

Shrapnel



a novel in fragments
Sean Mclain Brown

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by Sean Mclain Brown

(an excerpt of a work-in-progress)

*“Here dead lie we because we did not choose
To live and shame the land from which we sprung.
Life to be sure, is nothing much to lose;
But young men think it is, and we were young.”*

- A. E. Housman (1859-1936)

On the Run

I don't need an alibi. I'm here to confess. I did it. I'm on the run from my own life. I'm on the run from the Marines, from the charred bodies of young refugee children, from nightmares, from people who would love me only to be betrayed. I can't remember how I got here, sleeping in abandoned houses and parking lots, picking up tin cans and bottles by the highway for cash and working odd jobs.

I begin to feel like I'm going to make a clean get-away, driving on caffeine and fumes. I stop one morning when I see a spotted yellow hill bulging like an overfed calf with softening pines and a town nestled in the valley.

I pull off the highway and stop at a Mom and Pop store. I buy a few apples, some cans of tuna and chili, toilet-paper and a six-pack of beer. I'm in no hurry to be anywhere in particular, but I never stay long. The highway is always waiting, lit by the headlights of my Rambler, a twenty-foot wash of yellow on black.

I left home a long time ago with nothing but a sea-bag of clothes and a couple hundred dollars. Along the way, I've seen lunatics prayed over and demons cast out. I've eaten from garbage cans, slept in alleys with junkies, watched the sun set over the Sierras and about every state. Nothing seems to matter but the road but listen, listen, I'm still alive, I'm dirty and I smell, and I have thousands of miles to go. It's always the same story; the people

I meet on the road are reincarnated as mimes or photocopies. I left home with nothing. I ask nothing to change.

I open my car door, throw the bag of groceries into the back, and slide in the front seat. I slap the black cement nail cross hanging from my rearview mirror to see it spin, it's a shrine for warding against my own flesh, as the Apostle Paul said, *O' who will save me from this body of death?*

At a cemetery outside of town, I stop and walk across a narrow swath of yellow grass, nearby; a coyote's crooked tracks lead off into scrub brush and sage. I lay on the hood of my car and I realize there are a million other nights like this one, the glare of lights in Hercules, the ghost shift of the Milky Way billows, a sudden shudder of wind brings the smell of acacias and I know its time to go, and so whatever can be said, I say to myself, apologies are in order, a prayer or two for my family who are gone or lost, or running like me, on the road where I came from, where everything is necessary and nothing belongs.

* * *

Moab, Utah

Latitude 38.77 N Longitude -109.55 W

I've driven so long, so far, I don't notice road signs anymore. I'm in Utah again and the heat isn't the problem. I see a mirage wavering from my rearview mirror, the long barren Moab desert stretching on and on. I turn to my left and nearly swerve off the road—I saw Captain Walker again, as if he were alive, sitting in the passenger seat. I panic and quickly pull over. I close my eyes and breathe slowly. I open my eyes. Nothing. No one. Just the desert. Always the desert. I look in the mirror and see someone else, the frozen look that soldiers wear; my hands grip the steering wheel so tight my knuckles turn white. I look back at the mirage.

* * *

In the Arabian Desert, there are no signposts to mark the miles, no roadside diners to pass the time. There is only the sun—rising from the east and oozing down like a pour of black-orange slag in the west.

Most days I feel like everyone else. I wake up. I wash my face. I brush my teeth. I brush my hair. I don't eat breakfast. If I happen to have a job, I go to work. If I don't feel disgust for myself, it's a good day.

Several hundred thousand Iraqi and Kuwaitis and three of my good friends—Walker, Lang, and Morris—died so the cost of gas could be twenty cents cheaper, but it's not cheaper is it? I have to live with that, so as often as I can, I try not to think about it.

I have a picture of myself that I only happen to look at when I pack up and move—which is often. I am kneeling next to a Cluster bomb by the side of an aircraft with my arm hugging the bomb like a friend. On the bombs we often wrote, “*To Saddam: Happy Ramadan,*” or “*To Saddam: This bombs for you, courtesy of the Marines.*”

People ask about the Gulf War, “What was it like?” I usually laugh and ask “*What do you think?*” They say something consoling, “Well at least no one *died.*” *Right, asshole,* I say under my breath. “Unless you consider *no one* more than more than 100,000 dead Iraqis and Kuwaitis,” I say out-loud. Their faces twist as if I’ve suddenly morphed into a nightmare and they find the quickest and most expedient excuse to get as far away from me as possible. If I’m feeling particularly morbid, I ask them if they’d like to see my genuine souvenir severed thumb from an Iraqi soldier (which is really a shriveled prune I put in a ring box).

It was a modern war. All wars will be like this in the future, or better. Many people will die and it will be simple to kill them. It’s easy to squeeze the trigger when you’re looking at crosshairs over a moving spot on a computer screen. How quaint and impersonal. In medieval times, if you wanted to kill someone, you looked that person in the eyes before plunging your sword into them. Yes, by all means, let’s call this war a success.

* * *

I keep old news-clippings of rescue stories in a box in the trunk of my car. There is one I keep at the top. The story is about a homeless man who lived in the alley next to a building that caught fire. He ran into the building and saved a husband and wife and their 3-month-old baby girl. The couple was wealthy and gave the man \$20,000. The newspaper said

he planned on going clean and starting a new life. Underneath this story is a follow-up written a year later. The man spent all the money and was back living on the streets again. He was quoted as saying, “It isn’t that I don’t want to change, I don’t believe in anything anymore. I want to believe, but I don’t know how.”

Warfare really hasn’t changed much, with the exception that it’s easier to destroy a small village in less time than it takes to get a number-one super-size value meal through the drive-thru. We like things fast, efficient, and clean.

The people doing the killing are never the ones who start the war and very rarely understand why they’re doing it. “*I do not do what I want to do. O who will save me from this body of death?*” The apostle Paul said that two thousand years ago and we still don’t get it.

War made it easy for us to do what we did not want to do. Captain Walker didn’t want to die but it happened just the same. On the morning of the day he died, during the preflight check of the aircraft before his sortie, I asked the Captain where they were headed. “Just pickling a few bombs, targeting entrenched artillery.” Captain Walker pushed open the oil panel and checked the oil lights. “Fish in a barrel, Corporal Patterson, Fish in a barrel.”

An hour after he launched, I heard explosions to the north. The great guns of naval ships in the Persian Gulf hammered Iraqi positions, like a giant falling to the earth. Then there were smaller sounds; the dim drums of bombing runs from which I imagined he would return. Hours later, his sortie began to return. I counted each aircraft like a Bedouin counting sheep. One was missing. Later we found out he was shot down. I couldn’t bear to go to his memorial. They told me it was a memorable ceremony. I heard the color guard fire their salute, Taps echoed from the stadium, and I watched the jets surge in staggered formation across the sky, one spot missing where Captain Walker’s plane would have flown.

During the war, there were lots of times we were rescued, by each other and something else, call it god, call it a force, call it the universe, and I pinch myself when I wake up in a cold sweat and admit—I'm alive but still responsible.

In the desert, the darkness is so complete, so absorbing, you can't see five feet in front of you. But the stars, the stars are what I like to remember most. Every night I lay back on the dunes and watched them. I knew all their names: Cassiopeia, Delphinus, Orion, The Great Spiral Arm. They are as clear and familiar as crystal stones in a river tumbling back over itself. I stopped so long, I could see them move. They were alive.

I still see them—all the fallen and the lost. It shouldn't happen that way, not here, and not in the desert, where everything rushes to the forgotten taste of water. Where nothing resists.

* * *

I wake up when a truck rushes past, rocking my Rambler and covering me in dust. I drive on to Moab slapping myself every five miles to keep from lapsing back into what I can only describe as day-sleep-walking, without the walking part. At the Gas-n-Go I see a help wanted sign and ask the cashier about a job. She said Harlan, the owner, isn't in on Sundays, but I can check back tomorrow. I ask her where the nearest laundromat is at and head there to wash two-weeks worth of sweat from my clothes.

I pull in to the Sudz-o-rama and haul my sea-bag of clothes in and get busy washing my clothes. I'm alone in the Laundromat. I pick up the remote for the TV and flip channels; a televangelist shouts *Praise Jesus!* I click again, a commercial audience laughs, *click*, four out of five dentists agree. I settle on a documentary on wolves reintroduced in Yellowstone

National Park. Ranchers protest the release, citing that their cattle will be easy prey. Ha! We're all fucking prey! Prey preying on prey. I flip back to the TV evangelist.

The wind outside kicks up and a dust-devil forms in the parking lot. I watch the spinning dust swirl papers and I begin to get dizzy. I look outside as the light turns orange in the haze of dust and sun. It all rushes back.

* * *

Wind hawks through scattered hulks of twisted steel on the highway where refugees fled our assault on Iraq's eastern border. The sky is heavy and black with the smoke from oil well fires. No one looks into the eyes of the enemy, except me. Scarred faces, bodies turned inside out from shrapnel and 50mm guns. The pockmarked desert is littered with scorched craters as far as the eye can see. I walk up to a body, a young man my age, napalm burned the flesh from his body.

In the distance, a black tent of smoke hangs over Umm Qasr where Marines ousted a pocket of resistance in a heavy fire-fight. Under the smoke, we hump munitions, a few thousand liters of sweat evaporates, no one seems to notice how thin we have become, even our letters home, a few shallow words wrung dry: *We're OK here, life is fine, how are the kids? How are you?* Jokes are made, *Truth may walk the desert unarmed but behind him are 100,000 pissed off Marines*, and I can't help but wonder about the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, what the air might smell like there, what oasis beckons, what jets howling beyond the horizon, the comfort of rifles and rationed water, the huddled masses in exodus, Moses nowhere in sight.

I begin to feel nauseous, and my head feels like it's spinning inside a circle so tight, it's only a spot. I grab my canteen and take a long gulp. I taste diesel and chlorine. I tell myself it's only a dream and it is. The dryer buzzes and the TV evangelist says *Jesus wept*.

* * *

I wake the next morning with my right cheek stuck to the green vinyl of my backseat. I sit up and stretch, my neck is cramped. Sleeping in the car isn't my first choice, I love to sleep on the ground so I can see the stars at night, but the mosquitoes nearly ate me alive. I locked up my car and I walked to the gas station to find Harlan and see about a job.

At the station, I walk in the office and look for Harlan. No one is there. "Hello? Is anyone here?" I hear a clatter in the garage and someone curses, *Fuck!* I walk through the door and see a man in greasy green coveralls picking up a wrench.

"Hello," I say.

"Eh? What can I do fer ya?" The mechanic turns to me as he wipes his hands on a rag. His face is like 40-miles of bad road on the Alaskan Highway, a body like the Pillsbury doughboy and he's got a cigarette dangling impossibly on his lip.

"I'm looking for work."

"Yer, that guy with the lime-green Rambler?" He asks, squinting into the smoke.

"Yes sir. Name's Garrett."

"I work for a living, ok? Don't call me sir." The mechanic walked over to the tool chest and put away the wrench. "So yer the guy my daughter Sandi told me 'bout?"

"Yes. Are you Harlan?"

“Guilty as charged,” Harlan smiled as ash from his cigarette fell into a puddle of gas.
“So, the job, it’s not much, just cashiering, clean’n up. Can you change oil?”

“Yes, I was a mechanic in the Marine Corps.”

“Marine, eh? Semper Fi. I was a dog-face in Vietnam.” Harlan walked over to the soda machine.

“You plan’n on sticking round long?” Harlan fished quarters out of his pocket and dropped them in and slapped the coke button. “Want a coke?”

“Yes, a coke would be great,” I said “Not sure how long.”

“Good. I don’t trust anyone who is certain, nothing is certain, eh?” Harlan dropped in a few quarters and slapped the coke button again.

“You got that right, Harlan.”

“Good, can you start today?”

“Where’s the broom?”

“Coveralls in the closet, help yerself. Then I’ll show you around.”

Harlan gave me 25 hours a week. The pay wasn’t much, but Harlan let me stay in his fifth-wheel trailer behind the garage, and his wife, Dianne, made me a small breakfast and lunch everyday. A cot and two hots. I was set.

* * *

Outside the garage, I lean against a pump and swig from a cold coke. I lean into the heat. In Saudi, I leaned into the heat rising from black tarmac on the flightline and watched the sun melt into the horizon, with no relief in sight, we sucked it up, we rationed our water, and it’s the water I hated, not the lack of it, but its foul chemical aftertaste.

The desert will swallow all American infidels, Baghdad Betty says out of the tinny short-wave radio and I want to believe her, so much so when I walk over the dunes at night and watch the slow twirl of stars wheel around me like a celestial carrousel, I feel the earth moving beneath me.

I am just a remnant, cast off from another time and place, this too will pass, but for now, I feel the weight of space packed with the numb sense of duty that young men follow without question, our struggle is the struggle of boys who wish only to be back in little league, out in right field waiting for that one sweet high ball. We struggle against the slow grinding train of war and its eventualities—becoming what we fear and desire—killer and prey. We know our lives are at risk—who would not protect their own? I lean into the heat as a car pulls up for gas.

* * *

I hear a knock on the trailer door. “Garrett?” It’s Harlan. I roll out of the cot. I’m just checking to see if you’d like to go hunting with me.

“Just a sec, Harlan.” I throw on a shirt, stumble over and open the door. Harlan has on a camouflaged vest and an orange MAC tools cap.

“You just wake? Late sleeper, eh? I’m going hunting for pheasant. Want to come along?”

“I’ll pass. I’ve got a killer migraine.” I couldn’t tell Harlan that I never wanted to touch a weapon ever again. I didn’t want to answer questions.

“Been drinkin? Ok. just let me know if you ever want to go. I usually go once a month to keep from gett’n rusty.”

“Ok Harlan. Thanks for the offer.” Harlan winked and nodded. He hobbles away and takes off in his Ford Super-cab.

Hunting isn't my thing. I can't bring myself to touch a rifle. Even knives make me skittish. But, shit, I could break down a rifle! Faster than anyone in my unit. I sat back down on my cot and looked at my hands. I put my hands through the motions of breaking down a rifle. These memories, there's no separation from my waking life and my past.

I sit on my bunk with my M16A2 on my lap. The canvas door to our hooch flapped in the slow desert breeze. I broke down the rifle with ease, drop out the magazine, pull back the bolt, lock it, and check the chamber for rounds. I pull out the take-down pin and wedge both hands around the slip ring and remove the hand guards.

The rifle's maximum effective distance is 550 meters for a point target, and at the 500-yard line the target looked like small black gnat. Firing any distance greater than 500-yards required compensation for the force of gravity on a spinning bullet, otherwise known as spin drift. But I wouldn't need to compensate, not at this range. The rifle weighed 8.79 pounds with a 30-round magazine and its cyclic rate-of-fire is 800 rounds-per-minute and after I pull the trigger, the ball round would exit the chamber with a muzzle velocity of 3,100 feet-per-second. At close range a body proved little resistance to the two-and-a-half inch bullet.

I separate the upper receiver from the lower and pull out the charging handle and bolt. I lift the barrel up to the light and inspect the bore. Through the barrel, everything shrunk. At its end, moths looked like dust specks hovering around the dirty halo of a distant and terrible sun. The bore was clear and clean. I reassemble the rifle, pull back the charging handle and bolt and release. It shot forward in the chamber; the action was smooth. I sighted in and took aim at shadows.

One winter, when I was ten, my father and I followed the tracks of a fox in the snow beyond our pasture and into the woods. We found the den just across Naaman's Creek near the damn I had built for a swimming hole the previous summer. It was frozen over. We watched quietly as the mother poked out of the den, sniffed the air, and tilted her head as she looked at us. Father gave the order, I raised my rifle and the last thing I remember, after I squeezed the trigger, was the fox's clear yellow eyes looking at me. She never blinked.

* * *

"Fucking shit!" Harlan cursed from under the hood of a Chevy Impala. He was replacing the timing chain and one of the bolts in the water pump was rusted and broke off. I'm changing the oil in a Dodge van with Florida license plates. Its work I can do with my eyes closed and I do, since I live most of my life with my eyes closed, except when I'm reading of course.

Last night I read an interview in the New York Times with Peter Weltner, an author from San Francisco; there's one line that's tattooed in my head. Weltner said "In absence, we are made aware of presence and that the world outside is made remarkable and is redeemed." I want to be redeemed, but I don't know how. I want to understand what this means. No matter where I go, I am reminded of absence. In the high mountain passes of the California Sierras, I am reminded of the desert. In the desert, I am reminded of snow.

* * *

Winter was especially cold that year at Parris Island and the drill instructors equally sadistic. Qualifying on the rifle range at night proved difficult for me and the rest of the recruits from my platoon.

A blizzard crept up and bit us in the ass. It couldn't have happened at a worse time. This was the last night fire to qualify. But that wasn't what we were worried about. Lying prone in the snow, the slings of their rifles tight around our biceps with sling-palsy setting in, we sighted in and fired tracer rounds at able-body targets—the size and shape of a man's

This was how, on the last day of December, our platoon was forced to strip naked and line up asshole-to-bellybutton to be inspected for the missing round. Even the wounded boy was called back from the hospital, though they allowed him to stay on the gurney.

Of course any one of us could have hidden the bullet, but we were not that foolish. One of the recruits whispered that it was another DI prank, but was quickly silenced with a rifle butt to the stomach. They searched for several hours but never found the missing bullet.

The scores were tallied, we dressed, were called to order, and began the long march back to the barracks, with the metallic taste of brass and gunpowder on their tongues, and the cold wind at our backs whistling a cadence we had never heard and for a moment, we listened.

* * *

I listen to the hum of the highway from the steps of the trailer as I drink a beer. It's a perfectly clear night—only a sliver moon. The stars are close here in the Moab desert. Even the few streetlights don't diminish the clarity of stars in the desert. I walk out to the edge of the trailer and take a piss. "Shit!" I stub my toe on a rock. I stoop and pick it up and hurl it into the field. I come from rocks; hard, stubborn, and buried under pressure and time.

My cursed roots—my father and his and his—descendants from the abolitionist John Brown. Noble, idealistic, but certainly fucked-up. Neither well-bred or well-born, often profane, I am a man without description or narrative. I am a watchman on post and the world is a trip-flare on a guarded perimeter held by force. There is nothing to guard but

rocks. I stare into the studded dark and name my desires—a home, a book, a father—I’m an imperfect son, nameless and mute.

* * *

On TV President Bush says, “Our soldiers are heroes, they’re patriots, they made the ultimate sacrifice, they gave their lives for freedom.” What bullshit! Only suicide bombers want to die. Soldiers don’t choose to give up their lives. We want to live. And no moral, no sense of patriotism, can change the fact that in the last instant, the moment before the bullet shatters the skull and empties out the brain, every soldier wishes they were suddenly someplace else.

And after the war is over, it’s never over. There’s no going back once you sign on the dotted line. After I was discharged, I had transparent skin and white hair, as if I’d been incarcerated inside a deep well for a long, long time. I have forgotten what the word civilian means and the terrible machinery that taught me to kill or be killed, eats through my stomach and so I am always empty; the horrors, the successful, wandering hunger I have become.

* * *

After a day of oil changes, cleaning up fuel spills from broken fuel lines, and washing and chammying Harlan’s truck, I ride down to the Slickrock Critter Café on the bike that Harlan lent me. I’ve struck up a friendship with Martin, a crazy physics professor at Utah State

University, and he promised to show me some of his work. As I rode up, Martin was scribbling furiously at his usual table out front. “Martin!”

“Garrett,” Martin stood and took his books from the other chair, “here, have a seat.”

“Thanks,” I plopped down my notebook, “be back, gonna grab an espresso.” Inside, the café was bustling; university students, business men and women, bikers, and the occasional nobodies like me.

“Hey Jason,” I say to the owner, he was behind the espresso machine, as if he had nine arms, pulling levers and knocking out used grounds in-between billows of steam.

“Hey Garrett, the usual?” Jason turned and smiled at Jennifer, his wife, as she stepped behind him to grab some half-and-half.

“No, make it a double.”

“Don’t want to sleep tonight?” Jason laughed and shook his dreads out of his face.

“No, it’s Martin, he’s going to show me some of his theories.”

“Ah, well then, better make it a triple, on me.” Jason laughed again and Jennifer shook her head as she rang me up.

Outside, Martin was picking up papers the wind had blown off the table. “Sorry, I’m a mess.”

“Aren’t we all?” I say and help him pick up the papers. “What’s this?” I ask, picking up a picture, that looked like it was taken of a puddle of water with small wing shapes, what I can only describe as looking like birds.

“Oh, you’re in luck. I’m finished, well, just a mock-up of my presentation for the Theoretical Physics Institute Symposium in Alberta next month.”

“What is it?”

“The symposium?”

“No, man, your work!”

“It’s my adaptation of String Theory.” Martin shuffled the papers, walked over and put them back into his Harley Fatboy saddlebag. “Hey, want to see it? I’ve got the mock-up on Powerpoint.”

“Sure, why not.” Martin took out his laptop and booted up. Jason came out and delivered two plates of his famous salmon and potato casserole.

“Jason, I can’t...”

“Hup, hup! It’s on the Prof, he insisted.”

“Thanks Martin, but you know...”

“Consider it a bribe,” Martin laughed, “who else is going to listen to the ramblings of a frenetic physicist? By the way, did you finish “The Dancing Wu Li Masters?”

“Yeah. Thanks. I have more questions than before I began!”

“Welcome to my world.” Martin smiled a disarming yet mischievous smile. He was a big guy— solid and round. He looked more like a lumberjack than a physicist and his blue eyes penetrated everything, so much so, they eclipsed his face. Sometimes that’s all you could see.

Martin and I dug into the steaming plates of food. Martin continued. “When my wife Deborah was alive, before the cancer got bad, she listened patiently as I droned on and on about my work, and then, she’d smile and ask if I stopped to eat during the day. She knew how scattered I was and loved me anyway. Martin looked away for a moment.

Between mouthfuls of salmon and potato casserole, Martin and I watched blue swirls spin clockwise like toy tops on his laptop. The simulated sub-atomic particles began to mutate; it was like a beautiful dance of ballerinas. Out of blue cyclones, smaller strings appeared and lifted away, “like a flock of wild loons, Deborah would have said,” said Martin.

Before she died, Martin told me he watched anaplastic cells invade surrounding tissue under the microscope. He said they looked like tiny black holes.

“...*the specific behavior of the cancer cells tells us what type of cancer it is.*” Martin told me the doctor said this in response to a question Deborah asked. I imagine Deborah as a woman who held questions in her hand, as a child might hold a cocoon up to a light to see the winged creature growing inside.

Martin told me the night Deborah died, he picked up her paintbrushes and painted a hypothesis on his dining room wall:

“Ms. X falls into a collapsed star. She will pass through the event horizon without incident and continue to her fate at the black hole singularity. Gravitational time dilation ensures Mr. Y will watch Ms. X approach the event horizon and fade from view. Presumably, if Mr. Y waits several hundred thousand years, the black hole will evaporate and Mrs. X will return in the radiation.”

Martin took out his mini-mag flashlight and held his hand in front of it.

“Even faint stars cast such a shadow,” said Martin. The sky reddened over the ridge to the west. There would be bright stars tonight. Martin opened and closed his hand, its shadow—a haloed universe collapsing or a loon heavy and slow to take wing.

* * *

Harlan asked me to change the oil in Sandi’s Honda Civic and that she’d stop by around Noon to pick it up. It was 11 am when a souped up Chevelle roared in to the station. Sandi hopped out of the passenger side.

“Hey Garrett, is my car done yet?” Sandi’s boyfriend, Mike, got out and walked over to the soda machine and popped in two quarters for a coke. “Damn!” Mike hit the machine repeatedly.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Fuck’n ate my money,” Mike said as he kicked the machine.

“Whoa!” I said as I walked over to him.

“Give me two quarters”

“I’ve got the key, hold on, don’t kick the machine Mike.”

“Whatever,” said Mike. I open the machine and give Mike his coke. Meanwhile Sandi hasn’t said a word.

“Sandi...” I begin to say.

“My car? Isn’t it done yet?” Mike walks over to her car and peeks under the hood.

“Your dad said Noon.”

“Well, he was wrong,” Sandi said. Mike exhaled impatiently and ran his hands through his hair.

“Ok, well, give me ten minutes.”

Besides reminding me of baboon’s ass, Mike also reminded me of a crazy Marine I knew in the Gulf who was in the Military Police.

While on guard duty, I worked with Lance Corporal Gibbs, a corn-fed farm boy from the Ozarks. Guard duty was a job for shit-birds—Marines who either couldn’t be trusted, had fallen by the wayside, just plain didn’t give a fuck. I fell into the latter group but Gibbs was an enigma. He actually enjoyed the work. I think he was just too stupid to realize he had a shitty job, but maybe anything was better than throwing bales of hay and shoveling cow shit.

A cloud of dust kicked up in the distance along the inside of the perimeter fence. A Humvee appeared at break-neck speed, toward our guard tower. Our relief was on the way.

The Humvee skidded to a stop a foot from the base of our tower. “Hey shit-birds!” A red faced, shock-headed M.P. stuck his head out of the driver’s window. “Yer replacements are here, get your asses down here.”

“That’s Sergeant Wallace,” said Gibbs “A real crazy muther-fucker.” We grabbed our gear, slung our rifles over our packs, climbed down the ladder and hopped in the Humvee.

“Wanna see something fucked?” Wallace asked. Wallace had that wide-eyed-I-haven’t-slept-in-ten-days-look all the time and he reeked of sulfur and gasoline. On the dash was a homemade bumper sticker that read, “Marines enjoy going to exotic new places, visiting ancient cultures, meeting interesting people and killing them.”

I didn’t want to go, but lately, I didn’t care much about anything. I was along for the ride, literally. A proximity flare had been tripped and Wallace was just about to leave on patrol after he picked us up.

“You wanna hunt for rag-heads?” Wallace grinned “Lock n’ load man.”

As we rode through the dunes, a few jets rolled belly-up on a Victory fly-by leaving thunder in their wake.

“Give ‘em hell!” Wallace shouted out the window.

When we reached the perimeter flare we found a camel with its front legs blown off from a pressure mine. The camel’s eyes were glassed over. It groaned and whimpered. It sounded horrible, like an injured child. Wallace hopped out and walked over to it.

“Damn, lookit all that gook coming out of it!” Wallace kicked the camel.

“Put it out of its misery man,” I said.

“No. Com’on Gibbs, take a look.”

Gibbs refused to get out. When I turned to look at the camel again, I heard a loud clap in my head like a sonic boom. In one swift motion, I grabbed my M16, pulled back the bolt and released, and locked and loaded a round in the chamber. I watched myself from a distance.

I put the rifle to Wallace's head. He froze. I heard Gibbs say something but everything swam in molasses—super slo' mo. I told Wallace to shoot the camel. He unholstered his 9mm and shot the camel in the head.

I felt myself sucked backward into the weight of my body. I slapped Warren on the back. "War is hell, man." I jumped into the Humvee. Wallace didn't say a word. None of us ever did. We rode back to the base in silence.

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I drive out past Highway marker 141, where the trains no longer run, turn onto a fire road and continue on to an old copper mill that operated in the late 1800s. I stop at Halfway Stage Station, a lunch stop in the late 1800s for stagecoach travelers making the 35-mile trip between Moab and Thompson, the nearest train station at that time.

I hop up into the open door of a box-car smelling of pine tar and creosote and grab the hooch out of my pack. I drink white lightning from a mason jar under the wreckage of the moon. I imagine the men who worked the mill and loaded the box-cars. I see the red and green lights of the signal lanterns, but not the men who wield them. I go on swimming in this darkness in my head, the wind whipping the bushes of sage and scrub-brush. I smell salt in the air. I miss the ocean.

I want to crawl back through the fissure of night, go back to the beginning. I want another life. I want another morning where I can sit with my coffee, stoke last night's fire while the sky streaks with rain and grey light over the Atlantic. There are wings across water, a morning star held course saying—follow me. In the afternoon, from the dark crest, stragglers and immigrants cast from the rough wave line where obstinate children refuse parent's cries. Where shadows peddle by on rickety bicycles made of clouds, tongues wagging obscene gestures like old men who climb the skies with kites in search of lightening.

I fill my jar and see my father's ghost. I try to understand my place. I try. But I am always the son who seeks approval he will never get. I grab my notepad and headlamp from my front seat and begin my letter:

Father, to write this letter is to move towards forgetting, so in the act of losing, something can be found; a name, a particular Saturday morning, a father and son flying gliders into strong headwinds in spring.

This is a land where no one remembers what they cherished—or hated for that matter—watch out for those treacherous crosses, you said, see the lines of those laboring beneath, their long moves plotting a course up Golgotha.

As the story goes, you were away playing war when I was born and what followed was many years of disinterest. And now, I see reconciliation as a car-crash in slow-motion, and forgiveness is more like the disciples falling asleep in the garden where no one is without blame. But this is not Gethsemane. If I had a pocket full of stones and could see you now, I would not cast them.

As I sat crouched on the steps to your trailer a few minutes before I left, the last time I would ever see you; Willie Nelson on the radio, and you on the ladder next to your trailer, your shadow thinning while you bolted the main-tie-down before

a storm. I see you in the shifting light as you were when we were all together; slinging a plate of food across the kitchen because it was cold, mother in tears. It was the end of us, as a child puts away childish things. When I turned to leave, you said, all-right, drive safe, see you kid.

I remembered the word for your name and I often call it out in my sleep, as if I believed in its power to save, as if all the stories you told me were true and there was no such thing as fiction.

I take another swig. I pull out a letter from the back of my journal. It was the last letter I received from my father; he was cryptic and elusive about his illness. I take out the pocket watch you gave me and wind it. I want to travel faster than time, entangled in the past and present, and father, if you could send a quantum message to yourself when it might have made a difference, when you were a young Marine pilot strafing Chu Lau in Vietnam with a wife at home and me unborn, would you have listened?

In your package, you sent me copies of your x-rays; your cells—black holes like rotting oranges stacked on a fruit stand—and inside the package, an article titled, “Physicists Freeze A Pulse Of Light In A Cold Gas Cloud,” and scrawled at the bottom you wrote:

“Everything we know is changed. Remember Joshua in the desert,
how he prayed in the heat of battle in the day when the Lord
delivered up the Amorites before the sons of Israel.

And Joshua said in their presence:

“O sun, stand still at Gibeon,

And O moon in the valley of Aijalon.”

So the sun stood still and the moon stopped until the nation avenged

themselves of their enemies. Is it not written in the book of Jashar?

But I see your past, Father, your heavy pack shouldered high, filled with all the things you and I cannot say and I begin to hope Einstein was wrong about light traveling through a vacuum. Not even the smallest simultaneous particle can save you; as if Time were a ritual you could ignore like a birthday or a philosophy you could outwit like love, as if you were Joshua and could hold the sun in the sky for a day.

It's been some time since I've written to my mother. The last she heard from me was when I sent her a postcard from Big Sur.

Mother, clouds of tattered sheets blow across the sky, everything is beaten and dry, and there are things I want to show you; the pale yellow flowers growing in the desert are in bloom, and through the window of my Rambler, the world looks fine.

But you are not here, as when I was a child on cold winter Saturday mornings watching cartoons, and now I live where something is always in bloom, the weather here is usually fine, tell me, what's the weather like where you are, can you plant tulips and daffodils, is the humus dark and rich or hardpan clay? Do you still stop on dusty one-lane roads and dig up plants?

I wish I could follow you through your day, watching in hysteresis, marking time or some measure of grace, how the shape of things depend on its history, like a spade striking stone, the edge dulling, even now memory snaps back, work calls, the lag between cause and effect subsumes, the rain stops and I haven't even begun.

I shout out to the moon. The long wailing howl of a wild thing. I mouth the word LUNA and nothing happens. I live in a strange cloud of indifference—these cities, these strangers I pass the time with, riding my car through dark shadowed terrain, sitting out in the middle of nowhere. Now that I am free, what will anchor me in this dim weightlessness?

There is magic in repetition, so let me repeat my life; there is restlessness, waking in the early dark to scribble words that I do not understand, there is a little sleep and within that space are fragments. I see my father and mother's faces hovering in the space next to me I want to reach out and touch their faces, I call out their names in the night and wonder if they can hear me.

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