

## *Petals in the sand.*

By Joshua Suddath

June '05. Navajo Indian Reservation.

Somewhere outside Shiprock, New Mexico.

I never considered the idea that there could be a place like this here. In America. I've been exposed to poverty before, in varying degrees. Albania, Iraq, Thailand, Liberia, etc. But I expected it there. That's where those charity commercials on TV say all the poor people are at; those are the faraway unfortunates we should all feel sorry for. I have, of course, heard of the urban ghettos in all of our major cities, although I cannot honestly say that I have physically been in one long enough to even begin to understand them. From an outsider's perspective though, those places have a much more oppressive quality in their appearance than this one – the buildings are taller; the people and life in general seem much more crowded and unlivable. But here, in this vast desert emptiness, all the little houses (government issue, I can't help but think) are quite far apart, many of them completely out of sight of their nearest neighbor. The completeness of solitude I feel reminds me that Mother Nature is calling. I pull my truck off the road and onto what appears to be either a gravel turnaround or a heavily littered scenic overlook. They drink a lot around here don't they?

I finish, stretch a little, and think about what I've seen today. Not much really. A ribbon of burning asphalt stretching out to eternity through shimmering waves of heat. More blue sky than I will ever be able to comprehend, much less recollect. A lot of rocks. Desert stuff. And hitchhikers, dozens of them, none of whom I've picked up. (Don't look at or think about them and they disappear behind you as fast as you want them to.) As I climb back inside and shut the door behind me, I think about an observation I made early this morning in front of the campfire. I pick up my journal and write a few simple little lines about it. Time apparently flies by. I look

up from the blinding whiteness of the paper, refocus my eyes on the endless highway in front of me, and see yet another hitchhiker, who seems to have appeared magically from nowhere. He's only a couple of hundred meters ahead, walking toward me on the opposite side of the road. From this distance I can see only the off-white color of his shirt and the blue of his jeans. As he comes nearer, I slowly begin to become anxious for a reason I can't explain. Very quickly I open my road map and turn it to the New Mexico page. After a minute or so, I look up again and see the old Indian, now almost beside me, staggering and stumbling through the blazing noon sun. Obviously Drunk. As he walks, his old cowboy boots kick up the bone dry dirt and create little puffs of powdery dust among millions and millions of glittering beer, wine, and liquor bottle fragments. Very Drunk. I watch him for a moment, until he slowly turns his head my way. His empty eyes. I look down and pretend to study my road map. I try to feel ashamed, but feel lost instead.

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Shiprock. A truly magnificent rock formation. - Aptly named, since its jagged spires vaguely resemble the sails, masts and riggings of some kind of nineteenth century wooden sailing ship. It apparently was created when the sandstone that surrounded a magma pipeline eroded away millions of years ago, leaving the much harder igneous rock behind. Geologists call it a volcanic neck. I just think it's beautiful. After watching it grow steadily larger on the horizon for at least half an hour, I have resolved to get a closer look. I apparently miss the main road that leads to this sacred giant, if one exists at all. After a good deal of searching, I find a Navajo road that seems to point in the appropriate general direction. Ten unimaginably bumpy minutes, and perhaps a chipped tooth later, this "improved" road peters out to four dusty tire tracks through the scrub— two on the right, going toward my goal; two on the left going toward nothingness. More hesitant this time, I continue. The road then proceeds to fork again— and again— and again. "Enough," I finally decide, and put the truck in park. Shiprock appears no

closer than it did nearly an hour ago. I step out, stretch and reach into the cooler, reaching through tepid water and finding a warm beer. I open it. “Maybe a little closer,” I reassure myself.

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The sun is sinking lower on the horizon. I don’t think I can make it back to town before dark. I don’t really care to anyway. Hopefully the Navajos won’t mind if I trespass for the night. I build a small fire and heat a can of pinto beans. Not yet satisfied, I dig through the black abyss of my pack, hoping to find some other form of sustenance in there. A small can of tuna. “What would mom say?” I wonder, as I drink the juice from the can.

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Fuck. It’s almost dawn. I imagine rolling over and snoozing for another hour. Then I think of the inferno that is to come shortly. The fear of being cooked awake in my sleeping bag wins out this time over my inherent laziness, so I opt to get moving while it’s still cool. Within a short time the fire is rekindled, and a quart of water simmers over it. Enough to wash my hands and face, and to make some coffee— not necessarily in that order. Speaking of hygienic issues, my nose tells me that my current pair of wool socks has begun to change colors from black to a silvery, salt crystal grey, color. Time for a change. I turn on my flashlight with a click, climb into the bed of my truck, open the tupperware container I keep there, find a clean pair, and put them on. After returning my boots to my now cold feet, I continue to work my way toward the bottom of the container. As I do, I glance at the covers of some books I have brought along for the trip. *The Stranger*; *On the Road*; *For Whom the Bell Tolls*; *Desert Solitaire*; *World Almanac and Book of Facts*; *Far Side Gallery: Vol. 5*. That’s when I spot one I haven’t read in quite a while. An unhappy story, unremarkably told, as I recall, about some long ago war in some far off place. I haven’t thought of this book in, well, I really don’t know; it’s been a long time. I

don't even remember packing it. Without really thinking about why, I pitch it to the ground. It lands with a dusty plop. I jump down, and rejoin the campfire, which has brought my pot of water to a steady boil. I shine my flashlight into my pack and quickly find a small glass jar of instant coffee. Anything that tastes as terrible as this garbage, which they somehow find the nerve to call Taster's Choice, is easy to find in there. Were it a container of regular (not poison tasting) coffee I'd have to dig and search for an hour just to locate it. I dump a tablespoon or so into my old blue mug and add water.

About halfway through my second bitter cup I begin to feel myself slowly emerging from my typical grouchy, unapproachable morning exoskeleton. I survey the landscape around me, and in the silvery pre-dawn light, find it just as beautiful and ugly and desolate as it was yesterday. It still feels good to see new sights in new places.

I put my cup down in the powdery, sandy dirt and pick up my flashlight and the book. As I turn through its pages, something about the way they run over my thumb tells me that I have, at some point, stuck something in there. Perhaps as a bookmark. "Maybe it's money," I hope, albeit doubtfully. I grab the book by the spine and give it a gentle shake. Nothing. I shake it again, harder this time, and a small flower falls out and lands between my feet. Puzzled, I pick it up for a closer look. A rose. Flat and ugly now, but still, it is a rose. Oh yeah. Now I remember. I hold the flower by the stem, spinning it between my thumb and forefinger, old thoughts and memories I haven't recently taken the time to recollect trickling through my mind. I smell it. Nothing. Smells like paper. I almost throw the thing into the fire, but a moment of indecisiveness causes me to hesitate. I sit there on the ground in the desert silence, elbows on my knees, still unconsciously twirling the rose in my hand; thinking, seeing, and breathing clearly, feeling the emptiness and perfect indifference of the desert pass through me. I look over my right shoulder— to the east— and am taken aback by the beginnings of the most beautiful desert sunrise I have seen in a long while. "That's a good sign," I say aloud. "Gonna be hot today though."

I put the flower back in its book, where it belongs.

### A Realization.

(the first two days)

“Don’t do shit, don’t unpack shit until I tell you. That means no sleeping bags and sure as hell no tents. We’re only going to be here for tonight, so I don’t want everything all fucked up when the time comes for us to roll out of here. Everybody understand that?” “Yes Sir!” we all say, glad to hear such expediency in the voice of our Lieutenant. We are all perfectly content to sleep in our vehicles for a night if it means we can get on the plane that much sooner. A happy mood seems to permeate the atmosphere, to consume even the nervousness I always figured I would have when this moment came. But the moment has now arrived, and it seems that it will take us into the history books, and figuratively speaking, into the pantheon of heroes which we had all been taught to revere.

I sleep like a child that night, dreaming no dreams I can recollect in the foggy stillness of the grey Grecian dawn, which, as it progresses, slowly reveals snow capped mountains I cannot name only just visible through the morning fog. I awake knowing that today was the day, and I feel happy seeing sights I’ve never seen on a place I’d never been. The question now was when, when would it happen, when would all this waiting end?

The initial coolness of morning was deceptive, and it gives way to a hot afternoon, with a perfectly cloudless blue sky and scorching sun. Shelter is out of the question; the vehicles are the only option, and while they provide shade, they are at least twenty degrees hotter than the air outside. And so, everyone simply lies around, shirts and boots and socks off, soaking up a beautiful Mediterranean day, telling jokes and smoking cigarettes, like Marines always do when they get bored. There is a difference today though. The jokes are a little more serious, a little more macabre. “Hey Bean, when you get killed tomorrow can I fuck your girlfriend?” “Fuck you mother fucker.” Laughter and expletives all around. Eventually though, the conversation fades and one by one we drift away from the circle. I decide on an afternoon nap. “Not shit else to do anyway. This sitting around doing nothing is driving me crazy,” I think to myself as I tie my boots and walk to my Hummvee.

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“Hey dumbass, get up. Get up man,” says John excitedly. “Fuck you dude, I’m fucking sleeping.” “No seriously man they’re passing out the goddamn ammo.” “Oh shit. I guess I might need that huh?” I say, as I kick open the door of my vehicle. “Goddamn piece of shit door.” As my feet hit the ground I feel a shock of pain course up from the bottoms of my feet to my

calves. “Jesus fucking Christ,” I mutter to myself as I hobble in the general direction of the platoon toward the neatly stacked green metal boxes of ammunition. “What’s the matter man, feet hurt?” “Yeah from sleeping in those vehicles in the fucking fetal man.” “Oh well, looks like tonight’s the night huh? They don’t just hand out this shit for no reason.”

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(the third day)

“Still no sign of life on this damn air strip. Have they forgotten about us? God don’t let this be one of those times where they fuck us around for a couple of days and it’s all for nothing. I’m ready for this, I know I am.” All of these thoughts float vaguely in and out of my head as I watch the sun on its way down behind the mountains. “Tomorrow is four days John.” “Yeah I know man, seems more like a week though, don’t it?” “Sure as shit does. Nothing to do now but wait for tomorrow.”

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(the last day)

“You know why they do this shit right? So we’ll be so pissed off that we’ll be willing to kill somebody just to get the fuck out of here.” I sit to the side of this conversation, not a participant, but definitely a proud supporter of the theory. It is now day six on this god-forsaken strip of asphalt, and if something doesn’t happen soon, mutiny would seem to be the most logical choice. But alas, at the end of the tunnel, light. The Lieutenant, whom we have not seen in three days, has finally seen fit to grace us with his presence; the rank on his collar no longer the shiny silver we are used to, but now instead a subdued black. Combat insignia. To confuse snipers. And to keep from getting his college boy head blown off. “Gentlemen, gather around.” We do as he says. “Gents we’ve got C-130’s inbound, and they’ll be here to pick us up in two hours. Every body understand?” Muffled silence. There it is, the news we’ve been waiting for, for nearly a week. But no cheers, no high fives, just a lump in every throat and a colony of butterflies in every stomach. We’ll be flying into ----- Airport. For those of you who don’t know, that’s up in northern Iraq, up by the Turkish border. Now guys, Alpha and Charlie companies are already there. They’ve encountered some resistance, but the airport is secure. They’ve got a few guys that are hurt pretty bad. Just remember when we hit the ground, spread the vehicles out, you are going to want to bunch up, but whatever you do, don’t...” By this time I have stopped listening, actually I can no longer listen to him spout out the shit he had learned in officer candidacy school. I think I see a hint of fear in his eyes behind his carefully ingrained and practiced “command presence.” I feel my hand quiver ever so slightly as I rub the stubble on my chin; my fingers are suddenly cold. I look at the faces around me. This is the first time it really occurs to me that some of them, the best friends I had ever had in my life, might not make it back. This was the first time I considered the fact that I might not make it back. There was no fear, not yet, but perhaps the strongest feeling was kinship, not only with the men around me, but also with the Marines who came before us; in Vietnam, at Iwo Jima, at Belleau Wood. They felt the same fears and uncertainty I feel at this moment. For some strange reason, that is reassuring.

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We’ve finally loaded up, chained the vehicles to the floor, and taken off. The plane quickly increases in altitude and levels out. I check my shirt pockets, a small Bible in my right and a miniature Buddha in my left. No sense taking chances. I think of where I got that little statue. Thailand. She was beautiful wasn’t she? I wish I could see her again. I know that will

never happen again though, regardless of what happens here. A deep breath and I'm back in the present. And I'm thirsty. "Hey John, give me some of your water. Hey! You dumb Pollack, give me some of your water." He's asleep. A swift punch in the arm remedies this. "How in God's name are you sleeping?" "I don't know fucker, I'm tired." "We're going into a goddamn combat zone and you're fucking sleeping – Jesus." I say as I take a drink of his water and throw his canteen back at him. As I lean back in the uncomfortable Hummvee seat and try to relax, I think of how he truly is my best friend, despite the constant stream of vulgarity we spout in each other's general direction. I think of how in some weird familial sense I love him as though he were my own brother, and would kill and die for him, just as I know he would for me. I think it was Jesus who once said, there is no greater love than the love of someone who is willing to lay down his life for his friend.

I search for this verse in my pocket Bible, but am unable to find it in the soft red lights of the plane. I tuck the little green book back into my pocket, and nervously slide down in my seat, resting my head against the hard metal of the truck. I understand for the first time in my life that religion truly is the last refuge of the condemned, as I try without success to get my brain to calm down and remember the words to the Lord's Prayer. Suddenly I am no longer in my seat, and my head collides with a metal rod a foot or so above me, immediately I hear a thunderous crash that seems to come from everywhere, and I am back in my seat again, red lights blinking, the plane shaking in ways it should simply not be able to do. A flight crew member comes out of his seat at the front of the plane and tells us to put our goddamn seatbelts on, we're making our approach! As quickly as I can I try to do as he says, but the fucking buckle is fucked up. I slow down, breathe, try again and it clicks home. Just then the plane shudders – in earnest this time – and I feel it sweep around and bank to the left. We're coming in. Then a strange metallic sound. Then another. Then another. Like a hammer striking sheet metal. Bullets. A realization. Please God, please God don't let me die God. Not like this. Just give me a chance God. Please God I don't want to die.

### The plaque.

The Lieutenant read the inscription on the plaque, "...to Sergeant -----, whose leadership and dedication to younger Marines was an asset to second squad and to Engineer platoon. Good luck and Godspeed." He handed it to me and shook my hand. At this point I turned to the assembled group of men, some dear friends I had served with for years, others kids who were new to the Corps and to the platoon. People I would never really get to know. Looking at this piece of wood and engraved brass, the realization came that this was it, my days as a United States Marine were over. A sense of numbness, of being overwhelmed, swept through every cell of my body as I delivered what to me seemed a bumbling, rambling speech about nothing in particular. Next came the obligatory handshakes, slaps on the back, good lucks, etc. One of my friends said he and some guys were getting together to drink some beer later and that I should come. I said I would, but I knew it was a lie as soon as the words came out. Then it was over. Vaguely nauseous, with the plaque under my arm, I walked away alone; away from an entire world I was only then realizing that I loved in a way I couldn't even explain to myself. I was now a free man.

“What the fuck happened man?”

The last time I saw him, I cursed and yelled at him for no reason. In my best Marine Corps Corporal voice I told him to “get the fuck out of here you little piece of shit.” That was my right - to talk to people who were junior to myself - that way. I was a non-commissioned officer and he was not.

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I wasn't there to see it happen, but they said he never felt a thing. The rocket propelled grenade exploded only a few yards away, sending a single piece of shrapnel through the back of his head. The hole was so small they said you couldn't get your little finger into it. They said he shook for a minute and then he died. He was nineteen years old.

Reasons (excuses).

The drive from North Carolina went smoothly like always. This was the last time he would ever have to make this trip though, so he took his time. He thought of how ironic that would be, to go out in a fiery car crash while on his way back for the final time. There would be no accident today though. As the miles slowly rolled away a strange sense of foreboding or perhaps even dread began to build in his guts. He honestly had no idea what he to do next with his life. “I've got a long way to the graveyard,” he thought. “What am I going to do with all that time?”

As he drove he thought about experiences he had once had as a high school kid. At least he tried to. The past years had so greatly overshadowed all that came before them that the first seventeen seemed like they had happened to someone else, and he had only read or heard about them somewhere. He thought of the friends he had back then. He hadn't spoken to most of them since. He had spent years overseas, going from one place to the next, making new friends and forgetting old ones along the way. Many of those people back home were now married and had children, or so he had heard. “Dumbasses,” he muttered to himself as he pulled alongside a semi-truck with “Jesus Saves” and “Show Me Your Tits” written in the accumulated dust on the back. Passing a green sign that gave the mileages for Knoxville and Nashville he decided he'd stop in the former for some coffee. “Just seventy five more miles and I'll stop for a while,” he repeated to himself as he glanced down at his gas gauge.

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The miles continued to tick away. The closer he got, the more he couldn't help but feel that he shouldn't be going back to that place. "What the fuck ever man," he whispered under his breath uneasily. That way of speaking would have to go. Real people don't talk like Marines do. Wouldn't those uptight, goody-two-shoes, shit heads at First Baptist have a heart attack if he walked in there and actually spoke to them in a manner that he found comfortable though? He smiled as he thought of the scenario:

Man in khaki's with bad comb-over: "Hi -----, are you happy to be out?"

-----: Fuckin' A man. I was pretty goddamned tired of getting fucked with by those lifer motherfuckers, you know? Oh yeah, how's your fuckin' wife and kids dude?

He couldn't help but laugh out loud when he pictured the look on the supposedly pious man's face as he tried to assemble some kind of a retort in his squeaky clean mind. No, from now on it would have to be: "Oh yes, I'm very well thank you." and "My I really enjoyed that game of golf, we should do it again sometime." and "No dear there's nothing wrong, I was just thinking that's all."

"My exit, about fuckin' time," he said as he pulled off the interstate and got onto the highway that would take him directly back home. Home? That word just didn't seem to have the same ring to it anymore. Home to him was a faraway place, a place to be idealized and talked about at three in the morning on sentry duty with a kid from Jersey. Or in the cargo hold of a gigantic troop transport ship with a Polish kid from Illinois. Everybody has a home they love-and love to talk about-- in the military. Even if it was just the little shit-hole he was from in nowhere Tennessee, whose only claim to fame was the quantity of sweet potatoes it produced. From here on, home would not be some abstract concept. It would not be far away. It would be under his feet and all around him. The people he had once thought about so fondly would be at the next table over at the town coffee shop, asking the stupid questions he knew they would ask over and over again. Or they would thank him for his service in their innocent, good natured and overly patriotic way. They would shake his hand and buy him lunch, making a big show of it in a way he knew would be embarrassing, and to him at least, unnecessary.

As he topped the final hill of the trip, he felt a sudden nervousness he never expected. He looked ahead, and could see the grey mailbox with most of his last name on it. (The first three letters had fallen off years ago.) Over the course of the last couple of hundred feet he frantically thought of hitting the gas on his truck and simply going-- anywhere-- for a few weeks, a few months, or a few years. He didn't feel ready yet, he still had some thinking to do. His worldly possessions-- the ones he really needed anyway-- were all packed up in his truck bed and in his sea bags up front. He could just keep going for a while and call his parents tomorrow. They would understand. His dad would anyway. His foot moved from the brake to the accelerator. He touched it ever so gently, slowly applying pressure, feeling the truck begin to gain speed.... and then hit his right turn signal and pushed down firmly on the brake.

As he wheeled his truck into the old familiar driveway, he took a deep breath. Not of relief, but one of resignation. His journey, at long last, had, for better or worse, reached its conclusion.

A nice cup of coffee.

“Are you glad to be out?” asks the plump, rosy cheeked man at the diner. How many times have I heard that question in the last month? “Fuck you, you big fat son of a bitch,” I dream of saying. Then I picture the look of surprise on his face as I kick his fucking table over on top of him... “Yeah, I sure am,” I say, as I smile without making eye contact and sit down at the table to his left. “He’s just trying to be nice,” I tell myself. “Yeah, I know how you feel, I was in the Guard back in the 80’s; I always hated it when they’d send me off somewhere. They had me building an airstrip out in the Mojave Desert for a month one time. It was a hot sumbitch there, let me tell you.” I smile and nod politely. “So, did you kill anybody over there?” “Nope,” I say, telling the truth, not looking up from my coffee. “Well that’s too bad huh? Boy I wish I was over there right now, I’d love to kill me one of them raghead bastards.” Hate begins to surge up from my guts to my heart to my brain and down into my arms and legs. Not dislike, not impatience, but hate, pure undiluted hate. I consider taking my fork and inserting it into his temple. It would only take a second provided I didn’t hit the earpiece on his glasses. I can see his fat face screaming in his scrambled eggs with his blood all over his nice clean shirt. “Well Jimmy, I’ll see you later,” I say as I finish my cup of coffee, stand and walk briskly to the cash register. “Let me pay for that.” “I’ve got it,” I interject a little more forcefully than I mean to. I give the cashier a dollar and step outside into the brisk, sunny, early spring morning. I shut the door of my truck, take a deep breath and drive away.

The girl at the party.

“This music is too loud,” I yell into the ear of the pretty girl in front of me, “do you want to go outside and talk.” “Yeah, sure” she says with a drunken smile, and outside we go into the cool night, the music fading behind us as I shut the door and we walk away. “You want another beer?” “Yeah, okay.” We sit alone together in the dark on the hood of someone’s car, making the small talk people of the opposite sex feel they have to make with one another to feel comfortable. Eventually though, the subject turns to lost loves, and I realize that she’s very drunk— and crying. Quietly at first, then slowly escalating into an uncontrollable childlike sobbing, replete with those hiccup-sounding gasps for air I remember my brother making when we were very young. “I want to die,” she says.

I try to feel sympathy, to give a shit. I look inside myself, but find nothing, nothing but the insidious emptiness I always feel. I want to hold her in my arms and tell her that nothing of the pain she is feeling matters; that it is a wound which will heal with time like all wounds. I want to tell her that today is a gift, and she shouldn’t waste it like this. I want to make her feel happy to be living; to have never really known sadness and despair; to have never been touched by mankind’s inherent evil. But I know that to her nothing is more important than this stupid emotion she is shedding these stupid tears over. I know that no explanation from me can ever make her understand anything outside of what she thinks she knows. I suddenly realize that this sobbing ball of writhing emotion is something I have no business messing with— and in the end messing up. She is too complex, a being who feels too many emotions that I no longer feel. It’s not that I don’t find her attractive, since I do, and always have, (I have known her since we were kids) perhaps more so than anyone I have ever known in my life. It’s just that I do not possess

the emotional energy to care about her. Or about anyone or anything else for that matter. I could lie and pretend, but for some reason lies make me sick. Unnecessary lies do anyway. My entire life is now a lie out of necessity, and for whatever reason, I cannot bring myself to fabricate another one for my own sexual benefit.

From this emptiness, impatience begins to consume me. I know what's next. Within a few minutes I'll begin to feel that strange kind of hate for another innocent person whose only offense was trying to get close to me. I am trapped in a foreign place with strangers who used to be my family and friends. I hate them all, but most of my hate is reserved for myself, and now increasingly the pretty girl next to me. Instead of sympathy I feel a kind of condescending aloofness. Instead of lust I feel revulsion. "What the fuck is wrong with me?" I ask myself. "I could have her right now if I wanted her." But I don't want her. I don't want anything but to go - to go anywhere but right here right now. I feel I can hardly breathe. I can feel the emptiness pulling my insides apart. I stand up. "Hey, I've got to go." "I'm sorry, I'll stop crying." "No it's uh not that, I've uh got to get up early in the morning. I'll see you later though." I lean down and kiss her cheek, tasting the salt of her tears.

I walk away into the darkness, leaving her there, crying all alone.

### That smell.

That smell. It's something I'll never forget. Strangely it's something I can't quite remember either. The stink of shit, piss, rotting food. The smell in the air of something bad that happened yesterday, and today is somewhere around you putrefying in the sun. When I smell that smell another world comes— sometimes flooding; sometimes trickling— back into my brain. I hear the doves singing in the trees above me. They sound sad to my human ears, but perhaps they aren't really. The broken down Soviet-era trucks stink of burnt oil and desert dust and the staleness of my great-grandmother's closet - the one with her dead husband's clothes in it - the one she never opened. I smell the dirt under my fingernails, and see the sight of an uprooted rose garden now turned into sand bags. I remember how small and red and beautiful the flowers were, and how I felt a pang of remorse as I shoveled them into the green cloth bags to be made into instruments of defensive warfare. I hear the sound of morning prayers blaring over faraway speakers at dawn on a day I knew was going to be entirely too hot. They sound ancient and holy and soothing and intimidating and terrifying all at the same time. I see faraway trees through a faraway fog. They make me think of home and bottom lands and soybean fields for some reason. I see a perfect sunrise frozen in time by a perfect picture taken by a long gone friend. It reminds me of a happy moment now lost forever. I hear explosions that knock out windows and scare me half to death. I feel the strange freedom of the prison that is a combat zone. But that smell, that awful fucking smell. It's still in my nose. From time to time when I drop my trash into a filthy dumpster, or pass a full porta-john, or drive by a rotting animal on a back road, the memory of that disgusting, indescribable smell sends me half a world away.

The long, dim trail ahead.

May 2004 – Black Hills, South Dakota “Jesus.... Fucking.....Christ,” I gasp. “Is this... hill...ever....gonna end?” “I ... dunno ...man.” says John. “I think...I’m...gonna die.” “To the top... then... a... break...Okay?” “Yeah.... sure.” And so, onward and upward we go, one heavy foot step at a time– up, up, up, the trail never seems to end. It simply meanders gently out of sight around the next bend, instilling hope that this would be the last leg of our journey upwards, when again and again, upon rounding what seems to be the final curve of today’s hike, another quarter mile of trail appears ahead, and disappears around yet another bend. Our spirits are not dampened in the least though. We slog on, the weight of my brutally heavy, U.S. Government issue (stolen by me personally) backpack seems to grow with every foot ascended, the straps feel as though they are on the verge of pulling my shoulders off. But there were are no complaints; no thoughts of turning back. All around us is nature at her most beautiful. Everywhere, huge Ponderosa pines reach skyward from the rocky ground, their reddish bark contrasting sharply with the perfectly blue South Dakotan sky. In the distance, the ancient mountains loom above us, dark with shadow and the wondrous plant life they support. From our vantage point it’s easy to see why the first white men to see them called them the Black Hills. As did the Indians long before. There is something sinister, yet holy about them. Like a gothic cathedral perhaps. My heart tells me that this is a sacred place. I can’t help but feel that we are trespassing; that we don’t belong here, even though the day can only be described as gorgeous and completely calm. For some inexplicable reason, we talk in a whisper, this despite the fact that we haven’t seen another person in days. The Plains Indians used to come here to worship their spirits and to perform rituals. In a way this is fitting, for I am looking for something, anything to believe in. I am looking for something that is true and real, not bullshit like everything else has turned out to be. Somewhere here in these gigantic boulders and herds of bison and pine trees I am looking for something I have lost. Even though I have no idea what this thing could be, or even if I would recognize it if I were to somehow stumble upon it.

We have finally reached the summit. Over six thousand feet if we are to believe the accuracy of the government made map in our possession. “Fuck it, bro,” says John. “Let’s go down the hill a little and set up camp. I happily agree, and after a bit of searching, we find a fairly level spot a few hundred yards away at the base of a small cliff. “This’ll work,” and I drop my pack. In thirty minutes the tent is up, and a meal of coffee, beans, and canned spaghetti is over the fire. We shovel the food into our mouths without speaking, as though we haven’t eaten in days. In minutes it is all gone. Time for coffee. I dig around in my pack for what seems like an eternity. Eureka! Ancient blue enamel coffee cup, sustainer of life, creator of the magnificent back country bowel movement. Ahh. A full cup. “Shit!” I hiss as the almost syrup-like substance touches my lips. “Hot, dumbass?” says John. I only smile. After blowing into the scalding hot liquid a few times, I stand and stretch, the sweat on my back from today’s hike bringing a chill to my body that feels simply exquisite. I look upward at the cliff face in front of me. “I’m going up there.” “Right now?” “Yeah come on, let’s go.” “Alright, I’ll be there in a minute.” I walk around the sheer face of the campsite and eventually find a far less vertical crevice just big enough to walk through. There seems to be a path, not a well worn one, but a path nonetheless, all the way to the top. A few easy hand and toe holds and I’m there. “How about that?” I think. “Only had to set my cup down twice.”

I sit and relax, on top of a boulder, soaking up the setting of the blood red sun way out on the edge of God's creation, sipping my still too hot coffee, as John finally works his way up to my perch. "What took you so long?" I ask. John smiles and holds up a freshly rolled joint. Ah yes, Marijuana, staple of any good sunset. We pass the weed back and forth until it and the sun are nearly gone, then descend back down into the shadows and our home for the night.

The fire has slowly begun to die. In a brief flash of paranoia I remember that campfires are illegal in South Dakota's national forests. A rule obviously created (or at least heavily influenced) by, fat, cowboy hat wearing, senators and representatives, from the depths of the logging industry's front pocket. To help prevent the natural cycle of fire and regrowth from cutting into profits. (Defacing a sacred mountain with the faces of four dead white guys— legal. Building a campfire to stay warm— illegal. Ain't America grand?) This moment of anxiety quickly passes as we give these popularly elected politicians our standard "Fuck 'em," a joint resolution passed unanimously by both John and Myself.

The entrancing effect of fire on the human mind— especially the stoned human mind has taken hold. The embers glow and flicker red and orange and blue and even green as we sit in wonder of them. The silence of the day has been replaced by the chirping of crickets and the rustle in the pine needles of various unidentifiable nocturnal creatures. "Where do we go from here man? Not that long ago we were *something*, you know? We were Marines, you know? Whatever that means now. What happens next?" All these thoughts seem to fall out of my brain like lead and to simply lie there, like something I didn't mean to show to the world, until my friend thankfully picks them up and shows me that he still understands. "I guess we just have to keep on living and take what we can get from what's left." I agree with him, and know that this is how things have to be, but in his eyes I think I see, and in his voice I think I can hear the same uncertainty that I know is in mine.

"Maybe we'll be better people someday because of all of this," he says. "I don't feel like a better man," I reply, not looking up from the fire. "I feel like a little kid who's lost his way out here." "Yeah I know. Me too. But we'll get there." "We'll see I guess."

### A Souvenir

I put the book down on the ground and stare blankly at the cover for a few seconds. "Leningrad— now those people had real problems to deal with," I mutter to no one, and pitch a rock through the fire. The rising sun has taken the chill out of the air, but I put a few small sticks on my campfire anyway. Shiprock still looms, unconquered, by me at least, in the distance. I try to decide what to do about this situation, but reach no conclusions. The only thing I feel sure of this morning is that I am in a special, albeit lonely, place, and I have arrived there by my own volition. Do the people who live here feel the same way? Or do they see this place as a poverty and addiction ridden hell? Or is it simply all they know? A dog's bark seems to answer me from

very far away. Probably from the single wide trailer covered with used tires that I saw yesterday afternoon. Maybe he's right, I think, maybe I should get the hell out of here.

But still, there's Shiprock, impartial, uncaring, looking as though it is awaiting a strong desert wind to push it along its way. Like it doesn't want to be here either. "You're being a dumbass man. It's a big fucking rock." Ah yes, that's me, the downtrodden realist, arguing with myself. I laugh.

I stuff my green sleeping bag back into my pack, throw my terrible coffee into the fire, and put my faithful mug back into its pouch. I stand, stretch, look all around, (I'm not totally uncivilized) and piss into the fire, putting most of it out; enveloping the immediate area with acrid smelling steam. I zip up and walk toward Shiprock for a few minutes. I pick up a tan-colored sandstone and throw it sidearm style toward what was to be my ultimate goal. "Nope," I say. "Some other time. I've gotta go back." Back home that is. I really haven't had any desire to be there until just now, but I can't help but feel that maybe it's time to stop running for a while. Maybe it's time to see if I've found anything wandering around all over creation, or if I've just wasted my time. I look down and pick up a rough broken piece of stone just small enough to hold with one hand. "You're coming with me," I say to the inanimate object, as I turn around and begin my walk back toward the truck.

### A Forgotten Flower

#### I

There's A Foreign Field, Far Away  
And A Tiny Red Rose Grows There Today  
Simple And Perfect, It Reaches To The Sky  
But Within Just A Week, The Rose Will Have Died

#### II

The Rose Is Destroyed  
Taken From The Earth  
Crushed In The Pages  
Of A Sad Old Book  
Of Its Former Beauty  
Only A Shell Now Remains  
A Rose It Still Is  
But It Will Never Live Again

#### III

The Petals Are Brown  
As It Lies In Death's Repose  
But I'll Never Let This Ugly World Steal  
That Beautiful, Tiny Red Rose

