

The Stick Soldiers

by

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ABSTRACT

This collection of poetry focuses on the experiences of a soldier who served six years in the Army National Guard and eleven months in Iraq. The collection is primarily divided into six sections (though each is not separated explicitly) and each section generally involves activities such as training for Iraq, deploying to Iraq, and returning home. In these poems, the speaker recalls different scenes from his experiences: encountering roadside bombs; performing guard duty; burning feces in a can; and living on small military base while at war. The main goal is to provide the reader with an in-depth, sincere, and unfiltered look at the life of a soldier in the military, and of course, in Iraq. The work relies on mostly free verse form with some of the work utilizing the sonnet form and couplets. The poems were greatly influenced by the work of Modernist Poets including Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and T.S. Eliot. This entire collection, which often does fall into that long trail of the war-poem genre, was influenced greatly by the following notable poets who went to war or served in the military: Isaac Rosenberg, Wilfred Owen, Yusef Komunyakaa, Randall Jarrell, and Bruce Weigl.

Spring in Jalula

1.

The air is exhaust smoke, desert heat, the black
sewage-streams that don't dry.

Cows graze beside the river of shit; their noses sift
through soggy trash.

2.

Last year, the liquor store was hit with two RPGs;
today, the store is a pile of brick.

When buying a car, it is cheaper
to buy the one with bullet holes.

3.

Mohammad, the ten-year old who doesn't go to school,
sells everything; when you hand him 300 dinars, he runs

through the streets, returns with Pepsi, chicken,
falafel. *Zam-zam?* he asks. *DVD, freaky-freaky? Knife?*

4.

After weddings, the people fill the sky
with red tracers fired from Kalashnikovs;

the tracers pass through darkness, but somewhere, they fall
back to Iraq.

5.

There is always a new bomb. Each week,
someone finds one, hidden

beneath bricks, buried beside curbs. At dusk,
people burn trash by the river. The smoke: white and blue.

6.

Daud, the town bum, walks the streets barefoot;
the cuts on his toes never heal. When he sleeps

on the same piece of cardboard beside the vendor stands,
all night he yells in broken English,

but no one ever knows what he's saying.

The Stick Soldiers

To soldiers, I hope the war is fine.
-Girl Scout Troop 472

The children colored the cards,
dated from December,
with Christmas trees, piles of presents,
snowmen smiling, waving. Sara wants
a doll. Evan, a dog. Kyle promises
to pray for us.

Outside the hootch, we open mail,
hundreds of letters
from youth groups, scout troops,
classes of school children.

Kerns wants to write back,
ask for pictures
of older sisters.

We tape our favorites to the door.
In blue crayon, a stick-figure soldier poses
as he's about to toss
a black ball,
fuse burning,
at three other stick figures,
red cloth wrapped over faces,
Iraki written
across stick chests.

In Jalula, the children draw us pictures, too.

In white chalk, on concrete walls,
a box-shaped Humvee with two antennae
rising like balloons from the hatch.
A stick-soldier holds a machine-gun;
he waves at us,
us, in the Humvees.

Further down the wall, a stick-man holds
an RPG
aimed toward the Humvee,
the waving soldier's head—
what the children want for Christmas,
or what they just want.

The Global War on Terrorism

*Well, it just says you're being mobilized
in support of the Global War on Terrorism.*

-Sergeant First Class Miracle reading the mobilization order.

We stir shit in rusty cans and watch the wind
blow the flames. When we leave our desert
uniforms hanging out to dry,
the next morning

they stand on their own, inhabited by ghosts
and sand. My face, neck and hands
are tanned
to a dark, sexy red. No one wants guard duty
at Tower Nine
beside the garbage pit. The SF guys

killed a bunch of dogs
and threw them in there one day. I saw flies
all over their faces.

When Werthman's in the port-o-john
and the cracks light up blue
from his laptop, we know
what's going on.

I took a picture of a tree, the only one
on base.
When we peel our socks off, our leg hairs stick
like leeches to the skin.
No one wants to play basketball

because they can't breathe.
They have volleyball tournaments
and I play reluctantly. Hair on my neck
sometimes curls,
grows inwards, and I bleed

when I shave. I avoid First Sergeant,
because he's always checking our faces,
looking for stubble.
The As Sa'Diyah Market

On long foot patrols we admired the chickens,
roasted and bronze, hanging

from the steel roofs of vendor stands,
the Iraqi sun burning
like a heat lamp. We had seen months

of FOB Cobra cooking: teriyaki chicken,
the color of transmission fluid; mixed vegetables

that broke like Styrofoam
in the mouth; the mush of gritz
always cold. All of this changed

when LT Stanton, a man
who took chances, walked to the vendor

with two Iraqi Police and pointed
to the first chicken in the row
glowing with warm grease, almost as large

as Stanton's tan bald head. The IPs sat
at a white table behind the stand; LT joined them,

setting his M4 like a twig between his knees,
the muzzle face-down
to the black asphalt. I turned my back

with the rest of the platoon, all of us a circle—
security—around the table,

the hanging chickens. Sometimes
you are certain
something terrible is about
to happen, but we just watched the endless

movement of the crowd, the glares
from older men, the women passing

as if we were only date palms. LT yelled
my name. I took three steps back, turned, he handed me
a piece of the chicken wrapped

in warm pita. Not wanting anyone
to see me do anything but be at the ready, both hands

on the rifle, head scanning each detail
of the crowd, I pretended to wipe the sweat
from my temple, my cheek, but instead stuffed

the food in my mouth: tomato, onion, something
I couldn't name. On that street we'd found dozens

of IEDs for us; weeks ago, three IPs had been shot
dead in their jeep; and some bombs
had blown so close our legs and hands shook

for hours. But I just stood and chewed, holding in
a grin because that chicken

was the best thing I'd tasted in years, and somehow
I was enjoying this day—though that wasn't something
I was supposed to say, so I bit

my tongue, and made sure not one
person in those crowds could know.

Responding to an Explosion in Qarah Tappah

A boy's father builds IEDs in a dark corner of the family courtyard. One night, the eleven year-old explores his father's work: he curls a det cord in small hands, rubs the smooth body of the blue mortar, feels a cold firing pin, gazes at the array of cellular phones. He touches something the wrong way, a round explodes, the boy—all over the courtyard. Second platoon hears the explosion; they drive toward the sound. When the father comes home, he is blindfolded, hands zip-tied behind his back, and taken away. We drive through the empty hills, the ground so hard, so stale, it crunches under our tires as if made of sun-dried bones. We have come to assess what is left: the remaining shells, the pieces of phone, the coils of wire. We don't speak to anyone, not even each other. As we walk through the courtyard, behind three old women in black abayas, we see two small girls in flowing, flowery dresses, the hems swaying against their feet. The girls cry softly, moderately, like sorrow was something they were trying for the first time.

The First Engagement

-March 18, 2004

1.

You run with the others over gravel, looking up
at the dirt-berm wall that surrounds your home, FOB Cobra,
and you climb to the edge that ends against sky.
You push with boots, claw the loose dirt with one hand,
hold the rifle in the other as the terse pops
of warning shots go silent. At berm's edge,
beneath the crooked Kevlar cover, you peek to see
the hundreds of meters of mortar-beaten
land and then why you're there: a white truck moves
down the broken asphalt road, orange sparks,
hundreds, splash from its tailgate—a vehicle-born
IED. It could be headed to the village, just north;
it could be headed for the main gate.
Inside the truck, the driver can't see
or does not see or doesn't care to see:
you, the dozens of rifles,
the Bradley's black cannon
aimed to the windshield, the hood,
his own head, his passenger's head.

2.

You steady your rifle
atop the berm, and first, the Bradley fires,
its orange tracers, almost gentle, weightless
as they fly to meet the truck's grill; the platoon follows:
down the line, they fire together. You aim. Your first shot.
But the truck slows. When you adjust, your foot slips,
you fall below the edge, unable to see. A lieutenant yells
cease-fire—silence. So this is it?

3.

No one knows the man
was dragging rebar from the back of his truck; no one knows
he was taking it to re-build his home; no one knows

the man is shot in the leg, the stomach. All you know:
an hour ago, three mortars fell from the sky for you, this vehicle

with sparks is for you, it's only day three and how many more,
until you can go. Steam rises from the hood,
the blown tires sag to the concrete,
the rusted bumper hangs beneath shattered headlights, and from the space
where a door used to be, the man falls to the road for you,
for the Bradley, for all the men, to show just how you've done.

Nights in the Quadrilateral Pool of Sawdust and Sweat

—Fort Knox

In the dim room of blue tile,
the twelve steel heads spray
too hard, and the two drains choke
from too much water. We're nude

except for the rubber flip-flops
to keep fungus
from between our toes. After months, we know

each body:
the red checkmark scar
where Shotwell's appendix was lifted;
a topography
of burnt skin on Melvin's back;

Shelton's ebony penis
uncircumcised, how he'd walk the halls after,
wringing it out like a cloth, not caring
who watched; McCall's muscular symmetry
from a life of afternoons
at the World Gym in Rapid City, South Dakota;

half of Psalm 27
tattooed in Olde English
on Garcia's wide thigh, *you will*
protect me just above the kneecap; freckles

on Halpin's arms, his back (Derden, with a pen
one day asking, *can I play*
connect-the-dots); the stretch-marks,
a beet red on Leal's lower stomach;
the brown birthmark
above Kitt's left nipple; Perron, from Boston,
his strict tradition:

brown towel around his waist,
he'd walk to the rusted
industrial fan, open
the cloth with both hands

like parting a curtain for sunlight,
and he'd rock left and right
while the wind dried his balls; Wolfe's body

hairless and thin—we'd watched him use those arms

wrapped in fat veins
to pop a zit
in the middle of Thome's back;
the dash of blood streamed down
like a tear of watercolor.

The Range

We shoot green silhouettes
of men. Their blank faces

are painted beige, their plastic
chests, checkered with holes,

but still, they rise in the July sunlight
like a boy too stupid to know

when to stay down, when to quit.
Drill Sergeant Grant paces

the gravel walk. He stops
to lie beside me on the beaten grass.

Between shots in the deep hush
of smoke, he says *breathe, breathe...*

as we watch the targets fall
flat to the earth. I never

speak, but only fire, study
the range for the next one—

hold my breath, tap
the trigger, take them down,

one by one, like it was all
the world needed done.

Basic Training

We're mopping the bays when Whitson walks off and shuts himself in his locker to sleep. Whitson was a guy that everyone hated but no one would fight because we all agreed he'd be like the *Monty Python* knight who'd come after you even when all his limbs were chopped off. On his 6'5 frame was a head like a bowling ball and when he talked—he never shut up—he always had a smile on his face that said *fuck you*. Everyone was tired of hearing about all his girlfriends in Reno, Nevada, and all the times he'd beaten someone's ass in Reno, Nevada, so when we heard him snoring, his ass on the wooden chest of drawers, his back against the corner of the locker, Gottner walked in and clicked the combination lock, then spun the dial. Running the mop across the linoleum floor, Michaels said *How the hell we supposed to get him out?* Gottner, from Texas, didn't look up but kept turning his mop and pushing the wringer, *The fuck should I know. He can call Reno, Nevada.* Drill Sergeant Grant was walking down the hallway with Popeye's Chicken—he always ate in front of us—and as he came in the door, Gottner yelled *at ease* and we all stopped, stood at parade rest. Grant sipped from his drink for a few seconds and said *This Cherry Coke is good, my, so good*, and sipped again. As we stood there holding mops and brooms, staring at Grant, there was a gargled snore that came from the bay across the hall. Grant looked up, *What motherfucker is that?* With drink and bag in hand, he walked to the other bay and we followed. He didn't even speak, but just stood by the locker, nodded toward the doorway, and we understood what he wanted: six of us held the locker as three others slowly tilted it. As it reached ninety-degrees, Whitson's body fell against the door and his snoring turned to *Fuck, what—*. He pounded on the door, *Open up you fucks, open up you fucks, don't fuck with me—*Grant cut him off, *Hi, Whitson*. Whitson went silent. Eight of us carried the locker out the front door and set it where Grant pointed, on the sidewalk beneath a small beech tree. He told us to make up our own knock-knock jokes and try them out on Whitson. At night, when we thought he'd want us to get him out, Grant had us lay the locker on its backside against the concrete. All through the evening, Whitson yelled and banged against the door, but after a few hours, we only heard his moans, and then nothing.

Full Moon, M2 Machine-Gun

—Fort Bragg, December, 2003

The night sky washes through skeletons
of trees. In the truck below, four men sleep
sitting up, breaths of silver steam. Tonight,
in this Carolina forest

before we go to war, we stay awake,
cold, watch for the threats
of nothing.

Yesterday, Captain said
they found Saddam
in a hole.

Everyone says
things will get better. Mom wrote

Maybe you won't have to go.
I wrote, *Yes, maybe*—but I know better.
Beyond this muzzle,
the white pines stand defiant; they say
to the cold, *Fuck you*; they say it
to the stars, too.

We remember
Saddam's sons,
their misshapen faces
on the TV screen
as we stood in line
after smallpox shots

inside the Medical Center; we clapped, yelled,
and a doctor told us
not to disturb the scab

that needed to grow
over the three holes
in our shoulders.
A desert waits.

The Summer of Crawling

—Fort Knox, Kentucky, July 2002

We low-crawl across the yellow
grass of the practice grenade-range: sixty boys,
arms and legs, holding hard to the earth.
Drill Sergeant Barnes yells at our bald,
sun-burnt heads, *We're getting ready to invade Iraq
and Saddam Hussein wants you dead.*
He throws a smoke-grenade: a mist of red
floats above our heads. The smoke means
crawl. Faster. Barnes yells
*You all will go and half of you will come home
horizontal*. I study a small dandelion weed
inches from my face, spit the taste
of canister-smoke onto one of the leaves.
Barnes tosses another: a white cloud grows
above the ground. We crawl, groan, reach,
our bodies sop the dry dirt with sweat.
When he lets us stand in formation and march
down the asphalt road to the bayonet-assault-course,
he makes us chant—our shouts billowing against
the miles of forest at Knox—*gotta train, gotta train,
gotta train to kill Hussein...*

Tomorrow, We Go Up North

—*Camp Udairi, Kuwait*

Night before we cross the border
some of the guys stand outside the tent
and drink non-alcoholic beer.

I crack one and take a sip—it tastes
like shit, but I drink half
just to stand with everyone else. The beer
reminds us the desert we stand on is real,
that tomorrow we will place the bullets
into the chambers of our weapons. Never

would any of us drink non-alcoholic beer,
except for tonight. Thomas, the tall medic,
bought the booze at the PX
and as someone walks in
or out of the tent, he pulls a wet,
dripping can from the bucket of ice
and says their name and
you want a cold one?

No one says anything
except if they called their wives
or kids on the satellite phone. I called home—
no one picked up—told the answering machine
I was leaving in a couple weeks, a lie
for operations security. “OPSEC,”
the captain yelled all night.

I dump the other half of the beer
behind the tent and walk past Davis
and Benson who are betting

on how many miles it will be
before we get attacked. Inside, everyone still packs
their duffel bags and rucksacks,
stuffing them until they bulge.

Four-Letter Word

I don't wanna hear that fuckin' four-letter word.

-Specialist Skeen in a bar in Leesville, Louisiana
after getting his 35th tattoo.

1.

At Fort Polk, Louisiana,
the Opposition Force shoots
all three of us,
but we enjoy this death,

which gives us a chance to sit,
smoke, rest our feet. Dying
is part of training
for war in Iraq.

We leave in two months.

2.

My Aunt Joan hates that I'm going.
She talks

at the retirement home,
*My nephew is going
to EAR-RACK!*
saying the four-letter word

like trying to spit food
from her mouth.

3.

*Killed
when his convoy vehicle
struck a roadside bomb*

*Killed
when a roadside bomb
hit his vehicle on a mounted patrol*

Killed

*when his unit was ambushed
with small-arms fire*

Killed—

4.

On the slow computer
in the Internet and Phone Center, I say
the names of the dead.

Age, hometown,
cause of death.

IED, RPG,
small arms,
vehicle-rollover, car bomb—
things to be avoided.

5.

Home for Christmas leave.

*This is our son, he's going to Iraq.
He's leaving for Iraq.
His unit is being mobilized for Iraq,*

*He has to go to Iraq.
I'll get you a drink, you're going to Iraq.
E-mail me when you get to Iraq.*

*Hopefully things will get better when you get to Iraq.
Are you scared about going to Iraq?
Did you know you would have to go to Iraq?*

*I can't imagine going to Iraq.
Is there a chance you might not go to Iraq?
Where will you be in Iraq?*

*What will you be doing in Iraq?
How long will you be in Iraq?
Iraq? Really? Iraq?*

6.

My Chemistry professor asks
why I'm withdrawing from class.

She says, *e-mail your address,*
I'll send you guys cookies.

7.

At Ohio State
with Jake and Larry, we walk

from house to house,
keg to keg, drink beers

from a book bag. When I wake
on white carpet in a living room,
I'm not sure what has happened,

but I'm still going to Iraq.

8.

Channels went home for Christmas;
he never came back to Bragg.

He's AWOL; LT says
the Marshals will find him
within a week.

9.

Asleep in the barracks.
Three a.m., two feet
hit the floor. Someone runs

(tomorrow we will know it was Spencer)
to the lighted latrine,
and three paces from my bunk,
spew lashes

across the red floor as if dumped
from a bucket above—but he doesn't stop,
vomit falling as he runs,

and in the stall,
after coughing up the rest,
a slow breathing,
cold water in the sink; he sucks it

from a cupped hand, again and again.

10.

At the high school football game,
Dan and John shake my hand. They stand

in thick, unzipped jackets.
When we lean left

with the hundreds of heads

watching the ball in the air
soaring to our home end zone,

I feel the tremors in my chest,
the silent crowd inhaling to explode,

the open mouths,
the arms, the screams.

Observation Post

Hanley spits strings of saliva-
laced dip into the gravel. Hours ago, a dud dropped
on the south side of the FOB, sent up a breath
of dust. Marwan, the interpreter,

drives to the entrance gate,
picks up his two boys. Their summer job:
filling sandbags for dinars.
At the intersection one mile down the road,
a three-round burst,
a precise incision
through the windshield. Neck, mouth, nose.

We drive with the captain in a Humvee
and find the two boys
crouched together, hands
over heads on the floor, their father
wet on their bodies.

Captain takes a photo, and we lean
toward the backseat window, as he points
at red scraps of Marwan,
beside the seatbelt buckle. Later,
he'll show everyone, magnifying
the camera's screen, *that's skull
right there, that's skull*,
as if needing others to agree.

We watch crowds carry the wood coffin
through Sadiyah's streets.
Peshmerga arrive in jeeps
with RPGs, Kalashnikovs;
they drag suspects
to the police station,
where they'll take turns
with the rifle butting.

I'm cleaning my fingernails with a Gerber;
Hanley whispers,
A shooting star. When I look, he says,
Go fuck yourself. Before dawn,
we see movement

in the retreating darkness. Through the binos:
a donkey mounts another in a field.
When our relief shows up, we say,
if they're bored, two donkeys
are fucking at three o'clock;
a dud hit before midnight.
Marwan is dead.

Raid

A dozen thin dogs bark
and follow us as we walk
the paths of the village.

Derron wants to shoot, holds his muzzle
inches from a wet nose.
I swing at one with the shovel—it jumps back,
circles our squad.

Sheikh Sharif greets us like guests,
offers chai, shakes hands.
Face covered with green cloth,
the informant points to the layers of compost, straw.

Wolfe swings the metal detector;
I dig, open the ground, toss dirt
with orange peels,
blackened tomatoes. Sergeant Kenson
stabs a shovel straight
to the split earth,
feels for steel crates.

After an hour, our necks stain from sunlight.
The dogs pace in the dust.

The Sheikh smiles,
holds his infant son,
says, *mister, nothing*,
nods to the upturned ground.
He kisses the child, hums a song.

When LT wants to leave, I give the ground
some final stabs, kick the dirt
over upturned dirt, then stand
in the never-dead sun,
and all that's left:
a deep hole of nothing,
the dogs circling with wet tongues.

Traffic Control Point

In armor, sweat, and skin, I sat
in the Humvee's shell of steel.
Miles of traffic moved down the freeway,

north to Baghdad, engines shaking,
vehicles blurring against ghosts
hovering from pavement heat.

A white car curved left, leapt the curb,
and came at us like the line of a bullet.
Jenkins traversed the 240, there were shouts

and shots—then I hovered high
above the roaring earth
on an orange bed of smoke

when the man's body, gone at the torso,
twisted toward me, flailing out
his thin, dead arm, like he wanted
to hold my hand.

Friday Night, FOB Cobra

1.

Smith, shirtless, curls forty-pound
dumbbells, veins burst

like worms over his biceps. The curls
are part of his plan for home:

a sex life.

2.

On burn detail, Ritchey stirs shit
with a metal rod,

asks Carter—standing back with a smoke—
Doesn't it make you hungry?

3.

In Tower Ten, Stevens discusses mutual funds,
interest rates. He says a young guy like me

might spend all his money on a bike, a truck,
a house. He's taking his wife

for a cruise, investing the rest,
and that's what you do with money.

4.

Jones' brother sent him a twelve-pack
of UltraSensitive LifeStyle

condoms. The box reads:
almost like wearing

nothing at all. He cuts it out,
tapes it to the front of his flak vest.

5.

When asked why his hands are so hairy,
Kenson says, with a cup of coffee in one of them,

and a ball of wet Copenhagen
bulging beneath his lip, *I ain't a fuckin' girl.*

He sips four pots a day, changes the grinds
once a week. The coffee tastes of steam and heat.

6.

Kellerman's wife divorced him over e-mail.

7.

Ski boils water in a canteen cup, adds Ramen,
slices of expired Slim-Jims. He discusses

the meaty juices, how the heat pulls them
for flavor. He says this meal is sacred.

8.

Sergeant Thompson has been in so many fights,
there is no cartilage left in his nose.

In line for the phone, he shows us:
bending it like an ear

with one finger, flat against his cheek.

9.

On marriage, Perry says, *It ain't like that.*
You think you just walk in the door,

and she hands you a beer,
gives you a blow job.

It ain't like that, he says. *Just wait,*

it ain't like that.

10.

Sprinkling hot sauce over cold, boiled potatoes,
Dempson talks about reading the paper,

the names of the dead. All of us know
he's slept with ninety-seven women.

After we finish our food,
he tells us about one.

Pictures of the War

When I send home a disposable camera, so my parents can develop the film, see pictures of the war, I don't know that Ellis stole it and photographed his penis. Giggling, with a wad of dip nudged behind his lip, he tells me weeks after I send it, how, sitting on his bunk, he'd simply pulled up his black boxers, pointed into the darkness, and clicked. I imagine my mother taking the glossy photos from the envelope as she walks out of the store. Since I'd already taken up half the roll on the drive from Kuwait, Ellis' picture was somewhere in the middle. Most likely, she would thumb through that section and see: row of mud homes; children shouting for candy; rusty T-72 tank; penis. The question was whether or not she would recognize it. Perhaps, she would think: her son is with a bunch of men in the desert, the penis, a part of some joke, and move to the next photo. Or maybe she would slowly flip through the pictures, study each one, thinking, *my son is at war, this is what he sees*, and, upon gazing at the close-up of the penis, think only how it reminds her of a penis, and then quickly scold herself for such thoughts. She might just stand there, squint, move in closer, and focus on the unusual darkness of the picture, debating whether or not the photo was a misprint, a mistake, or just something that was better not to see.

After Curfew

—*Jalula Police Station*

A black dog sniffs the bag of smashed tomatoes
beneath the blinking lamppost.
Daud, the bum with bandaged feet,
snores face-down on a piece of cardboard
beside the concertina wire that catches trash.
There hasn't been a gunshot all night.
Inside, the drunk we put in the jail cell
vomits into a bucket. The police don't speak English,
so we smile, give the thumbs-up, and say *good*
as they point at our machine-guns, flashlights,
Night-Vision, and other equipment
they don't have. When there's nothing left to point at,
two of them open the doors of a Nissan Jeep,
turn up the radio's volume.
A Kurdish lute scratches
over a man's singing voice, his pitch
somewhere between a cry and a scream.
Next to the black streams, under a lamp like a spotlight,
three police, slowly, begin to dance. They lip-sync
through cigarettes, blow breaths of smoke at the sky,
hold their loaded Kalashnikovs
against their bodies, a hand on the butt,
a hand on the muzzle, and their feet shuffle,
their heads roll in slow circles;
they follow the rifle's lead.

The Rocket

Blue as the pale sky this rocket
lay beside a dry wadi
alone where there was nothing
for miles, as if a man, too tired
to take it any further
had set it here years ago, this spot
on the sun-hardened ground.
There was no wind. There was no one
but us, our trucks parked
at the edge of the valley. Sergeant Sumey,
tired of staring, walked to the rocket.
We all knew better than to touch
a thing like this, but all of us, all our hands,
had done it many times before. Sumey grabbed
the rocket like a handle to the earth,
lifted it—no longer than his M-4—
above his shoulder, and leaned back,
widened his stance, as if about to throw it
to the barren hills in the east,
so we could watch its arc, its twirl,
as if doing the rocket the favor
of making sure it left the world in pieces.

Causeway Overwatch

—As Sa'Diyah

From the darkness between midnight and dawn
a white truck speeds across the causeway,
one headlight dim. We wait in a ditch beside the water.
With hands and boots, I climb to the concrete,
stand over the faded yellow line,
flash a light above my head,
wave arms, flash again. The truck still speeds,
brights growing in the darkness. Moving to the road's edge,
I steady the rifle to the windshield's black.
Johnson fires warning shots, two tracers,
orange in the sky. Two hundred meters.
The truck could be full of bananas, melons,
nothing—but it will not stop,
and we can shoot, all of us can shoot.
Johnson yells he will, but the lights die,
brakes wake the night, two men fall
from each side door. Hands over heads, they crawl
on knees, the driver shouting, *I am sorry, I am sorry.*
He bows to the ground, *Please, please...*
This man has my muzzle in front of his face.
We tell him to stand,
but he shakes so much he can't. In the dark,
his body resembles another silhouette
trembling in the wind on a firing range.
Beside me, another cigarette burns,
another soldier waits to shoot,
another morning.

Desert Nocturne

When we wake to the rotors at dawn,
I run outside shirtless with Walter,

bare feet on gravel, and try to save
the wet underwear and socks

we'd left to dry on the line, but it's too late.
We squint in sand, wind, take what we can

in our arms. Over the hill, and above:
the sky a bruised blue, the thinning moon,

the green Black Hawk sunrise.

The War Was Good, Thank You

-In the college cafeteria, a freshman girl asks,
So, how was the war?

1.

We live in small steel hooches
shaped like boxcars. We fill bags

with sand and sweat
to pile beside us. Our rifles collect dust

when we sleep. Our rifles collect dust
when we fire them.

2.

In Jalula, I stood in the turret, hands
on the Fifty. I looked over mud walls and fences

into backyards, alleyways. A man
and a woman backed from a doorway; I watched them

through dark sunglasses and the sight aperture.
They kissed, then turned—they saw me. The man smiled,
as if wanting me to keep it a secret. I didn't tell anyone.

3.

Some afternoons, I lay outside shirtless
and set ice cubes

on my closed eyelids. I let them melt.

4.

After weddings, people point rifles
to the sky, and fire,

as if wanting to put holes
through heaven.

5.

Groups send care packages. There's always so much
ChapStick, baby wipes; we pile it in boxes

or throw it to the children. I spoil myself
with ChapStick, balm my lips

even when it's not needed. Outside the wire,
I raise my chin to the sun, flex

my lips, kiss them together, not afraid
of anything, not afraid at all.

Demobilization

On Bain's 23rd we fill a piñata
with cigars and the small

sample bottles of liquor.
When the red donkey's body

breaks, falls in two pieces,
Bain keeps beating it against the grass.

Home From Iraq, Larry's Tavern

—*Northfield, Ohio*

Outside on the smoker's patio,
the Army vet shakes my hand
for the twentieth time, yells
about *loyalty, country, duty*.

Between gulps, he explains his shame
for missing the Storm—
a bum knee, ten-thousand
beers later, and now, another war
to miss. We finish the cans,
throw them at a wall, crack new ones.

The summer sweat sticks to his face
and in his eyes is the horror
of not going, that he'd live
all his life having to say *no*,
blaming a bum knee,
hitting it hard with a palm
to punish it.

He shakes my hand again,
grabs my shoulder,
and then seems to want to kiss me,
suck out whatever was left
since he'd wanted to taste it so badly.

Barracks Dream

Together on the blue blanket in a wide Ohio field,
he wants to wrap his arm around her shoulders.
The white pines are warm beside them;
the men far away check cords
that will send light
through the summer darkness. But the waiting
only reminds him of Tower Nine with Davis—
their fight on the twelve to four shift,
shouting long after midnight, why or why not
the war was just, waiting for the never-
accurate mortars to fall out of the sky. They came close
to blows, and Davis left the post,
stood alone by the berm, but both of them knew
they needed to feel
a fist on their faces, so much inside
trying to explode—the people, the shit-streams,
the electricity from the blasts—all of it
coming up like spew. Davis punched
a sandbag instead.
They waited the final hours in silence. Now,
he lies beside this girl.
After all the months, the mornings
with men, the barracks dreams,
he can't lift his hand
just to touch her.

Firework Elegy

Inside an olive sky,
they huddled on quilts
stretched over hills.

They would enjoy the spectacles,
the bright splashes thrown at the sky,
the ways of speaking—light, spark, rise.

He hated that this was home.

We knew, for him,
these holidays would be different,
but we opened our mouths,
shouted to each blast,
dressed our children
with fires and flags.

While faces faced the heavens,
he clutched grass from the ground,
but soon let go,
let his body touch the earth.
His hands shook.

The colors continued to sound.
He covered his face with a forearm.

From the sky,
it's a wonderful war.
Tracer round reds,
blooming explosions,
and all our cigarettes,
one for every dying star.

First Snow

I'm driving on a road that will not explode.
Out the window, stiff white pines
huddle above the wall of limestone
torn with dynamite
to make space
for the three lanes of 77 North.

Trash is still suspicious.
A bag. A bottle. A bump
in the gravel. Torn patches
of iced grass.

I used to dream of men with shovels.
Thousands digging
beside the long Iraq road,
smiling with triangular teeth
chiseled from shrapnel
jut from wine-red gums.

They sow the soil with bombs,
or what we name:
Improvised Explosive Device.

*

Although there is a hole
in this roof, Spoonman doesn't
sit on a strap, body not
half out in the open-air, cigarette not
on lips, machinegun not mounted, not
held in his greasy hands not there.

*

I've left college to drive home
for Thanksgiving. The first flakes of snow
touch—flail—across the windshield,
fade behind on the black concrete.
As I push the switch, the sunroof slides
to let in the wind, the snow,
and who can say about loving—
when we put holes in our roofs for the sky—

that we don't, and we can't.

Doc's Kill

In the police parking lot, we chase a dog
that's limped for days
after a hit from a car.

We'd seen the stretches
of red skin sweat
where black fur was torn away, and finally,
Doc said,
he'd put it out of its misery.

We cornered the mutt
against Hesco barriers
that brimmed with Iraq's dirt.

The dog stood, shaking for balance,
and Doc stepped forward,
pointed the barrel to the head, fired,
and as the dog jumped back, the bullet

pierced the lower jaw like a hole punch.
It ran off, limping every third step,
shrieking from its gut.
With rifle pointed, Doc chased after,
but there were too many trucks,
soldiers—no clear shot.

The dog weaved
through garbage-laced concertina wire
and vanished into the brush. Even gone,
we heard the yelping,
constant over all the village.

Face red and wet, Doc gripped his rifle hard.
Everyone knew it wasn't his fault,
but he waited,
aimed at the foliage,
ready to show everyone
when he set out to kill something,
he meant it.

Ways of Looking at an IED

-Notice that in both photographs of the artillery shells there is a wire leading from the bag. Also notice that the plastic bag had sand thrown on top of it to make it look more like roadside trash.

-1st Infantry Division Soldier's Handbook to Iraq

1.

Beside the field of potato rows,
Sumey sees an alarm clock
taped to a two-liter bottle. We create
a perimeter, back up the trucks, flatten

the potatoes under tires.
The Explosive Ordnance Disposal team
isn't sure; when they're not sure,
they blow it up.

2.

*Why don't you walk over there and get yourself
a Purple Heart, says Spoon.*

3.

With a broom, a woman beats a rug
draped over a clothesline. LT waves her away,
bomb, bomb, he says, but she shakes her head,
turns her hips to swing again.

4.

Spoon is awarded
the Purple Heart in June
when the shrapnel misses his head,
but the bricks that hide the bomb
knock him unconscious.

5.

When the shell detonates beside our truck,
the sound is too loud to hear; the wind wraps the truck

with shrapnel, bricks, smoke; the ballistic windshield
shatters; glass on Kenson's cheek;
blood like smeared lipstick.

6.

For three hours we clear the neighborhood
because of a black plastic bag.

The staff sergeant in the bomb suit
orders everyone to *back the fuck up* even further.
In the bag he finds six ripe tomatoes.

7.

Sergeant Sumey says he almost vomits
turning in the turret
to see our truck vanish
inside smoke. *Thought you were all dead.*

8.

We avoid trash, disturbed soil, animal carcasses.
We arrest men
who dig beside the road.

We hate the ground.

9.

Outside the city: rocks stacked
like children's building blocks.
Sergeant Kenson won't wait for EOD. *It's nothing,*
he yells, and no one can stop him when he starts to walk;
even LT tries to restrain him, but he walks,
and all four of us in the truck shout,
but it's no use. When he lifts his leg to kick the pile,
we look down—we close our eyes.

Green Dreams

Tell me where bad men hide, young Iraqi boy. That's why I stand here.
How closely you study me from across the street
in broken sandals and dust-covered clothes. Talk to me.

Young boy. Somewhere my mother worries for me.
On this street, with my men behind me, I sometimes feel explosive.
Behind this mask, this costume, I am scared.

Listen to me. At night I dream of grass. Thick fields of glowing grass.
On that road between us, men set bombs for trucks. They set one for me.
I called my mother to say I was okay. Her voice seemed from another dimension.

Listen. Earth is the only place to be. You know as much as me.
All we can do is be men. Just be men. All that's certain is that our bodies
will lie horizontal riding the earth's ethereal spin.

Tell me where bad men hide. I will kill them.
Study me. I am not Mister. These red hands know this rifle; so smooth, cozy,
I do not want to let go. Dear boy, no, not *Mister*—look at me, say, *War*.

Site 947: A Situation Report

-There are 946 suspected WMD sites in Iraq

Again we drove through the night, the splash
of black on our tires. We found the valley
in the stale hills miles from the village
of As Sa'Diyah.

From a naked ridge, we looked down
through goggles and saw
the green swamp of shaking sticks,
thousands of legs,

arms pulsing,
green crippled fingers
falling atop each other,
hundreds of camel spiders
fucking in the moonlight.

We knew to be still. We stood
as if at attention. They moved,
a swarm on the ground,
all of them touching,
the entire swamp shifting
as they changed positions.

We backed up, our boots slow
on the sand, but for no reason,
Johnson began to applaud.

Although they didn't seem to notice,
we jumped into the Humvees and drove,
our rear gunner scanning from the turret,
the dust from our trucks gliding
like a slow rain off the ridge,
blue in the moonlight as it fell
to the gathering of bodies below.

Burn Pit

-FOB Cobra

1.

We heave bags of trash
from the Humvee's steel bed.

The splash of flame and ash,
the spoiled food from chow, the boxes,

the lumber, the scrap metal.

2.

We burn everything, and we stand in the blue smoke
of our war's leftovers. When the bed

is empty, we light cigarettes, and stare
outside the wire: three hundred meters

to an open field of desert, two of the stray dogs fight.

3.

They try to tear
each other's necks, but as the wind pushes

harder, their movements blur in the dusk.
In between the flashes of burn pit

smoke, when the dogs jump to their hinds, mouths wide

for each other, they seem to be
in a dance, moments before a kiss,

but just when their lips could meet, the pit
glows, the smoke thickens; we only see

their long shadows collide and fall.

4.

By sunrise, we'll scoop one with a snow shovel,
dump the carrion inside a black garbage bag,
and to keep it from becoming

a bomb, like everything,
we'll give it to the pit.

This Morning, We Carry Body Bags,

1.

brand-new, still sealed in plastic wrap,
pile them in the back of the truck.

The dip bulges from LTs lip and I imagine

2.

bullets against the truck
like horizontal rain.

Before dawn, four men shot
six Iraqi soldiers dead

as they slept on cots,
dragged outside the checkpoint hut

3.

because it was too hot.
At the Jalula hospital, traffic stops. Men smoke

in white dishdashas that wave
in the wind like bed sheets. From the hills,

a Black Hawk rises. We close eyes,

cover faces, not wanting to feel

4.

flying pieces of earth. Four men run
the first body to the chopper;

it bounces on the green gurney
beneath an IV bag held

by a hand to the sky.

Nocturne with Sandstorm

—*Northern Kuwait, Arabian Desert*

By dawn, the moon seems cut in half
with a dull razor. The soldier writes
his mother, but not of the dream
where he's lost both arms,
and tries again,
and again, to hug her.

The brown sheet moves in from the east,
and three camels wait,
black ghosts grazing
on white dunes of sand.

The curtain will cover the desert
with desert, but the men brush teeth,
lace boots, finish
cigarettes. Kuwait reminded them
of when they were boys, playing ball
on the unkempt, little league infields.

In a white pick-up, a Bedouin drives with his son
away from the storm. The boy stares
out the window
at the waking men,
the line of trucks.

When the pick-up passes the convoy,
the boy leans out, waves his hand wildly,
left to right.

After the soldier seals the envelope,
places it in the pocket of his ruck,
he waves back,
but the boy only sees
his lifted arm.