

Marks

I grew up with the same mythologies as other dumb American boys.

Yet when I picture a statue of David, I do not imagine Michelangelo's 17-foot tall marble masterpiece. The milky figure is a breathtaking study in masculine form, but this sculpted nude has never seemed to fit my image of the young David who left the tending of his father's sheep and faced the warrior Goliath. He's too beautiful, too fully-formed. This David is not the youngest child of Saul. This David is a young *man*: a college quarterback, an Olympic swimmer. Now, Donatello's David: that's my David. Donatello gives us an effeminate and delicate boy, hand on his hip like some bratty bottom. He is shown just after the battle—Goliath's severed head at his feet, beard exfoliating David's toes—but make no mistake, this sculpture shows a boy at the brink. Rather than Christ-like abs, the bronze David wears a boyish paunch and effeminate hips. His body appears soft, his demeanor, gentle and shy. He seems nymphic, right legged tilted almost coquettishly. One of the wings from Goliath's great helmet creeps up the back of David's leg, stopping just shy of where the curve of his backside meets his thighs. The whole scene seems so boyish and queer, so much so that even art historians recognize its homoerotic qualities. This unmarked body, not yet sculpted by hardship, a girlish boy mixed up in someone else's war by folly and by a childish pride: that's my David.

I'd like to say I joined the military unmarked, that I arrived at the Military Entrance Processing Station, a multipurpose facility that acts as everything from a clinic for physical exams to an administrative office for processing those entering the military, as young and pure as

a Renaissance bronze. Yet the truth of my enlistment is that the physician inspecting my young body with latex gloves missed neither the tiny scar on my forehead where I had fallen from top bunk onto a Tonka truck as a child, nor the dime-sized Mongolian Blue Spot decorating my backside. Still, aside from these minor blemishes, my young, soft body raised a hand and swore the oath of enlistment without any real damage at eighteen years.

Teeth

The first mark came early. As my platoon huddled together, celebrating a well-run obstacle course in the middle of our basic training experience, a helmet-clad head jerked back toward my face, sending a good portion of my front teeth to the back of my throat.

Basic training being the frenzied experience that it is, the emergency dentist at the clinic asked if I was experiencing any sensitivity in the injured teeth. Me being in no pain and terrified of the backlash of my drill sergeants should I miss training, I insisted I felt fine, and walked around for the remainder of basic training, and several weeks that followed, looking like Lloyd Christmas.

Eyebrow

I crawled slowly through the Southern California hills, avoiding the ridgeline and staying low to the ground in my foliage decorated ghille suit. *Slow is fast*, I repeated in my head, a mantra of the week's training. I found my spot slowly. Deployed the rifle slowly. Took slow aim. Breathe. Breathe. Breathe. Squeeze. The sniper rifle cracked sharply. The scope, mounted atop the receiver, cracked with it, leaving me with what my comrades will later call *a kiss*. I felt only the slightest tickle on my brow as the weapon recoiled in my hands, and then, as though a slow rain had begun without my notice, a wet stream crawled its way down my face. Unaware of any

injury, I finished the exercise. Target. Breathe. Squeeze. Target. Breathe. Squeeze. Target. These are what matter when one is shooting.

When I returned, my vegetation-adorned helmet in one hand and the rifle in another, someone pointed the injury out to me.

“Whooooeeey! Looks like she gave you a little *kiss* on your forehead. Come over here and let’s get you cleaned up.”

My hand touched my face, and returned covered in camouflage paint and red. Her kiss would leave a scar visible for years.

Hips

I read an essay recently that reminded radicals that we mustn’t forget the history of appropriation and imperialism present in tattoos. The idea referred both to the recent tradition of tattoos of foreign languages on the bodies of westerners, and to how tattooing was introduced to the West: through Captain James Cook’s exploration of the South Pacific, and through the spread of the U.S. military.

As a young, dumb American soldier in Seoul a decade earlier, I thought of neither of these fitting connections as a friend and I stumbled toward a back-alley shop near what troops called “Hooker Hill,” a brightly lit alley where Korean and Russian women call out to passerby from the doors of dimly lit bars.

“Mister, I know you.”

As we entered the shop just at the hill’s base, the middle-aged Korean owner and artist recognized my friend Danyel and me as both Americans and as soldiers. We were quickly seated, and as we fingered through the folders of bright illustrations, the artist, clad in a Rolling Stones tee, pointed at the wrapped needles he held.

“Clean. American. First use.”

We agreed on a price, the shop minimum, and he began to set up his station.

“I lock the door,” he insisted as he pulled the bolt lock shut, the legal status of tattoos being grey in the country generally, but entirely off limits for U.S. soldiers.

This sounds familiar, I know: cliché even. It’s eerie how traditions like this, like soldiers getting drunk in a foreign country and getting a tattoo, repeat themselves, how young men and women mimic cultural fables. In the morning, as a shower trickled over my hung-over head, I glanced down at my queer tattoo, my first tattoo. I had eschewed the anchors, pinups and eagles that so many soldiers of my period receive, accepting instead a flaming star, just below the waistline on my taugt hip. The star was something slightly off, something a bit feminine, something hidden.

Hands

I don’t belong here. The Baltimore Veterans Affairs Hospital is for old men. Veterans with mesh caps with Korea or Vietnam emblazoned across them. Broken men. Worn bodies. A thin man in camouflage pants wheels an oxygen tank behind him. A thick man showing off his tattooed arms coughs a wet cough into a towel.

I wish I could say that I shattered both of my hands doing something heroic. How might a warrior injure himself? Charging a hill? Shrapnel? Gulf War syndrome maybe, tiny desert sands stirred with weaponized chemicals. Damp jungle air mixed with defoliating herbicides.

In my early twenties, I broke my hands skateboarding down a hill. I raced down the hill, without any protective gear, as quickly as I could, allowing the hot desert air to slap at my face. When I lost control, I tried to bail, tried to feign running through the air fast enough to hit the ground and keep moving. When I came down, I didn’t stand a chance. My hands hit first, and

gravity scraped me along the asphalt for several feet before leaving me to rest. My Army buddies told me that it was a dangerous hill to speed down, and that I was dumb for trying. My boss threatened to charge me with dereliction of duty for skateboarding when I was on-call. My doctor cut open both of my hands and tried to bolt the bones back together. When he opened up the left hand, the bone was worse off than he thought, so he slipped in a cadaver donor's scaphoid while I was under for surgery. He told me just as casual as that, the day after, in a recovery bed.

Army doctors get away with a lot.

In a cubicle where I wait for the benefits administrator to come talk to me, there is a pamphlet for *Atomic Veterans*. That's what Veterans Affairs calls vets exposed to ionizing radiation during America's atomic era. It's common enough that they have a name for it. Vets stationed outside of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but also veterans near testing ranges in the U.S., and vets who were intentionally exposed to radiation for the sake of testing its impact on the human body.

Many vets in these latter categories were sworn to silence, and for decades couldn't legally discuss their exposure to anyone, including medical professionals. By the time a law came along to allow them to seek the treatment that many of them need, many were already gone. Those still living had been carrying the secret for so long that they still didn't come forward. The pamphlet in front of me is an effort to reach out to those atomic veterans, to let them know that they are legally able to speak up, and to seek treatment for their wound.

I'm here because I need medical insurance, and because I need to document skateboarding injuries that Veterans Affairs considers 'service-related' because I was in the Army when they happened.

I don't belong here.

Arms

I collected a history on each arm as I served. At times my choices bent toward tradition: sailors who operated a ship's anchor windlass often tattooed hinges in the 'ditches' of their elbows. Other times, resistance: the posters of radical political cartoonist Mike Flugennock decorate each shoulder. Sometimes pride: the purple, pink and blue stars reflect the bisexual pride flag. Other times, penance: the pistol and skull on my arm came near my departure from service. With the sense of doom that hung over all of us soldiers, my early twenties saw the addition of a marking that grows more humorous as it ages – "Live fast, die young" tattooed on my biceps.

Soldiers love slogans. Greggs' forearm dagger declared "death before dishonor." Abel's shoulder pistols were wrapped with "Assist, Protect, Defend." Levi's back was a memento mori: "Die Trying." Names and dates of the fallen are common. So too is the Soldier's Creed: *I will never quit*. Something simple. Something meaningful. A saying to rally to, even if it isn't true.

Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.

Head

The second decade of the new millennium is filled with tracts on the reintegration of the warrior into non-military culture. What we missed. Who we are. Women and men caught between worlds. Reintegration. Assimilation. Transition.

It's true, of course, but most of this commentary misses the point. It's not just combat or PTSD or war ripping through those closest to you. It's culture shock. The military has its own rules. Its own values. Its own language. One can still be locked up for adultery in the military, or

even consensual sodomy. A soldier can lose several months' pay and be confined to her barracks room just for being mouthy to her boss.

When I got out of the military, I took an internship with the biggest LGBT rights organization in the country. Months earlier, I was a staff sergeant, broad-shouldered and in charge of training dogs to detect bombs for missions protecting the President of the United States. A dog and I worked with Secret Service, protecting the world's leaders. We trained with real bombs. Carried real guns. Real cowboy shit.

Then I was an intern. A college student.

I over-dressed my first day as an intern, in a tie and slacks and short-cropped hair among t-shirts and skirts. But I stood out in other ways too. I worried about playing streaming music or using social media at my desk. I hesitated to join the early-twenties interns on afternoon food-truck runs. Progressive youth talk with their own code – right and wrong are a language they've honed in their last few years of college, and the grey ethics of military service during Iraq and Afghanistan left me an outsider from the start.

"How old are you?" one college junior asked me with a raised eyebrow in our shared cubicle space. I had to relearn my position, as a young adult, as a worker, as a queer person. New language, new values. I felt, at once, years ahead and years behind my peers. That sort of displacement disorients everything. The veteran examines each action to determine if it makes sense under these new rules. Working at a university now, I find myself questioning every utterance; *does this sentence make sense to civilians, or is my army showing?*

Did you hear the one about the cookies sent to the deployed soldier? About the marine and the professor? The veterans and the school desk? The on-base bar filled with wives the week after deployment?

Veterans have their own mythologies, and the underlying theme of these stories is easy to read: reintegrating. Fear of being alone. Humiliated. Left behind. Forgotten. The war in Afghanistan ended (again) in December of 2014. The story made a blip in the news, but competed with the normalization of relations between the U.S. and Cuba, the shooting of two NYC officers, and reports of hacking at Sony ahead of the release of a particularly belligerent film about North Korea.

Our generation has no V-J Day parade. We serve far from home, and life moves forward without us. We return to find everything changed, and our identities developed differently than those who stayed, and when all fanfare and pride have receded, we often feel embarrassed for having to catch up. We took a different path than our peers, and when we leave that path, we must often backtrack before we can move forward.

We are left with this mark, on our resumes, of course, where we must show that during the period of our lives when we should have been writing for a university newspaper and running for student government, we were walking around with guns strapped to our hips. We have to wear this mark too though, carry ourselves knowing that we volunteered during a particularly ugly time, and that no one really cares. Don't get me wrong, Veterans Affairs is stronger than ever and the new GI Bill offers vets a real chance to transform themselves and their lives, but the place left for the veteran in contemporary society is pity, and that is the real badge we wear. Veterans aren't blind to the fact that the spirit of 'hire a vet' flag-waiving isn't a recognition of the personal and professional development we undertook during our service; it is a charity, a service to the community.

Whether we deployed or not, we all left home, those of us who served in the years following The Day the Towers Fell. The world kept moving, and now we must either catch up, or stay lost in the desert.

Heart

On my chest I left a mark, a heart, anatomic in design, with a quote: “Get busy living, or get busy dying.” Stephen King. A phrase I found particularly evocative in my youth, connecting it to blurred motivations behind why I joined the army and why I chose to leave it.

This isn’t about that. Or it is, I suppose, indirectly.

Mental health professionals talk about the moral injury military service leaves on veterans. Emotional conflicts arising from the transgressions of one’s moral and ethical beliefs. Vets experience this sort of injury not only from their own actions, but from the acts of “peers and leaders who betray expectations in egregious ways.”

Disclaimer: I’ve never killed anybody.

Disclaimer: Never ask a veteran if they’ve killed somebody.

Yet in early 2003, as U.S. ground troops moved from Kuwait into invade Iraq, as people around the world marched together as a plea for peace, I trained as a rooftop gunner, preparing all year long with my fingers on the trigger of a machine gun.

Later that year, when the world learned that young military police had humiliated and terrorized detainees in Abu Ghraib prison using dogs, feces, nudity and threats, I wore an armband with embroidered with crossed pistols and ‘MP,’ and then ran off to become a dog handler.

I said nothing in 2005, when members of my unit recently returned from the corrections center at Guantanamo Bay laughed and joked about the BBQs and the Quick Reaction Forces

that scuffed up detainees at the illegal prison. I said nothing when a young corporal from United States Regional Correctional Facility—Korea giggled as he told me how forced washings started with the ass and crotch before moving to the face. I said nothing when my thrice-deployed colleague told me that he couldn't wait to get back, because "shooting at Haji is simpler than dealing with ex-wife bullshit."

In the months-long ritual that turns citizens into warriors, service members are instilled with a new moral code. When and how it is alright to kill. Why we must follow orders. Who the good guys are, who the bad guys are, and why the world is black and white. This acculturation process is meant to make the act of combat mechanical. Soldier is told, soldier does. Something else happens to the self during this period too, indoctrination beyond 'follow orders.' It is the formation of *We*, a process in which supporting the in-group rises above doing what is right.

It's violation of this black and white that causes bewilderment. How does one mend the ethics of Haditha when the villains are wearing the same costumes as you? Abu Ghraib? Guantanamo Bay? Ramadi?

The fog of real life has no place in war.