The heat of it all: A collection of fiction, poetry, and nonfiction

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I would like to dedicate this thesis to my wife Stephanie and my daughters, Alexandra, Catherine, and Emma without whose support I would not have been able to complete this work. I would like to thank the many other people who have influenced my work and have been there with me along the way. There are too many of you to mention here. You are not forgotten. And to the many soldiers, sailors, and Marines still fighting battles on the ground, at home, and in your minds and hearts: Take one day at a time. Every day is worth living. Trust me.
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The Heat of it All is a thematically organized collection of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, drawing upon the author’s experiences as a war combatant, firefighter/paramedic, and farmer, as well as a son, husband, father, and grandfather. The book examines emotional, ethical, and metaphorical heat: the fires of temptation, desire and fear, the ongoing chemical burn of trauma and its aftermath, and the healing warmth of family love. In particular, the author explores and challenges traditional notions of masculinity and heroism, inspired not only by his own ambivalence about these notions and his experiences in traditionally heroic occupations, but also by classic and contemporary writers, who use their writing to not just record but investigate their own and their characters’ deep ambivalence about what it means to live a life of duty and service to others, what it means to be a contemporary American male.
INTRODUCTION: THE HEAT OF IT ALL

The Heat of it All is a thematically organized collection of my fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, written during my time in the MFA Program in Creative Writing and Environment at Iowa State University. The book draws upon my experiences as a war combatant, firefighter/paramedic, and farmer, as well as a son, husband, father, and now grandfather. In these stories, poems, and essays, I investigate the literal heat of battle (I served two tours of duty as a Marine and solider in Iraq and Kuwait) and fighting fires (I have been a paramedic and firefighter in Des Moines for sixteen years) and farming (I worked with my grandfather for a time as a farmer but left in part because of the influence of industrial agriculture). But I am just as interested, in these works, in examining emotional, ethical, and metaphorical heat in my own life, as well as in the lives of my imaginary characters: the fires of temptation and desire and fear, the ongoing chemical burn of trauma and its aftermath, the healing warmth of family love.

In this book, I particularly explore and challenge traditional notions of masculinity and heroism, inspired not only by my own ambivalence about these notions and my experiences in traditionally heroic occupations, but also by other contemporary writers—such as Larry Brown in On fire and Dirty Work, Tim O’Brien in The Things They Carried, Yusef Komunyakaa in Dien Cai Dau, and Brian Turner in Here, Bullet—who use their writing to not just record but investigate their own and their characters’ deep ambivalence about what it means to live a life of duty and service to others, what it means to be an American male. The “heroes” in these pieces (veterans, firefighters, paramedics, police officers) are not archetypal heroes who live clean, productive lives,
courageously and selflessly thrusting themselves into harm’s way to save others and the world. The heroes contained in the book are deeply flawed individuals, wrestling with their own fears, guilt, fears, selfishness, and anxieties about living up to their own and American culture’s expectations for how they should comport themselves.

My characters (and I include myself as a character, for in creative writing you must separate the person you are from the character you reveal and use imaginatively in the poem, story, or essay), people perform those duties because that is their job. But they are drawn to the work because they are addicted to the adrenaline, the excitement, the gore, the heartache. They look forward to carnage, yet also to want to fix and repair everything. But they can’t. They can’t always save someone’s life, or fix a car, or stop a building from burning to the ground, or repair the land from the chemical toxins poured into it. Likewise, they cannot save themselves from their own faults, and they cannot shield those around them, especially those they love, from the collateral damage of that love.

My “heroes” have ordinary lives, and I am just as interested in that facet of their personal lives, as I am in the drama of their extraordinary jobs. They have wives, children, pets, complex family histories. They stand in line at Starbucks, get stuck in traffic, stare blankly out the window while sitting with their families. They struggle to maintain the masks of sanity and happiness, struggle daily to tamp down their own pain, sorrow, confusion, and struggle to answer unanswerable questions about why they couldn’t have protected or saved more lives. They must learn how to come home and switch roles quickly, to shut off the adrenaline, and forget the horrific things they just saw, tuck away the disturbing images, in order to perform the ordinary heroism of
domestic tenderness: being a patient and loving father, providing for both spouse and family.

Because I examine in my poems, essays, and stories this tension between the heroic and the ordinary, the divide between the horrific and the domestic, my work is also part of the tradition of trauma literature—literature that includes work by not only classic American writers such as Hemingway but acclaimed contemporary poets and prose writers such as Yusef Komunyakaa, Tim O’Brien, Thom Jones, Larry Brown, Kevin Powers, John Musgrave, Brian Turner, Michael Perry, and Anthony Swofford—writers who explore what it means to be a veteran, a firefighter, a civil servant, writers who seriously investigate the emotional and moral complexities of American masculinity.

The aftermath is what lingers. The actual time spent in combat, the actual time spent on an emergency scene is minimal compared to the lifetime of reliving actions and outcomes, good or bad—a constant pressure squeezing their bodies and their spirits. Doctors call it anxiety or depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or shell shock. Whatever the technical term for it, I am interested as a writer in the aftermath of memory, the way the past turns the screws, presses every last ounce of compassion out of people who have survived and experienced extreme crises. Sometimes my characters crumble, sometimes they maintain their façade of sanity, and other times they crack, causing more personal damage, more collateral damage, and the aftermath continues, building like dry tinder waiting for a spark to release the heat of it all.
The Heat of It All is not organized by genre, but thematically, so that the individual pieces, regardless of genre, can be in more fluid conversation with one another.

The fiction is written in third person and draws upon my experiences and my career as a firefighter, paramedic, and soldier/Marine—a lifetime of witnessing others in crisis. My fiction springs from this lifetime of observations and my attempts to imagine my way into the lives of others. My nonfiction, which includes all the prose pieces written in first person, ranges from more research-based pieces to more personal reflections to braided narratives that combine research and personal experience. I am particularly fascinated by the braiding method in nonfiction—which is particularly effective in the work of such writers as Barry Lopez, Norman Maclean, John McPhee, Michael Perry, and Lauret Savoy. This technique allows me the flexibility as a writer to move more freely between different times in my life, broadening the scope of my investigations, and I hope deepening the thematic resonance.

The poetry in this collection focuses mostly on my military experience, except for a handful of poems rooted in my firefighter/EMT experiences. I have struggled to write about my military experiences and the more disturbing aspects of my current job. I find it emotionally difficult to spend that much time reliving and re-examining the most traumatic scenes. The poetry provides me with a disciplined literary method for stepping into the past and concentrating on brief, intense memories. My memories of combat move in slow-motion. I live in a constant loop of slow rewind, play, and fast-forward. Dust seems to linger in the air, bullet casings softly tumble, and my vision moves slowly from image to image, scene to scene. I think that the very nature of poetry forces both
writer and reader to focus on intense moments or scenes. Slowing everything down, describing those moments, is what makes my war experiences, for me at least, so appropriate for poetry.

The title piece of the book, “The Heat of it All,” is perhaps my most emblematic and ambitious piece, a poem in which I attempt to integrate the central themes of my writing—soldiering, fathering, coping with trauma and loss and grief, and searching for a way to redefine what it means to be a modern American man, both hardened and weakened by experience, but aiming for tenderness and ordinary blessings.

My story is not much different from other veterans, or firefighters, or fathers. “Civilians” expect us to be heroes and often thank us for our service when they know very little about what we actually do and the burdens we carry. They tend to place us on a pedestal where we do not want to be. Being normal, living an ordinary life is the only thing most of us want when the uniform is off, and the drama recedes into quiet. This book sits at the intersection of those two desires: the desire to live an extraordinary life in service to others, the desire to live an ordinary, quiet life in service to family and friends. In this book, I try to examine the heat generated when those two desires meet.
PART I: BURN
Fire

I think I was predestined to become a firefighter. I love fire. I love its heat, its light, and the comfort it gives me when it’s dark outside. When I was a kid, our neighbor spent all year piling up all of his lawn debris and tree scraps from his tree-trimming business, and in the fall he would invite all of his family and friends over to burn the whole pile down. He roasted a whole hog too. I watched him take a knife and dig the cooked eyeballs out of the pig’s head and plop them in his mouth. *You want one?* he asked. I shook my head no.

I loved watching the fire grow to consume the branches and tree stumps. The pile was taller than me. The heat was so intense that I couldn’t look at it and I backed up. My eyes felt dry, my face was red hot, but I stared into the fire, watching it breathe and eat all of that wood. The wood popped and cracked like the fire had chomping teeth. In a couple of hours, the fire had converted the giant woodpile to gray talcum powder-like ash with red hot coals.

There is something mesmerizing about staring into fire. It rekindles a part of our DNA from our prehistoric days of survival. Fire gave early humans warmth, comfort, and security. Humans did not invent fire, they did not discover fire; they learned how to harness it and use it. But sometimes, like a wild animal, it gets out of control and runs wild again, threatens to destroy and consume anything in its path. Modern humans are still learning about fire, its many uses and benefits, and how to control it. It is the struggle between taming something wild or letting it loose.

It was sometime in the middle of the night, and my Engine Company raced to the south side of Des Moines on a structure fire assignment to an area of the city we know as The Hill. It was our third structure fire in less than ten hours. A record for me. I had worked
several shifts where I had two working structure fires in twenty-four hours, but not three in ten hours. We were tired. Our bunker gear was soaked through and smelled of the char from the last house fire.

Engine 4 chugged up the 9th Street bridge, and I looked out over the south side of Des Moines. I searched for flames or heavy smoke in the night sky, yet saw nothing. Dispatch said that police officers on scene reported a house fully involved. They could not verify if there were occupants, so we had to assume there might be someone inside.

As we got to the bottom of the bridge and started our climb up The Hill, smoke lingered through the neighborhood. As we turned on to Burnham Street, the houses were lit up with the unmistakable glow.

Engine 4 stopped, and I jumped out and pulled the hoseline from its bed, lifted it to my shoulder, and ran for the front door of the house. It was an older house, probably half a century to a century old, balloon frame construction. Fires in these houses have no fire breaks built into the walls and can spread easily if the fire is allowed to get into the stud cavity. Fire can hide and grow behind the plaster, climb to the attic and smolder, then burn, and weaken the roof. They are stubborn and can be difficult to extinguish. These older houses have usually had many owners who have built modifications to them, complicating the floor plan and creating a maze for firefighters to find their way through in blackout conditions.

I stopped at the front door and flaked out the rubber hoseline and waited for pressurized water to fill it. Soon the water stiffened the hose, and I opened the nozzle to bleed the air out of the hose. I pulled back on the bail, and air burped out the tip before a steady stream of water burst out the nozzle. My backup man tapped me on the shoulder. We stood up and entered the house. I easily kicked the front door open because the fire had
weakened the jamb. I opened the nozzle to push the fire back into the house and steal its heat away. The orange body of the fire darkened when water touched and instantly converted it to white clouds of hot steam. Inside, fire was everywhere. When we got to the house, it was in post-flashover stage. Flashover is the point at which a room and its contents reach ignition temperature simultaneously and ignite. Post-flashover is the period after flashover when the room and its contents are free-burning and the fire has likely spread into the structure of the house, threatening its structural stability.

My backup firefighter and I moved from room to room and darkened the flames. The floor was spongy. I heard other firefighters enter the house to look for victims and hidden fires. Chunks of sheetrock and plaster fell off the walls and ceilings, hitting me on the head. But we powered through the house and extinguished hot spots in places where the fire had burned in to closets and corners. I noticed there was no furniture in the house, indicating that the house was vacant.

Gas-powered fans were set up at the doorways to push smoke and heat out of the house, but the heat was not dissipating as fast as it should have been. Fire was hidden somewhere in the house, and I walked through the rooms trying to find it. In one of the bedrooms I felt the floor become soft, and the wood floor creaked under my weight. My throat knotted up in fear as I had the feeling that I had gone too far in. That I was somewhere where I shouldn’t be. I felt that if I took another step, it would be the last one I took. Just as I had that thought, the floor split and moaned under my feet, and I fell into the basement.

My flashlight was damaged when I landed, and I was in complete darkness. Small orange embers floated by my vision. It was much hotter in the basement. I rubbed my mask to see if debris was blocking my vision, and heavy black soot whipped off on my glove. I
paused for a second and moved my arms and legs. I was uninjured, but lost and trapped in the basement. I looked for anything that gave off light, like a window to the outside, basement stairs, or the light from the hole in the floor I fell through, but all I could see through my soot-covered mask was dense black smoke. I tried to be quiet to listen for voices, but all I could hear was the crackling of fire. I realized the fire had started in the basement somewhere and spread upstairs. An orange glow appeared to my right and climbed the wall to burn the floor joists above me. It grew in intensity every second.

I had read many National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) reports of firefighters killed by falls and being trapped and overtaken by fire, smoke, and heat. And now I thought that I would become the subject of one of those reports and another tally on the list of line of duty deaths (LODD) in America. It was hard to comprehend and understand at first what was happening.

I felt as if I had left my body and I looked down on myself, huddled in a corner of that basement in that burned-out house on the south side of Des Moines. I saw my face through my face piece, my eyes illuminated by fire. I felt the fire had set a trap for me and was closing in. Firefighters don’t talk about it, but I think we all believe that fire has an intelligence. It knows when you come to kill it and tries desperately to fight back.

England and most of continental Europe had been logged out. The lack of resources stalled progress and the English looked to their new territory in North America for those resources. When Europeans came to America, the forests seemed to provide an unending supply of wood. Some settlers even considered the American forests as a barrier to expansion. 820 million acres. Trillions of board feet waiting to be used for fuel, construction,
manufacturing, furniture, and export. Colonies were formed and expanded, and as the need for more wood grew, loggers spread west.

Cities grew and manufacturing thrived in America because of wood. Massive fires burned entire cities to the ground. Thousands of people died each year. In isolated incidents, hundreds of people were killed in fires in the workplace. In 1736, Benjamin Franklin established the first American fire service in Philadelphia in response to the potential danger of growing cities built from wood freshly cut from the virgin American forests. On April 1, 1853, the first professional fire department was formed in Cincinnati, Ohio. Settlements spread west, clear-cutting forests and planting crops. Cities grew, and the need for lumber increased.

The deadliest day in American fire history occurred on October 8, 1871. On that day the Great Chicago Fire started as well as three other wildfires in the Great Lakes Region: The Great Michigan Fire, the Peshtigo Fire, and the Port Huron Fire. Chicago had suffered over three hundred deaths and one third of the city burned when Miss O’Leary’s cow kicked over an oil lantern. Given the wind direction that day, only Miss O’Leary’s barn was lost. Ironically, her house was upwind and was saved. It was later demolished, and the Chicago Fire Department Training Facility was built on that site.

The three wildfires to the north of Chicago consumed over five million acres of forest and killed over three thousand people and were thought to be the cause of a drought and careless fire practices. An investigation later theorized that a comet had crashed in the Upper Midwest, distributing methane gas over a wide geographical area, which then ignited. This theory was later proven to be false. The Peshtigo Fire in Wisconsin is still the greatest loss of life to fire in the United States: an estimated 2,500 people.
In the summer of 1994, I worked for a hardwood flooring company in Vail, Colorado. That summer was a busy fire summer. While driving to jobsites, I saw the smoke from forest fires burning miles away.

I worked with a New Zealander, Steve. He had left New Zealand after high school and had been all over the world. We were working on a jobsite near Beaver Creek, and we went to lunch at the Jackalope Café in Vail. All during the morning we noticed the sky had darkened from smoke from a wildfire. On the restaurant’s TV, a journalist reported a fire near Glenwood Springs. Glenwood Springs was over sixty miles away from Vail. The smoke had traveled that far down the I-70 corridor. The news reported over sixty firefighters were unaccounted for. As we ate, the sky grew darker as if the sun was setting. We walked out of lunch to a darkened sky and the smell of burned wood in the air. Ash fell from the sky like a snowstorm covering cars and parking lot. All I could think about was how the ash consisted of cremated remains. I learned later that fourteen firefighters had died on Storm King Mountain.

America’s love for wood-built houses has never stopped. New housing developments are going up each year. In the American West, housing developments are popping up in remote forest land, and each year wildfires burn whole areas down. Every summer wildfire crews risk their lives to save the forests, which should be allowed to burn anyway, but also to save those new houses from destruction. In 2009, nineteen hotshots in Prescott, Arizona found themselves trapped in one of those new subdivisions, and they all perished trying to save the homes from the forest fire.
Although firefighters are known to be brave, they can be very stupid too. Their bravado gets them killed. My fire department does have a lost or trapped firefighter protocol to follow. It is essentially self-rescue. Tactics and techniques to literally save your own ass are preached over and over in fire academies and fire schools throughout the United States.

I am supposed to follow the protocol without delay, but I stalled. It was my ego that got to me first and told me to find my own way out. I am supposed to request a Mayday over the radio. To do so would commit four firefighters with specialized equipment to come find me. I am supposed to activate my PASS device, but I did not.

PASS stands for Personal Accountability Safety System. Some have to be manually turned on and more modern devices turn on automatically when the air valve is opened on the SCBA tank. The PASS device alarm can also be activated manually or activated because of inactivity. For instance, if a firefighter is injured and goes down and is not moving, after so many seconds the PASS device will begin to alarm, transmitting a loud audible sound with a strobe light. It sounds like a giant pissed-off cricket. If you watched the 9/11 coverage after the Towers collapsed, the chirping noise on the television as firefighters began to dig through the rubble were PASS devices of the downed firefighters alarming. The New York firefighters had to work fast, because once the batteries ran out on the PASS devices, there would be nothing to signal to them where their friends were buried.

Before I became a firefighter, I worked construction for many years. My stepfather was a carpenter. During high school, I used to work with him over the summers and on school breaks. I started out by cleaning jobsites, then eventually worked my way up to
helping them frame houses. I liked working with the wood outside in the Colorado sun. I
would sift through bundles of pine studs, looking for the straightest ones to frame walls, and
build roofs with them.

It was my first real job. It was hard work, but it felt good to look at the walls we had
erected in a day or how much sheathing we nailed to the walls and roof. To take something
from the foundation to the peak of the roof was rewarding. I think back at how many board
feet of lumber I cut and nailed into walls, headers, partitions, rafters. My knowledge of
building construction comes in handy as a firefighter. I know how houses and buildings are
built. I can stand on the street and look at the windows and doors of a house and have a good
idea of how the floor plan is laid out. I can imagine where the fire has traveled, how to chop
my way through wall, if need be, to save my life or rescue a fellow firefighter who has
become disoriented or trapped.

In 2016, there were 475,500 structure fires in the United States resulting in 2,950
deaths, 12,775 injuries, and $7.9 billion in property damage. Not including the massive loss
of firefighters on 9/11, there is an average 115 firefighters killed in America each year.
Hundreds more are injured. From that number, only a handful are killed during firefighting
operations from thermal injuries, collapse, or asphyxia when their air supply runs out.

I’ve never been sure what is worse: burning alive or choking to death.

Firefighters are taught about the Fire Tetrahedron, which consists of heat, fuel,
oxygen, and a chemical chain reaction. Fire needs all four to live. Fire breathes and eats like
humans. Its waste is smoke, light, water, and gases. Take away any of one of those elements,
and it dies.
Pyrolysis is the chemical reaction that takes place when a substance is heated and then ignited. Fire does not burn directly on a material, whether the material is a solid or a liquid. The process is a gas exchange in the air. Fire needs the right mixture to burn; each material gives off different properties and has different ignition temperatures. Look closely at a candle burning and there is a gap from the wick to the color of the flame. That is where pyrolysis is taking place.

Fire gives off chemicals. The smoke itself is a visible gas, containing its own chemicals, but there are invisible chemicals that can kill. Carbon monoxide, hydrogen cyanide, hydrochloric acid, and phosgene are some of the by-products of combustion. It is imperative to keep your face-piece on and breathe the air in your bottle.

I’ve read NIOSH reports of firefighters running out of air, and in desperation, they take their regulator out of their mask and cover their mouths with their hoods in order to filter anything out. But it’s not enough. These firefighters usually die or are so injured afterward, they have the lungs of an eighty-year old smoker and have to leave firefighting.

I have heard many stories of retired firefighters who worked into their sixties, who worked fires before Self-Contained Breathing Apparatus (SCBA) were mandatory, who died of cancer or other job-related illnesses.

After a while my low air alarm began to chirp, and I started to realize that help might not be coming for me. I activated my Personal Alert Safety System (PASS) device and began to crawl through the basement to find a way out. The fire grew hotter and more intense above me. It grew so hot that it felt like tiny hot knives were poking my ears and neck. I tried to crouch lower without compromising my mobility. I imagined my protective clothing going
through pyrolysis, its maximum temperature of eight hundred degrees being compromised as the basement approached flashover ignition.

Then I heard footsteps, loud footsteps. I saw flashlight beams through the smoke, and I crawled to them. It was another crew. They found the basement and brought a hose-line to fight the fire. I got to my feet and walked to them shouting. I had never been hugged by so many people at one time. With my low-air alarm activated, I went outside into the night and to the street. I took off my charred and hot gear and sat on a curb. My district chief came up to me asked me if I was all right, and I said I was fine. Behind me, my fellow firefighters finished extinguishing the fire in the old house. Its lumber probably came from out west somewhere. Carpenters’ hands had touched every inch of that wood, and now its charred skeleton steamed in the cold autumn night, letting out its last breath into the air.

It is the control of something dangerous that lures me and others like me to this work. It is the mesmerizing effect of fire’s glow and heat that draw us to sit by it and to bare our naked hands to it for warmth while sitting around a campfire. It is its destructive power that we try to control and use for human need that sometimes gets us all into trouble.

And I changed my air bottle and went back into the fight. I searched for hotspots, chopped window sills apart with my pick-head axe, forged by heat, to look for any ember hiding in the century-old wood.
Iowa, August, summer humidity. Weathermen call it *Weather you can wear*. My t-shirt sticks to my chest. Sweat rolls down my spine like rain on window glass, sending a strange chill through my body. High noon. The hazy sun bathes the corn I walk through, with its heat, its energy. The dark green leaves of corn absorb the light and reach high for it, reach out across the rows and touch my arms and legs. We are all made of it. The energy of all things. We keep our own suns burning inside.

What is it that haunts me? I hear a voice, I turn, but nobody is there. But yet my ears still ring, like a child’s high-pitched distant scream.

In August, Ramadi was hot too. *It’s a dry heat*, they said. Watch out for taxis too, anything suspicious. Taxis are everywhere. Thousands of them blend in like stars in the night. Nissans, Saabs painted orange and white. Look into the faces of the drivers, look for their sweat, anxiety in their eyes. Trust your instincts. They may be packing a bomb—hundreds of pounds of plastique—waiting for the right time to press the trigger. They keep their suns in the backseat.

My platoon rebuilt a school in Al Habbinayah. We patched bullet holes with tan clay plaster. We replaced shattered windows with fragproof glass. We gave the kids school supplies and backpacks they stuffed full. They walked to school like little sherpas, hunched over from the weight of it all. Their futures waiting for them. They waved when they passed us, they waved so hard we set our rifles down in the sand and hugged them when they kissed us on our cheeks. I made a friend. Her name was Hibba. She was six years old. *You’re as beautiful as the sun*, I told her. She held my hand and we walked to the new school together in full light. Unarmed, una afraid, like we were home.
I thought the taxi driver kept the sun. Before he let it loose, 
I looked into his eyes when he passed me, 
by the mosque, with blue teardrop minarets 
under the hot sun, in the middle of Ramadi, 
by the sacred mosque, in the middle of a traffic circle. 
Before he disappeared into his own light, 
I thought I saw the face of Jesus, or was it Mohammed 
driving that taxi? But it was his heat that burned us. 
My ears bled. I heard distant screams through bleeding, broken 
eardrums. Dizzy from the energy that hit me in the chest, 
in the head. I couldn’t stand. The concrete burned through 
my clothes and sticky cold sweat. The sun hazy 
from the smoke of the burning taxi, now nothing 
more than a crater. The violence of it all from the heat 
he packed in the back seat.

I heard from the SEALs that all the school kids died 
when a JDAM missed its target. Smart munitions 
make mistakes sometimes, they told us. It’s not their 
fault. They have no eyes because they cannot cry.

Was Hibba outside at recess when it hit? Did she hear 
the whistle as it fell? Did she look up into the sun, blinded 
by its light so she could not see the moment when it reached 
down and touched the earth?

Years later, I am reminded of her in my daughters’ 
pain. My hands shake when I clean their little cuts. 
I hear them scream when I run water over burns. 
They cry when they are sick with fever. I shiver 
when I wring out and fold damp washcloths to place 
on their heads. I have to turn my head so my good ear 
can hear them talk and so my eyes can read their lips. 
I have to do this because of all of the suns we use against each other.

We pack our own suns, bring our own heat, 
and unleash all of it onto the world.
Eclipse

When I was in elementary school an eclipse happened. The world knew it was coming. Light blacked out. My teachers talked about it the whole week before. We learned about why it happens and why it is so special.

We made paper goggles with slits in them. We took paper and made small holes so we could see the sun and the moon cross each other’s path and so we wouldn’t go blind.

The day the eclipse arrived, we waited outside. It was like a long recess. I played football with my friends.

The daylight dimmed. The teachers called us all close and told us to grab our papers with the holes and the slits. Something bigger than all of us. Something bigger than any problem on Earth, any problems at home or with friends, dimmed the sun in the middle of day. The moon stepped in front of the sun.

I couldn’t help but glance up into the sky without my goggles. The sun was brighter, hotter, and burned my eyes faster. I saw crescents not circles. It hurt.

I picked up my goggles made of white cardboard with the tiny holes in them and I squinted, but all I saw was the burned crescent in sight. I cheated and looked too early at the sun and its heat, its partial image.

But then I could see the sun. Take away its rays of light and heat, take away its projection of power, and you can see the naked body of the sun, its shape, millions of miles away.

The power of its core, its heat.
Ten years ago, Kim became a firefighter/paramedic for the city fire department. She was excited, eager, and wanted those busy shifts and the bad calls. She was proud to put the uniform on in the morning. She stood in front of her full-length mirror dressed in navy blue, boots polished, her hair pulled back into a clean ponytail. She smiled back at her reflection and felt like a superhero.  

Now she looks in the mirror and sees a veteran. She dreads the start of another 24-hour shift. Her uniform is tight around the waist. Wrinkles have formed around her mouth and eyes. Her ponytail frizzes and falls apart.  

A few months ago, she and her partner, Rick, responded to a chest pain call. When they arrived she saw the semi-truck. The semi was shiny black, polished bright, like piece of obsidian with wheels. At first she didn’t think anything of it, but when they went inside and made contact with the patient, she realized that he had come back into her life. For years now, she had erased him from her memory. Her ex-stepfather, Don, had moved back into town with his new wife and their children. He had gray hair and a round beer belly and was married to a much younger woman. Kim remained professional, working her way through the chest pain protocol, hoping that he wouldn’t recognize her. She didn’t think he did. They transported him to City Memorial Hospital. Since then, she cannot get the image of him out of her mind, and her childhood memories had come back.  

People call 911 for anything, some more than others, and the firefighters call them “frequent flyers.” They are the bullshit calls: someone’s been sick all day and decide to call at three in the morning when he could have made an appointment with a doctor, or a homeless man faking a seizure so he can sleep inside somewhere for the night, or an arrested
drunk driver faking an asthma attack so he won’t have to go to jail. It took Kim a while to catch on because she didn’t think people would stoop that low, but after working as a paramedic for a while and seeing hundreds of real seizures, real asthma attacks, and truly sick people, she began to know better. The spark, her compassion, began to fizzle.

Her ex-stepfather was a frequent flyer.

They started going to 1000 Stephen Avenue a lot. But it was still spurtty, meaning that they would go there a bunch of times and then wouldn’t for quite some time. She was sure it was because his new younger wife threatened to leave him unless something changed, and then he would behave himself for a while just to keep her around.

In the last several months, Kim had transported her ex-stepfather at least five times. She wondered if he recognized her? She guessed not, since he was intoxicated every time they responded, and as always, with the usual bullshit chest pain complaint. Kim also tried not to make eye contact. It had been years since she last saw him, since she was in middle school. She followed her protocols word for word.

Each time she went there she looked at his wife and his daughter for signs of abuse. The emotional signs were there, but there were no marks on them. Don knew how to play the system. He knew not to leave a bruise or the smallest scratch. He knew that was all evidence that could be used against him. He had them brainwashed too, had them believing that if he went to jail, they would be out on the streets.

Their situation began to escalate. The police had threatened to arrest him on several occasions, but he always had his “out” with the chest pain complaint. Plus, his wife begged the officers not to arrest him. Kim knew it was a matter of time before things went too far.
“I don’t think it is safe for you to be here,” Kim told his wife.

Crying, she said, “I have to be there for him. He had a bad childhood. It’s not his fault.” It was the bullshit excuses he had been telling her to justify his actions. Kim couldn’t help but think she was talking to her own mother. She remembered some psychologists had called it love, but she called it brainwashing. The abuser brainwashes the abused into thinking they can’t live without him.

The police would get him calmed down and make him go to bed to sleep it off. Kim knew it would be a matter of time before he became physically abusive, and then the worst could happen. He could beat her and the kids, and maybe even kill them, but the damage had already been done psychologically. She is brainwashed, Kim thought, and the kids will grow up too fast, brainwashed themselves, regret their childhood, and have nothing but terrible memories to remember their father by.

Rick and Kim are in one of those cycles again, where they respond to 1000 Stephen every shift with the same outcome, and the burning rages inside her.

The call came in at 11:51 pm. “PD is requesting you at 1000 Stephen for a domestic with injuries,” the dispatcher said over the radio.

The red and blue LED lights reflect off houses and street signs. The sirens echo off the buildings and underneath bridges.

“I hope she leaves the dumbass. I’m tired of these people,” Rick says and then yawns.

Kim says nothing but grips the steering wheel tight and turns onto Stephen Avenue. Don is in handcuffs and sits in the yard, and a police officer stands near him.
“Same shit, different night,” she says. Rick and Kim walk past Don. He glares at them with blood on his hand and arm.

“Stupid idiot punched his hand through a window. He hit his wife too. She’s inside,” one of the police officers tells them when they enter the house.

The mother is sitting at the kitchen table, crying, with her face in her hands. One of her daughters stands next to her mother with her arm around her. The little girl has been crying so much that she has run out of tears. She sniffs and tries to catch her breath, stares through Kim at some point on the wall behind her. Kim cannot help but think of herself when she looks at these girls.

Kim’s mother was less than supportive throughout her life, especially when she tested to become a firefighter. She told her that she wasn’t good enough, that someone would let her die in a fire because she’s a woman, that it’s a man’s world, and she should find a secretary job or be a teacher.

Kim never knew her biological father. They lost contact with him after her mother divorced him, but she’s sure he would treat her the same way as her mother. Although, after Kim was hired as a paramedic, her mother changed her tune. Her mother told her friends that she supported Kim the whole time, that she was there through all the bad times, and that she was proud of her brave daughter. But, it’s true. She was there through all the bad times. She just didn’t do anything about it—the model mother.

Some members of her family told her that she turned out well for the shitty childhood she had endured. Don used to get drunk, then beat her and her sisters, and their mother. When Kim was seven, she saw him hit her mom so hard he broke her nose, and the police
came to take him away. Kim thought that was it, they were finally rid of this man, but her mother always took him back. Kim tried to be strong for her little sisters, and she tried to protect them and their mother. One night, during one of their fights and after crying in her bed, she grabbed a broom handle and broke it over his head when he was yelling at her mother, and knocked him out.

Kim kept swinging at his unconscious body, shouting, “Stop it! Stop it! Leave us alone!”

Her mother grabbed the broken broom stick. “Kimmey! Kimmey! No!”

Her mother hugged her, and Kim cried in her arms. Kim heard her younger sisters in their bedrooms crying, too.

Kim never had friends over to spend the night. She was too scared that things would go wrong and she would be embarrassed at school. She tried to keep up the charade that her home life was great, but some of the teachers knew better, and they could tell when something was wrong with her. It was hard keeping this secret hidden. Her friends had nice clothes and neat haircuts, and it made her sick to hear them talk about the family vacations they would go on over the summer and how they took piano lessons and did all kinds of things that she didn’t get to do. She asked her mother if she could take piano lessons, and her reply would always be that they didn’t have the money or the time.

Then, finally, after they endured more beatings, her mother decided to leave Don for good. Kim was glad to be away from him, but she still felt scared and guarded. She remembered how she used to dream up ways of killing him. He was a truck driver, and she used to think about how she could blow his truck up with him in it. She would walk around his semi and stare at it, looking for places to put a jug of gasoline and arc some wires into it
to make it explode. She fantasized hearing him scream while he burned to death. She tried to bury the memories and emotions. She hoped they would just go away. But they landed somewhere inside, like fall leaves stacked on top of one another, becoming a dried-up, moldy heap.

“Ma’am?” Kim says with a soothing voice. “Where are you injured?”

“He hit me in the face.” The woman raises her head, and her left eye is swollen shut and bleeding. The little girl begins to cry again when she sees her mother’s eye. “They are going to take him away, aren’t they?”

“I don’t know. I think so.” Kim dabs the cut with a dressing and applies an icepack to her swollen eye. She winces in pain when Kim places the cold pack on her face. “We should take you to the hospital to get your eye looked at. You may have an orbital fracture.”

“A what?”

“It’s your eye socket. It may be broken. What about your little girl?”

“I think she’s fine.”

“Do you have any owies?” Kim asks the girl. She lifts her pajama top, showing red handprints where she had been grabbed and squeezed violently. Kim runs her fingers gently over the bruises.

“Does it hurt?” The girl nods. “Does it hurt to breathe?” She nods again with a pouty lip. Kim turns to the mother. “Ma’am, we should take her in, too, to get looked at.” She probably doesn’t need to go to the ER, but the eyes of the doctors and nurses, and their reports to the Department of Human Services, may help in keeping this man away from them for good.
When Kim arrives at the fire station this morning, like every morning, she checks in the ambulance alone, because Rick likes to read the paper and drink coffee before the start of his shift. The back of the ambulance is a mobile ER, stocked with nearly everything they need to respond to any kind of emergency. Methodically, she checks through the medications to make sure they are there, checks the expiration dates, and ensures the right drugs are accounted for. The controlled substance box is the other medication box that she checks in. It holds the narcotics and the paralytics: Ketamine, Fentanyl, Morphine, Versed, Ativan, and Succinylcholine—the stuff that can kill if not used properly. They are highly addictive with street value. They are all there, and she checks them off on the sheet. The box is sealed with a drug tag assigned with a number that has to be correct on the sheet, and if it is not, the medication has to be accounted for on the controlled substance log. The box is clear plastic, similar to a fishing lure box so that the medications can be seen without opening the box. If any of these medications are missing or unaccounted for, it is a criminal offense. Kim pauses for a second, alone in the back of the ambulance. She looks at the drug box, and she thinks about what tonight could bring—another trip to 1000 Stephen Avenue. She feels she has to do something if the call comes in.

The thought of going back there again for the third shift in a row turns Kim’s stomach. Her hands shake. Sweat beads on her forehead. She realizes that she has no witnesses. She breaks the tag and opens the controlled substance box. Her fingers glide over the most lethal medications they carry. She removes the Succinylcholine (sux is what they call it for short) and she stares at the bottle. Sux is a paralytic facilitating intubation in obtunded patients. It is a weight-based medication administered through an IV, and within
seconds it paralyzes a patient’s body, including the breathing. However, the heart and the brain continue to function. The patient is completely aware of what’s happening, at least for a while until the brain becomes hypoxic and the person slips into cardiac arrest. Kim removes a syringe and a needle from the drawer and draws up more than a lethal dose of sux. She removes the needle from the vial, disposing of it in the red sharps box and puts the syringe full of sux in her cargo pocket. She drops the empty bottle on the floor and it cracks. She then replaces the tag and documents in the logbook and then changes the tag number and notes the reason—broken vial.

“Hey, Rick,” she says when she enters the kitchen, “I had a little accident.”

“Oh gosh, now what?” he says, turning away from his newspaper and coffee. He acts like it is a big deal, but he has a smile on his face.

“There was a broken tag on the controlled substance log, so I went to replace it. The lid came open, and a bottle of sux fell and broke on the floor.”

Kim brings the box, the log, and the broken bottle of sux as evidence to show him. The only time there needs to be a witness, as far as the department is concerned, is on paper. A witness has to sign, verifying that he or she saw you remove and replace the controlled substance.

“No big deal. We will just go downtown and draw out another vial.” Rick signs the drug log as the witness. “You’ll have to write a letter to administration about the broken vial of sux, and keep the broken vial so we can show them.”

“No problem.” She puts the broken vial in a ziploc bag, places the drug box and the drug log back in its lock-box in the ambulance.
Tonight, while on scene at 1000 Stephen, she reaches down and feels the shape of the syringe in her cargo pocket—the sux still there, waiting to be used.

“Hey! This asshole’s out here complaining of chest pain,” one of the police officers comes in to the house to tell us.

“I’ll go out and check on him,” she tells Rick. Rick stays with the mother and daughter. He is lying on his back, writhing across the ground in pain. Kim knows it’s an act. The irony is that a chest pain takes priority over a bruise or a broken eye socket, and the father, the abuser, draws the most attention by faking a heart attack. The jail will not take him with this complaint. The fakers all know the paramedics and police have to operate by a set of protocols, and they cannot judge or accuse the fakers. Kim plays along. She acts concerned and has the police help him into the back of the ambulance where they handcuff him to the cot.

Kim follows the standard chest pain checklist: “How bad is the pain on a scale of one to ten, ten being the worst pain you’ve ever had in your life? Can you point to where the pain is? Does it radiate? Are you having shortness of breath? Does it hurt to breathe?”

He answers perfectly, a beautiful performance. She continues to play along. She wants to keep him here, alone in the ambulance, where anything can happen, where things are in her control, and she has the power to cure or to let life slip away.

She connects all the EKG leads. The monitor’s amber tracing of a Normal Sinus Rhythm, the healthiest heart rhythm that anyone can have. She places a nasal cannula in his nostrils and slides the tubing over his ears. She starts an IV in his arm. He winces in pain. She enjoys this. She gives him 324mg of aspirin to thin his blood, then a nitro spray which dilates his veins and lowers his blood pressure. He still reports pain, and she gives him
Fentanyl in his IV. She administers the chest pain protocol, and all she has to do is monitor and reassess his status. All of the drugs she has given him are non-lethal doses, and as long as his blood pressure doesn’t drop to a dangerous level, he can take the medications. He plays her, so she plays back.

He tries to look her in the eyes. She avoids eye contact as much as possible. “Do I know you?” he asks.

“No. Well, I’ve responded here numerous times in the last few months. That’s where you’ve seen me before.”

“No. Not that. Aren’t you little Kimmy?”

“No. I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

“You can’t be her,” he says, then coughs.

Rick opens the ambulance door. “Is he going to the hospital?”

“Yes. He’s got chest pain. He reports the pain as a seven out of ten and has trouble breathing. I already ran through the chest pain protocol.” Kim blows her falling-down bangs out of her face and rolls her eyes.

Rick shakes his head and winks at her. He knows it’s bullshit. “Gotcha. They need to go too.” Rick points back to the house. “I’ll have to call another ambulance to haul them. I’ll go back and stay with them until the other unit arrives.”

Rick shuts the door and walks back to the house. Kim is alone again with her eX-stepfather and in control.

Don turns his head to her. “Are we going to the same hospital?”

“We can’t take them to the same hospital as you. It would be an uncomfortable situation for them and inappropriate, considering the circumstances.”
“But I love them. I didn’t mean to hurt them. I was abused as a child. My dad beat me bad almost every day. I can’t stop it. It’s a part of me.”

He starts sobbing, but he cannot wipe his eyes because his wrists are cuffed. She realizes then that she has something in common with him and the rest of his family. She was that little girl in the house with the red marks on her rib cage, and the mother could be her too, and that she could be like him, sitting here pathetic, doing everything he can to keep his family and delay his trip to jail.

But Kim chooses to not go down that path. She tries to do something to help and to stop these things from happening to other women and children, but the burning inside her is too much sometimes. His eyes are shut, trying to stop his tears. Kim removes the syringe of sux from her cargo pocket. She looks at the syringe, the power in her hands. With one quick injection, she can paralyze his entire body, stop his breathing. His arms and legs will go limp, but his heart and his brain will still be working. He will be able to hear her and see her do nothing to keep him alive. She can let his heart go into ventricular fibrillation (v-fib) and then slip into asystole, flat-lining. V-fib can be converted back into Normal Sinus, but asystole is a complete heart stoppage, and it’s almost impossible to regain a viable rhythm without an aggressive resuscitation attempt. It won’t take long, and he will be circling the drain, as they call it. She can let him slip away and then start to work him, making it look like she is doing something, and then she can call for Rick to come help.

The beauty of sux is that it is hard to trace in the body. An autopsy will show up nothing. The medical examiner would have to look for it and try to identify the chemical in a very specific blood test. This family will be rid of this man. Although the wife might stubbornly grieve over the loss of this waste of human skin, she will probably find another
abuser to attach herself to, like Kim’s mother did after she left Don. Then she will leave him and find someone else to beat her. The cycle never broken.

Kim is bound by the EMT Code of Ethics “to do no harm.” Would she be doing harm by releasing the family from him, or would she be doing harm by killing him? What harm would be worse? He will be charged, sent to jail, and then be sent to counseling where his wife will take him back in. Things will be fine for a short while before it starts up again. But she’s seen it all too often in her family and with some of the patients they come in contact with. The alcoholic wants detox, though leaves before finishing the program. Or the meth addict becomes addicted to the methadone that is used to break him of his meth habit. The cycles of addiction and abuse are never broken unless some outside force acts against the momentum, and they either die or are stunned into sobriety. But she is not hopeful for anyone. Not anymore. Not after all she’s seen.

Kim twists the syringe into his IV tubing and pauses. *Just one quick push, and it’s nighty-night for this asshole,* she thinks. The clear liquid rests in the syringe ready to be injected, and her finger rests on the plunger. There should be an EMT credo stating, “To do what is right no matter what it takes,” but there isn’t. To do what is right is too ambiguous. What does right mean? She is paralyzed herself. The hate and the sorrow, the rage and the guilt, don’t mix in the same set of emotions. She burns inside, and will always burn inside no matter what she does now.

She releases her thumb from the plunger, and unscrews the syringe from the IV tubing. She squirts the sux into the garbage can, and disposes of the syringe in the sharps box.

Don stops crying, turns his head to her and says, “Thank you, Kimmy.”
Obtunded

Of feeling, I try to escape.
Broken glass and upturned furniture.
Yard chairs lying in the grass,
like two corpses, cold and dead.
Drywall holes and sprung doors.
I try to escape, but cannot.

How to save the obtunded:
2mcg/kg Fentanyl, IV push.
Relaxation of smooth muscle.

Of remembering, I try to forget.
Scratched out eyes,
broken ear drums,
remove the senses,
make the tragic less vivid.
Blood-splattered dreams,
the nickel smell of blood.

How to save the obtunded:
2mg/kg Ketamine, IV push.
Amnesia of the pain.

For fear of losing you,
I will try everything.
Jaws clenched tight,
blood coughed through
the gaps in your teeth.
Crepitus in your ribcage,
collapsed lungs, filling with blood.
Hands and feet decorticate.
Breathe for me, please.

How to save the obtunded:
1mcg/kg Succinylcholine, IV push.
Paralysis of nerves and muscle tone.

Open airway, equal and bilateral,
chest rise and fall.
EKG tracing heartbeats,
steady and strong.
Your life extended, 
the trauma treated.

How to save the obtunded: 
2mg Versed, IV push. 
Continued sedation.

Empty bottles, ruined walls, 
red skin, a soul lost. 
Things seem out of sorts. 
Life is a show for most, 
a heartbreak for some. 
You died two days later. 
I sit here with the damage.
My Alpha

I have been a paramedic long enough to know the street lingo for dead or dying patients. DRT means Dead Right There (self-explanatory). Circling the Drain means someone is going to die soon. After those calls, my ambulance crew jokes about what we saw or what someone did or said on the scene in an effort to make things light and to get our minds off of what just happened. To a civilian, it can sound mean and heartless, but the dark humor is our coping mechanism to detach us from caring too much. Although, after the death of a child, there is always silence. It is never a joke or even remotely funny. I remember those images of the hurt and sick children, the feelings, and the panic to do something to make the dying stop.

It has to be hard to be a paramedic’s kid. My three daughters have endured countless safety briefings since they were old enough to understand: bicycle safety, how to cross the street, fire safety, fire escape plans, how to drive safely, and so on. They are all teenagers now, and I’ve backed off from my many spirited safety briefs, but occasionally I do catch myself launching into the hazards of the road, the weather, and other drivers. I receive exhausted sighs and eye rolls. I know they need to make their own decisions. It’s hard to let them go.

One morning, we responded to a rollover car accident on the highway. We arrived on scene and found an SUV upside down. The headlights were still on and steam hissed from the radiator. I found the driver, a teenage boy, lying on his back in the grass near the SUV.
His face was swollen, his left leg bent in an unnatural angle. Blood bubbled out of his mouth. A witness said he was following the vehicle when it left the road and rolled several times. He said he saw a body fly out of one of the car windows. We couldn’t find his wallet or an ID. Before we left the scene, I grabbed a backpack stitched with a local high school emblem lying next to his body. I hoped to get his name.

My daughter Emma is a tomboy. When she was five, she started begging me to get her an ATV. I said no for two years and then gave in. I bought her a helmet and small Yamaha 80 four-wheeler. I demonstrated how to shift, turn, and brake the ATV safely. I could tell she wanted to ride it; her eyes told me she had enough of my instruction. I began my safety briefing, and her shoulders sagged. Her eyes looked everywhere but at me. I cut the briefing short because she wasn’t listening anyway.

“Drive slow,” I told her. “At least until you feel comfortable.”

She strapped on the helmet, and I let her go. She drove slow and learned how to shift and turn. She became comfortable driving it and sped up on every lap around our acreage. Soon, she had the throttle pegged, and the exhaust whined when she raced by me. I ran out into her path trying to flag her down like a NASCAR pit crew waving a yellow caution flag.

“Slow down please!” I yelled to her each time she passed me.

She nodded her head like she had heard me.

My crew and I were able to keep the boy alive on the way to Methodist Hospital. We suctioned blood out of his mouth and throat, pushed pure oxygen though a tiny tube we had inserted into his trachea. I monitored his heart rhythm and hoped it didn’t change to anything
lethal. When we arrived at Methodist, I gave my patient report to the trauma doc, then moved him to the trauma table, and he became an Alpha Gamma Alpha. I’ve known about Methodist’s goofy naming system for trauma patients, and it didn’t bother me before, but that day it made me mad. I wanted to find his actual name, because his parents needed to know.

Alpha Gamma Alpha is what Methodist Medical Center names all their bad trauma patients; they call them Alpha for short. They may know their names, but the code is used on all the documentation until the patient stabilizes or dies. I never asked why they do this, even when they do know the names. Maybe it helps the trauma team detach from feeling, to think of that person lying bloody, broken, and near death as a job to do? Maybe it’s their own version of dark humor.

Emma ignored my pleas to slow down and continued to speed by me. But she handled the machine well. I eased up and relaxed a little. Then Emma went over a bump, and the ATV went airborne. Emma panicked when the ATV landed. She moved the handlebars to the left and right trying get control, the rear wheels rooster-tailing dirt into the air, and then she crashed into a tree. The motor stopped, and there was silence. Emma did not cry or shout for help. I stood frozen. I’m a paramedic. I’m used to action. I know what to do in stressful situations, but I forgot about all my experience and all the medical knowledge I know.

I heard the trauma team refer to the boy as “the Alpha.” He’s not a fucking Alpha, I said to myself. I looked through his backpack for anything that might identify him. I found a parking ticket, Algebra homework, and a birthday card from his parents. I handed my findings to the social worker assigned to my Alpha. She said they would contact his parents.
A police officer had run the vehicle’s plates and found his address.

My Alpha died the next day. The news reported his name and published a recent picture; he was a handsome kid. I relived the scene. My hands shook, my throat tightened, and I hoped the parents had made it to the hospital in time to let him go.

I ran to Emma, shouting her name.

Images of children I had tried to help crossed my mind: a dying girl asking about her mother who had died when their minivan was hit by a drunk driver; the five-year-old boy who fell from a third-story apartment balcony and broke his legs so bad that I couldn’t stop the bleeding in time; a six-month-old baby girl floating face down in an overflowing bathtub. And all the SIDS babies.

There are so many. Too many.

I saw her move, and before I could get to her, she was walking around the ATV, inspecting the damage. She only injured her pinky finger, but I carried her like she was a baby to the house. Her arms were wrapped around my neck, her legs wrapped around my waist.

In the bathroom, I ran her finger under running water. My hands shook while I cleaned her wound and bandaged it.
Questions of Life and Light

How dare you present yourself
to me in all of your forms
and not just one to make
everything so clear.

Is it nature that you love more
than me and men?
What is the form you come to me in?
What is it called?

In the half-light of dusk,
in the growing reflection
of the sun against the moon,
you come to me in all shapes,
all colors. The roundness of red,
the heat of oranges and yellows.

In your absence, I am left
with blackness. The absence
of life and lights,
love and hope.
Fullness and shape.

In our end there is nothing
that remains to remind those
of who comes after, that we
were here once, that for better
or for worse, we had life.
PART II: HEAT
At the Recruiter’s Office

He said,
You will have honor, adventure, camaraderie.
We will give you everything:
clothes, beans, bullets, and Band-Aids.
You can have it all
and the world will be ours.

He asked,
Are you a communist? Are you a homosexual?
Are you white, black, Hispanic, or
other? Do you need money for college?
Can you kill to have it all? Are you insane?

He said,
You will stand on ground and defend it.
You will take orders and like it.
You will bleed red, white and blue.
We will teach you. You will learn.

Are you tough? Do you want to see what you’re made of?
Are you a liberal? Do you love America?
Can you carry our flag? And
if needed, die for us all?
Check yes or no.

He said,
If that happens, we will wrap
a coffin around you, shoot a salute
into the air, and rest you eternally in her soil.
Your mother will live assured that you
did this for America. She will have
the flag we draped over your body. It will hang
on her wall next to family photos
in a frame wrapped in dark, finished wood.

He said,
at last, your signature, please.
A news story predicted the United States would suffer approximately 40,000 casualties in the first ninety-six hours of the invasion. I tried not to think about that, but it was hard to wipe that number out of my mind when I was nineteen years old and on a warship bound for the Persian Gulf in support of Desert Shield. It was New Year’s Eve, 1991, and I focused on some much needed shore-leave in the Philippines. From the ship, we could hear the fireworks going off in Olongapo City as our Company Commander granted us leave for twenty-four hours; that’s how long it took to refit the USS Tripoli with food, fuel, complete repairs, and a take on a Seal Team hitching a ride with us to the Persian Gulf.

It must have been funny to see my platoon on the flight deck of the Tripoli, wearing our Gold’s Gym tie-dyed tank tops tucked into stonewashed jeans we bought at the PX in Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii. Nearly all of us had the Marine Corps high-and-tight haircuts and wore our dog tags on the outside of our shirts. And to think, I used to wonder why women in America wouldn’t come near us.

After our Platoon Commander let us loose, we rushed down the gangway and made our way into town. My friend Eric, from Idaho, and I tagged along with a couple of experienced Marines who had been to the Philippines before and knew the best place to go for women and booze.

In Subic Bay, the streets were busy with locals, selling anything they could to us: food, clothes, watches, stereos, women. The traffic was thick and cars honked to clear the way. Bicyclists weaved in and out of cars and pedestrians. Eric and I stopped and talked to some of the girls and looked around at the street vendors selling food. Whatever it was
called, it smelled good. The meat cooked on metal skewers over small charcoal grills made of cinder block and steel grates.

The older Marines told us to forget the vendors and prostitutes in Subic Bay, and they found a bus to take us on the eight-mile trip to Olongapo City.

“It’s where the beer is cheap and so are the women,” one of them said, “and for five bucks you can get a Filipino woman. She will bring you back to her apartment and do anything for you.”

“First, they wash your junk. Then they massage your entire body before you do the deed.” Another Marine in my platoon told us this as we bounced along in the back of the bus with dense jungle to our right and a view of the ocean on the left.

A sailor chimed in from across the aisle, “Fuck yeah! Those chicks are so small you feel like you are going to break them in two!”

I was anxious and ready to forget what could happen to all of us in the coming months. I wanted to forget that I was in the Marine Corps and that by evening I had to return to a ship with five thousand other men heading to war.

We arrived in Olongapo City to dense traffic. The bus driver honked his horn and shouted something in Spanish I couldn’t understand to move people out of the way. One of the Marines we were with stood next to the bus driver and tried to explain to him where the club was. The bus driver nodded and parked at an intersection, then pointed down a street to his right. The Marines we were with got off, and Eric and I followed them. The other passengers ran and scattered as soon when they got off the bus, like little kids racing to a playground for recess.
It was wild there. The New Year’s Eve celebration had started. People threw firecrackers in the street and set off rockets, whistling and hissing as they climbed and then exploded overhead. I was impressed with the power of the fireworks: huge rockets and bandoliers of firecrackers at least ten times the size of the Black Cats we could buy in the States. The explosions were much louder, and the rockets screamed and sprayed sparks all over, starting a small fire by a street vendor selling replica athletic jerseys. Locals screamed as they beat the flames with anything they could find: the shirts off their backs, the shoes off their feet. The fire finally went out when an old woman dumped two bottles of water on it.

The other Marines found the club they had told us about. It was dark, crowded, and loud. The music was in Spanish, and the bass was turned up so high the speakers’ sound distorted and cracked. There was a large stage at the back of the club. Women spun on poles, some danced, and others swung on swings hung from the ceiling, kicking their feet back and forth to go higher and higher. Men cheered and whistled through fingers stuck between their teeth. We side-stepped through men talking with women, and we ordered our drinks at the bar. The beer was cold, the glass sweating from the high humidity, and I drank them as fast as I ordered them. Eric and I tried to be cool like we had done this a million times, but it was obvious that we were green, the only males in the club sitting alone and not talking to any women. Eric shrugged his shoulders at me. I nodded back. He was shy. I knew I would have to take the lead.

I hailed one of the women as if I was calling for a cab. Soon, several sat beside us, on our laps, all over us, trying to get our attention. When one got up, another took her place. It reminded me of Close Encounters of the Third Kind, when Richard Dreyfuss was surrounded by the short aliens, reaching out with their long skinny arms to touch his skin and his face,
while he smiled at them, in awe of their alien curiosity. The girls gave me so much attention, I felt flattered, and I thought they loved me.

“Do you want a date?” one asked me in hard-to-understand English.

“A what?” I loved her smile, her straight black hair, bronze skin, and eyes so dark I could fall into them forever and never come out. She was dressed for work: transparent white slip with a yellow bra and thong underneath.

“Do you want a date?” she repeated and shook her breasts at me.

“Oh, uh, yeah, sure.” Is this how a transaction starts? I thought. My words started to slur. I bartered with her on the price of her own body, and I couldn’t believe how easy it was. Maybe she really did like me to make such a good deal like that, or maybe she just needed the money?

Eric smiled a lot, and didn’t talk much. He just nodded and blushed when they talked to him and raked their fingernails through his hair. I think he was a virgin, but I never asked him. One of them grabbed his butt, and he spit out his beer and coughed.

We made our arrangements and left the bar to go to their room.

It was dark, and the fireworks were more intense. The streets were filled with firework smoke like a fog. My ears rang from the explosions. My eyesight clouded with sunspots from the flashes. I tried to walk, but felt uneasy, my legs unsure. My date held me up, because I was too drunk to walk straight. Euphoria swept over me like I was an ordinary man living his life, sometime in the future, somewhere else, not heading to war and maybe to my death. But I was in the United States Marine Corps. I was a lean mean fighting machine, a born killer for the United States’ government. I had my gun in my pants, and I could not wait for it to go off. I had to suck it up and remember who I was and where I was and why.
Then someone threw an exploding bandolier into the street in front of us. Eric and his
girlfriend were in the middle of the noise and the fire. My date and I turned our backs to the
explosions. I felt pieces of gravel and chunks of fireworks pepper my back as we crouched
down. She screamed or maybe that was me? When the explosions stopped, I turned around
and looked for Eric and couldn’t see him right away. The haze was thick and stung my throat
when I breathed. I coughed. I squinted. I covered my eyes with my hands like I was looking
at the sun, and I saw Eric sitting on a curb holding his hand. His date sat beside him with her
arm around his shoulders, consoling him. Blood ran down his forearm like tassels of red rope
and pooled underneath him on the street.

“What happened?” I tried to open his hand to look at the injury.

Eric wouldn’t let his hand loose so I could look at it. “Don’t touch it, Griff.” He
grimaced. “One of them damn things landed in my hand and just went off.”

“We got to get you back to the boat.”

“No, you stay. I’ll be fine.” Eric took off his shirt and wrapped his hand.

“No way, man,” I said, but I didn’t want to leave. “Well, are you sure?”

He nodded.

I looked at my date through the haze-choked street. Even if it was for money, she was
the first woman who had expressed an interest in me since our ship left California over a
month earlier. How long could it take anyway? But I couldn’t leave a friend behind,
especially Eric.

We said goodbye to the girls, and tried to get our money back, but they turned,
laughed and went back to the bar where we picked them up. They would be someone else’s
dates tonight. I realized then that it was all about business to them. They didn’t love me. The beer had been talking, telling me I was lonely.

I helped Eric to his feet and slung his good arm around my neck. We walked slowly, swaying together through the street, and watched other Marines with their dates, their arms wrapped around them, laughing and groping.

We stumbled back to the Tripoli. We were pretty fucked up, but managed to climb the gangway together and then to sick bay. Eric sat on the exam table, and I propped myself against it. The Navy doctor told Eric that he had to be flown back to Hawaii for surgery. The firecracker was so powerful that it had ripped the inside of his palm apart and damaged ligaments and muscle. His trigger finger was limp, lifeless.

While the doctor stitched Eric’s hand to stop the bleeding, our Battalion Sergeant Major, who served three tours in Vietnam and was wounded twice, visited him in sick bay.

“I was shot in the thigh, and it burned like hell,” he said, launching in to a story, “But the landmine thing still bothers me. It was an antipersonnel mine designed to kill in a radius. It blew outward, rather than up. It spared me death, but killed two Marines who were next to me. All I got were some shrapnel wounds to my ankle. I spent two months in a hospital in Saigon, and then I was shipped back to my platoon. You’ll be back with us when you get better. Who knows how long this thing will last. You’ll be flown to Clark tomorrow for a flight back to Hawaii.”

Then he just left. The nerves in my face tingled. My throat was dry. I couldn’t swallow.

I wanted to go with Eric to Hawaii. I didn’t want to be one of the forty thousand casualties. I wanted to live. I wanted to go back into town and find my date.
Instead, I helped Eric back to his bunk, and we tried to sleep as other Marines straggled in from their wild night in town. They whooped and hollered and told their stories. They held their fingers under their noses and told each other to sniff. One of them ran through the berthing area naked and jammed his cock into another Marine’s face, only to get punched in the balls. We were kids, a bunch of horny drunk kids, away from home and on our way to our probable deaths with everything to lose.

I lay in my bunk, Eric above me in his. I heard him crying. He didn’t want to go to Hawaii. He wanted to go to the Gulf. Since the first day of boot camp, we were trained for war, and we had one on the horizon. Iraq was our first worthy adversary since Vietnam. But I secretly wanted to escape instead of Eric. Every day the Tripoli was at sea, it sailed closer to the Gulf. I thought more and more about my life and my future.

The whole thing of dying for your country didn’t comfort me; I would not have made a good samurai or a kamikaze. I wanted the enemy to die for his country, so I could live on and join the civilian world once again, go to college, pay taxes, have 3.1 kids, a modern wife, with a suburban four-bedroom house with an attached garage.

I covered my ears and thought about what it would be like to die. I wondered if it would hurt or does everything just go black? If I was captured, how bad would the torture be? But I wouldn’t be captured, I thought. I would make sure to save one bullet for myself.

The next day we were to depart from the Philippines. We were all in uniform and in formation on the flight deck of the Tripoli. Our Platoon Commander waited to address us until after Eric’s helicopter lifted off. Its rotors blew wind over us, and the chopping of the air beat my eardrums. I maintained my military discipline and stood at attention, looking
straight ahead. I saw Eric out of the corner of my eye, his hand bandaged in the shape of a white club, walking toward the helicopter escorted by two other Marines carrying his sea bags. He boarded onto the helicopter and was headed to Clark Air Force Base for a flight back to K-bay.

I had been with him since boot camp and through the Marine Corps School of Infantry. We had talked about everything and what brought us to the Marines. I imagined him back in Idaho, elk hunting with his father. He could never tell anyone that he went to war, only that he almost made it. He would have a scar on his hand to remind him of that night in the Philippines.

The helicopter lifted off, banked and blew the rotor wash over us, flying away from the Tripoli across the water. The beating of the blades in the humid air grew faint, and my Platoon Commander began to address us.

“Marines, we are leaving Subic Bay, and the next stop will be Iraq. We will start getting serious about training in the next few days. We will be in the Gulf within the week.”

Our commander continued to talk, but my mind trailed off. Storm clouds had formed to the west of us, the sea choppy, and some of the big waves had made it through the breakwater, causing the mighty Tripoli to rise and fall, lift and list. My stomach churned, and I thought I was going to throw up. I wished that I had been a few steps ahead of Eric, taking the brunt of the fireworks, so I could go to Hawaii. But I remained on the Tripoli. We were designated to be the amphibious assault force, onto the shores of Kuwait to attack the Iraqis.

I considered Eric to be the first casualty of the war. Only 39,999 left to go, and I hoped that I would not be one of them.
Rumors of Saddam

Homeless children kidnapped and fed to lions.

Human hunting range.

Medical experiments on healthy humans.

Villages wiped out. Every one vanished.

Underground nuclear detonations.

Girls and boys raped by soldiers.

All were rumors we heard.

Back home, no one believed us.
Rules of Engagement:

When driving in a convoy in Ramadi: If a child steps in front of your vehicle, do not stop. The child may be a sympathy decoy to trap you in an ambush.

Semper Fidelis,
General of the First Marine Division
Camp Blue Diamond
Ramadi, Iraq
Chappell, Nebraska

New cops are all alike. They have romantic ideas about police work they only see in movies. When they are alone in their tiny apartments in front of their full-length mirrors, they practice quick-draws in their underwear. They dream about working in the cities where all the action is. But the testing process is competitive at the bigger departments, so they find jobs in smaller towns, like here at the Deuel County Sheriff’s Office. They stay for a few years for the experience, and then leave when they land their dream jobs in Denver, Omaha, or with the Nebraska State Patrol.

The Deuel County Sheriff’s Office is as small of a department as an aspiring police officer can find, with seven deputies protecting the tiny county and its two towns: Big Springs and Chappell. The county sits on the southeast end of Nebraska’s panhandle, where I-76 splits from I-80 and runs southwest to Denver. I-80 is an artery filled with bad blood. Thousands of cars pass through the county every day with families on vacation, sleepy-eyed truckers, drug smugglers, illegal immigrants, and fugitives speeding to take their problems somewhere else—and the Nebraska State Patrol is ready for them. That’s their beat.

Off the interstate, on the cracked and pot-holed county highways and through the quiet streets of Chappell and Big Springs, is Deputy Nick Taylor’s territory. He knows all the town gossip, he knows who is sleeping with whom, and he knows who owes money to whom. From behind his badge, he enforces what he can off the books. He holds power over the county, and he can leverage his will with the law on his side.

Tonight, Nick is on patrol with a trainee, Garret Lippart. Garret is one of those aspiring big city police officers who found his way to the Sheriff’s Office for the experience and to wear the badge and carry a gun.
“You rookies are all the same, you know that?” Nick says. He looks out his window in the black night.

“What? What do you mean?” Garret asks.

“You all talk way too much and ask too many damn questions.” The bright green of the dashboard lights illuminates Nick’s face.

“Yeah, well, I just want to know what to do in every situation. I want to be ready.”

“When the shit hits the fan—you will never be ready for it.” Nick pauses to let that little bit of advice sink in and the kid shuts up for once.

“So, have you had to use your sidearm?” Garret’s voice crackles like a teenager asking his dad about girls and sex.

“You mean, have I ever shot anyone?” Nick replies. “No, I haven’t. You know, there’s more to police work than drawing your gun on people and shooting them down,” Nick lies.

“I know.” Garret’s sad face turns down to his lap, and he sinks into his seat, dejected.

“Is that the only reason why you want to be a cop? So you can shoot somebody? No way, man. You became a cop for the wrong reasons,” Nick says. “The reality of this job is you spend most of your time trying to talk people down, resolving situations without violence. Then there’re all the reports. Reports up the ass, and that’s a whole other shift, just teaching you about that.”

Garret nods and looks out his passenger-side window. The yellow lines on the black asphalt highway appear and disappear in the headlights, then bleed away into the night behind the red taillights.
“You know what? We do have our intense moments around here. Things can get out of hand sometimes,” Nick says, trying to make Garret feel better about his future.

Garret looks up from his despair. “Yeah? You mean it?”

“Yeah, I do. But always remember this about law enforcement. It’s not about how many criminals you kill. It’s about how many you bring in alive to stand trial.” Bullshit, Nick thinks.

“Yeah?” Garret says. He sits up straight in his seat and adjusts his seatbelt over his shoulder, ready for the good stuff, the secrets of police work.

“Using your firearm is the absolute last resort—when all other options are gone. You don’t want the blood of another human on your soul.”

Nick glares into the darkness just ahead of his headlights, searching for something else to say to bolster the rookie’s confidence. Out in the distance, a set of headlights appear on the side of the road. A brown pickup is pulled over and parked. Its driver is in the ditch puking. They stop, Nick turns on his emergency lights.

“Here. I’ll show you some Western Nebraska, small-town police work.”

Garret perks up, nervous, and touches his sidearm to make sure it’s still there. He touches the smooth leather of the holster and the cold blued steel of the barrel.

“You won’t need that with this call. I know this guy. He’s a drunk, but harmless.” Nick shifts the police car to park and points to the license plates. “Do you see his plates? H-O-U-N-D.” Camouflage decals spell out Poon Hound on the back window.

“Yeah, I do. Are you going to call this in?” Garret asks.
“No. I’m not. Now, pay attention. This guy is Kevin. We call him Kevbo around here. An old friend of mine.” Nick shuts his door and walks to the front of his cruiser where Garret meets him. Garret’s fingertips rests on the holster release for his Glock .40.

“Kevbo! What’s up, man?”

Kevin looks up and staggers. He raises his arms to block the flashing red and blue emergency lights from his vision. “Nick? If that’s you, leave me the fuck alone, will ya?” Kevin’s 6’5”, 310-pound frame towers over Nick.

“C’mon, Kev. Talk to me.”

“Let me call Komer. He’ll come out and get me and take me home.” Kevin’s Pioneer Seed hat is cocked over to one side of his head. Kevin’s eyes are bloodshot and squinty, and he can barely stand against his pickup fender.

“Why don’t I just call your wife?” Nick says.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“Been out at Komer’s again, working on *Poon Hound*?” Nick asks and smacks the hood of the pickup with the palm of his hand.

“Truck pullin’ season’s coming, isn’t it? So, yeah, I’ve been working on *Poon Hound.*” Nick steps out of the way as spit flies out of Kevin’s mouth when he says *Poon.

“How’s she looking? She going to be ready?”

“Who? *Poon Hound* or my wife?”

“*Poon Hound,* of course.”

“She ain’t like you, remember. She’s better now, a real pullin’ truck. Hell, she’s twice the truck you knew her to be. She’ll take me to the pro circuit this year.” His words are slurred, and he struggles to keep his balance.
“Bein’ that we are friends, I’ll call Komer for you, and we’ll wait until he gets here.”

“What about my truck?

You can come get it in the morning, once you sober up.” Nick removes his cell phone from his pocket and dials Komer.

Nick and Garret follow Komer and Kevin into Chappell. Komer is also a drunk, a functional drunk. He needs the stuff to live a normal life, and he has seizures if he doesn’t drink for a couple of hours.

A few years ago, Komer tried to sober up, but only lasted one day. He had to be transported by helicopter to Kearney, because his seizures turned life-threatening when he stopped drinking that day. Ever since then, he’s drunk even more, and once a week, he drives his rusty old ’76 Chevy Silverado into Big Springs and fills the bed with cases of Bud Light and Black Velvet.

Komer parks his car in front of Kevin’s house. Kevin’s wife, Holly, has left the outside light on. Kevin staggers to the front door, opens it, and an upstairs light turns on.

Nick lives a few miles outside of Chappell in single-wide trailer at the end of a dead-end road. He likes it out there. It’s secluded and away from town. He can do what he wants and have whoever he wants over to visit.

Holly hides her car behind Nick’s trailer in case someone shows up unannounced. After every shift, Nick comes home and waits for Holly. She arrives around nine in the morning after she gets Kevin off to work and her two boys to school. They make love, then Nick falls asleep, and Holly leaves without disturbing him. Nick uses her like Ambien.
But on this morning, Holly is distant and quiet while they are having sex. Nick finishes and rolls off of her. Holly pulls the covers to her neck and stares at the ceiling.

“What happened to all the dirty talk?” he asks. “Something wrong?” Nick wipes the sweat from his forehead and face.

“I saw you escort Komer and Kevin home last night,” she says.

“Yep. I had to. No way I was going to let Kevin drive anymore last night.” Nick yawns. He is usually asleep by now.

“He’s getting worse, you know.”

“I think so, too. I’ve been seeing him out late while on patrol.”

“He’s drinking more and spending more time at Komer’s. Then he comes home pissed off and immediately starts yelling at me and throwing stuff around. Bitchin’ that he can’t get the right parts for *Poon Hound*.”

“Well, truck pullin’ season is coming up. It’s natural that he would be out at Komer’s working on his truck.”

“I know, but he spends more time on that truck than with his family. He carries on that I don’t support him and his dream and me and the kids are in the way.”

“Well, winning the national title is a big thing. He could go on tour, and with all the endorsements, he could quit his job.” Nick tries to be sympathetic, but distant.

“But what about me and the kids?” Holly sits up bed. The covers fall down exposing her breasts. “I don’t feel safe there, and I’m worried about the kids. I could just leave him.”

“No. You don’t need to leave him,” Nick says.
He knows that if she left Kevin, she would stop seeing him, too. She would have nowhere to go. Her parents retired and moved to Arizona. She would move there with her kids.

“The next time he comes home like that, don’t call 911. Call me on my cell. I might be able to help without causing too much of a ruckus.”

“But I may not have time to call you.”

“Listen, if you call 911 and report a domestic, then all the State Patrol dickheads on I-80 will come swooping in like vultures, and it will be embarrassing.” Nick says. “I’ll try to keep an eye on him tonight. I’m training a new guy. He’ll like getting to arrest someone.”

Nick gets out of bed and puts on sweatpants. His hairy belly slumps over the waistband. He straightens his comb-over and digs lint from his navel.

“I’m not sure if I can keep doing this, either,” Holly says. She gets out of bed and dresses.

“What do you mean this? You mean us?”

“Well if things change between me and Kevin, for the better I mean.” Holly pauses to put her bra on.

“We’re just having fun, right?”

“Yeah, it’s fun, but I worry about my kids and what it would do to them if we got a divorce. My parents divorced when I was young, and it took me a long time to get over it.” Holly sits on the bed to tie her shoes. “Besides, my mom would just say, I told you so. She always says I should have married you anyway.”

“Who’s fault is that?” Nick finds a dirty t-shirt lying on the floor. He smells it, then puts it on.
“Mine. But damn, we were so young. You left for the Army, and I stayed here in Chappell. What the hell else was I supposed to do?”

“You’re right. I shouldn’t have left. I should have stayed here.” Nick walks over to Holly, hugs her, and wipes her tears from her cheek. “I’ll do what I can.”

“Okay. Thank you.” Holly pulls away and kisses Nick on the cheek. “I have to go,” she says and walks through Nick’s messy trailer.

The screen door shuts behind Holly. Nick grabs a beer from his refrigerator and, barefoot, steps out onto the stack of pallets that serves as a patio. He watches Holly’s car disappear down the gravel road. He tips his beer all the way back until it’s empty and throws the can in his yard.

He goes back into his trailer and makes a strong whiskey and Coke. He looks at the only picture he has on his walls of Kevin, Holly, and him next to *Poon Hound*. In the picture, Nick has his arm around Holly.

He and Kevin built the first *Poon Hound* in high school. Back then, Nick was the driver and Kevin did all the mechanical work. They had won local truck pulls and had local sponsors and had hopes of winning the pulls at the Nebraska State Fair. Nick misses the lights, the smell of the exhaust, the noise of the truck’s engine when the accelerator is dropped at the green light, and the crowds that cheered when he pulled farther than the other drivers.

In Chappell, where life moves sluggish through time, Kevin thinks he’s still the big fish in a little pond, unable to grow up and accept that he has real responsibilities. He’s still working on the same damn truck with the same stupid name. Time has stopped for Kevin, stuck in his high school days.
When Nick came home after being gone for eight years, he noticed that nothing had changed, like he had stepped into the past—same buildings, same people, same problems. The world he left had moved on. It drives by him every day on the interstate, right by Chappell—the small town that the interstate forgot. This is his world now. A life under an invisible shield.

* 

Near Komer’s farm, Garret and Nick are parked off of Highway 30 on a gravel road just out of sight of passing cars’ headlights. Eagerly waiting to catch a speeder, Garret stands outside the patrol car aiming the speed gun. Nick sits in the patrol car. He removes a flask from his cargo pocket and pours whiskey into his 32-ounce fountain drink he bought at the Loaf ‘n’ Jug convenience store in Big Springs.

A car passes, and Garret opens his door and jumps in. “Seventy-two in a fifty-five! We got one!”

“Settle down. Let that one go,” Nick says.

“What!” Garret is out of breath from the excitement.

“Let’s wait. What’s that one speeder hurting anyway?”

Garret returns to his place at the front of the patrol car, aiming the speed gun at passing cars. Nick watches the cars go by and then a brown pickup with Poon Hound decals on the rear window passes them. Nick yells out the window to Garret, “Get in. Let’s stop this one.”

“What? Ain’t that your buddy?” Garret says when he gets into the driver’s seat.

“Yeah, but he’s pushed my limits too far. I thought about how I let him go the other night, and I told myself that I wouldn’t do it again. Light ‘em up. Let’s go!”
Nick takes a long draw of his fountain drink through two red straws. Garret switches the emergency lights on and accelerates right up behind Kevin’s pickup and bumps the sirens button on and off. Kevin pulls over. Garret approaches on the driver’s side. Nick follows, but stays out of Kevin’s view.

“Sir, hands on the wheel,” Garret says, staying back from the window.

“All right!” Kevin is pissed. His speech slurs. Garret goes through the standard traffic stop questions, checking license and registration, and then investigates for drinking and driving. Nick stands in front of the patrol car’s headlights, observing. Kevin attempts to see who the other officer is by putting his hand up to shadow his eyes. Garret makes the arrest and walks with Kevin back to the patrol car.

“You fuckin’ brand new cops gotta make an example out of someone, don’t you? My best friend since high school is a deputy. He’ll get me off.” Kevin finally recognizes Nick once he is out of the headlights and the emergency strobes. “Nick! Tell this rookie to let me go, will you!”

“I can’t this time, Kevin. I’m just shadowing him tonight. He’s making all the decisions,” Nick says and takes the last sip from his tainted fountain drink.

“We’ve been best friends since high school. C’mon, let me call Komer to come get me.”

“I told you I can’t this time. Besides, longtime friends has got nothing to do with this.” The whiskey takes hold. Nick’s words slur. He pays closer attention to his speech and leans against the patrol car, hoping Garret won’t notice.

“It’s Holly, isn’t it? You’re still pissed that I stole Holly from you.” Garret moves Kevin to the backseat of the patrol car. “Well, too bad!”
Nick remains silent.

“All right. Get in the car,” Garret says.

“What a nice night,” Kevin says from the back of the patrol car. “Too bad I ran into you two.”

“All right now. That’s enough,” Garret says.

“Why did you come back to this shithole, Nick? There’s more about this than you know, kid.” Kevin leans forward to the metal cage that separates the front seat from the back.

“He’s a real piece of work.”

“Shut up! So much for being best friends, huh?” Nick says and punches the metal cage hitting Kevin’s face and sending him back into the seat. “You’re under arrest for OWI.”

Kevin laughs and curses Garret and Nick on the way to jail.

For a time, it is quiet around Chappell, and for Nick it becomes quieter without Holly. She spends more time with Kevin, and because he lost his license, she has to drive him to work and then pick him up. Nick has heard the gossip around town that they are going to counseling and trying to work things out. Nick regrets allowing Garret to arrest him, but he feels he should protect Holly and her kids. But Nick has other options.

Nick spends most of his on-duty time at the Loaf ‘n’ Jug, standing by the magazine rack, reading the paper and the magazines, sipping on his spiked fountain drink. This becomes his routine. He likes to talk to the cashier, Annette, who works the 11pm-7am shift. It is quiet, and during that time, several hours pass before a customer walks in. Annette is older than Nick by almost twenty years, but she flirts with him and he flirts back. She is overweight, smokes, and has dentures. Annette is one of those types who never has a chance
to leave Chappell. She was a high school drop-out, married to several bikers and truckers, and had a kid with nearly every one of them. Her life is Chappell. She knows no different, and it doesn’t bother her. Nick arrested her three years ago for public intoxication, and he always thought she hated him for it, but soon she visits Nick at the end of their shifts at his trailer on the dead-end road, wearing the springs out in his bed.

“How come you never left Chappell?” Nick asks her once.

“I don’t know. No use in doing much else. I got my kids here. I don’t think I’d do any better elsewhere.”

For Nick it is a void to fill, something to do while he waits for Kevin to fall apart again. He knows it will be a matter of time before Holly comes calling.

When truck pulling season starts in May, Kevin drives his pickup out to Komer’s again without a license. Nick tails him once from Komer’s place back to his house. He drives way under the speed limit and swerves when Nick stops him. Kevin is drunk. Nick asks him where he is going, and he says he is going home. But Nick calls Komer and gives Kevin another break.

Nick has his suspicions that Kevin is falling apart again, and he parks in an alley behind their house every night to observe and make sure things don’t get out of hand. While he sips on his spiked fountain drink, he hears Kevin and Holly yelling at each other. They argue for about an hour every night. He stays there until it gets quiet. Then all the lights turn off in the house, and Nick goes back on patrol. It is all entertainment to him, something to do in a small town.
One morning, after Annette leaves his trailer, Nick finishes the last of his whiskey as a car pulls up to his place and parks behind his trailer. He thinks it’s Annette and looks around his kitchen and sees Annette left her dentures on the counter. He grabs them and goes to meet her at the door to give them back to her.

“Can I come in?” Holly says through the screen door. He is surprised. Nick throws Annette’s dentures behind his couch.

“Of course,” Nick says. He can smell the cigarette stink on him from Annette’s mouth, and he tries to maintain his distance from Holly.

“He’s back to the way he was before. It’s that damn pullin’ truck of his.” Holly sits down on one of Nick chairs covered in dirty clothes.

“Is he threatening you and the kids?”

“No. But it’s coming to that point again. I know it is,” Holly says. Nick knows she is lying. It’s already past that point. He’s heard the yelling, the degradation, the smashing furniture, and doors slamming shut from his many nights parked behind their house in the alley. He could be out on the interstate stopping speeders, but those people never pay their fines. To them, Chappell is nothing more than a drive-by.

“Do you need me to do something?” Nick asks.

“What else can you do?”

“Not much else really, now that I think about it. I thought popping him for OWI would help, but obviously it didn’t,” Nick says and finishes the last of his whiskey. Nick burps in his throat and blows the air out his mouth. He washes his face and hands in his kitchen sink to remove the cigarette and old-sex smell. He is paranoid that Holly can smell Annette on him.
“We’re broke. Kevin spends all our money on the truck. We have bills due, and I can’t pay them.” Holly hugs Nick.

“There’s not much else I can do except arrest him again. Things will be good for a while, but then eventually you’ll be right back where you started.” Nick rubs her back and runs his hand underneath her pants and squeezes her behind. He unbuttons her jeans and slides them to her ankles.

Holly smells Nick’s chest. “Have you started smoking?” Holly looks up, sniffing at his mouth.

“What? No, I don’t smoke.” Holly goes to her knees. She slides his sweatpants to his feet and tries to take him all the way in. “I’ll think of something. You don’t need to worry about that right now.”

Nick leans against the counter talking to Annette at the Loaf ‘n’ Jug. “You could stop by in the afternoon, say five o’clock or so.”

“Oh honey, that’s when I wake up to come here,” Annette says. She inhales a deep draw of her cigarette, exhales, then coughs violently. She pounds her fist on her chest. “Damn! But what about six?”

Nick thinks about that. He takes a long sip from his drink. “That should be fine.”

The dispatcher interrupts the flirting, “Two-One, this is County.”

“This is Two-One, go ahead,” Nick replies into his lapel mic.

“Possible domestic at 1635 2nd Street in Chappell. Subject appears to be armed and intoxicated. The caller is the wife who has exited the residence to make the 911 call. Be advised children are being held by the subject in the house.”
“Copy, en route from the Loaf ‘n’ Jug.”

Nick runs to his patrol car, buzzing from his tainted fountain drink. He accelerates from the gas station and drives two blocks to Kevin and Holly’s house.

“Two-One, be advised, there are two State Troopers headed your way, ETA five minutes on both.”

“Copy.” Nick arrives and finds Holly sitting in the front yard holding her youngest son, crying.

“Where is he?” Nick asks, trying not to yell at her.

“He’s in the house!” Holly screams. “I think he’s hurting Kevin Jr. He has a shotgun!”

“Kevin!” Nick shouts and enters the house through the kitchen, and on the kitchen table he sees a rifle case unzipped and empty. He removes his Taser from its holster and points in front of him. In the living room, Kevin has his son by the collar on the floor. Nick spots a shotgun near them.

“You little bastard!” Kevin yells into his son’s face. “You’re holding me back from doing what I want to do!”

“Dad, stop it!”

“Kevin! Let him go!” Nick points his Taser at Kevin, but he doesn’t hear him and slams his son repeatedly on the floor. “Kevin! Kevin!” Nick quickly slides the shotgun with his foot behind him out of Kevin’s reach, all the while keeping his Taser aimed at him.

Kevin turns his head and sees Nick. “You! You prick. We were friends, and I found out tonight that you’re fucking my wife!” Kevin lets his son go and walks slow toward Nick. His fists are clenched, and he’s ready to fight.
“Let’s calm down. Let’s go outside and talk this over.” Nick keeps his Taser drawn on Kevin. Kevin Jr. cries on the floor behind his father. Nick motions to the boy to leave the room. “Go on, son. Go outside with your momma.” Kevin Jr. runs past them outside to his mother.

“Don’t call him that! He’s not your son!”

“I know. Now let’s talk this over.” Nick lowers the Taser.

“Yeah, let’s talk this over! Have you been with my wife?” Kevin looks as if he can lunge at Nick at any time. Nick does not answer.

The dispatcher’s voice comes over the radio mic. “Two-One, this is County, what’s your status?”

“I’m talking with the subject now.” Nick speaks into the mic while he keeps his eyes on Kevin.

“Be advised, Two-One. Troopers are five minutes out.”

“More pigs on the way! Great! I’ll tell them what a piece you are.” Kevin moves closer to Nick. “I know you drink on duty. I know you’ve nailed a couple of lot lizards over at the truck stop in Big Springs in the back of your patrol car. I know a lot of bad shit you do, and you think because you wear a tin star that nothing can get to you. You take me down, and I’m going to take you down with me.”

Kevin eyes the shotgun lying on the floor next to Nick’s feet. Kevin lunges for it. Nick shoots and delivers repeating pulses of electrical shocks. Kevin’s arms convulse. His eyes roll back in his skull, and he drops to the floor. But he is a large man and drunk and the Taser has little effect. Kevin rips the Taser barbs from his chest, breaking the electrical current, and he crawls to the shotgun.
“Kevin, stop! Kevin, stop!” Nick yells. He tosses the empty Taser to the ground and draws his firearm. Kevin grabs the shotgun and raises it for a hip-shot. Nick aims for Kevin’s chest and fires three rounds. Kevin collapses, air gurgles from his mouth, and his arms fall lifeless to his sides.

“County, this is Two-One. Shots fired. Subject is down. Send EMS.” The smell of gunpowder lingers in the air. Nick looks at Kevin’s limp body and holsters his sidearm. He wraps the Taser wires around one of Kevin’s arms and around his neck to look like a struggle took place. He grabs the shotgun, stands where Kevin once stood, fires a round into the wall, and lays the shotgun underneath Kevin’s arms.

“Copy Two-One, subject is down. EMS has been dispatched,” the dispatcher replies.

“Two-One, are you injured?”

“Negative. I’m fine.” Nick brushes his comb-over with his hand, then closes the front door. Holly and the boys are safe.

Several months later, the Nebraska Department of Criminal Investigation finishes their investigation and finds that Nick had appropriately used deadly force, and Kevin’s homicide was ruled justified.

Nick leans on the counter at the Loaf ‘n’ Jug in Chappell, sipping his spiked fountain drink, when a Nebraska State Trooper walks in. Nick nods at the trooper, and he nods back. The trooper walks by him, uses the restroom, then grabs a drink from the cooler, and goes to the counter to pay for it. The trooper’s uniform is clean and pressed, his brass shiny. Annette rings up the trooper’s purchase.

“You know a Garret Lippart?” Nick asks the trooper.
“Yeah, he’s new. He’s assigned to Post 19 in Omaha,” the trooper replies.

“Garret got his start as a deputy here in Deuel County.” The trooper does a double-take at Nick.

“Hey, aren’t you the officer who shot that guy a few months ago?”

“Yeah, that’s me.”

“I read DCI’s report. It said you were justified. Too bad it had to be a friend of yours.”

“Yeah, too bad.”

“Word is you shacked up with his widow. Is that right?”

“Yep, that’s right.” Nick stands, waiting for an insult to follow.

“The weirdest shit goes on in small towns. I’m going back to interstate where shit’s normal.”

The trooper shakes his head and walks out. Nick stands at the counter and watches the trooper get into his all-black patrol car and drive off, back to I-80, where the real crime is.

“What was his problem?” Annette asks in her gravelly smoker’s voice.

“Who cares? He’s headed back out to the interstate where he belongs.”

Nick sucks the last of his fountain drink through two red straws. He listens to the electric hum of the fluorescent lights and the buzz of the coolers in the convenience store. He imagines Holly and the kids sleeping safe at home. He thinks of Kevin and what it must be like to be dead and buried deep in the barren soil of Western Nebraska.

Annette chatters her dentures at Nick, gets his attention, and winks at him. “Why don’t you come on back behind this counter and I’ll take your mind off whatever it is you’re worried about,” Annette says, coughing.
She removes her dentures and sets them next to her ashtray. Nick steps behind the counter facing the store-front. Annette drops to her knees. Nick looks out for strangers and stares at his reflection in the glass.
We thought you were everywhere
in the shadow of a broken window,
waiting for hours. For that perfect shot.
And when it came you shot once
and shouted, Allah Akbhar!

We never knew your real name.
Mustafa, we wondered. We thought
you were a ghost more than a real
man. But the fear was there. Real
as the death that came from anywhere.

Chris Kyle, America’s sniper, said he killed you.
Generals told us you were well trained
like one of our own. They said you
were once an Olympic shooter.
These are the games we play with each other.

If you were so good, how come Wes lived?
You knocked him out, with a lucky shot
to his Kevlar helmet. Wes will always be known
as the one man Juba didn’t kill.

ISIS claimed to have killed you in 2013.
Or was it 2014? That is the nature of legends.
Their story lives on. Inspiring youth, warriors
to fight for you. To hunt for you. Your name
to me is unlike Saddam, bin Laden, Hitler,
generals or politicians.

But we stand on the same ground.
Abandoned Kiddie Pool

We were told to watch out for snipers when we sat in the kiddie pool on that roof top in Ramadi. Wes and I wore sunglasses under the hot desert sun. We sipped water from our canteens like drinking margaritas in Las Vegas or mojitos in Key West. We raised empty fingers to our lips and puffed expensive Cubans and tipped invisible waiters.

This is the fucking life, huh Griff? Wes said.
Poolside at Ramadi Resort.
A fucking kiddie pool in the mail!
All the way from Arlington, Mass!
Here’s to you, Grandma! We raised our plastic canteens to the air to toast. They clanged together like delicate cocktail glasses. We laughed like civilians in swim trunks. No body armor, no weapons.

A bullet snapped above, then another. We rolled over the sides of the pool, dumped water on that hot roof, low-crawled to the ladder down into a sandbag bunker. Somewhere in shadows, just out of sight, Juba laughed and spared our lives. To remind us of this war so that we may join him one day for drinks and cigars, poolside at some imaginary hotel in Baghdad. Somewhere other than here.
The Ghost of Baghdad

Like the monster in the closet, the goblin under the bed, he hid in the shadows, waiting for hours, for the perfect shot. Juba taught us lessons: always keep an eye open; keep your head on a swivel.

Wes ate his MRE in the turret at a security checkpoint. Exposed, he chewed with his mouth open. I hated it. The smacking of lips and gums, masticating chicken fried rice.

The shot rang out.

We ducked and took cover.

The barrels of our M4’s tracked with our eyes the rooftops and windows.

Turrets spun and gunners pulled the charging handles of their weapons.

I found Wes slumped over the .50 cal. His head rested on the butterfly trigger like he fell asleep. Dreaming while he ate. I couldn’t look at him the way he was then.
PART III: SMOLDER
After work, Paul sits in his car in the driveway listening to the radio. It’s raining hard for September in Wyoming and he isn’t looking forward to the mad dash to his front door. He looks out his car windows at his house, his yard. Brendan’s toys haven’t moved in a year. His green turtle-shaped sand box, the lid, the shell of the turtle, lies upside down next to its body. Streaks of water run down the glass, make everything seem hazy and undefined, like standing behind a waterfall looking at someone else’s life. He needs to get Brendan’s toys picked up, but maybe tomorrow.

Paul runs to the door and fumbles with the keys. He flicks the light switch on and off. He checks the refrigerator to see if the food is still cold and it is. The power must have just gone out. There is a smell in the house, something he’s used to. He thinks it’s his clothes stinking of chemicals and the rawness of the earth. He works for a fracking company. He was hired two years ago when a large shale oil deposit was found north of Cheyenne.

In the dim light of the kitchen, he finds a small flashlight in the back of a junk drawer where he and his wife, Anna, store miscellaneous tools and other things that belong on a garage tool bench rather than in a kitchen drawer. The light is dim and yellow, the batteries low. He opens the basement door and shines the light through the darkness. The light glistens off water. “Shit,” he says.

At the bottom of the basement steps, he touches the water and lifts his finger to his nose. Their carpet, a deep red shag, left over from the 80’s when their house was built and the first owners finished the basement, is ruined. Paul uses the shower and toilet after work to keep his dirty clothes away from Anna and the rest of the house. He steps through the water. His boots push water from underneath, leaving a print behind until it fills back in with water.
Thick, dirty water bubbles out of the shower drain. Paul remembers when he lived in Iowa as a kid. Every house had a sump pump because the water table was so high. One time his parents’ pump quit working and the basement flooded, but with clean groundwater, filtered through the black loam soil. His father made him run a Shop-Vac, sucking up the water, then carrying the full buckets into the yard to be dumped. But there is no need for a sump pump in Wyoming. The water table is too low, and the climate is dry and arid, like a desert.

Paul opens his beer and flips the switch on the pump. He follows the red hose up the stairs and to the door. He looks at the hose stretching out into the street. The flattened hose shakes, then fills with the waste, hardening as it climbs up the stairs, through the yard, and into the street where the gray water shoots out from the end of the hose. Paul puts on a facemask and starts sucking the water up with the new Shop-Vac.

He has to get this cleaned up, or most of it at least, before Anna gets home from work in the morning. Anna is an ER nurse and works nights at Cheyenne Regional Medical Center. It takes everything he has to keep her happy. But neither of them has been the same since Brendan passed away.

The power went out because of the crack that opened up. Geologists said it was because of fracking—a disruption from deep in the ground, creating voids, changing the pressure of the rock. In combination with the abnormally high rainfall, an “atmospheric river” the meteorologists called it, which loosened the topsoil and spilled large amounts of water deep into the earth. The rivers usually only hit the West Coast, but sometimes, when the temperatures have been too hot for too long, they make it this far inland. The massive
storm clouds stall out over the mountains and dump their buckets of water when the weight becomes too much to carry.

There were earthquakes before the crack opened up that should have been a warning, but the frackers kept on going. The government couldn’t stop them. The politicians who could have voted to regulate them were paid off. Their pockets lined with the dirty oil, their houses nowhere near the acidic pits of leftover fracking chemicals. The opposition tried to use the Oklahoma earthquakes as an example of what could happen if fracking isn’t stopped, but they didn’t listen. The thirst for oil is too great, and fracking was another way for oil companies to keep up with the demand no matter what the cost was or could be. They didn’t imagine it would be this bad.

Paul didn’t want to work for the fracking companies, but he had no choice. He had to make more money, and he needed the insurance for Brendan’s treatments. On a Saturday, he left the hospital and met with a fracking foreman from Texas sent to Wyoming to tap the largest shale oil deposit in North America. He started on the spot, driving a tanker truck, hauling the thousands of gallons of chemicals from the derricks to the holding ponds.

Paul asked the foreman, Tony, how they were planning to dispose of the chemicals.

“We don’t know yet,” he said. “Fracking is so new that we have to figure it out as we go.”

Tony’s sweat built up on the top of his big belly, soaking through his white button-down shirt. He adjusted his white hardhat on the top of his head. The DrillRite company decal looked bright and proud over the brim.

“So all this waste just sits here on the surface?” Paul pointed to the chemicals floating in holding ponds. Luminescent rainbow colors floated on top of the water beneath it.
“For now it will. We’ve got to get the shale out of the ground quick, before regulations shut us down.” Tony walked away and left in his diesel pickup.

Paul stood and stared into the pool of waste. He could not see his reflection in the fluid. He looked along the pine ridges in the background. He remembered he used to hunt antelope near here.

Anna pulls into the driveway as Paul drags a rolled-up piece of the carpet onto the pile of damaged goods stacked by the street. The rain has stopped.

“What the hell?” Anna says when she gets out of her car.

“The power went out last night, and the basement flooded.”

“Flooded with what?” Anna looks over his shoulder at the front door. The red hose is stretched through the doorway like a tongue. “Is the power still out?”

“I don’t know. Sewage, I think. And no, the power came on in the middle of the night.”

“Oh great. Does it stink in there?”

“A little, not as bad as it did last night. But I’m used to it by now.” When Paul got tired of vacuuming water, he cleaned whatever he could, to get the smell out of the house. He knew that Anna liked the smell of bleach, the smell of cleanliness, she told him. Paul hated that smell. It reminded him of the hospital.

“Is the rest of the house okay?”

“Yep, it’s fine. The water works. Everything is almost to back to normal. Everything should be fine. I kept the doors closed to keep the cool air in.”
“Well, I’m going for a run, and then I am going to take a nap when I get back.” Anna walks by him. No kiss. No I love you or Thank you for doing this, you’re so sweet.

“Say, what are you doing today? Do you want to go catch lunch after your nap?”

“Oh shoot, I can’t. I promised Allie we would go to lunch. Tomorrow, maybe,” Anna enters the house holding her nose. “It still stinks in here.”

“Sure,” Paul says to himself.

Allie is Anna’s friend who works at the hospital. Allie has three kids. She’s nice, but wants Anna to spend a lot of time with her. She told Paul once, “I think it helps with her grieving process.”

Anna walks to the driveway with her headphones in her ears, stretching her arms as she walks. Paul throws another section of carpet on the pile and watches her. Anna starts to run as soon as her feet touch the street.

“Bye,” Paul says. He doesn’t know if she heard him or not. Her ponytail swings back and forth to the cadence of her running stride.

Their weekends used to be their time to be together, but since Brendan died, they have spent their weekends doing their own thing. Anna picked up extra shifts. Paul found things to do around the house, mostly hanging out in his garage, sitting in a chair and drinking whiskey. It was longer than a month after Brendan died before they even said they loved each other again. They haven’t had sex in over nine months.

Anna loves her morning runs, especially on Saturday mornings. There is little traffic, and the air is cool in the fall. She feels like she could run forever away from Cheyenne, away from memories. Maybe she could start over again in another town. Maybe move back to
Denver and work at Denver General Hospital in the ER, where the action is. Nothing ever happened in Cheyenne.

But she runs on, with Nickelback playing on her iPod. She runs harder when she thinks about Brendan, slower when she thinks about Paul and the times they used to share together. She remembers when they would meet each other during the day to have sex in the front seat of Paul’s pickup in the back end of big parking lot. It was exciting. They were newlyweds trying to have a baby. She ran faster when she thought of the doctor who told her that it was going to be hard for her to have a baby because her uterus was at an angle, not conducive for the sperm to travel. Paul and Anna would try different positions to keep his semen swimming in the right direction. They knew it wouldn’t work like that but that was Paul, always joking around. She feels a smile creep up the corner of her mouth, and she remembers how often they tried to have a child, all the fun they had. How Paul tried to be so romantic all the time, buying her flowers, visiting her at work in the middle of the night when he couldn’t sleep because she wasn’t there next to him in their bed. Paul used to tell her that she meant security to him. She told him he was like Adderall to her.

After Anna leaves for work that night, Paul finishes cleaning the basement. The smell of bleach is strong in the air. His hands are dry and chapped, stinking of a mix of sewage and cleaning chemicals, and he is alone again. The clock above the stove ticks away. With a drink in his hand, Paul drifts into Brendan’s room, still untouched. The shades are drawn. Blankets thrown off the bed, his toys scattered all over the floor still lying where they were the night they rushed Brendan to the hospital because his breathing became slow and shallow. It’s dark in his room, the room of a ghost. He remembers the helplessness, guilt, and
shame. He can replace a transmission on an ’86 Chevy Silverado, can clean up a flooded basement, but he can’t bring his son back.

The doctor told Paul and Anna that Brendan had leukemia, an aggressive form that attacked the lungs the hardest. Brendan was seventeen months old, and the doctors said their son had a year at best. Then, one month later, they rushed Brendan to the ER. His breathing was labored. He was coughing up pink phlegm, and choking on the stuff.

The ER put Brendan on a breathing machine, and he remained on it for two weeks, until Paul and Anna decided to turn it off. They tried so hard to have kids, and it had been a miracle that Brendan was born at all. They blamed each other for his death. They stood across from each other at his funeral, then across the grave at the cemetery, the divide in the earth where they left their son.

Eventually, they went back to work, and friends expressed their condolences. Paul and Anna could not wait for this to stop. They wanted to work to forget, to not be at home, the last place they had a family together. All that was left was the two of them, husband and wife, with no kids. They played along for a time, not sure what to do, not sure who the other person was. Strangers.

Paul has been off work for over a week. DrillRite is shut down. The crack, a mile long and forty feet across, stretches through the oil fields. His company faces bankruptcy. The news televisions pictures of the crack, contaminated water running through the center of it like a wild mountain river. Huge sections of the crack’s edges slough off under the cutting force of the water. The news reporter wears a mask to try to protect her from the fumes, the
fumes from the hundreds of chemical holding ponds where drivers like Paul have dumped their waste.

Paul drives out to the office to get his last check. The company has set up a makeshift emergency command center out of an old army canvas tent near the split in the earth. The National Guard has blocked roads that were destroyed and are there to protect the remaining workers from the protestors. The road to the office has curved from the broken, sliding, unstable earth. Protest signs are posted along the road.

“God Save Us!”

“Fracking Is Our Sickness.”

“Make America Oil-Free!”

He approaches a National Guard checkpoint. Hundreds of protestors block the road, chanting and spitting on his car. Paul honks his horn for them to get out of the way. Some of them jump into the bed of his pickup and pound on the back of his window.

“Get out!” Paul yells at them.

“You sold your soul for money!” one yells through the glass.

“The Earth is our mother. You have to give something back!” another yells.

He stops at the checkpoint. Police and National Guard soldiers remove the protestors from the back of his pickup and handcuff them. The soldiers escort Paul to the tent where the company has its temporary office. Drones fly over the crack. Scientists look through surveying equipment at another scientist across the divide, talking on radios to one another. Another group listens to the ground, tracking something with a graph machine, the needle bobbing up and down, making neat black lines, tracking the noise, the heartbeat of the earth.
Paul enters the tent and meets Tony. “Well, this is it, Paul.” He hands him his check and puts his hands on his hips.

Paul opens the envelope and looks at the amount. “No severance pay or anything like that?”

“Nope. It is what it is. Oil is a moving boom town. Boom or bust, they say. Now it’s a bust.”

“Are you starting up again? Somewhere else around here maybe?”

“Nope. This is it, like I said. We are heading back to Texas, maybe North Dakota. I hear they may have something up there. The news wants to blame this thing on us, but the damn crack formed because of the rain that dripped from that damn river in the sky or whatever they called it. The atmospheric river thing. You know what I’m talking about. We got our scientists working on it now. Collecting facts and such.”

Paul stands still, expecting more of an explanation, like what is he suppose to do now. He folds his check and puts it in his wallet.

“Thanks for all your help over the last two years,” Tony says. “It’s been a good ride. We just need to clear this environmental thing up with the state. We’re more or less shut down in Wyoming permanently.”

Tony escorts Paul out of the tent into the hands of the soldiers. Paul reaches out his hand. Tony turns and reenters the command center. Paul stands there open-handed.

“Let’s go, sir. Back to your vehicle,” one of soldiers tells him.

“I want to see it.”

“You can’t. It’s too dangerous. There’s risk of an earthquake.”
Paul walks toward the edge of the crack anyway. He hears the water raging in the bottom of the thing. Drones buzz, flying over the crack and then hovering.

“Sir, stop!” The soldiers grab Paul by the arm.

“You can’t stop me. Let me see it, and then I will be on my way.”

The soldiers shrug and escort Paul to the edge. The National Guard is made up of local working people and college students who put on the uniform and think they have authority. He looks down into the divide. Milky brown water races through the bottom. Pieces of plastic float by. Blue plastic barrels with his company’s name on it bounce off the jagged sides. Pieces of ground break away from the sides and fall into the water, creating a splash. The water reaches Paul and wets the bottom of his pant legs.

Paul returns home to an empty house. Anna is at work, he thinks. She doesn’t share her schedule with him anymore. He remembers the night he took Brendan to the ER. He remembers when he met Anna. He remembers when he stood across from her at his funeral, his casket lowered into the earth, and how lonely that made him feel.

He sits in the garage in his lawn chair. He looks around the yard. The grass is tall, the toy box unmoved for nearly a year. He sets his whiskey down and backs his pickup to the toy box. He throws the toys into the pickup bed. He dumps the sand that sat in the bottom of the toy box and then throws it in. He packs Brendan’s things in boxes and leaves his room barren. He’s tired of seeing Anna stand in the doorway of the room, staring, just staring at things. He packs the boxes fast, not pausing to look, afraid that a thing that may hold emotional value will stop him. He stuffs the blankets from his bed into a box and loads them into his truck.
He drives to an old country road where he used to hunt antelope and stops at the divide. No one around. Nobody knows where this road leads to except for him and maybe a few other people. He backs his pickup up to the edge without getting too close and begins to toss Brendan’s things over the side. He watches the green turtle sand box pitch and roll in the dirty water. The undertow drags it down, but it bobs back up. The sheets and the stuffed animals soak up the water, and everything washes out of sight.

He can’t sleep in their bed, not by himself. He watches late-night TV and waits for Anna to come home. His adrenaline begins to wear off, and his hands and back are sore from lifting and tossing. He sits in the recliner in the living room. The TV drones on in the background until he falls asleep.

“What did you do?” Anna screams when she sees Brendan’s room cleaned like a renter has moved out.

Paul springs out of his chair, still half-asleep. He looks around, hears Anna yelling and crying.

“I couldn’t stand having his things in this house anymore.”

“He wasn’t some drifter. He was our son!” Anna tries to talk through her crying.

“Anna, you have barely talked to me in almost a year. I want us to get back to normal. We can go to counseling or something, but I think we can still have a family.”

“No! Not again! I can’t go through that again.” Anna slumps against the wall.

“Stand up and listen to me!” He grabs her by the arms and lifts her back to her feet. She’s limp, no strength to stand on her own.
“Paul, you didn’t even talk to me about it.” She braces herself against the hallway, like an elderly person, and then steps into their bedroom, and slams the door.

“Let me in,” he says through the closed door. “We have to face this thing. I don’t want to do this anymore.”

“Leave me alone!” Anna opens the door dressed in her running clothes and puts her headphones in her ears. Paul tries to talk to her to get her to stop, but she runs away from him.

Anna runs hard and doesn’t let up. She can feel her breath try to keep up, but her legs weaken, and then she stops and walks. She walks along the bike trail near downtown Cheyenne. It’s Sunday. The streets are empty. Traffic lights change colors for cars that are not there. She is a phantom in a deserted city. The last survivor.
Anhydrous Ammonia

When we arrived in Lacona, Iowa, in the Des Moines Fire Department’s brand new, state-of-the-art, half-million dollar Hazardous Materials apparatus, Lacona’s Volunteer Fire Chief met us without his protective gear on. He wore shorts and a t-shirt. He scratched his shaved head and ran his fingers through his long biker beard. He looked us over from head to toe, examining our uniforms: navy blue pants and t-shirts, boots polished bright and shiny.

Our incident commander lit into the fire chief immediately. “Where’s your PPE? Why aren’t your guys wearing theirs?” The look on his face was like a child’s when his parents come home and find he hasn’t done his homework.

The embarrassed fire chief gave us a brief situation report, then ran off yelling orders to his firefighters. A valve had failed at their anhydrous ammonia storage facility. I looked through binoculars at the four white storage tanks. White vapor violently dispersed from the broken valve like the sound of jet plane at full throttle pushed by thousands of pounds of pressure stored in the six thousand-gallon storage tanks. As the vapor rose in the air, it dissipated about twenty feet off the ground. The Lacona firefighters sprayed water onto the plume to contain the gas and prevent drift. When the anhydrous ammonia comes in contact with large amounts of water, it changes composition and transforms into ammonia hydroxide and remains in puddles on the ground. At this point it is diluted enough that it does not pose an immediate threat. The area smelled of ammonia, and it reminded me of my mother scrubbing the floors in our one hundred-year-old farmhouse. The smell was strong and made her eyes water.

My incident commander quickly designated safety zones upwind from the release. The size of the zones is established by considering variables unique to the incident: weather,
humidity, wind speed, air quality, and the type of chemical involved. Through air monitors we can determine if an area is within a safe breathable air working range: 19.5%-23.5%. If the monitors show a number outside of that range, it means the air is contaminated and the cold zone is moved farther away until numbers stabilize.

The warm zone is the next level of severity. Decontamination lines are set up right where the warm and cold zones meet. Air monitoring is ongoing, and the use of PPE (Personal Protective Gear) and SCBA (Self-Contained Breathing Apparatus) are required. It also acts as a buffer zone between the cold zone and the hot zone.

The hot zone is established by using all the current environmental factors and models established by OSHA, the USDOT, and other regulating bodies. The hot zone is where the highest level of HAZ-MAT protection (fully-encapsulating suit), PPE, and SCBA are mandatory.

It is also where the leak was and where I and the other HAZ-MAT technicians entered to correct the problem.

In the cold zone, with the assistance of an attendant, I donned the Level-A, fully encapsulating HAZ-MAT suit. I sat in a folding chair with my SCBA strapped to my back. My attendant struggled to slide rubber boots over my feet and rubber gloves over my hands and then tape the boots and gloves to my suit. It was a hot day, 86 degrees with 67% humidity. I drank water to hydrate before the suit was zipped up and over my body. My attendant attached a voice-operated radio mic to my throat immediately below my Adam’s apple. My partner was dressed in the same way next to me.

After the incident commander assessed the situation and formulated an action plan, we were briefed in the cold zone. A valve on one of the pipes broke. It was a proportioning
valve, used to evenly allow filling from all four tanks at once and to regulate the pressure when nurse tanks are filled for agricultural use. All of the main tank valves were open and security-chained, to prevent tampering and an illegal release of the chemical.

Methamphetamine manufacturers used to steal anhydrous ammonia to make meth. It was once a primary ingredient in the manufacture of the substance. But state law had required that all anhydrous ammonia tanks be secured to prevent tampering. It worked, but meth producers found other toxic ingredients to use. Bolt cutters would be needed to cut the chains, allowing the individual tank valves to be shut off. We did not repair the broken valve. That came after. We were here to stop the leak.

All across Iowa and the Midwest where corn is grown, tractors pull anhydrous ammonia applicators, and white ammonia nurse tanks bounce behind them, injecting the fertilizer into the ground. It is stored as a liquid. But when it depressurizes and comes in contact with water, it rapidly converts into a gas so the molecules can readily adhere to soil moisture. It’s lighter than air, and it rises in the atmosphere. It has an expansion ratio of 300:1 when exposed to air and water. The rapid composition change and conversion from a liquid to a gas creates extreme cold—frosting over valves and creating frostbite injuries to those who come in contact with the gas.

I remember riding with my grandfather in the tractor when he applied anhydrous ammonia to his fields and helped him change out the nurse tanks. My hands were cold from touching the valves. I watched the applicator knives dig into the black dirt. Vapor escaped
out of the ground until the anhydrous stabilized and adhered to the soil moisture. The ammonia smell lingered in the fields for a long time after application.

Patrick, one of my grandfather’s employees, delivered full nurse tanks to the field, and then he took the empty tanks back to the co-op where the fill-station was located. One time, he was in a hurry and did not bleed the lines before removing the valve. Three thousand pounds of pressurized anhydrous ammonia instantly vaporized in his face and hands. He fell to the ground screaming. His face and hands were frozen. I was just a kid then, but I tried to help him. I grabbed one of his hands, and he screamed when I touched him, so I let go. I didn’t know that his skin would feel cold and waxy-unhuman. My grandfather and I loaded him in the back of the pickup and drove him to the emergency room in Ames. He recovered and after two weeks had regained his sight, but he still had sensations of numbness in the tips of his fingers. If Patrick had been wearing eye protection, gloves, and had been taught the proper tank transfer procedure, his injury could have been avoided. This was before OSHA, before people understood and realized the need for regulation.

In Europe, anhydrous ammonia is labeled as an inhalation and flammable hazard. In the U.S., because of the farm lobbies, anhydrous is labeled only as a corrosive. This allows anyone to transport the chemical without special training or a Hazardous Materials Certification on their driver’s license. The farm lobbies are powerful. They manipulate policy to their favor, disregarding science and safety for less regulation and more profit.

In the right mixture and atmosphere, the chemical can explode. It is a rare occurrence, but it has happened many times before in the United States. In the community of West, Texas in 2013, an anhydrous ammonia plant suffered a massive explosion, injuring over one
hundred people. On April 16, 1947, the deadliest incident happened in the port of Texas City, Texas, when a ship’s cargo of anhydrous ammonia exploded, killing 550 people and injuring over 3,500. It is still considered to be the deadliest industrial accident in US history. Anhydrous ammonia is a cousin of ammonia nitrate, the same chemical used in the 1994 Oklahoma City bombing. Both chemicals are used as agricultural fertilizer, but they are labeled differently. It is difficult to imagine that a chemical that cools rapidly when it touches the air and moisture is explosive, but it is.

I transported hundreds of those nurse tanks with a pickup. My yellow hazards flashed as cars and semis sped past me. I pulled hundreds of them over Iowa fields, injecting the chemical into the ground. Before I became a firefighter, I had no idea that I towed a bomb behind me.

I stood up from the folding chair. My attendant lifted the top of the Level-A suit over my head and pulled on the zipper enclosing me in the suit. He taped the zipper with Tyvek tape and then walked to the plastic window on the suit that I could see out of and gave me a thumbs-up sign. My partner and I walked toward the storage tank lagoon. I carried the bolt cutters, and he carried a video camera enclosed in a protective case in order to sit on the ground and record our actions and movements in the lagoon. My SCBA regulator opened and closed each time I took a breath. The temperature climbed inside my suit. It felt like I was a walking greenhouse. Sweat beaded on my forehead and ran down my face and neck. The hard plastic throat mic that was Velcroed to my neck rubbed on my Adam’s apple when I swallowed and talked to Incident Command over the radio. It was uncomfortable and bordered on the edge of maddening, if I let it get to me. There was no way out of this suit. I
could not self-rescue if something went wrong. If I ran out of air, or my SCBA failed, I’d have to evacuate immediately to the warm zone to be de-conned and removed from the suit. If the anhydrous line were to rupture further and spew larger amounts of vapor, or worse, liquid, my suit could be compromised and my skin frozen like Patrick’s. If I were to go unconscious, I would have to wait for the backup team to enter and drag me out.

All of this trouble to get more grain and maximize profits, to get more out of the ground that I grew up being told was the richest soil on earth. If you grew up in Iowa, you were always told that. It confused me as a kid. If Iowa is the richest land on Earth, then why must we to put so much fertilizer in the soil? It still doesn’t make sense.

Time, history, and big business has a lot to do with the way things are. Most of Iowa had been pounded flat by glaciers that reached down from the arctic. The glacial weight and force crushed rock and flattened hills, making what we know today as the Des Moines Lobe. When the glaciers retreated, they deposited large amounts of rock, silt, and drained off their ice-melt and carved rivers and creeks, forming the Mississippi and the Missouri River watersheds. Thousands of years of erosion and wind blew sand, silt, seeds from all over the continents to settle in the Des Moines Lobe. Grasses and trees grew. Fire sparked by lightning burned the prairies down hundreds of times. The ash mixed into the soil, making it rich and black with nutrients. Where the glaciers stopped on their retreat back north, they melted large amounts of water forming shallow ponds. Grasses grew up to the sides. Wildlife came and formed the wetlands. Much of the area of the Des Moines Lobe was once wetlands and vast prairies in which grass grew so high that settlers avoided Iowa for a long time.
There was an idea among the early farmers that the only good farming ground was where there were large stands of trees, and the first settlers to Iowa settled near the rivers where hardwoods grew. As the population increased in those areas and more settlers from the East sought land, they were pushed into the prairies. The settlers could not break the tangle of grass roots until John Deere invented the iron plow. It took eight oxen to pull one plow blade through the ancient grass prairie, flopping it over and exposing the black dirt underneath.

They planted their crops and realized that crops thrived, especially corn, a member of the grass family, and soon there was a rush on land in the Iowa Territory. Surveyors marked off 640-acre sections of land and then divided them down further into 48-acre plots to be sold at $1.25 an acre.

Farming became more science and big business than a way of life. As the decades rolled on, science made modifications to the corn plant. It became more dependent upon fertilizers as the ground nutrients weakened and the plant became more robust and used more of what the exhausted soil could offer.

American agriculture developed a chemical dependency problem. Norman Borlaug’s plant breeding improved the quality of crops and the efficiency of their yields. Although he is hailed as the father of modern agriculture who ushered in the Green Revolution, he inadvertently set modern agriculture on its path to industrialization, because the hybridized plants had more vigor and therefore they needed more nutrients. The ground couldn’t replenish fast enough, and fertilizers became a part of farming, running up the costs.

In the 1960’s, Borlaug’s Green Revolution spread into parts of Asia, where it was successful for a year or two, but the plants depleted the soil. The poor farmers could not afford the chemicals to support the plant varieties, and they went back to their old methods.
But the Green Revolution is still going strong in Europe and North America, where farmers make more money and can afford the extra costs of production.

In the summer, my grandfather and I would drive around in his rusted-out Chevy LUV diesel pickup checking on fields. I would walk out to check the ears of corn. He’d pull the husks back and run his fingers over the yellow-gold kernels. One day, I grabbed one of the ears, husked it, then took a bite. The corn was so bitter and dry that it seemed to suck the saliva out of my mouth. I spit it out immediately and then threw the ear of corn into the field.

“What’s wrong with it?” I asked.

My grandfather laughed. “You’re not supposed to eat that corn. It’s not sweet corn.”

I didn’t understand. I was always told that Iowa farmers fed the world.

In the 1970’s, the United States Secretary of Agriculture, Earl Butz, implemented a plan to increase exports and drive up the demand for corn. The plan was successful, and farmers converted their operations from a hybrid of livestock and crops to crops only. My grandfather was one of those farmers who sold off all of his livestock and converted his operation to row-crop farming only. He built new grain bins to store grain, bought bigger equipment, and plowed under land that had been fallow or used for hay and straw production to feed and bed his livestock. He ripped out fencerows, cut down trees, plowed under them. He planted more acres of corn than ever. That harvest, he produced more corn than he ever had and had no place to put the surplus of grain. He moved all of his machinery out of his brand-new machine shed and dumped the grain in the ground and stored it there until he could sell it.
He used more chemicals than he had ever before and he stacked the hundreds of fifty-gallon drums on his property. Over time, they rusted and leaked. It smelled like pesticides. He eventually dug a large pit and pushed all of the barrels into the ground and buried them.

After I served an enlistment in the Marine Corps, I returned to Iowa and farmed with my grandfather, because I didn’t know what I wanted to do. I bought into his farming operation and rented my own land. I used anhydrous ammonia to fertilize my ground for corn. I used pesticides to get as much of a yield as possible. I spilled those chemicals on my clothes and skin. I had, like most farmers, no formal training in handling emergencies. If you were concerned about exposure, you had to read the fine print on the containers. One time I remember having to drive back to my apartment in the middle of the day because the Roundup I spilled on my clothes had leached through and began to burn my skin. I showered with soap and water until the irritation went away, but my skin remained red for days after that.

My HAZ-MAT partner and I walked to the valve. A stream of water was directed to the right, pushing the vapors away from us. We located the valve. I cut the chain, and my partner knelt down and shut the main valve off. We repeated this procedure on the remaining tanks. The hissing stopped, and the remaining vapor dissipated into the air. Then we inspected for other signs of damage and determined all the other lines were still intact. The firefighters shut off the water, and we walked back to the decontamination area.

Condensation ran down the plastic window of my suit, but I could make out where the decon area was. There was no threat from the anhydrous ammonia now, but we still had
to get out of these suits. People were walking around. There were no more zones of caution. With the valve off, the threat was contained.

We walked back to the warm zone and the decon line. The decontamination area was a series of steps where the entrants were scrubbed with an agent, mostly mild soap and water. Through each step in the process, the boots, gloves, and Level-A suit were removed and placed in yellow fifty-gallon drums to be safely disposed of at an incinerator. We took turns and stepped into a series of inflatable kiddie pools used to catch any contaminant that fell off of us when we were scrubbed with soap and water. We were careful not to touch the outside of the suits. The entrants were not allowed to assist the decon team with removal, because they could be exposed to the product. Once we were decontaminated, the decon line was packed up and placed into more fifty-gallon drums for disposal.

I eventually left farming, but I returned years later when my grandfather lost his leg to skin cancer and had to retire. I helped him during his last harvest. One night in his workshop, we took a break. While the grain dryers whined outside, we ate our KFC chicken bucket, and I told him that I was thinking about returning to farming. He told me to find something else to do. He said he didn’t like the way farming had become. He wished he could go back and raise food. I guess, as he prepared for retirement, he thought back on his life and how he strived to make more money by producing more grain and now thought it pointless.

He died the next year. When my grandmother and I were looking through his things, I found black and white photos of him as a child helping his father harvest corn and other vegetables. There was one picture of him as a boy sitting in a wagon full of potatoes. This was the Iowa he talked about that night in the machine shed. The Iowa that fed the world
with food, without all those chemicals that may have cost him his life. I wondered how many times he had been exposed to the chemicals he used.

I rode in one of the jump seats in the HAZ-MAT apparatus back to Des Moines. I looked out the window as we passed fields where farmers pulled their anhydrous applicators across bare soil, their knives injecting the chemical into the ground with the hope that this year would be the year their harvest would be the best on record. My grandfather and I used to think that way, too. But now all I can think of is how everything is disposable.
The house is empty now. 
No more voices. No more footsteps or doors closing, children laughing and crying.

The paint on the walls of a once-popular color skin the walls. The flat surface a shade of a time once remembered. A place forgotten.

Matted carpet where foot traffic had worn and pressed and tweeked their fibers. Now left to themselves, they reconnect. Furl themselves back into shape.

This house was full once. 
Full of a family’s laughter. Now nothing more than an empty body. A body without blood and heart.

Abandoned
I’m not sure why I stopped today. Maybe I’m searching for something from my past, some recognizable relic left over from the demolition. I park in the old gravel driveway and look out over neat rows of small corn plants growing where my childhood home once stood. I walk between the rows of corn. My eyes focus on the ground. My boots scrape the surface of the black dirt, careful not to disturb the plants. I turn up chunks of concrete, pieces of brick, and splinters of wood.

After my parents divorced, my mother and I moved to town. Other people had lived in the house since we moved away, but no one had lived there since the new landowner bought it three years ago. I had heard from town gossip that he had no interest in renting the house.

“I’m a farmer,” he told people, “not a goddamned landlord.”

He bought the property to plant crops in the rich black dirt. The buildings were going to be razed. The new landowner ordered the demolition of the house, the barn, the chicken coop, and tore down the windmill that spun in the wind until the day an end-loader hooked the top of it and brought it to the ground.

On demolition day, I parked on the road. I sat on the tailgate of my pickup and watched the yellow backhoes and dozers blow their black diesel exhaust into the sky as they ripped, dragged, and tore apart the buildings. Wood snapped and splintered. Concrete spalled and fractured. Metal cried and bent. The skilled machine operators separated the metal from the wood and concrete without getting out of their seats. The metal was shipped off to be sold.
for scrap. The rest of the rubble was pushed into a hole dug into the ground and set on fire. The pieces of the house and barn smoldered in the hole for days until dirt was pushed over the top of it.

The white gravel driveway that once led to our garage, the only thing that couldn’t burn, now ends in an empty field of black dirt.

I liked to scare myself. When I was child, I thought the old two-story house was haunted. I would stay up late and read ghost stories with a flickering flashlight. I read stories of ghosts hiding in old houses unable to let go of places they knew when they were alive. I thought ghosts lived in my closet. I didn’t like the cellar either. I imagined a lost soul hiding in the darkest part of the cellar with the damp and mold, where the light of the incandescent bulb could not reach.

I knew every board and hayloft rope in the barn. I knew where to step so I didn’t fall through rotted wood. I used the ropes to swing from one hay mount to the other. Sometimes I wouldn’t make it to the other side, and I swung back and forth, sliding down the manila rope, burning my bare hands on my way down to the ground.

The windmill worked to keep the well open, and underneath the windmill was a rusted pump with a blue steel cup hanging from a hook. On hot summer days, I would pump the handle and bring the spring water up from somewhere in the earth beneath me. I filled the cup and drank the cool stony water, letting it run past the corners of my mouth.

I hoped to find an artifact today, something linking me to this empty place. Something to hold in my hands and take home. I hoped to find the blue cup, a piece of
manila rope, or the pink jewel-shaped doorknob from the old cellar door. But everything was pulverized, burned, and buried efficiently. I should have brought a shovel to dig down to where the buildings now lie together in their mass grave. I stood above them, their frames twisted together, their ghosts somewhere above ground.

“Hey you!” the new owner yells at me from the road. He stands by his brand new Chevy Silverado pick-up wearing a green Pioneer seed hat. “What are you doing here?”

“I was just looking around. I used to live here,” I say.

“Well, you can’t be here. You’re trespassing.”
My partner and I found her this way
After her husband called 911. I stood below her,
reading her note, in morbid curiosity.
She must have thought she was invincible,
because I saw the tattoo on her shoulder:
a black arrow shot through a red heart,
and inked in faded block letters below:
FOREVER YOUNG smeared and blurred
from suntans and age. Her blonde hair in curls.
The pink blush, blue eye shadow, and black mascara
cannot hide the purple mottling on her face.
She floats and swings now, above us all.
Suspended in the damp, cold basement air,
from the yellow boat rope tied around her neck.
After Her Funeral

After the funeral the widower sits at the end of the bar in the dark corner, by the women’s bathroom at Nubby’s Bar and Grill. Lighted only by glowing signs and garlands of Christmas lights, his wrinkled hands cup his glass like he once held on to the world. He touches his ring, embedded in skin worn hard and leathery from decades of work. He rolls the band, then pries and twists, pulls, grunts until the ring is removed from his finger. He sets it down on the dark-stained wood counter. A woman walks behind him, laughing with her friends as she walks away. His eyes strain to the corners. He does not move his head to see her breeze past. He loosens, unknots the tie, sets it on the ring, and orders another round by himself.
PART IV: ASH
Alberta Clipper, 1982

Sean and his mother lived six blocks away from his middle school, in an old mansion that had been converted into an apartment building. It had four tall Corinthian columns and large windows with ornate wrought iron bars covering them, a reminder of how prosperous and grand this area of Des Moines once was. But the neighborhood had fallen on hard times, and now the streets needed repairs, and trash littered the yards. Homeless people often slept on the street corners or on park benches, and sometimes Sean saw them digging through the dumpster behind their apartment building. His mother told him to stay away from them when he walked to school. When he saw one on the sidewalk, he would cross the street to avoid him.

When Sean met Mr. Pindekooper, it was an unusually warm January day in Iowa. There was no snow to be found, and the grass was green in some of the yards. On that day, in Earth Science class, Sean’s teacher announced that the warm weather was ending. A massive cold front would drop its freeze over Iowa, and the school district was dismissing school early. She called the storm an Alberta Clipper, and used the occasion to teach the students about weather systems.

“Does anyone know how an Alberta Clipper got its name?” She looked around the room, and then she changed the question. “Okay, does anyone know where Alberta is?”

Sean loved geography. He loved reading about countries in his green and white World Book Encyclopedias that their neighbor in Apartment 3 gave to him. The pictures in the encyclopedia were full of colorful photographs and information on how people lived around the world. He would fantasize about visiting these places, about seeing the Taj Mahal,
Chichen Itza, or the Parthenon. He would spend hours studying the pages of the heavy books, and he knew the answer to her question. Sean’s hand shot up in the air above him before his anxiety could stop it. “Al-Al-Al-Alberta is in C-C-C-Canada,” he sputtered.

He heard some students laugh, and he looked down at his desk. He knew the answers and did well in school, but he couldn’t sound intelligent and express himself like he wanted to, often stammering when he got too excited. But sometimes, like today, he wanted to answer the question. He hoped that each time he raised his hand that everything would be fine and his words would flow out clear and fluent. He wanted to go home, open his encyclopedias, and escape into their pages. Let them take him somewhere else.

He went straight home after school because some of the kids would follow him and pick on him as he walked. He tried to ignore them. That day was no different; a group of boys followed close behind. He could hear their footsteps on the sidewalk, and they mimicked his stutter.

“Hey, Sh-Sh-Sh-Sean. Wh-Wh-Wh-Where do you think you’re going?”

He ignored them and walked faster. He was a block from home. He could see the back of his apartment building with its two large green dumpsters. A homeless man was digging through them, throwing aluminum cans into a shopping cart behind him.

One of the boys shoved him, and he fell to the concrete. There were five of them, including Javon. Javon was two years older than anyone in sixth grade. He was expelled because he brought a knife to school and threatened one of the teachers. He was sent to juvie for a while and then was allowed to come back.

“You gonna do something, Sh-Sh-Sh-Sean?”

Javon stood above Sean smacking his fists together.
Sean stayed put. His palms stung from falling on the sidewalk. Javon grabbed his backpack and tried to lift him to his feet.

“Get up, boy!”

The rest of the boys stood around Sean in a circle, an eclipse of bodies looming, shadowing him from the sun.

A man stepped in front of Sean and pushed Javon to the ground. Javon got up and tried to go around the man, but the man pushed him down again. The man stood with his hands out in front of him like a boxer readying for a fight.

“Get out of here, you hoodrats!”

“C’mon, let’s go,” Javon said. He and the other boys turned and walked away.

The man helped Sean off the ground. He wore a dirty green down jacket with holes in it. His stocking cap was pulled so far down over his eyes that it looked like his gray beard spilled out of the hat like a veil.

Sean felt like he should turn and run to his apartment. His mother had told him never to talk to strangers, especially homeless strangers. She told him they were always drunk or on drugs, and always wanted money. But he felt like he owed this man something for helping him.

“Th-th-th-thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Sean.”

“How did you know my name?” The man smiled and his mustache curled, showing his grayed and yellowed teeth.

“You remember me, don’t you?”

“No. I-I-I um—“
“Yep, I was there with your uncles when you were born. It was a fine day that day. Sunny, birds chirping, better times for all.”

He opened his jacket and removed a brown paper bag. He peeled the paper off the top and folded it over the side, lifted the bag, and then drank from it. Suds ran down the side of his mouth. He wiped the liquid from his beard.

“Your daddy was so proud that day.”

Sean didn’t know what to say.

“No worries, son. You were too young to remember me.” The man looked up to the sky. The sun still shined bright. “Yep, they say an Alberta Clipper is coming in soon.”

He took another sip out of the can in the brown bag. Sean was confused. He’d never seen his dad before, let alone any of his family. His mother never talked about his father, but she never talked about any of their family for that matter. But he had never this seen man before either, and he wasn’t sure what was real. Something felt wrong.

“I should get going.” Sean turned and walked away.

“So soon? I’ve got more stories. I just have to remember them.” His hands shook, and he squeezed the brown bag until the aluminum can popped under the pressure. Foamy fluid bubbled from the top and over his knit gloves.

“Nice seeing you, Sean. Tell your folks I said hello.”

He turned his head and nodded. “Wait. I don’t even know your name.”

“Well, I’m Uncle Bill. Bill Pindekooper.”

“Nice to meet you, Bill.”

Bill touched his fingers to the brim of his hat in a kind of salute and tipped the can up to his mouth.
Sean watched Bill’s Adam’s apple bob up and down, swallowing the contents of the can. Sean then turned and walked the rest of the way home.

His mother shook her head and disappeared into her bedroom and dressed for work.

“I told you to stay away from strangers.” Her flowery perfume flooded through the apartment.

“But Mom, he helped me. J-Javon and his friends were going to b-b—“

“Beat you up?” Mom said from her bedroom. He hated it when she finished his stuck words for him. Sometimes she would tell him to just spit it out. It was easy for her. She didn’t stutter. She took him to speech pathologists. It worked for a while, but the stutter came back. They told him to tap his fingers when he talked. To talk in a cadence. It was too much to remember. He had to plan his speech. Nothing could be spontaneous.

She emerged from her bedroom wearing her long black trench coat and her knee-high leather boots: his mother, transformed and ready for work. “I made you supper. It’s in the oven. There are leftovers from last night too.” No matter how little they had, she always made things work. “By the way, I am going to call your principal—no better yet, I am going to the school on Monday to find out why kids are bullied so much at that school.”

“I’m fine, Mom. I can manage.” He pulled the “A” encyclopedia from its shelf and turned the pages to Alberta.

“Nope. I’m going to make some changes at that school. I always talk about it, but I’ve had it this time. Monday morning, I’m going in.”

“No seriously, Mom. Don’t. Things will be worse.” He could imagine Javon and his friends having more reasons to pick on him.
“We’ll see about that. But right now I’ve got to get going. There’s a storm coming in tonight. If it’s too bad, I may stay at Steve’s for the night, but I will be home tomorrow morning.”

It didn’t matter if there was a storm or not. She always stayed at Steve’s when she worked nights. Tonight, she just had a better excuse. Sean had just turned eleven. She thought he could take care of himself. “Don’t go anywhere. Stay indoors and keep warm.”

She always said she worked nights for him. She made food before she left. She told Sean she loved him, and he knew that no matter what happened, she would do anything for him. He looked at her in awe. She puckered her lips and blew kisses. He blew his back, and then she left for work. He went to the window and watched her board the bus. Her long curly blonde hair billowed over her shoulders. Snow had started to fall, and the wind blew it in horizontal lines.

That night the Alberta Clipper dropped in and changed everything. Heavy snow fell and covered the green grass with the colors of winter, so many nameless shades of white. The wind blew snow past the window, and he could feel the cold leaking through the thin glass where frost had formed. He scratched at it and looked down on to 6th Avenue. Snow-covered cars drove past with their headlights on and their windshield wipers sliding across the glass to keep the snow off. A man stood at the corner with a large plastic bag slung over his shoulder, waiting for traffic to pass. When it was clear, he crossed the street and walked slowly through the deepening snow.

He looked across the street to the convenience store. Its bright halogen lights cast a dull glow against the snowfall. It was not unusual to see homeless people in his
neighborhood since there was a homeless shelter six blocks away. He saw them carrying bags or pushing shopping carts full of aluminum cans, each worth five cents. The homeless cherished them like nuggets of gold.

How did they survive the winters? Where did they go to stay warm? Some went to the shelters, he knew that, but not all of them. Sometimes he saw them asleep on park benches or sitting on a curb drinking from their brown paper bags, and he wondered about the one who chased off Javon. Was he at a shelter? Was he out in the cold?

His mother had left him hamburger casserole, which was not one of his favorites, so he smothered it with ketchup to drown out the taste. He put his empty plate in the sink and stood in front of the mirror in their living room. “Albert is in Canada, Mrs. Darge,” he said to his reflection. He didn’t stutter if he was alone or if he sang songs. His mother told him he sang beautifully, that he should sing more often, but he didn’t like the sound of his voice. He wished he was mute, or deaf so he could use sign language. Talk with his hands, not his mouth.

The wind picked up outside, and the old mansion creaked under the pressure. Windows rattled in their loose frames. He heard a faint knocking sound. At first, he thought it was the wind, but it was steady and didn’t stop. He listened through the door and heard it coming from the hallway. He opened the door, and cold air drove through his pajamas. He looked both ways, but nobody was there. The knocking continued. He stared down the steps to the entry door. The sound was coming from the outside. He moved slowly down the steps, opened the outside door, and the wind was so strong that it blew the door out of his grasp. Snow had drifted up, embedding the door’s design in the snow. An arm hung out of the drift, then a body fell into the entryway. It was covered in snow, but it moaned and was still alive.
It crawled into the entryway. His hands and bare feet instantly felt the pins of the icy cold air. Clumps of snow fell off the body as it leaned up against the wall.

“Sean?” It was the man from the afternoon. Bill or Uncle Bill? Sean couldn’t remember. His beard and mustache were frosted over.

“Yes, it’s me.”

“So cold outside. Can I stay in here tonight? Just inside the door here, out of the wind?”

“I don’t know.” Sean stuck his hands underneath his armpits and danced to keep his feet warm. “What about the shelter?”

“Full. They can’t take anymore in.”

“They won’t let you in? On a day like today?”

“No, they can’t. Not enough room, not enough blankets, or places for people to sleep. I’ve been to that shelter many times. They are nice, but the others try to steal my things, they try to take what I have, which ain’t a whole lot, but they are my things.”

Bill’s hands tremored. Sean wasn’t sure if it was the cold, or from being afraid, but he looked desperate.

“They try to get you to go to their church, but I can’t go. I can’t. I haven’t gone to church since before I left for Nam. My mom took me then. It was the last time I saw her.”

Sean’s mother would kill him if she found out, but Bill had helped him earlier. “You can come up to our apartment. My mom’s gone. We-we-we-we have food to eat.” Sean slapped his thigh to get the words out. He did that sometimes. It looked weird, but it worked.

“I can’t. That’s too generous.”

“It’s okay.”
Sean helped him up the stairs to the apartment. Inside, Bill sat on the wood floor, shivering. The snow that had caked his beard thawed and melted into small puddles. He helped him take off his jacket. It smelled like body odor and piss. He was a much smaller man under all of his layers of coats.

“Thank you so much,” he said over and over.

Sean showed him the bathroom, and he set a pair of his mother’s sweatpants and a sweatshirt on the sink and told him to put those on. Bill couldn’t stop thanking him. He shut the door and heard the shower turn on.

He came out of the bathroom. Sean’s mother’s clothes looked tight. Bill’s arms and legs looked puny in the pastel-colored clothes. “Smells good out here.” Bill raised his nose in the air and sniffed like a dog smelling a meal. His gray hair was slicked back. His beard was bushy and long. He didn’t smell dirty anymore, and his skin was rosy around his eyes and his nose. “Is there a man of the house?”

“No. Just my mom and me.” He didn’t feel nervous. There was something about Bill that wasn’t threatening, a calm in his eyes.

Bill went to the living room, sat in the worn-out recliner and leaned back like he had lived there his whole life. “Oh, is this your chair? You’re the man of the house. Do you mind if I sit in your chair?”

“That’s fine.” Sean paused, tapped his leg, trying not to stutter so he wouldn’t notice.

“I don’t sit in it often. How old are you?”

“I’m thirty-nine. I know I don’t look it, but the streets will do it to you. Sleeping outside, all the drugs and drinking, wears a man down. Don’t you worry none. I’m not the man I used to be when I knew your dad.”
“Did you really know my dad?” He knew Bill wasn’t all there in the head, but Sean was curious, and he anticipated what he would say next.

“Yep, I met you when you were a baby. At the family reunion and all. Yep, your uncles were all there. Your dad carried you around and showed you off to everybody. He was proud of you all right. He would boast, ‘This is my boy, Sean.’ He held you up to God. ‘A real gift,’ he said. You were proud too, if a baby could be proud. You never made a peep.”

“Mom says I n-n-n-ever met my dad. She says he left b-b-b-before I was born.”

“Well, I think that’s something your momma tells you to make you feel better. You need a man in your life. I could see how those boys were after you today. You need someone to teach you how to be around other boys and men. Your momma does a good job, but a boy needs a man around to show him how to do man stuff. Yep, when your dad said he was going to take off, I told him I would help watch over you.”

“B-b-b-but I’ve never s-s-s-seen you before.”

Sean had no one else to talk to. Kids at school left him alone. Teachers worried about his home life. He didn’t know any different. He didn’t know what it was like to have men in his life. His mother brought other men home, younger men, like Steve, and they would spend the night and try to act like they were his best friend, or boss him around like a father would do. Some of them would stick around for a while but most just spent the night and then he never saw them again. But she never let a man like this one into their house, an older man, a homeless man. Bill knew things about Sean’s life, at least what he thought was about his life. Even if the stories weren’t true, Sean liked them anyway. He needed stories that he could tell people when they asked about his father and his family. He had nothing to tell people when they asked. But Bill might give him stories to tell people.
“I know, it’s hard to understand and all. Your grandma and grandpa were there when your daddy took off. Everybody cried and were wailing about it. But I told him that he had to go off and figure out who he was. Couldn’t be no father unless he found that out first. Say, your momma wouldn’t mind if I smoked, would she?”

He lit a cigarette before Sean could say anything. But honestly, he didn’t know for sure what his mother’s policy was. The men who spent the night didn’t smoke in the apartment, or if they did, they always went outside.

“Can you t-t-t-tell me more about my dad and my family?”

He took deep draws on his cigarette, and the coal at the end of the cigarette glowed bright, and then he’d let all the smoke out of his lungs in long exhales. Soon the smoke filled the tiny apartment.

“Maybe you shouldn’t smoke in here.”

“What? Oh, right. You’re the man of the house. No problem.” Bill sat up in the chair, spit in his hand, and squashed the cigarette out in it. The cigarette sizzled and went out, and Bill put the butt in his sock. “For later,” he said, and winked.

“Thank you. I don’t know how mom would feel about that.”

“Well, your dad is from California, like me.” Bill started back into the stories like he hadn’t stopped to put his cigarette out.

“I thought my dad was from Des Moines?”

“Nope, he was from Fresno, California, born there I think, then moved here with his folks when he was about your age, if I remember. He worked delivering newspapers. He’d get up before dawn and load them rolled-up papers in his bike and throw them at peoples’ houses. Some of them would hit the side of the house and some people yelled back, ‘Thank
you!’ And others would yell, ‘Hey, don’t hit my house with those papers, you damn paperboy.’”

Bill laughed at that. Sean smiled too. He had no memory of his dad, but he liked the stories.

“You know, a young man like yourself ought to go find some kind of work to help your momma out, like your daddy did with the papers.”

“I’m not old enough yet.”

“You can find something for sure. There’s always someone out there who needs a hand doing something.”

“Why don’t you work?”

“I’m retired, disabled. Hurt my back years ago and can’t work anymore. Say, do you have anything to eat?”

“Mom made hamburger casserole.”

“My favorite. Did you leave any of it for Uncle Bill?” He stood and hugged himself, rubbing his hands over his arms to generate heat.

Sean made him a plate, and Bill shoveled food into his mouth like he hadn’t eaten in days. Pieces of the casserole fell on his gray beard, but he kept eating.

“You know,” Bill started before he swallowed, and he could see the food moving around in his mouth. He didn’t have good manners. “After we eat and this fine food has settled, I’m going to teach you how to take care of yourself. Teach you how to defend yourself against those bullies.”

Sean didn’t say anything, but he felt excited and relieved. His mother never told him how to do that. She always told him to shy away from fights, to turn and walk away. Don’t
drop to their level, she would tell him. He never knew what that meant, but he listened to her and stayed out of trouble. “My mom always told me to stay out of fights.”

“Oh, that’s your mom for you.” Bill took another bite of the hamburger casserole.

“One time, she told me to stay out of fights, too. When I got out of jail for sending those two guys to the hospital for calling her names, she grabbed me by the collar and said, ‘Uncle Billy, you stay out of fighting, it only gets you in trouble.’”

“Sh-sh-sh-she said that to you?” He contorted his head to free the blocked word.

“Yes. She did. Everybody liked her in your dad’s family. She looks out for everyone. She taught you how to be kind too. That’s why you let me in from the cold.”

While he ate, Bill told him more stories about his father. He told him about the time when his father was a teenager and he and some friends took Bill’s old pickup for a joyride around town. Bill said he knew that his father had taken his pickup, so he didn’t call the cops to report a stolen vehicle. He said he waited on the front step of his porch until they came back. He could tell Sean’s dad and his friends had been drinking, but Bill told his dad not to do that again and told him to go sleep it off.

Bill told the stories with so much passion that Sean was convinced that he had to have been there, had to have lived the stories with his father and the rest of his family who he had never met. They filled the void he had about a family he never knew. Sean drew faces of imaginary relatives in his mind. Gaps of time were filled in. They were something that he could hold on to. They were the answers he longed for. His mother couldn’t or wouldn’t tell him about his father and his family. Maybe she didn’t know for sure, or maybe she knew and wanted to keep the truth from Sean, to protect him. But now he had something that he never
had before, an identity that the other kids in school had. Even Javon had a mother and father, bothers and sisters, and he was sure he had stories too, good or bad.

Bill told him about when he was in Vietnam and how he had a Vietnamese girlfriend for a little while and they had a baby together, but he had to leave them in Vietnam when he was sent home. He said he always wondered about them and wondered how his son would be getting along without him in Vietnam.

“Your dad told me to write to her,” Bill said, “and see if she would send a picture of my son, but the problem was that I didn’t know where to send the damn letter, you see.”

Bill went outside to smoke. When he came in from the cold, frozen and shivering, he carried the smell of cigarette smoke into the apartment. He suffered in the cold for his smoking habit, but it invigorated the storytelling. He moved the furniture to the walls.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to teach you how to protect yourself. How to get by on the streets.”

The Alberta Clipper raged outside. The winds picked up again and rattled the single-pane window, and the cold air frosted the moisture on the inside of the glass.

“C’mon, boy, I’m not going to hurt you,” he said. He stood in the middle of the living room. “We’ll go in slow motion at first.”

Sean walked into the middle of the empty living room. He stood there with his hands at his side. He looked at Bill, who had his clenched hands up, bent by his face like a boxer. Sean was apprehensive, but he was eager to learn.
“First things first. You have to protect yourself. Put your hands up like this.” Sean raised his hands. “No, like this,” he said and then corrected Sean’s stance. “Now, try to throw a punch at me.”

“What?”

“Yes, throw a damn punch at me and see what happens. I won’t hurt you.” He nodded his head. “C’mon.”

Sean threw a weak punch, and Bill knocked his hand away.

“Throw a better punch. I know you got it in you.” Bill stood with his fists by his face. “Do you want them boys to keep picking on you all the time? Do you want people to get the best of you?”

“No,” Sean said quietly.

“Do you want to just take what this world gives you?” Bill’s voice got louder, like he was trying to give a pep talk. “You got to take what’s yours. Things will not be given to you.”

“What do you m-m-m-ean?” Sean lowered his arms to his side.

“You need to go out there and get what you want. Nobody is going to hand you things. It’s time you learned how to be a man. Your daddy told me to teach you this stuff.”

Sean realized that he had missed out on things that only boys with fathers learn, ways of the world, the ways of the streets and getting by with others, like Bill said. He felt angry, like he had lived all eleven years of his life in a cave, away from things. He didn’t want to feel scared anymore. He wanted to make his father proud of him, even if he never got to meet him. He pulled his arm back as far as he could and swung at Bill. He blocked his punch.
“Good! Now do it again. Your dad told me to smack you on the head when you stutter. He said it’s like when a damn record player gets stuck. But I can’t do that. I can’t harm a child.”

Sean was enraged now. He had never felt this mad before. He knew now that he had disrespected every man in his family by walking away from fights, and he never even knew it. He looked at Bill, this scrawny homeless man who gave him a life story and taught him how to make things better for himself, and somehow he knew that if he didn’t learn to fight, that all this would be for nothing. So he threw punch after punch at Bill, but Bill deflected every one of them. He punched harder and faster until he was flailing his arms around like a windmill. He felt some punches land on Bill’s face, his chest, and his stomach. His fingernails ripped at his beard and his face. He stomped on his feet, and he fell to the ground, and Sean stood over him with his fists tightened, his heaving chest pushing his breath in and out through clenched teeth.

“Okay! Okay!” Bill cowered on the floor in a ball with his arms protecting his head and face. “I think you figured it out. You got all that frustration out of you. Now I’m going to get up.”

Sean lunged at him again but didn’t strike.

“Okay, okay! Calm down. Let me up, boy.” He got to his feet and then stood in front of Sean. “That’s it. You found that thing inside of you. Call it a fire or a flame, I don’t care. The thing that can save you in this world. When people push you into a corner, you push back until you find your way out. You keep going day after day.” Bill knelt down to look him in the eyes. “Now when someone calls you a name or calls your momma a name, you let them have it. You may win the fight or you may lose, but if you stand up for yourself and
your momma, men respect that. And the ladies do, too. The other kids will stop bothering
you, too, as long as you let them know you’re not going be pushed around.”

Sean’s fists and teeth remained clenched. He thought of all the kids who called him
names, made fun of him. He thought of all the girls in his school who laughed at him when
he stuttered, all the times he was too polite to people who took advantage of him, and he
sensed that things were going to be different. He lowered his fists, and his breathing slowed.
He felt his pulse in his neck, its cadence, slowing. He hugged Bill.

“There, there now. Shhh. I didn’t want to be the one to teach you these things, but I
promised your dad.” Bill held him tight like he was holding his own son he never met. “Your
life just changed. But listen to your momma. She’s right too. Stay away from fights. Don’t
sink to someone else’s level. Be kind to others like your momma says, like you was to me.
All I’m saying is sometimes you have to stand up for yourself. Sometimes you have to take a
swing, because the world is always fighting against you. Don’t be like your dad and me. We
fought everything all the time, and most of the time we lost.”

Sean pulled away from him, “So where is my dad for real?”

“I really don’t know, son,” Bill said.

It was, Sean learned later, the only truthful thing he told him that night.

“But let’s get back to work. I got more things to show you.”

As the cold wind blew outside, the Alberta Clipper drew people indoors where it was
warm and people were together. No matter what they did for work, they paused and took
shelter from the cold. Sean imagined daughters baking warm chocolate cookies with their
mothers, sons and fathers working on cars in their heated garages, and Sean was here in his living room with Bill, learning how to fight, when not to fight, and how to pick your battles.

They took breaks between the sparring to drink water and relax. Bill told Sean about his grandfather, who he’d never met, who served on the USS Indianapolis. The ship sunk and the entire US Navy didn’t know what happened. His grandfather survived four days of fighting off man-eating sharks. He watched his friends die around him, and was finally rescued and went on to live a long life. Bill told him that if his grandfather hadn’t fought back against those sharks, then Sean wouldn’t be here. Blood surged through his arms. Veins lifted from his skin.

They sparred and talked all through the night. The blues of dawn became brighter and bled through the frosted windows. The wind slowed, the building stopped creaking and groaning, and then the deadbolt unlatched. His mother was home.

“What the hell is this?” She walked into the furniture still shoved against the walls, and she saw Bill sitting in the chair, drinking one of her beers. “Who are you and why are you wearing my clothes?”

“Mom, it’s Uncle Bill!”

His mother grabbed her purse and swung it at Bill, hitting him on the head several times. He raised his arms over his head to protect himself from her heavy purse. “Get out! Get out! I’m calling the cops!”

“Ma’am, please. Your boy saved my life,” Bill said between blows.

“Mom, stop! He knows Dad and Grandpa! He knows us!”

“No, he doesn’t. He’s a drunk homeless lying bum!”
Sean stood between them trying to shield Bill, but some of her blows hit him, too. His mother smelled of cigarettes and men’s cologne. She stopped swinging her purse and called the police.

Bill sat on the couch, silent, and out of stories. His hands were handcuffed and resting in his lap. Sean explained to the policeman what he had done. His mother insisted on pressing charges. The policeman reminded her that it was against the law to leave a child under the age of thirteen alone.

His mother ignored the threat and stayed focused on getting Bill out of the apartment. “Just get this bum out of my place.”

“All right, stand up. Time to go, sir.”

Bill stood up, still wearing the sweatsuit. The policeman had bagged all of Bill’s coats and clothes.

“Do you want your clothes back, ma’am?”

“No, he can have them now.” Sean’s mother stood near the door with her arms crossed.

Bill looked at Sean. “Thank you, thank you so much.” Bill’s tremors intensified, and he walked out of the apartment, escorted by the police. “Thank you, thank you,” he called.

Sean nodded. He didn’t know what to say to him.

He went to the big window and looked out onto 6th Avenue where the police car was parked. He scratched at the frost so he could watch Bill leave. Bill sat in the police car without a struggle and then rode away. He never looked back. Across the street, another homeless man pushed a shopping cart filled with black bags through the snow, heading to the
convenience store. A frayed American flag hung by a stick strapped to his cart, and snow spun in circles on top of ice.
Cumulonimbus

Clouds billow like mushroom clouds. The bigger the IED, the darker, the blacker, the taller the cloud. Lifting heat, smoke and lives up into the sky. Up and away. Out of reach from us all.
Killer Foot

In the aftermath of an IED blast:

bodies lie among chunks of human meat like discarded

scraps on a butcher’s cutting floor.

A hand rests on the hot asphalt with a gold band on its ring finger.

Not too far away, on a highway, a truck, its window shattered.

The innocent driver slumps over dead—killed by an amputated

flying foot.
Red Beta

One time when my children were young, my wife and I took our three daughters to shop for school clothes at Wal-Mart. I was bored by the in-and-out trips from the dressing room to the clothes racks. They asked me if I thought something looked cute, or if something matched. I didn’t know. My youngest daughter became restless, sitting in the cart, her legs stuck out of the leg holes. She wanted out. I picked her up in my arms, and we walked through the aisles. She was one then and knew the names of some things and was trying to learn her colors.

We walked through the clearance aisle. I was amazed at what was for sale: St. Joseph statues, cell-phone cases, failed infomercial items, sandals, undersized spatulas and utensils. That day they also had a fish for sale, on clearance for thirty-three cents. I stopped and looked at the poor fish. A red beta swam in mucky water. Algae had formed on the container where the water level met the air. The fish’s fins were torn and waved like battered flags. Its mouth opened and closed, breathed and gasped. It swam, then floated, near death I was sure.

My daughter reached her pink hand out and pointed at the fish.

I remembered the many times I had talked my mother into buying me a pet fish. I promised every time that I would take better care and not pester or overfeed them. But my curiosity got the best of me. I got bored with the fish just swimming and looking at me through their glass bowl. I loved watching them eat and dart around the tank when I tapped on the glass. I tried to get my mother to buy me some piranha, but she said absolutely not. I wanted to feed the fish real meat. I dreamed about catching frogs at the creek from behind
our house and putting them in the tank for the piranhas to feast and tear their flesh apart while I watched. It was a boy’s curiosity.

One of my mother’s live-in boyfriends, Terry, was in Vietnam. I had a fascination with warfare. All the males in my family had served in the military and had been in combat. I knew from a young age that I would join the military, too, and serve my country in combat as they had. I had always asked my uncles about Vietnam, but they remained quiet, their eyes glazed over.

One day, when I was alone in the house, I looked through Terry’s Army green foot locker he had carried with him since he left Vietnam. Inside, were Terry’s photo albums. I flashed through pictures of him wearing his camouflage with a cigarette hanging out of the corner of his mouth. There was another picture of him standing next to a Vietnamese family, smiling. On the next page was the photo of a dead Vietnamese boy clutching an RPG. His face was ripped apart. His tongue hung out of his mouth like giant hands had tried to separate his jaw from his head. It was the first time I had seen the insides of anything.

I stood in the Wal-Mart clearance aisle with my daughter. I let her hand touch the bowl. I remembered my first IED attack in Iraq. A suicidal cab driver had detonated explosives in the middle of a crowded street in Ramadi. I remembered the smell of sulfur, burning rubber, and plastic. Unrecognizable piles of flesh were strewn across the streets and smattered against buildings. Children’s bodies were mangled with the adults. The innocent never see evil coming until it’s too late.

The red beta gulped its dirty water and turned one eye to me, as if asking for help. I wanted to take the fish and flush him down the toilet. But my daughter would be upset, and
that could be considered theft of some sort. I felt guilty as I held my daughter in my arms. I
would protect her and her innocence with my own life, but I could do nothing for the beta.

I left the fish there in its bowl, on the clearance aisle, for sale for thirty-three cents,
and we walked away. My daughter screamed at first and thrashed about in my arms, but then
she calmed down when I put her pacifier in her mouth, and I thought about mercy.
Dandelions

David’s mother died on a Thursday. One year before she died, his father noticed her doing strange things, like putting her car keys in the washing machine and dirty clothes in the refrigerator. Her speech had slowed. When she talked, she rolled her tongue around her mouth like the words were peanut shells she tried to spit out. His father called him one day and told him to come home because something was wrong with her. David called in sick the next day from work and drove the hour and half from Cedar Rapids to Des Moines.

His father couldn’t explain it to him, because he hadn’t taken her to the doctor yet. But David thought he knew what was wrong and couldn’t face it. When he arrived at his parents’ house, their lawn was overgrown. Yellow dandelions had taken over the yard and were in full bloom. Paint curled off the wood siding like flakes of dry skin. His father always took care of the house and the yard. When he was a kid, his father paid him one penny for each dandelion he removed from the yard. Every day, he tried to fill a five-gallon bucket full of them and waited for his father to get home from work so he could show him the haul and collect his money.

Dandelion roots dig deep in the soil. Simply pulling the flower and the jagged leaves off the stem doesn’t kill it. David had to use a special yard tool that was forked like a snake’s tongue. He worked it into the ground and lifted and pried until the dandelion popped out of his father’s lush blanket of grass. His father inspected each of the plants to make sure he had removed most of the root.

“These damn things are like icebergs,” he said. “There’s a lot more under the surface, waiting.” His father obsessed about his yard, the house, and his family. David’s mother was his life. He’d do anything for her and always sought her approval. He kept the
house in good shape and repaired everything. But he was lost when she got sick. He couldn’t do anything about it. She made him who he was. Her illness was something he couldn’t fix.

David’s father met him at the front door. His eyes were red. He heard his mother screaming from the back room. “Let me out of here! You rapist-kidnapper!”

“What the hell is going on?” He looked over his shoulder. The house was a mess.

“Something is wrong with Mom.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“A couple of weeks. Maybe longer. I don’t know for sure. It’s too hard on me.” His father wiped his eyes with the bottom of his untucked black Dale Earnhardt t-shirt. His hairy round belly stuck out of the bottom. “I had to lock her up in her room because when I woke up from a nap she was gone. I looked around the house for her and in the yard, but she wasn’t here. I drove around the neighborhood and found her at a park going up and down the slide over and over.” His father could barely get the last words out of his mouth.

“Alzheimer’s?”

“I don’t know. I hope not. So I brought her home and locked her up in her room.”

“Let me out, you rapist!” his mother yelled and pounded the door harder each time.

“Why is she calling you a rapist?”

“When I went to get her off the slide, I had to pick her up and carry her cradle-style back to the car. She kept saying I was kidnapping her and that I touched her…you know.” His father pointed to his crotch. His parents went to church every Sunday and volunteered during the week for other activities. He never heard either of his them say a single bad word. Nothing worse than “hell.”

He went to the bedroom door and knocked. “Mom? It’s me, David.”
“Who? I don’t know of a David. Are you here to fuck me too?”

“Mom! Please! I’m going to open the door, okay? It’s your son, David.”

It was quiet, and as he listened with his ear pressed to the door, he heard the squeak of bed springs. He opened the door and walked into the room slowly. He peeked his head around the corner and saw her lying on the bed naked with a pillow over her eyes.

“Just do it already. Then leave me alone,” she said. He noticed that her voice had changed, too. She didn’t sound like his mother anymore. Her voice was deeper, throaty. A stranger’s voice.

David grabbed the sheets she had thrown on the floor and covered her with them. She threw the sheets off of her, screamed and tried to get up. He wrapped her with the sheets and held her down. He looked into her eyes.

“It’s me, David. Mom, I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Get off of me!”

She looked at him with wild eyes like she had never seen him before. It had been three months since he had been home for a visit—last Easter Sunday. She cooked ham and mashed potatoes. There was nothing wrong then.

“I’m your son. Don’t you remember?”

“No. I don’t know you. I don’t have any children. Molly had a baby, and its head popped off.”

“What?”

“Molly had a baby, and its head popped off,” she sang and flicked her thumb from underneath her curled index finger. David remembered flicking the heads off dandelions in their yard when he was a kid in the same way.
When his cousin Sammie came to visit them, they played in the yard. They would take his father’s hated dandelions and rub the yellow flower pollen on their faces. They held the stems in their clenched fists and flicked the flowers off, singing that same song.

Sammie rubbed the yellow flower on her cheeks. “Am I beautiful?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, am I?”

He didn’t know what to say. He was six, and she was nine. He didn’t see her often. She lived in Colorado with his mother’s sister and her family. He only saw her once a year at best.

“Well?” she asked again. She stood up, put her hands on her waist, and twirled in front of him as he sat in the grass.

“I guess so.” He didn’t know what else to say.

She picked a dandelion with the seeds that were ready to blow away in the wind and sat next to him in the yard.

“You know, when you blow these seeds off, if you make a wish, it will come true.” He watched her gently blow the seeds off. He closed his eyes and made a wish.

The doctors diagnosed David’s mother with an advanced form of Alzheimer’s. They didn’t let her go home. They ordered her to a secured care unit that specialized in advanced cognitive disorders where the patients were unable to care for themselves.

She was lost inside of her mind. The pathways of information had deteriorated and began to cross over each other. His father, an electrician, called his mother “short-circuited.”
David wasn’t there for the deterioration of her mind, but his father was and kept it to himself.

“Didn’t you notice the warning signs?” David asked.

“I honestly didn’t know something was wrong until this last week.” His father sat at the kitchen table. His hands were wrapped around a beer can. He used to drink a lot when David was younger. He quit cold turkey when he pulled into the driveway too fast after a night at the bar and ran into the garage door. His mother was furious. She threatened to leave him if he didn’t stop drinking. He did.

David remembered when he got too drunk and stayed up late working in the garage. After he had gone to bed, he would come into David’s bedroom and cry and tell him about things he should have done and that he was sorry for being such a bad father.

David never knew what to say to his father then. He told him about his plans he had before his mother got pregnant. He wanted to get out of Iowa and drift around the world. He never planned to get married or have children. He never thought he would be good enough for anybody. His parents were always hard on him. They were alcoholics, too. They were factory workers who pulled the overnight shifts. Their schedules were backwards from his. They worked their shifts at the Firestone plant, and then they’d go to the bar. They would come home after he had left for school and pass out. They woke in time to make him supper and then go to work as he was going to bed. His grandmother would come and stay with him at night until he got old enough to stay by himself.

They tried to have a regular family life on the weekends, but his parents drank so much they couldn’t stay awake. Their weekends were two-day long family fights that ended up with his father hitting his mother. Sometimes David’s grandfather would come after his father. He would yank him out of bed and call him worthless and break things in his room.
David’s grandmother died of cirrhosis when he was twenty-one, and he never spoke to his father ever again. David’s father told him that he blamed his own father for his mother’s death.

“Adults can make choices. They just didn’t make the right ones,” he told David once. “A husband should protect his family. Not lead them down a path of destruction.”

His father fought those demons his whole life. He did what he thought he should be doing, or at least the opposite of what he learned as a child.

“I never went to college. Didn’t want to. I had plans on working on a Merchant Marine ship. Travelling the globe,” David’s father told him as he swayed next to his bed. “But. But, then I met your mom, and within a month she got pregnant, and I did the right thing. I got married and got a job.”

“I know, Dad,” he told him. He held the sheets up to his neck.

His father threw his arms around as he told David about his missed adventures. “It’s funny. I get seasick on the canoe on Saylorville Lake, yet I was going to take off by the sea. I was going to get out of Iowa for good. There was nothing left here for me.”

“I know.”

“But I did the right thing. I did the manly thing. What a man should do.”

He talked for what seemed like hours. He repeated himself. He told the same story, but changed the word choice. He was too drunk to know what he was saying. His father wanted David to escape like he had wanted to do. Then his father would stagger down the hallway and climb into bed. He heard his mother talk loudly at him, but he got up every day at five in the morning, made coffee, ate breakfast, packed his lunch, and then went to work as a construction electrician.
On Sundays, they would dress up for church. They got there early so his father could kneel at the altar and pray with hands clasped in front of his face, resting his forehead on his knuckles, and cry in silence. David finished praying early and sat back in the pew. He studied his father. He wondered what pain had dug itself so deep inside him that he couldn’t get out.

When David graduated from high school, his aunt and uncle came to the ceremony and the graduation party. Sammie, too. She was a sophomore in college. She brought one of her friends along, Bethany. After the graduation party, he asked his father if he could borrow the car and go out. He took Sammie and Bethany with him. He showed them around Des Moines and visited bars on Court Avenue. He was too young to drink, but Sammie talked a bouncer into letting him in the bar if he promised not to drink.

Bethany was beautiful. She had acorn brown hair and dark brown eyes. She asked David to dance, and he did. He had never danced with a woman. He went to prom in high school, but he was too scared to dance, so his date left him alone against the wall.

Bethany ran her hands all over him. She moved his arms to the beat of the music. She grabbed his waist to get him to sway with her, and eventually he started to move to the music. When a slow dance came on, she moved in close and put her face in the space where his neck met his shoulder. He felt her breath on his skin. He smelled her perfume. He felt her soft hands stroke the back of his head. He felt her waist push against his.

When they got home, David went to bed. The girls slept in the guest room. His parents and his aunt and uncle were up late playing cards at the kitchen table. He stared at the dark ceiling and thought about Bethany and the way she made him feel on the dance floor.

His door opened slow.
“Sssshhh.” Bethany lay next to him in bed. She rubbed her hands all over him and got on top of him. He told her to stop, but she told him to be quiet. It was over as soon as it began.

“That’s it?” she said.

David nodded. “I guess so. It was my first time.”

“Two-pump chump,” she said. “You just popped right off.”

She dressed and left the room. He heard Sammie and Bethany laughing from the guest bedroom down the hallway.

He felt sick when he thought about it. The slickness between her legs. The alcohol on her breath. He leaned over the side of his bed and threw up in the trash can. His head spun around the dark bedroom as he thought about what had just happened. He didn’t even like her, or females for that matter, not at least in that way.

They left the next day. His mother forced him to go to the driveway to see them off. The girls were already in the car. Bethany held up two fingers and then closed them into a fist and moved up and down. He couldn’t hear them laughing, but he saw their mouths moving, and he knew it was funny to them. His face felt hot. He awkwardly hugged his aunt and uncle before they got in the car. Then they backed out of the driveway and drove off. Bethany held up two fingers until they were out of sight.

“Boy, that Bethany sure is something,” his father said.

A week before his mother died, she started to sing when she talked. She still didn’t recognize anybody. But for some reason she noticed what she liked about people. She sat in
her chair by the barred windows and stared out into the nursing home’s courtyard. She liked to watch birds eating and playing in the bird bath.

“Hi, Mom,” David said.

“Oh, hello,” she sang in a choir-like singing voice. The notes in her syllables rose up and down. Her voice quavered when she held certain notes. “You are such a handsome man,” she sang.

“How are the birds today.”

“They are soooo beautiful.”

He sat next to her in chair. She touched his shoulders.

“You are so strong.”

His father sat behind her crying. He tried hard to stifle it. But as David talked to his mother, he heard him sob and then be quiet again.

“Why is that man crying?” she sang to him.

“He loves you. That’s why.”

“That is so nice of him,” she sang.

His father called a week later and said she had died. She suffocated on her own saliva. David asked how that could happen. His father said the doctors told him that the last stage of Alzheimer’s blocks the body’s ability to control its involuntary functions. She stopped swallowing and then stopped breathing.

His father had her cremated. He had a red granite memorial set at the cemetery, but kept the ashes with him at home. David sat in a chair on the porch and watched him spread some of her ashes on the lawn. He walked in silence as he watched the gray ash pour out of
the urn, falling on the overgrown grass and the yellow dandelions that they had battled his whole life.

His father started going to the bar again after work, and David would get phone calls from him at three in the morning. He missed his wife and wished he had been a better father. He wished he had taken David to more places. He wished he had more kids because that was what his wife wanted. She wanted a big family, but David was the only child. He told David to get married and have lots of kids and give them everything they needed, even if it meant going broke.

“I always wanted to take you out to Yellowstone,” he told David during one early-morning phone call. “What do you say we head out there soon?”

“Okay, Dad. Let’s talk about this in the morning.”

“I can’t. I have to work tomorrow. We’re working seven days a week downtown. All kinds of young kids are moving back to town. Downtown Des Moines is booming.”

“But it’s Sunday. You have to go to church.”

“Shoot! I haven’t been to church since Mom passed.” He coughed over the phone, and it sounded like he may have vomited. “Heck, I don’t even care about the yard anymore. What for, right?”

“Right, Dad. What the heck.”

“Say, you should move back here. There’s more jobs here now. We could hang out more often,” he said.

“Let’s talk about this tomorrow, okay?”
“Okay. But just know that all I ever did was take care of my family. Can you believe that?”

“I do, Dad. I appreciate that too.”

David wished he had agreed to take his father on that trip to Yellowstone, because the next day he got a call from the Des Moines Police Department. The neighbors reported to the police that they heard a loud bang coming from the house and called 911. The police said they found all the lights on in the house and the TV volume was turned all the way up. They broke the door down and found his father sitting in his chair with a rifle in his lap and his trigger finger still in the trigger well.

After the estate was settled, David quit his job in Cedar Rapids. He moved back to Des Moines and lived in their house. He got a job at Firestone and worked the overnight shift, and on the weekends, he would sit on the front porch and look out into the yard at the tall grass and the dandelions. He mowed only when the city threatened to fine him for an overgrown lawn. Sometimes he walked out into the yard and picked some of the flowers and rubbed the yellow on his arms and face. He let them grow their roots deep in the yard. He watched their seeds blow off into the wind, starting new plants somewhere else, hopefully in the neighbors’ yards. Sometimes he lay in the yard among them. He waved his hands over their yellow blossoms, and let them tickle the soft skin underneath his arms.
Silence

I remember you when it’s quiet.
When I am alone, walking,
I only hear cardinals
and my steps on the ground where
we were once.

I remember you when it’s quiet.
When all the children have gone
to bed, dreaming of tomorrow.
If it ever comes in the future--
that someday.

I remember you when it’s quiet.
When the house is empty,
red lipstick left like a fingerprint.
A dirty glass in the kitchen sink,
your boxes left half-packed.
Memorial Day Parade, 2006

I watch the veteran from the other side of the street in the shadow of buildings. I hold my infant child with both arms, tired and sore. The Honor Guard passes. My wife claps and cries, from patriotism, I think.

He sits in his wheelchair in full sun. His World War II Veteran hat cocked off-center, pulled down to shade his eyes. He is unable to stand when the colors pass, but he raises his bony arm in a painful salute.

He could have served anywhere. Decades ago in that other life. He could have beached on Normandy, parachuted into Belgium, survived the invasion of Wake Island, Pearl Harbor perhaps. But I don’t care to know.

I shift my arms as my child sleeps. The high school marching band passes. The crowd claps. My arms are sore, my shoulder still aches. My body remembers when I threw too many grenades in Ramadi.
Accidental American

I’ve heard people say to leave history where it belongs—in the past. And I’ve heard people say we have to study history so we never repeat its mistakes. Since I was a little boy, I have been fascinated with history—especially military history. My prize possession was a full set of Encyclopedia Britannica, a gift from my grandmother to my mother. My mother never touched them, but I read them every day. My puny arms struggled to pull the volumes out and set them on the floor. Sometimes I knew what I wanted to look up, and other times I just browsed through the table of contents and let my curiosity take me anywhere in the world or anytime in history, an early form of web-surfing.

My grandfather on my mother’s side was born in Germany. I was fascinated by this. But I didn’t understand why he didn’t fight for Germany in World War II. I was too young to understand world politics and immigration, but I tried anyway. I consulted my encyclopedias. I was still fascinated with war. And about that time, when I was trying to figure out the world, Star Wars came out. It was the first movie I saw in the theaters. I was glad Luke, Han, and the rebels destroyed the Death Star and the Imperial Army. But there was something that fascinated me about the Imperial Army and the Dark Side. I think it was the uniforms, or just being so powerful that the entire universe was under your control. At night, I would walk around my yard and look up into the sky. At that age, it was hard for me to understand the reality of things, and a piece of me wanted to believe that up in the night sky, in a galaxy far, far away, there was a struggle taking place between good and evil. But all I had to do was look into what was happening here on Earth and in my own family to find those kinds of struggles, divisions of ideology, and complicated political boundaries.
It took me a long time to come to realize that Germany had lost WWI and WWII. I don’t know why this bothered me so much. I liked their uniforms. They looked like the Star Wars Stormtroopers. I read about concentration camps, but didn’t understand that either. I was raised in confusing political and social boundaries. I got into a fight at school once because I talked about my grandfather coming from Germany, and a boy told me that all Germans were pussies. I got sent home from school after I punched him in the face.

I still grew up trying to figure out how my grandfather was born in Germany yet still fought for America in WWII. You wouldn’t think my grandfather had any German in him at all if you saw him on the street. After the war, he returned home to Coon Rapids, Iowa and farmed with his father. Then he left farming and ran heavy equipment until he retired. People called him the Catman, because he always wore a black baseball ball cap with a CAT patch on the front.

During family gatherings, the German would come out of him. After a few drinks, he broke out his accordion. He played it and danced around the living room to entertain all of us kids. While he played the accordion, he kept his eyes closed, and he danced without stepping on anyone or knocking anything over. Then he sat in his recliner and played his harmonica, eyes closed, as tears rolled down his cheeks. He liked to play slow songs. His hand would quickly fan the chords, and the notes bounced around the narrow living room walls and across mine and my cousins’ little ear drums. The rest of the adults were in the kitchen playing cards. My grandfather stopped playing. He set his harmonica in his lap and pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the tears from his eyes. He was bound to another place by music and song. I always wanted to know why.
His parents, my great-grandparents, lived in Denison, Iowa after they retired from farming and sold their farm. I would have no choice in going with my grandfather to visit his parents; my mother made me go. The trip from Nevada, Iowa to Denison seemed like it took forever. They lived in a small house on a hill. My great-grandfather, Henry, always sat in the front room in his recliner reclined all the way back, facing the TV. Professional wrestling was always on. My grandfather would walk past his father. Hello, Dad. No response. Hello, Grandpa. No response. I asked him about why Great-Grandpa never talked to me. He said that where he came from, grandkids were supposed to be seen and not heard. Thankfully, my grandfather didn’t follow that rule. He took me fishing, and we went on trips together, and he would play with me and all of my cousins. I remember him holding me as a young boy. His rough face against my soft skin as I snuggled close to him, the smell of his aftershave.

Electric Shave—more alcohol than lotion.

My great-grandmother was another story. She would talk to me and liked being around children. She spoke English well, but with a very strong accent. It was so strong, she rolled her R’s like Spanish speakers. I learned later that their accent was called Low German, the accent of the commoners. Hitler and most of Germany during WWII spoke Low German. If you watch speeches of Hitler on the internet, you’ll notice he rolls his R’s a lot. It’s ironic now how modern Germany speaks High German. During the war, High German speakers were used for radio transmission among the Wehrmacht, like we used Native American code talkers. And most younger Germans today need a translator to understand Hitler’s speeches. It is strange how inside of one small country, small things such as accent can cause confusion.
She would hobble out of the kitchen to greet us. “Halo. Come to kitchen, I have cheese und crrrackers.” My great-grandmother Louise was kind. A sweet little lady. Her kitchen was her domain, and she would play German records while Great-Grandpa snoozed to tacky 80’s professional wrestling on the TV. I couldn’t understand what the musicians were singing, but my grandfather did, and he ate his food and tapped his foot on the linoleum to the beat.

I was born in the time when color TV and color photographs started to become normal and not too expensive. But as I walked through my great-grandparents’ house and looked at family photos, I wondered who all the people were. While my great-grandfather watched wrestling, and my great-grandmother talked to her son, I looked closely at all the photos. There was one of a young man by an artillery piece. He had a curled mustache and spiked helmet. He had high cheekbones and squinty eyes like my great-grandfather. Another picture had a black banner draped over it. The man in the photo looked like the Wehrmacht soldiers I read about. And there were many more photos of military men. Some were just headshots, but they were black and white, not showing arms or the chest where all the medals would be. I asked my grandmother.

She said, “This your great-grandfather. This one is my brother, and all the rest are brothers and nephews of your great-grandfather. Most of them have died. But this one is my brother. He never returned, and this is all that I have of him.”

I tried to ask my grandfather over the course of his life about his past. I knew about the time since I was born, but what about before that? I knew that he immigrated with his family from Germany in 1929 when he was seven years old. These areas in the Midwest
were popular among German immigrants. My grandfather said his classes were taught in English, so he had to learn English fast. His teacher did not have the patience to teach foreigners, and she often smacked the children with the wooden chalkboard pointer she carried around. He and his sisters would come home from school and help teach their parents English.

I asked him if he remembered his grandparents. He said no. I asked if he remembered the day he left Germany. He said no. Maybe too much time had passed. He remembered when he found out about Pearl Harbor. He and his father were in Anita, Iowa for a cattle sale. He remembered going to the local café and eating breakfast. They then went to the sale, and the auctioneer announced before the sale started that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor and that there were many lives lost and ships sunk. He said he and his father didn’t buy any cattle that day and they didn’t speak on the drive home.

My grandfather wanted to enlist, but he was torn. He knew he had family members in the Wehrmacht and he might have to go and fight them. His mother had only told him sad stories from when Germany was in WWI. His father never talked much about his WWI service. In my grandfather’s German family, every male that was old enough had to serve in the Wehrmacht, and the young boys and girls were forced to be in the Hitler Jugen. Every school in Germany had became a public, military-style school. All the children had uniforms to wear, were required to learn drills, camping, military skills. No one in Germany questioned the Nazis, because they had lifted Germany out of the economic depression, and to question the regime meant losing your job, having the State confiscate your assets, being kidnapped, or executed.
My grandfather “graduated” from school in eighth grade. That was normal back then. Only more well-off kids went on to high school and college. My grandfather was not a citizen when he was drafted in 1942. He was a child when he immigrated here with his family—an accidental American. If that happened today, he would have been a DACA child.

He reported to Camp Dodge, Iowa for basic training, then on to Camp Cooke, California for more training. On that train ride from Iowa to Los Angeles, he met Violet Finch from Kelley, Iowa. They talked for a while and exchanged directions on how to get a hold of each other. Violet was on her way to Los Angeles to work in the North American Aircraft plant. Ernest and Violet would meet up several times, before Ernest and his unit were then sent to Fort Dix, New Jersey to be shipped out eventually to England. He and his unit waited there until they landed in France on June 20, 1944—D-Day plus fourteen.

My grandfather recalled being stationed in England. White and black troops were segregated into different areas. His camp was on the other side of a town from the black camp. He said there was a lot of tension between the white and black troops when they were on leave. The troops were not allowed to be too far from their units. There was a riot one time, and the American and British military police had to put it down. The mayor of the town had banned all American servicemen from entering his town from that point on.

My grandfather landed in France, and he drove a supply truck all over France and Belgium. He remembered being out on the road when the Battle of the Bulge started. The attack first started with heavy artillery bombardment and German infantry. My grandfather narrowly escaped those first few days of the battle when the American lines were broken. But there was always the fear of the Germans breaking through the lines and cutting everyone
off. Eventually the lines stabilized, and the Germans were beaten back to where they started.

His fears of hurting or killing a relative remained, and he had made it all the way to Aachen, Germany, which is across the border from Northern France, without incident. Still, this was nowhere near his hometown, Tornesch, which was about two-hundred and fifty miles to the north. I asked him once how he would feel if he had killed one of his relatives. He told me they were the enemy, and he wouldn’t think much of it if he had. But in an odd twist of fate, as soon as his unit touched German soil, they were given orders to report back to Antwerp and board a ship for the Philippines. While there, his unit processed Allied prisoners of war. His unit then was tasked with transporting supplies across Japan after the war’s immediate end.

When he returned home, my grandfather married Violet Finch, the young woman he met on the train. They settled in Coon Rapids near his parents’ place and raised a family. My mother was born on that farm.

I served in the military, including tours in Iraq. I had always wondered about my German family members who served in the Wehrmacht, and I had from time to time asked my grandfather what he remembered. But at that age he couldn’t remember much. All that I had from him was a town, Tornesch. When I returned from Iraq in 2005, I had made it a point to not put things off anymore, to accomplish things I’d always wanted to, and not be one of those people who lived the rest of his life saying that he wished he would have done this or that. After nearly being killed several times, your perspective on life changes and you realize that you only have so much time in this life to have fun, but also to do the important things. So I set off to find my German relatives.
Using Google, I started to track down family members. My grandfather couldn’t remember specific names, and I had lists of Ludemanns. Finally, I found a German phone book for Tornesch, and I started at the top of the list and began to call numbers. Some people who answered talked to me for a while until they realized we were not related. Others hung up on me, and then about halfway down the list, I got in contact of one of my great-aunts who spoke English very well and knew exactly who I was.

We corresponded several times, and I convinced my grandfather to go along with me, but in the end he stayed home. When I asked him why, he said he was afraid of what they might think of him since he served against them. I assured him that that was old news and they would be glad to reunited with him. But those old feelings of fear and guilt are hard to forget, so I went without him.

My great uncle, Joern, met me at the airport in Hamburg. He spoke clear English. He had been a Merchant Marine and traveled all over the world. He was Danish by birth and married my great-aunt, Birget. He was a well-educated man, fluent in five languages: German, Danish, English, Spanish, and French. He was also the self-titled family historian. He had binders full of information. He had spent countless hours researching and building the family tree, which had grown to twenty pages, and it took fifteen minutes to line up all the pieces of paper. It literally covered his entire living room floor, with family members dating back to the 1600’s.

I was only there for a week. The history was so abundant and rich and my relatives were so full of stories that I didn’t have time to collect all of them. I enjoyed those stories
about the family, but my real interest was in my family’s military history. I asked my older relatives about it because I had ignorantly thought that the wounds would have healed.

My uncle Meinhard went into his bedroom and brought a big box and sat it on the kitchen table. With Joern present to translate, we went through the pictures. There were many black and white photos of my family members, the men in uniform. One thing I noticed right away was all of the pictures were copies. The photos were cropped in such a way as to remove the Nazi armband with its notorious swastika, and they reminded me of my great-grandmother’s pictures that didn’t include the soldiers’ arms. I had to steady myself for what was coming. It was obvious they had served in the Wehrmacht, but I had hoped that none of my family members were death camp guards. Thankfully, none were. Like me, they were fighting men. And I knew that whatever ideology brought you to wear a uniform, when you are on the front lines, it is really about you and your comrades in that moment in that area fighting for your lives.

Nearly every male in my German family fought for the Wehrmacht. They didn’t actually know what unit they belonged to, but the stories remained. The oldest of my relatives to fight for the Wehrmacht was my grandfather’s uncle, Wilhelm. He was involved in the Siege of Leningrad. He caught frostbite so bad that the military sent him home. He refused to have his leg amputated, and dealt with the pain for his entire life. Meinhard recalled watching his mother remove, clean, and redress his wounds every night. He said that you could look into his body and see the muscles and tendons moving. He was sick a lot and had to visit the hospital frequently, but he was always treated with a homemade elixir that was supposedly a cure-all. It looked like cloudy whiskey and smelled like Jagermeister. My aunt told me that I could drink it for stomach ailments, or use it as a sleep-aid. She moistened
a cottonball and gave it to me before I went to bed that night, said to put in my ear that rang constantly with tinnitus, an injury I sustained during a IED attack in Ramadi. I woke the next day with a clear mind, and although the tinnitus was still there, it had lessened in severity.

I learned that one relative was a pilot in the Luftwaffe. He was killed in the Battle of Kiev when his fighter plane was damaged and he crashed into a factory’s smokestack. Another distant cousin was in the Battle of Stalingrad and was captured. He survived only to spend the next five years in a Soviet Gulag. Once he returned to Germany, he was a different man and drank himself to death a few years later.

Klaus, my grandfather’s first cousin, had fought in France and was in Germany fighting the Americans when the surrender was signed. He was disarmed and sent home on foot. The family story has it that they all knew my grandfather was in the American army and possibly in Germany, and he stopped at every American camp on his way home and asked for my grandfather by his German name, Ernst Ludemann, but he was told to stay out and was often beaten back by unfriendly American MP’s.

Another of his first cousins, Kurt, had also fought on the Western Front and survived the war. He immigrated to Canada and worked in the forest, cutting down trees for the Chicago Tribune. He had to work on the logging crews for five years before he earned his Canadian citizenship. He then married a Canadian woman and lived the rest of his life in Windsor, Ontario as a factory worker. I had corresponded with him several times by phone and letter and even arranged a visit with him, only to have him cancel because of health reasons. He knew that I was interested in his story, but I wonder if he was too ashamed to share it. He told me that one time my great-grandfather had come back to Germany to visit, and he had convinced him to immigrate to America. They both went to Hamburg to the
American Embassy only to find out that America was not taking any more immigrants that year. But the Canadian Embassy was next door, and they both went there and found out about the logging crew opportunity. He left Germany a month later.

Others, who were too young to fight for the Wehrmacht, were in the Hitler Youth. My uncle, Meinhard, was one of them. He said he had to wear a uniform to school every day, and close-order drill and physical training became a part of their school curriculum.

When I returned home, I shared the photos and souvenirs I brought from Germany. My grandfather and I sat for hours and talked about his birthplace. I could tell as he sat across my kitchen table from me that his mind trailed off from time to time, the synapses of memory connecting intermittently. It would have made better sense to him, but I was grateful that I actually got to step inside his childhood home. I had seen pictures of it before, and it hadn’t changed much since the pictures. It was a house connected to a barn. The barn still had a thatched roof. The current owner was gracious enough to allow me to enter the house and take some photos. I showed them to my grandfather, but none of the interior photos jogged his memory. The outside of the house and barn did, though. His eyes trailed off somewhere behind me out my big picture window in my kitchen.

“You know, Shane, I should have just gone with you.”

“I know. But it’s too late now.” I didn’t know what else to say, and I felt bad about saying what I did.

I have never returned to Germany, although I wished I had. The requirements of family life take priority over numerous overseas trips. Over the years since my trip, my
grandfather would call me out of the blue and say, “Shane, let’s go to Germany. You and me. I’ll pay for it.” I was excited to hear him make the offer because I thought it would be amazing to see this place with him, but those promises never materialized.

Some years later I Skyped with our German family and arranged a time for them to talk with my grandfather. I set the laptop up on my kitchen table with my grandfather at my side as I dialed them. They answered, and I explained to Grandpa the different screens and told him not to shout. He thought they couldn’t hear him. Joern began to talk in English and soon started to talk in German. I watched my grandfather struggle with some of the words, and then he began to speak German fluently and carry on a conversation with Joern. I was impressed that my grandfather could recall his native tongue, an immigrant who could have had a different life in a different country. I was reminded of my youth and visiting my great-grandparents. A part of me felt cheated that I didn’t grow up knowing more about my heritage. But I understood the confusion and the desire to assimilate into a new culture and identity.

I sometimes wonder what it would have been like if they had not immigrated when they did. I wondered if my great-grandfather knew what was coming and got his family out of Germany before it was too late. If they stayed, I wondered if my grandfather would have served in the Wehrmacht and been killed or injured. Or even if I would have existed in the first place. It was dizzying to think about. But I still imagined myself and the rest of my family in this alternate present, affected by events in the past that never happened.

I am a legacy, the second generation, of an accidental American. A young child of immigrant parents. I had stood on that dock in Hamburg, probably the same dock my grandfather walked on to the S.S. St. Louis, which took him to Ellis Island. I wondered if he
hugged the rail and waved at his family for the last time. I hope he did, because that little boy never returned to his homeland.

Ten years later, I said goodbye to my grandfather. I wasn’t able to unlock anymore memories before he passed. But while my family and I were cleaning out his house, we found letters he had written to his family and to my grandmother while he was overseas. The letters are filled with excitement, homesickness, musings about life, and the fear of dying at any moment in combat, and of course—love. They read like any American kid would write home to his parents and his sweetheart. And maybe that’s all that I really needed to know about my grandfather’s accidental American citizenship: he became an American, and lived just like any of the rest of us, finding his own version of the American dream.

He nearly spent his whole life here. He became a citizen and did not take it for granted. He served his country, and left his family behind to wonder and worry. He will live on in my memory, and I hope in the rest of my family’s thoughts and prayers. My German grandfather loved and cared for me and his family. He was gentle to his enemies, and in the end, he slipped away in peace while reaching for something in the air that I could not see, something just outside of my plane of sight and understanding. I’d like to think it was God. Or could it have been his grandfather reaching out for him, too? I hoped so.

That year, 2017, my own grandson was born in July. My daughter was gracious enough to allow me into the room with her while he was born. My wife and daughters stayed in the hospital room to help take care of the baby, making sure they didn’t miss any new moments of his young life. I went home that night by myself.
I woke the next day before the sunrise. I was anxious to get to the hospital and see my grandson in his first full day on this earth, in this new life of his. But I had paused to let God show me the hot orange sun break the horizon and rise into a perfect circle low in the morning sky, and I wondered if my great-grandfather stopped to see the sunrise on my grandfather’s first day on this earth. And as a grandfather, I want to be just like him, because that’s is the only way I know how to love my grandson, like my grandfather loved me. I took a picture of Weston’s first sunrise on my phone, and one day I will show it to him. He may not know what it is or what significance it carries for me, but maybe someday, after he has lived the dramas in his life and had his own family, including his own grandchild, maybe he will think of me and the distant promise of a bright warm sunrise.


