

# COLLATERAL

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With thanks to our home base:



Poetry:

**Jennifer Conlon**

“I Can Hear the Rot in You”

“The Law of Truly Large Numbers”

“To Encompass Its Largeness We Build a Fence”

**Jehanne Dubrow**

“Patton”

“Tackle Box”

**Ann Iverson**

“September Eleventh Memorial”

**Ivy Kleinbart**

“A Week in Palestine”

**Wes Moerbe**

“Widow Street”

**Lisa Stice**

“Distance”

“PCS”

Creative Nonfiction:

**Dennis Humphrey**

“1000 Words”

**Francisco M. Martínezcuello**

“Tell Me a Story”

**Andrea Wuorenmaa**

“Honey”

Fiction:

**Stephen O’Shea**

“From the Land of Genesis: Part III”

## POETRY

Jennifer Conlon

Jennifer Conlon lives in Tempe, AZ and hails from North Carolina. She is a poetry candidate in ASU's MFA program, where she also teaches freshman composition and poetry, and serves as the First Looks Editor of *Hayden's Ferry Review*. Her poems have been published by *Four Chambers Press* and *Hiedra Magazine*. These three poems are inspired by the experience of watching her brother return from war. They inspect both the internal, individual structures of trauma as well as the ungraspable numbers of those affected.

I Can Hear the Rot in You  
Jennifer Conlon

Clinking like a rake over not-leaves,  
maybe a rock, maybe a hot wheel. Your outside  
has no noise, but I hear past your thinning  
exterior, your arm hair,  
past the clenching and unclenching  
of your mouth. I learn to read your war.

I learn to hear what it says in various hours  
of your day. I learn to listen hard  
because its voice is low and often  
says things it does not mean,  
has to take them back and start over.  
Sometimes your war is a whisper  
that speaks to your body.

I wonder if you ask your war, will it take all this back.  
Because I can hear the rot in you. I can hear  
the kudzu twisting up your spine,  
crumbling you like bark. I can hear the soft dark  
earth tilling itself under there. You tell me  
your war is home and you are not scared.  
All that rot warms you, keeps you  
in your body. Something like the difference  
between the slug and the snail.

The Law of Truly Large Numbers  
Jennifer Conlon

says soldiers have grenades for heads  
says you can survive with no limbs  
like an appendix

The Law of Truly Large Numbers  
says you can find god in a deployment letter  
you can be every piece  
brought back  
in a sack built around the one long zipper

The Law of Truly Large Numbers  
sees you sleep-walking  
lays bubble wrap in your path  
wakes you with warm milk

The Law of Truly Large Numbers  
tells you that every tragedy has  
already happened and you don't  
get a handout

The Law of Truly Large Numbers  
says you can kill 700 deer today  
and eat each one with a spoon

The Law of Truly Large Numbers  
comes by for a drink  
asks if it can sleep on your couch  
after you say no to the bed

The Law of Truly Large Numbers  
says that PTSD tastes of rotting oyster shell  
and you won't drown from eating it

The Law of Truly Large Numbers  
eats breakfast with a newspaper in its lap  
asks you how was the war

To Encompass Its Largeness, We Build a Fence  
Jennifer Conlon

*Of the 2 million Americans that fought in Iraq and Afghanistan, about 500,000 suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*

If PTSD were aquatic, we'd make room for the pool.  
Imagine a big enough house to contain  
500,000 nightmares with pill bottles with guns.  
We call the house a skyscraper.

Imagine how it sleeps.  
How it dreams in mistakes: a bag  
in the corner filled with all 500,000 pieces  
of your rifle, a boy knocking on the roof for you to come outside  
and shoot him. Imagine a not-dream where he comes inside  
and gives you tea. This is his house.

There is no one to divine the future  
from these organs. The meat of 500,000 living bodies  
is instrument, is song, is work.

Imagine the impact zone as 500,000 light years—  
the distance to Andromeda.  
How long would it take to walk a light year?

## Jehanne Dubrow

Jehanne Dubrow is the author of five poetry collections, including most recently *The Arranged Marriage*, *Red Army Red*, and *Stateside*. Her work has appeared in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The New England Review*, *The Southwest Review*, and *The New York Times Magazine*. She is an associate professor of creative writing at the University of North Texas. "Patton" and "Tackle Box" come from her sixth book, *Dots & Dashes*, which won the Crab Orchard Review Series in Poetry Open Competition Award and will be published in 2017.

Patton  
Jehanne Dubrow

My husband loves to stand before a giant flag  
that isn't there and quote the General  
to his troops, which is to say to me,  
that I'm the troops need rallying  
before the beach is stormed, or in our case,  
before the combat of routine marriage.  
All Americans love to fight, he says.  
The sting of battle is the sting of coming home.  
Husband-and-wife is killing business.  
We must love one another by the bushel-  
fucking-basket. He says, an army is a team.  
You're not all going to die, he says,  
although the bed may seem a rendezvous  
with the enemy. But that's the goddamned thing.  
Only sons of bitches give in to cowardice,  
purple-pissing their separate lives  
while heroes fling themselves against a coast.  
This we'll defend. Every bastard is afraid  
of waking beside the same body everyday,  
the way she lays there like a corpse,  
and you think to yourself, how long must I lie  
in this shell hole, the hell with that.  
But then, she moves, and you wipe the dirt  
from your face and you realize this is the victory.  
To wait it out. Only a sock full of shit  
decides to run. Rip open the belly of wedlock.  
Make the screaming your best friend,  
make a constant advance on the line, make  
it blood and gut, a thousand consecutive hours  
of lousy commitment. Breed bravery  
in yourself until the bullet in your lungs  
becomes a triumph, and thirty years from now  
you'll tell your grandson this wheeze  
and cough is how to recognize a man.  
All right, you wonderful guys, go grease  
the treads of your tanks, he says. That is all.



Tackle Box  
Jehanne Dubrow

From the weight of it,  
the way its contents clicked and rubbed  
with a sound like artificial wings,

you would have thought my husband  
was a collector of silken miniatures,  
hand-tied flies for catching fish.

But inside were the insignias of his work—  
pins in the shape of oak leaves,  
shoulder boards, ribbons,

oceans of obedience  
in those shipshape compartments.  
And, watching him search

for a ceremonial medal,  
it was easy to imagine he was looking  
for a nymph or minnow, blue

damsel or yellow sally,  
as if gone to war  
were the same as Gone Fishing.

And when he found the gold length  
of braid or the sleeve device  
and lifted it from the box,

he was like a man who loves  
those still Sundays on the water  
and could already picture his line

far over the edge, cast out,  
a green deceiver knotted at the end,  
waiting for something to happen.

Ann Iverson

Ann Iverson is a writer and artist. She is the author of four poetry collections: *Come Now to the Window* by the Laurel Collective, *Definite Space* and *Art Lessons* by Holy Cow! Press, and *Mouth of Summer* by Kelsay Books (forthcoming). Ann is also the author/illustrator of a children's book *Queen Freda and the Dangerous Dragon* by Orange Hat Press (forthcoming). She is a graduate of both the MALS and the MFA programs at Hamline University. Her poems have appeared in a wide variety of journals and venues including *Writer's Almanac*. Her writing and art can be viewed at [anniverson.weebly.com](http://anniverson.weebly.com).

On "September Eleventh Memorial": My stepson served three tours of duty so to visit the memorial was a necessity for my family's healing process. While there, the poem came to me so suddenly that I had to scribble the words on a napkin. A force beyond me wrote - I just stepped out of the way and acted as transcriber. Poets know that this doesn't happen very often, and when it does it's holy, sacred ground.

September Eleventh Memorial  
Ann Iverson

Of course  
it must be water falling  
then falling again  
not just falling once  
but falling twice  
into giant footprints  
where two things did not fall  
but melted into themselves.  
Into what deep caverns  
can we make pain flow?  
How deep can a name  
be engraved?  
How slow was the fall  
when you held another's hand?  
Does this water make a difference now?  
Does it extinguish the burning finally?  
How far away is one's real face?  
How did one tree survive?  
It's only been fifteen years.  
When will we complete the world  
before we destroy it?

Ivy Kleinbart

Ivy Kleinbart teaches writing at Syracuse University and co-leads the Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group. She received an MFA in creative writing in 2007 and an MA in English in 2009 from Syracuse University. Her poems have appeared in such places as NoTell Motel, Bateau, Stone Canoe, and Cactus Heart. Most recently, she co-authored a chapter in the book *Generation Vet* and co-edited a special issue of the journal *Reflections* on veterans and writing, which is forthcoming in November 2016. She is also co-editor of *The Weight of My Armor*, an anthology of veterans' writing, due to be released by New City Community Press and Parlor Press in December 2016.

This poem grew out of a series of conversations with the Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group around questions of moral injury and the military/civilian divide. In writing this poem, I aimed to bear witness to the truth as I remembered it. I struggled over how to represent the story about the Palestinian boy, who was this totally illegible but *real* person I found myself wondering about. Ultimately, I wanted to show that war and occupation damage everyone they touch—not only when big bombs go off, but also in more mundane situations.

A Week in Palestine  
Ivy Kleinbart

When it was over and he returned from that week in Palestine,  
I was a coward, afraid to look him in the eye,  
afraid I'd see signs of another version of the person I knew.

What a strange dream the morning he left, to see him dressed in fatigues,  
standing in the pre-dawn doorway looking down at my still prone body in the bed,  
the machine gun he'd stowed in a closet behind a heap of clothes  
now slung over his shoulder, saying simply,  
"Ok, I'm going. Don't forget to feed the fish."

There was no choice in the matter. Nothing to discuss.  
It was Palestine or prison. And though we were both opposed to the occupation,  
we certainly weren't calling it "Palestine."  
It was "the territories" or "Gaza" or "the West Bank."  
After all, we *were* the occupation.

I can't recall whether, when he left, he knew, or didn't know, or couldn't say  
where they'd send him, what they'd have him do.  
Had he tried to explain, I'm sure I couldn't have grasped it.  
And things were different then—no cell phones—  
no way to check in—gone meant gone.

When it was over, the thing that bothered him most, he said,  
was picking up a boy no bigger than his own skinny little brother  
and forcing him into a jeep to guide them to their "target."  
He never said the word "terror,"  
but it was there

in the boy's face, in silences  
between sentences of the story he only halfway told.  
I had questions, but either couldn't bring myself to ask  
or figured it wrong to press.  
*Target*, I thought.

I could rationalize and tell you things were different twenty years ago.  
The conflict wasn't full-blown; we still had hope for peace, even.  
He was a decent, gentle person, fearless and sternly ethical.  
He never would have let anything  
happen to that kid.

But what am I trying to convince you of?  
Convince myself?

All I can tell you is, his week in Palestine felt like a long time.

I spent most of it alone in his dingy room on the kibbutz,  
watching television late into the night, sleeping in his bed  
without him, getting up at 6:00 am to cook eggs  
in a cement shack a mile deep in the fields for two dozen  
men who grew up with him, loved him like a brother,  
and understood things about him I never would—  
biding my time in that strange place that never came to feel like home,  
going to class each day, studying a language I never fully learned,  
and remembering to feed the fish.

## Wes Moerbe

Wesley has served on both the homefront and abroad in the nation's recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. He has been the man at the door in "Widow Street," but never the recipient of such news. Wondering what that must be like gave birth to the poem. Wesley has published poetry and professional articles in *Military Review* and *Infantry* magazine. He continues to serve in the US Army as a Major of infantry and lives near Savannah, GA with his wife and dog.

Widow Street  
Wesley Moerbe

Through the lace at the window,  
I see two men, fingers fidgeting.

Polished shoes rock the porch  
beneath sharpened blue trousers,  
the glow of a cross  
and silver bars reflecting an icy sky.

Their ribbons, thick summaries  
of months ticked off the calendar  
and stitched in gold upon dark sleeves.

Weathered knuckles reach for the door  
and we all three wince in that singularity.  
In that silence I recall the script.

First, robotic introductions:

names and ranks I won't hear,  
places and units I won't remember.

*Am I the wife of Samuel R. Vanallen?*  
I am, and his friend, his lover,  
his children's mother, his mentor  
and his better nature, his fantasy.  
I am the one to whom you'll pass  
a spangled blue triangle.

*May we come inside, please?*

Away from the unnamed women  
cold stomached, hunkered behind their blinds,  
all whispering prayers and private hatreds of this place  
where widows are born but never quite die.

We pass through the oneness  
as authority knocks and I answer,  
the door swinging wide in the cold.

They begin the practiced words,  
these young men made to be old,  
their sympathy smothered by decorum.

*Are you Mrs. Samuel R. Vanallen?*



## Lisa Stice

Lisa Stice is a poet/mother/Marine Corps spouse who received a BA in English literature from Mesa State College (now Colorado Mesa University) and an MFA in creative writing and literary arts from the University of Alaska Anchorage. While it is difficult to say where home is, she currently lives in North Carolina with her husband, daughter and dog. She is the author of a poetry collection, *Uniform* (Aldrich Press, 2016). You can find out more about her and her publications at [lisastice.wordpress.com](http://lisastice.wordpress.com) and [facebook.com/LisaSticePoet](https://facebook.com/LisaSticePoet).

She writes, "I wrote "Distance" and "PCS" in response to the impact our most recent Permanent Change of Station had on our toddler daughter. She was two and going through so many developmental changes of her own, that uprooting her from familiar scenes, people, routine, and such sent her little world into a spin. Before she was born, we had made other cross-country moves under orders, but I felt helpless in helping my daughter cope with and make sense of all of the upheaval."

Distance  
Lisa Stice

we are at play  
we are in a house  
on a pretend road

either to safety  
or ruin – around  
and around

and around  
the kitchen island  
going away

going away fast  
we believe  
we are far away

earth is made  
of distances  
great and small

when we are far  
away, we believe  
we are near

\*some words borrowed from *Go, Dog. Go!* by P.D. Eastman and from “Laying Plans” *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu

PCS

Lisa Stice

Why do they say *permanent*?  
It doesn't hold steady,  
but then neither do mountains  
nor bridges nor brick houses  
nor anything else.

They say, *Go. Adapt.*  
Now we understand—  
we're permanently changed.  
That can be counted on,  
and we change often.

\* PCS (Permanent Change of Station) refers to military orders requiring a change of duty location.

## NONFICTION

Dennis Humphrey

Dennis Humphrey teaches English at Arkansas State University–Beebe and has served two tours in Iraq in the National Guard. His fiction has appeared in *storySouth*, *Southern Hum*, *Clapboard House*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *BloodLotus*, *Toad Suck Review*, *SN Review*, and *Fried Chicken and Coffee*.

The picture described in the essay “1000 Words” started out as a way for me to spend time with my child while I was in Iraq. The picture existed for many years before the essay, during which time it had to speak for itself from its frame on the wall or from my computer desktop background. I wrote the essay partially due to people’s out-of-context interpretations of the drawing, especially after I had remarried and had been sent off again from my family to the war in Iraq. It was also partially in response to the saying 'a picture is worth a thousand words.' I wrote an essay of exactly 1000 words to show how these thousand words make the picture tell a story no other thousand words can tell.

1000 Words  
Dennis Humphrey

Images *mean* in ways that defy definition, the way that words can be pinned to dictionary pages like dried moths in a child's science project. Pin down an image and before your eyes it will wriggle free. It will pop in and out of meaning like a quantum particle, altered by each act of observation. It will twist in the eye and in the mind like a Rorschach ink blot, meaning anything and nothing. Would that words could do all that.

I have a picture in my mind now, a photograph that was sent to me about five years ago. I don't have to wonder what the circumstances in the photo were. I know the photographer, my former mother-in-law. I know the child, my daughter. I know she was waiting for her daddy to make one last trip home, two days at Christmastime, before a year-long deployment to Iraq. She had turned two years old in August. She stood by the window in her mamaw's front room, with the window open to hear my truck coming. Her mother was not there. She did not wish to be. My daughter was just spinning around to look back at mamaw when the shutter snapped.

In the following March, when that photo caught up with me in Iraq, tucked in a letter from my in-laws, I felt the distance in the wonder in my daughter's eyes—hazel, like her mother's eyes, every color that eyes can be, all in one gaze. The wonder alighted in my mind, and there it fluttered, day and night for weeks, until I took pencil and sketchpad in hand. In stolen moments, between trips to the bunkers, on late watches when the intel said we could expect trouble but there was nothing to do but wait, when I should have been sleeping, the wonder took form in graphite on paper. You see, I had an idea. Her mother's birthday was in May. I would send the drawing to her, to reach across an even greater distance. I even wrote a poem to go with the drawing:

She is spinning  
    'round,  
and her mind is turning  
    over  
days and weeks for memories,  
her whirling hands and feet moving in time  
as still she waits,  
with the window up in winter  
to listen for an absent  
    sound  
body dancing now  
    but mind grown quiet  
as fresh snow  
    on the ground.  
She is spinning  
    'round.

I would send the drawing and the poem to my mother-in-law, and she would have them matted and framed and wrapped and delivered to my wife, her daughter, my daughter's mother, on the birthday I was away. I knew the drawing could not survive the trip through the mail from Iraq to Arkansas if I did not treat it with some fixative to prevent the graphite of the pencil from being smeared into a uniform gray blur by the friction of the envelope that carried it. I also knew

that my likelihood of finding a professional art matte spray fixative in central Iraq was a longer shot than the one I was taking to change my wife's mind. The closest I could find was a can of hairspray on a dusty shelf in the makeshift PX they'd put in a commandeered building from the old regime. Of course the shelf was dusty. Everything was dusty in that place.

Since the hairspray was not intended for use in fixing anything but hair, I was leery of the effect it might have on the drawing, more especially the paper. If there were any oils they might stain the paper or render it translucent, like an antique lamp shade. I made a test drawing. I'd be lying if I said that I remember what it was. A Rorschach ink blot would do just as nicely. I tested the hairspray on the control drawing. It fixed the graphite in place against all smudging, and it had no adverse effects on the paper. Success! I couldn't believe my luck. I treated the drawing, printed the poem and sent them both, after taking a digital photo of the drawing just in case the plane carrying the original out of Iraq were shot down, you understand.

Six weeks after my return from Iraq had reunited me with my daughter, by then a precocious three and a half going on thirty, before any decision had been reached by my wife on the future of our marriage, my wife was killed when she lost control of her car and crossed the median of I-430 into the path of an SUV.

Nine years later, the original drawing, still matted and framed with the poem, sits in a box for safekeeping. I will give it to my daughter when she is old enough, whenever that is. The digital photo I took in Iraq I have saved on at least three hard drives and two flash drives. I have used the image as the background for my desktop on every computer I have owned since then. Others have seen and commented on it. Those who know and recognize my daughter wonder at its detail, even more when they ask who the artist was. In time, however, there were things to add. It became the centerpiece of a collage of pictures of all my children, and my new step children, and my new wife, and the new baby we had together five years ago. One of the IT techs at work was helping me with a software bug one day, and she said that, in her opinion, I had the best desktop background on campus. That picture vibrates now in a context that did not exist when its first meanings branded themselves on a seething mind in the crucible of war on terror. Those meanings are still there, indelible, but now ghostly images in a multi-layered palimpsest, which even now takes on another layer, as I wonder what it might mean, to me or anyone, without the thousand words.

Francisco M. Martínezcuello

Francisco Martínezcuello was born in Santo Domingo, República Dominicana and raised in Long Island, New York. He has been writing short stories and journaling since he was a teenager. His passion for literature and writing continued throughout his 20 years of Marine Corps service and helped him understand the impact of war on our nation's veterans. He is a product of the 2015 Writer's Guild Foundation Veteran's Writer's retreat, the 2015 Veteran's Summer Writing Intensive at Marlboro College sponsored by Words After War, and a participating member of So Say We All and their monthly Greenroom Writers Workshop. His first fiction short story 'The Gift', was published in the April 2016 issue of the Dominican Writers Association (<http://www.dominicanwritersassociation.com/single-post/2016/05/16/The-Gift>). He is currently working on his first novel and a collection of short stories in San Diego.

"Tell Me A Story" was inspired by the transition from military to civilian and how to process what has happened to my identity as a result of 20 years of service. My Marine friends have come and gone and I have lost friends as a result of the war or dealing with the effects after returning home. Each loss has its own pain and regret but none like the first one.

Tell Me a Story  
Francisco M. Martínezcuello

The zygomaticus major and minor muscles are better known as the “smiling muscles.” I first noticed my zygomaticus muscles atrophied in October twenty-five while I was at a Vons Supermarket in San Diego when the front swiveling wheels of my shopping cart seized up. The shopping cart was invented by Sylvan Goldman of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Sylvan sat in his office one night in nineteen thirty-six and wondered how he could get his customers to move more groceries and yet I was stuck in aisle thirteen not moving shit. The increase in static friction forced my back to round, and head to dip while I shortened my steps still unable to move an empty thirty-five pound aluminum vessel. My thirteen-year-old twins, amused with my struggle, offered comic relief by making faces at me as I kicked and whispered expletives at the winning wheel. I scratched my left wrist and adjusted my memorial bracelet that I had purchased in February two thousand four, while Tavaya, the eldest by two minutes, held a jar of Smucker’s Apple Butter.

“What you got there, Bub?” I asked in between pushes and grunts.

“What do people use this for?” She raised the jar in a synchronized fashion.

“I can’t read the jar.” I squinted, I scratched my hairy face.

“I hate scruffies, Dad.” Nyoka, the younger twin, smirked, referring to my failed attempt at bearding. My zygomaticus muscles did not respond.

My father hadn’t been in my life since I was three and my parents divorced. I cannot comprehend what it’s like to have a father, let alone a lifer Marine veteran who missed years of his children’s’ lives. My daughters were on a repetitive seven stage emotional cycle of deployment. This cycle included: anticipation of loss, detachment and withdrawal, emotional disorganization, recovery and stabilization, anticipation of homecoming, renegotiation of marriage, reintegration and stabilization. Stage One “Anticipation of Loss” came to me when I was sitting in the Transition Assistance Program classes that separating service-members receive. I had received my DD-214 and officially retired from the Marine Corps in September twenty-five, and my mind was going through this seven-stage cycle for the third time. The first time was during my yearlong stay in Iraq two-thousand-and-eight. The second was Afghanistan two-thousand-and-eleven. And now I was deploying from the Marine Corps.

My twins stared at their Stage Two “Detached and Withdrawn” father. A man foreign to them, bound by blood, who made them uneasy, but whom they mimicked and teased to alleviate tense situations. They called me names like “beardo” in order to get a response from my expressionless face. In the Marines we are taught to compartmentalize our emotions and not allow them to interfere with the decision making process. The faster a leader makes decisions on the battlefield the faster the troops can execute to overwhelm the enemy. Emotions cause hesitation which leads to loss of life. But when my daughters would hesitate kissing me goodnight as if they were smooching a porcupine I would be lying if I said it didn’t bother me.

“Smucker’s Apple Butter,” I said. “I used to know someone who loved the stuff.”

“Tell me a story, Dad.”

At that particular moment it was hard to tell if my daughter came up with that phrase organically or if she was mimicking me again.

*Tell me a story* transported me back to a world when my zygomaticus major and minor were flexible and strong; undefeated against sadness and anger.

March two thousand in Rio De Janeiro, Brazil. I was a young enlisted man, a Sergeant, and a Marine Security Guard at the American Consulate in Rio de Janeiro. I was the new guy



and my immediate supervisor had just returned from Bahia, Brazil. His name was Danton Kyle Seitsinger, but he preferred Kyle for short. Kyle felt it appropriate that FNG's (fucking new guys) work all the holiday shifts so that the senior members of the team could enjoy life.

I had transferred from Kampala, Uganda, flying from one continent to another—a long flight that caused my short temper to flare—then landed on the eve of Carnival only to go to work the next morning. After three days of shift work, standing in dress blues for most of the watch, I relaxed in the empty Marine House. I was watching TV when Kyle walked in through the front door. A hairy barrel-chested man in a black Speedo, he shouted, “Tell me a story.”

“I’ll tell you a story,” I responded. “I’ll tell you a story about a Sergeant who screwed over another Sergeant by making him work before he even had a chance to acclimate to a new environment.”

Kyle laughed, “It’s carnival son. We don’t have time for that.”

While my initial reaction towards Kyle wasn’t positive, his gregariousness won me over enough to shed tears when his tour ended, and he was honorably discharged from the Marine Corps after six and a half years in the summer of two-thousand. Kyle was an infantryman by trade but he didn’t spend much time with a line company as a result of his success on the rifle range. He was an instrument of war and he dutifully mastered his craft with precision so much that he was tasked to train others on the range, becoming a coveted rifle range coach at Edson Range aboard Camp Pendleton.

Kyle was born on October fourth, nineteen seventy-four in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, a place I would curse much later in life for giving birth to the shopping cart. He was the product of a cattle ranching family. Throughout his life Kyle moved with purpose and speed as if instinctively driven to explore this world. Kyle found service and sacrifice early through simple gestures like giving his jacket to the cold, poor kid in school. He wasn’t a saint; he was flawed like all teenage boys. His lack of discipline and disdain for authority resulted in his enrollment at the Wentworth Military Academy in nearby Lexington, Missouri.

Later in Rio, Kyle would receive care packages from his community, church and family. The contents of the care packages often included children’s clothes, soccer balls and Smucker’s Apple Butter. Kyle presented the children’s clothes to the orphaned and impoverished children of Rio. He threw soccer balls to the kids on the street from the armored vehicle on his way to work. And he routinely smeared the apple butter on toast or shoved spoonfuls into his mouth every morning and washed it down with coffee.

“Put the jar in the cart. I’ll tell you a story after some toast.”

After she put the jar in the cart, I pushed it with ease, as if the apple butter greased the stuck swivel wheels. We finished shopping and returned home.

In early February two thousand four, I received a phone call from then Staff Sergeant William Pennington. William was stationed with me and Kyle in Brazil, and we continued our friendship. It was my junior year at Cal State San Marcos and the twins were turning two that summer. My girlfriend Tausha, who would later become my wife, answered the phone. I was bottle feeding Tavaya while watching TV in the living room of our nine-hundred square foot apartment. I always admired Tausha’s olive complexion but moments after picking up the phone I noticed her skin had turned pale. “You need to take this call,” she said. “It’s William.”

I exchanged Tavaya for the phone.

“What’s up Pennington?”

“Kyle’s dead Frank, he was blown up.”

There’s no other way to receive bad news in the military, you’re trained to ask yourself

two things when you receive information: 1. What do I know? (The five W's) and 2. Who needs to know it?

William provided me with the 'who' and the 'what,' but the where, when and why didn't matter to me.

After the Marines, Kyle went to Oklahoma Christian University in pursuit of a degree in both journalism and Spanish. He also went into the Army Reserves as a way to help pay for school. He was on his way to graduating but was called to active duty in November two thousand three with the 486<sup>th</sup> Civil Affairs Battalion out of Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Back from the store, the twins put away the groceries while I placed four slices of bread in their respective spring-loaded trays of my automatic toaster and I triggered the lowering mechanism. I opened up the jar of apple butter imagining Kyle opening a care package.

On January twenty-ninth, two-thousand-and-four the United States sustained the largest loss of life in Afghanistan at the time. The Army said a weapons cache exploded in Afghanistan and never explained anything more to the eight families that were seventy-four-hundred miles away. Those families absorbed the shock waves and were fragmented that cold Thursday in January. The Army didn't have to tell me a story; I already knew Kyle's. I'm positive Kyle went on patrol with his care package and handed out clothes, toys and chocolate to Afghan kids. I'm positive the children were being watched by others just as I watched the orange toaster coils glow. I'm positive the kids fed Kyle information and Kyle acted on it.

My automatic toaster radiated three-hundred-ten degrees of heat on that bread as I was trying to comprehend the effects of three-thousand-degree heat on flesh. The toaster popped; the image vaporized.

"Paper plates Dad?"

"Yes."

I felt the girls' stares as I grabbed the toast slowly and sat it on three plates. One for each of them and two for me.

"I'll get a butter knife," said one.

"I'll get milk," said the other.

"I'll be at the table." I grabbed the apple butter along with the toast. Moments later we all sat down.

I began to tell them a story about apple butter and how it used to be a family and community effort to make. I told them of the importance of canning and jarring, specifically in the time before refrigerators. I told them that apple butter would last through harsh winters and communities would make it and hold festivals in October. I paused the story, took the knife to the apple butter with my right hand as I held the toast on my left when I thought of Ghazni, Afghanistan where Kyle took his last breath.

The capital city of Ghazni is at the foot of the Hindu Kush Mountains, roughly seventy-three hundred feet above sea level.

I elevated my left wrist where the starchy plateau laid flat on my palm, my bracelet in my line of sight. I smeared the deep brown apple butter over the caramelized toast like an explosion coating its path with shrapnel and soot.

"Are you okay dad?"

"No. No I am not."

I entered Stage Three, "Emotional Disorganization," when I took a bite of the toast. I was surprised by the sweetness of the apple butter but it didn't ameliorate the bitterness. I was angry at Kyle for not seeing my daughters or me before he left. I was mad at him for answering the call to serve again even when he'd already done his time. I felt guilty for surviving after

twenty years of service and he had been denied his dreams. I was so occupied with anger I was oblivious to notice the twins had dismissed themselves to their room. They put me in timeout.

While in timeout, I thought more about why Kyle continued his service. I think he missed the sense of purpose and the brotherhood that came with it. I missed it too, so I applied to the San Diego Police Department. I was scheduled to attend the academy in November.

I had an appointment with a psychiatrist on the morning of October twenty-second, twenty-fifteen. It was a beautiful Thursday and I woke up feeling more optimistic than usual. The psychiatrist's office was on Third Avenue in Hillcrest so I decided to get there early for breakfast since it was near a diner that I'd been meaning to check out. At around seven in the morning I got to the gentrified diner made popular by their portion sizes, moderate prices and hip clientele. I walked in with my suit and tie on, sat at the bar, ordered and stared at my coffee. My left wrist was itching and so I scratched it; bracelet exposed. I ate my breakfast and asked the waiter for my check. He said it was already taken care of while he pointed to my wrist. I didn't know how to respond to a free meal. The loss of a friend was worth more to me than breakfast. I didn't want to be rude but my zygomaticus muscles were uncooperative so I left a tip instead.

October had been cold, but that day it was sunny and seventy-six degrees. At the psychiatrist's office I took the battery of tests and waited for the interview. The psychiatrist went into the waiting area where we exchanged greetings. As she led me down the hallway to her office a volley of questions came out of her like a three round burst from a service rifle.

"Are you ready?"

"Are you ok?"

"Why do you look so sad?"

When we got into her office she sat down at her desk as I sat in a chair in front of her. I told her a story about being born in the Dominican Republic and raised in Long Island, New York; often times being the only family of color in the neighborhood. She folded her arms like my mother did when she was dissatisfied with me and not buying my bullshit. I moved past my demographics and continued. I told her more stories about eating government cheese and purchasing food with food stamps or "monopoly money" as the bullies referred to. I told her a story of depression after Kyle's death to which her response was, "You had a tough life." I told her that I only know of my life and that I cannot compare it to others. She asked if I've had flashbacks and I told her a story about my experiences. She asked me why I wanted to be a police officer. I told her that I sought purpose and I wanted to serve my community. She recommended I find another profession. I was a liability and considered a high risk for the department.

There would be more rejections in the months to come, that was merely the beginning. My email inbox is full of letters like:

*"Dear Mr. Martinezcuello:*

*We have carefully reviewed and considered your qualifications for this position. We regret that we are unable to offer you a position at this time."*

And,

*"Hi Francisco,*

*...unfortunately we are going with another person for this particular role. You did interview well and I am looking at other opportunities for you."*

And also,

*"Dear Mr. Martinezcuello,*

*We have reviewed your application and found you qualified for the position. However, you were not among the most highly qualified candidates."*

In November twenty-fifteen, a few weeks after my visit with the psychiatrist, I drove up to San Clemente where Kyle's family dedicated a bench in honor of him at the Marine Monument in Semper Fi Park. There's a beautiful view of the San Clemente Pier being swallowed by the Pacific. I sat on Kyle's bench that foggy fall morning. I was slumped over with my head in my hands, rubbing my hair back and forth in frustration. I whispered, "I'm trying," when my bracelet scratched my forehead. I took off the bracelet and studied it for the first time. It was scratched by Babylonian sandstorms and battered by the Afghan metamorphic rock but you can still make out the engraved print "SGT Danton Kyle Seitsinger OK ARMY Enduring Freedom KIA 29 JAN 04". I got up off the bench to throw the bracelet when I noticed the fog had lifted and I could see the pier clearly; to the left of beach swings. I remembered a day in March twenty-eleven when I took the twins to meet with William before I deployed to Afghanistan. William and I exchanged stories about Kyle that day. My daughters asked me and William to walk the pier and try out the beach swings so we did. I pushed the girls on the swing, their backs crashed against my hand like Newton's cradle. Their blond locks danced with the on-shore breeze as their bodies' defied gravity. "Higher daddy, higher," they demanded until they were parallel with the heavens; their zygomaticus muscles active, present and accounted for. At that moment I could feel Kyle's presence. He was there that spring two-thousand-eleven just as he was in November two-thousand-fifteen and for the moment all of us were together again. This realization welcomed me into Stage Four "Recovery and Stabilization" and I felt my facial nerve trigger the zygomaticus minor to draw my upper lip up igniting a chain reaction. My Cranial Nerve fired signals to the zygomaticus major and I felt the corners begin to turn; I got into my car and returned home.

## Andrea Wuorenmaa

Andrea Wuorenmaa is a writer from Michigan's Upper Peninsula and a recent graduate of Northern Michigan University's MFA program. Her interests include historic and travel writing in the realm of creative nonfiction, as well as the personal essay.

The found essay "Honey" is a collection of threaded quotes from letters written by the author's grandfather and father (both deceased), during World War II and the Vietnam War, respectively. The author thus considers the work a familial-composed essay, a kind of lifeline to the past and a brief vision of each generation's experiences, fears, and hopes for the future.

Honey

Andrea Wuorenmaa

it's wonderful. I can't believe it's you. You have been worrying, I can see that. Honey, you sure do look sweet. You really look the tops and so pretty, that my eyes, just can't believe it. Now I miss you so much, that I'm afraid I'll go crazy. Got my radio (transistor), stationary, & envelopes wet when I fell in a stream. I threw the stationary away and the radio is dried out now & working fine. The weather's been miserable for the last two weeks. It's been raining and breezy. Everybody seems to have colds and coughs. My cough isn't very bad now and my feet are in good shape now. I never had the chance to have my teeth checked. There's only a little nicotine on them. I'll have them when I return, don't worry. I listen to good tunes every night in my hutch with a candle burning. Sure is lonely though. I sure miss home, didn't know how nice it was until I came over here. I understand you have a bike now, honey. How much did you pay for it. Is it one of the latest types, or one of those old ones? Now, don't go and hurt yourself, honey. I know, that you can ride a little at least, so there shouldn't be any reason for getting hurt. The French people are swell. They treat us nice, and trade eggs, and milk, for our cigarettes and candy. They are happy, because they are free now. This was written in my fox hole some where in France. Temperature: about 90° / Loc. – Khe Sahn / Time – 4:00 p.m. / Days Remaining – 186 / 7 APR. 68. I finally found a bit of time to drop you a line and let you know what's happening. I was just dying of thirst and we happened to cross a stream, nice cool water, I filled my canteens, sure was good. With my buddy's 126 instamatic camera I took some pictures of me digging a fox hole near the L.Z. It's not bad at all here, just like sitting in the backyard at home. There's been steady air strikes and B-52 strikes with helicopter gunships pounding the area. Boy, the area around Khe Sahn is so cut up with bomb craters from B-52's and jets (F-4 Phantoms & Skyraiders) it's not half as bad as they say it is though. How's the fishing? In one letter you told me how you had cried, and how you scolded your little brother, for spilling milk, on the cellar floor. You really must be upset honey. Please don't act like that, towards any one. You are over worrying yourself honey. You must relax and try to forget about this war, because it will drive a person nuts, in the end. Don't scold any one for a small incident like that. I use to be like that, years ago, but the army woke me up, and I realize now, that all people have a heart, and that is some thing. I don't want to break on any one. I know what a broken heart is honey, and you do also. We left Camp Evans about a week ago and we still haven't patrolled, just been making a fire base for artillery to get a little closer to the Laotian border to aid troops in that area. We've been making bunkers, laying wire, digging foxholes and mainly pulling security for the artillery battery of 6 guns. Aside from that working, plus cleaning the land, I've written letters, played cards and talked with the guys. I'm tired of being separated so long. I know you are too honey. This can't go on forever, we know. This war should be all over by xmas at the most. It sure would be nice, if I did get home to you, on xmas Eve. I think, that would be a real nice time to meet after this long wait. Honey, are you taking good care of your self? That worries me, more than any thing else honey. I want you to be just the same girl, as when I left you. It's nice to see Planes going on Raids over here. I've seen, so many, that I don't even look up no more. We really got an air force honey. We are on a fairly high hill overlooking the flat land to the east all the way to the coast. There are mountains in all other directions covered with jungle terrain. The weather is in the 80s and 90s (sorry to rub it in like this) and a nice breeze blowing too. I just returned from Protestant services. My feet have a little jungle rot on the bottoms, nothing serious. I don't have a smoking cough anymore. I have 207 days to go and a couple 'till R&R. I wish I could have attended the ski tournaments but it's one of those things. I haven't written to

anyone else but my own family, just not a letter writer anymore. Here it is July, and just about one year, since I was home. It seems ten years to me, and I know it's the same feeling with you. Incidentally, I just ruined another camera. It got wet last night, they just don't last over here. I've two more rolls of film taken in Japan to send home. Too bad about that Seablom lad. I'll admit that it is bad over here and people should have a little more feeling for G.I.'s in Viet Nam. I didn't know him and it sure is horrible. He was probably mine sweeping a road. I miss you, Dad & the kids more than anyone else in the world. Stay healthy & don't worry. I understand you, and your ways, and the will, you have to work, and take care of a home. I know honey, it takes a lot of good points, to make a good wife, and you really have all them points. I know, our future, will be a grand one honey. Don't worry.

## FICTION

Stephen O'Shea

Stephen O'Shea is a Texan author finishing a PhD in creative writing at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, Scotland. His current project is a collection of short stories based upon the narratives of combat veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. He's been published by American and Scottish literary magazines, earned honorable mention in *Glimmer Train's* Short Story Award for New Writers, was awarded runner-up to Moniack Mhor's "New Author" award, and recently received The Gillian Purvis Award for New Writing. Stephen also teaches first and second year creative writing workshops at the University of Strathclyde.



“From the Land of Genesis: Part III”  
Stephen O’Shea

Ryan could hear his wife breathing beside him. He’d spent the afternoon in downtown Colorado Springs, and now he was struggling to fall sleep. He often struggled to sleep, but on this night he didn’t even try. Instead, he waited for his wife to fall asleep so that when he peeled back the covers to leave, she wouldn’t wake up.

On sleepless nights, Ryan would usually work in the garage. He’d work on his ‘98 Ford until he got tired or until morning came, and when he set down his tools he would do so carefully, so that the metal did not cling against the concrete. His torque wrenches were the hardest because they were pure metal and had no rubber handles. Whenever he used a torque wrench, he would grab a towel from the kitchen and set it on the concrete to put the wrenches on. That way he wouldn’t have to worry about waking up Carly.

But Ryan no longer had a car to work on because he had sold his old Ford a few months ago to buy a new F-150. It was a 2014 model and didn’t need as much work as the ‘98. Since he had just cleaned it yesterday, Ryan had nothing to do but lift the garage door and, as quietly as he could, drive out of their cul-de-sac home.

Theirs was a nice house in a neighborhood of nice houses. Ryan had been promoted to manager at the mechanic shop several years ago, and after he began dating Carly—who he met clerking for a downtown towing company—he started saving money to place a down payment on a house. This past year, there had been talk between Ryan and Jim, the shop owner, about opening a second location; Carly’s Christmas bonus had been double what it was the year before; and, as the market in Colorado Springs grew, the value of their house rose. They had appraised it four months before and found it worth about thirty-percent more than they had bought it for.

With all of this adding up, Carly decided that Ryan should buy a 2014 F-150. She was secretly embarrassed riding in Ryan’s old ‘98 Ford, and she thought that a new truck might pull Ryan out of the garage and into the house more. The new car had leather seats and an automatic transmission that hummed as he drove out of town. Its air-conditioning could hold comfortable temperatures and the V8 engine was enough to press him against the back of his seat whenever he accelerated onto a highway ramp. He was accelerating onto I-25 just now, heading north, and because he hadn’t slept for two nights and was slightly delirious he didn’t think much about where he was going until he reached the outskirts of Denver.

Ryan went driving only to calm his nerves, but he had a half-tank of gas and scenes from the recruitment office were still running through his head. There were mountains to the left and empty plains to the right, so Ryan cut west onto 470 away from downtown.

He’d always liked the mountains. When Ryan was a boy, a truck came to their house in Dallas and unloaded a bed of bricks for their garden onto the driveway. They piled into a heap and, to Ryan—who’d grown up in the Panhandle—this was as close to a mountain as he’d seen, so he climbed it. When his parents told the story, they said that he was naked and that he cut himself on the way down. They also said that he pushed his younger brother off when he tried to follow. Ryan didn’t remember this, but he’d laugh when they told it. He’d also laugh when they told the story of him biting Kevin on the back. Kevin had finished his first puzzle and everyone was clapping and so Ryan bit him. “Jealous of the attention,” they used to say, and Ryan would laugh because it was funny but also because he felt bad.

Ryan was skirting Denver when he got the urge to call his brother. He wanted to ask him about his work and to laugh about the old times. It was nearly midnight in Dallas, but Ryan

suspected that his brother would be at work. He didn't know exactly what kind of work Kevin did, but he knew that the law firm he worked for in Dallas was famous and dealt with corporations.

Ryan scrolled through his phone and used his Bluetooth device to call Kevin. He heard the ringing around him as he drove with his hands on the steering wheel. The phone rang four times and then it went to voicemail. "Hello, you've reached Kevin McDermott, attorney at law. I'm unable—" Ryan hung up the phone and called again. This time it rang twice before the answering machine picked up. "He's probably trying to sleep," Ryan thought, and as the recording rolled he tried to think up a message to leave. "Hey little brother," he wanted to say. "Just calling to check up on you." But it sounded weird in his head because he hadn't called to check up on his brother maybe ever, and the last time they had talked, Kevin had asked the "checking-up" questions. Then Ryan remembered that he hadn't called his brother since he heard that Kevin was to be made partner. His mother had told him over the phone, and while Ryan had meant to call and congratulate his brother, he had forgotten and never did.

The Bluetooth beeped off and as the silence set in Ryan saw that he was passing through Boulder, Colorado. The drive became steep after the university, winding in a series of switchbacks up the mountainside. It was dark, but the moon was out and Ryan could see the glow of Denver and the barren line of the plains beyond. Snow on the road was being wisped by the wind, and as Ryan climbed higher he started worrying about ice, but it was the end of May and the snowplows would've been through for Memorial Day.

By the time Ryan reached Estes Park he could feel the altitude. He had lived in Colorado for fifteen years, now, but the mountain air still felt thin. He had to take deep breaths to get oxygen into his chest, all while he sat without moving in his truck. The strain reminded him of a time that he hyperventilated during a snowball fight with his brother. Afterward, his father had placed a plastic bag around his head to steady his breathing.

Ryan pulled into the Beaver Meadows entrance at Rocky Mountain National Park a half-hour later. There were five kiosks at this entrance, but only one of them was open at 3am on a Wednesday. When Ryan rolled down the window, he felt how much colder it was. The Park Ranger took Ryan's pass and held it close to his face.

"What brings you out, this time a night?"

The ranger was friendly. When he smiled, the skin around his eyes pulled back and crinkles formed along the corner of his face.

"Stargazing," said Ryan. They both knew this wasn't true, but it didn't matter.

"Couldn't get away for Memorial Day?" said the ranger. Ryan held his gaze. "Moon'll set in a few hours. You might catch a few constellations 'fore dawn, but it's not the best fer visibility tonight."

The man's face was tan and weathered. His skin scrunched together, measuring Ryan up as he glanced into the bed of his truck. It was a new truck and the bed was clean. When he looked back to Ryan, he raised the gate.

"Trail Ridge Road is open," he said, handing over the pass. "Just be careful drivin it. Sure to be icy this time a'night."

The ranger was right. There were several patches of ice along the road, and Ryan had to drive slowly to avoid fishtailing. Walls of snow lined both sides of the road except along the switchbacks, where the edge was sharp and exposed and carved its way into the mountain. After each of these, Ryan would rev his engine to get the truck moving again. It was a heavy truck, with a V8 engine that rumbled every time he accelerated out of a turnout.

Ryan knew there were beautiful views at each of these turnouts, but even with the moon he couldn't see beyond the glare of his headlights. They reflected back at him and kept his eyes dilated so that at one point he became frustrated and pulled into a scenic turnout. He idled for a moment and turned off his headlights. Then he stepped out of the truck. The cold was enough that he could see it coming out of his mouth. There was no wind, so the steam collecting in the air with each breath. After his eyes adjusted, he could see the mountains outlined by moonlight, the pavement glow behind him.

He got back into his truck and drove for a while with the lights off. He could see the snow and the road clear enough in the moonlight, but before he could reach another switchback, he switched the lights back on. "Can't be doing that," he heard himself say. "You're too old for that, now."

When he turned the lights back on, he noticed the fuel gauge on his dashboard. The needle hung just below the letter "E." Ryan flicked the glass with his finger. When he'd hit Denver just a hundred miles back, it had read a half tank. But it was a new truck and Ryan had not anticipated how his new V8 engine would cope with the steepening slope of the mountains.

He'd also no way of knowing how far he had driven down Trail Ridge Road. His phone had no service and there were no mile-markers above the snow to mark the nearest park exit. Ryan decided that he would instead drive into the next campsite and find a park ranger. But as he drove with his foot lightly on the pedal, he began to realize that he might not make it to the next campground.

When his truck finally stuttered to a stop, Ryan was on a slope with very narrow lanes, but he managed to coast to the crest of a short hill. Going with his foot on the brake and both hands gripping the steering wheel, Ryan guided the car toward a switchback at the bottom of the slope. It was hard to control the truck with the engine off. Ryan had to wedge his back against the seat and push his whole weight against the brake for the wheels to slow. Then he tucked the car into a small turnoff where it would be safe from traffic and falling rocks.

Ryan still had no service on his phone, but he knew that if he found a ranger soon and got some gas into his truck, he might be able to get home before Carly woke up. Or else he could drive to an area with reception and call so that she wouldn't be worried sick. He could even make it to work on time, and go on pretending like he'd never gone into that recruiting office the day before.

But he didn't go looking for a campsite to find a ranger. He didn't even get out of his car. He sat there in his seat until the warmth was gone and the battery died, and when he noticed the trailhead sign before him it was already four in the morning. It was the cold that finally pushed him out of his car. The snow beneath his sneakers broke as he stepped out. In his backseat was a jacket that said Jim's Motor Repair. It had oil stains on the sleeves, but Ryan put it over his coat as an extra layer. Then he put on his boots and a pair of work gloves and walked over to the trailhead sign.

The sign was a triangular slate on a wooden post. Ryan pointed an LED keychain light at it, but the lettering was so worn that he couldn't make out anything except for a ponderosa pine, and below a word that might've read "Campground." Ryan zipped up his jacket. He would hike the trail to the campground and find the park ranger, there. He imagined himself hiking through the woods in the mountains, and driving home to the sunrise. He walked for a long time. His feet moved beneath him, and his breath came out in stuttered spurts from the altitude. Mountains shimmered in the moonlight and a river trickled somewhere far away.

Ryan had enlisted over a decade ago because he wanted to fight in Afghanistan. "Kabul," his recruiter told him. "If you go anywhere, you'll go to Kabul." He told Ryan about Kabul. He

told Ryan that it was a city surrounded by mountains, that it was higher in elevation than Denver and that it wasn't hot there like people thought it was. He told Ryan about the food and the culture and the vibrant colored robes that the women wore, and he told Ryan about how the people would view him, an American soldier. He told Ryan that he would be their liberator. This gave Ryan an image of himself as a field soldier. This image was shattered the night that George W. Bush appeared on live television and told the world that there were Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq. Two months later, Ryan was driving a truck in the desert to invade Baghdad.

It took two hours for Ryan to find a sign that read "Colorado River Trail." By that time he was thirsty and faint from the walking. He'd reached the ruins of an old ghost town and knew now that the trail would not lead to any campgrounds or park rangers, but he wasn't concerned about reaching home in time for work anymore. Ryan had forgotten to pack any water.

It took a long time for the thirst to kick in. Cold and exhaustion kept his mind distracted, and when he'd left his home in Colorado Springs six hours before, he hadn't even thought to bring it. Now the river was a taunting trickle in the darkness and Ryan's throat hurt.

Ruined foundations from an old ghost town scattered the field before him. A post in the middle read "Lulu City," and beyond that was a riverside beach where the water became wide and shallow. A stream trickled over stones, pushing against the pebbly shore. Ryan's boots were waterproof, but he was tired and thirsty and not thinking of the cold, so he underestimated the river's depth. When he took a step in, the river came past his ankle. It flooded his boots and soaked his socks. Ryan didn't notice this until after he'd scooped the water with his hands and drank from it. Then his hands and his lips and his feet were cold. He kept drinking until he felt the cold inside of him, and even though he was thirsty he stopped drinking because now he was shivering.

Ryan took a few steps back and sat down on the shore. He stayed like that, hugging his knees to fight the convulsions of his body, but the cold was in his gut and in his lungs and the rocks beneath him were cold. There was another hour before sunrise, and several more before the air would become warm. He had no food or gas. He wasn't even sure anymore if he knew which direction his car was. Breathing became difficult and his vision blurred. Above him the night was pale and the stars became a shower of mortar. The screeching of it fell down and Ryan began to gasp.

He was running for a bunker, his heart shuddering with every concussion. There was an explosion and he was on his back, panting for air but there was nothing to breath. He felt a pain in his side and thought he might be hit, that his lung had collapsed. Ryan's vision cut out. There was a man carrying firewood. Trees fell and Ryan shaking, curled up on the rocks. His chest was moving too fast. A man leaned over him, young but weathered. The desert around them seared with heat from the blast.

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When Ryan woke up, he was lying on the ground before a fire. There was dirt in his hair and on his lips. His elbow throbbed and he could tell that he had been dropped there. His eyes adjusted past the glare to find that they were inside a kind of ruined log-cabin. Behind Ryan the wall was two or three logs high. The other side had no walls. There was a fire, a tent, and a man. The man was young and he was preparing a kettle. Ryan could smell coffee.

"You hyperventilated," said the man.

Ryan tried to sit but his head was ringing. "Jesus," he said.

The man placed a flimsy grill over the fire, pinning its legs in the dirt. "The altitude, probably. But you were almost hypothermic."

He had a strong voice and facial hair, but the hair at his cheek was longer than on his chin and the hair on his head was matted down. He wore jeans that had patches at the knee, and his coat had fur on the inside.

Beside Ryan were his boots, drying by the fire. His socks had been draped across them and his feet were bare. His work jacket, which had been across him like a blanket, was beginning to slip from his shoulders.

“How long was I out?” said Ryan.

“Fifteen minutes. Not long.”

Ryan felt his toes. They were still cold. “You carried me here, made a fire—”

“I was already making a fire.”

Ryan watched him place the kettle onto his makeshift grill.

“That’s how I found you,” he said. “I was gathering wood for the fire.”

“Oh,” said Ryan.

The younger man poked at the fire with a stick and glowing flakes shot up. Above them, the night peeled back a violet haze. To the east was a line of orange, broken by the ridgeline. Carly would be awake, soon.

“You’re a veteran,” said the man.

Ryan nodded. “How’d you know?”

“Your driver’s license.” Ryan reached for his wallet and the man said, “I didn’t take your money.”

Ryan’s hand fell back to his side. He looked at the young man across from him. His boots were Army. There was a bayonet looped onto his belt, as well. An army combat knife.

“Iraq,” said Ryan. “The invasion. You?”

“Afghanistan.”

Ryan nodded. He wanted to ask when, but he supposed it would’ve been recent. He looked about mid-twenties in the firelight.

“What’s your name?” Ryan asked.

“Doesn’t matter.”

“No, I suppose it doesn’t,” he said. “But it’s something to call you. Something besides ‘Kid.’”

“Mark.”

Ryan nodded. “Okay,” he said. “I’m Ryan.”

The coffee percolated and Mark used a rag to grab its handle. “I only have one mug,” he said. He poured half of the coffee into his mug and the rest into a bowl. He handed the bowl to Ryan. He didn’t apologize or offer him the cup. Instead, he moved with his mug and sat down across from Ryan. The hairs of Mark’s moustache grated against the cup when he sipped.

“I don’t suppose you have any sugar,” said Ryan, pulling his legs beneath him. His body was stiff and he couldn’t remember the last time he’d sat cross-legged.

Mark didn’t answer. Instead he said, “You’re from Colorado Springs. Hiking up here in the middle of the night.”

“I was driving. Ran out of gas a few miles back.”

“Driving here, in the middle of the night?”

“I couldn’t sleep.”

Mark pulled out a pan out from his backpack. It was dirty and charred on the bottom. He placed it over the grill and pulled out a plastic Tupperware container. He used his combat knife to carve a glob of grease. It sizzled when it hit the pan.

“Not a lot of people drive through the mountains when they’re trying to fall asleep.”

“That’s true,” said Ryan. He stared into the brown murk of his coffee, let the warmth of it wash over him. “I went to a recruitment office, yesterday.”

Mark’s face tightened. “What the fuck’d you do that for?”

Ryan was silent. The answer now was the same it had been two days earlier, at a Memorial Day barbeque: it was because Terry, their gunner, had slumped to the floor of their Humvee with a bullet through his neck, but it was also because of the smoke circles, early mornings in the chow hall and afternoons at the motor pool. Ryan thought about New Years, when Marty snuck a case of Bud onto base and spewed all over his boots after his third can. The four of them had sat in the dirt afterward, already drunk when the flare went up. All of Iraq turned red for five, maybe ten seconds. Ryan thought about that flare and how simple the world had been then, but that story was too hard to tell so when he looked at Mark he said, “Near the end of our tour, we got stationed at an outpost on the road to Basra. It was a pile of rocks, really. Hesco walls, tents for sleeping. In the morning I’d wake up to the sunrise and make coffee with my sergeant over a fire.” Ryan watched the flames as he spoke. “I guess you just miss it, sometimes.”

Mark tightened his face. He was cracking a pair of eggs over the fire and he had to lift the pan off of the grill when the grease popped.

“You think that,” said Ryan, the bowl of coffee steaming over him. “But wait until you have a nine-to-five.”

“Fuck that. I don’t need a desk job and I ain’t going back to that shithole.”

“I said the same, ten years ago.”

Mark was breaking the yolk with his spatula on the pan. “Yeah,” he said. “But you went to Iraq. You were part of the invasion.” Mark said this like it was a privilege. “Take it from me. There ain’t nothin left in that place worth fighting for.”

Ryan thought about this. The coffee in his bowl was cool enough to sip now, but he held it before his face without drinking. “I guess it doesn’t matter,” he said. “The recruiter from the other day, the one at the office after Memorial Day, he said that it was their busiest time of the year.” Ryan looked up. “That he’d already met his quota. That I was too old.”

The spatula halted and, for a moment, Mark held it above the pan in perfect stillness.

“I’ve always wanted to go to Kabul,” said Ryan. “But it doesn’t matter. Iraq, Afghanistan. Maybe I was lucky.”

Mark looked like he might say something, like it was on the tip of his tongue if he could only find the words. Then he shook his head and said, “Fuck it.” He turned back to his food. “There ain’t nothin back there for me.”

Mark took the pan off the fire and put it on the ground. He used the spatula to pick up an egg and balanced it there with the steam coming off of it.

They sat in silence for a while. Ryan sipped from his bowl. The coffee was bitter and burnt, but the warmth and the smell of it gave him chills. It felt odd that just moments before he had hyperventilated and might’ve become hypothermic. The thought was uncomfortable, so he looked across at Mark and said, “What about you. What’re you running from?”

Ryan gestured to the ruins around them. Etched into one of the logs was the phrase, “Fuck the police,” and half-buried next to him was a crushed can of Coca-Cola.

“Running?” said Mark. “Who said I was running?” Ryan didn’t reply, and Mark shook his head. “I ain’t running, man.”

“Okay,” said Ryan. “So why are you here.”

Mark laughed. “That’s a long story.”

Ryan opened his arms. “Well,” he said. “Nobody’s making you tell it. But I’m in no rush to get back to my truck.”

Mark sighed. “Sure, but it’s not like I’m gonna walk there with you.” He said this and then flinched. “Look, I’ve been roadtripping for a few months, now—working and camping to save money—but I ran out of cash after Yellowstone and had to sell my car. I hitchhiked from Salt Lake to here and now I’m gonna take the Colorado down to Mexico.” He glanced at the river where he’d found Ryan. “All of the way to Baja California.”

“That right?” said Ryan, smiling.

“Sure, that’s right.”

“You’re gonna hike to Mexico.”

“I’ll raft it once the river gets deep ‘nough. Fish for food, camp the riverbanks. Not like I’m the first to do it.”

“And the Grand Canyon?” said Ryan. “The Hoover Dam. What’re you gonna do there?”

“Keep goin, I reckon.”

Ryan laughed. He liked Mark. He liked Mark and he liked his spirit. He made Ryan think about his own plans for after the war. This made him quiet, but after a while the smell of fried egg taunted his stomach and he had to ask Mark for a bite. Mark gave him the second egg whole. It was still in the pan and he had no utensils, so Ryan had to wait for it to cool so that he could eat it with his fingers.

“I’m just a few miles down the trail,” said Ryan. “Let’s get me some gas and then I can take you into town. Get you some gear. I’ll drive you all of the way to Grand Junction, if you like.”

Mark took a bite of his egg from the spatula. He had to breathe in and out to cool the egg. “Nah,” he said. “That’d defeat the point.”

Ryan was surprised. He wanted to ask Mark what the point was—he wanted to repay him—but Mark was busy eating and Ryan’s own egg was steaming in the pan before him.

“What about you,” said Mark. “What’re you gonna do now that you can’t enlist?”

Ryan shrugged. He knew the answer was to go home, to open up a second repair shop and start a family. But he couldn’t say that. Not here. Not eating eggs with his bare hands and the mountains all around them. “Montana,” he said.

“That right?”

Ryan pinched the egg with his fingers. It was dirty from the grease in the pan, and the yoke wasn’t fully cooked. “Upper Rockies,” he said, biting it at the edge. “Cabin in the woods. Maybe I’ll do some mechanical work on the side. You know, small-time stuff for the locals.” He said this, and after he said it he could see himself there. The vision was so real, it was like he could pull it out of the earth and hold it there with the grease in his hands.

Above them the sky was white. A curtain of dawn had pulled back the violet sky and now the sun was about to breach the mountains. It would’ve risen on the other side of that ridgeline long ago, and as Ryan waited for it to come he thought of how it would’ve been morning in the north, in Montana, an hour before. It’d be high above the Atlantic, now—and in Europe, as well—and a few hours from setting in Iraq. Ryan thought about how the sun set in the States at the same time it rose in Iraq. “The Land of Genesis,” he said out loud. He pulled his knees up and felt the dirt on his feet. His toes ground together with the sand between them, digging into the earth. He took another bite of his egg. The yolk broke from its core and dribbled down his chin, onto the pan.