

## 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.