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Shrapnel

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Thesis

SHRAPNEL

by

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Fifteen minutes outside Iraq, our C-17 drops ten thousand feet. Then, by the way the bird bucks, I know we’re mapping the Zagros mountain range. Strapped to a mesh bench, we rise and fall in our seats. White interior light cuts off, and red beacons beside the exit doors ignite. Across from me, Thorpe holds a hand to his mouth; vomit slips between his fingers. At twelve minutes out, assistant jumpmasters lift their doors. Wind rages in, thin air mingled with diesel exhaust, and its stench suffocates. I unbuckle my seatbelt and tuck it behind my back. My ritual begins.

Jumpmaster: Ten! Minutes!

Our Father, who art in heaven,

Jumpmaster: Get! Ready!

hallowed be Thy name.

Jumpmaster: Outboard personnel, stand up!

Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done

Jumpmaster: Inboard personnel, stand up!

On earth as it is in heaven.

Jumpmaster: Hook up!

Give us this day our daily bread,

Jumpmaster: Check static lines!

and forgive us our trespasses

Jumpmaster: Check equipment!

as we have forgiven those who trespassed against us.
Jumpmaster: Sound off for equipment check!

*And lead us not into temptation, “OK!”*

Cruise: All OK, Jumpmaster!

*but deliver us from evil.*

Jumpmaster: Standby!

*For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory,*

Jumpmaster: Green light—go! Green light—go! Green light—go!

*forever and ever. Amen.*

The outboard row exits first, and their collective bodies move like a centipede constricting and decompressing. One by one, they vanish, falling out the door.

Rivers: Last man! Last man! Last man!

His feet shuffle as he moves forward—heel, toe, heel, toe—and he’s gone. My chest tightens as blood pushes through my heart to my neck. I feel its heat and pressure pulsating through my temples. My line advances, and I follow.

My arm extends as I pass the rear wheel well, and I struggle to keep my elbow level with my shoulder so my static line won’t fall in front of me. This cord anchors me, but I can’t get tangled up with it. Once I’m falling, it’ll stay with the bird, keeping the pack tray and anything else it’s wrapped around: my arm, my neck. I stomp with my left foot, and my right drags behind. My machine gun slaps against my thigh, and my ruck dangles at my waist—114 pounds of gear trying to break my back. I refuse to stoop.

I reach the jumpmaster and lock eyes with him, then extend my arm. His mouth moves, but I can’t hear what he’s saying. His hand clamps down on mine as he pulls my
static line. I cling to the reserve parachute strapped to my gut and hesitate. He slaps my shoulder. I leap.

\textit{One-thousand.}

Engulfed in warmth, I ride a jet-blast’s wake.

\textit{Two-thousand.}

Wind roars, and my feet flail, trying to find each other as I spin, then lock heel-to-heel and toe-to-toe.

\textit{Three-thousand.}

I grip my reserve’s deployment loop, and I think of pulling it.

\textit{Four.}

The main parachute deploys, jerking my body with its opening shock.

Risers lift, pushing my helmet over my eyes then face. I twisted in my descent, and I cannot lift my head. I grab at the straps with downward pointed thumbs. Sturdy hold. Bicycle kick. Unwind. I adjust my helmet and observe my parachute, looking for gores and tears. I see none. Figures of planes migrate toward the horizon as dark shadows against deep night. The world is obscured, silent, and still. I can’t gauge my rate of decent with others. I can’t see them. I look below and wonder when to lower my equipment, but the ground is as dark as the sky.

I enter the VA Outpatient Clinic at 16:55. Coming through these sliding doors, I get looks from those who fought in Vietnam, Korea, maybe a few from World War II—it’s hard to tell what war they fought. They all seem so old. They have wheelchairs,
oxygen tanks, catheters. I’m not so lucky. Scars don’t ravage my body, and I have all my limbs. They judge me with their milky eyes, wondering where I got wounded. They have earned disabilities, and I can almost feel their disappointment as I follow a lacquered red line to Mental Health. It’s a path I have to follow. It’s a place where I have to wait.

Empty seats line walls, and I sit where I can watch doors and hallways. A sign attached to a perched television says Please do not change channel or adjust volume. I couldn’t reach it unless I had something to stand on. Grip armrest, shift feet, tug. My seat doesn’t move. Bolts thread through its base, anchoring it. Who threw a chair? Places like these, they don’t anticipate. They react.

Television: Kim Kardashian isn’t one to let her five-foot-two stature get her down—the reality superstar is constantly reaching new heights in sky-high heels.

There’s another story occupying real estate on screen. A scrolling banner below the talking head reads: 66 US troops have died so far this month, making August the deadliest month for American forces in the nearly decade-long war. It rolls across the screen and departs.

Decade.

The word rattles in my head, bouncing around like a broken tab in an aluminum can. Kosovo was the war I signed up for. The Global War on Terror was the war I got. War in places so dry that it begs for blood in the absence of rain.

The anchor drones on about guests, clothes, and money spent. It sickens me. The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier should be converted into a catacomb. I drop my hand over
two killed in action bracelets and bend their black-enamedled tin tightly against my left wrist so they won’t shift. They feel more like a manacles than mementos.

I don’t want to be in this place. Nothing good comes from it. Cara wants me to be here, thinks it can save me. Save us. I suppose that’s reason enough. Better her advice than my brother’s. Rob would probably tell me to get laid.

Beneath empty seats, dust wads cling. I strangle armrests and breathe deep. Hold for eight seconds, release and wait, then breathe again. I can’t stand waiting, and I hate sitting. I check my watch: 17:25. I should have been called by now.

Bulletproof glass encloses the reception area. Metal wires weave between panes, and I see a hollow reflection of myself bound in diamond webbing as I approach. Dim lights flicker within. I press a button. Press it again. Again and hold. Someone must hear it.

A door opens. A large-bellied man with thin arms wipes mayonnaise from his chin with a paper napkin. Even now he takes his time. He sits, adjusts himself, sips on his Styrofoam cup’s straw, sets it down, then rubs his hands. He leans his fat face into his microphone.

Receptionist: Can I help you?

“I had an appointment at five.”

He checks his screen.

Receptionist: You’re late. Did you get your notice? You need to arrive here fifteen minutes prior to your appointment.

“Yes.”
Receptionist: Last four of your social.

The numbers roll off my tongue like spittle. A neon bulb’s light pools on his forehead.

Receptionist: Dr. Casper may not be able to see you. Just a minute, please.

He makes a call. Drums his fingers on his table, then presses a button. An electric buzz grates in a nearby door.

Receptionist: Head on in. Last room on the right.

Dr. Casper’s door is open. I enter, then sit. Water stains on his wall have turned brown. A stench of ammonia lingers. Looks like someone’s been pissing on this wall for years, but it’s water. Just water.

He asks me short questions; I give him short answers. He looks more at his screen than at me. Clicking, typing, recording.

Dr. Casper: Your prescriptions are current.

“Citalopram and Zolpidem—yes.”

Dr. Casper: Do you feel like they are doing a good job? Any reactions?

The sleeping pills are useless. Jack Daniels works better. “No problems. They’re fine.”

His face glows blue. Reflecting in his glasses, black lines of text grow. I can’t read what he is writing, and I can’t see his eyes.

Dr. Casper: Any problems with memory?
“None that I can recall.” He doesn’t laugh. Probably heard it before. “Sometimes I mix up dates and events.”

Dr. Casper: Oh?

I dip my head. Things that happened, I remember them now like sprawl in a humvee’s dashboard. Metal jutting out of metal in no particular order. I didn’t keep a journal. “I don’t know. It’s like all of my deployments have fused.”

Dr. Casper: And how many deployments is that?

It should be in his fucking database, I’ve answered that so many times. “Five.”

Dr. Casper: But you’ve been sleeping well? At least six to eight hours?

“Well enough. Could it be caused by the meds, my memory?”

Dr. Casper: Well, there are many things that can affect it: sleep, prior injuries, smells and other stimulants. I suppose your medications could be a factor, but it’s not listed as a side effect. The major issues with this are…

He keeps talking. I rest my head on my fist. He says symptoms, and I give him numbers. On a scale of one to five, one being no occurrence at all, and five being frequent. I never score below a four.

I scratch at a loose string in my chai, and as I pull it out of its stitching, and the cushion expands. When the thread snaps, I ball it between my thumb and index finger, then stow it in my pocket. My wristwatch’s soft ticks vibrate on my skin. I haven’t been counting them. I should’ve been. Dr. Casper asked a question. What was it? Think.
My rifle’s bolt glides out easily and rests in my hand—a grimy hand where solvent and carbon outline every crevice and fold. A torn and stained shirt wipes the bolt dry, but residue remains. A toothbrush and dental pick scrape it free. Pipe cleaners penetrate nooks. Snake the bore. Disassemble, lube, reassemble. Functions check.

Attempt to place the selector switch on safe. If the selector switch fails to go on safe, pull the charging handle to the rear and release. Place the selector lever on semi. Pull the trigger to the rear and hold. The hammer should fall. Hold the trigger. Pull the charging handle to the rear and release. Release the trigger, and pull it to the rear again. The hammer should fall. Place the selector lever on burst. Pull the charging handle to the rear and release. Pull the trigger to the rear and hold. The hammer should fall. Hold the trigger. Pull the charging handle to the rear three times and release the trigger. Pull the trigger. The hammer should fall. Release the trigger. Pull the charging handle to the rear. Place on safe. “I’m sorry. What was the question?”

Dr. Casper: These disruptive thoughts. Can you recall the last time they interfered with your life?

“It’s hard to drive.”

Dr. Casper: Why?

“Sometimes I want to hit the brakes if I’m being tailgated.”

Dr. Casper: Do you?

Yes, sometimes. “No.”

Dr. Casper: What else?
Was there something to his tone? What else. What not else? Everything. “Passing under bridges. Sometimes I jump lanes, or ride between them.”

Dr. Casper: Do you think about it before you do it?

“Briefly. I check my mirrors, look ahead, then gun it.” There’s no planning to it, and he knows I’m lying. He checking his watch. He doesn’t care. It’s his job. He’s on the clock. He’s just checking boxes.

Dr. Casper: I have to ask, and there’s no judgment in the question. It’s something we do for everyone who walks in here. Please, be honest. Do you feel like you may be a threat to yourself or others?

Am I a threat? No. Everyone else is a threat. They try to get to close. They want to thank me for a burden they weren’t aware of, or to tell me how they would have done it even though they’ve never put on a fucking uniform. They want to tell me what I did was fine, that it’s over, to get a job that pays minimum wage and be thankful for it. They want to inspect wounds without anesthetic.

Stop. Stop. Stop.

Deep breath. “No. I’m fine.”

Dr. Casper: Good. Everything seems to be going well. Just keep up with your medications and call these numbers if you have any problems.
He hands me a 4x8 script, and his name is just scrawl. There’re no letters, just lines and loops. He rises and opens his door. As I pass, he taps my shoulder with a closed fist like we’re buddies.

Dr. Casper: Soldier on, eh.

I nod my head, bite my tongue. Go fuck yourself.

I pass through empty hallways. Heels click on linoleum and echo. Lights flicker, flashing in my face like flares from a carbine’s muzzle.

_A quiet life_—weapons jam: slap pull observe release tap squeeze, muzzle-flash—*I’d like that.* I have to keep moving. Hesitancy kills. Body square. Head on a swivel.

“Door.” I level my rifle at our next entrance, but my eyes drifts from what’s over my front sight post to the man I just shot. There’s a fluidity to it, shooting. Donning a helmet and body armor makes men different. Makes training take over. Person other than us with a gun in our area of operation? There’s no thinking. Take him down. Muscle memory. Bullets travel faster than consequences. Cruise, Rivers, and Malloy signal all clear once they stack on their corners.

Thorpe: Coming in hot.

His shoulder brushes against my back as he enters. He points his rifle at the neutralized threat. He kicks a Kalashnikov from dirty, limp hands. Weak gurgles. Tiny bubbles. Staff Sergeant Wilson loiters outside, leading from behind. He’s fattened while deployed: a mark of a shitty soldier, and an even worse NCO. Nothing like Atwater, a man who led by example.
Wilson: You get that dune coon?

Thorpe: He’s dead.

Wilson: You sure?

Golden flash. I didn’t hear Thorpe’s gunshot. I haven’t heard any since the firing began. First shot pierces. After that, they sound like paper tearing.

Thorpe: Pretty fucking sure.

It’s hot today. Hotter than normal? No. I’m moving. Moving makes it worse. Body armor traps heat. Jensen enters with Wilson, then starts to work the door with a wrecking bar. Back on point. Focus. Focus. Focus. Eyes ahead. 3. 2. 1. Door buckles. \textit{Left, right, left, right, left, right—kill.} We enter as a blossoming flower, just like we trained, all muzzles in at the same time. A man stands and his \textit{thawb} flares. His hands are up. Why are his hands up? “Get down, now! On your fucking face!”

The room scintillates like a dozen cameras recording a picture at different angles. Smoke. Crimson mist. A freshly painted wall. His body drops. He falls forward, collapses on his knees, then face plants. Arms outstretched. Head down. He looks to be praying, but he’s not. He’s dead. He’s just dead. “What the fuck?”

Wilson: What?

Words crawl out of my throat. “He surrendered.”

Thorpe: Only because he was out of ammo.

He removes a pistol from his cargo pocket and holds it to my face. He thinks I’m some dog. He wants me to learn. He drops his pistol. It thuds on the dead man’s back. “Rules.” I can’t stop. My head nods. Why am I fighting? “There’s rules.”
Thorpe scoffs. Sucks his teeth and rolls his eyes.

Wilson: Game’s changed.

Thorpe: You with us? You playing?

It’s just a game. In a few years, kids will be playing a pixilated version of me here, killing. They won’t think about it for a second. Press a button. Squeeze a trigger. It’s just a game. Maybe they’ll bitch if the graphics aren’t good enough—not real enough. Kids don’t care about context, just content. More bullets. More explosions. More blood and gore. Brains exiting a man’s body looking like jelly won’t make them happy; they want to see chunks. They want to see thoughts splayed out under their boot heels as they walk away. “Yeah.”


“Roger.” Muzzle up. Veins pulsate in my temples as my heart and neck throb. These steps are off. My toe keeps catching, and I feel like I’m just about to fall. “Clear.”

Rivers: You sure, boss?

Check and double check. Get it right. Floor blanketed in shards. Smoke rising from buildings beyond this room’s jagged window panes. I walk with my weapon down. Glass crackles under my feet, crushed to a glinting powder. “Come on in. You can see most of Fallujah from here.”

Wilson: Call it in. Alpha sector clear. ACE report.

Time to wait. We did our job. We just have to hold it. No one comes in unless they’re our own. They need to know the challenge and password. Ranger = Danger; running password: fury from the sky; number combo 5: 0 + 5 = 5; 1 + 4 = 5; 2 + 3 = 5—
must equal 5. What if someone botches the math? He’d be speaking English. Do I shoot?
What if his English is broken, but he gets the combo right? Shoot? Shoot. Safe to semi, semi to safe. One shot, one kill. Trained to die, never will. Sky’s rumbling. I can feel it in my fingertips. Blackhaws? No, Kiowas. They come quick and leave the same. Our building shakes. Glass ripples and falls free like loose teeth. Fire erupts from an adjacent building. Hellfire missile, has to be. Sucks to be in there. Did they feel it? God’s finger pointing at them. Then the Lord rained down burning sulfur from the heavens. Dense smoke rose from the land, like smoke from a furnace. Cows sit down before it rains; bugs fly low. There’s a smell to it, rich, vibrant—the rain. Does death have a smell?

Cruise: Pretty hot out there, huh Sarge?

He leans against a wall. I don’t remember the last time I’ve had a shower. A cloud of reek drifts from his body. His clothes are like mine: salty and encrusted with grime. I can’t smell myself, but I can smell him. He talks to me, but doesn’t look. I can’t imagine what he sees. “Yeah.”

Cruise: How long do you think we’re going to be here?

There was a clear sky at sunrise, before the mission began. Light reflected off sand and adobe structures. It caught in windows of tall buildings. Now at sundown, I chew the inside of my cheek and squint. Light comes in ribbons between pillars of billowing ash. Ruins. Rain will wash all of this away, if it ever comes. I snort. I can’t help it. I look to Cruise. He’s there, but he’s gone. “Don’t know. We’ll go when the birds land. I’d be lying if I said otherwise.”

Cruise: Cool.
He comes to me and puts his hand on my shoulder.

Cruise: You good?

“Sure.”

Cruise: Sure?

“Never better. Thorpe treating you right?”

Cruise: Meh. How much longer till you get your rocker?

“A month.”

Cruise: Take me with you when you get your own squad.

“I’ll do what I can.” His soot-smeread face cracks open, showing white teeth. “I’ll do what I can.”

Cruise: I’m holding you to it.

He taps my shoulder with a fist, then turns to a window and watches the world burn.

Wilson: Hunker down, gents. Alpha’s almost done. We should be out of here by first light.

I hear the choppers coming. They’re hovering overhead. They come to get the wounded. They come to get the dead.

I climb the stairs, pulling on the railing. Parking deck’s ninth floor is empty and enclosed. Withered trees below expose every planning flaw within Los Angeles. Roads sprout as if organic, sprawling and knotting like wild vines. Each highway seems constructed to circumvent past mistakes. Orange cones and warning signs litter the
streets. There’s no symmetry to it. No order. My car is cold. I turn the ignition and pull out of my space. I look ahead and wonder if this vehicle could accelerate to a velocity great enough to bust this deck’s concrete lip. Force versus mass. It’s a good thought experiment, escape velocity. My car’s engine rattles. Service light comes on. I can’t remember the last time I changed its oil.

I follow painted arrows atop asphalt along a downward spiral. The path out. I dial through radio stations, but none of the music appeals to me, so I turn it off and look between my ceiling and rearview mirror. Stars can’t break through this darkening sky. All these high-pressure sodium lights burn smog. I stop at a sign and wait for a gap in traffic. As I do, I remove my two killed in action bracelets, and wrap them around the stick shift. A car’s horn blares. I drop my coin in a cup holder; it rattles and settles. If there’s no gap for me, then I’ll have to make one. I cut someone off, and he doesn’t seem pleased. In the mirror, the driver points at me, fingers extended and joined. His head tilts and bobs. I hit my brakes.

Cars lurch. I wish my car were bigger. I wish it had a cattle-catcher bolted to the front. This herd irritates. They’re too busy with their phones, food, and cosmetics to know what’s going on around them. They don’t look for the signs, and when highways split, they jump lanes too late. Most often they make it, but sometimes they don’t. It’s those moments when congestion begins. Not because of a wreck—that gets pushed to the shoulder quick. It’s when people rubberneck, that’s when things bog down.

The procession bows downhill, then arcs up. I keep my eyes ahead and count brake lights until I lose track. Flares burn off to my right and bathe my cab red, its light
warming half of my face as I pass the Mustang smashed against a side rail it cordons. Traffic clears as if nothing happened. As if nothing matters. Maybe it doesn’t. Maybe it never did. Broken hash marks lead to a junction, and I drive under a cloverleaf overpass, unable to switch lanes.

**Cloverleaf** ahead. Van atop it. “Hey, Malloy!”

He stands in the center of our gun truck; a cargo strap cradles his hamstrings. His torso exits the roof, and he keeps one hand on his heavy machine gun oriented straight, while his other grasps a two-forty canted off to the right. He ducks down and makes eye contact with me, concentrating on my lips, trying to read them.

Malloy: What?

“Get that two-forty hot, then unlock your turret. Be ready to spin that fifty if you have to.”

Malloy: On it.

“Get your elevation up too. Jensen, move to the left lane. It’s harder for them to hit us if we keep ‘em guessing.”

Jensen: Roger, Sarge.

I key my hand mic. “Alpha-one-three, this is Alpha-one-four. Over.”

Wilson: Send it. Over.

“Van above. Keep eyes on. Over.”

Wilson: Copy. Moving to the right and dropping back. Over.

“Alpha-one-four out.”
The bridge passes over us like the hanging blade of a guillotine. Malloy unlocks his turret, then turns to face it. I look in my mirror. *Warning: Objects in mirror are closer than they appear.*

Smoke and light. Hot brass casings landing on my shoulder, nuzzling against my neck, burning my skin.

Rivers: Ambush!

“Hard right! One-three, engage! Suppressive fire!” Spider web fractures spindle across the driver side windows. Jensen leans forward, wide-eyed. He doesn’t know what to do. “Jump the divider. Spin this bitch around and take the onramp!” I grab Malloy’s leg when the truck turns, then fishtails between highways. I refuse to let Malloy fall.

“One-three, we’re coming in from the east.”

Dust plumes. Our truck wobbles when it hits the road, and the tires spin on asphalt hard as we make our way up. Malloy presses his boots against the radio centered between Jensen and me. He locks his legs and fires. With each falling brass, our target grows over the horizon, crumpling like tinfoil to our fifty’s slugs until it explodes.

“Brake right, Jensen. Fucking brake!” Malloy continues to lob lead into flames.

“Cease-fire, goddamn it.”

Wilson: One-four, what ya got?

My hands tremble, and I can’t find the call button. The van was rigged.

Wilson: One-four, you good? Did you use an AT-4? One-four, respond.

“Negative. We’re up and up. You?”
Wilson: We’re good. You clear up there?

“Roger.”

Malloy: He jumped, Sarge.

His voice is hollow and falls on us like ash. “What?”

Malloy: He jumped the rail.

Jensen: Fucking pussy.

“What do you mean he jumped the rail?”

Malloy: He abandoned ship. Fuck, he leapt the railing. What the fuck you mean what do I mean? Shit.

“He jumped off the bridge?”

Malloy: Did I stutter? Geronimo! I don’t think I can be any clearer. I have to see. Release door’s locking bar, pull the handle. It pops open an inch and is heavy and hard to swing out. “Jensen, call up Wilson and tell him I’m going to check it out.”

Jensen: You got it, Sarge.

“He, Malloy, orient your gun away from me.”

His gun slides north, and he points it down. The open road runs nearly straight, thinning to a narrow point. He pulls off his gloves and takes a cigarette. The Browning’s silver barrel catches the sun and glints. I never thought I’d see that thing fired outside a training range. I motion for him to keep his eyes on his sector of fire. He holds a cigarette between his lips, clicks his Zippo and nods. Smoke rolls out of his mouth, flutters, then
disperses. Flames lick billowing smoke from the van’s skeletal frame. A rocket-propelled grenade launching tube lies on the ground. There are no rounds.

Looking over the edge, I can’t see where the road and bridge intersect. Heat bakes me—the flaming van, the scorching sun—lapping at my body in waves. The overpass groans as if its broken structure can’t tolerate my weight.

Acrid stench—pungent and stifling. I cover my mouth with my left hand, and my right remains on my rifle’s pistol grip. I look through a hole punched in the asphalt. There’s a shape of a man below and an oily smear where his head should be. His clothes flap like down on a dead bird. So this is martyrdom. He failed. Will God still reward him? His body seems so small from here.

Jensen: Sarge, it’s one-three. They need to talk to you.

I turn my back to the wreckage and return to the truck. “Nice shootin’, Tex. Maybe aim for the enemy next time.”

He shrugs.

Malloy: Ain’t nobody coming. You think locals knew what was goin’ down today?

Fuck yeah they did. I observe the area. Houses are well beyond my eyesight, and I see no movement. Nothing’s determined. “Can’t say. Let’s go.”

The lane’s too narrow for us to turn, and I don’t trust the way forward. “Jensen, put her in reverse. Malloy, guide us down.”
We roll back, riding in neutral. The truck’s wheels screech, and it feels likely to topple. Whoever designed this thing did a shit job of it. “One-three, we’re coming down now.”

Wilson: Roger, one-four. Pull back beyond the bridge. We’ll meet you short of it. Don’t need that thing collapsing on us.

“Wilco. You fellas stop fifty yards shy. We’ll dismount and meet outside the kill zone.”

Wilson’s truck jumps the divider and accelerates toward us, then halts. There’s no traffic, so road rules seem arbitrary. Even so, they don’t apply to us. Wilson and his crew exit their truck, but Cruise stays up on the gun. They look around. They look at me.

“Rivers, come with me. Jensen and Malloy, pull security.”

We walk with our rifles at the ready. Wilson and Thorpe’s dangle at their sides.

Wilson: Well?

Thorpe has that shit-eating grin. I want to feed him my butt stock.

“I saw the van sitting. Didn’t look right.”

Wilson: Good call. Now what?

“Call it in.”

Thorpe chuckles. He knows something I don’t. Those little secrets he and Wilson share.

Wilson: Your truck get hit?

“Nothing serious. Couple of windows busted.”
Thorpe: It take any shrapnel? Anything sticking out of it where it shouldn’t?

I focus on Wilson. One more week, and I’ll be Staff Sergeant—same rank as him. I’ll have my own squad. Do things right. Fuck Wilson for breaking up my team, and fuck Thorpe for what he’s become. “What are you getting at?”


This isn’t an incident. Something happened here. They can’t ignore it. I won’t let them. Acid corrodes my throat, but I swallow it down. “So what? Just leave?”

Wilson: God, no. No, no, no. We have to sweep for brass first.

Can’t leave anything behind.

I look to Rivers. His back’s turned to us. He says nothing, but internalizes it all. He’s smart, too damn smart to be a specialist. He’s been in as long as me, but they won’t give him his stripes because he hasn’t re-enlisted yet. To hell with cordon bleu. “Malloy may have hit him.”

Thorpe: Think so?

“Yes. I do.”

Thorpe: I watched him fall. Haji took a swan dive. Looked intact from where I was sitting. That is, until his head got intimate with the pavement. Shit was great. Heh.
Make them see him; make them see everything. “Either way, we engaged where he fell. There may be casings beside his body.”

Wilson: Of course. We wouldn’t leave without checking the body.

Dust devils sprawl along this wasteland. Someday, sand will bury this place.

Wilson takes a disposable camera from his cargo pocket, winds it, then throws it to Thorpe. He removes his helmet while squatting near the headless man and points at brain bits smashed on the road. He smiles. Thorpe takes a picture.

Wilson: OK. Check his pockets.

Thorpe: Sure thing.

He plunders the body, pulling out a thick billfold, then stows it in his pocket. He thinks it’s funny. Martyrs don’t carry cash.

“Wilson, your Acorn on?”

Wilson: The magic IED jammer? Fuck yeah it’s on. How stupid do you think I am?

Clear streets. No movement north or south. Dormant road. “When was the last time you saw a vehicle?”

Wilson: Not for a while. Ten miles, maybe.

Thorpe: Got a phone. Let’s see who he’s been calling. Think he’s got girlfriend? A pretty cousin? Same number keeps showing up.
This is the main highway. There’s a long route we never take. Too many hills. Three cars pulled off back that way when we passed the exit. White hatchbacks with orange doors.

Thorpe: Can’t get a signal.
Thorpe: They ain’t mutually exclusive, Sarge.

Dirt swept roads. Piles of rocks lining the shoulders in both directions. Prime IED locations. Hard to detect. Would he have called first, or after? Battle Drill Four: Near Ambush. Soldiers not in the kill zone immediately identify enemy positions if possible; shit fires as soldiers in the kill zone assault through the ambush. “Wilson, get your truck up here now.”

Wilson: You trying to alpha dog me, son?

Run. Wave arms. Shout. “Stop fucking with that phone, Thorpe!”
Wilson: Where the hell you going?

Cruise can see me from his turret. He waves back at me. Can he hear me? He locks down his gun and slides below. I can just see him behind dust-covered ballistic glass, cocking his head low as he starts his truck. The engine tries to roll over, and diverts power from ancillary equipment, dulling lights, shutting down radios, restarting the remote IED jammer. Thorpe’s voice echoes.

Thorpe: Got a signal.

I weave along suburban streets designed for three-point turns. With this uniformed sprawl, I understand why the roads are so wide. Getting lost is easy, and at night, the street signs don’t help, being so damn reflective. There’s not a bar for miles, only strip malls and franchises. Different locations, same set up. Drop me in the woods, I can find my way around. Drop me in a suburb, and I’ll wander for hours. Can’t recall how many times I took a wrong turn here and there, returning to the fifteen and being surrounded by desert. Cara’s the only reason I kept trying to get back. If I knew she wouldn’t be home, I’d have moved on. I wouldn’t have tried to find my address.

We lie naked beneath a thick blanket. The barracks are quiet now that everyone’s on leave.

Cara: I don’t think you’d have me travel eighteen hours to stay in.

Let’s get out of here.

I didn’t. But few things go as planned. I stroke her hair back from her forehead.

“We could see a movie.”

Cara: Well, that’s a start. Which one? Your base’s theater only has two posters up.

Her leg slides between mine, and she runs her hand from my ribs to my hip. I want to tell her things I did and didn’t do while deployed, but can’t. I don’t know what to say, or even if it would matter. “The comedy. Let’s see that one.”

Cara: White Chicks? No.
“Why not?”

Cara: OK. Well, besides seeming racist and sexist, it looks really dumb.

“I refuse to see The Notebook. I hate Ryan Gosling’s face.”

Cara: That’s an odd reason not to see a movie. Besides, I think he’s handsome.

“Yeah. But you think I’m handsome, and I know that I’m not. Goes to show your poor judgment.”

She pinches my nipple and smirks.

Cara: I never said you were handsome. I said you were cute.

That’s a big difference.

“I see how it is.” I grab her and tickle the backsides of her knees. She kicks and squirms while laughing uncontrollably. The blanket falls from my bed, but I don’t stop. She’s ticklish nowhere else.

Cara: Stop. Stop it. I have to pee.

I let her go, and she rolls out of bed. When she stands, her knees buckle together, and she waddles, pigeon-toed, to the bathroom. I sit up, remove my condom, then drop it in a wastebasket. I clean myself with a baby wipe, discard it, then lie back and watch the ceiling fan cycle. The shower starts, and she calls for me to join her. I do.

The shower stall is small, and if I’m not pressed against her, I’m against the tiled wall. We wash each other. “We don’t have to see a movie.” She tilts her head down as I lather shampoo in her hair. I curve my hips closer to hers. “We can stay in.”
Cara: I need to recover a bit.

Water splashes off her head and into my eyes. It burns. When we’re finished, we dry and dress.

Cara: Since you picked the activity, I’m picking the movie.

We’re going to see *The Notebook*.

“Really? I think I deserve to choose what we are going to see.”

Cara: Why’s that?

“Because I’m a war veteran now.”

She rests her hands on my shoulders and stands on her toes to kiss me.

Cara: You can only play that card so many times. Do you really want to waste it now?

*House* lights are off as I pull into my driveway. I open my car door and exit, then rest my arms and chin on the roof, observing my neighbor’s homes. Steam slips out of my mouth as I breathe. Grass grows long on my untrimmed front lawn. It’s not as bad as my backyard where wild tangles conquer sod. Still, if I don’t mow soon, I’ll get a letter from the homeowners’ association telling me what a soup-sandwich my place is. I doubt my house brings down property values. Foreclosed homes with their dirt patches checkering the street, that’s what’s doing it. They should spend time watering those places before bitching at me. Of course, it’s easier to complain than act. At least my yard is alive and thriving. Dead fields: they lie low.
I close my door, and the interior light fades. I taste pollen in the air and sneeze. I turn on the sprinklers and listen to metal slap water. I’ll cut the grass in the morning when I know my neighbors are awake. I would hate to bother them.

My key enters the lock, and I have to rattle it to make it turn. I let Cara through first.

Cara: See. It wasn’t that bad, now was it?

“It was terrible.”

She enters the room and makes the bed. She plumes out the blanket, but it lands crooked.

Cara: Help me with this, please.

I go to the head and grab two corners. We lift it and settle it together.

“I really didn’t like how she got with that other guy.”

Cara: She thought he was dead.

She flattens wrinkles, running her hand out and flat.

“A little more loyalty would’ve been nice.” I tuck the corners.

Cara: So, what? She’s supposed to sit around and mourn him for the rest of her life?

“She didn’t look for him too hard.”

She folds her clothes and packs them in her duffle.

I put my hands in my pockets. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to start a fight.”

Cara: We’re fighting?
“Aren’t we?”
Cara: No.

She looks at me, head cocked. I don’t know what the hell is going on. “Why pack then?”
Cara: It’s my turn to choose what we do. We’re leaving.

“Where?”
Cara: Cinque Terre. If we go now, we can catch the last train.

“Did you get a hotel?”
Cara: No.

“Where will we stay?”
Cara: We’ll figure it out when we get there.

“I don’t want to go.”
She packs faster, half folding shirts and stuffing them in hard.
Cara: OK.

“OK what?”
She stops packing.
Cara: Now we’re fighting.

“Jesus.”
Cara: Right. Look. I love you, but I can’t stay in the barracks the entire time. You can come or you can stay. It’s your choice.
I’m going.
I lean against my wall locker with my arms crossed. I chew my cheek and shake my head.

Cara: Well?

I reach above and grab my assault pack, then throw it down. “Fine.” I open my locker, rip shirts and pants from hangers and stuff them in my bag, then empty a drawer of socks too. I zip the bag closed and hoist it on my back. “What’s taking you so long?”

I know my way around my house without having to turn on a light. Whoever built this place did a shoddy job, constructing this entire development on a strict timeline, moving from one site to another without thinking it through. So much had to be replaced because they didn’t understand that slow is smooth, and smooth is fast.

To keep my hands busy, Cara put me to work. I tore down impeding walls, insulated pipes, ripped up hideous carpets, and laid down hardwood. I put tile in the kitchen and bathrooms, added new cabinets and granite countertops as well. I hung doors, windows, shades, mirrors and pictures. I gave it color. The builders erected the frame—I made this a home. I did the best I could.

The yard holds two sapling magnolias near the walkway. At least it has trees.

“This place?”

Realtor: It’s a bit small, but makes for a good starter home. I have others a little out of your price range for your VA loan, but there are other options that can get you there.
She avoids looking at Cara—a woman who knows the game—and speaks only to me.

Cara: I’d rather stick to the plan.

Our agent shows us the property with resigned dedication. She filters through a large key ring until she finds the right one, then unlocks the deadbolt and opens the door. The rooms are spacious enough and have high ceilings. Bubbled drywall joints run in a grid that white paint doesn’t hide. Subflooring creaks under cheap carpet. Laminated particle board cabinets hang in the kitchen. Dried, yellow glue stains intersections of wood and wall. The cabinets have no knobs or handles. Between the kitchen window and screen, a spider makes its home. Thin webs catch only light, and I wonder how it survives. We exit the backdoor. If the realtor and my wife spoke, I didn’t hear them. I doubt they did, and they’re silent now.

Grass in the backyard maintains uniformity, as it should. Low cut blades, thick and green. There are no homes beyond the back fence, and the developed area ends after a dozen feet or so. Cypress trees stagger along the border. An adolescent Florida maple stands alone between fresh sod and brown, natural grass climbing up a draw. Down below, sycamores stand proud in their natural state. Their paper-thin bark flutters when ripped by a Santa Ana gust. August light seeps through woods and ignites the maple’s red, shedding leaves. Cara puts her hand on my shoulder, and I can feel her warmth through my sleeve.

Cara: I like it. What do you think?
She tucks a strand of auburn hair behind her ear, and it curls to her chin. She sees this place for what it could be, rather than what it is. She doesn’t blink.

“I don’t know. It needs work.”

She giggles, and I frown.

Cara: It has character, that’s all.

The realtor steps between us.

Realtor: I’ll let you two talk it over.

She leaves us, and Cara wraps her arm behind my back, then rests her head on my shoulder. She smells like lavender.

Cara: It’s not perfect, but what is? We can fix it up. Make it nice.

I take a deep breath and taste earth lingering in the air, the taste of things long dead passed through the bowels of worms. She puts her hand to my face and tugs on a patch of pathetic growth. “You mean I can.”

Cara: It’s something to keep you busy until you find out what you want to do. Idle hands are the devil’s doohickeys.

She pinches my side and leans into me, squeezing my waist tighter. I know she’s right. It’s been a year since I left the army, and I still don’t have a job. Local Sheriff Deputies came to recruit a handful of us separating. Defense contractors, too. Worse yet, National Guard and Reserve. That was about it for infantryman. No place in this world for a trigger-puller without a gun. “Is this what you really want?”

Cara: We can make it work.
She leans her face to mine, but stops short and grabs my beard between her fingers and pulls again.

Cara: I wish you’d shave this thing. I feel like I’m kissing a porcupine.

I look above and scratch my chin. Thick clouds of white and gray march on. A storm’s forming, but it’s not here yet. She puts her palm against my cheek and thumbs along the grain. The house seems sturdy, dependable. In the end, it will crumble. All things do. “I’ll shave it tomorrow.”

Cara: If you don’t, I will.

She runs a straightened finger down the side of my face as if it’s a razor cutting it all away. I smile.

Cara: I didn’t marry this guy. I don’t know who he is.

I don’t bother turning on the kitchen light. No need for it. I check my phone while opening the refrigerator. The bulb inside burned out days ago, and I haven’t replaced it yet. I should have. It’s my husbandly duty. I take a Pacifico, then close the door. My brother left a voice mail, but I’m not going to call him back. I’m too tired for his shit. His name scrolls across my cellphone’s screen, waiting for me to tap it.

I can’t find the bottle opener. Metal and wood strike each other as I rummage through drawers. I slam one closed, then strike the countertop and curse. Choking the bottleneck, I try to pry the top, but it won’t budge. The cap’s teeth cut into my palm. I
bleed. Put the top against the granite edge and push. The bottle pops and a flake falls.

Beer foams out and trickles. “Goddamn it!”

I clean my mess with a paper towel and discard it. I wipe the floor, the bottle, then the counter. I thumb the chipped area and sigh. “Fuck it.” I drink.

The clock above my stove glows: 9:30. Cara should be home. I could’ve asked her where the bottle opener was if I waited. Maybe she would have told me. Maybe we would have had a drink together, talk about our day. We don’t do that anymore. Now that I’m in college, she tells me to do my homework like the mother I never had. Staying busy is important, she once said. The house requires only maintenance now. Clean gutters, unclog plugs, mow the lawn. Getting a bachelors in something, anything, was the next logical step. Even if I could get a job as a contractor, it’s not like there’s work. Besides, I paid into my GI bill. Army took a lot from me, and I intend on getting every cent back. VA reps told me to maintain a C average to continue receiving payments. They have low standards for veterans. They expect us to be stupid. They expect us to fail. I get A’s just to throw it in their fucking faces.

I go to my computer and turn on a lamp. It lights only a globe around me. A picture of Cara and me at our wedding sits near the stark screen. We seem so much younger then, though it’s only been nine years. Her dark eyes stare into the camera lens; mine look to another photographer shooting from a different angle. I lay flat our silver picture frame and wonder if we ever saw anything the same way.
Three weeks of Airborne School leads to this: me, Rivers, and Thorpe celebrating at a sketchy club in Columbus, Georgia.

Rivers: And…Oh! He washes out again. Bet he failed his first cycle of Airborne the same way.

“Shouldn’t talk about it. He got hurt’s what I heard. Besides, he seems like a good enough guy.”

Rivers: Would’ve liked to see him in basic. Doughty would’ve fucked his arrogant ass up.

“At least he bought us beer.”

Rivers: True that.

He puts his fist to his mouth and points at Thorpe who shakes his head while holding his palms up.

“What happened, man? You said that was a done deal.”

Thorpe: It was goin’ real well. Made her believe I wasn’t military for a minute there.

Rivers: That a fact?

Thorpe: Said I was a contractor—did lots of things.

“OK. Like what, genius?”

Thorpe: Dry wall and concrete, mostly. The normal stuff. Told her what I did best though was plumbing—you know: laying pipe. I don’t think she got it.

Rivers laughs while holding out his beer and sways.
“I think she did.”

Thorpe: Fuckin’ Joe town, bro. So much swinging dick that even fat chicks can be picky.

Rivers: Sure. That’s what it is.

Thorpe: I don’t see you pulling any game.

Rivers: Haven’t tried, hoss. I’m here to get drunk, not ass.


Rivers swigs his bottle, then reaches around Thorpe and gropes him.

Rivers: You know it, bitch.

Thorpe: You’re cute, but I’m not that hard up.

He scans the room.

Thorpe: This’s ridiculous.

“Could be worse. We could be dry.”

Thorpe: I’ll drink to that.

Rivers: Hear, hear!

Thorpe: Well this is turning out to be one hell of a sausage fiesta.

She pass by me again. Her bare shoulder brushes against my back as she sidesteps into a tangle of spastic bodies on the dance floor.

“Let it go, man. Just have fun.”

Thorpe: Think you can do better?

Rivers: My battle-buddy here is a mad player.

Thorpe: That so?
Rivers: Hell yeah.

I want to tell Rivers to shut up, that I’m not interested in playing their game. I search scores of faces, looking for hers. Her dark hair, dark eyes, dark skin, all glistening in pulsing light. People gyrate while avoiding eye contact.

Thorpe: Twenty bucks says he burns in.

Rivers: Twenty bucks, the tab, and the cab fare back to post.

Thorpe: High roller. All right. But if you lose, you have to take a dip in the Chattahoochee with nothing but your jump boots.

Rivers: That’s an odd request, but you have yourself a bet, sir.

Thorpe: Don’t call me sir. I work for a living.

Rivers’s arm wraps around my shoulders; his head leans into mine. He stinks of hot breath and beer fumes.

Rivers: You’ve been looking. I know you’ve been looking. You got eyes on target yet?

Thorpe waves. Circles his hand, ordering us more booze.

“No.”

Rivers: There. Oh-niner.

Thorpe: Who?

Even this drunk, Rivers makes a damn fine spotter.

Rivers: That sleek thang right there.

His arm bows out, and his index finger extends from his pinched grip around his bottle’s neck.

Rivers: You got this, Battle?

“Sure.”

Rivers: No. Not sure. I want to hear, fuck yeah.

“All right.”

He taps a knuckle to my skull.

Rivers: No. Fuck, yeah! Look, bud. You’re a good looking dude, and if I were a chick, I’d suck your brains out your cock-straw. So let me hear you say it right.

“Fuck, yeah!”

Rivers: Fuck yeah, fuck yeah. Green light—go!

He slaps my ass and shoves me forward. My beer slips from my hand and sloshes down my pants. *Fuck, no.*

Thorpe: Friendly fire! You just shot your boy in the dick, dog.

Rivers: Nah, man. Chicks dig it when dudes piss themselves, *then* hit on ‘em. Shows confidence like no other.

I brush away the foam at my crotch. Thorpe taps his bare wrist.

Thorpe: We got a time limit on this gambit?

Rivers: Get goin’, champ. Thorpe’s is nearing blackout drunk.

I can do this. I’m airborne now. I can do anything. Walking feels like falling, and I float through the air, avoiding sky-sharks trying to steal my canopy’s wind. Hazards on the drop zone; slip away. She stands near the bar and waits her turn.
Wait. She places her elbows on the bar and rises on her tip-toes. I trace the arch of her back down to her tight mini skirt. Wait for it. Strings of her backless shirt rest atop her spine. Light pools on the small of her back as a bartender hands her a plastic cup. This is going to fail. She snaps her purse closed, shoulders it, takes a sip of her drink and begins to turn.

Now.

I step into her, and we collide. Her drink spills down my chest.

Girl: What the hell?

“Oh, Christ. I’m sorry.”

Girl: You should be. I just paid for that, jerk.

I brush my shirt, trying not to splash her. “I didn’t see you.”

Girl: You didn’t see me?

She steps back, puts her hands on her hips and pushes out her chest. She is not wearing a bra.

“Well, I saw you. Just didn’t think you were coming out this way.”

Girl: Thanks a lot, asshole.

She goes back to the bar, tucks a wisp of hair behind her ear, then tries to flag down the bartender. I stand beside her.

“It was an accident. Again, I’m sorry.”

She waves her hand at me dismissively. This isn’t going well. “At least your clothes didn’t get tie-dyed. I might have done you a favor, though. I don’t think I’ve ever seen these colors in nature. What were you drinking?”
Girl: Look. I just want my drink back, OK?

“Well, I could take off my shirt and wring it back into your cup, or I can buy you a replacement.”

Girl: You’re funny, but no.

“No? No, what?”

She sighs.

Girl: No, you can’t have my name. And no, you can’t have my number.

“Lucky for me I didn’t ask for those.”

I flag the bartender with cash, and he acknowledges me faster than all these girls with low-cut tops. “That no doesn’t cover me getting you a drink, does it?” She measures me, scrutinizing me from head to toe. I lift the brim of my shirt and flex my abs as I dab moist cloth to my tongue and recoil. “Whatever you were having was terrible.”

She laughs and puts her hand on my wrist.

Girl: No, that’s just you.

“Maybe it is.”

Bartender: What you need?

“Jack and Coke for me, and what she wants.”

Girl: I’ll have the same. So, what’s your story?

“Me? I don’t have a story?”

Girl: I’ll bet. Let me guess. First Battalion Ranger about to deploy on a secret mission to Kosovo? No, too many of
them these days. I know—Delta Force just back from South America.

Our drinks arrive, and we sip on them.

“No. I like it, though. Sounds exciting. I’m just a regular Joe.”


“Well, I graduated today. From Airborne School.”

Girl: Oh. A five-jump chump. Even worse.

“Like I said: nothing special.”

Girl: That’s too bad. I like my guys special.

“Good thing I’m not your guy. Just a sucker who paid to get a drink poured on himself. Maybe if the night goes right, I’ll get one to the face too.”

Girl: Worth it though, right?

I swallow the last bit. Ice rattles in my cup. “Every drop.” I set down my cup. She looks above and half-smiles.

Girl: OK.

“Sorry?”

Girl: Prove to me that you are special, and I’ll give you my name.

I look into her face. Her deep eyes pull me in and I drop my gaze. “Names don’t count for much these days.”

Girl: Fine. But getting my number too will be extra hard on you.
“What do you have in mind?”

This time, she holds the cash in her hand.

Bartender: What’s up?


Bartender: You might want to give me your keys with your cash.

Girl: It’s not for me. It’s for him.

Bartender: You driving tonight, guy?

“Nope.”

He fills my cup and shakes my head.

Girl: Drink it, and I’ll give you my name and number. Get through tonight without making an ass of yourself, I might just answer when you call.

“Fair enough. How bad can it be?”

Girl: Famous last words.

I swallow it down. A sweet fire numbs my tongue and burns my throat. My stomach clenches and tries to reverse the flow. I hold it down, take three deep breaths, extend and lock all of my fingers on the bar. “That was really bad.”

Girl: Don’t be such a pussy. I hope you have your phone handy.

Face numbs. Soon, I’ll lose motor control, then vision. Crap. I take out my phone. “Ready.” I dial in the numbers she says only once. Ringing comes from her purse, and I hang up. I activate the camera.

Girl: The name’s Cara.
“It’s a good name.”

Cara: My parents thought so.

“Mind if I take a picture?”

Cara: Why?

She raises her Jack and Coke to her lips.

The camera focuses. I lean against the bar to steady myself. “So it’ll last longer.”

She chuckles, then sticks out her chin and raises her hand to her mouth to catch her dribble. At that moment, my phone flashes and fakes a shutter snap.

Cara: You did not just take a picture of that.

“I did.”

Cara: You have to delete it.

She grimaces, then punches my chest. I smile. My speech slurs. Everything about this place fades: sound, light, smell, touch—gone.

A cursor pulsates on a stark screen. It mocks me. *Shit. Bag. Shit. Bag.* If I had a box full of a dozen different disassembled weapon systems, I could put them back together in minutes. I’ve shot holes in quarters 150 yards out. I’ve planned missions, and executed cordon and searches like a motherfucker. Why should I have to psychoanalyze *The Great Gatsby?* Oedipal and Electra complex; penis envy and womb envy; id, ego, and superego—all of it is bullshit. Fiction measuring fiction has one hell of a sliding scale, treating character behavior like symptoms rather than diseases themselves. Tom’s banging Myrtle? He wasn’t breastfed, so now he has to subjugate women with his dick.
No. He’s fucking around because it gives him pleasure. It’s just behavior. Levers and rewards. Shocks and punishments. Sick social cycles. If Tom got his face smashed in by Gatsby, he wouldn’t cheat again. That’s all there is to it. That’s the essay I want to write, but college isn’t a laboratory. It’s a factory, and they frown upon new ideas. Undergrads like me are required to regurgitate what’s been published. Find quotes, take them out of context, add new context. Write according to the mold.

The front door unlocks, and I rise from my seat. As I hear Cara putting down her keys and purse, I rise and stow my bottle where it won’t be seen, then go to the foyer. She doesn’t like it when I drink alone. Now, well after eleven, I turn on a house light.

“Hey.”

Cara: Hey.

She doesn’t look at me when she comes home anymore. Just puts away her things.

“You hungry?”

Cara: I ate. Sprinklers been on long?


Cara: Don’t. I took care of it. Just like I always do. You’re mowing tomorrow, right?

“Sure.”

Cara: Backyard too?

“If I can get to it before I have to leave for class, yeah.”

Cara: OK. Good. That’ll be good.
I hold my breath as I move to give her a hug. She puts out her arm and waves me away. She smells of wine and smoke. Something else lingers.

Cara: Not now. I really have to pee.

She shuffles forward, pigeon-toed, entering, closing, then locking the bathroom door. I stand beside her coat and lift its collar to my nose. She’s been smoking again, for months now. That much I know. I hate it when she smokes, but I can’t fault her. We all have our habits. The shower begins to flow. The toilet didn’t flush. This other aroma, I can’t quite place—a mix of lime, coconut, and pine. It’s feminine but masculine. Is she cheating on me?

I want to snap the coat tree in half. I want to take its broken trunk and impale the wall. Instead, I grab my bottle and go outside. Cool air. Damp soil and wet dust make small hairs on my hands stand on end. I choke the bottleneck, and my knuckles whiten. Fingers numb. Cars traveling down distant highways sound like rivers in a forest. City light suffocates. Headlights fall down overpasses like meteorites. Streeplamps are stars to a nameless constellation. There’s meaning here, but what I don’t know.

I throw my bottle and watch it arch wide. It topples neck over base as it falls. It strikes the road and breaks, clattering like a wind chime.

I shiver. Temperature’s dropped what, thirty degrees? Forty? Was at least a buck twenty today. Now that it’s in the eighties, it feels like winter. Violet hills line a speckled sky. I’ve never seen so many stars. Focus. I lower my monocular and click it on. It defines the landscape, making it flat and green. Nothing moves. The night is silent,
hallowed. I’d have expected more, it being the eleventh of September. I scan left, right, and down. Still nothing. Looking up the sky is perforated by millions of nameless constellations visible only through infrared. Whiteout. Lift night vision goggle. A fireball streaks and leaves a long tail.

Lieutenant Swift: Man the guns! One-hundred-percent security. Lock and load.

Soldiers unzip their body bags. Nylon wrestles canvas. They’re frantic. Somewhere in the hills, the Taliban waits. Both sides fear nothing and everything. Metal struggles to find its fit as men load rifles. I don’t need to see to work my weapon. Even in this darkness I can envision its operation. Men charge their weapons. The rifles are ready to fire. Safe to semi, semi to safe. My truck’s radio crackles and bleeps.

Swift: Bayonet base, this is Alpha-one-alpha, over.
Radio: Charlie-one-alpha, this is Bayonet base, over.
Swift: Roger. At approximately twenty-two hundred Zulu—break—Task Force Devil observed a flare in the easterly sky—break—Is there any intel on aforementioned flare? Over.
Radio: Copy. Wait one, over.
The radios silence; whispers and groans become its static.
Rivers: Now what?
“Don’t know.”
Rivers: Did you see it?
“What, the flare? Can’t say. You?”

Rivers: Uh-huh. The **flare**.


Swift: Send it, over.

Radio: Roger. We’re getting reports from all current areas of operations. Possible coordinated attack. What’s your current situation? Over.

“I saw no flare.”

Swift: Anything? Anyone see anything out there?

Soldier: Negative.

Thorpe: Shit nothing.

“All clear.”

Rivers: So. Everyone across Afghanistan saw it, huh? Must’ve been one hell of a lume round.


Swift: Copy that. Over.

Radio: Bayonet base out.

Rivers: All this for a shooting star.
There’s a pattern to the universe, but it’s beyond me. Beyond everyone. With the PVS 14 clasped to my helmet, its lens to my eye, I had seen so many stars out in the deserts of Iraq and Afghanistan. Standing on my porch, an hour’s drive from Los Angeles, I see few stars now. The universe had an explosive start, like a fire work tossing cinders all about. How much longer until it fizzles? Death occupies more space than life, and there are more bodies underground than above it. Everything done will have been pointless in the end.

Cara: What are you doing outside?

I embrace myself, rubbing my chest as if to kindle warmth. “Nothing.”

Cara: Are you coming to bed tonight?

I’m not well rested. It worries me, sleeping. Not knowing when the dream ends and reality begins. To me, they’re equally real. I awoke once with my hands on her throat. The way she writhed under my grip. Her gasping breathes after my release. And yet she asks me still to join her. A loyal master to a dog that should have been put down for biting. Why should I despise her for getting a new pet? “Soon.”

Cara: Fine.

I have yet to face her, and I won’t. It’s not fine. None of it is. Steps creak as she ascends them. “Was work good?”

Cara: Tedious. Cleaning up a backlog of foreclosure forms. It’s going to be a long month.

“I shouldn’t have used the sprinklers. I think it will rain tonight.”

Cara: Too late for that now.
“Go to bed. I’ll be up after a while.”

She continues without me. She doesn’t ask about my meetings anymore. Doesn’t ask about my day. I enter my house, close the door, then lock it. I brush my teeth and wash my face. Dark rings and spreading wrinkles surround my eyes. Lack of rest erodes me. I sweep floors, run the dishwasher, and lay out clothes for tomorrow. I strip naked, put my clothes in a hamper, then go upstairs. Her bedside lamp is off. She usually reads before going to sleep. I crawl under the covers, mindful not to shake the bed. We lie back to back without touching. We don’t speak. I touch her calf with my cold feet. Her soft and warm body curls inward, moving away from me in this confined space. If she’s not asleep, then she’s doing a damn fine job pretending. I close my eyes and begin to count down from a thousand, wondering where we went wrong.

Two dead insurgents swell in the sun three hundred yards south of our position. Wilson holds his hand-mic to his ear while flicking the pull ring of an incendiary grenade taped to his radio. It has no safety clip. If that pin falls, thermite will ignite and burn. It won’t explode. He’s a terrible NCO. He has no confidence in himself. Bet he thinks he’ll get swarmed, then beheaded with a bayonet so dull, it might as well be rebar. At least he’s prepared to destroy his equipment so it doesn’t fall into enemy hands. I’ll credit him that.


He throws his mic against the windshield, and it bounces and tugs on coiled wire until it dangles. “Frago, huh?”
Wilson: Captain wants us to wait. See if anyone comes to claim their comrades.

Thorpe: And then what?

Wilson: If they’re armed, gun them down. If not—detain and tactically question.

Thorpe: Hunting with saltlick, right on.

He removes his gloves and reaches into his pocket, pulling out a can of Copenhagen. With dirty fingers, he pinches some tobacco, then stuffs tucks it between his gums and bottom lip. He hasn’t been the same since he became a sergeant and was assigned to Wilson’s squad. Either rank or position changed him.

“And if we don’t follow through?”

Wilson leans his head back and grabs his body armor’s collar, pulling it away from his chest, trying to get air. He rests his chin on his knuckles when that fails.

Wilson: That what Atwater trained you to do? Just shirk responsibilities?

“No. But he would have made it clear to the CO that we are in no position to ambush, and that we don’t have the man power.”

Thorpe: Chill out, bro. We got way bigger guns.

All the better to see us with. “It’s just a plain waste of time and resources, that’s all I’m saying. There’s so many better things we could be doing.”
Wilson: Not the way the captain sees it. I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to lose two ranks and two months’ pay. Command won’t tolerate insubordination. “Especially when they make calls from an air-conditioned tent.”

Wilson: Our truck’s A/C works just fine.

He starts his Humvee. The engine turns; it vibrates the hood and numbs my arm. I look above where Cruise stands behind his machine gun, sweating. Forced air won’t reach him as he watches the valley below where the two bodies wait.

Wilson: I doubt anyone’s coming for them. Best to just hunker down for a while.

Thorpe: If they do, we’ll be ready.

“One more question, Sergeant. How long is a while?”

Wilson: Till those two decompose, or we have a stack of bodies, I’m guessing.

I walk over loose earth, and gravel grates under my boots. Suspended dust tastes of alkali and smells of sulfur. Salty, rotten eggs. Oil bleeds through dirt. I stoop low and put my finger in a dark vein, then rub it with my thumb. I run my hand along my pant leg, and a stain spreads. A black smear fills the coils and loops of my prints. A corner of a laminated picture I carry of Cara digs into my chest. I open my body armor. The breeze feels good against my saturated shirt. I linger for a quiet moment while looking at her. I place the photo back in my breast pocket and then close my vest.
Malloy smokes behind his Browning; Jensen’s about fifty yards away, pissing. Rivers rolls to his side, but keeps a hand on the pistol grip of his light machine gun and waves to me. I nod back.

Rivers: What’s the good word, boss?

“We’re here another night, at least.”

Malloy: Christ. Again?

Rivers: Like you have anything better to do.

Malloy: Was hoping to rub one out to a picture of your sister. The two of you look a lot alike.

Rivers takes off his helmet.

Rivers: After all this time together, that’s the best you can come up with?

He takes out a photo stashed within the crown webbing. He offers it to Malloy, who rejects it.

Rivers: You sure?

He holds up his hand, thumb pinching the second knuckle of his index finger.

Rivers: Hock a loogie on it and there you go. It’s that tight.

Malloy: You sick, incestuous fuck.

Rivers: What? She’s on the pill, and I wore a rubber. No incest in that. It’s like hugging, right?

Malloy: Too far, man. Took the joke too far.

Rivers: Every time you think of her, think of me.
A gust presses down on us, pelting us with silt. I turn my back and feel each grain cascading where my body armor doesn’t cover.

Malloy: I wish this wind would pick up. Be nice to have a haboob blow through and bury those sand-niggers.

Rivers: Hey, show some respect.

Malloy: Yeah, sure.

“Tell you what. Fighting with no body armor, no night vision, no air support—that’s ballsy. You don’t respect that, then you’re a goddamned idiot.”

Jensen: Who’s an idiot?

Rivers: Don’t worry about it.

Malloy: If they weren’t so dumb, I wouldn’t have had to put them down.

He pulls his eye protection from his face and tries to clean it of dirt with his shirt sleeve. He can’t though. The dust is part of his clothing now, ingrained in the weavings.

Malloy: Trying to ambush us with just their AK’s. Assholes.

Jensen: If taking a bullet was a sure way to get to heaven—living in this shithole—I’d run around naked trying to get killed.

Malloy: Go to hell, Jensen. Fuckin’ rube.

“Shut your cock holsters. You two just keep your eyes down range. Don’t fire unless fired upon. Understood?”

Malloy: Sure thing, boss.

“Rivers, come with me. Need to reconnoiter this place.”
Rivers: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

We walk a wide perimeter around our truck.

“Wilson wants to send you to the promotion board.”


“He’s tired of your sarcastic ass.”

Rivers: That’s funny. Same reason why Atwater wouldn’t send me.

“That’s because Atwater liked you.”

Rivers: And Wilson doesn’t?

“Nope. Wants you out of the squad ASAP. Promotion’s the quickest route.”

Rivers: Still can’t believe Thorpe beat me to sergeant.

“I can. He’s not that bright, but he’s a sycophant. That goes a long way with most.”

Rivers: Think Atwater’s enjoying his new staff job?

“Fuck no. He’s surrounded by bootlickers.”

Rivers: They need a guy like him in operations though. Tell the colonel how it is.

“Don’t think it will matter much. We’re still out here, aren’t we?”

Rivers: Suppose so.

The sun sets, and we take turns putting on our night-vision gear while the others pull security. I wipe my optic’s lens with a microfiber cloth, then rise and adjust my rifle’s sling, muzzle down.

Rivers: So, what do I need to know about the board?
“It’s not too hard. If you don’t know the answer to something, know where you can get it. Be direct in situational type questions. Know the creed of the noncommissioned officer. That’s about it.”

Rivers: You know it?

“Mostly. Had to recite it three times a day at PLDC.”

Rivers: You have to write it down for me.

“Will do.”

Our uneventful walk ends when the circle closes back on our truck. Wilson’s engine rattles. Everyone can hear it. Anyone. We’re not even trying to hide. Rivers scoops earth and sifts for pebbles. He swings his arm wide, flinging tiny stones. They rise and fall, dropping like fat raindrops. Most land soft, just a thump. Others rustle through brush, clang off metal. A few clatter off Kevlar.

Jensen: Damn it you two. We’re right here.

Rivers: Yet you didn’t call out the challenge.

Jensen: No need, see you plain as day.

I stride forward to where Malloy sits, back to me. He flips through the pages of a book he’s read for the seventh time this deployment. He has no others. I extend my finger and run it across his neck. “And now Malloy’s throat’s cut. He gushing, trying to scream but only pushing bubbles. Could’ve been avoided if you said something, Jensen.”

Malloy: Thank God. Can I go home now?

Rivers: You don’t want to go through Dover. Best we bury you here.
“Let’s give him a proper funeral.”

Rivers and I kick dirt on him. He laughs and lunges for us.

Malloy: Sombitches!

He tackles Rivers, then goes for his arms. I squat behind Malloy, reach around his waist and arch to the rear. We stumble and fall together.

Rivers: You’re supposed to be dead.

Malloy: Nah, I’m zombiefied.

“Put one in his brain, Rivers!”

Rivers: I would, it’s just he don’t have one.

“I’m done then.”

I tap out, striking my palm in dirt. It swirls and lingers. Malloy relents. We three sit beside each other, breathing rustled dust together, grinning between coughs.

“Zombiefied? Where’d you get that?”

Malloy points to Jensen.

Rivers: What do you know about the dead, Jensen?

Jensen: Elephants mourn their dead. They spend a long time caressing the bones with their trunks.

Malloy: Here we go with the animal facts again. You know that’s all he talks about during our guard shifts? Ants have pets; pigeons and flamingos lactate—I can’t take another shift with him tonight.

Jensen: Well, it’s not like you had anything to talk about.
Malloy: Sometimes, Jensen, it’s better to just be quiet.

Wilson’s engine runs low and long and the compressor fan kicks up, adding a whine. Things been running all day, and I wonder how much fuel he’s burned.

Rivers: I’ll take first watch with Jensen.

Malloy: Fine by me.

Rivers: I know some animal facts myself. Like how humans are the only creatures who use fire.

Malloy: Good to know. You guys will have a fun, in-depth discussion. I’m going to get some rack.

He tries to crawl under the truck, a place where many go because it’s the only area with overhead cover. I grab his leg and pull him out, pointing to a foxhole fifteen yards off where Rivers and I’ve been digging between guard shifts. Only thing worse than getting hit by artillery is being crushed by your own vehicle because the emergency brake released.

“That way.”

Malloy: Fine.

“Get us at midnight.”

Rivers: Sleep well.

I don’t sleep well, and I’d be lying if I called it rest. When Rivers gets me, my body aches. Spine taut, legs cramped. I take first watch in the turret while Malloy sleeps, sprawled across driver and passenger seats. When we switch positions, he talks.

Malloy: Sorry about before. Didn’t mean nothing by what I said.
“No worries.”

He breathes deep and keeps his eyes trained on the valley. I look out my window and try to find the sky beyond all this dust. We don’t speak. For a time, sitting still is enough.

Malloy: I shot them. I think I brought them both down.

There’s no swell of pride in his voice. No remorse either. Just an even-toned statement of fact.

“Were you firing the fifty or the two-forty?”

Malloy: They were between us and Wilson. The two-forty then. It’s on the back side. Besides, they didn’t drop till I started shooting.

“Most of us were firing by then.”

Malloy: Never killed a man before. Hell, I’ve never been in a real fight. Did you see the way that dude’s head just? Well.

He brings a fist to his head, then moves it away while extending and wriggling his fingers.

“You don’t know you killed them.”

Malloy: Machine guns are the most casualty-producing weapon. You taught me that when you gave me the position.

“You got a tampon?”


“You should carry tampons on you. A tampon can plug a seven-six-two wound.”
He coughs a single bark of laughter.

Malloy: Yeah, OK.

“AK’s shoot seven-six-two. So does your two-forty. Wilson has a pack of Kotex in his truck, I think. Tell you what, I’ll go grab one, then head down there. If the tampon fits, then you’re right. If those holes are too big, it was Cruise. If they’re too small, then anyone of us with our peashooters got them.” I open my door and exit.

Malloy: What, you’re going right now?

“Sure. Beats smelling your ass all night.”

Malloy: You want me to come with you?

“No. Need you at the gun. If shit goes south, I want someone I can trust up there.”

Malloy: Yeah. Yeah, sure, Sarge. Thanks.

“It’s why I get paid the big bucks.”

Enemy corpses are not the only things rotting; morale is, too. We’ve stayed here too long, spending our time ruminating rather than moving forward. The mission needs to be accomplished. If there’s nothing left to watch, then we don’t have to stay. We need to be done here.

I soldier on, strides matching pulses of cylinders pumping under the hood of Wilson’s Humvee. The closer I get, the louder it is. Cruise stands behind his gun just how I left him, only the mic hangs in his ear now. He’s leaned over, head resting on the rear sight.

“Cruise.”

His body jolts.
Cruise: What’s that?

“You sleeping?”


“Where’s Thorpe and Wilson?”

Cruise: In the truck. Sleeping.

“Yeah?”

Cruise: Yeah. They get tired sucking each other off.

“How long you’ve been up there?”

Cruise: All fucking day. Only get to come down to eat or piss. Lazy fucks.

“Wilson still have that thermite on the radio?”

Cruise: I keep hoping for that thing to go off.

I flip open my knife and hand it to him, handle first. “Get it for me.”

He tucks inside, and moves quietly. He surfaces like a snorkeler breaching water and hands me the grenade. I put it in an ammo pouch, then go to the back and take Wilson’s last fuel can. It’s maybe a quarter full. Still, it’s enough. “I’m going down range. Don’t shoot me.”

Cruise: What are you up to?

“Don’t worry about it.”

I am proud of the Corps of Noncommissioned Officers and will at all times conduct myself so as to bring credit upon the Corps, the Military Service and my country regardless of the situation in which I find myself. I close my eyes and strike my helmet.
“Fuck it.”

The can oscillates with shifting fuel as I step over pocked stones, and hop over divots. Brush rustles and branches snap. The moon reaches its apex, and shadows shrink. I stand alone, rifle in one hand, fuel can in the other, bodies at my feet. Safe to semi, semi to safe. *I will be loyal to those with whom I serve; seniors, peers, and subordinates alike.*

I sling my rifle behind my back, then twist the cap. JP8 glugs out of the can, washing the dead, pooling on the ground. If that fuel wasn’t so hard to ignite, Malloy’s lighter would have done just fine. Still, it wouldn’t burn hot enough anyway.

I lean in close and kneel as if offering a prayer as I insert the grenade between the two stacked men. I pull the pin and step back. A thin stream of smoke rises. The thermite ignites, burning hot and bright. A fire blooms. Blood spatters out of their wounds. Their eyes boil. Bodies wither. The flames rage and cast shadows dancing through brittle grasses over shifting sand, converging on me.

A thunderclap lingers, roiling, shaking my house. I slip out of bed, grab clothes from a drawer, and creep downstairs, and into my kitchen where I put on my pants in darkness. People in my neighborhood sleep. I take a bottle of whiskey and a shot glass. I set them down and run my hands over smooth granite until I find the chip I made earlier. I thumb it, staring into my faint reflection. I backhand the shot glass. It crashes, striking our stainless steel refrigerator. It leaves a dent. I grasp the whiskey bottle’s neck and go out front where I sit on our porch swing, watching lightning ignite and fade. I drink. I want the past to be the past. I want to forget it. I take a long swig. Whiskey burns my
throat, but I continue until the bottle drops from my hand and rolls along the deck with a
growl.

I don’t sleep, just lie in a stupor, staring at vertical seams in the overhang above my porch. I lie there until clouds drift away. I lie there until dawn rises pink and orange. I lie there until a car pulls out of my driveway, honks once, then accelerates hard. Burnt rubber lingers in moist morning air.

I fall out of the swing, try to catch myself but cannot, and hit my head on the ground. My body throbs. My mouth is dry. My breath is stale. I reach for the doorknob. It won’t turn. I lift myself up and rest my head on cold glass. I can see something stuck against the interior side of the window, but my eyes can’t focus. I pull away, leaving an oily imprint of my nose and forehead. ‘NEVER AGAIN’ is scrawled across an orange post-it note stuck to the inner pane. Cara’s blood-smeared thumbprint taints it. I can’t blame her for locking me out. I’ve got nothing to blame but myself.

I move to the back of the house and check doors and windows. They’re all locked. I sit on the deck and watch a sea of green, dew-laden blades sway with the morning breeze. My yard has become ridiculous.

The reek of waste within the trash bag I carry seeps through thin plastic. Warm beer, rotting meat, spoiled milk. Bottles clink as I walk. I keep watch over the bag where corners of refuse protrude, making black strain white, waiting to burst. Wind pushes down stink, carrying voices of those behind me, laughing. Something foul drips from the bag, and I lift it away from my body. Beyond that tawny fluid, I can see my yard
stretching out towards low ground. Development’s end. No man’s land. Sycamores stand there like bones of forgotten sentries layered in dust, overtaken by kudzu. I can almost hear it, the kudzu, growing—spreading a foot a day, constricting limbs, strangling roots, feeding off the body that supports it. It’s an invasive species, and has yet to be eradicated. One tree remains clear. Its paper white bark peels and hangs like skin recovering from sunburn. My brother calls to me.

Rob: Hurry up, yeah! Meat’s done.

Smoke falls from my barbecue and runs between blades of grass. “Just a sec, all right.”

He holds his hand to his ear like he can’t hear me. I raise my voice, but he shakes his head and dismisses me with a wave. Wind rages and feels solid as it presses against my body. The sycamore breaks below where the canopy splits, then falls. It’s the sound of a bone crack; it’s the sound of a mortar shell. I duck. The bag splits. Garbage spills.

Rob: What the hell was that?

“The fuck if I know.” I point to the tree; he shakes his head and points to the rotting waste at my feet.

Rob: No, what the hell was that? Meatloaf? I mean, seriously, you need to clean that up. Shit looks nasty.

“You think? Get me a bag.”

He shrugs while lifting a platter.
Rob: Sorry, bro. Hands’re full. Hell of a house warming party, though. Never seen a tree come down on its own before. What are you going to do about it?

I put my hands in my hoodie’s pockets and tap my toe against a bottle, amassing trash. “I don’t know.”

Rob: Got a chainsaw?

“Nope.”

Rob: An axe?

“In the garage, but now’s not the time.” I stare at the pile of waste. How long until flies gather and worms surface? He nods to the fallen sycamore.

Rob: Well, you got lighter fluid out here—I know that for sure. We can just light that bitch up and let nature do the rest.

The limbless trunk of the sycamore points to the sky like a weather-beaten obelisk. I fake a laugh. “Sure. Why not? Head on in. Tell Cara I’ll be there in a minute.”

Rob: What evs.

He turns his back on me and walks inside where people have gathered to bless our house. People I don’t know and never likely will. I stand alone in my yard, surrounded by decay. When the time comes, I’ll have to rip that tree apart limb by limb with my hands if I have to.

Strangers walk through my house unabated, peering into pictures of me that Cara hung. Pictures of me holding a gun, surrounded by ghosts. They say those images are
either frightening or cool. Either way, they tap my shoulder and say good job, welcome home. My hands ball into fists.

   Cara: You OK?


   She puts her hand on my shoulder. I can feel her warmth radiate through my clothes and onto my skin. She dressed better than me, they all did—except for Rob. Not his style, he’d say. He’s got swag.

   Cara: Fine. I can’t believe how many people showed up.

   “I thought this was supposed to be casual. Just some friends.”

They gather at picnic tables, grazing on crackers and fruit. A slender woman with fake nails dabs a chip into a bowl of communal ranch dressing. Her lacquered press-ons penetrate the dip; she licks her fingers and swipes at it again.

   Cara: Well, I really just wanted to invite one person from the bank, but I didn’t want to be rude to everyone else. I honestly didn’t think they’d show.

   “For the new vice-president of sales?”

She smiles. There’s an honesty to her plotting. Some kind of sweet false truth or half-ignorance that makes her authentic. She’s always been a planner though. Somewhere, she knew they’d come. She’s important. People always follow important people, whether they want to or not. She tugs at the string of my hoodie, playfully coiling it.
Cara: Sorry.

“It’s fine. I’m going to get changed. I already feel out of place here.”

She leans in and kisses my cheek.

Cara: I love you.

I enter my bedroom and slide hangers, trying to decipher which would be best to wear. Times like these I miss my uniforms. Pretty hard to screw that one up. A black sweater over a button down seems right. Khakis too. I stand looking into a mirror bolted to the door of the closet and try to smooth wrinkles, and then my cowlick. It’s the best I can do. When I go back downstairs, back into the crowd, I am somebody else. They require it of me.

The Santa Ana’s have quelled, and remaining stragglers find their seats. They seem comfortable beside the cheapness of it all—the plastic cutlery, paper plates, napkins and cups. The only thing that worries them is the fallen sycamore lying in my yard, pointing in our direction. In response, they point back and whisper. I sit beside my wife.

Cara: No, no. It’s fine. It could be worse; it could be raining.

Then we’d all have to suffer.

A man to her left nods in agreement and cuts at his meat, a slab of flesh still red beneath brown.

“I’ll take care of it tomorrow.”

Cara: Thanks, hon.

Rob sets a plate before me. He holds a giftwrapped box in his other hand nearly equal in length to his height.
Rob: Quinoa and tofu. It’s better for you that the crap you’re serving.

I prod at it with my fork. Tiny grains crumble and fall like white ash. Sear-striped cubes reassume their form regardless of the pressure I put on them. I set down my fork.

“Thanks.”

Cara: Hey, Rob.

There’s an absence in her voice. A strained neutrality.

Rob: Oh, hey Car.

She turns her head and engages the man sitting beside her. A piece of gristle clings just above his chin. His jaw ruminates, and the gristle dangles. I force my eyes to my brother, who chooses to stand above me rather than sit beside me.

“What’s that?”

He holds it out for all to see.

Rob: Just a little gift for you guys.

He pushes my plate out of his way, a pitcher of water too.

Rob: Since this is your first house and since you’ve been together now, what four years?

“Seven.”

Rob: Seven years? Well, regardless, I thought that you should have this.

I peel away wrapping paper and open his box to reveal a wooden shaft and a folded blade.
Rob: It’s a scythe. There’s a real Zen to it.

Cara: That’s very… nice. Thank you, Rob.

Rob: Think of all the gas you’ll save not mowing, too. No more blood for oil, right?

He nudges my shoulder and laughs. I want to snap open this blade and swing down on him. On everyone here. “Very thoughtful. Excuse me.”

Cara: Where are you going?

“Just off to put this away.”

The dimly lit garage feels safe. Safer than out there. I hang the scythe beside my axe. The sycamore, it’s just there, rotting on my lawn. These guests, they watch it. That’s all they do. They don’t care about my home, my wife, or me. They don’t even care about the tree. They’re observers. Plain and simple. Judges sitting at their benches weighing the world. I grip the handle and lift the axe. The heft of it nearly equals my old rifle and feels natural in my hands. When I exit, I don’t return to the gathering; I go to the tree.

I swing, hewing branches. I swing, cleaving arm-thick limbs. I swing, chopping into the trunk, breaking through bark, working my way to heartwood.

Cara: You need to stop.

I continue.

“It won’t clear on its own.”

Cara: People are watching.

“Let them. That’s all they do anyway.”

Cara: We’ll call someone. Have it taken care of later.
I stop. Blisters form on my hands already. The guests no longer feel welcome, it seems, shifting their gazes like a school of frightened fish when I look at them. If they don’t like it, then they can close they’re fucking eyes. “Damn it, Cara. No.”

I walk to the back door of the garage and remove my shirt. I wrap it around my fist and punch through the pane beside the knob and deadbolt, then unlock both and enter. I step over fallen glass broken to tiny shards, and grab a pair of my old army boots and slip them on.

My garage quarters no vehicles; it is a reliquary. Tools line walls, half-empty paint cans rest in pyramids, a dry fuel can sits in the corner, broken shears lay atop a worktable, and a locked footlocker hides under a dusted, olive drab woolen blanket with US initials showing. At center, a dormant electric lawnmower. Its broken blade waits to be replaced.

I reach for my socket wrench set and dig through it. I haven’t been cleaning them properly, and motor oil smears over my hands, filling in every groove with dark lines. I open the mower and loosen terminals, set down my wrench, and remove the battery. I take it to a worktable and grab a replacement. I set it in place but can’t find my wrench.

“Come on.”

Shit keeps disappearing on me. I reach back into my toolbox and attempt several wrenches until I find one that fits well enough. I tighten down the positive terminal, then work the negative. Golden embers erupt. My hand burns. The engine smokes. My elbow tingles with numbness.
I hold my hand. I overextended the wrench, connecting positive and negative terminals. The current’s flow arc welded my wedding band. A smell of ionized air, burnt hair, and seared flesh, lingers. I look at my finger, but oil conceals my wound. I can’t tell how bad it is; I only know that it hurts. I try to wipe oil off my hand on my shirt, and then my pants, but it doesn’t work. The more I wipe, the more it smears. It just spreads from one area to another, ruining everything I touch.

I keep my arm erect as I rise and move to the sink. Pipes rattle when I twist the faucet. Murky water follows. When the water clears, I wash my hands. The oil becomes translucent, nearly invisible, but its viscosity remains. I can feel it rolling between my fingertips as water beads and slides off my hands. A second-degree burn begins to show. I stop the water, remove my ring and then dry my hands.

The mower has to be fucked now. I look to my gardening tools where my eyes catch Rob’s scythe. His gift to me. I don’t know why he did it. Must have been funny to him. Maybe it’s because I outgrew his shadow. Maybe he wanted to divert the light. I don’t think he could stand Cara and I being happy with our place when we bought it. Everyone who came had a good laugh. I grab the scythe with my injured hand. The blister pops, and clear fluid trickles. Fuck them. Fuck them all.

I exit my garage. Grass waves. I widen my stance, raise the blade above my head and swing low, twisting my torso to add momentum. I cut a swath, but the grass remains vertical—the surrounding blades supports what I severed. I’m going to have to fight for every inch.
I swing until my body slicks with sweat, until my lungs burn, choking with pollen. Snot oozes down my face. Grass cuts my arms, raising white welts over flush skin. My eyes itch. An aroma of torn grass mingles with perspired whiskey.

I swing hard and low; the blade catches a divot and halts. The jolt shocks my tendons and strains my back. I curse. I curse the earth. I curse the grass. I kick the free-standing scythe and let it fall. I step away and roll my shoulders, shrugging off pain. I need to breathe. Slow and deep.

The sun is higher now; I can feel it cooking exposed skin. I wipe sweat away from my face and then look to the palms of my hands. A red eye-shaped wound stares at me from where skin ripped away. Fallen blades lay in mounds. Half my yard remains untrimmed. I pick up my scythe, but I have no hope to finish. I raise the blade again and let it fall, letting gravity do all of the work. I drop and leave it, the scythe and grass, and return to my garage.

I wash my hands, arms and face with brown water. I have class in about an hour, but don’t have the things I need to get there. I punch a cabinet, and its door buckles inward. My knuckles bleed. I take a hammer and a screwdriver and move to the door leading to the house. I knock out pins holding together hinges, then throw the door behind me. I hear plastic crack, but I don’t turn around. Now, the lawnmower is fucked for sure. I enter my house, shower, dress, then leave. I’m not coming back.

Left here. Alone. In the middle of a war, I get stuck guarding empty tents that were erected when people believed in victory, and should’ve been torn down, weeks ago,
when that victory was declared. Now they just sit here, empty. Collecting dust. Olive drab tents, formed from some kind of impermeable synthetic, bake in the sun and smell like tar. The place looks like a forlorn circus; a circus that came to town, pitched up, then abandoned. Even a hand-painted plywood marquee sitting in front of the concertina wire gate looks dilapidated—almost unrecognizable.

There’s no escaping the heat here. It comes from above and below, accumulates in the tents, and isn’t afraid of shade. I move to my platoon’s tent and remove my gear. Helmet first, then my body armor. Hook and pile tape holding my body armor together tears open. I lay my helmet and body armor on my cot, giving a head and chest to the torso of a duffle occupying it. I hang my DCU blouse to dry.

Flies come as clouds, pluming in search of new food. They pilfer these tents, sucking on vacant, salt-crusted cots. It’s not enough for them. They’re here for the shit. I know it. I can smell it. I doubt the last person here fulfilled their duty, and now I have to burn it.

I thumb a pivoting lid atop a small earplug case. I could use them right now, either to plug my ears or nostrils, but the case is empty. Then again, even if I could plug my nose, I’d still taste it. Tasting it is the worst, the leavings of another man’s body wafting in the air working its way through my lungs and maybe down to my gut. It causes a gag reflex every time; I’ll never get used to it. I don’t think anyone should.

I rifle through my A-bag and remove a Gortex jacket and pants, as well as other useless equipment. I don’t know why we were told to pack this stuff on top. I have to dig to the bottom to reach my few remaining clean undershirts. Unless, of course, it was a
deterrent for thieves—put all the useless stuff on top and hope they’re too lazy to get at what they really want.

I put on a clean shirt and sunder another, then wrap the scraps around my face and knot it at the back of my head. I put on black, leather work-gloves. I sling my rifle and move across loose stones toward the latrine area. The gravel rolls out under my feet, but I slide along and soldier on.

Flies swarm around a plywood latrine. Their collective form looks like lingering smoke. The wooden latrine has only one specific use, but cum stains on the peeling floor suggest otherwise. There is no seat, just a splinter-edged hole carved from straight-bladed bayonets. Flies crawl around the walls, down impaled urinal pipes, and nest in a decapitated oil drum that serves as a commode beneath the outhouse. It’s a cauldron of bile, bubbling in the heat. I shift my rifle to my back and grab a handle with both hands. I can’t say how much it weighs, but it’s enough that I have to bend my knees to pull it out. Why can’t people just do their damn job and burn their own shit? I drag it to the edge of the western perimeter. The drum cuts a path through gravel as I drag it. Flies follow, crawling on my forearms, face and ears. I don’t swat them away. Killing them only brings more—they eat their dead. Despite the openness of the area, the sound of the flies stays where we set up camp. The sun bleached soil never rests; it wafts with slight breezes, forming a fog, absorbing sound.

I move to the center of the tent city where a shaded pallet rests, housing several five-gallon fuel cans of JP-8. I take one, as well as an ashen steel picket, and return to the oil drum. I pour in most of the fuel and stir it. The picket nudges something solid
scraping the bottom, rolling around. Probably a rock someone used to hold open a specific page of a *Hustler*. The latrine’s not a clean place, but it’s private. I ignite a scrap of cardboard and drop it in. The fire spreads like melting wax. Thin strings of heavy smoke trundle upward. Hot wind lifts burning excrement and sublimating urine. I gag. My body recoils. I don’t have much in me, but I give what I have. I hold my breath and undo my scarf. I slap it in the dirt, hoping it absorbs my vomit. I fold it over, put the inside out, and wrap it back over my nose and mouth. It stinks, but it’s better than the smoke.

In this brightness, I can’t tell if the drum is actively burning, or simply smoldering. Stirring the pot reveals no further truths. As long as the shit can smokes, something turns to ash—ash that can be later dumped into a hole and buried. I raise my fuel can and pour it in. It erupts. Fire singes my arms. Burns hair. I drop the can. It pours and pools around the base of the oil drum and ignites. It’s burning now, that much I know.

I take the empty fuel can and return it to the pallet. My head hurts. It feels swollen under my scarf, a synchronized pulsing with gushing flames. I can feel myself drying out. I need to drink. I move to a separate pallet fifty yards from the fuel cans where we keep our food and water. I drop my scarf and run my forearm over my face. I take a bottle of water and turn it over in my hands, trying to decipher the scribbled font. Everything is backwards here, backwards and jumbled. Though the water rests in the shade, it’s still hot. I twist the cap off, and hold the water in my mouth until it cools before I drink. I open a box of MRE’s, and sort out a week’s worth of meals.
“Chicken and rice; beef stroganoff; Gumbo—aw Jesus Christ.”

Gumbo—a vacuum-sealed soup holding jellied bodies of brine shrimp. I should have organized my food before fecal disposal, then burned this shit too. I dig through the box until I find something appetizing enough.

“It’s a vacuum-sealed soup holding jellied bodies of brine shrimp.”

I turn the bag over twice, imagining what I can make out of its contents. Crush crackers, melt cheese, fold in picante sauce. Combine. It’s a meal enough. I think it even comes with instant coffee, which will be nice when tonight’s temperature drops.

Air compresses; a shockwave ripples through my body. I drop and roll while raising my rifle. Safe to semi. There’s no movement. No more explosions. Just the sound of wet globs landing on gravel, drumming on tents. Semi to safe.

It wasn’t a rock in the shit-can; it was a grenade. A goddamn grenade that no one thought to mention was lost. A fucking bomb loosed from someone’s harness that went uninspected.

Tents catch fire, spreading from canopy to canopy. I run to my tent. I grab my gear and flee, then dress myself under a tree while watching this place reduce itself to ash.

I sit with my back against a paper-barked tree. I pull apart thin bladed leaves, tearing away its flesh. After an hour of waiting, I know no one is coming. No one cares. It’s just me. Brown veins spread from a stem and curl like a ribcage protruding from a spine. I crumple it between my thumb and index finger and let it fall. I scan the dirt road, trying to remember where Battalion TOC was set up. I guess south and march until I
reach a concrete building reinforced with sandbags. I can tell it’s the TOC because of its antennas. That, and the two diesel generators cycling out of sync.

I clear my rifle and enter. A private sits at a desk, mouth akimbo, reading a magazine with a sleek bodied woman on the cover. His name tag says, ‘Shoemaker.’

“This the TOC?”

Shoemaker: Uh, yeah. Need something?

He dog ears his magazine and lays it down.

“Any NCOs around?”

Shoemaker: I think Sergeant Winslow is in the back, maybe.

I walk toward the hall and hear Shoemaker rise. “As you were.” I wave my hand at him as if I’m someone important. He doesn’t know any better, holds what he wants to say, what he’s supposed to say I guess, and sits.

I push open a door. I don’t bother to knock. A gush of cool air washes over me. Three window a/c units hum, but their sound doesn’t hide sensual moans and deep bass rifts emanating from a large screen television sitting atop a map of the area of operation. These men should be tracking positions of soldiers; instead, they’re watching porn.

There are three men in the room, two of which I recognize as Major Fischer, the battalion XO, and the ops NCO, Sergeant First Class Winslow.

The third man’s shirt drapes loosely over his bulging stomach. His DCU trousers hang to his knotted, hairy-knuckled feet.

Third: Can I help you?
A pristine DCU top hangs over a filing cabinet. On its collar, an embroidered cross. The Chaplain. He looks at the screen and then back to Winslow, who shrugs.

Chaplain: You get used to it. Besides, it’s the only English language channel we get around here. Beats that other garbled crap any day.

“I need to make a call.”

Fischer: Morale phone is by the front desk. Got sick of callin’ back home myself, but have at it. Shoemaker can show you what to do.

He cocks his arm behind his head and thumbs to where I just left.

“My unit, sir. I need to call my unit. I doubt they have a phone.”

Winslow: At ease, soldier.

Pointing out the obvious seems to have stirred what little NCO instinct Winslow has. He must see himself as a bulldog for the master that pulls his chain, rather than a shepherd who keeps the flock moving forward. He seems to forget that all officers are trained by NCOs before they get their commissions.

Winslow: What are you doing here?

“Need a radio, Sarge.”

Winslow: No, what are you doing here? On this post, in this TOC?

“Tent guard, Sarge,”

Fischer: And you abandoned your post?

“Not much left to guard, sir.”
Chaplain: How’s that?
“Burnt down. Someone dropped a grenade in the crap-can. It cooked off.”

Fischer: Wait, what? I thought that explosion was E.O.D..
“You didn’t investigate the explosion, sir? Didn’t it seem a little closer than normal?”

Winslow: Someone would have called something in if it was suspicious.
“Did you even take a step outside? There’s a pillar of smoke not far from your front door.”

Helmets, chest rigs, body armor and rifles stack like neat tepees in the corner, burdened by dust. These men have no intention of leaving their TOC if they can avoid it. The Chaplain scratches his head, and I stare at wiry hairs overtaking his yellow toenails.
“I wish I had as much faith as you, sir.”

Winslow: Sir, we’d better get on top of this.
Winslow shuffles through several folders, looking for all the call freqs, contact reports and supply requests.

Fischer: Why you gotta go and do this to us, kid? You know how much work we’ll have to do now? Winslow, we’re going to need an ACE report from…

He points at me. Jabs his finger in my direction.
“Alpha, sir.”
Fischer: Alpha Company, and find out who is and isn’t missing any hand grenades.

Winslow: Yes, sir.

Chaplain: What should I do, Hank?

Fischer: I don’t know, pray.

“Sarge, I am going to need a ride back to my unit.”

Fischer: Sorry, kid. Not happening until the next rotation. We don’t have a vehicle to spare.

“Where should I stay?”

Fischer: Hell if I know. Where were they going to pick you up?

“By the tents.”

Fischer: Wait there, then. Maybe they’ll send someone to pick you up. No need having them come all the way over here looking for you.

“It’s gone. There’s no place for me to sleep there.”

Fischer: No room here, either. Sorry kid: shit happens.

Safe to semi, semi to safe. These motherfuckers.

Fischer: Anyone see my hygiene kit? I need to shave.

Winslow’s eyes fall on me.

Winslow: You can go now.
Twist the key and the engine revs. I hunt for a station that plays familiar music, but find none. What does play is crap. I switch to a local public radio station. NPR is safe. No one on that station tries to talk down to me, speak in monosyllabic words with a harsh tone. No one that I just want to punch in the fucking face. I go the speed limit and ride in the right. Cars pass me intermittently, quickly. Voices flow—it’s almost soothing, like a hummed lullaby. Trees silhouette the sky and cast shadow bars. Light pulses and stabs, urging a migraine. Sunlight evades my blinders.

Radio: Sergeant First Class Thorpe served in Fort Bragg’s 82nd airborne second combat brigade. He is survived by his parents of Sunrise, Florida.

My grip loosens, and my body feels light. My car drifts. A passing vehicle bleats; its driver shouts mute expletives with a phone to his ear. He uses his steering hand to flip me off, then cuts in front of me. I take my foot off the gas, turn on the hazard lights, and then coast onto the shoulder. The bracelets rattle as my car shudders hard, then stalls. I forgot to put it in neutral. I pull the emergency break, shut everything down, and remove my keys. The steering wheel supports my head.

Stars sparkle despite airborne sand. Gas generators roar as stacked quadcons refrigerate shelf-stable foodstuff. My boots leave impressions over previously left footprints. In ten minutes, I’ll be in my rack. In fifteen, I’ll be asleep. In eight months, I’ll be return home. In two years, I’ll tell the retention officer to go fuck himself. In three
years, I’ll be done. They won’t be able to get any more years out of me. They can’t call me back. “How’s the family.”

Thorpe: Fine. Yours?

“My brother’s bar backing now. He just got into the union. Yeah, and he joined a fantasy football team. He’s winning.”

Thorpe: Somebody has too.

“We’re not.”

Thorpe: The fuck that supposed to mean?

“Look around man. In our previous deployments, we used to be embedded within cities. Now were entombed by Hesco baskets.”

Thorpe: Don’t mean a damn thing.

“No?”

Thorpe: Nope.

“Cruise means nothing?”

He stutter-steps, then keeps on walking. I stop. Safe to semi, semi to safe.

Thorpe: Hazards of the job.

“It’s not what I signed up for.”

He turns to face me.

Thorpe: Oh? And what did you want, a bonus? College money?

“Kosovo.”

Thorpe: What?

“I signed up for Kosovo. I wanted to help end ethnic cleansing.”
Thorpe: Instead you became a part of it. Boo-fucking-hoo. Look, if these people didn’t want us killing them, then they wouldn’t be fighting, now would they?

“What’s your problem, man?”

Thorpe: You. You’re my problem. You pretend to be better than what you are. I’ve seen you cap a dude at two hundred and fifty yards and not even care.

He doesn’t have to say it; I can still see it. Sundown, dusty plane, village on a hill silhouetting a mountain range. Helicopters fly east to west. Company moves south to north. A child herds sheep along a ridge, moving toward the city against the flight path of the choppers. Bird drops a flare. I have no radio. Mortars does. Wilson points and aims his rifle, signaling me to engage a target. A second flare. The child nears it. Company is in the city. Birds are on fires net; mortars are on fires net. Wilson has an ASIP radio, and I don’t. Confirm order. Look through scope. Something glints: a butt stock. Safe to semi. Fire. “I thought he was armed.”

Thorpe: Funny things, thinking and being.

“Birds marked a target. Wilson gave the order.”

Thorpe: Don’t beat yourself up about it. You did your duty. Just like me. Just like Cruise. Just like all of us.

“He could’ve taken that kid. He could’ve been setting up an ambush.”

Thorpe: See, that’s what I am talking about. You think too hard—just like a damn civilian. You’re a fucking soldier. Put one
foot in front of the other, and do your duty. You reenlisting again?

“Thinking about it.”

Thorpe: You should. Nothing out there for you in the civilian world. Getting out is like hitting a reset button, except you’ll be old and useless.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

My phone rings. A profile picture of Cara laughs while holding her hand to her chin, trying to catch the drink spilling from her mouth. I can’t remember clear what she had or how I made her laugh. New voicemail message. Press and hold one, the line rings, tap in my code. She’s not laughing now.

Recording: Hey. I hope you’re on your way to class. Call me when you get there.

Electronic voice: End of Message. If you would like to delete this message, press seven. If you want it to save it to your archives, press nine.

I press and hold seven, then star.

Electronic voice: Message deleted. Good-bye.

Deep breath. Exhale. Turn off hazards. Start engine, left blinker, check mirrors.

Warning: Objects in mirror are closer than they appear. In the reflection: a vacant road;
clusters of barren trees; empty overpasses. Ahead is the same. Depress the gas, car fishtails, dirt kicks out, tires screech, wheels grip, plummet forward. Drive on.

I stand behind the gun, one hand on its pistol grip while the other guides our spare antenna over the hood.

Rivers: Looks like you’re getting the hang of it.

I adjust the antenna, making sure I cradle the area wrapped in electrical tape. Our truck slows as Cruise drives us into an alleyway. Side mirrors scrape adobe walls. As we pass between homes, I use the antenna to lift power lines, hoping I don’t get shocked. Once we pass under them, the lines drop and wobble.

Rivers: Hey, Sargent Atwater, when we get back to the Ba’ath house, we should start up a jousting tournament. I think we got ourselves a real contender.

Sergeant Atwater: At-ease that shit.

Rivers: All right. All right. Sarge, what are we doing again?

Sergeant Atwater: Looking for a reported abandoned cache.

“Think it’s still there?”

Sergeant Atwater: Probably been rat-fucked by now. Might find some loose AK-47 rounds.

Interpreter: Turn right, over there.

Sergeant Atwater: Easier said than done. Cruise, give it your best.
Cruise pulls the truck sharp left, and the side mirror collapses. He moves the humvee forward and reverse while working the wheel. The walls around us begin to crumble. Eventually, Cruise reduces them to speed bumps, then rides over them.

Rivers: I thought we weren’t supposed to cut corners.

Sergeant Atwater: Shut the fuck up.

We enter a courtyard. People straggle around picking through dirt like pigeons chasing breadcrumbs, pinching their flowing white gowns and hiking them up over their sandals when they squat. Some hold out their palms and brush away dust from AK-47 rounds. Artillery shells and anti-tank mines stack a man high.

Cruise: Hey, Sarge, did command want us to transport this? I don’t think it’ll fit in the back.

Sergeant Atwater: You think?

I look around. Behind me, an old man walks to the rear of my truck while dragging a sledgehammer. He side steps around our truck, puts his hand to his heart, then extends his palm to me. He smiles.

Old man: Salaam.

I raise my gun’s muzzle to the sky and return the gesture. He nods, then pays no further attention to us, just walks straight to the Artillery shells, removes one from the top, sets it on a slab of concrete, then raises his hammer.

Sergeant Atwater: Whoa! Stop!

By the time we draw a bead on him, the hammer falls. My testicles recede. The hammer strikes. Steal clanks on brass. The shell’s nose dislodges and falls. The old man
sets down his hammer, lifts the shell, and reaches inside the round to gut it. Sergeant Atwater turns to the interpreter while keeping his rifle leveled on his target.

Sergeant Atwater: You tell that stupid fuck to stop right now and tell us what the fuck he’s thinking.

The interpreter and the old man exchange words. The conversation begins cordially enough, but soon becomes an argument. At times, they strike their own chests, point to the sky or to the ground. They jab hands, fingers extended and joined, at each other but don’t touch. None of what they say is translated.

Cruise: Why didn’t that explode?

“He didn’t strike the primer.”

Cruise: So?

“Needs heat and pressure to go off.”

Cruise: And you know that how?

“Was on ammo guard once while in Grafenwör. Engineers were moving pallets of live claymore mines with a fork lift. A box fell off. They ran it over. Nothing happened. Damn near shit myself, just like this time.”

Sergeant Atwater: Hey, terp. You mind keeping us in the fucking loop?

The old man tosses his hand in the air and turns his back on us. He takes several deep breathes, then squats low and crosses his arms over his chest.

Interpreter: He says he’s trying to make a living?

Rivers: Sure about that?
He sells scrap metal. He disables the shells, takes the shells back to his home, then melts down the brass. I told him it’s illegal.

Is that a fact?
I don’t know. Is it?
Sergeant Atwater lowers his rifle, then runs his hand over his mouth.

What’s he doing with the propellant?
He leaves it.
Where does it go?
Others clean it up. Most gets used as fuel for their homes.

Won’t that shit blow them to hell?
Not when it’s out in the open like that. Needs to be shaped to explode. Otherwise it just burns like all other powders.

The old man stands and starts shouting again.

He wants to know if you’re going to arrest him.

Sergeant Atwater moves to the truck and takes the radio. He calls command and asks for guidance. They have none. He tells command to send an E.O.D. team to our location, then gives them the coordinates.

Tell him we’re not arresting him.
And what about the cache?
He can take what he can get before our disposal team gets here. After that, it belongs to us.
The old man listens to the interpreter and nods his head as if weighing Sergeant Atwater’s decision. He shakes the interpreter’s hand, then Atwater’s. For the next two hours, we watch him break round after round until the E.O.D. team arrives.

Ten minutes before classes begin, the campus is nearly empty. A man speaks through a megaphone addressing the stragglers. He stands on a step stool near a bus stop and preaches. *And I will make you fishers of men.* I hear words of love and peace, but his tone contradicts his voice. I should stop and listen, but I really don’t care anymore.

A sign impaled in the lawn says: *No walking on the grass, please!* It’s dead, so what’s the point? I cross over field, then enter my class’s building.

Access points: stairwells on opposite ends of the hallway; elevator; twelve rooms, each with one door. Doors are centered on 12x10 cinderblock rooms; doors open in and to the right of entrance. Cone of fire covers all but the front left and front right. I have no weapon. 14:55. I’m on time, but I’m late. I stand on the threshold, staring at backs. The only seats available reside within the cone of fire. Those to my right, the only people capable of retaliating from a concealable position, is an obese slob with food stains on his shirt, an anorexic girl who smells like steamed vegetables, and a stoner whose tepid expression confirms my opinion of him. University shootings are rising. It’s not combat. I’m not in combat.

The professor looks at me. She smiles, then shifts her attention to her papers, shuffling them. I turn and walk away. Fists tight. My pulse is up again. Drink water. Deep breath. I’ve seventy-three jumps and only one that counts. I can do this. Green
light, go! Green light, go! Green light, go! I exit the hallway and feel myself falling towards an open seat. One-thousand, two-thousand, three-thousand, four. Sky-sharks abound, slip away. Sit.

Professor: Our pre-writing exercise is going to be a little different today—it should be a lot of fun. I want you to take out a piece of paper and draw. Don’t worry, this is not graded and, because this is an English course, I don’t expect it to be a master piece. I want you to draw what you imagine nature to be, or our relationship with nature. You’ll only be sharing your picture with two to three of your peers, and we’ll be using this as a launching pad for our larger discussion today. I’ll give you about ten minutes. So, let’s begin!

She claps her hands with excitement, and begins to draw. She’s likely the same age as me, but behaves like a child. I have a pen in my hand and college ruled page before me. *Barren landscapes, bluffs, rivers, oceans, man, animals, violence.* Ink smears across my page in long arching strokes; rapid thrusts for shading; a tree forms; a willow. The leaves look like flames; I give it smoke; I give it darkness; I give it land; I give it death. Chest tightens, fists clench, every muscle in my body is a steal spring; a bear trap ready to sunder flesh and shatter bone. Nature never wanted us the way we are. Our bodies are built to be prey for better equipped creatures, or hosts for parasites and diseases. If anything, nature intended us to be a middle tier species, not what we’ve
become. I don’t pity nature; nature doesn’t pity us. My peers will likely talk about balance and harmony. I’m already bored. I don’t respect this professor. She has too much faith in her students.

**F-16s** swarm like carrion birds above Aviano Airbase, engines tearing air, piercing ear plugs. C-17s and C-130s align like geese leading their young. Bodies, equipment, and weapons sprawl along the parade field. Soldiers lay on their backs in shanty towns fashioned out of green cords and fluttering ponchos. Soldiers wait in line to fill brimming porta-johns. The opening and closing of plastic doors ventilates a vile stench over the trampled field. Troops scavenge empty green bins left over from breakfast chow, looking for tawny, silicone-textured eggs and dry, red-flecked sausage patties irradiated for longer shelf-life.

This is lockdown. No more commissary runs. Food is brought to us when dictated, not craved, and it’s nothing we enjoy. Individuals ration water and tobacco. Three days without progress, and no news. Rumors abound and cut confidence. Accumulated trash burns. We’re sit still in the humid heat, but move quickly at night, then rest during chilled mist mornings. Midday is when we suffer. When we try to hide in our little, shadowy bubbles. It’s the cycle of life, and we are its refugees, waiting.

Atwater: Jensen.

We roll on our sides under our community of entwined ponchos, our squad’s Taj Mahootch.

Jensen: Yes, sergeant?
His words are slow and carry a dull, Midwestern edge. His oblong head lulls on his narrow shoulders.

**Atwater:** Get your shit together, you’re off the manifest.

His lower lip protrudes out. He shows no signs of fury, only confusion. *Why isn’t he angry? I’d be enraged.*

**Jensen:** Yes, Sergeant. But, um, where am I going?

**Atwater:** You’ll be landing with the follow-on forces. Ammo’s here, guys. Put your crap away. We might be heading out tonight.

Fifteen hundred rounds of seven-six-two divided between two men, plus NBC gear, plus body armor, plus food, water, and the rest of our packing list. Eighty, eighty-five pounds? I look at my machine gun. Its finish doesn’t reflect. One-hundred and eleven pounds. Every ounce counts. Fuck me.

“Why’s my ammo bearer being scratched, Sarge?”

**Atwater:** Ammo bearers are non-essential. Someone else needs his seat.

**Rivers:** Fuck me, *non-essential.* Who’s taking his place?

**Atwater:** I don’t know, some cooze.

“Wait. Will she even have a gun?”

**Atwater:** Nope.

**Rivers:** Will she carry Jensen’s rounds?
Atwater: Nope. Oh, and that reminds me; each of us needs to carry a mortar round.

“Fuckin’ Charlies—goddamned, fat assed, lazy bastards.”

One-hundred and fourteen pounds, plus my body weight, not to mention the reserve, and the main’s packtray. That’s what? Three hundred pounds, give or take?

*Hopeless entanglements: one T-10D parachute can sustain both jumpers.* How large are these jumpers?

Atwater: Don’t worry about it. We’re jumping in somewhere between seven-hundred and a thousand feet. You’ll have plenty of time to make amends with God while you burn in.

Rivers: Nice, we’re going to be fucking lawn darts.

Atwater pats our shoulders and returns to the mock CQ. Jensen unties his poncho. He doesn’t think to take anyone else’s. His was the center, and now the structure collapses on us.

Thorpe: Aw, come on man. Think.

Jensen: Oh, uh, shit. Sorry, specialist.

I kick a poncho upward, flick open a blade and cut the cords. “Forget it. We had to take it down anyway.”

We pack our things as the line grows. Men cut from the same jib face forward, put one foot in front of the other, wobble in place, smoke, chew, spit, and walk away with an armful of bullets. Jensen stands beside me; he hasn’t the courage to start talking.

“What do you need?”
Jensen: Well, um, specialist. I was, uh, wondering—

“Relax Jensen, you’ve known me now for like five months.”

Jensen: Since I’m not jumping, will I still get the award?

Rivers: What award?

Jensen: The um, mustard stain?

He’s devastated. He’s a paratrooper, just like the rest of us. We have one mission, and one mission only: jump from a perfectly good airplane into enemy controlled territory and take it over. Now he’s just a damn, dirty leg like the rest of the military, one step away from being an even more savage civilian. Rivers and I look at each other; neither of us want to deliver the killing blow. A gentle lie will pacify.

“Sure buddy. It’s a unit award, I think.”

Rivers: Yeah, man. Definitely. But it’s not like we’re going to land and get it stamped on our chests right away.

Thorpe: A lot can happen between now and then, bud. Try not to think about it.

He smiles. He doesn’t belong in the Army; a recruiter must have pushed him through.

Jensen: Thanks, guys.

“Don’t thank us; thank your recruiter.”

Jensen: Good luck out there.

Thorpe: Same to you, man. Same to you.

We shake our heads as he walks away.
We stand in line for hours. The three of us rotate out for food on soggy paper plates, and eat with our fingers. Men undo bandolier zippers, draw ammo from crates, speed-load five-five-six into thirty round magazines. Others load ammo drums, or sling brass over their shoulders and around their necks. They make themselves look like Rambo. Like this is their chance to be bad ass heroes. The sun catches the rounds like cheap jewelry.


Rivers: Nah, man. They’re merchant marines.

From my periphery, I see a thin solder patrolling the line, clicking a camera.

“Tourist.”

Rivers: What’s that?

I thumb behind me.

“Some tool taking pictures back there.”

Thorpe turns and leans out of line.

Thorpe Oh shit, I think that’s her.

Rivers and I twist our necks. The uniform flattens her body; her boonie cap hides her face. She strides past us to the ammo table, captures the sign with her lens and stows her camera. The line moves forward; we take five paces and halt.

Photographer: Who’s in charge here?

Supply Sergeant: I am, Ma’am. Sergeant Buckley—that’s B-U-C-K
Photographer: I don’t give a damn how you spell your name—and that’s Master Sergeant to you.

Buckley: Oh, um, yes, Master Sergeant.

He locks it up, moves to parade rest.

Photographer: What’s wrong with this sign, sergeant?

Buckley: Uh, I’m not sure ma’am.

Photographer: Did your mama drop you when you were a baby, or are you really that fucking stupid? I am a Master Sergeant. Don’t make that mistake again.

Buckley: Yes, Master Sergeant.

Master Sergeant: Now I am going to ask you one more time, and I better get a goddamned proper answer: what is wrong with this sign, sergeant?

He scans it hard. His left knee trembles.

Buckley: Um, spelling Ma’aster Sergeant.

Master Sergeant: Shut you goddamned cock-holster and listen close, because this will probably be the first and last time you will hear a female say this to you: look at my chest. You see this parachutist badge?

Buckley: Yes, Master Sergeant.

Master Sergeant: It’s got two stains there—this one’s Panama and this one’s Afghanistan.
Thorpe: Fuck me. She’s good.

Master Sergeant: I’ve rode this bull twice son, and I’ve never met a limp dick like you. Take down that sign and give that shit away for free, or I’ll make sure that you’ll go through so much hell here that you’ll wish you’d deployed.

Buckley tears down the sign, and tosses it under the table like a Frisbee.

Buckley: Yes, Master Sergeant.

Master Sergeant: Carry on.

She removes her camera and takes a picture of the first soldier to receive a free drink. The soldier is laughing; Buckley looks as if he might cry.

Rivers: Yo, fuck Jensen.

“I hope she’s on our chalk.”

Thorpe: Hell, I wish she was our First Sergeant. You think Bowls would ever do anything like that?

“Nah, he’d ask if they had baby oil and a mirror that he could flex into.”

When we reach Buckley, we hand over yellow cards. Sweat soaked soldiers drop wooden crates on the table. We pry open wires, break seals, and load our weapons. I begin to laugh.

Buckley: What so funny, chucklenuts?

“Cock-holster. That’s a good one.”

Buckley: Fuck you.

“Could I have a Coke please?”
Buckley: Yeah. Sure.

Professor: OK, time is just about up. Each table can be a group, so get together and discuss what you drew.

She steps away from her podium and stands beside my table.

Kid: Yeah, so, ugh, I, um, drew a, ah, picture of a dude and, well, a tree. It kinda looks like broccoli, I know, but, uh, like, we can’t live without trees ‘cause we need them for, like, air to breathe and, ugh, lumber and stuff. So, well, I guess that, uh, I, um, was tryin’ to show that, like, nature and, uh, man is, like, well, symbiotic.

I can’t stand it. These are my peers?

Professor: That’s so good! I like it. Anyone else?

Man-child: Heh, that’s funny ‘cause I did the opposite. I drew, well, I tried to draw, a tiger assaulting a kangaroo; ‘cause nature is violent and, like, Darwinism.

Professor: Great point! Keep going with this.

She taps the table with her index finger’s knuckle, then walks away. I chew the inside of my cheek and shake my head.

Kid: Dude, what? When would a tiger and a kangaroo ever fight?

Man-child: I don’t know, man, but I am pretty sure a tiger would win.
Kid: I don’t know bro, kangaroos know how to box.

They speak as if they’re about to fight. As if the fate of the world depends upon this argument.

Man-child: No way, man. A tiger would win.

Kid: Yeah, OK. So, what did you draw?

He’s looking at me. My hand rests over my paper. The man-child is furiously searching the internet to support his thesis. I spin the paper and push it towards them.

Kid: Whoa, you put some effort into this.

“Yeah, it’s kind of difficult to see what it is. It’s supposed to be a smoldering tree.”

He turns the page counter-clockwise and peers into it, eyes lost between the black ink and white paper.

The man-child interrupts me, sticks a finger in my face as he scrolls the screen of his laptop.

Man-child: Shut up, shut up. Dude, check this out—

I force his laptop closed.

“Hey!”

The room silences, and I lower my voice.

“You stick that finger in my face and tell me to shut up again, and I swear to God you’ll be a finger shy. I’m not your buddy. Got that?”

His face pales, and his hand retreats from the table.

Man-child: Yeah, OK, sorry.
“I was trying to show how everything in nature is built for decay. That’s all.
Thanks for your patience.”

The man-child hesitantly opens his laptop, and the screen shows the anatomy of a kangaroo leg.

Man-child: Kangaroos have a toe claw. Maybe they’re related to raptors.

Kid: Heh, if a tiger tried to pounce on the kangaroo, the kangaroo would spill its guts.

“Animals are funny things,” I tell them. “You never know what they’re going to do.”

Sun bakes yellow sand. It flutters in the air, clings to my gear, and obscures my vision. I don’t know how far we are from the city. Flat and barren land extends out to nothing. An isolated, parked white van sways far off the road. I kick Rivers and point to it; he wakes.

Rivers: What?

“Van, two o’clock.”

I point with my non-firing hand. I search the landscape for possible ambush sites. Unless they’ve dug in this flatland, we’re safe.

Rivers: You see that, Sarge?

The three of them dismount with our interpreter and stack on the van’s sliding door. Atwater stands ready, the interpreter encroaches. Rivers places his non-firing hand
on the door, Thorpe covers the back. My gun is centered and hot, ready to fire. Atwater signals three, two, one—Rivers pulls. The door opens. A wretched stench of ass, sweat, and seamen floods.

“What the fuck?”

Atwater: Hold your fire! Hold your fire!

Rivers: Jesus Christ!

Thorpe: What?

Thorpe lowers his rifle, crosses in front of Rivers and sees everything. He recoils.

Thorpe: Oh, oh my god.

Two men pull their pants up from their ankles and fasten ropes for belts around their waists, then raise their arms in compliance with an unissued order. They wear green armbands. Kurds. A listless man slumps on his belly. Blood dribbles from his mouth and ass. The Kurds speak in quick, furious tones. Teeth line the floor like lose change from torn pocket.

Interpreter: It’s OK.

Atwater: Tell that to the guy with the pulverized rectum.

Thorpe: Rectum? Damn near killed him.

Interpreter: Well, he’s Ba’ath party.

Atwater: Any proof to that?

The men move slowly for a wallet. They provide identification. They pull out cigarettes and begin to smoke as our interpreter deciphers the cards to Atwater. They
offer me a cigarette; I decline. I don’t know where they’re hands have been. Atwater moves to the radio. He sends pertinent information and waits for a response.


Atwater: Negative. How would you like us to proceed? Over.

Radio: Roger, ugh…break. Leave ‘em there and bring it in, over.

Atwater: Bring it in? We still have three hours of patrol, over.

Radio: Roger, there’s a frago on its way down. We need all available trucks. Red Devil base, out.

“So, we’re just going to leave them here?”

Atwater: Yup. Fuck ‘em. We liberated their country. They want to act like dogs, let ‘em. Mount up.

Thorpe: I’m telling you guys, we should have fire-bombed this place to glass, then dropped a big fucking hammer.

I walk to the parking deck. Thin raindrops fall. I pull my coat collar to my neck and keep my face down. People walk and chat to each other or on their phones, oblivious to their surroundings. I don’t. I take it all in. I anticipate ten steps ahead, always seeking cover and concealment, corners—blind spots. I take the most serendipitous route and never the same one twice. The end point, however, is always the same; and that’s a problem.

I depress a button, and the elevator dings. Doors grate, then reveal a glass wall and an empty space. My breath steams, and the doors close. I wait. Take the stairs? No.
Not today. I press another button. I rise. I watch canopies, the tops of diminutive heads bobbing along sidewalks. Cars speed on, lights off, ignoring pedestrians at marked crosswalks that only have yield signs. Pedestrians have the right of way, unless they’re in the way. Mass versus force: the car will win almost every time.

I sit and caress the steering wheel before I turn the engine. She didn’t say it, but I’m sure Cara doesn’t want me home. A couple of years ago, she said she wanted a kid. Problem is, you can’t have a kid if you don’t have sex. What does she want me to do? Go back to the VA and say, ‘oh, by the way—not only is my brain fucked, but my dick don’t work either.’ She doesn’t talk about wanting a kid anymore. I can’t even remember the last time we went out together or had a pleasant evening.

I punch the roof of my car and yell. I yell until I can taste blood in my throat. I can feel the downward curve of my mouth pulling at my cheeks as I breathe hard through my nose. I don’t have a home.

After the first three knocks, the door behind me unlocks, and I kick my foot back to impede it. The door presses harder against me, and I have to pull myself away from Cara to bar entrance. Cara pulls up her underwear, then lowers her skirt as I hike up my pants and fiddle with my buckle.

Cara: Occupato!

She turns, then leans against the squat sink, tucks her hair behind her ears, then covers her mouth to stifle a giggle. I close my eyes and set my jaw.

Conductor: Biglietto prego, signorina.
The carriage wobbles as it rolls over the tracks. Cara composes herself, reaches into her purse, removes her ticket, then steps into me. She puts her index finger to my lips and nudges me aside. She puts her head on my shoulder, cracks open the door, slides out the ticket and bites hard enough to make me grimace. Outside, I hear the conductor punch the ticket multiple times. He returns her ticket, but holds on to it as she tries to take it.

Conductor: E i biglietti del tuo amico, per favore.

I laugh once like a burst of a sneeze. Cara’s jaw drops, but maintains control. Tears well in her eyes, and she slowly pounds my chest. I hand her my ticket, and she gives it to the conductor who works his punch more rapidly.

Conductor: Grazie.

Cara closes and latches the door. For a time, we laugh.

“How long should we wait to leave?”

She puts her hand over my mouth and wipes her eyes on my shoulder.

Cara: Give him a minute.

Cara leaves first, and I take a moment to wash my hands and face. When I get back to our carriage, Cara’s in my window seat, watching fields roll by. She turns to me.

The sunset glows on her face. She taps the seat beside her.

Cara: What are you waiting for, an invitation?

“Just wondering if we’re still fighting. Or was that make-up sex?”

I sit down, then lean in and kiss her. She takes my hand, and we interlock our fingers. She bounces the back of my hand on the armrest.

Cara: I don’t know about you, but I didn’t finish making up.
“You’re so pretty. You know that?”

Cara: Back at ya.

I raise the arm rest that divides us; she lays on her side, resting her head in my lap, and crosses her feet on the windowsill.

“I’m glad you came.”

Cara: I wouldn’t have missed your redeployment for anything. I just wish I could stay longer.

“You don’t have to go back to the states.”

Cara: I don’t have a visa, and I don’t think your command will let me move into your barracks.

“We could get a place off post.”

Cara: You couldn’t afford it.

“I can get a housing allowance.”

Cara: How?

“If you marry me.”

Cara: Shut up.

“I’m serious.”

Cara: Uh huh. Where’s the ring, then?

“I haven’t had the chance—”

Cara: You’re such an amateur, asking a girl to marry you when you have no ring.
“If you marry me, I can apply for command sponsorship. You could live in Italy with me.”

She gives me a sly look, eyes and mouth slanted.

Cara: Living in Italy is good, but with you…

Even though she’s joking, her words sting.

“The Army would pay our rent for off-post housing. We could get a little villa in Vicenza.”

Cara: A villa’s a bit much, don’t you think? I’d be happy with just an apartment.

“And then we could just be with each other. Everyday. Is that so terrible?”

Cara: It sounds so good, but I like to keep my options open. Besides, that’s not how you ask a girl. I mean, if you’re going to be this lazy about it, I can’t imagine how lazy you’d be twenty years down the road.

“If we even make it that far.”

Cara: Seriously.

She squeezes my thigh, and I pinch where her neck and shoulder meet, making her curl her arms and legs inward. Between pants, she chants ‘wait’ until I stop.

Cara: You only have like what, a year left on your contract? I mean, unless the Army can get me here next month, I doubt they’d go to all the trouble.

“Four.”
Cara sits upright, smile faded. Her lips pucker.

Cara: What?

“I have four years left on my contract.”

Cara: How?

“I reenlisted.”

She slaps me, twice, then turns to face out the window.

Cara: Why didn’t you tell me? You can’t just make decisions like that on your own.

She doesn’t understand the position I’m in. “The Army owns me for eight years, Cara. Three years active, and five inactive. Problem is: there’s a stop loss.”

Cara: OK?

“Even if I wait out my contract, it doesn’t mean they’d let me go.”

Cara: How does re-enlisting help?

“Gives me more control over my future. I’m doubling down on my service time this year, it being the last year of my first enlistment, and the first year of my second. In the end, I’ll have served seven years active duty, but it will count as eight.”

Cara: What about deployments? Duty assignments?

“I requested permanent duty assignment to stay with the 173rd.”

Cara: So? They can still deploy.

“I doubt it. The 503rd isn’t even at full strength yet. Iraq was a fluke. They’re not sending us anywhere for a while.”

She looks back at me over her shoulder, and keeps her arms crossed.
Cara: You can’t shut me out of major decisions like this. You just can’t.

We spend the remaining travel time quietly together, and disembark when it pulls into the station at Monterosso. We can hear Mediterranean waves crashing against the shore, a sound amplified by the station’s tunnel. I take my assault pack, and then her small suitcase. We packed very little. Then exit the station. We pass a vending machine that sells drinks, which has the picture of a can leaning diagonal down its face. The can says Birra. The price, two euros.

The bay is wide, and about a dozen fishing ships hold the harbor. Night’s fallen, and we have no map. We wonder the streets, looking for a hotel, but are unsure if anything’s open. Tourist season ended months ago. Drizzle blends with fog, but there barley a chill to it.

There’s a sign on one building that could be a hotel. Four Vespas sit in front of it, bike chains running through their spokes, binding them to a light pole. We walk up the street a bit trying to see if there are any similar buildings around it. There are none. A man rides a Vespa and pauses before that building. He dismounts, drops a bag, then knocks on the door. I trot down the hill, and try to catch him to get directions, but he leaves before I can. Atop the seat of a red scooter, three canaries lie dead, heads crooked. I return to Cara and suggest that we should keep looking. We search the alleyways until we reach one place that looks inviting. The sign says Camere da Vice.

Cara: Think this place rents by the hour?

“Oh, only one way to find out.”
I press a buzzer, and an elderly woman opens her window and leans out. She speaks poor English, but it’s better than our collective Italian skills. She asks if we’re married, and we answer yes. She looks us over, then agrees to rent us one room instead of two.

In the morning, Cara and I eat sfogliatelle. The crisp dough flakes when I bite into it and dissolves in my mouth. I wash it down with cappuccino. We return to our room, shower together, dress each other, then leave.

We spend the day hiking Cinque Terre’s trails, navigating thin dirt paths above jagged cliffs. The seas crashes below. The moist air tastes of sea salt, and is cool. For once, I enjoy marching. We spend hours working our way through woods. Cara stops every so often and asks for a kiss to keep going. I oblige.

Cara: When you train, is it anything like this?

“It’s a bit harder, but somewhat the same. Guys fall out though because of the weight they carry.”

Cara: Maybe you should kiss them.

“Maybe I should.”

The sun begins to set, and we decide to head back to our hotel. Cara suggests we take the train, but I’m too restless to sit. I want to walk.

Cara: Do you think we can make it back before dark?

“It’s only a few miles, we’ll be fine.”

Clouds creep over the ridgeline ahead, pushed by wind that blows in my face. A nail trimming of a moon began to emerge from the eastern hills steeped in vineyards. Our
feet cut into a graveled trail, and the further we travel, the narrower the path becomes. Hundreds of feet above sea level, I watch sailboats sway and head to shore. The sun sinks below the sea, and its cast light irradiates the marching clouds. I open my cell phone to check the time. It has no signal, and its battery is nearly dead.

The path became a plateau. The sunlight vanishes. We follow the sparsely vegetated trail until it becomes a thick wood. Branches and vines weave above and form a thick canopy.

Cara: Maybe we should turn back?

Her foot taps in the dark, and I can imagine she nibbles her thumb. Beyond the trees, the clouds covers the sky and smothers starlight.

“We’re just as deep in as we are out.” I take her hand. “Let’s just push on a bit and see where it takes us.”

I lead her forward. I don’t break my stride. Halfway through the woods, ambient light ends and I can’t see my hand in front of my face. We stop.

Cara: Let’s keep going, he says. It’ll be a good time, he says.

“Seriously, that’s not helping anything.”

Cara: Tell me we’re not lost.

“We’re not lost.”

Cara: OK. Where are we then?

“Italy. On the trails of Cinque Terre to be exact.”

She doesn’t laugh. It’s not funny. A step in the wrong direction could take us off a cliff. She wraps her arms around my waist, weaving them through the straps of my
assault pack. I take out my phone and hope to use its display light, but it’s dead. She shivers.

“Hold on. I think I have a spare shirt in my pack.”

Cara: But no flashlight, huh?

“Flashlights are for chumps.”

I reach into my pack and rummage around. When my hand falls on my camera, I felt a smile break on my lips.

“Close your eyes.”

Cara: OK.

I wind the disposable camera, hold it at chest level, close my right eye, then press the button. It clicks and flashes. “Ten steps forward, two to the right. We’ll get out of here bit by bit.”

Cara: This is a terrible idea.

Hours slip by as we paw at the trail with our toes. I ask Cara to wait, and scout ahead. I’m off the trail, and I can feel it. The soft earth crumbles under my weight. I stop walking and take a picture. Nothing reflects from the flash. I squat low, then get on my belly and reach out my arms like a man crossing cracking ice.

Cara: Anything?

Wind rushes vertical instead of horizontal, and I hear the ocean below crashing against stone. I slither back, but stop when a dull light catches my attention. A road snakes along the rock wall, and a car’s headlights burn on a leading from it to us. A trail of switchbacks with abrupt drop-offs along the sides.
“I found it! I found our way out!”

Cara: Thank God.

I have her grab my backpack from behind and lead her to the trail. We exit the woods, but the night still blinds us. We follow the path slowly with measured steps. With a flash, I can see the highway’s reflectors.

“We’re so close now.”

I take a step. Loose earth shifts under my heel. I slip forward, land flat on my back, then slide a few feet. Before I can say anything, Cara begins to cry.

“I’m fine.” I rise and dust myself off. “I’m fine.” I walk back up to her, and hold her tight. My palms rest on her back, and I can feel shuttering contractions of her lungs. I smooth her hair and kiss her forehead.

Cara: All I saw was your backpack, and then I saw nothing. I thought you were dead.

We walk along the road, exhausted, holding each other’s hand. Headlights crest the hill behind us, and we turn to face them, raising our arms and waving as we do. The car pulls up next to us, a window rolls down.

Cara: Aiuto! Aiuto! Smarrita!

The driver opens his door and waves for us to enter.

Driver: Dove stai andando?

Cara: Il treno, per favore.

He drops us off on the outskirts of Corniglia, and we take the next train to Monterosso. We travel silently, to weary to speak. We exit the train just before dawn.
Our footfalls echo off cobblestone streets. The sun breaks over the sea and sets it ablaze. A wave crashes against a large, cleaved stone jutting out of the shore. White froth spouts between the crack. I press my lips together as my throat knots. I begin to laugh. A deep belly laugh amplified by Italian architecture—stone and marble.

Cara: This isn’t funny. We could have died up there.

I bend over, put a hand on my knee, then hold out another, asking her to wait. I can’t stop. People look out their windows. Hot tears pour out of my eyes. My ribs feel like they will implode.

I call my brother. An electronic female voice answers so damn chipper.

Voice: Please wait while your party is being reached.

Pop music trails a static click. Rob doesn’t want his callers to hear a phone ringing like everyone else; he wants them to hear a song he chose. It sounds terrible. I pull the phone away from my ear; the speakers crackle and hiss. The music shifts abruptly. I hear Rob’s voice wither through background beats.

Rob: Bro? Hey bro? Are you there?

“Yeah, man. How’ve you been?”

His distant voice is hard to hear.

Rob: Yeah, I know right? Ha hah ha. You’re an ass! Hey buddy.

‘Sup?

“Not much, just calling to see how you’ve been.”

“Yeah.”


Wait, get the lady—what’s your name? Lydia? What do you want? Oh, just tell it to him. Hey, man. Sorry about that.

“No problem. We haven’t talked in what, like six months?”

Rob: Hold on. Hey. Hey! Yeah, you. This isn’t perfect; this is crap. Don’t try and sell that on me. No, no, no, I know the trick. If I wanted water, I would have asked for water. Hey babe, don’t drink that shit. Yeah, take hers back too. Get it right this time. It’s my brother. Yeah? You want to talk to him? She wants to talk to you.

Female voice: Hey.

She giggles. She wants to know what kind of game he’s playing.

“Hey.”

Female voice: Are you like his girlfriend or something? ‘Cause you kind of sound like a dude.

“Yeah, I’m his brother. Listen, can I talk to him please?”

Female voice: OK. Bye!
I can tell the phone is still in her hand, the music shifts, but I can still hear her
voice.

Female voice: He kind of sounds like a douche.

Beats and riffs explode.

Rob: Sure does. Hey, listen man. It’s not a great connection here.

I’ll call you back in a morning. Cool.

He hangs up the phone before I can respond. Conversations like these remind me
why I don’t talk to him. Why I don’t talk to anybody. Grazing fire: fire in which the
center of cone of fire does not rise more than one meter above the ground. The max
effective range of grazing fire over level or uniformly sloping terrain is seven hundred
meters. Physics and identity: rounds of similar design, weight and grain will never strike
a target in the exact same place due to the position of the firer, vibration of the weapon,
and atmospheric conditions.

The engines of the Humvees strain in the heat and dust. A new convoy of clean
trucks with multiple antennas sits outside of our compound—a former schoolhouse now
wrapped in sandbags and bound with razor wire. The men of my truck unload, and I start
to breakdown my gun. A large man in full body armor stands by the trucks with his
thumbs tucked inside the armholes of his vest. His face looks vacant, as if he doesn’t
belong here.

Rivers: Hey bud, need a hand?

“Who’s that?”
Rivers: The chaplain.

“That fuck? Why is the chaplain here and in full battle-rattle?”

Rivers: You didn’t hear?

“Hear what?”

Rivers: Well, the way I it was told to me is that Greene, from third platoon, asked the chaplain for prophylactics.

“Why, he afraid to beat it ‘cause his hands are so dirty?”

He laughs.

Rivers: No, man. Worse. Apparently, Greene’s platoon found a whorehouse in their sector. They said that it’s the only house in that area with a red light outside its door.

“So have they been going to it?”

Rivers: Every time they pull night patrol.

“And they don’t have condoms?”

Rivers: Nope. They’ve been bare backing local nationals for the past three weeks.

“That’s disgusting.”

Rivers: It’s been said that Sergeant Randle and Sergeant Cox tag teamed a thirteen year old.

My stomach churns. Legs shake. This is not the Army I joined to put an end to genocide.

“You’re fucking with me, right?”
Rivers: No joke.

“Have they been brought up on charges?”

Rivers: Nope. An investigation’s pending, but it probably won’t be resolved until after the deployment.

“Yeah, if the fucking paperwork doesn’t get lost between here and there.”

Rivers: That and, as it is, it’s just a rumor. Could be an exaggeration.

“People don’t just make up stories like that. There’s something to it.”

Rivers: Well, it’s war. That’s why the chaplain came. He’s here to keep tabs on our moral fiber. What the hell can we do about it besides write our congressmen?

“I don’t know. I just might. You got any paper?”

Rivers: No, you?

“No.”

Rivers: You know your congressman’s address?

“No. Do you?”

Rivers: Nope. I’ve got good news though.

“Yeah? They finally get a firm redeployment date?”

He pulls out a month’s old *Stars and Stripes*. The news is ancient to the rest of the world, but fresh to us. He unrolls it, finds a specific page, then hands it to me.

Rivers: You’re getting your stripes, dude!
I get a hotel near the campus. Take a top floor room. The manager working the desk tries to get me to check-in for multiple days, saying that these rooms could get booked. The parking lot was empty; this place is a ghost town. I’ll take my chances, day by day.

I fill the bathtub with hot water. I still smell of oil, sweat and grass. It’s in the fibers of my clothes. I disrobe and drop them in the water. I use courtesy shampoo to clean them and scrub out stains and stench with a toilet brush. I drain the tub and rinse out my clothes with the shower. I wring them out and whip them against the basin. The wet clothes slapping against the porcelain sounds obscene. I wrench down on my pants, socks, and shirt again, then hang them to dry. I get in the shower and wash myself with cold water.

My phone rings. I let it go to voicemail.

I dry my body with a crisp towel and wrap it around my waist. I brew a pot of coffee and pour it into a paper cup. I turn off the lights and sit in a firm chair holding my cup, clinging to its warmth.

**Radio:** Index!

Soldiers shout it. Their voices weave through trees. I take down my hooch and pack my ruck. I light a Sterno can. My canteen cup has a flattened shine and is seasoned with grit. I shake out dust, then fill it, and put it atop the fire. Water boils, and flecks of sand dance between bubbles. Two packs of instant coffee dissolve into the water turning it black, and a package of dry cream turns it tan. Steam lifts off the cup. Clouds part.
Sunbeams stab through the sky. Fog rises off melting ice and tank-churned mud. My drink is hot and bitter and delicious. Training has ended, our practice is over.

Two weeks of walking the box in Hohenfels, Germany, searching for opposing forces, enduring icy rain and hot sweat. Freeze, thaw, freeze. Soggy socks that never dry. Sleep deprivation. Adrenaline. I face the sun and close my eyes. Its dull heat increases. I feel warm. Warmer than I have in weeks. I shivered through nights with my wet socks at the bottom of my bag, crawling against my bare legs like trapped eels. With one word, it all ended. Index. Every year was the same. Trudge, endure, fight, index. Go to the barracks, clean weapons, clean self, eat biscuits and fried chicken, drink beer.

But the coffee. The coffee is always my favorite part. That’s when to make coffee. The pungent smell. Hands cupping warmth. Hot liquid entering my throat, settling in my stomach, then irradiating to my limbs. I should open a coffee shop: G.I.’s Joe. Canteen cups, camouflage netting along the roof; wood line mural along the walls.

Platoon Sergeant: Pack it up, gents! After action review in fifteen mikes!

I pour out my coffee. It pools, swirls and coalesces with melting ice. I throw on my ruck, grab my gun, and walk to the nearest deuce and a half.

I awake in a chair, coffee still in my hand, tepid now, with a cirrus cloud of cream atop brown liquid. My phone stops ringing. I lower my head and see Cara’s face on the screen. It slows the spin. Her benthic eyes lure me into their depths like a memory forgotten. I thumb her chin, and my phone dials hers.

“Hello.”
Cara: Where are you?

I should ask her that question, but don’t.

“Out.”

Cara: OK.

“You all right?”

Cara: No. How could I be? The house was broken into.

“I didn’t have my keys.”

Cara: Jesus Christ. You can’t keep doing this.

“What?”

Cara: Moving through life like a damn wrecking ball.

“You’re right. You’re always right. I’m sorry.”

Cara: Sorry? When are you coming home?

Her place haunts me, filled with pictures of the dead—of what was and will never be again. Hash marks of everything I’ve done wrong. “Take lunch around one. I’ll see you then.”

Her voice strains through the speaker.

Cara: You’re not coming home, are you?

I wait. “No.”

Cara: You have to come home. We need to talk.

“Tomorrow, Cara. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

Cara: Tomorrow?

“Yes. Goodnight.”
I could make her laugh, once. She thought I was clever. Now, she must think of me like some broken bird incapable of flight. One that needs mending. I’ve more jumps than I care to recall, and only one that counts. Gravity can’t break me. It’s had many chances. Every time I landed, I got up and walked away.

I take a tiny liquor bottle from the mini-fridge and move back to the window. Cars come and cars go. Down that infinite highway with golden eyes that only see so far. The rest is darkness. They’re following break lights and road maps. Directions other people gave to them. The same path they always take. Point A. Point B. Point A. Point B. Cars pull over when their tires go flat, when their engines smoke, or when their tanks empty. People walk away from their vehicles after putting a white shirt in their window. Hazard lights flash until batteries die. They stroll to the nearest exit ramp hoping not to be crushed by drunk or distracted drivers. Fatigue makes me dizzy. I am the fixed axis of rotation. Everything revolves around me, and I feel like shit.

Doughty: And what the fuck is the problem here?

“Drill sergeant, I am having difficulty zeroing, Drill Sergeant!”

Doughty: That’s because you’re using your daddy’s Kentucky windage technique, corn-fed.

“Negative, Drill Sergeant.”

Doughty: Excuse me?

“I’ve never fired a rifle before, Drill Sergeant!”

Doughty: Jesus Christ, what kind of country am I protecting?
He looks across the range. Most of the other privates have moved on. I am among the shameful few. He drops down and lies beside me. His voice calms. He puts the show on pause.

Doughty: All right, private. Have you done your dime and washer drills?

“Yes, Drill Sergeant.”

Doughty: Get in position.

I tuck the rifle deep into my shoulder, the sole of my firing leg boot aligns perfectly with the muzzle of my weapon; my forward weight rests atop two sandbags. I’m more solid than a tripod. He hands me a magazine. I load it, and the magazine’s base hovers just above the ground.

Doughty: Take three shots. Remember: slow is smooth, and smooth is fast.

“Yes.”

I rest my cheek on the rifle; it presses my mouth open. I taste rich, red clay with each shot. He looks through his binoculars.

Doughty: Not bad. One in the center, one above, one below. You’re zeroed, but you’re taking your eye off the target.

“Drill Sergeant?”

Doughty: You’re flinching. Not a lot, but just enough to get you slightly off target. Slightly off is a lot off, especially as targets get further out.
“How do I stop, Drill Sergeant?”

Doughty: First of all, keep your mouth closed when you fire. When your jaw is set, the weapon has less give.

“Roger.”

Doughty: Second: *stop thinking*. Slowly pull the trigger back to the rear, feel the weapon cycle, reacquire your target, fire again. It’s all muscle memory.

“Roger.”

Doughty: OK. Fire three shots.


Doughty: Again.


Doughty: Good.

Semi to safe.

Doughty: You’re zeroed.

I drop the magazine, clear my rifle, then lay rest the butt stock, leaving the muzzle pointed down range while atop the sandbags. He hands me the binoculars. His vision is sharper than mine, and I have to adjust the lenses. I count the holes. One in the neck above the circle. One below the waistline beyond the circle. A cluster of seven, center mass.

“Drill Sergeant?”
He rides a cleaning rod down the barrel of my rifle, and the bolt rides forward.

Doughty: Yeah?

“I only count seven rounds in the zero.”

Doughty: Our rounds are designed to pierce through light-skinned vehicles. They don’t tumble.

I look again and see three oblong holes, the rest are pencil stabs through the paper. For the first time, I feel like a soldier.

Doughty: Good shootin’ Tex, now get the fuck off my range.

I rise before the sun and am happy that I didn’t dream. I check on my clothes and feel their moisture. I move them to the A/C unit and lay them across the vents. I turn up the heat as high as the machine will allow me, and then exercise.

I alternate push-ups, sit-ups, lunges and jumping jacks every thirty seconds. I exercise beyond sweat. My muscles burn, and keep fat from settling. The window clouds with my breath, reminding me that I am alive. This regimen that keeps me going, but it’s not enough. I push myself harder.

Doughty: Front leaning rest position! Move! In-cadence! Exercise!


Burning. Every muscle in my body writhes. It’s been hours. I want to quit, just drop to my knees and dust off my hands. Rivers laughs. A drop of sweat falls from his
narrow nose. His laugh seems more like a belch, and it’s deep. Spittle dangles from his mouth and swings. Doughty’s voice inflects upward, signaling his final count. I shout it with others.

“Halt!”

Doughty: Get your asses out of the air! Don’t go to the ground. Hold it. Hold it! Seems we got a guy who thinks this is funny.

Who laughed?

Rivers: I did, Drill Sergeant!

Doughty: First platoon, you’re platoon guide thinks this is a joke.

Rivers: I do, Drill Sergeant!

Doughty: You like getting’ smoked, private?

Rivers: You can’t smoke a rock, Drill Sergeant!

Doughty: No, I can’t. But I bet your mama did when you were in her belly. That’s the only thing that could possibly explain why you’re so stupid.

Rivers: Hooah!

Sweat stings my eyes, but I want to laugh. I get the joke. Hold it. It’s all a game.

Doughty: Tell me, Rivers. What’s so damn funny?

Rivers: I do want milk and cookies, Drill Sergeant!

Some soldiers moan. Others chuckle. I refuse to let my knees dip. I arch my back.

Blood settles in my face. I feel veins throbbing in my forehead. Laughter swells. I join in.
Doughty: OK. OK. Y’all got jokes. Get your asses out of the air! I ain’t some dude you just met in the club. Position of attention, move!

We recite a chant, clap our hands, then stand still.

Doughty: Don’t worry, Rivers. You’ll get your milk and cookies. First Platoon—lights out!

I jump atop my bunk. Sleeping above my covers saves ten minutes remaking sharp creases and folds at reveille. That’s more time to rest. Neon bulbs above us go out row by row. Orange light invades a window between wall lockers at the foot of my bed and assaults my eyes. Snowflakes flutter against windows, collecting on sills. I stare at the underbelly River’s bunk and trace rusted web springs where his ass sinks. I kick it.

“What the hell you thinking, man?”

Rivers: What’re you talking about?

His weary but blithe voice scratches when he speaks.

“You know. What were you trying to pull back there?”

Rivers: Oh. That. I almost got him to say it.

“It? Say what?”

He lowers his head and looks at me, upside-down.

Rivers: His catch phrase, man. What, you think Drill is this much of a dick every minute of his life? That he’s like this with his wife and kids? Friends and family?

“I don’t know. Maybe.”
Rivers: *Pft.* Come on. You’ve said it before: this is all a game. He’s got a gimmick. Just need to work him up to it.

“Tag is a game. Monopoly. That’s a game too. Three hours of making a damn fool of yourself doing pushups and whatever else, that’s not a game.”

Rivers: What you described sounds just like how I played Pictionary as a child.

“Pictionary is drawing.”

Rivers: I know.

“Then you were a strange kid.”

Rivers: That I was. Now get some sleep. He’ll be back soon. I bet I’ll get him to say it. You’ll see.

My boots are still on, and I only loosen their strings. I stretch my arms and legs, then pull my poncho liner over my face. I rest like a corpse. Too tired to dream. Too tired to sleep. Doughty shouts a command and my body reacts. I’m standing beside my bedpost before opening my eyes. A table slides and topples.

Doughty: Pick it up.

Contradiction of standing orders: the center of the room belongs to the Drill Sergeant, and no trainee may cross into it. I hesitate.

Doughty: If I have to say it one more mothafuckin time.

Two privates with sinewy arms lift the table and hold it above their heads, anticipating a new punishment. They wait for further guidance.

Doughty: Put it in front of Rivers’s bunk.
They glare at Rivers while setting it down, then run back to their beds. Doughty takes long strides through his territory. A bulging plastic grocery bag swings in his left hand. He slams it on the table and stares at Rivers with a slash of a grin. He pulls out a half-gallon carton of whole milk and a platter of Christmas sugar cookies.

Doughty: Here’s your milk and cookies, private. Eat up.

Rivers: No thank you, Drill Sergeant.

Doughty: Front-leaning rest position, move!

We fall to our faces.

Doughty: On your feet, private.

Rivers jackknifes his legs to his hands and straightens his body fluidly. Drill Sergeant marches forward. Their feet interlock, and Doughty’s wide-brimmed hat taps on Rivers’s face.

Doughty: You mean to tell me, private, that you no longer wish to have milk and cookies?

Rivers: No, Drill Sergeant.

Doughty: No, you don’t want cookies? Or no, you do want cookies? You’re not making any sense, private.

Rivers: No, Drill Sergeant. I do not want any cookies, Drill Sergeant!

Doughty: Well isn’t that just a fine fuck you. Let me get this right. You don’t want the cookies and milk that I bought, with my own money, from the shitty paycheck the Army gives me,
which I could have spent on my family?! My boy needs

*new shoes*, private, and you tell me no?

Rivers: Yes, Drill Sergeant.

Doughty: Yes? So now you want the cookies? You better stop trying
to mind fuck me, private. This cavity ain’t for your pencil
dick.

Rivers: Whose dick is it for then, Drill Sergeant?

Doughty turns his back to Rivers. His shoulders bob up and down as he covers his

face, laughing. When he recovers, he pivots back around.

Doughty: OK. OK. You made me laugh. Can’t fault you for that.

He opens the milk and removes the plastic lid on the cookie tray.

Doughty: But I’m done playing with you, private. And I don’t waste
money. Figure it out. Rivers, stand fast! First platoon,

seems you’re platoon guide mistakes my kindness for

weakness. That’s all right, that’s all right. The way I see it,
those treats cost me two hours of wages. I’ll have to

recover it in your sweat. Position of attention, move. Front!

*Drop to the belly and push.*

Doughty: Back!

*Roll over, flutter kicks.*

Doughty: Go!

*Jump up, run in place.*
Doughty: On your belly, on your back, on your feet.

*Clap-clap.* He’s singing it now to the tune of head, shoulders, knees and toes.

Doughty: On your belly, on your back, on your feet.

*Clap-clap.*

Doughty: On your belly, on your back. On your belly, on your back.

*Clap-clap.*

Recruits grumble, and I hear the words *soap-party* murmuring around me. If he keeps refusing, they’ll go after him like animals. He’s my friend, but there will be little I can do when the lights go out and nobody’s watching.

Doughty: Mule kicks, go!

I put my hands on my head and jump, trying to kick my own ass with my boot heels.

Doughty: The monkey fucker, go!

I bend at my waist, reach between my legs, grab the back of my ankles, then drop my ass below my knees and rise repeatedly.

Doughty: Three more hours till PT, first platoon. Rivers, you going to keep fucking your platoon, or are you going to make the milk and cookies disappear?

Rivers: Yes, Drill Sergeant!

His hand snaps forward and grasps a fistful of cookies, then shoves them in his mouth. His face contorts, and he exaggerates his chews. He eats first, crumbs raining
down. We continue dropping and rising. Rivers drinks the milk. He starts slowly, breaths through his nose. His Adam’s apple matches our movement. White streams out the corner of his mouth as he arches his back and pours it down his throat like a frat boy with a beer. He slams down the carton while crushing it in his grip and returns to standing still.

**Doughty:** Position of attention, move! Good job, Sir Chuggington, good job.

**Rivers:** Thank you, Drill Sergeant!


The pace quickens. Milk sloshes in his gut. He snorts, cheeks swell. Milk and chewed cookies spout from his mouth and slaps on the tile. Drill Sergeant’s voice inflects.

“Halt!”

Vomit pools at Rivers’s feet, but the smell permeates. With his hands on his knees, Rivers bends and heaves. I watch him without turning my head, without turning my eyes. My nostrils flare.

**Doughty:** You disgust me, puke-guts.

He scans us, looks at the scuff marked floor.

**Doughty:** Anybody else want milk and cookies? Didn’t think so. I want these floors cleaned and looking like glass before first
light. You don’t like it, call your mamas. Write your congressman. But if you do, make sure you spell my name right: D-O-U-G-H-T-to the motherfuckin’-Y! As you were, first platoon.

He spins on his heel and exits. Spelling out his name, letting us know who’s in charge, that’s the gimmick Rivers was telling me about. I wasn’t paying attention when basic began three weeks ago. I get it now. Rivers wipes a long string of spittle with his forearm.

Rivers: Told you I’d get him to say it.

“Worth it?”

He laughs.

Rivers: Down to the last drop.

“Good. Go get a mop.”

Sunrise reflects off frosted grass outside, and ribbons of light refract through ice-lined webs on my window. In this chill, I consider the structural integrity of the hotel. I worry about the expansion and contraction of steel and hairline fractures. I wonder about how they reinforce the beams to keep it steady.

Reinforcement: The immediate, response-contingent presentation of a reinforcer which increases the frequency of a specific response. Reinforcer: Any stimulus, action, or circumstance whose presentation immediately follows a response and increases the frequency of that response.
The beams require maintenance or the building will collapse. Beam and bone, structures and frames. I dig into my green and gray digital patterned assault pack and take out my Gatsby paper. I reread it, then tear it in half. I take out my laptop and write a new paper with a focus on the principles of learning: the sick social cycle, positive and negative reinforcement, occasion and avoidance.

I argue against a Freudian interpretation of the novel, that the characters only differ by the complexities of their behaviors; complexities that resulting from degrees of reinforcement and punishment. The sources I cite are not literary; they’re scientific. It takes me an hour and a half to write and proof. I don’t care what grade my professor gives me. The thesis is strong, the argument supported, and the logic fluid. Moreover, it’s rational.

I stand in the center of the living room, wearing my broken Army boots, DCU pants, and a painter’s mask. Dapp streaks down the papered walls in sappy globs, suffocating the room in acetone. I roll the handle of a scraper tool in my hand and plan my attack. The bubbled areas seem a reasonable start, but the visible seams are more inviting. I begin at the western corner of the room and finger the overlapping paper. It peels and rolls onto itself, just enough to fit the blade beneath to skin the rest. White, smooth plaster glistens in the light. I look to the scarred floor, where a shred of paper lands and see the planks as they are. I can’t begin to imagine how they could appear once I lay down hardwood. Like mirrors, maybe. Lacquer over dark stain gathering light and reflecting an images of those who stand on it.
The next swipe doesn’t go as well as the first. Swathes of plaster cling to the paper like meat to skin exposing rib bone furring strips. Lightning bolt fissures run across the walls in every direction, revealing a hollow core.

“Christ.”

I take out my phone and dial in Cara’s number. He voice mail answers. I hang up the phone. I should know by now not to call. She doesn’t answer when at work. My phone vibrates.

Text: U OK?

I reply, ‘fine, call me when you can,’ and press the send key. I exit to the backyard and sit on patio furniture I brought with me from our apartment last week. An apartment we still have a month to live in. The process would’ve been streamlined if the bank didn’t drag their heels on the short sale paperwork. The table and chairs used to sit under a deck where we strung lights to remind us of Venice, of better days now gone. We would eat dinner there; make plans. College, job, house, kids. We’ve skipped the first two, but not for lack of trying. Colleges weren’t impressed by my high school transcripts. It’s a shame a GPA doesn’t become irrelevant after seven years like unpaid debts do. The furniture hasn’t been used since I put it here.

A thin layer of pollen covers it. Spider webs hang between the chairs’ frames and fabric, catching gnats, mosquitoes, and leaves—all of which are spun over as if the spider didn’t know what was important, and what to cut loose. I shake the chair out, rub the backing against the grass, and set it down. My hands tremble as I remove a cigarette pack from my cargo pocket. I’m not so sure I ate today. I know that Cara hates it when I
smoke, and I’ve tried to quit, but it never sticks. I only smoke now when she is gone. When she’s away, I fall into old habits.

I sit in the chair and light the cigarette, listening to the paper smolder like crackling leaves under a boot heel. They yard sways, wavering with the breeze. There is a rustling within the bushes beside a rickety wooden fence that divides my property from the neighbor’s. I rise to face it, squaring my shoulders and widening my stance. A man dressed in pale, stained jeans and a dirty undershirt, distended at the belly, emerges.

Intruder: Hey, how’s it going?

“Fine. You?”

Intruder: I’m Tommy, I live next door. You a contractor?

“Nope.”

This guy squints his dull eyes and runs a hand through his greasy, grey hair. The butt of my cigarette crushes between my fingers as I ball my fists.

Intruder: You the new neighbors then, I take it.

“That’s right. Wife and I just moved in the other day.”

He comes no closer to me, just stands beside the branches he emerged from. He takes out a cigarette of his own and lights it.

Intruder: So, you ugh, workin’ in the city?

“No, just got out of the Army. Need to fix this place up a bit.”

He sucks in the smoke and holds it for a moment. His eyes roll over me. The ash from my cigarette breaks from its own weight and flutters to the ground. He nods his head.
Intruder: Thanks for your service.

“Yup.”

Intruder: So, um, you have kids?

“No. You?”

Intruder: No, just live here with my ma. She’s old, needs help every now and then.

The stoop of the man’s shoulders, his down cast eyes, says otherwise. He helps her as much as he helps himself—a leech, just as greasy as his unwashed hair.

“That’s nice of you.”

Intruder: Thanks. Say, you know anything about plaster? My ma’s been at me for a while now to try and patch up some of our walls.

I lift my cigarette to my mouth; it’s dead. I flick it into the pile of leaves.

“Just that it’s easier to pull out than put up.”

Intruder: Well, I’m a landscaper and if you want to work something out, maybe fix some walls for me, I’d be happy to do your yard.

I gaze at the wildness of the field, the kudzu overtaking the trees, the purple flowers of wild sweat peas—I haven’t even bought a mower yet.

“I’ll keep it in mind.”

Intruder: OK. Well, you have a blessed day.
He turns his back on me and wades through the bushes. I sit back down and burn another smoke. I just got here and people are already bitching. I don’t need his help: I don’t want it. I’ll trim this yard; I’ll rake these leaves; I’ll fix this house. I take a deep drag and release the cigarette. It drops it like a dart, and the cherry erupts, shooting cinders. This is my house. I’ll take care of it.

I hover over the bathroom sink letting the water run. I’ve wash my hands, but the grit between my fingertips remains. I grasp the porcelain rim and watch streaks of dirt swirl down the drain. I pull a lever; seal a drain. Murky water pools. My phone rings. I know it’s Cara. I wipe my hands on my pants and answer. “Hello.”

Cara: Hey, babe. You called?

“I just had a very interesting conversation with one of our new neighbors.” I look in the mirror. My eyes are heavy with dark lines, wrinkled. I don’t feel young. “They’re nothing like us.”

Cara: Oh, that’s too bad. What are they like, then?

I run a hand over my face, pulling the skin down as if to remold it. Grime trails my swipe. I don’t know where to begin. “Nice enough, I guess. An old man and his older mother. I’ll tell you more about it when I get home.”

Cara: OK. Well, how’s the house coming along?

“Not so well. I need more tools.”

Cara: What are you going to do next?

I sigh, turn off the water, depress the lever, and let the water drain. “Come home, I guess—back to the apartment.”
Cara: Sounds good. How about you stop off and pick up some wine for dinner tonight, OK?

I exit the house, lock the doors, and enter my car. Checking my mirrors tells me how the Focus got its brand name. Atrocious blind spots. The only thing I can see clearly is the road in front of me. I bought it for mileage, though. I save a lot of fuel going straight.

I avoid major highways and take the back roads; I don’t want to get tangled up in the traffic. I like being where I can see trees or rolling fields of pasture; I don’t grip the steering wheel so tight when I do. I follow this road quietly, as if pulled forward by a stream.

When I was a child, I drifted down a stream on my back with my eyes closed. I used to go camping with my family on a little plot near a river. A four-man tent cramped by my mother, father, brother and I. I fell asleep in that river, I think. I awoke to my father and mother calling my name. It was a brief slip of consciousness. Here then gone. The water was powerful to me then, a six-year-old boy swimming in just his underwear. There was an edge of panic in my mother’s voice as I drifted away; my father seemed indifferent. They didn’t come for me; they stood on the bank reaching out. I had to swim hard to pull myself out of the river. I drifted down to an untrodden path. I cut my feet on briars getting back to the campsite. My father said, ‘good job jackass.’ My mother stood there with one arm across her chest while the other held a cigarette. I can’t remember a time when she didn’t smoke. I wasn’t surprised when she became ill, when she lost all of
her hair and looked like a sun-dried carcass. Life loans and death retrieves. I shouldn’t feel bad about things I can’t control.

At seventeen-thirty, the parking lot of the local discount superstore teems with chaotic shoppers buying lord knows what. I pull into an empty slot furthest away from the store. I turn off the car and sit. I close my eyes and try to be as still as my vehicle. The engine crackles and pings with heat.

I take deep breaths. My palms squeak against the wheel’s synthetic cover until I’m ready to remove my seatbelt and exit my car. I cup my keys in my hand, leaving one to protrude from my fist.

I approach a corral of carts and try to pull one out. It resists me, locked into the others. My knuckles turn white with effort. My jaw flexes and veins throb. I feel the rage. I tug and pull; the cart’s rear wheels lift from the pavement and slam down. I tell the cart to go fuck itself and push it, pull it, and slam it until it breaks free. A plastic clasp lies on the ground, broken. It was attached to the infant safety belt of the cart mine was coupled to. I could have unwound it, but I didn’t see how it was woven. It doesn’t matter now, anyway. I got the cart free. I don’t need it, but it’s a good buffer.

The market swarms. People in tattered clothes with equally worn expressions wander. I can’t tell if the children are pulling or being pulled as the sound of their rubber soles sliding across linoleum and screaming echoes throughout the place. Something about these one-stop shops, they always bring out the worst in people; it’s as if discounted products diminish civility. There’s no control here. These people have no trajectory, no purpose, until they miss something. Their carts screech at turns almost
missed; they swerve in and out of aisles; they turn without looking, without consideration, and crash into my cart without apology.

I reach the hybrid aisle of stock and refrigeration where wine rests in bottles at room temperature on one side and the swill is chilled on the other. I push the cart slowly across the aisle and look, scrutinizing every bottle, arranging those out of formation, checking their labels and awards. There’s no whiskey here. I’d rather whiskey. But this isn’t my place, and I don’t make the rules—I follow them. I reach out and take a random bottle of red. I’m not sure what it is; it’s dark; its label is simple. It shows no awards. It is what it is. I pull out and push on.

I tuck the bottle under my arm and let my cart lead the way. An overloaded cart pushes through my lane and doesn’t yield. It strikes the side of my cart; I let go of the handle. An old man watches what he began. My cart travels unguided, unimpeded, until it collides with a display of Cheerio’s. The tower crumbles; boxes fall and splay on the ground. I walk on.

Old Man: Hey! Your cart.

I drop the bottle and catch it at its base. I point out its neck toward the old man. I was going forward. He deflected my momentum. It’s not my mess. He can deal with it now.

“I got what I came for, thanks.”

I don’t turn to face him, but I hear the wheels of his cart churn over, around, and through the muddle of boxes. Apparently, it’s not his mess either.
I go through a self-checkout aisle wait for an attendant to check my ID and type in her code, swipe my card, exit the store, enter my car and drive home as if nothing happened.

I cut carrots in the annihilating silence of my apartment, eyes transfixed on the grime in the grout between the pale blue square tile-topped counter. My arm rocks forward and back in waves. I keep my elbow and wrist locked. Cara will be home soon. I don’t know what to tell her about our new house, how much work it is going to be. Tear down the walls, insulate them, hang drywall, mud joints, prime, paint, second coat—what am I going to do with the wreckage? The blade slips off the edge of the carrot and flays flesh from my index finger.

“Goddamn it!”

I throw the knife, and it bounces off the tile and clatters to rest. My wound is placid, a pink eye with clear, waxy rim. It oozes as if weeping from a dozen pinpricks. It forms a bubble, then drips and spatters.

I wrap a dishrag around my finger and kick a cabinet. The door buckles inward, splitting in two. One half falls to the ground; the other remains hinged to the frame, splintered along the edge.

I march to the bathroom, holding my finger upright, pointing to the ceiling. I start the water and put my finger under it. Cool sweat collects on my forehead, and I feel a slight tremble. I shut off the water and sit down. If I pass out, I don’t want to break my head where people shit. I focus on my breathing until I’m calm.
There is a sound of metal rattling on metal from my front door, of an ill-fitting key sliding into a deadbolt. I close my eyes.

Cara: Hey, honey. I’m finally home. Dinner ready?

“I’m in here.”

Cara: You would not believe the day I had today.

I can hear the sound of her things tucking into place. Shoes rest in a cubby by the door. A coat hangs on a coat tree. Keys go on a hook, purse too. Water bottle enters the sink.

Cara: Where are you?

“Bathroom. Door’s open.”

Cara: Christ. You can close the door, you know. We haven’t been married that long—we’ll never be married that long.

“Yeah, I know.”

I rise to my feet and try to manage the first aid kit.

Cara: What happened here?

“Nothing.”

Cara: The cabinet, it’s broken. What happened?

I sift through the kit, holding my hand upright. The rag falls and blood streams down my arm, following my veins. Band aides won’t fix this, and I can’t find the gauze, let alone the tape to hold it in place if I do.

“I don’t know.”
Blood trails down the hairless underbelly of my forearm and gathers at my elbow. It drips onto the floor.

Cara: Did you break it? I really want to get our security deposit back, you know.

I don’t respond. I haven’t found yet what I need, and I don’t know that I will.

Her feet stomp across the floor. It’s her argument stride. She’s making herself known. I try to close the door, but she catches it. She looks into my eyes between the crack of the door and the jamb. I drop my gaze and my hand and allow the door to open. She speaks softly, sternly.

Cara: Don’t. Don’t shut me out.

I step aside and lean against the sink. She has something to say to me, something about my behavior, but her expression dissolves when she sees blood flowing down my arm, collecting on my shirt and pants.

“Sorry.”

Cara: Are you OK?

“I’m fine. I just can’t find the tape.”

She reaches into the first aid kit. Moves some items and retrieves the tape. She holds it out in front of me like it’s nothing, no big deal. It is though, and I can’t understand why I can’t ever find the things I need, when I need them, and she can.

Cara: Here, let me help.

She places pressure on my wound until the bleeding stops. She cleans it with an iodine wipe and blows on it to dull the sting. She wraps it with gauze and tapes it tight.
Cara: It’s OK; everything is going to be fine. Just keep it elevated for a while. Do you want some ice or anything?

There’s a lot I need: a job, a better home, a purpose.

“I haven’t finished dinner yet, sorry.”

She takes my good hand. I feel her disarming softness, her warmth.

Cara: Come on, we’ll do it together. You tell me what to do, and I’ll cook.

I almost smile. “OK, boss. Lead the way.”

She laughs.

Cara: I am not your boss. If I was your boss, I’d have fired you a long time ago.

“Where would I be without you, huh?”

Cara: Face down in the gutter somewhere—that’s where.

She pulls me into the kitchen. I direct the meal preparation. Tortellini tumbles in boiling water as she blends herbs and spices into olive oil. I can smell the sea salt, almost taste it. She opens the wine bottle, pours it into glasses, strains the pasta, and divides it onto our plates. She spoons the oil over it. Breaks a baguette.

Tonight would be a good night to sit outside, but we can’t. I don’t tell her about the house, the hollow walls, the dirty furniture. It’s all a mistake. A terrible mistake. One I have to fix before she knows how bad it is.

Cara: Hey, you listening?

I haven’t been. I should have. I stick a fork in a tortellini. “Yeah, sounds crazy.”
I stuff my mouth. She lays down her fork.

Cara: So. The cabinet. What happened exactly?

I prolong my chewing, and swallow it when there are no pieces large enough for my teeth to pulverize. “Just got mad. I didn’t mean to kick it so hard. It’s no big deal. I’m sorry. I’ll fix it.”

She puts her hands on her lap, lowers her eyes. This isn’t the first time we’ve had conversations like this—a stool with wobbly legs, the doorframe when my key wouldn’t work. I fixed them though, made them better, stronger, more durable. Sometimes things that don’t work quite right need to be broken before they can be fixed.

Cara: We can’t keep doing this.

I grab my half of the baguette, roll it in my hands, pick pieces off and set them on my plate. “Doing what?”

Cara: I can’t fix the things you break.

“I can.”

The baguette is just a heel now, a round stump of what used to be a whole.

Cara: There’s services, you know. People to help you.

“Yeah. I know.” I tear the final piece in half and set it on my plate. “I’m done. I smell awful. I’m going to take a shower.”

I take my dishes to the sink and run water over them. Olive oil coalesces with water and swirls down the drain, but the crumbles of bread catch. They swell. I reach to pluck them out, but they are difficult to grasp from being so wet. Some come out, others slip down and gather waiting to form a clog. I turn off the water and hear light clinking of
silverware on a plate. I turn my head and see Cara, her back to me, still eating. She wasn’t done. I should’ve waited. I put my dishes in a strainer and head to the bathroom. I close the door.

I stand under hot water and watch steam rise from the streams pouring down on my body. They lift in swirls and merge, forming a fog, misting the glass. I dip my head under the spray.

Water collects in my hair then cascades off my brow. I write names on the fog-cloaked glass—Cruise, Rivers—then draw a cross.

I don’t know why Cara thinks that talking will do any good. Nothing good ever came from talking. My eyes fixate on the cross. I use to pray, once. That’s even more useless than talking. I run the flat of my hand against the glass, erasing everything I made. I close my eyes while the fog fills the swath. The bathroom door opens.

Cara: You think you might want to save some water for the fish?

“I’m almost done here. Sorry.”

Cara: Don’t be.

She undresses then enters the shower. She reaches around me, then grabs me tightly. Her breasts press against my back, and she kisses my neck.

Cara: Been awhile since we’ve done this.

She reaches out and grabs the bar of soap, then runs it up and down my chest while nibbling on my shoulder.

Cara: Been a while since we’ve done other things, too.
Her right hand traces my collarbone, glides down my nipple, then lingers at my navel.

Cara: You know I love you.

Her hand slides further down, and she strokes my penis. I stop her.

I close my laptop and check my clothes. They’re dry enough. I shower, dress, and go to the front desk to check-in for another night.

Rob doesn’t call me; I don’t call him.

I enter my car and twist the key. The radio is loud.

Radio: …church picketed the arrival of five fallen soldiers today just beyond the fence of Dover Air Force base. They carried signs saying ‘Thank God for Dead Soldiers’ and ‘God Hates Homosexual Enablers’. The group contends that God is punishing the military and the country for the nation's tolerance of homosexuality. The 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals sided with the church saying peaceful picketing is protected by the right to free speech under the First Amendment.

I turn off the radio and drive to Cara’s work. When I get there, I reclaim the tin bracelets from my stick shift, and place them around my left wrist.

Cara’s glass tower lords over me. My neck strains to look above, and it hurts my eyes to look at it. I drop my gaze to the sparkling pavement. My shoes shine like
obsidian. Shoe polishing is a lost art. Synthetics are all too common. I enter into a wide
marbled lobby. Two elderly security guards with thin horseshoe-molded hair protect a
My heels click on the floor, echoing off the walls. I pass through unacknowledged.
I press a button, golden doors open, I enter, they close and I am gone. The guards never
took their eyes off their crossword puzzles.

I enter her complex. Cubicles weave over the floor like a rat’s maze. The
receptionist asks me to wait. She used to smile at me and wave me through. I stand with
my back to the wall. Cara exits her office and comes to me.

Cara: I wasn’t sure if you were coming.

She’s not wearing her ring. I think mine is still resting on the worktable. I doubt it’s salvageable.

“I got a little held up.”

Cara: Are you doing OK today?

Bury it. I’m fine. Smile. “Never better. You?”

Cara: Well.

She puts her hand to her head, closes her eyes and points back to her desk. Her
movements are awkward; her language seems detached.

Cara: I just forgot to log off. Can you wait a minute?

“You waited for me.” I motion to her door. “Go ahead.”

She turns on her heel and walks away. A man intercepts her, tall, lean. His head is
like an incandescent bulb. Pointed chin, wide brow, auburn hair with frosted tips. His
mother must have drank while he was in utero. He wears expensive clothes, expensive shoes, an expensive watch, and a cheap yellow band around his wrist. He says something to Cara, and she looks flustered. This must be him: the man she fucked or is fucking. She returns to me, and he follows her wake with his hands in his pockets. He cuts her off and stands between us. He looks down at me. He stinks like lemon zest and hardboiled eggs.

Chump: Hey, Paul Bunyan.

Cara looks away; I’ve seen that expression many times before. She’s angry.


Chump: Haven’t seen you since the house warming party. Cara talks about you often, though.

I look to Cara, her back is turned to us and her arms are crossed. The entire office watches. “That’s funny, because I’ve never heard of you. Are you a co-worker?”

He chortles, looks around the office. People shift away from his gaze like a frightened school of fish, like he’s some kind of shark.

Chump: No. I’m her boss. The name’s Bradley Cope.

He reaches to shake my hand. My body is a taut steel spring. A soldier returned from a deployment once and discovered that his wife had been cheating on him. He followed her and her lover to the base’s post-exchange where he found them buying lingerie. He didn’t say a word to them, nor did he touch his wife. Just walked up behind them in line, took out a knife and cut off that man’s head, then put it on the checkout counter. That’s a man of conviction.
I take his hand. He’s fit, but his grip is soft. He’s a runner, or a cyclist. He’s never had to fight. I could kill him here, now. Twist of the arm, kick to the knee, a stomp on the throat. Through the ringing in my ears, I hear a man weakly calling out the name of an aspect of a God I once worshiped but worship no longer, repeating Allah over, and over again. I release my hand.

Cara: If you don’t mind, sir, I was just about to take my lunch.

Chump: Really?

He looks at his watch, not to check the time, but to hold it in front of my face. He thinks his wealth makes him better than me.

Chump: I have some time. Mind if I join you?

Cara: Thank you, Bradley. We’ll be fine.

He sucks his bottom lip and releases it with a pop.

Chump: OK, but I’ll need you back early. There’s important work to do.

He taps the crystal face of his golden watch. His rubber band wobbles, then rests canted.

This is what I fought for; this is what I preserved. The freedom to be an asshole. My fists are stones. His thin lips arch. I want to break his glass jaw. Cara looks to me.

Cara: Can we go now?

“Why are you asking me?”

He holds his smile. Puts his hands in his pockets, turns and walks away with long deliberate strides.
Cara: Come on, let’s get out of here.

We walk silently, holding our words. Holding our breaths. The elevator opens and closes. Gravity weakens and settles. She shoves me.

Cara: What the hell is your problem?

“What?”

Cara: Just walking away? That’s all?

“You’re not missing me.” I’m already gone.

Cara: What the hell are you talking about?

I say nothing, and stare into the distorted reflection from the polished wall.

Cara: You’re such an ass.

We walk out without looking at each other, without touching each other. Thin grey clouds line the sky.

“Where to?”

Cara: There’s a coffee shop just down the street.

She walks ahead with her face peering into her phone and leaves me behind.

The coffee shop we enter is narrow and crowded. It’s a hostile environment for me, and she knows it. She wants me rattled, on guard against them and vulnerable to her.

We stand in line beside each other, silent and tense. Italian and French words scrawl the menu board in fake cursive. There is no straight coffee here, just infusions, aromas and blends. She orders a tea and I, a cappuccino. I take my wallet out, but she has her card ready. She’s a quicker draw than me. She always has been.
We sit in a shadowy nook far from the door; I take the seat that faces it. I hold the laminated cup in my hands and feel my skin burn. She puckers her lips and cools her tea. We’re saying nothing and everything.

Cara: How’s Rob? Have you talked to him lately?

“He’s fine.”

Cara: Things haven’t gotten any better, have they?

She’s choking me. She knows how to cut through and wrap her narrow hands around my throat. “Thorpe was killed the other day.”

She puts her hand on mine. I haven’t felt her warmth in months. Her hands are soft and delicate and yet firm and strong. Today, they’re cold.

Cara: I’m sorry. I really am. He was such a good friend to you.

A tear burns my eye, trickles down my cheek and absorbs into the tablecloth. “He was. He came through Dover today. They’ll send him back to his family from there.” My hand recoils, and I shut down.

Cara: Will you be going to his funeral?

“No.”

Cara: You should.

“I doubt my professors would allow me to take that many days off of class.”

Cara: You should talk to them.

“I’m sure they’d be so accommodating. It’s not as if they get enough flat tire and dead grandmother excuses as it is. Besides, he’s not even blood. They wouldn’t care.
They wouldn’t understand. They would take my story and compare it to *Mrs. Dalloway*, or worse yet, *The Return of the Soldier*. They don’t know a damn thing about real life.”

Cara: You shouldn’t talk like that. People have more empathy than you give them credit.

“Yeah, like who? Bradley?”

Cara: Yeah, like Bradley.

“Uh-huh. I saw his Livestrong wristband. He have cancer?”

Cara: No. He’s a philanthropist though. He cares.

“He must care a lot to have paid a buck o’five for that synthetic piece of shit.”

Cara: And what about your wristbands?

“These?” I pull back the sleeve of my left arm and show her a black metal wristbands that hold Cruise’s and Rivers’s names, unit, location and date of death etched on them. “I was there, Cara. I endured that. Still do. Don’t you dare compare these bands to his.”

Cara: You don’t have a monopoly on suffering.

Rage crawls up like a smoldering inferno, and I seethe. My world burns, working its way to ashes. “You’re seeing him, aren’t you?”

She’s silent, sips her tea. Composes herself.

Cara: Yes.

“Good.”

Cara: Good?
Our marriage can’t be salvaged, we can’t fix it. After these past nine years, it’s better to just walk away. I feel lighter, like cinders carried over open flames. “You need something that I can’t give you. Do what you need to do.”

Cara: Goddamn you. You’re doing it again.

“Christ. What, Cara? What am I doing? Go ahead. You have all the answers, right? Tell me what I’m doing, because I’d really like to know.”

Cara: You only have two modes: rage and silence.

I hate her. I hate her so much. I hate her for her ignorance. I hate her for her knowledge. I hate her for her perfection. “This is what I am—“

Cara: No, it’s what you’ve become. You have no feeling. You’re so damn cynical; it sickens me.

“It’s not your problem anymore.”

Cara: No, it is. Damn it, I still love you. Why won’t you fight for us?

“Because we’re not worth fighting for, Cara! You’re done. I’m done.” I knock over my coffee; it pools on the floor and steams. “I’m just saying; I’m tired of fighting.”

Tactical withdraw, not retreat. “I have to go now. I have class soon.” I pull out my wallet and throw a few dollars on the table. “Get back to work.”

She doesn’t say anything. She doesn’t cry. Today, she’s more numb than me. I just killed something in her; it’s the one thing I’m good at, killing. Maybe it was something she wanted dead but couldn’t bring herself to euthanize. I’ll shoulder it. I don’t care. Somebody has too.
My body armor digs into my back as it presses against a Hesco basket. Dirt slips between its fibers and rests on my shoulders. I take a long drag of a state-side cigarette and hold the smoke in my lungs. Ash flutters, carried away in the wind. My interpreter sits by my side eating sunflower seeds. He works them slowly, deliberately. One seed at a time, he puts the shell between his teeth, bites down on it, sucks out the kernel, and drops the husk to his feet. I exhale.

“The loya jirga didn’t go so well, did it?”

Kahlil: You don’t think so?

The elders walk out of our compound in single file, escorted by our men in full battle-rattle carrying guns. The old men, dressed in loose cloth, have nothing. They don’t look at us, but we watch them.

“No, I don’t.”

Kahlil laughs.

Kahlil: Why is that?

“The shit Captain Dillon said.”

He bites down on a seed and spits out a shell.

Kahlil: What, the clean slate stuff?

“Yeah. Slate’s not exactly clean, is it?”

Kahlil: Sure it is. Why not? You guys are new here, right?

I raise my finger and point to the elders slipping below a hill. “They’re not. They’ve been here the entire time. It’s easy for Dillon to say, ‘wipe off the white board’
when none of our names have been written down. The names of their children are written in the soil, signed in blood.”

Kahlil smiles. I don’t know how old he is. Could be in his twenties, could be in his forties. He’s seen more combat than me. Seen it as a civilian on the battlefield. He’s got to be insane to be out here with no weapon. He takes a seed and breaks it open between his fingers. He holds the white inner flesh in the palm of his hand and blows on it.

Kahlil: I get what you’re saying. I do. You shouldn’t worry about such things. You’re here, you’re gone. Once you arrive at your home, you’ll never have to worry about this place again.

He claps his hands together and brushes away the salt. He rises.

Kahlil: You’re right though, it didn’t go well at all.

“Where you going?”

He turns and walks backwards while pointing a finger to the sun.

Kahlil: I need to wash for salah.

I lift my filthy hands. “We share the same God, right? Just pray dirty, He won’t care.”

Kahlil laughs and drops his hand at me as if batting away the suggestion.

Kahlil: You’re such a heathen.

I don’t think we could get ourselves clean enough for Him anyway. Just once, I’d like to pull Him down here. Push His face into the muck. Rub His nose in His creation.
I arrive at the campus with enough time to print out my paper and go to class. I walk to the student center, keeping my eyes low. The quad is full now. People herd to their stalls and await transportation. The evangelist is there again, but he’s preaching harder than before. His harsh voice irritates. People whisper to each other, point and laugh. The Word comes back to me as if I never forgot it. I haven’t practiced in years. *If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea’*. I don’t care to hear his message, but I must pass his way.

**Evangelist:** The Lord is coming! He will be like a thief in the night. Repent your sins; cast upon Him your errors and tribulations. The path to heaven is hard. Repent. The path to hell is wide. Repent.

I pass him without harm, and yet I’m drawn to him. His voice is like a precursor to a rumbling flood. The deluge arrives.

**Evangelist:** God hates faggots! Choose the path of Christ and not the path of homosexuality. Repent! God hates whores! Choose the path of Christ and not the pleasure of flesh. Repent!

I halt. *About—face. Forward—march.* My feet are moving; I have to correct him. Confront him; call him out. If your brother sins: rebuke him. I was zealous once. I believed. I’m close to him. Thick shoulders, legs narrow. He’s about my height, maybe
taller. His jaw flexes with the words. Fiery, zealous eyes. Be calm. Be nice. “What are you doing?”

Evangelist: Sharing the gospel. I am trying to save these people from the den of sin that is this campus.

“You don’t speak for God.”

He turns from me, puts out his arm.

Evangelist: Back Satan! The devil is in you and you know not what you say! Save your selves, Christ is calling you! Repent from your homosexuality! You are all on the path to hell!

I step in front of him. He tries to avoid me, but I’m faster. I block his vision.

“You don’t know anything.”

Evangelist: Back sinner; back faggot. You are damned; you will go to hell!

“You don’t know me. Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the same measure.”

His hand strikes my chest.

One.

His hand is thick, hard, strong. Stronger than I imagined. He continues to shout, but I don’t hear him.

“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own?”

He strikes me again.
Two.

Two custom made buttons bordered in red with diagonal lines running through the words ‘whores’ and ‘fags’ are pinned to his chest. He wears them like awards.

“You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the spec from your brother’s eye.”

I snatch the whore button from his jacket. I hold it before him. He’s silent now; I see fear in him. He was not expecting me. And now he’s not so sure God’s on his side.

“How can God hate whores if Mary Magdalene is the saint of wayward women?”

I flick my wrist and the button flies away. He tries to challenge me, but he stumbles on his own words. I take the other button and hold it up for the others to see.

“You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”

He reaches for his button, but I am too elusive. I stare at him.

“How can God hate homosexuals if they are how he made them?” I flick my wrist, the button flies. I step in, my face inches from his. My voice is low and quiet.

“What are you trying to bury?”

He moves to strike me again.

Three.

Muscle memory: grab wrist, sweep leg, lead arm.

His face plants into the dry grass; I pin my knee on the back of his neck. He struggles and stops as I exert pressure on his wrist and neck. I look to his flock—just kids waiting for a bus. Some cheer, others are horrified. I want to say something to them,
but can’t. I release my grip and walk away. Crowds converge around the evangelist. I walk against their flow and down a narrow street under construction. Three university police cars speed along the narrow road, sirens blaring and lights flashing.

I don’t look. When I was young, my desire to fight in Kosovo seemed God-ordained. It was the right thing to do. I went. I served. Somewhere afterwards, something changed. Did the evangelist feel the same way, summoned? None of it matters.

Still, he should’ve been smarter about it. Backed off when I challenged him—waited until I left and then resume his diatribe. Could’ve avoided the whole thing if he just did that—waited, been patient. Why’d he have to test me? I have my goddamned assault pack on for Christ’s sake. I haven’t let my hair grow out. He should’ve known I wasn’t fucking around.

I turn the corner and enter the building for my next class. Lobby; hallway, stairwell, elevators. Stop. Breathe. I check my watch. I’m late. I walk down the hall and enter as quiet as I can. Still, people look back in my direction, hoping for any sort of diversion. The professor, however, rambles on. His low voice barely registers over keyboard clicks and pens scrawling over paper. What the hell is he saying? I sit at a table and fold my arms. A perpetual tuning fork pierces my ears.

The professor’s droning voice spouts interpretations of Gatsby. Student’s screens erect a wall between themselves and the podium. Their fingers move like spider legs. They were on time, but they are not here. I can see their screens; he can’t. They must look like impenetrable scales to him. I try to soak up his words, but I am unable to hear him. How does he expect to win their attention? How long ago did he give up?
Chaplain: Sergeant.

I wipe my rifle. Splotches of oil and blood taint my clothes. He’s a minister and an officer. Am I supposed to stand for him? Salute a representative of something I don’t believe in anymore? I choose to sit. “Sir.”

Functions check. Attempt to place the selector lever on safe. If the selector switch fails to go on safe, pull the charging handle to the rear and release. Place the selector lever on safe. Pull the trigger. The hammer falls.

I lay the rifle across my thighs and stare at the receiver, then at the selector switch. There’s a few nicks and burs shining silver through its black enamel, the expected wear. I lay my hands on the center of the rifle, then slide them slowly to in opposite directions until they reach the flash suppressor and the butt stock, smoothing the gun as if it were a sheet, as if that simple act could fix it. The selector is on safe. The hammer fell. It shouldn’t have done that. “Fine.”

Chaplain: Is there anything you need? Anything you would like to talk about?


“No, sir.”

Chaplain: Well, if you ever need to talk—

Omniscience and omnipotence; fallibility. Was this his plan? Seems to me He fucked up somewhere along the line. “Sir?”
Chaplain: Yes?

“I was just wondering what faith you are, sir?”

Chaplain: Me? Oh, well. I’m Lutheran; however, I do provide services for many Christian denominations. Are you a Christian?

“Christian enough. Are you well versed?”

Chaplain: Yes. I have been in the church as far as I can remember, and I graduated from Gettysburg Seminary with an MA in Religion as well as Sacred Theology. Why?

Books; rigidity; directed experience and knowledge like a diverted river running to a dam. Drop it; let it go; he doesn’t have an answer—he only has doctrine. “I have a question. It’s something that I have been unable to reconcile over the past several years.”

Chaplain: Are you having a crisis of faith?


Chaplain: Yes.

“Then he ordered Adam to not eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”

Chaplain: And then Eve was deceived by the serpent, ate the fruit and gave it to Adam. Go on.

“You’re skipping ahead sir.”

Chaplain: What’s that?
“You forgot to mention how God left them.”

Chaplain: I don’t understand.

“God is absent during the interaction between the serpent, Eve and Adam.”

Chaplain: I’m not so sure about that.

“Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. He wasn’t there. He made them, and then abandoned them.”

Chaplain: Is that how you feel, specialist? Abandoned?

Forlorn. “The question I have, sir, is not about how I feel. It’s about the nature of God.”

He chuckles. This isn’t a joke.

Chaplain: I don’t think anyone but God is qualified to answer that question.

“Well, He allowed us to continue to think despite the fact he damned us for it. We have license to entertain the idea.”

He winces.

Chaplain: What is you view on the nature of God?

Foolish, idiotic, spiteful. “That’s what I can’t reconcile, sir. I can’t seem to understand why God would place the tree of the knowledge of good and evil within man’s grasp and order him not to eat from it. If God is all-knowing, then He knew they would fail. What does that say about God, sir?”
Chaplain: It says that God is much wiser than we are, and that we have free will. Sometimes that blessing can also be a curse.

Evasive, unanswered bullshit. Give him what he wants; give it to him like a nail in his palm. “Sir, I assume that you are here today specifically to talk to me about the near-ambush that took Rivers’s life. Am I correct?” Gather perspectives, control information, direct the narrative. They want to change how he died. Give him a medal; make him a hero. *If I die in a combat zone, box me up and ship me home. Pin my medals upon my chest; tell my mom I done my best.* I don’t know what he wanted, but he didn’t want that.

Chaplain: Yes.

“Did you see his face, sir?”

Chaplain: Whose?

“Rivers, sir. Did you see his face?”

Five days. Others have wept. I have not. What kind of monster have I become?

Chaplain: No. No I did not.

“I fail to see God’s design in that.”

Chaplain: You don’t have to. You just need faith.

I sneer. “Faith.”

Chaplain: Yes. Faith.

Close your eyes, put one foot in front of the other. Trouble is the road’s not even.

“Let’s be honest sir: we don’t have free will.”

Chaplain: Why would you say that?
“God created man with limited knowledge and limited understanding. If will is the power to act, and knowledge and understanding are the fuel of that power, we have limited will—not free will at all. Do you know what it is to sin, sir?”

Chaplain: It’s originally a marksmanship term, yes. To miss the mark.

“God put a blind fold on us, put His hand on our backs and gave a shove. It’s a game to Him—an infinite pin the tail on the donkey.”

Chaplain: God has a plan for all of us.

*The Lord saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The Lord was grieved that he had made man on earth, and His heart was full of pain. So the Lord said, ‘I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth—He has no plan. He botched it. He wants to hit the reset button but can’t. “How many have we killed, sir? How many of us have died agonizing deaths?”

Chaplain: I don’t know, sergeant. I don’t.

“Rumor has it sir that men from my company have been to prostitutes. What’s more, that they have even paid for sex with children. Is this true, sir?”

Chaplain: As far as I know, the investigation is pending.

God has a plan for us all. “I’m sure it is, sir. I have a mission to do now, sir. Excuse me.”

I leave him sitting on a box of MREs. I don’t give him a second look.

We patrol for hours, chasing the sounds of bullets fired, but find nothing. Random check points, pat downs, and tactical questioning serves no purpose. We have no mission.
We’re hunting for one. We drive the roads, back alleys and open country. People watch us watch them. They know our patterns; we have to guess theirs.

Malloy: This the edge of our sector, boss?

“Sure is.”

I exit my truck, tell him where to watch, and begin my walk.

The road narrows to the bleak horizon and radiates the heat of the day. Dust carries in the gentle breeze stifling the failing light. I walk in long gaits, pulling my knees to my chest. Eight hours done. Eight at the towers, then eight for rest. My body is weary. My exhausted mind strains to make sense of things. One foot in front of the other. Every step forward is a step closer to home; to a hot shower where both Cara and I would lather our bodies. I think of Cara’s soft skin against mine, the hard and ply press of her nipples against my chest. Her hair is thick and coils around my fingers; it springs when I pull them away, suds tracing the veins of my arms. Stop. Houses turn on their lights. Tiny windows of white. One of them bleeds. Is that the house? I want to step forward. I want confirmation. If it is the house, 3rd platoon will be here tonight. I want to know the truth behind that red-lit house. But I can’t do it alone. I walk as far as I am allowed, then cut across the street and return.

Dust thickens on this side of the road, and sand juts into the street. Slow down. Check this out. I drag my feet along the road. Heel, toe. Heel, toe. A lump rises in the road and in my throat. The bow of a saw blade, a wire to nowhere. I think of reporting it, but I don’t want to get it wrong. I crouch. I see a young girl’s face in the sand, crying out in agony as Cox invades her body while Randle cheers him on. God has a plan for us all.
Their bodies smell of rot and decay, and the girl’s mother counts American dollars. *Faith.*

This is the edge of my sector, and the beginning of theirs. This is no man’s land. This is the grey area. This not my responsibility, and yet it is. I stand and look back to the house with the red light. I see their faces: awful, ugly, terrible faces. Their faces are mine. We are an army of one, and I hate my reflection. I side step the IED and return to my truck.

Malloy looks at me while I sit and drink hot, dirty water.

Malloy: See anything out there?

“No. Let’s go.”

Inertia pushes and pulls my body. I’m not pulling security. I’m not listening to my radio. I’m not giving directions. *Faith.* I keep my mouth closed as eroding, airborne sand pelts the windshield.

Two soldiers from second platoon pull back the concertina wire and allow us access to our compound. Third squad is mounted and ready to go. They wait for us to get out of the way. Men pound on the fiberglass mesh sides of their Humvee in anticipation.

Cox: When did you become the gunner, Malloy?

Malloy: About a month now, sergeant.

Cox: Get your piece of shit outta our way. We got some scrapin’ to do.

“It’s quiet out there. Nothing’s going to happen.”

Cox: Oh, I got a feeling were going to get some action tonight.

Ain’t that right boys?

Multiple voices answer in a unified ‘hooah.’
Malloy: Have fun storming the castle!

“Where’s the chaplain?”

Cox: He’s doing mass tonight and tomorrow at the airfield.

Honestly, I think he just got bored here. Thank God for that, huh?

Faith. It’s in God’s hands now.

At the end of the hour, I follow the procession of students and lay my paper on his desk. I have three hours before my Literature and the Environment class. I go to the parking deck because I hate people. I ride the glass-backed elevator and watch their forms shrink. I enjoy the distance. The 6th floor of the garage is always empty. People would rather drive circles below than go to the top and take the elevator or stairs. I enter my car and it’s cold. It’s always cold.

I have a paper due soon. A creative non-fiction paper about a place for my next class. Man hasn’t been natural for thousands of years. What makes my professor, or anyone else, think that we can be natural today? All the literature presented in that class is stilted. A narrative of heroes and do-gooders trying to save the world one mangled and pulped tree at a time. Their logic is flawed. The world can’t be saved.

The sun hangs low over the horizon and peaks below the dark blanket of clouds. Tiny drops of water fall and tap on my window. I imagine the sun shifting hues as the planet encroaches a self-sustaining utopia my peers envision. I imagine their descendant’s manic screams as the sun becomes a red giant. I can almost see them burrowing below,
only to have molten slate descend upon them while others above embrace their extinction, skin evaporating and bones boiling.

My phone processes more information, multitasks more effectively and efficiently, than any of the computers aboard Apollo 11; perhaps more computing power than the control room. And yet, here we remain. My predecessors built a dinghy on this deserted island to give future generations hope. Their children striped that ship for parts to make their lives more convenient.

We don’t want hope; we want to be gods. We want followers. We build the world only to watch it burn.

**Thin** smoke chases foul scents: cardboard, plastic, Styrofoam—anything that could burn. The rosy aura flickers along the window, creating new shadows. I fold my shirts; roll my pants into tight logs, ball socks. I stuff them in my ruck. Pack them down.

Staff Sergeant Atwater’s head flags the door. He has camo on his face, and his glasses give him the look of a turtle.

Atwater: You ready to go?

“Just about.”

I sweep a pile of junk off a cot into a box. A Pringles can, Q-tips, a Toby Keith CD. All of these, leftovers from packages strangers sent to me. People who don’t know me. I bury their things with letters, post cards, and photos sent from friends and family back in the States. I pick up a book my brother sent me from his home in Las Vegas: *The
*Things they Carried.* I hold it in my hands and thumb through the pages. Every ounce counts. I drop it in the box.

I called this place home for six months. High brick walls, running water, and open lots make this place worth keeping. We fortified this enclosure with sandbags, Kevlar panels over the windows, and built watchtowers. Made it easier to defendable. I used to watch sheep graze on briar from those towers. It’s about as comfortable as it can get. Gone now. Handed over. I don my body armor, lift my ruck over my head and slide my arms through the shoulder straps. I close the box and grab my machine gun.

The smell of the burn pit strengthens as smoke rolls thick. A gray haze spreads over gravel. Two shirtless men smeared in soot stab at the pit with steel fence posts; five-gallon cans of JP-8 sit behind them. I throw the box into the pyre. Embers break from coals and flutter in the air.

Soldier: Fuckin’ Fourth I.D.

“Watch out for loose grenades.”

Soldier: That’d be a shitty way to go, huh?

“Tell me about it.”

Fourth Infantry Division is the reason we have to go. They’re can’t secure the western provinces, getting ambushed every other night or so. I always thought that RPGs would bounce off their tanks like matchsticks. The other soldier speaks as he lifts a fuel can.

Soldier: Whatever. I’m tired of sitting around.
A loud whoosh follows an orange flash. I watch the flames subside then walk away. The men laugh as they stab the crackling pit, sundering my box.

Soldiers marshal toward Humvees and larger trucks, Deuce-and-a-halfs. Their feet churn the sand. It plumes into the air and lingers. I hear someone call my name. I look up, and see arms waving from the flatbed of a deuce. It’s my assistant gunner, Cruise.

“Nice evening for a drive, huh?”

I raise my two-forty to him. He takes it with both hands and grunts as he lifts it.

Cruise: Yup.

I step on the wheel and pull myself over the railing. I drop my ruck, strap it to the side of the deuce. I wrench down on the straps, fixing it.

“So who’s all on this cluster-fuck of a truck?”

Cruise: Most of first, some second. Watch your mouth though. The Chaplain is coming too.”

“Goddamn it. He here yet?”

Cruise: Still in ops, I think. Let’s just not fucking talk to him.

“Yeah.”

I reach into my cargo pocket and remove a sand scarf, a torn threadbare shirt, and tie it over my nose and mouth. It is my second scarf. The first was lost a few weeks earlier on a route clearance mission. My truck was traveling over fifty miles per hour as I stood in its flatbed, clinging to my mounted machine gun. The drag of the air against the humvee loosened my scarf. It slipped off my face and carried away. Dust suspended in
the arid air bombarded my nose until I had to breathe through my mouth. My lips cracked and bled, my tongue dried and scraped my palate like sandpaper. I coughed bloody phlegm for days afterward. Jensen has said that a camel can close its nostrils as easily as I can close my eyes. I wish I were that lucky. I tighten the knot.

Soldiers in my truck joke as they put camouflage on their faces. I don’t. I tie down my machine gun with five-fifty cord because the deuce doesn’t have a mount. I weave the thin, green nylon cords around the bipod legs and attach it to a bar running the width of the cab. I pull a long belt of seven-six-two and load my gun. Laughter fades as the Chaplain marches towards the truck. His ruck is brimming with junk, and he carries a bulging duffle with him. Soldiers drop their heads as he climbs aboard. I turn my back on him. The sun sets.

A spout of noxious diesel exhaust erupts from a pipe into my face as gears grate. The motor of the deuce growls in fluctuating octaves. A Humvee pulls beside us; its gunner dry-humps the butt stock of his machine gun and points up at me.

Thorpe: I’m a make you my bitch.

I shake my head.

Chaplain: Hey! What’s your name soldier?

I look to Cruise and shake my head. We won’t give Thorpe’s name, even if he’s an ass. He’s the second best gunner in the battalion—second to me, always on my heels. He’s older, bigger: an imposing figure standing six-foot-two and weighing about a hundred and ninety pounds. In high school, between football practices, he wrestled mature alligators when he went on ride-alongs with his father, who worked for animal
control. He’s just as accurate as I am with the gun, but his shot groups are looser. He’s only been in the unit for about a year. He has a lot to learn.

Thorpe turns his back on the Chaplain and gives the finger. I want to say as much but can’t; we’re in the same truck. The Chaplain’s not here to help, that much I know. Two weeks ago, he pushed hard for a Court Martial, busting down one of my unit’s NCO’s. Cruise laughs under his scarf, fakes a cough. I pull the charging handle towards my body and the bolt locks back. I place it on safe and ride the handle forward. I close the ejection port at the bottom of the receiver. I don’t want dust to enter my gun, and gum it up and stop its cycles of function. The deuce lurches forward and moves beyond the gate.

We weave through compact city streets, roads not built for our largeness. Cars pull over for us; local nationals turn away. Children wave at our olive drab caravan. Soldiers shower them with candy. I watch the buildings and rooftops. I can see over walls into dust-ridden yards. Each complex has a small patch of grass, no more than 6-by-10 feet. I wonder why they bother, how much water they use to keep it alive.

We pass through the airfield. A-10 squadrons rest like ducks in a pond; red flags dangle from their missiles and dance in the breeze. The echoes of detonated ordinance are jarring. E.O.D. has been exploding recovered caches for weeks. I don’t predict an end to it soon.

We travel in the darkness down desolate roads. Cragged hills rise and recede. Shrubs grow low and never bloom. I don’t know how they survive in this climate. Today, when the sun was high, it was 140 degrees. Around noon, Cruise cooked a Cup-o-
Noodles by pouring water into the cup and leaving it in the sun. It took about five minutes for the noodles to soften. It’s probably in the 80s now, near midnight, but I feel cold. I glance at the soldiers sitting around me. Their heads bob and sway with the roughness of the road. Many sleep.

A thin orange light radiates off in the distance. Black clouds curtain the dark night and subdue the moon. A hand grabs the railing near my waist; a figure pulls forward.

Chaplain: Baba Gurgur.

“Excuse me?”

Chaplain: The father flame.

He points to billowing smoke licked by flames.

Chaplain: It’s been burning for thousands of years. It’s the place where King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon cast three men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. They were thrown into the inferno but did not burn.

I grit my teeth.

“Yeah?”

Chaplain: It’s holy ground.

I turn to face him; he gazes beyond me to a barren field where fire spouts into the sky like a geyser. The smell of sulfur-rich smoke is pervasive.

“Sir, this land hasn’t been holy in years.”

Chaplain: Think so?

Know so.
“Why’d you do it sir? Push for Fleming’s court martial?”

Chaplain: He broke a woman’s jaw.

It was true, but it was a reflex. I was there. The woman had assaulted him. Stuck a knife in his back. It lodged into his body armor. He spun around to face her, caught her in the mouth with the butt stock of his rifle. Technically, she was unarmed when he hit her. Why should he be faulted for her fragility?

“She did stab him.”

Chaplain: The knife didn’t penetrate. He called her a whore. We have to be better than that.

The Chaplain doesn’t carry a rifle, or a side arm—just his bible.

“We wear uniforms, sir.”

Chaplain: What’s that?

“We are better than them.”

The deuce’s velocity shifts hard, catching a turn it almost missed. It doesn’t shake me; I’m steady. The Chaplain topples; his back arches over the rail. I grab at him, snag his belt. I don’t think about it, I just do it. I should have let him fall. The engine slips back into rhythmic whirs. Gears shift. Exhaust spouts.

Chaplain: Thanks.

I let go of his belt. Next time, I’ll leave him in God’s hands.

“Sit down, sir. This isn’t a pilgrimage.”

Out on the open road, the stars vanish as the orange aura of dawn fades to an unquenchably dry haze of pale blue. The sun crests the horizon as a blazing white light.
The soil drinks the sunlight in the absence of water and gluttonously holds its heat. This
desert is not what I was expecting: no dunes, just windswept plains, dry and brittle.
Alkaline flats.

The top layer of soil is sand so fine that it flutters with the gentlest of breezes,
giving the entire area an illusion of fog. It is so thin and light that once it is in the air, it
ambles until midnight, well after most of the irradiated heat has subsided. The soil
underneath is as tough as concrete, and our vehicles move easily over it. We come to a
full stop, disturbing the topsoil as if it were moon dust, and arrive at our destination: an
abandoned farmhouse located on the tactical high ground. I slap Cruise’s helmet.

“Wake up. We’re here.”

He yawns, stretches his arms wide then grabs his crotch.

Cruise: Thank God, I gotta piss.

Thorpe’s truck is closer to the compound. I can see him in the distance removing
his helmet and lighting a cigarette while still in the humvee’s turret. He hasn’t even
unloaded his gun yet.

“No time for that. Give me your rifle.”

He hands me his weapon and rises to his feet. I break the belt of ammo leading to
a bandolier on my hip.

Cruise: C’mon man, really?

“Take my gun, get my stuff, and meet me on the north side. Tell Sergeant Atwater
that I’m getting us a room.”

He rubs his eyes.
Cruise: Roger.

I leap over the railing and land like a spring. Dust plumes; parched earth cracks. My sunglasses fall off my face and roll under the truck. I leave them behind. I trot to the house. Gravity feels dubious. My feet do not gain the traction to which they are accustomed. The land and sky fuse, each reflecting the other and become a blinding vacuum. I feel a sense of vertigo, but my mind is keen; my vision acclimates. I find my footing and move forward.

Our new home is a dilapidated brick-and-mortar farmhouse encompassed by broken earthen walls and dung-forged huts. I presume they were used for raising livestock, possibly goats. I can’t tell how long this place has been abandoned. Manmade structures last longer in the desert. The vegetation here is defensive. There are no vines that sprout from the earth, cling to the walls, and penetrate cracks to tear it apart.

I can tell from the fowl surveying the place that the farmhouse has become something of an oasis. It provides a commodity that is rare atop this bald ridgeline: shade. Any creature that desires comfort and security within this sanctuary has to fight for it. These creatures must have won their place not through gentleness or diplomacy; but from skill and aggression. I don’t know what lingers in there. Rats, maybe. Something large enough to feed hawks, at least. Thorpe’s calls out to me.

Thorpe: Hey, where do you think you’re going?

“North side.”

I don’t look at him. If there is a room of relative coolness, it will be there, centered and away from the rising and setting sun, below the second floor.
Thorpe: Oh, hell nah!

I hear strides behind me, the rapid crunch of gravel on hard soil. I turn to face it, but am speared by Thorpe’s body. My feet lift off the ground. I feel a moment of weightlessness, and then impact. My vision flashes red as my K-pot connects with the ground. Cruise’s rifle slides away from me. While laughing, I curse him with words I know he’ll understand.

“You sombitch.”

He calls out to his squad and presses down on me.

Thorpe: Go on!

They gather around us instead, and watch me twist under his weight. One of them cheers.

Soldier: Get’em, Thor!

Cruise: You gonna let him do that to you, boss?

Cruise’s voice is distant, but draws closer. I’m tired. I’m pissed. Thorpe reaches for my right arm. He’s going for an arm bar. I tuck it to my side, and keep my chin on my chest; I don’t give him my neck. I feel heat and sweat; I taste dirt in my mouth. It grates my gums. He brings his face close to mine. We’re helmet to helmet. He’s keeping me down, like one of his ‘gators. Alligators have teeth and stubby arms. People don’t. He hasn’t learned that yet. He will.

I form a blade with my left hand, weave it between his arms, finding his face. I press my hand’s edge where his nose and lip intersect and push. His head cocks back, and he groans. I grab his collar and pull out the slack. I wrap my legs around his waist, roll,
then dig my knuckles into his neck’s flanks. Blood choke. He tries to pull away, but I’m locked on his neck like a pit bull. He takes me with him. His tongue swells; his lungs push air through his nostrils, making a dry gagging sound, then goes limp. I let go.

I brush dust off my shoulders as men stand around me and watch.

“North side is first platoon, weapons squad’s. Anyone else have a problem with that?”

Thorpe rises on wobbly legs, grabbing at the men of his squad for support. No one responds.

Cruise: Good.

Cruise shrugs my gear as well as his own. He points toward his rifle.

Cruise: You going to get that? Or should I carry it, too?

We drop our gear in a shaded area just beyond the door of our new home. I dust off Cruise’s rifle and hand it back to him.

Cruise: Take a break. I’ll go get the other guys.

I look over the cliff to the river below. A river runs along green fields. It’s so far away. I take out my GPS and turn it on. I gaze at the house as the GPS tracks satellites and triangulates my location. Either the sand has whitewashed the bricks, or the red has bled out of them. I check my GPS again and stand befuddled looking to the river. It’s the Tigris.

I was taught about it in elementary school. My teacher said that this is where life originated—the cradle of civilization. I observe the area. It’s not what I imagined when I
was a child. Everything but the land beside the river is dry, hot, and barren. This is God’s land? What a miserable existence. I turn my back on the river and approach the house.

I enter the dim room, made darker to my unadjusted eyes and am welcomed by the muffled quite of soldiers unloading just beyond. A thin sunbeam pierces the shaded depths, revealing a shimmering pool of sand and wisps of dust. Fatigue permeates my body. I hear a sound like the motorized buzz of a child’s cheap toy emanating from the recesses of the room. I imagine a plastic duck wobbling from side to side, drawing ever closer. I see something creep from a shadow-cloaked corner. It seeks the sunbeam.

I’ve seen a desert camel spider before, but not one as monstrous. Squatting in the pale and naked light, it lowers its black-plated abdomen as it swings two hairy arms from side to side, as if tasting my scent. Its dun-colored skeletal legs clack together in 5/8 time. The head of the creature bares warts and barbs. From tip to tip, it is equal to the width of both of my hands splayed, placed together at the thumbs. I step forward. It rears on its two hind legs and pierces the air in rapid succession with its remaining appendages, gnashing its mandibles and hissing. I scream, like a schoolgirl, and flee.

Once outside, I remove my helmet and throw it to the ground. It bounces once, then rolls. I feel as if that spider is in my head, nesting, burrowing. I savagely tussle my matted hair; my skin feels tepid and loose. My squad charges and meets me by the entrance. They point and laugh at me.

Thorpe turns the corner, lays down his weapon, removes his body armor and DCU blouse, and listens to my description. He pulls out a silver-topped can of Copenhagen and taps the lid with his finger three times.
I look to Sergeant Atwater, who looks to Cruise who waves out his arms and steps back.

Cruise: Fuck that. I ain’t going in there.

I hear Thorpe open his tobacco can. He takes a three-finger pinch of snuff and stuffs it in his mouth. He steps closer to me, his lower lip protruding grotesquely, and he gives me a shameful nod.

Thorpe: I thought better of you.

He spits a thick string of brown-tainted saliva beside my boot. He saunters into the room, and is swallowed by the darkness.

Cruise and Atwater light cigarettes, then offer me one. I take one, but don’t burn it.

Thorpe breaches the threshold of the doorway, back into the light, face squinting, hands resting on his hips. He spits again.

Thorpe: You gotta be shitting me, right? Ain’t nothing in there.

His eyes grow wide. His jaw slacks. I hear the hissing. Thorpe howls. He pirouettes and strikes at his back. The spider clings to him; its barbed body does not lift from Thorpe’s filthy cotton undershirt. Its mandibles cut through the cloth and into skin.

I don’t know what to do.

Thorpe rips his shirt apart and flings it back into the farmhouse. His body convulses as he stumbles toward us like a drunken toddler, weeping.

Thorpe: It bit me. Am I going to die?
Staff Sergeant Atwater calls for a medic and pushes Thorpe towards the doc. He gasps for breath as if emerging from deep water. He twists his neck, trying to see his wound.

Thorpe: Is it bleeding? It feels like it’s bleeding.

The entire company gathers well in front of the door. An army of nearly fifty weathered combat veterans point and stare at a discarded shirt, watching and wondering if they should enter. Atwater waves us back and unsnaps a pouch. I hear the distinctive metal spring kick forward, as his arm arches high and a hand grenade rolls off his fingertips.

“Why didn’t you call *frag out*?!”

I drop to the ground.

He lands beside me. His body armor rises to his chin and he pulls down his helmet.

Atwater: He’s probably too damned smart for that.

The explosion buckles the exterior wall; sand and smoke wash over us. We pause and wait for the dust and nitrate to clear. Atwater orders us up, and we stack along the wall to clear the enemy-occupied compound. Lieutenant Swift joins us and stacks on the rear end of the line. We approach from the west and move in unison. The arachnid scuttles out with an unbalanced loping gait as we near the door. We cry out in a singular voice of fear and reverence. Swift draws his sidearm and fires. Puffs of dust spout about the spider who, despite having lost two of its legs, is too dexterous to be killed. Atwater
strikes the Beretta from the Swift’s overextended arm and shoves him against the wall.

The spider scurries into a patch of thick, brittle grass.

Atwater: Let ‘em go. He’s earned it.

Wicked creatures inhabit this land, things that burrow and wait for darkness. Even the decay-feeding insects wait for sundown before they prowl for carrion and other putrescence.

God’s land never intended for us to thrive. The resonance of my digital watch reminds me of that fact. I put a mefloquine tablet in my mouth and swallow it down with clean water from a plastic bottle. The pill prevents nature’s saboteurs from impregnating my body with malaria. I lay out a tripod and mount my gun. I spend the rest of the day digging a fighting position overlooking the growth below.

I lie in my pit in the failing golden light and rest my face on my fist. A west wind lifts the loamy scent of the Tigris, cascading up an un-scalable wall of burnt and sharp, jagged stone. I rise above and look below. My eyes linger on movement in the fields. I think of farmers tilling the earth, shaping it, reaping it.

My eye catches a flicker of light and a circular, downward puff of smoke—a mortar? I count the seconds.

*One-thousand.*

I tuck my shoulder into the butt of the machine gun.

*Two-thousand.*

I charge the gun, and press my eye against the scope and try to find a target.

*Three-thousand.*
I see figures of several men staring back at me, huddled against low lying brush. A broken tree—no, a tube.

Four.

I hear the originating bang; I pull the trigger.

The incoming mortar descends then strikes the farmhouse. A smoke-and-fire incarnation of a saw palmetto sprouts from the wall. All other guard positions fire, guided by my magnesium-tipped tracer rounds. Crimson beads of fiery lead rain down on the overgrowth below, razing the land the Tigris blessed.

Cruise slides into the hole, panting. He unfurls the barrel bag, lays out more rounds. He struggles to link more rounds to the diminishing belt.

Cruise: Fuck me! Our mortars are setting up.

I hear the rapid timbre of two-four-nine squad automatic machine guns harmonizing with the two-forties amid the deep resonance of 50 cals. Loose sand dances with the percussions. I hear a bang closer than before and dip my head below the pit.

Cruise shouts.

Cruise: It’s ours!

“Barrel change!”

He slides the barrel off my gun and lays it on the asbestos-lined bag. It smokes. He locks in a cool barrel. Smoke plumes below in four areas: one large and up, three small and down. After several seconds, I hear the bangs.

“There’s more!”
I yell to anyone who can hear me. I unlock the traversing bar and slide my gun towards a new target. I fire.

Two mortar rounds land near our compound, but they’re well off. Another strikes the cliff wall. They’re hip-firing now, just trying to be quick. A Humvee pulls up beside my position. Thorpe stands in the truck’s turret. He’s manning a gun not his own: a mark 19 automatic grenade launcher.

Thorpe: ’Sup bitches. I’m here to save the day!

He charges the handles back and lets the bolt ride forward. He pulls the trigger; the weapon fails to fire.

Thorpe: What the fuck?

“Ghost round, dip shit. You have to charge it twice!”

He charges it again and fires. I hear three loud thwoops and a long pause.

Cruise: Are you checking for impacts?

Three geysers spout from the river.

Thorpe: Duh. I’ve never shot this thing before.

I grunt.

“Where the hell is that mark’s gunner?”

Thorpe: In the house. With about three inches of steel sticking out of his leg, dick.

I hold my fire and look up at him. No time for training like during battle.

“Look, bud. It isn’t like firing the gun.”
A mortar round lands almost fifty yards behind us and showers us with sand. Smoke washes over us.

“You have to aim behind them while we shoot in front—don’t give ‘em room to run. Got it?”

We synchronize our fires; all guns working in harmony. I hear chatter from the truck’s radio but I don’t know what they are saying. Our mortars stop firing. The sounds of the guns lull. People wave their hands up and down in front of their faces, signaling a cease-fire. I place my gun on safe and tell Cruise to do a barrel change.

My ears ring like the constant vibration of a chime. But there is something more in the ambiance: high-pitched, whining. I raise my head and search the sky. Cruise points to the west.

Cruise: There.

One bird streaks across the sky, tilts to the side, showing long, flat wings. A-10 Warthog. Smoke spouts from its head as it strafes the land below. I laugh at the sound of its GAU-8 Avenger; it sounds like dysentery. The sound of our victory is a loud, wet fart. The 30 millimeter depleted uranium rounds are pyrophoric and quickly spread the fire we ignited. The Warthog levels out and flies away. People cheer. The firefight ends.

Fire consumes the land below, belching smoke and ash. A rosy aura illuminates the night as if aurora borealis were borne from the earth rather than the sky. I pat Cruise on the back.

“Watch the gun, I gotta piss.”

Cruise: We got time for that?
I point towards the burning fields. “We do now.”

I walk out in to the shrubs, their sharp thorns scrape at my pants but do not penetrate. I step over them and move a sanitary distance away from the firing position and compound, keeping a sharp eye out for any unexploded ordinance.

I find a good place and loosen my belt. I look below and freeze. Hands tremble. I can feel my skin paling as cold sweat forms on my brow. My head itches.

Below me is the spider, lying on its back, abdomen curled upward, with six legs folded over its face. My nostrils flare. My lip curls. I raise a foot slowly and then, just as slowly, position my boot heel it over its body because I’m afraid it will wake. I can do this. I count in my head and take three deep breaths. My heel drops. The spider’s body crackles like a fallen autumn leaf. I wipe the sole of my boot on a bush. I don’t look at it. I don’t want to. The thing hissed for Christ’s sake.

“This is my home now, bastard.”

Cruise lets me sleep the night through while he mans the gun. He says I earned it. Third platoon scours the engagement area while the fires burn out. The Chaplain went with them. They find five charred bodies. That is, they bring back five lumpy body bags—not one of them makes a whole. They also carry back three smoldering 60mm mortar tubes.

We lay the sacks on an LZ and the Chaplain prays for their fallen. He asks if anyone has anything to say. Men spit. Darkened and viscous saliva pools at their feet and seeps into the soil. No one says a word.
He finds me again, the Chaplain, a few days later and thanks me for saving his life back on the truck. I don’t see his face while he speaks, just the yellow-rot of his toenails. I wonder if they’ve shed yet. He brings me a gift from the Tigris: glass shards. They just look like fragments of a broken beer bottle. I can’t imagine how hot those explosions were, how hot those fires burned. They turned the Tigris’s loamy soil into glass. World’s full of surprises.

Chaplain: You know, many religious scholars believe that somewhere between the Tigris and the Euphrates is where the Garden of Eden was located.

“Holy ground, huh?”

He points to the glass shards I tumble in my palm.

Chaplain: You should keep those.

He puts his hands in his pockets then turns to walk along the cliff’s edge. He is whistling a familiar tune; it’s not a hymn I know.

I hold out the shards and turn them over with my thumb. They feel cool, smooth and clean. The small, irregular crystals catch the light and twinkle like amber. I turned God’s country into glass. Every ounce counts. I put them in my breast pocket.

I go to class and learn nothing. I use my laptop to find an apartment near campus that I can afford. I schedule an appointment with the landlord for the following day. I’m not drawn by its amenities, only by its availability. When the class ends, the professor wishes us a good day. She’s always so damn cheerful, I can’t stand it. She’s about my
age, maybe younger. I imagine spent her entire life in the cozy nook of some form of school or another. I doubt she’s seen the real world, just cordoned excursions in safe areas. Likely studied abroad to fulfill some sort of multicultural requirement to earn one of her degrees. Places where the people are contracted to like you. The real world’s uglier than that.

Over the next several days, I go to Cara’s place when I know she is working. We haven’t spoken since the coffee shop. She doesn’t call me when my things start to disappear. I keep expecting to see some other guy’s things there, but see nothing obvious. I don’t poke around either, feels like grave robbing.

After all my clothes, books, and other things are gone, I look around for other stuff. My eyes linger on the television. When all this began, I didn’t feel the need to do anything. Cara indulged me. We would sit and watch movies together, not speaking. I would make her diner, and we would eat in front of it. When we finished eating, she’d rest her head on my shoulder and place her hand on my chest. I miss that.

I go into the garage. The door is still down, lying atop the busted lawn mower. Spider webs hang in the threshold, hanging on to fallen leaves. I clear them away and hang the door, then go to the worktable for the pins. They lay beside my severed ring, untouched, unmoved from when I left them behind. I touch the ring and feel its coldness. I take the pins and fix the door. I go out back; the yard is mown. Brown patches show new growth. The blades of grass are short, green and uniform. I start to walk to my car but hesitate. I turn back into the house, take the TV and leave.
As I drive down the road, my phone rings struggle to retrieve it from my pocket. No one ever calls me unless it’s important. My back arches and my foot depresses the accelerator; body dynamics are interdependent. I slump into my seat, retake control of the vehicle. The phone displays a number and no picture, but I answer it anyway.

“Hello.”

Rob: Hey bud, what you up to?

Where to begin? He doesn’t know about Cara and me. He doesn’t know Thorpe. Then again, it’s not as if he really cares.

“Just on my way home.”

Rob: Yeah, classes treating you well?

“Fine. How’s the bar?”

Rob: Not as bad as you’d think. People can’t pay mortgages, but they sure as hell can pay for a drink.

“Yeah?”

Rob: Yup. I’m reporting less of my cash tips too.

“Keeping it in your mattress, huh?”

Rob: Sorry about the other night; horrible connection.

“Sure was.”

Rob: Man, you should have seen this chick I was working. She was fine.

“Sounds fun.”
Rob: Hell yeah, it was. I love Vegas girls, they always come out here to act stupid then disappear the next day. Low maintenance.

“Yeah.”

Why did I call him? It’s always the same: the latest lay, money made, hours worked.

Rob: So how’s the missus.

He never says her name. They’re all just faces and shapes to him.

“Cara, you mean?”

Rob: Yeah, her. Unless there’s something you’re not telling me?

“She’s fine.”

Rob: Must be nice having a sugar mama. So, you’re almost done with school now right?

One more semester; a degree only useful as a stepping stool to another.

“Yeah, I’ll get my BA in the spring.”

Rob: That’s cool man. Well, if you can’t find any work out there you should come live near me. The bar is only accepting applications from college grads now, I can be your in.

“And what? Leave Cara behind?”

I already have. Why do I keep forgetting? I wake in the morning, my arm slips along a cool smooth surface where her body should be. I come home from school and watch the clock until the fifteen minutes after her usual return time. I take out two plates
when I make diner and shelve one as soon as I set them down. I haven’t admitted it to him; I haven’t admitted it to myself. It’s over. A silent retreat of a forgettable conflict.

Rob: Meh, they have branches out here. She could transfer.

“You do know she’s not a teller, right?”

Rob: She’s not?

“No.”

Rob: Oh well. I tried.

“Sorry man.”

Rob: So, you celebrating tonight?

“No. Why?”

Rob: You haven’t heard the news then? They’re pulling the troops out this weekend. They’ll be done Saturday, maybe Sunday.

“No, I haven’t heard.”

Rob: Yeah man. A bunch of Joes came into the bar the other night, celebrating. I still have that photo of you with that big ass gun in my wallet.

“Oh?”

Rob: Yeah. I showed it to them, said that you were me. Hope you don’t mind. They left a big tip. Thanks for that.

“Yeah. Yeah, no problem.”
Everyone else does it, enjoying the lifestyle I earned them, why should I fault only him?

Rob: You sound a little preoccupied. Everything OK?

“I’m just on the road is all. Traffic is getting a little thick.”

The road expands before me like dried riverbed.

Rob: Don’t let me keep you. I don’t want you getting pulled over or anything.

“It’s all right.”

Rob: OK, OK. I’m going to let you go before you run over a child you wild-man.

“Yeah, thanks. Take care, huh.”


Over. It’s not over. It’s just beginning.

**Antennas** rise over my company’s forward operating base’s walls. Command Humvees overpopulate this place.

Unfamiliar faces swarm the compound like a disturbed anthill. Atwater orders us to wipe down our weapons, refill water, do personal hygiene and eat. He melds with the crowd and vanishes for nearly an hour, and returns with a heavily sketched flank of an MRE box. We gather around him.

Atwater: So intel says that there is something big going down, but they’re not sure what. Our company has been tasked with
spearheading the cordon and search. We’ll be leap frogging structures in the following order: 3rd, 1st, 2nd. Clean your weapons now, piss and shit while you can. Eat and drink while we drive. Let’s go!

We wait for dusk and drive without lights. Vehicles pull off in key areas and set up roadblocks with serpentine concertina wire. We dismount less than five-hundred meters away from the objective and move with urgency, bounding over each other at regular intervals. We are shadows along walls and parked cars. The world sleeps while we move. Minutes pass, they feel like hours. Silence is our only ally. The first two buildings we enter are empty. Vacated lots strewn with dust and debris. People had been here at some time; their artifacts remain: wrappers, wet socks, a pile of excrement in a corner. We speak in whispers.

“Way to go, intel.”

I’m tempted to break the chain of rounds dangling from my gun’s receiver that leads to my hip. The bandolier’s swaying on my hip creates an ulcer. I can feel wetness trickle along my outer thigh.

“Nothing is going to happen tonight.”

Atwater: Shut the fuck up back there.

His voice is quiet, but his tone roars.

We’ve followed others, but it’s our turn now.

We stand cattycorner to the third building. Lights are on, music and laughter weaves into the open air in a garbled language. I don’t know what they are singing; why
they are laughing; what they are thinking. Moreover, I can’t see them. Silhouettes pass the windows. I can’t make the faces of the bodies standing behind the panes.

Atwater raises his fist, extends three fingers and makes each one fall in regular intervals. I extend the gun’s bipod. We trot forward. Heel, toe, heel, toe. Slow is smooth, smooth is fast. My thumb rests on the safety. I’m ready to drop and fire. We stack on the door. Other squads stack beside us. Atwater leads from the front. He checks the door; it slides open; all of us pour in like bilge water emptying a ballast tank. Metal clinks on metal, munitions rattle in magazines; fifteen men sit in a wide room; three are dancing, five straddle a couch; the rest sit on the floor. They all raise their arms and cease moving. The music continues. Not a round exits a muzzle.

Thorpe: Well, that was easy.

Something catches my shin as I enter the room, I nearly trip. I drop my gaze and see a gun eerily reminiscent of my own.

“What the hell?”

Atwater: What is it?

“They have a fucking two-forty!”

I see their weapons stacked together like tepees. All of which are M-4 carbines with M-68 attachments, pac-4’s and pac-2’s. I feel disoriented, like stepping through a worm hole. They are the same weapons I trained with; the same weapons that I have fired. The same night-vision. The same sights. I know their weight, the force of their recoil; I know their accuracy.

Rivers: Where in the fuck did they get these weapons?
Atwater calls for the interpreter who scrambles to the front, clinging to body armor too large for his body. His helmet rides over his eyes.

Atwater: Where did they get these weapons?

The interpreter speaks to them, and he does. They exchange heated words like the ravings of two old men in a park arguing over a chess game.

Atwater: What is he saying?

Interpreter: I don’t know.

Atwater lifts a rifle from the ground, drops the magazine, clears the round in the chamber and throws it to the interpreter. He grabs at it, but it bounces off his chest and fumbles to the ground. Metal clatters on concrete, then stops.

Atwater: They look familiar to you? They fucking should. You’ve been surrounded by them for weeks now. Now I am going to ask you one more time: where did they get these weapons?

Interpreter: I don’t know.

Atwater grabs him by the collar, throws him to the ground. The interpreter’s helmet bounces off the floor.

Atwater: What did you say to them!? What did they tell you!? Did they ambush a platoon and raid their gear!? Are you on their side!?

The interpreter moans. He rolls to his belly and rises to his knees.

Interpreter: I don’t know what he said.
Atwater: Stop fucking lying to me! I heard you! Right in front of my face speaking that same damn gibberish to each other. Just like you did with that fuck with the one twenties and the sledge. What the fuck did they say to you?

Interpreter: I am telling you: I don’t know what they said!

Rivers: Hey, Sarge. Maybe they, uh, just raided 4th ID’s quadcons in Turkey.

Interpreter: Yes!

Atwater: Who did? The Kurds? Are they Kurds?

Interpreter: No, no they’re not. Turkish, maybe. I don’t speak Turkish.

Vulnerability, paranoia. The Turks wouldn’t allow 4th ID to launch an invasion from their border. We have them to thank for our jump.

“What the fuck are the Turks doing here?”

Interpreter: I don’t know. I don’t know.

Atwater: Yeah? You made that pretty fucking clear.

Atwater looks over the men now squatting with their hands resting on their heads.

Atwater: Fuck it. Tag ‘em and bag ‘em. We’ll let someone else figure this shit out.

He waves in follow on soldiers. We cuff the detainees with flex bands and pull burlap sandbags over their faces.
My key grates inside the deadbolt of my apartment door. Its serrated teeth tickle the tumblers, and I have to force the lock. The heavy wooden door swings open to a small living room and encroaches on a couch that impedes the door’s arc. Brown cardboard boxes stack neatly, still sealed. I rest the television on the mantle; its cord dangles like hangman’s noose. My stomach tightens, and I hunger. The narrow hall of a kitchen allows a should-length berth. Pipes rattle as water spatters out of the faucet. It runs brown to clear, but the taste of copper lingers. I fill a pot and set it on a burner. I pour in rice and let it boil. I sprinkle oil in a pan and drop a strip of chicken on it; I don’t bother to season.

When it’s done, I consume it beside the sink. I wash the plate and fork. The silence annihilates like the rush of rapids in an empty forest. I rest the weight of my body on my hands braced to a laminated particleboard countertop. The bright teal numbers of the stove’s clock is my only entertainment. A blinking colon. Seconds chasing seconds, one after the other, leaving everything behind. I go to my bed and stare at the ceiling in the darkness, trying to see images and patterns in the popcorn covering above until I fall asleep. All I see, though, is the dead.

I brew coffee when I wake. I start doing push-ups. Blood course through the veins in my arms and chest like lava rolling down a mountain. My body forms an arch as cool beads of sweat follow gravity down my face and spine. I’ve lost count. 45 or 55? I set a limit. Five more and I am done. Just five. 1...2...I shouldn’t have stopped. 3... My arms tremble; muscles seize; body collapses. Moist flesh slaps on tile. The living and the dead share more similarities than differences. Water gurgles like blood in the throat; my coffee is ready.
The handle of my mug has shattered some time ago, and I weave my fingers between jutting spikes. Its thick ceramic heats quickly. I imagine my hands would turn red if they weren’t so calloused. I go to my laptop and check my mail. I open my inbox, hoping for a canceled class. A fan whines as electricity circulates through the computer’s mind. Cheap, slow, piece of crap.

“What’s this now?”

I click and open the mail. I sip my coffee as I read.

Email: Your paper is very puzzling.

There’s no greeting.

Email: Is all the prose yours – or did you borrow from it from your sources? Are you just an excellent writer? (I hope so.)

The first paragraph does sound rather borrowed – “cannot disassociate action from identity.” Let me know. The paper is a little odd. I like your reading of the novel – but heck you barely engage with it. If you are going to talk about the novel, you need to talk about it. Too much of the paper is about context. Anyway this comes out a solid B because of your ambitious topic (too big for a short paper) and the excellent prose. By the way, if you want to write about FSF modeling behavior, you should write about psychoanalysis – the field is much more established in literary theory.-KC
Anger, rage, fury. I want to punch your face until it implodes. In deference, I type his title rather than his name. In the body, all I tell him is that the work is my own.

I don’t tell him to check my citations; he should have done that first. I don’t tell him my opinion of psychoanalysis; I clearly detailed that in my paper. I don’t tell him to go fuck himself; I’ve better tact than that. Better tact than him. Click, send, close. My mug is empty. I’m tired.

*Retreat* echoes across the emptying base. I slip a leather band over my left arm and pin it between the seam of my shoulder and sleeve. The setting sun lifts clouds like steam, cars drift away on wet wheels sliding on water. The rain stopped, but the trees drip when wind blows. Headquarters door stays open. Florescent light taints the hedges. I enter and remove my beret, then brush red felt from my hair. I’ll have to do a better job shaving it. I packed disposable razors, and have all night to do it proper.

Private: At-ease!

My left foot moves ten inches to the left of my right foot while my legs go straight without locking; my hands overlap, right over left, and interlock at the thumbs; they sit at the small of my back, centered on my belt with my fingers extended and joined. After a moment of silence, my head shifts towards the private beside the desk. He looks confused, scared and clean cut. My posture diminishes in the silence; his does not.

“Did the First Sergeant leave for the day?”

Private: Roger, Sir.

“Don’t call me sir, I work for a living.”
Private: I apologize, Sergeant.

“It’s fine.”

He is how his Drill Sergeant and Black Hats formed him.

“Don’t do it again.”

The follicles of his hair stand as rigid as he and as short as his answers. He had his hair cut today.

“As you were.”

He doesn’t flinch.

“What’s your name?”

Private: Rodriguez, Sergeant.

“Have you had chow yet, Rodriguez?”

Rodriguez: No, Sergeant.

“Have you had lunch today?”

Rodriguez: Yes, Sergeant.

_Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless service, Honor, Integrity, Personal courage_. He has to learn them now, a subversion of one to service another breaks the chain.

“Are you lying to me, Rodriguez?”

Rodriguez: No, Sergeant.

“Where did you have lunch today?”

Rodriguez: Chow hall, Sergeant.

“What time?”

Rodriguez:    Twelve-hundred, Sergeant.


“You keep a good log, Rodriguez. The writing is clear and concise.”

Rodriguez:    Thank you, Sergeant.

“When did you get your haircut?”

Rodriguez:    Sergeant?

I point to his head.

“Your scalp is pale, and there’s still hairs on your shoulders.”

I point to a wreathed rifle on my chest.

“You see this badge?”

Rodriguez:    Roger, sergeant.

“Out there, trust is the only thing we have. If you lie to me, even about the stupidest shit, I can’t trust you. If I can’t trust you when you say that you have eaten when you have not, how can I trust you to pull security on an objective when I am charging in?”
Rodriguez: Roger, Sergeant.

“This is your first night on CQ, isn’t it?”

Rodriguez: Roger.

“I figured as much.”

I’d rather be alone. Pass the darkening hours without questions or enforcement of standards except on myself.

“You won’t make the chow hall. Go take an hour and a half. Do personal hygiene, get some rest and come back here. I’ll order us some pizza.”

He nods and smiles. For twenty-four hour shifts like this, some NCOs brought entertainment. Others brought pillows. I have a pen. Index cards fan out on the desk; some of which have Rodriguez’s handwriting. The information is incorrect.

“Rodriguez, one more question.”

He turns and faces me; locks himself into the position of parade rest; his beret sits perfectly on his head.

Rodriguez: Yes, Sergeant?

“Why did the Sergeant Major come here today?”

Rodriguez: I think there will be extra duty personnel tonight. PFC Cox, I think.

“Sergeant Cox is back?”

Rodriguez: He was gone, Sergeant?

“Never mind. Go on. Get your ugly mug outta my CQ.”

He’s a trots off like frightened deer.
I move to the First Sergeants office and open the door by sliding my military identification card along the knob, and rifle though his cabinets in the darkness until I find Cox’s record. I skim it.

Losing two ranks and two month’s pay followed by medical discharge for desertion and a three-month crack binge? Are you fucking kidding me? I place the folder back in the file cabinet.


I thumb through a UCMJ handbook until I find the article written specifically for desertion.

*Article 85: Any person found guilty of desertion or an attempt to desert shall be punished, if the offense is committed in time of war, by death.*

They wouldn’t put him to death. Cox needs to be punished. I think of tasks he can do: latrine, floors, trash, mowing, raking. They’re fucking chores, not punishments. A job needs to be done. Army’s gone soft. The door squeaks open.

Cox: Reporting for, oh. Hey man, how’ve you been?

That’s Sergeant, you fuck. His eyes are baggy sockets. His skin is pale and loose. He is a fraction of what he once was.

“Fine. You?”

He chuckles like he needs the Heimlich. The red rimmed nostrils on his rodent like face flair.

Cox: Could be better. Hey bro, you got any smokes?
“All out.”

Cox: Damn. Where’s your runner?

“Sent him for chow.”

Cox: You got me for three hours, what do you need me to do.

“Four, actually. But don’t worry, not much.”

Cox: Yeah, four. My bad.

“You look tired, Cox. Why don’t you take a seat?”

Cox: Heh, thanks. You were always a pretty cool dude, you know.

*With his humanity he draws the people near to him.*

“Well, I’ve always believed in sugar over vinegar.”

Cox: Except for when they crossed you. What was that private’s name?

“Who?”

Cox: That dumbass you smoked ‘til he cried.

“Pine?”

Cox: Yeah, that’s him. Man, you were roarin’ at him. You remember Wilkes?

Short and plump, rounded baby face. He could have passed for fifteen.

“Juice-box?”
Cox: That’s what we called him. Almost forgot about that. Well he heard you and took a peak around the Hesco basket and just watched.

“Called him a garden gnome and asked if he wanted to play with Pine. I never saw that dude run so fast before.”

Cox: Man, we were rollin’. We didn’t take you for such a hard ass.

“All I ask is to not be fucked with.”

Cox: Same here bro, same here.

Rodriguez enters the room and halts. He looks at Cox and then to me.

“Come on in Rodriguez.”

He takes two steps in then stops.

“Rodriguez, this is Cox. Cox, Rodriguez.”

Cox: ‘Sup Rob.

Rodriguez: PFC.

“You don’t have to stand at parade rest for him, Rodriguez.”

Cox: The hell he doesn’t.

“The hell he does.”

Cox: OK, OK.

He waves his hands in the air.

Rodriguez: So, you two know each other?
Cox: We go way back. Back when ole sarge here was a cherry just like you.

Rodriguez: Yeah?

I cross my arms over my chest.

Cox: Uh-huh. I was even there at his board. Did you know he saluted the Sergeant Major before he was dismissed?

“He asked me a round of questions. I thought the interview was over. Atwater didn’t tell me about that part. Your boy, however—”

Cox: Burroughs? Yeah, I know. God, that was hilarious.

Rodriguez: What happened?

He thinks he knows me. He thinks we’re the same. We’re not. It’s a game. Rules have changed. Rules.

Cox: He was at the position of attention, reciting the NCO creed. In the middle of it, he starts talkin’ real slow like he forgot the words.

“And then the smell—”

Cox: God, it filled the room. Worse than a truck stop shitter.

“You could see it bleeding through the leg of his pants.”

Rodriguez: That’s disgusting.

Cox: When he was done, his tempo picked right back up like nothing happened.

“When they asked him to sit back down he kind of just hovered over the chair.”
Sergeant Major asked him why he was sitting so funny, and he said ‘cause I got the butt-pee Sergeant Major’.

“They tried not to laugh. When the Sergeant Major turned him over to the First Sergeants, they couldn’t even get a question out.”

They sent him on his way, and the next thing you know he maxed the board. He was promoted two months later.

Where was this?

“In theater.”

Yeah, war is full of shitty stories. Like the time Simmons was on that oil drum we used as a commode on our compound.

“Yeah.”

Haj started bracketing us with mortars and we were like ‘Pinch it off, get the fuck in here’ and he was like ‘I can’t! I’m almost done!’

Oh my God, what happened to him?

“Nothing. After the shells started getting really close, he bound out of the stall with his pants around his ankles. QRF set out to where they thought the mad-mortar-man was, but he evaded capture yet again.”

Yeah, he’s probably still out there in rain boots, whitie-tighties, cape and mask launching rounds for the underdogs.
Cox is laughing now, harder than he should. A wet gurgle, phlegm in the throat that won’t shake free. I slap his back.

“You should tell him about Randle.”

He coughs. Green spittle falls on his fist, and he wipes it on his thigh. That shut him up.

Cox: Nah. No need to scare the kid.

Rodriguez: What happened to Randle?

“IED. I didn’t see it, but I was on the detail that cleaned out the truck. Anything that couldn’t be washed off had to be burned.”

Cox: Shut the fuck up, man. I don’t want to hear that shit.

“Cox and Randle were boys.”

Rodriguez: Sorry to hear that.

Cox: It’s fine. Now just drop it.

“So, you want to tell him where you’ve been for the past three months, or should I?”

Cox: What the fuck are you talking about, man?

“Just sayin’, the best way the kid here can learn is from example. You want to tell him why you’re not an NCO anymore?”

Cox: Fuck you.

Rodriguez: It’s cool, I—

“No. It’s not cool. Where did you go, Cox?”
Cox: Like I said in the statement, I was car jacked and couldn’t get back to post. It’s Fayette-fucking-nam. Shit happens.

Rodriguez: Shit man.

Cox: Yeah.

“How did you get back to post, Cox?”

Cox: Cops picked me up. Let’s just drop it, OK. Christ. Don’t you have a latrine to clean or something, Rob?

“Sure, why not?”

I look to Rodriguez; his lower lip puckers. He may be new, but he knows that cleaning should be Cox’s detail.

“Third floor’s latrine needs a good scrubbing. Be back in thirty.”

He shakes his head and leaves the room. Cox lurches forward in his seat with his neck strained.

Cox: Better him than me. I’m sure he’ll get that latrine spic’n’span.

His gurgling laugh resounds in my brain. He leans back in my chair, bends back his head. Young girl’s face, eyes winced, teeth grit, body jerking forward and back. I put my hands on the crest of the chair and pull it down. He spills out of it.

Cox: What the fuck!?

I kick his ribs. He reaches towards his belt for a clip knife; I stomp on his hand and kick him again.

Cox: Ahh-hah-ah!
He’s weeping. I kick him again.

“You got jokes, huh?”

I work his stomach; he can’t breathe.

“Sad thing is I don’t hear anybody laughing.”

Cox: I’ll fucking kill you!

He scrambles to get up, but I hook his forearm with my foot and sweep it out.

“Shut your goddamned cock-holster. Yeah, I know all about it Cox. Remember what I said about people fucking with me?”

Cox: Fuck you.

“Is that what you told ‘er? Sorry, bitch. I’m not selling.”

I drive my knee on his spine and put him in a rear naked choke. My head is close to his ear and I whisper to him.

“How much crack did you smoke, huh? Shit didn’t help, did it?”

He gurgles; drool slides down my forearm.

Cox: What the fuck do you want from me, man?

“What happened in theater? Tell me about you and Randle.”

He squirms in my arms under the weight of my body. He’s thin, wiry and weak; a husk of soldier. He cries.

Cox: His head landed between my feet, OK! Fuck you, go to hell!

My head drives into his temple and I lean back.

“Mother fucker, I will bury you in the impact area. No one will ever find you.”
His body trembles. He’s on the verge of passing out. I give him breath.

“You tell me what you did. What you and Randle did.”

Cox: I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about!

“At the whorehouse!”

I drive his face into the tile. Blood trails a tooth chip.

Cox: Nothing happened. Talk to the IG; nothing happened.

“Bullshit.”

Cox: I’m serious!

“I know you’re lying to me!”

I plant my knees and twist his neck, he groans with the pressure.

“What did you do to that girl?”

Cox: We fucked her, OK? We fucked her ‘til she cried and we
fucked her some more. Happy? You want the details.

I never did. I only wanted one thing: an end to genocide. Peace wouldn’t bring it
about. Something else had to.

“Tell me what you did.”

Cox: You’re a perverted freak!

Faith. *Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my
side. Stop doubting and believe.* I have to know; I’m not a murderer. I didn’t kill Randle,
the IED did. It was there for him to hit. Randle and Cox reached out for that forbidden
fruit. It was God’s plan, not mine.

“I’m not the one who fucked a little girl.”
Cox: I don’t know how old she was. Besides, man, she’s fucking haj. Who cares?

Grind his face in the tile, wax it with his blood, sweat and tears. He roars in agony.

“I care!”

Cox: Fuck! OK. We both fucked her, all right? We took turns; double-stuffed her like a goddamn dune coon Oreo. Glazed her like a donut.

This isn’t the Army I joined. This is the Army I inherited. I should kill him now.

*In the cities of the nations the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them.* I grab the knife, lay my hand atop his head and take a fistful of hair. I hold the blade to his neck. It opens his skin and blood trickles out. I should kill him, but I don’t have the faith. I drop his head and rise above his broken body.

“Get the fuck out of here.”

He rolls to his back and his eyes are furious and fearful.

Cox: You’re done, man. You’re fucking done.

I don’t care.

“Maybe I am.”

He crabwalks backward, slinking away like the pathetic bottom-feeding creature he is. He pulls himself to his feet and backs out the door. He trips over the lawn mower, and a gas can sloshes. I enter the bathroom; wash my hands and face. I take a handful of
paper towels and a bottle of Simple Green. I spray the blood spatter, and it dissipates. I wipe it away. The room is silent but for the click of the clock on the wall. Time soldiers on and never slows. I clean the latrine. Faith. Yeah, I have faith. Faith enough.

Hours slip by us uncounted. Darkness falls to predawn, turning the sky pale grey. Birds too stupid to migrate sing. They revel in the barrens of winter. They feed off rot and decay, eating garbage. They defecate on sidewalks, streets and windshields. The ambiance of the outside world invades the hushed interior. Cars coming and parking. It lulls. Rodriguez struggles to keep his eyes open. His head nods forward then jerks back. He wants to be awake. To be like me. I’d rather be like him.

A golden-orange aura flickers along the eastern wall of the CQ behind the rising sun. As I walk toward the door, Rodriguez rises and follows. I exit the building, and the aroma of war returns. Burnt hair. Seared flesh. I watch, and as I watch, a diesel fueled fire burns in the center of the formation area, Cox centered in the flames, head curling down to his knees.

Rodriguez: Oh God!

I hold my breath. Put my hands in my pockets.

“Get the fire extinguisher.”

Rodriguez rushes in and returns before the door closes. A white chemical cloud spouts and plumes. A body writhes.

Rodriguez: He…he’s alive. Sarge, he’s alive.

I turn and walk with patience. I go to the desk and write in the log.

I pick up the phone. *Faith.*

The classroom is silent but for the low hum of his weak voice. Students click away like cicadas in heat. They waited seventeen years to be here, and this is how they spend their time. This is their moment, their glory years. After this, they will be nothing but fodder for the soil.

Someone said my name. Their typing slows, and some steal glimpses of me.

Was I thinking aloud?

Professor: In all it was quite an interesting paper, rather daring, but it simply doesn’t work.

They try to turn their heads before smiles break on their lips, but I know. Children aren’t as clever as they think. All of their tricks have been tried before; they just think they’re inventive. I peer into a screen below; she doesn’t know how sharp my vision is.

Post: OMG! Epic fail! What a tool.

What’s her name? I should be furious. I’m not. I proofed her paper in a previous class. What was her thesis?

Professor: Honestly, it’s implausible that an undergraduate student could unlock the true meaning of a novel. Now, as I was saying…

Oh yeah, Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography is difficult to read. That’s what she based her paper on. It is the result of stagnation. Stagnation he encourages.

“Excuse me, professor.”
Professor: Just a moment.

“No. I will respond now.”

I sit upright in my seat, square my shoulders. His hands drop, as does his jaw. The clicking ceases entirely.

“First of all, I will say that I can think of innumerable subjects where people were wrong: the right to own slaves, for one, and gravity, another. Moreover, I never said that my interpretation was the true meaning of the text—there is no truth in anything. What I said was that behaviorism is a more verifiable method of understanding each major character’s psychology.”

He raises his hands as if surrendering.

Professor: OK. Thank you.

I won’t let him quit what he began. Nothing’s ever that easy.

“I’m not finished, sir. I don’t appreciate the fact that you accused me of plagiarizing my work while you have yet to cite anything that supports your arguments towards the text.”

Professor: May we move on now?

Old white men like him always do that: start fights they don’t want to finish—especially when they know they’re losing.

“No. No we may not. Just because, what, you have a piece of paper, you think you’re the only authority in this place? Do you even know what the world is beyond your office or these walls? The hell you know about humanity?”
Between him and me, a sea of students’ eyes grow wide. They don’t know who to look to, other than each other, and when they do, they giggle.

Professor: I am going to have to ask you to leave now.

I gather my books and push them into my assault pack.

“Gladly. Just know that you’re a pathetic excuse for teacher.”

He shoots once more at me as I stand in the kill zone of the doorway with my back to him. I can feel his eyes on me, his rage. I stop and let him get proper aim. For the first time, I hear him clearly.

Professor: I won’t argue with you anymore on the matter. Life is too short. Keep your opinion. It is a free country after all.

I turn and face him, holding my assault pack in front of my chest. Four bars of colorful ribbons are pinned to it, and my Combat Infantry Badge is sewn above my parachutist badge with a black star above the chute and a copper star suspended in the risers. I hold my bag out, and point to my awards and decorations.

“You’re welcome for that, by the way.”

I turn and leave. He says something as I exit the door, but I can’t hear his words over the furious clicking.

Like the evangelist, all he had to was keep his mouth shut. Better still: apologize.

I used to believe that pushing a bike was easy. The wheels make it feel almost weightless; it carries me forward. Not in the dirt, though. Sand, really—sand so fine and loose that it fuses with the air agitating my lungs. The fucking thing is so hard to move. I
sling my rifle over my back and push the bike forward; it requires two hands to steer. Its wheels churn the earth, leaving serpentine furrows. The village is only a few clicks away. The broken adobe walls and dung-forged huts are easy enough to see. *Around her hair she wore a yellow ribbon.* The smell of their fires comes in faint wisps; low-lying shrubs must be the fuel. There’s no timber. The riverbed is dry, full of sharp shattered stones. How can they continue to live here? How do they survive? The villagers stare at us uneasily, some with half smiles, others indolent. Most of their teeth are missing. Lieutenant Swift places his hand on the Kahlil’s back and tilts his head toward the Kahlil’s ear.

**Swift:** Ask if anyone knows the person who owns this bike.

The people of the village examine each other and then the bike. They speak in hushed tones that I cannot begin to syllabicate. One man speaks softly while chewing his thumbnail.

**Kahlil:** He says they don’t know.

I lay the bike against the wall of clay. It chips under the bike’s weight. My fingers undo my helmet like a spider removing debris from a web. “Tell them that the owner of this bike is not coming back.”

**Swift:** Put your helmet back on, Sergeant.

“Tell them he is dead.”

I drop my gloves and pull on my body armor until the hook and pile tape rips apart. Heat escapes my body as wind weaves through my rank, saturated top.

“Tell them that he was killed.”
Swift: Enough, Sergeant!

It will never be enough. No amount of words can absorb the blood I spilled today. Shooting that man was like killing a nation. If I didn’t started a blood-feud, then I’ve kept the blood running. We leave in a month. If retribution doesn’t happen now, it’ll happen to someone in the unit who takes over. Someone who didn’t earn it. I understand now. To them, the military is only another tribe, and we’ve assimilated into a culture of violence.

Swift glares at Kahlil.

Swift: Don’t say anything.

I stride toward the lieutenant. He’s just a goddamned butter-bar on his first deployment. He still thinks that everyone is the enemy or an enemy supporter.

Swift: Stand down, Sergeant.

I look into his eyes. I don’t see a leader in him. All I see is fear and trembling. He’s just a kid. Fresh from college; no experience. Just a Bachelor’s degree. No suffering. No loss. No regret. Maybe he cheated on a test. Maybe he plagiarized a paper. Maybe he broke a girl’s heart. Around his grave she laid the pretty flowers. I look over Swift’s shoulder to the Kahlil. His eyes lock with mine and he shakes his head ‘no.’ He speaks for the lieutenant, but he answers to me.

“Tell them that I was the one.”

Unarmored and unarmed, I walk towards the villagers.

I feel an impact to my back and fall to the ground. A body is atop mine. Sand skitters, rifles charge. I roll over and feel hands on my shoulders going for my collar. Swift is trying to choke me out. Trying to be a man. I tuck my chin down and give him no
access. I put my left hand behind his head and hook my fingers into his helmet straps. His hands brush against my face, but he can’t aim well, and most of his strikes ricochet off the ground. He’s never had to fight like this before. I’ve been fighting all my life. I put my right hand on his face and push it back; his chinstrap slips as I hoped it would. My left hand becomes a vice, pulling out all slack. I yank, the nylon line digs into his throat. I strike. His nose crumples under my fist. Blood spatters on my knuckles. Swift slumps over and I straddle him.

Malloy: That’s enough!

More hands are on me, pulling me back.

Swift: You son of a bitch! You’re fucked, you’re so fucked!

I lay back with my arms propping me up. Why did I just do that? What the fuck was I thinking?

Swift: You’re done. You’re so done.

All those years in college, and he can only speak in clichés. Blood and snot form globules from his face and drop to the ground in red spheres. They burst like water balloons when they land. Malloy trains his rifle on Swift. He owes the boy no allegiance.

Malloy: I don’t think so, sir. Not the way I see it.

He draws down on Swift, and in that moment, I know I made a monster of him too.

Swift: Don’t point that weapon at me, Malloy.

Malloy: I’m just making sure you don’t do something else stupid.

Look around you sir, it’s just the four of us and Kahlil.
Now, are you going to calm down, or am I going to have to send Rodriguez over there and take your side arm?

I close my eyes; I don’t want to watch this. Any of it. Anymore.

Swift: I swear to God, I will bring all of you up on charges!

Malloy: The hell you will, sir.

Swift: The hell I will. Rodriguez, take Malloy’s weapon.

Rodriguez: No, sir.

Malloy: They teach you about UCMJ back at the Point sir?

Swift: Sure as hell did, you pieces of shit.

Malloy: You’re familiar with article 128 and 133—aggravated assault and conduct unbecoming an officer and gentleman?

Attacking ole Sarge like that will cost you your commission.

He’s silent. I compose myself. I pick up my gear and put it back on.

Swift: You sons of bitches.

Malloy: You’re not making it easier on yourself, sir.

I dust off my clothes. He wipes his nose.

Swift: Fine. Fuck it. This was a bad idea anyway.

“Get on point, sir.”

Don’t need him shooting any of us in the back.

“Take us home. If you go off course, we’ll correct you.”
The villagers don’t move until we’re well atop a hill. Even then, I can see them standing by the clay wall staring at the bike. I doubt they understand what just happened. They just want to live their daily lives.

My next class fills like bees entering a hive and humming. The droning becomes a roar. Voices talk one over the other as if their ideas are brilliant. Really, they’re just mumbles; drowning words in deafened ears. They enjoyed the last book; that much I know. I didn’t. A bipolar boy walks into the woods, he doesn’t come out. And?

The professor gives us ten minutes to free write.

I leave my paper blank.

She instructs to finish the paper with two discussion questions.

I leave my paper blank.

When she says ‘2 minutes remaining,’ I scrawl one question: What’s the point?

Professor: So, let’s begin our discussion with your impression of the book. Did you like it? Was it fun to read? How did it make you feel? Did it inspire you? What did you think of its structure and tone? Yes?

She points across the room to a girl who has been silent most of the semester.

Girl: I haven’t really enjoyed most of the works we’ve read in this class, they were all pretty gross—I mean, who wants to know the mating habits of geese or how bugs eat frogs, right? But this book was good. Even though I knew what happened, it kept me guessing like how he got there, or why he was there.
The Man-child raises his hand. He sits in the front right corner of the room now, as far as possible from me.

Man-child: I really respect this dude. It takes like a lot of balls to just go out into the wilderness all by yourself; to just, like, dump everything you own and be like ‘fuck you society.’ I suppose that beats working some job until you’re a hundred and dying of colic.

Others answer using words I do not agree with: smart, hero, passionate. Youth. They’re such a carpe diem sort. It’s easy for them. They live on other people’s time. Other people’s words. Other people’s ideals. It’s no wonder they’re so fond of vampires and zombies. It’s no wonder they dress in fashionable clothes mimicking what can be found at the Salvation Army. The day they seize is not their own, but the generation before them who provided it. They want to shuck the husk of materialism and run free in the woods like animals. They seem not to notice the price tag on their Che Guevara and Bob Marley shirts. The pretentious kid is last. His voice raises an octave when he attempts to make his point; the inflection of a question followed by a brief pause begging his peers to ask him to clarify his brilliance. They never do, and yet he continues. He calls the boy the first Christ figure of existentialism. His peers sit in a hushed silence.

Someone whispers totally.

I laugh.

Professor: I’m sorry, do you have something to say?
I look to her face. I think she’s my age; maybe younger. I don’t know what she sees, but I know what I see. I am nothing like these children. I am nothing like her. Do I have something to say? Sure, why not? I haven’t made my participation points for the day.

“I think all of you,”

My eyes scan the room and settle on the professor.

“Are getting a little carried away here.”

Professor: And why do you say that?

I roll my eyes, slump my shoulders. How many more battles do I have to fight?

“Sure, this book is considered nonfiction. But is it, really? We only discover the kid’s character through who the author chooses to interview, selections of the kid’s journal the author chooses to include, and allusions which lineate multifinality and equifinality. Krakauer uses crazy as some catch-all term when really it’s more nuanced than the one example he uses. And I find it hard to believe that he only found one person who spoke ill of the kid—what, he sometimes smelled like feet? Sure, he dumped his car and burned his money, but that wasn’t some existential epiphany. It was a manic episode. If the kid was anti-establishment, why do we find him a few months later working in the largest food chain in the world serving slop? He’s no hero. It’s idiotic to worship him. He’s not a messiah, he’s just a kid with untreated behavioral issues.”

We can smell our own.
“And, as a general rule, you should never trust a person who changes their name and speaks in the third person. This kid didn’t seek union with nature, he was simply running away. In the end, he begged for society. *Begged.*”

They cross their arms and look away from me.

Professor: Thank you.

She points to another student who continues to praise the boy, though with less enthusiasm. People prefer to see the world how they want rather than how it is: ugly and meaningless.

**Chinook’s** door gunners open fire as we land, and machine gun fire synchronizes with the helicopter’s churning blades. The tailgate drops, and we pour out, running and falling to the ground with our elbows angled, propping our rifles and guns. Rotary blades’ wind pushes against my back, and I can feel its static field raising hairs on my nape. The tailgate rises like a drawbridge, and the bird flies away. Its departure leaves us silent, abandoned. And in a moment, there is the rustle of bodies lifting from the dust. The rustle of ammunition in magazines, bandoliers. The charging of rifles and guns.

Swift: Wilson. Get your men and secure the western flank. Once you set up security, call over the mortars. Use the ASIP—no icoms.

Wilson: Yes sir.

He puckers his lips and attempts a whistle. The sound of it is wet and flat. We rise, like dogs, and gather around him.
“You want me on point?”

Three days in his squad, and I already know Cox and Randle did everything for him, carried him along. He’s an NCO born for ops, not the line. He delegates duties he doesn’t know, and he delegates often.

Wilson: Yeah. You take point. Thorpe, take the rear.

“Rivers and Cruise, up front with me.”

I want people I can trust, proven. Jensen’s getting his footing, but he needs more time. Malloy was Wilson’s when I got here.

Thorpe: Wait, what? Why do I get all the cherries? Cruise is coming with me; you take Malloy.

Wilson shrugs. He should’ve figured this shit out day one.

“Cruise and Rivers came with me to this squad, same day as you. We’re a team. We know how to work with each other.”

Thorpe: Yeah well, I’m in no mood to babysit two scrubs.

Wilson: Man’s got a point. The three of you are a little too cozy, anyway.

Divide and conquer; hell of a leadership policy. Cruise rolls his eyes, the muzzle of his rifle dips. He’s not happy.

“Let’s go.”

We walk a three hundred meters from the LZ where men still lay in the dirt, waiting, and secure a perimeter as best we can. I sketch a fire plan in the dirt and brief Wilson, going over the sectors of fire twice for him.
“Got it?”

The chubbiness of his cheeks press against the straps of his helmet as he sucks on a hard candy.

Wilson:   Yup. We’re good. I’ll go get mortars.  

“You aren’t going to use the ASIP?”

Wilson:   Gotta keep the lines clear of chatter.  

The all clear isn’t chatter. I wonder if he even loaded the freqs. I point to the radio on his back, the hand mike in his ear pressed against his face.

“You mind leaving that thing with me then?”

Wilson:   You won’t need it. Just shoot anything that comes too close.  

He turns and walks back to the LZ, back to where the platoon can see him. They can’t see us. I can’t see them. Might as well be on an island.

Rivers:   Everything all right?  

“Yeah, tops.”

We settle into the dust and scan our sector. I can see the platoon starting up the hill towards the hamlet. I don’t even know the name of this place, I doubt anyone does other than the top brass. Just some shithole in the middle of nowhere, a place where they dump excrement in their streets and walk through it the daylong. My eyes follow a ridgeline, tracing the broken terrain behind the town. A herd of goats move toward the city from the east. Malloy points in that direction.

Malloy:   What’s that?
I raise my rifle and look through the ACOG. It’s not a great scope, but it’s better than nothing.

“A kid and some goats.”

Rivers: Shouldn’t we call this in? Where in the hell is that fat fuck?

I look over my shoulder to where mortars have set up. The erect tubes wait to be fired. Men stand around them, smoking. I raise my rifle and gaze at them through my scope. I can almost hear their jokes; I can see it on their lips. A box of MREs sits by their feet, opened. They don’t look at us; they don’t look at the advancing element.

“Doing what he does best: eating.”

Rivers: Hell of an opportunity, huh?

It doesn’t take long for the shooting to begin, for the red smoke to plume so far away, for a Blackhawk to arrive and strafe. Safe to semi, semi to safe.

“Keep your eyes open, look for runners. Don’t engage unless you know for sure.”

Rivers: Right on, right on.

Malloy lays low. His breath is rapid. I can see the pulse in his neck pumping that adrenaline of the first firefight. That feeling of sex and fear bound together like losing virginity. I know it. You only get it once, that feeling; after that, it becomes almost routine: flaccid.

The birds fly counter-clockwise, pivoting on the village. It no longer fires, but waits to. It does what it was designed to do. The boy walks closer to the town as if drawn to it. He’s not rushing, but he wants to see, I think. Wants to know as much as I do about what the hell is going on up there. He follows a trail that runs behind a spur of dirt and
rock leading behind the village. The bird circles once more and drops a flare. A red star falls and a pillar of smoke rises. It tumbles along the spur, smoldering.

Malloy: What the fuck was that?

I wish I knew. I wish Wilson left the radio. He’s with the mortars, they have a radio. They’re on the support by fires net, as well as the Blackhawk. I hear Wilson’s voice over the divide; it’s quiet but there.

Wilson: He’s marking a target. Shoot ‘em!

Malloy readies himself, takes aim at the spur and tries to get a bead. He fiddles with the sight adjuster knob on his m-68 lens. He’s clearly not zeroed, and he won’t hit anything more than ten feet away.

“Hold off, Malloy.”

Malloy: You heard what he said, right Sergeant?

Rivers points to me.

Rivers: You hear what the fuck he just said?

Malloy: Roger, specialist.

I lay down in the dirt and press my cheek against the stock of the rifle. I can taste the soil in my mouth, grating in my gums. I set my jaw and look through the scope.

Wilson: Engage!

“Shoot?”

The goats marshal behind the spur now, and the child follows. The bird drops another flare as a cloth wrapped head silhouettes the spur. I put my eye to the scope, rest my finger on the trigger.

Rivers: Anything?

Between the smoke and light, something glints—a butt stock—safe to semi. Three pounds of pressure is all that separates this man from death, and I feel all of it in the meat of my index finger. I wait for the natural pause in my breathing. Acquire target. Squeeze trigger. The target drops. I hold my breath, and taste dry dirt.

Malloy: You get ‘em, Sarge?

The child stops walking and looks to his feet, frozen in all this heat. It’s hot today. It’s always hot. When will winter come? Wilson waddles toward us in a half-assed run. He stands over me with his hands on his knees, sucking on air like some damn oxygen thief.

I breathe. “Yeah, I got him.”


The muzzle of my rifle dips as if I can’t bear its weight. Semi to safe.

Malloy: The fuck you did.

Wilson: Nobody asked you a fucking thing, private. So shut your goddamned mouth.

I rise from the dirt and take a knee, keeping my eyes on the boy so very distant from me.
Wilson: Atwater said you were a hell of a shot. Can’t believe you actually hit him. Take these two and clean up your mess. I hope he has a rifle. I’m fresh outta throwaways.

“Let’s go, guys.”

I walk on point. Malloy and Rivers flank me, rifles ready. The muzzle of my rifle points to the ground. I hold only the sling and let the rifle dangle. The boy has yet to move. His face is fresh and young but still. I don’t know if he knows this man. I don’t know that it matters even if he does. He shouldn’t be seeing this. I shouldn’t be seeing this. Behind the man is a bicycle, banana seat patched with reflective tape. He could be the boy’s father. He could be a stranger. The man’s voice echoes over sun scorched earth like a faint wind.

He holds his hand to his pelvis.

Malloy: What’s he saying?

His blood runs red and dark through his white clothes.

Rivers: He’s praying.

His intestines distend.

Father: Allah…Allah…Al-lah…

Rivers moves the man’s hand. There’s just a dot of a wound; a period to his sentence.

Rivers: Get me your field dressing, Malloy. Now!

Blood spouts in slowing pulsations.

Rivers: Fucking shit. IV bag, go.
Rivers presses the wound to stop its flow.

Malloy: I can’t get a vein.

Rivers: Tourniquet his fucking arm!

Malloy: With what?

Rivers: Your belt. Shit, come on.

The man’s breathing shallows as his blood pools. He stops talking. Rivers removes his weapon sling and binds the bandages, then compresses the man’s chest as Mallow holds the IV bag high. Blood pumps out of the wound each time Rivers presses.

Mallow: He’s dead, Rivers. He’s fucking dead. Just stop.

Rivers stands, removes his helmet and throws it to the ground.

Rivers: Fuck!

He kicks the helmet, and it bounces along the dirt. He puts his blood soaked hands on his hips, stares at me, then shakes his head.

Rivers: Fuck.

A slow drip falls from the faucet in my apartment’s sink and taps in the steel basin. A rust colored string streaks down the drain beneath the clear stream of water when enough beads have gathered to flow. Once gone, the water collects again. Someone lived here before me, and that rust didn’t form overnight. I can’t fix it. I don’t have the tools. Even if I did, I wouldn’t know how. Might do more damage than repair until I figured it out. The number for maintenance hangs from the refrigerator. I doubt they’d
come if called. It’s for emergencies only, I’m guessing. They want to know only about broken pipes.

It’s all I hear in the silence of this place, the slow drip. I walk to the television and run my finger along the screen where a film of dust rests atop my faceless reflection. The looped cord dangles over the mantle. I never connected the cables. Didn’t even plug it in. There’s no point to it, any of it. I grip its side and throw it across the room. It strikes the dry wall, rips a hole, then tumbles to the ground. The screen cracks into splintered webs. No one can fix it now. It needs to be recycled. It needs to be replaced.

Atwater enters the HQ room just across the hall from ours. It’s going to be a long meeting, an important one. I can tell because they closed the door. Cruise rests on his cot with his arm over his face. Rivers sits across the room from him, sewing together a seam in his shirt. He lifts his eyes from the thread and points to my rack.

Rivers:       Mail came.

I move to my cot, thumbing through a dozen letters I’ve received from Cara today, trying to put them in order of their post-marked date. I hate reading things out of order. A thick manila envelope interrupts the flow of it all, and I flip it over. It’s from Rob with a post mark from Vegas. I peel the flap and up end it. The contents spill out. A series of pictures flops onto my cot along with a single, tri-folded letter and an autographed Hustler. A busty woman straddles a fifty caliber machine gun in shredded fatigues. Dark smudges linger on her glistening skin. She puckers and looks into the camera with vacant eyes. The black ink of a felt marker scrawls below her knees and says
*Soldier On* with a series of X’s and O’s before and after it. I flick the magazine into the squad box where the rest go—*FHM, Maxim, Stuff*. It’s what those back home think we want; what they think we need. It’s what they need to appease their guilt.

I unfold his letter and read it. It’s insubstantial—talks about women, raves, going to the AVN awards. The pictures he sent reinforces what he says, like he needed to provide evidence. Like I cared. I run my hand through my hair and feel the collected dirt and grit that will not wash away.

When I joined the Army, I tried to get him to come with me. He said that Kosovo wasn’t a real war. That if there was a real war, he’d join in a minute. He never did. He never will. I put his pictures back in the envelope and throw it in the burn pile.

I write a note to him on the back of a thin cardboard box. Thank him for the things he sent. I write his name and address on the other side and draw a box where a stamp should go and write ‘free’ inside it. I don’t sign my name.

Rivers: Christ, this is such bullshit.

He flicks his index finger back and forth, then sucks it.

“Not born to be a seamstress, huh.”

Rivers: No. This whole place is a fucking patchwork, tryin’ to get stitched back together. I’m tired of pullin’ double duty. I’m just damn tired.

I take the burn box and drop it just outside the door where the company dumps its accumulated garbage. I look down the hall to Randle’s room. His family must have received his things by now. It didn’t take his squad long to pack and inventory his things.
He didn’t keep much. Nothing more personal maybe than a hygiene kit. I wonder what his family is going to do with it—agonize over a dull razor? Make a shrine out of a toothbrush? Could they even figure out who he was from those things? And if they did, would they even care? Thinking about it makes me want to purge more of my things. Have it so there’ll be no relics once I am gone. “It’s ridiculous.” I reenter the room.

Rivers: Sure is. Route clearances. What the fuck—hey, we don’t know where the bad guys are, so um, just drive up and down the road until they find you.

I drop to my cot, roll a shirt and tuck it under my head. Cruise yawns and stretches his arms above his head. He didn’t even bother to take off his boots, he was so tired.

“It is what it is.”

Rivers: Fuck no it isn’t. Thorpe was right. This whole place needs to burn.

“You ever find out your congressman’s address?”

Rivers: Congress-woman, and you know what that cunt said?

‘Thanks for your service,’ and basically, ‘suck-my-dick.’

Fuckin’ liberals, they say they’re against the war but’ll do nothing about it.

Cruise: Maybe you should have donated to her campaign.

Atwater: All right, that’s enough of that.
I didn’t even see him enter, he walked so quietly. His presence usually demands attention. Shoulders slumped, arms lax. Defeated.

Rivers: Sorry, boss.

Atwater: Listen up, you three. First Sergeant Bowls called me in there to tell me that I made the 7’s list.

Cruise: Hey, that’s good news. Platoon Sergeant Atwater. Good ring to it.

Rivers: Now you can start telling people to fuck off, huh.

Atwater: About that, Top don’t want two PSG’s in one platoon. He’s trading me to Headquarters staff for some privates

“So what, we’re like cigarettes now? Things to barter and burn?”

Rivers: Hey, they classified us as cargo so we could fly over Turkish airspace, didn’t they? Maybe they forgot to revert the paper work.

“Wait, so who’s taking over weapons?”

Rivers taps my shoulder.

Rivers: Time to step up, Sarge. If you need a good team leader, I know a guy ready for the board.

I know he’s talking about himself, but I’m not in the mood to joke.

Atwater: No one.

Rivers: Wait, so what happens to us?
Atwater: Whole damn thing’s getting modified. The guns’ll be communal weapons. Due to recent losses, the three of you will be absorbed into Wilson’s squad, Thorpe’s goin’ there too. He’s taking over for Randle.

Cruise: Christ, I thought we were done with Thorpe.

Atwater points to me.

Atwater: You get Cox’s position. For the next two weeks, you will train the platoon how to operate the guns while also assuming the duties of a Team leader. It’s a hell of an opportunity. It’ll look good on your NCOER and your résumé.

Cruise: Well, do we get to keep our own room?

Atwater: No, dipshit. Ops is taking it over. Top’s tired of doc’s hygiene issues.

“When do we start?”

Atwater: Time now. Pack your things and report to Wilson. He’ll tell you what to do from there.

The damn water drops infuriate me more than my tinnitus, and this poorly lit apartment gives the whitewashed walls a hue of gray at sunset. I’ve no pictures to hang. And if I did, I doubt I’d want to. The hole in the wall is my only decoration. Don’t think
I’ll get the security deposit back. I sweep the shards of glass into a dust pan and dump them into a trashcan.

I take the wreckage of my television and walk down the stairs. The sound of my soles striking concrete echoes off the flat, cinder block walls and bounce above and below the sprawling stairwell. I halt my descent and look below. The lights are out. I hold the thin television by the cord over the center of the well. I relax my grip and feel the cord sliding until the prongs catch my hand. I close my eyes and breathe deep. I let it go.

One-thousand.

Two-thousand.

Three-thousand.

Four.

The television’s impact resounds up the stairwell to the ceiling above, and then reflects back down in a weaker voice. I’m sick of this place.

Echoes of wild dogs and a guttural churning of my truck’s engine pollute the open road. No one is out tonight. My body shivers as a cool breeze presses down my body odor. I watch the roadside roll like the ocean’s face. I feel almost peaceful. I loosen my grip on the Browning and relax, singing Wilco in my head.

Theologians, they don’t know nothing, about my soul—light blinds, sound deafens, chilling heat. Is this death?

Sergeant Atwater:  
Go, go, go!
I lurch in the truck as it accelerates. I cling to my gun. Golden sparklers ricochet across my periphery, a piccolo blows in my ear three octaves above middle C and holds. A hand grabs my leg.

Sergeant Atwater: What you got?

Is this heaven? I cling to my machine gun, anchoring myself as best I can.

Sergeant Atwater: Damn it, specialist! What you got?!

It can’t be heaven. It’s not heaven.

“Nothing! I can’t see anything!”

Sergeant Atwater: Nothing?

Someone strikes my wrists from below, and my hands go numb. I’m pulled by my belt, and my helmet catches the turret while being shoved into a vacated seat.

Sergeant Atwater: Is he wounded?

Rivers: Don’t think so. No blood.

Warm liquid pours over my face and burns my eyes. I taste saline on my lips.

“Fuck, fuck. Cut that shit out!”

Rivers: You want to stay blind?

“I wasn’t hit? What the hell was that?”

Sergeant Atwater: A lume round, I think. Either these jokers were practicing, or they don’t know what the hell they’re doing. Rivers, how many of those caches we report today?

Sergeant Atwater: Yeah, probably not.

My vision begins to return, and I see Rivers’s face as a shadow. His hand wipes soot from my face.

“I thought I was dead, man.”

Rivers: That could have been bad. Real bad.

Sergeant Atwater: Rivers. You remember that guy by the cache of one twenties?

Rivers: Hitting them with the sledge? Fuck yeah, I remember.

Sergeant Atwater: Interpreter said he was salvaging the brass and selling it.

Rivers: Sounds about right.

Sergeant Atwater: You think that’s all he’s selling?

My apartment looks to me more like a prison cell than a home. A storage unit, maybe. A placeholder. I’ve been cycling through the same clothes for the past three weeks. Writing meaningless papers that do nothing but ruminate about eras long dead. Chasing a meaningless degree to maybe get a job where I won’t fit, where I won’t belong. I can’t remember when I read a book written and published in the past ten years. Thorpe was right. What in the fuck am I doing here? This part of the world has nothing to offer me, and I it.

This room is too small for a squad. It holds too much for the space it offers. It’s only nine by ten, furnished with two beds, two desks, four wall lockers, a futon, a coffee
table, and an entertainment center. We have to rotate chairs if we want to sit, and crawl
over each other to reach the bathroom. A thin haze of cigarette smoke lingers despite a
fast cycling ceiling fan and an open window. Tar collects on the walls. Tar and mold.
Half-empty Budweiser bottles serve as ashtrays. Stale beer and moist ash waft out of their
necks. Command took our phones, restricted our movements.

Times like these, my squad and I would play first-person shooter games. We’d sit,
shoulder to shoulder, smoking, drinking, and pressing buttons to kill pixilated enemies.
The missions were always simple: kill most things, complete objectives—linear.

We aren’t playing now, not drinking either. Just watching the news—watching
and smoking. At least that hasn’t changed.

Rivers: I hear we might be going to Turkey; link up with 4th ID.

Sitting on the edge of my bed, I hold a packing list in my hands, a familiar
packing list made for training rotations in Germany. Everyone says we’re going to the
desert. This isn’t a packing list for the desert. I take a separate folder and update my
emergency contacts, and beneficiaries, then check my stock portfolio. I put my enlistment
bonus on gold, and it may be the only reliable thing in my life right now.

“That’s crap. We’re not going to Turkey. We’re not going anywhere—except
maybe Graff.”

Cruise lifts his head from his hands. Maybe the smoke burns his eyes, makes him
rest like that. He’s too young to be that tired already.

Cruise: The country is going to war, specialist. We’re not going to
Graff.
I shake my head.

“Look, you’ve only been here a few months now. You don’t know how things work. There are only two things that you can count on in this unit: we go to Grafenwör and Hoensfeld August through October, and we do it again March through the end of April.”

Rivers: That’s the truth. Remember that deal in the Ivory Coast?

Thorpe: Don’t mean nothing. The French were just faster to deploy.

“Yeah. Exactly. The French got there before we did. That’s saying something about this unit.”

Thorpe points to the television. He flips between news stations. Every one is the same: talking heads beside images of soldiers, helicopters, tanks.

Thorpe: Saying is done and gone. Doing’s coming.

“Whatever you say.”

I lay my head on my pillow; it conforms to my skull, covering my ears. Smoke rises into the ceiling fan like a benign tornado. It catches the blades and dissipates.

I take my phone from the countertop and am tempted to break it as well. Rather, I open my contacts and start deleting numbers long dead: Rivers, Cruise, and now Thorpe. And as I do so, I pass over Rob’s name. The three of them were like brothers to me, only more so than Rob. We were of similar mind, differing in opinion, but singular in purpose. God how I miss them; I’ve failed them. And now I feel like crying, only the tears won’t fall. I rest my head on the counter atop folded arms.
I should be thankful that there’s still blood in my veins. I lift my phone and tap the screen, dialing Rob. I don’t listen to his song, but am surprised when he answers. He yawns.

Rob: Yeah?

“Hey, what’s up?”

Rob: Oh, hey bro. What time is it?

I can hear him shifting in his bed, rubbing his eyes, stretching. I envy how well he sleeps.

“Ten thirty in the morning.”

Rob: That early, huh. What’s going on?

My eyes wander across the apartment. Sealed boxes, stained carpet, damaged wall.

“I was thinking to come and visit you.”

Rob: Yeah? When?

Nothing holds me back.

“Today.”

Rob: Shit, don’t you have classes or something?

Yes. “Nah, I’m good. Need a vacation is all.”

Rob: Cool man. You got my addy?

“I do.”

Rob: All right then, come on down. I’ll clear off the couch for you.
“Right on, right on.”

I leave my assault pack in the corner, and stuff my clothes in a garbage bag instead. Just a number of shirts, pants, socks and underwear. I don’t care if it matches or not. It doesn’t matter. With bags in hand, I walk down the stairwell. The lights are still out and only thin beams of sunlight enter through the windows above. At the base of it all is my television, crumpled and broken. It’s been a couple of days, but no one has touched it. It has more dust on it now than when I dropped it. Does anyone even care?

I hold a cigarette in my hand. The ember flares in the dark of the night. I tremble with the wind. On the other side of the FOB, an aura of fire illuminates a blackened pillar of soot. The acrid stench of canvas and wool is swept away when the earth exhales. I am numb. I am mute.

Thorpe: You OK, man?

His voice is raspy and hoarse, his breath rancid. My hand shakes. No, no I am not.

“Yeah. Fine.”

Thorpe: They all thought that you got hit too. I kept telling them that the initials of your battle roster ID were the same, but the last four were different.

It should have been me. “Yeah, no. It was Jensen.”

Thorpe: Yeah, I know. He going to be OK?

“Shrapnel hit the bridge of his nose. He was walking the last time I saw him.”

Thorpe: Jesus.
Blood fuels the flame. Even from this distance, I can hear the pints soaked into the seat searing.

Thorpe: Come on, man. Come inside. You shouldn’t be out here.

“Have they cleared out his things yet?”

I sit in silence. Flames lick the air, fueled by the blood of my friends.

Thorpe: No. But sitting out here can’t be good for you either. You need to drink something, get some rest. Come on.

He puts his arm around my shoulder. I feel the heat of his illness. The recesses of his sullen eyes are deepened by the shadows of flickering lights.

“How you holding up?”

Thorpe: Well, I feel like I swallowed and passed battery acid. I can’t keep anything down. But whatever. This place, man, it’s a fucking shit hole. Everything here just needs to die.

I step on my cigarette. It tasted of burning gun oil and dirt. I want to quit. We approach a corridor immune to the wind, but vulnerable to the smoke. Thorpe puts his arm out. I bare his weight. He feels so light.

Thorpe: Oh, Christ.

His body convulses, and he dry heaves. He’s malnourished and dehydrated. I imagine his pain; I have felt it before; I feel it now. He should have gorged himself on anything. Vomiting nothing is the worst.
His knees wobble, but he carries himself well. There are no lights within our room except the flickering orange though the single window pane. Shadows dance in the darkness. These cots are empty pine boxes, and soon Rivers will be buried.

I park my car between two others and negotiate my way to the curb beside Rob’s apartment. I unbuckle my seat belt and rub my face. Removing the keys from the ignition ignites the dome light. I lean forward and peer into the rearview mirror. My eyes look eroded. The drive was nothing, just followed the directions and dotted lines, and yet I’m exhausted. My phone vibrates.

Message: You here?

I reply yes and exit my car. I stand on the curb of the empty road under a high-pressure sodium light, thumbing the base of my key. I leave my bracelets behind.

The light at the crosswalk holds red, and I wait, despite the lack of traffic. A lithe shadow of a familiar form creeps from an alleyway. It weaves and sways. My eyes squint as the base of the key nestles in my palm and forms a fist; the serrated shaft becomes an extended claw between my coiled fingers. I feel a smile on my face as an image of a kangaroo hops in my mind. I loosen my grip. The shadow subsides as it nears the harsh orange light, retreating to the body that cast it. Rob wears a haircut for a younger generation, swooping down across his brow. Face obscured by a well-trimmed beard. Tight jeans on a slim frame. He looks so weak.


The light turns green, and I cross the road.
“I do what I say I will do.”

Rob: You always have.

He greets me with a hug and my body tenses. Stop. Breathe. One, two, three.

Four. I pat his back as if tapping out of a chokehold. He releases me. Rolls his shoulders and flexes his arms.

Rob: You’re looking good, bro. Fit.

I shrug.

“I try.”

Rob: Cara come too?

“No.”

Rob: She finally run off on you huh?

He laughs, taps my shoulder with a closed fist.

“Something like that, yeah.”

Rob: Good one.

His smile fades as I stand resolute. It’s not a joke. I haven’t joked in years. Shit’s not been funny for a while now.

Rob: Oh. Damn. Sorry about that. Damn sorry. Look, you got to be hungry, right? Big guy like you has to have an appetite.

He would know; it’s all he has: appetites. Why else would he live in such a place? Endless buffets of more than just grub. Still, it’s not his fault. He is what he is, and I am what I am.

“Let’s go, yeah?”
He leads me to his place where he offers me a drink and a sandwich. Alfalfa between hard bread. Lettuce, avocado and a tomato slice. No cheese. From his stories, I gather that he doesn’t need to eat meat; he satisfies that craving in other ways. He tells me that Vegas is a great town because there are so many interesting people from all over the world to meet. People of different cultures and societies. That Vegas is the nexus of civilization. He’s selling it to me, and he’s selling it hard. Harder than I did when I asked him to join the Army with me. This isn’t the first time I’ve been here. I agree with him: Vegas is the center of the world. Only, there’s just one type of person who comes here. But I don’t tell him that.

Rob: What you need is to get laid. Fuck that self-interested skank.

I want to reach out and break him. Just start punching until his face, a face that looks like mine, becomes pulp. It wasn’t her fault. None of it was. It was mine. The fault will always be mine. “Just stop, alright.”

Rob: Yeah. Sure. No problem. Listen, why don’t you go get cleaned up. Go to my closet and pick out some clothes, because you can’t go out looking like that. I call a couple of friends and we’ll get out of here.

“Yeah. Fine.”

Water cascades down my head. I close my eyes and stand in the darkness, tasting the water. It tastes like saline. It tastes like being blind. I write the names of the fallen on the glass door with my fingertip. Names that rise with the steam and fade away when I’m
not there. Cruise, Rivers, Thorpe. I shut off the water, leaving their names drawn on the glass.

I wear Rob’s clothes. They’re constricting. He says the ladies will eat it up like it’s a compliment. I’d shrug, but I’m afraid I’d tear the shirt. It’s not that I’m huge; Rob’s just a step away from emaciation.

We step out of his apartment, and he points to two women walking our direction, telling me their names. They wear metallic dresses, one silver, one blue. They glisten under the street lamps, their large hooped earrings bob with their strides. One of them raises her arm and waves. He points to them each, giving me their quirks.

Lydia: Hey!

Rob: Sup, bitches!

They trot forward, closing the gap, and embrace him.

“Hey.”

Rob: These are my friends, Lydia and Bell.

Bell steps forward, kisses my cheek, rubs my chest.

Bell Oh, you’re cute. Cuter that your brother. Why didn’t you tell me you had a brother?

Rob: I told you I had a brother. Hell, you talked to him!

Lydia’s gaze burns on me, I can feel it.

Rob: And how can he be cuter than me? We’re twins for chistsake.

“Fraternal.”
Bell: Now I remember that voice. So you are a dude.

Rob puts his arm over her shoulder, pulls her close and licks her ear. She elbows his side.

Rob: Let’s get out of here while the nights still good, huh?

You’re drivin’.

He throws me the keys and walks away with Bell in tow, running his hand down to the small of her back where the fabric of her dress begins just above her tailbone.

Lydia walks beside me. She wraps her arm around my waist, then rests her head on my shoulder, blonde hair rolling in front of her blue eyes. Her breath smells of beer, cigarettes, and mints. My hand constricts on the key.

Lydia: So, Rob says you’re like what, a hero or something?

“Something like that, yeah.”

Lydia: You were in a war?

“Yeah. Iraq and Afghanistan. Been to both a couple of times.”

Lydia: Those things still goin’ on?

I doubt they’ll ever end, even when no one is there to fight them.

“Still going on.”

She rubs her hand across my back. Says something indoctrinated.

Lydia: Thank you for your service.

I glance at my shoes. Dark mirrors reflecting orange light. I don’t know why I still shine them. I tumble the key in my hand. Rob twirls Bell and cups her face in his hands.
and approaches her with an open mouth. He presses her against his mustang and thrusts his hips into hers. I press a button, the hazards flash, the doors unlock.

“You kids ready?”

I open the passenger door for them and they slide into the back, groping and giggling. I hold the door for Lydia.

I enter the car, turn the starter, the engine turns with a ferocity I haven’t felt in years.

“Where are we going?”

She points down the road.

We drive under city lights. The sound of Rob and Bell’s sloppy kisses force my hand to raise the rearview mirror so that it reflects the silenced dome light. Lydia puts her hand on my thigh. I glance at her. She smiles. The car chimes.

“You mind buckling your seat belt?”

She runs a hand through her hair. Her locks fall between her fingers; her hooped earrings sways.

Lydia: We’ll be there soon.

See fills the periphery of my vision. Passing lights accent her curves, catching glitter on her skin. Her skirt rides up her legs, and I can see the line of her hamstring run to the arc of her ass. I keep my hands on the wheel and look at the road ahead. She shifts in her seat, adjusts her dress.

Lydia: Pull in over there. We’ll walk the rest of the way.
Rob and Bell lead, nuzzling, kissing, hands on each other’s asses. I don’t know why I am grafting into his group.

I’ve put my things in boxes, I don’t plan on coming back. I’m ready to move on.

Rob: So, why are you doing this again?

“People are dying, Rob. A lot of people.”

Rob: Well, so what? That’s the UN’s problem. Not ours.

I fold a shirt, tuck it in a cardboard box. I doubt I’ll wear it again.

“UN’s got no teeth.”

He puts his hand on the threshold of the door, runs it up and down the beam. Picks at a fleck of paint.

Rob: Other people’s problems. They’ll solve it, peacefully.

Through international courts and shit.

“Peace can’t beat war. Ever. And it’s idiotic to think that it can.”

Rob: Yeah, but that doesn’t mean you have to fight it.

I close the box, folding flap over flap, and seal it with tape.

“Every generation has its war. This is mine.”

Rob: It’s their problem. U.S. fought for its freedom. They should fight for theirs. Hell, even this country’s not that great.

Why should we be wiping other people’s asses when we can’t even wipe our own?

“Some asses are shittier than others. Join with me, it’s not too late.”
He lowers his eyes, and shakes his head.

Rob: No man. It’s not my thing.

“Remember that time you pulled that dude from his truck?”

Rob: Yeah.

“They didn’t hit us, man. They hit someone else, and you tried to do something about it.”

Rob: Lot of good that did for us, huh?

“Something’s got to be worth fighting for.”

Rob: Yeah, I’m fuckin’ fighting right now, dipshit.

I put my hand on his shoulder. He looks up and away. Eyes red and wet. He runs a thumb along the bridge of his nose. His lip quivers then steadies.

Rob: Tell you what. If we ever go war, legit war, I’ll join. Sign up for your unit.

I wrap my arms around his torso and hug him; he leaves his arms limp at his side.

“Fair enough.”

The club smells like sweat. Darkness and light alternate with the music, showing glimpses of faces, shoulders and arms. Body parts suspend and vanish. Here and gone after a spastic twitch. I ball my fists, grit my teeth. The beat of the music matches the throbbing in my neck. I want to clear this room and raze it. The world is burning and they stomp their feet as if they can put it out. It won’t though. All of this dancing, and exuberance—it’ll fade. Time will weaken their joints. Experience will break them.
Lydia pushes her body into mine. I can feel the moisture of her warm skin on my arm. I can feel her heat through my shirt. She speaks into my ear, it’s the only way I can hear her.

Lydia: You want to get a drink?

*Give strong drink to the one who is perishing, and wine to those in bitter distress.*

Want? Need. “Yeah, where’s the bar?”

She rests her hands between my shoulder blades, and my body tenses. I can feel the pressure pinching my neck and spine. She leans across my body pointing, but I trace her arm to the bulge of her thinly veiled breasts where light pools and glitters.

Lydia: Over there. C’mon, I’m thirsty.

The bar isn’t against a wall. It’s not even a bar; just a besieged cache encircled by tables guarded by two men and a girl who don’t even look like they are old enough to drink, let alone serve. I hold cash in hand above the others and wave.

Bartender: What you need?

Lydia: Strawberry Vodka and Redbull.

He looks to me, brows arched—a look not questioning what I want; rather, my presence. I’m too old to be here, and I know it.

“He looks to me, brows arched—a look not questioning what I want; rather, my presence. I’m too old to be here, and I know it.

“Jack and Coke.”

Bodies swarm around us, push us together, and constrict like a noose. I can’t do this. I put my hand on the table before he turns.

“Just Jack—a double.”
He nods. Lydia’s body rubs against mine; her hips and body sway with the light and the music.

Lydia: What’s the rush?

“Just catching up is all.”

Rob and Bell are not far from us. They hold each other close. On a stage, they embrace more than dance. Hump more than embrace. Their mouths open and press together as if to share the air in their lungs while hands slide up and down each other.

Bartender: Twenty-five.

I drop two bills on the table and take the clear, plastic cup.

Lydia: Cheers.

The liquid is warm and dry, soothing in all this moisture hanging in the air, feeding mold. A thick shoulder bumps my arm while I drink. The brown liquid sloshes out of the cup and stains my shirt. There’s familiarity to the tone, but alienation in the voice. The sound of a young buck trying to dominate.

Alpha: Watch it.

I lower my drink, try not to crush it in my hand but fail. The Jack falls to the ground in amber droplets as two other men work their way by his side. They don’t look at me. They look at her.

Alpha: Sup, slut?

Lydia: Fuck you.

Alpha: This your boo? Baby, you need a real man.

He points to his crotch and thrusts the air.
Lydia steps to my side.

Lydia: Let’s get out of here.

I shake my head. My drink is gone. Now, I just want to fight.

“You owe me a drink.”

He owes me more than that. They all do—all of those who danced and fucked and loved while I watched my friends die; while I killed so they could sleep at night soundly. I’ll never sleep well again because of all that sound between my ears.

Alpha: The fuck I do. Get on out of here before you get yourself hurt.

He stiff arms my shoulder, and I roll with it, widen my stance. His two friends are watching now; they see me and I them.

Two-thousand.

I thrust my arm, knuckle jabbing his windpipe. He falls to his knees, gasping for air. Lydia flees.

Three-thousand.

His friends are on me, grabbing my arms, pushing me against a table, holding me down. I don’t resist. Resisting always makes it worse.

Four.


I tense my body and prepare for a blow, wherever it will be. Core tight, legs loose.

Rock steady; roll ready. He throws a haymaker into my gut. He wasn’t square to the
target. He struck me, but didn’t aim through. Even if I hadn’t prepared myself for it, it wouldn’t have been so bad. It’s a shame; for a big guy, he doesn’t hit so hard. He’s never had to fight because of his size. His fist glances off my face, and I can feel my cheek swell. A throbbing in my brow. I think of winter, of hard packed snowballs. That’s all it is. Just snowballs.

Kid: Stick his ribs, bro.

There’s a white blur beside the Alpha as he swings. A solid fist connecting with the Alpha’s ear that dislocates his footing. People scatter, crashing into each other like fire spreading across a dry field. They shout over the music. From the sound of it, more fights begin. It’s hot tonight. I can feel the heat on my skin. I can feel the heat in my blood, trickling down my brow like molten lead.

Alpha: I’m a fuckin’ kill you!

Rob straddles the Alpha, a man much larger than him, swinging. Arms loosen on mine like chains taken off a fighting dog as the two other men grab Rob from behind.

I’d have taken the beating if it was just me. But it’s not. It never was. This is what it means to be brothers, and I won’t let Rob get his teeth kicked in. Muscle memory: it’s all muscle memory. A downward, sideways kick; kneecap pops, a scream. The twist of an arm; the thrusting pressure of a palm against a locked elbow till it unhangs. A kick to a jaw. Bodies sprawl along the floor.

The Alpha rolls Rob over; they’re arms intertwine and push on each other’s faces. I kick the side of his head, his body goes limp. I straddle him and strike. I strike until my knuckles throb. I strike until his blood spatters on my shirt. I strike until I feel the
structural integrity of his face buckle. I strike until I feel arms entangle my body, pulling me like the opening shock of a deployed parachute.

Rob: Come on, man! We’ve got to go!

Blood oozes down my hand; it could be mine. The alpha’s face is pulped and raised all squishy. His body lays limp and crooked against the legs of a table. I hear gun shots and screams. A bottle on the bar shatters, its liquid trickles on the floor. Rob pulls me along, Lydia and Bell help.

My squad loads our unarmored cargo Humvees, skeletal husks of vehicles that have no doors and open flatbeds with tarpaulin wrapped, plywood planks for a roof suspended by salvaged parachute lines. I still don’t understand why 4th ID needs us here when they have perfectly good Bradley and Abram tanks.

Rivers: Jar Silah is such a shithole.

“You got that right.”

It’s just a cinderblock town with an open sewer system that spouts shit and piss into the streets. The smell of it hangs in the air like a morning mist. Everyone’s gotten sick because of it.

Rivers: Can’t believe they got me drivin’ tonight.

Jensen: You rather be crappin’ your guts out, like Thorpe?

Rivers: I’d rather not fucking be here at all.

I run the mission again in my head—a simple ‘knock and talk.’ Cross a bridge, set up a perimeter, snatch an arms dealer. We strap our rucksacks, water, and food along the
sides of the flatbed of our unarmored Humvee—anything to provide cover. That act is symbolic at best, like taking a placebo to fight cancer.

Jensen: You almost done down there, Rivers?

Rivers grunts in harsh tones and fumbles with the radio as Lieutenant Swift stands over him, smoking a cigarette.

Rivers: Power amp is busted.

Jensen: What the hell does that mean?

“Means the radio won’t reach back here, dumbass.”

Rivers: Guess we get to call it a night, huh sir?


Wilson: Yes, Sir?

Swift: Your power amp working?

Wilson: Roger.

Swift: We’re switchin’ trucks. Get your driver over here.

“Hey Sir, want me to move the gun?”

Swift: Nah. We don’t have time.

“It’ll just take a minute—”

There’s never enough time to do things right. My truck should be in the rear, to give my gun the widest field of fire. Now that I’m in the front, my actions are limited. It just feels odd, like trying to throw with a non-dominant hand.

We exit the gate and drive fast down an unlit highway, without headlights. The engine roars and the wind howls.
Kahlil: Is this safe?

Jensen: Speed is security!

Speed is all we have for protection, really. It’s not like they can’t hear us. Even in this darkness, it’s not like they can’t see us either. Only our trucks have the silhouettes of men’s heads bulging from the body of the vehicle. They are so damn wide and low, I don’t know who we’re trying to fool driving in blackout, us or them. I hunker down, press my shoulder against the butt stock of my machine gun, and looked ahead. I feel static before a storm, when hairs on the arms and nape stand on end, as we drive through a cut between two rising hills. The road is empty. It’s been empty.

Jensen: RPG!

He raises his rifle and begins to fire every round in his magazine. Four men behind me open fire, retaliating against an unseen enemy.

The tracers and rocket-propelled grenades travel against each other. I pull at the butt stock of my machine gun, trying to orient the muzzle towards the ambush. The makeshift gun mount reduces the area in which I could fire. I can do nothing but watch. My weight shifts hard. An explosion trails light and heat followed by another, booming against the hill beside us. The driver cuts hard left and accelerates as a rocket propelled grenade skips across the hood of our truck and explodes. Jensen falls in the cab and screams. We drive on. There’s no room to turn around. I don’t look behind. I keep my eyes ahead of me and hear nothing but ringing. I watch for anything that might be waiting, but there’s no follow on assault. I feel the wind pass through me. Once we cross the bridge, I turn my head. Blood runs black down Jensen’s face as he opens a field
dressing, hands trembling. Rivers’s truck smokes and hobbles along well behind us. It rests on the railing of the bridge.

"Turn around!"

For once, Wilson takes command. He places several of the soldiers at the mouth of the bridge, quarantining it, then mounts the truck. I give Jensen the gun, and he slumps over it with the field dressing bound around his face. He spits a long string of blood atop the roof. It scrawls along the canvass right to left. I take his rifle and feel the heat of it radiate through the hand guards. We stop the vehicle short and dismount. Jensen lays down suppressive fire along the hillside as Wilson and I bound forward. He breaks left, and I go to the driver’s side. The gunfire ceases.

I keep my rifle and eyes trained on the hill and call out for Rivers. He doesn’t respond. No one does. I reached over with my left hand and grab his shoulder.

“Rivers, you good?”

I feel heat and sticky moisture on my fingertips; his body slumps forward. A sound like a pitcher of water poured onto concrete follows. I turn my head. My rifle lowers. There is a hole in the smoking dashboard a hand’s width from the steering wheel. I can’t speak. I can’t weep. I can’t rage. I am silent.

I push his body back into the seat; his head lolls. His left arm slips forward, free of a forearm, and cauterized. There is a hole in his face, a jaw broken free. His tongue dangles like a tattered shoelace.
Lydia’s flushed skin highlights her wide eyes. I know that look, the rush of adrenaline, the feeling of surviving something without having to see death. My eye is swelling and it is difficult to see things as they are. I give her Rob’s keys and ask her to drive. I rest my face against the window, letting the cool glass numb my eye. Lydia talks, but I don’t hear her. Bell coos and coddles Rob who kicks my seat and speaks.

Rob: That was fuckin’ sweet! I was like—blam—not in my house! And Johnny Bad-ass here was like—I know ka-rah-te, he-yah! Lydia, babe, bring us home.

Lydia puts her hand on my thigh. I lift my face from the pane and I look to her hand. It hasn’t a callous.

Lydia: You OK?

“Fine, just tired is all.”

Lydia: The night’s still young. We can go to my place. Get you some ice for that eye, wake you up a bit. How’s that sound?

“Good, sounds good.”

Her mouth opens as she smiles. Her teeth glisten in the passing lights.

Lydia: Great.

She turns on the radio, and quickly changes from the news to music. She sings with it. Lyrics about the night being good, and living it up. She keeps one hand on the wheel as she raises another, writhing in the driver’s seat. Rob and Bell kiss again, they’re tongues slap together like wet towels.
When we arrive at her place, Lydia takes me by the hand and leads me up the stairs. Her skirt doesn’t cover her ass, and I can see everything. I watch my feet climb the stairs instead of her, noticing blood on the toe of my shoes as well as the scuffs. I wonder what it will take to get them like mirrors again.

It’s a small apartment. Two bedrooms, a living room and a kitchenette. Bell wastes no time taking Rob into hers, shutting the door and blaring her radio to hide the sounds of their fucking. Lydia sits me on a cigarette-burned futon and moves to the kitchen to get ice. Under the light of a neon bulb, her skin looks grey and shimmers with a thin film of sweat. She reaches into a freezer and scoops ice into a sandwich bag.

Lydia: Coke?

I’d rather coffee. “No thanks, I’m good.”

Lydia: You mind if I do?

“Have at it.”

She comes back with a bag of ice and a tray. She hands me the ice then lays the tray on the table and picks up a severed straw. I sit upright as she snorts a line.

Lydia: You sure you don’t want any?

“Yeah, no. I’m. I’m fine, really.”

She extends her pinkie and tickles her red-rimmed nostrils. She straddles me and holds the bag of ice to my eye.

Lydia: Does it hurt?

I can feel the heat radiate off her body as the ice chills my face.

“Not so much.”
Lydia: Good, that’s real good.

She leans her head in close to mine and kisses my neck. I put my hands on her sides and feel the softness of her firm body. She shrugs a shoulder; a strap falls. She sets the ice down, leans back, and pushes the other strap off, letting her dress fall to her waist. I look to her face, a face that wants me to look at her body. I pull her close and feel the delicate flesh of her breasts press against my chest. She kisses me and grinds. I close my eyes as she runs her hands through my hair and along the back of my neck. I don’t feel her though, I feel Cara.

Rivers: Hey, you got a minute.

His voice is low and soft.

“Yeah.”

Rivers: When we get a chance, I’d like to go see the retention officer.

“OK. Why?”

Rivers: I want to re-up.

“Really?”

Rivers: It’s about time, right?

“Why now?”

Rivers: The only reason I’m not an NCO like you is because of retainability. They wouldn’t send me to the board when they sent you. And now you’re getting your rocker,
becoming a staff sergeant, and I’m get treated as a fuckin’ PV4.

“I don’t treat you that bad, do I?”

Rivers: No, not you. Wilson, Swift—hell, even Thorpe. I want out, man.

“Just wait until the deployment ends and the stop loss is lifted. Then you can get out for good.”

Rivers: I don’t want out for good—out of this platoon. The only way out is if I get my five. This place needs privates bad because it’s a fucking meat grinder.

“How long are you reenlisting for?”

Rivers: Eight.

“Eight? That’s a long time. Why not two, or four? Once you hit the ten year mark, which you will be well beyond if you re-up for eight, your only option after that is life or out.”

Rivers: I know.

“Then why eight?”

Rivers: It’s what I always wanted to do. Ever since I was a kid, you know. I mean, we all played cops and robbers, cowboys and Indians, or some variant of it—good guys and bad guys. When I was a kid, Desert Storm preceded Duck-Tales. My friends were pissed that they didn’t get to watch
their cartoon. Not me. I was excited. Here were these dudes, doing what I did for fun, but for real.

“Even after Cruise? This shit seems fun to you?”

Rivers: It is what it is.

“Never figured you for a lifer. You hate this job.”

Rivers: No I don’t. Remember what I told you back in basic when Doughty was smoking the shit out of us?

“No. what?”

Rivers: It’s all a game. It’s all a gimmick. Mine was hating the Army. Yours too, I suspect.

“It’s not the Army I hate.”

Rivers: How about you?

“What about me?”

Rivers: You gonna re-up?

“No. I’m done. I can’t keep doing this.”

Rivers: Gonna miss you when you’re gone.

“Promise me one thing though, all right.”

Rivers: What’s that?

“Don’t let this shit get to you. Any of it.”

Rivers: I won’t.
Lydia works her hand into my shirt and begins to unbutton it. I put my hands on her shoulders and move her back.

Lydia:    What?

“How old are you?”

She laughs an irrelevant chuckle.

Lydia:    Twenty-one, why? How old are you?

I count the years between us.

“How thirty-four.”

She moves into my body again, nibbles at my ear as she undoes my shirt.

Lydia:    Well, I was never very good at math. I don’t see the problem.

When I was 21, she was 13. That same year, Randle and Cox fucked a girl Lydia’s age. I saw the IED, but didn’t report it. The blast of that bomb killed Randle and injured most of Wilson’s squad. As a result of my action, Rives, Cruise, Thorpe and I were absorbed into Wilson’s. I had no faith then, and I have no faith now. I lift her off of me and rise to my feet. She looks up at me and stares.

“I do. I see the problem. I have to go.”

I take Rob’s keys from the counter and exit her apartment. She says nothing as I walk out the door. I drive to Rob’s place, throw his keys inside his apartment, lock his door, then leave.

The night is dark and cool. My right eye throbs, swollen near shut, and I walk without depth perception. I enter my car and smell the scent of other’s lingering on my
clothes. When my eye heals, I’ll wash out this car. Soon, all of this will be just a bad memory of decisions I made, bad or good—maybe it doesn’t even matter. Maybe that’s all they are, memories. Sitting in my brain like water in a basin collecting rust.

I turn the key and drive.

A pristine rifle impales two sandbags hidden by clean boots. The rifle’s butt holds a flawless helmet. Dog tags dangle from the pistol grip.

First Sergeant: Staff Sergeant Wilson.

That is not his helmet.

Wilson: Here, First Sergeant.

That is not his rifle.

First Sergeant: Sergeant Thorpe.

Those are not his boots.

Thorpe: Here, First Sergeant.

Those are not his dog tags.


He is gone.

A decade. Just over one third of my life gone. Left to fester in lands I never wish to see again. Lands I can never leave behind. Land that surround me now as I drive. The tan hills, the hot days, the cold nights—they’re all the same. Those places were as foreign
to me then as this place is now. Broken mountains. Dry and brittle grass begging to burn.

I exit San Buenaventura; I didn’t even know I was in it. I just followed the lines from where I departed. Broken hashes equally spaced, one moving in front of the other. Soldiering on. I’ll have to turn around.

The Pacific Coast Highway is emptier than the 405. Cars lead, and cars follow, but their taillights and headlights are pinpricks. The engine of my car rumbles. I should have serviced it regularly. I roll down my window. Wind rushes in. My right hand drops from the wheel and lands on the stick shift, then my seatbelt buckle. My thumb depresses a red button, and the belt retracts, tucking itself beside my left shoulder. There is a smell of familiarity. The smell of exhaust. Wetness before the rain. Salt.

I set the vehicle on cruise control. My left hand drops to my waistline, and I close my eyes.

*One-thousand.*

*Two-thousand.*

*Three-thousand.*

*Four.*

Deep breath.

Eyes open.

The car went straight, but the road has curved. I’m between lanes. I put my hands back on the wheel. I pull over to the side of the road and take out my phone. The sun crests over the foothills casting light through the smog. I bring up Cara’s picture and think of calling her, but hesitate. My thumb slides along the phone’s face, rubbing her
pixilated cheek creased by a laugh. I check the gauges. There’s a quarter tank of gas left.

I have miles to go.

**The End**