

BENJAMIN BUSCH

Wilderness

My Commanding Officer was missing. The message came 10 years after our tour in the war. He had retired and was fishing alone on a lake in Canada. Search parties went out. Then he was found.

It's hot as I drive away from home. The funeral will be tomorrow, 737 miles to the cemetery, 11 straight hours. I leave late and head into night, Michigan letting me go. On a route around Toledo, the asphalt is so new the rollers are still parked along the shoulder. Streetlights reflect off the smooth pitch as if it's moist, that oily licorice look of a surface too slick to steer on. I was in charge of repairing roads in Ramadi, filling bomb craters and clearing trash. I never saw a clean street in Iraq, a country where tar is so close to the surface the Sumerians used it as mortar for their bricks.

But that's not what comes to mind right then. I'm already adrift.

It's midnight and my drive is just beginning even though I'm three hours into it. I haven't been to a military burial since 1996. I was only out of the Corps for two months when two birds collided over Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, an attack helicopter rising into a troop transport killing twelve of my Marines. My departure had been so recent, I hadn't even been replaced and my seat in the Sea Knight fell to earth empty. I imagined the fuselage ripped open by Cobra blades, all of us cut to pieces, sky and swamp sprayed with blood. But I was home with my wife trying to see suburban America as a place I could live in.

We bought a small house in College Park, Maryland just inside the beltway and I paced the yard like a pen. I had lost a sense of direction, unable to recognize myself out of uniform. Standing in the honor guard with my peers, my sword drawn, our Dress Blues keeping us stiff, we buried a lieutenant in front of his fiancée. Their

wedding was planned for that weekend and friends had all gathered to celebrate. They stood shocked and quiet. There was almost nothing said. It was May. I joined a reserve unit a week later.

I scan the channels for rock stations and they blare in and fizz out, overlapping with talk shows and commercials. A few minutes of AC/DC and then they're gone like their century, signals making their way into space with our casualty reports and radio checks. All of the urgent messages and calls home just noise that passed away.

A sign for the Toledo Zoo stands strange in the dark web of roads and ramps, a conquered hinterland now barren of animals and trees. Before we deployed, my CO named me Lone Wolf because I was often on my own, drawn to the fringe. Our small detachment didn't lose a man in 2005. I was the only one wounded. I remember him rushing into the casualty center as I was attended to. We'd been in Iraq for two weeks then. A decade ago. There's no distance kept in time. It was last month. It was every day, the Euphrates opaque, barely moving past, dense with dust and sewage, no fish striking its surface and no way to see its bed. It boiled, churning rather than flowing, the current indiscernible. No one swam. It was known to pull people under and keep them for miles.

I was sent to swimming lessons for years but found ways to never really learn. I didn't believe it was a physical act I could master and it kept me wary of the pool, where drowning happened. Somehow I remained completely dauntless in the river, the shore always near enough, the current sensible, pressing me, bulging against my waist. The pool was chemical. It burned my eyes and smelled nothing like water.

I failed the swimming merit badge test at Boy Scout camp. We did laps within lanes of roped floats in a deep block of lake. The odd formality of the evaluation returned me to the panic of water taught as danger. I took some in my lungs and coughed myself helpless. Quitting hurt as much as learning I could die in a pond.

The base is still eight hours away but my hair feels long. I may have gone feral since the war, like when I was young. I'm an expatriate returning to Quantico, Virginia where I became a Marine. I spent years there. I think about the zoo, it's absolute captivity. I understand a little how it must be to live in one. All those rules and boundaries and waiting for a gate to be left ajar. It's hard to be an outlier, to get to the outer reaches. It's harder to come back.

An ad hisses for KISS touring later this summer. The first album I ever bought was Love Gun, from a yard sale across the street in Poolville, New York. The cover was incomprehensible and compelling. There was no gun and I didn't understand the innuendo for years. I joined the KISS Army. Then I bought the Destroyer album as another collection was sold. Records were part of garage sales back then, a dollar or

two each, especially as guys began buying tapes to play in cars. “Detroit Rock City” was the hit on Destroyer and still plays in southern Michigan all the time. The song ends with a car crash. It comes on at midnight as I drive and the beat takes me back to Poolville, to me before I knew anyone who died. Before war was more than just stories I’d heard. Music takes me to the water.

In the Sangerfield River, which curled around my town, yellow leaves in the stream signaled the end of trout season. Foliage dropped and moved past, suspended and spinning, pressed like scabs onto stones and logs. The river had cooled and I waded through it to the deeper pools where I hoped a worm might still be noticed. I rarely used silver lures, though I had a few. I preferred the hook. I rubbed worms in leaves to marry their scent as if they fell from trees.

I ventured upstream from the ruins of a dam that once powered textile mills and saws. It was fished-out near the village, but no one walked this far up and I considered it undiscovered country. In truth, the area had been well trafficked for two hundred years by boys with poles and men with guns, natives with arrows and nets before that. But I’d never seen any of them. Rediscovered country was almost as good.

As I threw in my line, I tamped the clay bank to form a place to stand in the thinning shadow of an old willow tree. An oak trunk lay below the surface and I had mapped how the water was sucked under, carving a pit patrolled by trout. The bait would have to follow this path or fish would know it to be bait. The river struck its stones, the sound of static between stations, a solitude of water, the hushing of a crowd. I hummed rock songs.

3 AM at a rest stop near Youngstown on the Ohio/Pennsylvania border and people are sleeping in their cars, seats back, windows fogged with air conditioning. The humidity smokes halos around the light poles. Toll plazas are the loneliest places despite people pulling up with their windows rolled down. At this hour the roads are bare. I’m searching for a radio signal and still not thinking of Iraq.

I push past Gettysburg in the dark, markers noting where 50,000 soldiers died, then bend through the Virginias. I shave off my beard in a gas station bathroom. I wonder as I approach the gate to base, if the Marine guard will turn me away. I’m a civilian now. A savage. I look wrong, like a terrorist on my Driver’s License. This is tribal territory and I am unrecognizable, my 16 years shorn and starched impossible for him to see in me. I sit straight and want to apologize. I want to confess that I feel less complete now than I did when I belonged here. I’m missing too but no one is looking for me. I’m Lone Wolf. The guard waves me through.

The service is at Eleven Hundred. I have a few minutes to buy a small eagle, globe and anchor pin for my lapel, change into my suit at another gas station and line up

at Quantico National Cemetery to follow the hearse, the heat over 100 degrees. I speak of him as my CO, not as a civilian, not as someone who became someone else or was anyone before. Most people wait sealed in their cars, engine fans laboring to keep passengers cool.

Headstones stand in rows draped over the rolling knolls, their perfect geometry revealed and warping as I pass. Someday, if there's anyone left, they'll uncover this cemetery, Arlington too, all the dead in their uniforms, and try to make sense of them. Four hundred thousand and counting, like the terra cotta warriors of Emperor Qin, the fired clay slow to shatter back into silt. We are so quick to be soil, embalmers doing their best to preserve us for...for what? Rediscovery? The pharaohs of Egypt have been uncovered, looted by thieves and archeologists, displayed in museums to be viewed as nothing more than dead. And here's one more, found in a lake at peace. We all go missing when we die. Is it right to find us?

Marines carry the casket to a small brick-pillared committal shelter and we gather around. Only a few make it into the shade, the rest lit bright and squinting. I sweat fast into my black suit, my thick hair dripping at the tips, the sun unavoidable, and I finally think of Iraq. I thought the war would be on my mind the entire trip, but it wasn't. I looked at yellow lines and charcoal hills, tried to stay awake. I wandered and forgot. I had no music in Iraq so I don't return there through songs. I remember Iraq as static.

A priest reads some passages, dust to dust, and no one is invited to say anything about the man in the coffin, the one who survived the war and died fishing alone in a boat. A heart attack. Fell, drowned and drifted for a day, gone wild, lungs filled with lake. He was 58 and two years from receiving military retirement pay. His family will get nothing. Nothing but a plot in a line on a slope. Taps plays its haunting notes. His wife cries quietly. I haven't slept in 28 hours. My suit is soaked.

Then it's over, a line forming to shake hands and offer brief embraces, a folded flag presented to his widow. The day stretches, heat bridging the desert to the hole they have dug. We held memorials in Ramadi for our dead, but we didn't bury them there. They went missing from us, taken away to be laid in graves while patrols went back out, one man short. We're a naval service so every seat in a bird, truck or ship is known as a "boat space". Mine plunged into a swamp without me. They recovered an empty boat on a lake, my CO's watch still in it. That's when they knew. I want to be found alive or never found at all.

At The Basic School, on the far side of base from the cemetery and 23 years ago, we jumped into a pool from a fifteen-foot platform. Full gear. Abandon ship drills. We struck the deep end of the vat with our legs crossed and resurfaced, hands first,

splashing furiously above our heads. The purpose was to puncture a hole in imaginary fuel burning above us if our ship had been sunk. These were lessons from World War II. Our backpacks served as life preservers and we kicked our way forward while sweeping the water aside, palms facing out. It seemed absurdist and, though we went about it very seriously, we sputtered and flailed like drunks, lumps of wet woodland camouflage bobbing on packs swollen with clothing in Ziploc bags. It looked like the reenactment of a disaster. Helmets slid over our eyes, rubber rifles hung from our necks and our boots dragged like stones tied to our feet, all of us trying to push the water out of the pool.

I had to come in on days off for remedial instruction in the crawl, which I had already taught myself to do badly, my head up and arms wheeling the way teens escape sharks in movies. The precision of our technique was examined closely. In war, water would be hostile territory, every ship sure to be torpedoed. I wasn't concerned enough that any of this was possible. Lungs full of air, my Dead Man's Float was measured at 11 inches underwater.

I never wore a watch when I was a kid. The sun told the time and I was usually late getting home. I never worried, like my parents did, about drowning. In the bright noon I tied a wet maple leaf by its stem eight inches above the hook to serve as a sail. It joined the swirling camouflage. Filament pulled over my finger from the reel so I could feel the action. I was stalking while standing still, almost holding my breath, the line unwinding. Leaves trapped in the flow pressed under the fallen oak and surged on the other side as if spilling up from beneath the earth. My pilot leaf was lost in the billowing wreckage, uniquely indistinguishable, and the line went lax as the bait circled the pool. I can see myself then, hunched on the shore watching the reflection, waiting for the dull golden flash of a trout strike, hunting the frontier. Being there in the sounds of fall, I was in the space that still grows around solitude. My CO found this one last place, heard the call of the wild, listened to the water, went all the way.

I drive on as dirt is shoveled over him, through *The Wilderness* battlefield and find it noted only by a plaque. It's strange to see a sign beside wilderness that says it's wilderness. Like a sign in a city for a zoo. They still find bones here, men forever lost in the woods. The radio is on but I'm afloat on the road, forest on one side, the Euphrates on the other, past ads for caves cut open for tourists, squares of pasture and lawn, all the found places marked, fenced and named, rain dropping so thick people are pulling over, the highway ahead blurring into cloud. I think of the funeral as the sound pounds the windshield and roof. Rest in peace, sir. I want to know what the water told you.

BENJAMIN BUSCH is a writer, filmmaker, and illustrator. He's the author of the memoir *Dust to Dust* (Ecco) and his essays have arrived in *Harper's*, *The New York Times Magazine* and on NPR. His poems have appeared in *North American Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Five Points*, *Michigan Quarterly Review* and *Epiphany*, among others. He teaches nonfiction for the low-residency MFA in Creative Writing program at Sierra Nevada College, Tahoe, and lives on a farm in Michigan where he shovels by day and writes at night.