

TESTIMONY

Eleven Poems by Noah Charles Pierce (1983-2007)

READY?

The sun just dipped off the horizon.
Only a matter of hours now.
After months of waiting
Morale is high, let's do this.
Then we spot the first cruise missile—
Silence.
My stomach goes in knots.
Reality just kicked in.
Even nonsmokers light one up.
What will tonight have in store.
Time to load up.
Guess we'll find out.

LOST

It's been hours since we saw our unit.
Keep heading north hoping to find them.
The sky was full of green streaks—
Pretty amazing,
Beautiful, if only nobody was dying at the
end.
Too many explosions to use the night
goggles,
Just made you blind.
I ask my driver, Are we in Iraq yet?
He shrugs.
An enemy tank blows up and tells us we are.
A year ago
All I worried about was next weekend.
Now I wonder if I will see the morning.
Finally, radio contact.
That was an easy night.

DUST

The wind is picking up a little dust
No big deal
It must be getting worse
Vehicles are upside down all over
It's daylight now and we have to stay put
The sky is a weird orange
Just midday but it's dark
Better tie a rope before you go pee
Seems like someone keeps dumping a
bucket of
Sand on my lap
I wonder if this is an omen not to wage war
Or is this our glimpse of the hell we are
destined to

EVERYTHING I IMAGINED

They yell, Get out of the truck
I just wonder why as I take cover
Boom and I hope that's friendly
Someone yells, Open fire
Don't know what I'm shooting at
People fall, but did I do it?
Just keep shooting
Really just want to roll up in a ball and
wake up
If only it were a dream
As we advance I no longer fear for myself
I worry about whoever that guy is next to me
My eyes burn from all the smoke
I wonder if the smell of death will ever
Leave my nose
People shake my hand now
They say thanks for serving the country
Sorry, but you guys were the farthest from
my mind
That day was exactly the way
I imagined War



FUTZIE NUTZLE

WTF

Hurry up and eat
We roll out in 20
Tonight just doesn't seem right
The feeling won't shake
Can't smoke enough cigarettes
Why are these vehicles fucking with me
I shine my spotlight, he pulls over
The other stomps on the gas
Oh fuck, another car bomb
I shoot
Someone shouts, This one's dead
At camp people shake my hand
I'm just upset and pissed
It was a doctor
The investigation said it was done by the
books
I ask myself, What the fuck kind of war is
this

FRIENDS

I feel bad for the kids
Can't blame them for begging
Can't give them anything, they beg more
This one was different
He was 7
I let him sit next to me on the Bradley
I give him water
He goes and gets me food
It's great compared to MREs
No English
No Arabic
Yet we still understand each other
Then it's time to leave
He wraps his arms around me crying
I say it will be OK
I still wonder if he is

FREEDOM ISN'T FREE

It's dark and I sit at my .50-cal trembling
40 mph in a hummer and I have *déjà vu*
Just want to go home
Then that bad feeling hits me again
Are my ears bleeding?
Is everybody else OK?
Goddamned roadside bombs
We are fine
Another truck wasn't so lucky
Back at base no food, can barely get a
New truck ready in time for the morning
Another day kicking in doors
Find a cache and insurgents responsible
For American deaths
Frustrated because we have to be nice
As we arrest them
So when you talk to me
I may not seem to pay attention
I may forget to laugh at a joke
Remember freedom isn't free
I would do it all over for you

BAD PLANNING

I sit on the Bradley turret reading a book
My crew fast asleep
Bush said all major combat was over
I was in Baghdad and would have agreed
I vaguely remember the gunshots
I do remember very clearly how the bullets
felt as
They just passed my head
First drive-by experience, got the shooter
Scared, just let the other guy get away
My crew never knew
Next thing I know we have to go to Fallujah
Now I know Bush didn't know
What he was talking about
The major combat was just beginning

2ND TIME

We are getting on the plane.
That last step,
I hope it isn't my last on US soil.
Nothing to do but sleep.
I wonder what it will be like this time.
Hurry from plane to bus,
Sleep some more.
Stopped, I hope we can get off for a smoke.
Must be lucky.
Before I light up the feeling hits me.
Did I ever leave the desert?
The girlfriends, the parties, the training
GONE—
All I remember is this godforgotten country.

DRUNK

It is 7:30
Got off work at 4:30
Yet I find myself drunk again
I drink to forget
But it seems like I drink to remember
At least drunk I don't dream

STILL AT WAR

Got home almost a year and a half ago
We were so happy
That beer never tasted so good
Iraq was the farthest thing from my mind
That was the best week of my life
It crept up slowly
First just while sleeping
More real and scary than when it happened
After, it's on the mind awake
Never 10 minutes go by without being
reminded
Been home a year and a half physically
Mentally I will never be home

A STONE

I close my eyes and a man brings a stone to put into my hands. I do not want the stone and close my hands against it, but still he sets the stone into my hands and I begin to feel its face and with my fingers I feel its markings, rough to touch, only a stone. But even though I do not want it and know it is only a stone, as I hold it in my hands the mute stone becomes a thing dear to me and soon I see that I do not want to give it up. I begin to see that it is the only one of its kind in the world, in all of the spinning of the unknowable world that does not stop for anyone.

I hold the stone in my hands, and I begin to know, as if the stone were telling me, that it comes from a place by the sea where it has always been alone with no words ever to speak its history and no breath to breathe its nature to anyone.

As if it were telling me, I begin to know the long history of the stone spoken by markings of the skeletons of sea creatures that had traveled over it. Thrown by the sea for no reason to the stone where it lay in its place enduring and silent.

And I do not see the stone with my eyes, but I begin to weep for it. For the unspoken stone that holds the salt and water of my tears on its face. The worn face of the stone, a thing only itself and nothing more.

I open my eyes and see the stone and think again, oh this is nothing, only a stone to be thrown away again and given back to its place where no one will see it. I see myself as if from a great distance, in a place at the edge of the sea, the stone held out before me and I will throw it away. And I begin to hate it again, for all its insignificance and passivity in the face of the world and I think that it is nothing.

And then I remember again. How for a few moments because of the stone, the stone of my coldness was broken and I felt the old emotion, sunk like a stone in the still and knowing heart of ourselves. Given to us for no reason, in the still and knowing heart of ourselves, the old emotion that must, in the end, be known as love.

In all of the places of silence, you can kneel down and listen to the language of the stones.

—SANDRA WALLER

Sandra Waller lives in Sharon, Massachusetts.

See page 2 for more about Noah Pierce.