

BENJAMIN ARDA DOTY

MINUTE OF ANGLE

The sounds of saws, of the ground breaking, and of the gears of a crane come from the police station they're building below us. It's all that we listen to, except each other, for hours. The temperature is 98 degrees, but will probably reach 110 by 1400 hours. Dust blows across the landscape and covers everything, as if it were coughed up by some demon god cast off to eternity in the dry heat of the desert. I haven't seen a part of the country that isn't like this. We're on the fourth floor of an abandoned school. The classroom is empty but for a row of desks connected together to look like a pew. Harmon is studiously sitting down at one of these desks, looking through the scope on his M24. He's pointing his weapon out a large frame where a window once was. Shards of glass litter the floor along with torn pages from a book in a language we don't understand. There's the crunch of glass under our boots when we move. The walls are bare concrete, and everything from the classroom that can be gutted has been. Dust the color of chalk covers Harmon and makes him look like some ghost of himself. Through the frame of the window that once was, we see the entire perimeter of the station and the rooftops of cream-colored buildings that look like the work of a cubist painter interested in elevated squares, less concerned with what things mean than what they represent. Mosul.

"Why are your people bombing these people?" asks Harmon, right eye glued to his sight.

"What people?" I say, looking at the station.

"The Kurds. Why are the Turks bombing the Kurds?"

"I don't know. It's a long story."

"Feels like we have all the time in the world. Tell it to me simple." He grins as if he's got some idea.

"Some people just don't like each other. That's as simple as it gets."

"Cording to what I read, your people are keeping the Kurds

down.” Harmon is always reading something on down time—*Newsweek*, *USA Today* and *Time*.

“They’re not my people,” I tell him. “I’m an American. Same as you.”

“Just saying,” he says, drawing his face away from the scope and up at me with that grin.

“You going to start that black-white thing again?”

Harmon has a self-righteous streak sometimes.

“No, man,” he says, looking back into his sight. “All I’m saying is that these fucks have enough trouble without that shit your people are stirring up. Just saying.”

“You’re always saying something.”

“God-given right. All I’m saying is I want to get home. Kiss my baby.” He looks up again and grins. He has a woman, Tracey, whom he never stops raving about.

“Some day.”

“What do you miss about Jennifer?” he says.

“Her smile.”

“Every guy misses his girl’s smile. Be specific.”

“Her yellow summer dresses.”

“What else?”

“The way she puts her hair in a french twist with a pencil.”

“Better.” He lightly laughs and focuses back on his sight.

I look out on the small plaza in front of the police station. We wait. My hands stick to the spotting scope. Once I would never have sweat so much. A pack of small boys, five of them, are kicking around a soccer ball.

“Will you look at what the tallest kid has on his shirt?” says Harmon.

I see what Harmon talks about when the tallest kid turns to face the gate of the station. It reads Certified Sex Instructor on what looks like a diploma on a faded gray shirt.

“How old do you think he is?” asks Harmon.

“I don’t know.”

The boy begins to bounce the soccer ball on his knee. He’s not half bad. The ball goes higher. On the fifth bounce, the ball jerks a little. I flinch. The ball falls without any air in it.

“Why the fuck did you do that?” I say.

The boys gather around the dead ball and then look around before deciding to take off quickly and leave it there, like a fallen comrade who’s not worth the trouble.

“Someone’s going to be pissed. Way to compromise the position,” I say.

“Shit’s happening. Boys shouldn’t be playing here.”

“Way to fucking go,” I say, surveying the windows and rooftops to see if anything has moved and if anyone may have seen where the shot came from.

“Seven-two,” says Harmon. “Seven-two.” He says it as if it’s a downright shame—not because I’m behind him by one—but because I’ve confirmed only seven to my name in the two years we’ve been in this God-forsaken place. “Seven-two,” he says.

The radio clicks on to an angry voice.

“Way to fucking go. You answer that, big shot,” I say. My palms are sweaty. Sweat beads on my forehead. I’ve never sweat so much. For one moment, then and there, I want to kill Harmon. I never, really, have sweat so much. I rush for water in my canteen to slake my thirst.

Harmon looks like a ghost of himself. He grins the entire time Barbero, our new commanding officer, berates him over the radio. We pack our weapons and things and relocate to a secondary position, even though the classroom doesn’t seem compromised.

“I was getting bored,” says Harmon as we leave. He places his hand on my shoulder. “Relax, man. You got to let things go.”

Harmon’s right; I’ve got to let things go. Harmon has the best attitude I’ve come across in the 25th.

We relocate to the third floor of an adjacent building. The temporary police station is on the first floor. We slip into the building by passing over the roof from ours. Someone has put in new windows, even though the wiring and copper behind the walls have been pulled out, leaving behind cracks that look like fault lines. We continue to watch the construction of the police station, which someone in high command considers a potential insurgent target. Rockford and Menendez relieve us at 2200 hours, twelve hours after the start of our watch, and wait for the moment that makes us who we are.

The microsecond when the hammer hits the primer is the precise moment when a sliver of light splits the earth in half and opens a channel between heaven and hell with you in the middle of it, a space in time so acute it obliterates distinctions between right and wrong because no man is faster than a speeding bul-

let. You will aim for the chest. You will hear your own heart-beat, and time will slow down. Between one pulsation and the next, you will measure the life of another human being in the space between two notes of music no one will ever hear. You will see as God sees, and there will be no other way that could be the right way because this was always the way. Between the eye looking through the hole and the press of a finger is a view through this portal, this moment of Zen. Every man forgets his troubles and this war at the tip of a slug. His spotter stays beside him, guarding him and willing to catch him if he falls.

Harmon does his best with me.

We spend our off hours in a large TEMPER tent with twenty cots, ten in each row. Harmon listens to music on his iPod, something slow and sweet like Marvin Gaye or the Commodores, old soul. It helps him to sleep, he says. His eyes are closed, he's smiling. Harmon can't do a closed-mouth smile or half smile. It's always something wide.

"Whatchya doing, man? Get some shut-eye," he says.

I'm sitting at the edge of my cot and playing with a sealed envelope—addressed to Knoxville, TN—in my hands, the third one in less than a week. I've kneaded the envelope so much that it's wrinkled, as if it has gone a million times around the world and through as many hands only to end up in the same place.

"You sending another letter to Jennifer?" asks Harmon.

I look up at him from the letter.

"Lord Byron," he says, "you writing poetry again? When are you going to let me read some? See Mr. Sensitive."

I put the letter away.

"You got to talk more," he says. "You'll feel better. Ain't nobody could have done better."

"That's why we're pulling duty at a police station."

"The whole chain of command can go to hell. It'll blow over in no time. Go to sleep. Get something from the medic to help you." He turns over on his back again, puts on his earphones and places his hands behind his head. He closes his eyes and grins; he could be dreaming of being on the beach somewhere.

They turn the lights off. McCarthy begins to snore.

Fox hits him with his pillow.

"If you don't stop snoring, I'm going to smother you in your sleep," he says.



“Fuck you,” says McCarthy.

I put the wrinkled letter under my pillow. I’ve stripped off the desert camouflage and am lying down with only my dog tags, a sand-colored T-shirt, and underwear on. I’m burning up. It’s impossible to get used to sleeping here. I open up a water bottle and drink.

Jen doesn’t like letters. She prefers e-mail, she says, but each e-mail she’s sent me has become shorter. I haven’t seen her in nine months; we’d been together one year when I shipped out of Fort Benning. It’s her first year in nursing school, and like most of us here, I like to believe in her loyalty as much as I believe I’ll return in one piece. Twice a week she writes. I think about all the doctors in the hospital where she interns, looking at her ass or something. And her, smiling and flirting with them. Jennifer says she doesn’t like it when I’m jealous, but when I think about it more, I find more reasons to leave me than to stay with me. I still owe the army two more years.

I send the letters anyway.

In the last week, nothing has been the same. I can’t tell my mom because she’d only worry more. I can’t tell my father because he’s dead. In the letter I’ve written to Jen, I curse the army. I tell her I hate the Iraqis, even though we don’t really know any of them. I tell her we’re losing. I tell her morale is low because everyone knows we’re here on a sham. I tell her about how Harmon asks me all these questions about fighting Arabs and how often he forgets that I’m Catholic. I tell her how often he forgets that even though my mother’s Turkish, my father’s American and I was born in Oklahoma, how Turks aren’t Arabs.

I also tell her that I don’t know if what we did in Iraq is right. I tell her about the soldiers who are accused of murdering a man on his way to pump water to increase their body count. I tell her my probable kill is probably alive, even though she never wants me to talk about the Iraqis we nix. I tell her how hard it is to stop sweating and how much water I drink every day. I even tell her that Harmon’s questions get to me, that I sometimes wonder if I’m fighting on the wrong side. I tell her about everything but the one real thing on my mind. I tell her I may not be fit to serve anymore.

I ask her if she’ll meet me someplace exotic like Paris or Moscow if I show up missing one morning. I ask her if she loves me, no matter what.



I put the letter in which I tell her all these things under my pillow. It is like the second letter before it, which is like the first. I plan to send the third despite the risk of someone reading it. We hear they do. The army owns everything. If something goes missing, we pay. If Harmon wastes a bullet on a soccer ball, he has to pay. If a pair of socks disappears, we pay. If I lose my mind, I'm sure there's a way I'll have to pay for that, too.

McCarthy snores. I hear the struggle that takes place as Fox, unable to sleep, follows through with his promise.

That thing I couldn't write about was two weeks ago when a roadside bomb sent a Humvee, and the u.s. patrol in it, thirty feet into the air in flames north of Hilla. Six of us in two-man teams were thinly spread across the town. Hilla was hot. Gunfire, like the repeated cracks of a whip, and small explosions made us wonder if another American soldier had been killed. At 0230 hours, we watched a stretch of pot-holed road that led to one of two bridges over the Euphrates. A curfew was in place. We observed the road from the top of a cratered water tower whose dome had been ripped apart some years ago at the start of Enduring Freedom. Harmon spotted.

"Every morning at five-thirty, my grandpa and I would set out for this little quiet area off Lake Blackshear," said Harmon. "We'd catch bass, perch, and catfish coming down the Flint."

"You still go fishing with your grandpa?"

"Died three years ago."

"You miss him? I never knew my grandfather," I said, training my weapon on different objects in the dark with the patience of a jungle cat.

"He had three heart attacks, but he lived till he was eighty-nine years old. Nobody can complain, I guess. He had slave blood."

"What are you talking about?"

"He had slave blood. He could put up with a lot of things, like three heart attacks, and last. He had slave blood."

"Do you think Juba's out there?" I asked.

Juba's name is whispered throughout the country. He turns hunter into hunted. He aims for the vulnerable spaces between the body armor. He never takes a second shot. He's killed over one hundred Americans, but no one can be sure.



“So you believe in the boogey man?” asked Harmon.

There’s a website someone’s put up for Juba, accessible anywhere around the world. He’s a celebrity for the enemy. A few days after a soldier is killed, Juba may take claim for it. Sometimes, there may be a picture on the website no journalist could have had the access to take. We don’t know if Juba is real, but every night and day, he’s a ghost who can hide better than we can. Some say he’s Egyptian.

“On the left side of the road, ten feet from the bridge,” said Harmon.

Through the telescopic sight, I saw the green silhouette of a lone figure crouching along the bank of the road. Anybody this late at night couldn’t have had anything but bad intentions past the curfew. U.S. vehicles would be driving down the bridge soon.

Harmon cleared the order to shoot with Captain Littlejohn. The target rose and moved closer to the road. I held the M24 as comfortably as if it had always been a part of me, like an arm. I heard my heart beat and imagined the flapping of a hummingbird’s wings when time slows.

I judged space and time at 2,800 feet per second. I found the minute of angle and squeezed the trigger.

Jennifer hasn’t answered my letters. Last night I talked to her on the phone.

“Have you gotten my last two letters?” I said.

“No. I’ll look out for the letters,” she said. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, sweetheart. Read the letters.”

“Remember what I said before you left? Tell me everything. Always tell me the truth and be yourself. Did you forget?”

“No.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, babe.”

“I’m worried about you. You don’t like to talk anymore.”

“You’re the one who’s not—”

“Not what?”

“I have to go. Read the letters. I love you.”

“Okay, but,” she said, pausing, “I love you.”

I didn’t have to go, but I couldn’t talk anymore. I never knew how empty of life saying those three words could sound until





Jennifer said them. Harmon once said, “Remember what you have back home.” I take a sip from a bottle of water I always carry with me.

We cleared the area as we walked toward the kill. We watched the buildings for the possibility of someone else with the one we took down. But there was no one else.

The young man’s head faced the dry dirt. He may have been sixteen or seventeen. The back of his striped white shirt was blood-stained where I laid the brass through his chest. His left hand lay raised over his head. In his right hand, beside his legs, was a water bottle filled with milk from a goat or cow. Several feet from his fallen left hand, in a crevice of broken concrete, were four kittens in a shoe box, maybe a week old, whose cries were barely audible. We only looked down and stared. The wind kicked up some of the sand off the bank into our faces. Off the Euphrates, we could see the reflection of a starless sky and detached half moon. There was our silence, the low howl of the wind, the hungry cries of little kittens, and a boy’s face neither one of us would turn over to see.

Our captain showed up with Elliot after we didn’t answer our radios. He surveyed the scene and shook his head. He gave orders, and when Elliot returned from the vehicle, the captain replaced the water bottle filled with milk with a coil of detonator wire. He chucked the bottle into the Euphrates; the bottle plopped on the surface and slowly disappeared with the current down the river.

“Get rid of this,” he said, handing over the box to us.

Harmon looked at me and said nothing. He took them away to the bridge. I sat down on the bank and took off my helmet.

“Son of a bitch night,” said the captain.

When Harmon returned, I didn’t ask questions. I wouldn’t look up at the river or the boy lying with his face down in the earth.

I picked up my weapon and put my helmet back on. Harmon and I sat in the back. Elliot started up the Humvee.

“We got a dead one here. Send the clean-up crew,” said the captain into the radio.

Elliot drove us to camp.

“Our duty is to shoot to kill,” said Harmon later before





we went to sleep. “We don’t take chances if we want to get home.”

We went to Mosul two days later.

For two weeks, we guard the station until some newly trained Iraqis take over our duties. They are as green as their uniforms. Wide eyed and confused, they look like kids dropped off at their first day of school by their mothers. As the captain once said, “They’re no good for shit.” One day they wear Iraqi Army uniforms. The next day they could be the ones setting the IEDs. We pack up and follow a convoy to An Najaf.

I see a medic, who supplies me with Triazolam. I sleep, but it does nothing to stop my sweating. The land is trying to suck the water out of me, as if it’s some large dehumidifier in the biosphere. I’m losing weight, that nearly ninety percent of my body made up of water. When I try talking about Hilla, Harmon will hear nothing of it. As the convoy moves farther south, temperatures reach 120 degrees. Dust continues to cover the landscape, as if the desert is reclaiming the land men thought they would civilize with roads and buildings and hope. My mother sent me a *nazar boncuk* to cast off the evil eye, and even though I shouldn’t believe in such things, I’ve started keeping it in the left breast pocket of my uniform. The glass it is made of feels even more slippery in my sweaty hands. I douse my head with half a bottle of water to cool off and drink the rest in the back of the APC. I wonder if I can hold a rifle the same way again, as still as the walk of a spider across a reflecting pool of water.

An Najaf is Shia. It isn’t as hot as Ramadi, but Jund al Sama, the Soldiers of Heaven, regularly take shots at us. The cease-fire ended three days ago. Two days ago, marines raided a barber-shop, in which they found several hundred AK-47s, a cache of explosive material, mortar rounds, anti-tank mines, and enough RPGs to take down a flotilla of Cobra gunships. They also found a pamphlet urging enemy marksmen to shoot doctors and chaplains since it will hurt morale more than a normal soldier’s assassination.

But if we kill more, we raise morale. According to the rules of engagement, all armed forces go out of their way to minimize civilian casualties. As men who don’t miss, we’re supposed to keep the civilian body count low. But there is the pressure. A



kill is a kill. Those who attack us don't wear uniforms, so every civilian threatens.

We pass the charred remains of an overturned Stryker APC. The call to prayer empties from a speaker hoisted on the lone minaret of a mosque off the main road. The Koranic proclamations of the imam's guttural voice pull the spleen. Women and men gather at the weekly market where vendors sell what they can, from expensive watermelons to toilet seats, under the watch of heavily armed American and Iraqi soldiers, who wouldn't have the least idea of who could be carrying a bomb. I close my eyes to rest them of what we see day in and out.

I dream of a fall evening in Billy's backyard as kabobs are grilled over charcoal, with the voice of Roy Orbison, Chris Isaak, or somebody who sounds like one of them in the background. A Nerf football flies. An aluminum trash can is filled with ice and beers. I'm half drunk at six-thirty, and Jennifer comes over every once in a while when she's through talking with one circle of folks or another. She leans over to kiss me. "Last weekend may have been the best in my life," she says, referring to our getaway at the Keys. "Please come back in one piece," she says. Even though that's what every girl says to her beau about to go in harm's way, she's saying it to me. The silver crucifix her grandmother gave her hangs above her cleavage. She teases me. "These girls will miss you too," she says. All is well in the world. I haven't left home.

Ten of us take up positions in abandoned buildings over points deemed strategic in the city. A platoon of Leathernecks killed seven of the Soldiers of Heaven. There are fears of reprisal. We take the roof of a shelled apartment building, five stories tall. As we walk up the flights, we pass the undoorred entrances of gutted homes. On the second and fourth floors, we set up trip flares. On the roof, we wait. Someone somewhere burns discarded tires, sending up a stench over the neighborhood. At dusk, the scattered lights give Najaf the look of an outpost on a desolate moon, some post-apocalyptic setting from a science fiction novel. Yet, in the background, we hear the sounds from a party, music from a wedding, an indication that life goes on where we have been ordered to take it. I wonder if Jennifer and I will ever get married. I entertain the idea that I can will it if I want it badly enough. Harmon sits with his back against the door to the roof. He eats and spits out the shells of sunflower



seeds. He's not cracking a smile and seems lost in contemplation. Our waiting hours float on dreams.

I want to confess. I do. I want to tell him about the sweating. I want him to know that I can't do this anymore and, if I'm unfit to serve, both of our lives are in danger. But all he's going to tell me is that I'm crazy. I can see myself at the VA psych ward, wrists and ankles tied to a bed, screaming for water. I finish another bottle and place it beside the one before it along a row against the low wall, lining the edge of the roof. Yesterday Sanchez joked, "We can't carry a supply truck for all the water you drink." Harmon takes up his weapon. He wants to smoke, but can't. I look through the scope and watch. We follow our men, and those who aren't our own we stay close to on the trigger. Our eyes are open to boogey men and opportunities to boost morale.

As hours pass, we piss into the empty bottles. With his face painted like a tiger, Harmon looks like a demon born of the night. Several hours may go by when we say nothing at all. In this silence, our own thoughts and memories play over and over, a track as empty as the void of night in An Najaf. If we don't blink fast enough, the dark may close in on us. I haven't slept in two days. I sweat through my undershirt, absorbed by the unquenchable climate.

"Six hundred yards," says Harmon. His voice is barely audible, almost at a pitch only dogs can hear, but, accustomed to it for so long, I hear it.

I'm on one of those silent tracks.

"On the hospital roof," he says.

Through the scope, I see the world in contrasts of green, our color-blind predatory night vision. Beside a water tank on the roof is, unmistakably, a man, whose arm and leg I make out from behind his hiding place. My heartbeat searches for steadiness. A verdict has come down for us to execute this matter of life and then death. My muscles are taut, but my hands are like melting butter. I think of the innocent kid.

"Come to papa," says Harmon.

The arms and legs emerge from the shadows and become the man. He's holding what appears to be a rifle in both hands. The red aiming dot is on his torso.

"Take it," says Harmon.





COLORADO REVIEW

I adjust the scope for elevation, focus and distance, the minute of angle, the inch to which the slug will hit my desired impact point at one hundred yards.

At six hundred yards, I adjust the minute of angle one-sixth. In astronomy, it is the angular distance from the celestial equator, which cleaves the earth down the middle. I wipe my right hand on my dust-covered fatigues.

“Glanton,” says Harmon, losing the pitch of his voice. “Jeffrey Emre Glanton,” he says, pronouncing my full name, even the Turkish middle name my mother gave me. “You take it.”

I shut my eyes, open them. My heartbeat knocks on the door of the last chakra. A gate opens at which no judgment will pass. I become the red dot, which *is* because it *isn't* the space around it, existing because of what it isn't—this war, a dream to be home and in love, dead kittens and children, the confidence of a friend, the sweating. I find the minute of angle, or, rather, it finds me. Precision makes everything of nothing. There's the silence, a calm as vast as an ocean without waves. I squeeze the trigger.

“Jeffrey Emre Glanton,” says Harmon, when the target drops. “I love you. Eight-two.”

