



DUST TO

DUST

A MEMOIR

BENJAMIN

BUSCH

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BENJAMIN BUSCH

ecco

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DEDICATION

For Tracy, Alexandra, and Kyrrah

EPIGRAPH



Stories are . . . in a sense, about ending and about endings, and of course they are also the heartfelt prayer, the valiant promise, that what we have loved might live forever.

—FREDERICK BUSCH, “DEATHS”

CONTENTS

[DEDICATION](#)

[EPIGRAPH](#)

[PROLOGUE](#)

Chapter 1

[ARMS](#)

Chapter 2

[WATER](#)

Chapter 3

[METAL](#)

Chapter 4

[SOIL](#)

Chapter 5

[BONE](#)

Chapter 6

[WOOD](#)

Chapter 7

[STONE](#)

Chapter 8

[BLOOD](#)

Chapter 9

[ASH](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

[CREDITS](#)

[COPYRIGHT](#)

[ABOUT THE PUBLISHER](#)

PROLOGUE

I knew very early that I was a solitary being. I longed for the elemental. As a child I was drawn into the wilderness, the reckless water of oceans, rivers, and rain, the snow and ice floes, the mountains of rock, stones, and sand, the forests, and the ruins left vacant by human decline, neglect, and tragedy. The places we had given up or could not take were what attracted me. I wandered the woods and brooks with unsubstantiated confidence, and I declared myself daring with unseasoned conviction.

It was beyond me to realize that I borrowed much of that invulnerability from the protection of my parents. They worried and were vigilant. Though they did not follow me on my adventures between breakfast and dinner, they assembled a story of where I had been when I returned hungry. They encouraged my delusions because childhood is the time for magical possibilities. I did not consider the possibility of rejection or betrayal. My ambitions imagined no losses. What could be lost?

I believed, once, that I could predetermine my journey. I wanted to create something that could not be destroyed, and to do that I had to disbelieve the evidence of destruction. I had to look at the bones and ash around me as the yield of errors, not of dreams. But I grew up and found damage, and death, and the friction of incalculable consequences. I had mapped a path through the wild with wishful premonition in my youth, but I had come to find my way by mishap and deviation. War was the wilderness, and I went there, too.

The soldier arrives home to discover that the war he has returned from has already been forgotten, and because he has survived as a witness to it, neither he nor his country are innocent. Both try to dream again, the soldier by remembering himself before the war, and the country by forgetting the soldier it sent away. The legionnaire returns to find Rome in ruins, its roads still straight, leading on the way he had once marched. It is, perhaps, better that his home is deserted. It can never be what was before, and the people who can forgive us cannot know what we have done. But the arch at the entrance to Rome still stands, its carved letters clear in the marble. It recounts only victory. The paved

roads are also there, leading to conquered lands where free people dig for the buried empire, its value being in that it is now lost.

My father, a novelist, experienced the world through language. It was an intellectual relationship with the physical universe. My mother was a librarian and understood. He could write with authenticity about experiences he hadn't had, could breathe life into people he hadn't been. He found a way to live outside of books—but not without some degree of astonishment that the things described in the books often actually existed. I was different. I gained comprehension of my environment by throwing myself against it. Digging, cutting, climbing, stacking. What my father built with words, I built with pieces of the earth, stones, and wood. He wrote most about loss and failure because he feared mistakes and departures so much. Tragedy was inevitable to him, whereas I believed that the inevitable could be fought. I thought that with enough defiance, mortality could be made at least improbable.

Trilobites were unconcerned with legacy, yet we find them fossilized, their stone portraits preserved in the rock. These remains are merely impressions, their tissue and shell replaced with gray minerals, death masks rising back to the surface. I have felt the sun and wind on my face, and though I remember the sensations imperfectly, there is an imprint I carry.

Childhood is still present in me. I can hear my own echoes now, elliptical, my voice changed but not the wonder I had. In seeking to disinter my childhood, I have found it unburied.

Chapter 1

ARMS

I was not allowed to have a gun. My parents were fresh from Vietnam War protests, and they had no intention of raising a soldier. My mother was against the idea of toy weapons, and my father quietly supported the embargo. He had been a boy once, though, and was a war baby. His father, Benjamin Busch, had been a sergeant in the Tenth Mountain Division, fighting German troops in the Italian Alps. My mother's father, Allan Burroughs, had been a Marine in the Guadalcanal campaign against the Japanese. He called me "Little Son of a Gun," but I continued to have no guns at all.

I spent much of my childhood constructing forts in our backyard and gathering local boys for epic battles. Each spring the cornfield nearby was plowed and flat river stones rose in the rows for me to harvest. I spent the cool mornings walking the furrows and hauling pieces of lost sea ledges and mountains back to my fort site. The afternoons I spent laying them in place. I built thick stone walls and dug in, preparing for siege. No contingencies were made for escape or surrender. I played as an officer wielding a maple-stick sword and falling early under withering fire. As I had no sidearm or rifle, I could not reasonably hope to survive a gunfight, and I honored those odds. No one ever came within stabbing distance, and I could never reach the enemy's line. Not realistically. Everyone else had something with a trigger. But casualties in war games came without consequence. There was no death in dying.

My father watched through the kitchen window, but I could never tell his mood as an observer of my recurring death. It was a small window and he was far away. One day in 1974, after I fashioned myself a rifle out of a length of old pipe, wire, and a board, my father turned to my mother and said, "Well, fair's fair," and for Christmas that year he bought me a toy M1 Garand, the same kind of rifle carried by my grandfathers in the war. It had a solid wooden stock, a metal barrel, and a wooden bullet painted gold and glued to the bolt inside. It could not fire, of course, but it was perpetually loaded.

went out into the vocal battle of children at war and sometimes, with my rifle, didn't die.

The fort grew from a simple stone barricade to a two-story wooden eyesore cloaked with bedsheets and ringed by a trench. Boards were hard to come by, so the structure evolved unevenly with what could be found discarded from projects around town. There wasn't enough wood to sheath the walls, so I used the old sheets my mother had draped over tomato plants in the garden during frosts. The rusting nails that held the cloth bled long orange stains from rains, and the fort always smelled damp. It became my focus of effort, and I continued to patch and expand the building for years, manning it every day. It had in it more nails than any house in town, and it would never be finished. My grandparents each visited once a year, and I would eagerly invite my grandfathers to inspect the fort. I knew they had both been in a war and would have good advice. My father's father would stand at a distance smiling at the complexity of the ideas at work, but I could tell he was disappointed by my craftsmanship. I explained the temporary use of the cloth as an excuse for what was still poor construction without it. My mother's father saw it differently. He would stroll out to the trench beside me with a cigarette and a glass of bourbon, and we would sit there for a few minutes. I crouched down in my trench and he sat on the edge with his feet inside, the ditch only as deep as his knees.

"Son of a gun," he'd say. "You stay low and let 'em get close."

He would sit and drink as smoke curled around his head. I thought, with him there, that I had done well.

A few years later my father, a writer and professor of literature, took about a dozen students to London as a study group. My mother, my brother, and I went with him to live in a flat on the edge of Hampstead Heath. Britain had not yet fully recovered from World War II. There were sections of London that had not been rebuilt since the German aerial bombardment, and construction crews would still occasionally pull unexploded ordnance from the ground. Thirty-eight years had somehow not been long for the generation that had survived the random falling of bombs. It seemed impossible to find a British family that had not lost a member in The War. While my mother stood in line at a pasty shop with my brother and me, an old woman noted that my mother had two sons. She looked at my mother with a kind of sweet admiration and said, "How wonderful. One for your country and one for you." My mother was haunted by that immeasurable expectation of sacrifice, and years later she would repeat the old woman's words to me as if they had been a curse.

We took day trips to castles. It established stone as the material required for legacy, and I began to draw detailed pictures of battlements. I penciled every individual stone. They were designs for my own castle, a structure I would construct later, when I was old enough. I remember the staircase built inside the walls of Rochester Castle, and how the solid blocks of stone were worn into deep, smooth dips in their centers. I asked my father how feet could do that much damage to rock, and he explained

that knights wore metal shoes. That made sense. I wanted metal shoes. I had seen some in the Tower of London, which was full of metal armor and handheld weapons, and the idea of knighthood weighed heavily on me. War became smaller, closer, and, in the artful stone of castles and sculptured steel of armor, beautiful. The savagery of medieval battle had left nothing behind it but alluring artifacts and mystique.

I attended school there and my class spent the year studying Roman Britain. The teacher organized a play about Queen Boadicea, an early Celtic leader of the Iceni tribe who fought heroically against Roman control in Britain. We could either be legionnaires or Celts. I wanted to be in the legion, but I was cast as one of Boadicea's warriors. We were referred to as barbarians, not Celts, taking on the name given to unruly peoples north of Rome, and we were considered a horde instead of an army. It seemed yet another step down. We were sent home with a list of things to make and instructions on how to dress for the play.

I showed the requirements to my father, who looked at them as if he couldn't read and handed them to my mother. Shield, sword, belt, dark cloak. To make a shield she gave me a large piece of cardboard from a grocery box, and we covered up the tomatoes printed on it with glue and brown butcher's paper. I said a warrior, barbarian or not, would never emblazon his shield with vegetables. I drew undersized dragons on it, which looked like smudges at a distance, and lightning stabbing out from the center, actually a common Roman shield design rather than Celtic. My mother had found some black material, which she wrapped over one shoulder and fastened around my waist on the opposite side with a safety pin. I wore brown shorts, no shirt, and one of my father's belts wrapped almost twice around my hips. Last was my sword. My mother was at a loss for how to make a sword. We finally just cut up strips of the cardboard, glued them together, and then wrapped them in black plastic from a garbage bag. It looked terrible. I was very disappointed and my father was happy to be free of blame for the errors I found in wardrobe and armaments. My costume might have done well in America, where expectations were low, but when I arrived at school I was immediately ashamed.

Some of the children came in elaborate armor that looked like accurate replicas of Roman uniforms. Their parents had spent weeks working on them, and the children were afraid to move much for fear of tearing something that had been carefully glued. The barbarians ranged in their interpretation, and we looked somewhat like a horde. The teachers had built an impressive wooden chariot as well as two matching horse costumes with papier-mâché heads and brown-cloth bodies each worn over two men. Half-blind, they pulled the chariot around the room with the girl who played the queen standing in it, and we followed. We rehearsed for days.

My part consisted of nothing more than following Boadicea's chariot into the room chanting angry nonsense, waving my embarrassing sword, lining up against the Romans, and then charging to my dramatic death. On the day of the performance for a hundred parents, the staff, and several hundred students, we dressed in our classroom and the Romans marched into the auditorium. The legion stood shoulder to shoulder at the edge of the stage. They looked wonderfully imperial, but I was relieved not to have been chosen for Rome. I could imagine how my armor would have looked if I had been left

craft it from a tomato box.

We assembled in the hall outside while speeches were made inside. At some point we were given a signal and made our entrance. My parents said that as we came in yelling, I was the barbarian most noticeably smiling. Boadicea gave her speech about liberty, and then we were to attack the Roman ranks, failing to achieve our freedom. I rushed up the steps at a boy wearing imposing leather Roman armor, and he made an uncomfortable slash at me. This was my cue to perish. In rehearsals, I had gone through the motions, pretending slowly to pretend. But this was the performance. I threw myself backward with a scream, my feet coming off the stage, sword and shield tossed into the air, and I struck the oak floor on my back with a smack that sounded loud even to me. I was told afterward that half of the parents stood up and the play went silent with a gasp. I lay unmoving, arms extended, eyes closed, laboring to control my breath. A teacher hurried to my side and stooped, trying very hard not to let her voice sound hysterical.

“Can you hear me, dear?” she asked. She had her hand on my chest. It was cold.

“Yes,” I hissed, trying not to move my lips.

“Are you hurt, sweetie? Can you move?”

“I’ve been killed,” I whispered, keeping my eyes closed.

The teacher withdrew, I heard my mother’s voice in consultation with her, and the play went on. More boys falling carefully on the floor at the foot of the stage to the constrained sword strokes of the boys dressed too well for fighting. Queen Boadicea, seeing all of her men killed, made another speech, drank poison, slumped in her chariot, and was pulled out of the room by the teachers dressed in Roman horses. I had pretended at war again and had, again, been killed in front of my parents. It was my first memorable public performance and a blend of the two professions I would go on to pursue more seriously.

I brought the profession at arms home to Poolville, the village in Upstate New York where we lived. It had once been a prospering mill town on the Sangerfield River, with taverns, hotels, and a newspaper, but it had declined into a quiet hamlet of fifty homes. Its industrial history had been reduced to a few stone ruins along the water, collapsed remains of gristmills, woolen mills, and sawmills. Beside the railroad tracks were the foundations of the train station and creamery. The town was still surrounded by working dairy farms, and the field behind our house was used for crops. The farmer had planted corn the year we returned from England, and when it had grown even with my head, I treated it as ranks in a host. I took a steel lid from our galvanized garbage pail, its small central handle ideal to wrap my entire hand into, and dashed between the lines of stalks with a long straight sapling that was sharpened at one end. Hacking at the crop was forbidden, so I just ran through the claustrophobia of green leaves, fast enough to feel like I was cutting my way into their mass.

surrounded, my shield pushing the arced leaves aside and my spear extended. I roared with what voice I had then and fought my way an eighth of a mile to the river. There I could look back, breathless, at the undisturbed field. My charging through it had left no gash that I had imagined rending in the ranks. The water was still a boundary, and I stood at its edge, slicing at its surface with my spear. Nothing to do but turn and walk back the way I had come, my shield glossy with dew. I passed through again without making an impression, and my path closed in behind me.

It bothered me that I had to stop at the river's edge. I traced the river all summer, using bridges to get to the other shore. The far side was a wild tangle of vines and underbrush and took hours to walk a mile through, but it left me alone on the riverbank, and that made it mine. The river had been named of course, but I considered that to be its name in general, not the name here. This part was unknown like Antarctica, which had been named and left almost entirely untraveled. One day that year, as the corn grew to almost twice my height, I was able to advance quickly upriver because I had decided to cross in the water. It was the day I had risked what it could mean to be utterly wrong, slipping on the slick rocks, the water depth difficult to judge by eye, the power of the current inestimable. I had been given swimming lessons, and in the blind chlorine burn of instruction I had learned little more than to be worried about deep water. But this was a river, where, even distorted, the bottom appeared more real than the abyssal blue floor of the pool.

I stepped in with my spear. It was colder than I had expected it to be in late summer, the water from rain finding its way out of the hills. I arrived on the other shore, my jeans wet to the waist and suddenly bound tight to my legs, my socks spongy and shoes loose. The pebbles on the bank slid as I stepped on them, and my soaked shoes bled water onto the dry stones. I did not like being wet, but once I was soaked with my clothes on, I lost the hesitation to be wet that way again. I could cross rivers. It changed my view of boundaries instantly, and the absolutism of my parents' warnings about water. I had challenged the laws of men and nature, and I was unharmed.

I slipped back through the field, leaned my spear against the barn beside the asparagus patch, and returned the lid to the garbage pail, and went into the house. My pants had not dried, and my sneakers squeaked and foamed bubbles through their ventilation holes from my soaked socks.

My father was at the kitchen table reading. He was already balding in the middle of his head, and he allowed an explosion of beard to conceal his neck. He was overweight, which made him self-conscious, and he always looked swollen in his khaki pants and penny loafers. He took on the look of a Jewish intellectual gone native in the frontier, haunted with secret knowledge of the wilderness. He had, in fact, been made afraid of nature. His Brooklyn childhood had been filled with an overbearing mother who had been an imperious naturalist and, by her constant examination of plants and warnings about them, she had made exploration of the outdoors into resentful labor. He couldn't remember the names of the plants or birds that were repeated to him, and he avoided the garden, watered only houseplants, and grew nothing but stories of nature hunting us down. He had his hackles permanently up, and protected my mother, brother, and me ferociously. We called him "the Bear" and he enjoyed the title. Nobody fucks with a bear and, like most bears, he took everything seriously.

My mother was the opposite in everything but our defense. She was happy to walk in the woods and dig in her garden. My father would watch her from the back porch amazed that she could make life from dirt, that earth was a comfort to her, and that she had an understanding with nature. They were madly in love. He would head up to his workroom and she to her garden and they would meet in the kitchen—always the kitchen. We could not get anywhere in the house without going through the kitchen, and one of my parents was sure to be in it.

I thought he might not notice me as I sloshed past.

“So,” he said. “Are we safe from the river now?”

“River?” I tried to ask with surprise.

“I would think it difficult to get that wet without one,” he added. “Well, there are lakes, too, I suppose.”

No lies came to me.

“You’ll pass swimming lessons before you go wading again,” he said.

I went to my room to wonder, for the rest of my life, how he knew.

We had not had a medieval age in America. It was explained to me that with the invention of the rifle, swords had become merely decorative. I did not like to hear it, and it vexed my obsession with true chivalry. But rifles returned, slowly turning me toward the illusory romance of our Civil War. I bought by mail a bullet from a southern battlefield. There was no damage to it from impact. It was heavy, a .58-caliber minié ball, almost white, caked with oxidized lead, fired into soft dirt or dropped by the Union. That Christmas my parents gave me a bullet mold. It would have been from around the same time as my minié ball but used for a small hunting rifle. It was a simple brass clamp that closed two empty halves of a bullet together, leaving a small hole in the top to pour molten metal into. You had to make one at a time, keep the lead at a boil while you waited for each bullet to cool in the mold or dipped the clamp in cold water. I had no hunting rifle, no shells with primers, no gunpowder, no lead . . . but I wanted to make bullets.

I began by aiming the drip of candles into the hole. They were white candles and there was enough delay between the drops of hot wax for them to harden in the mold in layers, each drip visible in the soft bullets. They looked like they had been cut from quartz-colored seashells. I had one gray crayon and I melted it on our woodstove in a Coke can that I had cut in half. This way I could fill the mold one pour, and I made one solid gray bullet. It looked real.

The large box of sixty-four crayons I got that year had copper, silver, and gold colors, made with fine metallic flakes, and I immediately melted them and poured them into the mold. After those, I had no more gray or precious-metal crayons, so I began to use other colors. I produced the projectiles carefully, as if they could explode in the process of their creation. I made handfuls of them, gave some

away as gifts I can't remember explaining. "Burnt orange" and "turquoise blue" bullets. "Goldenro
ones for imaginary guns.

When the school safety patrol went on a trip to Washington, D.C., we stopped for an afternoon
Gettysburg. I was excited to visit Devil's Den and the field where Pickett lost his division. Standing
on Cemetery Ridge, I tried to picture the charge against it by more than twelve thousand men, a
effort that saw so many killed it exhausted Lee's army into a retreat from which it would never
recover. During our last year in Poolville, my parents had gone to a dealer and found an 1860
noncommissioned officer's sword for me. It was a magnificent Christmas gift. I knew it had cost too
much, but more than that, it signified my parents' admission that I was a martial creature, and that
their prolonged effort to dissuade me from my natural tendencies had failed. My father looked
wonderfully pleased as I held the sword in our living room beside the glittering tree, but I could tell by
the tight smile on my mother's face that the gift had survived a great deal of discussion. The sword
was said to have come from the battlefield at Gettysburg, but there was no proof that it had. I
examined the straight steel blood-grooved blade, which had some nicks, and the brass hilt, handle, and
pommel. Even in the Civil War, this sword would have been little more than symbolic. Its scabbard
had been lost, and in my mind, that left it forever drawn. My parents would not allow me to run with
it, for very good reasons, but I could march, raising it and swinging at the head of invisible ranks.
I was careful not to strike anything solid, preserving the damage to the blade that I believed to have
been done in battle.

Poolville was my hometown. I circulated through it as if the village were pumping me around. I did
the hand mowing on the lawn circuit with Mr. Macgregor, who spent so much time on his riding
mower that he began to walk as if he were still seated. I raked leaves for everyone who did not have
children still at home, and I weeded gardens in backyards. By the end of the summer, my hands were
stained green and there was a crescent of dirt under my nails that took a month to grow out. I stacked
firewood and threw bales onto hay wagons, packed them in the lofts of barns as they tumbled on
elevators. I walked the railroad tracks and the river, fished, and dug in old ash dumps for artifacts
from the turn of the century. On my rounds I would stop in to see Mr. Tuttle, one of the last of the
original families to settle the village, and ask him for another story about the dam, which lay ruined
behind his house. He was always in his immaculate yard inspecting a flower, picking up a stick, or
watching the river pass. The elders were never more pleased than on Halloween when we would all
dress up and go to every house. We did not understand the importance of our annual visits to them,
presenting ourselves in costume, excited for their offerings. I would always dress as a combatant
of one kind or another. I went from cowboy, to knight, to soldier, to *Star Wars* stormtrooper wearing
a deformed papier-mâché mask I had made. It was a village that raised children and saw them always
in motion, gathering in the town square for baseball, hide-and-seek, war games, and snowball fights.
They watched us arrive and move away.

My parents decided to sell our house in the village and relocate to the rural landscape fourteen
miles away. Before we moved from Poolville, we mowed the lawn one last time, disassembled the

rusting swing set, and hammered the sandbox apart. It sat in the shade of a pine tree and had been ignored for a few years. It split into pulpy strands of wood, and we found that we could have broken it by hand. The boards had rotted out on the bottom, and because it had never been lined, worms had worked dirt up into the lower inches of sand. When it was built, my father had bought bags of smooth play sand, which looked bright when first poured into the box, and it drained rain immediately. It was a dark tan now, stained by leaves, mined with pinecones, and held the water that fell on it. The ocean square of beach seemed to have aged away from the sea. The sand also sat lower in the box, much of it lost by years of traffic. It had continued to migrate, finding its way back down rivers, along beaches, and into dunes.

For a moment the sand held the edges of the box, the long settled corners looking carefully built, defining the walled outline of an ancient citadel destroyed and filled with desert. My father began to cut into it with a pointed shovel. He threw it far into the yard to spread it out, and it disappeared into the grass as I raked it. A shovelful sliced from a corner had in it four plastic army men buried where their position had been bombarded years earlier. As the sand thinned in flight, showering in an arc across the grass, the soldiers bounced and rolled on the surface again. They were unchanged. I wiped them off and returned them to the bag in my room with the other soldiers that had not been dead so long but had been killed many more times.

Next, the stone walls of my fort were thrown into a pile behind the garage, the trench around the fort filled in and raked flat, my wooden fort dismantled and driven to the town dump. It was not in any way my parents' intention to destroy this monument, but there was, for me, a certain loss of history. As we abandoned our post with the last load of furniture, a small green square of perennial ryegrass lay where, for eight years, my fort had guarded the house from the fields.

The Sangerfield merged into the Chenango River south of Poolville and continued down the valley to the larger town of Sherburne, running along the railroad tracks, swelling with tributaries until it became the Susquehanna and emptied into the Chesapeake Bay hundreds of miles away. We moved in the direction of the water, finding a house in the shale hills above Sherburne in country large enough that we could not see any neighbors. It was like a colonial outpost, and I set to work as if it were. I cut several miles of pathways through brush and swamps, constructing small shelters on the high ground and in the sapling tree lines along the way. My new fortress was built beside a stream next to an outcrop of discarded fieldstones that served as my quarry. Thirteen years old and isolated in the countryside, I began a long period of mostly solitary play. I went down the hill to Sherburne for school, sports, and work, but it was not my hometown and I remained emotionally distant from it. Instead I bonded immediately with our land.

My parents mostly contributed books to my interest in war-fighting. Birthdays and Christmas brought David Macaulay's *Castle*, Harper's *Pictorial History of the Civil War*, and Tim Page's *Nam*. I patrolled the land each day with a hatchet, a machete, and a pair of Japanese military binoculars captured by my mother's father in World War II. I was allowed as many blades as I could carry but no firearms of any kind. Without neighbors for war games, or the emergence of any true adversaries,

the surrounding hay fields, I couldn't call a rifle a pressing requirement, though with what was left of my youth I continued to practice at territorial defense and pretend at survival. Each afternoon as the sun set, my father would stand by the porch of the house and call out toward the distant darkening woods for me to return from the frontier for dinner.

In 1987, I left home for Vassar College to study studio art. I drew political cartoons for various campus papers and ran for student offices. I began serious drawings with charcoal, blackening my fingers with burnt wood sticks to mark images onto newsprint, then rubbing the ash back off with erasers. I made meticulous intaglio prints, engraving lines into zinc and copper plates, inking them, and pressing them onto paper. I worked clay into nudes, cut metal, carved wood, and painted oil colors onto canvas with rabbit-hair brushes. My thinking was expanded by work like Frank Stella's 1957 painting *Tomlinson Court Park*, Malevich's *White on White* from 1918, and Robert Mangold's 1977 *Imperfect Circle #2*. I shifted from realism to abstractionism. But I also made bottle-rocket launchers out of copper tubing and pine when the sculpture studios were empty. They looked like advanced versions of the first rifle I had made for myself out of a pipe and a board. At night I worked on campus patrol circling parking lots and unlit paths with a radio and heavy flashlight. Despite discouragement of military recruiting on campus, I found my way to the Marine Corps Officer Candidates School the summer after my junior year.

I sat with several hundred other young officer candidates from colleges around the country in a high metal classroom in Quantico, Virginia, as the staff filed in to be introduced. The commanding officer of the school was to make a speech. It was to be the last moment of wondering if we had made terrible mistakes coming here. Colonel Fox stepped to the podium, his officers and senior enlisted Marines in a line before him, and gave his speech. It was one line:

“Attrition is the mission.”

There was silence as we waited for him to say more, perhaps something lauding our interest in service to the nation, or something inspiring to encourage us through the next ten weeks. There was more, and he stepped away. We glanced at one another. He was not referring to an enemy. Within six weeks we would lose 40 percent of the young men in the room to unsatisfactory leadership evaluations, injuries, and integrity violations. The door slammed behind him and the instructors began to scream at us. We went into complete disarray. As I was pressed out of a door, called a “hatch” from that moment forth, I turned to see an instructor hurl a chair. We were re-formed into platoons outside on the parade deck—the ground was called “the deck” from then on—and we remained ill at ease for the rest of the summer in a land we had the wrong names for.

I had arrived after an undistinguished year as president of my class, and the recruiter had made much comedy of a President Bush from Vassar joining the Marines. George H. W. Bush was

president then. There was a certain delight in the persecution I received due to being a Vassar student and once I made the mistake of taking pride in it. We rarely saw an officer. This was by design. The officers were in command, but the senior enlisted Marines were in charge. There was a difference, and the appearance of an officer, a rank we hoped one day to achieve, was built to be an event, an almost spiritual witness to something near perfect. It was on such an occasion that my sense of humor reflected poorly on me.

We were to be inspected by the Captain, and we had been polishing brass belt buckles and black leather boots all morning. We had ironed for hours the night before and had burned every loose green thread back into the cotton camouflage uniforms with lighters. We lined up and the officer made his way around the squad bay, one officer candidate at a time. He was preceded by a gunnery sergeant and followed by a staff sergeant. They were immaculate, and we were all found, individually and collectively, to be a mess. We were to make no eye contact, even if we were eye-to-eye, and we were also not to look away. I stood at attention, seeing nothing, as doom converged on me. We were to greet the officer with our college and contract. I said, "Vassar." There were only two types of contract, air and ground, but I said "infantry" instead of ground. I was nervous and said both school and contract without a pause in between so it sounded like "Vassar Infantry." Few words were less likely to appear together. The Captain paused as he looked at my uniform. He continued to not look at my face. His brow bent slightly, and I could tell that something I had said was wrong. I thought that it was "infantry."

"Not to be rude, Candidate Busch," he said, "but isn't Vassar a girls' school?"

He meant it as a serious question—not everyone knew that Vassar had been coed for twenty years—but I thought that this was my moment to prove that I was unafraid. Someone with pride in his school able to stand up to what was unintended as a joke. I said, and said too loudly, "Women's college, sir!"

The women at Vassar had already trained me to correct the term "girls' school" when I heard it. The staff sergeant's head spun, and he looked at me as if an octopus had come out of my face. The Captain nodded, looked straight into my eyes, and stepped away to the next candidate. I stood in a hush, the other candidates waiting for me to be killed as the staff sergeant stepped in front of me and turned, one pace behind his commander. He was shorter than I, and though I stared just over the top of his head, I could sense his wrath. He was almost trembling. That night, after a day spent crawling in a swamp, wearing the uniforms we had cleaned with such care for the inspection, I was told to push up on the floor until the building sank. I thought that I would have a heart attack from doing push-ups. My suffering was eventually ended, and I was sent to my rack by a bemused instructor who said, "I got a joke for you." I stood waiting, my arms dead at my sides, for him to tell me, but he turned and walked away.

I carried an M16-A2 service rifle there, but we never fired live ammunition. Mostly, I cleaned it. For ten weeks I cleaned it, carried it, aimed it, and cleaned it again. It sweated carbon from years of shooting blank training rounds in the humid July of Quantico, Virginia, and I was surprised

discover how porous oiled steel can be. We marched endlessly and incorrectly, and my rifle slowly formed a bruise on my shoulder from drill practice. There was something pleasing about its weight and it became what it was supposed to be—an extension of me. Every Marine is a rifleman. Every Marine recites the Marine Rifle Creed:

This is my rifle. There are many like it, but this one is mine.

My rifle is my best friend. It is my life. I must master it as I must master my life.

My rifle, without me, is useless. Without my rifle, I am useless. I must fire my rifle true. I must shoot straighter than my enemy who is trying to kill me. I must shoot him before he shoots me. I WILL . . .

My rifle and myself know that what counts in this war is not the rounds we fire, the noise of our burst, nor the smoke we make. We know that it is the hits that count. WE WILL HIT . . .

My rifle is human, even as I, because it is my life. Thus, I will learn it as a brother. I will learn its weaknesses, its strength, its parts, its accessories, its sights and its barrel. I will ever guard it against the ravages of weather and damage as I will ever guard my legs, my arms, my eyes, and my heart against damage. I will keep my rifle clean and ready. We will become part of each other. WE WILL . . .

Before God, I swear this creed. My rifle and myself are the defenders of my country. We are the masters of our enemy. WE ARE THE SAVIORS OF MY LIFE.

So be it, until victory is America's and there is no enemy, but peace!

I wondered about the final line. It sounded like the final enemy would be peace itself. It still makes sense that way. Peace would destroy everything we were preparing for. The staff sergeant instructor at OCS had said, "If you can see it, you can shoot it, and if you can shoot it, you had better only need one bullet to kill it. We don't shoot to wound in the Corps . . . and we don't miss." I thought of my rifle with its perpetual single golden bullet.

I graduated from OCS and went back to Vassar for my senior year as a studio art major. My Quantico rifle was recycled to be cleaned for another ten weeks by another officer candidate who would never get to shoot it at anything. I felt diminished without it, and so in December of that year, I bought myself a rifle at a Kmart in Poughkeepsie, New York. It was a Marlin .22-caliber long rifle with an artful hickory stock, and I thought it an appropriate gift to myself on my twenty-second birthday. My roommate seemed suspicious of my new possession but allowed it to lie, unloaded, in its box in my closet. Two months later, on February 23, 1991, I watched on television as the United States–led ground war was launched against Iraq. It lasted nine days. Within twenty-four days combat troops began to return home. I had missed my generation's war.

The dilapidated trailer that I lived in after college had been abandoned for years and was filled with the damp, uncirculated smell of an empty home. It was positioned on top of a small hill behind a horse barn, its back window overlooking an isolation of young forest that blocked a view of the river beyond the pasture below. The trailer looked out of place on the old farm, its top half painted a fading military green that looked powdery with wear, and the bottom half white, its doors and windows wrapped with

dull extruded aluminum trim.

I worked most days as an assistant for the artists Harry Roseman and Catherine Murphy Poughkeepsie. Catherine was going to begin a representational painting of a target on a tree and wanted real bullet holes in it. She didn't want all the impacts to be in the center. That was the difference between art and war. I brought my rifle, and Harry and I fired it for the first time. The rounds tore through the paper with an aimed randomness that violated the perfection of its numbered circles. Then I cleaned the rifle, and Catherine spent a year painting the target.

The trailer sat on what was left of an old estate. There was a large, noble home, an in-ground concrete swimming pool, a carriage house with a workshop, servants' quarters with a garage, greenhouse, a chicken coop, a small cabin, a barn with a paddock, and the trailer. The original proprietor had dammed the river as if he had owned it in order to raise the water level so that he could run his boat and pull water-skiers. It was an extravagance that the new owners could not restore, and the boathouse, built on the raised shore of Fishkill Creek, had collapsed. I gathered the posts and boards of the boathouse and burned them, leaving nothing but an earthen depression that had once been filled with water, a motorboat held suspended above it. The morning after the fire, I sifted the ash to pick out the warm nails so that the horses and sheep wouldn't get any stuck in their hooves.

The oaks and maples near the river had been protected with rock wells several feet deep, but most of the trees had since died and rotted down into the stone-lined holes in the pasture. Everything was in decline, the original owners long gone and the new owners living beyond their means and station. They did not want anyone to know how little they truly had. A strange collection of renters stayed in the various buildings. Above the carriage bays lived a sign maker and his wife. He was a bitter arm and leg veteran of the war in Vietnam, and I would stop in to visit him as he made signs and ranted politics. There seemed to be no one he could not list reasons to despise. But he had a soft spot for the horses that roamed the pasture and fed them oats that he bought. Beside the trailer was a long chicken coop that had been cleaned out and inhabited by a man who rarely left its dark interior. He always appeared at the door in the same black T-shirt that had a skull and crossed salmons and said SPAWN AND DIE on it. Inside, the space looked dim and soft with discarded couches he had found. A woman rented the cabin, but I saw her only three or four times in the year that I lived there.

The trailer was surrounded by debris. Everything that had broken on the estate was laid around it in a staged disorder of perpetual abandonment. The family had the hoarder's thought that objects retained a value, even in ruin, and should be coveted. Disregarded items depreciating in storage were still in inventory. Fence posts and extra shingles, cans of half-empty roof sealant, bricks, tires, heaps of rotting firewood, lawn mowers, propane grills, and an old Ford Bronco. Because these objects were being stored, they were often covered by plastic tarps. The bright blue tarps partially concealed the newer deposits, but the older tarps were either green or were bleached gray and looked solidified, as if they had been cast in plaster. They had been pressed down by weather for so many years that what they protected could be seen like bones through thin skin. Nothing was ever removed once it had been dumped near the trailer. The collection was cumulative. Tall grass grew between the junk, and the

yard in front of the trailer had turned into little more than a path, large enough to drive a truck through with something else to leave there.

Inside, the space was glossy with polyurethaned veneer. The walls and ceiling were both covered with smooth, thin birch panels stained a golden pine, but water had found its way in. The veneer cracked and the shiny finish curled as if it had been burned. The ceiling sagged and split open at the panel joints, revealing the pink fiberglass insulation. It looked like whale flesh being sliced. It was a frail capsule. In the small back bedroom, the ceiling had fallen in and there was just swollen insulation overhead. I would seal off that room and live in what was left. The trailer had electricity, and water came to it from the barn through a garden hose that lay stretched across the lawn like a striped snake sunning itself. During summer days the water baked in the hose, came to the faucet hot, and smelled of rubber. At night it came in cool. If the mobile home had ever been inspected, it would have been immediately condemned and destroyed, but it wasn't that kind of deal. I wasn't going home, I had no money, and I needed a place to live where I could trade labor for rent.

I cleared away all of the refuse in front of the trailer and planted a small garden where I grew tomatoes, corn, green beans, and herbs. A woodchuck began to grow large grazing in it. On a day off, I lay on the roof of the trailer with my rifle, waiting for him. It was hours before he ambled up to the corner of my plot; I held my breath and shot him through the head. There was no hunter's celebration, no trophy to mount, but I took a picture of the rifle and the woodchuck lying beside each other and sent it home. I had a rifle—and I could use it.

At night I worked at a Kay-Bee Toys store in a worn-down mall nearby and offered advice to parents buying plastic rifles as Christmas presents that year. Some made realistic sounds, some had red lights in their muzzles, some cocked. There were very few for the serious boy at war, and I was always disappointed when someone selected a purple rifle with pointless buttons and accessories. I would get back late after restocking the shelves and work hunched over on exacting ink drawings, an easel propped on a table in the miniature kitchen. The year went by quickly, and fall felt early when it came. My grape tomatoes littered the ground under the plants after the first frost, and the vines dangled from strings and stakes as if they had been boiled. At night I could hear the black walnuts drop through the glass of the empty greenhouse.

I had no phone and my fiancée, studying in Russia, would have to call a pay phone in front of a nearby grocery store once a month. We would arrange the next call each time we spoke. What money I made I put toward a small diamond ring for when she returned.

In the winter, everything in the trailer froze. I used hay and manure to cover the garden hose that brought water from the horse barn to the trailer but not the pipes underneath the bathroom. In the morning, the water in the toilet bowl was frozen solid and I had to crawl under the trailer with a hair dryer to heat the drain and the feed lines. I packed the space with hay and flushed the system with boiling water every night. The shower still froze in the wall, and I tired of trying to defrost it. I joined a local gym and took showers there. My parents came to visit once. They entered the trailer as if they might fall on them and were at a loss for where to sit. They stood feeling too large and awkward in the

space. My mother brought me some purple irises from a local store. They left and my father told me that she cried on the way home.

Sometimes, in the winter, I would go inside the greenhouse and watch the snow fall through the holes in its roof. I could see exactly where the stark branches of the black walnut tree extended over the building by where the panes had been smashed in. It was quiet. The light in the room was tinted almost blue by the thick snow on the glass that had not yet been struck by walnuts. It was like looking up from underneath a frozen pond that had been drained of its water, strange slats cut in the shell of surface ice, and I felt more like I had fallen in from above than like I had entered by the door below. The air was still, the winter wind kept from the space by the glass walls, the cold coming in from above with the snow. I could hear the snowflakes tapping lightly on the side windows and the edges of empty pots.

In the spring of 1992, I accepted my commission as a second lieutenant in the United States Marine Corps and returned to Quantico for nine months of training to lead infantry platoons for the next three years. I left my .22 with my father for protection (from the KKK and local lunatics) and for peace and control on their rural tract in central New York. I was sent to Okinawa, South Korea, Australia, Ukraine, and the swamps and deserts of America to carry a rifle for the Marines. My father shot a rabid raccoon one day, while I shot nothing but targets. He had been a rifle marksmanship instructor as a Boy Scout in his late teens. I had become deadly accurate, but our only enemy then was peace. One night my father heard wild dogs or coyotes in the field behind their house and went forth into the night with my rifle to defend his old dog. He fired a number of rounds out into the darkness, toward the sounds of the pack. He was moved by the urge to defend his home, his family, against invasion and the invisible enemies that encircled us. Years passed, and the rifle leaned against a bookcase in my father's writing workroom with what bullets were left in it.

In April of 2003, I entered Iraq as the commanding officer of a light armored reconnaissance unit. There seemed to be at least one AK-47 assault rifle in every Iraqi home, used mostly for communication. Three to seven rounds would be fired into the air and, often, answered in kind from somewhere nearby. These sometimes sounded like delayed conversations in code. Warnings and acknowledgments. We knew enough to tell when the shooting did not involve us. Celebratory fire was common, too. I watched the sky over Iraq every night as tracers rose into the darkness like sparks getting slower as gravity caught them and pulled the tiring lead back toward the ground. The phosphorus ignited on the rear of the bullet would betray the origin of the shot, but after the tracer

burned out, the projectile would continue on its invisible trajectory, falling into other people's lives. was estimated that hundreds of Iraqis were killed each year by stray rounds fired in celebration from personal rifles. I found it odd that celebration and mourning were coupled in so many single, detached acts. All bullets land somewhere.

I did not fire a weapon during the entirety of my first seven months at war, but I was responsible for every bullet in my unit. We had killed people, and they would remain dead despite my condolences. Defensible actions still produced inexplicable grief. As I was leaving Iraq, intelligence reports noted that sniper rifles were a much sought-after item on the Iraqi black market. A war against our occupation was beginning.

At home, my war was not popular. It was deemed, by the evidence, to be unjustified. An unjust war. Despite injustice, it was not ended and seemed, by various costs, to be expanding instead. Marines sent to kick in the door during the invasion were being sent back to deal with increasing regional violence in places like Fallujah and the Syrian border. The insurgency had begun, and foreign terrorists were using entire Iraqi neighborhoods against us.

An Iraqi boy, surrounded by war, could not play war. He could not build a fort and pretend, even, to its impossible defense. Our enemies had blended with the local populations, sometimes *were* local populations, and we were necessarily forced to regard everyone with almost equal suspicion. To avoid accidents, we made it illegal to sell toy weapons in stores, and toy guns were confiscated and destroyed whenever found in homes; a child playing with a toy rifle might be mistaken for the enemy and shot by a soldier on patrol. In Iraq, there were consequences for children acting on their imagination.

I returned home at the beginning of October, and my unit began a hurried demobilization. I cleaned my rifle and pistol one last time and turned them in to the armory to be reissued to a new mobilized reservist and carried back to Iraq. The war would go on, and the rifle would stay in it. I went home and auditioned for a small role as a police officer on HBO's *The Wire*, where I carried an empty plastic prop pistol. It had no weight to it, and I was pretending, again, to be armed. One day in Baltimore while walking from the dressing room through an alley to a film location, I heard a production assistant relay the call, "Rolling!" and I thought I might be in the shot, so I quickly stepped behind a building. On both sides of the alley were row houses. A man slid out from under a car, saw me, and began to step backward to his house, loudly defending himself from charges I hadn't made. A heavy man stood silently by the engine. I watched him while I spoke to the other. I looked like a cop, had a badge on a chain around my neck, and he was looking at my plastic pistol, real enough to scare him. I explained myself—*only an actor*—and he smiled, not believing a word, until I continued down the alley. It had been this way for me in Iraq.

Sometimes when I was not filming, while walking along the street or standing in line at a store, I would be gripped by the sudden feeling that my pistol was missing. My *real* pistol. I would instinctively reach for the spot where my drop holster had hung on my leg in Iraq before I could catch up with myself. Rituals are slow to leave the blood. And blood, I had learned, was important.

I have been welcomed home many times, but I have never come all the way back from the places
have been. As I walk now, I am still balancing myself on the smooth beach stones in Maine, my face
rough with salt and grit, looking for seashells and bombs in the wrack, the smell of dry cut hair
smoke, and gunpowder in the wind. My childhood is here with my war, home now, and I remain
scouting ahead with my dusty rifle and fishing rod, my parents following behind worried about where
my errantry will take me.

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