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University of Southampton

Faculty of Humanities

Creative Writing

A Novel, *Scattering Thomas Taylor*, and critical commentary ‘Trauma, memory and narrative: a creative and critical exploration of memory and trauma in the veteran’s narrative, 1967-2014’

by

Alexander Michael Hammond

ORCID: 0009-0006-2786-3393

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, September 2022

University of Southampton

Abstract

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A Novel, *Scattering Thomas Taylor*, and critical commentary ‘Trauma, memory and narrative: a creative and critical exploration of memory and trauma in the veteran’s narrative, 1967-2014’

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My PhD novel *Scattering Thomas Taylor* seeks to explore the role of the returning veteran in late 20th- and early 21st-Century American Literature. The novel explores trauma, memory, and current national attitudes towards veterans, focussing on the arguably linked but vastly different experiences of Vietnam veterans and soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. Through an exploration of literary depictions of veterans’ experiences both during conflict and on their return, and by experimenting with these depictions in my own creative work, I aim to provoke in the reader questions about truth and authenticity, and the role and purpose of story-telling. Through depicting Tom’s story-telling about his experiences in Vietnam, and Frank’s attempts to remember and transcribe them, I also explore the impact of trauma and grief on memory and relationships.

The critical component explores the origins of the modern veteran novel through close reading, literary criticism and historiography, and assesses constant tropes in the field, and aims to identify and examine developing trends and traditions emergent in the fledgling literature of the War on Terror. I focus my examination on Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* as O'Brien's work seems to be a primary influence on the new literature to come out of the War on Terror - for example, Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*. My initial interest in this area of research stems from a curiosity about the disparity of experience (on the surface at least) between returning veterans of Vietnam, and those returning from Afghanistan and Iraq, inspired by conversations with veterans of these conflicts.

I also question how the influence of writing by veterans of earlier wars has come to shape how veteran narratives are written, published, and marketed, leading to a questioning of biographical authenticity, and an exploration of narrative role of 'truth' outside the narrative text itself.

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DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

Print name: Alex Hammond

Title of thesis: Scattering Thomas Taylor: Trauma, Memory and Narrative in American Literature from Vietnam to the War on Terror; a Novel and Critical Commentary

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
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5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission;

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Date: 02/09/2022

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Scattering Thomas Taylor

by Alex Hammond

We have shared the incommunicable experience of war. We have felt, we still feel, the passion of life to its top. In our youths, our hearts were touched with fire.

—Oliver Wendell Holmes

*

It's been nearly fifteen years and I can still hear Tom Taylor's voice. Hear it quite loud sometimes. But now, I try to remember a man and remember instead the taste of shrimp cocktail and Clan MacGregor, and the cold damp stab of a spilled bag of ice beneath stockinged feet. An apartment stinking of cigarette smoke and dog and filled with cacti and aloe and other succulents, potted samples of hard desert life. A garage full of camping equipment and the scent of motor oil and red desert sand. I still have a key to his apartment on my key ring, next to the red tag distinguishing my set from Nerys'. A small silver key, one spot of rust on the teeth. Thomas Taylor, memory, tells me to drop by any time. Tom, who showed me the desert and the mountains of Utah and how to love and hate a place with equal passion; who shared his stories and his jokes with me and whose eyes gleamed bright and frightening when he told them; whose grin was that of a wolf and who was solid and timeless and so, so angry. Thomas Taylor, who is dead.

*

It is morning.

I face the sea and breathe with the grey heaving swell, with the low rumble of spray feathering over rocks below. Cold salt air sharp in my nose, my throat. My ears burn in the early morning chill. I turn and jog home. A full wind from a lead sky caps the waves and blows inland and presses firm on my back until the road climbs. I leave the road and enter the undergrowth and then trees of the long sloping dirt climb along Pen Dinas. I don't run to music, haven't for years now, chasing instead the calm and the silence of the hour. The last of the sea mist sits over Aberystwyth. I climb above it and it hazes what I see to my left and out across the valley towards Constitution Hill and the cemetery where Nerys' Mamgee is buried and then I'm at the top and my lungs and legs scream. I cross over the top of Pen Dinas and down the other side towards Penparcau village. My skin burns, missing the rough hand of the sea breeze. My ears ring, missing the roar of water. I press on.

At home I shower quickly, make coffee and take it upstairs. Nerys has fallen back to sleep. I set the coffee on the bedside table, not wanting to wake her. I sit on my side of the bed, sip from my mug, an old Bullshire one, an old joke from the old job. The duvet and pillow on my side are still damp from the stale glass of water I knocked over as I reached for my phone.

I look at her dark hair spread across the pillow, the soft pale skin behind her ear. I want to reach out and touch her, ask her to wake with me and sit silent vigil, remembering a man I once knew, a man she never met. I keep my hands around the mug. The ringing phone disturbed her enough this morning.

"Who is it?" she had asked, running her words together.

“It’s Jay,” I said, and later, when I asked when the funeral was, she sat up at the word and rubbed her hand between my shoulders.

I lie back now, slowly, and listen: her breathing, the ticking of the alarm clock we keep by the bed.

*

We're eating breakfast at the table in the kitchen, half-listening to the radio. She asks:

"How are you?"

"Okay."

"So what happened?"

"Jay says he died in his sleep." I spoon hot porridge into my mouth and swallow with effort. "Wonder how he heard about it. Didn't know they kept in touch much."

"You didn't keep in touch much either though, right?"

"More coffee?"

"Frank."

"What? More coffee?"

"Remember what Doctor McAllister said."

"She wasn't all that. There's a lot to be said for repression."

She tuts. "I liked her."

"I know."

Rains rattles on the roof, and I turn the radio off to listen. The morning is now overcast, steel-grey. "You know, Tom used to talk about rain in the jungle. He used to say the canopy was so thick that for days after it stopped raining you'd still get water falling down from the leaves, dripping onto your helmet." I drum my fingers lightly on the table like Tom would do when he told the story. "He called it Vietnamese water torture."

She smiles. I've told her this before. She pours herself more coffee. "I fell asleep again, after you left. Sorry."

"You're tired. It's okay."

"You go far?"

“Down the hill and along the Prom and back past the castle, then up that back path across Pen Dinas.”

She groans. “I need to run that bloody hill today. Haven’t been in ages. You want more to eat?”

I shake my head. “Copy won’t write itself.”

She looks at me and makes a face. “Will you have time to work on your book today?”

I stand up with the empty bowl in my hand and carefully lift my chair and tuck it under the table so it doesn’t scrape against the floor because she detests that sound. I say: “Working late tonight?”

She shakes her head. “Open to five today.”

“So you’ll be home for dinner?”

“I’ll be home for dinner.”

“Remember it’s Date Night.”

“We don’t have to. What with Tom and everything. We can skip one.”

“No, I want to.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. I’ll cook and get some posh wine in.”

“That’s nice. Think of something nice to cook for me. I’m thinking Mediterranean.”

“Any part?”

“A sunny part,” she says and laughs. She reaches out, kisses my cheek. “I want some bloody sun in my day. Do it with food.”

“Well, we could go out?”

“Need to save the pennies if you’re going to Utah.”

I scrape uneaten porridge into the bin and take my dishes to the sink. I rinse them and stack them in the dishwasher. "I don't have to go," I say.

She doesn't turn from the window but watches the rain run down the glass. "Go to work."

*

I sit down at my computer and scan the shelves from the chair, mouthing the titles to myself while the computer warms up. I log in to the Company website but the background of the home page shows mountains and I am again thinking of that year in Utah and the smell of the pine forests that sweep up the heights in Uinta National Park in the north of the state where I first got to know him, and how they climb up and how the peaks stand above them, too real and clear and yet just too much like a dream.

I miss the mountains. When we first moved here we took trips with the money we'd saved from selling up and moving out of London. We went to the Pyrenees that first summer, to the Spanish side where it's quieter and we could rough-camp and we hiked all day through mountains and down into vineyards and back up again, pausing for water and to eat meat and olives and cheese at an abandoned Ermita, and on again over into the cool shade of the pines where columns of processionary moth caterpillars queue around ancient rest stops. Though nowadays when we camp, we stay pretty local. We sleep in tents these days too. The Welsh mountainsides are beautiful, but the Pyrenees are more so and peaceful too and try to hold onto something wild still on the Spanish side. But they're not the Uintas, and the Uintas was never the southern Utah desert. I've walked many places but none of them were quite that desert.

The cat arrives, unceremonious, a low chirrup and he's up on my lap, pawing at the keypad, and I'm back in the present and looking back up at the bookshelves. There are six assignments on the screen and I need to start them. They're timed though and I delay opening the first one. The delay gets longer every morning. I've had to put tape over the clock in the bottom right of my computer. There might be a way to hide it but I don't know it, and the tape works well enough. I stare more at the bookshelves and I don't recognise the books. A

title leaps out at me, then another, and another. I can remember some, from school reading or from half-finished promises. I recognise ones that were loaned to us and never returned. I can't remember the ones we loaned out and don't have any more.

And then, like seeing it for the first time, an old blue spine peeks out at me. An annotated collection of fairy tales. I'd forgotten it was there. I'd forgotten we had it at all. Maybe now I'm just thinking about it but maybe too it's just now pushed itself forward, standing out from the others, just for today. Maybe. The yellow 'used' tag still clings to the spine, dust and grime browning the edges where the sticky tape has peeled. I open it, linger over the University of Utah Library stamp inside the front cover. An inscription, red ink, dashing lines, not much looping: *Frank, Good luck in the 'Job'. Remember there are no new stories*. Typical of Tom to ram the point home with an old copy of the book, the marginalia in the distinctive, contrasting handwriting of several different students from over the years. I flick the pages and a small envelope falls out from a version of Iron Hans. I lean from my chair to pick it up, disturbing the cat who leaps away and curls up on the sofa and watches me as I open the envelope and then before I see it I remember what is inside.

The photograph is a digital one, printed onto card and faded mainly into greens and blues, striped where the printer ran the ink cartridge over the sheet. I look a lot younger and so does Jay. And there is Ashley, standing beside me, strands of her blonde hair resting on my shoulder. She is holding my hand. I look at the picture and wonder who we were then and I think I remember the shirt I am wearing and I don't remember being that skinny and I remember that was before everything. I hold the picture now not seeing us all as we were then nor as we are now but as we might have looked in the inbetween, when things might still be different and hopeful and without tragedies. There have been a lot of those we have seen, all of us, since this photo and they weren't always our tragedies but they will always be tragic

for us and I think of the way the plastic and rubber on the soles of those new shoes had bubbled and melted and I think of the smell of petrol and hands like claws and when I look at the clock it has been nearly an hour. I breathe, and put the picture away.

There is a letter in the envelope too. I open it and recognise Ashley's childlike scrawl. I don't read it. I put it back in the envelope with the photograph, tucking them back in the book, marking again a place where, some years before, I believed it had more meaning than that of a simple bookmark. I put the book back on the shelf.

I work through the day on my web-copy assignments, stopping only for lunch when I go to the kitchen and heat some soup. My feet are bare and the tiled kitchen floor is as cool as the day outside. I stand close to the stove, watching for bubbles to appear. I sit at the table and eat my soup slowly, blowing on each thin spoonful before bringing it to my lips.

I wonder just how peaceful it was for him to go in his sleep like that, like Jay said had happened. Maybe it was one scotch too many and down he went, to sleep and not wake up. Maybe it was a dreamless sleep, finally. I don't recall him sleeping too well. I remember one trip out in the desert, we had turned in for the night around the slow burning fire, and he woke us up. I didn't hear the scream but felt sand kicked over my face as Jay shot out of his sleeping bag, shouting and looking around for trouble.

"Sorry," Tom had said eventually. "Bad dream."

And Jay said: "I thought you were being eaten by a fucking mountain lion or something," and started to laugh.

I asked Tom if he was alright. He sat up, stoked the fire until it had flared again, reached for his cigarettes. "Bad fucking dream," he said.

Jay asked him what the dream was and I said not to ask, to give him a break.

Tom just looked at us, lit his cigarette from the fire, lay back into his bag. I could still see the glowing tip of his cigarette but could not tell if he was still awake or not.

Except that's not true. That's not how it happened. It was I who pressed it, me, ignoring Jay's warning. It was my question that kept Tom up, that made him remember. I made him tell us the story.

He cleared his throat, his smoker's lungs rattling in the cold night air, and I wondered if he was going to cough up the story from somewhere deep down, from under coats of tar and booze. And he started speaking:

"You know, when a guy gets hit people shout for medic and we come running. That's our job. Patch him up, keep him alive long enough for the dust off to show up and take him to hospital, if he needs it. Or patch him up enough and get him back in the fight, if it's not too bad. But you can't always see very far in the bush, you know? And when you've got incoming everyone hits the deck, right? And then you're on your own. You know, when you see it in the films, those guys are all standing too fucking close together. Just to get them all in shot, right? Think of the camera as a machine gun. An MG can sweep a field and waste a guy and everyone hits the deck. If they're bunched close together a good gunner can get two or three guys before everyone is in the dirt. More if the guys are really new. Bullets go through people man, and keep going. Especially those old Soviet rounds like they were using. Mortars too though, or booby-trapped 105s: they'll get a few guys at once, they standing too close together. So we're all fifty feet apart and it is fucking lonely man. And when you hit the deck all you can see is grass. So if a guy gets hit you follow the voice calling for help. If you hear it. War is loud, let me tell you. So we get hit this one time, and this guy is calling for me and the heat flying overhead is serious heat, so I had no choice but to crawl. So I'm crawling and this guy, he's screaming and hollering Medic! Medic! So I'm crawling and I can't see

him and then I get to a small break in the grass and peer through. I can hear this guy calling Medic! Medic! and through this break in the grass I can see he's a fucking NVA! And he's after me. This isn't like some stray round. Not some boobytrap left for anyone and you're unlucky to get it. This motherfucker was looking for me, personally. Now I had showed up behind him somehow. Lucky for me I guess, so I got him. Not much further away from me than you are now, and an M16 on rock and roll can cut a guy in half."

And I said to Tom at the time: "I can't imagine," but I did.

*

I'm frying garlic, chilli, parsley and capers in olive oil when she parks up outside on the steep road. I have added king prawns and some crushed black pepper when she puts the key in the lock. The table is set, there are candles, and there is a bottle of Picpoult de Pinet from Tesco chilled and beading in a red ceramic cooler on the table.

I've cooked off a splash of the wine in the pan, added a handful of torn mushrooms, some slices of sweet red pepper, some cherry tomatoes, and set the pasta going when she steps behind me. One hand brushes across the small of my back, she smiles and says hello and then goes straight to the shower. Her passing leaves a trace of perfume that cuts through the aromas of the pan. I add basil and squeeze in lemon juice, add a little salt. I chop some parsley fine as a garnish, the blade slipping and paring away some of the nail from the ring finger of my left hand. I turn the heat down on both pans and go to the bedroom to tidy the nail with some clippers before returning to the kitchen.

The wine is poured, bruschetta out of the oven, dishes are on the table and I'm dressing rocket with lemon juice and salt when she returns in jeans and a jumper, her hair towelled and loose, and sits down. "Smells good."

"Thanks."

She pours us each a large glass of wine. "So."

"So?"

"When's the flight?"

"I've found one with a couple long layovers for cheap. I'll book it tonight."

She looks down at the tablecloth and with the tip of her finger she traces a shape in the spilt candlewax on the table. She has small hands. They are very pale and in the candlelight look soft and delicate. But they are skilled, knowing hands, capable and carrying

the calloused memories of burns from her part-time job as a chef. I resist the urge to reach across the table and lace my fingers into hers. It would be easy, a simple gesture but it's not right because it's not for her, it's for me, seeking reassurance that what I'm about to do is okay when I know it could not be.

“So when do we fly? Need to book the time off. Had a word with Jimmy today anyway. Compassionate leave, all fine.”

“Serious?”

“Yes serious. Book me a ticket too.”

I raise my glass. “That’s good.”

“Don’t sound too thrilled.”

“No it’s good. You don’t have to, you know.”

“He was important to you. I want to.”

“It’s great. I’m glad you can come.” I refill our glasses. “I’d be fine, you know. Just so you know.”

“I know.”

“Great. I’ll book them tonight.”

“I don’t have to come, if you don’t want.”

I take a bite but don’t taste the food, not really. “I want you to.”

“Doesn’t sound like it.”

“I’m a bit nervous about it is all. And sad.”

“Nervous? Why?” She takes another sip of her wine and sets the glass deliberately on the table. “Is it her?”

“No.”

“Why wouldn’t it be? You almost had a family with her. Makes sense, you still think about her.”

“It’s not that.”

“Are you nervous? Or excited?”

“No,” I say and watch as she refills the glasses. “It’s not about her. Or me. Or even you, or any of that. It’s about Tom.”

“Okay.”

“I mean it love, it’s just about Tom.”

She holds a hand up. The skin at the base of the palm is red. “Just don’t worry, it’s fine.”

I reach for her hand. “You burn yourself?”

She puts her hand in her lap. “Not badly.”

“I’m serious love, it’s not about her. Not at all.”

“Let’s please talk about something else now Frank. Please.”

We eat quietly and let our conversation drift to pleasant things. We talk about Chile some years before, the last time we really travelled together; back when we first were dating and I was a Neighbourhoods officer and she was just leaving our team to go into Child Protection and it was okay for us to be a couple for the first time. We took annual leave together and she laughs when she recalls our old sergeant berating the team for not realising we were a couple. “Fine fucking policework the lot of you,” he had said and one of us responded like we usually would. “Job’s fucked mate.” Back before things snowballed and got on top of the both of us and before we started bringing the Job home to each other and locking ourselves away in ourselves. Long before we realised it was time to get out, when we felt good about what we did and when we organised our shifts as best we could to go

househunting to buy our first flat in Plaistow. Planning for the future, and letting ourselves live out childish expectations and expecting childish things of our own. But we laugh tonight. We laugh and we drink the wine and we love each other with muddled heads and then we go to bed.

*

We are very quiet when we wake up. It's very early. I'm normally the first up but today she's in the bathroom already when I get out of bed. I make coffee and some toast, fruit, eggs. I take the empty bottles and divide them into two bags, one for the recycling bin outside and one into the boot of the car. They only take the recycling every two weeks around here and I can't bring myself to take all our bottles out at once. The neighbours can see the recycling bin. We'll drop the other bag off at the bottle bank on the way.

Eventually she comes down and I shower and take our bags out to the car while she eats.

"I'll drive," she says.

"It's okay, I got it."

"You had more wine than me last night."

"I did?"

"Yeah. I don't think I had more than a glass from the last bottle."

"Fair enough," I say. "I'll just go warm it up."

I switch on the engine and the heating then climb into the passenger seat, rubbing gloved hands together as the car warms, and then she emerges from the house. She looks tired, pale. I watch her: the shapes her lips make as she mouths her thoughts, the way the cold pale light flecks her brown eyes with gold. She fastens her seatbelt and pulls her hair free from her scarf, and as it falls I catch a flash of white, a brief glimpse of her neck, and for a moment I don't understand why we're leaving at all; why I don't just say to her never mind, forget it; why I don't just say let's go back inside, and wrap us up in a blanket and bury myself under her hair forever. I'm sorry, we could whisper; I love you, still and always. I

love you, and everything will be okay. I take off a glove, fiddle with the heating, put the glove back on again.

We drive in silence through a frost-bitten morning but before we get to the main road I try to break the silence. “I don’t think Jay is telling me everything,” I say.

“How’s that?”

“Just, dying peacefully in his sleep? That’s a how. What’s the why?”

She signals a turn and the click of the indicator is loud in the car. She pulls us to a stop and I take the bottles from the boot and slid them into the bottle bank, almost enjoying the muffled crash as the glass impacts inside. I get back in. “An illness maybe?”

“Was he sick?”

“Jay didn’t say. He got a bit shirty on the phone too when I asked.”

The road hums beneath us. Mist still hangs over the mountains a few miles inland but it thins as we head further from the sea.

“I don’t really want to see her,” she says.

“Who?”

“I just – I don’t really want to see her.”

“Okay. Well, she married Jay so we can’t really avoid it, can we? But everything was so long ago. Don’t worry.”

“Just – it doesn’t change anything. I don’t want you to see her and I know you will because we’re staying with them and fine, whatever. Don’t fall in love with her again.”

“Okay.”

After a while she sighs and then laughs a bit and we pull into the airport carpark and she says “I’m being daft. Bit like you but not as bad.”

“I don’t think so.”

“I am. I’m being daft and so are you.” She smiles. “We got this.”

We check our bag and go through security and then sit in the departures lounge with a cup of coffee. “You hungry?” she says.

“Not really,” I say.

“Let’s get something to nibble anyway.”

We sit in one of the airport café restaurants and order pancakes and share them and she orders us each a pint of beer. We drink the beer and I order us another one and we toast to a grim holiday and drink the beers. “We have time for another?”

“You reckon?”

“Maybe a half.”

We order another drink each and drink them quietly with our books out. When our flight is called I tuck the envelope back into my book to mark the page and walk to the gate. Standing in line, I look at my watch and count the hours back to Utah time.

*

When we take off I try to read but Tom's voice is in my head and now isn't the time to remember him, not when I'm tired and have had a few beers and don't know what we're flying into. Nerys has fallen asleep already. There is good space in the air for thinking and that's not always the best way to spend time. It's a good space to think through Tom's stories maybe, for remembering, but not like this. I know I will sleep before long, can feel it dragging at me. I can't give him such a short time. I'll have a quick nap, I'll just close my eyes for a minute, and then when I open them and am refreshed, maybe after they've served food, and when the rush of fans and the roar of engines drive all thoughts inward to where I don't want to look too close; and the dry cyclical air reduces being to a muted and simple state; and at the raising of the wheels and at the following of the sun, I will remember him. I'll remember his stories and tell them well to Jay when I see him.

I look down through the window at the Scottish coast, the rises and crags of rock and I think instead of mountains in my own memory; of how clean the air is up there in spring, when the storms come and wash away the smog and when the air is cold enough to taste cool and clear like water fresh from a spring. I remember leaving Utah filled with a desire for that purity in my life, that simplicity and moral well-being that comes from the avoidance of wanton excess; filled with the desire to be a Good Man. I smirk at the memory of the kid coming back and playing man. Putting on my own ill-fitting uniform and finding out that a uniform comes with a history of its own, one that is different for everyone you come across while wearing it. Finding out what it is to act the uniform outwardly and still feel like the kid on the inside.

*

A red-tailed hawk darts from one side of the canyon to the other and disappears over the rim. Tom is decanting rough cheap red wine into our canteens and diluting it with water and passing the canteens around. Someone says: do you have bad dreams a lot? I know it is me asking because my neck burns hot and shameful and I try to say it isn't me.

And then Jay, in shorts and boots and a Vietnam-era Marine helmet throws a shard of rock at my feet. It skitters away down the canyon and the dust it kicks up settles in my wine. I watch the dust and grit float and settle in my cup while Tom speaks. "The one last night," he says, "was one I've had before. It's an old mistake." He looks up to watch the red-tailed hawk return and in that moment the sun is at an angle to blind me somewhat to his face and I can see only his silhouette.

The canteen in my hand burns in the sun and it's hotter and so much hotter and too hot. I try to let it go and when I look down my hands are clawed around it and won't move when I want them to and the sun, it's the sun heating the canteen and it's too hot, too hot and I can't let go I can't.

*

Eyes closed and sleep won't come again. Eyes open and sleep calls but then again, eyes closed and sleep won't come back. I ask for another coffee from the flight attendant and he gives me sugar too and I think why the hell not and so I drink a sweet coffee and I feel worse. I flick through the news on the in-flight entertainment. Protests in the US after another black man shot dead by police. You would think the two nations are so different but whenever I read these stories I remember I remember I remember the things I'm glad I don't get told anymore. "Oh, so you like beating up black people then?" when someone found out what I did. But with these I remember I remember the things that I couldn't resign like the mother's wail and voice, how her knees gave way and how dry and cold her hand felt on mine and how tight she squeezed it when I told her that her son was dead. I hope still she did not see his blood on my trousers where I had knelt by him and felt his ribs crack under my hands from the compressions, my colleague slipping in his blood and holding both her hands over the wounds. He had too many holes in him to plug and hold and there are too many memories like that one.

Some can shrug it off. I hung up my uniform and left it behind. So did Nerys and we know both of us there's no shame in it. Same as Jay – although our leaving was a choice and his was not. I remember something about him getting hurt, a non-combat injury. It's been a while since I thought that much on him. I know he's no longer working odd jobs all over the place and is an established local photographer in Salt Lake now. I know that he joined the church for Ashley, that they married before he went to the war; that he got married in his dress blues. I don't know him though. I know Facebook him, Instagram him. Not him. I used to once and we were inseparable but if I think too much on it then I can't remember now how to talk to him. Modern communication has made it a lot easier to lose touch with people:

convenience makes us lazy, the effort so little it is rarely made. Like Tom. I made no effort and now he's dead and I push that thought away for now.

I buy a beer this time and another one for Nerys who wakes and toasts Tom Taylor's memory with me and then they serve lunch. My stomach is raw though, the recycled air is already drying the inside of my nose and mouth, tasting wrong. I finish the chicken pasta salad quickly and drink my white wine, which makes me feel better, and another coffee, which makes me feel worse. Maybe time now to catch up on reading. Book or kindle? Fairytales, because Tom recommended them and they have a moral and his stories never did? *The Sun Also Rises* because we all used to pretend that Salt Lake City in 2005 was Paris in 1926 and would talk about books and war and sometimes not talk about war but it was always there. *Desert Solitaire*, because Abbey's desert is lost now and ours is still there.

My lids are too heavy even for good memories of pretending but again sleep won't come. I flick through the news again. An actress I admire has given birth and I look at her publicity photo for a bit. I read the article twice, first indulging in the illusions that she really is her best-known character; then again, honestly, without kidding myself, as an interview with an artist and not a creation.

*

Fourteen GIs die in this story.

I was a convoy medic. They'd send us out on big long missions, thirty days at a time, heavily armed, lots of guys. We'd go looking for them because the Ho Chi Minh trail came past us. Found nothing except some stashes the NVA ditched in a hurry. Always heard us coming. Shit, trucks were so loud, they knew we were coming before we did. So, sometimes we'd get hit.

First convoy I was on we got hit. That's the first time I killed people, if you want to know. That's what everyone wanted to ask when I got back. I can see you want to know it too. Don't worry. It's okay. Same questions. How many people you kill? What's it feel like, killing somebody? Ask me that one later – dime's on my side right now, right?

I couldn't see a damned thing first time I killed people. They mortared us, and hit the lead vehicle, then the tail vehicle, then loosed a few more at us while we were going nowhere. So we sprayed back, and man, when we'd fire, we'd lay out some serious heat. Strip a jungle bare.

Anyway, so I look around and everyone's in the classic infantryman's position, you know: face down in the mud, gun held overhead – shooting at air. I thought, well, what fucking good is that doing? So I got hold of an M79 and launched a few grenades at where I figured the fire was coming from. After a short while it was over, and a few of our guys were sent out to check it out. When they came back one of them held up four fingers like this, told me I got four. Said : "Doc, you got four." Didn't really think about it then. There were fourteen GIs to be tagged.

*

I wake. I didn't know I was asleep. And I wake and can only imagine over the dull drone of the jet engines just how quiet the room could get when he talked. Partly that was his myth though, and not his story – the dime on his side. Whoever had the dime could talk. He said every soldier has war stories and they'll all interrupt each other, so you take out a dime and pass it around and you can only speak when the dime's on your side.

My limbs are stiff, my feet swollen, so I make my way to the back of the plane to stretch my legs, my arms, my back. I look out of the window at the banks of cloud rolling westwards. I don't quite believe why I'm coming back, or even that I am coming back. I remember watching the clouds on my way out to Utah for the first time but can't quite remember who I was as I watched them then. Too much knowledge, even when I try to forget it, to remember how fifteen years ago felt: I can't remember having not known Jay and Tom and Ashley; can't remember ever not knowing Nerys. It's odd, coming back. Everything is changed but I feel like I'm side-slipping into someone I used to be without leaving who I am now. Instead of grief or even that particular, peculiar curiosity of the observer I felt all those years ago, I feel something new. Nerys was right. I should be ashamed – I am excited.

*

“It looks like it does on a map,” says Nerys. She sounds disappointed.

“I know.”

“It’s the Grand Canyon?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Just like a map. Not like I thought it would be.”

“No, it isn’t, is it?”

In front of us are a father and son. The father is trying to get the boy to look out of the window. The boy is scared he’ll get sucked out of the window. The father laughs and reassures him and eventually the boy leans over his father and presses his nose against the Perspex. “How’d it get there daddy?”

“The Colorado River and a long, long time.”

I remember this, like I remember the smudge of grease on the Perspex left by my own nose as I struggled to see it, to take it in all at once. Unnecessary. The father would have done better to take his son there on the ground.

“We’ll go there,” I say to Nerys. “We’ll go see it ourselves, from the ground.”

“Will we have time this time?”

“Probably not. No, probably not, no. We’ll come back.”

“Okay.”

“Maybe with a little one like that. Only we’ll show ours the canyon from the ground. A trip that takes some effort, that takes so long the actual travelling isn’t an inconvenience

anymore but is some small way of demonstrating the time you should take to truly appreciate the long hard slow grafting work of the river.”

“You practise that?”

“A little. Always thought it would be a good lesson for our kid. Or kids.”

“What kind of lesson?”

“Not sure. Just thought it would be a good lesson about the planet or the world or something.”

“Would’ve been nice,” she says and she turns away and looks out of the window again and I realise now my mistake and I open my mouth to apologise but there’s not really any words for this so instead I wait for the wrinkled red blanket of the southern Utah desert to appear below us. We watch it without comment and each in our own thoughts and though I am looking at the desert I am thinking of walking in it and showing it to a family and I can’t stop this thinking and I should, I must.

We approach Salt Lake City and as we stare out of the window the heights rise before the plane dips and I see the colour of the trees and not their form, darker than the dust below the brilliant white of the caps. Thin membranes of cloud scud below and thicken and then thin again and I wonder if we are over the Salt Flats but no. No, it’s low cloud, laced with veins; tree-covered heights paling through, marbling the vapour. And then we descend, and suddenly there is the Wasatch range and I have forgotten how fat mountains look from the air and how the city seems to lap at the sides of them. The air is clear and I remember how the storms make it so, swiping away the smog and leaving people with clearer skies to worship, for a little while. Tom told me about that, how the wind can tear down two valleys and collide over the lake to form waterspouts. But where we talked like that and where it happened and where we were I don’t know anymore. The city is already so unfamiliar to me, even from the

air, like it has rotated ninety degrees in the last fifteen years; memory dwelling in old haunts that don't sit now where they used to. But the world does shift like this; the immovable buildings rotating on the axis of memory until all is shifted and slant and new, and the ghosts they shift too. They follow the movement of the old places or maybe it is they who drive it.

*

We step off the plane and walk towards the arrivals lounge and collect our bags.

“Pint?” says Nerys.

“Pint,” I say. “If there’s somewhere to get one.”

We keep walking, past a couple places where maybe we could get a beer but I say let’s get on out through customs first and then we’re through and there is Jay at the gate. We go to shake hands, instead embrace, slap backs, revive a couple old jokes. He looks the same but his hair is longer – not that jarhead cut anymore but with a neat side-part, shorter at the sides – and thinner. He speaks slower too, but that is just the relaxed speech of the Southwest and I have to adjust again.

“Good to see ya,” he says, “and to meet you in person Nerys! At last!”

“Hello lovely,” she says and they hug.

“Good to see you too, been a while,” I say.

“How was the flight?”

“Long.”

Jay leads the way to his jeep and I say “Nerys, Jay’s had this jeep since I first met him. We logged a lot of miles in that thing.”

“Still runs like new,” he says.

“Logged a lot of tickets, too,” I say.

“You rebels,” she says.

We walk along the walkway from the elevator and thread our way through the multi-storey car park and he points out his jeep. I throw my bag in the back seat and we climb in and shut the doors. “Good to see you guys,” he says again and we say it back.

*

“So Tom is fucking dead man.”

“Yeah.” I watch Salt Lake City as we drive from the airport; the rusty metal of industry sliding endlessly past the window. I am tired. I shift in my seat. The collar of my shirt rubs against the back of my neck, clammy. I want a hot shower, a shave, clean clothes.

“I didn’t think Mormons swore?” says Nerys.

“Did I? I’m sorry.”

“I don’t mind, love.”

“Sometimes they just slip out. I try to watch out for it though. I’m sorry.”

“Doesn’t bother us,” I say. “So, how’s work?”

“Not bad. I gotta swing by a short shoot on the way back, actually.”

Nerys shoots me a look.

“Short?”

“Couple hours. It’s on the way. Sort-of. Sorry guys, I’ll be real quick.”

“What’s the job?” says Nerys.

“Some pro shots for some Instagram influencer or something. Won’t take long.”

“Right,” says Nerys. I look back at her from the passenger seat a couple times but she doesn’t look back, just looks out the window.

We drift the wide, easy streets of the city, stop-starting through traffic. I glance around. I do more looking than talking, and Jay seems content to let me place myself once again, to let Nerys see his hometown for the first time. She still won’t look away from the window. Jay turns some music up. I don’t recognise it.

We drive on and soon the bungalows of Brigham City skim past and then we are clear of populated spaces. I watch the mountains and heights around us. There are grooves cut into

the face of the ridges, stepping them; ancient beaches left behind by the receding waters of the Great Salt Lake. I stare in mute fascination, recalling the wonder of these sights from long ago, and the undeniable presence of them in front of me dizzies me with reality and memory. Along this stretch of road is a Mormon temple and I recall driving past it at night years ago. Mormons really know how to light a building, and the temple as we drove past glowed brilliant bright in the dusk like a beacon against the shadowed promise of the high ground behind it. I spend some time looking out for it but I don't see it. We must have passed it already.

Jay turns the music down. "How's work going?"

I shrug. "Okay I guess. Pays the bills just about. And I'm writing all day, every day, which helps. Had a short story published online last month."

"Nice. You get paid for it?"

"Token fee. Sixty euro."

"Worth quitting being a cop?"

"Yep," I say.

"Yep," says Nerys.

"Why'd you guys quit?"

I wait and then Nerys says "Job's fucked mate," and Jay laughs but he's not quite sure.

"So, what's your story about?" he asks me.

"Kind of a modern fairytale."

Jay rolls his eyes. "Let me guess: something about a river, or mountains, or a forest. There's some young lovers in there, and there's a war or an accident or a crime, and it's about saying goodbye."

I say nothing but I hear Nerys giggle.

“What’s it called?”

“*Moor Parting*,” says Nerys.

“Oh for fuck’s sake.”

“Must be bad to make you swear,” I laugh and so does Jay.

“Find a new theme, Frank.”

Nerys says “That’s what I’ve been telling him but he never listens.”

“Yeah, I know, but I’ve been working on that story for years. I think it’s one I told you about when I was still living here. And sometimes that’s what it takes: years. And I work hard all day and don’t get much time for it.”

“Bull. You just put it off. And you won’t get out of that procrastinating habit if you’re stuck in one place. You’ve got a wife and a life now. There’s your trade off.”

“Hang on a minute. I’m stuck in one place? Other than Iraq, have you ever lived outside Salt Lake?”

Jay shrugs. “Touche. But seriously? I sorted myself out. I made a plan, and I’m following it through. A year after I got out I held two jobs until I could give one of them up, and gave the other one up ‘bout three months back. Now, I live just on my photography. If you want to change things it’s no good whining.”

“Thanks for the wisdom.”

“Nid fel nad oes gennym swyddi a chynlluniau.”

“Dwi’n gwybod.”

“What is that?”

“Welsh,” says Nerys.

“You know how rude it is to talk like that?” says Jay. He’s sort of smiling but I can’t read him. I used to be able to but now I can’t.

“Sorry,” says Nerys. “I was telling Frank I need a shit and a shower and a pint. Happy?”

Jay bursts out laughing, so does Nerys. “You’re cool,” he says.

“I know.”

Around the jeep the country is green and fertile and is indistinguishable from neighbouring Idaho. I watch the prairie grass and long to go south, into the desert – red and hostile and quiet. I think of Tom and Jay journeying out there together. A pang, like I missed something essential, some vital moment, a shared experience that was essential to Tom, that maybe if I had been there with them on that last trip I might finally have understood something. “Let’s go to the desert tomorrow,” I say.

“Tomorrow’s the funeral.”

“After then.”

“Sure. Where?”

“Tom’s canyon.”

Jay smiles. The jeep gather speed. I open my window a little. The air, stiffened by the seasonal chill, whips around us. It smells of grass and salt and tyres. “You know that eats the gas up quicker, that thing being open,” says Jay.

I shut the window.

“You’ll like this. Hey, Nerys, you’ll like this,” says Jay. “There’s a cop patrols this stretch of highway who never misses. You speeding, got a taillight out, had a sniff of beer that week, whatever, he’ll get you.”

“He’s good then,” says Nerys. “But he can’t catch everyone.”

“Every time. Serious. We call him Robocop.”

Jay is grinning broadly now and I watch his face and then laugh. “Bullshit.”

The smile disappears and Jay sighs. “Now why would you go and say that?” The engine revolutions mount; the needle creeps up the speedometer. “Seriously, I can’t think of a single reason why you’d think I was lying to you.”

“You just did.”

The jeep lurches forward with another burst of acceleration and I look at the numbers the needle is tickling.

“Slow down Jay,” says Nerys.

“I believe you,” I say. “You don’t have to prove it.”

“You just had to believe me. That was all. Ain’t never given you cause not to, have I?”

“Okay, I believe you Jay. I believe you. Slow down.”

“I’m afraid it’s too late for that Codfish,” he says, and the needle creeps further up the dial. “You’ve impugned my honour.”

*

There is a memory. An empty road, dark. I don't know rightly where, it could be one of many. Flickering reflections of our blue lights eerie the sidewalks and houses to either side. In front the taillights of a red car look blurred like dust from the road as the car speeds away but that can't be right. It's wet. But it hasn't rained. A corner, and then smoke. Taillights gleaming out from beneath a tree, the branches low, covering the top of the car and not covering but through. Running towards the car now opened like a tin can, cut away at waist height.

*

Despite the strengthening light of the morning sun, the lights of the patrol car are bright in the passenger side wing mirror. I can't see the officer approach. There is a small movement of Jay's hand and I look down and his hand is curling around the camera hanging loose on the chord around his neck. "You okay?" I ask. I feel a hand on my shoulder. Nerys. It slips away and she sits back.

Jay puts both hands on the steering wheel. "This ticket'll be about eighty bucks. You got me for half, right?"

"How much?" says Nerys.

"Why?" I say.

"Because this was your idea," and he turns to the window and says "Good morning, officer." His voice is quiet and I can't see the officer's face. Jay's knuckles on the steering wheel are white. So much for bravado – talking to police makes everyone nervous. I remember people shaking they were so nervous; dry mouths, wrong words. Even if there was nothing going on.

Jay says nothing for a long time after we move off and keeps both hands on the wheel and after a while he exhales long and low like he has been holding the air in a long time and he takes one hand off the wheel and rests it around the camera again and he says: "So this girl we're shooting today had some dude like an ex boyfriend or something doing her Instagram shoots and between you and me that guy was a moron. We're gonna do something exciting with her today."

"By exciting you mean we'll have to pay half of whatever fine you get?" says Nerys.

"You still bothered by that? Don't worry, I don't mind paying half," he says.

*

Jay lied. We're nearly two hours out Salt Lake, near Hyrum, and there's a big lake near Hyrum, and a stone jetty stretches out into the lake, and from the water, bright against the silhouetted heights behind her, dances a shivering beauty.

"Is the bikini really necessary?" I say.

"Why not?" shrugs Nerys. "She's got a cracking arse and that's pretty much what Instagram is really, isn't it? Showing off."

Jay comes back and shows us what he's been shooting, while the make-up man the young woman brought with her demands a freshen-up and a wardrobe change. Jay's shots are good. There's some standard ones, showing her posing on the jetty, stretching out, or looking wistful over the water to some distant horizon as the salt air flicks her hair up romantically. Then there's a sequence of shots from when she danced through the water and Jay used a slow shutter speed and it looks like she's gliding across the waters of the lake.

"Frank, do me a favour and get a light reading by the end of the pier there."

"Don't the camera do that for you?"

"The DSLR does but I wanna shoot film and I need a light reading for that."

"Why not keep using the DSLR?"

Nerys turns up the heater in the jeep.

"Just get me a fricking light reading and then get out of frame, will you?"

I take the small plastic box from Jay's outstretched hand. I walk to the end of the jetty and take a light reading. My hands are shaking slightly in the cold. I glance towards the young woman, still sitting in the car, the make-up guy leaning close to her and dabbing something on her face. "She's not even ready yet," I say.

"These are for me."

I stand behind Jay while he snaps away, a heavy, mechanical click instead of that audio skeuomorph from the digital camera. He fires off the shutter a few more times and winds the film on. "I love this camera," he says, deftly opening the back and removing the finished roll of film. He deposits it in a black film case and has already got a new cartridge loaded and is spooling it with one hand while dropping the old roll into his bag. The camera is clutched between his knee and he works quickly with it, almost like it's a part of him.

"You look like you could do that blindfolded," I say.

"I can. Mamiya 6 7. My favourite, I think."

He snaps the cover back over the film and winds it, readies it, and brings the viewfinder to his eye. The lens of the camera flexes as he adjusts the sights. I pour myself some coffee from a thermos. Jay glances at it but doesn't take any. The Instagram influencer he's photographing is also Mormon, I realise, and Jay doesn't want to be found out.

"You know, you handle that thing like a weapon," I say.

"It's my living, bro. Gotta treat it right."

"This is my camera, this is my gun?"

Jay looks at me and smiles and it is kind and those kind smiles are rare from Jay, but this is one with a gentle shake of the head and a conspiratorial look. "Just exactly right. Just how it is in the movies," he says. He is taking more pictures now. I watch him for a bit, stuff my hands in my pockets as far as they will go. I shiver.

"I want some Ansel Adams shots," he says, not taking his eye from the viewfinder.

"You know? There's some great stuff to be photographed don't have people in it."

I nod. "Bring your camera when we go out to the canyon."

Jay grunts. "Nerys gonna be okay with that?" he says.

"With what?"

“With us taking off to the desert and leaving her sitting there with your ex?”

“Try and stop her coming with us.”

He grins. “I got some good shots from down that way when I was there with Tom last. Show you when we get back.”

The jeep horn beeps. We look over at it. Nerys is gesturing. It is quite possibly a rude gesture but I can’t quite make it out. The influencer walks towards Jay and I head back to the jeep. This is the last shoot it turns out, and afterwards the influencer and her make-up artist drive off and Jay gets back in the jeep. “Anybody hungry?”

“Yes,” says Nerys. “And thirsty.”

“Café Sabor?” he says to me.

“Oh man, I’d forgotten about that place.”

“Let’s do it.”

*

Tom's old favourite Mexican restaurant, built in an old railway building. Best Mexican food in these United States, Tom used to say.

We order a pitcher of beer and Jay orders a coke and Nerys and I drink the pitcher and pick at quesadillas and tortilla chips and salsa. Jay orders himself a carne asada burrito and helps himself to our quesadillas and chips too.

"So we going to the desert after the funeral then or what?" says Nerys.

Jay looks at me. "You want to go to Tom's canyon, right?"

"So you were listening."

"Only Tom knew where that was," says Jay.

"So let's take him with us."

"Steal him from a funeral home?" laughs Jay. "What the fuck is this, Codfish? Here you go giving me all of this Constable shit for a speeding ticket and this whole time you guys are planning on stealing human remains?"

Nerys laughs. "No planning, but why not?"

My neck burns and I remember sharp like needles that feeling from years before when Tom or Jay would catch me out, would sue some military term or turn everything around faster than I could see coming so the joke was on me and I would know it was on me but I wouldn't know why. "Just thinking," I say.

"You know," says Jay. "I think he'd like that." I look at him now and I can feel that each of us knows what the other is thinking, if not how we're thinking it. We're remembering a sinking sun blooding the sky near fifteen years past, three of us watching it fall and Tom turning to us and saying: bury me here boys.

"Right," says Nerys. "What are we doing about this empty pitcher then?"

*

We don't order more beer and I pay and as we're leaving Nerys nudges me and asks if we're going to be paying for everything and I say they're putting us up and Nerys says then we should buy them both dinner, not feed that fucking man mountain with all of our savings.

As we drive south back towards Salt Lake Nerys says "Don't mind me," from the back seat and dozes off. I can feel the beer closing my eyes and say "Sorry mate, I gotta shut my eyes for a bit too."

"Sure," says Jay and when he says later "So, let's think about this," and I open my eyes we're back in Salt Lake and the sun is hanging low over the peaks to the west. I yawn.

"Think about what?"

"How to get Tom out of there, Codfish."

"Right. Isn't that a felony?"

"Only if we get caught."

"Mate, I was just talking."

"It shouldn't just be talk. Think of him, stuck on some memorial plinth like a fucking ornament – excuse me – some Christmas ornament. He'd so want instead to be out in the desert and you know it."

"Yeah, but –"

"Bro, when I go you better pull off something this awesome for me. Awesomer. Consider this your audition."

Jay takes us the long way through Salt Lake City and back to his place, through those wide streets and past those old haunts, those almost familiar buildings. Everything appears smaller than I remember.

"Feeling nostalgic?" he says.

“Sure.”

“So, what’s the best diversion?”

I sit up and rub my face. “Well, it’s a funeral, right? So cry. A lot. Be hysterical. Be asked to leave.”

“We’ll be sitting right at the back, we’re not family. We’ll just get ushered straight out.”

“Fire alarm?”

“Frank,” Jay shakes his head, “he’s been cremated. Don’t you think a fire alarm is just a little insensitive?”

“We’re talking about stealing Tom’s ashes from under the noses of his nearest and dearest,” says Nerys from the back seat. “You’re worried about insensitivity?”

“Morning,” says Jay to Nerys in the mirror. “Fine, okay, fire alarm. But what’s next in the plan? We pull the alarm, they usher everyone out, but we’re still sitting right at the back cos we ain’t family, so we’re out the door first and again, no chance to swipe Tom.”

“I could be the distraction,” I say.

“I doubt that.”

“He can be very distracting,” says Nerys. “Get him talking. He’ll send them all to sleep.”

I laugh and Nerys squeezes my shoulder. “Jokes,” she says.

“Seriously, I could speak. I could go up there and say I want to say something. It might put people out but they’ll let me, I’ve come all the way from England.”

“Wales.”

“All the way from Wales. I say some speech or something, or tell a story or two of Tom’s, I get overcome with emotion – ”

“Ooh he can do the waterworks just fine too. On command. It’s so cute.”

“ – you Jay come up and take me out for air, you can even call me Codfish – yes in front of all those people, fuck it – we swipe Tom on the way past and then we’re through the door, out the exit, into the jeep that Nerys and Ashley have already got waiting with the engine running, and on to the desert. Boom!” I slap the dashboard and laugh.

“Hm, maybe.” Jay sits up straighter. “Hey man, pretend to be blind! They’ll let a blind guy do anything.”

“That’s a horrible idea.”

“Why am I sitting in the jeep in the parking lot like a plum? Why are the girls not allowed in the funeral?”

“Wait, that’s not –”

“Serious, if they think you’re blind they’ll never suspect a thing.”

“I’m not pretending to be blind.”

“I will.”

“No you won’t.”

“I’m not sitting in a fucking carpark with his ex while you two fart around in the funeral home.”

“You have to pretend to be blind. Serious, did you leave your balls in Europe or something? What happened to the guy who stole a disabled kid from his parents to cut the line for the cigarette counter? I want him back.”

“What’s this now?”

“I did not steal a disabled kid. And nobody needs to be blind.”

“Somebody does.”

“Who?”

“Everyone in the fucking room sorry the room.”

“This isn’t some gag Jay, this is Tom’s ashes we’re talking about. It’s more than just some prank. Have some respect.”

“Yeah and find me a better role than sitting on my arse in the jeep.”

We pull up at a stoplight and Jay is quiet. I watch him, the glow from the taillight of the car in front washing his face red, lending something of the demonic to his countenance in the darkness of the mountain’s shadow. And then I see that yes, this is mostly just talk but this is talk with Jay and I don’t know now how likely it is that this is just talk. It’s a thought for a moment, fleeting, and gone.

“So,” says Nerys. “What story you telling to distract everyone then?”

“Storyman again,” says Jay. “You just want to get up there and share in front of everybody. Feel part of it.”

“What’s that?”

“Forget it.”

“No, what did that mean?”

“So which story,” he says. “Nerys is right. You need to pick the right one. So which one you gonna tell? About how he almost convinced you to rob a liquor store with him? About how he nearly killed me when he loaded my cigarettes and one blew up when I was doing ninety down I-15?”

Nerys bursts out laughing. “What’s that one?”

“You could tell the one about how he got drafted.”

“I want the exploding cigarette one.”

“Why the drafted one?”

“Fine, ignore me, I’ll just talk to myself back here. Getaway driver my foot.”

We pull up to his driveway and get out. There's another car parked there and I take it to be Ashley's. Jay heads towards the door while I get our bag out of the back. Nerys hangs back with me. "So, this is fun. Ignored all the way back, not enough beer, no fucking shower yet, and now I get to meet your ex girlfriend sober and smelling of bum."

"I'm sorry."

"You're not, you're fucking loving this memory trip."

"You have dibs on the shower."

"Too right. And find me a beer from somewhere because if they're Mormon I bet you there's nothing in that house to drink."

We walk to the house quietly, noting the well-kept front lawn, the fresh white paint on the outside of the house, the yellow ribbon in one of three frosted glass panes set in the front door. I wonder how much of this is Ashley's touch, how much is Jay's. Through the front door I pick up the faint scent of dog. Nerys walks through the hallway, which opens into a wide room, the kitchen first and then the living room, separated from each other by a breakfast bar. Jay calls out from the living room: "Dump your bags and come say hello to Clyde." He opens the back door and the big black retriever bounds in, greying now around the muzzle but with the lope of a much younger animal. Clyde is a big dog and I'm carrying our bag and when Clyde jumps up I'm off balance. I fall backwards and land on the bag. Jay laughs: "Guess you remember Uncle Frank?" I sit up and make a fuss of Clyde, avoiding his wet snout and disproportionately large tongue. Nerys takes over, fussing the excited creature and talking softly to him in Welsh like she does with all animals. "Well now, Jay, how'd you get hold of him?"

Jay shrugs. "Tom asked me to take him, a little while ago."

"They finally figure out he was keeping this big old bugger in that tiny flat of his?"

Jay laughs.

“How long you had him?”

“Nearly two years? Tom called me out of the blue, wanting me to keep an eye on him.”

“Out of the blue?”

“Yeah.” Jay is putting the Café Sabor leftovers in the fridge. “Didn’t hear much from Tom after you left. An occasional email, went to the desert with him once, maybe a year or so later? Then nothing but emails. You know, when you try to meet up with someone and the schedules just don’t work?”

“Same old excuses.”

“Always, from everyone. Like neither of us really wanted to make the time.” He scoffs. “Tom was retired, but I really didn’t have the time. Had a beer with him a couple nights before I went to Iraq, then not long after I got back he called and asked me to take Clyde. Saw a lot more of him since then. He used to come check on Clyde a lot. Drove Ashley nuts. That’s how come they called me, I reckon, when he died.” He smiles. “Made me his emergency contact.”

“You?” says Nerys, “Or was it Clyde he meant?”

Jay laughs. “Yeah, I guess. I just had a phone he could use.”

“He made you his emergency contact? What about his family?”

Jay rolls his eyes. “No, Officer, I don’t know why he made me his emergency contact. And I’m not in his will neither.”

“Fair enough.”

“Anyway, guest room’s through there. It’s pretty basic. Never had much call to use it.” I take the bag through. The room is narrow, most of it taken up by a small double bed

hard against the interior wall, and next to it a bedside table and a lamp with no shade and no bulb. Unlabelled boxes stacked against the opposite wall leave about a foot and a half of floor space free for movement.

“I’ll get you a bulb for that lamp,” says Jay, returning with a beer in each hand. He hands us one each. “And there aren’t any blinds, sorry.” He takes a third beer from where he tucked it in his back jeans pocket and twists off the cap, raises it, takes a pull.

“I thought you guys didn’t drink?” says Nerys.

He pauses and looks me in the eye and exhales slowly and then shrugs. “Reckon God’ll understand a couple of beers tonight, considering.”

I nod and look around again, surprised at how clean the place is. “You’ve got a nice place here.”

“Thanks.” He turns away, Clyde following, and calls over his shoulder “You guys smell like ass. Shower’s to the right.”

Nerys grabs the bag and her beer and heads to the bathroom. I sit back on the bed and look at the floor. I listen, but I don’t hear Jay talking to anyone. I don’t think Ashley is home.

*

He took me to see the salt flats. That was where he told me this one. Out there the ground is so flat you can see the curvature of the earth and the salt crust underfoot gives slightly and you feel the planet might be getting set to swallow you down to its core; or spit you up into the wide blue sky way above to keep going on and on and on out into a cold void beyond meaning and hurt. I kept wondering why he had not just come out here and hidden until the war was over. Of course, I'd not seen the desert yet. Something else he would show me, later. I thought that any space big enough could hide a man. I didn't realise until later that there are some places that are a pleasure to hide in. I asked him how he came to be in Vietnam. "Dumb bad luck," he said:

I wasn't a great student. Really. I figured I might be a doctor, maybe wanting to help people, or make a lot of money. Or both. So I worked my ass off to get into Harvard med but once there? I was too damned free man, I loved it. I spent my time smoking dope and chasing scooters. Not that I could get the really good stuff – of either – when I was here in these United States. The dean summoned me at the end of Spring Semester. We talked about a class I'd just failed. He told me to take the rest of the year off to think about it, come back with a clean slate in the fall if I wanted to. I just figured shit, why not?

So I get back to my folks' place like three days later and my draft notice is sitting right there on the fucking table, like they'd been waiting for me. Only now I'd lost my deferment. There it is. So off I went to a war with a hangover and a red-headed girlfriend called Cora who promised she'd write and did for a couple months. She was from Danbury, Connecticut and was a real warm thought on cold nights in basic, let me tell you.

So I was Harvard med, and two semesters was good enough for the army so they made me a medic after basic. I should've seen it coming when they gave me that year off. Singled out by God. It'd happened to a couple other guys before me too. One story about a guy drafted the day after he was kicked out of college. He probably deserved it though, I mean that guy stole an arm. Yeah, some dead guy's arm was the punchline of a practical joke he pulled on a buddy of his who worked the booths on some toll-bridge. Stuffed the toll money in the dead hand and hid it up his sleeve. Handed the money over and drove off, leaving the guy holding the arm. Yeah, you laugh. I thought it was pretty funny too, once. Not so much anymore. Guess I just heard it one too many times. So, like I said. Dumb luck sent me to Vietnam. Emphasis on the dumb.

*

“Wake up snoozey.”

I open my eyes. Nerys is standing over me, drying her hair on the towel. I sit up.

“Good shower?”

“So good. Your turn.”

I take my washbag to the bathroom, lock the door, undress and stand under the hot water for a long time. Afterwards, I shave and fingercomb my hair. I check my hair is not thinning as much as Jay’s. Not quite. I dress in fresh clothes and feel good. Crisp.

I join Nerys and Jay in the kitchen. There are jars of beans and spices on the countertop, a lattice of garlic bulbs hangs from a hook in the ceiling above them, their intertwined stalks holding them all up together. There is a rank of fresh herbs, roughly pruned, growing in small pots that line the countertop, the stems bent and crooked as they have pushed towards the light from the long narrow window. The kitchen smells fresh, that musky odour of dog somehow kept at bay. Jay is chopping – short, sharp, rapid movements like a chef, guiding hand forming a claw, blade moving flat against the top of the middle finger between the second and third knuckle, cutting edge angled slightly away; the technique reduces the chances of injury and increases the speed at which the knife can work. Nerys is watching with approval and but I know for a fact she would have probably had all the chopping done by now. She doesn’t appear to have said anything though and she smiles up at me and taps Jay on the shoulder and says “Here he is! Beer monkey!”

“Dude! Thought you’d drowned in there. Grab us beers.”

I open the fridge to get us each another beer from among fat labelled jars of pastes, pickles, and preserves. I open a beer for each of them and then open one for myself and say “What we having?”

“Oh, Jay’s got a full menu for us! Mexican food! Chicken and peppadew quesadillas; salsa and guacamole with hot corn tortilla chips; black bean soup though Jay says that’s from a couple of nights ago but I do love a black bean soup.” Nerys beams at me. She hates black beans.

“Ash’ll be home in about a half hour,” says Jay. “She said we can go on ahead and start without her.”

“Cool,” I say. “So when’d you learn to cook Jay?”

“When I got out. I’d had enough of the manure they fed us. When I eat, I want to know what’s in it, and I want to taste something.”

“I’m impressed. It’s a far cry from the Beto’s breakfast burritos we used to live on. Or Pudge Brothers’ pizza.”

“It’s gotta be fresh man, it’s gotta be healthy, it’s gotta be prepared with care. We hardly eat out now, we like to cook for ourselves.”

“Well I hope you enjoyed your lunch today,” says Nerys.

“Yeah that’s a good place,” Jay says without turning around. “But since I got out I am determined about food. Like, you ever had an MRE? I guess not. If you had you might understand. If you’ve ever had to live off them, you’ll agree one hundred percent. There’s no substitute for good home cooking.”

Nerys takes a long pull of her beer and glares at me.

“Quite domesticated,” I say.

“What’s that mean?”

“Never mind.”

“A man should know how to cook,” Jay says, turning around to face me. I can’t help but notice the knife in his hand, hovering just slightly above the chopping board. “A man

should know how to take care of himself. Just because I'm a man doesn't mean I need to eat shit."

"Okay mate," says Nerys. She's looking at the knife too. She's not leaning against the opposite counter anymore. She moves fractionally to her right.

"Guess Nerys does all the cooking for you huh? Mr Modern Story Man?"

"We take it in turns."

"Well then up your game, Codfish. You better know your way around the kitchen too or Nerys here'll find a guy who does."

"Frank's a good cook," says Nerys.

"I was only joking too guys," says Jay. "Codfish can't take it, don't dish it out." Jay looks at me – really looks at me, like he's waiting for me to look away. There is something behind his eyes like the next move he makes will depend entirely on whether I flinch. I remember this look, on the faces of young kids chased out of stolen cars and into dead ends; on blurred-tattooed toughs walking at me outside their flat or their car or coming out of a pub or football stadium. It's a searching look. They're looking for the twitch, the hesitation. Their minds not quite made up. I didn't expect to see this look again, and not in the eyes of my friend. Maybe I'm not seeing it –he seems too calm, too still. "Shit," I say. "Pudge Brothers will always get my vote."

He laughs. "They're gone, man."

"No."

"Yeah."

"This is turning into a really sad trip," I say.

"Let's go sit, dinner won't be a minute."

He walks past me and Nerys mouths ‘what the fuck?’ to me. I grab us all another beer from the fridge and we move to the living room. Jay has sat himself down on the sofa, and Nerys and I each take an arm chair on opposite sides of the room. There’s a low glass coffee table in the middle of them all. Clyde wanders over and rests his massive head on my knee. I look down at the big sad dog face that is peering up at me and stroke the animal’s head.

“I’ve got some of Tom’s music,” says Jay, bouncing up. Clyde starts to follow him but then pads towards Nerys and back to me and back again, unsure of which human to be spoiled by next. Jay wanders around, calling out from various parts of the house as he looks for stuff. Eventually he comes back with a cable and plugs his phone into the speakers in the living room. “I put this playlist together so when Tom and I went to the desert he wouldn’t have to fiddle around with that CD changer all the time.” The opening riff of The Charlatans’ long version of ‘Alabama Bound’ rings out.

“Thought you said you only went to the desert once,” says Nerys.

Jay doesn’t look round. “We went a couple times, I said.”

Nerys shakes her head a little.

“Why’d he have trouble with the CD changer?”

Jay drains his beer. “I don’t know. You know he always used to jump from one song to another to another, given half a chance.” He suppresses a belch, listens to the music for a moment. He sings, tuneless, low: “Drink your good cherry wine, and leave that whiskey be.”

“How’d he look Jay? Last time you saw him?”

Jay goes to the fridge and brings us more beers. Mine is still half full. He hands me a new beer and sits down, wiping the condensation from his palm onto his jeans and opening the beer. “Last time I saw Tom? Don’t know. Looked about like he had since he gave me Clyde. Maybe a bit thinner. He shook some, too, you know, and his eyes like danced about.

Not much, but just a bit,” he pauses, listening. “Just a bit restless,” he says at length. “But he seemed okay, just like he’d been drinking too much coffee. Which he was too, by the way.”

“Maybe he was sick? Like, the start of some motor neurone thing? Maybe that’s why he gave you Clyde.”

“You a doctor now too?”

“No but we do love *Grey’s Anatomy*.”

“Well shit, then prep for surgery sir!” Jay laughs. “Nah, he’d’a said.”

“Would he?”

“Sure he would. He wasn’t shy about that. Death, health, hurt – they were his water, man.”

“When’d you see him last?” asks Nerys.

“Fuck man, is this good cop bad cop or something?” Jay laughs and sits a little straighter. “Couple months back. Last time we took a trip to the desert together. Just a couple days, just to get away. I’d just got through with my last shift at the Pi, full-on self made man. He’d happened by to see Clyde.” The next track comes on, The Doors ‘Hello, I Love You’ and Jay rolls his eyes. “I put this damn playlist together but now it just sounds like a fucking soundtrack for a History Channel doc. Vietnam, numbah ten GI, pale American flags and mist over Arlington sunrise, bugles, Hueys and rock’n’roll.” He changes the track to the Black Rebel Motorcycle Club, something from *Howl*. “Good time music. You remember this?”

“Yeah.”

We listen for a while to the music of fifteen years before and finish our beer and Jay brings us another each and we drink those too.

“What time we need to leave tomorrow?” asks Nerys.

“Think we need to be there for eleven so if we’re out of here by like nine-thirty we’ll be okay.”

“We having breakfast somewhere maybe?” I say.

Jay thinks about it. “Oh man, you know it. The Village Inn tradition lives! Let’s get out of here for like eight and induct Nerys into our finest old ritual.”

I rise to fetch the beer this time and hand them out and sit back down and open mine and take a pull. It’s thin, light – the 3.2% of State Law. We’re quiet now. Jay puts the Black Rebel Motorcycle Club song back on and it plays out and we’re all sort of quiet and lost in our thoughts and we hear a key in the door and I don’t mean it but my pulse does quicken a moment because that key is Ashley stepping back into my life and for the first time into Nerys’. I look at my wife and she looks at me and I think we’re okay.

*

She is wearing an old U of U hoodie, jeans and Ugg boots and when she walks in she smiles and we do hugs and introductions. Her hair seems darker and is tied back into a ponytail. Her skin is still pale and I can't tell if she's wearing makeup.

"Great to see you guys. And to meet you Nerys."

"Nerys," she gently corrects. "So nice to meet you too. How are you?"

"I'm good," she says. "Hey you," she says to Jay and kisses him hello. Jay asks:

"Good day?"

She rolls her eyes. "Urgh, I can't even."

"Yeah," he says. "You see that Barbara?"

"Yeah."

"How was she today?"

"Oh, fine. We were on opposite shifts, so it's someone else's turn today."

Jay shrugs. "Well, that's something." He slips past me and I realise I'm still standing and I sit down again. I hear the rattle of Clyde's food in his bowl and the big dog comes lumbering past Ashley and towards the sound. "Sit down guys, I think we're about ready to eat, just let me feed the dog."

"Oh god," says Ashley, "I've had nothing but trail mix and salad all day so I am starving." She emphasises 'all day' and 'starving' heavily, like melodrama. To hear her speak is like hearing a recording from fifteen years before, all the ticks of speech from jokes and popular culture present in her inflection but difficult to place now.

"Work alright?" I ask.

"I want to know about this Barbara," says Nerys.

Ashley rolls her eyes. “You don’t wanna know. She’s this nightmare woman at work, one of the other therapists. Been there like, forever, and always rejects any new thinking on theory or practice. How she still has a job I don’t know but she is a nightmare.”

“Oh no,” says Nerys.

“Yeah, anyway, how are you guys? How was the flight?”

“Long,” says Nerys. “But we’re here now and it’s good to finally meet you all. I feel like I’ve known you for years.”

“Oh I know, so good to meet you too.”

Jay brings out some food and some more beers. Ashley watches him and smiles and he’s brought one for her too and she opens it and sips it. “Can I give you a hand Jay?” I ask.

“Nah you’re good. You guys just sit there and keep pretending this isn’t horribly awkward.

Nerys laughs and so does Jay and I do too more so perhaps than I feel. Ashley smiles. “I don’t know what I’m gonna do with him sometimes,” she says. Clyde pads out of the kitchen and slumps heavily next to her. “This dog,” she says, “is eating me out of house and home.” She plays with his ears and he yawns and lies down. “Ew. Dog breath. So you guys! How long you been married now?”

“Five years,” says Nerys. “Feels longer.” She winks at me.

Ashley laughs. She has taken her boots off and is sitting now with one leg tucked under her; her other foot is stroking Clyde’s head. Her socks are low on the ankle and striped, one red and one blue like from two different pairs. Clyde snores contentedly. She shakes out her ponytail and her hair falls by her ears but back from her face, like it has been held in place for a long time.

“Kids yet or?”

“No,” says Nerys, carefully. “No, not yet. But we’ve been thinking about.”

“Uh huh,” Ashley is stretching her hair out. She looks at me very quickly before looking back at Nerys and saying “Well there’s no hurry on it. It’ll happen when it’s meant to happen.”

Nerys is looking down at her beer now and says “I guess,” and drinks from it and I drink from mine. Ashley hasn’t touched hers. She runs her hands through her hair again and says “I’m gross. I need a shower.”

“Well, food’s just ready,” says Jay. He brings out platter after platter of food. “Dig in, guys.”

“I’ll be right back, I’m gonna shower real quick.”

“No, eat honey,” says Jay.

“I’ll be real quick,” she says and gets up and heads to the bathroom.

We pick at the food. Jay is up and down a lot, changing the music, getting water or more beer, plugging something in somewhere or unplugging something from somewhere else. Ashley is a while in the shower and when she comes back she picks over the leftovers. Her beer has gone warm and flat in the bottle, untouched. Jay is in the kitchen getting more drinks but this time when he comes back he only brings two and hands them to Nerys and myself and then he sits down on the sofa next to Ashley and puts his arm around her. I feel dwarfed suddenly in the armchair and look over at Nerys who is still leaning forward in hers and then there is a long, long while when nobody says anything.

“So we’ve all probably got a lot to catch up on,” I say.

“I know right?” says Ashley. “Where do we start?”

I laugh. “How was your wedding?”

“Oh, you wanna see the wedding video?” says Jay.

“No Jay, they don’t wanna see our wedding video, it’s like four hours long.”

“Sure Frank? I shot a lot of it myself.”

“Where’d you find time to film on your wedding day?” says Nerys.

“I know, right?” Ashley nudges him. “Thank you Nerys, he drove me nuts.”

He smiles. “Well there were a lot of people taking pictures of the wedding dress. I needed something to do. After all, not too long before we got married I’d been at the bar.”

He laughs. Ashley smiles quietly and looks down at Clyde.

“Tom came. He made jokes about the lack of booze.”

“I think he brought his own.”

“That’s good he came,” I say.

“It was,” says Ashley. “It would’ve been good if you guys could have made it too,” she says. She trails off a little bit and doesn’t say ‘but’ and maybe she should.

“Oh it’s alright,” says Nerys. “I didn’t invite any of my exes to our wedding.”

Jay laughs and I say “We didn’t really invite anyone. Just parents to ours.”

“Oh really?”

“Yeah, saved the money for a house instead.”

“Smart.”

“How long you been married now?”

“Three and half years is it? How about you guys?”

“Five years,” says Ashley.

“Three if you don’t count how long I was overseas for though so it don’t seem as long to me.”

“Seems longer to me,” says Ashley. “Like you were away for longer than you’ve been here.”

“That’s because we still enjoy being married. Give it another fiv, we’ll soon be sick of each other,” says Jay, and laughs and so does she but his hand has moved lightly to her shoulder, fingertips stroking the back of her shoulder faintly, almost unnoticeable. Reassuring, perhaps. It must have been hard, worrying about him for so long, but I don’t ask because I don’t want her to ask me if I worried about him while he was in Iraq and the truth is that I don’t know if I did or not. I don’t know if I gave it much thought. I talked about him being there when I was training and when I was on shift, I know, and a couple of my colleagues had been soldiers before they were coppers so I told them, but other than that I don’t think I worried, or thought about it much at all.

“Are you coming to the funeral?” Nerys asks.

“Yes,” she says.

Jay nods.

“It’s sad.”

“It is sad. He was only my dad’s age,” Ashley says.

“Your dad fight in Vietnam too?” asks Nerys.

“No. He got a college deferment.”

“Smart,” says Jay.

“It’s weird to think about that,” says Nerys. “He was our dads’ age. My dad would have had no business fighting in war. Much as he’d have liked to probably.”

“Yeah,” I say. “It is sad to think of it that way.”

“Well, he’s in a better place now,” says Ashley.

“I doubt that,” I say.

She doesn't laugh. "No, he's in heaven. He fought hard to be a good man, even if he wasn't godly, and he fought hard when he was in Vietnam and he kept fighting. It's sad that he had to but he did. He's in a better place now."

"I was only joking."

*

The sun slips down without our noticing and there are more empty cans on the table than I recall emptying. That's me and Nerys. Jay hasn't touched one since Ashley got home but he's keeps fetching them for me and Nerys. Ashley doesn't say anything. The house is warm and I stare for a while at the empty cans and say: "I met him in my first class after Christmas. He was a belligerent bugger even then. Talk about a first impression. He called me Codfish and teased me for putting filters in my roll-ups."

"He did. But only because you are a Codfish."

"I'm glad that's stuck."

"Written on your tombstone dude."

"Cheers for that. Remind me again why I came back?"

"Tom's dead."

There it is, I think, and I look at the empty beer cans and right now I can only recall rooms with a thick fug of smoke coiling about our heads, empty bottles, and table tops glistening with spilt booze. And stories. Men sitting together, armchair historians, reconstructing the past, projecting the future, and always stories, trying to tell them mostly, sometimes listening to the ones being told. I embellished every one of mine for the benefit of Tom and Jay's entertainment and there's nothing to say they didn't do the same. So we recall now the stories – Jay's of training or of childhood mishaps, Tom's of Vietnam and of coming back, and even I can't remember the ones I told then. I wonder where the truth was in a single word we spoke to each other. Maybe the truth was in the telling, as I have read it so often is, and doesn't lie in the story itself; all I can remember is the truth of a lot of drinking, fading a lot of memories. Maybe that was the only true thing there was, of the three of us sitting together. I ask Jay now: "He was fun, wasn't he?" and Jay shrugs.

I remember him as tall, mocking the extra-slim filters in my hand-rolled cigarettes. He called them mouse tampons and he had grey eyes that darted quickly around my face; the blood vessels lining the whites seemed too thick, the lids rimmed red. He smoked Winston's and asked me where I was from in England. He said he used to work in London for a bit, after Vietnam, when he had had enough of the States for a time. Arrogantly I told him England, not London, and he called me a Codfish and then he asked me if I liked beer. I said yes and he said fuck the class, let's go for a drink. We sat in his apartment and drank beer and scotch and ate shrimp cocktail and I treated him to dinner later. The economy was good then and the money was mine in name only and underwritten by the student loans company and the assumption they wouldn't be asking for it back in a hurry. It was easy to be easy with money then.

He drove us to a restaurant through the middle of a storm that howled sudden up the valleys, two winds clashing over Tooele. That was the first and last time I have ever been in the car with a drunk driver. He swerved in and out of traffic and said "You sure you're good to buy dinner?" I said I was and then he swerved again and laughed and said "Ah don't worry about it, I don't think we're gonna live that long." We laughed because we lived, even though the blizzard was screaming down the highways around Salt Lake City. He asked me who I read. I told him Vonnegut and Hemingway. He said you've made a friend today.

I remember this, I remember an evening and yet the speed of remembering takes away the immediacy. The memory itself is not enough. Only a minute can have passed since I last spoke but I have recalled a whole evening fifteen years ago. It doesn't seem enough. So I speak again: "What's the plan for the morning?"

"Early start."

Nerys stretches. "I'm tired and a little drunk. See you in the morning?"

“Sure, night Nerys.”

“I am right behind you,” Ashley says. “I’m beat.” She leans over to Jay and kisses him. “Don’t be too long,” she says.

“Be right there,” he says.

And then it is just Jay and I. He gets us both a beer and winks at me as he opens his. We drink it mostly in silence, listening to the music. After what seems like too long I look down at Clyde and then I look back up at Jay.

“Say it, man.”

“So,” I start. “How’d it happen?”

*

There is no catching up now; no imagined fireside, no dwelling in the comfortable stories we both know. Jay sits up straight. “What you mean?”

“How’d Tom die?”

Jay smiles. “Not what I thought we were gonna be talking about but sure. Heart failure, like I said.”

“Yeah but what stopped it?”

“I don’t know Frank. Like I said, I didn’t see him much.”

“You made desert-trip mix tapes for him. He was at your wedding.”

“I fucking hate cops.” Jay sits back, looks away – down at Clyde, at the table, at his own fingertips. “He went out to the canyon. Told me he was going but I had some work lined up so couldn’t go with him.” He shakes his head. “Maybe not even that. Kinda got the feeling he just wanted to go by himself, but felt like he had to ask.”

“How’s that?”

“You know. Just, you get to feeling when a person wants to be alone. And we’d gone a few times since I got back, yes, but this was different. Normally he’d be saying ‘Clyde needs to get out there’ which was like his code for ‘welcome back from war, come heal with me before you explode’ or some shit.”

“He’d do that?”

“Yeah. I was having a hard time adjusting, I guess, and he knew it, Ashley knew it, even I probably knew it. The thing they don’t tell you is it’s a cycle, like, you’re fine and you’re fine and you’re fine and then fuck it you don’t care anymore, and it won’t last forever but it’s never far away. He told me that. So he’d stop by and say ‘Clyde needs to get out there’ and off we’d go.”

“But not this time.”

“Not this time.”

“What’d he say instead?”

“I don’t really remember.”

“So, what do you think happened?”

He sighs, rubs his hand over his hair. “He fell, I guess. Maybe he passed out, had a heart attack on the canyon rim or something. I’d almost forgotten he was out there, tell you the truth. Someone found his car, then they found.” He laughs. “He’d made me his emergency contact, I tell you this?” Yeah, well, this is how I found out. Officer knocked on my door. I ID’d him for them as there was no one else, no family or nothing in these parts.” He picks up his beer and examines it, worries at the label with a thumbnail. “He’d been out there a while man, couple weeks at least. Hence cremation now, rather than after the service.”

He falls silent and I watch Jay’s eyes; the eyes that identified the putrefying remains of an old friend. I know that sight and now I smell it and I don’t want to picture it anymore and I force it down and then out of nowhere I think of Nerys. Staring at the edge of the table, at the corner where the table becomes space, I imagine the fall from that rim, the blunt force of rock tearing flesh, cracking bone, sickening oblivion; I picture her falling then, not Tom. I see myself. “Christ.”

“Look,” Jay says, “he’d have wanted it that way.”

“Who would want that?”

“You know he loved it out there. He even asked us to bury him in that canyon. Ask me, he died a happy man.” He sits back, folds his arms. “And Ashley’s right – he’s in a better place now.”

I speak before I think: “No chance he might have jumped?”

“No way.”

“Jay, if he was starting to suffer from anything —”

“He fell. End of story.” He raises his beer. “To Tom. We’ll steal what’s left of him and take him back where he belongs. Oooh-rah.”

I smile. “There it is.”

Jay lowers his voice, looks dramatically over his shoulder like he might be overheard. “Okay so it’s settled. You tell some story or whatever, I come get you and while you’re causing a commotion, we swipe the guy and bolt. Deal?”

“Deal.”

“Oooh-rah.”

I start to laugh.

“What’s so funny?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? Yeah, funny. Funny as a funeral. Seriously, what kind of amateur hour is this anyhow? How you supposed to fool people with a heartfelt tale if you’re laughing your ass off?”

“Yeah I know. But seriously. Tom – our old buddy Tom, is currently sitting in a fucking jam jar.”

He starts laughing. “How is that funny?”

“There it is.”

“There it fucking is.”

We drink another beer and then we’re done. My eyes are closing and I say goodnight and head to bed. I close the door behind me and get undressed in the dark. Climbing into bed I’m glad that drink and jetlag have made me too tired to care if there is a poisonous spider

nestled somewhere in the sheets. My eyes close but before I succumb to sleep I am aware of music playing softly down the hallway.

*

Sleep eludes me. My eyes open and I look at the clock on my phone and realise I've been in bed forty minutes. Nerys snores soft beside me. I open the notes app on my phone and do what I was trained to do, write it all down, everything Jay said as I remember it. After, I lie back and listen to the sounds from down the hall; music, shuffling. Jay has not gone to bed yet. I recall introducing the two of them, how quickly Jay changed, how he started to talk like Tom, walk like him maybe. He would have grown a beard just like him too, if the Marines had let him. New soldier, looking up to the old one. A song as old as Achilles. But it doesn't have to be just soldiers, does it? We're all each one of us dependent on those who came before and what they learn and how they teach it to us; and we must learn other things and write our own verses to the lesson. Those first people, those hunter-gatherers, would have to tell each other stories to pass on the vital information of survival, of life. And young hunters would ape old hunters because that is how they would learn. It's not changed that much at all then, if you think about it that way. Other people's love, and affection, through which we feel valuable, productive, necessary; through whom we feel we might leave behind something valuable, productive, necessary.

Like she's heard my thoughts Nerys says softly: "Are you awake love?"

"Yes."

"Good," she says. "It's time, you know."

"Think Jay's still up."

I hear the rustle of cloth, she rolls away from me and scoots her hips towards me. "We better be quiet then."

I run my hand under the covers, discover she has pulled down her pyjama bottoms. I trace the line of her hips. She flinches slightly. "Your hands are cold."

I laugh, blow on them, rub them together, and then trace my fingers back over her hips and over her buttocks, down between them. She pushes her hips towards me and I pull down my own pyjamas. She reaches back to guide me. She rocks her hips back as I push into her. She slips a hand down between her legs and touches herself. Our breathing quickens together. She moves her hand from between her legs and reaches back to my hips, gently pulling me to her. “I’m too pissed to come,” she says. “How about you?”

“I’m getting there.”

“Good, hurry up and come in me then.”

Afterwards we pull our pyjama bottoms back up and she raises her hips up and I slide a pillow beneath her. We hold hands. “Dream of strong swimming,” she says, and we giggle.

Eventually her breathing shallows. She sleeps. I can’t. I picture Jay, looking down at the cold steel table, a sheet bright white under medical lamps. Pulling back the white sheet. Red dust. Tom’s face. Jay’s nodding head. That’s him, he might say. That’s the motherfucker. But he probably doesn’t swear. He just looks, nods. It’s not the first body he’s seen and maybe he knows now that Death – who loves the desert and whose shuffling feet Jay has heard approaching before through desert sands, over the grumble of Humvee engines and the discordant crescendos and diminuendos of war – has a hand everywhere. I know I am starting to dream now. I wonder if the room was cold. It must have been.

*

Jetlag wakes me at five. I slip out of bed so as not to wake Nerys and make some coffee and stand at the window, watching the day of Tom's funeral change the world into colour. From Jay's window the high peaks of the Wasatch are visible. I remember those mountains and I remember staring drunk and full of romance at just such a sunrise and saying to myself these, these I will miss the most. But even that wasn't true in the end. I don't recall missing anything. But now, as they face me, glass blue and crowned with snow and glistening and mighty, I feel again as if I never want to leave.

I hear a sound behind me. Nerys is up, pouring herself some coffee. She comes to stand with me. "They're beautiful," she says.

"They are."

She yawns. "I can see why you loved it here."

"It's a pretty state."

"You ever think about moving back?"

"I did."

"Still tempted?"

"Nah," I say. "Beer's better in Wales."

She laughs. "True enough. Though I like not feeling shite this morning."

"The joys of the regulation 3.2 percent," I say. I run my hand down her back. "How not shite are you feeling, exactly?" I say.

"Leave off you," she says. "I'm a bit sore from last night and you need to recharge your balls for another day. So no wanking in the shower."

"Honestly," says Jay, walking into the room, "sometimes I doubt what you guys speak is even English. But no one, and I mean no one, is 'wanking' in my shower."

“Don’t worry,” I say. “Getting ready for a funeral doesn’t really put me in the mood anyway.”

“People are weird about death,” says Jay. “Serious. Ashley was telling me about it. Like, sometimes people get a real urge to feel alive when they’re going to funerals.”

“Makes sense,” Nerys says. “We always used to do it more in the days after dealing with a sudden death or a fatal or something. Didn’t we.”

“I suppose.”

“Not like right after mind,” she says. “Some of these poor buggers’d been dead for weeks and that smell does *not* go away quickly, let me tell you.”

“Nerys.”

“What?”

But Jay doesn’t seem to have noticed, or if he has he hasn’t minded. I think of Tom on the slab, the white sheet. Red dust. “Nothing.”

*

Nerys had the bathroom before me, and after I have showered and am back in our room she is finishing putting on her makeup, wrapped in her towel and perched on the end of the bed holding a small compact mirror. “There you are. Thought you’d decided to have a wank after all,” she says.

“Doubt even I could manage one this morning,” I say. I nearly make myself laugh but there’s a small catch in my throat and I realise now it’s been there since I woke up and it’ll only grow today.

Nerys folds the mirror away and closes screws the mascara brush back in the tube. “Mae gen i syndod i chi.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes.” She stands up and opens our suitcase and brings out two bundles wrapped in linen cloth. “We’ll need to straighten them out, but I thought it fitting.”

She hands me one of the bundles and I open it up. The thin white fabric spills away and the deep blue we’ve neither of us worn for a while now looks back up at me. They’re not expensive, these suits. They don’t fit very well, the buttons always look loose, they only look smart from a distance. “We’re not supposed to still have these,” I say.

She is silent for a moment and looks down at hers and says “Well, you know what the Job’s like. Probably don’t even know we’ve left, let alone these.” She starts to wrap hers back up. “It was just a thought, we don’t have to wear them.”

“No,” I say. “Thank you.”

She smiles. “Well then,” and she slaps at my belly lightly. “Time to see if these fucking things still fit us, right?”

*

Jay wears his dress blues. Only Ashley is not in a uniform. She wears a rather subdued grey skirt to just below her knees, a white shirt that blouses a little at the shoulders and a short black half-cardigan buttoned tight beneath the bust. I remember how self-conscious she was about her broad shoulders, suddenly.

“We got time?” Ashley is saying to Jay as he folds his dress white gloves into his belt.

“Yeah easy,” he says and then he catches sight of Nerys and I and grins. “It’ tha rozzahs! Get to tha choppah!” he says.

“You guys look great!” Ashley says, almost like we’re in costume.

“Ah thanks,” says Nerys. “Probably an error though, I forgot these things weren’t designed for people with breasts,” she laughs. “You’re looking lovely. So it not an all-black thing for funerals here?”

“Not at all,” Ashley says. “He’ll be resurrected in Heaven, so a bit of colour is a reminder of that.”

“Oh,” Nerys says. “I didn’t know Tom was Mormon too?”

“He wasn’t,” I say.

“But we are, and it would annoy him a bit so it’s appropriate,” says Jay.

I laugh. “True enough.”

“Anyway,” he says. “Village Inn?”

“Oh,” I say. “Oh, yes.”

Jay drives. We eat breakfast at the Village Inn where we used to stop after a night at Tom’s house to refuel and recover. Three eggs, hashbrowns, sausage, toast, coffee, four times. Nobody really bats an eyelid at the uniforms. Nerys and I leave the headgear in the car so I suppose we look like porters from a hotel or something, if you don’t notice Nerys’

sergeant stripes. Jay heaps hot sauce over his eggs and blackens them with pepper. I drink too much coffee and it churns my already unsteady stomach. I go to the bathroom where, sadly, nobody has scrawled 'Hayduke Lives!' and when I get back the bill has arrived.

I always paid back then, when the exchange rate was favourable and the money was a student loan anyway. I take out our credit card. "Careful now Ashley," Nerys says. "If you get to close when he opens his wallet you'll get covered in moths."

"Ha ha," I say.

We head out, back to Jay's jeep. The street is littered with fallen leaves but the sun still shines warm on the asphalt. I look up and let the sun warm my face and I extend sweating fingers to cool in the faint breeze. We pull out of the parking lot and merge with the traffic.

*

The funeral home is a modern building of too-bright construction that defies the architects attempts to recreate the authenticity of centuries' wear. Even the stained-glass windows are new. But it commands a peaceful view in the foothills of the Wasatch National Park and that's something, I guess. Jay slows the jeep to a halt and we sit for a second in silence, finishing thoughts of the drive, before we get out. We tug on our head gear. Ashley wears sunglasses. I blink and squint in the sunlight. We walk on white stone paths through neatly trimmed lawns towards an arched doorway. "Would you look at this place?" says Jay. "It's a postcard. Is that an actual babbling brook?"

"Yup. And look over there, a majestic waterfall," I say, pointing to a water feature beside a white-walled mausoleum crowned with red tiles in imitation of the Spanish style. Most of the alcoves cut into the outside walls are empty, but in a few of them sit small urns of faded pottery, well-tended but withered. "It's a fucking gallery,"

"Language dude. This is a fucking funeral."

"Jay."

"Sorry hon."

I study the mausoleum. The alcoves remind me of a holiday to Rome years before when Nerys had stomach ache and stayed in the hotel until the afternoon. I had gone out exploring, out to a ruined Roman town on the outskirts of the city; one whose entranceway for tourists began in the necropolis and I look now and remember those decaying monuments, the little arches for Roman Great and Roman Good standing empty, sockets in skulls. Not even skulls. Nothing. Just worn and weathered brick, the respectful marble long gone, stripped away by papal command.

“Come on,” says Jay, gesturing towards the funeral home. There are a few people milling outside the doorway. Two guys in black suits talk quietly with an older woman.

“Frank,” Nerys says, plucking at my elbow and bringing me back from mostly happy memories of a mostly happy holiday and no – no, that’s not right. Bringing me back from that thought of empty sockets in a skull. “What are you looking at?”

“Nothing,” I say. “Sorry.”

We walk towards the door, following close behind a couple in subdued, conservative clothes. Her wedges clack against the bright concrete. One of the suits is talking. “ – peaceful place. It’s the waterways. I’ve always felt the sound of gently running water helps create just the right atmosphere of –”

*

Tom's urn is right at the front of the assembly. There is no gangway to the centre, no avenue of escape, just walkways around the edges. The few chairs that have been put out are arranged in rows six abreast in the centre of the room and the room is a small room, with big windows along one side covered by large, ill-fitting blinds. Dust floats in stray fingers of sunlight. The room rustles with whispers, half-voices. Life hushed, embarrassed by death, barely suggesting itself. We take four seats at the back.

"How," hisses Jay, "are we supposed to get the damned thing out of here if we have to run all the way around these people?"

"Forget it Jay."

"Seriously?"

"Forget it."

"Hell no."

"Mind your language boys. Ladies present."

Jay looks up and whispers "you're fucking kidding me." The man who spoke, who is still walking around to find a seat closer to the front, looks back again. He wears the Purple Heart on his chest. He frowns at Jay's uniform, like Jay should know better.

"Jay, forget it."

"Just calm those ovaries, Codfish."

"Fine, but you pay bail."

"I don't have that much money."

"You'll have to find it somewhere. No way are we getting out of here clean with that thing."

"Tom'd've embraced the challenge."

“Tom’s in that fucking jar, now just leave it.”

The man with the Purple Heart scowls back at us again.

Jay leans closer to me. “We even in the right place?”

There is a small desk-top American flag next to a large portrait photograph of Tom. Airbrushed, a computer effect to rose-tint memories from the moment they became all that there is left. I lean over to Nerys. “Tom lost weight.”

“Seriously, we in the right place?” says Jay. He looks at the funeral programme again, as if the words on it, the details, will have changed.

“Look, the huge portrait. That’s Tom. He’s just skinnier than I remembered.”

Jay squints. “Oh yeah.” He studies the portrait for a while. “Guess dying burns the fat right off you, huh?”

I laugh between my teeth despite myself. The Purple Heart turns and frowns at us again. I stare at the portrait of Tom and take in the room again. It is quiet, respectful. Reverent. “Tom really is gone, isn’t he?” I say. “There’s no way he’d have stood for this if he was alive.”

I feel Nerys’ hand over my own and turn and smile at her. She looks at me and gives my hand a small squeeze.

The sun shining through the blinds makes the room hot. His urn sits on a covered table alongside flowers and photographs. I try to count attendance but the sun is rising higher, those long fingers of sunlight escaping from behind the blinds now reaching up, stretching out towards my face. They find my eyes. Someone stands up. It is one of Tom’s doctors, or nurses, or old army pals, or someone. A throat is cleared. A voice intones. A veteran is someone who, at one point in his life, wrote a blank check made payable to the United States of America for an amount of up to and including my life. Jay shifts beside me, nudges me.

People tell a few stories about Tom but they're not about the person I remember. Ignoring the sunlight, I try to listen. I almost hear Tom, our Tom, respond: Tom served his country (and fourteen GIs die in the story). Tom did us all proud (but I'd just killed four people). Tom was a good man (and they called me Doc). He always tried to make us laugh, keep us going when times were hard (but I'd just killed four people). He was special, his memory is special, and he will be missed (and fourteen GIs die in this story).

I might as well be somewhere else. The sunlight is hurting my eyes now. I close the left one, squint the right, see burning red. Nerys' hand over mind becomes hotter and hotter. Sweat prickles under my arms, along my forehead, my scalp; down my neck and back. My palms are damp and I can feel the throb of my pulse in my dry throat. I wipe my palms on my trouser legs. Thomas Taylor is not here, not in some urn: those ashes are nothing to do with the man I knew. I will not scatter them anywhere. I glance at Jay. He is expressionless, sweating too. He stares at the floor. We will not do it.

II. Welcome Home

“Know ye not that ye are in the hands of God? Know ye not that he hath all power, and at his great command the earth shall be rolled together as a scroll?” – Mormon 5:23

*

“‘Take only photographs, leave only footprints.’ Those first words Tom spoke to me came from on high, and they sum up the man I knew, a man who cared passionately, and felt deeply, about the natural world around us; about the beautiful but most delicately balanced areas of the American South West. I met Tom the year he came to Utah from the East, the year Congress designated the High Uintas Wilderness. I’d just finished grad school and had read about the little exposure of colourful quartzite hiding away up there, and decided I had nothing better to do than go look for some. So, following John Muir’s example I threw modern man’s load of bread into modern man’s burlap sack – sleeping bag, sturdy boots, water, matches, jerky, some oats and apples, a small cooking pot, a couple of hooks and some line and, most important as it turned out, beer. I left my car by the trail head and walked into the Wilderness, planning on hobo-fishing – catch-and release, of course – and spending some time under the stars. Time to figure out what was next.

“I met Tom towards the evening of the first day, having pulled my line for what I impatiently decided must be the last time from a lake of shy rainbow trout and I started walking higher, away from the mosquitos that would rise plague-like towards sundown. Yes, I know, *exactly* when I should’ve been casting. But, as Tom would say, I was new.

“It would be easy to put Tom into my own fiction and say that I saw his campfire from across the lake, and glassed the area with my binoculars to reveal him there, naked and bearded and howling like a wolf. But that’s the fanciful Abbey fan in me again – a literature the love of which Tom shared, but did not ape like so many others, myself included. Believe it or not he was sitting in a tree. I’d stopped to rest and have a beer, and I looked down and saw a nugget of rose quartz near my boot, about the size of my thumb. I reached down and brushed some of the trail dust off it and spat on it and polished it up on my shirt. Rose quartz

alright, and it had no business being there. I put it in my pocket and – this is true – this voice growled it seemed from on high: ‘Take only photographs. Leave only footprints.’

“Scared the hell out of me. I jumped away from the tree and he came slithering down and stuck out his hand. ‘Share a beer?’ he said. The friendliness, the openness in this greeting was written right across his face – if not obvious in his tone of voice.

“‘Why not?’ I said to him. The world was good that day, despite my fishing disappointments and clothes stiff from drying sweat. So, I handed him a beer. As we drank he told me he’d been up there about a week already, and I told him about my fishing failure. The first thing he did was take me back to a lake where the skeeters were biting and taught me how to fish. We caught seven trout in a short space of time using hooks baited with night crawlers. Even though it’s catch and release up there, Tom was hungry and that’s what he was eating, and despite myself I joined in. I told him though, I told him about the sanctity of the wildlife up there, of the wilderness, and as I was later to learn, this lecture was a mistake. At the time though, he told me he planned on becoming part of the wilderness so it was okay. So we pulled those seven rainbow trout out of a mountain lake set aflame by the setting sun. They weren’t that big, maybe seven inches or so. We knocked them against rocks and gutted them with pen knives, throwing the guts into the water to feed the other fish and washing our catch in a small stream that flowed into the lake. We wrapped them in leaves and laid them carefully in my bag, and we walked higher up the mountain but not as far as the tree line.

“Tom was a good outdoorsman and as our friendship went on through the ages we often went to wild places together, to fish, practice bush skills, to talk, to heal. To drink. When I heard the news Tom was gone, I was brought right back to this first meal with a friend. Tom lit a fire and left me to trim the needles and stubs off some good lengths of spruce branch. He teased the ribs of each fish out from each flank and stripped the skin. He

made three holes in the skin on each side. He threaded the trimmed, bare spruce branches through the holes and drove them into the ground at an angle over the fire so the fish hung flesh-down and open over the flames, like books left face down on a table. While we waited, Tom made a joint – it was a younger time – and we passed it back and forth. I don't really know what we talked about but a lot of it was about the peace out there. I asked him why he'd come and he said he'd had enough of just working what he could find back east and had been reading about this area and thought he'd take a look.

“The fish wasn't yet done – although the joint was – when we heard the helicopter. Remember, this place had just been designated a wilderness: we probably shouldn't have made a fire where we did and we certainly shouldn't have been eating those rainbows. Tom was spooked. He hissed at me not to look up, said they can spot you for sure if you look up, the pale moon of an upturned face against dark earth. Yeah, he was spooked.

“Me, well I just plain panicked. I said we've got to hide the fish! Hide the fish! Douse the fire, spread the smoke and above all, hide the fish! Now, Tom had built the fire so I left him to take care of that – although he didn't move – and I stepped up to the challenge of the fish. I plucked up one of the two boughs out of the ground and started looking for a place to throw it. Of course, it was hot and I got worried about starting a forest fire – I know – so I started towards a clearing when I realised that the helicopter would for sure spot some idiot running out of the tress wielding a stick of half-cooked trout. So I turned back to the fire, put the fish back and kept my face pointed at the ground. Tom didn't like the sound of the helicopter much and when we were sure it was gone, I asked him what spooked him so much. This was when he told me he had been in Vietnam. He said there were a lot of helicopters there and if they weren't landing, they were shooting; and if they were shooting, they weren't all that choosy about what they were shooting at.

“Tom and I ate the fish and I said I’d missed Vietnam through my college deferment and he said ‘Good for you.’ When we’d eaten Tom said he was going to walk a little further along this stretch of the forest and I said I was going to go a little higher and get out into the stars. We said so long, shook hands, and I gave him my address in Salt Lake and told him to look me up. Now, one thing Tom held firmly, honed by his time in Vietnam, was a zero tolerance policy toward hypocrisy and – I’m afraid there’s no other word for it – bullshit. Remember I had told him about the sanctity of wildlife and wilderness while we were fishing? He remembered. As we parted he called out to me: ‘Hey. Take only photographs!’ and something flew out of the growing night and landed on my hat brim with a small splat. Whatever it was, it was slimy where it brushed my cheek. I was to be up there for another three days, unable to wash at all, and Tom had nailed me with a damned fish-skin. He laughed and I burned with the lesson learned and though I snatched it away quickly I could smell it the whole time I was up there. Finally had to throw away my hat! When I came down off the mountain – hatless – and got to my car, Tom had left his address on a piece of paper tucked into the wipers with a message inviting me to come fishing with him anytime.

“But as fun as he was, a prankster, a gruff upholder of and adherent to what he saw as truth and honour, he was also a good friend. Tom, as many of you know, had stories about Vietnam, and had lost friends of his over there. The war killed my cousin too, though not in Vietnam. He was a suicide because he didn’t believe in the war and embraced his conviction totally when they came for him. It was a very dark time for me, for my family; it was a dark, divided, bitter time for this country. But when I told Tom about this he simply nodded, and said something to me I’ll never forget. He said: ‘There’s another one who didn’t make the Wall.’

“And that, for me, sums Tom up. He understood, in a way nobody I have ever met understood, both sides of what that war did to this nation, to us as a people, and how far we got in healing that wound. Tom found readjustment difficult when he got back from the war, but he was blessed with a good sense of humour and a determination that it wasn’t going to beat him. He was a survivor, he made progress every day, and he enriched the lives of all those who met him. Yes, Tom will be missed – even if, for those of us with a weaker disposition, his love of illegal Mexican fireworks may not be.”

*

The soldiers are in their dress uniforms. One stands at either end of the casket, the third faces the casket and stands off to one side. He holds a bugle at a smart angle. They're all sweating. The funeral director stands and gives us instructions as to what to do during taps. Nerys and I look at each other. "Jay," she says, "What should we do?"

Jay leans round. "Just stand, take off your headwear with your right hand, hold it over your left shoulder so your right hand is across your heart. Like this," he demonstrated with his own hat. Nerys nods.

We stand. Taps sounds. Gunshots are heard from outside. The flag is folded. Jay salutes and the other veterans salute too. The two soldiers look to be in their teens as they fold this large flag, and they don't fold it precisely and so meticulously, unhurriedly, they undo their mistake and repeat the last steps. They present the folded American flag to Mitchell, who takes it gratefully. I don't hear what they say when they hand the flag to Mitchell. I'll ask Jay later.

Fifteen years ago the sun was hot. There was no breeze. We sat at a table outside Desert Edge, drinking pitchers of local beer and listening to Tom and Professor Mitchell talk about how they were drafted or otherwise. Tom had written a paper on the experience of coming home, some creative piece. "It's not poetry," he had said, "but I can't say I saw much poetry out there wasn't directly attributable to good dope. Reckon they fired all the poetry out over the Western Front and left us legacy soldiers with nothing but photographs and medals and rock and roll."

Mitchell had said then: "Sounds like you've worked a lot of that stuff through Tom. Good for you man."

Tom said nothing. I remember he glanced at me, blue eyes rimmed red. "I gotta piss," he said.

"Hey Tom," said Mitchell, catching his sleeve with one hand, raising his glass with the other. "Welcome home."

Tom nodded, smiled, waved it away, walked off.

Mitchell looked back at us. I could see beer in his eyes, hear it in his voice. "You guys catch that?" he said. "What I said to him? Welcome home?"

"Yeah."

"Know why I said that? It's important. Those guys, they got such a lousy reception when they got back, we need to let them know they're welcome home."

"Sure."

"It's important."

"Sure is."

"So it never happens again."

"Right."

I see this all in front of me like it was last night.

*

The breeze coming down from the Wasatch is sweet and cool, chilling the sweat on my forehead, through my tunic, down my spine. It tousles the carefully combed hair of the people filing out through the doors of the funeral home, and stirs the tie of the funeral director as he stands outside with Mitchell and they dole out ‘thank you for comings’. We nod as we pass and nobody seems to bat an eyelid at mine and Nerys’ strange uniforms. We stand away from the other mourners. Jay nods over at the mausoleum. “Where do you think they’ll plug him in?”

I ignore him and watch Mitchell thanking everybody as they left. “Was Mitchell like the closest thing to family he had?”

Jay shrugs. “Maybe.”

“Maybe us too but they knew each other for years,” says Ashley. “It’s so sad.”

“I don’t know about that,” says Nerys. “You can pick your friends.”

“I was thinking,” says Jay. “Let’s swing by Tom’s old place. Don’t know if it’s been cleared out or not by now but there’s stuff there we could use. For the desert. I have a key.”

“I still have a key too.”

“Congratulations. Worth a shot, anyway.”

We are walking back to the jeep but as we near it somebody calls out for Jay.

It is Mitchell, the short, bald, sturdy professor of English and Philosophy and anarchy at the U of U; the writer and deliverer of Tom’s eulogy. At one time he had taught both Jay and me. And Tom. It was in one of Mitchell’s classes that I first met Tom. “Jay,” he is saying. “Jay. Thought that was you.” His eyes, creased from years of outdoor living, squinting against desert sun or glare from a lake, drooping slightly now with an extra fifteen

years and grief, widen a little as he struggles to place me, a smile frozen in place. “And Frank too. Wow. Glad you guys could make it. How you been?”

Jay shrugs and I say: “That was a lovely eulogy. I didn’t know Tom’d been in Utah that long.”

Mitchell laughs and I’m back at a bar called Desert Edge and we’re drinking pitchers of beer and Mitchell laughs at something Tom says. Today, Mitchell says “Well, it’s hard to put a friendship into ten minutes.” He looks back at Jay and asks, with a warmth to his voice: “How you been Jay?”

“Been good, mostly.” Jay is sort of squirming, like he’s a child being asked questions by a relative he’s only just met.

“I’ll bet that’s Ashley’s doing mostly. Good for you guys.”

“Thanks.”

“Nerys,” I say, “this is Mitchell. He was our professor here. Most of those books of mine in the house were from his classes.”

Mitchell shakes Nerys’ hand and looks at me. “You read any of ‘em yet? Good to meet you, Nerys. Look at you guys. So you’re like, bobbies?”

Nerys laughs. “We were. No more. Went back to school.”

“Good for you.”

“Yeah.”

He looks over our shoulders back to the funeral home and down at his watch and says “I have to get going here now, but it’s great to see you guys.” He shakes our hands and starts to walk off but stops and says “Look, how long you guys here for? Be great us all have a drink, catch up?”

“Sure, when works for you?”

“Tonight? Desert Edge?”

“Sure.”

“Great, see you then,” and he walks back towards the funeral home and we walk to the jeep. It’s the only car left in the lot. We climb in and Jay starts it up and we drive away.

*

I look out the window at a passing house where children have been playing on the front lawn; two discarded children's bicycles, blue and pink, lay close together; a mother scolds a small blond boy; a younger blonde girl cries, perched on the steps of the porch; above their heads, swaying in the slight mountain breeze, the inevitable Stars and Stripes. Jay spies a patrol car waiting at the intersection and reaches over his shoulder and fastens his seat belt. "I didn't recognise that photo of him," he says after a while.

"Neither did I, at first."

"I got no photos of his face, you know that? Not one. I only got a couple of him at all, and none with his face. When they told me he was dead, I couldn't remember what he looked like."

"Me neither."

"No, I mean, I don't mean like remember him." He shakes his head. "I didn't think I'd be able to identify him." The light turns green and he drives us to the next light. It's red already and he stops the jeep again and drums his fingers on the wheel and looks from side to side and in his mirror and forward again and repeats this scanning arc. I glance behind me and Nerys and Ashley are staring out of their windows and they're not speaking. I look back out and watch the city as Jay slides us easy forward to the next light. It's red too. And I think about recognising a photograph and a face and I remember how a face and a body is a life and when the life is gone there isn't much recognisable. I think about the way those shoes bubbled and melted and I don't want to think this and I feel hot again despite the fans blasting out cooling air. I crack my window and the hot tarmac and engine oil smell hits my nostrils and I suck at the air, trying to be quiet, and I feel a hand on my shoulder and I reach up and put my hand over it. Nerys' hand squeezes lightly on my shoulder and I squeeze it back and

roll my window back up and Jay rolls the jeep forward again and we go on. I half-remember the drive to Tom's old apartment and feel I can taste a scotch hangover and I swallow and try to fix where I am in time.

*

It's dark in the jungle man, and not like this. Dark you can't tell night from day, you know? It's a three canopy jungle, more, and you can't see your hand in front of your face sometimes in the middle of the day. And at night when you'd sleep you'd pull your poncho liner all over you so the bugs wouldn't get all up in your business and you'd sweat and get bit anyway. Big fucking bugs, too.

And when it rained, and man did it rain, it's still raining in the jungle for days after the clouds have gone. You'd hear these fat old drops on your steel helmet man, plink, plink, plink. Loud. Makes you jumpy. Like water torture. Vietnamese water torture.

Those days were good though, when nothing happened. Waiting to blow a 'bush and not blowing it, sure beat the hell out of having to do something. That's when people could get hurt. We were just counting our time man. Put in your time and get back to life.

*

The way to his apartment is narrow by Utah standards – just enough space for two cars to pass each other. To the right is a low corrugated tin roof on steel supports, open-facing but covering the parking spots, protecting them from snow in the winter and sap from Scots pines in spring and value-losing strong sunlight in summer. Jay parks the jeep in an empty bay and we all walk through the two blocks of apartments until we get to the back. Tom lived in one of the few places with a private garage. This is what he gave us keys to.

I take my set and fumble through them until I come to the one with the rust on the teeth. I hold it up and Jay laughs. “Looks about right.” I try the key, pressing my hand against the sun-warm metal of the garage door. It fits but doesn’t turn smoothly and I don’t want to force it. I step back and Jay tries his and after a slight pause the lock turns and the door opens upwards and back. As the door folds up the sunlight explores the room and I am drawn up by an electric, guilty memory: the rush of blood in my ears, the guilty smiles, the half-controlled fumbling when Ashley and I would come here for some privacy. I note the places where we stood, where I kissed her, where bare skin touched the outside world and more than once bare skin touched bare skin and maybe it was here that we set it all in motion.

Jay lingers outside and I make my way through the garage, negotiating stacks of boxes.

“Well,” says Nerys, “This looks creepy as fuck. Full of spiders, too.”

Jay laughs. “Yeah, watch out for them, they’re nasty. Not like your British spiders that take care of your pot plants when you’re out of town.”

Ashley shudders. “Yeah, our spiders are badass. Seriously, like, this is where horror movies start.”

Nerys sighs. “Fucking hate spiders anyway.”

“Relax,” I say, although I flip back the lid of each box gingerly. I snap my hand back when a small spider scuttles from the underside of a box lid but I don’t recognise it as harmful and press on. We look through boxes of stuff. Jay find Tom’s old army poncho. “This always hung up by his bed, didn’t it?”

“I guess.” I dust myself down a bit and look around. “So all his stuff’s been boxed and stored already?”

“As if he was never here.”

“The Dead Man in Yossarian’s tent.”

“Who’s tent?”

“Christ Jay, read a book sometime.”

Jay fingers a bullet-hole in the poncho and says “Who’s going to take this stuff then? We can’t let it just get thrown out.”

I shrug, staring at Jay’s finger as it worries at the hole in the poncho. A combat scar. “That’s a wild story, that poncho.”

“Sure is.”

“From a dream. Kind of makes you think.”

Jay nods and then looks up and says “What dream?”

I pull out another box, carefully lift the lid. “You know. There he was, sleeping in his foxhole and he has this dream that he’s late for school or something. And his dad is yelling at him ‘Run!’ and he shoots out of his foxhole half-asleep just as the sniper’s bullets hit the poncho where he’d been lying. Spooky.” The box is full of old shirts. I put the lid back on it, move on to the next.

“Spooky, yeah,” says Jay. “Not what I heard.”

“What?”

“Tom told me his poncho got peppered when the guy behind him triggered a boby-trap, and everyone hit the deck and when they got up there was not a scratch on them. Not one. Must have been an old trap, not set properly or something. Six guys and not one got hurt. He said that was a good day.”

“That’s nothing like what he told me.”

“Maybe your Storyman inclinations get in the way of your memory, huh?”

“Or his did,” I say. “Or you got hit in the head one too many times in the Marines?”

Jay turns and starts poking through some more boxes. I wonder when Tom told him that story and maybe it could have been before Jay shipped out, that Tom was telling a good war story to a friend about to go to war; a young friend who might be scared. I turn back to the boxes.

It’s Nerys who finds it, in the end. In an old chest of drawers, under a few books and maps and a small, half-empty tin that proves to be a snakebite kit. “What’s this?” she says, holding up a green folder made of card, faded yellow along one side and across the top; the rest is dark green, its original colour. I imagine it sitting under a stack of books, perhaps on a windowsill, the exposed edges fading in the sunlight. It is unmarked. Tucked inside are a few sheets of paper. The first is a form and I do not look at it closely; the rest are pages of type. I scan some of the text, recognising it – not the words, not the form. Not the object. I pause and read again, carefully. It’s a story. The language is curious, clerical and clinical. I turn back to the form and pay attention this time. Type at the top, under the address of the VA hospital in Salt Lake City, states that this is a record of Thomas J Taylor’s psychological evaluation for post-traumatic stress disorder. I turn the page and read. Then I read it aloud:

“I was on my first convoy and hadn’t been in Vietnam long at all. Everybody was calling me new, or the Medic. Nobody wanted to know me. It was a lonely time. The convoy

was ambushed and a mortar round detonated in the bed of the truck ahead of mine, killing fourteen American soldiers inside. We returned fire and I used an M79 grenade launchers, targeting some visible muzzle flashes. When the firing stopped, I went to try to patch up some of our wounded but the only serious casualties were the fourteen men in the truck ahead of mine. Our scouts came back while I was preparing the bodies for evac and one of them said to me ‘Doc, you got four.’ I had just killed four people, and I was putting American casualties into bodybags, but what struck me was that they called me Doc and it made me happy. Happy. I’ve always felt guilty about that.”

“I know that story,” says Nerys. “You’ve told me something like that before.”

“Yeah,” I say. “But he didn’t used to tell it like that. I mean, it’s flat, factual. I guess it’s bare truth though, told to a shrink. Not like a story he’d tell you or me. Like the poncho. Maybe this is what really happened. Fear, action, reward, guilt. Pure, like no embellishments. Not like what he told us.”

Jay takes the folder, flips through some of the stories. “So what, you think this is like Tom’s true time in Vietnam then?”

“Yeah,” I shrug. “Well, it’s what he told his doctors at least. And he was going for a PTSD assessment, so he’s going to keep it simple and keep it about him. So it’s probably the closest to the truth we’ll get.”

Jay and Ashley look at each other then and Jay shakes his head and Ashley says: “I’d suggest all his stories are true enough.” She glances back at Jay, who is flicking through the papers still, thumbing them back and forth; his eyes scan quickly up and down the pages, impatient to see it all, or none of it. “He might just have had to make some parts up. To make us understand. Just means that they’re stories,” she says.

Jay looks up. "And a true story is just that: a story." He closes the folder and hands it back. "You still wanna go to the desert?"

"I really want to see it," says Nerys. "Can we still go?"

"Sure," says Jay. "Let's go home and get changed though. Feel like I need another shower after this place."

I look around at the unevenly stacked boxes; here one overflows with clothes, there one half-filled with books collects dust and mites. "Yeah," I say. "Anything here we can use for the desert?"

"Stealing a dead guy's stuff now. Very kosher, Constable." He laughs, looks around, crosses to a dresser and on opening a drawer and finding it full of maps, shrugs, says: "Guess he don't need any of this anymore."

We take the folder, and supplies for the desert. We take two snakebite kits, one camp stove and three small butane cylinders, a lesson from Tom: 'you know how long it takes the desert to make a piece of firewood? Better creatures than you might need it.' One water-filtration pump, two aerosols of insect repellent. We take two sleeping bags (Fart Sacks! Tom calls, from some memory or other) and unroll them, shake out the black widows and brown recluses that may or may not be hiding in there, and roll them back up. Two boxes of long matches, a spare jack, an empty jerry can for water. A topographical map, creased and bleached by sun and ingrained with red dust. A compass. A copy of 'Cape Solitude' by Edward Abbey, the photocopied essay so old and tearing and flimsy, with enough strength for maybe one last reading around a campfire. Half a bottle of Clan MacGregor (Get Jay! I'm calling a meeting of the Clan MacGregor! calls Tom again and it's like he's here, now). Nothing else. The garage still looks so full. We load our sad little inventory into Jay's jeep and we don't talk much on the drive home.

*

When we get in Jay says he needs to take Clyde out for a walk and Nerys says she wants to go for a run so can take him. “You coming?” she says to me.

“Alright.”

We change out of our tunics and I don’t know why but this feels like the last time we will zip them up and put them away. We change into our running gear and grab poo bags and Nerys gets Clyde’s leash and the big old dog leaps like he’s a puppy. She clips his leash to his collar and Nerys call it “Right then, back in a tick,” to Jay and Ashley who nod and wave. We step out into the mountain heat and Nerys says “Right then Mr Utah, where we headed?”

“Let’s head on up to the U campus and up into the heights behind it. It’s not too far but there are good hills with levels in between before we hit the trail.”

“Sounds taxing,” she laughs.

“Nothing like Pen Dinas.”

“Dim chwys.”

We start to run and run east towards the bluffs behind the dorm blocks. Clyde trots at nerys’ side. We run up through houses and streets towards the dorms. We come to a cemetery and turn east again and the run isn’t pleasant until we get to campus and after a long wait at traffic lights in bright autumn sunlight we cross in to the campus. Its familiar enough and I know the way but there it is again, that strange feeling of being completely outside and foreign in a familiar place. I run on through the dorms and note the cylinders of turf that have been cut out of the lawns and remember puzzling over what it was when I first arrived here until I was told it was management, to help the lawns through the rains, the freezes, the snow. There are a few students up at this hour. I’d forgotten how early classes start here. We jog past a group of young women who are heading towards the dorm gymnasium and I’m struck

by just how young they look, how much younger than I remember any of us being, like we were never children ourselves. We run on and I look for my old dorm window and I think I see it and I know exactly where Ashley's old dorm window was. We carry on up Red Butte Canyon Drive, and up to turn onto the bluffs of the Wasatch National Forest before we hit the trail to the reservoir, and I forget what year it is.

Fifteen years ago, right here, the city twinkled below us. Ashley was silent for the longest time, letting me watch the lights flicker on below us as the last weak rays of the spring sun disappeared behind the Wasatch. Here, on the open gravel car park with that wide view down to Salt Lake I remember how she tucked her hair behind her ears and turned her blue eyes towards me and tried to smile. Her mouth twitched down and she frowned as a tear escaped and it didn't look real, not at all, though I felt the emotion it was like I wouldn't let myself believe she felt it too. She apologised, I remember, and I told her not to be silly, not to apologise, that it takes two but she apologised anyway. After a while she started up the car and we drove back in silence. We got out of the car and I walked her to her door and that was when she asked me if I was sorry too. I don't remember what I said. But right here, on the gravel where the hourglass finally drained she apologised to me and I still don't know what for.

The scent of warming trail dust and sage scrub fills my head and I quicken my pace, pushing on. Nerys matches me easily. Blood sings in my ears and the sweat pours freely from me and cools enough and I feel like letting go. Nerys has let Clyde off the leash and he forges ahead and picks up on the increase in pace without even looking back. As we near a small, bush-covered plateau, I slow, realising I haven't been running with my usual diligence. Gone is the paranoid scanning of the ground in an effort to spot cold, sluggish rattlesnakes before stepping on one. Nostalgia is more than a disease, Jay, it's damned dangerous.

The plateau is little more than a flat stretch where three of the many trails criss-crossing the foothills meet and widen, and was – maybe still is – used by college kids as a place to hide and get high. I would run here early in the mornings and watch the day start, the sun's slow rise throwing bright light against the blueing spectre of the Wasatch and below the city would shine like gold. Today the sun is bright overhead though it moves towards afternoon, the old mountains bask under the sun like blue and white reptiles, and the city, devoid of the horrors of skyscrapers, bustles under the thickening brown blanket of smog.

Breathing heavily, I spit. Nerys tuts and I smile a quick apology. Clyde investigates my spit and I try to get my breath back. My mouth is dry, tack, unpleasant. Nerys breathes deep, sweat glistening on her forehead and soaking her running top. I'm thirsty now, and suggest we turn back. Nerys nods. We jog back more slowly, and Clyde jogs with us, looking bored. When we get back to Jay's house the dog laps only a little water and looks at me. "What, you're not tired?" I say. "I'm shattered." My shirt is soaked with sweat and I am still breathing heavily. "Damn dog, you're in good shape for an old man." I stretch gulp down some cold water from the refrigerator. Nerys is already half-way through her warm down. I smile and reach down to pat Clyde. "How can that lame old squaddie put you through your paces and not me?" I mutter. I pet him again. "Nah, he doesn't. You might be spry but you're still old. Wouldn't do to push you too hard." I stretch my leg muscles and my back and the dog watches me the whole time. Between stretches I am talking to him. "Don't want to hurt you," I say. "Better to run you gently so you don't get hurt," I say. "Jay would kill me if I pushed you too hard and you got late," I say. "Vets are fucking expensive in this country," I say. "And you're old, expensive to insure."

"He's not so old," says Jay, smiling. "Go shower, I'm gonna feed him."

I head to the bedroom to get a towel and Nerys hands me one and follows me to the bathroom. We turn the shower on and I get in and she pees and then gets in the shower behind me and leans close to my ear and says “We’re going to be drunk tonight, so you’d better fuck me now.”

*

The cab takes us all to Pioneer Park and stops on the north side across the street from the park. We get out and I pay the driver from the back seat. We walk along South 300 West and it's strange to think we were at a funeral this afternoon. We turn onto Piedmont Avenue, a narrower street. "Here's one where ol' Brigham couldn't've got his wagon and eight to do their one-eighty," Jay says to Nerys, and explains why the city has such wide main streets. I'm not really listening. I'm remembering this street, the restaurant we've stopped in front of, the Cucina Toscana. Back then, Ashley and I drove past the Temple on the way here and she told me why she left the church. A common enough story among young Saints at the U: the need to experience something outside church-guided life, some kind of questioning, and it rarely lasts but I didn't know that then and thought I was special. But perhaps, even as we parked up and she told me how excited she was to show me her favourite restaurant, perhaps I knew the clock was already ticking for us, the Temple already calling her back. I guess I knew even then that I couldn't win that one. I take Nerys' hand. I'm not going to think about this, I don't want to think about this, I don't want nostalgia, I don't want these memories and thoughts. Jay is still talking about Salt Lake history to Nerys and I interrupt him. "Was there a wake or something we should've gone to?"

"Don't think so."

"Me neither. Weird."

We walk into the restaurant. It's almost too familiar: I find myself hoping that in this restaurant, at one of the tables, we're still there: a treacherous little part of me hopes Ashley and I are still there, waiting, that we never left and we're waiting, waiting for us, for fifteen years ago, at our table, unchanged and unhurt and waiting.

There is room for us, though the restaurant is busy. I glance around at the other tables. No recognition, no familiarity.

“Hi there! I’m Whitney and I’ll be your server this evening.”

I smile up at the waitress, thankful for the interruption. Getting sick of my own thoughts – I need to be out of my head, today I can’t be in here. I clear my throat. “I’m not sure what these pair are having, but could we have two pints of beer please?” I watch her face, half-hoping for a reaction to my accent, and am thankfully disappointed.

“Been married too long,” Nerys nudges me. “You’ve forgotten how to flirt.” She looks up at the waitress. “We’ll have a pitcher, if you have it?”

“Sure no problem.”

“Guess we’d better get some water then,” says Jay. “And I’ll have a lemonade.”

“Me too.”

Nerys and I both end up ordering risotto. Jay is still looking the menu over and then he orders for himself and Ashley.

When the waitress has left with our order I look at Jay and say: “So, you never told me what happened to your knee?”

Ashley goes quite still but Jay smiles as the waitress brings our drinks over. I pour beer for Nerys and myself and then Jay raises his glass and says: “Here’s to Tom Taylor, dead and buried. Ooh-rah.” We touch glasses and I take a long drink and by the looks of her glass after, Nerys does too. “My knee?” Jay says, carefully avoiding looking at the pitcher. “I landed bad in training a few times and it was always sore, and I just lived with it. Then this one time I jumped off a Humvee in like, all my gear, and landed real bad on it. Hurt like hell but I kept on, kept running on it, training on it. In the end my sergeant found out and made the doc take a look at it. Turned out I needed surgery, had needed it for a while, so they said.

Not major but I can't extend it properly, can't carry what a Marine needs to carry. It would blow out from under me if I was carrying all my gear and needed to carry another Marine on my back. So I'm out. Can't go back, even if I wanted to."

"Do you?" says Nerys.

"No. Maybe. I don't know. I don't miss shit exploding around me, if that's what you mean. Not some combat junkie. And I don't miss how boring was is. But I feel bad, you know?"

"Kind of."

"Well, no, I guess you don't. It's weird. Like I haven't finished doing my part. Most of the guys in my old unit are out there again. I sometimes wish I was with them. Sometimes." He sips at his lemonade. "Only one guy from my unit has been hurt, and it was after they went back without me. I don't like that much. Like, it weighs on me a bit. I know it's dumb, but it does. So yeah, sometimes I wish I was with them. But only sometimes."

The waitress comes back with out order and I clear a bit of space on the table for her to put the food down. "Is it the attention? Or the belonging?" I say. "I miss not having a uniform or a badge anymore. I don't miss the Job, but I miss being able to say I do the Job."

"That's pretty honest."

"I got bored of lying to myself about it a while ago." I finish my beer and pour another for myself and Nerys. I mispour it slightly and the head is high on Nerys' so I swap her glass for mine. She doesn't like too much head on her beer, doesn't like the texture. "So, sometimes you wish you were still there. And the rest of the time?"

Jay is looking at his lemonade. "I get on with my job, and I love life. I never forget what Tom said about it, about getting back to life. They call it putting your Battlefield Mind away but it's the same thing. I didn't see much out there, to be honest. I wasn't in any

firefights. But if you're after gory details then yeah, I saw a Humvee disintegrate. IED. Guys from another unit. We pulled them out of there, what we could. We didn't know them, they weren't our guys, but they could have been. Hell, they were Marines so there were my guys I guess. I don't know. Maybe what I'm saying is it could've been us, and it wasn't, and I'm real glad it wasn't. If it had to be somebody, I'm glad it wasn't us, and there's no honour in feeling relief that some other Marines were killed." He speaks quietly. One hand rests in his lap, the other on the table. Two fingers curl around the base of the lemonade glass; his thumb rests light on the glass and the table.

The waitress has not left. She hovers instead at a discreet distance, listening. She comes back to the table and, hesitantly, puts a hand on Jay's shoulder and says "Thank you. Welcome home," and walks away. I stare after her, not really sure if it happened. Another waitress comes by and says it too, then: "Whitney's brother's in the Airbourne, out there right now. It means a lot to her."

I nod and Jay, quiet, says: "I hope he comes back safe. Could we get another pitcher and a couple more lemonades please?"

We eat the food quickly after that and we don't talk much as we eat. Nerys and I order another pitcher of beer; Jay and Ashley nurse their lemonade. Ashley watches me as I order the pitcher and she says nothing but there's something not right, I can tell; she sits tense and speaks lower, laughs a bit less. She has edged her seat a little closer to Jay, a little further from me. She and Jay glance around every so often.

I take a piece of focaccia and mop up the last of my risotto and I chew slowly while nobody is talking and Jay and Ashley keep doing their casual glances around.

"Pam maen nhw mor nerfus?"

“Oherwydd ein bod ni’n yfed. Oherwydd efallai y byddan nhw’n cael eu gweld gyda ni.”

“Shots then?” Nerys says and I laugh.

“That’s still freaking rude, guys,” says Jay.

“I thought it was beautiful,” says Ashley.

I take another sip from my beer and reach for the water pitcher and pour Ashley some more water and then Jay and then Nerys and pour the last of it into my own tumbler. “You’re looking around, seeing if anyone you know will see you and think you’re drinking with us, aren’t you?”

Jay laughs. “Busted.”

“Relax,” I say. “If it’s a problem, we’ll stop.”

“Speak for yourself mate,” says Nerys. “I’m on holiday.”

We laugh and Ashley says: “Oh no, you carry on. Just,” and she leans forward slightly, “some people around here can be real gossips and I just can’t deal with that anymore. I hate gossips. They’ve got nothing to talk about so they talk about each other and themselves and each other again. I’m just, like, gosh, stop it already and read a book!”

When our plates are cleared away we split the bill and Jay looks at his phone and says “Mitchell’s early to Desert Edge, we should make a move.”

Nerys finished her beer and says “Is it walkable?”

“I think so,” I say.

Jay shakes his head. “It’s a couple miles way. We’ll get an Uber.”

“That’s not too bad, what, half an hour ish?”

“Mitchell’s already there.”

“But he’s early. I could do with a walk.”

“We’ll sit outside,” I say. “But we should do what the locals tell us.”

“Okay.”

We wait for the Uber outside the Cucina Toscana. “I’m tired,” says Ashley. “You guys have fun though.”

“Wait,” says Nerys, “oh don’t go home, stay out with us.”

“Thanks, I’m beat though. I’ll take Clyde for a quick walk around the block.” She gives Nerys a hug and looks at Jay and says “Try not to wake me when you get in.”

Ashley’s Uber arrives first and ours arrives a minute later and we get in. It takes us south on 300 W and then left onto W 600 S, dropping us off at the junction of E 600 S and Martin Luther King Jr Blvd and we walk to Trolley square. There is no sign of Mitchell. Jay walks in and sits at a table outside. We sit with him and the server brings us menus. “There’s a fourth coming,” says Jay.

“I thought he was here already?”

“Nah he got held up.”

“Nid dyan’r hyn a ddywedodd yw e.”

“Na.”

Jay stares at us for a moment and then says “What’ll we have?”

I look at the menu. “We should have classics from when we came here with Tom, surely?”

“Felly mae eisiau yfed bryd hynny.”

“Rwy’n credo hynny.”

We work through a pitcher of each of these classic local beers. I remember them tasting better, but they’re good. Utah Pale Ale; Provo Girl (the cartoon of the Provo

brewery's buxom barmaid still fluttering her eyelashes at us from the label, even after all these years apart); Polygamist Porter (Why Have Just One?).

I go to the toilet and when I come back Jay is deep in conversation with our server. She is listening intently and Jay is saying something about training with the Marine reserve when he was at the U.

"Oh," she says. "So are you still in the Marines?"

"Frank, Frank," he says as I sit back down. "Frank, this is Victoria."

"She's one of Mitchell's students."

"You doing the Lit of the American West?"

"And the others. And she actually reads the books. And comes to class." Nerys giggles at me. "Unlike, apparently, you. You always told me you were a straight student."

"Very wise. And did I?"

"The first of many lies! That's what makes a good marriage," she laughs. "Blatant disregard for the truth."

"So no," says Jay. "I'm not still in the Marines. I got IV'd out 'cause of my leg."

"Invalided. Means he was hurt," I say.

"Were you wounded?"

Jay leans in. "I don't like to talk about it."

"Yeah, 'cause he buggered up his knee playing football or climbing ropes or something," I say.

"Least I went." He looks at me hard and that look is back and this time almost fierce and I look away from the challenge this time because something is coming now; something seems building behind those eyes like the storms that swell and wind up over the mountains

and then hurl themselves with reckless power through the city and stir and crash the waters of the Great Salt Lake; energy and electricity and force unbridled.

“Well then,” says Nerys. “Shall I measure the dicks for you or shall we just have a pint?” She laughs. I do too, a little, and look at the waitress who does not look at either of us but picks up a single empty glass from a nearby table and stands it alone on her tray. “Can I get you guys something else?”

Nerys drains the last beer from her glass and winks at me. “More polygamy. I’m a big fan of that one.”

“More polygamy then,” I say. “Why have just one?”

“More polygamy! Bring me a pitcher of wives,” says Jay.

“Sure thing.” She swings away from the table.

“She is a very good looking woman,” Jay says, getting up. “My turn for a leak.”

I watch him leave and when I turn back I see Victoria pointing towards our table. A figure turns from the door and makes his way towards me. It’s Mitchell. He grabs my hand enthusiastically. “Good to see you Frank.”

“And you. Guess you couldn’t find a wake to go to either?”

He laughs. “You decide to hold one of your own too? I don’t mind admitting I had a couple for Tom already.”

“So did we,” says Nerys. “But we ate so we’re being well behaved.”

“We should join forces.”

“Strength in numbers.”

“Speaking of, we’ve got more polygamy on the way.” I turn in my chair, reach an arm towards the bar. “Garcon! Another wife for my mate here.”

“Damned good show.”

“Mitchell, your English accent hasn’t improved. And nobody says that anymore. They haven’t since, like the war.”

“Well, why not?” He laughs again. He is ready with his laugh, easy, but it shows his teeth which are straight and white and not by nature, and this has collapsed his mouth a little so that when he laughs he presents surprisingly expansive lips and gives the look his head might split open laterally at the jaw. “Jay with you?”

“Taking a slash.”

“He drinking too?”

“Ashley went home.”

“He’s Jack?”

“Long as his wife isn’t around, I guess,” says Nerys.

“That’s not good.”

“It’s not that bad either.”

“Guess not. So he’s married now, and how about you?”

“Eight years,” says Nerys. “And I feel every one of them.”

Mitchell laughs, looks back at me. “Somebody married you?”

“Take a seat won’t you? You’re making me dizzy.”

Mitchell sits and Victoria brings over another pitcher. “Hi professor,” she says.

“Hey Victoria, how are you doing?”

“You got classes with this guy? Let me guess, the roll call of American environmental activist writers?”

She laughs. “Only two. I guess it’s the same class you took?”

“Yeah, a long time ago.”

“He didn’t show up a lot,” says Mitchell. “Where were you?”

“Probably in the desert with Tom, a lot of the time.”

Mitchell grunts. “Yeah you treat that year like it was a victory lap.”

“Victory,” I say. “Victoria?”

“Yeah?”

“Make sure you always go to class.”

“You don’t want to end up like him,” says Nerys.

“You certainly don’t want to end up like me,” I say.

“Or like me,” says Nerys.

“Oh she can end up like you. You’re doing very well. You’re a scholar, hardened on the killing streets of Tottenham. A warrior-poet!”

“What even is that?”

“I don’t quite know but I heard it once and thought it sounded like a massive cliché.”

“Probably because it is one. Boo hiss, Frank! Down with all cliché, don’t you know?”

Victoria is still smiling and she says: “So can I get you guys anything or...?”

“Oh sorry sorry,” I say. “I think we’re okay thanks.”

“Another pitcher of UPA?” says Mitchell.

“Good man.”

Jay comes back and shakes Mitchell’s hand and down and as he does so there’s a faint trace of maybe tequila but I’m in no state to be sure. It could be any one of us or just the bar.

Mitchell raises his glass. “To Tom,” he says.

“To Tom.”

“Welcome home Jay,” says Mitchell and we raise our glasses again and drink.

“Welcome back Frank,” says Mitchell, and we drink.

“Welcome to Utah, Nerys,” says Mitchell and we refill our glasses and drink. Victoria brings the next pitcher and sets it down on the table and clears the empty one away, the condensation still beading on the empty glass.

“It’s good to see you all again,” says Mitchell.

“Think the last time I was in this bar was with you and Tom and Jay,” I say. “That’s gotta be fifteen years ago now.”

“Serious, how do you remember all this stuff Frank?”

“Oh it was like my last night here or something, it’s indelibly inscribed on my memory.”

“I’ve heard so much about it. All the time,” says Nerys. “*All* the time. When he first joined my team he was called ‘Utah’ by the rest because every thing he said started with ‘when I was in Utah.’”

Mitchell raises a glass. “To Utah!”

“Can we drink to Utah?”

“Good point. Someone bring me a glass of lemon water. This should be a proper Utah toast.”

“This beer’s quite lemony,” says Nerys.

“It is. Citrus notes. Hot damn, that’ll do.”

We raise our glasses and drink.

“This is the wrong table though,” I say. “We were sitting inside when I left. At one of those barrels in there.”

“I’m not moving,” says Nerys.

“Yeah, let’s make new memories,” says Jay. “And try to remember them.”

“Which barrel Frank?” says Nerys.

I look through the big screen doors and sight through the bar and I point out the third barrel in from where we're sitting and say "That one, I think. I don't know. Stuff's got a bit turned around in my head but I think it's that one."

"Cool," says Nerys. She opens her bag and pulls out the green folder. "I have an idea." She flicks through the pages, quickly scanning them, and plucks three sheets out. "Pick one," she says.

"Pick one?"

"Yeah."

We look at the three pages she's taken out. Mitchell says "What's our criteria?"

Nerys shrugs. "You guys came here with Tom? A lot?"

"Yeah."

"Which one fits here the best?"

Mitchell looks at her for a spell and then hands a sheet back to her. "This one."

"Good." She gets to her feet, a little unsteadily, and then stalks into the bar. She talks to Victoria, who shrugs, and then I watch Nerys make her way to the barrel-seat I'd pointed out. She carefully slides the sheet of paper under the glass barrel-top covering and comes back. "There," she says. "Face up, where you can see it. And so can everyone else now."

"What?" says Jay. "You guys live in a movie or something? What difference is that going to make? Those are just stories. The ashes, man. Those ashes are Tom. He's dead."

"We can't just throw his stuff away like that," I say but Mitchell stops me.

"The stories make the life. He'll be remembered this way."

"Yup," says Nerys.

Mitchell raises his glass. "To Tom."

"Fuck it, why not?" says Jay.

“To Tom.”

“Another pitcher of wives?”

“To polygamy!”

*

It was dark and I was pulling guard duty with a buddy. We'd got back from a long convoy only that day and we were hungry and wet and tired. We lit some C4 to heat some chow. We got mortared pretty soon after that and two guys were hurt, one seriously. He lost his legs. I thought we were careful but I still think maybe they zeroed those mortars in on the light from our cooking and I've always felt bad about that.

*

“We should get going,” Jay says, eventually. “I’ll get us an Uber.”

“Let’s walk,” I say.

“It ain’t close.”

“I’m pissed. Uber,” says Nerys.

At the door, Mitchell shakes our hands, holding Jay’s for a fraction of a second longer and saying ‘Welcome Home’ as Nerys and I stand a little to the side, supporting each other, watching. Mitchell turns and walks away, and shouts “To Tom!”

“To Tom!”

The Uber pulls up and we get in and it sets off. It’s a short ride but would have been a long walk. We walk through Jay’s front door. Ashley has left a lamp on for us. Clyde stirs but doesn’t move. I shut the front door behind me. “I’m out,” says Nerys. “Later losers.”

“G’night.”

“Don’t be long,” she says and makes her way unsteadily down the corridor to our room.

There are two glasses and a bottle of scotch on the table between Jay and I now. I realise I don’t have anything to say, nothing that I should say. Jay says: “It’s not a regular thing, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“What isn’t?”

“People saying stuff.” He takes a long pull from a glass of water and then pours us each a scotch and sips his. “You know, people falling over themselves to welcome me back, a hero, whether they wanted the war or not. Mostly people just get on with what they gotta do. Might take a minute to think about a vet on a national holiday or when a new meme does the rounds. But sometimes, if they find out, they’ll say something.”

“Is that good?”

He shrugs and stands up and turns the heating on. We sit in our coats, the house still too cool to remove them and sit comfortably. The leather of his jacket creaks against the back of the sofa like a loose floorboard and it feels for a minute like someone has just come in the room. “It’s more like a compulsion,” he says after a while. “People just say it, like they’ve been told to and they’re not sure when or why.”

He refills our glasses. “When Tom got back, there was all this shit happening. Everything was all tore up. Everyone blaming everybody else, some stab in the back thing going on in Washington about how we weren’t allowed to win. People hated soldiers.” He shrugs. “Not everyone. But a lot of people hated soldiers.”

“What’s it like now?”

He laughs. “Now? People bend over backwards to thank us if they say anything at all and they don’t fucking know why. It’s so empty. I was being thanked for my service before I even fucking did anything. And where are all those protestors from ’03, huh? All those Stop the War fuckers. I’ll tell you. They got jobs and got married and had kids and now they’re scared about the world their kids are growing up in because their right-on liberalism didn’t stop the causes of Black Lives Matter or anything. They might still share a meme but they don’t fucking do anything anymore. And you know, they never fucking did. They weren’t protesting for change back then, they were protesting so they could feel part of the history of it, to say they protested and so they could fuck other people who protested and they’re the worst, Frank. Worse than the ones who never gave a shit in the first place. Those motherfuckers who once stood up to stop a war don’t fucking stand for anything anymore and they gave up on us, and I can’t help but feel that whenever one of them smiles and walks

away and I think they feel it too. They just don't wanna fucking know." He finishes his scotch and pours another. "Let's get drunk," he says.

Ashley must have heard us by now and I don't want to be blamed for his slide into sin. Religious people can be very dangerous about little things like that. "I'm pretty drunk already," I say.

"Not enough."

"Got any beer?"

"Nope."

"You're lying."

"Yep." Jay pours us each another measure of scotch. "To Tom." We drink. "Hey man," he says, "wanna watch *Platoon*? I'll be Tom and interrupt it at all the good parts."

"Great."

We get drunk and watch war films, telling Tom's stories over the noise of the television. With cries of 'Ooh-rah' and 'To Tom' we drink toasts to the spirits of warriors past and present. The nobility of this sentiment is intoxicating. We try to hide tears that don't come without effort anyway. We try to be stoic, sensitive, understanding. We try to be some ideal of men. Jay shouts 'Ooh-rah' and I don't try to keep up with him. "Remember what Tom said Codfish! You clink you drink. Bad luck not to drink." I drink. The drink makes all of this easier; the drink stands in the way of it all.

I look at him, at how his eyes now pool in his face, melting puddles or waterholes without distinctive parts or boundaries like eyes should have. Just glistening. I wonder again what it must be like in a world where bad luck matters, where a nod to Fate here, a careless omission of a ritual there, means death or life, or being and remaining whole. What it must do

to you inside to hold on to luck like that, not knowing if Death had heard the clinking of glasses this time and overlooked you, casting an eye elsewhere for some poor rulebreaker.

Jay takes another drink and coughs. "I never killed anybody, that I know of."

"Good."

"That I know of. I might've done. My unit killed. My unit did a lot of killing. Fucking frosty killing motherfuckers we were. But nothing where I can honest to God say that if I hadn't been there then there would still be one more life running around."

"Then you did good, Jay."

"My gunner did. In my Humvee. He wasted some motherfucker with the fifty, right through the wall. Took the thing clean apart."

I don't ask if the thing was the wall or the person. Jay is flicking through the search options, trying to find another movie. He keep spelling the name wrong and it won't come up. "Fucking thing. What they don't show you in films is those slugs can go through whatever you're hiding behind. You can't hide from them. Ah, there it is," he says, having finally found the film he was looking for. "I got a new one. Lemme show you my war."

"You did alright mate. You can be proud. It's okay."

"Yeah sure. I guess – I guess I feel like I didn't do my job out there? I mean, I'm a fucking Marine, I was there to kill. And they the fuck not? They were there to be killed. And so were we."

"I don't know."

"I guess you don't." He does not look at me this time; it's not a challenge now. He just slumps back down and pours us both another drink. "Maybe you could try to understand boredom then. You been really bored? War is fucking boring. Really boring. Like some office when everyone is bored and everyone is young and dumb and blames everybody else

except themselves just like you all do in your real jobs. Only difference is every now and then instead of losing a client or fucking up a spreadsheet, they might die.” He shrugs. “Don’t try to understand. I don’t know if you can. I don’t know. Anyway. Ooh-rah.”

“I don’t know. Policing is just routine, mainly. Two percent adrenaline. Four percent horror show. The rest is routine. Make a mistake you’re more likely to get fired or even go to prison than get killed but that happens too, sadly.”

I drink with him. From somewhere he has produced to cigars and we mainly let them burn themselves out and watch the smoke hanging in the air. We have not opened windows because of the cold outside and there is enough smoke to sting the eyes: Tom again, saying it’s enough to put callouses on your eyeballs only he wouldn’t have said something like that about something like this.

“Callouses,” I say.

“Huh?”

“Callouses on your eyeballs,” I smile.

“Callouses on your nostrils.”

“Oh yeah, that was it.” I laugh. “I know that one. Sudden death, fella’d fallen asleep next to the heater in his flat and never woke up. Been there a couple months. Finally a neighbour called when she noticed something coming through her ceiling.”

“Oh, nice.”

“Yeah. Opening that door mate, that’s put callouses on your nostrils.”

“Yeah.”

“You know, I called that in and said he was dead, but we’re not medics right so we can’t declare it. Control said I had to get a doctor or someone to confirm life extinct. I was looking through the guy’s skull. But you know, rules are rules.”

“Ooh-rah,” says Jay. “Burning desert sun, bloated bodies by the riverbanks, burnt out cars by the roadsides. Callouses.”

“Callouses.”

Jay raises his glass. We knock back another. Clyde hides in his basket under the high-hanging cloud like he used to when he was a younger dog, Tom’s pet; when we used to tear it up all night like this, talking war, watching war films, trying to really understand what we were being told. Now it’s just me on the outside, trying to understand my friend and worrying how much trouble we’ll be in when Ashley comes through and catches us drinking and smoking in her house.

Jay is pouring another measure. “Sometimes I miss Tom to talk to,” he says. “He got it.”

I remember listening to how Tom would take to us, how he wouldn’t always finish a story or would finish one and keep talking at the end: digressions, explanations. They were not neat stories, not at all. I remember thinking at the time that he was not too far from being a rambling old drunk – yes, a man damaged by an experience none of us should have an yet in a way some of us always want. An experience keeping him above our unknowing pity. But a rambling drunk too, maybe.

I look at Jay now. Maybe those explanations, years later to younger men, are a way to make up for the terse expressions of the recently returned. Maybe Jay talked to Tom when he got back. Here, like this, without war films to provide the background, or rather a middle ground on which I could meet them yet never really meet them because they knew it better than any film could show.

I watch Jay’s hands and they are steady. I suddenly picture them in Ashley’s hair and her voice swims in my ears. It is jealousy of course and it stops everything dead. It’s a real

effort to start thinking again, or even to figure out how this jealousy has even arrived. And tonight Jay has told me more than he ever has and we're closer again than we've been in years, and yet this jealousy has broken in and given rise to a sense of betrayal. I know it's nonsense but I don't feel it's nonsense. Maybe he lied about when they got together, and if he lied then and tells the same lie now then what else has he lied about, and who else has he lied about, not just Ashley, but maybe Tom too – jealousy, jealousy; like a discordant ending in a piece of music it breaks the spell of all that has gone before, and sometime life needs those spells. It must be fought. “Ooh-rah,” I say. We drink again. Jay has been talking this whole time but I've not been listening, again. “So yeah,” he says. “Sometimes the old fuck was good to have around.”

“You ever wish you had stories like his?”

“I'm kinda glad I don't. But I know what you mean.”

“Why is that? Why would anyone want that?”

“No idea. Maybe 'cause life's a movie and we all want to be the movie's hero and that's what good heroes are, tortured.”

“That's fucking stupid.” I stand up. I need to go to bed. “We're fucking stupid.”

“Yeah, but I bet we aren't alone.”

I go to our room and undress in the dark and climb into bed. Nerys doesn't stir as I lay beside her, trying not to knock her with a toe or knee or elbow. The room is hot. It spins. I sweat. From down the corridor, I hear music. Jay is still up.

*

I can't sleep. I think I can't sleep. The room isn't spinning and when I look around Nerys is still asleep next to me and the desert is flying past the windows. Jay is driving and Ashley, where is Ashley. Tom is in the passenger seat. He turns around and there's just shadow, no face.

And then he's back and I can smell the burning petrol hot metal and everyone else is gone now and he's at the foot of my bed, staring at me with those big melting eyes wide and rolling back in his skull as his skin blisters, his hair burning away and his mouth is so wide in a silent scream and it grows wider and wider.

I sit up. I am soaked in sweat. Nerys' hand is on my shoulder. I look over to her. She is lying on her side, one hand on my shoulder, eyes open but not having moved much. As we agreed was what to do a long time ago.

"Was I loud?"

"A little noise, not much this time."

"It's been a while."

"Yeah."

I sit up and rub my face. "I don't get it. I don't dream when I'm pissed."

"You okay?"

I sniff. I can still smell burning fuel. "No. But I will be." I stand up, put my clothes back on. "You go back to sleep."

"Don't be long."

"Just long enough to be okay, promise. I'll take it from here."

"You got this."

I make my way to the kitchen and get a bottle of water from the fridge and then go sit in one of the armchairs that faces the window. The dream came late then because the Wasatch are brighter, the sky paling. The sun is coming. My mouth is dry, my head sore. My skin cold now, and sticky. I sip the water and focus on where I am. I count the corners of the room. This is Jay and Ashley's place. We are in Utah. Nerys is here. The burning man was three years, four months and seventeen days ago. He is not here. It doesn't smell like burning petrol. There isn't a fire. That sounds is Clyde. Clyde is here. Clyde is Jay and Ashley's dog. He was Tom's dog. But Tom is dead. Tom is dead. Ah – there it is. There's the why. If you can trace back to a simple, true 'why', you can come back from the stress of the dream. The 'why' means its resolved; the stress cycle is complete. I am safe and it is over and it is not then it is now, here and now. Be in the happening now.

“Hey Frank,” Ashley calls out, softly. Her voice is flat.

“Hi,” I say. I get up. “Good morning.”

She is in her running gear. Clyde is looking up hopefully at her. “Jay beat you to bed then? First time for everything.” She takes a swallow of some water and stares hard at me. “I'm impressed.”

“I just woke up,” I say. “Couldn't sleep.”

“You guys have a good time last night?”

“Yeah. You?”

“Barely slept.”

“Sorry if we kept you up.”

“Are you?”

“Yes. Sorry. I didn't think we were that loud.”

“Well, drinking does that to you.” She slams the bottle back in the fridge and turns to face me and her eyes are ablaze, her face drained. “I know he tries, but you show up and he goes right back to where he was before he found Jesus and the church and me and you lead him wrong.”

“Me? Didn’t he used to do this stuff all the time?”

“Tom was different. Tom was a soldier. Jay needed a soldier, needs a soldier. Someone who’s been through it. He doesn’t need some drinking buddy without a real care in the world.” She is close now, pupils dilated, nostrils flared, flushed, shakey, her voice almost a hiss. I tense up. This is the part where a normally expect a fist. “So in this house,” she says, “my house in which you are a guest, you will take some responsibility. For once in your life Frank you will accept your influence over others.”

“The fuck does that mean?”

“And you do not use language like that in my house or you will leave right now.”

“I’m sorry.”

She stalks off and sits on the sofa and holds her head in her hands. I sit back in the armchair. “I’m sorry, Ashley.”

She sighs. Clyde pads over and rests his massive head on her leg. He looks at me reproachfully. “He’s hard work, Frank. You being here doesn’t make it easier. You’re making it impossible.”

“I don’t mean to.”

“I love him. I love him so much and I can’t tell what he really feels anymore. Or if he even feels anything. I don’t know if he has any faith left; I don’t know if he has any love left.”

“He still loves you. I don’t know about faith.”

She tucks her feet up under her. “I know why he joined the church,” she says. “I’m not blind. But love is the path to Jesus Christ and he loved me enough to join the church and that love will lead him to Jesus one day, I know it.”

I shift in my seat and she looks right at me. “How about you Frank?”

“I’m not interested.”

“Well Jesus loves you anyway.”

“Sure.” I sit back down and sip my water. “Your faith is yours. I don’t believe and I don’t want to talk about it. I don’t want to argue about God.” I take a breath. “We already did that.”

“No we didn’t. We never said it.”

“I lost that argument in every way that matters. Do we really need to say it now?”

She looks away again. “No. It’s in the past and it’s so long ago that I guess not. But it’s on my conscience, what we did.”

“That my fault too?”

“What we did was plain wrong. You don’t need God to tell you that.”

“It would’ve been a disaster.”

“We can’t get pregnant, you know. Probably because of that.”

I sit quiet. She blames me. She does. Still, after all this time and that makes two of us. “You sure?”

She shrugs. “Doctor says it can happen, can cause problems.”

“You think it’s punishment? Bloody hell Ash, you need to forgive yourself That’s not God’s job. That’s yours.”

She wipes a tear from her eye. “And you don’t have kids do you? You think that’s coincidence? Maybe —”

“No. I’m not going down that road. Not today and not ever.”

She looks over at me for a second and stops. It’s like her face changes, like she’s recognising me only in reverse. “You slept badly?”

“Yes.”

“Nightmare?”

I sip my water.

“First in a while.”

“No. First time I’ve had this one in a while though.”

“And you had it despite drinking.”

“Yes. So there you go. Proof indeed of the almighty benevolence of God. Even pissed I still get punched in my sleep. It doesn’t matter. I just don’t want to talk about it. But for what it’s worth, I’m sorry Ashley, for what we went through together and for how young we were not to be better to each other, for each other, while we did it.”

“Thank you,” she says. “I should take this one out.” She stands up and then turns back to me. “He doesn’t drink around me and I don’t ever get the impression he hides anything from me. But you being here,” she shrugs. “He’s twenty again and I don’t like it.”

“He went to war.”

“You think I don’t know that? He’s my husband, Frank. I know it. I work with veterans every day and I thank God every day of my life that my husband came home, that he came home in one piece, and that he hasn’t tried to strangle me in a nightmare, that he doesn’t own a gun and I haven’t come home to find his brains all over our walls. His faith is holding him together but it’s fragile. Don’t undermine it. You’re an enabler Frank and he is too tough to notice how dangerous being with you can be so I have to be strong for him. So I’m telling you now, if you let him wind that clock back to when you two were goofy kids

then he won't stop going down that road after you're gone and I'll have to pick it up." She sighs. "I'm going for a run. Just think about."

I sit in the chair for a long time after she's gone. I stare at the door to Jay's study. It's open, but I sense the still, thick air of the forbidden, the private, from beyond the door frame. I stare at the door and think of Ashley. I stare at the door and think of Jay. I finish my bottle of water and stare at the door. I think of Nerys and get to my feet and I almost make it past that open door and to our room and back to bed and on.

Jay's study is a small room. There isn't much in there – a desk and a filing cabinet, a computer with two monitors. One the wall are framed photographs, mostly of his unit during their deployment to Iraq. There are the obligatory War Photos – Tom showed us his once and called the War Photos and emphasised the words like they should be capitalised; sic photos of a group of young men in olive drab green, covered in all the ammo and weapons they could get their hands on and posng for the camera. Tom said a War Photo is what happens when GIs get bored, a product of too much time, too many weapons and two or more bored GIs; grab every weapon you can find, the bigger the better, take a photo and send it home for the girls. Ooh-rah.

Jay's War Photo is of he and some buddies posing on top of an armoured vehicle. They are huge with body armour and weapons, imposing, inhuman. It's hard to imagine Iraqi civilians easily opening their hearts and minds to such robotic, intimidating figures. But I guess by the time Jay was there, hearts and minds wasn't really a strategy anymore. The other photos are similar, but ther is one with 'Guardian Angels' scibbled across the bottom. It shows Jay, I think, sitting with another marine in front of the levelled remains of some building. But there is a tree, a huge tree, next to where he and his comrades are sitting. They look heavy, as if the branches cannot support the leaves for much longer. Stretching out in

front of them is the flat and dusty desert of Iraq, the dust smearing up, paling and fading into the blue of the sky. I wonder who Jay trusted with his camera to take this photograph.

Next is one of Tom and I, in the Utah desert. I recognise it from a trip we took just before I left. I stand in silhouette against the red rock, looking on as a storm front chases the sunlight across the mesa towards us. I remember that now. It was strangely warm. There is the inevitable cigarette in my mouth. Embarrassed by the affectation in ym younger self, I pick up the photograph and think about that road from long ago, the one Ashley doesn't want us to travel again. Maybe she's right; maybe Jay is holding onto that memory and it'll undo him again. I stare at my younger self in that photo. I'm looking out at the approaching storm. My silhouette looks shockingly thin. I have a few things I could tell that skinny, brash youth; a few warnings and a good slap. Tom's stocky figure sits on a rock, pointing something out but the camera appears to have caught him in the act of reaching towards the retreating sunlight. *Bury me here, boys.*

I look around. The room where the lives are kept. The Paper Room. We turned the smaller of our two bedrooms into an office when we moved in. We did it ourselves, together, slowly moving the furniture, the moving slowed even more by laughter: dirtying old clothes, clearing the powdery taste of disturbed dust from our throats with cold cans of beer; headaches from fresh paint. When everything was moved in we stood together, arms folded, elbows touching, surveying the new order in our lives. We lit a candle under a small bowl of lemon and green tea oil to mask the new paint smell, and then Nerys called it the Paper Room and the name stuck.

And now, this is how I think of these rooms: as made of paper, fragile and delicate. I never wear shoes in the Paper Room, always move in it like everything will tear at the slightest touch. We keep the entire paper record of our lives in here: passports, bank

statements, one marriage certificate, two wills. We store keepsakes in this room: ticket stubs, museum brochures and theatre programmes, two very special old boarding passes, one wedding photograph and one honeymoon photograph pinned to a small corkboard, and next to those is another image that we have turned around to face into the cork for now and we've not talked about how long it will be that way.

I wonder, did they decorate this room together too? I don't see much of Ashley in here at all, save a few photos lined up on one side of the desk like a shrine. These rooms and all the documents and paper that makes a life. Like the boxes of Tom's life in the garage. Maybe Nerys is right. Maybe the life really is in the paper and stories, and the body is just something that life borrows from the cosmos for a bit in order to make this little sad mark.

I hear a door opening and I turn and walk towards the bedroom. Nerys is still in bed and when I get in beside her she stirs and opens her eyes and says to me: "She really thinks you're a bit of a cunt, huh?"

I laugh. "You heard that?"

"She's not completely wrong."

"I know."

"But you're my cunt and I do love you."

"Love you too."

*

I am woken by Clyde jumping on me. I groan, pull the blanket over my head, half-heartedly attempt to push the dog away. The smell of the sheets, distilled overnight in my cocktail sweat, is almost enough to rouse me. Nerys is gone, the sheets on her side of the bed cool under my hand. I wonder what the time is. Jay laughs. "Rise and shine, Codfish. We got a long way to go today."

I drag myself to the bathroom and into the shower. When I get back to the room there's a bottle of cold water and two round pills sitting by the bulbless lamp. I swallow them and drain the glass before venturing into the kitchen. Jay is dresses, putting the last few items in a small rucksack. On the kitchen table are Clyde's leash, a ziplock bag of dired dog food and a few tins of dogmeat. Jay loads up. Bacon is frying in a pan. Nerys is sipping coffee at the breakfast bar. Ashley looks up from the pan and flashes me a smile without mirth. "How's that 'sanctimonious' Mormon rule on not drinking looking now?" she says.

"Better by the minute," I say.

"You heard us hon?" says Jay. Ashley looks away, looks at me.

Jay laughs. "How you feeling, cupcake?" His smile is white through his beard.

"Not bad, considering. What pills did I take?"

"Migraine meds. Salvation."

"Thanks."

Nerys looks at us and sips her coffee. She says something inaudible in Welsh.

"We running late?"

"Yep."

"Time for coffee before we pack?"

"Jay's already packed everything," says Nerys. "Speedy."

“Just gotta get us and the dog packed in there and we’re Oscar Mike.”

I study his face. He turns away, cinches the straps on the pack, and jams a leather sombrero onto his head. He whistles, but there are dark circles under his eyes. I wonder if he’s slept at all. If not, then he heard Ashley and me, like Nerys did.

“But first,” says Ashley,” Bacon and eggs and toast. Eat up.”

We eat and then shoulder our packs and head to the jeep. Before we get in I offer to drive.

“Doubt you’re sober enough yet.”

I nod agreement and Jay laughs. “You can take over later, on the road.” He calls for Clyde. The big dog is sniffing around in the bushes outside, tail high, eyes bright, nose wet; he knows he is going with us, he knows maybe the smell of the gear and the sight of the bags what kind of trip it will be. We load him into the back of the jeep and Nerys and I sit in the back. We set off in silence and eventually I say: “I drank too much.”

“Yeah, it’s al good.”

“Thanks,” I say, and turn my gaze out of the window as we drive on through the city. I look up towards the clear hard sides of the peaks, at that definite plunging dark rock beneath the snow caps, and picture again the void, the fall. Oblivion. I focus instead on the city we’re leaving.

Salt Lake City in the early morning and it could be anywhere. They tell you that in the tourist guides and the local development videos. Salt Lake City could be anywhere. It’s cheap for Hollywood to film here, and the city doesn’t need much dressing to become New York or LA. Street corners and building facades that can stand in for almost any city in the United States and that’s Salt Lake City. It’s both coasts and the middle, a pioneer grid, watched over the the most American Christianity there is; a uniquely American brand of Christianity, born

and reaised in the United States, taking old stories and spinning them anew, promising even in the afterlife success and upward social mobility for the faithful and hardworking. There, with gleaming white spires, is the Temple. This is Zion.

Salt Lake City in the early morning and it could be anywhere. I've missed this place, and the memories that sit ill-formed in restaurants and bookshops that aren't the same size or in the same place they were when I left. I've missed it, but it's time to go. Utah is a bit state beyond this city, one and a half times bigger than the whole of England, with less than half the population of London alone. That great expanse calls now; a high call, one that should never be ignored. Tom knew it, and once upon a time he tried to show it to two kids more interested in how many people he had killed and his generosity with his scotch than in what he was trying to show us, to tell us. Mitchell knows it, and I think that maybe now – maybe now – we know it too. Or we may have the beginnings of a good idea of it. We'll see it. We'll head out with everything we now have on our backs and in the stillness of the desert, in the contained world of one not so special and yet so sacred canyon, we'll look for what Tom saw. We'll enjoy it for a while. Then we'll leave, full, better, having missed almost everything the canyon has to show but still somehow elevated, transcendent. Thoreau quested for truth and so do we, though our definitions vary greatly. The summation of the desert into one great truth is impossible. There is the hard truth of the rock; the patient truth of the slow-growing, hardy plants; the dry truth of the water or lack of it; the hidden fragile truth of the living things making their home there. The invasive truth of the highways. The all-pervasive truth that Death kicks sand over your footprints in the desert; and then there is the people truth, the perspective truth – flawed but honest, and it's the only truth we'll ever really understand, we four philosopher and the story-truths of an old dead friend.

The sun burns over the peaks surrounding this Zion-under-smog, and there it is, the pulling in the gut, the first punch of something inside that burns to run, to get away; to find safety in the harshest places. This feeling says enough to thoughts of why and how and tells us simply to do, simply to go, to be there and figure out the why of it later.

I wonder if this crossed Tom's mind when he willingly stepped onto the bus that took him eventually to Vietnam. Perhaps this is why the desert held such a special place in his soul; that feeling of having to go, of having to bear witness to something so much bigger than himself. Maybe this is a universal truth, but I doubt it: maybe there are just a few rockheads who follow it once and need it forever after. Either way, says the punch in the gut, you're going – whether sanity likes it or not.

Part III
Scattering Thomas Taylor

Do not jump into your automobile next June and rush out to the Canyon country hoping to see some of that which I have attempted to evoke in these pages. In the first place, you can't see anything from a car; you've got to get out of the goddamned contraption and walk, better yet to crawl, on hands and knees, over the sandstone and through the thornbrush and cactus. When traces of blood begin to mark your trail you'll see something, maybe. Probably not. In the second place, most of what I write about in this book is already gone or going under fast. This is not a travel guide but an elegy. A memorial. You're holding a tombstone in your hands. A bloody rock. Don't drop it on your foot – throw it at something big and glassy. What do you have to lose? – Edward Abbey

*

There's something wrong in all I've been telling you. Something missing. What do you think of Tom, now? Because he did say those things, that he wasn't done killing yet; and he did refer to women as 'scooters' and I'm pretty sure he had no problem with paying them to 'sit on his face' when the mood took him.

When we tell a story about a person – especially someone who the public would call a hero, if not in his time then absolutely in ours – then we have to tell the whole story, and we so rarely, rarely do. Think about the misty-eyed conversations over the World War One centenary not so long ago, or the constant referral back to the so-called 'Greatest Generation' who fought in World War Two. Think about the solemn pride taken in large body counts. This isn't anything new – every culture seems to do it – and then picture this, because it's true: two friends meet up after a time apart, one British, one American. The American is visiting the UK for the first time. The Brit takes their friend around the tourist attractions, shows them what there is to see. They go to the country – small village somewhere, doesn't matter where, there's a place in every British village for this true story to take place – and they walk through the village and they go for a pint. Outside the window of the pub, there's a memorial just across the street, at a point where three lanes intersect. It's a simple standing stone cross, not unlike the more weathered stone crosses marking ancient pilgrim ways. This one has faded poppy-wreaths beneath it. What's that? The American might ask, though it's just as likely, maybe more likely, that the Brit will point it out first and know what that is? Either way they'll finish their pint and have another one and at some point the Brit will talk about the body count of World War One and the Brit will get solemn, even if just for a split second, because there's a lot of pride in national struggle and suffering and mourning. It comes I guess from a good place of remembrance, even an intangible sense of gratitude, but it

so quickly spins bad and undoes the purpose of remembrance. We stop remembering and start imagining, and that inspires the misty-eyes and awe and overshadows the lessons such slaughter rams home to the slaughtered generation. That pride doesn't tell the whole story.

You can't tell a whole story, not really. You can try to balance what you've already said, though. So to do that, I'll tell you something else, something that'll only make it worse: Tom was at his most unbearable walking past a group of Asian students on campus. He had to say something. Always, he had to say something, whether it was a subconscious trigger or he was consciously trying to get a rise out of us. I don't know – I didn't listen to him when he said things like this. I'd hear it but I didn't want him to be that kind of person, so I wouldn't hear it.

If we walked past Asian men he would say something like he had seen who those people truly were and that they were evil little people; and in the same breath could nod towards the retreating back of an Asian girl and say "That's my poison man," and if you weren't right there with him in agreement he'd look at you and say "What? You got a racist dick or something?"

But this is all you know of him, right? This is all I've said and it's easy to tell these stories because you're used to the veteran being this man; you're used to the image of the fighting man who comes home from Vietnam and talks this way and says these things *because* of what happened to him in Vietnam. We don't really talk about what he *chose* to do in Vietnam; how maybe some of what he carried back with him was put in his pack by his own self.

He had a hooch maid – apparently a lot of guys who spent a lot of time on bases did – called Suong. Suong came running from one of the massacres – I don't know who did the massacring – and arrived at the firebase carrying a dead baby. Tom said it took two days to

convince her to put the baby down. They buried it. Then Tom let her live in his hooch. She was safe behind the wire, had food, and in return like most hooch maids she'd "keep my house and sit on my face." Tom used to say he'd learned everything about sex in Vietnam in a way he never did in the states, like it was natural there and in the US people (and he meant here, women) saw it as a gift to be bestowed. When he left Vietnam, he was worried about what would happen to Suong. He convinced a guy with a long time left to take her on. He gave him Suong and a case of beer. He felt guilty about not knowing what happened to her; I don't know if bartering her made him feel anything at all.

There's another side, of course, and you know it – another sketch of the veteran you're familiar with, where Tom is sitting at a table with you, cigarette in hand, beer in front of you, a storm outside beating against the windows and he seems a bit smaller in his coat, shrinking inside it and with wet eyes he'll tell you about his buddy killed in an air assault Christmas Eve 1970; about how they came and cleared his buddy's stuff out of the hooch they shared and nobody said a word but they gave him a pack of cigarettes. Or the stories where he was nearly killed – more than once, it was war and what do you think happens in a war? – for his country, how he killed for his country. Stories of noble sacrifice. Actually, Tom never told many of those because he didn't put up with bullshit. But he did have stories about getting home. He would talk of this one scooter he met in a bar took him home that night and they were getting all hot and she saw this red scar on his leg and asked him about it. When he said "I took some shrapnel in Vietnam" she threw him out, there and then. He dressed in the streets as he walked home. He said it was a cold night.

But let me tell you this about him too, because we think of sorts of things like this when we hear veteran: Tom wouldn't be climbing any clock towers, or if he did it would be with nothing more threatening than a pair of binoculars and a joint or two. Peeping Tom: he

was a keen birdwatcher. He belonged to some local societies but I forget which ones. I can remember some of the birds from our trips to the desert – turkey vultures, red tailed hawks – but he knew them all, and pointed them out to me. Our meanderings down canyons were often dictated by the sudden flight of some little grey bird he hadn't identified and wanted to see in. I followed, but only because he led, not because of where he led to. I was younger then, and it was his war stories interested me, not his later-life hobbies. He never owned a firearm the whole time I knew him. Jay liked guns back then, but Tom never went shooting with him in the desert as far as I remember. Tom said he'd done enough of that.

Tom was an actor, of a kind. He liked Shakespear, particularly monologues, because monologues are stories and when you deliver a monologue the dime is always on your side.

But this is why I now recall this misrepresentation in my story, the gaps in the fabric – think of the bullet holes in Tom's poncho that sits now, mildewing; a sad though – that have given me to paint Tom in the style of the traditionalists. We're passing a turn off to a high plateau from where you can sit and watch birds and mountains and the city being busy, unobtrusively off in the distance. Tom and I drove here when we shared a cigarette outside Mitchell's class and he told us to interview each other. On the drive we talked. We talked about who we read – we were both Vonnegut fans – and he first mentioned Abbey and Thoreau to me long before Mitchell assigned them in class. We both read Hemingway and were big fans of his detail, the minutiae of prose; we disagreed on McCarthy's sketching of a character through actions because Tom preferred dialogue and the third eye, the examining narrator, the god-writer with the supreme knowledge of the character, showing them to us inside and out with every tool available to the Divine Bard. We were two white men arguing over who was the greatest Dead White Man. He asked me what poets I read. I said I didn't

read poetry and he hammered the brakes on, hard, and pulled the car over and said “What the fuck, Codfish, you don’t read poetry?”

This was the first time I’d ever been called a Codfish, and the first time I’d ever been in a car that was pulled to an emergency stop solely for dramatic effect. “It just doesn’t move me,” I said. “Too clever for its own good, like it doesn’t want anyone to enjoy it. Poetry wants to be admired, it doesn’t want to please.”

He looked at me for a second, mouth slightly open, brown furrowed. “Well,” he said, “that’s one of the stupidest things I’ve ever heard. And I was in Vietnam, so how you managed to get on that list is idiocy of a titanic magnitude. Everything, and I mean everything, you know is wrong.”

“Okay, well, I guess I’ll give poetry another go.”

“Yes you will. Fucking new.”

*

Park City fades behind us and we continue down I15. Clyde is snoring loudly in the back. I can feel the dull roar of the road through the frame and with cool air circulating around us, laced with the smell of fresh coffee, the jeep is a comfortable place to be. The mountains still loom but they are some way off and there is flat land between us and the peaks and I get a sense of how small this jeep is in the land, and we in it, and the feeling rushes into me as we skim along the surface of the earth how vast these distances are in every direction and how short and slow our dash across this space is and it's like we're not moving but the earth spins beneath us and we motionless on it as it spins in the heavens and all thoughts and worries lesson until I think truly of the coldness dark around us and perhaps then all our thoughts and worries are it and they increase in value and intensity precisely for their unique, alien loneliness in existence.

We hurtle along the highway at the safest and sanest of speeds. The snores from the back get louder. Jay glances in the mirror. "He is really out," he says.

"Maybe it wasn't just me who had a rough night," says Nerys. Ashley turns her head away out f the side window and says nothing. The sound of the road is lulling me to sleep too.

Jay takes a long pull of his coffee and tosses the empty paper cup out of the window. He flicks with his phone, cycling through music, presses play. The thunder of drums shakes the jeep and Clyde opens one wear eye and Jay laughs. "No sleeping on the road, Codfish." A gruff imitation of Tom.

When Tom took us to the desert and to his canyon for the first time, I was driving and Jay fell asleep in the back seat not long after we'd left Park City. Tom had turned around and sprayed water from a bottle over him, shouting "You can't fall asleep on the road, Codfish!"

and then he'd let Jay sleep some more. As far as I remember, Jay had been on exercise with his unit and hadn't slept more than twenty minutes together for three days. We'd stayed up most of the night before too, of course: Hey man, we're headed off to the middle of butt-fuck nowhere with booze, drugs, and a crazy—ass Vietnam vet! You may never see us again! Come one, come all, and roll up! Roll up! Roll up! Everybody came.

Tom had brought a bottle of spiced rum and two of ginger beer and some limes and we stole ice from the bags stored in the dorm room's en suite shower and we spent the whole party in the corner making and drinking Dark and Stormies. Tom was liberal with meares and would finish half his drink and add more ice and more rum but not more ginger beer. "I'm an alcoholic," he had said, fixing me with a bloodshot stare and smiling. "But that's okay," he said. We laughed but I don't think we got the joke. We watched the other kids drinking and flirting.

"Christ, look at the," I said.

"Who?" said Tom.

"Everybody." I stood straight up, arms crossed. I leant my head closer to Tom's so I could speak without being overheard; so only we three could share this ivory tower and played the closed elite who were more than those around us because of our refusal to participate – our own illusion in the corner of the room. "I can't breathe for perfume. And look at that twat. He's got his shirt off."

"He works out," said Jay. "He wants them all to know it. Give him time, he'll lose his pants soon."

"There's nobody in this room who deserves to get laid tonight."

Tom leant closer to me. "What the fuck are we doing here? There is not one scooter here who'll sit on my face. Even for money."

That might not be what Tom said but he said it so often and this seems like the right memory, the right place for him to have said it then so I believe he did or must have said something like it. I do know we asked him: “What do you want to do?”

“Got any smoking dope?”

“Yeah.”

I went to get it from my room and left Tom and Jay guarding the room corner and passing the bottle between them. When I got back the room had gone pretty quiet and I remember wondering if the Ras had busted up our party like they usually did. But I heard Tom, loud and clear as I pushed open the door: “I already killed twenty-eight people. T was my turn! You kids too pussy to fight your own war? Fuck it, send us old fuck-ups back in. I ain’t done killing yet.” It was the tall shirtless kid he’d said this too, had provoked this outburst from him. He listened politely, and was quiet, and somebody laughed suddenly, and the buzz of the room picked up again and she turned away.

I thought about this as I drove the bickering, laughing pair of Tom and Jay out to the desert the next day. I remember thinking, this must be the home-front legacy of Vietnam now: troops are heroes no matter what they do. They can never be spat on again, or criticised – as if the two are remotely the same thing. Anti-war, pro-soldier. Pay lip service to each political stance and then get on with the party.

Tom had let Jay sleep some more after throwing water over him. It was so bright I was squinting through my sunglasses. I asked him if he really meant what he had said the night before, about not being done killing.

He looked straight ahead and said: “I say that? Guess I did. Look, he was dumb. Most kids are. We all are when we’re kids. You guys are dumb. I was fucking dumb. But that kind of mom-and-dad bread liberalism breeds uninterested liberals, liberal in name only. They’re

liberal ‘cause their parents are, and the right-wing are right-wing ‘cause their parents are: inherited politics like they inherited good cheek bones or heart disease. And everyone digs in with what they were told to think instead of thinking for themselves, and nothing gets solved and the gap just gets wider and wider. So you end up with Boy George starting a war in Iraq for no goddamn reason, and instead of doing the decent thing and fucking stopping the toddlers we’ve got holding the wheel, the left get all scared about a bit of name-calling, change their name from liberal to progressive, and go right back to eating each other for being the wrong shade of progressive. What the fuck?”

I pointed out to him that it was a pretty heavy way to prove a point, saying he would still kill, but he said: “It’s half-true anyway.”

“Serious?”

“I was good there, you know?” Haven’t been great at too much since. But I can still patch up broken people. Job I was best at when I got back was out here in S&R. But it’s a lot easier to fuck somebody up than it is to put them together again. Humpty-dumpty, right?”

We drove on for a bit and as the jeep ate up blacktop I thought about that. I couldn’t imagine then – there it is. That’s the problem. I still can’t imagine what it is I couldn’t imagine then. I’ve tried patching people up in the years between, and I’ve seen them get fucked up in seconds and sometimes we could put them back together again and sometimes all the Queen’s coppers and all the Queen’s doctors couldn’t put them back together again. But to be on both sides of that, I still can’t imagine. Everything I do have, from films, books, TV, even oral accounts from people who do know, who don’t have to imagine, I know to be wrong. Wrong in how I received it, processed it. I can understand what they’re saying to me, but not the true meaning of what they’re saying. So after a while I said to him: “That’s pretty fucked up,” without really knowing what I was saying.

And Tom, he rightly said: “No shit, Codfish.”

*

“Where were you stationed mostly?”

“Roundabouts Falluja.”

I watch the flat scrub of the desert fly past, the gleaming traffic and bright colours of the big rig trailers roaring past, jarring with the low-key shades of the roadside. Massive rumbling trucks letting me know unmistakably that this is American, and don't you forget it.

“So why did you join the Army then,” asks Nerys.

“Marines,” says Jay.

“Right. Then why did you join the Marines then?”

“Same reasons anyone does I guess,” says Jay, pushing the brim of his hat higher up his forehead and smiling. “Guns, girls, and college tuition.”

Nerys laughs. “Sounds like good enough reasons to me.”

“Two for three ain't bad.”

“What was Falluja like?” I ask.

“Hot.”

I watch Jay, in the mirrors from where I'm sitting, what I can see of his face. There's a stoic reserve about him. Missing is the bluster that would engulf him and carry him off on some prank, or some adventure; that carried him off to war. There's an edge now. I shake my head, look out the window, tuning out the conversation and watching the world through glass instead. If Jay won't talk then fine. I'll talk to him about anything else, about the desert, about Tom, about the writers who came here and whose souls never left; of Abbey and Peacock, of Ward, of Terry Tempest Williams. And we'll talk of beyond the desert, if there is anything: of Muir and Ehrlich, of Proulx, Strayed, McCarthy, Dodge, Krakauer, whomever. Of me. Of him. Of Tom. Of fact and fiction that blurs when humans come out here, and hot to separate

them again maybe. Anything but his war so we can talk about his war without mentioning it. And above all we'll read Tom's stories out loud to Jay or to nobody in the canyon and leave them there in the most fitting memorial I can think of.

*

I watch the needle creep a little further up the speedometer, inching towards eighty. I lean forward in my seat some, holding my hat between my knees. Smears of sweat from my fingertips leave darker patches on the brim where I clutch it.

“You get driver training in the Marines?”

“That’s right,” says Jay. “I know every dimension, vibration, and fool notion of this jeep, and I know how to drive in a hurry. And under fire.” He rolls down his window and lets the thunder of rushing wind drown his words. “I’m a pro,” he roars. “I’ll always have work.” He flashes a grin, holds one hand out into the slipstream just above his wing mirror, slowly rubs his fingertips together. He switches hands on the wheel, repeats the operation with the other hand.

“Everyone who speeds is a good driver,” says Nerys, “until they’re not.”

Ahsley turns around. “Jay’s very good,” she says. “And trained.”

Nerys snorts. “So am I but speed limits exist for a reason.”

Jay glances at her in the mirror. “You think I’m safer at 55 than at 65?”

“I think you’re safer not getting pulled over than you are at 80.”

“Nah, this thing can’t do 80. It can climb that mountain over there, but it can’t do 80.”

The jeep increases speed. The fixings start to rattle. Nerys plucks at my sleeve. I look at her and she’s shaking her head. We can see the speedometer. We’re getting over 90. The jeep is shaking now in its own slipstream. Jay’s hands make more corrections with the wheel. The road, the shaking, is louder now. Jay is looking back at Nerys in the mirror, glancing now only occasionally at the road. Nerys stares right back at him but she and I have both shifted a little, near bracing in our seats. Jay suddenly smiles and some of the speed falls away. Nerys rolls her eyes.

“You know what we should do?” Ashley calls. “We should pull over and take the roof down.”

“Won’t that mess up the a/c?”

“That is the a/c.”

“Well then. Why the hell not?”

We eat up miles and miles of road, the traffic now very light, until we come to a dirt track turn-off out into a flat plain and Jay pulls over, drives along a spell away from the road and kills the engine. “Piss stop time, Cly-bo,” he calls and the dog, panting in the back, sits up. The air outside is hot dust and sagebrush and fumes like hot metal or blood. Nerys sniffs the air and I feel her hand on my arm and I nod to her. “I got this,” I say, quietly.

“You got this,” she says, and then “Mae’n beryglus.”

“Nid oedd hynny’n dda.”

“Dylai un ohonom yrru.”

“Ei gar ydyw.”

“Fuck that.”

“What are you two fucking murmuring about now?”

“Nerys,” Ashley says, “help me get this covering down. These two can take the dog for a walk.”

Nerys stalks off towards the jeep, muttering curse after curse under her breath and then smiling sweetly: “Sure thing, Ash!”

I follow Jay and Clyde off into the brush. “Watch out for snakes,” I call after them. Jay waves a hand over his shoulder in casual acknowledgement. I stand straight and stretch and take a deep breath and opening my chest and pushing my shoulders back I try to open my every pore to the moment, the immediacy of being out here. The desert is still. Scrubby

stumps of blackbrush, ragweed, snakeweed – and I think that Tom would’ve named them all but I can only guess at their names, but no matter: there they are, whether someone is around to name them or not. Tough, sharp, entrenched, stubborn life, stretching away; rising and falling with the undulations of the land, rolling away towards the hazy, dark, spectral presence of cloud-crowned mountains looming thunderblack in the distance. Above, wispy crosses of fading vapour trails stretched thin like childhood memories break the azure sky; the sun having eased off some of its vehemence of high summer is nevertheless brilliant white and close, baking hard everything below it.

“Piss time,” says Jay. “Rehydrate, dehydrate, and rehydrate. The rhythm of the day.” He undoes his fly and releases a stream onto the sand. I turn away slightly and piss too. We stood in a spot like this one once but many miles away with Tom. I look back the way we have come, looking north towards home, and I remember Tom’s sermon and focus on the words that are snatched away quick by time and interfering memory and these words are not quite his words but they make me feel like his words did then. “These roads stretch all across this land,” he had said, maybe. “Trucks, tourists, missionaries, holiday-makers, heartbreakers, mischief makers, Abbey-fakers. And they’re all poisoning it.” He looked at us. “breathe deep, and you’ll see. The powerful, intoxicating smell of all-conquering progress. Big rigs criss-crossing the nation, pacifying the land, conquering the wild places with pre-packed deliveries of safe meat stamped with a sell-by-date; of beer; of frozen apple pie just like mamma used to microwave. That war is over, and we won. We won! We beat the hippies, the anarchists, the nay-saying environmentalists and their sabot-antidote for that virulent disease called progress. We won.” He stood rocked back a little on his feet, arms open and hands held out low in front of him. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other with the rhythm of his talk like a firebrand preacher on a soapbox, or a boxer facing up to his own shadow. “We

won! You hear that? You hear that you inhospitable, sun-baked, needle-nosed worthless arid scrubby son-of-a-bitch? Our building projects and highways and dams, our logging and strip-mining and fracking and cattle-farming and nuclear testing – all of it beat you! We kicked your whiny sandy ass with the booted feet of hundreds of thousands of honest-to-God American jobs, and we kicked it but good!” He looked back at us then. “And for what?” He rested a hand on my shoulder then, shaking so slightly as to be only a whisper of movement, felt not seen. “Frank, we should’ve just let them win. Why fight? They were right, in their way. All of this? It’s not going away. Shrinking maybe, but not tamed. Never tamed.” He straightened up, nodded.

“You okay Frank?” says Jay, walking back, Clyde trotting some distance behind him.

“Yeah, why?” I ask.

“Only you’ve been stood there for five minutes with your dick out, and I love you man but if you want to jack it let me get outta the way first.”

I laugh. “Was just thinking about Tom. You remember his sermons?”

Jay smiles. “We won?”

“Yeah. It’ll come back, he was always saying. We’ll shrink, in the end. The desert will always reclaim the road.”

“Places in Iraq you can barely see the road sometimes. Sand shifts so fast, road never had a chance. Desert won there and it never was muh of a fight. Clear it up one place, it’s back somewhere else, like you were never there.” Jy stops next to me, turns to watch Clyde sniff our a bush. “Some speech. Think you had enough to drink last night to start spouting Tom’s wisdom?”

I laugh. “Not last night, and maybe never again.”

“Let’s go, the girls’ll have had their piss-break by now.”

We turn to head off and Clyde barks at a bush. "He alright?"

Jay calls to him. The big retriever trots towards us a bit, stops, and turns back to the bush. He barks once more. Jay calls again but the dog ignores him.

"What's he found?"

"Don't know. Don't really wanna find out neither. You?"

"Scared of snakes?"

"Just a smart boy," he says. "Besides, the anti-venom vaccine for your dog is like way above our budget, so here's hoping Clyde finds nothing here." Jay calls for him again and this time Clyde comes bounding back to us and we walk back to the jeep. Nerys and Ashley have taken down the canvas roof and stowed it in the back and are leaning against the hood of the jeep, eating salt crackers, raisins and beef jerky. "Lunch time boys," says Ashley as we approach. Clyde goes to sit hopefully next to her and she slips him some jerky. Jay piles cheese and jerky onto a cracker and puts the whole thing in his mouth, opens a bottle of water and washes it down, then pours the water out in a slow stream for Clyde to lap at.

Nerys hands me a bottle of water. "Ni fydd hi' piss o'i flaen."

"Mae'r rhamant yn fyw ac yn iach."

"Rhyfedd os gofynnwch imi."

I laugh. "Love you."

"Love you too."

Jay looks at us. He shakes his head. "Tan grosero de tu parte."

Ashley smiles. "Nosotros somos mejores que eso."

"¿Tenemos que serlo?"

"Si."

“So cute,” says Nerys. “We don’t actually have to talk to each other at then.” She laughs. “But I’m fucking driving now.”

Jay laughs. “Sure thing.” He tosses her the keys and Jay and Ash climb into the back. Clyde bounds into the back seat with them and motions him to come sit in the passenger footwell by me. “You gotta hang on to him now Frank,” says Jay. “He’s a crazy old bastard same as you.”

“Tom was the crazy old bastard. I’m the boring old bastard.”

“Well, you’re the only old bastard we got now, so you’ve been promoted. From now on, you’re crazy too.”

I laugh and drain my bottle of water and make to toss it but stop myself – leave only footprints – and crush it and get back in the jeep, spreading my knee so Clyde has some room, and close the door. I drop the crushed bottle into a trash bag Ashley has tucked into the passenger side door. The dog stretches out, laying his massive head on my lap. “I’ll not let him jump,” I say, looking down and fondling Clyde’s ear. “If he promises to keep me from doing the same. We’re a team, me and rose breath over here.”

“Clyde’s too smart to be a volunteer,” says Nerys, reaching over and scratching his ears. Clyde looks over at her adoringly. “Mind you don’t lose your hat,” she says and starts the engine, adjusting the seat and wheel. A hand taps me on the shoulder, and Ashley hands me a big red handkerchief. I laugh, and loop it over my hat, knotting it under my chin.

“Yeehaw,” I say.

“You look like Susan Sarandon,” says Ashley, and Nerys laughs.

Okay,” says Jay, and turns the music up and we return again to the road.

*

On we drive. I could watch this country for hours. The brush lonely and scraggly, carpeting much of the land either side of the highway and on and the blurring shapes as the jeep speeds by and the hot wind blasting around us and it's a true desert wind that searches hungrily for moisture. It plucks at the water in your eyes and blurs vision just to block colours. The stereo is loud and I can just make out Tom's music, Los Tigros del Norte, fighting with the rush of wind through the open jeep. Snatches of Spanish hurled between us and lost behind bring phrases to our heads, as the bushes we try and f to focus on take shapes not wholly their own in the tricky hot light. Here the bare branch of a juniper might sn at our thoughts; to one of us it may be an outstretched arm, pleading; to another it may be a waving friend, but where one sees a greeting another will see a farewell. Dark narrow holes just visible where the land ripples up might give some an idea to shoot, to others including me they conjure coiled scales in the ark – horned eyes, flat spade heads, diamonds, cruel tongues and patient waiting venom.

Nobody speaks. Nobody could make themselves heard. Nobody has any words now anyway. A fine dust collects in our clothes, collars, hair and ear Soon, we've all tied bandanas over our faces to keep our mouths and noses clean. Sunglasses take care of our eyes. The hot sun draws out our sweat and the hard rushing air chills it and takes it away and we become cold and dry. We shift in our seats, discomforted.

The day wears on, the sun passes noon-high and rolls down again, and we pull into a gas station and pull up by pump and stop. In front of us, a large family spills onto the forecourt from a grey people mover. The station tarmac is hot and the smell rises up to us oppressive and chemical, the out-of-place and cheerless smells of 24-hour retail. Chevron. But even the chain companies can't always keep up with their stations, and a fould wind

some time past has ripped through the sign so it reads –vron. An old rusted car without wheels is vile behind the station itself, the abandoned machine now home to desert life.

I stare at the wreck and imagine the alien horrors that might wait for any soul foolish enough to clamber inside, and enjoy making my own skin crawl at the thought of hard exoskeletal scratches on old plastic interiors.

Then the kid shuffles into view. His gait is uneven, like there's a problem with his hip, and the sick light of the forecourt floods his face showing a swollen jaw, and broken teeth protruding at odd angles over a thick, fleshy lower lip. One eyelid is drawn down some like paper-thin scar-tissue over his left eye and there are patches on his scalp where hair has never grown or may never grown again. I feel the instinct rise from slumber again and I look over the quickly retreating backs of his family as they troop into the gas station. I catch Nerys' eye and we look at each other and I know she's thinking the same thing. Where are the parents? Do they know their child is wandering off? Do they care? Is the family known to police and do I need to know why? I almost reach for my radio and my mind has formed the first transmission back to controll before I remember where I am and shrug at the old habit. Nerys is still looking at me and smiles, pointing out where we've unconsciously positioned ourselves, between the kid and the jeep, her slightly advanced and to my side where I can cover her and she can approach. I give her a hug. "You got this," I say.

"I got this."

The kid approaches us.

Jay gets out from the back and says "That is one ugly-assed kid."

"Easy mate, they might hear us."

"Look at those teeth Frank. Those are some British teeth right there."

"Seriously mate, shut it. "

The kid moves a little closer and the last shadows fall away from his visage and Jay stops laughing. The kid – the child – stands two feet from the jeep. He screws his eyes up tight shut, like it hurts to look at us, or that the light what there is of it left in the day or the lights under the awning are too bright. He emits a low groan. “You morons can’t park in front of our van,” he says and his voice is like gravel. Nerys starts and I touch her shoulder.

“it’s alright mate,” I say. “We’re behind it. Your parents can still get it out. See?” I point.

The kid rolls his eyes. Fists clenched, he flares the lon narrow nostrils on his twisted bulb of a nose. He opens his mouth to speak and wheezes, goggling like a gaping fish. His parents call after him, call him away and he shuffles back to join them and his siblings, filing into the gas station. “And you call me Codfish,” I say to Jay when the kid is far enough away and immediately regret it. Voices drift across the forecourt, drawling voices, pure Southwest. Waiting for the kid by the door of the gas station, holding it half-open like it’s heavy and effort is too much, is the child’s mother. She looks tired but everyone does under that kind of light, and the shadows beyond the forecourt are chasing each other across the ground and up walls and I’m not sure I trust everything I see.

“That was weird,” says Jay.

“He looks like he’s been beat up everyday of his life.”

“Probably from doing stuff like that. Mutants. Seriously. Radioactive mutants. Fucking Utah man.”

“Now who’s living in a movie? If I was back home in the Job we’d have been sent to see that kid so often he’d know us by name.”

We enter the gas station. The kid is shuffling around the store, picking things up from shelves. His mother follows him around but she doesn’t pay much attention, not really. The

kid picks up a small sack of flour and throws it at her back but whatever ails him has robbed the strength there too. The bag of flour falls short, leaving only a small white dusting on the floor where it skids a few inches. The kid's mother doesn't even turn around. I avoid the aisles they are in; Jay finds something he needs on every shelf the child and his mother are standing at.

We pick up more jerky and bottled water and cans of chilli beef and some eggs and a packet of bacon for the morning. Jay adds some tomatoes and green chillies to the mix. We each carry a crate of beer and stand in line. In front of us is a man switching credit cards. "Try this," he says.

"No good," says the cashier."

"Well maybe this one," and this elaborate little dance he does, whereby he keeps the two or three items he is trying to buy crooked in his left elbow, held fast against his side; the left hand holds the wallet open, and he moves his hips from side to side to keep one item or another slipping from his grasp as he fumbles for another credit card, and another, and another. "One of these works, I'm sure," he says with an uneasy laugh. "Just never do get rid of the old ones."

The cashier stands patiently, eyes on the man's wallet and nowhere else. "It happens sometimes."

"Gas is just so expensive. Try this one. I'm sure there's enough on this one."

"Gas costs what it costs sir." The cashier tries the card. "No good I'm afraid sir."

"Well okay. It's them Arabs you know, keep everything under lock and key. And that ape in Washington don't do nothing about it. Not like we don't got oil of our own. We oughta have brought them Christ and taken their oil at the same time. Try this one."

"There you go sir, that'll do fine. Thank you and have a nice day."

“Thanks darlin, you have a good day now.”

The man leaves and we put our groceries on the counter. I can hear the kid and his mother behind us. She is speaking softly. It doesn't sound pleasant. I ask for a few cigars and a bottle of Clan MacGregor. The cashier bends to get them and behind us the kid throws himself to the floor and starts shaking, rigid like. The cashier straighten up and sees him and says “Oh my God, call 911. Call 911.” The mother leans over and looks down at her spasming child and says “Don't bother, he's fine.”

I don't know where she came from but Nerys is at the child's side before I even have time to drop the groceries and reach him.

“You alright mate, I'm Nerys, I'm here to help,” she says.

“Get off him! Leave him be I said, he's fakin' it.”

Nerys is doing her primary survey and I'm looking at her, waiting for instructions. I do a secondary survey, checking for any injuries. The kid seems to be all bends and lumps in the wrong places.

“Get your fucking hands off him,” shouts a male voice.

“That kid's about to bite his fucking tongue off, and my buddies here are cops so back the fuck up and let them help.” It's like Jay's voice is somewhere else. That's someone else's job. Concentrate on the casualty. The spittle froths at the kid's mouth and Nerys says “Gloves. Get me gloves.”

The cashier runs over with a bunch of thin plastic gloves for picking fruit out of a basket but Nerys ignores them. “Hands off,” she says and I step back. We clear space around the kid's head. Nerys takes a jumper from around her waist and bunches it in the small gap between the kid's head and the metal of the aisle.

A pause. Everything hangs around us, that small moment of actions about to be taken, decisions al bad not yet resolved to be made; a fraction of time as the synapses fire and options are weighed and assessed and emotions bubble and rise and heat blood. The low hum of the air as people try to get on with their business and pay attention to the unfolding dramatic scene without giving themselves away. And then the kid stops shaking and just lies on the floor, breathing hard like is lungs are eighty-five, rasping. And then he gets up, just like that.

Nerys looks at me and I look back at her and the voices around us come back. My ears prick up. It's been a while but some instincts don't go away and when you've done it enough you can hear a fight before it begins. You can tell from tone if a punch will be thrown. I hear myself: "Let's just go, the kid's okay. No harm done. Let's get going now Jay."

"You know that kid looks like he's been beat up every day of his life. You said it yourself. Maybe short-fuse here knows something about that."

"I ain't never hit my kid. My boy's sick is all, he ain't been harmed."

Jay now stands square facing the man and if he feels my hand on his elbow he doesn't let it show. He leans closer in to the man who leans a little closer back. Fingers twitch on hands held low by their sides. They draw themselves up. Eyes move rapidly as adrenaline courses in. "Prove it."

Here's another trick. You want to stop men fighting? Send a female officer. Nerys slips past me and I turn to the counter to pay for the groceries. I can hear her speaking, quietly, pleasantly – bright and breezy. Jay turns and looks at me and I nod. He storms out. I grab up the remaining case of beer and supplies and Nerys carries what I can't. I pass close to the dad, trying not to knock into him, and he says "Your buddy drunk or crazy or what?"

“He’s not drunk,” I say. “He’s got a bit of a temper these days. He’s tired.” I decide to try it. “Got back from Iraq not long ago.”

The man shakes his head. “Whatever. All these mental excuses these days. Whatever happened to warriors?”

“And how many tours did you do?”

“Keep walking British, you ain’t no cop. Get out of here or I’ll see you out like I did your buddy

Nerys laughs. “Let’s go Frank.”

We’re chuckling to ourselves as we walk through the garage and towards the jeep and then I see that Jay is not there. I turn around and Jay storms past me and I almost call out but he is through the door and I make to follow him and by the time I’m there he’s broken the dad’s nose and hit him again hard in the stomach and the man is moaning and retching and Jay is already walking back towards me. “Jay man, what the fuck?”

“Let’s go,” he says and we follow him back to the jeep.

*

I take the eel and as we rejoin the freeway I take myself out of myself and try to remember that it's not my job anymore to remember confrontations like that, to stop them, to write up what happened. I look over at Nerys. She looks back at me. She gives a thumbs up and I give it back.

We drive for maybe half an hour and I see Jay gesture to me and I pull the jeep over. We put the canvas roof back up, and drive on again. After a while, when the desert seems now truly dark, Jay says: "How did that fight start man?"

"You started it."

"What?" says Ashley.

"He was fine," I say.

"He was fine when he was leaving," says Nerys.

"What happened?"

"Jay hit someone," says Nerys.

"Just fucking that, huh?" says Jay.

"That kid collapsed. Nerys and I went to help and the family started kicking off. Jay kept the dad away from us while we worked and it got heated."

"Justifiable use of force," says Nerys. "Hyd nes iddo fynd yn ol."

"I thought we'd said we wouldn't do that now?" says Ashley.

Nerys sighs. "Sorry. That kid reminded me of someone."

"Are you okay?" Ashley asks.

"I got this," she says.

"You got this," I say.

After a long pause Jay says “You guys should be careful out here, you know. Jumping in to help like that’s not gonna get you any rewards.”

“It’s what we do. Did.”

“Jay’s right,” says Ashley. “They’re likely to sue you out here.”

Nerys laughs. “They can write to me in fucking Aberystwyth then.”

Jay laughs. “That’s right! You guys can shoot and scoot!” He laughs again. “We can use that!”

Nerys laughs too, properly this time. “At your service.”

This is too easy, I think. Something’s not right here and that something doesn’t have a name. I know Nerys. I know what that scene has done inside her. And she switches quickly. And Jay just did too. I don’t know what it is and right now it’s just a thought but I can feel Ashley’s eyes boring into the back of my head and this thought worries me. It’s just a thought and friendships sometimes can’t survive a thought that stumbles blindly into the gap between being spoken and being heard.

There’s a long silence and Ashley says: “So that kid. Was he sick?”

“Or his dad is knocking him from room to room every night,” says Jay.

“He was sick,” says Nerys. “He had a seizure.”

“You sure?” asks Ashley.

Nerys nods. “Yep.”

“He got up just fine,” says Jay.

Nerys shrugs. “That’s one for the medics.”

“Maybe he was born that way?” I say. “Genetic?”

“Fucking Utah mutants,” says Jay and he laughs.

“Good answer,” I say.

“Well,” he says, “There’s a lot of extra radiation around here.”

“Yeah.”

“What?”

“Mitchell’s class,” Jay says. “We talked about it. They test the weapons over in Nevada. And this land is full of uranium, too, naturally. But somebody figured out those clouds from the underground tests – and they go up like five, six thousand feet – somebody figured out they were nuclear fallout clouds. Know how? Group of geology students from the U were up in the mountains with Geiger counters, measuring radiation of rock formations to figure out their age. This is way back, long before our time. Like, early Cold War shit. So they’re measuring the rocks and taking readings and this huge cloud front rolls in, not forecast at all. And then their Geiger counters went nuts.” He laughs. “That’s how they figured it out.”

“So they know?” says Nerys.

“Yeah.”

“And they still test?”

“They stopped after the Cold War,” says Ashley. “Then under Dubbya they started doing it again.”

“So they know they’re killing people? American people?”

“We’re in the West,” she says. “We’re expendable.”

*

Jay taps me on the shoulder.

“Hey man, pull over. I’ll take the wheel.”

“It’s not been an hour yet.”

“I know.”

“So let me take it for a while longer. You drove most of the way down here.”

I can feel Nerys looking at me from the passenger seat. And then Ashley says: “Let him take the wheel Frank.”

“Yeah man. Keeps me focussed.”

“We can go a bit longer,” says Nerys.

“Frank, you drive slow-as for a cop. And we were late leaving, remember? I got to make us up a bit of time so we get through Zion Canyon before it gets full dark.”

“You think we will?”

“Not if you’re driving and do you really wanna drive those roads?”

“Are they bad?” asks Nerys.

I look at her and shrug apologetically. “Like the roads in Ceredigion only worse. And we don’t know them.”

Reluctantly, Nerys concedes and we pull over and Jay takes the wheel. Nerys and I sit in the back, Ashley up front with Jay, and Jay guns the engine and tears onto the highway and corrects the jeep’s heading with smooth motions of the wheel. We’re fast approaching dusk and Jay puts his foot down. The needle creeps swiftly to sixty-five and up. We hit eighty and he holds it there, the wind buffeting around us, the canvas loud. Clyde tucks himself down in the back, sheltering from the roar. Nobody can say anything and be heard, again.

The jeep can't hold eighty and slips down, not much, hovering around seventy-five and under. I look up as a police cruiser passes us in the opposite direction. Jay slows the jeep some but it's too late. I watch behind us as the cruiser pulls a U-turn and comes after us. He lights us up and Jay slows further, indicates to the side of the road, but it takes him some distance to actually stop the jeep.

"Nobody opened any of the beer, right?" says Ashley.

"No," says Nerys. "Though I wouldn't mind one."

"Open container laws," Ashley says. "If you're drinking in the back, the driver gets a DUI."

I see Jay looking at me in the rearview. "You might have to split this ticket with me too."

"I know."

The policeman walks up to Jay's window and Jay's hands are white on the wheel. I watch him in the rearview. He's watching the cop and my guess is he's looking right at the policeman's hip where the pistol is holstered. Jay breathes out through his mouth but keeps his hands on the wheel, gripping it tight, hands at two and ten.

"Evening sir. Know why I stopped you?"

"Not sure officer?"

"Not sure? I stopped you for speed."

"Oh really? How fast was I going officer?"

"You don't know?"

"Well, I guess I do."

"I guess you do too. This your vehicle sir?"

"Yessir."

“Got you license and registration?”

“License is here, registration’s in the dash.”

“Okay. Anybody got any weapons in the vehicale?”

“Yessir I have a pistol, a Sig Sauer.”

“Okay. Permitted?”

“Yessir. Permit’s right here.”

“That’s fine. Where you keep it?”

“It’s in my pack in the trunk sir. Think the dog might be lying on it.”

“That’s fine. Anything else?”

“Nossir.”

“How about the rest of you? You sir?” he looks through to me.

“No mate, I’m just a tourist.”

“Where you from?”

“We’re from England.”

“Wales.”

“We’re British.”

“Okay, you got any ID?”

“UK driving licenses alright?”

“I’ll have to see. You not got passports or anything?”

“Back at the house in Salt Lake.”

“Okay.”

“Okay well let me see the licenses then. If they’re photo ID then that should be fine.

You guys all just sit tight while I check these out, and keep your hands on the wheel,” he says

and pauses and has half-turned away but looks back at Jay and says “and, uh, don’t reach into the back for anything okay?”

“Nossir.”

The cop walks away and Ashley speaks. “Tiene un arma?”

“Nunca donde pueda alcanzarlo sin asfuerzo.”

“Desaste de eso.”

“Esta bien, nena.”

“Desembarazate de eso!”

“Okay.”

Nerys looks at me. I didn’t know there was a gun in the vehicle. I shake my head. I don’t need to speak Spanish to know Ashley didn’t know either.

“You brought a gun?” I say.

He shrugs.

“And you didn’t think to say anything?”

“Ah you’d have just fussed over it.”

“Too right.”

“It’s just a fucking gun. Get over it.”

“Why do we even ed a gun in the canyon?”

“You never know. Like condoms.”

“Right, rather have one and not need it, than need it and not have one.”

“Yeah.”

“Bollocks.”

“It’s a free country.”

“Tom never took a gun.”

“I ain’t Tom.”

“He’s coming back,” says Ashley in a small voice.

“Fucking cops. No offence.”

Jay is looking hard in the rearview. One hand has left the wheel and is curled around the camera around his neck again and he grips it hard. The cop approaches the driver window and Jay’s hand starts to come up from the camera and seeing the movement the cop steps out into the road slightly and squares his feet, hand on his weapon. “Show me your hands!”

Jay looks over at him and the cop draws his weapon and raises it. “Do it, do it now, hands out the window, both hands.”

“Jay.”

Jay raises both hands and extends them, empty, out the window. The door on Ashley’s side opens. “Out on the ground, now!” And it’s the other cop and his gun is also raised and it points at Ashley and covers back to me. Nerys and I show our hands, Ashley raises hers. I swallow the feeling of adrenaline. “Yes officer,” I hear Ashley say and she steps out of the car. “You,” the officer says to me, “get out. Slowly.” I push the seat forward trying to keep my hands in view and step out of the jeep. I can hear Jay on the other side of the car, saying it’s a camera, not a gun. I hear the familiar fast zip clicks of handcuffs. The officer on his side is still shouting and I can hear adrenaline in his voice.

The officer on my side is calmer and I take deep breaths and follow his instructions, dropping to my knees on the ground and interlocking my fingers behind my head. The asphalt is hard on my knees; the draft from a passing whips the hot desert air through my ti-shirt. I feel the cuffs locking around my wrists and am hauled on my feet and turned to face the jeep and pushed against the side of it. I look across the jeep and Jay is looking at me across the roof and I briefly wonder at the officer safety training these guys have had, letting two

suspects have eye contact. I feel the officer's hands in my pockets, around the waistband of my jeans, my underwear, running up and down my legs and inside the cuffs of my t-shirt and under my arms. He takes my hat off and inspects it.

"Where's the weapon?"

"I don't know."

"Where is the weapon?"

"Honestly, I don't know. Jay said it was in his bag in the boot."

"In his boot?"

"The trunk. The trunk of the car."

"Okay." The officer's voice has changed, sounds like he's smiling. "You British?"

"Yeah."

"Why you out here?"

"believe it or not we came out for a funeral."

"In the desert?"

"Salt Lake."

Jay is being marched back to the police cruiser. His entire body is tense, the body-language of a fighter, ready to strike. I utter a silent prayer to whatever gods might be listening that he does nothing.

"So what brings you down this far from Salt Lake?"

"We were going to a canyon. The guy who died, Tom, he was an older friend of ours from college. He had all these stories, from when he was in Vietnam. He asked us to bury him in the canyon but we can't do that so we took his Vietnam stories and thought we'd bury those there instead."

There's a pause and then I feel the handcuffs released. "You serve?"

“No, but Jay was a Marine.” I laugh. “I was police until two years ago.”

“No kidding. Where?”

“London.”

“Imagine that. You guys don’t even carry guns, do you?”

“Most of us don’t. I never did.”

“Right. Well look, you’re good to go but your buddy’s behaviour has given us cause to search the entire vehicle, you understand that right?”

“Be my guest,” I say. Jay is still in the back of the cruiser and I’m instructed to open the boot and take our bags out but leave them zipped. With Jay still in the back of the cruiser, the more nervous cop comes back towards us and watches me while his calmer colleague searches our vehicle. “Do we get a copy of the search form?” I ask.

“What’s that?”

“Oh, just we have to fill in search forms when we search a person or vehicle. Wondered if you guys do the same over here.”

“Well, that’s none of your concern.”

“Was only asking as paperwork always takes a while. Just wondered how long we’d be here.”

“As long as it takes.”

“Fair enough.”

They finish the search of the jeep. “You boys been drinking?”

“Not today, those are for tonight when we’ve finished setting up camp.”

Okay.”

They breathalyse Jay anyway and then they write him a speeding ticket and they return his ID. We're left to put the bags back ourselves. Before they leave, the calmer officer looks at Jay and says: "When'd you get back?"

"Roundabout a year ago."

"Welcome home."

"Corps?"

"First of the Tenth, Al Anbar Province."

"Third of the Third, Fallujah."

"Brother Marine. So why'd you act like you just did?"

"It was a fucking camera."

The calmer cop looks at his colleague. "A camera?"

His colleague shrugs. "Couldn't see from where I was."

The calm cop looks back at Jay. "You get why this happened?"

"Affirm."

"Alright. Well, here's your citation for speeding, and next time keep your fucking hands on the wheel, numbnuts."

"You bet."

I wave thanks at the officers and load the bags back in the jeep, and Jay starts the jeep up again and we drive off.

*

We drive in silence. Ashley in the front stares pointedly out the window. Nerys has put her headphones in and is also staring out of the window. Jay is silent, and I get the sense he's fuming. I should say something, either to break the tension or to start the argument that's gathering like a stormfront. Clear the air. But I just don't have the energy. I take moment instead to follow Tom's old instructions and I pay attention to the sunset and take in the brassing effect the copper sunlight has on the few clouds and when the sun dips finally below the far peaks with only a small wedge winking like a last lingering look through a crag or crevasse before disappearing to, leaving only this dusting reflected sky behind, I feel calmer.

The road curves only gently in front of us but I'm getting tired of blacktop. The desert around us is invisible now and with the headlights of the few other cars and the small visible world illuminated by our own being the only land in sight, the jeep feels small, the world outside unreal. Makes me think of those old war movies, where the camera is outside the aircraft and pans up and the aircraft or the camera rocks from side to side and the actors playing pilots look out and some dry ice is blown across frame like a cloud. The illusion of movement but nothing is moving. That's how it feels, like we're the only ones in the world the five of us and Tom's stories and the whole world is in this jeep and outside is just nothing.

We drive on and through Zion canyon and it's a shame not to see it in the daylight. The stars now are the only lights in the heavens and they scatter a grim suggestion of illumination onto the world below, a lie of light hiding the true shape of the land in the shadows, picking out only surfaces. In the jeep, the red lights of the dashboard illumination pick out only faint points on our faces.

Jay says “piss stop,” slows the jeep and pulls over. We take a break and stretch our legs and Jay and Clyde and I walk a bit away from the jeep to give Ashley and Nerys some privacy. Nerys rolls her eyes. Clyde stays pretty close to us and we return to the jeep. Beetles and moths flutter in the headlight beams and around the smears of their kind on the windscreen and hood and grill.

Jay drives us onward through that dark desert, invisible but there. He puts on Tom’s music – nobody is talking anyway. I start to feel it in my guts, the excitement, the kinship. The rumble of bass in our every cell masks the ever loudening grief we’ve been running from.

But there is – and always must be – a time in the desert for silence, for listening to nothing but the engine; or pulling over for a piss-stop and listening to the keychange of tyres from running bitumen to runching stones and then nothing but the sigh of the wind, the ticking of the cooling engine. A trip might have a soundtrack but a really good trip into the desert is about silence mostly and has no score, not even your own beating heart. To have this silence you must really open yourself up; every nerve and pore and synapse must receive it – no, crave it. It must penetrate you totally. Otherwise you’ll miss it. Otherwise, you should just damn well stay at home.

I recognise the shape of the land, dark silhouettes dusted by moonlight. I remember now sitting behind Tom as we drove this way, noticing the bluish marks in his neck. I asked him what they were and he rubbed his neck and told me it was shrapnel. Still under his skin, after all this time. Working its way out, slowly. He said bits of war had been falling out of him in the shower for thirty-five years. Once, a half-inch sliver had come out while he was washing his hair. He said that stuff blowing up sends small sharp shit flying everywhere, and

if it doesn't hurt you enough to notice there and then, you'll not know it's even there and it travels with you, sometimes for years, until it maybe grows out, maybe.

The album finishes and Jay kills the stereo. Talking, where there is in the dust, will come later. The headlights of what few cars there are on the road now rush towards us, hurrying home. Ours is the only one going east as Jay turns off the highway and out into our own nowhere I feel a pang, that punch in the chest again It's a shame because together we're heading into that most necessary solitude but I remember Tom again, his solemn mantra whenever we turned onto the trail and from the back seat I glance at Ashley, who stares still out of the window or scrolls through her phone. I remember clearly the time he took me out here after Ashley had gone back to the church, after she left me – after everything. Before the police, before Nerys, before the burning man. That time after everything and before the rest of your life, the vacuous non-space when everything stops at once and your feet are still running but they're trading only air and you go nowhere. I remember Tom's mantra then, turning as we did then through a watery sunlight towards his canyon, the best place in the world to heal and to wait for afterwards to kick in, for your feet to touch the ground again. But this is now, maybe, and Tom is just a folder in the back seat.

"This is the turn-off," says Jay like he's read my thoughts. "The exit for the last highway – "

" – and don't miss a bit of it; not a single step wasted with regret. That's waiting for you back behind you and it will always wait there. Just enjoy here. Enjoy the ride."

*

The road is paved now. It wasn't before. We run smooth for a couple of miles before this new road brings us to a dirt track, possibly one of the few dirt tracks left. We turn up it little way and stop. We get out and walk ahead for a while, checking for large rocks buried in the earth of the track that could smash the jeep's sensitive underbelly, cracking the oilpan or breaking an axle. We do not want to be stranded out here.

But there are rocks in the road, just some holes where such rocks once rested and have been pulled out and tossed to the roadside to lie, stained on one side from the rough uncoupling with the earth. Tyre tracks stretch away along the track as far as headlights and hand torches reveal, more evidence of increasing use. We stand together, looking at the tracks, and Jay breathes deep. Clyde explores us. A small breeze stirs the dust, the sigh of it around the bulk of the jeep and through the fabric of our clothing the only sound. It's a hot breeze, smelling of years of patience and heat. A clear, clean smell on a cleansing wind.

"Looks busier than last time," I say.

Jay is quiet for a bit, then slaps my shoulder. "How the hell could you tell that?"

"Tracks," I say, pointing.

"Can you tell how old they are?"

"No. You?"

"No."

"Then why'd you ask?"

I watch the ground, the slight shimmer of scrubs flicking in the breeze, the illusion of shifting, changing land conjured by the incremental movement of sand. "I don't remember so many tracks."

Jay grunts. “You just remembering what Tom said. We came here, what, twice with you? Tom was always saying it was too busy. Said it more and more the more we came out here.”

“He was right.”

Jay says nothing, watches the wisps of cloud silvered in the faint moonlight. I glance up too. “He was right, wasn’t he?”

Jay shrugs. “Maybe.”

“He would’ve known. He came here a lot.”

“Maybe it wasn’t getting any busier. Maybe it’s just that he came here too much.”

Jay turns around and heads back to the jeep and I follow. We drive up along the track slowly, Jay keeping the jeep in four-wheel drive and we laugh at some of the heavier jolts. “I hope there’s nobody else where we’re going,” he says.

“That likely?”

He shrugs. We roll forward, slowly. A few miles down the road we pass the place wre others have given up, have stopped their vehicles and made camp. There are still some black scars on the earth and rocks from their fires. They climb higher and people have clearly camped here to explore the canyon on foot, moving in from the level end, the safe end, walking all day into a dead end to find the reward – but we’re not there yet, and I won’t ruin it with anticipation. And I have a job to do. The fainter hearts haven’t driven this far so we press forward, cautiously. Ashley has moved to the back seat so I c get in and out easier, and I jump out every now and then to crowbar rocks out of the way and roll it to the side. We’ll put them back where they came from on the way back out again. All of them.

Jay pulls over and kills the engine. “We should stop here tonight. We can press on a bit more in the morning.”

“Seriously? That’ll only give us a day in the canyon.”

“Eternity in one sound better to you? I can barely make out the track in broad daylight, and I got nothing to see by now worth the name. It narrows too much just around here. No, I don’t fancy a free-fall off the rim and into hell with you. No offence.”

In the back I hear Ashley scoff. “None taken,” I say. “Want me to drive?”

“You’ll only kill us faster.” He laughs. “Fire, food, sleep. We’ll wake when the sun comes up and that’s worth the stop anyway.”

*

We walk around to the front of the jeep and I lean against the hood. I flinch away from the hot metal. We'll unload in a moment but I want to take this moment, listening to the darkness and the wind of our own – Tom's own – Cape Solitude.

Jay speaks first. "Time to unload."

"Cool."

"You gonna do anything to help?"

I turn around. "Build a fire. Get dinner going."

Jay laughs. "That's Ashley's job man. Nobody builds fire like Ash."

Ashley gives a small smile and says "Go carry stuff, Frank. We'll do the skilled work."

I laugh and Nerys shakes her head. They gather twigs by the light of the jeep's headlamps, careful to avoid disturbing any scorpions that might lurk by nearby rocks or under brush, or venturing from the bark of a nearby gnarled and twisted Joshua tree. Jay and I carry some of our stuff – we don't unload much, we're here one night. I drop the sleeping bags on the mats Jay has brought over and turn around. Ashley has got the fire going and Nerys is reading can labels by firelight. "Chilli beef?" she says.

Ashley laughs. "Or?"

Nerys smiles. "Beef chilli?"

"Let's go with chilli beef."

I turn back to the jeep where Jay is bringing the last bag. He looks towards me, winces, looks down and jumps back. He curses, loud, his words echoing around the canyon below.

"What?"

“Fuck.”

“What?” I walk towards him. Nerys and Ashley stand up. Jay is clinging to the back of the jeep, staring at the ground. His body is jammed against the spare tyre, one foot on the rear bumper, the other held across it. His hand shoots out, Palm up. “Don’t fucking move.”

“Jay, what is it?”

“Snake.”

“Very funny.”

“Funny hell, the fucking thing just bit me”

I move sideways, climb onto the passenger seat and pull a torch from the glove compartment. “You’re fucking kidding.”

“No, I’m fucking serious. It bit me and now its fucking waiting for me.”

I flick the torch on and search through our gear for the snakebite kit. Clyde moves reluctantly out of my way, and I curl a hand through his collar to stop him leaping out: a rattlesnake can kill a human, depending on its size and where it bites you and how far from help you are. If it bit Clyde we’d be burying the old dog out under the desert moon this same night. Nerys calls out: “What’s it look like?”

“Look like? It’s a fucking snake.”

“The bite. What’s the bite look like?”

There is a pause, then: “I can’t see shit.”

“Can you edge around towards me?”

“On one leg?”

“Semper Fi Jay, you can do it.”

Another pause, and then the sounds of effort, slight movement of the jeep on its suspension, the muffled sounds of clothing and a body sliding along the metal. I lean out of

the passenger window and watch Jay ease his way around the wheel, keeping his weight on his arms and good leg. I reach out to grab his hand and pull him in. He slumps across the seat and I scan the ground with the torch to find the snake. “I think it’s gone.”

“Bullshit. It’s gone under the jeep. I heard it rattle.”

“Rattlesnake?”

“Big one.” Jay drains some water from a bottle. “You got that kit?”

I hand it to him. “How’s it feel?”

Jay shakes his head. “Think I’m in shock.”

“Want me to suck the poison out?”

“Keep your lips to yourself.”

A coyote yips from far away. The wind sighs against stone, shifts the sand, changes the landscape. Outside, lights flicker as Nerys and Ashley edge around the jeep in a wide circle, walking slowly, scanning the earth with flashlights. I point the torch at Jay’s leg. “I can’t see any bite.”

“What can you see?”

“A scratch. Some blood.”

“Isn’t that what a snakebite looks like?”

“I thought there’d be fang marks.”

“It’s not a fucking vampire.”

I shine the light outside again, highlighting a spot within jumping distance from the jeep. I shine the light around and see no movement. I jump. I land, heart pounding, and quickly flash the light under the jeep. “I can’t see it.”

“What?”

“There’s no snake under the jeep.”

“Maybe it’s back where it was before,” he says. I can hear him fumbling with the snakebite kit and muttering, to himself or to Clyde. And then I hear a voice. It’s Nerys.

“Found it.”

“Where?” says Jay. “Is it a rattler?”

“Oh, definitely,” says Ashley and something isn’t quite right. There shouldn’t be that much mirth in their voices. I walk slowly towards the rear of the jeep, scanning the ground with the torch. There is something, fixed in the cross beams from Ashley and Nerys’ torches: pale, translucent. I steady the beam of the torch, focus on it. Inching forward, checking again the ground underfoot, I realise I am bent almost double and I wonder if snakes can jump. I straighten up and creep closer. The beam of the torch now holds it steady. It is very snake shaped. And hollow. Laughing, I flick off the light and walk back to the jeep. “Semper Fi, badass.”

“What? This isn’t funny.”

“I forgot you were scared of snakes.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

Ashley appears. “It’s just a snakeskin. A shed snakeskin stuck on a little bush or something. You scratched yourself on a twig, saw the snakeskin, and your brain made a pretty spectacular leap.”

I laugh again, shine the torch into the jeep where Jay is sprawled out, one trouser leg rolled up to his knee. “Semper fucking Fi, mate.”

“You panicked,” says Ashley, “and that’s okay.” She’s not laughing now and her voice is soft, like you’d use with a dog you didn’t know or a lost child. “Anything could have made you think you heard a rattle. And Frank and Nerys and I have all checked. No snake under or around the jeep, and that’s no bite on your leg.”

Jay looks down at the hastily applied dressing on his leg. “Fuck,” he says and pulls it off and throws it into the back of the jeep. “Fuck.” He lays back in the seat. “Fuck.” He starts to laugh and Ashley smiles.

“You know you can’t really call me Codfish anymore now.” I walk towards the fire and laughing say over my shoulder: “You still will though, won’t you.”

“Yeah.” More laughter from within the jeep. “Well, at least we can let Clyde out now.”

“Now that it’s safe.”

“You’re an asshole.”

In the otherworld beam light of the jeep’s headlamps, Ashley and Nerys gather together the brushwood and sticks they collected and build them into a small pile. Ashley soaks a few small cotton balls in a little bit of gasoline from the spare can and uses three matches lighting them but the wood is dry and before long the fire is going strong and burns a little faster than she and Nerys can feed it before she finds a balance, the fire and she, and it settles down and so do we. We open a tin of chilli beans each and push them into the fire and watch the labels flicker and burn too and when they are bubbling I put on the one of the gauntlets Nerys had used gathering firewood and hand the tins around. The chilli is piping hot, nourishing if a little sad on the taste front but the basic elements give it a feel of authenticity; purely imaginary, wholly appreciated.

Ashley blows on a spoonful of beans and stares at the fire, chewing thoughtfully. She looks up. “Nerys?”

“Yeah?”

“That kid at the gas station. What happened?”

“Thought we went over that,” Jay says.

“No,” says Ashley. “I mean, you seemed to freeze, like you recognised his voice.”

I reach over squeeze Nerys’ knee. She glances at me and nods.

“Yeah, the voice sounded familiar. Only that kid was a lot older.”

“Do you want to talk about?”

Nerys shrugs. “Nothing really to tell. Was a job I went to that was a bit creepy.”

Ashley is quiet, waiting. Jay is looking at the fire. I watch the pair of them and look back at Nerys and realise this is what they do. Ashley doesn’t seem to miss anything and Jay knows what she does and maybe it would be good to speak. I’m about to say something encouraging to Nerys when she shrugs again and says: “Was on nights with Team – the response team – with my mate John. Big lad, used to be firearms before he came back to Borough. Really sweet. Anyway, it’s winter and there’s this freezing fog that’s rolled in. So we’ve gone to like three minor accidents. About three in the morning a job comes up about a lost three-year-old child seen wandering down the road. Now, John’s boy was about three at this time so he puts us up for it almost before they’ve finished sending the job out. Anyway we get there and it’s one of those really old London streets, and it was dead, there was no one there. And it’s out in the quietest part of town so there’s not even London traffic noise. So we drive slowly up and down the street and there’s no trace of this missing child. I’m about to call it in as an Area Searched – No Trace and John says ‘Stop.’ So I stop and he gets out. So I get out too and it’s colder than a witch’s tit and he turns his radio way down and just listens. And then he starts look under cars. So I start looking under cars. John’s working one side of the street and I’m doing the other. And I get to this van that’s got like a high wheelbase and I look under it and there’s this shape just huddled underneath. Shaved head, skinny little thing. So I call out ‘Hello sweetheart, it’s the police.’ And there’s no acknowledgement. Just keeps breathing really heavy, these shuddering rasps, shivering. John’s heard me and he gets on the

floor next to me and says ‘Alright mate,’ and I don’t know if it was because John’s got a really deep voice, or because he was a bloke, but something made this child take notice. His head snapped round and it was like a snarl, like his fingers were all clawed. Like Gollum.”

Nerys looks over at me. “Are we going to have a beer or what?”

I open one and hand it to her and open one for myself. Jay opens one too and Ashley says nothing but just slowly chews a small spoonful of beans at a time and waits for Nerys to continue.

“So, just like Gollum,” Nerys says. “John somehow coaxes this kid out and he’s wearing next to nothing, looks almost like a pillowcase with holes for his arms and legs. We have a look around and I spot a house where the front door is a bit open. Normally we’d be going in together but John’s the only one this child responds to, so in I pop. And my baton’s drawn, too right, and these were the old asp friction lock ones so you could have it drawn but not extended so I’ve got it kind of hidden in my hand and I can’t find the lightswitch. So I walk around the house and then upstairs and I open a door and there’s a couple sleeping in the bed. And the man wakes up and jumps out of bed with like a hammer in his hand or something. I had that baton racked faster then you would believe and I shout at him to drop it. And fair play to him he did drop it straight away when he realised I was police. Anyway he said it was their kid and they come down and John carries the kid up to his room.

We talk to the parents about the kid getting out and they’re in despair. ‘We’ve tried everything, we don’t know what to do,’ – you know, people whose kid needs help and they can’t give it. See more and more of that, the last few years. And then there’s this noise and it sounds like a TV or a film or a game or something and it’s coming from this kid’s room, and we head over and it’s just the kid making this wild, howling, inhuman noise. And there is nothing in this kid’s room, like it’s empty and bare, Just a bed and there’s a lock on the

outside of the door and the parents tell us the kid just trashes anything they put in there. And they're at their wits' end and don't know what to do. You could see they loved their kid but.

When we leave John says 'Whatever call comes through next, we're taking it. I can't dwell on that.' We were both really shaken up. Like, it was horror-movie spooky. And then we get a call through and we take it and turns out it's murder, so we ended up doing a double-shift."

We finish our food and read to each other from *Cape Solitude* and then absorb the stillness having neither covered our tracks nor removed our clothes nor peered over the rim of the canyon into the watching waiting abyss; nor questioned our lack of courage, our unwillingness to contemplate let alone take the big jump, the simple step into freedom a oblivion. But we have got a fire going. We've brought food and water to last a few days. And, of course, we've brought what we have left of Tom Taylor.

*

The only guy from training I saw in Vietnam was the only guy I ever got in a fight with in the army. I kept waking him up coming back drunk off a pass during AIT and he made an apple-turnover out of my sheets. Man those hurt when you're not ready for them. I was so mad. Knew it was him too, and he started laughing and it was angry laughing, you know? Like there was no feeling to laugh about but he laughed anyway. So I grabbed him out of his bunk. He blacked my eye and I broke his nose; fattened my lip and stung his ear. Ha! We got a lot of shit for that one. Extra guard, no passes, the whole thing. So we deploy and we're in the same base in Cam Rahn Bay and he'd come to my hooch. We'd hang, get high mostly. The Huey he was in went down during an air assault and he was killed, December 20, 1969. I knew then I was a dead man. We'd lost a lot of guys recently and I got that feeling and I just knew, just knew I wasn't coming back. Sometimes I don't think I did. That none of this, not you, not this beer, not this city, none of this is real. That I'm asleep in a foxhole somewhere in Vietnam and I'm about to get greased.

*

We lay in a rough circle around the fire that occasionally spits and cracks as it glows, shooting a spark or two heavenward with the dreams of those of us who sleep. I can hear Nerys breathing deep, the sleep of wine. Ashley is invisible, huddled in her sleeping bag. Clyde is curled up between Ashley and Jay, his eyes shifting mournfully from Jay to the fire, alert a little at every hot crack of the embers. Jay has wrapped him in a blanket to take the sting out of the cold desert night. Above is that glistening bright sky – more stars shine here than shine down on me at home – and I watch them wink above and listen to the sounds of the night fading across the air: desert wolf, coyote; the high whine of the mosquitos rising from the waterhole in the canyon to feed. I pull my hat a little further down my head and breathe in hard, inhaling the sharp taste of bug repellent. We're layered in it, and it forms a film over my skin, mixing with sweat, sliding slick against the soft interior of the sleeping bag.

I realise Jay is talking but he's not asked me anything yet so I say nothing and listen, motionless, spooked by every small tickle of body hair against fabric, lest it be a brown recluse I didn't shake loose, or pressure from outside the bag of something scuttling, slithering or creeping towards my face.

"I love how still it is," says Jay.

"Except for the bugs."

He laughs. "They're as much a part of it as the stars, rocks, and air. Maybe more so, being alive and all."

I gesture for Jay to throw me the bug repellent and he does so, laughing when it bounces through my hands and skitters into the blackness behind me. Cursing, I reach for my

flashlight, and manage to recover the can without reaching too far away from the pool of warmth thrown out by the fire. “What d’you mean?” I say, turning back.

“‘Bout what?”

“Living things being more important. Without the other stuff they wouldn’t, couldn’t live here.”

“What? No. Alive is better than not.”

I Pause. “Isn’t it all – ”

“Alive is better. What else is there?”

I leave it then, remembering instead how I pressed Tom with questions the first time he took us out here, how I feel a burn of shame at the remembering, at being seen to be that naïve. And something else – a frustration, a helpless anger sticking in the back of my throat. I open my mouth to bring the question up and not let him get away with it, or shut it down, because if you’re not talking about life and death out here where the balance is so fine and fragile then what are you really talking about? And where better than under the starscape with the openness of the galaxy and an eternity beaming high above to add weight and urgency to such talk? But something stops me. Maybe it’s Tom. Maybe my anger, my frustrated anger isn’t towards Jay’s blunt refusal to discuss a damned thing, but towards Tom. But I don’t know why I’d be mad at Tom.

Jay arranges a fisherman’s mosquito net around his face and neck and jams his collar back up and leans back and pillows his head on his pack and faces the fire, the net masking his expression and casting a strange longness to his features like the sloping glare of a wolf. I watch for his face, half-lit in the glow and last flickers of our mesquite fire, hatted, shadowed, blank. I realise I can’t ask him anything, not really, and then I see why I might be mad at Tom: because he’s dead, and I can’t now ask him if I ruined the trip; I can’t make sure he

thinks well of me. I'm mad because I can't ask him to tell me I'm all right, that I got it, that I understood.

A soft snore from across the blaze draws my attention. Clyde raises his snout slowly, too. Jay is asleep, his barrel chest and cavernous nostrils draw and expel air in enthusiastic cacophony. At each rising crescendo I realise I'll never sleep while he does. I reach for the can of bug-repellent to throw at him but when I raise my arm I see Ashley's bag move and I stop. From the folds of her sleeping bag her eyes catch the glow of the fire and I see she's not looking over at Jay, not disturbed by his snoring. Her eyes burn in the firelight and I realise she is watching me and then I wonder why, in the last few nights we've stayed with Jay and Ashley, did I never hear him snoring before? The thin walls of their pre-fab house wouldn't have hidden that noise. I lower my arm and set the can carefully back down beside me. Ashley's bag moves a little more as she lowers her head and she disappears back inside her bag again and is still.

It's no matter: I'm not tired anyway. Huddling down further in my bag, the movement pushing warm air up around my neck and bringing with it the hot smells of sweat and bug juice, oil and a faint trace of washing powder, and I busy myself with watching silvered clouds ghost past a fat white moon.

*

The world is in that half-awake I remember from night shifts that stretched into the morning or from long nights with wine and olives and peanuts with Nerys when Friday becomes Saturday and it's lunchtime before we realise we should go to bed. I unzip my bag and climb out of it. The sun just breaks the line of the horizon, changing with every second the colours of the canyon walls, new hues of red and orange and purple. The twigs and scrubby leaves of juniper, creosote, mesquite are pale, almost paler than when bleaching in full sunlight. Another desert illusion. The mesa is black in silhouette. I throw some more mesquite on the embers of last night's fire and build it back up, squatting by the fire and using four matches to get it going well again. My hands shake. The rubber thong of my sandals bites at the soft flesh between my toes but I daren't risk bare feet. I start a pot of coffee going, stand up and swallow some water from the jerry can. Chilled by the night air, it hits my empty stomach and I silently urge the coffee pot to heat.

Jay's snores halt. He peers out of his bag. "You making breakfast?"

"Coffee."

He clears his throat and recites Tom's little poem:

"Lord, keep me free from bite or blow

So I can lay my turd and drink my joe

Then (happily!) will I submit

This fragile being to divine wit."

I smile. "Joe's coming."

"Make some breakfast."

"When the coffee's done."

"Use the gas stove."

I fetch the stove from the jeep, every movement loud, the slamming of the door an unspeakable abomination, a crime against peace itself. I connect the little gas canister to the stove and play with the valve. Touching burning match to hiss of gas, I get it going. I set the pan on the heat and after a minute of letting it get hot I pour in a little oil from a small glass bottle we brought with us – such luxuries, easily transported. I pour in a few preserved jalapeno slices and some fatty rashers of bacon and pour in a carton of pre-whisked eggs, and scramble the whole lot together. I pour two mugs of coffee and take the pan off the heat – it can finish cooking when everyone else is awake and I can serve it up. I leave one mug of coffee by the fire and I take mine towards the canyon rim and sip from it, feeling it warm my throat and belly. I stretch, take in the view, and piss over the side of the canyon rim. Jay joins me. He muffles another yawn, looks out over the still canyon, and says “Good coffee.” He sips, and then he unbuttons and pisses too. “Beautiful morning,” he says.”

“When you lot have finished your pissing contest,” drawls Nerys in a voice muffled by the sleeping bag still pulled up over her head, “some of us are gonna need some fucking tea.”

Ashley laughs from within her bag. “How you feeling hon?”

“Like at some point in the night Clyde came and shat in my mouth.”

“That bad?”

“Need tea.”

“We’ve got coffee?”

“Why, oh why, did I leave civilisation for this barbaric land?”

“The things we have to do for the little boys.”

“Wake me when it’s worth it.”

“Sleep long and well, sister.”

“Just who d’you think you’re married to?” I say, and take a ziplock bag of teabags from my shortsleg pocket.

“Oooh, I did pick a good one, didn’t I?”

“You always were very smart.”

“Yes,” she says, stretching and climbing out of her sleeping bag. “Well done me.”

I boil water for Nerys’ tea on the gas burner and put the breakfast pan back on the fire and stir everything through until it’s piping hot. Then I spoon food into the four mess tins we’ve brought with us, and add powdered milk and a sachet of sugar to Nerys’ tea. She sips it silently and we all eat without saying very much, just watching the sun rise and detail the world around us, and Clyde explore the desert. He doesn’t wander too far.

Jay feeds Clyde and then cleans and stows our cooking gear and stows everything but what we need for a day and just-in-case a night in the canyon below into day packs, and then before we leave we stretch ourselves to the fast-warming sun and absorb the happening now of where we are, just for a moment. The light strengthens but there’s no heat in it yet and for a moment the view out over the canyon and across the rippling landscape of other hidden canyons and emptiness towards the mesa occupies all our attention. Nothing really hums to life, no droning of insect wings like any countryside elsewhere. The day just gets brighter and then it starts to warm.

“Who’s Suong?” asks Nerys, quietly.

“Who?”

“Suong. I was looking at some of Tom’s stories this morning. There’s one about a hoochmaid called Suong. Don’t tell me what a hoochmaid is,” she holds a hand up, “I can guess.”

“Well, I guess Suong was Tom’s hoochmaid?”

She pulls a face at Jay and sits up. “This is fucked up,” she says. She gets the folder out of her day pack and opens it, leafing through a couple of sheets of paper, and then says: “Listen.

“There was this one guy in Tuy Hoa somehow managed to get a shitload of Coors beer. I mean a shitload. I’d love to know how he did it. He was a pretty popular guy for a while. That’s how I took care of Suong. I was getting short and started worrying about what was gonna happen to her when I was gone. So I went to this guy and got to know him. As much as I could anyways – he wasn’t giving much away. He guessed I’d come to pal up to him for some beer. So I offered a trade. For two cases he could take Suong for his hoochmaid once I’d DEROS’s out. He was about two-hundred-something left in-country, but he worked in the base hospital so spent far less time in the bush than I did. It was a good trade. No idea what happened after I left but I hope he kept his word. Seemed like a decent enough guy. He was Harvard med too. Sometimes I think he only traded for Suong ‘cos we were the only two Harvard grunts in Vietna,. Quite a world, huh? I’ve always felt bad though about not knowing, for sure, what happened to her after that. She was a good gal.’ So,” Nerys puts the folder away, “he sold a woman for beer?”

“Fuck,” says Jay.

“You knew that,” I say. “You know that story.”

“Didn’t.”

“How you feeling about your idol now guys?” says Nerys. She laughs.

“Not a good look,” says Jay.

I pause. I would condemn this act – selling another human being – so why am I going to defend it? Because it happened in the context of Vietnam, when morality was not what we

know it to be? Or because I don't know what really happened? "Well, he cared for her, right? He was making sure she'd be looked after."

Three faces look at me for some moments. "Yeah," says Ashley in a small voice, "really well looked after – sold as a sex slave for a case of beer."

"He gave her to some other guy – as if she was his to give – and in return this guy gave him some beer. That's a fucking transaction, definition of. He sold her. He sold a human being."

"You're thinking of the context, Frank?" says Nerys. "That it's not the worst that could have happened?"

"I guess. Like, you think of Vietnam and the thing everyone says about it was the complete breakdown of moral norms. It was a war. On the sliding scale of fucked up things to happen in Vietnam, saving this girl's life, even for a year, in exchange for whatever, is pretty low down on the list of moral failures."

Jay drains his mug and spits coffee grounds onto the dust between his feet. "Well, thank fuck there's somebody here with the experience to tell me what a fucking war looks like."

"Honey."

"Please, with your vast experience, enlighten me some more."

I don't say anything. I can't. I've gone too far without even knowing it. The silence rushes in, angry words snatched away but recorded forever, to haunt us when we return.

"Jay."

"Save it. There isn't any fucking honour in that. That's a story he should've left in Vietnam."

"And what about the whole truth?"

Jay stands up, spits. "Fuck the whole truth. I want to keep liking the motherfucker."

He pours some of the last of the coffee into his mug, replaces the pot on a small flat rock by the fire. He pours a little water over the fire's embers and it hisses and steams and dies. "We should get walking before it gets too hot," he says, and turns towards the jeep. I hear the door open, glance over and see him walk around it unfolding an entrenching tool. I stare away, back over the canyon. We all do. Privacy is easy here, if you just look the other way.

*

We take our time picking our way along the rim of the canyon; breathe in the early morning shadows, the dust from the rocks. The smell of cool sand, more used to heat, is steadying, calming, earthing.

But not for long. Looking down, we can't miss how many others' footprints in the dust, and Clyde is unusually active, exploring ahead like he would were it a walk in the park. Whoever was here, they were here not too long ago, and they had a dog. I wonder what brought them here: the quest for peace, perhaps, or wanting to be part of a movement, of something greater than themselves that was born and died before they had read a word about it in print. The vanishing wilderness. I don't blame them for wanting to see it. It's a good space to be in. You watch the sun more, and the wind swirling the dust. You can say things but not mean any of them, not really – just let thoughts form and out and reinvent themselves and disappear without any real heed of witnesses. It's lazy to talk. The sounds are the wind, the brush, crickets, an occasional muttered comment. This emptiness takes hold of you, peels away your layers and reveals nothing. Your thoughts are loud in your head but they don't make sense, not like they do when you're in a city and trying to find solitude – escaping into city solipsism, the philosophers' solitary confinement of the mind, is an anxious space, filled with regret and recrimination and fretting about tomorrow. It causes ulcers. Here, it's open, hushed. You hear conversations you've had, years ago and miles away, and like getting in touch with an old friend you're startled by how familiar and strange the voices sound, ricocheting off your memory and out over your tongue. Nowhere does a moment seem so real, nor reality so far away. No wonder Tom loved this spot. I hear him bark from some distant memory. I force myself to look up from the ground, to look around like I'll see him,

like he's preserved in the desert and is waiting. And from the rocks to whom years are nothing, I hear him again:

"Keep your head up, Codfish," said Tom. "You're missing everything."

"I don't want to step on anything nasty," I said.

"You won't."

"We don't have anything in England that can kill you."

"At least not living things, right? You'll be fine. You'll hear a rattler and the scorpions are hiding."

I looked up at him; he looked back at me, his face dark under the shadow cast by the brim of his leather sombrero. Grey-white beard jutting forward from his chest as he surveys his country, his broad shoulders no longer burdened with the slight hunch, thick sturdy legs braced apart. A man of and for this country, I thought. I tried to enjoy the walk, to forget the dangers and tread lightly, joyfully. I tried to ignore the pull of the edge and the tantalising terror of the fall; the plummet down sharp, skin-tearing rock to the final, blunt canyon floor below; concentrated instead on trying to enjoy the sight, the vast expanse of territory, of landscape, of undulations and rock formations and sheer quiet. And then I saw Tom looping a rope around a boulder. He looked at me, grinned that wolf grin and said: "Ready for an adventure?"

Yes. Yes, I'm ready for an adventure but my head keeps swinging down and I'm scanning the ground and it's not just out of fear of the alien that I do this today. I look for sign, for Tom's footprints, for the last evidence of my friend passing this way: like touching the walls at Pompeii, a sight of the footprint might ground me, make me feel part of it again, and make him less gone, less alone.

The rising sun makes its presence felt. The rocks we lean on when we rest are warming; my shirt clings to my torso and I notice Jay plucking his away from his chest too. I begin to feel that my skin might soon burn, and I take sun lotion from my pack and rub it over my arms and neck. Under the brim of my straw hat I feel small, sharp stabbings, constant irritations – an itch from the headband that no amount of scratching will relieve. Everything here is rough, hardy, and balanced enough to survive, to make life work: the wicked spines of the yucca; the prickly pear; those tough old creosote bushes and scraggly pinyon trees. There's enough life, which means there must be water, somewhere, sometimes. The canyon, like most canyons, was formed by water, carved out by mountain runoff and the flash floods that appear without warning, deceptively slow, muddy, violent. I breathe deep, let myself enjoy the feeling of sweating freely. This is peace, this is where you can breathe and reflect. You can heal here too, Frank, I tell myself. Like Tom would do.

"We shoulda driven," says Jay.

"How much further?" says Ashley.

"We parked further back down the trail than I thought," he says.

"I'm sweating like a pig. You having a good daydream Frank?"

"I was."

On we go and the sun climbs a little higher, relentless. It's maybe not even eight in the morning but the heat is rising and the earth reflects it back up at us. We pick our way further along the rim and there are more footprints now and cigarette butts and signs of other fires further back from the rim. Eventually, Jay points: "I think this is it bro."

Tom's Anchor, the big rock around which he would tie the line so we could rappel down the canyon wall. Scared the shit out of me the first time and I doubt today will be any

different. The big boulder doesn't bear a single mark to show Tom's passing this way. Jay loops the rope around the rock and drops the loose end down. "Whose going first?" he says.

"I've never abseiled before," says Nerys. "You've done this before though hon yes? Show me?"

I smile and harness up. The worst part is that moment of leaning back over the edge, letting the rope take your weight. The harness clinches tighter around buttocks and scrotum and the thought rings out that one slip is the end of the line. But your head, torso, those essential parts containing mind and soul and heart and guts, are held dangling over space. There's a point where the body stops the mind, applying brakes acquired over millennia of smart quiet survival, and this moment leaves you hanging, almost inert, half held solidly against the rock and half over space. Heartbeat quickens, blood thunders around your body, coursing through your veins to deliver adrenaline to every fibre as your body readies itself for the fall, or the climb. Sweat, heavier sweat than the late morning sun demands, moistens palms under white knuckles. But a swift smile to your companions, a wink, and the mind takes control of the body as it has had to do for so long and so often does not: swallowing down the adrenaline, forcing your vision to widen and stay aware, to not tunnel-vision – forcing that white-knuckled grip to move down the rope; unlocks the legs and works booted feet down the surface of the rock; forces hips down and back and shoulders out, away from the wall. And then it feels good – then we are moving! Almost fast enough to stop your heart and you no longer worry, you experience. You try to slow your descent but you're not moving too fast, not really: it's just the last joke of the body, mad at the mind for winning and taking it to this uncomfortable place, tricking it into thinking you're going too fast. You hit the ground on bent knees and unclip from the rope and call up, say "That's how it's done"

and then remove the harness, rubbing inner thigh (or higher) where it's hurt. This is the descent; this is the mild man's rush.

I release myself from the harness and Jay hauls it up. I dust down my clothes where they bunched under the harness and look around. The canyon curves away slightly in the direction of the Wash and narrows considerably. It's quiet. Ants busy themselves in the dust. I can hear the scraping and soft muted sounds of those above; Ashley is making her descent. I walk across to the other side of the canyon and sit on a high rock and watch her progress. She makes it look easy. I can hear her talking as she comes down but that can't be right, because there's more than one voice but only hers would be echoing. There's a muffled laugh. Somebody else is in the canyon. I walk towards where I think the sound is coming from, towards the curve in the canyon wall where it slopes down towards the Wash some three miles or so away. I round the curve and see a bouldering mat and a couple of bags of equipment on the ground. The voices are a bit further along the canyon and I make my way towards them and a young man walks around the corner. He is tall and very thin and he is shirtless and has a tattoo of a turtle across his left breast and is wearing sunglasses and he is white and his hair is in dreadlocks. My heart sinks.

"Hey," he says.

"Hey."

"You mind waiting up there?" he says, pointing behind me. "We're shooting."

"Shooting what?"

"My wife. She's an influencer." He looks at me for a moment like he's inspecting me.

"We're climbers. Doing a series for her 'gram." He looks at me again. "Instagram."

"Oh. My mate's a photographer, am sure he'd be happy to help."

“Cool.” He looks behind him and back. “I shoot the climbs but maybe like some ‘behind the scenes’ stuff would be cool.”

“I’ll go ask him. How long are you gonna be?”

“We’ve been here like, an hour or so? Might be a couple more but there’s only so long you can climb in a day you know.” He smiles.

“Sure. We’re gonna be coming through before long.”

“Man, I know, free country. But any chance you could hold off? The canyon’s great if you head away from the wash too.”

“I know.”

“Cool.” He smiles again. “But like, we won’t be long.”

“We’re burying our friend. This was his canyon. We’ll pass by quick, but we’ll be passing through.”

He nods. “Cool man, that’s cool.”

I wait.

“Like, burying burying? Like, a body?”

“We’re saying goodbye. Not a corpse.”

“Cool man.” He nods again and waits, then he looks at me and takes off his sunglasses. “Hey, maybe we could help? It would be a great shot for the gram.”

I laugh. “Mate, you can fuck the fuck off with that. But we’ll stay out of your way.”

“Just a thought man, be cool.”

“You too.”

I hear footsteps approaching around the corner and turn and Ashley is there.

“Everything alright?”

“Just negotiating passage.”

“Hey man, it’s not like that at all. All good, whatever.”

“Come help Nerys, Frank? She’s coming down now.”

We walk back to the rappel site and Nerys is already over the edge and inching her way down. She’s laughing but it’s strained. Eventually she makes her way down and I help her with the harness and she laughs again. “That was fun. Don’t make me do it again any time soon.”

Jay lowers Clyde down and I take his harness off and he trots away some way and sits down, happy to be on firm ground again. Jay comes down and we sit by the rock pool and eat oranges and flick the peel into the dust and spit the seeds and pith into the rock pool. The water is tempting, the sun and air already warm. I test it with my hand. Cool, dark, deep, good for bathing.

“What are the odds he’d find one with standing water?”

Jay shrugs, kicks at an open condom packet left at the base of a small lip of rock, the used prophylactic considerably tucked inside. A couple of ants, startled, crawl out of it. Jay laughs. “Looks like a lot of people found it now.”

“There’s some people down the canyon.”

“We can wait.”

“We can walk straight past.”

“Naw. We can wait.”

Nerys has stretched herself out on a rock and closed her eyes. “Was he here long then, if the canyon is so busy?”

Nobody says anything.

“I didn’t think it would be so busy,” she says. “The way you talk about it, it’s like a secret. I didn’t think so many people would know about it.”

The canyon walls hold her words and nobody replies.

“Who found him?” she says.

“Think it was hikers reported his car. Not many people come in the canyon this time of year cause the flash floods can seal you in. You can walk in from the Wash end but when it floods it’s pretty inaccessible. But the cops found him in the end.”

Jay opens his pack. Clyde trots around the canyon, sniffing, exploring, urinating. Jay takes the camera out of his pack and clicks the viewer on and starts flicking through some shots he has already taken. I didn’t hear him shoot this morning but I’m close enough to see some of his shots. Clyde, left of centre foreground, sitting by the front headlight and wheel and partial grill of the jeep which is cut off and closes the left side of the frame, the ground flat stretching away with some scrub in the foreground before it falls abruptly in the middle distance. The canyon rim. Clyde stares at this drop-off and the photo makes him look wise and he stares with unblinking certainty and acceptance. The ground rises again in the background. Right foreground but a little further back is most of me. I must have been stirring coffee but just here at this moment you can see most of me but not my face and my head is angled some towards the rim of the canyon. Even I can see how my shoulders are hunched and tense at this angle. It’s a good contrast, between myself and Clyde, though not flattering.

“I like that one,” I say.

He nods. “Good light. I took it again on film but I don’t know if Clyde stayed like that. Hope it comes out.”

“It’s funny when you think about,” says Ashley, “how we can see pictures straight away now.”

“Yeah.”

“You remember waiting to get film developed?”

Nerys laughs. “Yeah! We used to wait forever to get them. Take photos from the night before to get developed and go have lunch and tell ourselves we were hungover or that we weren’t as hungover as we felt, and that we had a good time.”

“And everyone gets all excited and dwells on the pictures of themselves,” I say, remembering.

“And they never think they look as good as they’d hoped, or as they do.”

“Nor does their crush.”

I laugh. “Yeah. And they look at the photos and look and look and try to make it like they remember it so the crush makes sense.”

“Fuck, who’d be a teenager again?”

“Certainly not now.”

“Not ever.”

“Amen.”

We stand up and drink some water and the sun as it climbs higher chases the shadows from the canyon and heats the air around us and we start to bake. We dump our packs in the shade and strip to sandals and underwear. Jay bombs into the water, followed by Clyde. I sit with Nerys and we dangle our feet in the water. Ashley slides gracefully in beside Jay. I take a bottle of Casillero del Diablo from my pack and the mugs and a bottle of water and then rejoin Nerys, shucking my sandals off by a low sloping shelf of rock that provides the only access to the pool.

The water is cold around my feet and I focus on the feeling of the cold spreading into my feet and up my legs and up through me. The cool reaches about as high as my hips. I keep my hat on – the shade in the canyon is retreating fast. I open the wine and pour a good splash

into each of the mugs and dilute it with water from the bottle. Jay ducks under the water and pops back up and pushes the water from his face and with a couple kicks is treading water in front of me. “You remembered to dilute it.”

I laugh. “Nothing quite tastes like the piss he used to dilute for us. This should be a bit better. Never did figure out what it was he brought.”

Jay laughs and I hold two mugs out to him and he takes them and passes one to Ashley who sips it and smiles. Nobody says anything. God and Ashley can make their own peace out here. I hand a mug to Nerys and take a pull from mine and set it down on the rock and get into the water. I slide in, a slight scrape of the flesh around my hoips and kidneys against the rock, a pleasing exfoliation, a reminder of my spreading middle and age. The water is cool, slightly abrasive. The wine even diluted hangs heavy on my tongue. I tread water some. Clyde swims circles around the rock borders – it’s not a large pool but this is how it is here, why it’s lasted: an overhang from the canyon, a long confluence of geological events conspiring to cast this small rock pool in shade all day long. Difficult for cattle to reach it, it remains mostly untrammelled and unspoiled, save for the tourists and the explorers, the adventurers and condom-wearers, and misty-eyed nostalgia seekers and wayward philosophers like us.

Above the overhang, from when the water levels in the canyon were higher and more constant, can be seen the evidence of the Anasazi: high up beyond our reach now without ropes and ladders, pictograms adorn the rock face, maybe twenty feet above us, some fifteen to twenty feet below the overhang. I remember looking at them with Tom, remember him telling me they were pictograms because they were drawn on the rock, and that we might find a petroglyph or two carved into the rock further down the canyon but we never did. I stare at these centuries old depictions painted above us: a fat deer with antlers, off to one side and

slightly reared up; two bighorn sheep; figures with bows, a series of hand prints, some clearly belonging to the same hand, some not; a wolf or coyote off by itself in the distance, watching proceedings. Under them all a snake, long and patient, menacing underfoot as the other figures dance above it. And above them one of the ghostly horned-headed figures, squat headed and broad-shouldered, tapering up from nothing to the waist like a spectre, violent, hard aggressive. He holds a weapon, this demon, and from his head shooting upwards are long jagged lines like lightning and small figures above. It looks to me like the demon is dreaming of other demons and the dreams look violent so I see why he'd be armed. But I'm no expert on this.

"Looks like he's having a bad dream," I say.

"Who?"

"That chap up there, with all the lightning and shit coming out his head."

Jay looks up. "You mean Gazorbeam?"

"What?"

"Like in *The Incredibles*. Gazorbeam. Dude shoots awesome killer lasers from his eyes."

"Yeah. That guy."

"You reckon he's having a nightmare?" Nerys asks.

Jay shrugs. "Don't blame him. I'd have nightmares too if I fried everything I looked at with the naked eye."

I laugh but it makes me wonder about last night, about him sleeping and snoring and how there had been no snoring at the flat, just the music late into the night and on until early. "You ever have trouble sleeping?" I ask.

Jay ducks under the water again and launches himself out and sits up on the side of the rock beside Ashley. They swing their legs in the water and sip from their mugs. “Why?”

“Well, Tom did. I do too, sometimes.”

“Me too,” says Nerys. “Not nightmares, though.”

“No, not nightmares. Just, trouble sleeping is all.”

“Yeah,” says Jay. “Sometimes. Not like Tom. And sometimes it’s not even like trouble sleeping. Like, sometimes I just don’t wind down into sleep.”

I know what he means, that sick grey feeling of having never quite slept enough, of not relaxing down to it. Like catching snatches of sleep. Nerys and I used to joke that our light, wakeful, restless sleep comes in shifts between and and would come in handy when we had a baby and that though was all that got us through our tossing and turning, bathroom trips, and getting in and out of bed in the middle of the night to go downstairs and read and come back up again. Or to have a drink. “You ever try pills?”

“Yeah. Hated them.”

“Me too.”

“Worst nights sleep I’ve ever had,” says Nerys. “Like being out, not being asleep.”

Jay nods. “Exactly. Like the lights would go out for eight hours but you wake up just as tired anyway and miserable to boot.”

“Yeah.”

“So how about now mate?” I ask.

“Same. You?”

“Better. Ish. Eventually.” I sip from the diluted wine and refill us and splash more water in. I take out a tube of cheese and some crackers and set us up a small lunch. “It’s a long process,” Nerys says eventually, and I realise Ashley hasn’t said a word in a long time.

She's just sitting back, her legs in the water, her eyes hidden behind sunglasses and the brim of her hat. She could be asleep but I feel I can just feel her eyes are open. Watching. Observing.

"What is?"

"Therapy. Treatment." Nerys shrugs.

"What you mean?"

"How long's it been since you slept well?"

"Last night."

"You were snoring like a lion," I say.

"Exactly."

"What about the night before though?" says Nerys. "The night before that?"

Jay stands up. "So I have a little trouble sleeping. That's pretty common. Plenty have got it worse."

"Mae hynny'n iach," says Nerys, under her breath.

"You spoken to the VA about it?"

"Nah."

"You should," says Nerys.

"I go to the VA about my knee. That's it."

"Just tell someone there that you're having trouble sleeping."

"It's my knee keeps me awake man," he says. He reaches for his knee, his hands cupping the kneecap, his thick fingers resting gently on it. "Seriously, it fucking hurts sometimes. Not too often now, but if I don't warm up in the morning or before I go to bed or go for a run? Or if I bang it?" He shakes his head. "Seriously, sometimes it feels like it's just

the pins are holding it together.” He smiles. “So yeah, don’t worry about me. That’s all that keeps me awake.”

“So what kept you awake?” Ashley asks.

Her face is still hidden but I can feel her gaze on me and I take a little time, longer than I want or should really, to answer. I open my mouth and form some words that go and disappear into the hot still air unspoken, the thought rising unreachable like the pictograms above us already and in the end I say: “Oh, you know. First world problems.”

Jay laughs and Nerys looks at me.

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The day doesn't cool but the sun moves past its zenith and we climb reluctantly from the cool water when the rock around it becomes too hot to sit on comfortably. The air is full of the smell of hot dust and sunscreen. Nerys has been flicking through Tom's folder again but packs it away when we start putting gear back in our packs. We have decided it's time – the instagrammers have had long enough. "I'm gonna tell 'em we're coming through," says Jay. "Might come better from a photographer." He smiles. He walks away down the canyon and I notice his limp is more pronounced and I wonder if he's putting it on for the people further down the canyon or if he is in more pain, and if he's in more pain then how come he could sleep. But I push the thought away. He'd talk if he wanted to. Maybe. Maybe not to us, but he'd talk to Ashley.

We shoulder our packs and stand up and then I hear Jay calling out: "You guys need to come see here," and I pick up his pack too and he calls out again "and bring the camera." He has one slung around his neck so I assume it's the digital one and I dig for it in his pack and as I pull it up I can hear Jay speaking. He is further down the canyon and out of sight around the curve in the canyon wall, where it narrows and the narrowing of the rock walls cups the sound and it whispers around the canyon so I can hear him from where the packs are thirty or forty feet away as clear as if he was standing right here. "Yeah, right here. It's okay, you didn't know. Not like this canyon belongs to anyone. No, we'll be quick."

Clyde pads off after the voice and I pull the camera out and flick it on. Waiting for it to power up I look back again. I can feel the hot sun baking my back. Sweat runs down my neck and I wipe damp palms on the material of my shorts. It's hard to see the images Jay has taken in the glare but I hold the camera up so it casts its own shadow over the small screen at the back, and thumb the button to flick through the saved images. There are a few of us from

last night, shots as the sun set above the canyon. I click back and there are a couple of photos of food, presumably some more of Jay's work photos, one of the urn space at the funeral home where Tom's service was held, and back. Looks like he snapped a few of us drinking – there's one of me sprawled in a chair, smiling goofy, eyes glassed, pale, happy in company and ready for bed. I flick back, a few of me and Nerys, and me and Ashley. There's one of Nerys and I on the sofa, and Ashley on the chair opposite us. We're all looking away from each other – Ashley out the window, me down, Nerys across the table and just off away from the lens of the camera. Their table looks vast and empty between us all. I'm surprised Jay took this, but what is worse is we all look bored. I flick on again, past images I recognise of the actress up near Hyrum, and I'm about to stop but I'm curious and Jay is still talking to the climbers and Ashley and Nerys have walked on to join him. An image of a car accident appears on the screen. A white saloon has been flattened at one end. A man lays next to it, one hand held up to his head. Another man, pale, stands next to him. In the background a man is springing from a metallic blue SUV, caught in the moment of gathering speed as he runs towards the flattened car. He is pointing, his mouth open. I assume he is shouting. I think he is shouting at the camera. At Jay.

And then I'm there. I can smell the fuel, hear the hot ticking of the engine and the surreal shapes metal takes on when forced into a new shape. I can hear the man on the ground moaning and I can hear the footsteps as people rush to his aid. Why would Jay pause to take this photo? Has he helped them out of the car and then stepped away? Would this be him constructing a scene? I turn the camera off and put it away. I remember the accident being cleared up, watching through the window as Jay drove us from the airport. A white car. It was this same one. My mouth is dry. I swig some water. What possessed him to take this? He was a Marine, he would have been able to help. He should've helped.

A cascade of images: directing traffic while paramedics work on a screaming motorcyclist in the road behind me on Seven Sisters Road, trying trying trying not to scream abuse at every car that rolled past with the window down and phones raised ready to snap a photo of the unfortunate injured man behind me; up and down a fast roads intersection in every direction, lights blazing and begging the control room to call back the informant to tell us exactly where this white Audi with the human arm hanging from the window was and them constantly replying there was no answer from the informant; the size of the bump on the infant's head as we rode in the ambulance with her and her heavily pregnant mother to the hospital, making her smile with my hat while the paramedics checked her for signs of brain injury; the mother's hand in mine the fifth time I came out of the resuscitation ward with no new information about her son whose face was so smashed up his own brother hadn't been able to tell me who he was. And the smell of burning fuel and the man in the van asking if the road would be closed long as he only lived the other side and didn't want to drive around and me telling him patiently that I couldn't say how long it would be closed and not saying that I'd just watched a young kid burn to death around the corner. I let it fill me, the cold disgust at people, at all people, and how they respond when something happens terribly and suddenly in front of them. You just want to be part of it, all of you. You just want to have a story to tell, a traumatic moment to tell in the pub or to make yourselves seem more interesting; a haunted past at someone else's expense. And Jay who has seen the worst is no better than the rest of you rubbernecking sadists. And then I let myself know again and feel with such certainty how there is no hope, not for any of us. I flick the camera off in disgust and put it back in Jay's pack and I shoulder it next to mine and set off down the canyon.

Nerys intercepts me. "Mae gennym broblem."

"Beth sydd wedi digwydd? Those fucking influencers?"

“Jay’s talking to them. He told them it was a burial. A military funeral.”

“I said something the same I think,” I say. Nerys looks agitated. “What is it?”

“See for yourself,” she says, “that Jay’s bag?”

“Yeah.”

“Open it.”

I sling the bag down carefully and open it and Nerys takes the camera out and sets it carefully to one side and slides her hands in carefully and pulls out a small bundle from the bottom of the pack. She holds a wrapped American flag tea-towel and she unwraps it and holds it up, but not unwrapped all the way so the flag-towel is still draped a little down her arm like a waiter’s white cloth. Tucked in the folds of Old Glory is a small, burnished-bright pewter urn. “He took him,” she says. “He took Tom.”

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Nerys leads me back to Jay and Ashley. They're talking to a group of five young climbers. They are all sinewy, tight muscles gleaming. They have grazes and their hands and elbows are covered in chalk and blood. "I get it," Jay is saying. "It's a good place for a shoot." He is inspecting one of their cameras. One of the men is taking some experimental shots with one of Jay's cameras.

"Yeah," says one of the women. "These are good routes too. Not overclimbed, you know? Not worn or touristy."

"No sure."

"That's our USP," says the man I spoke to earlier. "We don't just want to show the world Sendily's skills and build the brand. We want to show the world what they can't see, what they're missing."

Sendily nods. "Yeah, like, about how fast these secret places are disappearing."

"It's getting harder to find these spots," says Jay.

"I know," says the man. "When I saw your buddy down here I was like, surprised. There's never anyone here."

"We kinda thought we were the only ones who knew about it," she says.

Jay nods. "Yeah. We been coming here off and on for the last ten, twelve years or so. There's more people every trip."

"Or more signs of people."

"So you guys come out here all the time huh?"

"Well I did with a buddy," says Jay. "Frank here used to come back in the day but he's not from around here."

The man smiles. It is a slow, easy smile. "Yeah I gathered that from the accent."

“Our mate who showed us this place came here for longer. From when he got back from Vietnam.”

“Oh man.”

“Yeah. He died here.”

“Oh serious?”

“Pretty blunt Frank but yeah, our buddy died here. This was his favourite place. That’s who we’re burying.”

“Wow. I’m so sorry. But it’s good you came out here.”

“Yeah. We’re gonna scatter him here. He asked us to.”

“Is that allowed?” says the man. “Like, you get permission?”

“Not really. But he fought for freedom in Vietnam so I figured I could do it,” says Jay. “We could do it.”

“That’s cool,” he says. “Hey, mind if we attend?”

“Attend?”

Sendily looks up. “My cousin was in Iraq. He’d like it if we paid our respects.”

“Well, it’s kinda a private thing.”

“No, that’s cool. Just wanna say thanks.”

“Can say thanks to Jay. Jay was in Iraq.”

“No shit.”

Jay nods. He doesn’t look comfortable. “We’re gonna do this ourselves. But thanks for the thought guys. Means a lot.”

“Anything you need. Where do you need to be?”

“We’re gonna start where they found his body,” he says. He points to near where the climbers had set up their stuff. “There.”

It is about twenty feet further around the curve in the canyon wall from Tom's Anchor, before the canyon curves again slightly the other way and runs straight to the Wash.

"Oh shit guys, we're so sorry. We didn't know."

"It's okay."

"We'll move our stuff down the canyon."

"Thank you."

"Just a few shots left to take here and we'll be on our way."

"It's getting kinda late for us," Jay says. "We're gonna do it now."

"We'll be, like, a half hour."

"No shoot is a half-hour."

"No. But we'll be real quick."

"We're gonna ruin your shots, though."

"Jay."

"We ain't waiting."

"Look guys, I know this is a big deal and I'm sorry for your friend and all, but we got a business to run. We'll be quick."

"You can wait."

There's a long pause then and the wind stirs just slightly over the lip of the canyon and Jay seems motionless and then "Sure. Sure thing. It's a good cause." Sendily turns and then says "Mind if we get a shot of you guys? We can share your friend's story. Honour him that way?"

I can feel Nerys rolling her eyes. Ashley speaks. "That's very kind of you."

We follow Jay and the climbers to their gear and then Jay stands slightly away from the spot and points. “They found him about here.” It is a strange place; between the wall of the canyon and a pile of boulders that fell long ago. There are lizard tracks in the soft sand that lines the bottom of the space. It’s about two feet wide and six feet long. A few exploratory ants make their way about the rocks, and a single Jerusalem cricket waits in the sand. I bend close, squatting down, and the cricket jumps away and finds shelter somewhere among the dry vegetation.

“It’s a ways off from where he would’ve climbed down,” I say.

Jay shrugs. “It’s a long trek along the rim. Maybe he just pushed it too much, got dizzy, slipped. Or maybe – .” He shrugs.

“Maybe what?”

Jay looks down into the shade of the crevice, the sepulchral space that held our friend for a time. “Maybe his heart really did just stop.” He turns away.

I look up, examine the wall of the canyon. Recent rock falls, maybe, have scarred the face of the wall but these scars, already, are fading. Or maybe these small chips were caused by the dragging of heavy boots and pack, of bones that hit back at the rock even while themselves breaking. I turn away too. I don’t want to think about that. I remember instead a story I wrote, about a man in a car accident, knocked from a motorcycle. I remember Tom reading it, our discussion – he said he’d help me write about injury, that I needed to understand the truth about what injuries are, and what they do. And in this canyon, clear as day, warm air slipping past and through my skin, filling my lungs and making my chest heave, his gravelly voice is in my head; a voice heavy with the weight of too much experience. “Frank,” he says again from this distant memory, “you’d be amazed at just how damned *hard* it is to kill a human being.”

I turn back to Jay and Nerys and Ashley. Jay holds Tom's urn in his hands, still wrapped in the tea-towel. His shirt collar flaps a little in the breeze and the towel stirs as well. He holds it gently, his hands steady, not shaking. Nerys is holding the folder of Tom's stories, words forming an echo of a life from ashes and dust. Now. Tom's growling voice in my head makes me look around, makes me notice, pay attention. The little things: the smaller parts that Tom loved – the angle of the shade from the rockwalls dictating the terms of life; the need to watch, carefully, where I plant my feet lest I disrupt something that is simply, as Tom would point out, trying to make an honest living.

It's weird to have an audience. They're standing a little ways off from us and trying not to be too disruptive. I hear a click of a lighter and the faint smell of cannabis. Tom would've liked that but they're too strange. This isn't how it should be. Nerys is watching me and then she turns to the group and walks over to them and I hear her say "I'm sorry guys, but can we have this moment? Like, in the nicest possible way, can you fuck off?"

They laugh, not entirely comfortably. "Serious?"

"Yeah. We want this to ourselves. Please."

"Okay sorry," they say. They start to shuffle off but they're not moving very quickly and by now we are all watching them. Nerys walks back and I hear something said a bit louder than other things they're saying and I can taste the rising tempers in the air, feel it thicken between the canyon walls and with nowhere to go. They walk down the canyon and out of sight but there's a bad feeling.

"So how do you wanna do this?" Jay says after some time.

"You tell us," says Nerys. "You brought him here."

Jay shrugs. "I didn't think this far ahead. We could leave the urn, wedge those stories under it somehow. Or we could scatter his ashes and take the urn back."

“Maybe they won’t notice it’s empty. Maybe we could fill it with sand.”

“I reckon Tom might like that. Sounds sneaky.”

“So about where should we spread him?”

Jay sighs. “I’d thought to throw him off the rim, you know? But it didn’t seem quite right. And at the watering hole – well, he’d have got pissed at us for dirtying up the water.”

“Yeah.” I stare down at the funereal gap in the rocks, the nature-made grave and resting place and I can’t shake the thought that Tom chose this and though that choice was wrong, this place is right. “How about here man?”

“Where he was found?”

“Sure. Whatever led him to end up here, he chose that path. Let’s put him back where he belongs.”

Jay laughs. “Burying him where he fell?”

I shrug. “Why not?”

“Like a trooper at the Little Big Horn, yeah.” Jay sets the urn down on a low flat rock and drapes the tea-towel flag over it. “You got that wine?”

I dig the bottle out of my pack and hand it to him. He unscrews it and takes a swig and pours a little on the dust in the gap between the rocks and hands it back to me. I take a drink too, and mix a little more with the dust. I hand the bottle over to Ashley and she shakes her head. “This was you three.”

Nerys nods. “I’m getting the impression girls wouldn’t be welcome on one of his trips here.”

I shrug. Jay reaches down for the urn and makes to hand me the flag but then stops. “Naw, I’ll hold this, it ain’t your flag. You scatter him.”

I take the urn from him and open it and pull open the plastic bag inside. “I didn’t know he’d be wrapped up inside here,” I say. “I didn’t know they did that.” The wind picks a few wisps of ash from the top of the open urn, and I pour a handful out and scatter it over the wine-darkened earth. I pour another handful out and scatter it a little wider around the gap and I pour a third out. There is maybe three-hundred grams of ash per handful and Tom is roughly ten handfuls of ash. “Here,” I say to Jay. “He’d want you to have a hand in it.”

Jay laughs. “Good one.”

I laugh too. “Didn’t know it till I said it.”

Jay throws a couple handfuls of ash into the space and the earth is greying with Tom’s charred, ground bones. Ten handfuls. It is not many and soon the urn is empty. I unceremoniously shake the last of Tom out, and Jay rubs the ash residue from his hands on the flag tea-towel and hands it to me and I do the same. Jay then shakes the tea-towel out and holds out one narrow end for me to hold. I hold it out and Jay folds the flag in simple, measured movements, not a flag-folding ceremony, but with reverence. He puts the folded flag into his pocket and looks around. “We’re gonna need a rock.”

I look around but Jay has found one. “Okay,” he says. “We can use this to weigh down the stories.”

Nerys finds some tape in the bags, and Ashley seals Tom’s last story in the wallet. Jay tapes it to a rock and turns it so it will get minimum exposure to the ink-fading ferocity of the desert sun. We leave his last story, him, taped to the rock in a little plastic wallet, telling in his own words and not ours this time – this time we are silent – to his favourite place, his refuge for better or worse, he and those fourteen GIs, whoever they are, dying on that road in Vietnam. Until the sun bleaches out the ink and the wind and sand tear the story from the

rock and cast it into the canyon and the rains come and the canyon floods and the water takes it and absorbs it and carries it wherever.

Jay sits down on the canyon floor, back against the wall, facing Tom's last resting place. I join him. He takes some wine from the bottle and hands it to me and I drink too. "So long, Tom," he says.

"So long."

Nerys takes the bottle. "Nice to have met you," she says, and Jay starts laughing and so does she. Ashley sips from the bottle. "God speed," she says.

We sit and drink the wine in silence. Clyde stays away from us, next to where Tom fell, and he sits. Upright, ears up, panting, but fixed – he doesn't move but sits still for the longest time and I study him, the greying hair around his muzzle, the awkward swell of his aging knees and the now-white hair around his paws. His big eyes, mournful as always, look right just about now – mournful, waiting. We sit and watch him and finish the wine. At some point I hear Jay's shutter click and I'm glad he's taken a photo of this moment. I feel the memory of the anger at the car crash photo surge again along wine-swollen veins but I suppress it. We listen instead to the emptiness of the canyon. We finish the wine and when the wine is finished I write Tom's name and dates and rank and his little desert mantra onto a piece of paper and tear it from my notebook and roll it up and slip it in the bottle. Through the dark glass I can see the paper has absorbed some of the last drops of red wine. I screw the cap back on and we all walk to Tom's place together and we push the bottle half into the ground. Jay scoops red sand from the canyon floor and fills the urn and wraps it back up in the flag and buries it at the bottom of his pack. Clyde has still not moved and the dog stares at where Tom once was and at where Tom is now and if he understands anything it is that we are sad and as Jay kneels by his pack and does up the straps Clyde breaks his vigil and pads

over to Jay and rests his big head on Jay's shoulder and sits again and I turn to let the two of them have that small moment in private. And then we hear the sound of the helicopter blades chopping the air above us, heavy and regular. It makes a pass by the canyon and Jay looks up. We can't see it, but we can hear the blades. The sound changes, flatter, quicker. "They're hovering over the jeep," he says. "Come on, we need to walk out."

We shoulder our packs and turn and walk away from Tom and out of his canyon to the flood plain beyond where the sun is past its zenith and yet the sky for all that still seems too dark for the time of day.

*

We can't see much of the sky above us. The canyon narrows as we make our way through it but the light shifts, reds deepen and the narrow strip of sky above us is bruised. Clyde stops dead and Jay stops next to him and puts a hand on his head and a low rumble sounds out over the top of our canyon and then rolls around us, muted but close. There are flashes of light that give shape to the contours on the greybellied clouds partially visible above us and the air around us takes on a heady petrichor. More rolls of thunder and more flashes of light and Clyde stops moving and whimpers, tail and ear flat and tucked. "Come on buddy," Ashley says to him, almost a whisper. "S'okay. Come on." Reluctantly, the old dog starts moving again but he sticks close to Jay's heels and keeps looking back to Ashley. He almost trips Jay twice and his head hangs low like he's been scolded.

We press on and pass a small cottonwood tree near a rocky outcrop that sticks out at an odd angle, twisted and curved upwards in pursuit of the thin light from above. Tom used to call this lone tree the Last Post and tradition dictates we take a swallow of water and a swallow of whisky from the hip flask and then we say together as Tom used to say "Back to the World" and we laugh and walk on. As we near the mouth of the canyon and the walls widen and more of the sky is visible it has brightened already but the greens and purples and reds are as vibrant and ethereal as ever, like an oil painting that is perfectly crafted by a realist master but contrasts too much to be a photograph and makes you look closely. There are birds, little grey ones, fluttering past the mouth of the canyon and up it and they sit high up on the walls of the canyon before flitting away again.

As we leave the canyon towards the Wash there is blue in the sky again but the air has a heaviness to it, a watery quality and it takes me back to being a child and staying up late on summer evenings to watch horror films. Scared the hell out of me and the air feels thick like

it would then. There is a low rumbling in the distance, a vibration that rises to a roar as we step out of the canyon walls and onto the wide flat space of the Wash and then we see it, running from right to left, a thick dirty red onrush that cereens through the dust and soaks it in a churns it and adds it to its own unstoppable mass, cracking and breaking chunks of hard dry earth and drawing that with it too.

We stop and Jay automatically clicks Clyde's leash on, the other end tied to his pack. We are maybe five feet out of the canyon when the rush of the flash flood completes its encirclement of our way out, rushing onward toward a gulch a half-mile away and in its rushing pulling the very fabric of the world we walk on along with it. A disturbance in the water, a bulge and then when the bulge reaches a bend a trunk of dead tree is revealed, pushing into the bank and taking much of the bank with it and slowly revolving around its pivot until the flood has worked it free and takes it on with it, bobbing sedately along and over the gorge and away.

"Shit."

"Doesn't look like much does it?"

"Nope."

"Almost looks slow enough to wade."

"Almost."

We watch it for a few minutes and there is no sign of it abating. "So do we wait it out or head back and try to climb out?"

Jay takes off his hat, rubs at the cropped hair with one hand. "I don't think I can climb it."

"Your knee?"

"So let's wait it out."

“Yeah.”

Over the roar of rushing water, a new sound rises, a steady chop and then a helicopter appears, not too low but close enough for us to see it and for it to see us. A dark beast with a white belly, it circles us once before heading on a ways up the canyon. We listen to the sound of it receding but the canyon focuses the chop of the rotors, channelling the noise and distorting it and throwing it back at us like a marauding drumbeat and it sounds like the heart of the canyon itself.

“Maybe we should head back,” Ashley says. “Head up there anyway, wait this out in the canyon.”

Jay nods. “Reckon they’ll be waiting?”

“Why would they be waiting?”

“Fucking cops, man.”

I shrug. “Could be they’re looking for somewhere to land? They could help us get out of here. Doubt there’s enough space between flood and canyon wall for them to help here. But up by the watering hole where it’s a bit wider, maybe.”

Jay spits. “Not entirely sure they’re here to help us,” he says and he turns and starts back up the canyon which still vibrates with the sound of the chopper and tied to his bag Clyde follows along behind him and I take another long look at the glutinous, ominous rush of water and Nerys catches my eye as I look back.

“Maen nhw ar ein holau ni? Neu ef?”

“Dydw I ddim yn gwybod.”

“Hablar maldito ingles.”

“Who are they after, Jay? Us, or you?”

Jay says nothing and then we turn too and follow Jay and Clyde and Ashley, the beat of the rotorblades still thrumming in my chest.

*

We are maybe two hundred yards inside the canyon again with the roar of the flood behind us still audible and the rotors bruising the air still echoing from ahead and so maybe with those we miss the rattle or maybe it doesn't rattle at all. Clyde moves a little off to the side towards the small cottonwood Last Post and the rocky outcrop where there is a small seeping of water from the canyon rock, and we know nothing about it until Clyde yelps and we look and we see the recoiling, the scales stretching out and contracting and that flat spade head raising up to strike again if necessary. It's maybe three feet long, a young adult, and it waits and rattles and stares us down and we in mute fear stare back and Clyde wheezes and his snout already swells and through the whimpers he whines. It hurts.

We say nothing but we back up and walk around watched all the time by those narrow eyes and the rattle comes now warning us against coming back. Clyde makes it seven or eight feet and with a whimper he collapses. "Oh buddy," says Jay. "Come on." He scoops Clyde up into his arms and groans with the effort and the dog whimpers and tries to growl because he is hurt and cannot breathe. The bite is up on his snout, two inches below the left eye. Jay carries him a few more feet until we are safely past the diamondback and he can go about his business having done his terrible work. Jay sets the old dog down and pulls off his pack. Nerys and Ashley are already clawing through their packs and I sling mine to the ground and search through it. "Snakebite kit," Jay says. "Get the snakebite kit." Clyde lies limp, wheezing. I pull my pack almost apart searching. Nerys upends her pack and empties everything and Ashley then does the same. I find one in Jay's pack and hand it to Jay. He pulls it out and looks in it and takes out the scalpel and the suction extractor and stops. "These don't work."

"I know."

“Fucking Tom! These are so out of date! None of this shit works!”

“Honey,” says Ashley. “Oh honey. Help him.”

“Oh God buddy I’m sorry,” says Jay. Clyde lies quiet now, his wheezing as he struggles for breath is slower. Jay’s face is white and he looks up at me and I’ve seen that look before not on the faces of paramedics but on that mother’s face as my colleagues tried to hold her back and the boy’s blood kept pumping over my blue-gloved hands spilling bright red on the latex and so bright on the ground and on my skin. That look, that look that says you have to know something else. This is not happening. You have to do something else. You know something else to do. You can do it. This is not happening. You can do it.

Shock. Nerys grabs my shoulder and I push Jay out of the way. “Move.” We get our hands on Clyde, she takes the scalpel and makes incisions by the bite and I get the suction device going. Jay comes back and holds Clyde’s head in his hands and on his knees he presses his face to Clyde’s. “I’m so sorry buddy. I was cheap. I’m so sorry.”

“Honey.”

“I’m sorry buddy.”

“Jay.”

He cradles Clyde’s head and those big melancholy eyes roll white as the dog is gripped by panic but lacks the energy to move. His tongue lolls foma-specked out of his swollen mouth.

“Jay.”

“Dammit shut up. Buddy I’m sorry. I love you buddy. I’m so sorry.”

He reaches over for his pack and it is a second before I know what he’s doing.”

“Jay no!”

“I’m sorry buddy.”

“Jay!”

“I’m sorry.”

Jay holds him and squeezes and then stands and raises the pistol and sights it between Clyde’s eyes and Clyde tries to stand as Jay has done, tries to sit obedient and loving and Jay pulls the trigger and the shot barks loud around the canyon silencing the flood and the rotor blades and all of us. Jay has closed his eyes and his cheeks are wet. The stunned silence of the canyon as the shot echoes from wall to wall and washes over us and over the motionless body of the dog fills me. Clyde’s blood seeps into the dry sand of the canyon floor and is bright bright red and so dark at the edges where it hits the earth.

“I’m sorry buddy.”

Jay puts the safety catch back on his pistol and puts it in his bag and sits down next to Clyde and holds his head in his hands and we three stand around him. Ashley and I both take a step forward but Nerys is there first and she reaches my friend and sits next to him. She holds him and he just lets go and she holds onto him as his shoulders heave and he sobs and his tears hit the dust by where he sits and the desert drinks up tears and Clyde’s blood quickly and without apology. Then, in the stillness, I feel Ashley give a very small shudder. I turn. She’s crying too but holding it back. I put a hand on her shoulder and she puts her hand over mine and squeezes it and looks up at me. There are tears in her eyes and her eyes swim in front of me because there are tears in mine too and I can’t see, I can’t see.

*

We carry him up the canyon and corpse releases urine and faeces as we go. Already, flies are finding him and worry at his nostrils and eyes and mouth and anus and the hole in his head. Ashley and I swat at them as we walk and Ashley gets out a spray of bug repellent and spritzes it uselessly in the air, chasing the flies away. "That's not doing anything," I say.

"It's chasing them away."

"It's not. It's just a waste."

"Just shut up Frank," she says. "Just shut up."

She sprays at flies again and they keep coming back and she sprays faster and the bottle must have got slippery from the bug repellent leaking from the nozzle because she drops it and she lets out a cry of frustration. She kicks the can and breathes deep and then walks on after Jay who carries the lifeless dog over his shoulder.

Nerys stops to pick up the can. "She used almost all of it."

"I know."

"I don't have any left. Do you?"

"No."

"So tonight is going to be fucking brilliant with the bugs."

"I don't see us staying here tonight."

Nerys is quiet for a minute. "Your friends have some fucked up traditions," she says.

I look at her for a moment and she looks at me and her eyebrow flickers just a little and I find I'm laughing. I'm laughing and I can't stop and the tears are coming too and I see tears in her eyes and she is laughing with me. I hold my arms out and she steps in to them and we hold each other and laugh and then we are quiet and we breathe each other in, the sweat and the dust, the bug repellent, the salt tang of tears. The points of contact are alive: her

breath and the tip of her nose in my neck; strands of her hair catching on the stubble of my cheek; finger tips stroking gently on my shoulders; the small movement of muscles in her back beneath my hand; the pressure of one of her hips against my thigh; the beating of our hearts.

“Okay?”

“Okay?”

We walk on after Jay and Ashley and we hold hands even in the hot desert air. Jay has stopped where we buried Tom and has put Clyde down some ten feet away. We only have one small entrenching tool and so three of us use sticks and the four of us dig a shallow trench for Clyde at the foot of that sepulchral space. The pages of Tom’s last story face us down as we bury his dog. We lay Clyde, already stiffening, in the shallow trench and then we cover him as best we can with dust and sand and spend an hour or more collecting rocks and stones and we build a cairn over where he lays.

“Reckon that’ll keep him safe?” says Jay.

“I really don’t know,” says Ashley.

“I hope so.”

“Me too.”

Above us comes a scream, almost unintelligible. We look up. On the canyon rim, looking down at us, I make out a couple of familiar figures. The voice echoes as it comes down into the canyon. It is the climber and her photographer. I don’t know what they’re saying but the voice rises and it looks like the climber is holding the photographer back. Whatever those words are he is spitting down into the canyon are a curse and they hum in the air around us without form or shape but with venom and agony. Another figure joins them and there’s no mistaking the hat and silhouette of a police officer. The voice gets louder but

no less earthly and the photographer is gesticulating wildly. The police officer nods and disappears and then the photographer and the climber disappear. The police officer returns and shouts through a loudspeaker. We still can't make it out but he tells us to leave the canyon, I think. We wave to show we've understood. We wash our hands and arms in the rock pool and I pass out some hand sanitizer from my pack and we apply it liberally and rub it into our skin and spend longer doing this than is probably necessary.

"Jay," says Nerys, quietly. "What the fuck have you done?"

And Jay without looking up just says "Everything."

"I think we better go," I say.

"Yeah."

"Just tell me," says Nerys. "How much trouble are we in?"

Jay shrugs. "Don't worry about it Codfish," he says. "This one's on me." He walks away towards his pack and slings it up on his shoulders and I say: "It's cool. I got you for half again."

"Na. Y tro hwn."

"Cawn weld."

"Fuck that."

"Okay."

We walk away from Tom and Clyde and out towards the flood stepping around the red smear where Clyde was shot. Passing around the Last Post there is no rattle and we look as we pass. There is no sign of the diamondback. "He's gone," I say.

"Yeah," says Jay. "Wrong place, wrong time."

"Yeah."

"Fucking figures."

“Swearing again.”

“I’ll make it up to Him later.”

“Okay.”

Two hundred yards to the canyon mouth and then one hundred and then fifty and we can’t hear the water any more, not with the same intensity, but as we turn the last twist of the canyon and the still-moving flood comes into sight the thwomp thwomp thwomp returns beating the very air in our lungs. They are waiting for us and we walk out to meet them.

*

There are four of them with two marked SUVs waiting for us on the other side of the flood water. The helicopter makes some lazy circles around us. I do a quick calculation and realise he has to have landed or it can't be the same one. Fuel would be too low. We stop and stand in plain sight and it looks like one of the them is shouting something to us but we can't hear him over the water and the beat of the helicopter. He reaches into his SUV and speaks into his radio mic and after a few beats the helicopter moves off and though we can hear it fading in the distance it doesn't go completely.

"Probably landing by the jeep," says Jay. "They won't let us back there."

"This is a lot of fucking trouble for a stolen urn," says Nerys. "What else is going on?"

"I don't know."

"Bollocks."

"We need to find a way back to the jeep."

"Are you kidding? Honey, no. No. It's the police. We're going to do exactly as they say."

"Honey look at me. Look at me. It's okay. It's okay. Nothing wrong with what we did. With what I did."

"Jay they will shoot you."

"No they won't. We'll be okay. It's all gonna be okay."

"Jay," I say. "This is our area of expertise. We'll do exactly what they say."

He looks away from Ashley and at the two of us standing a little ways apart from them. "You guys do your thing," he says. "I do mine."

"You're fucking insane," says Nerys.

We walk a little closer to the water and this time we can hear the officer as he speaks through the loudspeaker on his SUV. “Julio Vasquez, stay where you are.”

We stop.

“Whatch’all want?” says Jay.

“We need to talk to you guys. Where’s your dog, sir?”

“Dead.”

“Dead?”

“Yessir. Snakebit.” There’s a catch in Jay’s voice, he stumbles over the words.

I shout: “We had to shoot him.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. How many firearms you guys got?”

“Just the one sir.”

“What is it?”

“Sig Sauer.”

“Got a permit?”

“Yessir.”

“And you ain’t fixin to use it agin today are you?”

“Not particularly.”

“Where you keep it?”

“In my pack.”

“The one you’re wearing?”

“Yessir.”

“You want to slowly drop that pack on the floor.”

“Not particularly.”

“I’m gonna have to insist.”

“Officer, it’s hot, I’m tired, we’re out of water and we’re stuck on this side of a flood. I just had to put my dog down, and if I drop this dang thing I don’t know if I’ll be able to pick it up again, so as long as my piece stays in my pack, I’ll keep it on my back if it’s all the same to you.”

“This is madness.”

“Alright. Just keep your hands by your sides and out your pockets. I want to see those hands at all times, you understand me?”

“Yessir.”

“Same goes for all of you. I can’t see your hands at any time, we’re gonna have a problem.”

“Yessir.”

“Alright then. Now, I’m gonna need you guys to come over here so we can talk. We got water, and there’s AC in the vehicle.”

We look at the water. “He’s having a laugh, right?” says Nerys.

“There’s no way we can cross that,” says Jay.

“You sure?”

“Yeah. That’s a bullshit order.”

“They’d know if we could cross or not,” I say.

“I’m telling you, we can’t.”

“I’ll try it.”

“Frank.”

“No, enough is enough. You want to be a stubborn American individualist, you go right ahead. I’m doing what the cops say before one of us gets hurt. I’ll sort this shit out if I can.”

“Alright. Be careful.”

“Always.”

I shout out “I’m coming over.”

“You come slow. We’ll throw you a line.”

I walk to the edge of the water and baulk. It looks shallow, it looks quick. I don’t know how powerful it could be but if it gave Jay pause for thought then I must be careful. I can’t see any hazards and that worries me. The water is very churned and muddy. I can’t see anything that might hit me or knock me over. I set one foot in and the water splashes up quite quick and rises over my boot and up my bare leg to halfway up my calf. I plant the foot and lunge forward with my other, planting it heavy in the much and water that flows fast around me and is roaring again now I’m in it, thrumming the air around it. “This doesn’t seem like a good idea, officer,” I shout.

“You’re fine, we’re floating a line down to you.”

“Right.”

One officer comes forward and throws a lifeline out into the water upstream and it lands close by me and I have a flash, remembering throwing these lines across a sports hall at Hendon, laughing at the one officer who let go and threw the whole bag and line into the imaginary water. This officer does it right and the line floats down to me. I grab it and start making my way across, planting my feet and hauling firm on the line. Two officers at the other end are hauling on the line too and it’s pulling me forward, which pulls me off balance a little but I pull back to keep the line taught and that steadies me. I’m being pushed further and further downstream in the rush of the water but I make steady, slow progress. I’m nearly two-thirds of the way across when a sharp biting pain lances up my leg. I curse and my leg buckles underneath me and I fall sideways but keep hold of the line. I can feel myself being

pulled across but the pain in my leg is not abating and all I can think of is Clyde trying to breathe and the swelling and I feel the panic rising up. My chin is just above the water and I get a mouthful of filthy, soil-laden water and I choke and spit and try to stand but the water holds me off balance. Something big bumps into my hip and scrapes painfully underneath me. It catches my trailing, injured leg and I feel it catch and then there is more pain. The water around me looks deeper red than I remember the river looking and then there are hands under my shoulders and I'm being pulled up onto the bank. I look back at my leg. Blood is pouring from a long gash in my left calf, deep by the look and feel of it. I look at my hands: white, shaking. Shock. I try to sit up but am pushed down. "My leg," I say and try to sit up again. I'm pushed back again, hard, and then I'm being rolled roughly onto my front, and feel a weight pushing my pack into my back. It makes breathing hard. My arms are yanked behind me and pain lances up from my shoulders. I feel cuffs being put on my wrists and I'm being held on my front. Someone is reading me my rights. I'm still on my front. The weight still presses into my back and I can feel someone else pushing my shoulder down too. "Positional asphyxia," I say. I try to shout it but drawing enough breath is hard. My diaphragm is constricted by my own weight, the weight of my pack, and the weight of the officer kneeling on me. "Positional asphyxia," I try to say again. My face is full of dirt – the dust I can see in front of my face turns to hummus in the water that runs from me and the drool escaping my mouth. My leg still throbs and I can feel the blood pulse from it. My shoulder burns with the force of being restrained. "I can't breathe," I say.

I remember: CS Incapacitant Spray. We carried it when I first joined, and usually got some in the face when we used it. It attacks the moist parts of you, irritating the respiratory system. It hurts, but it's main stopping power is the sense of panic this unleashes. It's temporary, but the panic I well remember. I focus now as I did then, pushing that panic down,

focussing on the inside, making myself relax, on breathing out the adrenaline that courses through me. I do not struggle. I try to breathe regularly. I cough as I inhale red dust. “For God’s sake, roll me on my side,” I say. Nobody listens. I have no authority here.

Eventually I see sky. I’m hauled to my feet and dragged to a vehicle and they sit me in it, rough hands pushing my head down. I am left alone. My leg is still bleeding. I hear the megaphone: “You coming across now.”

I don’t hear any response but I hear an officer near me curse. When I’ve cleared my head enough I look up in time to see Jay disappearing back in the canyon. Nerys and Ashley seem to be sitting by their packs, hands on their heads. An officer approaches me. “Your buddy has really messed up.”

*

There was a kid, a young probationer out with us one night. We stopped a car and seized it for no insurance. He questioned the driver, and you have to do that under caution. Only he starts out with “You have the right to remain silent.” Watched too many American cop shows. We called him Miranda after that, but not for too long. Everyone is new at some point. So when an officer comes to read me my Miranda rights again I start laughing.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing. Just remembering a story.”

“Care to share?”

“From when I was a copper.”

“Sure pal.”

I’m sitting up in the car now. Someone has finally tended my leg. It hurts. They’ve cleaned it, sterilized it, bound it.

“Where’s Nerys?”

“Who’s Nerys?”

“My wife. She was with us. Where is she?”

“Waiting for the flood to settle. With the other lady.”

“Okay. And Jay?”

“He ran, and left you in a world of hurt. You’re all in a lot of trouble.”

“He didn’t run.”

“Sure looked like it to me.”

“I’d be more worried about me being injured under your care.”

“Nobody made you try to cross the flood. That was pretty stupid.”

“It was your idea.”

“Nope. You’re an adult, it was your choice. We were all the way over the other side of the water. How could we have made you do that?”

“You ordered us to cross.”

“We didn’t.”

“This is going to be fun,” I say, and lean back in the seat of the car, staring at the ceiling. “That why you’re reading me my rights again?”

“Again?”

“Again.”

“Nobody read you your rights yet sir.”

“They did. When I was being restrained. Completely unnecessarily, I might add. See, I used to do your job. And you’re worried you were too rough with me. Which is fair. You probably got hands on and didn’t bother to check that I was injured. You went straight for the dramatic arrest like you got a film crew here or something. And I was face down in the dirt and you kept me on my front too long. It’s amazing I didn’t actually go completely into shock and then suffocate, given the position you had me held in.”

“You trying to tell me how to do my job?”

“Yes. Because you’re clearly untrained. That, sir, was panic. And there was more than one of you. So, two officers panicked arresting an injured person of interest. In the Met, you’d be in for a proper bollocking and probably suspension pending a really protracted, soul-destroying investigation.”

“Whatever you say sir.”

“I’m really looking forward to my interview, by the way.”

“Trust me sir, so am I.”

*

Dear Frank,

I know you were hoping to find me back here at home, and by now you'll have realised I'm not there. I hope you understand why this is, why we need time apart to heal. You see, it wasn't until we went to Utah that I realised just how broken we were. The nightmares, the therapy, the drunken rows and the drunken make-ups, none of it seemed like it was a real problem, was just a way of being. And then I saw Jay, and it took someone else to be the one suggesting the last drink nobody wanted for me to realise something was truly wrong.

I'd always known it, I guess, always felt it and I think you did too, that's why we always felt so guilty all the time. But we're not doing each other any good at the moment. You might have noticed I've not been joining in with the drinking for a while. No, I'm not pregnant, and I know you had hoped I was – we had hoped I was. Instead, I've been focussing on getting back to life, and it's like my head has started to clear over the last year or so since Utah. I don't know if the therapy has helped me; like you I think I still thought it was something to be ashamed of, something that might get me sacked or retired early, something that would stop promotion. But it's nonsense thinking like that, isn't it? The best thing you and I did was leave the Job together, a clean break and a new life, a chance to reconnect with a normal, real world, without the horrible little things life deals to everyone in small bundles but that we get to see them all open all at once. And then we wasted it. We thought getting out was enough but really, don't you see, what we needed was a way to get back into a life. I hope, now that the lockdown is coming to an end and we can move a bit more freely, we can spend a bit of time reconnecting with things, and then reconnecting with

each other. It might be that it takes too long, or that you're not willing. Maybe I won't be willing, but as I write this, I hope we both will. There's a family that is us, even just the two of us, and it's a family we chose and a family we should both want to keep choosing, not a family we just need. So that's why I'm gone, for now. And that's why you're reading a letter, sitting on top of a pile of paper, on our kitchen table.

The pile of paper is your story, and mine. About a week after we got back I had a meeting with my supervisor and we agreed to throw out everything I'd written before – those police stories, the collection I was writing for my PhD, not gone forever but they're not what I was wanting to write about. One day I'll finish them. But there was another story to be told, and one that I felt more able to tell. So, I wrote about your friends, and about Tom's funeral and our trip to the desert. Everything in these pages is true, Frank, even if you disagree with them. Maybe not what actually happened, but how it felt to be there, what scattering Tom really felt like, and how you were and how I was and how Jay and Ashley were.

Some parts of this were easy – I was with you, I could recount what I saw easy enough. Jay, the city, the countryside. Tom's stories, the ones in that folder we found and the garage we found it in. But I had to fill in a lot of gaps, too. You are a quiet man Frank, much quieter than when I first met you, and never so much so as when we drove anywhere. I watched you, watching the city around you and trying to guess at the feelings in your head, the memories and how those memories felt. I know you, though, and I know what nostalgia feels like and you've spoken of those times enough in both funny and sad moments over our last ten years together that I think I got the hiraeth down well enough.

You'll have to forgive some artistic license, though. How could I, for example, know what you felt like, seeing Ashley again for the first time after so many years? It took a lot out of me, to make me set aside the pain of knowing how easily the two of you got pregnant, and

how hard it has been for us. It's an easy enough thought to get past, don't get me wrong, but to write it was hard and I hope you'll forgive any misunderstandings, or any perceived inaccuracies, but in the end I had to write it my way.

In places I've written you thinking what it looked like you were thinking; where I thought the words you said, the things you did, came from. Salt Lake City having made a quarter-turn from what you remembered, that came from looking out of the window and you asking me if I'd seen the Grand Canyon, and being surprised it wasn't on the map of the flight path and that we'd come from another direction. I didn't write your disappointment – it seemed unfair, how much you wanted me to see it. Instead I wrote how much you wanted me to see what you had seen back then, and I wrote that as you wanting it for yourself. I don't think writing it like that strayed too far from the truth, even if you didn't say it. I wrote Tom's canyon exactly as I saw it, and I took some of your quietness, some of that disappointment, and painted the walls of the canyon with it. I was not there, back then, I'd never met Tom, I couldn't know what that canyon meant to him. But I know what that memory meant to you. I'm sorry I had to write a more dramatic ending to the story than happened, though. But you'll understand when I tell you that in a story, you can only have a character grasping for something that's lost for so long before something gives way or bends or happens, because that's what a life of searching really is – looking for something lost while the rest of your life happens around you.

Something else happened too, though, and I hope you'll forgive me for recounting the boy in the burning car, or not recounting it. There are some things, when you're telling a story, that creep in when you don't even know it, and you think you're making one point and bringing a certain memory, feeling, person even back to life, even if only in shadow or relief, and then you get to the end of the telling and realise what you really told was a story you'd

hidden from yourself, all along. A story you didn't even know you needed to tell. I know we didn't really scatter Tom's stories, Frank, not literally; but in a way that's exactly what happened when we went down to his canyon with his friends. We told his stories, and the stories we have make up who we are. The stories we tell, the stories we retell, those form the memory of who we are to each other. Those are the stories people will tell to each other just like we did in the canyon, when we're dead, when the person is gone and all that's left are the stories. But the stories we keep from others, keep only to ourselves, are the ones that form the other side of our person; that hidden shadowed side that mostly disappears when we die. Or could do.

I know you saw horrible things that haunt you. I also know that the boy in the burning car wasn't one of them. I would ask a small act of forgiveness from you, for that: for putting my hidden untold story onto you, when I know you carry your own. But because you carry your own with you, and I don't know them, my boy in my burning car must stand in for them.

So, now you know. I haven't handed this in yet; no-one else has read it. You get first refusal, because it's about you, but I get final say because it is also about me. I will promise you this, though: until we're together again, until we can heal together and not hide together, until we can be raw and hurt in front of each other comfortably, I'll not let another soul ever read this story.

Deuparth gwaith yw ei ddrechrau, cariad.

Critical Commentary: ‘Trauma, memory and narrative: a creative and critical exploration of memory and trauma in the veteran’s narrative, 1967-2014’

Preface

I started my PhD in 2014 with half a novel and a general idea of what I wanted to write about. *Scattering Thomas Taylor* was to be a novel about veterans, and the stories those veterans tell and retell. I’d had the idea from hearing veterans of the American War in Vietnam tell me a story, and then tell it different to someone else. While this isn’t unique to veterans, something about the gulf of experience between storyteller (went to war) and audience (hadn’t gone to war) sharpened my interest in why a particular story was told, or retold differently. As Kate McLoughlin points out, “War stories are out of control, ‘endless’ (in inexhaustible supply, constantly rehearsed and lacking conclusion) and ever-lasting.”¹

I quickly realised that why a veteran tells a particular story, or retells it in different ways over and over again, has its roots in trying to make oneself understood. Tim O’Brien repeatedly turning to memories in *The Things They Carried* is, arguably, a literary representation of this; Karl Marlantes discusses his motivations for starting *Matterhorn* 35 years before it was published as an attempt to “explain myself... to tell my story.”² Marlantes also discusses how literature and storytelling are methods to help veterans relay their experiences to family when they can’t.³ And Jonathan Shay in *Achilles in Vietnam*: “The

¹ McLoughlin, Kate, *Veteran Poetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) p201

² (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/jul/11/marlantes-matterhorn-book-review> accessed 27/07/2022).

³ (<https://www.motherjones.com/media/2010/04/interview-karl-marlantes-matterhorn-vietnam/> accessed 27/01/2020).

advice that veterans consistently give to trauma therapists is ‘Listen! Just listen.’ Respect, embodied in this kind of listening, is readiness to be changed by the narrator.”⁴

So, I realised my novel was about trauma, memory, and storytelling. This ‘about’ caused problems straight away – I had themes, but not a story. One of the authors key to my research, Tim O’Brien, famously authored a short story called ‘How To Tell A True War Story’⁵, and my initial thinking about *Scattering Thomas Taylor* can be summarised by breaking down the title of this story into the constituent parts of ‘True’, ‘War’ and ‘Story’. I was looking hard at the first two and neglecting the third: I was, after all, writing a story.

My initial focus on ‘True’ and ‘War’ also raised the problem of authenticity. The first and most obvious issue of authenticity I needed to address is that of my own biography. I am not a veteran writer, so can my stories of veterans be ‘authentic’? The question of whether or not it’s possible for a non-veteran to write war authentically, however, is not one I need address in this thesis: I’m not writing war – I’m writing what it is to sit across a barroom table or campfire from war’s impact on the human.

As to whether the non-veteran can write about veterans, this leads to questions the publishing industry is currently asking itself, albeit through the lens of protected characteristics such as race and ethnicity, gender, and sexuality: whose experiences can the writer portray? Is writing only valid if it comes from lived experience? Does a writer need to be from a particular background in order to write about that background? These are important questions about identity, and ownership – and in many cases, exploitation – of that identity, though they don’t concern this thesis beyond my rather simple (biographical) explanation: I

⁴ Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam* (Scribner, 2003), p189

⁵ Tim O’Brien, ‘How To Tell A True War Story’ from *The Things They Carried*, (London: Flamingo, 1991) p64

have lived in Utah; I served for nearly ten years as a British police officer; and I know and have known veterans of the wars in Vietnam and Iraq.

It feels a little like taking a short-cut to fall back on biography like I just did above; really, shouldn't storytelling push us beyond the idea of lived experience as the final word in authority on a subject? What about the variety of lived experience? What about the nuance of boundaries within those experiences? For a start, Tim O'Brien says:

“Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been there? I think not. He can tell war stories.”⁶

I interpret this as O'Brien asserting that one's experiences just give one stories – not any meaningful insight. In an interview for Pritzker Military Museum & Library's 'Citizen Soldier' series, Tim O'Brien and Karl Marlantes discuss the difference between the experiential authenticity of 'having been there', and 'the truth': different perspectives can lead two soldiers who fought side by side to have memories about the same battle that are completely alien to each other.⁷ Perhaps the soldier cannot say anything meaningful, then, but the soldier's experience does give us truth – if not 'the' experience of what war is, then 'a' experience of what war is. As Robin Silbergleid says:

⁶ Tim O'Brien, *If I Die In A Combat Zone*, (London: Flamingo, 2006) p23

⁷ Marlantes, Karl and O'Brien, Tim, 'Citizen Soldier' episode 'The Fiction of War', Pritzker Military Museum & Library, 2013 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v77I5rIvHIY> accessed 11/12/2018)

“...I am not interested in whether O’Brien tells the truth... but rather why the narrator needs to declare the truthfulness of events or details in order for the book to do its work as a narrative account of Vietnam.”⁸

Could it be that the nature of the conflict at the heart of *The Things They Carried*, and it’s cultural legacy (including the sort-of reconciliation that accelerated after 9/11), require *more* authenticity, *more* truth, because it was such a polarising experience, and one that directly impacted so few Americans, but had massive cultural resonance for most, if not all? I don’t think so. I think this has more to do with trauma, and how we write traumatic experiences, or how we express them – particularly as we enter a time when the latest generation of young people are at last tearing down a lot of the stigmas that surround mental health. Silbergleid, in examining what he terms ‘autobiographical metafiction’ as a literary technique, seems to agree that this creative tool is designed for this purpose:

“...issues of ethos, including authorial intent and credibility, are central... this technique provides a means of engaging the ethical problems involved in writing about traumatic material, material for which the issue of the ‘true’ or the ‘real’ necessarily remains in question.”⁹

Ultimately, this is what I’m writing about – the role stories play in our discussions of trauma and understanding. The irony is that I, a non-veteran writer, am relying on a veteran writer to authenticate my writing by asserting that being a veteran doesn’t make one more qualified to

⁸ Silbergleid, Robin, ‘Making Things Present: Tim O’Brien’s Autobiographical Metafiction’, *Contemporary Literature*, University of Wisconsin Press, vol. 50, no. 1, Spring 2009, p129-155

⁹ Ibid.

talk meaningfully about war. Whether veteran-status alone renders one more qualified to talk about trauma, on the other hand, I will examine through the work of Phil Klay; one of a new generation of veteran writers, writing into a world primed for the veteran to be traumatised, because that is what popular Vietnam narratives and cultural representations tell us being a veteran is: to be witness to trauma.

The publishing industry, however, feels a bit differently. In a 2012 interview with Kevin Powers for *The Guardian*, Susan Crown writes:

“...if it’s a truism that most first novels are autobiographical, it is also true that some resumes are more equal than others...”¹⁰

This notion that an author’s biography gives them authority in a chosen subject has arguably been quite consistent throughout publishing history, as we shall see later. But while authenticity is a much-debated term, the authenticity question for my thesis is two-fold. First, the authenticity of experience, and in this thesis that means veterans’ experiences as they relate to both telling war stories, and the (arguably consequential) myth of the trauma hero¹¹. How these authentic experiences are relayed, and in what form, is a key concern of *Scattering* Thomas Taylor.

Second, how is this authenticity deployed in a publishing context – how is it marketed? Some of this argument is informed by current discussions within the publishing industry about authorship, cultural appropriation, and what an author can and cannot write about; I’ll also touch on the different concepts of ‘authentic’ and ‘true’ for different audiences

¹⁰ Susan Crown, Guardian Book interview with Kevin Powers on *The Yellow Birds*, *Guardian*, 13 Nov 2012

¹¹ See Roy Scranton, ‘The Trauma Hero: From Wilfred Owen to “Redeployment” and “American Sniper”’, *LA Review of Books*, January 2015

of war writing, be they literary, or memoir audiences. This critical commentary uses an examination of how the industry markets veteran writing as a means to interrogate ‘the authentic’. And this brings us back to O’Brien’s ‘How To Tell A True War Story’, as it is key to the aspects I’m examining of this particularly fraught area of debate around authenticity and publishing.

So, once again to the constituent parts of the title of O’Brien’s story. ‘How To Tell’ looks at the creative and cultural contexts in relation to authenticity – particularly the question of a non-veteran writing veteran narratives (my case). ‘True’ in this context doesn’t mean ‘what really happened’ – *Scattering Thomas Taylor* is a work of fiction, though drawing from memoir, biography and oral history in places. Rather, I use ‘true’ here in the creative sense, referring to an artistic goal whereby the writer or storyteller makes the reader feel what they are reading, deep in their emotional core; ‘true’ as in ‘true to experience’ or ‘true to life’; compelling enough and accurate enough that the reader forgets they are reading. It’s like ‘willing suspension of disbelief,’ only it’s more of an aspect of the writer’s craft, and thus requires less of a conscious act on the part of the reader. I will also examine critical writing and reviews that assess fiction and war writing against the ‘true’ narratives of what is termed ‘the kill memoir’. How does the fictional veteran narrative compete in this space? ‘War’ is the theme, rather than a constituent part – veteran narratives are still one of the most explicit representations of trauma, and I will be examining the troubled ‘nobility’ that attends this kind of trauma – compared to, say, abuse memoirs or the ‘misery porn’ bestsellers of the late 90s and early 2000s – and how this relates to masculinity. For example, does the Myth of the Trauma Hero make it okay for men to be broken by war/ ‘noble’ traumas, and if so, does that render other forms of breaking less masculine/ acceptable, or more problematic? And finally, ‘Story’ – what are the requirements of plot, narrative, story, market and audience that

influence the creative decisions I have had to make? To be frank, *Scattering Thomas Taylor* has been a paralysing endeavour for the most part – torn between an academic interest in the themes, a pedagogical pursuit of creative writing disciplines, and an industry-informed obsession with ‘what will sell’.

Thanks to the fact that the publishing industry is a business and operates this way, biographical authenticity is how a veterans’ narrative is presented to the world. The target audience for Phil Klay and Kevin Powers isn’t the same as for *American Sniper* – despite the subjects being the same. Tone is important, and Klay in particular engages in a most O’Brien-like way with the myth of the trauma hero, pointing out the problematic nature of lionizing the veteran experience and a veterans’ trauma, how this can absolve us of the guilt we should arguably feel, and obscures other valid traumas. In many ways, the veterans’ narrative, or at least the Myth of the Trauma Hero, provides perhaps unintentionally a cultural context in which the only way it is ‘okay’ for a man to be traumatized, or indeed for anybody to be traumatized, is in service to one’s country on the field of battle.

Chapter One: “He can tell war stories.” Authenticity in American Vietnam and Terror War narratives.

Included in the DVD release of *Band of Brothers* (2001) is a video diary by actor Ron Livingston, depicting the pre-shoot ‘boot-camp’ the actors were put through by Vietnam veteran and retired USMC Dale Dye. Livingston narrates, and we are shown, an incident when one actor is made to hold himself in a stress ‘diamond’ press-up position as punishment

for an infraction. Gradually, other actors join the unfortunate player in this position, and Livingston discusses the feeling of camaraderie between the cast-members that this process instilled, and this incident demonstrates. The music swells. *Band of Brothers* is ultimately the story of a tight-knit elite unit in World War Two. The presentation of this moment in the video-diary in this manner is linking the experiences of the cast with the experiences of the soldiers they depict. This, we are being told, is a serious, authentic production.

It's a common feature: if we look at DVD releases of popular war narratives like *Saving Private Ryan*, *Band of Brothers*, *The Pacific*, *Black Hawk Down*, *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Generation Kill* and so on, we find 'extra' features depicting the actors going through these 'boot camps'. Indeed, Matt Damon was even excluded from much of the 'boot camp' process the rest of the cast of *Saving Private Ryan* was put through, in order to enhance the sense of resentment toward him/ his character from the other actors.¹² But why? Why do audiences value this extra knowledge? It doesn't affect the plot, for example, so why do we care?

It is a standard entertainment marketing strategy: 'based on true events'; 'inspired by a true story'; 'the untold true story of...' and so forth. In traditional book publishing, the dust-jacket biographies of veteran-writers state to us their credentials: this is an authentic account by someone who was there. We assume their words on war have more weight than the words of those who have not been there.

There's an old joke, which I first heard from Rich Hall (as Otis Lee Crenshaw):

Q: How many Vietnam vets does it take to screw in a lightbulb?

A: You don't know? Of course you don't know. You weren't fucking there, man.

¹² *Saving Private Ryan*, dir. Steven Spielberg (Dreamworks, 1998), DVD Extras

This joke relies on a common cultural understanding and knowledge of the refrain of the misunderstood, alienated veteran: “you weren’t fucking there” is the emphatic expression of frustration at the uncrossable experiential gulf between veterans and non-veterans. In his short story ‘Psychological Operations’¹³ from *Redeployment*, Phil Klay uses this joke as a way to demonstrate his character understands “...that the idea behind this joke is wrong but is aware of how it functions in the culture.”¹⁴ Waguhi, an Army Psy Ops veteran, is telling a war story to a classmate, Zara. In the opening section of the story, Klay uses this joke to point out that the punchline – and the culturally recognisable figure of the traumatized veteran – still miss the point:

“It’s amazing how well the veteran mystique plays, even at a school like Amherst, where I’d have thought the kids would be smart enough to know better... And that’s really the game. Everyone assumed I’d had some soul-scarring encounter with the Real...that either destroys you or leaves you sadder and wiser. It’s bullshit, of course... the only thing I felt I really had on these kids was the knowledge of just how nasty and awful humans are.”¹⁵

Waguhi likens the experiential gulf between himself and his classmates to that of the only other non-white student in the class – in particular, he likens his “veteran mystique” to the “street cred” Zara gets for being black and from Baltimore: “That she was... a million times more privileged than 90 percent of the white guys I served with in the Army didn’t particularly matter. Baltimore, everybody who’d seen an episode of *The Wire* could tell you, was a rough city.”¹⁶

¹³ Phil Klay, ‘Psychological Operations’, *Redeployment*, (London: Canongate 2014).

¹⁴ Kate Kelloway, interview with Phil Klay, *Guardian*, March 2014

¹⁵ *Redeployment*, p170.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p171

Klay is playing PsyOps with the reader. This is a collection of stories about veterans and war by a veteran of a war. But as readers accept that this story comes from the other side of an experiential gulf, one we (for the most part) don't know, but can at least imagine, we are becoming the figures he disparages in this story. He's pointing out to us that we are just like the white kids in the Amherst classroom who've seen *The Wire* and are now according Zara street cred. Klay has credibility to portray the returned veteran because he is one. He has the authority to write such a character in the first person – the 'I' that keeps us as readers sitting quietly, audience to an experience; witnessing but not quite sharing it in the way close third person, for example, would allow us to.

But Klay is a white author, not the only other non-white person in the class at Amherst. And he was a Public Affairs Officer, not a Psychological Operations specialist. The authenticity his biography gives him, he is saying, is a fiction. In 'Unless It's A Sucking Chest Wound', Klay depicts a rear-echelon Marine who only feels like a Marine when he returns home. Meeting a woman who presumes he is traumatized, the narrator reflects: "I don't have PTSD, but I guess her thinking that I did is part of the weird pedestal vets are on now. Either way, I didn't contradict her."¹⁷

Again, Klay is playing with the reader: we too are the woman who presumes he, as a veteran, can speak to things we cannot – or such as the woman in the story, we are reading his work to find a higher truth, perhaps even something to help us understand our own personal histories and traumas, through the writing of somebody who has been through 'More' than us – that "...soul-scarring encounter with the Real".

¹⁷ From 'Unless It's A Sucking Chest Wound', Klay, *Redeployment*, p260

In *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*, Mark McGurl

makes the argument about the novel being experience-tourism:

“A novel is... a very good example of an “experiential commodity” whose value to its readers is a transvaluation of the authorial labor that went into its making, and most often has little to do with the economic value of the pulp upon which it is pressed. This is brought into relief by the even better example of tourism, where the tourist pays simply *to be* in a certain place, but hedges the immateriality of his experience by taking pictures and purchasing durable souvenirs. Since reading novels and being on vacation are so often aligned in popular practice, we might well suspect a deep link between the two. Isn’t the printed matter of the novel put back on the shelf in a sense the “souvenir” of the quasi-touristic imaginary experiences that were had inside it?”¹⁸

It's important to bring McGurl in here, as the legacy of how Creative Writing as an academic discipline was formed in the postwar US must be considered when thinking about veteran narratives. As Eric Bennett says in his introduction to his further study of American Creative Writing pedagogical history, *Workshops of Empire: Stegner, Engel, And American Creative Writing during the Cold War*:

“To understand creative writing in American, even today, requires tracing its origins back to the apocalyptic fears and redemptive hopes that galvanized the postwar atmosphere. These origins touch, with varying pressure, countless dimensions of American literary culture from 1945 to the twenty-first century, including pedagogy, poetics, canon formation, and patterns of commercial success. In some respects the early Cold War is a distant memory to readers and writers in the second decade of the twenty-first century. But in others it remains the contingent foundation on which many American writers have erected structures of

¹⁸ Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*, Harvard University Press, 2011

ostensibly eternal common sense... The minds of Engle and Stegner... of their colleagues, and of their influences, were not woven from the weak threads of curriculum and handbook, of grade-book and classroom rule-of-thumb. The Cold War-era writers who laid the ground for a future nation of Masters of Fine Arts programs pursued their ambitions with a deep knowledge of the Western canon and a hungry consciousness of world events. They faced down the philosophical dilemmas of the geopolitical mess. They lived fully and passionately in their times, read the news with anxious vigilance, travelled widely, cared deeply about the Pax Americana, and built up their writing programs informed by that concern.”¹⁹

It's worth discussing the origins of how the writers most prominently featured in this thesis were instructed to write on Creative Writing MFAs, as it gives an indication into how style and approach are not only acting on the authors themselves, but also on the understanding of what makes good writing held by those cultural gatekeepers in the publishing industry.

One crucial aspect to the founding of the modern creative writing program was the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 –the GI Bill. The Bill provided WW2 veterans with funds for college education, unemployment insurance, and housing. So, the creative writing program was born in teaching these veterans how to write their stories. They were mature, experienced, willing to write and they had government money to learn how. Wallace Stegner, novelist and one of the key figures in founding the modern Creative Writing program, reflected back on the first generation of veteran writers: “When the GI students began to come back and demonstrate such a mature capacity it was perfectly clear that I was going to do something to make a program for them.”

¹⁹ Eric Bennett, *Workshops of Empire: Stegner, Engel, and American Creative Writing during the Cold War*, (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2015), p4

So what does this mean? Well, McGurl makes the point that these veteran-writers were being taught the works of modernists and veterans like Hemingway, as well as the works of Henry James. The notions of ‘write what you know’ and ‘show, don’t tell’ so familiar to students and teachers of Creative Writing are rooted in modernist writers such as these. So the veterans are taught to write like that, and this writing gets published, and becomes influential. Soon, writing that breaks these rules is seen as ‘flabby’, ‘purple’, or ‘slow’.

But as generation after generation of American writers are taught to write what they know, it starts to become a rule in the publishing world – and your books are sold (or not) based on your own biography.

McGurl highlights the problem:

“Hence the irritation one so often encounters on the part of professional authors in the face of what seems to them a limiting biographical reading of their fiction... fiction emerges in the most literal sense from the experiences of the author – writing *is* one of those experiences.”²⁰

However, he also points out that:

“...making this link begins to explain the deep affinity of workshop fiction (not to mention that curious new thing, “creative nonfiction”) to the nonfictional genre of the memoir, but it leaves unexplained the specific role, precisely, of creativity – and relatedly,

²⁰ McGurl, *Program Era*, p19

fictionality – in the enterprise of creative writing.”²¹

Let’s put this another way: Tim O’Brien, in his novel *The Things They Carried*, published a story of revisiting Vietnam after the war with his daughter. They go to a rice paddy where a friend of his was killed, and O’Brien bears a heavy guilt for his death. The story concludes with his daughter offering a kind of forgiveness and innocence (though not total, that would defeat the point). Of course, the O’Brien in the story is not the Tim O’Brien who actually fought in Vietnam. In an interview on the anniversary of the book, O’Brien says he still gets people asking him how his daughter feels about the story. He replies, of course, that he doesn’t have a daughter, didn’t even have children when he wrote the story, but needed an innocent ‘other’ for the purposes of the story. The ‘happening truth’ is not as important as the ‘story truth’, because the ‘story truth’ makes the reader feel the way the ‘happening truth’ made the author feel.

In light of this, let us consider how the US and UK publishing industry markets veteran narratives (as opposed to non-veteran narratives like Helen Benedict’s *Sand Queen* or Roxanna Robinson’s *Sparta*), and how this pushes the importance of authenticity on us.

When Sceptre published Kevin Powers’ *The Yellow Birds* in 2012, the author biography on the back inside dust-jacket read: “...served in the US army in 2004 and 2005 in Iraq, where he was deployed as a machine gunner in Mosul and Tal Afar.”²² Here, this tells us, is an author who knows his subject. The dates, the names of the towns/battlefields, are

²¹ Ibid., p17

²² Powers, Kevin, *The Yellow Birds*, Sceptre, London, 2012

undeniable, grounded – Real.²³ Interviewing Kevin Powers on publication of *The Yellow Birds*, Susan Crown notes:

“And there's no question that Powers – 31, army veteran, fresh off the [University of Texas MFA programme](#) – is himself a compelling proposition: if it's a truism that most first novels are autobiographical, it is also true that some resumé's are more equal than others, and reviewers have been quick to ferret out the points at which Powers and his narrator overlap.”²⁴

This is nothing new: Hemingway's self-mythologizing centred on his having been wounded in Italy in World War I; Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5* (1967) centres around the author in Dresden as it is destroyed, the metafictional portrayal of the author himself as a first-person witness emphasizing the traumatic experience Billy Pilgrim is trying to escape from through fantasy. Ambrose Bierce, Joseph Heller, Norman Mailer, James Jones, Tim O'Brien, Karl Marlantes are some of perhaps the best known of a long list of veteran American fiction writers whose novels are a lasting legacy of the experience of the wars they fought. And this 'authenticity' of biography comes into play for non-veteran writers (or perhaps, more accurately, 'civilian-veteran' writers) such as Viet Than Nguyen, Ocean Vuong, Nam Le, and to a lesser extent (though her contributions to the furthering of Vietnam-veteran writing cannot be overstated), Maxine Hong Kingston.

When Canongate published *Redeployment* in 2014, they too included the customary author biography on the back inside dust-jacket. Phil Klay, it said, "...is a veteran of the US

²³ From *Guardian Book* interview, Susan Crown, Kevin Powers on *The Yellow Birds*: 'I felt those things, and asked the same questions', 13 Nov 2012

²⁴ Ibid.

Marine Corps. He served in Iraq during the Surge...”²⁵ No mention, however, of what he did in the Marines, of where he fought. Phil Klay was a Public Affairs Officer²⁶, a fact he does not disguise, but one his publishers have played down. We cannot deny that Phil Klay served, but does his non-combatant role make him as much of a veteran as Kevin Powers? Does it undermine the authenticity of his writing, his fictional portraits of war?

Kate McLoughlin provides an excellent examination of what is meant by the term ‘veteran’:

“...in the United States, veterans are defined as ‘personnel who have served for a minimum period of service and have been discharged with at least the status of ‘honorable’ despite the fact that they may not have served on operations.’”²⁷

McLoughlin then turns to Paul Fussell to highlight a key distinction:

“Paul Fussell, American Second World War veteran and author... was in no doubt on the matter. Criticizing J. Glenn Gray’s *The Warriors* (1959) as showing ‘every sign of error occasioned by remoteness of experience’, he notes: ‘Division headquarters is miles – *miles* – behind the line where soldiers experience terror and madness and relieve those pressures by crazy brutality and sadism. Indeed, unless they actually encountered the enemy during the war, most “soldiers” have very little idea of what “combat” was like.’ Fussell quotes William Manchester’s remark that ‘[a]ll who wore uniforms are called veterans, but more than 90 per cent of them are as uninformed about the killing zones as those on the home front’... Fussell’s remarks, made in the course of arguing who may legitimately pronounce on the ethics of dropping the atom bomb on

²⁵ Klay, *Redeployment*, Canongate, London, 2014

²⁶ <http://www.philklay.com/bio/> accessed 3 July 2018

²⁷ Kate McLoughlin, *Veteran Poetics: British Literature in the Age of Mass Warfare, 1790-2015*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) p13

Hiroshima, demonstrate a visceral certainty that veterancy is coincident with front-line combat experience.”²⁸

We are being presented with the fact of having gone to war, of ‘*having come through*’ as McLoughlin calls it²⁹, as the qualification for writing meaningfully about war. This is what the publishers of *The Yellow Birds* and *Redeployment* imply: someone who has been to war is taken more seriously when writing about it than someone who has not. For marketing and publicity purposes, it doesn’t seem to matter whether the *having come throughness* entailed any actual combat experience – having served, to have earned the status of ‘veteran’, is enough.

It is perhaps the authenticity of the veteran-author’s experience as a soldier that makes their novels ‘literary fiction’ as opposed to ‘general’ or ‘commercial’ fiction (to use industry labels). With the latter you’re reading a story – with the former you’re sharing that *having come through*, or at least that’s how the marketing goes. All of this despite the fact that very *having come throughness* is presented through the great artificial lens of ‘how to write a story,’ developed through established Creative Writing pedagogical techniques: Kevin Powers and Phil Klay are both graduates of MFA programmes, University of Texas at Austin and CUNY Hunter, respectively. Tim O’Brien is a graduate of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop MFA and teaches Creative Writing in Texas, occasionally.

Thinking back to McGurl, publishers are selling to us the notion that one can read *The Things They Carried* or *Matterhorn*, *The Yellow Birds* or *Redeployment*, and having now ‘experienced’ the American Wars in Vietnam and Iraq, store that experience like a scar –

²⁸ Ibid., p15

²⁹ Ibid., p10

albeit one on a bookshelf or Kindle library. Ironically, as we have seen, veteran writers (O'Brien and Klay in particular) then undermine this position with the substance of the book you've just bought.

I want here to distinguish between the 'lived authenticity' discussed above, and the more 'technical authenticity' an accomplished writer can achieve. Authors go to great lengths to add 'authenticity' to their writing: Cormac McCarthy famously spent ten years researching and learning Spanish, and the untranslated lines add a confused element to the reading of *Blood Meridian*, for example, that further discomfits the reader – a technique I deploy in *Scattering Thomas Taylor* with untranslated exchanges in Welsh and Spanish, but more on that later. One could even argue that the simple, matter-of-fact way in which McCarthy portrays violence in his novels adds further discomfort, and thus enhances our own impression of authenticity: this is what a scalping really would be like, we tell ourselves. Ron Hansen's linguistic choices in *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* add an authenticity through drawing us into a 19th Century way of speaking, of structuring thoughts and framing images; Toni Morrison's linguistic choices in *Beloved* achieve a similar effect – as does the publicity around it. In interviews Morrison has stated the character of Sethe is based on a real runaway slave who tried to kill all of her children – and though Morrison did no further research into the 'true' story, by rooting it in an historical event the power of the novel is reinforced:

"I was amazed by this story I came across about a woman called Margaret Garner who had escaped from Kentucky, I think, into Cincinnati with four children," Ms. Morrison said, sitting in an office at Alfred A. Knopf, her publisher, on a visit from her home near Nyack, N.Y. "And she was a kind of cause celebre among abolitionists in 1855 or '56 because she tried to kill the children when she was caught. She killed one of them, just as in the novel.

I found an article in a magazine of the period, and there was this young woman in her 20's, being interviewed - oh, a lot of people interviewed her, mostly preachers and journalists, and she was very calm, she was very serene. They kept remarking on the fact that she was not frothing at the mouth, she was not a madwoman, and she kept saying, 'No, they're not going to live like that. They will not live the way I have lived.' Now I didn't do any more research at all about that story," Ms. Morrison said. "I did a lot of research about everything else in the book - Cincinnati, and abolitionists, and the underground railroad - but I refused to find out anything else about Margaret Garner. I really wanted to invent her life."³⁰

Indeed, Morrison's rejection of further historical research adds to the power of the novel, allowing her to so skillfully manipulate the reader between the *certainty* of Slavery and the African-American experience, and the *story experience* of willingly suspending disbelief to accept ghosts, and Beloved.

But this is a different kind of authenticity to that used in the marketing of veterans' narratives. The authors named above have biography and skill to make their work *feel* authentic, but it's not the lived experience marketers draw on for war fiction. It's not that we don't also demand high-quality technical authenticity from our veteran writers, but that we ask for more.

Some have argued that the war narrative has a trauma and 'nobility' assumed of it. Writing in *Eyewitness Nam*, William Broyle suggests: "War stories... are like fairy tales. There is something primal about them. They have a moral, even a mythic truth."³¹ This is, of course, countered by O'Brien:

³⁰ Mervyn Rothstein, interview with Toni Morrison, *New York Times*, August 26 1987

³¹ William Broyle, from *Eyewitness Nam: Brothers in Arms no. 11*, (Orbis Publishing) 1988.

“A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever. There is no virtue. As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil.”³²

And Patrick Hagopian’s argument in *The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials and the Politics of Healing*³³ that the national healing of rifts opened by the American War in Vietnam was facilitated by the construction of the Wall memorial emphasises the post-Vietnam, and post-9/11 ‘Support Our Troops’ mentality – memorializing soldiers almost before they’ve even gone to war – evidenced in Klay’s comment in ‘Unless It’s A Sucking Chest Wound’: “...the weird pedestal vets are on now.”

This audience-assumed ‘nobility’ and trauma, something perhaps ‘sacred’, demands our sources have first-hand knowledge of the events they depict. This expectation of authenticity also plays on a publisher’s commercial concerns when acquiring and positioning titles and stories. Marlantes describes the experience of trying to publish *Matterhorn*:

HistoryNet (HN): Did you work on your novel all these years?

Karl Marlantes (KM): I would go in fits and starts. I first started writing it about 1975. And I started trying to sell it in 1977. No one would look at it. Nobody wanted to publish a big book about an unpopular war. I’d work on it between contracts, mostly on weekends. My kids would say, “Mom, where’s Dad?” The answer was always the same, “He’s in the basement working on his book.” I tried to sell it again in the mid-

³² Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried*

³³ Patrick Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials and the Politics of Healing*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009)

'80s. Then, the response was the market was too saturated with Vietnam War fiction, and Hollywood had already done *Full Metal Jacket* and *Platoon*. I kept working on it, and in the '90s I was told maybe I should switch it to the Gulf War, and later to move the plot to Afghanistan.

HN: How did it finally get published?

KM: I gave the manuscript to a friend of mine, Ken Pallack, who sent it to his friend Tom Farber, who had just started this little nonprofit literary publishing house called El León. Tom had me send it to one of his editors, Kit Duane. I said, "You want me to spend 50 bucks at Kinko's and send this to a woman in Berkeley?" He convinced me to do it, and she loved it. I felt like going to California and kissing her. Kit is the one who pulled it out of obscurity, and El León published it in paperback in 2007.

HN: And that led to Grove/Atlantic picking it up?

KM: El León is a small publisher with no marketing staff. They publish books so writers at least have a product instead of just a manuscript. Their print run was 1,200 and my pay was 120 free copies. So I had a product, but in trying to interest people in New York, I ran into the same problem. No one would read it because, I was told, it was a big book and it was about the Vietnam War. Then my wife came up with a brilliant idea: to have El León submit it to a bunch of writing contests. She and I put together a list, including Barnes & Noble's Discover Great New Writers program. Some women in one Barnes & Noble's store read it, loved it and sent it to the head of the program. Then it went to the chief fiction buyer at Grove Press.

HN: What did you expect the reaction to be after Grove published it?

KM: I was just hoping to make back the advance and maybe make some money over the course of the next five years. I also hoped it would get reviewed by people with respect. I hoped veterans would read it. But we had incredible backing from Barnes & Noble. We had sales reps writing to Entreakin saying, "This is a great book." And then independent bookstores got behind it. The buzz started. Someone sent a Tweet saying, "Entreakin has another *Cold Mountain* on his hands."³⁴

As you can see here, the primary concern behind the rejection of *Matterhorn* for years was market – Vietnam was too unpopular a war, the market was saturated, etc. But Marlantes found, eventually, a market – and publishing did what it does best, which was leap on the shift in readership towards epic Vietnam war novels by a veteran, and attach their marketing machine too it.

But the shift in market context (the War on Terror and the lionizing of veterans post-9/11) and the surge in 'veteran narrative' and 'true war story' interested the publishing industry has catered to hasn't just brought veteran fiction about war to the front: it's also

³⁴ Interview with Karl Marlantes for *Vietnam Magazine*, 14/09/2010, on HistoryNet.com (<https://www.historynet.com/interview-karl-marlantes-author-of-matterhorn/> accessed 28/07/2022)

given rise to what Brian van Reet calls the ‘Kill Memoir’³⁵. These ‘non-fiction’ accounts of soldiers’ experiences in the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, such as *American Sniper*, *No Easy Day* and *Carnivore* come under attack from van Reet for claiming the authenticity of experience without that authenticity being present in the text itself:

“...it is remarkable and more interesting that in a marketplace glutted with soldier memoirs – whether of the best-selling kill variety or a much more thoughtful and modest kind – only two literary novels written by soldiers in the war on terror have been released by major imprints. Both of them, “Fobbit” and “The Yellow Birds,” were published in the fall of 2012. Though they are fictional, they read, in my mind, like more accurate depictions of the totality of what happened in Iraq than any of the supposedly factual accounts I have mentioned... One benefit of war fiction is that it does not succeed or fail based on accurate body counts or who really fired the fatal shot into Bin Laden’s skull. The fiction writer, and not facts, is the arbiter of truth, using his or her experience, along with interesting fabrications and a number of different tones not readily accessible through a memoir to create something far greater and truer than the sum of its parts.”³⁶

In positioning fiction as more ‘authentic’ than memoir because of the tools available to the fiction writer – such as demonstrated by McCarthy, Morrison and Hansen above – van Reet – himself an Iraq war veteran whose debut novel *Spoils* (2017) set in Iraq counters the ‘authenticity’ of his own experience as a veteran by focussing on a female soldier captured by Islamic militants; two things he was not – is stating that fiction gives us something closer to ‘truth’ than truthful retelling can. Tim O’Brien’s “How To Tell A True War Story” from *The*

³⁵ Van Reet, Brian, ‘A Problematic Genre: the “Kill Memoir”’, *New York Times Blog*, July 2013

³⁶ Ibid.

Things They Carried pursues a similar theme. O'Brien's own work emphasises his distinction between 'happening truth' and 'story truth'. For example, O'Brien addresses his experience of deciding whether or not to flee to Canada or go to war as a draftee in both his memoir *If I Should Die In A Combat Zone*, and in his novel *The Things They Carried*. In the former, O'Brien states: "I couldn't bring myself to upset a peculiar balance between the order I know, people I knew, and my own private world."³⁷

But in *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien uses fiction to make the reader *feel* this point. His fictional self has fled to the Canadian border, and has taken up lodgings with an old man, Elroy Berdahl, in his dilapidated fishing lodge. 'O'Brien' and Elroy never discuss why he is there, but the old man takes him out fishing on the Rainy River and stops the boat close to the Canadian shore. He looks away from 'O'Brien', and lets him make up his own mind. And O'Brien's decision process, summed up in the quote above, becomes, through fiction, a kaleidoscopic vision of everyone he has met or will meet, jeering him. Through this fictional tool, O'Brien shows us what he felt, and we feel it too.³⁸

This method of Show Don't Tell is a staple of creative writing instruction, and this lineage of creative writing pedagogy is at the root of George Packard's assessment of modern war writing when he describes how narratives such as Powers' *The Yellow Birds* and Phil Klay's *Redeployment* bring the Iraq war into line with Hemingway and O'Brien's narratives of their wars: "The style of understated disillusionment remains universally recognizable and pervasively influential in war literature."³⁹ He argues soldiers' narratives do not need plot because they do not need to make war intelligible, and that this new writing "takes the

³⁷ O'Brien, Tim, *If I Die In A Combat Zone*, Flamingo, London 2006

³⁸ O'Brien, Tim, *The Things They Carried*, Flamingo, 2006

³⁹ George Packard, 'Home Fires: how soldiers write their wars', *New Yorker*, April 2014

war...as a given,” without politics or causal exploration; that ultimately these veterans “instead of a coherent explanatory narrative, [present] us with fragments... their work lacks context, but it gets closer to the lived experience of war than almost any journalism.”⁴⁰ This line of thinking echoes the assumptions we as readers make based upon the authenticity of the writer’s own experience in war, allowing their biography, and our understanding of what that biography means (the traumatized veteran on the other side of the experiential gulf) to fill in the blanks. This is the epitome of Show, Don’t Tell.

Roy Scranton is scathing⁴¹ of Packard’s summary. First, he outlines what he calls the ‘myth of the trauma hero’ – boy goes to war with romantic notions, sees and does brutality, comes home unable to make sense of his memories, nobody wants to hear his truths, finally accepts that only he can know the truth for *being there* and must bear this truth for society. He argues against Packard’s interpretation of conventional war narratives, stating that in extolling war as a personal tragedy only understood by the veteran author, “we allow the psychological suffering endured by those we sent to kill for us displace and erase the innocents killed in our name.”

So if this ‘truth’ as depicted through the literary and fictive techniques of veteran-American writers serves also as a way of alleviating the guilt of a culpable nation’s reading public in having supported or tolerated/paid for the war we sent the veterans to fight, then using fiction as a method of trying to bridge the experiential gulf between writer and reader must necessarily fail. The reader can get no further than their own sense of empathy with the writer, and not with those whom the writer has killed before putting pen to paper.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Roy Scranton, ‘The Trauma Hero: From Wilfred Owen to “Redeployment” and “American Sniper”’, *LA Review of Books*, January 2015

Our acceptance of this could be indicated by the emphasis on American casualties, and a lack of memorial for the thousands of Somali's killed, in the events depicted in Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down* (2001). This is touched on in a fascinating discussion between Tim O'Brien and Karl Marlantes hosted by the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, edited and available on YouTube from 2015⁴². Challenging this idea of our acceptance could be the publication of veteran writer Elliot Ackerman's *Green on Blue* (Daunt Books, London, 2016) – taking the perspective of the Afghans though perhaps the fact of it being published by Daunt Books and not one of the Big Five is telling – I would have liked to explore this further but there simply wasn't enough time.

Sam Sacks takes aim at critics – the influential readers stalled by this empathy with the veteran-writer alone – rather than the writers themselves:

“Modern war writing is a strange thing to praise, because such praise ennobles the account while deploring the event. Time and distance blunt this quandary... but when the dead are barely cold ... a familiar language of acclaim is always invoked: shared suffering, eternal truths, the passion play that transmutes pain into collective redemption. War is hell, but its themes make critics purr.”⁴³

As part of his exploration of the language of praise heaped on veteran writing, Sacks looks at why these texts are written (and received) as they are, and cites the root cause as the public's “unprecedented disconnection” from the conflicts of the War on Terror. “As if in response to this public appetite for artistic redemption,” he argues, “veterans have been

⁴² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v77l5rlvHIY&t=2s>

⁴³ Sacks, Sam, ‘First Person Shooters’, Reviews, *Harper's Magazine*, August 2015

producing stories of personal struggle that are built around abstract universal truths, stories that strive to close the gap between soldier and civilian.” Sacks goes on to outline the important point that all wars are not the same, and that as modern war literature is rooted in personal redemption and thus follows the ‘trauma hero’ story-arc Scranton so deplores, it avoids the difficult questions associated with the wars these veteran-American writers fought. “...it’s representative of a genre that scrupulously avoids placing the Terror Wars within a larger political or ideological context. Redemption seems to rely on a shared incomprehension of what exactly these wars were about. Stories can save us, as O’Brien said, but they can also let us off the hook.”

However, Sacks doesn’t take into account where these veterans learnt to write – or perhaps more accurately, how they were taught to write. Arguably, veteran-American writers aren’t expected to address the wider causes and implications of the wars in which they fought, because creative writing pedagogy tells them not to worry about it – the serious literary novelist, the MFA writer, is taught to write what they know. They Show, never Tell, and they follow the principles of the modernist American white male writers, like Hemingway, whose writing was held up as a teachable text from the earliest days of American MFA programmes: “...Hemingway’s conversion of war trauma into graceful literary understatement would prove a powerful example, even as his avoidance of the university was being reversed.”⁴⁴

The use of these techniques creates an authentic feel in writing. But what about the war stories told by those who weren’t there? Are their stories less valid, because they come not from a personal, directly experiential place, but from research, conversation, ideas –

⁴⁴ McGurl, *The Program Era*, p61

writing. Wonderful writing about, or rooted in, war, by authors who have no experience of war themselves: *Sand Queen*, *Sparta*, *The Watch*, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*. And what about those stories of war from people affected by, but not directly involved in it? Are their stories less authentic? Viet Thanh Nguyen, Ocean Vuong, and Nam Le are not veterans, and write compellingly on what it is to be Vietnamese, and Vietnamese-American, but the war and its legacies and experiences are essential to the narratives of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, *The Sympathizer*, and *The Boat People*.

And from our long list of World War One and Two veterans, their deaths have not stopped compelling and authentic-*feeling* novels of those conflicts from consistently being published: *Birdsong*, *Regeneration* trilogy, *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, *The Picturebook*.

My own novel attempts to negotiate the gap between the authentic and the relayed experience. On a purely marketing level, my 'dust-jacket biography' can make no claim to veterancy, and I am trying to make use of this through the biographies of my characters. There is Tom, the now-deceased Vietnam veteran; Jay, who has transitioned from young pre-war recruit to Marine veteran in the years since the three were last together; and Frank, the non-veteran narrator, who becomes obsessed with Tom's PTSD file as an authentic account of what really happened, and not just embellished stories. I chose Frank as my narrator (mirroring the first-person narrative point of view prevalent in most veteran novels) precisely because he is, like me, a non-veteran, and this is one of the techniques I am using to explore how far this experiential gulf extends, and what effect this has on storytelling.

I am approaching the debates around authenticity above by splitting the novel into two timelines: the primary, first-person present tense narration of Frank's experiences returning to Utah, reuniting with Jay, and burying Tom; and the second, far more fragmented and unreliable account of Frank's memories of Tom telling stories fifteen years prior. It is

Frank's obsession with the 'authentic' account of what happened to Tom in Vietnam (and afterward) that drives him to latch on to Tom's PTSD folder – though he doesn't realise how 'inauthentic' those versions are, as they too are told with an intended audience in mind; in this case, the Federal Government and VA's requirements to diagnose 100% disability, with the attendant benefits cheque. But Frank's wide-eyed obsession with Tom and his time in Vietnam stems from the role of the reader as discussed above: Frank does not understand that the lightbulb punchline is wrong because it functions for his view of the world.

Jay, however, has crossed that experiential gulf. In Frank's idealised memory of ten years before, Jay is just as naïve and hero-worshipping as Frank. But in the happening now of the present timeline, Jay has moved beyond what Frank thinks of as a common experience, and into the rarified strata of the combat vet, earning himself a place on Klay's 'weird pedestal'. Frank's inability to see the problems his veteran-worship can create leads to Jay slipping back from the progress he has made in therapy. Frank believes this to be a wider problem, a society failing to understand and support the 'wounded warrior' adequately, but Ashley reveals that Jay had always had a tendency toward alcoholism, the war just gave him the excuse he had needed to take it further. She also points out that Frank, now, is providing that excuse. Here, I am looking to show the cracks in the mythological 'trauma-hero' narrative in real terms – the damage this mythologizing can do to the treatment and recovery of flesh and blood people, and how our quest for understanding, authenticity, and blind 'honouring' can interfere with specific, individual treatment and recovery requirements.

Chapter Two: Reflective Commentary

There are several components to the creative approach I have taken with *Scattering Thomas Taylor*; I've endeavoured to break them down here into sections to engage with the research arguments made above. First, I want to discuss a little how this idea came about, because my research interest and the beginnings of this story have the same roots. Partly, I think, because of growing up in the UK but with an American identity – indeed, I don't think I really identified myself as also being British until I was well into my teens – there was a certain mythology surrounding stories of The Old Country. My dad would talk about the American South, where his family are from, and California, the people and places there, in a reverent tone; stories would skip back and forth through generations, and people living and dead became large-looming gods in a family mythology. When we visited the US, my grandparents' house and neighbourhood became in my imagination the place where all of these things had happened, despite the stories spanning generations, several states, Mexico, and Vietnam. An empty sandlot across the street could have been where Pickett's charge swept past, or where my uncle broke his collarbone playing football with my dad at the age of six, or where my grandad had his buggy accident, or where Cousin Jeff died on his motorcycle. The spiky, hardy, lush plants in my grandparents' garden were equal parts desert and jungle: where the West was won, and where Vietnam was lost. For a kid at the time growing up in Carlisle, with its deep greens and browns and leaden, weeping skies, the round lush life in California was alien and all the mythologies from the stories seemed like they could really be true there.

I started writing *Scattering Thomas Taylor* in the winter of 2008, and developed the idea through my MA at Lancaster in 2010. It is unrecognisable now from what I was writing then, but at its root the novel comes from stories about the American War in Vietnam I had

grown up with. As a kid, the stories of veterans my dad knew in his youth in America during the war shaped how I understood that conflict. These stories formed a frame of reference for me when, as a teenager, I watched the US and UK invade Afghanistan in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. When I was eighteen, I registered for the US Army Selective Service (in a vain attempt to secure Federal Aid to go to college at UC Santa Cruz) at the same time as the US and UK invaded Iraq. I thought more and more about Jay Watson and Lloyd Trimble, my dad's friends who were Vietnam veterans and whose stories I had grown up with. I was unable to avoid drawing parallels between Vietnam and the War on Terror – and given the title of this thesis, I clearly still can't – and the half-remembered, sometimes clarified, 'never quite *right* as I remembered them' stories told by my dad based on what he remembered of what Jay and Lloyd had said kept returning to my mind. I read Tim O'Brien for the first time that year, and Toni Morrison, and began to think about writing and memory, and the function of stories in memory and trauma.

In the summer of 2005 I flew out to California with my dad, and we went on a hiking trip with my uncle and his friends – more trips that had taken on a mythical status, containing as they did tales of bears and fish, high peaks, rockfalls, and men with mythical names like Stokes and Ukes and Holly. The tone of these stories was one I readily adopted, hoping my own stories of undergraduate adventures could be imbued with the same sense of legend (I know, I know). I was excited to go on one of these trips – while I can't remember if it was ever explicitly said that this trip would form a huge part of my "becoming a man" (again, I know), that idea was certainly lodged somewhere in my still-developing 20-year-old brain.

The reality of this trip was something fragile, however – beneath the gilds of stories designed to mythologise, I found unhappy men unable to admit they were unhappy, or that

what they had been promised as affluent middle-class white men turned out not be as fulfilling as they'd hoped. When we came back, I was thinking just how fragile and damaged the mythical figures from these stories were – and the tone I so readily adopted when describing my own friends sounded suddenly, and prematurely, elegiac.

Just before I flew to Utah, dad and I had dinner with Lloyd and his wife Debbie. He showed us a slide show of photos of his time in Vietnam, and even brought out a folder full of his PTSD interview notes with the VA hospital. Lloyd took us through some of his 'stories' and I realised I remembered them, but I remembered how they had been told to and remembered by my dad. The differences between those altered oral tellings, and the clinical versions in the PTSD folder, struck a chord with me, and I found myself rereading O'Brien and thinking again on his ideas on the interpretive ground between 'story truth' and 'happening truth': "I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth." And "A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth."⁴⁵

In Utah, I talked my way into a grad-level Play Construction class taught by the inimitable and truly inspirational Jeff Metcalf, and there I met an actor and poet, John Baker. John had been a convoy medic in Vietnam, first with the 101st Airborne and later with the 1st Infantry Division, The Big Red One. He and I were paired up for the first assignment of the class. We had to interview each other and develop a dialogue from the interview notes. We drove to Tooele and sat on John's boat and talked literature and music, and he told war stories. He was writing a monologue for the class that was partly about Getting It Right and partly catharsis. As Karl Marlantes said in an interview: "The moral drive of fiction is

⁴⁵ Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, Flamingo 2006

faithfully to "get it right" through the contrivance of making it up. Ideally, the novelist must be Everyman to convey the essence of a situation in a universal language. This is a tall order when it comes to a subject that is both intrinsically unsharable (not everyone can be a GI) and innately unimaginable (few ex-soldiers want to talk or write about what they have seen and done). At the same time, a writer needs tranquillity and perspective in which to recollect the emotion. The bigger the trauma, the longer the necessary perspective.”⁴⁶

John’s drafts of the monologue were shaped by talking through aspects of his experience, his stories, and again I was struck by the difference in tone. Much like Lloyd, a story that was told to amuse and wrong-foot a listener such as myself was retold, or rewritten, in a completely different tone. Much like Lloyd’s story of getting a medal for falling out of a helicopter, John’s story of accidentally driving into a minefield were told for humour and shock, but were relayed in writing in sombre, mournful tones – though in very different ways. This got me thinking about the idea that these stories were their own personal war memorials as much as they were anecdotes, and cathartic exercises. But that there was also an imperative to tell, to share, to make it understandable.

Readers of *Scattering Thomas Taylor* will recognise this theme in the discovery of Tom’s PTSD folder, and in the differences between remembered and told stories:

It’s Nerys who finds it, in the end. In an old chest of drawers, under a few books and maps and a small, half-empty tin that proves to be a snakebite kit. “What’s this?” she says, holding up a green folder made of card, faded yellow along one side and across the

⁴⁶ Robert McCrum, interview with Karl Marlantes, *Guardian*, July 2010: (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/jul/11/marlantes-matterhorn-book-review> accessed 08/06/2022)

top; the rest is dark green, its original colour. I imagine it sitting under a stack of books, perhaps on a windowsill, the exposed edges fading in the sunlight. It is unmarked. Tucked inside are a few sheets of paper. The first is a form and I do not look at it closely; the rest are pages of type. I scan some of the text, recognising it – not the words, not the form. Not the object. I pause and read again, carefully. It's a story. The language is curious, clerical and clinical. I turn back to the form and pay attention this time. Type at the top, under the address of the VA hospital in Salt Lake City, states that this is a record of Thomas J Taylor's psychological evaluation for post-traumatic stress disorder. I turn the page and read. Then I read it aloud:

“I was on my first convoy and hadn't been in Vietnam long at all. Everybody was calling me new, or the Medic. Nobody wanted to know me. It was a lonely time. The convoy was ambushed and a mortar round detonated in the bed of the truck ahead of mine, killing fourteen American soldiers inside. We returned fire and I used an M79 grenade launchers, targeting some visible muzzle flashes. When the firing stopped, I went to try to patch up some of our wounded but the only serious casualties were the fourteen men in the truck ahead of mine. Our scouts came back while I was preparing the bodies for evac and one of them said to me 'Doc, you got four.' I had just killed four people, and I was putting American casualties into bodybags, but what struck me was that they called me Doc and it made me happy. Happy. I've always felt guilty about that.”

“I know that story,” says Nerys. “You've told me something like that before.”

“Yeah,” I say. “But he didn't used to tell it like that. I mean, it's flat, factual. I guess it's bare truth though, told to a shrink. Not like a story he'd tell you or me. Like the poncho. Maybe this is what really happened. Fear, action, reward, guilt. Pure, like no embellishments. Not like what he told us.”

Jay takes the folder, flips through some of the stories. “So what, you think this is like Tom's true time in Vietnam then?”

“Yeah,” I shrug. “Well, it's what he told his doctors at least. And he was going for a PTSD assessment, so he's going to keep it simple and keep it about him. So it's probably the closest to the truth we'll get.”

Jay and Ashley look at each other then and Jay shakes his head and Ashley says: “I’d suggest all his stories are true enough.” She glances back at Jay, who is flicking through the papers still, thumbing them back and forth; his eyes scan quickly up and down the pages, impatient to see it all, or none of it. “He might just have had to make some parts up. To make us understand. Just means that they’re stories,” she says.

Jay looks up. “And a true story is just that: a story.” He closes the folder and hands it back. “You still wanna go to the desert?”

While Frank is focussed on the differences of how Tom’s folder lays out the story to the version he has remembered, Ashley (the trauma therapist) and Jay (the combat veteran) have a more nuanced understanding of story and truth than Frank and Nerys (who, as former police officers, understand perspective but have more hardline understandings of ‘truth’). That Frank’s remembered version of the story is the version the reader first encounters is a deliberate move to help conjure the ‘myth’ of Tom Taylor, before the closest thing to the ‘reality’ of him the reader can experience is revealed throughout other stories, his and those of others who knew him.

I also aimed to look at context for audience reception: what Frank remembers about being told the story is as telling as the story itself, and I continued this approach with Nerys’ monologue about the spookiest call she attended as a police officer:

Ashley blows on a spoonful of beans and stares at the fire, chewing thoughtfully.

She looks up. “Nerys?”

“Yeah?”

“That kid at the gas station. What happened?”

“Thought we went over that,” Jay says.

“No,” says Ashley. “I mean, you seemed to freeze, like you recognised his voice.”

I reach over squeeze Nerys' knee. She glances at me and nods.

"Yeah, the voice sounded familiar. Only that kid was a lot older."

"Do you want to talk about?"

Nerys shrugs. "Nothing really to tell. Was a job I went to that was a bit creepy."

Ashley is quiet, waiting. Jay is looking at the fire. I watch the pair of them and look back at Nerys and realise this is what they do. Ashley doesn't seem to miss anything and Jay knows what she does and maybe it would be good to speak. I'm about to say something encouraging to Nerys when she shrugs again and says: "Was on nights with Team – the response team – with my mate John. Big lad, used to be firearms before he came back to Borough. Really sweet. Anyway, it's winter and there's this freezing fog that's rolled in. So we've gone to like three minor accidents. About three in the morning a job comes up about a lost three-year-old child seen wandering down the road. Now, John's boy was about three at this time so he puts us up for it almost before they've finished sending the job out. Anyway we get there and it's one of those really old London streets, and it was dead, there was no one there. And it's out in the quietest part of town so there's not even London traffic noise. So we drive slowly up and down the street and there's no trace of this missing child. I'm about to call it in as an Area Searched – No Trace and John says 'Stop.' So I stop and he gets out. So I get out too and it's colder than a witch's tit and he turns his radio way down and just listens. And then he starts look under cars. So I start looking under cars. John's working one side of the street and I'm doing the other. And I get to this van that's got like a high wheel base and I look under it and there's this shape just huddled underneath. Shaved head, skinny little thing. So I call out 'Hello sweetheart, it's the police.' And there's no acknowledgement. Just keeps breathing really heavy, these shuddering rasps, shivering. John's heard me and he gets on the floor next to me and says 'Alright mate,' and I don't know if it was because John's got a really deep voice, or because he was a bloke, but something made this child take notice. His head snapped round and it was like a snarl, like his fingers were all clawed. Like Gollum."

Nerys looks over at me. “Are we going to have a beer or what?”

I open one and hand it to her and open one for myself. Jay opens one too and Ashley says nothing but just slowly chews a small spoonful of beans at a time and waits for Nerys to continue.

“So, just like Gollum,” Nerys says. “John somehow coaxes this kid out and he’s wearing next to nothing, looks almost like a pillowcase with holes for his arms and legs. We have a look around and I spot a house where the front door is a bit open. Normally we’d be going in together but John’s the only one this child responds to, so in I pop. And my baton’s drawn, too right, and these were the old asp friction lock ones so you could have it drawn but not extended so I’ve got it kind of hidden in my hand and I can’t find the lightswitch. So I walk around the house and then upstairs and I open a door and there’s a couple sleeping in the bed. And the man wakes up and jumps out of bed with like a hammer in his hand or something. I had that baton racked faster then you would believe and I shout at him to drop it. And fair play to him he did drop it straight away when he realised I was police. Anyway he said it was their kid and they come down and John carries the kid up to his room.

Nerys tells this story because she’s prompted – Ashley has noticed Nerys’ reaction to the voice of the possibly abused child they have encountered earlier. But Nerys (much like Frank) is not interested in telling the story for therapy’s sake. Because she is aware Ashley is a trauma therapist, she deliberately aims the story for ‘spooky’ rather than ‘revealing’ – and the conclusion, where her and her colleague John decide to take whatever the next call was to stop the spooky and end up stuck on a murder for another twelve hours, is part of Nerys’ attempts to shrug off what she perceives as Ashley’s professional concern and interest.

When I think back to my initial conversations with John Baker, or the stories my dad would tell me when I was growing up about Lloyd Trimble or Jay Watson’s experience in Vietnam, or Todd Nimigon talking to me of military life, I am struck by how many of these

conversations took place on the road. I became, early on in the writing process, fixated on the idea of the captive audience of the long American road trip – big distances leave a lot of room for talking in the car. The logistics of who sits where proved difficult to balance – trying to avoid my only two male characters doing the talking throughout was a conscious decision, initially for parity and to give my other characters room to breathe and live; but as Nerys developed as a character (initially she didn't even come to Utah) it became clear she and Ashley needed to be in the car too. So, the road trip about memory and grief and remembering Tom Taylor became about friendship and love and trauma: two marriages struggling under the weight of the said and not said. I drew some inspiration for this decision from the fabulous (though unrelated to my research) novel *Highway Blue* by Ailsa McFarlane, a writer with a similar transatlantic biography to my own (which did give me some hope!), who puts a broken and estranged couple in a car together for a long drive, Much like Natalie Hart's *Pieces of Me*, the drama – and story – comes not from the themes being discussed, but from the character's situations (distance, too much proximity, unresolved trauma). It was good to give myself room in the text to expand beyond my themes, and focus on using character to keep the story moving forward. There is work to be done, I think, to move the novel a little further from themes and emphasize story, but that work is not going to make this book commercially viable.

What started as a novel about veterans and trauma a decade and a half ago has morphed into a novel about how we all live with our traumas, and how we live if we look at them (Tom, Jay, Ashley), if we don't (Frank), or if we recognise we should, but can't (Nerys). It is also a novel about grief, and friendship, and love: changing love, growing love, fading love, expectant love, and dying love.

It is, of course, a completely unmarketable and unpublishable novel, even when it is truly complete. Using police officers – even former ones – as protagonists would guarantee that no agent or publisher would pick it up, and rightfully so: the swing towards finally opening access to the hallowed offices of Publishing following the murder of George Floyd in 2020 was the final nail in the coffin of a novel that has one leg in the US and one in the UK, but not in a practical, relatable, and universal sense. And that’s okay: There will be a new draft of *Scattering Thomas Taylor* – one that removes some of the less palatable to the zeitgeist elements, and instead focusses on the themes I mention above, but in a more universal way. I’m still figuring out how to do that, however. Maybe I should go back to thinking about where the idea first came from.

Back in 2008, I had a flash fiction piece called ‘Too-ele Veteran’⁴⁷ and a quote from Tim O’Brien:

“Stories are for joining the past to the future. Stories are for those late hours in the night when you can't remember how you got from where you were to where you are. Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story.”

What I really wrote, I think, is a novel about stories – about their power to hold us, to keep alive something that is gone. This is why I chose to use the same device Ian McEwan deploys in *Sweet Tooth*⁴⁸ and switch the first-person narrator from the character you thought you were following, to one you met in the novel. And to play with turning the very artifact of the book, its physical presence, into part of the story. Because just like Lloyd, Tom curated

⁴⁷ Alex Hammond, writing as Will Fields, ‘Too-ele Veteran’, in *Workshop*, UEA Undergraduate Creative Writing Anthology, Norwich, 2007)

⁴⁸ Ian McEwan, *Sweet Tooth*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 2012)

his experiences in that PTSD folder for a certain end; he told the stories he thought were right, in the way he felt needed to be told to the person listening at any given time. And Nerys has done this to Frank too – I think he might finally listen, because if nothing else, a story can help us understand something we don't realise is happening to us. And that, ultimately, is what those who hear war stories need to remember, as Vonnegut and as Shay's veteran patients remind us: "Listen. Just listen."

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