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## Intraspecies Communication: Memory, Story-Telling, and Football in American Fiction of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars

In 2012, Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* won the National Book Critics Circle Award for new fiction. The novel—Fountain's first—was also among the five finalists for the National Book Award that year, along with another debut novel, Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*, which received the 2013 PEN/Hemingway award for first fiction. Both are American novels about the Iraq War.

Implicitly acknowledging emerging writing about the post-9/11 American wars, scholar Roger Luckhurst, also in 2012, argued that narrative representations of recent U.S. wars are “often displaced or filtered through the iconography of prior wars” because the current “military, political, and ethical quagmire, without foreseeable end, has not made for easy narrative contours or crystallizing representations.” But by then and in subsequent years, crystallizing representations in fact offer compelling commentary about the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Contradicting Luckhurst, scholars such as Stacey Peebles and Suman Gupta have explained how social media—blogs, email, social networking sites—have reduced the temporal and psychic distance between the theatre of war and the home front, allowing virtually any participant or interested observer a voice in the dialogue about war. Now demobilized from the Marines, the narrator of Phil Klay's short story “Unless It's a Sucking Chest Wound” tracks his in-country comrades on

defenselink.mil, and, when he reads that a friend has been killed, watches his funeral on YouTube. “With the internet you can do nothing but watch war all day if you want,” he notes. “Footage of firefights, mortar attacks, IEDs, it’s all there. There’s Marines explaining what the desert heat is like, what the desert cold is like, what it feels like to shoot a man, what it feels like to lose a Marine, what it feels like to kill a civilian, what it feels like to be shot” (257). Memoirs and poetry have offered more mediated, aesthetically sophisticated observations of the in-country and postwar experience. Yet, as the success of Powers’ and Fountain’s novels affirms, the traditional fictional narrative remains the most powerful medium for telling the stories of war. And—again—for contemporary wars, the literary testimony has appeared essentially contemporaneous with the combat experience. Since 2011, a variety of creative narratives—novels and short stories; by veterans and non-participants [Kevin Powers, for instance, is an Iraq War veteran; Ben Fountain is not], women and men; about the battlefield and the home front; about combatants, local citizens, and families left behind in the US—have announced that serious fictional responses to America’s twenty-first century wars contribute meaningfully to the national conversation about the significance and legacy of the country’s long military occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Luckhurst asserts that a “lesson from the American engagement in Vietnam is that wars need a definitive end, however ignominious, before there can be any sustained cultural reflection.” His acknowledgement of the Vietnam War as a touchstone for contemporary conflicts is appropriate, since that mid-to-late twentieth century war shares important characteristics (arguably: protracted length, ambiguous purpose and strategy, tenuous conclusion) with its “successors” in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet Luckhurst’s allegation about the need for a “definitive end” is, while understandable, inaccurate. As he implies, scholars and students of the Vietnam War have long accepted the truism that after 1973 Americans quietly forgot about their country’s prolonged and unsuccessful misadventure in southeast Asia. At a 1985 Asia Society conference on “The Vietnam Experience in American Literature,” writers and scholars discussed publishers’ lack of interest in books about the Vietnam War for nearly a decade after its ignoble end. Indeed, despite several memorable late 1970s narratives (Philip Caputo’s memoir *A Rumor of War* and Larry Heinemann’s novel *Close Quarters*, both 1977, and Tim O’Brien’s *Going After Cacciato*, 1978, for example), most of the memoirs, novels, and films that have become “classics” of the Vietnam War appeared in the 1980s or later. That compelling fictional representations of both the Iraq and Afghanistan wars were published at the time of America’s withdrawal of military personnel from Iraq in

December 2011 and now, as it works to wind down Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, is only one of many notable contrasts—juxtaposed by equally significant similarities—between the new literature from the recent wars and the imaginative texts of earlier wars, particularly Vietnam.

Siobhan Fallon prefaces *You Know When The Men Are Gone* (2011) with a quotation from Homer's *The Odyssey*; the passage, which recounts Penelope's "wonderment" at the ragged condition of her husband as he arrives home after his long postwar journey, is an appropriate invocation for Fallon's interconnected short stories about the wives left behind at Ft. Hood, Texas when their young husbands deploy (and re-deploy) to Iraq. The epigraph also presages the uncommon extent to which many of these new narratives both subtly and overtly acknowledge the long tradition of classical and later literary interpretations of war. Stacey Peebles quotes Samuel Hynes' assertion in his *The Soldiers' Tale*, a study of memoirs by veterans of the World Wars and the Vietnam War, that most war narratives do not acknowledge the literature of earlier wars. Yet, as critics such as Jeffrey Walsh (in *American War Literature 1914 to Vietnam*) and John Limon (in *Writing after War: American War Fiction from Realism to Postmodernism*) demonstrate, American war writing in fact does commonly acknowledge its predecessors. The Gulf and Iraq War memoirs that Peebles examines are, she notes, "deeply engaged with the images and texts of soldiers who preceded them" (47). Many of the novels and short stories that have succeeded the early Iraq War memoirs similarly demonstrate their authors' appreciation for and accommodation of the capacious canon of writing about war—and about emotional trauma. In "Prayer in the Furnace," one of the longer stories in Phil Klay's 2014 collection *Redeployment*, the chaplain-protagonist quotes World War I poet Wilfred Owen in a challenging sermon about suffering and compassion. Throughout the story, he discovers lessons and consolation from his reading of St. Thomas Aquinas, Paul, and St. Augustine. Jonathan Shay, in his studies of American veterans of the Vietnam War—*Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (1994) and *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* (2002)—suggests (and the most recent war stories affirm) that ancient literary narratives of war often present cogent parallels with modern conflicts. Indian-American novelist Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya imbeds *The Watch* (2012), his story of a US Army company at a remote combat outpost in Afghanistan's Kandahar province, within the frame narrative of a modern-day Antigone's valiant insistence on burying her brother, who has been killed by American combatants; though the brother is a Pashtun enemy of the Taliban, the Americans refuse burial because they, ironically, believe

him to be a Taliban leader. As amputee Nizam waits outside the compound to inter her brother's body—the watch—chapters of the novel offer the first-person experiences and perceptions of the Army company's Tajik interpreter, its medic, and its officers—and reveal their growing respect for their Antigone as well as their slow apprehension of the meaninglessness of their war. Lt. Nick Frobenius, who is wounded in the battle that kills Nizam's brother and who dies on the Black Hawk dustoff that is airlifting him to safety, was a classics major in college. Before the battle, he recalls that he met the wife who has just told him that she's leaving him ("I don't know you anymore. There's so much violence in you. Where does it come from?") in a school production of *Antigone*, in which Frobenius played Creon, the ruler of Thebes who entombs Antigone for defying his orders and burying her brother (47). In the final chapter, the intransigent, by-the-books company Captain picks up the "damn book by Sophocles that Frobenius lent me. . . . It's the age of Creon," Frobenius has argued. "He's the government and the corporations and everything else that matters, and he's totally faceless. He's a machine, a system, he has his own logic, and once you're part of that, it doesn't matter if you're a grunt or a general: you're trapped in a conveyor belt of death and destruction. And . . . the saddest thing is that we're part of Creon. We're all compromised and there's nothing we can do about it. It's like losing your virginity. You can't get it back once it's gone." (258).

Joyce Carol Oates sets her 2014 novel evocatively titled *Carthage* in the small upstate New York town to which Corporal Brett Kincaid returns after he is badly wounded in Iraq. *Carthage* is a familiarly Oatesian mystery about the diminutive, socially awkward younger sister of Kincaid's fiancée and the role that the physically and emotionally scarred veteran may—or may not—have played in her disappearance and apparent murder. Oates does not explore the resonances of her novel's setting and title, though Roxana Robinson does in her classically allusive 2013 novel. In *Sparta*, Robinson—who also places her story, geographically, in an ancient Greece-tinged setting—explores the challenging homecoming of Marine officer Conrad Farrell, who has, after two tours in Iraq, lost his own virginal idealism about the war—and about his country. His mother had been incredulous at Conrad's enlistment, a career in the military to her "absurd male sentimentality" (23). But for Conrad, like Frobenius a classics student, "war was the route to nobility. . . . 'The classical writers love war, that's their main subject,'" he explained. "'Being a soldier was the whole deal, the central experience. That's what first got me interested. Sparta. The Peloponnesian War, the *Iliad*. Thucydides, Homer, Tacitus.' . . . Courage and loyalty. . . . Commitment, a code of honor. All

straight from the ancient world, from Sparta. Semper Fidelis” (24, 22, 23). And in *Eleven Days*, her 2013 novel about a multiply-deployed Navy SEAL and the single mother who adores him, Lea Carpenter invokes the stories of Thetis and Achilles, and of Jason and the Argonauts. She expands Robinson’s implied contrast between Athens, the civilized society, and Sparta, the warrior world that Sara’s Jason chooses over his elusive father’s covert espionage activities. Underscoring *Eleven Days*’ theme of the devoted mother whose stoic loyalty inspires her heroic warrior son, Carpenter summons an account of King Leonides of Sparta, who chooses for his doomed battle against a larger Persian force not necessarily the most experienced or most ferocious of his men, but those “who would go based on the strength of the women in their lives” (137). Jason thrives on action, but his redoubtable mother Sara, weaving back to Fallon’s stories, is another “Penelope, unraveling her looms” (30).

The classical precursors invoked in these texts reinforce the protagonists’ sensitivity to the lands of ancient civilizations in which they find themselves fighting, which perhaps explains a literary reliance on ancient Greek wars and locations more pronounced and sustained than in earlier American war narratives. And several of the more introspective American soldiers translate their attraction to the “code of honor” that motivated ancient warriors into respect for their modern-day enemies. Frobenius, for example, confides to his journal that much as the “ancient Greeks lived and died by a code of honor,” the Taliban demonstrate a clear “honor-shame dichotomy” that he understands (227). And yet, the bloody realities of combat inevitably complicate these characters’ embrace of the gallant, romantic ideal of war as “the route to nobility.” Though they are willing warriors—enlistees, sometimes career soldiers in the modern all-volunteer military; many inspired to fight after the terrorist attacks on the US on September 11, 2001—their hard-won combat lessons prevail. Before he dies, Frobenius confronts “the illusion that there is no larger meaning to this war, no essential truths, nothing transcendental”; Taylor, his company’s medic and the thoughtful narrator of another chapter of *The Watch*, has been reading an 1897 book entitled *Habits and Customs of the Native Tribes of Kandahar Province*. Nizam’s vigil is, he asserts late in the novel, his “breaking point. I don’t want to be part of the SitRep that writes her off as collateral damage” (222, 191). You can’t obliterate civilians and expect to win the battle for hearts and minds, Taylor asserts. “We’re not winning this war; we’re creating lifelong enemies. It’s time to admit that our own leadership has ring-fenced us with lies” (191). And even the self-absorbed but un-introspective Conrad Farrell comes to understand that his war lacks the dignity of its ancient

antecedents: “We went over there for no reason, there were no WMDs. It was a lie. . . . We lost our men for a lie” (347). None of the authors who invoke classical parallels does so ironically; their protagonists do not let their own war experiences undermine their ancient inspirations, but they recognize—eventually—that theirs is a more inglorious war.

Not surprisingly, then, many of these contemporary authors, implicitly rejecting the idealistic nobility of war that the ancient texts present, concede the complexities and disappointments, even disgrace, of America’s current wars by pointedly embracing a more modern, ambivalent tradition of creative writing about war; again, Luckhurst’s invocation of the Vietnam War heralds the inevitable parallels. In *Fobbit* (2012), set at Forward Operating Base Triumph in Baghdad in 2005, former Army journalist David Abrams satirizes the hapless desk jockeys (REMFs or pogues in earlier wars, Fobbits in Iraq), whose job is to deploy “milspeak” to spin heroic stories and jettison tragic ones, but whose primary preoccupation is staying out of harm’s way and surviving “Saddam’s Sandbox” (233). In his acknowledgements, Abrams thanks Norman Mailer and Tim O’Brien, as well as Joseph Heller and Richard Hooker (author of *MASH*)—whose novels *Fobbit* most resembles—for “paving the road and lighting the streetlamps” (371).

Nineteen-year-old, small town Texan Billy Lynn is an unlikely hero, overwhelmed and bemused by the media juggernaut that has tackled Billy and his squad. Ben Fountain’s novel is a comic tour-de-force, a vertiginous account of the last afternoon of Bravo Company’s two-week American Victory Tour, arranged by the Army for maximum public relations effect after Bravo’s eight surviving soldiers are captured in a Fox News video engaging heroically in a brutal firefight in Iraq. On Thanksgiving afternoon, the setting of the novel, the cross-country goodwill tour and efforts to pull together a movie deal culminate in the heroes’ sheepish participation in a Dallas Cowboys half-time show—a Texas-sized extravaganza to be followed (to the astonishment of the few civilians who learn this) by the soldiers’ return to Iraq. For the press and the good-ol’-boy, ersatz patriots at Texas Stadium, the heroes of Al-Ansakar Canal are “the angelic warriors of America’s crusader dreams”; for Billy the battle that earned him the Silver Star is only the tragic site of his buddy Shroom’s death (124). Though Billy observes that the Army and the war have heightened his awareness of America’s superficiality and its “nightmare of superabundance,” Shroom too has contributed to Billy’s education by giving him, a self-proclaimed non-reader, books by Jack Kerouac and Hunter S. Thompson—and Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five* (220).

Brian Van Reet directly evokes Ernest Hemingway in “Big Two-Hearted Hunting Creek,” one of the fifteen short stories, all by veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, in *Fire and Forget: Short Stories from the Long War* (2013). In fact, the account of a trout-fishing wounded veteran who creepily tries to show two teenaged girls his battle castration only vaguely parallels the war-damaged Nick Adams and Hemingway’s “Big Two-Hearted River.” But veteran-author Kevin Powers channels the master throughout *The Yellow Birds*, the elegiac, first-person account of John Bartle’s military experience in Iraq. The setting of the novel shifts among basic training in 2003; combat in 2004; Bartle’s return home, through Germany, to Virginia in 2005; and—for reasons that the book slowly reveals—military prison in 2009. *The Yellow Birds* begins:

The war tried to kill us in the spring. As grass greened the plains of Ninevah and the weather warmed, we patrolled the low-slung hills beyond the cities and towns. We moved over them and through the tall grass on faith, kneading paths into the windswept growth like pioneers. While we slept, the war rubbed its thousand ribs against the ground in prayer. When we pressed onward through exhaustion, its eyes were white and open in the dark, while we ate, the war fasted, fed by its own deprivation. It made love and gave birth and spread through fire. Then, in summer, the war tried to kill us as the heat blanched all color from the plains. (3)

Compare the first paragraph of *A Farewell to Arms*:

In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains. In the bed of the river there were pebbles and boulders, dry and white in the sun, and the water was clear and swiftly moving and blue in the channels. Troops went by the house and down the road and the dust they raised powdered the leaves of the trees. The trunks of the trees too were dusty and the leaves fell early that year and we saw the troops marching along the road and the dust rising and leaves, stirred by the breeze, falling and the soldiers marching and afterward the road bare and white except for the leaves. (3)

Powers echoes Hemingway’s simple, unassuming sentences; his attention to the landscape; his repetition. And *A Farewell to Arms* concludes with the grim recognition of the impersonal inevitability of death with which *The Yellow Birds*

commences: “You died. You did not know what it was about. You never had time to learn. They threw you in and told you the rules and the first time they caught you off base they killed you. . . . You could count on that. Stay around and they would kill you” (327). Hemingway’s Lt. Frederick Henry famously declares a separate peace because of his disillusionment with the brutality of war: “I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory. . . .” (185). In *The Yellow Birds*, when the zealous Sgt. Sterling kills a local civilian, Bartle’s friend Murph announces that “that bitch got murdered,” and Bartle—channeling Frederick Henry’s tired cynicism—clarifies: “There was no grief, no anguish, or joy, or pity in that statement. There was no judgment made. He was just surprised. . . . none of it seemed to matter much at all” (22-23).

Late in *Eleven Days*, Jason’s supposedly-dead father David approaches his son in the Frankfurt airport as Jason prepares to embark on his final mission. Jason does not know that the older man who admires John F. Kennedy and reminisces about Da Nang is his father, but the man seems to know a great deal about David and about Jason. Privately acknowledging his influence on his son, the man asserts that David “saluted the flag with his soul” and insists that “DNA matters. . . . There’s a line that stretches straight from Omaha Beach to this gate. It’s a genetic line, a line of guys who made the choice to do the right thing. A line of slaughter and service and failed missions and quiet triumphs, of wives waiting at home for husbands to arrive” (207, 209). Or, as Tobey C. Herzog notes in his analysis of *Vietnam War Stories*, “literary war stories, across time, war, continents, and cultures, have common elements” (4). The new war fiction’s acknowledgement of its literary predecessors’ interpretations of earlier twentieth-century wars—and war’s nobility or futility (or both)—permeates these texts, which reiterate oft-repeated themes and truisms about combat and its aftermath. Many of these narratives reprise, for instance, a theme that resonates throughout virtually all writing about war: that only the soldiers who directly experience the horrors and exhilarations of combat can ever understand it. As Bagger states after his return from R&R in James Webb’s Vietnam combat novel *Fields of Fire*, “I kept thinking about the bush. Like I belong here, and all the other stuff is only important because I *earned* it here, because it’s a part of being *here*. Like I been here all my life, and the people in the bush are **real**, are my people. Like nobody in the world except for us understands this, or gives one flying fuck about it, but that’s all right, because it matters to us” (my emphasis; 265). Or, as veteran Pete tells teenaged Sam, the protagonist of Bobbie Ann Mason’s *In Country* who wants to learn about her father who was killed in the war, “Stop thinking about Vietnam, Sambo. You don’t know how it was, and you

never will. There is no way you can understand. . . . Unless you've been humping the boonies, you don't know" (136).

Billy Lynn concurs. Billy's war is not the Vietnam War: Cowboys fans keep congratulating him and his fellow heroes, thanking them for their service: "no one spits, no one calls him baby-killer. On the contrary, people could not be more supportive or kindlier disposed" (38). But Billy knows that none of these star-struck civilians understands what he's been through and that they all want something from him: the movie producer, the callow press, the Cowboys' owner, the wealthy white fans ("they could be the congregation of the richest church in town, Our Anorexic Lady of the Upscale Honky Bling") (109). Americans, confronted with "the war made flesh," feel a "mystical transference" with Billy, he thinks, but it is a false comprehension, because only "the Bravos speak from the high ground of experience. They are authentic. They are the **Real**. They have dealt much death and received much death and smelled it and held it and slopped through it in their boots . . . and tasted it in their mouths. . . . You had to be inside it to understand the pure human misery of that day" (my emphasis; 39, 66, 67).

The redeployments in Phil Klay's story collection are not repeated postings to Iraq but acknowledgements of the challenges of readjusting to civilian life after the characters' in-country experiences. The newly returned unnamed narrator of the title and opening story, "Redeployment," contrasts his irrational stage orange alert readiness to the casual cluelessness of civilians "who have no idea where Fallujah is, where three members of your platoon died. People who've spent their whole lives at white" (12). He knows that "it'll be a long fucking time before you get down to white" (13). Phil Klay's chaplain-narrator concludes "Prayer in the Furnace" with a catalog of his Charlie Company's postwar deaths and casualties: suicides, car accidents, drug-induced violence. His old Staff Sergeant, transferred like the chaplain to a new battalion, lashes out at a returned soldier who has confessed to in-country crimes during an Iraq Veterans Against the War Winter Soldier event: "You can't describe it to someone who wasn't there, you can hardly remember how it was yourself because it makes so little sense. And to act like somebody could live and fight for months in that shit and not go insane, well, that's really crazy" (165).

*Sparta's* Conrad Farrell returns from his second deployment in Iraq physically uninjured but debilitated by survivor's guilt, symptoms of PTSD, and an enduring irritation with most aspects of contemporary American life. Because he comes home to a boundlessly patient family and girlfriend who want to help him readjust to civilian life, he quickly exemplifies the logical extension of the "you had to be there" theme: that the war experience cannot be shared or talked about. Conrad

is like Braiden Chaney in Larry Brown's *Dirty Work*, who doesn't "want to talk about . . . rockets, or machine guns, or fragmentation grenades, or exploding beer cans" (17). Conrad cannot share his ventures in Iraq, because they are events from another world, "the **real** thing, the world he knew, carried inside his chest. . . . He couldn't talk about this. . . . The words would make no sense here. There was no way between the worlds" (my emphasis; 188). Ordinary language cannot carry the weight of the ineffable war, as Billy Lynn knows: ". . . to talk of such things properly we need a mode of speech near the equal of prayer, otherwise just *shut*, shut your yap and sit on it, silence being truer to the experience than the star-spangled spasm, the bittersweet sob, the redeeming hug, or whatever this fucking *closure* is that everybody's always talking about. They want it to be easy and it's just not going to be" (137). *Eleven Days'* Jason, the professional, elite soldier, has triumphed in high-risk operations in Iraq and Africa and other off-the-grid locations before his final, fatal participation in a raid contemporaneous with and much like Operation Neptune Spear, in which Navy SEALs killed Osama Bin Laden in Pakistan in May 2011. Jason and his fellow Special Operations troops share horrific and valiant experiences but "none of these stories would appear in print, nor would Jason share details of them with anyone. . . . This was not a profession that gave rise to many memoirs. . . . They weren't archeologists. They weren't war correspondents. They were warriors" (148-9).

In these narratives, a veteran's reticence can be strategic as well. Even when he comes to accept that he is suffering from PTSD, Conrad Farrell knows that "you couldn't admit to any of this while you were still in service. There was no way forward once this had been let loose into the spoken air" (215). *The Yellow Bird's* John Bartle resists sharing his wartime activities because—as the novel reveals near its conclusion—he has covered up the actionable circumstances of his friend Murph's ignominious death. But like his fellow protagonists, he perceives that his war experiences not only should not but **cannot** be rendered once he returns home. "What happened over there?," his mother asks. "What happened? . . . How do you answer the unanswerable. To say what happened, the mere facts, the disposition of events in time, would come to seem like a kind of treachery. The dominoes of moments . . . showed only that a fall is every object's destiny. It is not enough to say what happened. Everything happened. Everything fell" (148). Cara Hoffman's 2014 novel *Be Safe I Love You* presents protagonist-Iraq veteran Lauren Clay, her first week home ("not always the safest place for a returning warrior"), and her resilient belief that she is responsible for her hapless father and her teenaged brother, whom she adores (42). Lauren refuses to share any of her war experiences, and the novel's

plot depends on portentous hints that presage the sensational conclusion, in which Lauren—slowly, inevitably—betrays the unacknowledged psychological damage of her wartime actions. Lauren dodges the doctor who belatedly recognizes the “red flags” on her Post Deployment Health Assessment and ignores the warning signs of her imminent breakdown (41). Her young brother slowly realizes that Lauren has come home “a ruined version of herself,” but the story delays Lauren’s—and the reader’s—confrontation with the trauma that causes Lauren to believe that her dead combat buddy and her dead dog are alive. For these soldiers, the secrets and horrors of their wartime experiences are, as Toni Morrison writes about the subject of race in canonical American literature, “unspeakable things unspoken.”

The civilian victims of war keep their secrets as well. *The Book of Jonas* (2012) presents the story of teenaged Younis Iskandar, who changes his name to Jonas when, after his family is killed in an American airstrike in an unnamed Middle Eastern country, he is sent to the US by an international relief agency. Jonas’s own aftermath struggles to adapt to life as a teenager in America are exacerbated by the lingering legacy of the violence of war. Referred to a psychologist after he eventually lashes out at high school bullies, Jonas—like the American vets—refuses to share his war experience. When Jonas’s therapist asks him what it’s like “to lose everything,” he thinks about his wounds, his brief indifference to whether he lives or dies, his surprise to discover that he has survived. “Should he say that the thing was now part of him, defined him, founded him, that he could no more describe its effect than he could describe being born?” (7). “What is it like to lose everything?” Jonas can only ask, in reply; “What is it like not to?” (8-9).

Jonas has indeed lost everything—his entire family, his house, his country. He eventually reveals his own war crime—killing Christopher, the MIA American soldier who has nursed and sheltered him after his family is firebombed—and atones for his actions by returning to his home country and sending Christopher’s war journal to his grieving mother. Jonas is essentially alone, but the American veteran-protagonists in the aftermath narratives bring their damaged psyches home to the emotional entanglements of waiting families, those very civilians who, as—to reiterate—virtually all war literature proclaims, cannot apprehend their soldier’s experience. And the unspeakable, unshareable aftereffects fester for the isolated sufferers. In this they are, again, reprising the aftermath experience of their literary forebears. As Thomas Myers asserts about Vietnam veterans, for the soldier “the war continues to be an active force long after its visible signs are gone. As recurring nightmare, as personal obsession, as historical enigma, the war returns

with the veteran not as an inert cultural organism in a body bag but as the potential for renewed upheaval, for real catastrophe" (194).

Chris Starkmann, the protagonist of Philip Caputo's 1987 novel *Indian Country*, for instance, struggles with his unresolved (and undeserved) guilt over his actions in Vietnam after his return home to a supportive wife and a worthwhile job, which are not enough to defeat his demons. Chris cannot admit even to himself his debilitating sense of responsibility for the accidental death in Vietnam of his boyhood blood brother, Bonny George. More than a decade after the war, Chris feels like "a stranger and an exile" (432). More than a decade after the war, he misses his fellow soldiers and even the jungles of Vietnam: "He belonged there. The bush was his true home" (100). Like Starkmann, Powers's Bartle languishes after his war in his culpability for not seeing his friend Murph home safely. He wallows in alcohol and sleep and isolation, unable to vanquish his despair: "you failed at the one good thing you could have done, the one person you promised would live is dead, and you have seen all things die in more manners than you'd like to recall and for a while the whole thing fucking ravaged your spirit like some deep-down shit. . . like you have bottomed out in your spirit" (144-5). David Mogeson (called Moge in Iraq), the protagonist of Siobhan Fallon's "Camp Liberty," cannot wait to finish his tour and get out of the army, but on his mid-tour leave he is distant with his girlfriend and parents and anxious to return to his squad in Baghdad. Moge wonders whether "after all of his longing to get out and get on with his life, in his comfortable middle age he would look back at this time and realize that his years in the army were the most vivid, the most startlingly **real**, of his entire life?" (my emphasis; 55).

"Real" is *Sparta's* term as well. Home from Iraq, Conrad Farrell is agitated, impotent, sleepless, and drinking too much. He yearns to re-enter his pre-military, civilian world, but he cannot put the war behind him; and military blogs ("volatile, digressive, and full of rage") by fellow vets as well as emails from his troops pull him away from daily life (173). Contemporary urban life and well-meaning but clueless family members overwhelm a struggling Conrad; Iraq was the real world: "In-country you knew what you were doing. You planned the missions and then carried them out. You knew what you were doing. You had a purpose. . . . He wasn't meant to be here. . . . He was separate." In combat "you had some kind of extra sense, and you could feel the tension surrounding an ambush, an attack. It was real" (234, 235). For many of these soldiers, war—whether horrifying, ennobling, or exhilarating—is incompatible with (and often preferable to) the mundane vicissitudes of everyday life. General Cummings in Norman Mailer's World War II novel, *The Naked*

*and the Dead* (1948), muses that though war is “tedium and routine, regulations and procedure. . . [the] naked quivering heart of it” transcends all. In battle, with the “shattering, screaming burst of a shell,” Cummings feels “such power that it was beyond joy. He was calm and sober” (566). The veteran-protagonist of Jacob Siegel’s “Smile, There are IEDs Everywhere” echoes the general’s perceptions about the concentrating effect of combat: “You could make the guns talk. . . . When you got it right there was a pure flow, thoughtless and unfeeling, unlike anything else... ‘Over there things were clear’” (*Fire and Forget*, 3-4).

Over and over, these narratives reiterate the profound truisms of war, ancient and modern, most of which testify to the powerful “otherness” of the war experience. But the clarity and “realness” that Mailer’s General, Conrad Farrell, and other protagonists discover in combat are dramatically qualified by another recurring theme of these texts and narratives of twentieth- and twenty-first-century conflicts: war’s maddening and pervasive ambiguity. For soldiers, there may be lucidity in combat’s most dramatic moments, but the larger purposes and meanings of their wars are clouded with uncertainty. Noted Vietnam War veteran-author Tim O’Brien sounds the leitmotif:

For the common soldier, at least, war has the feel—the spiritual texture—of a great ghostly fog, thick and permanent. There is no clarity. Everything swirls. The old rules are no longer binding, the old truths no longer true. Right spills over into wrong. Order blends into chaos, love into hate, ugliness into beauty, law into anarchy, civility into savagery. The vapors suck you in. You can’t tell where you are, or why you’re there, and the only certainty is the absolute ambiguity (“How to Tell a True War Story,” 88).

In “The Things They Carried,” his paean to the varied burdens of combat, O’Brien embroiders his theme of the fundamental meaninglessness of the war: “It was not battle, it was just the endless march, village to village, without purpose, nothing won or lost. . . . They carried the land itself . . . the sky. The whole atmosphere, they carried it, the humidity, the monsoons, the stink of fungus and decay, all of it, they carried gravity” (15). The chroniclers of the current desert wars similarly highlight the metaphorical implications of their searing, sand-infiltrated lives. In Brian Turner’s “The Wave That Takes Them Under,” Henderson and his platoon are on a night mission, lost and struggling: “the wind drives hard against them, soldiers falling back or tumbling down dunes to roll into pits where the sand seems determined to bury them” (*Fire and Forget*, 56). The nearby soldiers disappear in

the whirling grit, one become “only a form in the wind and sand . . . more shadow and movement than man or a soldier” (56). And Henderson stumbles upon a dead soldier “half-buried” in the sand, the radioman who “speaks the grammar of sand now” (57). Lt. Frobenius, in his *The Watch* journal, echoes Turner’s meteorological metaphor: “One hundred and twenty degrees. . . . No breeze, but dust and grit everywhere. We walk around caked in dust, sinking knee-deep into dust, coughing dust. . . . We appear and disappear as in a magic trick, swallowed by the dust and then regurgitated as dust-coated creatures” (247). Kevin Powers also evokes the symbolic resonance of the unfamiliar landscape’s challenges; “our purpose,” Bartle notes, “was as vague and foreign as the indistinguishable dawns and dusks with which it came” (7).

Powers further explores the pervasive obscurity of war. In Germany, on his way home from Iraq, Bartle tries to process Murph’s death and his own complicit war experiences: “I might have wrung it out, hoping I might find an essential thing that would give meaning to this place or that time. I did not. Certainty had surrendered all its territory in my mind. . . . I realized . . . that there was a sharp distinction between what was remembered, what was told, and what was true. And I didn’t think I’d ever figure out which was which” (60). For Billy Lynn, who contemplates his imminent return to combat in a rare quiet moment at Texas Stadium, the war is less obscure in its meaning than frighteningly arbitrary (and very personal) in its execution. “The freaking randomness is what wears on you, the difference between life, death, and horrible injury sometimes as slight as stooping to tie your bootlace. . . . It’s the randomness that makes your head this way, living the Russian-roulette life-style every minute of the day” (27, 53). The satire of *Fobbit* turns on the ludicrous inanities of the logistical operations of war and the particular absurdity of its repetitiveness, which Abrams refers to repeatedly as “Groundhog Day” (155). Abrams’s summary of war’s ambiguities is all the more powerful because it is ready-made—Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s infamous 2002 statement about the alleged lack of evidence of a connection between the Iraqi government and terrorist groups: “There are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we don’t know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don’t know we don’t know” (19-20).

As with forerunners such as Tim O’Brien and Michael Herr, whose narratives (*The Things They Carried*, *In the Lake of the Woods*, *Dispatches*) are extended metafictional meditations on story-telling, the Iraq/Afghanistan authors—logically following the dusty, perilous path from the ambiguities of war to the

problems of how to understand it and **how to tell it**—grapple with and foreground the technical and metaphysical dimensions of their tales. Phil Klay’s “After Action Report,” a story about two Marines struggling with their account of and responsibility for the accidental killing of an Iraqi child, ends with a flippant “whatever. It doesn’t matter” (52). Earlier, the narrative recounts “a joke Marines tell each other. A liberal pussy journalist is trying to get the touchy-feely side of war and he asks a Marine sniper, ‘What is it like to like to kill a man? What do you feel when you pull the trigger.’ The Marine looks at him and says one word: ‘Recoil’” (47). Klay’s character’s glib anecdote, which affirms both that “you had to be there” (in a way that a journalist could never be) and that the experience of war cannot be told, echoes Michael Herr’s inclusion, early in his Vietnam War classic *Dispatches*, of a similarly oblique commentary on war’s unknowableness: “what a story he told me, as one-pointed and resonant as any war story I ever heard, it took me a year to understand it: ‘Patrol went up the mountain. One man came back. He died before he could tell us what happened.’ I waited for the rest, but it seemed not to be that kind of war story” (6)

A year after their demobilization, Jacob Siegel’s first-person veteran-narrator in “Smile, There are IEDs Everywhere” is excited to spend a long evening reconnecting with his old Iraq buddies. They have shared the experiences that he can neither impart to his resentful wife nor capture in his nascent writing:

I got up every day . . . and tried to make sense of what happened over there, how it all fit together, why it counted so much if I wasn’t even sure how to add it up. . . . I couldn’t write the things that haunted me for fear of dishonesty and cheap manipulation. . . . War stories are almost never about *war* unless they’re told by someone who was never there. Every now and then maybe you talk about something or listen to someone who needs to get it off their chest, but those aren’t the stories you come back to, not for telling. (10-11)

Or, as O’Brien notes, “story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth” (“Good Form,” 203).

Most of the protagonists of the desert war texts are not—like Siegel’s and O’Brien’s narrators—would-be authors, but they live **in** stories, and they recognize that their difficulties remembering, comprehending, telling, and recovering from their wartime traumas are exacerbated by the inherent ambiguities of the war. Phil Klay’s veteran-narrator of “Bodies” was posted to Mortuary Affairs, “the unit that

handled the dead . . . reminding Marines of everything they know but never discuss” (55). The story begins with his announcement that his war stories are lies: “There are two ways to tell the story. Funny or sad. Guys like it funny . . . Girls like it sad. . . Either way it’s the same story. . . What I liked about the story was that even if it had happened, more or less, it was total bullshit” (53-54). Klay’s narrators do not have trouble remembering their wartime experiences; for them the reality of the experience cannot, should not, be shared. The unnamed female veteran-protagonist of Iraq veteran-author Mariette Kalinowski’s “The Train” tries to breach the chasm between her pre- and post-war selves by endlessly riding the New York City subway. Her survivor’s guilt impedes her readjustment, and she can “feel Iraq everywhere”: desert, gray-tinted sand. “She couldn’t tell if these sights were solid or ghosts” (*Fire and Forget*, 66-67). Haunted by “that day” that a suicide bomber killed her friend and fellow soldier, Kalinowski’s protagonist struggles to return to her pre-war life, to “the last solid part of her before the edges of her experience faded into the questionable fogginess of memory, that state in which a person could no longer be sure that what they recalled was true, or even their own. . . She wants so badly to remember everything about that day [but] reality on that day couldn’t be trusted, because she was no longer sure which parts should be kept, which discarded” (63).

The obfuscations of the war collide with the unreliability of memory, and uncertainty is the result. Jonas Iskander’s refusal to tell his psychiatrist about “what . . . it [is] like to lose everything” is only in part a willful silence about his crime (“he knows that the law and the truth are rarely the same thing”); throughout *The Book of Jonas*, Jonas genuinely struggles to remember (11). Though the novel is set in Jonas’s present, and moves chronologically from his adolescent arrival in America through his unsuccessful college experience, Jonas persistently returns, in his elusive memory, to his childhood in his home country. But memory “plays . . . trick[s]”: “It is impossible for him to tell, to look back and see clearly, and each attempt he makes to do so, to clarify his memory, sharpen its lines, results only in further blurring the picture, smudging it like a clumsy child playing with finger paints” (55). Jonas becomes a story-teller when Paul the counselor discovers (in a contrived plot device) that Rose, the mother of the MIA soldier Christopher, lives very near Jonas and consequently pressures him to meet with the grieving mother. Years after her son’s disappearance, Rose grapples with her own lack of clarity: “the worst part is not knowing for sure, not having closure” (82). She in turn coaxes Jonas to tell her anything he knows about her lost son, and Jonas tries to oblige. For Rose, Jonas “unwinds a story that is, like all stories, a mix of memory and impression” (91). *The Book of Jonas* is a novel about memory and story-telling as

much as it is about war. As Jonas “unwinds” his account of his time in the cave with Christopher, he describes for Rose (and later for Paul—and for us) “how it was, or how he remembers it, or at least how he has convinced himself he remembers it” although he has the “feeling that he has been adding and subtracting, substituting what should have been said for what he fails to remember accurately” (109, 123).

A coming of age novel, like *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk* and *The Book of Jonas*, *The Yellow Birds* is, Michiko Kakutani writes, “a philosophical parable about the loss of innocence and the uses of memory.” Bartle’s tortured aftermath winds back to his guilt and shame about —and inability to truly recall the facts of—Murph’s death. “I could not tell what was true and what I had invented,” he asserts (135). Like Jonas, Bartle becomes a reluctant story-teller when the Army Criminal Investigation Command tracks him down and he has to confess that he has falsified the circumstances of Murph’s brutal death at the hands of their enemies: “I think maybe it was my fault, fuck, I did it, no it didn’t happen, well, not like that, but it’s hard to say sometimes: half of memory is imagination anyway” (186).

The Iraq-Afghanistan narratives underscore the universality of the experience of war: Fear. Homesickness. Combatants’ camaraderie. In short, the fiction inspired by the Iraq and Afghanistan wars invokes the essential, enduring themes of creative narratives about combat and its aftermath. Yet these are unique wars, fought not in the jungles of Vietnam or the forests of central Europe, but in a new, parched terrain and against local insurgencies and militia troops rather than institutionalized armies; they are wars fought in Humvees and wrapped in Hescos, wars in which improvised explosive devices and multiple deployments mean unprecedented—and debilitating—physical and psychic injuries. They are wars fought by volunteer, multiply-deployed combatants inspired, often, by America’s global war on terrorism. These are not your fathers’ wars.

The presence of American female soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan is a footnote, barely acknowledged, never central to the story, in most of these narratives.<sup>1</sup> Mariette Kalinowski—the sole female veteran-author included in the *Fire and Forget* anthology—inscribes no gendered significance to her narrator-protagonist’s Iraq War experience. Neither does Cara Hoffman explore in *Be Safe I Love You* the details of Lauren Clay’s deployment (beyond the much-delayed civilian death incident that nebulously damages her) or suggest that Lauren’s sex is in any way significant during her military service. For Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya, the unnerving and unusual woman on the fields of fire is the local civilian, the Antigone figure. Distraught after Taliban forces breach Alpha Company’s wire and stage “the perfect ambush” and Frobenius’s Black Hawk crashes, the soldiers in

Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya *The Watch* are further unnerved by the female amputee who hauls her cart from the mountains and begins her long vigil on the arid plain near their base (53). Nizam cannot be reasoned with or intimidated as she patiently waits to receive her brother's body. "I am a dilemma for them," she recognizes. "I am a woman in their man's world, and they do not know how to proceed" (8). At the end of *The Watch*, when the sniper Simonis responds literally and tragically to Captain Connolly's directive to "take the shot . . . if you see anything happen out of the ordinary," Nizam dies because, to Simonis, she and her flashing knife are indeed extraordinary. Masood, the interpreter, explains, as Nizam lies dying, that with the knife she has slaughtered a lamb as a gift to the soldiers. "We were to feast on it tonight. It is part of our culture" (278, 279). By the novel's denouement, all of the American soldiers—save the intransigent Connolly—have been tempered by the anachronistic amputee and her brave vigil. One by one, Connolly's officers try to convince him to let Antigone bury her brother, because they recognize that her solitary mission displays a dignified obligation that trumps their own. The Medic speaks for them: "They're fighting for their survival, their homes, their beliefs. Okay, those beliefs are fucked up, but what are *we* fighting for? . . . Their slings and stones are more powerful than our M-203s. Their nation's more powerful than our army. . . . The moment that girl showed up, I knew it was over for us" (192).

Like Nizam, the Iraqi and Afghani characters in these stories and novels—and the texts' attention to them—are "out of the ordinary." The narratives of America's most recent wars include unprecedented observation of, and often unusual respect for, the local nationals (allies and enemies, civilians and combatants) who are thrust into the conflict. Connolly can communicate with Nizam because Masood, a new interpreter, arrives at the outpost just after the devastating battle. The "terp," who hates the Taliban hajjis for killing his family, is a complex character. Dismissed by the grieving grunts as a "frickin' raghead," he misunderstands the Americans as much as they fail to appreciate him (100). He is appalled by the soldiers' gentle treatment of the base dog, Shorty, "the most unclean of animals" (28). He is alarmed when he hears Black Sabbath's "War Pigs." He mistakenly suspects that Nizam is a diversionary "plant" of "the black-hearted Taliban," because he cannot accept that a woman would act so daringly on her own (253). And when he befriends the sniper Simonis, Masood reinforces the Medic's perceptions about America's local allies and enemies when he incorrectly presumes that the American soldiers' motives for fighting mirror his own. "You represent democracy, freedom, and the rule of law; your task is truly noble," Masood declares, explaining to Simonis that the US must support not the corrupt government but a real leader, like Massoud, commander

of the Mujaheddin (109). “I don’t do politics,” responds the “bored . . . indifferent” sniper, who insists that he fights only because he likes being a soldier, because it’s “fun to shoot people” (110-11). Simonis is “a tourist with a gun”; Masood—who, when he sees the Taliban bodies, feels “a reluctant kinship with them”—fights because of his faith and for the future of his country (110, 103). Frobenius would comprehend the interpreter’s dedication to the cause. Before he is wounded in the Taliban raid, the doomed lieutenant confides to his journal his grudging respect for the warriors who will soon take him out of the battle:

I am haunted by the image of one of the Taliban fighters. . . . [T]here was an air of the invincible about him. He seemed totally unconcerned about his safety as he strolled . . . through the rain of bullets, firing his Kalashnikov at our positions. . . . If this was the caliber of the men we were fighting, driven as they were by a hankering for heaven, then all of our vaunted training amounted to nothing. Even I, with my intellect and education, had nothing that matched up to that kind of belief. (226)

Malik, *The Yellow Birds*’ interpreter for the Americans, is killed in his own home town, when he stands up to show Bartle and Murph where “Mrs. Al-Sharifi used to plant her hyacinth” (10). His Iraqi family, like Masood’s Afghani people, was slaughtered by America’s opponents, and he knows that “they’ll kill me for helping you.” (9). Robinson’s Conrad Farrell remembers his Ramadi “terp,” Ali, an educated Iraqi who risks “kidnappings, decapitations” to help the Americans. Ali explains his motivations to Conrad, but the self-centered Marine willfully ignores the moral implications of his own actions: “[Conrad] was doing his duty. There was the question of why the U.S. forces had destroyed this country. The question of why they were treating their allies—the people they had come here to liberate and protect—with such deep and lethal contempt. The question of whether what they were doing was honorable. None of these were thoughts he could address” (77-79).

Siobhan Fallon’s Moge initially resists the idea of a female terp, but Raneen returns from an innocuous hearts-and-minds humanitarian mission with valuable strategic information. “No one notices the women in this country and therefore no one notices how much the women notice,” she explains to an impressed Moge (48). Their unlikely friendship—and Moge’s inchoate romantic feelings for Raneen—ends abruptly when the interpreter disappears. Sgt. Moge’s attempts

to convince his colonel to find Raneen fail; he knows that Raneen's family will offer no assistance "since it was [her] cooperation with American forces that got her kidnapped to begin with" (67). Raneen remains unaccounted for, probably dead, and so the soldier who had been contemplating reenlistment decides to go home. Naema, Kate's Iraqi-civilian *doppelgänger* in *Sand Queen*, loathes the vicious American soldiers who imprison her father and brother; her attempt to cooperate with Kate to gain information about them is overshadowed by her resilient efforts to protect her mother and failing grandmother during the American occupation.

In *Achilles in Vietnam*, Jonathan Shay criticizes the Vietnam-era American military for instilling in American combatants an unqualified hatred of the enemy. "To our modern mind," Shay writes, "the enemy is detestable—by definition. . . . Vietnam-era military training reflexively imparted the image of a demonized adversary: The enemy soldier was pictured as evil and loathsome, deserving to be killed" (103). In contrast, he notes, the *Iliad* emphatically portrays the enemy as worthy of respect, even honor" (103). Even in the post-9/11 age, the authors of Iraq/Afghanistan narratives, who so often acknowledge ancient Greek literary forebears, often mimic Homer's warriors' respect for the enemy as Vietnam narratives did not.

If, however, the soldiers, veterans, and authors of the Middle Eastern wars betray an uncommon comprehension of the residents of Iraq and Afghanistan, they demonstrate a similarly exceptional alienation from the people and the country they return to. As Billy Lynn notes, back in the US, "people could not be more supportive or kindlier disposed" to the heroes (38). Even the less lauded veterans (those who do not, like Billy Lynn and his buddies, appear with Beyoncé and Destiny's Child on the Jumbotron at half-time) return to loving families and an American society that has learned, in the forty-odd years since the Vietnam War, not to blame the warrior for the war. While many Vietnam War narratives include disdainful representations of the antiwar movement and its partisans, Iraq/Afghanistan literary veterans (like those of earlier American wars) do not return home to the abuse or indifference of a virulent protest movement, since recent U.S. wars did not provoke a large-scale, organized peace movement. Yet their postwar adjustment is easily as troubled as those of Nick Adams or Chris Starkmann, who perceives that he is "living in a dangerous land, where he was hated" (102).

Indeed, that no one back home cares about the combatant—the logical development of the "you had to be there" sentiment—is a strongly-held belief for many of these protagonists. Several of Abrams's Fobbits—the denizens of the "cubicle maze of staffers from personnel, intel, ops, logistics, and civil affairs, as well as the chaplain, the lawyers, and the computer network gearheads"—spend their

Sundays watching home front football games on satellite TV (127). The battalion commander likes to think that the crowd's muted cheers are for him and his soldiers in Baghdad, since "it was true, they were also, in a sense, moving a ball back and forth across a field of play" (127). He knows, of course, that "of those thousands packed into the stadium, only a couple hundred knew what was happening over here in Iraq; and of those two hundred, only a few dozen actually gave a shit. . . . America, the beautiful ostrich—Oh, beautiful, for heads buried in the sand, for amber waves of ignorant bliss" (127-8). John Bartle tells the CID captain who comes to interrogate him that "'it's different out there *now*. . . . No one cares'" (183). The insistence that something is "different . . . now" (my emphasis) is what distinguishes the contemporary narratives from those of earlier wars. *The Watch's* Nick Frobenius knows that "no one back home gives a damn about us. No one gives a shit. Fact" (214). And Nick more broadly indicts contemporary Americans and American society for an unprecedented—even systemic—indifference to the war and its warriors:

the military is the only institution left in America with any conception of honor—or any of the virtues that made the good old U.S. of A. the place the whole damn world looked up to. . . . The rest of them—the civilian leadership, especially—are just a pile of crap. . . . The politicians . . . the big businessmen and bankers look after their own, and the rest of the country can just go fuck themselves. . . . I'd like my one and only life to be different. I'd like to be proud of my country and what we represent. . . . that's why I joined the army in the first place. (141-2)

These characters—again, not draftees, but willing, idealistic, patriotic soldiers—feel betrayed by the country for which they fight. Pundits and social scientists have addressed the growing divide between the military and the civilian world in contemporary America, at a time when only one-half of one percent of the population are in the military. A recent Pew Research Study notes that "veterans who served in the post-9/11 period . . . report more difficulties returning to civilian life than those who served in Vietnam or the Korean War/World War II era, or in periods between major conflicts." These narratives—even the tendentious *Sparta*—offer no particular explanation for the chasm that separates the military and the rest of America. Their consistent derisive dismissal of ill-informed, apathetic, or banal civilians precludes any serious consideration of the sensibilities of non-military family members, neighbors, or the general public.

David Abrams's Fobbits are rear-guard soldiers who, out of harm's way and with plenty of leisure time, share a supercilious perception of the superficial absurdities of American society. An old *People* magazine features Tom Cruise's "very weird" affair with Katie Holmes and Michael Jackson's pajama-ed court appearance, and thumbing through it, a bored Private Anderson decides that "America sure was a funny place to look at when you got far enough away" (7-8). *Fobbit*'s inept Captain Abe Shrinkle stockpiles the care packages that steadily arrive from Americans who want to "empathize" with deployed soldiers as they sit "in the land of cheeseburgers and Paris Hilton perfume" (165). The cornucopia of care packages, like yellow ribbons, shows that civilians "really knew how to Support the Troops. It was incredible how the screech of pulling tape across the flaps of just one box could bring spiritual harmony to a person, make her feel like she was doing Something that Mattered" (164). Abrams's menu of the care package "booty"—"gel insoles for combat boots, nail clippers . . . months-old copies of [magazines]. . . rosary beads, photos from the 18<sup>th</sup> Annual Fireman's Pig's Roast in Eau Claire, breath mints"—is a sadly comic parody of Tim O'Brien's litany of "the things they carried" (171).

Even while still in training, the self-selected elite SEALs in *Eleven Days* pride themselves on their unique role in contemporary warfare:

The guys are aware that many people . . . don't believe these wars are the right thing or that the warriors' roles in them are justified. Most people wouldn't know a Team guy from a Ranger or which side we fought on in Vietnam. Most people might concede the merits of World War I or Korea but be unable to identify the details. And most people, in the abstract, prefer butter to guns, but most mostly prefer not to think about it at all... the kids who are fighting . . . are aware that what they do and the choice to do it will never make sense to most people (91).

Jason and his exclusive colleagues are decidedly and proudly **not** "most people."

Although Klay's otherwise sympathetic chaplain is frustrated by his inability to get any of the higher-ups to investigate a possible war atrocity, he directs his cynicism primarily toward the homefront, that "gluttonous, fat, oversexed, overconsuming, materialistic home, where we're too lazy to see our own faults" (151). The Psy-Ops veteran-narrator of Klay's "Psychological Operations," back home and in college, manipulates his naïve fellow students with his "veteran mystique" and admits that "the weird thing with being a veteran . . . is that you do feel better than most people. You risked your life for something bigger than yourself. How many people

can say that? You chose to serve” (203). Hoffman’s Lauren similarly feels superior to the “lax, entitled way of soft civilian life” (13). She is dismayed by her brother’s sedentary, technology-addicted life and dismisses anyone’s assumptions or advice about her postwar plans: “She’d come home to a world of fragile baby animals. Soft, inarticulate wide-eyed morons with know-nothing epiphanies and none of them... did what she said. . . . she could accept that these people didn’t know how to lead or follow, but they could at least shut up. If anyone owed her anything for serving in Iraq it was to shut the fuck up” (159). Lauren disparages even veterans of earlier wars; the first Gulf War was merely “the dull trial run of the real war from which she’d just returned” (60). She is outraged when her father compares her to his Vietnam-veteran friend. “I didn’t get drafted,” she insists. “I wasn’t some sitting-target chump with eight weeks of basic. I enlisted. I was educated. I had people under my command.” (133). A similarly dismissive Kate, in *Sand Queen*, completely rejects her mandated postwar female veterans group. The “fat and shapeless” Vietnam nurses and first Gulf War pilots “disgust” the damaged Kate, because “none of them was a real combat soldier like her. They have no fucking idea” (108).

No postwar protagonist is more maladjusted or more annoyed—even outraged—by the vagaries of contemporary American society than Conrad Farrell. Conrad has been in the marines for four years, and he fumes at the maddening changes that he finds at home, most of which advertise the casual, careless superficialities of modern life. Conrad is annoyed by public cell phone conversations, the celebrity worship of gossip magazines, scruffy facial hair, and pedestrians who do not stay out of his way. He feels as though his country has “left [him] behind,” and he neither denies nor offers an explanation for the military’s proud otherness: “It’s all so insular, the military,” his girlfriend complains. “They keep everything from us, but I kind of have the feeling they also blame us for not understanding them. But how can we?” “It’s tribal,” Conrad retorts, and not to be told. “What we know, we’ve earned. But even if we try, we can’t. It’s like intraspecies communication” (135, 269). You had to be there. Unspeakable things unspoken.

*Fobbit’s* care packages become, in *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*, a variant ironic commentary on O’Brien’s catalog of “the things they carried.” O’Brien’s grunts’ weapons, good luck charms, personal necessities, and the fruits of “the great American war chest” morph, in Texas Stadium, into a Thanksgiving groaning board of “lush, moist . . . luxuriant” food that represents the excesses of “the God-blessed realms of mainstream America” (“The Things They Carried,” 16; 59). The holiday feast is courtesy of the profits of the Cowboys’ gift shop, a banquet of Cowboys-branded game jerseys, western boots, Christmas ornaments, “chess

sets, toaster ovens . . . ice makers, personal oxygen bars, and laser-guided pool cues” (29). The players’ equipment room is another pleasure palace of gleaming, state-of-the-art, superfluous **stuff**. Fountain (as his title and setting promise) explores the parallels between the game of war and America’s favorite spectator sport, which Jonas, in *The Book of Jonas*, bewilderingly discovers to be a “second religion” in the US. Billy thinks that football is an “an excellent sport” that became a “bloated, self-important beast . . . once the culture got its clammy hands on it” (163). The team owner tries to inspire his losing players (“the best-cared-for creatures in the history of the planet”) by comparing their trials on the turf to Bravo Company’s challenges on the battlefield, but Billy Lynn—and the novel—know that football is a pretentious game while war is **real** (184).

In these novels, football—that relatively risk-free battle on an AstroTurf field of fire—is an inspired synecdoche for contemporary America and for the war-tested protagonists’ incredulity at Americans’ indifference to their wars and their sacrifice. The veterans of early twentieth century American wars could assume that most young men were fellow participants and that many home front civilians supported the war. Narratives of the Vietnam War consistently confront their returning protagonists with rabid anti-war activists; the soldiers generally dismiss their home front antagonists as spoiled, callow, and clueless—but the war protestors’ animus toward the war and the warriors arguably denotes a passionate, informed reaction against the war. Peace activists might be misguided, even immoral, but they care. For the protagonists in these narratives, that small percentage of Americans who have volunteered for military service, the you had to be there theme is more substantively undergirded by the universal assumption that everyday Americans are thoroughly apathetic about the soldiers’ fate. In these novels, the folks back home are interested not at all in America’s military incursions abroad but, shallowly, in celebrity worship, social media, and the country’s “second religion.”

The authors of the fifteen stories in *Fire and Forget: Short Stories from the Long War*—all combat veterans except army wife Siobhan Fallon, who claims her own “medals on the other spouse’s chest”—met and began to write and share their war stories through a New York University Veterans Writing Workshop (222). The editors recognize the tenuousness of their attempts to capture the reality of their wartime experience. “One thing a vet will always tell you is that it’s never like it is in the stories. Then he’ll tell you his” (*You Know When The Men Are Gone*, 222; *Fire and Forget*, xiii). They proclaim their right to say “we were there. This is what we saw. This is *how it felt*,” even as they acknowledge that “what’s ‘real’ . . . quickly goes up in smoke” (xv, xiv).

The claim to authenticity by embracing ancient and modern classic war literature. The privileging of the first-hand accounts of participants, counterpointed by the dismissal of civilians who “were not there.” The summoning of the profound and overweening unknowableness of war. The metafictional preoccupation with the challenges of telling the story, a process complicated by war’s ambiguity as well as by the unreliability of memory. The authors of the first wave of narratives about America’s latest wars capture and deploy the time-tested themes and tropes of writing about war; their contemporary twist is a sophisticated interest in the locals, the civilians, the collateral damage of a war-scarred landscape. In including the stories of non-combatants—Jonas, Nizam, the terps—they investigate, as Siobhan Fallon explains about her stories about the wives of the troops, “what she, too, has survived and what she is made of” (222). And they illustrate the deepening divide between a complacent home front and a military whose ground troops, whose youthful finest, feel themselves forgotten by—and superior to—a country permanently and superficially immured “within the sheltering womb of all things American—football, Thanksgiving, television” (*Billy Lynn*, 21).

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**(Endnotes)**

1 *The exception is Helen Benedict's Sand Queen (2011), a relentless indictment of discrimination and brutality—from abusive fellow GIs, callow officers, and enemy prisoners—against female soldiers in the American military. Kate Darby—an oddly unsympathetic, whiney protagonist—meets constant, debilitating, ultimately career-ending abuse from the men who surround her in Iraq in the early months of Operation Enduring Freedom. “It’s a boy’s club,” Kate learns, “and it’s never going to be anything else. Bros before hos, as they like to say (106).*

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