

# fugue

No. 19

Winter 1999-2000



featuring poems by Philip Dacey



# fugve

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**Winter 1999-2000**

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## *Editor's Notes*

Here it is: the first *Fugue* of the 2000's. No, it won't beam its contents telepathically into your mind; it won't read itself to you while you take a bath; and it won't bake you cookies on a rainy Saturday as you read. At least not yet. But this issue of *Fugue* will give you some great poetry and prose for your reading pleasure. For now, you'll have to bake your own snacks.

Our featured writer in this issue is Philip Dacey, the University of Idaho's Distinguished Visiting Writer of poetry for Spring 1999. Dacey is a prolific poet and a wonderful teacher to boot, teaching all writers who'll listen that "there is no such thing as writer's block." And after reading his work and enjoying the wonderful imagination and variety of his subject matter, you'll see what he means. *The Deathbed Playboy*, Dacey's most recent book, was published in 1999 (shortly before his arrival on the Palouse, in fact) by Eastern Washington University Press.

But Dacey's isn't the only fine work in this issue. We have powerful, imaginative, and funny work from established and not-so-established writers alike, which run the gamut from edgy to light, from recollections of the horrors of war to the act of "burping squid" at the local aquarium. Every page is guaranteed to give you some of what you are looking for, whatever it may be. So read around or go from cover to cover. We hope you like what you read.

As always, many people deserve recognition for their invaluable help and support that put this issue of *Fugue* into your hands. First, I'd like to thank the staff of *Fugue* (the editorial board, the associate editors, and Ron McFarland, the faculty advisor) for their hard work and dedication to this project. Without their time and effort, none of this would be possible. Also, without the generous financial support of the University of Idaho—specifically the College of Letters and

Science and the Department of English—and individual sponsors and subscribers, this magazine would not be possible. My sincere thanks also go out to the faculty and staff of the English Department, especially the Creative Writing faculty (Ron McFarland, Tina Foriyes, Mary Blew, Lance Olsen, and the new addition, Robert Wrigley) for all of their support and commitment to *Fugue* and to our program. And without contributors, no literary magazine can run. So thank you, and keep the great stuff coming. On a more personal note, I'd like especially to thank Tabetha Bissegger, the assistant editor at *Fugue* and a close friend, for her hard work, encouragement, and help turning out this issue of *Fugue*.

But we at *Fugue* have saved our most important thanks for last. All of us here want to thank *you* for picking up this copy and reading what it has to offer. While you may be surprised at what you see, we think you'll be as satisfied as we are with what's inside. So enjoy.

## Stephanie Dickinson

### *Home Funeral*

Her bangs puffed under rise up and  
there's the homespun dress  
blowing to the side in the farm wind,  
but the girl smiles intently

covering her mouth with her hand.  
You wonder what the occasion is  
for the girl's sash and best brown shoes  
cobbled together like broken reins.

She's nine and her mother won't leave  
her room while everyone gathers  
on the lawn in the orchard blossom,  
gaudy and rotten sweet as aging lace.

She watches the photographer bend  
over the tiny coffin, steadying the camera,  
a hatbox with an eye in its middle,  
that burns the baby's face into tin.

The tattered sky looks as if it will rip  
over the satin lining and seed pearls,  
the baby who lived seven days  
green corn husks under her head.

Horses graze in the pasture while  
a buggy loiters on the lawn  
here to take the raw board coffin  
a mile up the road to Roger's Grove.

The Depression is on. You can tell it  
in the sag of the barn roof, the Model-T's  
thin tires. The girl knows the soil grows  
corn to pay taxes. Everything shrivels.



## Philip Dacey

*Philip Dacey, the featured writer for this issue of Fugue, teaches at Minnesota State University in Marshall and served as Distinguished Visiting Writer of poetry at the University of Idaho during the spring of 1999. The most recent of his six collections of poetry is The Deathbed Playboy (Cheney: Eastern Washington University Press, 1999). He is co-editor of Strong Measures: Contemporary American Poetry in Traditional Forms (HarperCollins, 1986).*

### *Paying Their Respects*

I would consider my life a success  
if a number of women showed up at the burial  
whom my family and friends didn't know,  
one half-hidden by an evergreen tree,  
the other two, say, shadowed by umbrellas  
in the steady light rain, each woman  
a discreet distance from the other two,  
and all three far removed from the mourners  
huddled around the freshly dug hole,  
three flames, I want to think, somehow still burning  
in the moist air, though I have to admit  
they'll probably be keeping away not so much  
from the living as from the dead,  
my gone self, whom they would yet punish  
for all my distances and reserve, every  
grudge nursed in the classic Irish manner,  
this newest disappearance the ultimate,  
my earlier ways of going dead around them  
mere practice for this perfect rebuff.

I imagine two in dark clothes, the third  
a statement all in red against the grey day.  
Two—maybe including the one in red—  
will be crying or holding back tears, the other  
immobile and staring, eyes as cold as the rain,

colder than the forgiving rain, as if  
she were waiting to make sure I did not push  
open the casket and climb out with one more  
good story to tell, a fresh supply of blarney  
to charm her into forgetting my sins,  
themselves why she's here in the first place to see  
for herself the scoop of symbolic but very real  
dirt fall onto the lid to become mud  
and wash down the sides of the glossy box  
before she turns away, all smiles now,  
and slips into her car, its slammed door  
a thunderous goodbye and good riddance.

Although two of the secrets from my past  
will leave just before my family and friends,  
who'll later hold a corpseless wake noisy  
with jokes and toasts and stories and songs,  
the more sentimental the better,  
one will stay, not knowing why she stays—  
as the rain falls, not knowing why it falls—  
and watch two men in hooded slickers  
approach the grave and pitch their shovels  
into the nearby small hill of clay and dirt,  
one of them all the while talking under his breath  
and making small gestures with his free hand,  
to the laughter of the other, though the words  
carry farther than intended, unless of course  
they're meant to carry in a kind of stage-whisper  
across the grass and amplify themselves  
ricocheting off the cold stones until they take  
by surprise the woman who stands alone,  
looking a little helpless, and tease her  
with the knowledge of what the man did the night  
before, and with whom, and precisely how.

## *The Illicit Motel*

We have come to the illicit motel,  
to lie on the illicit bed,  
between the illicit sheets,

although down the hall  
there are children disturbing  
the pool, licitly swimming.

Even the lemony macaroons  
you baked and brought from your home  
thrill like crossing a border

just upwind of a patrol car.  
For we have stepped so far outside  
of our lives, keeping us

from families and friends,  
whose ignorance of what we are doing  
is like a slow touch here, and here,

we feel like intimate strangers,  
to each other and ourselves,  
how the dark angels must have felt,

though we have fallen to a place  
higher than where we were before.  
As one hour disappears into the arms

of the next, our haloes, unscrewed  
and set upon the nightstand,  
will give off a low-frequency light,

no hindrance to sleep

but beacons for the bathroom  
where we will wash away

exactly nothing from us,  
none of the evidence  
tribunals swoon to hear,

but only admire in the mirror  
the flushed and palpating fields  
upon which we have acted out

our transgressions; that is to say,  
the reversed objects and instruments  
of our prayers. I swear, Love,

the catechism was incomplete:  
there are heaven and hell  
and the illicit motel.

## *Counsel to the President*

*"After the heart bypass and before the trial of Robert Altman, Clark Clifford occupied himself by reading the collected poems of W. B. Yeats."*

*Michael R. Beschloss*

A sudden blow, the indictment beating still  
against my fibrillating heart, that thrilled  
so when each year I'd pocket a cool mill.

No greasy fingers fumbled in my till,  
but manicured, which set the tone for all  
the lawyers who followed me, their courtly slouch

toward Washington to be born this time rich  
a terrible beauty draining brains deep  
into Potomac corridors beyond reach,

sacrifice of the provinces' prime crop.  
Missouri, for instance. I would arise and go  
back home to ride with Truman's whistle-stop,

like swans forever young at Coole, or throw  
the poker game Sir Winnie thought he won  
en route to Fulton for the Iron Curtain speech.

O sage Cuchulain and sage Acheson,  
my guardian warriors, one hot and one cold,  
tell me I'm not changed utterly, but simply old,

that my good name which ever brightly shone  
persuades hearts still, as if it were Maud Gonne.  
But spirits fade at the ring of a phone—

it's Lady Bird or Jackie just saying hello.  
At the club, few handshakes, and I eat alone.

Who goes with Fergus or with Clifford now?

My famous gesture—the judicious press  
of fingertips together topped by my advice,  
what journalists called “Clifford’s wisdom-tent”—

feels like the merest arrangement of small bones.  
Nothing can be whole that has not been rent:  
loopholes were my life, through which now dolphins

plunge, ecstatic as their tails mock my hopes  
for First American, whose chairmanship  
proved I kept only a rag-and-bone shop.

How can you tell a banker from his bank?  
Turning and turning in the widening hunt  
for smoking paper trails, the banshee-accountants

can so far claim to have transformed my swank  
hair—thick, waved, distinguished, a blinding mane  
that once made women, and investors, swoon,

as silver as the apples of the moon—  
into thin, loose strands as white as a ghost  
that lifts and falls like Connemara mist.

Yeats dreamed angels copulated to breed  
light; I dreamed money fucked itself for no  
reason and spawned a stain like clouded blood.

The consummate insider thrust outside,  
I push my floor’s number and rise into  
the vaulted sky of a New York apartment.

This is my tower at Ballylee. From here,  
I see Central Park and Ireland’s wild shore,  
where a fisherman casts his long lament.

## *Canzone: The Wall*

Washington, D. C.

Not far from Constitution a long wall  
two black wings constitute gives you your face.  
The sun's protective arc above the wall,  
a leap from end to end and so slow all  
the light stands at attention, quickens the mirror  
pilgrims pass in front of and call a wall,  
descending hellishly until the cool wall  
catches fire with history, name by name.  
Granite becomes horizon, where to name  
desire is to stop dead before a wall  
that monumentalizes absent touch.  
Hands in reaching reach for themselves to touch.

Not far from Constitution you can touch  
a memory that constitutes a wall,  
panel after panel, black wounds to touch  
shut beneath a conscripted sun whose touch  
begins the restoration of a face,  
its grave lines owing to the engraver's touch,  
the blast of grit aimed at a heart. Come touch  
with me the story built into a wide mirror,  
of a war wider and darker than that mirror,  
by walking where a girl, with perfect touch  
against paper against stone, sees a name  
penciled into existence. It is your name.

But what if no one reads a certain name  
all day? Does it, the dusk begun, lose touch  
with itself and wander, searching for a name  
across the stone, saying each other name  
futilely until it abandons the wall,  
crawling in the grass all night, with no name,  
to wake, at dawn, in place, saying its name?

I saw a veteran in a chair lay his face,  
cheek and forehead, against that cold surface  
as if in hard thought of a buddy's name,  
which he then dared whisper to the mirror,  
as if to save a man inside a mirror.

Clearly, what's monumental is some error  
in which grass slopes upward to a name  
gripped in the branches of a tree. The mirror  
a war built incorporates the sky, a mere  
glint off an airplane's wing no hand can touch  
to stasis, even less reverse, as a mirror  
reverses those dying to enter that mirror  
and spool time backwards who find only a wall.  
Thus wreathes, cards, cigarettes lean on a wall  
that doubles them, gifts both sides of a mirror  
gather like two hands gathering a face  
trapped in a history too hard to face

unless you raise both hands up to your face,  
the way that mother does, crying in this mirror.  
Despite the stone, this place is just one face  
after another, wife, brother, friend—face  
it, everyone here is missing a name  
no more to be recovered than is a face  
that plunged years down past a cliff's granite face,  
our policy near Constitution, sheer touch  
and go, so that a stranger comes to touch  
that mother, saving a nation some face.  
Personal lineaments soften this wall  
to a door, which opens on to a vista of wall.

Come rise now back above ground as the wall  
thins until it no longer holds a face,  
where you see near-naked runners, your mirror,  
carriers of messages between one name  
and another, quick and dead, who thereby touch.



## *Bagatelle*

The little songs accumulate like beads.  
Are they for necks and wrists, accessories  
to tick attention to a woman's entrance,  
or anchors fingers find sinking to prayer?

A bead of sweat forms on any forehead  
behind which answers to that question roll  
around like beads stripped by chance from their wire.  
But the lips pucker to a circle, bead

of space through which the whistle's just to come,  
a hum that strings itself through pose or prayer,  
indifferent, as if a god neither looked  
nor heard, sovereign of simply being there.

## James Mayo and Ryan Witt

### *Conversation with Philip Dacey*

There was every indication that spring should be with us. This was the week of “The Masters,” always a sure sign that summer is just around the corner. Green shoots of wheat were beginning to break throughout on the hills, while pheasants were going through their mating rituals. But winter was a little reluctant to release its grip on the Palouse region of northern Idaho. April 6 saw highs of near sixty, but by six p.m. an inch of slushy snow covered the hills and streets of Moscow. April can indeed be “the cruelest month.” One thing that offered a respite from the weather was poet Philip Dacey’s presence in town, giving a week-long poetry writing workshop and a public reading at the University of Idaho. The three of us sat down in the poet’s hotel room for a discussion which ranged from the writing of formalist poetry to world politics.

**James Mayo:** I suppose we could begin with the inevitable question. How would you define your writing process? Does a poem have its birth in some idea, a word or phrase, an image?

**Philip Dacey:** I would say yes to all three, idea, phrase, image. Sometimes for me, poems have beginnings in events that almost or partly happen to me or imagined events that could have happened or maybe events that I would like to have happened in my life—and I write them all as if they did happen. The poem about Wichita I read at the reading, “How They Do Things in Wichita” is such invented autobiography. Also I use history, historical events and persons, a lot. Actually, I find myself getting material and inspiration for poems in just about everything and anything. After the initial shove, the process is probably a three-part process. In the first part you try to find the right angle of entry, as if you were jump-

ing into the water, and you get your direction and then work the whole thing out until you have a completed draft. Development is the second phase—adding, subtracting, expanding, revising—and then in the third phase the poem is run through the wringer, meaning you’re testing it, weighing every word, refining. Donald Hall has a wonderful, simple way of talking about the writing process. He says you have to be two different people. In the beginning, you’re the “big spender” and in the end you’re the “miser.” The big spender puts everything down, doesn’t hold anything back, is totally generous, almost to a fault—all of the chaff ends up down on the paper with the wheat, if there is any. You’re non-judgmental, non-censoring in the beginning; you don’t care about making a mess, you’re not a perfectionist or anal retentive—anything goes. I think there should be something in the middle because you have to shape all of that stuff before you become the miser with it. That’s why I speak of three phases. I think it’s also important to write regularly and as much as you can. There are exceptions of course, like Hopkins, who took seven years off and came back to poetry not the mediocre poet he had been, but the full-blown Hopkins we know—the new voice had been germinating all the while. When I’m on leave, I usually get up early and write every morning and do some re-writing in the afternoon and evening. That is important for me—regular, disciplined writing on a schedule. I don’t think the poet should wait for inspiration. I think of writing poetry as joyous labor, but labor. I come from blue-collar folks. I don’t carry a lunch pail with me when I write, but I carry a lunch pail attitude.

**Mayo:** You seem like a very scheduled person.

**Dacey:** Right. My own trains run on time in my life, and I don’t think it’s immoral if you make your own trains run on your own times, as long as you don’t impose the regimen on others who might not be keen on it. There are probably certain poems I might have written if I didn’t have this particular approach to writing. For example, in the book I’m writing now on Thomas Eakins, I have a tight schedule of so

many poems per month, and I have a pretty good idea of what those poems are actually going to be in the coming months. I can tell you right now what I'm going to be writing the second week in June, for example, if I had my schedule with me. The point is I like the results or I wouldn't do it. I haven't gotten off my schedule once. The bad side is that maybe if I had not set up that type of schedule I could have wandered more and ended up writing an Eakins poem that isn't part of my schedule, a poem I'd be happy to have. But of course I don't know that would for sure happen, so I choose to do it this way and produce what I know I can and want to produce. But this is a special project because it's such a long, focused kind of book. It requires, and I'm giving it, a lot of rational control. But normally when I sit down to write, all bets are off, and I'm happy to see what comes up. I like the word "scribble" when I talk about writing. I don't think of myself as a poet so much as a writer and scribbler. Scribble suggests that, in some way, you shouldn't take it too seriously. And the word author is always with a capital A. Scribbling sounds like the right attitude to instill in somebody. You're just half asleep or half paying attention and you start putting stuff down. You don't compose formally. At least the scribbling is probably in tune with the big spender idea. The big spender just scribbles. "What do you do for a living?" "I'm a scribbler." Like the famous quote about Gibbon writing *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Somebody would see him constantly working on it and finally said, "Scribble, scribble, eh, Mr. Gibbon?" And the reason that's important to me is that it shows the attitude of the non-writer, looking at the writer and devaluing and diminishing what he or she does, and to the outsider it looks like just a kind of scribbling, and they ask, "What's the point of this?" and "Why would anybody want to do that? What a waste of time!" And here's this man, Gibbon, who had a fabulous experience in life writing his great work, and he had to do it in the face of people sneering and looking down their noses at him, and he kept doing it. It's a kind of heroism.

**Ryan Witt:** The Sisyphus of the pen.

**Dacey:** “The Sisyphus of the pen.” Spoken like a true writer.

**Mayo:** Hey, someone write that line down!

**Dacey:** I’m going to write that down and use it, and I’m not kidding. Eliot recommended thieving.

**Witt:** You said that in one part of the writing process the writer needs to be a big spender and in the other needs to be the miser. I read once that it takes a certain unsoundness of mind to write poetry. So is the poet a little bit schizophrenic, a little bit loopy, unsound of mind?

**Dacey:** I don’t think the poet is any more loopy than anyone else on this earth. Eliot also said literary people are shits, but if he’s right, and he might be—people who see experience as material for a text are users—that doesn’t make them crazy. I remember being struck as an undergraduate by *The Liberal Imagination* by Lionel Trilling, a book with wide currency in those days, the Fifties. And the thing that I remember from that—I can still picture myself riding a bus and reading that passage, it must have made an impression on me—is precisely his position *vis-à-vis* your question. He said that the notion of madness characterizing the artist has it completely backwards: the artist, outside his or her work, outside the process, may suffer in some way from some mental disturbance; but the writer is imminently healthy, imminently sane, precisely in the process of the work itself and the artistic pursuit. So it’s a very healthy activity. And more people, he might say, should engage in it. I began writing poetry in my late twenties, in ‘66 or ‘67. And at that time I was, to some extent, unsound of mind and unsound of heart. The circumstances are not particularly interesting, but I was a little confused as to who I was and what I should do, and I seemed to be unable to find a clear direction, seemed to be drifting in some way. So in that sense, I needed some help. Poetry came into my life, unasked, unsought, a surprise, and I began writing it. I hadn’t intended to. I guess you could say, to support your question, that I started to write out of that

unsoundness, but you could also look at it my way, that the angel of poetry, if you will, came and took me by the hand, and recreated me, healed me, by means of itself. So I have been ever grateful for what poetry has given me; I remain devoted to it, to her. A chivalric knight was never more devoted to his lady. And there are dragons to fight, like Bly's attacks on form in the seventies and, now, at the other end of the spectrum, the New Formalists who call themselves revolutionaries just because they can count to ten.

**Mayo:** Could you talk about your experience teaching at different schools and in the workshops and readings? I don't know how much of that you've done.

**Dacey:** Not as much as some people, like Stephen Dunn or Jorie Graham, who probably have to turn down gigs, but a lot more than some people do. I've done quite a bit over the last twenty or twenty-five years. I consider that a privilege and a perk of the writing work that I do. It's something I'm happy to be asked to do, to travel and meet new people. One of the things that has come with me through poetry and the profession is meeting so many people that I'm happy to meet and, in many cases, keep in touch with them over the years. The workshop gigs also mean that I can reduce my teaching time at the university, because of extra income, so that now, as a rule, I'm teaching four months out of the year and writing eight. With regard to reading, I've changed quite a bit over the years as a reader. I think I'm much better than I was when I started out giving readings two or more decades ago. About eight years ago I began memorizing and reciting my poems because I had established a music and poetry trio with my two sons, and they had written music to go along with certain poems of mine and of others. To do that successfully, I had to memorize the poems, which was something that I didn't really set out to do. It came as a result of our putting together our show, which is what it really was. We ended up at our last performance, after word of mouth, filling a 300-seat theater. We always got standing ovations. Since then, I've stayed with that practice. In memorizing the poem you

become the poem. There's a kind of intimacy not there when you actually read from the book. My readings have become sort of an adventure for me, a high, something of a high-wire act. I like to surprise audiences and entertain them, and I might try to do that to a fault. There are certainly other ways of approaching the whole challenge of presenting a poetry reading. I could have given a totally different kind of reading from the one I did the other night by choosing totally different kinds of poems—ones without any kind of humor, ones where the texture is much denser, and the audience would have come away with the sense of more seriousness or a sense that this is really literature. I've published close to a thousand poems, but I don't say that to pat myself on the back. Actually it's probably a discredit to myself that I've published so many poems, but I'm saying there's a wide range of poems that I've written in terms of voices and strategies. I like to locate myself all over the map. The question is "Which me am I going to be at this reading? What do I want to emphasize?" Since I've been memorizing these poems, I've gone to the more accessible poems, the ones that have certain kinds of conventional appeals like humor and wit and stories and characters.

**Mayo:** Like "Difficult Corners," the poem about your brother the traffic cop.

**Dacey:** Right.

**Witt:** Hugo says in *The Triggering Town* that matters like rhyme and meter, form, are what make and break poems, and if a teacher can make a student aware of these things, the teacher has given them a shove in the right direction, letting the other things, like meaning, take care of themselves. Is that what you're getting at in your essay "In Praise on Nonsense"?

**Dacey:** Yes. I see a spectrum available to poets, and at one end of the spectrum are pure sound and nonsense, and the poet, especially in the last hundred years or so, has been envious of musicians and abstract painters because musicians and abstract painters can operate with pure form only. The

poet has to carry the baggage of meaning, representationality, reference to a world outside the poem. Moving toward that borderline offers predominantly pure sound. Swinburne heads that way, for example, and Stevens, not to mention many current Language poets *à la* Stein. I think the student should experience that end of the spectrum. But on the other end of the spectrum, I see prose, which is not pure sound but discursive, informational, rational, crystal clear, like the directions we might give someone who's coming to our town from another. And you can approach that borderline, too, as a poet. Frost does most of the time. And Hardy. I like the project, the challenge, of incorporating as much prosiness as one can without crossing into straight prose. Probably experience at the nonsense end will help keep one from crossing entirely over the prose borderline. And the opposite is true. There's the challenge of approaching the nonsense border without losing sense entirely. It's like a rubber band maybe: you get too close to prose, you're still attached, and you get pulled back. Same at the other end. For me, this is a helpful way to see the project of writing poetry, which also connects to my belief of there not being any such thing as poetry, but there are poetries. So when I praise nonsense I'm praising half of the spectrum, and a different kind of poetry exists at each infinite point on the spectrum. The ends of the spectrum are like night and day. You can't have the one without the other. The poet negotiates between those two forces. Too many poets, at least those who band together in groups and clubs and schools, tribally and nonglobally, so to speak, are exclusivists and want to reduce our choices as poets.

**Mayo:** I was reading here that you were in Yugoslavia on a Fulbright. That's a hot-bed right now, politically and militarily. What was that like? Did you teach writing? Literature?

**Dacey:** I was there in 1988 on a Fulbright lectureship in creative writing. There were several other writers, including Larry Levis, who died not too long ago, Colleen McElroy, who's out in Seattle, and Mary Crow, in Colorado. It was a



wonderful kind of gig; we had a lot of freedom. We were meant to tour the country, meet writers, present our work, and learn about the country. We traveled sometimes as a group, sometimes on our own, all over the country. I spent a good bit of that time in Belgrade, and I also went to Sarajevo three times, which was probably my favorite place in Yugoslavia. During the Bosnian war, I was both surprised and not surprised by what I read about in the headlines. I mean I saw the ethnic problems when I was there, but I saw people mainly coexisting with them. I liked Yugoslavia very much. At the time, that was the furthest east I had ever traveled, but I've since been to Vietnam. I did see in one instance some irrational hostility toward Albanians on the part of a Russian living in Serbia. And this was from a very sophisticated, educated man, who spoke great English. And when I heard him talking about Albanians I was actually shocked. I didn't know how to deal with it—whether to confront him or not since I had just gotten there—so I didn't say anything and just listened, finding it hard to believe what I was hearing. He was, ironically, actually part of some team that was going down to Kosovo to help reduce tensions there. I'm sure of course I could find an Albanian who shows irrational hostility toward Serbs and Russians. I did get a sense, then, of the passions that were alive there and dangerous. Of course you can find the same thing in America, hatred of Jews or blacks, you name it. We can't feel superior to the Balkans.

**Mayo:** And what about NATO's actions there recently?

**Dacey:** I think it's right that Clinton recognizes it's a bad choice, and it is a bad choice to do the bombing. I can't say that when the bombing started I was convinced it was a mistake—a bad choice, yes, but I didn't know if there was another alternative. I would like to be able to take the position that violence is always a mistake, but I'm not sure that's always the case. I think that because of the passions that I saw at work there, there's nothing you can do that's right. You're involved in an ugly situation and you're therefore going to do ugly things. And it would be interesting to know what the

situation would ultimately be like if the bombing hadn't started, what developments would there have been, but that's possible now only in an alternative universe. I think it's important that it's NATO doing the bombing and not just us. Americans are feeling that if all these countries work together, there's some validation for the action in that cooperation. There certainly did seem to be opportunities for Milosevic to find some solutions. But solutions may not be what he wants; if he has a choice between power and solutions, he chooses the former.

**Witt:** Change of pace. What do you call a good time?

**Dacey:** That is indeed a change of pace. Well, the woman in my life comes to mind first. She lives in Iowa, so I'll miss my usual weekend with her because of my time here. My idea of a good time is to reunite with her and do what we do on the weekends. My second idea of a good time is being with my children. They're very important to me. The time I spend with them is precious, and not enough in my opinion. Not that they're remiss. I'm grateful that they have their own lives, their own things going on, and don't need me around, though I love being in their presence. I like teaching very much. That's a good time. I've been teaching less and better as I get older. I don't get worn out or burned out from teaching, because I take time off, teach part-time usually. The writing is also a good time. And I love sitting in bars and talking with people. I come from an Irish background, so there's certainly a precedent for my doing that. Of course, if my relatives had only drunk at bars instead of at home all day it would have been better! I'm also a runner and racquetball player. I exercise a lot, and that's very important to me. Getting lots of mail is fun. I think all writers like getting mail, partly because writers' lives are very much out there in the mails—manuscripts, royalty checks, notes from editors, the business end of writing. I'm already looking forward to getting home this weekend and going through the mail.

**Mayo:** I'm stealing this question, but what's your favorite word?

**Dacey:** Yesterday it was “verisimilitude.” I used it in class. “Paraphernalia” is a good one, I think, both because it’s a kick to say but also when people say it they change the “pher” to “pha,” and that “pher” or “phern” is the word’s central pleasure. If I had to choose one, I would have to pick “amateur.” I like the fact that amateur has a secret life. It’s often used in a pejorative way—“So and so is an amateur at such-and-such.” But in an etymological sense, an amateur is one who does something simply for the love of doing it. The Latin root is “amat,” he or she loves. A good professional therefore keeps alive inside of him or her an amateur, and I think that’s a good thing to keep in mind for writers, especially those just beginning, the idea that they have to stay an amateur if they’re going to succeed professionally.

April 9, 1999

Most recent collections by Philip Dacey:

*The Deathbed Playboy* (Cheney: Eastern Washington U. Press, 1999)

*The Paramour of the Moving Air* (*Quarterly Review of Literature*, 1999)

*What’s Empty Weighs the Most: 24 Sonnets* (Elgin, IL: Black Dirt Press, 1997)

Earlier books (selected):

*The Boy Under the Bed* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U. Press, 1981)

*Night Shift at the Crucifix Factory* (Iowa City: U. of Iowa Press, 1991)

*Strong Measures: Contemporary American Poetry in Traditional Forms* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986; co-edited with David Jauss)

## Olivia V. Ambrogio

### *Burping Squid*

The Marine Biology Labs of Woods Hole, Cape Cod,  
welcome visitors with  
tours of research areas  
(our guide is a young Communications major  
with speech rehearsed;  
he gives us a slideshow first  
and knows all the animals)

Inside the labs there is even a touch tank  
where two women, remembering a picture of blue-eyed  
scallops,  
pick up a clam and wait for it to look at them  
and a man grabs a traumatized lobster by the tail:  
its legs clench, its claws open and close futilely on air

Our guide is obliging, he  
catches a small squid from a research tank and lets us touch  
its huge spinal nerve while its tentacles  
quiver pathetically and  
by the time he puts it back it's so far gone  
he has to burp it  
to get it to sink  
He warns us to keep our hands away from the sharks who,  
watching us with their dead eyes,  
are the only ones spared the indignity  
of human probing

But I am grateful for the trip: I have discovered my true  
destiny:

I was meant to be a tour guide  
for the Marine Biology Labs—  
I will learn more than the spiel,  
and my talk will be peppered with

"*That's* not a scallop" and  
"Leave that starfish alone!"  
I'll train the lobster  
to pinch on command;  
I will burp squid faithfully

No more will horseshoe crabs  
curl into fetal positions,  
be hoisted from the water and pried  
to display *all ten* of their light-sensing organs  
No more will the searobins  
live in fear

And my lines  
as we reach the shark tank will be  
"If you want to get a *really* good look,  
lean over"

Peter D. Gorman

## *Operation Citizen Mongrel*

Per Gums Walker the government is going to seize our underwear. I told him that frankly the government could have mine, and if they take Frankie Furley's it might just finish off the repressive bastards, but Gums Walker said that the government is going to seize our underwear and pour itching powder into all of it and then give it back to us, and then they'll have us under complete control, because we'll all be too preoccupied with the itch in our pants to notice the government's final takeover of our lives. I worship Gums Walker and I do everything he says, and Gums Walker says we've got to organize, we've got to get Jefferson's Army together and head for the hills. We've got to get our guns and ammo. Everyone else has got to free their minds.

Don't think for a moment that the government will stop at underwear seizure to exert their control over us. Just look at what they've done to me. Per Gums Walker the government made me fail algebra and killed my dog. Our algebra teacher is Mr. Stoop, alias Fraction Tickler, a government agent who managed to get hired as a math teacher by our high school. His role is to discourage the youth of America by causing them to fail algebra and give up on their futures. There are many government agents posing as high school teachers across America, a fact clearly stated in the document *Operation Citizen Mongrel*. Some of us in Jefferson's Army say that algebra itself is a government plot to wipe out our minds and fill it with nonsense. We say that it's not some of the teachers but actually the entire subject that is suspect, but this is a matter of contention, and per Gums Walker we in Jefferson's Army need to keep from arguing, because then we're just being divisive and playing right into the government's hands. They want us to fight amongst each other and get so mad that we give each other lobotomies. In other words, the government wants us to do their dirty work

for them. Lazy sons of bitches.

As for my dog, "John Brown" I called him, the autopsy said he died of old age, but he was only 12, and Victor Van Winkle says there was a bullet wound beneath his left ear, says he saw it with his own eyes. The government did it. Plain fact. I hate them for killing John Brown, my one and only pit bull. What harm did he ever do to anyone, except for the unfortunate incident with Old Man Robertson? But per Gums Walker, John Brown must have sniffed out a government stockpile of laughing gas, and that was the end of John Brown. (Laughing gas is one of the government's main weapons, because it causes the citizens to lose focus—they start giggling and are unable to organize.) One of the government agents saw John Brown sniffing around their laughing gas stash, and they decided right then and there to finish him off. The government's got agents everywhere, believe it. It's all written down in that document *Operation Citizen Mongrel*.

*Operation Citizen Mongrel* is actually a classified government document that was secretly published by a courageous man who decided that he had to let the world know what the government was up to. Of course the government shut down the printing of *Operation Citizen Mongrel*, and now you've got to keep quiet about even owning a copy, but all of us in Jefferson's Army have got one, and we've got one for you too if you're willing to join us. If you read *Operation Citizen Mongrel*, you will realize that the U.S. government's main objective is to turn its citizens into savage dogs, and then treat them as such. Frankie Furley said that he wouldn't mind being someone's dog if it meant he didn't have to work. Frankie Furley is the stupidest soldier in Jefferson's Army, our weak link if you will, and unfortunately he holds a position of some significance. We need more and better soldiers, which is why Jefferson's Army wants you.

Per *Operation Citizen Mongrel*, there are three basic objectives of the U.S. Government:

**1. To demobilize everyone by taking away their means of transportation.** This is mainly being accomplished by going after our cars. All auto mechanics are working as spies for the government. They are sabotaging our cars while pretending to fix them. Anyone who doubts this need only think of their own hair-raising experiences. There's a mystery in auto repair that most of us can't penetrate, and a cost that is so high it discourages further driving—this is by design. The government wants your only means of travel to be your own feet, which will make it easier to keep you on a leash. Other forms of attack include encouraging us to buy foreign cars, all of which are built to break our hearts, and by increasing the cost of gasoline, which will eventually keep us from ever going anywhere except on foot. Once the cost of gasoline is high enough, not even buses and planes will be able to afford to stay in operation.

**2. To indoctrinate the U.S. citizens into believing that Russia and Japan really exist.** And not just Russia and Japan, also China, South America, Africa, Iran and Iraq, India, and all the rest. There's the United States, Canada and Mexico, and Europe. These are real places. We know this. The rest are fake, government creations used to justify wars, outlandish news stories, and other distractions so that we won't notice how the government is taking over our lives. Read *Operation Citizen Mongrel* and you will realize that those lousy foreign cars come from Michigan, made with deliberate ineptitude, and promoted as reliable, cheap alternatives to the real thing, not that the mechanics won't get you in the end anyway. But Americans really think there's a place called Japan, where they make all these cars that suddenly appear at all the dealerships. How gullible Americans are! Look at all the lies that they've swallowed whole without question. The saddest thing about Americans is how easily they buy into this false world. Examples? First the government used a phony war with Russia that went on for forty



years and was never fought (a so-called “cold war,” a nice touch, they’ve got some good lackeys working in their marketing department), then they say Japan is the reason you don’t have as much money as you should. These days it’s mostly stories about Iran, or Iraq, which is actually just a typo of Iran that the government was too embarrassed to admit to, so they had to create a whole new country. The government uses these imaginary places to justify anything and everything. The largest government office is the so-called foreign affairs one, where people are constantly working to create histories and languages and photographs and maps of all these imaginary countries. The government created a bunch of new countries as recently as 1990, just to keep things interesting, and to keep us confused. It worked. Americans are more confused than ever, and still believing in full the government’s version of the world.

**3. To force everyone to wear pink shirts.** Not much is known about this unusual objective. Some say that the idea is to remove our gender identities and turn us all into feminine types. Others say the color pink will make us easier to spot, so that the government will always know where its dogs have gone and what they’re up to. Perhaps the government has both objectives in mind. They are a devious sort, and much as it pains me to say it, something of a clever bunch too. But evil all the same, and I don’t ever forget it.

Jefferson’s Army meets every Tuesday and Thursday evening, and sometimes Gums Walker calls an emergency meeting. Jefferson’s Army is named after Thomas Jefferson, a humble book publisher from Virginia who declared war on the United States in 1887. The authorities came and took him away. They sought to discredit him by putting him in the loony bin, so that everything he said would just be put down as the ravings of a madman. The government’s propaganda said he wanted a return to the Confederacy, that he was pro-slavery, but what he really wanted was a return to anarchy,

that time of glory between the defeat of the British and Washington's first day in office. He wasn't pro-slavery; he was anti-brainwashing. So is Jefferson's Army. We accept people from all races, creeds, and colors, except for the weird ones. Thomas Jefferson, the president, was the Devil, and the author of the original document, then known as the *Declaration of Subordination*, which over the years evolved into *Operation Citizen Mongrel*. Thomas Jefferson, the book publisher, was a prophet. He was the first one to publish *Operation Citizen Mongrel*. The government has continued to update its document, and brave citizens have continued to publish the latest versions. It is from the latest version (1996) that we all read a passage at our meetings.

Even rebel gangs need some structure, and Jefferson's Army does have a hierarchy, albeit a benevolent one. Gums Walker is our General, Frankie Furley is Minister of Disturbances, Victor Van Winkle is Vice President of Original Thought, and I am the Secretary of Polluted Brains (to clarify, brains that have not been washed). I preach to the converted, and make sure they are not slipping into enemy hands. Six more members without titles make up the rest of Jefferson's Army. I am 19 and everyone else is older, but I think we may have gotten Willie Further to join so I won't be the youngest anymore. The government is causing Willie's hair to fall out. Willie turned 18 but election day came and he didn't vote. The very next day he noticed he was going bald. The government won't even let you be apathetic, they take it out on you for doing what you want to do. Willie's not entirely convinced that the government is taking his hair. I feel kind of sad for Willie, him being so naive, but he'll come around to our side, he'll see the truth. I've loaned him my copy of *Operation Citizen Mongrel*. I told him to take special note of the section entitled "How to Neutralize the Samsons Among Us." He'll come around to our side in no time.

The members of Jefferson's Army all have one thing in common: all of our parents are fighting for the other side.

Some of our parents are government agents, others are doing the government's work but they don't know it. I come from an unusual family, in which one parent is a government agent and the other is an unknowing government collaborator. My mother is the government agent. The only reason my father doesn't leave her is that he doesn't know better. The only reason my mother doesn't leave him is that she knows he is doing his share for the government cause, albeit done in ignorance. My mother would freak if she knew about me and Jefferson's Army. I keep my copy of *Operation Citizen Mongrel* hidden under my bed, but I never stop worrying that my mother will find it.

Young Willie Further has joined us in Jefferson's Army. I'm taking full credit for this one: Willie will make me proud. He has spotted the government's dirty work in places none of us had yet noticed, like trash collection. Why should the government want to collect our trash? To go through it, that's why, to read all about us, to know all our dirty little secrets, to be able to blackmail us when necessary. Willie's insight has already caused us to act. Jefferson's Army voted to have its members collect their own trash from now on, and bury it in a distant field. The government has lost its key to our diaries. All this is thanks to young Willie. I am so proud.

I was mowing the front lawn when I heard the terrible news from Victor Van Winkle. He drove up in his car and told me that Frankie Furley was a spy. I was stunned. Frankie had been my official big brother when I first joined Jefferson's Army, and seemingly as loyal as he was obese. I pleaded with Victor to tell me that it was all a joke, but Victor said he knew it was true because it was per Gums Walker. Somehow Gums had found out that Frankie Furley was working for the other side. This is a serious setback for our organization. We thought that Frankie was one of us, but now we find out he's one of them. There's so few of us, and

far too many of them, and all the secret stuff about Jefferson's Army that Frankie knows, well I don't have to tell you how scared we all are. And hurt, and befuddled, and betrayed, but fear seems to be overwhelming all the other feelings. I know it is for me. I went to see Gums as soon as I'd heard. He was brooding in his bedroom. I bowed my head. "What's our next move?" I said quietly.

Gums was tapping his fingers on his cat. "We need to use him. He already knows too much. But we can use him to our advantage. We're going to tell Frankie that we plan on taking over the village green gazebo, and from it shout out passages from *Operation Citizen Mongrel* through a megaphone."

"But then the government will know all about it. They will be waiting for us at the gazebo. Frankie will tell them everything."

Gums nodded. "Exactly. And we won't be at the gazebo. Some of us will be close by, taking photos. The government spies will be all over the place. This is our chance to find out who some of our enemies are. We'll take their pictures and follow them home. In ways such as this we can use Frankie for a little while, until he realizes that we know he's a spy. Then we head for the hills."

"With our guns and our ammo?" I said excitedly.

Gums nodded. "With our guns and our ammo."

At our next meeting Gums Walker explained our plan to take over the village green gazebo. Everyone knew it was a set-up for Frankie Furley, and Frankie just sat there, believing it was all true. I thought we had him fooled for sure, and thereby also the government. Except that when the evening came for the takeover, the government failed to show. I was loitering in front of the drugstore, in sight of the gazebo where I was looking for the government agents who I thought would surely be nearby, when I saw Frankie emerge from a hedge with a megaphone in hand and mount the gazebo steps. Frankie took his place in the gazebo and began chanting anti-government statements, while looking around

for the rest of Jefferson's Army. I thought we had fooled the government, but unfortunately the government fooled us by keeping their spies in hiding, so the plan failed to do anything but thoroughly embarrass Frankie Furley, though to my eyes he looked more committed and fervent than humiliated. He certainly didn't seem to be going anywhere anytime soon.

Frankie began living in the gazebo. He continued his ranting through the megaphone, reading passages from *Operation Citizen Mongrel*, until he got so hungry that he started begging for food. Gums started thinking that the government was going to let him starve out there and then make Jefferson's Army take the blame, so he assigned me to make a food delivery to Frankie. I brought Frankie a shopping bag full of junk food and fruit. He looked terrible, had lost a lot of weight. "What happened to you guys?" he asked me. I just smiled, but not because I was happy or laughing or anything, just because I couldn't think of anything to say to a friend and a traitor. I was so confused, I just left him his food and went home.

Frankie's behavior confused the lot of us. Some of us began wondering if perhaps we had been wrong about Frankie, if perhaps he really was one of us, and that perhaps he just didn't realize that we were deceiving him about the gazebo takeover. Gums Walker dispelled our doubts. He said that this was Frankie's way of proving his loyalty to us, so that we would take him further into our confidences. "The government doesn't want him to reveal himself yet, so he can further infiltrate our organization. They're clever bastards, those government agents," said Gums. "But we're staying one step ahead of them."

The government is extremely inventive, I'll give them credit for that, and they go to incredible lengths to deceive Americans. Willie Further's parents took him on a trip to a place they called Japan, that fictional country created by the

government. Willie said that the place they went to was incredibly realistic looking, as if it really were a distant foreign country. He said they actually were in a plane for what seemed like forever, and then got out at this place where everyone looked the same, which he said was done with make-up, and the place was like no place he had ever seen before. He said that the government's fatal flaw was pretending that their fictional country called Japan had an alphabet all its own, a bunch of lines and curves instead of letters, and he said it was the most ridiculous thing he had ever seen, yet the government tried to pass it off as the country's own language. We both laughed for a long time about this. Yet after a full week in this fictional place, Willie Further's parents still believed it actually existed. We laughed about this too, but it was kind of sad, in its way.

Life got very hard for Frankie in his gazebo. He became delirious, and instead of reading from *Operation Citizen Mongrel* he began chanting nursery rhymes. He put a bounty on George Washington's head. He believed himself to be Tom Paine. Some men in white coats took him away one morning. I was wondering how long it would be before the government stepped in and helped out one of their own. I haven't seen Frankie since they took him away. They probably relocated him to some unsuspecting suburb in the Midwest. Sometimes you got to feel sorry for the government's spies, ill-treated as they are, though in the end you harden your heart and remember that they are all working for the other side.

It wasn't long before we lost another one of our comrades to the enemy. Per Gums Walker, Willie Further had gone over to the other side. This particularly distressed me, since Willie had been one of my recruits. I asked Gums how he had found out, and he said he had caught Willie Further wearing very silly hats. "See Chapter 6, 'How to Walk Among Them,' in which, and I quote, 'We shall walk among

them under laughing skies, and they shall be so taken with the hilarity up above that they will take no notice of our hands in their pockets and our thoughts in their heads.”

“*Operation Citizen Mongrel* is at times cryptic,” I said.

Gums Walker nodded. “The government was careful to disguise some of its plans, in case the document should ever fall into enemy hands. Clever bastards.”

“Yes. But I feel terrible about Willie Further. He was a good soldier. Is there any chance that we’re mistaken? Maybe he’s only wearing the hats, silly though they be, to cover up his receding hairline. Maybe he’s not working for their side at all.”

Gums slowly turned his head to look at me. At that very moment, with his bloodshot eyes upon me, I knew that I was no longer a member of Jefferson’s Army.

My underwear is missing. The interpretations are many, and all of them are disturbing. Suspect number one is my mother: kind, caring, and sliding into second base with her spikes in the air, never mind that her shortstop son is assigned to cover second. I sleep little, and my dreams are filled with FBI agents pouring itching powder into my boxers, which they return to me while laughing uproariously.

Victor Van Winkle told me the terrible news. “You’re out of Jefferson’s Army. Per Gums Walker. Because you’re one of them.”

“But I’m not one of them,” I pleaded with Victor. “I’m one of us.”

Victor shook his head. “It’s a done deal. I’m sorry. Sometimes we switch sides and don’t even realize it. It’s risky for me even to be talking to you. Gums told me to send you a letter saying that we knew about you, and that you better not come to another meeting of Jefferson’s Army, or else. I decided to tell you this in person. One, because you’re an old friend, and I thought a letter was so impersonal. Two, because I want you government bastards to know that I’m not

afraid of you.”

I thanked Victor for having the balls to confront a government bastard like myself, and for being such a good friend.

My mother bought me a pink shirt. She expects me to wear it. Soon she will see to it that I own only pink shirts. I told her that I needed a new set of underwear. She asked where all my underwear had gone, as if she didn't know.

It's true that I'm a bit old to be living at home. I just don't have the money to live on my own. How can I do my part for the rebellion when my mother is working for the other side and living in the same house? And where will it end? The next thing is for Dad to bring home a used Yugo. The Yugo was a government disaster, a foreign car that fell apart too easily, so the government covered it up by dissolving the fictional Yugoslavia and creating a bloody war. Buying a used Yugo is a sure sign of cooperating with the government. It's not like when Yugos first came out and you couldn't blame citizens for seeing the low price and falling for the latest government plot, but now that the jig's up the only reason anyone would buy one is to show solidarity with The Man. And so I sit anxiously by my window, waiting for my dad to pull into the driveway with the enemy's favorite automobile, and then I will truly know that both my parents are government spies. And then what will become of me? Will I too succumb, give up my resistance and turn myself into a toady, a puppet, a stooge? I wish I could describe the depths of my despair when I say that I probably will end up working for them, that even now I may have started going over to their side.

A Yugo never did pull up into our driveway, but something happened that was just as bad: my parents told me that we were all going to Japan. “It will be a nice vacation for you,” my mother said. “You've been so aloof lately. Frankly your father and I think you need to get away from it all, for a little while.” Then she smiled in a way that made me shiver.



I am in this place called Japan now. It is a remarkable creation. I take my hat off to the government for its authenticity, though its language looks as funny as I imagined it would. Chopsticks are a cruel joke too; nobody would ever try to eat with those, except actors on the government payroll. Still, based solely on the size and scope of the project, Japan sure beats the hell out of Disney World. I look around and wonder how much it costs the taxpayer to keep an operation like this running, and I feel sorry for everyone who buys into it, and I feel sorry for myself because I don't feel like I belong anywhere, certainly not here. One good thing has happened on this trip, one very important thing: I've had a revelation. I may no longer be a member of Jefferson's Army, but I've realized that I'll never join the government's side. No matter what anyone says. I was never one of them and I never will be.

All of my missing underwear has mysteriously reappeared, but I'll be damned if I'm putting any of it on.

# Bradley David Miller

## *Ricky Recon U.S.M.C.*

*You can tell a true war story if it embarrasses you. If you don't care for obscenity, you don't care for the truth; if you don't care for the truth, watch how you vote. Send guys to war, they come home talking dirty.*

—Tim O'Brien, *How To Tell a True War Story*

### 1. The Real Reason

*He remembered again what the Inuit had always said, that to gain more wisdom than others one must do abnormal things.*

—William T. Vollman, *Butterfly Stories*

Why'd I join the Crotch? Shit, Cuz, that's the granddaddy question of m all, ain't it? Why would any sap volunteer f'r that bullshit? I always thought it was f'r the same reasons as anybody else: get some money f'r college, travel, get laid in exotic places— y'know, t'get a history. I never understood the real reason though, till this dude told me, this Australian dude. No, no, come t'think of it, he was from New Zealand. Yeah, he was from New Zealand, but he was in the French Foreign Legion.

It was like a week after the war started. Believe it'r not, my sorry ass fired the first shot. Put a TOW round right into the middle of an Iraqi armored column, January 29th, 1991. Y'can check the record books on that shit: O.P. Two just south ah the Saudi-Kuwaiti border. Believe me; y'fire a real missile, at a real tank, with real fuckin people in it, y'don't f'rget that shit. It sticks with ya—f'r life.

Hell, when I signed that contract I never thought I'd end up in some desert dodgin bullets, writin tear stained letters home t'Mom. I never thought I'd end up waxin a bunch ah ragheads. Shit, I got nutin against them. They were the sweetest surrenderin saps y'd ever wanna meet. I mean, Goddamn, if there was more armies like that, there'd be no reason f'r war.

Huh? ... TOW 'n'O.P.?... TOW's a fuckin acronym, y'know, the first letters of the words make a shorter word. Let's see, whatda fuck d'that stand fr? Sumpm like Tube-launched, Optically-tracked, Wire-guided sumpm, y'know, like a big ol bazooka type thingy. The Crotch's gotta fuckin acronym'r abbreviation fr every-damn-thing. O.P. fr Observation Post, L.P. fr Listenin Post, A.O. fr Area ah Operation'r just plain ol Poz fr position. They're all fuckin simple though, s'use y'r head. Whatda they call it?—context. Yeah, context. So don't be interuptin me every two seconds just cause y'don't know the Goddamn meanin of a word. Just fuckin listen. Y'll figure'm out. All right?

Good. Now like I said, it was about a week after that shit started, and my team was back in the rear with the gear, chillin out, enjoyin our sudden status as heroes. It's such a load ah crap, the propaganda, hero worship, bullshit the Corps creates. One minute, I was regular ol *Ricky Recon*, didn't rate nutin more than a daily dick up the ass courtesy ah Uncle Sam, then bam, I light up some ragheads, and all the sudden I'm mister Bronze Star. That Hollywood-heroes-n-cowards horseshit they're always feedin ya is bullshit, pure bullshit. There ain't no such animals. The only Goddamn glory that fuckin matters is survivin; that's it—survivin.

Shit, the only reason I got the fuckin medal was cause I humped the damn TOW. I sure as hell wasn't gonna let some other motherfucker fire that bitch after I humped it all over that Godfrsaken desert. My bro Duncan was the one who did the real damage, callin in that air strike. I can't even imagine how many people we offed with that thing—just mass death 'n'destruction.

I heard the grand total was sumpm like a hundred-thou. That's a hundred thousand people we demapped in a matter a days. Remember that shit next time y'fill up y'r tank with unleaded, Cuz—I know I sure as fuck do.

What?... Yeah, humped. That's right, motherfucker; I said humped. Beli'me, y'don't fuckin *carry* nutin or *bike* nowhere in the fuckin Crotch. Y'fuckin hump. Y'carry a

fuckin hundred-odd pounds on y'r back fr thirty fuckin miles in the middle ah the fuckin night, y'don't call it fuckin hikin; it's humpin. And y'hump a nick not a pack; a goddamn *ruck*—ruck like *fuck*. Got it?

Good. Now, like I's sayin, we was back in the rear, and we rated a little liberty. Them ungrateful Saudi bastards had put a ban on alcohol n'gettin laid, so liberty really didn't mean dick. I mean, just gettin hold of a stroke mag t'jack y'r meat to was like next t'impossible.

They did give us a little free time though, cause I think it was somebody's birthday... Macdonald's. Yeah, it was Mac's birthday, so we was, y'know, lookin fr sumpm t'party with. So me n'my bros—Macdonald, Duncan n'Brody—wandered over t'this Foreign Legion tank dug in about half-a-klick east ah us.

Thinkin back, we was lucky we didn't get capped, sneakin round like that in the dark, but it was cool. There was four dudes at the tank just hangin out, smokin n'jokin. We got t'talkin with'm, n'they whipped out this fifth ah Uzo, y'know, that nasty licorice tastin crap. I'll tell ya what, I can do shots a tequila with the best of'm, but that Uzo is some nasty shit. It's like drinkin motor oil. Gives y'one ah them gag things. Y'know, where y'kind ah puke, but y'don't quite all the way cause y'worked so damn hard just t'get it down.

There were four ah them Legionnaires: a guy from New York, a dude from New Zealand, and a couple ah freaks from some Eastern-European-third-world type ah shithole. The guy from New York was some ex-felon dude who had these killer jail house tats: the Virgin Mary on his left arm n'this evil lookin Satan-type-thingy on his right. Said he was definitely right handed—if y'know what I mean.

From what I could figure, he'd joined the Legion fr the ol change ah identity thingy. I guess he'd spent a couple years in the joint back stateside n'then got busted again, dealin, so it was pretty much a lock he was headed back. Said it wasn't worth havin a life if y'had t'live it in prison though, so I

guess he just said fuck it n'joined the Legion. The way he explained it, it's as close t'prison as y'can get, but y'r sentence is guaranteed at only five years.

I guess that New Yorker kind ah explained why I joined the Crotch then, but I didn't make the connection till that other dude, that New Zealand dude, said it flat out a little later. I'll tell y'what though, that New Yorker was the nicest guy y'd ever wanna meet, ex-con'r not.

The two dudes from Romania'r Germany'r wherever the fuck they were from didn't speak dick fr English. The guy from New York said they had all kinds ah them fuckers in the Legion. Said they were always runnin round stealin shit n'stabbin people in the ass with little home-made shivs.

The fourth guy was the dude from New Zealand. He had one ah them killer accents that made y'just wanna kick back n'listen to the motherfucker talk. Kept bummin smokes from us, callin Camels "Land Rovers" n'Marlboros "Cowboys." Kept sayin shit like, "Hey mate, lemme get a Cowboy," or "Kin Ah get a Land Rover frim ya, mate?"

Them dudes told us some crazy shit about the Legion—made a stint in the Corps look like fuckin Sunday school. Said when y're a recruit, y're lower than the lowest layer ah whale shit in the deepest part ah the deepest ocean. Said all they did all day was march n'sing songs, march n'sing songs. I guess they got a fuckin song fr everything in the Legion. Said they don't feed ya nutin but bread n'butter n'black coffee, and there was never even enough ah that shit t'go around, so y'always had t'fight fr y'r share. Said y'had t'learn French like ASAP, too. I guess that's all they allow ya t'speak. Said they start beatin ya if y'don't pick it up quick. Them two dudes who spoke English said it only took about three months ah them beatins before they were speakin French like a couple ah Parisians. Said they pretty much beat ya fr anything and everything in the Legion. Sometimes when they was really pissed at a dude they'd make'm dig a grave, jump in it then fill it up to his head and just kick the living shit out ah the poor dude's grape. Said they nearly killed

some stupid fuck once with that shit. Put'm in the hospital for reconstructive surgery and crap, and the Corporals who done it didn't get in shit f'r trouble. What I thought was the worst fuckin shit though, was that they had t'get rid ah all their civvies. They couldn't wear nutin but Legionnaire uniforms f'r their entire five year enlistments whether they was on duty'r not. Now, lemme tell ya, that shit sucks; it just ain't human.

Well, after hearin all that shit, y'know, I couldn't help but ask that Kiwi dude why he'd joined. I member he took a big ol cool drag off ah Land Rover, exhaled n'looked me right in the fuckin eye, and then in that cool as shit accent he said, "Well, mate, Ah reckon Ah joined f'r the same reason ya boys joined the Marine Corps. Ah wanted ta punish meself."

*I wanted t'punish myself.* Man, it was like he slapped me in the face. I finally understood it then. I joined the fuckin Corps t'punish myself, y'know, punish myself out ah bein a criminal punk, dope-smokin, car-stereo-stealin juvenile delinquent n'into what I thought was a real man, the manliest ah manly men motherfuckin possible: a United States Recon Marine.

Yep, we hung round them Legionnaires til that bottle dried up n'the stories ran out. I d'know if I was drunk'r just kind ah shaken up from what that Kiwi motherfucker said, but what happened as we was leavin still gives me chills.

We was a good hundred meters'r so from their tank when all ah the sudden we heard'm singin. Now, I don't member the words t'the song, and I wouldn't sing it if I did. N'not cause it'd be queer either, but cause it ain't my motherfuckin song t'sing. Y'see, it was a song sung by four strangers, four French Foreign Legionnaires. It was a song I'd never heard before'r ever will again, but man, it was the perfect fuckin song. It was about the Legion's love n'respect f'r the Corps from some battle in WW One or WW Two where a unit ah Marines saved a unit ah Legionnaires. The only words I member are the last ones which were the only English ones

ah the song:

*God Bless  
The United States Marine Corps.*

I'll tell y'what, that song was the Goddamn single most beautiful fuckin piece ah music I've ever heard in my life. Walkin back t'my hole in that pitch black desert night, hearin them dudes, singin that song, man, it was just one ah them moments, one ah them moments where fr a few seconds all the Corps' fuckin bullshit, somehow, *almost* seemed worth it.

## 2. Stupid Motherfucker

*He really is a cunt ay the first order. Nae doubt about that.  
The problem is, he's a mate n aw. Whit kin ye dae?  
—Irvine Welsh, Trainspotting*

Why y'always askin me bout Recon every time y'come over here? Y'better not be thinkin about joinin the Crotch. No cousin ah mine's makin the same mistake I did.

Recon ain't all that. It's still the fuckin Marine Corps. Y'ain't gotta be no rocket scientist t'hump a ruck n'fire a rifle. Shit, Recon was filled with a bunch ah stupid motherfuckers. I had this one dude in my team named Casper, dumbest motherfucker I ever met, the kind ah super freak y'just knew was headed straight t'maximum-security if he ever got out ah the Suck.

I'll tell y'what happened t'ol Casper the friendly freak, but first hand me'm pills. Yeah, them blue ones . . . Thanks, Cuz. Swear t'God; they got me on like 30 fuckin different pills. I'm swallowin a Goddamn new one like every half-hour.

Anyway, like I's sayin, I think it was like a year after Saudi. Yeah, it was right in the middle ah winter cause I member it was piss-ass cold out. My team was up in some Froggy Foreign Legion shit hole, livin in them big CP tents,

freezin our balls off in the Goddamn Alps, doin para ops. Lemme tell ya, there ain't nutin worse than standin in the freezin wind of an open doored CH-46 at 1000 feet, sweatin from y'r nerves, while y'r balls are frozen solid, clinkin together like ice cubes.

My team'd just come off ah five day hump fest through the Alps with ol Sergeant Grope, and we was back in tent city, y'know, tryin t'stay warm. It was just our new jump team though. My bros n'the rest ah the platoon was off doin some other bullshit trainin at some other shithole with Lieutenant Dumbfuck. I can't member where.

It was actually pretty cool, y'know, as far as the daily anal Jarhead shit went. There was a whole battalion ah Gyrenes workin their asses off squarin away this tent city while my team was kicked back in our own little hooch just chillin. It ain't like we didn't earn it though. Shit, I humped a radio, a SAW, an ammo drum, a flak jacket, a gas mask, my own chow, my own water n'my own sleepin bag f'r five fuckin days. If jumpin out ah bird with that shit strapped t'y'r ass n'then humpin it through the Goddamn Alps f'r a whole fuckin week don't rate a little chill time, I d'know whatda fuck does.

So, like I said, we got back from our little five day hump fest n'did all the Uh-Rah shit by the book—y'know, cleaned all our gear like Sergeant Grope-y'r-ass wanted—then he cut us loose. It was like eighteen, nineteen-hundred by then, but we was out in the middle ah nowhere at some Frenchy Base durin the dead ah winter, so liberty didn't really mean dick other than a chance t'get drunk at some beer garden down the road.

Now, y'see, Casper, the freak I'm tryin t'tell ya about, he'd been talkin the last four days about this joint he'd scored in Greece. Normally, I wouldn't'ah given a fuck about no hash, but ol Casper claimed t'have a real joint, y'know, good ol fashion weed. I'd had it up t'my eyeballs with hash; that's all them Eurotrash punks sell over there, so when Casper started runnin his jib about some straight herb, I was practi-



cally droolin. The rest ah the team were strictly a bunch ah bevy boys. They weren't up t'sweatin no piss tests, so they didn't get no invite. Me myself, if I had t'freeze my ass off in some French shithole without a cocks slut in sight, I was *at least* gonna get stoned; I didn't give a fuck about poppin on no piss test.

So as it was, me an ol Casper decided we'd go off in the woods n'smoke out then hit the beer garden n'get thoroughly shitty. What else was there t'do, right?

So we humped out t'some draw in the middle ah nowhere n'copped a squat on some tree stump. It was just around sunset, gettin dark n'shit, and there we was out in the middle ah some Frenchy base, freezin our balls off, sittin on some stump, gettin ready t'smoke this Goddamn Greek joint. Not what y'd call a typical Jarhead scenario, but I was psyched t'smoke that doob, so Casper whipped it out.

That joint was a big ol tater, too, one ah them funky lookin ones with multicolored designs on the paper n'shit. Man, I swear we must ah smoked that thing in like thirty seconds, like two crack whores hittin the pipe. I mean, Casper was a wacked-out fucker, but God knows I wasn't gonna turn down no real dooby.

So we smoked that ol hog leg, and, ah course, I got all paranoid. I started bitchin bout how we needed t'get back, bout bein out in the middle ah nowhere in some Froggy shithole, bout how we was gonna get busted. So t'chill me out, Casper whipped out this eight-ounce family-sized bottle ah Robitussin.

I took one look at that bottle n'figured, whatda fuck. Y'know, why not, nutin but a couple ah juvie depressants, right? So we downed that Robo in two swigs: a guzzle apiece. That's the only way t'do it. If y'try t'do it in more than one, y'll never get it down. It's just too fuckin nasty.

It's a sick high, too. Y'get this funky tunnel vision thing, and y'lose most ah y'r hearing, but there's this mean ol body buzz. It's some wild shit, kind ah like a heavily sedated acid trip.

But anyway, back t' Casper. Now, normally Casper was pretty much the quiet type, always readin his Rambo catalogs, learnin how t' kill people with a paper clip'r make a bomb out ah dogshit. Y'always got the feelin that he thought a lot about what he said before he said it. When he did talk, it was usually some really pathetic, bizarre question. I member this one time the motherfucker actually asked me why girls peed sittin down. Can y'believe that shit? Whata fuckin rock.

Now, before I f'rget, lemme give ya a key piece ah background on ol Casper. Y'see while we were in Saudi, diggin some fuckin hole together, out ah nowhere, out ah the clear fuckin blue sky, he told me that he used t'huff paint fumes with his sister back in *Looser-iana*. Kin y'believe that shit? Said he lived on some swamp river, and what they did f'r fun was sit on their washin machine n'huff spray paint til they passed out. Said y'saw all kinds ah cool colors n'shit just before y'went out. I was like, "No shit there, Einstein, y're cuttin off the oxygen t'y'r brain. It's called *Ass-fix-iation*."

Everybody pretty much knew Casper was a brainfuck, but what were we gonna do?

The Crotch was about the only logical place f'r a freak-a-nature like that. Plus, the backwoods fucker knew his way around the bush better than anybody, n'he sure as fuck wasn't no cheesedick, so nobody really had a problem with'm.

We all just considered'm a joke really, y'know, someone t'rip on n'laugh at. I member he had this weird girl titty we always used t'fuck with'm about. His left titty was all swollen up n'round, like a sweet-little girly tit. God, there was no end t'the grief we gave him about that. I know he had a complex about it, too, cause he'd never take his shirt off. He *said* it was from smokin too much grass as a kid—inbreedin was my guess.

But like I said, he was normally pretty quiet, but that night he was runnin his fuckin soup cooler like a Parris Island recruit callin mama on liberty Sunday. I was fucked up enough after that Robo—y'know, all smiles, perma-grinned—

that I didn't give a fuck who I was talkin to: Casper, Lieutenant Dumbfuck'r some fecal freak runnin his cock holster about his bleedin hemorrhoid problem.

So, after drinking all that Robo, Casper navigated us back onto some road n'stated talkin bout how he wanted t'be a hitman when he got out ah the Suck. I just played along n'said, "Oh yeah, y're gonna be a hitman, huh?" So he said, "Yep, I been readin up on it. It sounds like a good lifestyle." A good lifestyle he said, like he was talkin about bein a doctor or a lawyer'r some shit. He was fuckin serious though, so I said, "Whatcha gonna do, put an ad in *Soldier ab Fortune?*"

He just laughed at that n'stated on bout how he was gonna shave his head bald n'get a tribal tatt on his skull. Believe it'r not, the dumbfuck already had a tatt on his pecker. I swear t'God; I shit you not. The motherfucker actually had a Badboy symbol tattooed on his dick. I'd seen it. Don't gemme wrong; I ain't no brown boy, but y'take a few showers with a dude, y'can't help but notice a fuckin tatt on his johnson.

Well, after hearin about his tatt plans, I started laughin at the idiot n'had t'ah sit down. I think that joint we'd smoked had some opium'r sumpm in it cause I was fuckin ate-up like a soup sandwich. I wouldn't'ah put it past'm Greeks, lacin their joints with opium. They drink that Uzo crap, and it's supposedly got opium in it. Either way I didn't give a fuck though. I dig that shit, that spinnin feelin; it's like a little carry ride all in y'r head.

So I parked it on the curb t'enjoy my buzz, and that's when it all started. I was sittin there, floatin off into lala land when I looked around t'find Casper, and I see he's across the street yankin on the gate ah what looked t'be an armory. He was just standing there, pullin back n'forth on that gate: one ah them cheesy, eight-foot, wire-jobby fences. Now, any fuckin idiot knows y'don't yank on no Foreign Legion armory gate at zero-dark-thirty, specially when y're a fucked-up Jarhead, so I yelled at him, "*Casper, quit fuckin with that*

gate!"

Well, Casper wasn't listenin t'me cause then *he* started yellin, "*Hey, cocksucker, over here!*" pullin back n'forth on that fence, just tryin t'work up some discontent. Ah course, some fuckin sentry popped out then n'started yellin back at him in French, "*Voohshay voohlay vooh! Voohlay, vooshay vooh!*"

Bam! Immediately I went from dreamy-dream county-fair-ride world t'total fuckin paranoia. I started screamin, and I know I was loud, too, cause y'can't hear dick on Robo, "*Shut up, y'stupid motherfucker! Let's get the fuck out ah here!*" but Casper didn't listen. He kept right on yellin.

That Frenchy bastard was still yellin, too, but it wasn't in French anymore. It was like Romanian'r German'r some shit, "*Dohi dabichaya zastraya!*" Like I told ya before, the Legion's gotta bunch ah them types. A bunch ah shiv-makin ass stabbers and this one was plenty pissed, pointin his rifle at Casper.

Casper still wouldn't give it up though. He kept on goin n'goin, yellin n'shakin that cage, tauntin that guy like an animal, so that Froggy'r Romanian or whatever the fuck he was, charged up t'that gate n'stabbed at Casper with his rifle. I thought my head was gonna fuckin explode. Casper jumped out ah the way, and that sentry got his rifle caught in the fence. That's when Casper started climbin. Can y'believe it? He started climbin the fence, tauntin the dude, spittin on him, callin his mother a whore. It was like I was watchin a movie, like one ah them slo-mo fight scenes y'see in all them Van Damme flicks. I can fuckin see it now: Casper's dumb ass climbin that fence, yellin at the top ah his lungs, spittin at that sentry, laughin like a hyena, then—CRACK!

That Legionnaire put a round right through Casper's grape—brain matter everywhere. Scared the ever-livin-shit out ah me.

I don't member much after that. Somehow, I made it back t'the beer garden unnoticed n'pounded brews til I passed out. I guess I got there when the rest ah the team was

already drunk, so nobody really noticed when I showed up'r even bothered t'ask where I'd been. F'r all they could remember, I'd been there the whole night.

There was a big shit sandwich the whole team had t'eat a few days later though. We all had t'ah stand tall in front ah the man f'r like two hours. I played it dumb like everybody else, but our cover was blown. We were scrubbin shitters n'pulling mess duty f'r like the next four months.

God, Casper was a stupid motherfucker. Man, Cuz, it's hard t'believe I actually miss that sorry sap.

### 3. Brown Boys, Discharges and Real Men

*Nothing brings you together like a common enemy.*  
—David Foster Wallace, Infinite Jest

Veteran's benefits?—shit. I ain't got no vet benefits. I didn't get no honorable. They kicked my ass out; I was in the wrong fuckin place at the wrong fuckin time.

I was standin Barracks Duty NCO with this boot from Motor-T, some sorry ass-wipe private from Hee-Haw Junction *Klan*-tucky. It was like two in the mornin. Everybody was asleep. I'd told the boot t'wake me up if anything happened. I mean shit, what kind ah pussy can't wake a man up? Y'got a situation, y'wake up y'r Duty Non-Commissioned Officer, the man in charge. Y'grab his leg. Y'slap his face. Y'wake him the fuck up.

What? . . . Whatda hell I tell ya before? . . . Don't be interuptin me with stupid questions when I'm tryin t'tell a fuckin story. It don't matter what the fuck Motor-T stands for. It's short f'r Motor Transport, brainiac. Now, where the fuck was I? . . .

Huh? . . . Yeah, yeah, okay . . . Now, let's see. Goddamn it. All right, here we go. Now, what happened was, this brown boy—Simmons, some shirt lifter Recon got from Division S-4—got his signals crossed with this dude named Ford. Y'see, ol Ford was always tryin t'be funny, talkin shit

like he was gay, y'know, actin all queer n'shit just t'get a laugh. Y'put a bunch ah sex-starved macho a-holes t'gether and it never fails—some fuckwad is gonna play the ol gay angle joke, y'know, faking homo shit just to get a rise outa somebody or freak somebody out. It just happens. Hell, I done my fair share, jokin round with my bros but never like ol Ford. He made a habit of it. It was kinda like his trademark or sumpm. So, from what I figured, Ford said sumpm t'Simmons, n'Simmons thought he was serious, so Simmons snuck over t'Ford's rack after lights out f'r a little y'know what. Like I said—fucked-up, huh?

Well, I guess Simmons realized pretty damn quick his *gaydar* must ah given'm a false reading, so he took off out ah the barracks. So ol Ford gets up, gets a nine-mil he had stashed out ah his car n'comes straight back t'that boot from Kentucky, my Assistant Duty, and tells him flat out what happened. Ford told him sumpm like, "This motherfuckin faggot just tried t'suck my dick. I'm gonna shoot the cocksucker. Y'better wake up y'r Duty NCO." So that boot comes back t'the NCO section where I'm racked out n'tries t'wake me.

That's what he said at the fuckin court-martial at least. Said he woke me up n'that I told'm t'leave me alone. Said I told him t'let Ford shoot the faggot.

That boot went back out t'Ford n'told him I said he could shoot that brown boy. Can y'believe that shit? *Yeab, I hereby authorize ya t'let Ford cap some faggot.*

Ol Ford, bein a card carryin homophobe like every other straight motherfucker in the Corps, went outside, found Simmons, n'returned the favor with four nine-mil rounds t'his chest.

Now, let's just suppose f'r purely hypothetical reasons I did say sumpm t'that boot like, "Whatever, let'm shoot the fudge packer, just leave me alone." I shouldn't'ah been held accountable f'r sumpm like that, sumpm I said when I was half asleep. It shouldn't'ah been considered no lawful order. I don't even member bein woken up, much less sayin nutin.

Now Ford was my buddy and all. I mean we didn't go kibitzin around with each other every weekend, but we'd spent some time out in the bush together, and I never had a problem with 'm, but I'll tell ya what. He's the one who should ah swallowed that whole giant turd. He put four rounds through that brown boy at like twenty meters—killed the motherfucker. But, in the fuckin Suck the Duty NCO's always responsible fr any shit that goes down on his watch, so I got royally ass-fucked, too.

I frget what they convicted me of. There was sumpm in there bout conduct unbecomin an NCO, that Article 36 bullshit, the catch-me fuck-me one. The one that says even though y'didn't break any real rules, we're still gonna fuck ya cause this one covers everything. I think they even had some bullshit in there about authorizin the unlawful discharge of an illegal firearm.

Y'know what pisses me off more than anything about all that shit though? It's the simple fact that the higher-ups knew Simmons was a pillow biter when they sent him t' Recon. The XO knew he was a flamer, and the zeros up at HQ knew, too, cause he was already on his way out when Recon got him. I know they just sent him t'Recon cause they knew sumpm like that would happen. It's like they wanted him t'get capped. I mean, why else would they send some homo t'Recon, the single most sadistic unit in all the fuckin military? Everybody knows if that kind ah shit floats t'the surface some stupid motherfucker's gonna—at *least*—put the brown boy in the hospital. That's just the way it works.

It's all such ah fugazi. I mean, I worked with that guy Simmons fr like a week in S-4 before he got capped, and I'll tell y'what, he was just a regular ol macho Gyrene. That holy-roller-homosexuals-are-immoral-sinners crap everybody's always preachin is bullshit, pure fuckin bullshit. Morality ain't got fuck t'do with it. I mean, I know I done a helluv ah lot ah worse shit than suckin some dude's cock in my time. Goddamn, if it's that fuckin hard t'get t'heaven, they can send my ass t'hell. One thing's fr sure though, bein

queer sure as fuck ain't got nutin t'do with being masculine. It's just a simple question ah what they call *Ass-thetics*—y'know, whatever type a ass gets y'off: male'r female. Unfortunately f'r Simmons, nobody in the fuckin military will ever figure that shit out.

Now that I think about it, Simmons didn't quite understand that shit either. I member—before I ever knew he was gay—I asked him why he joined the Corps. It's kind ah funny what he said; he wasn't really any different than me. He said he just wanted t'be a Marine—he said he thought the Corps would make him a real man.

#### 4. No One Ever Tells Y'That Shit

*Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been there? I think not. He can tell war stories.*  
—Tim O'Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*

Y're what? Y're joinin the Corps! Whatda fuck? Whatd'ya think, it's all some kind ah Hollywood bullshit where y'go t'war, save the day, n'everybody lives happily ever after?

What?

Oh, fuck me, huh?

Y're a tough guy, now, huh? Got it all figured then?

Well just sit the fuck down and shut up tough guy cause y'don't know dick. I'm gonna spell it all out f'r ya once n'f'r all, n'if y'still wanna go join the Suck, be my guest.

Them fuckin stories I told ya, y'thought those were kind ah funny, huh? Y'liked'm, didn't ya? Well, I got one more fuckin story f'r ya here, but this one's different—there ain't a Goddamn funny thing about it.

Bout a week before the scheduled G-Day ah Desert Storm—when the breach ah Kuwait was scheduled t'kick off—all ah Recon Battalion moved t'the Saudi-Kuwait berm t'start reconin the division's forward area f'r raghead units n'minefields.



Since my team was the big combat first-kill heroes, we got picked as the team that was gonna do the actual eyes-on-objective recon. We was gonna go out first n'fartherest, some ten odd miles into the raghead front lines, recon some minefields, then send all the info back through a radio-relay team dug in a few clicks behind us who'd in turn relay it back t'HQ.

God knows they could ah picked a better team than us. I was the fuckin Assistant Team Leader, and I was the laziest, complaininest motherfucker in the whole Goddamn Battalion. Ol Grope-y'r-ass was our team leader. He was a bearable guy, but he didn't know dick about Recon. He'd spent the last four years on barracks duty in the fuckin Philippines, catchin the clap, bonin 12-year-old whores. Then we had Casper, and I told y'bout that inbred. Believe it'r not, he was our fuckin navigator. Me n'Dunc humped the radios, and neither ah us knew diddly about comm. Brody was the point man, and he was just a dumb pack mule. Mac was tail-end Charlie, and that redneck bitched almost as much as I did.

Duncan, Macdonald, Brody n'me were bro's though, called ourselves the Band ah the Hand. Mac was a crazy redneck from Tennessee who was always listenin t'Hank Junior on his Walkman. Brody was some crazy-assed drug fiend from the Midwest, and Dunc was a smart-assed surfer-punk, muscle-head from Florida.

The day before we left f'r Saudi we all went out n'got shit faced on tequila n'Jägermeister n'burnt each other on the back ah the hands with lit cigarettes, right on the meaty part between the thumb n'the forefinger. I can't really explain why the fuck we did it other than it just seemed like the thing t'do at the time—we was bro's, y'know.

So we was bro's before they fuckin sent us t'the desert, and we got even tighter there. Y'know what I mean—tight? Well, what I mean is closer than I ever been to anybody: friend or family, woman or man—we was bro's. Lemme tell ya sumpm, it ain't like nowhere else in the whole fuckin world, the desert ain't—everything just gets real fuckin

serious out there. I know this might sound like some kind ah candy-ass bullshit, but it's the truth. Out in the desert it all just kind ah melts, everything, into one giant, empty nothingness, just endless time n'empty space. Everything y'fuckin do seems t'take f'r fuckin ever. Time just stands still, every fuckin moment, every fuckin second; they all just drip by like thick-assed molasses. You'd be pullin firewatch in the middle ah the fuckin night, out in the middle ah that giant empty nowhere, and y'd look at y'r watch, and it'd be three-oh-five. Then y'd fuckin suffer y'r way through an hour ah waitin n'watchin n'contemplatin y'r own nothingness, and then, y'd look again, and it'd be fuckin three-oh-six. It all just fuckin slows down out there. It was war-time, Cuz, desert-war time. Somehow y'just can't help but think n'talk about the big stuff like love n'death when y're livin on desert-war time. It just draws it out ah ya, Cuz, like y're tryin t'fill up all that space n'time with the power ah y'r own measly little life.

Yep, we was bro's, but that didn't mean we were motivated, dedicated Gyrenes. We weren't that stupid. We didn't wanna be in the Suck—nobody did. Shit, we scammed our way out ah as much ah the daily bullshit as we could—everybody did.

Don't be shakin y'r fuckin head at me, motherfucker. It's true. Wise up, braindead. It's the fuckin Marine Corps—every aspect ah y'r motherfuckin reality is controlled, from the length ah y'r hair down t'the shine on y'r fuckin boots, n'lemme tell ya, that shit ain't no fuckin fun if y'gotta mind ah y'r own.

Anyway, dickhead, like I's sayin, my team got picked, so we did as we's told cause that's all y'can ever do in the fuckin Crotch: follow y'r orders n'hope f'r the best.

So we got our patrol orders and we set out on the first night ah that mission. It was on one ah them eerie, pitch-black nights. I'm talkin zero illum, no moon, no stars, just cold, black empty darkness: the kind ah dark that scares y'down deep in y'r balls, the kind ah dark that shows y'what

it's like t'be blind.

We had these little tiny glow-in-the-dark dots sewn into the backs ah our bush covers, n'I swear t'God that little dot on the back ah Grope's cover was all I saw that first night out. I just followed that little fuckin dot.

We went like ten clicks into the raghead lines that first night out. It was probably closer t'twenty clicks worth a humpin though, changin direction, switchin back n'forth, cartin around a hundred-odd pounds worth ah shit: radios, chow, water, rifles, SAWs, grenades, Claymore Mines, gas masks, flak jacket, E-tools, ammo, binos, cameras, all kinds ah shit.

Nobody said a word that first night, not a fuckin word. After about seven'r eight hours worth ah silent humpin through that darkness Brody halted the team n'told ol Grope he thought he spotted sumpm about a click'r two in front ah our poz. Well, we busted out the Night Vision Goggles n'the Starlight scope, but still, it was so fuckin dark out we couldn't tell what was out there'r if there was anything out there at all. All we knew was we weren't movin through it'r by it without knowin whatda fuck *it* was. So we dug in, y'know, buried ourselves in a few feet ah sand n'pulled fifty percent security until first light.

Nobody really slept though. I know I didn't. I was too fuckin scared, lyin there in that black soup, havin silent anxiety attack after silent anxiety attack. First light finally came round, and we saw whatda fuck was in front ah us.

Now listen, Cuz, I don't care whatda fuckin government says'r denies cause I saw what I saw, and my symptoms are real. I ain't had a good night's sleep in Goddamn years cause my fuckin grape feels like it's gonna explode 24-7. Everybody that's left ah that team will tell ya the same fuckin thing. There was a whole Goddamn herd ah dead camels lyin tits up out there, lookin like they'd all just dropped right in their tracks. We had the binos on them motherfuckers, and I swear t'God they didn't have a fly or a maggot or a sand flea on'm, and that fuckin place was crawlin with sand fleas.

Well, as soon as we figured out what must ah happened, we put our gas masks on, packed up our shit n'double-timed it out ah that poz as quick as we could. We wore our masks f'r a few hundred meters, but we all ended up takin'm off. Y'just couldn't breathe in them things; they made y'overheat, and y'can't afford t'do that shit in the fuckin desert, specially when y'r water supply's limited.

Everything started t'turn t'shit then. We shouldn't ah been humpin around in the broad daylight without our gas masks on, but we had to. We shouldn't ah been yellin at each other, but we was. The Band ah the Hand was bitchin at Casper n'Sergeant Grope f'r walkin us into some fuckin chemical death zone, and they were bitchin back at us about shuttin the fuck up.

Our attention t'security went t'shit. It was like we f'rgot all about bein behind enemy lines, and we was back at Camp Lejeune humpin around some swamp, bitchin at each other about what a bullshit trainin mission we was on.

Fuckin Brody even popped a dip ah Copenhagen in, and ol Grope started bitchin bout his dip spit leavin a trail. That's when Brody stopped the team, and the two started in on each other.

I thought they was gonna fuckin throw down right there out in the middle ah the damn desert. The way they was yellin n'screamin, y'could ah heard'm a good mile'r two away. Hell, if the wind was right, y' could hear a guy cough half-a-mile away. It was like livin in the middle of a giant, empty parking lot.

I member Brody yellin, "Fuck you, Grope, like some raghead patrol's gonna track a trail a dip spit." Then I heard'm, the APCs. I heard'm fore I saw'm.

It was a low rubblin noise that just kept gettin louder n'louder, like a fuckin freight train bearin down on our poz: a fuckin shitload a raghead Armored Personnel Carriers, closin in on us. Well, Dunc n'me jumped on the fuckin radios n'tried t'get comm, callin every motherfucker we could f'r an air strike or a arty fire mission, but we couldn't

get nobody, not one Goddamn motherfucker, n'them fuckin ragheads kept gettin closer n'closer.

I'll tell y'what, Cuz, I ain't never been so scared in my fuckin life. It was like I felt dead, like I knew my number was up. I really thought I was gonna buy it right there. Worst feelin in the fuckin world. Made me sick t'my stomach, practically shit my pants.

Everybody started goin 911 then, yellin n' screamin, cappin off rounds at the motherfuckers. Eventually we settled down n'dug in though after we rattled off a good chunk ah our motherfuckin ammo n'finally realized the tent dwellin bastards were too far off yet t'hit. So we put out our Claymores, kept tryin t'get comm n'waited. We did a lot a prayin t'God, too. That's a no shitter, Cuz. That shit y'always hear about there ain't no atheists in foxholes is true—everybody in that team all ah the sudden got real fuckin religious.

Well, them motherfuckin APCs got t'within about a half-a-klick ah our poz before an AV-8B air strike took'm out, every fuckin one of'm, total fuckin annihilation. Turned out Team Three'd spotted our situation just in time on one ah them long-range electrical optical systems they had set up at their poz behind us. They called that air strike in n'saved our asses.

After that, everybody was just happy t'be alive. We all wanted t'tank the mission n'turn back then cause we couldn't get no comm, but ol Grope wouldn't have it. The motherfucker went all gung-ho on us, pullin rank, tellin us we was gonna Charlie Mike it, comm'r no comm.

We all went at it then—God, I d'know f'r how long—until Grope started threatin court-martial f'r dereliction ah duty'r mutiny'r some shit. So we sucked it up and started humpin it again. Well, we hadn't gone no more than a couple ah clicks when out ah nowhere this fuckin arty fire mission starts screechin o'r our heads n'lands like 400 meters in front ah our poz. Fuckin scared the piss out ah all ah us. It was a fuckin friendly fire mission, too, comin from behind us. So

once again, we di-di-moud out that AO n'tried t'get comm. but ah course, we couldn't get none. So finally, ol Grope-y'rass told us we were gonna hump it back t'team three's relay poz n'get some radio contact with HQ.

I guess that's when they broke us, when we really realized they had us by the balls. We knew what Grope's orders meant: more fuckin humpin the weight across that giant beach only t'be told t'turn back around n'finish the mission. We all knew we were gonna have t'go collect a bunch ah bullshit info: info they already had from satellite n'aerial recon, info whose only real purpose was t'make Recon Battalion look good, info the fuckin Colonel could use t'justify Recon's existence n'get his Goddamn combat proficiency marks.

Hell, fuckin ground troops weren't even needed in that desert. We was just gettin in the way out there, and we all knew it too.

I mean, we didn't know all that shit at that time, but we could feel it. I know I could. I could feel my insignificance, my expendability. Shit, I'd been feelin it since the moment I signed that fuckin contract. Lemme tell y'sumpm, that ain't the way a man ought ah feel. It weighs y'down, real heavy like, like a giant anvil pressing down on y'r spirit 24-7/3-65.

Thinkin back, I know we all felt that weight then after that arty fire. We all knew then the only way we was gonna ever have a life worth livin again was if we finished that bogus mission, so we all zombied out after that. Nobody said a word. We humped back t'team three's poz, made our radio shot back t'the rear, got our orders n'fuckin reconed that damn minefield better than any six motherfuckers ever reconed a Goddamn minefield before. Shit, we crawled the last 500 meters t'the fuckin forward edge ah that bitch. Brody even climbed an electrical pylon n'took pictures. We mapped out the entire minefield, complete with detailed drawings n'photos ah all the wire obstacles n'unmined foot lanes. We got everything; I mean fuckin everything. Then we just about double-timed it f'r like twenty fuckin clicks til we got back

t'friendly lines.

I'll tell y'what, I ain't never felt so alive in my whole fuckin life as when we got back t'that friendly berm. Everybody in the team was hyped, feelin high as shit.

What happened next still seems like a bad dream'r sumpm, one ah them sick twisted dreams y'can't get out ah y'r head.

Yep, we was all shit-assed happy t'be back in a friendly AO, and ol Mac, man, he was runnin his jib at like a hundred miles an hour, "yee-hawin" n' "hee-hawin" n' "fuck-yeahin," just bein fuckin happy as shit t'be alive. He had this gut ripper anti-personnel grenade, the type that pops up right about stomach level before it explodes, y'know, a fuckin bouncin betty. He was twirlin it on his finger by the round loop on the retainin pin. Nobody thought nutin of it. We was all carryin a bunch ah grenades, and we had ta turn'm in t'the ammo dump, so we all had'm out. But Mac was all *extra* happy, bouncin along. Its almost like I member him skippin. I know he wasn't, but I can see it in my mind's eye now: that ol redneck skippin along with a big shit-eatin grin on his face, twirlin that grenade on his finger, hummin some Hank Junior tune, when—POP!—the fuckin thing flew off his finger. I member seem that grenade go flyin off his finger n'then lookin at his finger n'seein that retainin pin still looped on it.

Mac turned then, just f'r a second, and looked me square in the fuckin eye. Man, Cuz, his eyes were empty n'cold like some kind ah poor helpless animal waitin to be slaughtered. I knew then with that fuckin look—before he ever jumped on that Goddamn grenade—that it was over f'r him. I stared at him f'r a second'r two; then Brody pulled me away. Mac yelled, "Fire in the hole," and took the blast in his fuckin gut.

The blast didn't kill him right off though. He lasted a good minute'r two, sufferin, suckin his own blood n'guts tryin just t'breathe. He sounded like some kind ah fuckin out ah control cappuccino machine. Our corpsman, Doc Hastin, ran up n'tried t'help him, but Mac was gone. He had a hole

right through'm where his fuckin stomach used t'be, raw meat hangin out everywhere. Y'could smell'm burnin, too. Worst smell in the world, burnin flesh. Made me puke. I mean really puke, vomitorium projectile puke. Makes me fuckin sick just thinkin bout it now.

I ain't never been the same since, Cuz. Mac was good people, top ah the fuckin food chain. Him n'my bro's was who I was out there fightin for: him n'Brody n'Dunc, not any that bullshit y'always hear like God, Corps, country. I wasn't fightin fr any ah that shit, nobody was. That crap don't mean dick, don't mean dick t'nobody, never did n'never will. When them rounds start comin down range, all that bullshit like God, Corps, country, family, friends'r even fuckin oil, all that shit goes out the fuckin window. It's just you n'y'r bro's, fightin fr each other's lives.

Timothy John Macdonald, he was the reason I put up with all the daily bullshit the fuckin Suck threw at me. He was the one that I was out there layin it on the line with; he was the one I was fightin for: my friend, my best friend—my fuckin bro.

The best way I can describe it is, it changed my everything—forever. All that shit that I thought was supposed t'be important before that like friends n'family'r shit like love and a career that bullshit just don't seem t'matter now. It all just seems like a worthless bunch ah bullshit cliches, everything. It's like everybody's just fakin their way through'm, like nobody knows shit about nutin, like everybody's fuckin blind—cept fr me.

Well, Cuz, nobody ever thinks about that kind ah shit happenin to'm before they sign up, n'God knows nobody ever tells y'bout it. The fuckin recruiters never tell ya y're gonna lead a miserable fuckin existence fr four fuckin years. They never tell ya they'll send y'off t'some fuckin desert half-way across the world t'dig holes n'dodge bullets n'cap innocent people y'got nutin against. They never tell ya that once y'finally do get out ah the Corps y're gonna be talkin like a convict, drinkin like a fish n'gettin off on watchin other guys



suffer cause y'spent the last four years hangin out with a bunch ah sewer-mouthed macho assholes. No one ever tells y'that once y're out y're gonna be broke n'unemployable— unless y'wanna be a hit man or a burglar or even worse a fuckin cop. They never tell you y're gonna end up a sleepless walkin zombie cause y'r brain feels like it's gonna blow open like a volcano 24-7/3-65. Nobody ever tells y'the military ain't gonna pay y'r medical bills fr some fuckin *syndrome* they gave you. Nobody ever tells ya you'll have t'watch y'r best friend get his fuckin stomach blown off n'then bleed t'death out in the middle ah nowhere in some Godfrsaken desert half way across the Goddamn world. No one ever tells y'that shit.

Well, Cuz, I just told ya.

So, if y'still wanna go out n'volunteer to eat that crap sandwich, go right ahead. Just don't ever come round here sayin I never told y'that shit.

*Seven*

Somebody told me once  
it takes seven years  
for the body to replace itself  
This, I'm sure, is a statistical calculation  
based on generic rates of cellular  
regeneration and decay.

But seven has always seemed right to me  
for the number of re-creation:  
the Tarot's chariot,  
the week's enclosure,  
the gambler's pet.

Seven years. The silence has been almost  
that long between us. So when you called  
tonight, asked what was new with me,  
I wanted to say everything,  
but that's not quite true, not yet.

There's still some vestige  
of the girl I was,  
pooling, each morning,  
in the shower drain.

## Melanie McDonald

### *Rain Dance*

That gray barn behind the pond we built in 1963, the year Kirk Dotson ran off. The year my husband fell in love with him.

Just the year before, we'd been featured in the co-op magazine as the "Model Rural Electric Family." I still have that issue, minus the page of recipes I clipped out. The feature article tells about the uses of electricity on our farm, including my all-electric kitchen. There are pictures of us, too.

See, here we are: I'm standing beside the range in a fresh apron, my hair teased into a sticky beehive, stirring a pot on the front burner (nothing in it, a staged shot), while Hadley leans down into the refrigerator, one big hand clasped around the door handle. "Hadley and Sarah Bennett enjoy the modern conveniences of their all-electric kitchen." Another photo shows him gathering a couple of eggs beneath the glaring lights of the henhouse, his face and blond hair hidden under a John Deere cap. The pictures are only in black and white, but that's okay. We look new in those photos, milk-faced and innocent. A farmer, twenty-seven, and his wife, twenty-four. We had no way of knowing the coming year would sprain our marriage.

Our trouble started early that summer when Hadley hired Kirk, the farmer's son from down the road, to help him build our new barn. Kirk had just graduated from high school. He helped his father run their hog farm. His mama wanted Kirk to go on to college, try for a finer life. He said he just wanted to be a farmer like his daddy. Looking back, I guess he thought college would cost too much money. He wouldn't have put his parents out that way. Kirk was a nice boy. I should say, young man. Shy. I thought he was real good looking. Healthy and strong. He had broad shoulders and long legs like all those Dotsons, his daddy and uncles and

grandfather, but with his mother's green cat-slant eyes and high, sharp cheekbones. His hair was deep brown, with some russet lights to it. A fine specimen, as people say. Kirk reminded me of boys I'd seen on the state college campus, admired from a distance during my one semester of school, before I dropped out to marry Hadley and move back to the farm.

Hadley, unlike Kirk and me, had gone to college, but felt obligated to come home and care for the family land after his parents died. Sometimes I've wondered what our life would have been like if he had stayed in town to work, and I had finished my schooling then. That summer would never have happened. Maybe we would have had some kids.

Hadley and I both loved to read. We kept our library cards worn thin with use. We also subscribed to a few magazines, *Life* and *Look* and *National Geographic*. When Kirk started to work for us, Hadley gave him the old issues. We saved them all, stacks and stacks. We were delighted to find Kirk was a reader, too. Hadley and Kirk and I would discuss articles on Madagascar or Kyushu, Japan's southern gateway; rhapsodize over stunning photos of glass blowers, summoning vases from syrupy molten strands, or an artist's rendition of theories about the surface of Venus.

Hadley told me he was glad to see a young man who could think beyond school and the farm. When Kirk nodded in agreement with our comments, or pointed out some detail one of us had missed, Hadley's rugged face softened with delight. He became a joy to both of us.

As the barn went up, beam by beam, board by board, we three fell into a comfortable routine. About ten each morning, I paused at whatever chore I was doing, laundry or mending or painting the well house, to take a jug of lemonade out to the men.

At noon, Hadley and Kirk came in, smelling of sweat and sawdust, and we'd have lunch at the kitchen table, the radio turned to local news on the AM country station. We'd have beans and cornbread, or pork chops and mashed potatoes, a

salad with fresh sliced tomatoes, pie or cookies, iced tea. We'd cut up and tease each other all through the meal. The kitchen rang with their laughter. I loved to hear them laugh. I can still see both of them sitting there at our old Formica table with the padded vinyl chairs, their arms propped up, gold flecks in the turquoise tabletop reflecting on their elbows like freckles.

Later in the afternoon, I'd go out again with more tea and maybe some apples or cookies. Men work better on a full stomach, my grandma always said. Anyway, I liked having an excuse to go out and talk to them, to watch their sweating bodies dry in the breeze whenever they stopped to rest. I remember a constant breeze that summer, rustling the squat soybeans and whispering among corn stalks, flirting with my skirt when I walked along the path to the barn.

They were two fine men, and I felt a secret pleasure sometimes at having both of them all to myself, for days on end, for as long as it takes to build a barn. I enjoyed watching them together. They enjoyed each other's company. And I confess, I did have a mild crush on Kirk, the kind of proper, never-acted-on crush one person may be allowed to have on another sometimes, provided no one ever takes it seriously.

I thought Kirk maybe had a crush, too. Every morning at eight, he showed up clean in a t-shirt, bathed and combed, despite temperatures that hit 80 in the morning shade of the porch, and work that had both of them dirty and sweating in half an hour. Of course, Hadley also started out freshly showered each morning; but, being his wife, I never pondered his personal hygiene habits. I knew them as well as my own.

In the evenings, Kirk lolled around after they knocked off for the day, talking until suppertime. Sometimes, he even stayed for supper, and we sat out on the back porch and watched the sun set. Then Kirk headed home, with some reluctance. Hadley and I went on inside, maybe watched *Bonanza*. He usually felt too tired to stay up for the news.

That last week of August, when they finished the barn, it rained and rained. The third morning, Kirk knocked at the kitchen door and grinned at me, water streaming down from his slick hair in front of his ears.

“Sarah, have you been sneaking out to do your rain dance again when no one’s looking?” He shook his head like a pup, droplets scattering against the cabinets.

The week before, it had been so hot and dry, we joked about needing a rain dance to bring on the clouds. I did a little shuffle-step in the powdery dust outside the new barn, spinning around with a full pitcher of tea, not spilling a drop onto the parched ground. They laughed and applauded, clapping their hands against the moist sides of their tea glasses. And over the weekend, clouds moved in, the leaves ruffling backwards on trees in a flurry of silver, always a sure sign of rain coming.

I swatted him on his soaked shirt sleeve. “Honestly, some people are never satisfied. First you complain about it being hot and dry, and now it’s too wet for you.”

“Well, we needed some rain, but enough’s enough.” He grinned at me again, and I felt my face flush. A picture flashed in my mind—how wonderful to dance with a man in the rain, clothes and hair slicked down to skin, wet flesh clinging together.

“Hey, Kirk, you ready?” Hadley pounced on the glass of orange juice I’d poured and set out for him on the counter, beside a plate of buttered toast. He didn’t like a big breakfast in the summer. I offered Kirk a glass of juice but he said no, thanks. Hadley stuffed the last bite of toast into his cheek, and they set off for the barn together, splashing through the rain.

By noon, when they came in for lunch, the steady down-pour had slowed to a drizzle. By evening, the sky began to clear. Spikes of late golden sunlight fell across the field, making the new wood of the barn glow.

“Let’s celebrate,” Hadley said when they came through the kitchen door that evening, ravenous for cold drinks.

“How about going to the drive-in? Sarah? Kirk, how about it?” An occasional outing to see a drive-in movie was one of the few treats besides magazines and television we allowed ourselves back then. Time was short and money tight when it came to entertainment on the farm.

“Sounds great,” I said. Kirk agreed, and said he’d bring the beer. Common practice, to smuggle in stronger drink than the snack bar offered. Kirk headed off to his house to shower and change. We picked him up later on the way to town.

Sitting between the two of them in the dark cab of Hadley’s truck that night felt like heaven, snuggled down with a box of popcorn and an icy contraband beer. The evening air was cool, but I felt warmth rising in waves from the denim-clad legs stretched out along either side of me. Although I sat demurely, munching popcorn, my mind raced with possibilities; their shirts disappeared, my palms brushed along taut lengths of thigh. Giant images flashed like lightning across the screen in front of us, while the drive-in speaker squawked lines like a tethered parrot beside Hadley’s shoulder. The scent of Kirk’s freshly washed hair, of Hadley’s cologne, hovered in the air. My skin tingled. I was too drunk on intimacy to follow the story.

Afterward, we drove home in the dark. The night breeze rushed past us in the truck, full of the smell of dust and hay and clover. The chirping of crickets hovered all around us, just beyond the yellow beam of the headlights, audible above the crooning radio, and our occasional voices. The moon was a sliver that night, concealed by passing clouds.

I offered them ice cream, which we ate out on the back porch. Kirk and I sat against each post at the top of the porch steps. Hadley sat down a couple of steps below. We left the porch light off. In the slatted light from the kitchen, I could see the shaded hollow between Kirk’s collarbones at the open throat of his shirt. I wondered how it would feel to brush my fingertips there, my tongue. Hadley asked me something and I jumped, startled.

“What, hon?”

He smiled at me, reached his hand up the stairs and caressed my calf. “I asked if you want any more?” They both grinned at me, and I could feel my face flush.

“Oh, no,” I said, and lied, “I guess I was nodding off.” I set my bowl down and stood up and arched my back, lifted my arms toward the sky. “If we’re all finished, I’ll take these on inside.” I took the empty bowls from each of them and stacked them into my own. I headed into the kitchen, the screen door twanging shut against the low murmur of their voices.

“Night, Sarah,” Kirk called after a few minutes. I stepped back out onto the porch where they were standing. I leaned up on tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek. “Bye, Kirk,” I told him. “Thanks again for the beer.” While they lingered on the porch, saying goodnight, I went in to get ready for bed.

I took my time. I shaved my legs with careful strokes and smoothed lotion into them. I brushed my hair until it glowed in the bathroom mirror. I pulled on a short peach gown and lay down on the bed, stretched out in drowsy, sure anticipation.

When I woke up, it was a little past two. I couldn’t imagine where Hadley might be. I wondered if one of the horses had fallen sick, or if he’d been called out to help with a fire or some other emergency. I pulled on an old quilted robe, stepped into houseshoes.

I went to the front door. There was no sign of anyone in the yard or the road beyond. I passed through the living room and the kitchen, walked out on the back porch. I couldn’t see anything amiss. There were no lights on in the well house, the chicken house, the shed, or the old barn where we kept the baler and other equipment. Still, I went out and made the rounds, switching on lights in each building, flooding the empty spaces, calling my husband’s name.

The new barn was the last place left to look. It was the only building on the farm without electricity. Hadley



planned to wire it, but hadn't gotten around to it yet. I went back to the kitchen and pulled the flashlight from the junk drawer. The batteries were dead, with no replacements. So I pulled the old kerosene lantern out from under the sink, trimmed the wick, lit it and headed out.

The barn door stood ajar when I reached it. I pulled the door all the way open and stepped inside, the lamp held out in front of me. Before I could speak, I was struck still. Two bare bodies gleamed beneath me, entwined like serpents on the floor. Two faces turned up to me, eyes glistening in the sudden light. Hadley and Kirk.

"Jesus Christ, God Almighty!" I dropped the lamp, turned and fled into the night. Right at that moment, I never wanted to see my husband's face again. Or Kirk's. (I don't know what happened to the lamp, which I never saw again; I guess the fire died, or they beat it out. I could have easily burned down the barn.)

Home. I went back to the house, seeking comfort where there was none. In the yellow glare of the kitchen light, I saw those bowls still stacked in the sink, melted ice cream drawing a couple of drowsy flies. Mechanically, I shooed them away, then turned on the hot water tap, sending a stream hissing into the sink. I got out the dish soap, added some to the water in the basin, and began to wash the sticky bowls and spoons. My hands shook until I thought I might drop a bowl and break it. Then I thought, why not. Why not break them all. I lifted one high, ready to send it smashing onto the hard floor, but force of habit stopped me. No use being wasteful, regardless of what's been handed to you. I set the bowl finally, carefully on the drainboard.

Half an hour had gone by when Hadley came on up to the house. He came in through the front door, pausing in the unlighted living room.

After a few minutes, I went to the doorway. I could see him, a faint outline. He was sitting, just sitting there in the silent dark.

"Well, Hadley, I suppose I'd better start locking up the

livestock at night.” He sat slumped in his navy recliner, head between his hands, not speaking, even when I muttered the next bitter words at him.

“I wish you were dead.” His head drooped lower, and his shoulders heaved once. “At least then, I’d know what to do.” I left him there, went to our bedroom and locked the door.

Later on, I got curious. I thought making him talk about what I’d seen might help banish or even make sense of the jumbled, frightening image—the two of them locked together, dark hair tumbling against gold—burned into my brain.

I got out of bed and pulled an old quilt, his grandmother’s double wedding ring pattern, from the closet, and grabbed the pillow from his side of the bed. I shuffled back into the living room. He had nodded off in the recliner. I dumped the pillow and quilt on his lap, and with a hand flat against his shoulder, shook him roughly awake.

“Tell me what you did. Tell me exactly what you did with him. Tell me what he did to you. Everything.” I felt jealous of his body, what it could do with another body that I could have no part of. And of his feelings, that he could have feelings for someone else I couldn’t begin to understand. Didn’t want to.

He sighed into the dark. “Don’t, Sarah,” he said softly. “Please, don’t do this.”

I wouldn’t allow Hadley any dignity those first few days. I didn’t think he deserved any. Neither would I accept his apologies or explanations. I wanted—I don’t know what I wanted. All I could think was that I could have handled being widowed better than this. At least then I’d know why I grieved for this man I had loved and married. A man, I realized too late, I didn’t know at all.

While he told me again and again, “I love you, Sarah. I do love you. But I needed—I needed him, too.” His eyes darkened with loss. But I could not forgive him, even when he promised that what had happened was over, that he’d never see Kirk again.

Later, Kirk came to apologize, stuttering through a maze of broken words on the back porch. I didn't invite him in. I can see now how brave of him that must have been, to confront me: the wronged wife, one who would have been the obvious, innocent victim in that community and time, my righteous anger and disgust. Spurred, of course, by my own secret guilt and shame—I had been attracted to him myself.

I couldn't think of a single thing to say to Kirk by way of forgiveness. Finally I just told him, "I have no idea what to say to you right now. Will you please just go away, and leave us alone."

At last I looked up through the screen door, looked him in the eye. He nodded at me in silence, turned and walked down off the porch. As far as I know, he never set foot on the place again.

And I believe Hadley kept his word, as far as not seeing Kirk any more. But there were times when he acted strange, so quiet and far away. I figured he must have been thinking about Kirk then, at least sometimes. I could hardly stand to walk into the raw wood smell of that new barn. It must have been even worse for Hadley.

It took Hadley and me considerable time to make our peace. But after a couple of months had gone by, we began to touch each other again. I couldn't hold myself away from him forever. Hadley put his arm around me one night in bed, outside the covers, like a bundle he'd carried off with him into sleep. The next time he put his arm around me, it was under the covers. The shock of warm skin against my thin cotton gown made me shiver.

"Is it alright?"

Holding my breath—I didn't know until he asked, and I had to answer.

"Yes," I whispered. "Yes."

There were rumors about Kirk. Kirk had gone bad, people said, a young man grown restless and mean with the

mindless work and boredom of farm life. Ignoring his mother, arguing with his father. Finally, one Saturday, he got careless with a grappling hook when he was pulling snapping turtles out of the stock pond, probing the murky water for the heavy dull bodies, thrusting under and then tossing them up onto the slick clay bank. He must have lost his balance, and by accident he sank one of the prongs into his own thigh. He panicked and yanked it out right there, gouging out ragged hanks of his own flesh. He lost an awful lot of blood before they got him to the hospital over at Woolverton.

Hadley's face looked white and drawn when he came back from church the next morning. I'd stayed home that day, to watch our bitch that was whelping.

Silence hung over the kitchen for a long while after he told me. The toaster and polished bread box gleamed uselessly, bearing our reflections.

"We need to go see him, then," I said, finally. Hadley nodded, avoiding my eyes.

I left him sitting at the kitchen table by himself for a while, to get my good coat out of the hall closet. When I came back, he'd pulled himself together a little.

"Ready," I said, and he raised himself out of the chair. We went on out and got in the truck and drove to the hospital without another word between us.

Kirk lay sleeping between sterile white sheets, eyes closed, his breathing shallow and irregular. His mother, calm with shock, sat there beside him.

Hadley shook so hard I could feel his hand tremble beside mine. Right then I knew, how much he wanted to touch that boy, hold him, a human being he'd loved. But it was Woolverton, 1963, and he couldn't.

I took my husband's hand in mine and gave it a squeeze. Then I took both our hands and laid them over Kirk's. Left them there. I looked up at Hadley until he met my eyes.

A few weeks after Kirk was released, he left home for good. He'd gone as soon as the leg healed enough to walk,

headed off to Kansas City. We never saw him again.

Looking back, I'm not sure why we didn't try to have children. Maybe because work on the farm never stops long enough. And maybe because, once the ground beneath you has shifted so much, you don't go seeking out any more changes. Life passed, day by day, until we settled into calm middle age. Hadley always was a good husband, up to the day he died—his heart.

He never did get around to wiring the new barn. Eventually we just let it close in on itself, from lack of use; maybe we should have torn it down, but Hadley never mentioned it. Anyway, I can't see any point in bothering now. It has been there for so long.

*Story Problems*

A train leaves Philadelphia at 8am and travels west at 100 miles per hour. Two hours later, a second train leaves San Francisco and travels east at 80 miles per hour. If a careless switch operator accidentally throws the wrong switch, connecting the two tracks on which the trains are traveling, how long will it take before the two trains collide? And would it make a difference if on one of those trains, a young woman wearing a bright yellow dress were on her way to meet her fiance with the deed to their new home tucked safely inside her purse? Or if the conductor of the train were only two days from retiring after thirty years with the railroad? Or if there were a boy on his first family vacation to the seaside? But what if that careless operator sends only one train down the wrong track with his accidental flick of a lever, to a track that leads not to a collision with the other train but to a dead end in front of a granite wall. Would it matter what train the woman in the yellow dress is riding? Or the little boy? Or the retiring conductor? And if the careless switch operator has slept through his shift from too much drinking the night before, causing a more careful operator to pull the correct lever and keep the two speeding trains separated, where will they pass and at what time? Would anyone care, including the boy who just threw up on the woman in the yellow dress?

What if her name were Wanda? Yes, Wanda Jean Franklin, a young woman who has never before owned a yellow (and now stained) dress, much less a wide-brimmed hat and matching handbag. What if she has saved up her loose change for months in a pickle jar she keeps hidden beneath her bed in the boardinghouse where she lives in exchange for fifty dollars a week and evening dish-duty, until enough crumpled bills, dimes and nickels have gathered to buy the (now stained) yellow dress. The same dress that she

first sees in the department store window, worn by the faceless mannequin with the cream-colored vinyl purse and shiny new shoes, the night her boyfriend takes her to the movies. Would it matter what the boyfriend's name is, if he were a Dwight, a Norman, Max, or Jim? Would a different name cause them to walk down a different street on the way home, perhaps past the park instead, so that she never sees the dress in the window? And what of the movie? If they see *Some Like It Hot* instead of *An Affair to Remember*, will they be holding hands so tightly, walking so closely and slowly together down the avenue? Or would they be so wrapped up in each other's eyes that they don't notice the window display at all, and the next morning a plump woman with flame-red hair purchases the yellow dress for her niece?

For every story problem there is a set of givens, and it is a given that Wanda Jean Franklin sees the yellow dress in the window, that her boyfriend Jim comments on how pretty she'd look in it, that instead of seeing *An Affair to Remember* or *Some Like It Hot*, they buy a ticket for her landlady so that Wanda can smuggle him up the backstairs of the boarding house, to spend two hours making love to him. And Jim proposes to her. But what if, instead of proposing to her, he tells her that he's taking a job with the Pacific-Atlantic railroad? Would it matter that he has to leave that same night? That he leaves her in tears at the station to catch the midnight train to St. Louis and promises to write every day? And what would it mean if he saves his money from the job to surprise Wanda with a honeymoon cottage with a white picket fence? But it takes two years to save the money, and the letters grow shorter, fewer, colder. And the dress that Wanda sees in the window, the yellow one with the matching shoes and handbag, is bought and lovingly hung on her room's wall, like a precious painting, nearly eighteen months before. Then, after a year of waiting for Jim to either return or send for her to join him, the dress is moved into her closet. After two years, it has gradually voyaged through the closet and now hangs, nearly forgotten, in the very back.

And what of Jim working for the railroad in St. Louis? Which would have the larger impact on those two speeding trains: if he dedicates himself to his job and thinks of Wanda at every moment, or if he spends long nights with strange women and thinks of her only when he feels obligated to respond to her increasingly desperate letters? But what if those letters aren't desperate but simply distanced because she's living her own life independent of him and any false sense of the future? He might even suspect that she's seeing another man. And what if she is? Would she have the right, and would she enjoy it, even as the yellow dress hangs in her closet? Would she understand if the reason his letters come fewer, shorter, and colder is that he's working double shifts to earn as much pay as possible? And what would it mean if Jim finally sends for her to join him, if he mails her a one-way ticket to start a new life together, and if on the night before she is due to arrive, all his friends at the railroad throw him a party? And what if one of the people who attends, who arrives at just a few minutes past nine and drinks more beer than anyone else, is the man in charge of switching the levers that sends trains onto new tracks?

Suppose that the wrong lever were thrown and the tracks crossed . . . would the retiring conductor, even with his thirty years of railroad service, sense that something were wrong? Or would he be focused instead on the retirement condo he and his wife Maeve have just purchased in Sarasota, the one on the beach with the ice cream-colored pink and green awning? Or is he focusing on the bitter taste of the coffee Maeve has sent along with him in his metal thermos? No sugar, again. Would something seem different to him on that train trip, would the tracks sound different, vibrating peculiarly beneath the metal wheels? Would the engine run differently? The sound of the steam whistle? The smell of the air? Would he be able to sense any difference at all? Or maybe there is no difference between this train ride and the thousands of others he has taken during his long career. Not even a cold shiver up his back. And if he does shiver, in some



kind of telepathic or karmic warning, would he simply shrug it away, blame it on the morning chill, and reach for his thermos of bitter coffee?

Would it make a difference that the train crew surprises him that day with a retirement gift of a brand new fishing rod and a jelly roll with a single candle flaming up in the middle? He loves jelly rolls, they all know it, just as they all know that Maeve forbids him to eat them. Your cholesterol, dear, she warns gently. Would it make a difference if he suffers a mild heart attack two years before? Or that he spends a week in the hospital hooked up to all kinds of whizzing machines? And if the heart attack is actually severe, forcing him to remain in the hospital fluctuating between life and death for over three weeks? What if that is the reason for his retirement? Could that heart attack dull his senses to the point where he won't notice when the train turns off its correct course and speeds down the wrong track, won't suspect that the scenery passing by is strange and unknown, won't feel any shivers of cosmic forewarning? What if there is no heart attack at all? Or no wife. What if she divorces him ten years before, leaving behind a house full of empty rooms and a kitchen stocked only with a single box of jelly doughnuts? What if he never marries her at all? If on that night when he meets a beautiful and funny woman at the train station in Mobile—an adorable creature who is lost and stops him to ask for directions—she catches her scheduled train and he never sees her again?

Still, he would smile at the boy who bounces aboard the first-class car with his parents, unable to sit still because of his excitement. That is a given. The boy with the light brown hair and Buster Brown shoes, dressed in a small suit that matches his father's and holding a little suitcase of his very own. And the boy would smile back, perhaps even wave, hoping secretly without daring to ask that the conductor would offer to show him the mighty engine on one of the stops. Would his mother admonish him for fidgeting in his seat, for marking fingerprints all over the window, for asking

too many questions? Would it dampen his excitement at all or merely make him even more nervous? So nervous that he develops motion sickness? And in his excitement, would he notice any of the people around him, including the woman in the bright yellow dress until he vomits on her just as the train passes into Chicago?

What if his parents are lying to him? If there is no vacation to the seaside as they promise, but instead a trip to a California hospital? Could the conductor tell, even as he waves to the boy, that Tommy is terribly sick? Would the pretty woman in the yellow dress scream less loudly when he vomits on her if she knows that his medication causes queasy stomachs? Would the conductor take him to meet the engineer if he knows the boy is dying? The crayon drawings Tommy makes of the passing scenery, including one of a railroad track curving away from the train as the cars switch tracks, would be sent back to his classmates and teacher. And if there is no sickness? If the trip is an excuse to leave him with his aunt while his parents take a second honeymoon? Or adopt a baby sister for him? And if one of his parents remains behind because someone has to take care of the dog and water the plants, would he be as happy, even as the train speeds westward at 100 miles per hour? What if his family has never bought a dog? Or any plants. Would it make a difference to the conductor who runs to fetch a bucket and clean towels, or to the woman in the (now stained) yellow dress who begins to weep loudly because she has no other dress to change into before her fiance greets her at the station?

For every problem, there exists a specific and limited set of givens around which a unique solution revolves. It is a given that one train leaves Philadelphia at 8pm and travels west at 100 mph, while a second train leaves San Francisco two hours later and travels east at 80 mph. It is also a given that a careless switch operator *does* throw the wrong switch and *does* send those two speeding trains onto the same track, with no way to detour them or stop them, and it is a given that they will collide at a combined velocity of 180 mph

somewhere in middle America. There will be no survivors. Within this set of givens, would it matter that if on one of those trains, a young woman wearing a vomit-stained yellow dress were on her way to meet her fiance with the deed to their new home tucked safely away in her purse? Or if the conductor who was only two days from retiring after thirty years with the railroad wipes jelly from his mouth? Or if the boy on his first family vacation to the seaside suffers motion-sickness? Or if a twelve-year-old girl in Muncie, Indiana, her pencil paused in the middle of calculating the exact time of the impending collision, wonders if she will ever use algebra in real life?

# Alana Merritt Mahaffey

## *C-Section Beauty Queen*

Because I look like a jack-o-lantern  
the smiling scar with staple teeth  
and my nipples shining like rosy eyes  
still round from the week-old baby.

Because my body, always pale,  
shows stretchmarks like blue  
highways on a travel map. On my belly  
I arrowed, "You are here," and grinned.

Because my tits burst open  
with milk when she cries  
howling for another drink  
her eyes brown like a calf's.

And the drugs they give me  
for the pain and the stitches  
make my body funny, make  
me not care at all. It's like

a spent Christmas package  
just opened, just like so,  
like a wide, waning moon across my body  
the womb like a shallow cup I just poured.

I am beautifully vandalized.

## Contributors' Notes

The poetry of **Olivia V. Ambrogio** has been published in *Red Cedar Review* and *Yemassee*, and she has work in the forthcoming *Anthology of Detroit Poets* from Wayne State University Press.

**Marta Boswell** is the recipient of two Academy of American Poets Prizes. She is pursuing a Ph. D. in Creative Writing at the University of Missouri-Columbia, where she is an editorial intern at the *Missouri Review*.

**Philip Dacey**, a University of Idaho Distinguished Visiting Writer in Spring 1999, has published close to a thousand poems. With David Jauss, he edited *Strong Measures: Contemporary American Poetry in Traditional Forms*, which was published in 1986. *The Deathbed Playboy*, his most recent book, was published in 1999 by Eastern Washington University Press.

**Stephanie Dickinson** was raised in rural Iowa and now lives in Hell's Kitchen, New York City. Her work has seen print in *The New York Quarterly*, *The Seattle Review*, and *Willow Springs*, among others.

A self-proclaimed member of the private sector, **Peter Gorman** has published work in *Satire* and *Lynx Eye*, among other magazines. He is not a member of a militia group and lives in the Washington, D.C. area.

**Anna Harrington** received her M.A. in English at Michigan State in 1995, and now works as an advertising executive in Chicago.

A graduate student attending Henderson State University, **Alana Merritt Mahaffey** received the Voices International Poetry Award and the Rice Honorary Award for poetry in 1999. Her work is scheduled to see print in *Grasslands Review* and *Poetry Motel*.

**James Mayo**, former assistant editor of *Fugue*, now lives in Pensacola, Florida, where he enjoys not seeing snow.

**Melanie McDonald** is working toward her MFA in the creative writing program at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. She has received a first place award for fiction from the Western Arkansas Writers' Workshop in Fort Smith.

A former United States Reconnaissance Marine, **Bradley David Miller** is a recent Summa Cum Laude graduate from the University of Central Florida, where he received the Fiction Honoree award for best fiction writer.

**Georgia Tiffany** teaches English at Mead High School in Spokane, Washington. Her poems have appeared in *North Dakota Quarterly*, *South Dakota Review*, *Willow Springs*, and *Malabat Review*.

# fugue

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featuring poems by Philip Dacey