingers between the soft pink pads of their toes.

See if you can't clean those, Uncle Shakes says, then he sits heavily on the stump I'd been using as a chopping block.

Uncle Shakes has a mason jar tied to a string around his neck. He unscrews the lid and takes a big drink of the smoky liquid that sloshes around inside it. He gasps and belches and looks at me where I stand across the fire.

You look just like your mama, he says.

I tell him thanks and put a pot of beans and water over the fire.

When I was younger, I liked to pretend that I was invisible. This was before, when we still lived in a house and had a working car—when the world was bright and green and didn't taste like the inside of a burned-out microwave. The car would bring us to the old house. Mama, my brother, and Daddy would pile out, but I would stay curled up in the backseat pretending to sleep or play until someone came to get me. Usually it would be Mama. She'd climb in the backseat, curl up around me and ask me if I was okay. I'd nod, but I did my best to seem unsure, to keep her there with her warmth encircling me for a little longer. The more I tried this the longer it would take Mama to check on me, like she thought that just because I was faking it that must mean it wasn't real. But it was real. I needed to know I mattered somehow.

Eventually, there came a time when my brother checked on me first. While I pretended to sleep, my finger and thumb picking a hole in my dry lips, my brother put on two pairs of jeans, three sweaters, and a ski mask. He closed the bottoms of his pants with hair ties, found a hornet nest still drowsy with morning frost, and threw it into the car with me.

That was the last time I pretended to sleep.

Now, I wish I really was invisible. I'm always being told that I look like someone else, but I have no mirror, no basis to see or understand the resemblance myself. All I can see are the dark semi-circles of filth hiding beneath my fingernails and the dry, splotchy skin around my knees and knuckles.

My brother is sliding the rabbits' fur from their bodies like he's removing a pair of stubborn wool socks. He asks Uncle Shakes if this is all he brought to eat. Uncle Shakes grunts to his feet, walks over to the four-wheeler, and takes a lever-action .30-30 from a softshell case.

If you want more to eat, we've got to go kill it, he says.

We cook the rabbit and eat them still hot and dripping from the fire, our fingers numb to the heat. We spoon beans into our mouths straight from the pot, using the corners of our blankets as napkins. The meat tastes funny. Like it's old, even though Uncle Shakes had killed them just this morning.

During lunch we hear a far-off boom, like a peal of thunder. My brother says, I reckon that's Daddy, do you think he got Mama?

I tell him I don't know.

After we eat, we walk through the trees toward a pale patch of gray clouds. The shore of the alkali lake is muddy and covered with hoofprints. The mud sucks at my old leather boots, leaving behind a coat of oily, rainbow-hued muck, and icy water soaks into my socks. Lumpy, mud-colored catfish wriggle through the muddy shallows, their fins cresting the water, their eyes glassy and unseeing.

Uncle Shakes unzips his fly and urinates in the water. The wind rises and I smell salt, rotting pine trees, and something sweet and sickly. An animal rustles in the cattails along the

shore—a crippled deer is stuck in the mud, its hind legs quivering and useless. Uncle Shakes doesn't even seem surprised when my brother picks up a rock and bashes the deer in the face with it.

That's a man, right there, Uncle Shakes says.

Uncle Shakes walks me up an old game trail, leaving my brother wallowing and slipping in the muck as he field-dresses the deer. He slices open her belly with a skinning knife and heaves her steaming innards into the mud with his bare hands. Uncle Shakes and I stop at a fork in the trail, where a fallen log, shingled with green moss and mushrooms the color of eggshells, lays alongside the path. Uncle Shakes pushes the .30-30 into my chest. I hold it tightly while he unscrews the lid of his mason jar and takes another drink, his palsied hand sloshing moonshine into his beard.

If we see something, you're going to need to shoot it, he says. Can you handle that?

I nod, but I'm not so sure as I let on.

I sit on the fallen log. I remember what I've been taught, checking the wind and making sure that my silhouette isn't breaking over the horizon. The dead tree is wet, and dampness creeps through my heavy canvas pants and into my underwear. I'm cold and trembling nearly as much as Uncle Shakes, who leans against the log at my feet.

The silence pulls at my chest with delicate fingers until I feel like someone has torn my heart from my chest. I ask Uncle Shakes if he knows where Mama went, if he thinks Daddy will find her and bring her back. Uncle Shakes doesn't look at me. He unlids his mason jar and tosses back the last of his shine and licks the rim of the glass.

Daddy is a man, he says, and a man always takes care of his responsibilities.

Where'd they take her, Uncle Shakes? I ask.

He sighs. She's at the bit mine, he says. That's where they all are.

All who?

All. everyone.

What does she do there? What do they want with my mama? I say and swallow my sobs.

They use them to find the money they hid in the sky, Uncle Shakes says. It's always about the money.

What money?

I forget you were just a baby before the bombs, back when they learned they could pull money from the air, Uncle Shakes says. The mines started popping up, and people stopped going to work. The army needed people to collect the money, to keep the mines clean and running smooth.

And that's why we hide out here?

Yeah, it is.

I want to ask him why they took *her*, why they take all these people and they never come back, but Uncle Shakes is sleeping with his mouth open, a pale shimmer of blue peeking from between his eyelids. I'm supposed to watch for deer, but I'm tired too.

I'd been to the bit mine once before. Never went inside or anything, but I saw it. It used to be an old wood-pulping mill. The roof is jury-rigged with monstrous fans that churn and chop at the air. The noise washes over the trees, sending flocks of birds spinning into windows and the rusted-out hulks of parked cars. My brother once told me that if you live too close to the bit mine you'll go nuts, start talking to the trees, jump in front of a road-train. But we have lived in the shadow of that soul-numbing drone for as long as I can remember, and there's nothing wrong with us that a good meal or two couldn't fix.

When I wake, Uncle Shakes is gone, and Micah has draped the dead deer's foreleg over my lap. I fall back off the log, flailing my arms, and my brother's laughter follows me back to camp.

When we get back to the clearing, Uncle Shakes is sprawled against the old bathtub, dipping his mason jar into Daddy's nitro. My brother drops the deer carcass and says, holy shit, Uncle Shakes.

Uncle Shakes drains the glass, wipes his mouth with the sleeve of his flannel shirt. He asks what we're gawking at, but before we can say anything Uncle Shakes burps and turns into a burst of red gore. We have to clean our blankets off in the alkali lake and dry them, steaming, by the fire. I shiver in my damp bedding the whole night, thinking about Mama and how I had to pick up the biggest pieces of Uncle Shakes, his ribcage and one leg from the knee on down, and throw them into the lake.

The next morning, I dig through Uncle Shakes' saddlebags and find an empty, grime-stained mason jar. I fill the jar with Daddy's nitro and screw the lid on carefully. I wrap my parcel with deer hide and carry it in a canvas tote bag. I leave my brother asleep in his blankets and begin walking toward the bit mine, the ever-present drone invading my ears like a nest of pissed-off wasps.

The bit mine is easy to find. I just follow the power lines, which multiply quickly the closer I get to my destination. Wooden arms and metal skeletons carry the power until the lines become an enormous metal snake, sheathed in insulation and protective coating, coiling toward the dead ground.

I follow the cable along the old access road, through the trees to where a clearing nestles against the back of the mines. The bare ground is littered with the bodies of deer in various

stages of decay. I don't know if they were drawn here like I was, or maybe they were dragged here by soldiers or some monstrous troll that I imagine lives beneath the mines.

The power cable slithers over the ground, through the rib cage of a deer skeleton, finally descending into a deep hole, as if it could suck the very blood from the earth. I peer over the lip of the hole. The walls are brown and purple, studded with chunks of white-flecked rocks. I unwrap the mason jar and hold it carefully by its lid.

I release the mason jar, watch it catch a final glint of muted sun as it plummets into the hole. I hear the far-off sound of glass shattering, feel the roar of heat and light, and I throw myself to the ground as dirt and rocks pepper the ground around me.

I stay curled up there, listening to the great motors sputter and fall silent. I'll wait for somebody to come find me, for someone to notice I haven't come in yet and ask if I'm okay.

Marsh Lights

Cleo saw the frog while pulling weeds in the garden. It was early summer, the air hot and moist, and wild grass and vining plants threatened to choke Uncle Darrell's harvest of maize and white clover. Her uncle had brought his spade down to uproot a stubborn explosion of crabgrass, and when Cleo grabbed the clumped dirt and roots to throw it in the wheelbarrow, she saw something moving in the upturned soil. She brushed the dirt aside, revealing a frog with bumpy olive skin, its front legs pawing frantically as if trying to swim away. She scooped the frog into her palm and saw where the shovel blade had severed the frog's hind legs. The pale, blue-veined sinew gleamed in the afternoon sun.

"What you got there, princess?" Uncle Darrell said. He'd been in a terrible mood—worse than usual—since yesterday when he was attacked by an entire nest of hornets by the fence line, and his face and neck were covered with ugly red welts.

Cleo dropped the frog into the pocket of her sack dress, turned to face him, and stood with her hands clasped behind her back.

"I asked you what you got." Uncle Darrell grabbed her roughly by the shoulder and wrenched open her small, empty fists.

"I don't have anything, sir," Cleo said, trying to keep her chin from trembling as Darrell's rough hands chafed her skin.

"All right, then," Uncle Darrell said. "I shouldn't have been so rough." He dropped Cleo's hands and smoothed the frizzy, brown hair that hung over the girl's thin shoulders. "Why don't you get a drink of water and check on your mama. She needs her medicine. And tell that brother of yours to get his ass out here."

"Yes, sir," Cleo said.

Cleo stepped carefully through the garden, her head down but her spine straight. When she rounded the corner of the shotgun house, she lifted her eyes and began to run, her bare feet flashing over the brown earth and dying vines of couch grass.

She ran past the backyard, past the window of her mother's dim and silent bedroom, vaulting over a broken fencepost and into the woods until her toes squished into the gumbo of mud and rotting leaves; she ran until she reached a stand of white spruce, where she slowed, picking her way carefully over a mat of unsteady moss and vegetation.

She stopped by a large white rock at the base of an ancient cairn. The cairn's surface was so covered with green moss and mud that it formed a hill, a viewing platform for Cleo to survey the marsh, a stage on which to dance with the loose-branched trees. She often climbed the hill to watch the clouds pass over like churning waves.

Cleo had covered the white rock with a mural of charcoal, berry paste, and crushed flowers—a deer treading softly; a line of ants carrying a salamander; a frog with an indigo butterfly perched on its eyeball—an entire procession of bog creatures. At the top of the rock, Cleo had scribbled furiously with her charcoal, leaving an empty disc to represent a full moon.

Cleo squatted down where water and earth joined, the skirt of her dress wet and dripping with mud. She pulled the wounded frog from her pocket and lifted it up to eye level. She extended her index finger and gently stroked the frog from the tip of its nose to its stumpy, vestigial tail. The frog simply sat there, blinking its protruding eyes when her finger drifted too close.

Cleo scraped away a handful of moss at the water's edge. Peat, hummus, sulfur, and the smells of rotting plants and animals seeped into her nostrils. She scooped up dirt with her hand

and placed the wounded frog into the depression, covering its body back over with mud and slimy black moss.

Cleo sat back and rested her hands on her knees, waiting. It wasn't the first time she'd found a wounded marsh creature in Uncle Darrell's garden. Her uncle's tools were cruel and sharp, cutting through wings, tails, and limbs with no regard for their owners. When Uncle Darrell's tiller had torn through the nest of a short-billed wren, Cleo picked up the entire nest, the fibrous oval mangled and filled with dead fledglings, and she buried it in the marsh by her sacred white rock. When she returned, the small grave was burst open, wriggling with many-legged invertebrates and insects. At first, Cleo was horrified and took them for grave robbers, but a female wren flew down from a tree, probed the wriggling centipedes with her small beak, and coaxed out three chicks, their gossamer beaks convulsing with hunger. From that moment, Cleo knew the marsh contained a magic, as deep and dark and ancient as the land itself.

As Cleo watched the wounded frog, she heard the wind whisper through the treetops, a low and constant roar. She closed her eyes, felt the breeze tousle her hair. In these moments, she often thought that the bog was trying to communicate with her, speaking mysteries in a language she could not understand. Gooseflesh tingled her arms, and when she opened her eyes, dozens of butterflies and fuzzy moths fluttered about her head and landed on the partially buried frog, their wings flapping lazily. She smiled.

"I'll be back later," Cleo said to the frog's blinking eyes, barely visible through the kaleidoscope of chitinous wings. Then she ran back to the house.

*

Cleo walked in the back door to find her brother, Tad, in the kitchen, eating cold oatmeal out of a ceramic bowl and staring at his reflection in the broken television on the counter. She

grabbed a small, green apple from the kitchen table and worried at the knobby thing with her teeth.

“You check on Mama?” Tad asked.

“I’m about to,” Cleo said. “Sir wants your help in the garden.”

“Why do you call him that, Cleo?” Tad said.

“He told me to call him sir.”

“But he’s not here,” Tad said. “Why not call him something he really deserves?”

“Like what?”

Tad dropped his spoon into his bowl with a squish and a clatter. “How about asshole, dickhead, or shit-stain?”

Cleo laughed, covering her mouth with a hand bordered by five crescent-moons of grime. Tad could make her laugh even at his most sullen, a mood that became more persistent as his frame grew, long and lank as the cattails that bordered the marsh. Uncle Darrell took Tad’s growth as a challenge, finding any excuse he could to grab the boy by the nape of his neck and whip him with a hazel switch until Tad’s skin split open. Uncle Darrell’s finest crops were fear and hatred, and Cleo felt his presence in nearly every corner of their little house.

The back door crashed open. “*Boy!*”

Uncle Darrell stomped into the kitchen, a hazel switch clenched in his fist. “You’re supposed to be weeding that garden. What’s taking you so damn long?”

Cleo backed into the corner, trying not to be seen. Tad gripped the edge of the Formica table, daring to meet their uncle’s frenzied face.

“Cleo just—”

Uncle Darrell's palm caught Tad on the ear, sending him sprawling backward over his chair and his bowl banging to the floor, oatmeal shooting across the kitchen with arterial force. Cleo wanted to stay and protect her brother, to untangle Uncle Darrell's vice-like fingers from Tad's long, dark hair. But Uncle Darrell twisted the boy's arm behind his back and slammed him against the counter, and Cleo's willpower crumbled. She sprinted out of the room with her heart beating her betrayal in horrifying rhythm: *cow-ward, cow-ward, cow-ward*.

In her mother's bedroom, it was dark and cool, the window covered with an old Army-issued blanket, its edges ragged and moth-eaten. An oscillating metal fan turned sluggishly on top of a squat, cat-pawed dresser. Cleo closed the door, the sounds of flesh-on-flesh, of furniture jostled and joints twisted, fading into background noise. Her mother lay mired in blankness and bedclothes. Cleo sat on the bed and watched her mother sleep in a narrow band of light emanating from the window, remembering her as beautiful once, her hair full and thick as a lion's mane, her eyes flashing. Now she looked so limp and listless—never speaking, mostly sleeping. Even when her eyes were open, they only seemed to stare into empty space.

Cleo retrieved a brown glass bottle from the top of the dresser. She opened the bottle and immediately grimaced, pinching her nose between thumb and forefinger. The chalky, off-white tablets inside the bottle smelled terrible—harsh and synthetic. Mama's medicine, which Cleo gave to her every morning after breakfast. Darrell said Mama needed it to stay healthy, since she couldn't get out of bed on her own, and didn't Cleo want her mama to stay healthy? She selected a tablet, pushed gently on her mother's chin, and dropped the pill inside her mouth, where it would dissolve.

Cleo reached out and brushed the hair out of her mother's eyes. Her mother stirred, her arms and legs shifting beneath the covers, and then she was still. Cleo watched her mother's

chest rise and fall, soothed by the sounds of her breathing, soft and steady as the marsh winds. She slouched down to the floor, to the pallet of blankets she lay on every night. She wished for a magic strong enough to wake her mother, for an enchanted bottle to catch the breeze and fill her mother's lungs with new life. Her mother's hand slipped off the edge of the mattress, landing on Cleo's trembling shoulders. The little girl grabbed her mother's supple fingers, clutched them to her cheek and cried.

*

Later, after Darrell went to sleep, drunk and filthy in the only other bedroom, Cleo crept out of her mother's room and stepped onto the cold kitchen tile. A choir of crickets and bullfrogs serenaded the swampland. The storm door was latched, and a breeze drifted in through the screen, filling the house with the heavy scent of rain. Out the window, the sky was plum-colored, and the bruised clouds cloaked the flora in dark shadows. Through the distant trees, marsh lights danced like a coterie of witches.

Tad lay by the door on his creaking Army-issue cot, holding a towel filled with melting ice against his eye. "What do you want?" he said.

Cleo sat on the floor beside the cot, resting her chin on the telescoping aluminum frame. "I want a story."

He sighed. "You're the one who's always reading. You should be telling me stories."

"Nuh-uh. I like the stories about the old days best."

"Oh, so I'm old now?" he said and poked her shoulder.

"You're old enough to remember what things used to be like," Cleo said.

Tad turned to face her. His uninjured eye reflected the light from the back porch, and Cleo saw the small, furry wings of moths mirrored in his watery pupil. “Okay,” he said, “I’ve got a story.”

Cleo laced her hands beneath her chin, settling onto her crisscrossed legs.

“There was once a great temple,” Tad began, “and a beautiful priestess lived there with her children, a boy and a girl.”

“A prince and a princess?” Cleo asked, her shoulders stiffening.

Tad laced his fingers beneath his head and stared at the ceiling. “Of course not. They were acolytes.”

“Alca-whats?”

“They’re like priests-in-training,” Tad said. “‘Cause, you see, the priestess’s husband died years before—the temple’s enemies killed him just after their daughter was born. Before he died, he built a giant moat to—”

“What’s a moat?”

“It’s like a river that goes around a building and keeps out bad guys,” Tad said.

“Can it be a bog instead?”

“Sure, but only if you stop yapping and let me tell the story.”

Cleo put her fingers to her lips, mimed a zipping and locking motion, and threw away the key.

“All right,” Tad said, “Now, where was I? That’s right, the bog.” He cleared his throat. “The priest used magic to turn the land into a bog. He knew that if the family protected the bog, the bog would protect his family. But the priestess’s wicked brother knew that there was magic

in the bog. ‘Cause, you see, the priestess loved her children and that’s where the magic came from.”

“The priestess’s brother moved himself into the temple. He couldn’t understand the magic of the bog, and he started digging up the land, looking for it so he could steal it for himself. Everywhere he dug, the bog shrank back, and the land dried up. The creatures—the bugs, frogs, and snakes—attacked him whenever he went into the marsh. But even with all this magic, his spirit poisoned the ground.”

“One day, the wicked brother thought to himself that, since the priestess loved her children so, then they must be the source of the magic. He tried to make the children his slaves, which angered the priestess. She told the wicked brother to leave and never come back, but her brother was crafty, and he poisoned her, stealing her voice and her spirit.”

“The wicked brother rules the temple, now. And, every night, the creatures of the bog sing to the queen, asking her to wake up and chase the evil brother away.” Tad turned toward Cleo, his face a wooden mask in the twilight. “The end.”

Cleo’s mouth gaped open. “But that can’t be the end. What about the acolytes? What about the girl and the boy?”

“They’re on their own now, Cleo,” Tad said and rolled to face the wall. “Now go to bed before Darrell wakes up.”

Reluctantly, Cleo stood to leave, but the chorus outside beckoned her, and she walked to the storm door, gazing out into the night. The moon was nearly full, but a thin filigree of clouds made its light hazy and dim. Cleo played her fingers over the ratty metal screen, poking idly at a ragged hole in the thin metal grid. She wished that there was more light, or that she possessed the courage to venture out into the night and check on her wounded frog. She glanced back at Tad,

burrowed deep in his blankets, and she wished that some of the bog's magic would seep in through the screen door and fill her brother with hope. She lingered a few moments longer, watching Tad's chest rise and fall, then she padded back to her mother's bedroom to sleep.

*

Tad had a paper route, which he started every morning before the sun came up. Not many people lived in their little hollow, the houses few and far apart. He would wake up before first light and ride his bike eight miles to the Chronicle's small office, where he filled his canvas sack with newspapers. Cleo hated to be in the house with only her unspeaking mother and her uncle, the shit-stain, to keep her company.

That morning, after breakfast—always oatmeal or cream of wheat cooked by Cleo—Uncle Darrell asked her to sit on his lap. He was dressed in stained overalls and scuffed work boots, his undershirt grimy with crusted sweat. He pulled Cleo onto his thigh and stroked her hair and told her what a good girl she was. He smelled rancid, like spoiled milk or sour mash, and his sandpaper beard sent a shiver through Cleo's shoulders when it brushed the downy hairs on the back of her neck. All the while, her heart thundered, and her muscles hummed with a manic energy when Uncle Darrell placed a hand as rough and knurled as a cow's hoof on her leg. She shut her eyes tight, wondering if this was what the frog felt before her uncle's shovel sheared off its hind legs.

That was when Tad came through the back door, sweaty and huffing from his bike ride. He eyed Darrell and Cleo, his eyes, one purple and knotted, narrowed into slits.

"I brought home your paper, Cleo," Tad said, his voice strained and cracking.

Cleo moved to jump to her feet, but Uncle Darrell held her in place for a moment.

“It’s about time you got home,” Uncle Darrell said. “Now get some breakfast, ‘cause I need you to bring some peat back to the house and fertilize the garden.” Then he released Cleo, slurped the last of his coffee and walked out the door.

Cleo walked over to Tad, who stood with one hand clutching his canvas sack. She could see Uncle Darrell in the garden, a tank of insecticide strapped to his back as he walked from row to row, spraying death on the beetles and locusts there. Tad was staring at the big man, his eyes dark and clouded. When Cleo tapped his shoulder, Tad startled, his hands balling into fists.

“Sorry, Cleo,” he said. “What do you need?”

“My newspaper, please,” Cleo said, rocking on her bare heels.

“Oh,” he said, digging a solitary newspaper out of his sack, “here you go.”

Cleo took the paper and began spreading the different sections onto the tabletop. But, out of the corner of her eye, she could still see Tad staring out at Darrell. The look on her brother’s face scared her. He was often surly, but never hateful.

“I’m going to kill him,” Tad said, his voice so quiet that Cleo could barely make out his words beneath the rustling newspaper.

*

After she read the paper, Cleo followed Tad into the bog. She knew the bog well, navigating through brush and around standing water with carefree ease—as if she herself were a bog creature. Cleo walked beneath a canopy of willow trees, letting their long hair tickle her ears as she listened to the rattling timbre of the cicadas. When she found Tad, her brother was covered from head to toe in muck, strings of moss and vine tangled in his long black hair. He grappled with the spade, hefting huge chunks of peat into the wheelbarrow.

“Hey, Cleo,” Tad said. “You read your paper?”

Cleo nodded, digging her perpetually naked toes into the slime at her feet, listening to the soft gurgle of mud.

“What’s going on in the world?” Tad asked.

“They found a body in a bog a bit like ours,” Cleo said brightly.

“A body?” Tad said.

“A dead body.”

“I figured as much,” Tad said, a blue vein straining from his temple as he slapped another load of peat into the wheelbarrow.

“The article said that hundreds of years ago, people used to leave offerings to the spirits and dainties that lived in the bog.”

He stopped digging. “Dainties?”

“Yeah, dainties,” she said. “The people would pray to them.”

Tad grinned and speared the shovel into the bog. “I think you mean ‘deities.’ It’s another word that means ‘god.’”

“I know what it means,” she said and stuck her tongue out. “Anyways, they used to leave all sorts of things as offerings to the deities. Sometimes, they’d walk people out into the bogs and they’d hit them over the head and leave them as a sacrifice.” She smiled, pleased with herself.

“You don’t say,” Tad said.

“They said there’s stuff in bogs that keeps the bodies from rotting like they normally would, and it turns their skins all dark and leathery,” Cleo said. “And their bones dissolve so they’re all wiggly.” She shook her arms loosely from the shoulders to demonstrate. Tad grinned, stabbing his shovel into the peat and shaking his arms and legs until Cleo collapsed against a tree in a fit of laughter.

“Be careful,” Tad said. “You spend so much time in this bog that your bones might turn into jelly too.”

Cleo smiled. She wondered what it would be like to live without a skeleton. Would she be able to crawl or would she be stuck somewhere like a deflated balloon? Like her mother? The article hadn’t said how long it took bones to liquify, only that the body they found had likely been there for hundreds of years. She wondered if frog bones would dissolve in the bog and if it would happen faster because their bones were so much smaller.

“My frog!” she cried and ran down the path, heading for the hill that overshadowed her white rock.

At the white rock, she clenched her feet to keep her balance on the quaking ground. A heron startled, hopping on its long legs and flapping its wings until it awkwardly took flight. Cleo fell to her hands and knees, scrabbling in the moss and muck for the small eyes she’d left protruding from the bog.

Nothing.

She kneeled on the ground and closed her eyes. The breeze sang through the dark trees and her tangled hair. Cleo’s heart filled with emotions she didn’t understand, and she spread her arms and felt the wind prickle the soft skin between her fingers. She knew that if she just kept her eyes closed and said the right words, like a magic spell—no, like a prayer—then the marsh would hear her and tell her its secrets, and she would be able to speak with the creatures that called it home.

But Cleo didn’t know any prayers.

Cleo sighed. Then she opened her eyes and saw the largest frog she’d ever seen, sitting proudly on top of her painted rock. Its body was squat and green and as big as a barn cat, its pale

belly swollen with water. Cleo put her hands over her mouth, then dropped them, crawling closer.

“Is it you?” she asked. “Are you my frog?”

The frog stomped its front legs, turning to face the crouching girl. Cleo knew the bog was special, that an ancient power dwelled amid the mud and reeds. She believed that her frog would be healed, but she never thought it would turn into this—a king among amphibians. Cleo reached for the frog, clutching it to her chest and watching as its throat expanded and contracted with each breath. She placed the frog gently into the pocket of her sack dress.

*

Cleo improvised a basket from the skirt of her dress and filled it with mud and peat, the blinking frog resting in the muck like royalty. She shuffled back to the house, the ground beneath her bare feet quivering like jelly. The sun was setting by the time Cleo caught sight of the shotgun house, and the clouds were as fine and soft as pink lace. She stork-stepped over the broken fence, muck sloshing over her fingers and into the brown grass. Darrell was deeper in the garden, digging by the hazel tree that bordered the fence. He chopped the shovel into the ground again and again.

Cleo slipped through the back door, oblivious to the trail of slime and decaying leaves she left in her wake. She stepped into the darkness of her mother’s room and sat on the bed, her dress cold and wet on her bare legs. Her mother was lying motionless, but her eyes were open and staring at the ceiling.

“Mama,” Cleo said, “I brought something to help. I hope it will help.”

Cleo listened, but she only heard her mother’s soft breathing. She dipped her hand into the muck she carried and spread it on her mother’s brow. Her mother’s head listed on the pillow,

which was stained dark from the oil in her hair. Her eyes settled on Cleo, and the thin line of her mouth twitched, her cheek dimpled.

Cleo placed the frog on her mother's chest. As the frog watched, Cleo began to spread a thick layer of mud over her mother's cheeks, her neck, and her bare arms and shoulders. She dabbed soft fingers beneath her mother's eyes, behind her ears, until every inch of her mother's exposed skin was covered. Tears filled Cleo's eyes, and she fell to her knees, her filthy hands clasping her mother's. She didn't know how much magic the bog possessed—or even if it could reach all the way to their little shack—but she knew that she needed to try.

“Please, Mama,” Cleo said, “please, wake up.”

The door creaked open behind her. “Cleo, did you give your mama her—what the hell?” Uncle Darrell said.

Cleo whirled and scuttled against the dresser, her hands raised in surrender. “I didn't mean to, sir! Please—I'm sorry.”

Uncle Darrell grabbed Cleo's arm, but she pulled away, her bare feet slipping on the soiled wood floor. She grabbed the blanket to keep her balance, but it slipped off the bed and knocked the frog onto the ground. The frog took a hop toward Darrell's booted feet, and the big man stomped hard. His dull black boot flattened the frog, viscera spattering on the bed, the dresser, and Cleo's legs.

Cleo screamed.

Uncle Darrell pulled the girl from the house, his hand tangled in her thick hair. She cried out, but he kept pulling her toward the hazel tree that grew along the fence. Cleo knew what would come next—she'd seen it happen to her brother enough times. She would feel the supple limb of a hazel switch—just another tool in Uncle Darrell's arsenal—tearing into her skin,

sowing pain and reaping fear. When they reached the tree, Darrell threw Cleo to the ground and screamed a string of spittle into her face.

“Pick one!”

Cleo sobbed, her vision blurred, but she hung limply to a thick branch of the hazel tree.

“That’s the one?” he said and, when she nodded, he pulled out a pocket knife with a boar-tusk handle and proceeded to slice away the wispy leaves and branches.

A blur of dirt and skin crashed into Darrell from behind. Tad, filthy and shirtless, plowed into Darrell at a full sprint and sent the older man sprawling headfirst over the wooden fence.

Tad brushed the filthy hair out of his eyes and helped Cleo to her feet.

“You okay?” Tad said breathlessly, his bare chest covered with a sheen of dirt and sweat.

Cleo nodded, her fingers digging into Tad’s arm.

Darrell scrambled to his feet, cursing and dragging one leg awkwardly in the dirt. The bone-handled knife had stabbed him in the fall and was now protruding from his thigh, a dark red circle spreading on his canvas pants.

Darrell limped toward the children and grabbed the shovel that he’d left leaning against the fence. He took a wild swing, the shovel’s heavy blade missing and gouging into one of the wooden posts. “I’ll fucking kill you!” he shrieked, his eyes red-rimmed and unfocused.

The children ran together, vaulting over the broken fence and into the darkening swamp. The light of the full moon seeped through the trees, dim and disorienting. They fought to see the forest floor in the half-light, tripping over exposed roots and splashing through deep puddles of water. Darrell crashed after them, seemingly unaffected by the knife buried in his leg, his cries vile and animalistic. Cleo could feel his rage sending a tremor through the night air. She looked over her shoulder, trying to gauge if they were outdistancing the crazed man. That brief lapse in

attention from her footing was all it took. She didn't see the tangled cypress root against the shadowy foreground—her foot caught and both children went sprawling in an explosion of mud and leaves. They tumbled into a clearing, the moon's light covering the marsh in a soft blue glow.

Then Darrell was upon them, his breath wheezy and ragged. Cleo cowered in horror as Uncle Darrell speared his shovel into the ground and straddled Tad's chest. He punched the boy in the mouth and nose, cutting his knuckles on Tad's teeth. His fingers tore at Tad's throat, ignoring the boy's hopeless struggles.

Cleo sobbed. She had hoped that the bog's magic would keep them safe, but now she felt helpless and naïve. Cleo scrambled backward, splashing through the filthy water. Her palms scraped against rough stone, and she turned to see her sacred white rock glowing in the moonlight, her sketches standing out in sharp contrast. She felt the first swellings of hope. The bog had led her here; she was sure of it.

Cleo walked behind her uncle, pulled the shovel out of the ground and hefted it in both hands. It felt heavy and awkward in her grasp, but she couldn't let that stop her—Tad needed her. Cleo aimed at Darrell's head and swung the shovel with all the strength she could muster. It was a clumsy blow, but the sharp, metal blade lacerated the skin at the base of Darrell's neck. He bellowed like a wounded ox, stumbling in the mud as Tad, now free, sputtered and coughed.

Cleo dropped the shovel and pulled Tad to his feet. "Are you okay?" she asked.

Tad spit out a mouthful of blood and his legs nearly gave out. "I'm not sure," he said.

Uncle Darrell groaned and reached for the shovel. He rolled to his knees and stood, using the spade as a crutch. His overalls were dirty and torn, and his face was covered in a mask of black blood, his eyes shining like dead stars. In the moon's eerie light, their uncle didn't even

look human. Tad and Cleo ran, stumbling up the hill which overlooked the white rock. They climbed and climbed, but even at its summit, it wasn't enough to keep them from Darrell. They pressed together, their feet edging along the cliff, Cleo's white rock thirty feet below. Darrell, blood trickling from his scalp, stood before them with the shovel hanging loosely from his hands.

Darrell smiled a grim little smile, raised the shovel in both hands and staggered toward the children.

"Close your eyes, Cleo," Tad said, and they held each other, listening to Darrell's boots squelching closer. Somewhere nearby, an owl screeched, its call echoing in the coolness. The air felt thick, almost tangible, and Cleo shivered as she felt the first prickles of goose flesh on her arms.

"I'm scared, Tad."

"It's going to be okay, Cleo," he said, his voice quavering. "I promise."

"Mama," Cleo breathed, her fingernails digging into Tad's arm.

The footsteps stopped, but no shovel sliced the air. Instead, they heard the wind gusting, carrying the sounds of singing, the voices of a million marsh creatures joining together in a chorus.

They opened their eyes.

Darrell's back was to them, his arms slack, still holding onto the shovel. All around them, the bog was moving, but it wasn't just the quaking of the peat. No, the ground itself was crawling as frogs, toads, snakes, centipedes, and locusts marched on, the rattle of their barbed legs and membranous wings keeping rhythm like the thunder of war drums. They swarmed up the hill, encircling Darrell in a narrowing lasso of bodies. Dragonflies and blackbirds swooped and volplaned at Darrell's head, and he tried to swat them away with the shovel.

He retreated from the marsh creatures, backing up to the edge of the cliff. Cleo and Tad huddled on the ground as all manner of insects and amphibians crowded around them, heading straight toward Darrell. The children watched as Darrell stabbed at the ground with his spade, shearing a toad in half, smashing a coil of centipedes into paste. They watched as the bog crept ever upward, encasing Darrell in a cocoon of flesh, mud, and feathers. They watched as he stumbled, lost his footing on the rocky cliff, and fell headfirst onto the white rock below. They watched as his body, limp and heavy as a sandbag, slid off the rock and into the bog, breaking through the surface layer of moss, where earth and water would leech all the hardness and cruelty from his bones.

Cleo and Tad sat in silence, huddled together, as the bog creatures slowly departed, marching back into the depths of the swamp. The full moon cast a soft glow, and a damp breeze blew against Cleo's hair. In the distance, Cleo thought she heard her mother calling them home.

Animal Control

On my first day working for Denise's step-brother Rick, he tells me he made a deal with the devil. His hand is shoved wrist-deep in a pit bull's mouth, his fingers protected by a Kevlar glove, when he tells me that he sold his soul for a lifetime lease in the old westside projects, where every other home is being bought by rich hipsters with trust funds and trendy dog breeds. I'm leaning into the wire loop, this sixty-pound pit making my feet leave the floor every time she thrashes around. Rick retrieves a prepped syringe full of animal tranquilizer from a leather holster with his free hand, bites the cap off with his teeth and pumps the dog full of snooze juice.

"Was it worth it?" I say.

He takes his hand from the dog's mouth, a string of slobber and bile connecting his glove to the dog's jowls. "Was what worth it?"

The dog snores loudly, her jaws popping as she runs and whimpers in her chemical sleep.

"The deal. The one with the devil."

Rick tousles the sleeping dog's ears. "Shh—it's okay, girl," Rick says to the dog, then he looks up at me. "Well, I guess it depends on whose side you're on, Skip. I don't have any complaints. Besides, it's just drugs, and everyone's snorting or smoking something these days."

He stands up, takes off his gloves and wipes his hands on his pants. "Come on. Let's get this bitch loaded into the truck, then we have to drop Pedro and a couple of the raccoons on the north end of town."

While we sit watching cartoons on the motel room's ancient television, Denise asks me to steal tranquilizers from her step-brother. The telephone is clanging in the background. I get tired of hearing the phone ring and ask if she's going to pick it up.

“Forget the phone for a minute,” she says.

“You don’t think Rick will notice?”

“Not if you’re careful,” she says.

Rick has this gig where he traps wild animals and strays—dogs, cats, squirrels, possums, raccoons, and the like—then re-releases them into up-and-coming neighborhoods when everyone is asleep. He throws a few bucks at me and Denise to plaster flyers for his business on car windshields and front doors all over town. He also disappears people for the city fathers—gets rid of anyone who causes problems or asks too many questions. Rick’s been training me to help him put the animals back out because he doesn’t want to risk being seen by his customers or some nosey neighbor. Denise says this could be a good chance to score some of the ketamine and diazepam he uses to keep the animals docile.

“You can only bring back however much it would take to tranquilize them, otherwise he’ll know you stole something. Just put on some work gloves and shove Pedro and the other critters into their carriers,” she says. She picks up a bowl, packed full of herb and powdery hash, and coughs a lungful of smoke as thick and sweet as honey into the air.

I take the bowl when Denise passes it to me, hold the carb and inhale. The hot, thick smoke enters my lungs, scouring all the dark rooms inside my body, chasing the monsters away.

“What if Rick finds out?”

“Then you’re toast,” she says. She giggles sleepily and leans her head on my chest.

The phone rings again, then my eyes and ears vibrate until I’m as high as a tuning fork. I had taken a couple of Ambien earlier, and between that and the weed I can feel my blood running heavily through my limbs, turning me into warm stone. Still, I know I won’t sleep—not really, anyway.

There's a stock painting on the wall behind the TV. It's a mural of creatures from some prehistoric era. Dinosaurs with long necks eating grass, ancient sea monsters, and flying lizards with beaks as long and sharp as spearheads. The painting, full of green and red hues, stands out against the flat, beige motel walls, which are cracked and peeling to reveal plaster and spores of dark-colored mold.

"Rick's a pervert. If he gets mad I'll just threaten to tell his dad how he used to spy on me in the shower when we were teenagers," she says.

"Your brother watched you naked?"

"Step-brother."

"Still." I say, turning to look at her.

She sits up and shoves me in the chest. "Rick's a pervert, but he's harmless. Besides, he's scared of you. He thinks you got all damaged in the war—like you sleep with a gun or some shit."

"I don't believe Rick's scared of anything," I say. "I once watched him drown a cat in a rain barrel, then he fell asleep with his head on his desk."

Sleep is a gift, one that I don't deserve. It only comes to me when its presence could kill me or when I get so high that my body melts into the mattress and I turn back into whatever ancient muck had once formed my primitive, unsleeping mind.

Denise walks to the front window in a pair of powder blue scrubs. She cracks the curtain and stares into the sky. The sunlight sparkles on the downy hairs on her cheeks and arms, and she's fucking incandescent. She asks me if I see the pterodactyl flying over the vacant lot across the street. I tell her no and ask her to come back to bed.

We were monsters, flying on muted wings. Arriving under cover of darkness and shattering doors, windows, locks, bones. Nightmares made flesh, people woke to our shadows over their beds, our claws tearing them from their homes. We shoved them into burlap sacks, flying out and leaving their wives and daughters with the emptiness of the night, the calls of desert jackals and long-eared owls haunting them until dawn. Flames from our demolition charges leapt, crackled, engulfed everything.

When I'd first met Denise, she was outside the First Baptist Church, blowing cigarette smoke out through her nostrils after our grief counseling group session. She asked if I was alone. She asked if I ever got sick of being told that the end-goal was to get to a place where we accept that our lives have been ripped apart. She asked if I ever wanted to just run away, find any old thing to do except serving out this sentence.

I said yes.

The next day, Denise got me a job on the set for one of those medical reality shows where actors play real people who get sent to the emergency room for bizarre, embarrassing injuries. Denise was a regular. She was always a nurse or a doctor. It was my first time and I was playing Man with Swollen Testicle—a pretty sweet gig for a novice. I was outside smoking a joint between takes, and she walked over and leaned against the building's worn brick façade. I held out the joint and she took it in her hand, each fingernail a swatch of mismatched paint. She asked if I could give her a ride back to her motel, so two hours later—still dressed in my hospital gown and with a fake ice pack stuffed into my underwear—I took her to her room by the river and we stood on the balcony and drank cheap vodka and smoked Mexican weed. Denise waved her hands in front of my face, her nails swimming like a kaleidoscope. We looked over the river

in the dark, a few faint pinpoints of light pulsed through the smog and light pollution and we saw two homeless men throwing rocks at each other before splitting a syringe full of heroin and falling asleep with their feet hanging in the water.

That night, she told me about the young Marine she had married long ago. How his helicopter was blown up by a rocket-propelled grenade during the Battle of Fallujah. She didn't even know she was pregnant until the seismic cramps and dark blood drove her to the emergency room. The embryo implanted outside her uterus and burst, sending her into shock. When the doctor opened her up to stop the bleeding, he discovered a collection of ugly tumors. Denise woke up a few hours later with no husband, no baby, and no uterus. The doctor told her that she was lucky the baby died, otherwise it might have been years before someone discovered the cancer.

When we woke the next morning, she told me we could make a few bucks canvassing the new housing developments for Rick's pest-control business. I've been following her ever since.

Denise is putting new film in her camera when I wake up. She's sitting on the bed next to me with her legs crossed. Her shirt is riding up her hips and I can see the pale skin at her navel, the flat pink scar that burrows crookedly up and down her stomach like a carnivorous worm. I sit up in the bed and yawn. My mouth tastes like a litter box, so I brush my teeth in the sink with the water running. It sputters and gurgles out of the faucet, carrying a metallic odor as it circles down the drain. I rinse my mouth and roll a joint on the sink, smoking as Denise messes with the camera, dozens of film cartridges spread around her legs.

"Have you ever thought of developing any of those pictures you take?" I say.

“Why should I? I like the feeling of never quite finishing something,” she says. She points the camera at me and clicks the shutter before I can turn away.

“It's too early in the morning for that shit.”

“Come on,” she says. “Not like that's the first time someone's shot you.”

“Yeah, but I was always able to shoot back.”

“Here” she says, extending the camera out to me. “You might do better with a camera instead of a rifle anyway. Maybe then you'd actually sleep.”

“Imagine if the Army issued cameras instead of carbines,” I say, tipping ash into the sink.

She puts the camera down and kneels facing me on the bedspread. “Why don't we leave this place?” She says.

I don't answer. I sit on the bed and smoke my joint. The TV is on. A young guy with a beard and hipster haircut begs me to call the phone number on the screen to get my addictions under control. He's dressed in surgical scrubs and has a stethoscope around his neck, but there's no way that he went to medical school.

“You know that when you do sleep, you yell and punch and kick? You're the angriest man I know,” she says.

“Yeah, that's why I'll never leave. This town can grow on you. Like a fungus.”

“No,” she says and shakes her head. “You can't let it get to you. It will eat you alive.”

I'm on my way to work when I start to doze off. It's dusk and a haze of sunlit clouds bloodies the horizon. In the dreary half-light, stuck in the oozing traffic, I feel my eyelids giving

out. I open my windows to the city—cars honking, the gritty taste of diesel fumes—but the air is hot and stinks of ozone.

Emergency lights are flashing in the distance, and I slump into my seat, preparing to join the line of gawkers ahead of me. A homeless man sits on the corner with a Styrofoam cooler full of water bottles, selling them for \$1 each. His sun-worn face is framed by feathers of white hair, and his eyes are milky and impossibly large. Those eyes make me think about the night when Hobo and Minifield were killed in an ambush, and I saw the corpse of a giant squid on the African coast. It was freshly dead, its skin already turning into leather in the heat, the eyes hazy and bulging and the size of my fist.

On the helicopter ride back to the base, the exhaustion hit me like a concussion, and I'd leaned the lip of my helmet on the rifle barrel extending up between my knees, the pulsing of the rotor wash lulling me to sleep where I dreamed of the rifle going off, the 5.56mm round coring a neat hole through my forehead before bouncing around inside my skull.

A loud noise jolts my head off the steering wheel. My heart is on full-auto, and the homeless man pounds on my window again. I wave feebly, roll down the window and hand the man a dollar bill that I can barely afford. The man reaches deep into the soupy interior of the cooler at his feet, hauling out a bottle that still has chunks of ice sliding lazily across its surface.

“Here, brother, stick that on the back of your neck and see if it don't get you where you're going,” the old man says.

My blood is whirring in my ears. “I know exactly where I'm going,” I say, or maybe I only think it, because the man is already hailing another car, waving a handful of water bottles at a small Honda behind me.

I drain half of the water, then hold the bottle against the side of my neck, savoring its coolness against my skin. A car honks and I ease off the brake, checking the intersection and guiding my car to the right. For months now, I have been finding myself in places that I do not remember setting out for. Heading home from the pest control, I might wake up leaning against a bar with a shot of whiskey in front of me. If I go to the store for milk or rolling papers, I might wake up two hours later in bed with a stranger's bare leg across my own. I've been forgetting. I've been losing weight.

The accident comes into view. A late-model pickup truck lays upside-down in the median, a foreign hybrid twisted into a bundle of scrap along the shoulder. Near the truck, a body lies under a white blanket, the color sharp and antiseptic amid the bluebonnets that grow between the roadways. I try to keep from staring, but it all seems too familiar, like an old photograph propped against my dash.

Someone is carrying Greene, the big man draped across my shoulders like a yoke. His leg is dangling by a thread of sinew and bone, but only moments ago someone had tightened a tourniquet around his shattered leg and marked the time on his forehead with a sharpie. I dig into my self-aid kit, swallowing caffeine pills, Motrin, amphetamines, morphine. I need to stay awake just a little bit longer.

I'm five years old, practicing dialing 911 on Mom's rotary phone. Never quite turning the final number before I put the phone back into the cradle. Mom is in her room with the door closed and there's a strange man with her. I can hear Mom giggling and moaning, the squeak of the mattress springs drowning out my cartoons.

Rick's Animal Control is in a shitty strip mall, attached to a sketchy day care and a sushi restaurant, which has been temporarily closed by order of the health department. I walk into the office and turn the lights on. I can hear the animals pacing in their metal cages, snuffling and scratching at the bars. I walk in the back room and see Rick. He's standing in front of a blue, metal barrel that's filled with water, and he's drowning a brindle-colored puppy. The mutt thrashes, but Rick just stands there, his eyes on his wristwatch.

"Hi, Rick," I say, giving the barrel a wide berth. I remember when Rick drowned the cat; I swear I saw its soul in a cloud through its pink, heart-shaped nose.

"Evening, Skip," Rick says, and he throws the limp dog into a yellow bio-hazard bag, then wipes his hands on his pants. "About to take Pedro and the gang out for the night?"

"Yes."

"Good." Rick walks to the row of cages, unlocks Pedro and rolls the possum around in his arms as if it's his baby. He takes a square of chocolate out of his pockets, places half in his mouth and offers it to Pedro, who gently takes the treat, purring and nuzzling against Rick's neck.

There's an obscene smear of chocolate on Rick's teeth when he smiles. "You just make sure to take care of my sweet Pedro, OK?" Rick says.

"I will."

Rick stuffs Pedro back into his cage and hands me a ring of keys. "There are instructions in my desk drawer," he says, then he walks over and places his hand on my shoulder. "Don't fuck this up, Skip."

"I won't," I say. "I promise."

It takes me a long time to find Rick's instructions, scribbled on yellow legal paper, folded messily and shoved in the top drawer of the desk. It's page after page of overlong descriptions, clients' preferences and obscure city shortcuts. The first sheet of Rick's instructions contains a cryptic warning: *Trank the fuckers!*

Pedro, the fat gray possum, hisses at me from the first cage behind the desk. Despite the warnings from Rick and from Pedro, I won't use the tranquilizers—not on Pedro, not on any of them. I have a job to do. From the way Rick handled him, Pedro seems tame enough. Besides, it seems counterproductive to drug animals whose sole purpose it is to raise hell in nearby communities.

No, I'll take the tranquilizers for Denise and me to share. I unlock the cabinet and place two bottles each of ketamine and diazepam, plus a few hypodermic needles, in my backpack. Then I put on the old hockey gloves Rick gave to me and stand in front of Pedro's cage. Pedro waddles in a small circle, a foul stream of brown shit issues from where his tail used to be—Rick had cut it off so that Pedro is easier to differentiate from any wild possums he catches. I don't care for possums—or raccoons or squirrels, either. They're all just rodents and I can't stand the way their eyes glow in the moonlight, lighting up my darkest thoughts, revealing my secrets.

Opening the cage, I reach in and blindly grope for the furry bastard. I snatch up a leg, twisting to find a better purchase. Pedro bites at my fingers, the heavily padded gloves muting his sharp teeth. His convulsions shake the other cages and drive the other raccoons and possums into a hissing fury, splattering the slimy remains of kibble and fruit onto the cold cement floor.

My temple is throbbing, my heart pounding, and I feel light-headed. I try to grab the scruff of Pedro's neck with my free hand, but his fur slips free of the leather glove. He twists in my grip, climbing up my forearm and raking me with his front claws. I let go of his leg and try to

shake him free, but he sinks his teeth into the fleshy part of my elbow, a splash of arterial blood gushing onto the floor.

Flailing against the white-hot stab of agony, I swing my arm, smacking Pedro against the metal cages which hold his kin, but he doesn't let go. I fall to the ground, pinning Pedro to the floor with my free hand, forcing my arm deeper into his wet, sharp mouth, and I plant my knee on his ribs and bear down. Sweat and snot drip from my face onto the cement below me.

I feel Pedro's ribs give beneath my weight, his bones cracking and popping. His small, dark eyes begin to bulge from his skull, I can see the threads of red veins in their glassy surface. He quivers once, his mouth goes limp, then he's still. Through it all, his eyes stay fixed on me. Even when I leave Pedro's crumpled bulk on the floor to vomit in the metal trash can, I can feel him watching me.

Denise greets me when I walk into the motel room. I slam the door, leaning against it to hold back the sounds of sirens and traffic, but the walls are thin and I can't turn off the wails and murmurs.

“Did you get it?” she says.

I nod and she throws her arms around my neck and kisses me. She pulls me back to the small, bare mattress and pushes me down, pulling my pants off and climbing on top of me. She pulls my hands to her breasts, only then noticing the bloody rag wrapped around my elbow, the long red scratches up and down my arms.

“What happened?”

“Nothing—just, it wasn't so easy to get the animals out,” I say.

“You’re bleeding everywhere,” she says. She gets up and finds the bottle of rubbing alcohol she uses to clean the hash oil from her pipe and fishes out a small first aid kit from underneath the sink. I pull my pants back up.

Denise unwraps the old t-shirt from around my arm. The blood is starting to dry, and it hurts when she peels away the cloth. There are a pair of puncture marks on each side of my forearm. When Denise pours the alcohol on the wounds it burns so badly I clutch my elbows tightly to my ribcage and rock back and forth.

“Fuck, that hurts,” I say.

Denise smears antibacterial ointment on my wounds, then puts on Band-Aids which don't stick to my skin because the ointment is too greasy. She gives up, wrapping my arm in a few swaths of gauze.

“There,” she says.

“It still hurts.”

“That's what happens when you get bit. What's Rick going to say?”

I sit there on the bed, my head down. Denise is kneeling between my legs and stroking my arm by the light of the small TV.

“I killed Pedro,” I say.

“That damn raccoon?”

“He was a possum,” I say.

“But he’s dead?”

“It was an accident. I couldn't get him to let go of my arm.”

She sighs and sits cross-legged on the floor in front of me. “Jesus, baby. What did you do with him after?”

“Pedro? I put him back in the cage.”

Denise puts her hands on my knees. “And the other animals?”

My hands are shaking. I stand up and dig the ketamine out of my bag. I prep an IV port, but the rubber tubing is too slippery. I keep missing when I try to put the needle into my arm.

Denise takes the IV from my hands and guides me to the bed. She kisses the crook of my undamaged elbow, then slides the small needle into a large blue vein. She strokes the hair away from my forehead as she injects the ketamine into my body. “Skip, what about the other animals?”

I feel warmth expanding through my veins. I'm drifting away from my own body, away from time and space. A tremor runs through me just before I liquify and I squeeze Denise's fingers.

“I burned them all,” I say.

I'm lying in a field of poppies. I've been shot in the side. The hole is the size of my fist, but instead of blood there is poppy milk leaking out of me, along with chunks of my shredded liver. Denise comes to me. She's naked except for a veil covering her face, but I can see the long, red scar on her stomach where the doctors had cut her open. She takes off the veil and mounts me. Then her face morphs into Rick's, and he puts his lips against my wound and drinks greedily at the milk. I'm shrinking, my body desiccating in the afternoon heat. I don't want to die. I don't want to be.

When I wake up Denise and a familiar-looking man are standing over me. At first, I think the man is Rick, that he's come to kill me for burning his shop and killing his animals. Then I

realize it's the hipster from the addiction commercials. He's wearing spearmint-colored scrubs and a V-neck that reveals a dark patch of chest hair, but the stethoscope is around his neck just like in the commercials. He smiles. It's supposed to reassure me but a coldness spreads through the pit of my stomach.

Denise puts her hand on my arm. "This is Kevin," she says, "He's here to help."

"But you were the one who wanted the ketamine."

"Not like this, though."

"Don't do this," I say, tears blurring my vision.

Denise reaches out and squeezes my hand. "It'll be okay, Skip."

The hipster pulls me out of the bed and into the scorched parking lot. I think I see Rick's van parked by a green dumpster, but it's just a plumbing service. Kevin eases me into an older Audi with darkly tinted windows. Denise gets in the backseat and leans forward to hand me a photograph. "I want you to keep this, so you'll always remember," she says. "Keep looking. Everything will be all right—you'll see it."

"Where are you taking me?"

"It's a rehab center Kevin runs," Denise says. "Rick doesn't know about it, so you'll be safe there." She kisses me on the cheek.

I hold the photograph in my hands as we pull away. The picture is a black-and-white, a tight angle of my face—eyes closed, hands over my mouth like a muzzle. At a stoplight, hipster guy turns to me and asks me if I'm comfortable. I say I'm tired.

"Don't worry. You can sleep as long as you like," he says. "You won't need to wake up for anything."

I nod, and I fumble with the picture, my fingers wooden, and I drop it into the center console.

Kevin picks up the photograph and puts it in front of me on the dashboard. “There,” he says, “just relax and look at the picture. We have a few more stops to make, but you don't need to worry about anything.”

He smiles at me like a shark, and I lean back into the seat with my eyes half-lidded and sleepy. We finally arrive at an old warehouse outside of town. Its smokestacks cold and barren, craning up into a caustic sky. The three of us walk through bay doors to see Rick standing there, his hands resting on the lip of a metal barrel full of water.

Denise sobs, covering her face.

“Shh,” Rick says, walking toward her and placing his hands on her face. “Don't cry. I always liked you, Denise. That's why I'll give you one hour to leave town, or I'll have Kevin, here, do with you as he likes.” Rick motions toward Kevin, who unloads two huge ice chests, watery and blood smeared, from the truck of his car.

“What about Skip?” she says.

“Skip and I have other plans. But don't worry; it's all for a good cause,” Rick says. “I doubt his liver's any good, but there's got to be something worthwhile in there.”

Denise gasps, her chin quivering as she looks at me. I nod, and she walks out the door and disappears into the glare.

“Skip, Skip, Skip,” Rick says, “you're such a disappointment. Here, I thought you'd be a part of our family, but you hurt Pedro. You hurt me.”

I suck in a breath, feel a hot tear racing down my cheek. Rick grabs my elbow and guides me to the barrel. The water is deep and dark, oily hues of yellow, green, and purple slide on its surface.

There are rooms in my head that I refuse to walk into—but now, with my stomach turning into lead, I feel myself slipping away to a place where pain and blood and sorrow don't exist, where my memories will flood my head until their madness eclipses me, replacing me with darkness, nothingness.

Rick slips the wire loop over my neck and pulls it taut. I can smell the water. And there, deep within, I see peace shining like a dead star.

Afghan Ghosts

The Navy psychologist's pompadour stands at least four inches into the air. You think he looks like Johnny Bravo. Still, he's a Commander, so you try to keep your focus from drifting to the crest of his blond hair as he peppers you with questions. You sit in his small office—more like a broom closet, really—on a secure facility on Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan.

“These are the standard questions that we ask all incoming personnel. While you're here, you might see things that trouble you, and we want to make sure you're ready for it,” he says.

“Roger, sir,” you say.

You assume that when he says “we,” he's referring to the entire joint task force, and that he isn't counting his hair as an extra entity.

“All right,” he says. “Let's get started.”

Twenty minutes pass, and Commander Bravo doesn't ask if you torture small animals or watch your bowel movements circle the toilet bowl after flushing. That's what your crazy Uncle Jeff, the former gunnery sergeant, swears they ask everyone. You assume they only ask Marines those questions. You're just a buck sergeant in the United States Army. Commander Bravo is more inclined to ask if you beat your girlfriend or drink too much.

“Okay, we're almost done. Last question: what's the most important thing in your life?” the psychologist asks.

You look at the floor and chew on your lower lip. You aren't married—hell, you don't even own a dog. Your girlfriend means a lot to you, and you feel like she's the only one who understands how it feels to watch a parent die a slow death. She lost her mother to breast cancer when she was only fifteen. She knows how hard it can be to watch a parent slip away. Maybe the commander's question isn't really that difficult after all.

“My parents are really important to me—especially my dad. We’ve had some rough patches over the years, but we’ve always made it through. For the first time in my life, I think of my dad as my friend,” you say.

“So, that relationship keeps you grounded?”

“I think so. He means a lot to me. He’s been struggling with cancer for a few years now. I just saw him before my deployment started, and he’s got a great outlook on life even though he’s in a lot of pain.”

Despite what you tell the commander, you know that pain is a relative term and that how your father feels cannot determine the reality of his health. A smile will not erase the tumors that consume his organs like cadaver worms. When you visited home before deployment, you were shocked to walk in the door of your parents’ home to be greeted by a skeleton—only a bit of papery, jaundiced flesh stretched over the skull of the man who raised you. The cancer spread from his colon to his liver. The man who taught you to read and took you deer hunting in the mountains of western Montana could barely stand to embrace you.

Perhaps you should voice these concerns—Bravo seems like a nice enough guy. But you simply aren’t ready to share these thoughts with someone you just met, especially not someone who looks like a cartoon character.

“All right,” Bravo says. “It’s great to have that kind of relationship to keep you centered. I think you’ll make a great fit with the task force.”

You stand to leave and shake his meaty paw. You have to duck your head to squeeze beneath the doorframe as you leave his office. You exit the building and wander onto the main road which cuts like a saber through the rows of plywood buildings and khaki-colored tents. The sun is just starting to set over the Hindu Kush Mountains, and the brilliance of its departing rays

frosts the landscape with an idyllic calm. The stillness is surreal, and you find it hard to believe that—perhaps only a few miles away—men with Kalashnikovs might be concealing explosive devices in roadside debris or waiting to ambush soldiers as they patrol a small tribal village. Ahead of you, a group of Army Rangers stands in formation by the task force flagpoles. They are gathered to memorialize a fallen brother, and they look like green and tan statues—a recruitment poster in still life.

You join the rear of the formation and assume the position of parade-rest, locking your hands behind my back and placing your feet shoulder-width apart. A pit bull of a sergeant major eulogizes from the front. He has a sun-burned bald head and a voice that sounds like sandpaper being rubbed over wet rocks. You wonder if he gargles with Liquid Drain-O.

“Yesterday, during a firefight with Haqqani forces, Corporal Tanner died from gunshot wounds while heroically engaging the enemy. He was a good soldier, whose fire team members affectionately called him Optimus Prime, due to his love for the Transformers. He was a consummate jokester, a husband, and a father—and he will be missed,” the sergeant major says.

This is only the first day of your deployment, and you are already witnessing a memorial service. You wonder how much death you will see in the coming months—how many shattered bodies and ragged hearts. A few of the youthful faces around you are stained with tears, and you want to ask how many final goodbyes have been said by these men in over a decade at war. General Order No. 1 prohibits drinking in war zones, but you know that order will be broken tonight. These men—hardly more than boys, for the most part—who knew Tanner will say goodbye to him in their own way, toasting from stores of vodka and whiskey surreptitiously disguised in bottles of mouthwash.

Tomorrow, they will wake up and fend off the dragons of their hangovers, setting their hearts and minds toward destroying the Haqqani Network in what seems an endless war. They will do it for Tanner.

The sergeant major finishes his memorial soliloquy and snaps to the position of attention, as rigid as the barrel of a rifle.

“Group, attention!”

Instantly, the youthful, acne-spotted Rangers—along with a few skinny airmen and hirsute Navy SEALs—snap to attention for the “The Last Roll Call.”

You move to the position of attention with them, not daring to disrespect the gravity of this moment. You listen as the sergeant major begins to call the names of soldiers in his unit—calls that are promptly answered by each man in turn.

“Staff Sergeant Hart!” the sergeant major says.

“Here, Sergeant Major!”

“Private Gordon!”

“Here, Sergeant Major!”

“Specialist Gomi!”

“Here, Sergeant Major!”

“Corporal Tanner!” the sergeant major calls the name of the departed soldier.

No one answers.

“Corporal Daniel Tanner!”

Another pause, the silence only broken by the heart-wrenching sob of a soldier standing beside you.

“Corporal Daniel Allen Tanner.”

The sergeant major sighs with that gravelly voice, his vocal chords hitching with emotion.

“Corporal Daniel Allen Tanner, twenty-two years old, killed in action on 19 May 2008, Khost Province, Afghanistan,” he says.

A soldier with a trumpet steps forward, and—in the moments that pass between the end of his march and the first note he sounds as the trumpet touched his lips—a portentous silence holds the formation captive. Then the soldier plays the most haunting and beautiful rendition of “Taps” that you will ever hear.

The sergeant major releases the formation, and the soldiers file by the helmet, boots, dog tags, and inverted rifle which comprise the “Battle Cross” set up to memorialize the fallen hero. As your brothers-and-sisters-in-arms pay tearful respects to Tanner, a phantom teases the hairs on the back of your neck. You swear that you hear your father’s name being whispered as the final trumpet notes echo across the stillness of the Hindu Kush Mountains.

Acknowledgments

A large group of people have contributed to this work, fortifying me with their patience, advice, and compassion. I am deeply indebted to my thesis committee, Deirdre McNamer, Kevin Canty, and Tobin Addington, for mentoring me and guiding me through this difficult process. They helped bring out some of my best work—even if they had to drag it, kicking and screaming. Thank you for helping me to believe in myself.

Thank you to the many writers who have instructed, inspired, encouraged, and strengthened me over the years—Adam Braver, Debra Earling, Cristina Garcia, Diane Bertrand-Gonzales, Melissa Scully, Refugio “Ito” Romo, and all the kind souls at Gemini Ink—you have made me a better writer and a better person.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to my tribe, to the military veterans whose writing and friendship have sustained me. Thank you to David Abrams, Benjamin Busch, James Moad II, and Brian Turner.

To my peers at the University of Montana’s Creative Writing Program—Bryn Agnew, Callie Atkinson, Catalina Baker, Pia Baur, Michael Byrne, Dwight Curtis, Natalie Elliot, Beatrice Garrard, Nicole Gomez, Eric Hollen, Barry Maxwell, Amelia Morand, David Queen, Kylie Westerlind, Taylor White, Amanda Wilgus, and Ben Yeager—thank you for being patient, thoughtful readers and constant sources of inspiration. Whether we shared a workshop or simply a good conversation, their kindness was my lifeline.

Thank you to my mother, Susan Joy Durovey-Antrim, for always listening, always allowing me to make mistakes, and loving me all the while.

This work is dedicated to my late father, Daniel Allen Durovey. His spirit lives in these pages.

Thank you to my partner, Tamara, for being my friend, light, and lover these past ten years.

Thank you for always being game for the next adventure and for showing me what it's like to possess true strength. Thank you to my sons—Ethan, Caleb, and Owen—for keeping me on my toes, for making me laugh and cry, and for demonstrating unselfish confidence. I'm so fortunate to have you all in my life.

Finally, to all my friends: Thank you for your generosity, which has been an endless source of joy and procrastination when I needed it most. If not for my friends, I never would have had so much fun, or cried so many tears of thanks, while putting off the actual work of writing my thesis.