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You Can't Come Home Again: Phil Klay's *Redeployment*

I've long guessed that serious students of "war literature" are *not* war lovers, that *love of war is not* why they turn to the literature. My guess has been that such readers, in fact, hold to the hope that the best of war literature might work to curb the all too inherent human drift toward belligerence. If Art, though, were as powerful as I trust most of us might wish it could be, then the *Iliad* should have put an end to inter-human hostility. Alas. Art and Life are different—if they weren't we wouldn't need Art. And if Art generally strains towards making sense, most of us have lived long enough to know that Life is under no such obligation. W.H. Auden, who came into his fullness as a poet as fascism was creeping across Europe, wrote about that scourge and then concluded that "poetry makes nothing happen," that nothing he ever wrote saved one Jew from the gas chambers. Yet, as has been written before, Art markets authority. Why else would officials at the United Nations have decided to cover the tapestry of Picasso's *Guernica*, as council members met to discuss the start of Gulf War II?

It was with such hope that I approached Phil Klay's new story collection *Redeployment*. I'd come across the collection's title story in the earlier collection *Fire and Forget*, a searing anthology written primarily by veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Klay's story was the strongest for me among the very strong pieces in that important volume. It was Klay's story's immediately established voice that caught me. *Listen*:

We shot dogs. Not by accident. We did it on purpose, and we called it Operation Scooby. I'm a dog person, so I thought about that a lot.

First time was instinct. I hear O'Leary go, "Jesus," And there's a skinny brown dog lapping up blood the same way he'd lap up water from a bowl. It wasn't American blood, but still, there's that dog lapping it up. And that's the last straw, I guess, and then it's open season on dogs.

At the time you don't think about it. You're thinking about who's in that house, what's he armed with, how's he gonna kill you, your buddies. You're going block to block, fighting with rifles good to 550 meters, and you're killing people at five in a concrete box.

We must accept, I believe, that any good writer can take on multiple personas and write about virtually any circumstance—to include war. There is also no doubt, I believe, that a combat veteran brings a special visceral authority to his work, especially if he can write. And Phil Klay, who served in Iraq as a Marine, can write. The positive comparisons between *Redeployment* and *The Things They Carried*, are, not only fair, but accurate. Dexter Filkins in his *New York Times Book Review* reminds us of O'Brien's work and then writes:

In "Redeployment," Phil Klay, a former Marine who served in Iraq, grapples with a different war but aims for a similar effect: showing us the myriad human manifestations that result from the collision of young, heavily armed Americans with a fractured and deeply foreign country that very few of them even remotely understand. Klay succeeds brilliantly, capturing on an intimate scale the ways in which the war in Iraq evoked a unique array of emotion, predicament and heartbreak. In Klay's hands, Iraq comes across not merely as a theater of war but as a laboratory for the human condition in extremis. "Redeployment" is hilarious, biting, whipsawing and sad. It's the best thing written so far on what the war did to people's souls.

The narrator of Klay's title story, burnished by the fire of war, undergoes a difficult ride home and then homecoming.

The problem is your thoughts don't come out in any kind of straight order. You don't think, Oh I did A, then B, then C, then D. You try to think about home, then you're in the torture house. You see the body parts in the locker and the retarded guy in the cage. He squawked like a

chicken. His head was shrunk down to a coconut. It takes you a while to remember Doc saying they'd shot mercury into his skull, and then it still doesn't make any sense.

And then:

Your wife takes you shopping in Wilmington. Last time you walked down a city street, your Marine on point went down the side of the road, checking ahead and scanning the roofs across from him. The Marine behind him checks the windows on the top levels of the buildings, the Marine behind him gets the windows a little lower, and so on until your guys have the street level covered, and the Marine in back has the rear. . . .

In Wilmington, you don't have a squad, you don't have a battle buddy, you don't even have a weapon. You startle ten times checking for it and it's not there. . . .

Instead you're stuck in an American Eagle Outfitters. Your wife gives you some clothes to try on and you walk into the tiny dressing room. You close the door, and you don't want to open it again.

Outside, there're people walking around by the windows like it's no big deal. People who have no idea where Fallujah is, where three members of your platoon died.

It comes as no surprise, and does not feel forced when the narrator, grieving over his dog's age and ailing condition, feels compelled to relieve its pain and shoots it, employing, of course, all the weapon discipline learned in war.

In *Redeployment*, Klay has compiled a collection of discrete stories—stories, that feature characters of all rank and assignment, and varying issues and dilemmas. These are not the stories of a single squad or battle. Klay investigates the psyches of junior and senior enlisted troops, officers, Iraqis, a chaplain, a civilian Foreign Service officer, as well as families and friends and dogs at home. Klay is interested in both the actuality and consequences of battle. His characters remind me that combat is for all soldiers, as it was for young Paul Fussell, an “introduction to the shakiness of civilization” and the subsequent, overriding knowledge that you were not and would never be in again “a world that was reasonable or just” (See Fussell, “My War”).

“I’m tired of telling war stories,” I say, not so much to Jenks as to the empty bar behind him. We’re at a table in the corner, with a view of the entrance.

So begins Klay’s “War Stories.”

Jenks shrugs and makes a face. Hard to tell what it means. There’s so much scar tissue and wrinkled skin, I never know if he’s happy or sad or pissed or what. He’s got no hair and no ears either, so even though it’s been three years after he got hit, I still feel like his head is something I shouldn’t stare at. But you look a man in the eye when you talk to him, so for Jenks, I force my eyes in line with his.

“I don’t tell war stories,” he says, and takes a sip of his glass of water.

“Well, you’re gonna have to when Jessie and Sarah get here.”

He gives a nervous laugh and points to his face. “What’s to say?”

Impossible not to recall Hemingway’s “Soldier’s Home”:

At first Krebs, who had been at Belleau Wood, Soissons, the Champagne, St. Mihiel and in the Argonne did not want to talk about the war at all. Later he felt the need to talk but no one wanted to hear about it. His town had heard too many atrocity stories to be thrilled by actualities. Krebs found that to be listened to at all he had to lie and after he had done this twice he, too, had a reaction against the war and against talking about it. A distaste for everything that had happened to him in the war set in because of the lies he had told. All of the times that had been able to make him feel cool and clear inside himself when he thought of them; the times so long back when he had done the one thing, the only thing for a man to do, easily and naturally, when he might have done something else, now lost their cool, valuable quality and then were lost themselves.

Sarah, one of the female characters in Klay’s story, who has come to interview Jenks for a writing project, asks the narrator of “War Stories” what his friend Jenks was like when he first met him, before the war wound, that is.

He was like me, I think. But that's not what I tell her. "He was a bit of an asshole," I say, and I smile at Jenks, who stares back with one of those looks I can't interpret. "To be perfectly honest, he was a worthless piece of shit. No subject for a play, that's for sure." I smile. "Good thing he caught on fire, right?"

In "Prayer in the Furnace," one of the longer stories, we meet a chaplain. That far into the book, I don't think I expected easy answers or healing platitudes, and I did not get them. What you find mostly is pain and battered consciences. And the pain is hardly confined to the combat zone.

. . . In the last month of the deployment, an IED had blown Ditoro's arm off. Though he'd intended to be a career Marine, after a year in the Wounded Warrior Regiment he'd gotten out of the Corps and gone on to live in New Jersey for a few years. And then he'd shot himself, left-handed, in the head.

Lance Corporal Rodriguez had sought out the chaplain in the war zone following the death of a friend. The meeting did not go well. And neither does the memorial service. And neither do the on-going battles in the city. People die, on both sides, necessarily and unnecessarily, innocents and combatants alike. "I know I won't make it out of combat alive," a young troop tells the chaplain. "Every day, I have no choice. They send me to get myself killed. It's fucking pointless." The chaplain tries to get the soldier to talk about "positive" things. The soldier, however, responds by announcing that the only thing he wants to do is kill Iraqis.

. . ."That's it. Everything else is just, numb it until you can do something. Killing hajjis is the only thing that feels like doing something. Not wasting time."

"Insurgents, you mean," I said.

"They're all insurgents," he said. He could see I didn't like that and got very agitated. "You," he said, hateful, "you want to see something?"

The troop pulls out a digital camera and flips through photos until he finds one he wants to show "Chaps."

I braced myself for something terrible, but the frame only showed a small Iraqi child bending over a box. “That kid’s planting an IED,” he said. “Caught in the fucking act. We blew it in place right after the kid left, because even Staff Sergeant Hauptert didn’t want to round up a kid.”

“That boy can’t be older than five or six,” I said. “He couldn’t know what he was doing.”

“And that makes a difference to me?” he said. “I never know what I am doing. Why we’re going out. What the point of it is. This photo, this was early on when I took this. Now, I’d have shot that fucking kid. I’m mad I didn’t. If I caught that kid today, I’d fucking hang him from the telephone wires outside his parents’ house and have target practice till there’s nothing left.”

I didn’t know what to say.

Do I? Do you?

When *Kirkus* Review labeled *Redeployment* “A no-nonsense and informed reckoning with combat,” I believe they hit the mark. As does Ben Fountain (*Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*) when he writes, “If you want to know the real cost of war for those who do the fighting, read *Redeployment*. These stories say it all, with an eloquence and rare humanity that will simultaneously break your heart and give you reasons to hope.”

Redeployment, as a collection, certainly does not neglect the actuality of combat, but an added and vital contribution of the book is its clear-eyed view of the returning soldier. In an NPR interview, Klay was asked about his own homecoming. He answered:

I don’t want to act as though my deployment was particularly rough, because it wasn’t. I had a very mild deployment; I was a staff officer. But just a few days before [I returned to the U.S.] I’d seen people coming into the medical facility . . . horribly injured. And then a few days later I’m walking down Madison Avenue in the summer and there’s just zero sense that we’re at war. It’s very strange and difficult to deal with the disconnect. And, of course, if veterans just talk to each other about wars, then that disconnect’s only going to continue.

In another interview, Klay was asked about the unique pressure or responsibility when you decide to write about war.

What we think about war says a lot about what we think about America, about American politics, about citizenship, about violence, and about masculinity. It says a lot about what we think about people in other countries and our responsibilities to them as human beings. It says a lot about what we think of death, and sacrifice, and patriotism, and cruelty. It says a lot about our limits as humans, our ability to endure and our ability to break. It says a lot about the stories we tell ourselves so we don't have to examine what we think about war too closely. So, sure, I feel a lot of pressure writing about that.

Art, at its deepest level, means to preserve the world. That can only be done when we face our capacities to both build and tear down. My own son, who served as a Force Recon Marine, told me years ago: "They teach us to engage and destroy. And by all accounts we're good at that. What they need to do is to teach us and the people we fight how to read."

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