CutBank

Volume 1
Issue 93 *CutBank 93*

Article 8

Winter 2020

In the Lake, Before Dark

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I

"You know how you shoot an Arab?" asks M., my platoonmate, on the way to our graduation ceremony. "You tell him, '*Wakef, walla ana batuchak!*'"—*Stop, or I'll shoot*. He taps his forehead. "Then you give him two in the head, two more in the knees, and say, '*Wakef, walla ana batuchak!*'" Our bus is pulling up to the Nahal Memorial, a concrete behemoth near Pardes Hanna. "That way others hear the shots and think you warned him." He smiles grimly. Other men rise from their seats.

We've been training for seven months in the Negev and are about to deploy to the Line. M., like me, is a foreign volunteer in the Israeli Army, another Jewish-American, and one of twelve in our brigade. He left CSU Chico last year for reasons that were never too clear. During our last furlough, about a month back, I visited his apartment in Tel Aviv, a dim, dusty, white nook, where he showed me a clip on his laptop. It was a video he'd recorded of his girlfriend, or someone, going down on him in his dorm. "She's kind of a fatty," he'd said. I wasn't sure how to reply.

The stage is draped with green banners—the color of our brigade—and small Israeli flags, which stand motionless in the heat. Hundreds of families are spread along a lawn, which aprons the concrete stage. M., like me, hovers back a bit, not eyeing the crowd for any relatives—we have none in-country—our rifle stocks hugging our waists.

As the Brigadier proclaims us new "warriors" and everyone in our regiment shouts, I remain silent. The sun is baking my uniform and the patches of grass interspersed among the onlooking crowds. Then I catch sight of a child, who can't be fourteen, gripping a video camera. This is 2004, when such things still exist. I can't really make out her face, only her bangs and the droop of her arms and the lemon-colored sundress she's wearing. She's probably two hundred meters out, just within range, it occurs to me, bleakly, of the M4A1 on my waist. I watch her now, frozen, indifferent to the roars of the crowd, to the ticking of busses, to the grumble of planes through the sky.

II

In the newspaper one morning, fifteen years later, I read of an "emergency authorization," just declared by the President, allowing the Raytheon Corporation "to team with the Saudis to build high-tech bomb parts in Saudi Arabia." The sun bleeds through the blinds. My youngest stirs on my arm, disrupting my reading. "The move also includes support for Saudi F-15 warplanes, mortars, anti-tank missiles and .50-caliber rifles."

"I have to pee," says my daughter, scrambling out of the room.

At the breakfast table, while she eats, I crank out an email to Raytheon, then one to the President, imploring them to halt the arms sales, reminding them of the thousands who have died in Yemen, the million more reeling from cholera. And it occurs to me, as it often does in these moments, that I have no basis for writing; that I myself have fired a .50-caliber rifle supplied with American aid. I also know that these letters are fruitless, a bit of comedy, perhaps, for the interns assigned to reply.

My daughter's spoon hits the floor: a discordant clanging, and not unlike the sound a .50-caliber makes when it shoots. I wait for the pulsing echo—that *oomph* that you hear—but the sound never comes.

"I want fork."

III

After the graduation ceremony in Pardes Hanna, I hitch a ride home with a platoonmate and two of his friends. All three are British by birth and enlisted, and all three smoke incessantly. The car's quiet is a welcome reprieve.

Earlier we stopped at a McDonalds, where my platoonmate explained that his taller friend, Y., is a sniper in Gaza and about to complete his tour. He's on leave for the weekend and has come to support his friend. He sits in the front passenger seat and keeps stroking his thin, yellow hair. He's unusually pale. He's barely spoken since we left, except when someone asked

him at our table, earlier, how many he'd "gotten down in Gaza." "Three," he'd explained, his bluish eyes veiny and rimmed. He inhaled a Gauloises, picked at his burger. "One was on a six-to-nine shift. Saw a guy coming out of a mosque, carrying a rifle. One shot in the head. It was quick." He recounted the other two, briefly, removing the seeds from his bun.

The air hangs heavily among us now driving, thick with Gauloises. Outside the traffic on 65 hums. I watch him stroking his hair, and I notice the pores on his nose, where tiny, white pimples have formed, and begin to wonder whether killing doesn't add to the stress, or in some way take it off. Then I begin to reflect on *got*, as in, *How many have you gotten*? and wonder why we've invented this phrase, and whether it doesn't in fact mean *possession*, as if, since you've taken another life, you've now come to own it, and everything that life would entail.

IV

2015

The air above Trout Lake is strangely fluorescent. An amber sun glows in the west; we've arrived late. My daughter scurries up to the shore, dips her toes in it. A loon skitters up from the pines.

Behind us, my wife takes view of the parkland, our youngest clutched in her arms. We're in northern Wisconsin, Labor Day weekend, visiting a cousin of mine, and we've happened upon this wooded lake. We know we should be going soon; that we still have hours to drive, and clothes to set

out, and lunches to pack before dawn. And yet, the water beckons.

I tiptoe over the rocks, patting the surface. Ripples cascade all around. Dark islands mirror themselves in the glass, perhaps a thousand yards out. Black spruces move in the wind.

I begin to wonder, as I will in such worlds, what stillness exists here, what calm.

V

The night of the graduation ceremony, I lie awake in my bed, still picturing Y.: his thin, yellow hair and veined eyes. I begin to wonder what I've done in coming here: who I will fight, where I'll go.

I turn to the woman beside me, a fellow "lone soldier," whom I will someday ask to be my wife.

"But this is what you wanted to do," she replies, when I tell her of the conflict I feel. "It's what you signed up for—"

"I know."

"You could still leave," she explains, not without a slight hesitance, as if she knows what my departing would mean.

Outside the air is still. A pink almond tree leans by our glass. We're on a kibbutz southwest of Jerusalem. I'm leaving tomorrow morning for Jenin.

VI

The Stanford Encyclopedia *of Philosophy*, in the entry on "War," explains that some scholars believe that "specific features of killing in war make it morally different from killing in ordinary life." These include: "The scale of the conflict, widespread and egregious non-compliance with fundamental moral norms, the political interests at stake, the acute uncertainty, the existence of the law of armed conflict, or the fact that the parties to the conflict are organized groups."

I wonder: does the Raytheon Corporation entail an "organized group?" Do the political interests of presidents, or powerful men, justify atrocities in Yemen? Does the scale of the conflict—what could be bigger than cholera?—circumscribe the act? Killing, I know, is hardly unique to that land. I begin to wonder who's responsible: the coalition pilot, or whoever drops the built bombs? His commander in a bunker? Prince Mohammad bin Salman, the de facto Saudi ruler? The oil conglomerates and arms manufacturers who back him? The U.S. President, who does their bidding? The people who elect the President, or the financial stakeholders of the corporations that lobby him? Their lobbyists in Washington? The five justices of the Supreme Court who decided, however fatefully, that campaign contributions are "protected" free speech? Am I responsible? For all I know, my own pension invests heavily in Raytheon, or others of its ilk. Does it really matter if it's Yemen, or Congolese diamonds? What are the "laws of armed conflict," or these "fundamental moral norms" by which we claim to live?

VII

The morning after the graduation ceremony, at a depot where my company meets, M. recounts how he spent his off-day, unsealing his Marlboro Reds. Apparently he travelled to Jerusalem's Old City, "deep inside the Arab Quarter," as he explains, to find loose tobacco. There, he reached for his wallet and accidentally grabbed the double-magazine latched to his belt. "An entire crowd of Arabs stepped back," he explains, tapping his pack with his palm.

It's unclear if he's joking. A couple months back, he reportedly spent a night in a military prison for having broken into his kibbutz's closed bar. "Wasn't so bad," he'd explained at the time. "Like being in the army. Except the food is worse, and you're alone." A child of Ukrainian Jews, he's shorter than the rest of us—the foreign volunteers—with oily black hair and green eyes.

"We're gonna get the worst of it," he says to me later, boarding the bus to Jenin. He's also a designated marksman in the unit, having proven a reliable shot. "Gonna kill the most people," he says, leaning back. He picks at his gums as he talks.

VIII

In Gur Aryeh, Judah Loew ben Bezalel, the 16th-century mystic and fabled rabbi of Prague, comments on the biblical episode of Jacob and

Esau, particularly Genesis 32:8 ("Then Jacob was greatly afraid and was distressed"). Citing Judah ben Rabbi Ilai, the 2nd-century sage, who asked, "Are not fear and distress identical?" Rabbi Loew explains that "the meaning" of the double-worded description—"afraid" and "distressed"—is that "Jacob was afraid lest he should be slain and distressed lest he should slay [others]" unjustly, in this case, Esau's men.

In *The Ethics of War and Peace*, Michael Walzer, the Princeton philosopher, points out that there is very little written in the Jewish tradition, apart from these passages, to govern Jewish conduct in war or purvey a code of ethics. This is because, Walzer notes, until the creation of Israel, "there were no Jewish soldiers who needed to know what they could and could not do in battle."

More recently, the Israeli Defense Forces has tried to enact such a code, which it terms "Purity of Arms." Among other things, it maintains that the soldier "will maintain his humanity even in combat." These rules, I believe, were once stressed to me in training, though in a language I could barely understand and amidst the yawns of other men. Yet I dwell on them now, fifteen year later: the meaning of "purity of arms"; the rules of what we can and can't do; even the recognition, perhaps as far back as the late-biblical era, and certainly the 16th-century, that war induces guilt, latent fears.

IX

2019

We're driving on I-59, my wife and I, doing sixty in the left lane. A huge thunderstorm's passed, and the sky appears bright, the road slick. We're about an hour south of our home in Mississippi, returning from the NASA base where my wife works, when a small, black thing slinks along the road. I almost jam on the brakes. We screech across the lane markings, and I regain traction, watching as a turtle inches forward, just beside our left tires.

"Ew." My wife recoils. "It's sad to see that."

In the rearview, semitrailer trucks loom. I know the thing doesn't stand a chance. I think about stopping, about backing up, even, and retrieving the shell with my hands. Would it bite me, I wonder. Would my wife think I was insane?

X

The moment we emerge from the Jeep, rocks begin thwacking the pavement all around us. It isn't clear where they are coming from.

We're in the town of Beit Omar, northwest of Hebron, inside the Central West Bank. It's January 14, 2009, the height of the Gaza War, as the conflict has come to be called. I'm in the Reserves, having flown back from the States. A half-dozen Jeeps cover Road 3527, which bisects the village. The eight men in my unit fan out.

Around us, steel shutters jangle and slam. There are shades being drawn. Little eyes everywhere.

The opened doors of our Jeep provide us little cover, as rocks keep smacking all around.

Soon the stun grenades start up. Troopers pull pins and heave them forty meters—at nothing, it seems, but parked cars. The sound these things make is impossibly loud. I've forgotten to bring earplugs, and I can hear gentle whining. Gas grenades whoosh through the sky.

Our job, one presumes, is mainly to provide cover for an arrest being made in the town. Our Sergeant cups the handheld, kneeling on the pavement. A brick nearly severs his head.

I'm not really scared here as much as confused as to why I've come back to this war. I suppose a sense of duty or camaraderie compelled me, though to whom, or just what, I don't know.

The thick of the violence, I'm well aware, is in Gaza, a hundred clicks west. I can vaguely hear choppers, the rumble of tanks, though these are drowned out by the shots that bang at my side.

White streaks of tear gas howl through the air, clanking down hard on the road. The rock storm has not abated. Tiny legs flit through the clusters of trees and smoking sedans up ahead.

XI

Trout Lake, Wisconsin, 2015

My daughter and I are both naked. My wife glances on from the shore, our youngest child asleep in her arms. The whole lake surrounds us, wide ovals fanning out from our heels. I hold my daughter's hand, stepping on muck and the tiny rocks etched in the clay, trying not to slide, feeling overwhelmed by the stillness and cool all around. My daughter begins giggling. "You're naked," she says.

"So are you," I reply, looking down.

Like two figures cast out from some land, we traipse through the water, half-mute, unafraid, a great sun bearing down on our heads.

XII

Gaza War, 2009

About a hundred meters down, a slingshot snaps and vanishes under a hood. It's impossible to know how many are confronting us. Hundreds, it would seem. Maybe more.

Soon a fusillade of bullets rips out from our rifles—smoking rubber-coateds, which bang off of shutters and shatter the windows of cars. We've already set fire to a couple incidentally, one of which is steaming ahead.

To our left, above a valley, a hazy sun sets, silhouetting far buildings, a mosque.

It's unclear how long we'll be present, if anyone's getting hit with our shots. The rocks continue flinging. Behind me, a staff sergeant kneels and thumbs down the wheel of his Bic.

XIII

Deliver me, I *pray Thee, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, lest he come and smite me, the mother with the children. And Thou saidst: I will surely do thee good, and make thy seed as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.* Genesis 32:12-13.

XIV

We kneel beside the edge of a building. The Sergeant hands me his rifle, which is equipped with rubber bullets, though I know, like him, that these things can blind, maim, or kill.

I hold the gun tightly, unsure exactly where I should point. During my regular service, several years back, I only faced a couple of encounters, neither of which, despite M.'s forewarning, resulted in anyone killed. Perhaps that's why I have come back here, I realize: a thirst for action, or blood. I don't know.

I take aim with the Reflex, its tiny reddish dot fixed on the mass of a crowd, what appears to be a shoulder, or some swath of flesh that's exposed. I can hear others yelling, the whooshing of bombs, stun grenades, probably. Flares. The sky has darkened softly, the buildings aglow. I keep picturing that stage where I stood. I feel a thousand eyes upon me, not least of all my own, and I can hear something, vaguely: my heart.