

# The War Comes Home

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# Flying Out

We enter through the cargo ramp, our heads down to avoid the spray of the engines. walking up the ramp is like entering a metal crypt, the dank smell of moldy water and sweat pumps through the condensation-covered vents. The stench is intense, a few of us gag as we breathe out our mouths.

“Jesus! It smells like someone shit themselves,” Kerns yells over the engine noise.

“Or died,” Hoover shouts behind us.

Our packs are a huge problem. There’s nowhere to put them, so we have to stick them in the walkway. These C-130s are the worst way to fly, the jump seats are just large enough for a small child, and the row of seats across the way are so close that we straddle our legs into each others’ crotches like a giant zipper of bodies.

We lock in and they close the ramp. We’d already gotten used to the stench from the plane. I lower my head to go to sleep, but to no avail. The seats are too tight, and Brad’s knee keeps hitting me in the balls as we taxi.

Frustrated, I unlock myself from my seat and move towards the flight deck ladder, stepping on everyone’s pack to get there. C-Rog yells at me, “Watch It, you’re gonna crush my fuckin’ smokes!”

Normally the loadmaster tells us to sit down, but this crew lets us move around even before takeoff.

“You want to sit in the flight deck when we take off?” she says to me.

“Why not,” I said.

As I enter the deck, we make the final turn for the runway. My seat is behind the pilot on the left and directly next to the window. Through the headset, I hear the pilot request a “max climb.” The tower comes back with, “Reaper 1-6 cleared for max climb departing runway 3-8.”

The aircraft lurches as the pilot shoves the throttle to the max, but we don’t move. The aircraft shakes like a washer on spin cycle. Suddenly, the jet blasts forward. My back sinks into the chair, the speed compressing the harness into my chest. The sunlight slowly shifts through the windows like a spotlight steadily scanning the flight deck. The runway lights race past us like spectators on a freeway. A low audible squeal starts and becomes louder through the headset as we speed up. The pilot pulls back on the stick, and the bumping of the runway ceases. The pilot yanks back on the yolk, and we ascend like a rocket.

The window fills with a beautiful, clear sky, it's the first time I notice how blue it was in Afghanistan. As we level off, I look out the window. The province looks nothing like the warzone I've spent the last 7 months surviving. No sound of gunshots; no mortars; just the quiet hum of the propellers.

The city is calm, no honking horns, no yelling in Balochi, and no screaming mothers. The perfect squares of poppy fields bring a sense of symmetry to the land. There's the field where Stephens died. I remember finding him. His blood was like molasses, drowning out the glowing red flowers around his corpse. From here, the poppies look like the skirt on an evening gown, elegantly draped around the village. The houses stack perfectly next to each other like children's building blocks. Below a car dances through the side roads like an ant traveling the trails of the nest, protected by the sanctity of its surroundings.

As we continue our ascension, the mountains take shape. They circle the entire province, curling towards the sky like fingers on a hand cupping the valley. They were beautiful. It was the first time I had ever noticed them. I spent hours of my time there looking down the barrel of my M-4 or the .50 caliber on the Humvee that I never stopped to look up. The lake off to the left shimmers like a little girl's dress, making me think of Kayla. She'd twirl around, laughing in her princess outfit. She told me one day she would be a princess, and I'd ask her, "What will you do when you become a princess?" And she would say, "I'll dance at the beautiful balls!" Her sequin dress would shine off the summer sun like a sparkler on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July.

As we climb, the entire country comes into sight. Miles of green pastures separated by jugged mountains that appear purposely placed in their spots. Sharp slices of crust create pockets of chaos in the sheets of green, looking purposely placed. There's almost no sand, yet that's all I remember seeing. Beautiful greens and browns span to the horizon. The province up here looked nothing like what we witnessed from down there. It looked like Wyoming, or Montana. It looked as if our departure put the province to sleep, nestling itself under the shade of the hills, its feet sticking out into the soft, glowing sun.

I can't help but stare until it disappears, playfully hiding behind bits of puffy white cloud. The aircraft levels off, and I open the door to the flight deck. I stop at the ladder and look down at the men, crumpled into each other trying to sleep. The red cargo lights drape shadows over them, as they fight for position to rest in peace.

# Revenge

The Blackhawk spins  
Up as we board, emerald lights bring an ominous  
Shimmer.  
The humid air sticks  
to the skin  
like fly paper, and condensation builds  
like the rainforest without trees. Many fear  
the darkness,  
but tonight, some carry torches.

These men are preparing like chefs for the feast.  
Reyes packs extra magazines, Harrow sharpens  
his blade.  
Their eyes glow red  
with the hawk's bright  
lights. Nobody speaks.

The darkness conceals  
our arrival  
as these men abandon  
the mission.  
They prowl  
like pumas hunting  
the next kill.  
They search for those who feast  
on our comrades, using nails and spikes  
to stab their bites  
and then disappear into the night  
their bellies empty but their smiles full.

They find the savages,  
unaware of our presence like oblivious jackals  
preparing their next attack.

Then these men feast.

We can't watch the horror  
as these men, these savages  
maul while muffling the screams.  
But we don't let them quit,

because these men seek revenge  
for the ones we've lost.  
They feast for the ones consumed  
by this wretched war.

So we let them finish  
until they stand over the kill,  
their smiles empty  
but their stomachs full.

# Ghosts

The landing gear slams into place as the chartered jet noses down. Nobody is saying a word, but everyone is playfully moving around to see outside like children at the New York holiday window displays. The back end of the plane flares, the engines cut back, and we feel the aircraft touch down like a bird on the lake. Some of the soldiers start clapping and cheering.

The turn on to the taxiway shifts the sunlight through the cabin, spotlighting some of the guys. Parker jokes with one of the guys about washing his ass. Reyes is still asleep despite all the noise and light. He slept through a mortar strike once that destroyed a transformer 40 feet from our tent; I never knew how he did it. Burgess is just sitting there staring at the front of the plane. He's by himself in his row. The window seat is empty, but the middle seat has a box with Enslee's stuff. Burgess cleared his bunk before we left and told us he'd take the stuff back to his wife.

The plane halts, and out the left side is a crowd of people cheering. There are signs that say, "Welcome home," and, "My soldier kicked ass." There's even one that says, "I'm naked underneath these clothes, Sergeant Barry!" The scene is like a 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade in downtown Hopkinsville. American flags fly and young children eagerly sit on shoulders, hoping to catch a glimpse of the action. As the engines shut down, the roar of the crowd becomes noticeable. A group of young soldiers stand at parade rest with some Sergeant Major as the lead.

We receive this welcome as if we accomplished something special. We are recognized for our accolades, but the only reward we earned was surviving. Nobody came out and cheered like this last week when Enslee came home in an American flag-draped casket. Nobody showed up with "Welcome Home" signs when that Blackhawk crew returned and were rolled down the cargo ramp like equipment on a conveyor belt last month. They come to see us, the brave souls, who returned alive. Some of the soldiers on the plane don't appear to mind either. They forget just two weeks ago, the soldiers replacing us from Bragg glared into our eyes like they were staring at ghosts.

A couple minutes later, the cabin is called to attention as the General enters the plane. He gets the intercom from the stewardess and starts in with some speech about how honorable our mission is and some other "tip of the spear" bullshit. Then he tells us to sit tight until the troop commander releases us and then he exits the plane. After about five minutes, some captain, who is apparently our troop commander, gets on the intercom and tells us that we can now, "get off." One of the guys in the back says, "You're damn right we can!" Laughter erupts through the cabin.

The crowd is screaming and cheering as we deplane. The soldiers sitting at parade rest are commanded to attention as the first group piles off the steps. The soldiers and

most of the crowd are sweaty. Kentucky summers are humid, but after spending seven months in Iraq, it feels mild to us. Rows of officers and Senior NCOs line the path to the crowd, shaking everyone's hand like we graduated school. None of them seem genuine, they spout the same "Welcome home soldier," as each one of them reaches for our hands like politicians up for election.

We float through the crowds, getting picked off by friends and family members one at a time. One group tells a young private, "You look so thin!" Another asks, "Was it hot over there?" Starting a conversation with a soldier returning from war is like starting a conversation with a person coming out of a coma. They're alive, but they have no idea what has been happening. But people coming out of comas want to know what they've missed, I just want to forget what I've seen.

Then I see them. My family. Standing off to the side, awaiting my arrival. Karen's yellow summer dress playfully sways around in the breeze, and her dark brown hair bounces as she leans down and points me out to Evan and Jessie. Evan's dark black hair is messily slicked over, and he's wearing a button up short-sleeve shirt like a child attending first communion. Jessie's dress is pink and her hair is pulled back in a pony-tail, but the humidity has made it frizzy. The stray shorter strands hang in front of her face like a young spider's silk thread.

Karen smiles, but the children look at me differently. They stare at me like they don't recognize me. I remember the look, it's the same one I got when I left Iraq. The soldiers from Bragg had the same look, that stare like we were already dead.

I walk up and pull them in, but I don't know how to feel. I'm emotionless, a statue receiving praise. I'm alive, but I feel dead inside. Karen's scent doesn't even relieve my sense of purgatory.

I think about those soldiers from Bragg, how they looked through me like an apparition. I remember back to when we arrived in Iraq, and the soldiers we replaced looked hollow and dull, and we stared at them as though they were already dead. Today we are celebrated for being alive, even though many of us don't feel that way. And we will forget about those soldiers from Bragg until we see them in a couple months, when we stare into their soulless eyes and pray we don't return home to silence.

# Evening Dance

I hate the sun here,  
it scorches like shrapnel  
that streams from the burning  
sand. It blinds  
like a bulb turned on in darkness,  
marching us to unexpected fire.  
It smiles and shimmers  
while we hide from it, relentless.

I used to like the sun,  
I'd watch as it danced  
to sleep every night, its blinding  
white glow would fade  
to reds and purples, and it swayed  
slowly as it touched the earth.  
The tantric dance, mystical and dangerous  
grasped our gaze like a siren, beckoning.

I used to like the sun,  
swaying and soothing  
like a hula, captivating.  
Its dance cooled the fire  
in our chests, forgetting the flames  
existed.

But I hate it now,  
Because I know  
as the sun pirouettes softly  
to sleep, the darkness  
hides our enemy,  
and they smile and shimmer  
as we hide from them, relentless.

# Lost

The taxi door rattled as I closed it. It reminded me of that Humvee we used until First Squad ran over an IED with it. The classic yellow Lincoln shook like a rocking horse as the driver popped the trunk. He quickly stepped out and ran to get my bag. I told him I could get it but he said, "No, allow me, and thank you for your service!" My 82nd Airborne T-shirt and olive drab duffel bag must have been the giveaway.

He handed me the bag and stared with a big grin on his face. I handed him the cash and tip, and he jumped in the taxi and took off, dark smoke spitting out of the tailpipe.

In Marion, people looked at soldiers liked endangered species. They would stare in amazement as you walk by, waving and passing the occasional, "Thank you for your service." When I came back from boot camp, two little boys wanted my autograph. Back at Fort Bragg, however, the local civilians looked at us like worn out pennies. We were an infestation in Fayetteville. Out in the sticks, nobody hears the stories about the Army guy putting three cops in the hospital.

As I grabbed my bag off the sidewalk, I heard the screen door slam open. I turned around to see my mother, holding herself up on the doorway. She squinted and pulled her head forward like a turtle coming out of its shell. Then she smiled and yelled, "Travis is here!" I asked them to pick me up at the airport, but my mother said, "My back is just so torn up, I don't think I can make the drive down."

"Right mama, 30 minutes down the road is too much, got it." When I asked her if dad could just pick me up, she said, "I'm not going to let your father be the first and only one to see you when you get here!" When I didn't say anything, she asked if I was still there. I hung the phone up.

That was life in Marion. In order to have drama, it had to be created. I remember when I left for boot camp, half the town came out to see me off. When my mother found out that I was going to Iraq, I got five other phone calls from old family friends in the town to say, "Now don't you go doing something stupid over there, lord knows what it would do to your mama." No, "Hey, be careful over there," or, "Hey you'll be alright." It was "Don't die or you'll upset your mother." Her drama was tiresome. She still cries about her weight, even though multiple doctors told her her eating habits would lead to diabetes. Dad tried to help by making healthier foods, but she would scream at him and say, "How in the hell am I supposed to live strictly off of vegetables? Who eats like this?"

I swung the bag over my other arm and hugged my mother. For a minute, it was nice to be home. I missed the way the humid air blended with the breeze, tossing around the soft smell of the rose garden. I missed the sound of the wind skating through the maple trees surrounding the house. They reminded me of football practice in the fall. Just as

the sun was making its way down, the breeze would begin, ventilating our pads. We never had that type of reprieve in Iraq. The body armor suffocated us. Even when the breeze came in, nothing got through. Our vests let nothing in, even air.

My dad, trying to push his way around my mother, made his way to the yard. I tried letting go of my mother, but she stayed locked on like a child squeezing a puppy. I squirmed to get out, but gave up when I looked at my dad over her shoulder. He was lightly chuckling and shaking his head. I never understood how he put up with her. When I left for boot camp, my mother told me, “Don’t worry if it doesn’t work out, you weren’t that big into sports as a kid.” My father, noticing the look on my face came over, hugged me and said, “We love you, and stay safe.” When Atwood, Kaiser, and McCann died, I called back home. My mother was out on the patio, so my dad answered the phone. The instant I heard his “hello,” and not mother’s, tears began streaming down my face.

“Dad.”

“What’s wrong?”

“It... It was a bad day.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Um... No, I don’t know.”

“Are you okay?”

“I don’t know.” There was a brief pause.

“Okay bud. You know we’re always here for you, right?”

“I know.”

“Hey, I don’t know what you’re dealing with, but I bet it’s pretty bad.” I pulled the phone away from my mouth. “But just know I love you, okay?”

“Thank you, dad.”

“What are you going to do now?”

“I’m uh... Going to get some chow.”

“Okay. We’ll send you a box with some stuff next week. I’ll make sure I send some dirty magazines for you.”

“Dad!” I laughed in between the light sobs.

“I love you, son.”

“Love you too, dad.”

“I suspect you don’t want to talk to your mother, do you?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Okay, I’ll just tell her it was a telemarketer that would let me off the phone.”

“Thank you.”

My mother, finally dropping her hug, pulls me back and looks into my eyes. I felt like she was just doing it for show. She heavy sighs and says, “You look skinny.”

“The desert does that to you.”

“Do they not feed you?”

“They do; lots of sweating though mama.”

Mama was a forced habit. Around here, that’s what everyone called their mothers. The west coast guys in the company would give me shit for it. They called me, “Bubba,” because I called my mother that, and because they claimed I had an accent. I never heard it, but they swore I sounded like a “country boy.” I hated those guys. Nearly every guy in the company was from Cali, Oregon, or Washington, and they all had the same attitude. They pretended like they were cool, and never seemed to take anything seriously. The only other guy not from the west coast was Derek, and he never made it out of Iraq.

When my mother finally let me go, I grabbed my dad and gave him a hug. He’d gotten a bit heavier, but still had the body of a construction worker. Calloused hands, hunched back, and a tight squeeze.

My dad released me, and we stood there in the yard in awkward silence. I hadn’t seen them in almost two years. The last time I saw them, I had just returned from boot camp. They gave us time in between to return home for a couple days, and during that time, I dished out all my money I had made in boot camp to my mother, who was apparently struggling to go to work. Dad was still working, but couldn’t make the hours up for her. I got to Bragg broke; thank god the chow hall was free. I kept sending money home. I remember right around Christmas, my mother asked me for money. When I told her I didn’t have it, she got mad. She asked me, “Well how the hell am I supposed to buy Christmas presents for everyone?”

“Don’t get me anything for Christmas then,” I said. I received nothing that year.

Dad broke the silence, “How was the trip?”

“Quick,” I said with a heavy sigh. “The flight from Kuwait to Baltimore was over 10 hours.”

“How the hell can anyone do that amount of flying in one shot,” my mother said.

“We landed to refuel, so there was a break in between,” I said.

“That’s still too much, they shouldn’t make you fly that much,” she said.

*How the hell would I get home then, mother? Maybe I should have just died over there and then you could have your pity party.*

We walked into the house. It looked identical to the way it was when I was a kid. Nothing changed. My grandmother’s clock still hung on the living room wall, and the photos from our vacation to Salt Fork Lake sat next to them. They were old, and hadn’t been touched in years. Dust piled up on everything. Dad couldn’t keep up with it. My mother barely ever cleaned when she could get around normally, and now that dad was working overtime, the housework was lacking. The dishes in the kitchen had started to pile up, and I could see laundry stacked beside the washing machine. Maybe it was always like that and I never noticed it. My mother took position on the recliner, falling into it like a person falling backwards into a pool. The creaking of the chair reminded me of the taxi — and of that Humvee.

“Oh, I forgot. Buddy said to call him when you got in,” Dad called from the kitchen as he moved some of the laundry off the floor to the washer.

“He wanted to meet you at the airport, but I told him it wouldn’t be appropriate if he saw you first,” my mother said.

Rolling my eyes, I walked over and dialed Buddy’s number. His parent’s number was the same number it had always been, and the phone calls went the same way they always did. The phone would ring once, and Buddy would answer. After about three or four seconds, Mrs. Cann would pick up and say, “Hello?”

“Mom, I got it already,” he would say through the phone.

“Oh, okay. Well who is it?”

“It’s just Travis, mom.”

“Oh, well hey Travis. Okay I’ll let you go...”

“Mom! Get off the phone!”

“Okay, well bye!”

This time was no different.

Buddy asked what I was doing later. We decided to head downtown to Chuck’s Bar and Grill for drinks. Chuck’s was the local watering hole. It would be the typical crew, a bunch of guys I went to school with and a couple of their wives. Most of the women in this town either got out as soon as they graduated or married their high school sweethearts. A few of them stayed and got jobs, hoping some stranger would ride into town and sweep them off their feet.

When Buddy showed up, the sun was starting to set. The amber sky blended with the reds and oranges of the maples, camouflaging in and out. I could hear Buddy’s truck coming down the road. His truck had an exhaust leak for years now, but in Marion, nobody really cared. He got pulled over in Columbus for it once, which is probably why he hadn’t been back to the city in years.

He pulled up and laid on the horn. My mother yelled something about the noise, but didn’t get up. Buddy’s truck was rusting, and there was a big dent on the right side of the bed. It had green scratches down the side. It looked like he hit a tree, probably while he was drinking. Buddy was a lush when we were in high school, but many people, including the cops, turned a blind eye to the best quarterback in Marion county. The windows were down and he was blasting some Brad Paisley.

“Jesus! You ever take that uniform off,” he yelled over the country music.

I jumped in and he stuck his hand out for me to shake it. I stared for a second, and then he laughed and grabbed me for a hug. He asked how I was, and then told me the Toyota factory he worked at paid well, but he hated it at the same time. He said, “I’m tired of making those damn Jap cars, I can’t wait until I can just open up my own shop. So, how many rag-heads you kill?”

“What?” I was shocked he would even ask me that question.

“How many of them terrorists you take out? Never saw you shoot when you lived here... How was it shootin’ them terrorists?”

“It uh, it was war man,” I said. He acted like I went out to the range and shot targets for six months.

“I bet so. There was almost a war here in this town man. The Richards farm was having a dispute about some land the new farmer...think his name is Nick? Anyway, he was claiming this bit of land was his and had some legal permits or some shit. The new guy went out and started plowin’ a field, and old man Richards went out there and started pumpin’ buck shot into his engine. Can you believe that shit?”

“Wow,” I said sarcastically enough Buddy wouldn’t notice. *Some old man shoots his shotgun in the middle of the field. Oh yeah, sounds like war alright.*

It was good to be home, but this town was severely lacking its appeal. The stores, the houses, the attitude, and the people were the same. Buddy had been talking about his auto parts shop since we were in high school, but he had made no moves to make that happen. After high school, he didn’t work except for small construction jobs. My parents’ house was identical to my childhood, and the city hadn’t changed either. It was like when I left, the town froze until I returned. The little stores in the old classical buildings were the same. Even the drama was the same. Land disputes, crazed drivers, etc... Was this town really that naïve that they equate a grumpy old man to war?

When I left for boot camp, I thought I wanted out of the small town life. I remember walking away from everyone and getting on the bus to the airport. I had to bite my lip to hide my excitement. I watched the town disappear as we drove towards Columbus, and nearly laughed out loud. The airport was full of people. Families were trying to carry their baggage and their kids at the same time. Men in suits would blow by, pulling little black suitcases on wheels and holding a cellphone to the ear with the other hand. I stood staring at the massive screen of flights, and felt calm amidst the chaos of the airport.

After going through the 10 weeks of training, however, I immediately wanted to return home. I missed the same old things I grew up with, and I missed being around everyone I knew. I didn’t fit in with most of the guys in the company, and I just wanted that down home feeling. This recent trip, however, was starting to make me change my mind. I hated the Army and the people in it, but I was starting to think returning home was an even worse idea. My mother was becoming more dramatic, and this town was feeling more like a vacuum than a way out.

After joining, I heard some of the guys talking about college. The GI Bill was a great option, and it sounded fun. I had thought about it before I graduated high school, but my counselor said small town guys get into college one way — athletic scholarships. College sounded like a great idea. It wasn’t the guys from the company, and it definitely wasn’t this small town shit.

We pulled up to the bar, which, once again, hadn’t changed. There were upgrades to the taps and the lighting, but the wood flooring and wooden bar hadn’t changed. The

entire place smelled like old beer and bourbon. As we walked in the door, everyone immediately recognized Buddy. Cheers and waves came from the bar, and as I walked in, the cheers got louder. Some of the people got up to greet me, many of them the older men in the town. It was nice to get a good homecoming, and for a minute, I felt comforted. It felt like when we landed back at Bragg after Iraq, except this time, someone was actually there to greet me.

We made our way down the bar, and finally ran into the old high school crowd. They had two chairs waiting for us, and two shots of tequila.

They asked how I was, and how North Carolina was. I told them it sucked, but it was nice because there were non-stop flights to Columbus, so traveling back here was easy. After some small talk, my trip to Iraq came up.

“How was the Middle East?” Joe asked. Joe left Marion to attend community college when he graduated high school, but came back to run his dad’s hardware store when he had a stroke. He had gained about 10 pounds since high school, which was probably from getting married to Suzy, who owned a section of the local bakery. She won 4th place at the Ohio State Fair for her creamy double fudge and bacon cupcakes. It was the talk of the town when I got back from boot camp.

“It was shitty, man,” I said. “I gotta be honest, it really sucked.”

“Was it the weather?” One of them asked.

“No, it was a war,” I responded slightly sarcastic.

“You know,” Derek’s wife, Mary, opened up, “You see these guys on the news that have died, but I think that’s just a small price to pay to kill all those terrorists over there.” Everyone nodded their head, except for me. “I mean, it’s better to fight them over there than to fight ‘em here.” Mary had a problem keeping her opinions to herself. She was the vice president of our high school student counsel, and rumor had it, she never stopped talking in the meetings. Kristen, a girl I was dating my sophomore year, showed me the transcript from the counsel’s meeting. Mary’s name was on every topic. I found it fitting she was the head of the PTA.

Tara must have noticed the look on my face, because she quickly responded with, “So where are you living now?”

“I’m in North Carolina,” I said and gave a light smirk to Tara. She was always good at mitigating conflict, we always said she should have been a great psychologist.

We continued drinking, and the conversation turned to how everyone else was doing. Brad came back to town to work under the local doctor until he could afford to get his PhD. Michael got a DUI heading up to Cleveland for a jobs fair, so for now, he was stuck here at the auto hobby shop.

But the conversation quickly came back to the war. The group had split up a little, with Buddy, Tara and I talking, and the rest of the group yelling over something. Suddenly, Derek pushed his way in to our group.

“Hey Trav!” He was getting a little too close for comfort, and his breath reeked of Jack Daniels and coke. “What do you think man. You think if some rag-head mother fuckers came over here, we could take them?” I stared at him, unsure if he was really looking for an answer. When I didn’t answer, he continued.

“I’ll tell you this man, if any of those little Taliban bastards came over here and tried some shit, I would end those guys. I mean, it wouldn’t even be fair!”

I felt my heart starting to beat like it would before we drove out on our convoys.

Then Buddy chimed in.

“Hell yea! I mean, if they came here, we could take them! Hell this bar is probably armed better than any of these rag-head terrorist assholes.”

I broke my silence. “Right, because pitchforks and hunting rifles will stop them.”

Everyone looked at me, I could tell that one came out completely sarcastic.

“Hey man,” Derek came in to defend Buddy. “What makes you think we can’t hold our own? These guys are stupid rag heads that would lose a fight on our turf.”

My stomach started to twist like the first time I heard a round whizz by my head, and my throat started locking up. I remember gripping my M-4 so tight, I couldn’t shoot straight. They tell you when you shoot to be loose or you, “figure eight” on the target. I was pulling the trigger so hard I almost shot into a second floor window, and these guys were on the ground. Suddenly I realized I was doing that to my beer glass.

My head dropped and I began laughing under my breath. “You really have no clue.”

“Hey man, we’re just saying these dumbasses don’t stand a chance against us!” Derek said standing up in his chair. Everyone around him cheered and drank their beers.

I raised my head. I felt the dizziness of the alcohol. I remember feeling that way when I saw Kaiser laying there after the RPG hit. I wanted to throw up. I just stared at his body, completely burnt on the right side and a pool of blood formed around him like a punctured syrup bottle. When the adrenaline kicked in, I got furious. I turned the M-4 to auto and unloaded downrange. I don’t know if I hit anything, but I ran out of ammo and had to pull Kaiser’s out of his body armor. I stood up from my chair.

“Right, the small town of Marion could win the war on terror!” I said sarcastically. “I mean, the United States military has lost thousands of people, but Chuck’s Bar and Grill has the answers!” I sat down facing the bar and grabbed my beer. I was hoping someone would confront me so I could smoke him.

“Hey, what the fuck man?” Derek ask. “Hey, just because you’ve been to Iraq doesn’t mean you’re some kind of fucking war expert!” He almost lost his balance when he finished.

I stood up, but a couple of the guys sat Derek down and partially got in between him and I. I stuck my head around them, and got in his face. He looked scared.

“And you think you are?” I lowered my voice. “You think your pickup trucks and pistols will save you? We had Humvees and helmets and we couldn’t save ourselves. I’ve killed people, and it doesn’t make you any safer. We lost three fucking guys when I

was there, one of them died right in my fucking arms.” My vision was blurring, but I wasn’t going to wipe away the tears. I thought back to the briefings they give us after we returned from Iraq. They told us, “Some people won’t understand what happened over there. Your best bet is to just not engage in lengthy, argumentative discussion about it.” I was failing miserably.

I pulled away from Derek. “You guys know nothing about war. You sit here and think you contribute to the war effort by buying me a drink and saying, ‘Thank you for your service’? Your small town problems mean nothing.” I laid a 20-dollar bill on the bar and stormed out.

The night had crept in while we sat in the bar. To the north, the stars shone bright and were visible. To the south, the light pollution of Columbus made the sky a hazy blur. It reminded me of Iraq when we would go on missions out in the small villages. After the flares died off, the sky filled with stars, except for Bagdad. The lights of the airfield and the spotlights drowned out the beauty of the night. I never noticed how similar the sky was here to Iraq until now.

Buddy came running outside. “Trav,” he yelled, and ran up to me. “Hey man, what’s the deal? They were just making small talk.”

“That’s not fucking small talk, Buddy,” I said, raising my voice. “They are making light of some serious shit.”

“Well hey man, they’re just saying what they think.” *Was he fucking serious?* “And I gotta be honest, it was kind of rude what you did after how they greeted you and got your drinks.” He stared at me, slightly swaying back and forth.

It felt like being back at Bragg with the company all over again. I didn’t fit in with anyone there, and now I didn’t fit in with anyone here. I said nothing and just started walking towards the road.

“Trav, what the hell,” Buddy said still standing there.

“I’ll walk home,” I said without turning around.

“Man, you’ve fuckin changed,” he said.

“No, you *haven’t* changed,” I said under my breath.

I started walking down 38<sup>th</sup> Street, which brought me back towards the house. The road ran north and south, but I needed to go east. I didn’t want to go home, but I didn’t want to go back to the bar — or to Bragg. I had no idea what to do.

The road was dead. I hadn’t seen a car in about 20 minutes until headlights appeared ahead of me. As they got closer, they exposed the thick layer of gnats and flies hovering around. It looked like the light by the smoking pit at Fallujah. Bugs I had never seen before hovered around that light.

I moved a little farther over to the side, but the shoulder went straight into a ditch. As the lights got closer, I noticed them slowing down. I stopped to let them by, but when I saw the faded Chevy logo on the grill of the truck, I knew it was my dad. He pulled up next to me, the window was already rolled down.

“I heard you might need a ride,” he said and threw the truck in park.

“Jesus. Who the hell called you?”

“Chuck. He saw you storm out and when you didn’t come back, he thought to call us.”

“Why the fuck can’t anyone keep to their damn selves in this fucking place!” I was like a kid not getting his way. I lowered my head and put my hands on my hips. “What did mama say?”

“I just told her Chuck said you and Buddy got into a fight about something stupid, and you took off walking. Get in.”

I jumped into the truck and slammed the door. The hollow door slammed closed, shaking the whole truck. It still had the leather smell I remember from when my dad got it brand new, but the leather was getting pretty tore up. There were stains all over the carpet, and the radio wasn’t working. The dashboard was faded from the sun, and the bench seat was losing its cushion. The springs dug into my back and legs as I grabbed the seatbelt and swung it around.

Dad put the truck into drive and drove until he found some driveway to turn around in. He threw it into reverse, lined it up on the road, and we headed home. We didn’t talk for a couple minutes, then Dad said, “So Chuck said some of the kids were a little scared of you. What happened?”

I laughed. “They said they were afraid of me?”

“I don’t know, that’s just what Chuck said.”

“Wow.” The truck went silent for a couple minutes. The moonlight illuminated the sweetcorn fields. The dead stalks popped up just above the surface like mines symmetrically placed for miles. The cool air was making the ride cold. I rolled up the window. As soon as the howling from the wind ceased, my dad asked, “Why did you come home?”

“What?” I was a little shocked by his statement.

“I mean, you don’t look happy here, and you obviously don’t fit in with these homebodies here in this town, so why’d you come back?”

“Well, I had to come back and see everyone.”

“Who?”

“Um, well, you for starters.”

He laughed. The last time I heard him laugh was when my mother was arguing that she was going to change by pulling a “360.” My mother asked what he was laughing about, and he responded with, “I don’t know where to start.”

“I appreciate that son, but you don’t need to come home for me.”

“Well, mama would get mad if I..”

“Your mama appreciates your visits,” Dad interrupted. “But she won’t get mad if you don’t show up. She’s more focused on ‘the talk of the town’.”

“Wow, thanks dad,” I chuckled.

“You know I didn’t mean it like that. What I’m saying is, you gotta do what’s best for you.” The dash lights lit his face as we drove along. There were no lights on the road, and his reflection was extremely bright on his window.

“Perhaps I don’t know what’s best for me.”

“Well, you got outta this town. That was best for you.”

“How was joining the Army to watch buddies die best for me?”

“Well, that wasn’t. But getting out of here was one of the best things for you.”

“Coming from a guy who never left.” I crossed my arms and looked out the window. We halted at the 4-way stop, even though we couldn’t see anyone for miles. The flashing red light blinked like the traffic lights in downtown after midnight. We made the turn and headed down Charlton Street.

“I had a chance to leave, Trav.” I turned and looked at my dad. His face was stern and was sitting straight up in his chair and looked like a teenager testing to get his driver’s license.

“How?”

“I got a chance to go to college, the University of Michigan. I had great grades, I was a good football player, and they wanted me to come up and try out for the team.” I had never heard this story. I would have thought that in a small town, everyone would have talked about someone getting the chance to go to college to play sports.

“So, why didn’t you?”

“I was scared.”

“Of what?”

“Of something different.”

“But it was one hell of an opportunity, dad!”

“It was, but I was scared it wasn’t going to be the same old shit I was used to.” I had never heard my dad curse. His demeanor was always so chipper, he never had a use for it. “When I didn’t take the chance, I knew I was stuck here. You got out Trav. I know it’s been really hard for you, and I can’t imagine what you’ve gone through, but you know what’s out there. You know this small town isn’t it.”

We pulled into the driveway, and my dad killed the engine. We sat there for a second, and then my dad said, “Trav, you need anything to get where you are going, you let me know, okay?”

I sat there for a second, and then said, “Can I borrow your truck tomorrow?”

“Absolutely.”

“Thank you, dad.”

“Your welcome, son.”

We snuck into the house. All the lights were off. I used my old maneuvers when I was kid and I was sneaking back into the house. I walked on the right side of the stairs on the first six steps, and then on the left side the rest of the way up. My dad followed suit, and we went to bed. I closed my door and looked out the window. I could see the

light coming from the city pouring into the sky, and thought about Kaiser, Atwood and McCann. I thought about how we would stop and light cigarettes after missions, and how McCann would say, “Man, if that fucking city wasn’t there, you could see the constellation of Aquarius. It stands for good luck.” McCann wanted to be an astronomer, and was taking classes so he could, “Get the hell outta this hot mess.”

I woke up the next morning and asked dad to borrow the car. I threw on civilian clothes and decided to pass on shaving. Walking out the door, my mother yelled, “You know your cousin Matt and cousin Mark are coming over today! You better not be late!”

“I’ll be back when I’m done,” I yelled back. She began yelling something else, but I knew she couldn’t get up fast enough to follow me out here.

As I drove away from Marion and closed in on Columbus, the city engulfed the horizon, and the traffic picked up significantly. My heart started racing, it was the first time in close to three years I had actually driven in a major city.

The 315 turn off lowered the level of traffic, and the exit for Ohio State University wasn’t much farther. I parked near the campus, and started to walk. There were students sitting under trees with laptops typing. Some students were in circles on the grass, engaged in discussion and laughing constantly. I remember the first time I accidentally walked on the grass at Bragg, some Sergeant came over and smoked me like I lit the grass on fire. Most of the people that walked by would say nothing, but a few would smile. The buildings were huge classical brick layouts, but the people around the buildings were young. There were renovations to some of the buildings, and one of them was nothing but glass on the outside.

The entire area felt new, but somehow, felt familiar. It was like I had been stumbling around in the forest, and then finally found my way out. A sense of calm came over me; something I hadn’t felt since the day I left for boot camp.

# Hypocrite

Argument boils  
over with my rejection. My comments spew  
off the screen, hoping to be louder  
than the reply. My words become a geyser  
that sprays with no regard  
for where it falls.

But on the days when the boots  
are laced, the stripes are sewn  
and the hat is placed,  
I must ensure to never stoke the fire.  
For I am the arsonist  
who sets the blaze  
in hopes that it is smothered

# The Story in Time of War

The story of war should be the breaking  
news that lights your phone in the middle  
Of dinner. It should stop  
you as you walk down the street and halt  
your thoughts of rushing  
to work on time.

The story should yank  
you out of your own reality and force  
you into a world where accounts of the horrific  
become apparent. The story should drag  
you through the mud and darkness  
weighing you down as you drudge  
through the black letters.  
It should separate the daily insignificance  
of life and thrust  
you into a reality millions witness,  
but few acknowledge exist.

The words should constrict  
like body armor, chill like gun metal, and explode  
like mortars. The characters pierce  
like rifle rounds, and emotions crush  
like armored vehicles.

The story of war should break  
your slumber, drench  
you in sweat, and drive you to rage,  
because the shadow  
of the turning page is cast  
by those who have survived  
and others that have lost.