Designated as an Exemplary Final Project for 2016-17

Dear Madison

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April 2017

This project was submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Graduate Liberal Studies Program in the Graduate School of Duke University.
Abstract

It seems to me that we valorize soldiers and military service in contemporary American culture. That is to say, we see soldiers as heroes because, according to a patriotic narrative, they protect freedom and keep America safe. This idea is ubiquitous in our public discourse and cultural messaging, often informing our collective response to veterans, which is usually gratitude. Yet, when we valorize soldier service in relation to a patriotic frame, we become unable to imagine a more nuanced soldier experience in war and importantly, after war. Dear Madison is my attempt to throw light on a more complex war experience as opposed to the limited one portrayed in our patriotic narrative. I approach this idea ethnographically, through the stories of some veterans (myself included) of our current wars. The idea of defending freedom and an American way of life are abstractions; the lived experience of people affected by political violence is concrete. It is the space between these two poles – the envisaged soldier life and the lived experience – which I explore in this creative project. I combine still photography, transcribed short audio documentary and narrative to arrive at a more substantive reality about the complexity of a lived and remembered war experience. So, in a sense, this is a project about memory – a remembered war experience in opposition to the somewhat formulated memory claimed by a patriotic narrative and its public display. The title, Dear Madison, derives from a letter that I received when I was in Iraq from a young girl named Madison. Looking for a way to weave stories about my war experience with the experiences of other veterans, I set the written project in epistolary form as a letter to Madison. The project is my response to her note, more than a decade late.
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prologue: Tranquility Hall</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: The Guy Who Made It</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photo Essay: Tin Soldiers</td>
<td>xix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter to Madison</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photo Essay: Granite Memory</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epilogue</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgments

This project would not have been possible without the cooperation from people who generously lent their time, their stories, and therefore their voice to this manuscript. They have my gratitude and admiration.
“He doesn’t blame them for such pedestrian thoughts, and yet, and yet...the war makes him wish for little more than the loose jaw and dull stare of the well-fed ruminant. Oh my people, my fellow Americans! See the world with prophet’s eyes.”

– Ben Fountain, *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*
Flags, Field of Honor, Fayetteville, North Carolina, 2016
these guys are in a hurry
that's why the injured guy is not in a litter
they didn't have time, just get him there
let's go
the guy up front is holding his right leg, barely
(you can't see that)
he's leading the way
the guy in the back is holding the wounded guy with one arm
he's heavy
he's doing more of a side-step, struggling not to drop him
letting some of that weight rest on his thighs
this isn't smooth terrain
they're stumbling and struggling and moving
watching for the chopper
it's hot
it's dirty
it smells like black powder and burning leaves
they can hear the whup, whup, whup of the chopper blades
if they get him there, he'll have a chance
they know this and they're hurrying
The first time I visited Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, I took the Red Line from the Metro Center Station in Washington, D.C. to Bethesda Station. I had been photographing war memorials on the National Mall and thought I could make it up there by dinner. I wanted to eat at the Warrior Café in Building 62 or Tranquility Hall, as it’s named. My friend Kyle told me I should go. He spent more than a month there after he was blown up in Afghanistan by a suicide bomber disguised as a police officer – a “green on blue” incident, as we say in the Army. He said that veterans tend to congregate at the café, sitting outside on the patio in good weather, playing cards, sharing stories and tips about their temporary home, like what nurse care manager to avoid, for instance, or the must-have physical therapists. It is there where Kyle began to heal and accept his new embodied self.

On this particular day, I arrived in the early evening, gathered a salad at the self-service line and sat down across from a young woman with her legs off. She was seated at the table facing me with her laptop open, pecking away at the keyboard. Her legs were in an oversized gym bag next to her wheelchair. Since she was in a T-shirt and shorts, I guessed she had just finished an occupational therapy session and was resting. I’ve been told the prosthetic socket can be painful for amputees, especially if there’s too much friction and residual limb movement. Before I had a chance to nod hello, a man about her age joined her at the table. I could tell by the easy way he sat down that they were friends. He moved so swiftly that I didn’t notice he was walking on a prosthetic leg, most likely a model with a microprocessor to track and manage weight distribution in the prosthesis, making it easier to walk and run, which he did when a young, energetic boy showed up with greasy fingers and a bag of chips. This young guy, Riley, maybe five or six years old, scurried up to the table chatting happily about something as his mother followed behind. The man made a playful move for the chips and Riley sped off, his
long hair flapping behind him, shrieking “mine,” as the man bounded after him at a distance just close enough to keep Riley alarmed.

Riley was there because his mom had happy news to share with these two. Her husband, Riley’s dad, injured in Afghanistan, had just learned he would soon be discharged and his traumatic injury claim had been approved. They would enter another phase of their new ordinary as a family. As for the other two veterans, they would soon be discharged from in-patient care as well and begin their long slog to reclaim their lives and identities. Such is a typical encounter at Walter Reed, this brief episodic glimpse on a late Thursday afternoon into a world where the extraordinary becomes normal – where, like anthropologist Zoe Wool writes, “the iterative process of healing and injury plays out on the bodies of hundreds of soldiers.”
Introduction

The Guy Who Made It

Near the end of his 2013 documentary film, *Unknown Known*, a biopic of former Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld’s career in government, producer and director Errol Morris asks the former Secretary about the Iraq War: “Wouldn’t it have been better not to go there at all?” Rumsfeld pauses and responds, “Well, I guess time will tell.” He then offers what seems to be an unprompted endorsement of the Bush administration’s legislative policies enacted after 9/11 to fight terrorism, like the Patriot Act, before telling the following story:

We went to Bethesda and Walter Reed a great many times. The strength that you felt from the families and the people was just absolutely an inspiration. It was an intensive care unit: the doctor said, “This guy’s not going to make it.” We walked in, met the man, talked to him and talked to the family. I don’t know what the word is, but the family, the wife said, “I know he’ll make it.” I think it was probably two, three, four weeks later; I went back and sure as heck the doctor said, “He made it.” Unbelievable. So, we’re a very fortunate country, and the good lord willing, we won’t have to be engaged in wars. But, I’m afraid human nature being what it is, that we’ll have to continue to ask young men and women to come serve our country. And their lives will be at risk.

There’s a lot packed into this generalized expression of American nationalism, particularly in those last two sentences, which can be read as: our country is worth protecting; war is not desirable, but inevitable; we need young men and women to fight those wars; “And their lives will be at risk,” like the guy who almost didn’t make it in the first part of Rumsfeld’s soliloquy, as I call it. Each one of those ideas is problematic, set apart from its nationalist
context in the story. To say that our country and by extension our values are worth protecting is to invite an analysis about precisely what values we’re speaking of. If it’s freedom, then we can think about what it means to be free. Is freedom partly a right to self-determination, or like some philosophers suggest, is there a certain conceit to thinking that we’re sovereign beings that can act solely according to our will? To say that war is inevitable because of human nature is especially vague and eschews nation-state behavior as a driver of political violence. 

To be sure, it’s not quite clear what Rumsfeld meant by human nature “being what it is.” If he meant our species has a tendency toward violence, then he’s not distinguishing between individual aggression and collective violence. In his soliloquized formulation, individuals, not nation-states, are complicit in war making. Despite this unsubstantiated claim, war is not an individual endeavor. It is a complex system that relies on political resolve, the mobilization of a compensated armed force, public consent, premeditated action and rituals like deployment ceremonies and memorial services to help us make sense of collective violence. It is more than an outgrowth of “human nature.” And to Rumsfeld’s final statement in this story about asking young men and women to serve our country, I wonder if we are asking for volunteers or incentivizing military service to field a force? In 2005, with our nation at war and for the first time during Rumsfeld’s tenure as secretary of Defense, the Army failed to meet its retention and recruitment goals, falling short by nearly 7,000 accessions; to make up for this loss, the Army increased its advertising budget by $100 million to $459 million for that fiscal year, added 1,300 recruiters, and nearly doubled enlistment bonuses, spending more than $138 million, all of this in addition to lowering enlistment standards.

Yet, I suspect these concluding statements in Rumsfeld’s story were not meant to be maxims for debate. They seem more like punch lines used to make the point, as perverse as it may seem, that our nation’s wars are necessary, perhaps inevitable, and freedom requires it. He is echoing a nationalist message that can be traced to the origins of our nation when the contours of American exceptionalism were formed in the writings of Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine,
and others who made claims about the universality of human liberties and freedom. The idea of America as a protectorate of a universal right to freedom, however abstract, was expressed explicitly by President George W. Bush in the opening paragraph of his address to the nation before America’s invasion of Iraq in 2003: “My fellow citizens, at this hour, American and coalition forces are in the early stages of military operations to disarm Iraq, to free its people, and to defend the world from grave danger.” According to this statement, the fate of the world is at stake, and the United States is the force of universal good in the necessary and simplistic binary. I say necessary because nation-states must be (or appear to be) morally justified to intervene militarily in inter-state politics. Writing about this idea of *jus ad bellum*, historian Eric Patterson suggests the state must profess to be a “legitimate authority acting on a just cause with right intent.” Of course, what constitutes “right intent” is arguable. Nonetheless, despite the concerns that I’ve just raised about these nationalist claims and their possible importance to a renewed understanding of nation-state foreign policy motivations, my specific interest here and in this project is not that discussion per se, but rather why the nationalist message echoed by Rumsfeld (and to be sure, others) seems to rely on the objectification of a soldier. I worry that when we objectify soldiers, we don’t inquire more carefully into their lived war experience. That experience seems to be washed out by patriotic hues.

I should be clear, though. I don’t think Rumsfeld is recalling one of his “great many” visits to Walter Reed in this soliloquy, although I’m sure he made visits there during his tenure as Secretary of Defense. By the time he left office in late 2006, more than 32,000 soldiers were wounded in Afghanistan and Iraq, some of whom would be treated at the then Walter Reed Army Medical Center. For Rumsfeld, factual accuracy is not central to his message. He is simply borrowing from the American cultural idea that soldiers make sacrifices to serve our country and protect our freedom. It is their willingness to make those sacrifices that should engender our admiration and categorical support for them and their families. This sentiment of support is ubiquitous in American culture and affects how citizens think of public policy.
A 2011 Politico, George Washington University poll underscores this point. Asked if they would favor or oppose defense budget cuts, including “programs for soldiers and veterans” to balance the federal budget, 82% of the respondents either opposed or strongly opposed such a measure. It’s not surprising that most people think this way. In a sense, we are told how we should think about soldiers in relation to national defense. Recalling President Bush’s remarks to the nation on the eve of the Iraq War, he addresses the military and their family members directly: “Millions of Americans are praying with you for the safe return of your loved ones and for the protection of the innocent. For your sacrifice, you have the gratitude and respect of the American people.” In that last sentence, there is a prescription of sorts for the American population, who supposedly benefit from soldier sacrifice. It may read: respond with gratitude for those that protect us. This sentiment of support and gratitude for military service and the institution itself is widespread in American culture. President Obama expressed a similar appreciation for military service members in his farewell address to the nation, saying: “It has been the honor of my lifetime to be your Commander-in-Chief;” before obliquely endorsing the military’s role as protector, “protecting our way of life requires more than the military.” Gratitude for military service in this scenario is a tricky public response. Philosopher Nancy Sherman raises an interesting argument about such expressions of gratitude in her recent book, Afterwar. She suggests that gratitude can be a problematic response when considered within the context of Kantian moral philosophy, saying that since gratitude is an exchange of sorts, a “reciprocation of goodwill” between people, it is important that this reciprocation be based on knowledge of the other or a shared responsibility of the act deserving gratitude. The problem arises when knowledge of the other is based not on an intimate knowledge of the person’s lived experience, but rather by a generalized knowledge, in this case one informed by a patriotic narrative.

Whether or not gratitude is a correct or acceptable response, it is at least a distraction. Lost in the rhetorical fog of our nationalist narrative is the truth that soldiers have interiority.
Rumsfeld’s nameless soldier has interiority, though obscured in his telling. By glossing over it, we may become distracted from inquiring about a soldier’s lived experience in war or at home as he or she reclaims his or her life with family support. In the case of Rumsfeld’s generic and gendered soldier, we don’t think about how he was injured. We don’t envision him with a tracheotomy tube in his throat, his leg in a traction device and a colostomy bag hanging from his bed. We only know that he was almost fatally wounded and survived. For Rumsfeld’s purpose, this representation is enough to tether with a nationalist message. But, if we reclaim the soldier-as-object representation from Rumsfeld’s soliloquy (and the more general patriotic narrative that valorizes soldier service as well), then thinking about the wounded soldier becomes less of an abstraction. We can begin to imagine what the soldier experienced in war. Divorced from the context of our nationalist message, we may begin to see he or she as a victim of political violence. It may also become possible to think of soldiers as agents of violence. There should be no doubt that Rumsfeld’s soldier went to war with a basic load of ammunition and training about the rules of engagement to know when and who to kill. He spent hours at live fire ranges and close combat marksmanship ranges learning how to properly aim his weapon, control his breathing, and squeeze the trigger.

Relying on my combat experience, my eyewitness account of war, I offer that the space between being harmed and harming others is where a soldier begins to feel a peculiar tension in relation to this ethos of gratitude for military service as it is represented in our nationalist message. The difficult truth, one that is beyond the reach of our imagination when the object-soldier lives in our nationalist message, is that a soldier can be both an agent and victim of political violence. To be clearer, Rumsfeld’s nameless soldier may have shot and killed a Taliban operative before he was wounded. Or perhaps he punched an Iraqi police officer for stealing his Meal-Ready-to-Eat while breaking during a joint patrol moments before he tripped a wire and detonated a house-borne IED that injured him. On the other hand, Rumsfeld’s soldier may have been a naïve young man or woman, who joined the Marines to pay for college, and was
wounded by shrapnel from an incoming mortar shell while walking from the chow hall to his or her hooch on an operating base in northern Iraq.

We don’t know who Rumsfeld’s soldier is, and this is precisely the point. Without this knowledge, we are constrained to think about this objectified soldier within the framework of a nationalist message, which valorizes soldier service vis-à-vis national security. This message, as described by Rumsfeld and others, though generalized and even vague, is unambiguous and therefore limiting. It relies on a simplistic soldier construct, which precludes a more nuanced and complex view about the loss, suffering, violence and psychological impact war has on soldier bodies. It not only limits how we think about soldier bodies, it precludes a discussion about civilian bodies and lives, other victims of political violence who suffer in the detritus of war. In this way, our nationalist message has a scapegoating effect. We seem to be replacing a more nuanced discussion about war with a simplistic narrative, in Rumsfeld’s case, about a guy who made it. It is in this light that Dear Madison can be seen as a counter-narrative to the patriotic messaging so prevalent in American culture.
Teenager in Parade Dress and Boy at Freedom Park Memorial, North Carolina, 2016
Dear Soldier

That you fore helping us.

Love Madison
Dear Madison,

Let me start by saying thank you for the note, and I’m sorry it has taken me so long to respond to you. It has probably been too long for this meek apology, but I didn’t know what to say to you then. And I’m not quite sure that I do now. I’m not even sure if you remember the card you sent to me in Iraq. Do you remember it? You sent a card with a picture of a kitten hiding safely underneath the front legs of what I’m sure was a kind, gentle dog. Inside you wrote: “Dear Soldier, thank you for helping us, Love, Madison.” Your note was like that kitten pictured on the front, innocent and sweet. I thought of you like that kitten pictured on the front. It was especially kind of you to sign the note Love. And I believe you Madison. I believe that you felt love when you wrote that card, a child’s love for someone you see as helpful.

I’m not sure where you were when you wrote to me, but I see you in a school somewhere with your classmates, sitting at a desk with shiny chrome legs, thinking about what to write to a phantom soldier thousands of miles away in a country as unfamiliar to you as the rip of machine gun fire. You’re a bit confused in my imagination, unsure of what to say. Perhaps you asked a teacher what soldiers’ do. This teacher, who is conditioned to dilute answers into the simplest of terms, says: “Well, Madison, they
help us.” Now with the context you need, you open that card to the
blank space behind the picture of the cute kitten and gentle dog
and thank me for helping you before you join your classmates in a
single file at the door and march off to lunch or recess or maybe
gym. I like this innocent image of you, but I must remind myself
that you’re older now. You’ve grown, so you have to grow in my
imagination. I’m not responding to a child. I’m responding to a
young adult.

I think I can be honest, maybe even unfiltered. But, I do
wonder if it’s safe to tell you about RPGs shot by teenagers and
the whistle of mortar rounds sailing over your head as you walk to
the outdoor sink on the FOB at four o’clock in the morning to brush
your teeth, or about crooked police that smile at you and call you
friend when they know you’ll be attacked later that day and drunk
old men with dusty feet in rubber sandals who try to extort money
from you by giving you phony information about insurgents. I want
you to know what we did in war, they way we searched private homes
whenever we wanted and as often as we wanted. Not because we were
thugs, rather we were chasing insurgents who we thought we needed
to kill or capture to create a secure environment, as we declared
in our mission statement. So, we sometimes placed our sniper teams
on rooftops to hopefully shoot and kill an insurgent arming an IED,
who was really a father of three without a job, paid to arm the
device, probably for money to buy food. (There were no jobs.) If the sniper team did shoot and kill such a guy, we would celebrate their success and perhaps award a medal to the sniper. We did these things on the same day we decorated the Christmas tree in the chow hall or gathered to watch the New England Patriots play the St. Louis Rams in the Super Bowl, again on the FOB, on a big screen TV attached to a satellite, one we purchased from the same Iraqis we sometimes stopped to question, detain, shoot or encourage to vote. It was a tangled place.

I want to be truthful, Madison, and I think you’re old enough to know about cleaning blood off of combat vehicles and the whup-whup-whup of chopper blades carrying dying soldiers about your age now to combat surgical hospitals in Baghdad and Kandahar. Those choppers were always in a hurry. They had to be. There’s not much time. If the bleeding soldiers shaking with shock made it to medical care within an hour, they’d have a chance. Many made it. Some didn’t. I remember one soldier who was shot in the leg and stomach in an ambush. One bullet broke his femur and the other ripped through his gut. He lay on the ground, face-up, and pointed in the direction where he thought the enemy was firing from so the rest of his squad knew where to shoot and avoid the kill zone. He was evacuated.

I didn’t see him until five months later after we returned to
our home base. He walked into my office to ask me a question about
his promotion. (He was due to be promoted when he was shot in
Iraq.) I don’t remember what I said, but I do remember looking at
his tracheotomy scar and gaunt face. He looked confused, unsure,
maybe askance is a better word for the way his eyes moved to the
corner of the room when he spoke. I later learned he died on the
C17 flying from Baghdad to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in
Germany and was resuscitated on board by the air medical team. I
can picture him in my office doorway, framed by the doorjamb and
holding loose papers in his right arm. I’m sitting at my desk,
gazing at his face and trying not to look at the divot below his
larynx covered by stretched and scarred skin where the plastic
tracheotomy tube was once sticking out of his throat. He seemed
skinnier. I should have hugged him. I should have stood up, walked
over to him and if not embraced him at least draped my arm around
his shoulders and said something simple like “I’m glad you’re
okay.” Sadly, I didn’t do that. I don’t remember what I said, but
I probably said something formal about his promotion question
like “I’ll make sure you have the points and we’ll process it
retroactively.”

And maybe this is part of the reason why I’m finally writing
to you now. Something in me has changed. I haven’t quite put my
finger on it yet, but I have something to say now. Although I
thought your card was sweet, it bothered me that you were thanking me for something that I wasn’t doing. You thought I was helping you, but I am not sure that I was helping anyone. I was trying to survive Madison, and you weren’t a variable in my survival calculus which included preparing for the worst to happen while at the same time making sure I was ready to kill and leaving the rest to fate, if there is such a thing.

So, afraid and uncertain, I bottled my fears into a routine that I thought would give me a chance to survive: ammunition loaded in a one to three tracer mix, crew-served weapons test fired, patrol brief prepared, radios checked, round chambered, weapon on safe, all of this routine dusted with a sprinkling of superstitious behavior like using the same blue pen to prepare every patrol brief and visiting the operations center for a tactical update exactly one hour prior to leaving on patrol. I did this religiously. I felt like if I knew every detail about the enemy’s attack habits or tactics, techniques, and procedures as we say in the Army, then I would somehow be more prepared, that this knowledge would magically strengthen the armor I was wearing like some sort of mystical spell, that knowing what could happen and how would help me when or if it did happen. It’s a strange jumbled logic, thinking you can control what is uncontrollable, but it helped me live. Thinking like this, I devoured intelligence reports and battle notes like
a hungry cat, scratching at them with my pencil, underlining and starring bulleted sentences and paragraphs that meant something to me then. I still have a few of those reports. I’ve scanned one to show you.

Judging from the tiny holes above the title Ar Ramadi Enemy TTPs, I must have had this one pinned to the plywood wall in my room. I wish I could remember taking it down when I left Iraq. I wish I could remember what I was thinking when I put it in a folder and stuffed it in my rucksack, deciding to keep it, carrying it with me for nearly fifteen years, packing it along with my bedding, books, pots and pans, as I moved from base to base, back to Iraq and back home again - this intelligence report, a paper talisman, always with me.

Maybe it’s meaning has something to do with that pigeon note I wrote after the sentence “insurgents have an extremely robust and capable reconnaissance capability with redundant forms of communication.” Perhaps this report is an unconscious tether to a day that could have ended badly for me or could have ended me. My friend Tim, who had his legs blown off in Afghanistan, has also kept military documents about the day that changed his life forever. He has a copy of the investigation his officers completed after he was blown-up by an IED. The report suggests he was partly responsible for his injury because he was walking on an unimproved
Ar Ramadi Enemy TTPs

Expect there to be IEDs in the yards of safehouses in addition to them being in the street. A favorite TTP of the foreign fighters in downtown Ramadi is to make the front yard of a house a kill zone. They plant the IED in the yard and detonate it once our guys get into a stack. 3 SF guys have been killed and 9 wounded by this.

- 99% of the time, only foreign fighters stand and fight to the death. They are the only ones who want to die and are therefore the most dangerous. The average Iraqi insurgent does not want to die. That is why every time we’ve gone in and done major operations in a crappy area (OK Corral, Abilene, Aggies, etc) there has been little to no fighting. The HVTs all run out of town and nobody wants to fight overwhelming force. The foreign fighters (Trick or Treat, Power Hour/Surge, Hamza/Zargawi house, Boulder) stood and fought.

- Insurgents nearly always attack in an area where they have multiple high speed avenues of approach to use for escape

\checkmark - The insurgents have an extremely robust and capable reconnaissance capability with redundant forms of communication. Yes, pigeons, telephone, signal flags.

- There are co-conspirators and sympathizers within the police force, ICDC, new Iraqi army, our contractors, and in the government. (Remember, we are the infidels). These guys are part of the intelligence collection apparatus for the enemy.

- IEDs are usually stored close to where they are emplaced.

- There are always weapons caches near where attacks occur regularly (50m to 1km).

- There will be weapons caches in the cemeteries buried or in false tombs (bring IPs or ICDC when you search to ensure cultural understanding)

- There will be weapons caches along the river

- There may be weapons caches in schools/school yards and in mosques

- There will be false walls, floors, and ceilings in safehouses that are used to conceal weapons and documents.

- Fighters will wear both sandals and sneakers or even go barefoot (see 1-34’s captured Mujahideen video for proof of that). However, we have noted that foreign fighters will often all wear the same footgear, normally Adidas knock offs. We call them the "Adidas Jihads." All the guys in the Trick or Treat house wore the same ones. One or two of the guys in the Muj video was wearing them also.

- The insurgents do not care about killing civilians. In fact, the death of civilians will generally benefit their cause. Salafis / Wahhabis benefit from a cycle of violence and are attempting to create one here. They want to burn this country into a scarred husk like they did in Afghanistan, Sudan, Algeria, Chechnya, etc. They don't care about civilians. They will blame all civilian deaths on us. Unfortunately, the public will often buy off on this. All collateral damage is our fault in the view of the Iraqis. The thinking goes that the fighting wouldn't happen if we weren't here, therefore it's our fault.
road when the bomb exploded. (It strikes me now as obscene to suggest he could have been partly responsible.) Anyway, maybe he and I keep documentary evidence for similar reasons, though I haven’t been traumatically injured like him.

As I look over the report now, I don’t remember calling anyone “Adidas Jihads” because they wore knock-off Adidas sneakers like the last paragraph suggests, but I do remember calling Iraqis “haji.” Someone recently asked me if haji was a derogatory label like gook used by Vietnam era soldiers. It was. We were told to stop that later, and we did, for the most part. By the way, haji is a term of endearment for an old man who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca. So, it didn’t make sense for us to call everyone haji.

Our interpreter pointed this out to us. I liked this guy, our interpreter. His name was Farouq. His left arm was shorter than his right arm and he talked with a lazy nasal drone that was somewhat comical. Also, he wore oversized goggles on the top of his head that he used for eye protection while patrolling with us. The sound of his voice on top of his clownish appearance gave you the impression that he was aloof and foolish. He wasn’t. He was savvy, attentive and brave. Besides, he hated Saddam Hussein. One day I asked him why he hated Saddam, and he said in that nasal drone of his, “LT, when I was young and he came on TV, my father would spit at the screen.” (He called me LT, meaning lieutenant.)
Just reading this report takes me back to that time, to those memories. It’s like the people materialize in my living room. I bounce around from place to person to event and span more than a decade with a speed a physicist would envy. Yet, as I read the report now, what I find particularly interesting is the last line: “All collateral damage is our fault in the view of the Iraqis. The thinking goes that the fighting wouldn’t happen if we weren’t here, therefore it’s our fault.” I remember thinking something quite different at the time: if the Iraqis didn’t let insurgents live among them, we wouldn’t need to be there to fight them. According to my logic, it was their fault. They were responsible for their country; we were there to fix it.

It seems to me now, practically speaking, that the Iraqi’s may have been right. We did bring danger and destruction along with our dollars, digital devices, trucks and guns. I remember an Iraqi mother who was especially wary of us at the time. We showed up at an open field strewn with trash near her home, next to a road we frequently used to bypass the rattle and confusion of the inner city. The trash worried us. It could easily conceal a bomb. We arrived there unannounced one morning with empty trucks, a stack of trash bags and dollar bills. Our idea was to pay Iraqi children money to pick up the trash, one bag for one dollar. Not long after we arrived and announced our scheme, children began flocking to
our trucks and dollars like sheep hunting for flecks of grass. The mother, wearing a black burka, marched over to us, fiercely shouted something in Arabic, and grabbed her son by the ear and hauled him back home. She was powerful. I watched her then. I admire her now. She knew that being close to us could be dangerous. She knew that bombs kill or injure everyone in the blast radius. She didn’t want her son to be one of the killed or maimed children of that war. That’s why she fetched him.

I imagine her at home before marching confidently into our orbit, busy making flat bread or tending to some other household chore, stopping momentarily, hearing the neighborhood clamor about Americans in the field; her eyes flash to the ally way, her son’s not there. Understanding the relentless pull of a child’s curiosity to the strange and unfamiliar, she instinctively reacts and marches to the trash field to fetch her son, grabbing him by the ear and pulling him (whining and wailing) into the ally and finally to the precarious safety of their home. This episode reminds me of a war primer written by German playwright Bertolt Brecht in 1938:

That they were there, the smoke’s a sign:
Sons of fire, but not of light.
Where did they come from? From the night.
Where did they go? Oblivion.
I would be the son of fire in this scenario. The Iraqi mother reminded of that. I’m still untangling myself from the good-guy-defender-of-freedom narrative that sustained me for many years. It’s not easy and it takes time.

It has occurred to me that you may be curious about how I looked then. I only have one picture. It was taken near a palm grove not far from the trash street. (Farouq is also pictured.) It’s not a good picture. I don’t remember the photographer. I was talking to a man, a member of the city council, if I remember correctly, who approached us as we patrolled his neighborhood to inquire about insurgent activity in the area. I was frustrated and afraid, though you wouldn’t guess that from the look on my face. It appears I’m admonishing the man. The caption I wrote then is embarrassing and untrue; I posture like I’m some sort of tough guy, the new-sheriff-in-town mentality at work. I was not fired up like I wrote, and this guy was not “peeping and hiding” in the misnamed orchard. It was a palm grove, and he approached us because he wanted to know what we were doing in his neighborhood. Yet, I argued with him because I felt like he was withholding information from me. I thought that he should know about insurgent activity because he lived there. But, how would he know? Why did I assume then that he should know, and why did I try to preserve a different
This photo was taken in early June ’04. We found this guy peeping and hiding in the orchard, foreground. I don’t remember what he said, however it “fired” me up. The guy wearing goggles is the interpreter.

John
truth with the misleading caption I wrote?

As I think about this now, perhaps I was trying to hide an incident, which occurred only moments before my encounter with the councilmen. We were interrogating everyone in the neighborhood, and just before the councilman approached me, I had asked my platoon sergeant to question a middle-aged man we stopped in the area. I may have said something like, “See if he’ll talk to you,” and then I walked away. When I returned to my vehicle, I saw that middle-aged man sitting in the back seat with his hands zip-tied and a sandbag over his head. I immediately removed the sandbag from his head and had him released. I hope I apologized. I remember the moment when I lifted that bag from his head, his look of anguish, the creased lines of his unshaven face as he pushed his mouth into a grimace and sighed with relief in one quick gasp of breath. Of course, this man was innocent. We impetuously upset his life, if only for a moment, introduced danger into his world, violated his safety, and most egregiously, his dignity, all because we wanted intelligence or “intel” as we say in the Army.

So Madison, I wonder what you may think now, knowing what I’ve just told you. Was I keeping you safe? I hope you’re beginning to doubt that. I was trying to survive then. It was about self-preservation. That soldier who was shot in the gut and leg and reappeared in my office after dying somewhere over Turkey or maybe
the Black Sea, he was trying to survive too. We were paid soldiers trying to survive in an ancient biblical land that we vaguely understood, where calls to prayer boomed from Mosque speakers five times a day and goats grazed on brown grass poking through dirt packed as hard as cement.

Your letter found me in this land, in Baqubah, Iraq, a city of about 100,000 people just north of Baghdad in the then so-called “Sunni Triangle.” This agitated city grew on chunks of land sliced by a slithering Diayala river that eventually made its way to the Tigris. This was our battlefield, a congested urban environment dotted with dusty palm trees, concertina wire, canals and jersey barriers, a place where we all enacted the roles that allowed us to live, like councilmen, father, insurgent or new-sheriff-in-town. We lived among the rubble and twisted rebar sticking from chunks of concrete from military buildings destroyed by American bombs during the Gulf War. We drove into this exotic place in aluminum combat vehicles hastily reinforced with armor plates and plywood boxes filled with sandbags. The armor and sandbags made us feel much safer than we actually were. I saw shrapnel from an IED blast punch a clean neat hole in that armor, missing the driver’s legs and lodging in the engine block. I’m not sure we would have been less safe had we removed the vehicle doors altogether.

We stashed unpackaged one-handed tourniquets in our cargo
pockets and Israeli bandages in our first aid pouches in case one of those pieces of shrapnel did hit our legs or arms. You needed those things to stop the bleeding if you were wounded. The one-handed tourniquet is easy to cinch tight quickly. That’s why we carried them. Tim, who I mentioned earlier, had eight on his body when he was strapped to a litter and lifted onto the medevac chopper. Kyle had four on his body, two on each leg, when he was evacuated. He told me he could see the dark wet patches of blood seeping through his pants despite the tourniquets. “I didn’t think they were working,” he said. I’ll tell you more about both of these guys later, but I should first mention Adam.

He was the first soldier in our unit to die. Adam was blown up by an IED in Baqubah. Blown apart is probably more accurate. He didn’t have a chance. He was on a dismounted patrol with his platoon in the old part of the city when he walked in front of an IED watched by an insurgent. This guy, the triggerman, detonated the device and large chunks of shrapnel blew Adam apart. The soldiers had to pick up his body parts and put them into black plastic bags. (This was 2004; we weren’t carrying biohazard bags yet.) Imagine his severed arm and hand laying on the road, lifeless but gloved with his watch dutifully telling time in dashed rectangular numbers like some magical plastic self aloof and immune to the horror unfolding around it. I didn’t see it happen, but I
was in the city. I remember the explosion that rattled windows and shook the ground in the early afternoon heat. You immediately ask yourself what happened, even though you know. You feel it. You know it’s bad. The explosion was too loud and too close. The voice on the radio sending reports to headquarters confirms what you already suspected: one KIA, killed-in-action.

I still think about Adam and occasionally look up his name on the Defense Casualty Analysis System website along with other soldiers I know who died in Iraq. His name is in a database under the tabs Operation Iraqi Freedom and Names of the Fallen:

FROEHLICH, ADAM DALRYMPLE SPC E04 2004/03/25 21 MALE

Most people know Adam as a number, one of the 6,863 soldiers that died in our current wars, but I knew him as an affable young man who liked video games and packed all of his belongings in a box before we left for Iraq. He was 21 when he died, a Specialist (SPC) or pay grade E04, from Pine Hill, New Jersey. He died on March 25, 2004. I remember hearing about how gracious his father was when he learned about his son’s death. We were told that he wasn’t angry. He didn’t blame us for Adam’s death, but he could have. Walking along the side of a road to scout for IEDs was not a good way to find them. Of course, the idea here is to find the bomb and detonate
it safely before it explodes. It’s like a cat and mouse game, sort of. Find the enemy before the enemy finds you. In this case, find the enemy’s IED before it kills you or someone else. We called this type of mission route clearance.

After Adam died, we learned. We would begin using thermal imaging devices to scout for bombs along roadside ditches and under trash or stuffed in animal carcasses. It’s a simple idea really. Explosive material heats at a higher temperature than the ambient temperature outside. We thought that our thermal devices would see the heat signature from the concealed bomb. Sometimes it worked. Other times it didn’t. The point is walking along the side of the road like Adam was doing (and not only him), with the hope that he’d find the bomb before it exploded, was not a good idea; it’s nearly impossible to spot one. Whether or not Adam’s Dad understood the particulars of a route clearance mission, he seemed to understand the danger we were all in and perhaps forgave us. I don’t know.

After Adam’s memorial service, we packed his personal effects in a plastic footlocker, sent them to Kuwait and resumed patrolling. On one of those patrols in the city, not longer after Adam died, I almost walked into an IED had it not been for a quick decision I made when I saw pigeons circling above me, lifting off from the rooftop of the tallest building, spiraling upward and then
Three men: one with a bomb, one with pigeons, and I have a platoon.

I’m walking the only way on a one-way street with the platoon.

Intense heat, burning trash, rot, stench, people, cars, bicycles, motorbikes, hanging flesh and dates, old men playing dominoes, it’s all there in the dense street.

I see pigeons and understand.

They’re above, on the roof, the highest roof, swirling into the air and spiraling back down, following and mimicking the man’s spiraling and swirling and twisting stick.

Up they go and back down in rhythmic obedience.

The man with a bomb sees the pigeon and understands.

He primes the bomb, gathers the detonator, and moves to the one-way street.

I want the man with the pigeons.

I race into the building with soldiers and machine guns,
pistols and radios and one shotgun, bandages and zip cuffs
and an idea to kill or capture the man with the pigeons.

Four floors, open courtyard, up, run, quickly,
time matters,
find the door, it’s locked, shoot, onto the roof,
he’s surprised, unarmed,

Don’t shoot – take him, take the stick.
The man with the bomb arms the bomb
and leaves it at the end of the one-way street.
He’s watching and waiting.

I call for armored trucks.
I get into the armored trucks with the platoon
and prisoner.

We move toward the bomb made for people.
It explodes on armor.
Shrapnel bounces off steel
and rips through
rubber tires.

I was lucky on that day. If I hadn’t stopped to raid the
building, I would have walked my platoon into the waiting ambush
instead of driving into it. I, or someone with me, could have been
blown apart like Adam. It’s odd to think about that day now. For
many years I had a curiously dismissive response to this memory, thinking there wasn’t much to tell. I wasn’t hurt, so why think about it or talk about it. Yet, I was there. It did happen. The moment is now remembered. It has filtered into my subconscious and so has become a part of me. I was running up the steps of a building with a team of soldiers to kill the guy with pigeons while other guys waited patiently to kill me, and my children were at home, walking to the bus stop, playing in their rooms, and (like me) groping for whatever rituals they needed to help them live. My daughter later told me her routine was to kiss a picture of me before she went to sleep, thinking I would feel the kiss thousands of miles away in my dusty biblical battlefield. I know that day – that memory – is a part of who I am now. It is part of who my children are. We foolishly think that our lives happen only to us. I’m beginning to learn that all of us are bobbing in the wake of that war experience. This includes everyone, not only me and my children, but Iraqi fathers, mothers, and children too, and don’t forget the Filipino and Indian workers who cooked our meals and washed our clothes on the FOB. We’re all a part of this strange war-kindled roleplaying, obeying a script that unwisely parses us into good or bad, right or wrong, friend or enemy – always this simplistic binary.

This reminds me of the time I interrogated a young Iraqi
woman. I was following the binary script. She wasn’t. We were searching her home because we thought her father was financing an IED network. We showed up at night. It was to be a soft knock, as opposed to a hard knock, which means we would not kick the door in and announce our presence with a flash-bang grenade, unless we had to or thought we had to. It is she that I most remember from that night. It is her face that materializes, her sheer mauve headscarf with gold trim hiding all but a wisp of dark hair curling onto her cheek, her matching dark eyes and her hand, her pale, shaking hand. She’s ensconced in my memory like that innocent kitten on your card, Madison. I wrote a poem about that day too:

I’m at a rich man’s house with my platoon
at night
to kill or capture the rich man.
Knock first, see if they open,
if not, go in hard.
Don’t give them much time.
They open,
soldiers run up the stairs, through rooms,
three women are found and pushed into the front room,
one old, two young.
I start with the young woman.
Where’s your father?

Jordan.

Crashing, thumping and yelling,
soldiers overturn furniture, scan rooms,
break cabinets, searching, looking,
yelling “all clear” while running through the house.

Why is he in Jordan?

Business.

Her hand begins to shake.

I see she’s beautiful,
mauve headscarf, earrings, makeup, dress and shawl.

She’s poised, though afraid,
sitting on the edge of a low couch,
alone.

What business?

I don’t know.

Her hand is shaking, quivering.

Is she eighteen, fifteen?

Oh, so beautiful, so dignified,
so poised – yes, poised,
though afraid.

Where does your father work?

I don’t know.
Where does he get his money?
I don’t know.

Her quivering and shaking hand,
soft, white, delicate,
she sits straight like she’s trying to lift her head through the roof,
to rise above,
something.
So pretty, so poised,
though afraid.
I stop.
I leave.

It may surprise you to know that I didn’t plan to write these poems. I’ve stumbled onto writing them, almost accidentally. Like I’ve said, it was only recently that I began to take my pigeon story seriously. For whatever reason, it seems easier for me to transcribe memories like these in poetic form. I’m not like other people, who are able to immediately transform that which disturbs them into art. It takes me longer, much longer. When the writer, Paul Auster, learned of his father’s death, he knew that he would write about him, saying in his memoir, the Invention of Solitude, the urge to write “was simply there, a certainty, an
obligation that began to impose itself on me the moment I was given the news.” I felt a different obligation after war, or maybe a wayward instinct, to ignore what I experienced, ignore so I could move forward, to keep moving, thinking that by tracking time in dashed rectangular numbers on a magical watch, I would stay on a flat surface, moving away from memory, steady-like, along a ramrod trajectory taking me to some end. I was marking time, as we say in the Army. Writer W.G. Sebald calls time artificial. He asks, in his book *Austerlitz*:

> And is not human life in many parts of the earth governed to this day less by time than by the weather, and thus by an unquantifiable dimension which disregards linear regularity, does not progress constantly forward but moves in eddies, is marked by episodes of congestion and irruption, recurs in ever-changing form, and evolves in no one knows what direction?

I thought I knew what direction I was moving. I thought it was quantifiable, like the readings on a GPS app that ticks of the mileage and portends your arrival time. Yet, life is not steady-like and neither is memory. It is fragmented like chunks of metal bursting from an IED. It irrupts. I can’t move away from my
remembered Iraq. The memories explode. They don’t obey time and artificial human constructs. Something else is at work here. Maybe that’s why some of these memories come in poetic form. The poems are like a piece of cloth, sheer maybe, covering the memories, making them tolerable, yet still visible, if only temporarily.

You know, Madison, it has suddenly occurred to me that perhaps I’m being too honest with you. And now I feel somewhat presumptuous and even embarrassed for thinking you may want to read what I write, especially since I don’t know you. I wish there was a way you could stop me if you wanted. But it’s obviously not possible. I’m here, remembering and writing and thinking at my desk, occasionally gazing out my open window and listening to a squirrel scurry over dead leaves in surprising bursts of speed and agility. You’re somewhere else, perhaps on a college campus now, no more desks with shiny chrome legs, rather residence halls with hard furniture and shared bathrooms. You’re unaware that I’ll soon carefully fold this letter, place it neatly in an envelope and walk it to the mailbox, join my life with yours, however briefly. I’ll even lift the red metal flag to signal to the universe that I have something to say.

Yet, maybe I should have thought more carefully about whether or not I should write to you. Though, you did start this correspondence with your sweet card. And there is the message in
your note that has always bothered me. I don’t mean to challenge you, Madison, but your note does have whispers of patriotism in it, faint innocent whispers about soldiers defending freedom and keeping us safe. Of course, you could not be blamed then. That’s the message you were receiving. I know this. But, I don’t hear those whispers when I remember my lived war experience. I didn’t hear those whispers in the palm grove with the councilman, in the building with the pigeon man, or in the poised young woman’s house. I don’t think my friends hear them either. Our remembered experiences are more complicated than simplistic narratives or simple stage directions in a binary script. After all, doesn’t the stage light come in and fade on where we orient our attention?

My friend Kyle, who was blown up in Khost, Afghanistan, struggles with a particular memory. It always seems to be awash in light. He told me that it’s especially difficult for him on the anniversary of the attack that wounded him and killed three of his friends. It could be something as simple as a country song like “I Drive Your Truck” by Lee Brice that triggers the horror of that day. Kyle said, “I can be caught unaware. There’ve been days when I’ve come into work and I’ve just had tears roll down my face until I get there. I think about how life would be different today if this didn’t happen.” To cope now, he pushes these thoughts away: “I know I have to be strong. I think of something else. If it starts
getting to me, I’ll do something to get my mind off of it quickly.”

Imagine yourself stopped at a traffic light, Madison, you look over at the white Toyota next to you; you see a middle-aged man sitting in his car, alone, in the driver’s seat, waiting for the light to change and he’s crying. What would you think? Would you guess that he’s recalling a day that changed his life forever, a day that started like all others but ended with him in a combat surgical hospital, tourniquets on his legs and a phone held to his ear as he told his wife, “I’m hurt, but I’ll live” at three o’clock in the morning, Eastern Standard Time? Or, would you look away? These experiences shape us. And this is really the point. There is a difference between what we did in war and what you thought we were doing, if you thought about it at all.

You may have read about the attack that wounded Kyle and killed nineteen other people. This story came to the world as numbers and labels in the New York Times: “A suicide bomber who walked into the crowded center of Khost in eastern Afghanistan on Monday morning as foreign and Afghan soldiers conducted a joint foot patrol killed three international service members and 16 Afghan police officers and civilians, witnesses and hospital officials said.” I suppose Kyle can be considered a witness. He was there. He was the squad leader who planned that joint patrol in Khost. The suicide bomber was wearing an Afghan police uniform and
detonated his vest near the center of the patrol, blowing himself up, and sending shrapnel and chunks of flesh away from his body that wounded Kyle and killed all of those people. The force of the blast knocked Kyle on the ground and backward ten feet. I asked him if he could remember what he was thinking at that moment, if he had a sense of how bad he was injured. He said, “Oh, yeah. I knew right then and there. I tasted sulfur in my mouth, and I wasn’t able to talk. I had fallen on top of a soldier and she wasn’t moving. I was looking around. I didn’t know if somebody would start shooting. I was looking for a way to get to somewhere to make sure I was safe, and I couldn’t move. My body was numb from the waist down. That’s when I looked and saw the holes in my legs. I saw the blood on my boots and my pants. There was blood all over the place, but I knew that I could move my arms. When I looked down and saw that my legs where all busted up – as bad as they were – I could still move my arms and I was trying to pull myself up. I was trying to get out of that area because I didn’t know what was going to happen next. I knew that I could see my truck, and I was trying to get to my truck. I felt like I would die. My father was there. He said, ‘Keep moving. Keep talking. Don’t close your eyes.’ He was lying on the ground with me. He was staring right at me; telling me to keep talking, ‘don’t close your eyes.’ I would have closed my eyes and wouldn’t be sitting here today.”
Kyle’s father had died a year earlier from cancer. So, his father’s ghost was alive and laying on the street with him. When he told me this, he turned and looked right at me with an intensity that startled me, as if he wanted to make sure that I understood – that I understood the force of his father’s words: “Keep moving. Keep talking. Don’t close your eyes.” I see them on the ground. Kyle, up on his elbows, inching backward toward his vehicle, scraping slowly over the ground,

keep moving,

he pulls his lifeless legs,

spits sulfur from his mouth,

get to the truck – the solace of armor,

keep moving,

the tire,

the door, too high,

underneath, pull underneath,

keep moving.

Kyle and I talked for more than three hours in his office on the day I took those pictures. When I first asked him about the suicide attack that nearly crippled him, he swiveled in his chair to face his computer and pulled up a New York Daily News article
online that featured a picture of the aftermath. In this picture, there’s an Afghan police officer walking in the background in front of some type of minaret that looks more like an amusement park ride which sends happy riders swinging in circles high above the ground. Wet puddles of blood are in the foreground. Kyle pointed to those puddles and looked at me with an intensity that I’m sure you’re now familiar with, Madison, and said, “That’s my blood on the street. I know right where I was standing. So, I left something there. That’s my blood.”

He feels like he left part of himself there. It’s a tether to that day, that country, to a time before, when he could walk without pain or run up and down a basketball court only hobbled by his age, just as he was doing the day before the attack that changed his life. “The night before, we were playing basketball together and it got dark. We planned to finish the game the next day after mission.” They didn’t resume the game. They couldn’t. They couldn’t play a game when half of their platoon where in combat surgical hospitals in Kandahar. This reminds me of four lines Joan Didion wrote in her memoir, A Year of Magical Thinking:

Life changes fast.
Life changes in the instant.
You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.
The question of self-pity.

She was recalling her husband’s death. After they sat down for dinner, her husband, writer John Gregory Dunne, suffered a massive heart attack and died instantly. Kyle could use those lines. He might say, “Life changes fast. Life changes in the instant. You exit your vehicle and a bomb explodes.” And there is the question of self-pity. “I still have my days,” Kyle says. “It’s still hard.”

At home, after he was injured, Kyle told me that he didn’t want to leave his bedroom. He wanted to stay awake all night and watch TV. His wife said no. “She yelled and screamed at me to get out of bed. ‘Come and interact with your family,’ she said. When I finally did get up and get out, I thought, this is good. It’s good to get fresh air, to sit in something different, to be in a different atmosphere. We had a ramp put on the house, and she put me in a wheel chair and took me outside. I just sat on the sidewalk. And I thought it’s good to be out here. It’s a good change. It’s okay to get out of bed. Before, I wanted to sleep all day. She would make me turn the TV off. I couldn’t understand why she was yelling at me. I’m thinking I’ve been through a suicide bombing. I’ve got holes in my legs. Why are you yelling at me? It was because she wanted me to get better.” Kyle is getting better;
he’s able to walk with less pain now because of a special device implanted in his leg, which he can control to send palliative electric pulses to damaged nerves.

But there’s still the question of self-pity and also the question of guilt. Kyle feels guilty for surviving. He feels guilty knowing his friend, Jay, twenty years younger than him, a newlywed and father, died on that same street, bleeding from shrapnel wounds while trying to crawl to safety with his Kevlar helmet twisted on his head and his weapon yards away from him, blown out of his hand, bouncing to the curb. He died trying to save himself by crawling to nowhere on a hot Afghanistan street, afraid, alone, and knowing.

There’s now a reserve center named after Jay. So, he’s memorialized on a building and in a glass box sitting in the entrance of that same building, squeezed between two fake artillery shells and the American flag. Inside the box, hiding safely behind a picture of him as a boy wearing another kind of uniform (maybe a flag football uniform), is one of his two dog tags. I wondered if it was the same one packed with his remains in Kuwait and shipped to the United States. I wondered if the tag was around his neck when the blast from a suicide bomber knocked him down, twisted his Kevlar and sent shrapnel into the parts of his body not covered with armor. It makes me sad, Madison, to think about him, this handsome, balding young man, now in a glass box with his boots, his
bowling ball, and only one of his dog tags, squeezed between two fake artillery shells and the American flag. I don’t know how I feel about this, his boots and other things, like the picture of him holding a fish, displayed as a memorial in a place where soldiers train to fight. Where soldiers learn how to pivot on their left foot, face the target in an athletic stance, raise their weapon to the high-ready position, aim, and fire two rounds before reacquiring a site picture. What narrative is in that glass box: A handsome and balding young man, who wore Oakley combat boots, liked to fish, bowl, and at some point in his life, play flag football, is now dead?
His box-narrative seemed incomplete to me. So, I decided to visit his grave, another box. This one placed seven feet deep in the ground so that his wife could be buried on top of him, if she chooses to some day. But, since she has remarried, it would be unlikely for her to make that choice. Nonetheless, Luis, the groundskeeper at the cemetery, had to dig the hole seven feet deep, a National Cemetery rule. Luis told me that when he receives an interment order, he checks to see if the soldier was married and then begins making preparations to dig the hole, seven feet deep in this case, otherwise, four feet deep. He does this by hand, using common tools like spade shovels, pick-axes and wheelbarrows, which are stored in a garage bay, next to another bay where Luis keeps the jigs he uses to set headstones and mark sod, the jigs stacked and stored on top of the casket lowering device.

Luis knows what to do in this cemetery. He feels the cemetery, its pulse, its life. He saw me looking for Jay’s grave number, in a binder, which is placed in a box on a stand near the entrance to the cemetery for visitors. I told him who I was looking for and he pointed to the grave. I followed the direction of his finger to the down-slope, on the far side of the small cemetery, to the marble headstone marked 7 1972. It was easy to find because it was the only grave marked with an angry looking Captain American doll, three flags, a teddy bear and a sun-bleached pinwheel.
Luis had been working on the grass when I arrived. It seems the species of grass he used to cover the graves, Bermuda I believe, though it does well in drought-like conditions, is not as green and vibrant as he would like. So, he decided to replace it with a different species, Kentucky bluegrass, I think. He was digging up sod when I arrived. Luis knows this cemetery. He remembers burying Jay. He dug Jay’s hole in the early morning, before sunrise because the funeral service was scheduled for the late morning, just before noon. As I’ve said, he digs with hand tools, so he needed at least six hours to remove the earth from Jay’s seven-foot hole, a hole now covered with Kentucky bluegrass and marked by a white marble headstone set in place with Luis’ jig, and now visited weekly by Jay’s mother. Luis told me, “She’s been visiting every week for three years.” So, Madison, before I left the cemetery that day, I paused. I looked around at the bright white headstones set in precise rows, duplicating over the landscape, seemingly to infinity, so many. I looked at the majestic old willow oaks, with strong branches reaching over those headstones like a protective mother. I like those willow oaks there in the cemetery. I like thinking about those willow oaks now, with their roots reaching deep into the ground and branches reaching out, over the graves, growing taller and stronger and higher than the American flag flapping fitfully on an aluminum pole.
Yes, Madison, I understand why Kyle lied and why he feels guilty. I also feel guilty, for other reasons. I feel guilty for surviving my war. I feel guilty for not suffering as much as other veterans do. I think I had it easy – four months on the streets of Baqubah and not a scratch. I told Kyle this – that I feel guilty about surviving – and he said, “You may not feel like you’re part of what happened because you don’t have broken legs or shrapnel inside your body. But mentally, you are a part of what happened. You knew the people who died.” What I didn’t tell Kyle is that I’m having dreams about Iraq, again.

I didn’t expect this, Madison. I thought enough time had passed; enough dashed rectangular numbers had disappeared and reappeared (again, my confused conceptions of time). I’ve had this new dream twice now since I’ve begun thinking about my war experience and talking with other veterans. It’s a checkpoint in Baqubah, the smell of burning trash, the jersey barriers, the concertina wire, the dusty palm trees, and the heat, always the heat. I’m stopped in my vehicle when we start taking fire from somewhere in the front. I open the door and climb out to see. I’m standing there, behind the open, armored door with my head poking over the top, one leg on the running board and one leg on the ground. I’m looking for the enemy. I’m holding my radio lazily in my right hand, reporting to headquarters, when suddenly my hand is
blown off by an RPG round. Just like that, it doesn’t make sense. It’s absurd even, my hand blown-off by a grenade shot by an RPG while I’m looking over the top of my armored door and speaking with headquarters. It would make more sense if I were shot in the head by a sniper. My head was exposed after all. That would have been more likely. It would be extremely lucky to hit someone in the hand with an RPG from 300 meters away - nearly impossible. The weapon is not that accurate. But it’s a dream, so the fantastical can become real. My hand is blown-off and I have a dream stump. So now, in my dream, I have problems with phantom pain and itching and prosthetics and residual limb movement like some of my friends, like Rob for instance, injured in Iraq, who now has one leg.

He once told me his missing leg itches. It drives him crazy, as he said. The obviousness and simplicity of this problem surprises me. Of course, it seems reasonable that you should feel other phantom sensations, like itching, if you can feel phantom pain. What can you do if your missing leg itches? Should you itch the empty space where your leg once was? Wondering about this, I asked him what he does for relief? He said he tries to itch another part of his body. Sometimes it helps, sometimes it doesn’t. It’s like fooling the brain into thinking the missing limb is palliated, I guess. The problem is you can’t always fool your brain.

Thinking about this makes me wonder about the origins of
my dream stump. It concerns me because now I’m worried about whether or not I’ve been fooling myself into thinking I’m okay when there’s still traces of anxious memory whispering to me. There may be something that I haven’t attended to, or cognitively processed, as a psychologist may say. Worse yet, it may be a depressive symptom. The dream could be like an ominous tale to remind me that I can’t fool myself. Or, maybe the dream is my way – subconscious, of course – to create a fiction of belonging, through shared experience, with the traumatically wounded veterans I know. Then again, Madison, maybe there’s no reason for me to be concerned. Perhaps the reason for this dream is simply because of the survivor’s guilt I mentioned earlier. But perhaps it has something to do with Tim. He’s the guy I mentioned earlier who had eight tourniquets on his body when a medevac chopper sped him to waiting orthopedic surgeons in Khandahar, Afghanistan. I suppose, as unexpected as it may seem, my dream could be related to coming to know Tim, of learning his story, of being exposed – however cursory – to the depth and power or maybe transcendent force of a human psyche groping for a way to make sense of being blown into the air and backward in Afghanistan’s Korengal Valley.

You see Madison, what Tim experienced terrifies me. The dream that Tim had or thinks he had while he was in a medically induced coma only hours after having his legs blown off, unnerves me.
This dream was episodic and fantastic. In this dream world, he was a fighter; he became a victim, and he was a fighter again, not an Odysseus-like fighter who perseveres through struggle, a real fighter, a new cyborg-like fighter, restored to health and working limbs through mechanization and robotics. In this dream he calls “Drowning,” he was bobbing in the rising waves of a dark ocean, tormented by churning water and whatever may lurk underneath the surface in such a dream ocean. In the distance, the expanse where the dark ocean waves appear to lap against the sky, he sees a ship, a “massive battleship with holes blown into the sides,” as he told me. He sees it, swims to it, and climbs inside to save himself from drowning in the ocean. Once inside the ship, he sees a staircase and runs to it. Tim said, “I ran as fast as I could toward the staircase, pumping one leg in front of the other with long strides as water began rushing into the hull.” So, he’s striding down a chambered hallway with iron walls in the bowels of a ship, ducking through doorways as salt water licks his heels, which are actually in a biohazard bag, still in the Korengal Valley or perhaps (I’m not sure of the timing) they had already been disposed of by personnel from Theater Mortuary Affairs. The point is, Madison, he will not be able to run in his new life. Yet, in his dream life, only moments after he was blown up, he’s running to save himself.

He can’t run, though. He’s really in a medically induced
coma in a combat surgical hospital in Afghanistan. Surgeons are debriding his wounds, flushing out the dirt, debris, cordite and contaminants that would later cause fungal infections requiring more surgical amputation. They’re desperately trying to stop him from bleeding. The interosseous device plunged into his sternum in the medevac chopper to pump blood into him, is still there, sticking out of his chest. The only clue that, in his dream, he is trying to save himself from drowning in a sinking battleship may be the occasional beep of the device measuring his vitals as his pulse rate picks-up.

And he does save himself in the dream. He makes it to the steps of the battleship and climbs up them into what he describes as an “old surgical operating room with bricks outlining the walls and a dome-shaped ceiling.” I’m not sure why the steps improbably lead to this room, but it doesn’t matter. It’s a dream, a magical space where our anxiety and fear and guilt are reinterpreted in dramatic performances with us in the lead role. What matters is Tim makes it to his dream operating room, which he said smells like moss, a place where he would soon be transformed (against his will) by waiting surgeons into a machine-like man that can walk, talk, and importantly, fight again. But he can’t. He’s no longer fit for service. This once hulking, broad shouldered, two-hundred-and-forty-five-pound man, now missing two legs, most of his left
forearm, digits on both hands, and parts of his genitalia, is in a medically induced coma, dreaming.

This is what frightens me, Madison, how the human psyche reacts to trauma. After his accident, if could be called that, his mind became hyper-aware. Now, I’m not a neuroscientist or psychiatrist, but I think his mind began working hard in those initial moments to make sense of the trauma that had just occurred. It created a fiction, a necessary dream fiction giving him cyborg legs and the ability to run away from danger. His neural pathways were active, sending signals that created the necessary fiction and pushed blood with healing life to the parts of his changed physical body that needed it. His mind began working to heal him at almost the precise moment that he stepped on the IED and flew into the air. There is something both corporeal and temporal happening here, simultaneously fantastic and realistic, attending to the physical and cognitive with a force that is beyond – excuse the cliché, Madison – the possibility of our understanding. The unknowability of this power is what frightens me.

Tim woke up from his coma dream in Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, about two weeks after being blown up and backward in the Korengal Valley. His father was there, in the room with him. Tim said, “Dad, war is no good.” His father replied, “Tim, you were injured in Afghanistan;
you’re at Walter Reed. You’re safe now.” Injured and now safe, I suppose that was true. But, I have trouble thinking about that day now as an accident that caused injury. As for safety, well, that’s always rather precarious. Isn’t it?
It has been five years since he made a third pass over the hidden IED in Afghanistan that changed his life. On that day, he was camouflaging a firing wire on a M18 Claymore anti-personnel mine, which he was using to protect his left flank. Using a mine in this situation is a common infantry tactic or active defense measure, as we say in the Army, if you don’t have the soldiers or manpower to protect a particular area. (Tim only had three guys with him when he was blown up.) So, to put it bluntly Madison, Tim was traumatically wounded by an enemy bomb while preparing his bomb to wound or kill the enemy. And he would have detonated that mine (if he needed to) by squeezing the clacker vigorously until enough electricity was generated to explode it. That mine he was emplacing sends metal balls spraying in a conical pattern toward whatever direction you choose. It’s a directional mine, so you can aim it at whatever area you want to protect. By protect here, I mean killing whomever is trying to attack you. (It’s the cat and mouse game again.) Of course, this does not mean that Tim deserved to be blown up. It was war, and war is not simple. I wonder, Madison, if knowing this complicates things for you?

Tim would not want you to feel bad for him (or to denounce him either). He will be the first to tell you that he wasted a guy at that same location with a M240B Machine Gun two days before he was blown up. In fact, he relates the two: killing and then being
injured. I think it’s a way for him to rationalize what happened on that day. He did something wrong (killed) and was wronged in return (legs blown off). I don’t think it’s that simple, but I’m not a psychologist. And I don’t want to be Tim’s therapist any more than I want to theorize about war. I simply want to be Tim’s friend. This means helping him find a date, accepting his invitation to watch him speak at a conference, hanging pictures in his house that he can’t place above thirty inches, cautioning him about the needy lady (too old for him) texting him lately, having the occasional lunch together (Whole Foods, he eats healthy), shaking his hand after he races across the finish line at the Boston Marathon in his hand cycle or wins Gold at the Invictus Games, or maybe watching his things as he exercises in the pool as he prepares for those games.

Tim doesn’t want sympathy. He wants independence (which is probably why he removed the push handles from his wheel chair and spends as much time on the road as he does at home). He’s in his early thirties, physically healthy and learning how to live without legs. He, like many others, is learning how to live now despite his remembered past, though it tags along for the ride.
On the day I took those pictures of him in the pool, I watched him slip into the water and swim for 56 minutes without stopping, nearly two miles. I like the picture of him with his right arm in the air, just before he plunges it into the water, rocks his torso to the right, and continues pulling himself through the water, moving steadily, side to side, breathing in rhythm with each stroke. I wonder what he was thinking in that moment. I wonder how he felt then, if pulling himself through the water could be a metaphor for pulling himself somewhere else.

Madison, I think there are probably enough people telling you what to think, and I do not want to be one of those people. So, I will not tell you how you should think about war, about the people who suffer because of war and the violence it brings, or the people who begin dancing at the first whisper of war song, the kind that rings with cords of patriotism. I’ve lived a war experience. Tim has lived a war experience, and so has Kyle, Jay’s mother, my daughter, Luis, the surgeons in Kandahar, the poised young woman, and the pigeon guy. Yet, I’m not sure any of us are able to explain what war means. We only know what we experienced. For me, I cannot help but think that Luis is as much a part of this story as the boy who stuck the sun bleached pinwheel in front of Jay’s grave. And let’s not forget about the boy who was hauled away from the trash field by his fierce mother. Yes, there’s something else at work
here, something that defies “linear regularity,” something that defies measurement yet binds us nonetheless. I decided to write to you because I imagine you to be not much different from the poised young woman who refused to answer my questions in the rich man’s home. So, I’ll just end this letter here, with the hope that wherever you are, you have grown into a dignified young woman who once picked up a pencil, opened the card with the cute kitten and gentle dog pictured on the front and thanked me.

So, you’re welcome, Madison. And thank you, I suppose.

Love,

John
Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Arlington, Virginia, 2015
Freedom Park, Cary, North Carolina, 2015
Ramp to Pacific Exit, World War II Memorial, National Mall, Washington, D.C., 2015
I told the story of my impromptu visit to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in the Prologue to this manuscript. Like I wrote, I had been photographing war memorials on the National Mall when I decided to visit there. I’ve included some of those images in the photo essay following my letter to Madison. It seems to me, those war memorials claim a narrative also, one that is usually refracted through the patriotic messaging so pervasive in our culture. The World War II memorial on the National Mall (pictured in the preceding photo essay) is no exception to this. Friedrich St. Florian, who designed the memorial, writes about the legacy of the monument on his website: “It celebrates the triumph of democracy in the mid-20th Century, while enriching the lives of those that visit.” So with that declaration as a backdrop, those that visit can walk around the oblong Rainbow Pool with fountains shooting water in neat, uniform parabolic arcs. They can pause on the Atlantic side to read an inscription chiseled into the granite wall attributed to General George C. Marshall: “We are determined that before the sun sets on this terrible struggle our flag will be recognized throughout the world as a symbol of freedom on the one hand and of overwhelming force on the other.” The message here is that freedom is at stake, and it takes a militarized force to assure freedom, an idea not unlike the one described by Rumsfeld in his soliloquy.

My interest remains to throw light on the stories that are obscured by this type of patriotic messaging, whether projected through a memorial or in our public discourse. The idea is to think about the story that is not being told. In the case of the World War II memorial, I don’t think many who visit that site are thinking about the tens of thousands of Japanese civilians who perished in the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki – victims of political violence or “overwhelming force,” to quote General Marshall. Yet, we “celebrate the triumph of democracy” at the memorial on our National Mall. Historian Erika Doss suggests the location itself, between the Lincoln and Washington memorials, imbues the nationalist message with
a more powerful currency. It aims to “reconfigure contemporary understandings of national purpose and identity;” I claim at the expense of a more nuanced understanding of political violence. I believe to access the possibility of a renewed understanding of such violence we must begin with an inquiry into the individual stories of people who lived the experience, like those in Dear Madison or like Lewis Puller, a Vietnam veteran who I have yet to mention, but has been in my thoughts as I navigated this project.

I first learned of Lewis’ story in the early 1990s when I read his autobiography, Fortunate Son. I was in the Army at the time, and as young leader, eager for whatever wisdom I could glean from the stories of people who led soldiers in combat. I saw that his book had won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992, so I picked up a paperback copy at the bookstore on base, unaware that Lewis was a traumatic bilateral amputee blown-up in Vietnam in 1968. His injuries were not unlike Tim’s from Dear Madison. Lewis had also stepped on improvised bomb, and the bomb threw him in the air. By his account, “I felt as if I had been airborne forever…I had no idea that the pink mist that engulfed me had been caused by the vaporization of most of my right and left legs.” After he was discharged from the Army, Lewis attended law school at William and Mary and became a lawyer with the Department of Defense. He was married with two children. He ran unsuccessfully for a Virginia congressional seat as well. After he won the Pulitzer Prize, he had begun to think about writing as a career. But he never pursued it. He shot himself in the head at his home about three years after his book was published, two years after he won the Pulitzer Prize. He was 48 years old then, in 1994.

In his obituary, Lewis’s wife Todd, said in a statement to the New York Times: “To the list of names of victims of the Vietnam War, add the name of Lewis Puller. He suffered terrible wounds that never really healed. In his struggle to recovery, we faced many troubled and painful times together.” Lewis’ name is not on the wall, but the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was important to him. He visited there frequently and was an invited guest at the dedication to the memorial in 1980. This is how he recalled that day in his autobiography:
My view of the memorial was unobstructed, but I was seated too far away to make out any of the names cut into its black panels, and for the next hour I felt myself being drawn into its center. I wanted to kneel at its apex, caress the names I had read during the candlelight vigil, and like a mute given speech for the first time, run back and forth from one end to the other, screaming out the names for all the world to hear.  

I feel like this sometimes when I try to reconcile what I experienced in war with its projected value in our public display. I want to take flight, so to speak; I want hover over the National Mall, swoop down on visitors taking selfies and whisper into their ears stories about war that they haven’t been told. I want to hover over football fields scattered across our nation as color guards stand at attention and F18 fighters jets fly in formation overhead after the last cord of the national anthem has been sung. I want to weave my way into the crowd after their muffled roar of approval and begin whispering stories about Tim and Kyle and maybe Luis and Jay’s mother and the mother wearing the black burka who saved her boy only to watch him grow into man during a maelstrom of political violence in Iraq. I’d like to open a portal and peer into Riley’s life as his father tries to be an attentive parent while attending to his own healing. I’d check in on them periodically, just to see how they’re doing. Sometimes though, like Ben Fountain’s fictional character Billy Lynn, I want to shout to anyone who will hear: “Oh my people, my fellow Americans! See the world with prophet’s eyes.”
U.S. Marine Corps War Memorial Print, Parking Lot, Raleigh, North Carolina, 2015
Wounded Warrior Transport, Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, 2016
Shooting Bubbles, Durham, North Carolina, 2015
Notes

Epitaph and Prologue


Introduction

2. Ibid.


Letter to Madison

(page 10) “That they were there, the smoke’s a sign…”: Bertolt Brecht, War Primer, trans. Warren Hope (Florence, KY: Robert L. Barth, 1991).


(page 23) “…was simply there, a certainty…”: Paul Auster, The Invention of Solitude (Sun Press, 1982; New York: Penguin Group, 2007), 4. Citation refers to Penguin edition.


Epilogue


