

## 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