

Pageant

Imagine a soldier.

What do you see?

Is it a man? Is he white? Maybe a clean, young face and a close haircut. Maybe a rough, old leatherface, cigarette hanging out of his mouth. Maybe it's *Platoon* you see. Maybe it's *M*A*S*H**. Maybe you see a sibling who served. A son. An uncle. If a war has ripped its way into your home, maybe it's not a soldier at all, but a box and a flag.

Imagine a soldier.

I never know what to say when people tell me that I don't look like I served in the Army. They're right. I don't, but I have a hard time putting together what is meant by this. I'd like to think they mean beard, but I've met plenty of veterans who are successfully wearing the lumberjack look. I'd like to think that when people tell me that I don't look like a soldier, they mean "you've got a bit of a tummy," or even, "you look like a hipster." I'd prefer not to think that they mean, "I hear your lisp. I see your *swish*."

Imagine a soldier.

What is he doing? Is he holding a rifle? Is he hiking, with a heavy pack weighing him down? Posing with Iraqi youth, offering a camera the two-finger sign for peace? What is it that soldiers do during the day? When they aren't in combat. When they aren't training. What goes on in the toybox when our nation isn't playing war?

Here's a picture of a soldier. In a bar, two middle-aged men with scruff on their faces and paint on their jeans slam oversized tokens onto the counter of their local VFW post. They laugh,

sharing stories and can after can after can. The tokens are challenge coins, weighty discs etched with the logos and slogans of military units. The men received the coins for merit: informal awards from military commanders for something outstanding: not a life-saving sort-of event though, that would warrant a ribbon or medal. No, the act had to be something more routine. A well-executed inspection. Zero accidents in X days. The men sling their coins onto the bar, telling a story about it, where they received it, who it's from. It's customary that the soldier with the coins from the person with the least prestigious background buys the rest a round of drinks.

This is fiction. The whole scene. I've never stepped foot in a VFW hall. I've never thrown a coin down on any bar. My coins are in a sandwich bag in a cardboard box in a storage closet. I don't know anyone who has actually bought a drink or been bought a drink like this. The whole ritual is something told from one soldier from another, but always spoken, never performed.

Here's a picture of a soldier. I received my pile of coins by means of the Soldier of the Year competition. A pageant, or at least something near what you might imagine a pageant to look like. During my sixth year in the Army, my bosses identified me as a particularly strong candidate for a competition meant to identify exceptional performers in the Army. Not exceptional at soldiering as you might picture it: running, shooting, following orders. Performing, like a young woman with a sash on a stage. At the higher levels of the competition, some more functional tasks were brought in: land navigation, assembling and disassembling weapons, commanding a squad through a mock Iraqi village, but for most of the circuit, we were pageant contestants.

Each month, soldiers selected by their unit would meet on military bases in one of the more civically-purposed buildings (offices, libraries, meeting halls). We'd don our best dress uniforms: our brass polished; our green suits cleaned and pressed; our hair clipped, fresh from the barber's chair. The women's hair would be pulled tightly back into a headache-inducing bun. We waited

for the review board, a panel of the base's military leadership who, in addition to judging our appearance and the subjective category of *military bearing*, would drill us on the various aspects of military knowledge, firing off one obscure question after the other.

These competitions turned the back offices of these buildings into the backstage at convention centers and suburban hotels where Little Miss Townsville pageants take place across the country. Every soldier would take a different approach to backstage. Some would primp, lint-rolling their coat for the twentieth time, or constantly adjusting their gig-line, the line formed by aligning the shirt, belt buckle and pant crotch uniformly. Others paced while quizzing themselves before the board.

“Sergeant Major, the deadliest war in American history was the Civil War.”

“Sergeant Major, the image appearing on the Medal of Honor is that of Minerva, the goddess of righteous war.”

“Sergeant Major, as of today, the toll in Afghanistan is...”

Others would sit around with pageant veterans, sharing tips and wearing the cool cloak of experience.

“Did you check current events today? You gotta check the morning's news before these things.”

“I'm glad Gunny Thomas isn't sitting on the board this time; his questions are the worst.”

“Last month I would have taken it, but my slacks had hanger creases across them.”

When our time came, the whole event rolled out like a recital. The question, review and evening gown portions came all at once. Knock three times exactly, not too softly, but not too forcefully either. Close the door behind you; don't slam it. Offer the salute and report. Hold the salute until returned. Perform the facing and marching movements in front of them crisply; practice

in a mirror beforehand. Practice in your low-quarter shoes on carpet. As they judge your movement and appearance, don't look at them; stare straight ahead. Take your seat only when told to do so. Begin or end each response with the judge's rank. Yes, Sergeant Major. No, Sergeant Major. I don't have an answer to that question at this time, Sergeant Major. Respond with complete sentences. Respond confidently, even if you're wrong. When dismissed, be sure to salute again. Leave the room in the most direct route. Close the door behind you; don't slam it. Don't talk about the questions with the other contestants.

Imagine a soldier.

It's being queer that brought me to these competitions. It was the opportunity to excel and to know that in an army that demanded its queer soldiers to lie about their identity, we were thriving. Granted, I don't know whether I would have had the guts to come out, even if I had won at the top level, U.S. Army Soldier of the Year (our Miss America). Still, part of me hoped that I could have been a secret whispered among queer troops. A queer army icon. Representation inside of silence. What gets beneath my skin about being told that I don't look like a soldier is that I worry it means that bookish, queer boys don't belong there. That is why I competed.

Imagine a soldier.

Perhaps my offense comes from the flatness of the image of the soldier too. That mainstream perception doesn't include the young, educated Indian who joined the U.S. Army to become a citizen, or the 20-something professional who joined to find a way to pay for his wife's medical care. It certainly doesn't include the working-class queer who came out for his teen years before being pushed back in to fit an Army mold. It upsets me because soldiers are a spectrum, many faces and individual identities molded into cogs for the machine. Maybe underneath it all, I'm upset because we are a nation at war, and the lack of understanding is another demonstration

of investment, the lack of skin in the game. Or maybe I'm embarrassed because of how little skin I had in the game.

Imagine a soldier.

"Where did you serve?" It's a question veterans often hear, both from other vets and from those who have not served. Like "where are you from?" it's a question that can mean a lot of things. What military base were you stationed at? What unit were you in? Though, most often, the question it is meant as an inquiry into war-time service. Iraq or Afghanistan? Which forward operating base?

I never went to war.

I joined the Army in the wake of September 11th. I spent eight years serving during a period of two wars. I spent four years of that time working with an explosive detector dog, a task desperately needed in the contemporary theatres of war. I never went. If I were a religious or spiritual person, I would say, "It wasn't in the cards." I would say, "God has other plans for me." But I'm not either of those things. I just say that I never went. I'd like to say that I don't feel any guilt about this situation. That I felt proud of the work I did elsewhere, and that that was enough. After all, it wasn't all smiling, posing and answering questions. But the truth is, I have mixed feelings about *not going*. Some guilt. Some relief. A morbid part of me wishes I had a war story for you, and part of me is afraid to consider what could have happened out there, me walking in front of a convoy of military vehicles, with a dog and a leash and a Kevlar vest and hope. Honestly, I don't want to shoot at another human any more than I want a human shooting at me. There's a sense of bullets dodged, but there's also a sense of guilt for lives lost. Call it witness guilt.

In October of 2008, I was named Non-commissioned Officer of the Year for my military base. After several levels of competition and months of training, I looked the best, had the best-

crafted biographical sketch, wrote the best essay, and answered the most useless questions. My commander patted me on the back. Round after round of my peers and supervisors congratulated me on my hard work. I received hundreds of dollars in checks. Liberty Bonds. Reserved parking spaces around base. No sash, but dozens of challenge coins from local military leaders.

When a challenge coin is presented, it is done so with a handshake.

“Great job, sergeant.” The coin is slipped from one hand to the next, often awkwardly, as both participants maintain eye contact the whole time. “You deserve this.”

I don’t remember saying it now, but the on-base newspaper interviewed me the day I received the honor. About the review board, I was quoted:

“It’s intimidating at first,” Moll said. “It’s a high-stress situation.”

That month Al Qaeda commander Mahir al-Zubaydi is killed by U.S. troops. AFRICOM, a new U.S. military command created for the purported purpose of responding to threats of terrorism in Africa, is activated in Stuttgart, Germany. U.S. Commanders of NATO request increased authority in pursuing drug-related crimes in Afghanistan.

In October of 2008, the news stations boasted that U.S. forces had sustained the lowest amount of combat deaths in four years. Only thirty service members were killed in Iraq and Afghanistan that month. Only thirty. Thirty volunteers. Thirty Families. Thirty. Thirty. Thirty. *“It’s a high-stress situation.”* Thirty. Only. Daniel Wallace. Scott Metcalf. Bradley Coleman. Nicholas Casey. Thirty. SSG Grieco. Capt. Yurista. PFC Egglestone. SSG Hause. CPL Robles. Thirty Families. Sim. Taylor. Lindenau. Dryden. Borjas. Penich. Pickard. *“It’s intimidating at first.”* Bertrand. Fortunato. Saint. McCraw. Medley. Dimond. Johnson. *The installation recognized some of its finest Soldiers in a ceremony Friday at garrison headquarters.* Reuben

Fernandez III. Jason Karella. Michael Clark. William Rudd. Michael Stahlman. Tavarus Setzler.

Jason E. von Zerneck.

Imagine a soldier.

What do you see?