

A.W.O.L.

By day, the soldiers from the 101st were kept busy reinforcing the camp they have set up here in central Iraq, primarily a base for the helicopter gunships flown by the division. The official name is Forward Operating Base Shell; another similar base is called Exxon.

--Jim Dwyer, *NYT*, 3/25/03

They get the money. You get the prosthetic devices, the nightmares, and the mysterious illnesses.

--retired Army Special Forces Master Sergeant Stan Goff,
from an open letter to GIs in Iraq, 11/15/03

This morning in a heartburn sandstorm
I saw my entire unit holding hands
so they could drag each other blind towards Baghdad
I could tell they were yelling to each other
but all I could hear
was little kids in a trailer park back home in Abilene
singing *Ring around the rosie*
While their mothers and fathers washed the supper dishes
the faucets sputtered blood
the pots filled with *Ashes, ashes*
and for the life of me I could not figure out

why I came all this way
to live in a scratch base camp named after Exxon
or to protect the one down the road called Shell
I don't know about you, man
but I refuse to go down
as some minimum wage, gas pump hero
I'm not going to embrace this particular suck

They told us war was whiskey in the morning
blood brotherhood and razorblade sistership
They promised that for once in our lives
we'd feel our hearts living in our chests
But this here is just a dead dog in the road
wired with explosives
laughter a throatful of glass
whoever we've killed today
shards working their way through our guts

Back home behind gates and check points
the locusts in suits divvy up briefcases of cash
while we divvy up the nightmares and prosthetic devices

They look just as impassive and debonair
as we do in our camouflage helmets, brother
but under the boardroom tables
their knees are trembling with desire

Just like ours tremble here in the land
where even the roosters refuse to sing
and pet tigers flick their tails
to the chop-chop-chop of helicopters
and look the other way
to let the tanks and limousines crawl past

They keep telling us it's a free world, brother,
so let's be free and go AWOL
scrape these desert boots from our feet and hobble around
down by the blown-out barber shops and cafes
where neon signs lie blinking in the rubble
and one spiked, high-heeled shoe full of ashes
stands all lonely in the square

I know a man down there
who sells colored balloons from his cart—
we'll buy two red ones
and tie them with fishing wire to our ears
so the snipers'll think we're too crazy to kill
We'll stop to dance with the one tattered dress
shimmying on the clothesline
while the orphan kid in the junkyard
cuts his tongue on the rim of a can
and raptors shake blood from their beaks like confetti

We'll fall in love with a streetful of urchins
eighty-six the dogcatcher and take in the strays
At night we'll lie down in donkey carts
and try to fall asleep
to the sad honk of donkeys
or widows moaning on their bombed out stoops
And if I pray at all, brother
it'll be that the stars stay where they are
too gaseous and weird to long for
a million black holes out of our reach

--Katie Daley, December 2003

Brigid Mulrooney's Condolences

Hello, America
Hello, New York
Greetings from Belfast, Derry and Ulster
Greetings and condolences and tears over the dam
for your blood under the bridge
Flesh gone to smoke, laughter to ash

For some it's the first time
that gut-jangling shake
when the shrapnel and dust settle
and you fathom how hated you are
For some others
the fists, billy clubs and bullets
have been falling all around them
along with the sneers and spit
and names dripping with the bottom of the bog
all their lives

But enough, enough—
Pablo Neruda was there and he said,
The blood of the children
ran in the streets
like the blood of the children
It never mattered whose children they were
their glad bodies
are no longer running in the streets
like the glad bodies of children
and that's that

And so, we get up from our own sad bodies
hunkering against the blasts and the rubble
We get up dancing anyway
We chalk poems at the crosswalk
We glue shards
of the smashed supper plates and supper fights
into sidewalk mosaics
in the crackled concrete at our feet

We look both ways
We cross on red anyway
We take the chance to come alive and loving
in the eye of the storm

--Katie Daley, October 2001