

Wall

My daddy, chopping wood behind the garage. Big ax, tall as me. He swings it up, up over his head, then it falls slow back behind him like it's gonna stay back there until *whoosh* it flies up, over, down so hard it scares me until I get used to it. Daddy chopping wood, it's the same steady as the water drip down the gutter.

He's in his t-shirt, white with brown under his arms. Sweat I guess but he never smells bad. My brother when he sweats he smells *bad* and I tell him and he pretends to swat me but he always misses because I'm his sister and he better miss. But my daddy smells good to me when he sweats but the brown under his arms and sometimes a hole there. The brown is crinkly and kinda hard, why? Sweat is wet, how can it make white t-shirts hard with holes?

Why he chops wood, I don't know. Everybody else buys bundle wood from the Wal-Mart for their fireplaces but not my daddy and we don't have a fireplace we have a woodstove to keep warm like we used to have up in the mountains when we lived there, that's what my brother said. I don't remember that I was little. Now I'm seven I'm not little.

My daddy works in a hospital in the Bay Area. He helps the doctors help the sick people. He has to drive down there four hours from here in the foothills because we can't afford to live in the Bay Area so my daddy lives in the camper in the hospital parking lot four nights a week. My mommy says she misses him but they fight on the weekends. Worse now that my brother went off to the war. It's not the same war as my daddy's war but it's in the same place.

My daddy can't hear so good because of the war. I have to repeat myself a lot to him which makes him mad and me too.

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She watches her young son, carefully marking the gray wall on the side of the house, using the black Sharpie bought expressly for all this.

Today, he must make 27 marks on the right side of the wall, and two on the left side. It will take him five minutes, she imagines, because he's so thoughtful about it. The markings haven't become a rote exercise for him, he thinks about each mark before he puts it on the wall. She didn't expect him to be this serious still, after so many marks have covered so much of the wall.

She sighs. We find solace in the small things of home, in the good things of our children. In the little strikes we make against the big things so wrong, these days.

The Clinton years weren't all that bad, in her estimation. She misses Clinton and not just the easy charisma. Okay, he made her tingly, and Harold would get angry at her for that, how can you be attracted to him, he'd hiss, post-Lewinsky, oh well. Intelligence. She misses intelligence. Infidelity is one thing—if she caught her Harold with pants kneehigh, he'd be out of the house on the other side of changed locks. But intelligence? It breeds confidence and she hasn't had confidence in the bigger world for years.

She can see the gray wall from the laundry room, which angles out from the house. The wall faces out to an alley behind their home that leads down a few houses to a popular park. A lot of people use the alley, it's a shortcut; it's why they bought the house, really, to let the kids be near the small playground just

down the way. The neighborhood feels safe, she likes that. Wanted it, after their years in the city, the years without children, the years with bars on the windows. Now there was farmland all around, here in the foothill community of Grasshill, a park down the way.

The right side of the wall has roughly 35,000 marks. In fives—one, two, three, four, then cross the diagonal, five. These represent dead Iraqis—civilians, police, soldiers. The left side of the wall has roughly 2,000 marks, also in fives. These represent dead American soldiers. Seeing a big wall with all these black lines in one place, it becomes undeniable, something you can see, measure, feel. Her son and daughter have put each black mark on the gray wall, using a ladder when they need to. They understand what each mark means, and take turns, updating the wall from the body count that comes in the newspapers. Although lately her son has done most of the work on the wall.

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What's between me and the old man is as simple as it is large.

The old man had told me about the Persian Gulf. He had been in the reserves to make a little extra money and boom: he gets sent over there, after the invasion of Kuwait.

The old man is not the warring type. Didn't even hunt when we were up in the mountains. He's not like that. Not that I noticed he wasn't like that; as a kid, you miss everything. But now I know. I know about war. And I have a little of the warrior in me, I found it in Iraq. It's easier to spot it in yourself when you are surrounded by it, and once you meet other guys who have it in them, pronounced, maybe you find it in yourself a little easier. I suppose you can find it

in other ways, in a bar fight when rage pangs up, as it will. But I never had that happen to me, until Iraq.

The old man may not have had the warrior in him, but the war is still in him. He came back from the Persian Gulf and since then he doesn't talk much. I always thought his quiet was due to him not hearing very well, artillery deafened him some. He used to talk more before my sister was born, as a kid I remember we'd talk at dinner—Mom always talked the most, but he would talk and kid around and be a dad, but not after the Gulf. But it's not because he can't hear. He just doesn't want to talk anymore.

I have a video tape that I have watched over one hundred times. It's from CNN, I taped it from the TV a few days after 9/11.

The first part of the videotape is of the first plane hitting the tower, only you barely see that. It's a couple of firemen, doing some street work, then the loud swooo-rrrrrrr-BAM the explosion and you look up and there's that fire hole in the first tower. How a camera just happened to be there, I don't know, and it almost swivels up in time to see the plane enter the building and it still shakes me everytime. But the first plane alerted anyone with a video camera to train the lens on the towers and that one camera caught the plane going into the second tower with a certainty that will not be denied, the certainty of war, of a bullet finding its way, the plane hits the tower and then there is the shrieking of women.

In Iraq, shrieking comes because of physical pain, not because of the horrid things you see, but on 9/11 in New York, nobody had ever seen that before except in the movies and while the movies should have made me comfortable with it I was never comfortable with it and I watched it over and over and over because I thought eventually I would understand but I don't and so I signed up for this Iraq, Iraq this time, Iraq my time. My old man did it for the money and he

got fucked and had to go and now he doesn't hear so well and doesn't talk too much but I did it because planes go into buildings and I have a thing to do now and that made my old man livid at me, he'd yell at me not to ruin my life, not to fight something that can't be fought, and I ignored him because I have this thing to do and his ears and what they've heard and his eyes and what they've seen, those ears and those eyes don't belong to me, they belong to him and he didn't see me off on the bus to Camp Pendleton but my mom did, crying like a baby and my sister did, crying for her mom and well I thought maybe he and I would get back to some kind of normal on some future day.

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I think I have I am in love.

I love Timmy Baishore. He is in my class. Mrs. Tinan's second grade, Grasshill Elementary. We sit by last name.

Timmy has red hair. Timmy has freckles. Timmy sits in the front of the class. I sit in the back. After lunch, Mrs. Tinan reads a story.

Timmy and I, we stare into each other's eyes. I feel something under my shirt, inside. I feel it I like it. I look in Timmy's eyes. And he looks at me and I know he feels something under his shirt inside and he stares at me until Mrs. Tinan stops reading and we have to do arithmetic which I hate and do bad at.

Usually, Timmy puts his finger up into his nose while he stares at me. So I do too. I did that once at home, Mom said stop it, mean. I don't know why Timmy puts his finger up into his nose. My nose is always wet, my finger gets wet. Timmy, it's like he has an itchy inside nose and he does that, so I do it too but I don't know why.

Once we walked after school. I asked him about his mommy and daddy and his mommy doesn't work and his daddy comes home every night. He didn't ask me about my mommy and daddy and I was glad but I told him that my brother was in the war. He asked if my brother was dead and I said no. No no no.

The feeling in my shirt was strong as we walked. It was happy. I asked him if his mommy cries a lot and he said he only saw his mommy cry once. My mommy cries all the time. She cries at TV when something sad happens. She cries at oatmeal commercials. She's been doing this for a long time, my brother said it was because it was her time in life. And I said what time in life, and my brother said you're too young and someday Mom will tell you but I don't like having a time in life when I'm going to cry at oatmeal commercials, I like oatmeal and I don't won't to ever cry about oatmeal in commercials and I wait for someone to explain this and I asked Mom once and she just said not yet.

I feel like I'm waiting for lots and lots. Mostly I'm waiting for the next time Timmy and I walk after school.

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She and Harold had talked about it first, at some length. The wall was Harold's idea, he had been more aware of politics all along and had influenced her over the years, slowly making her more astute, that how she feels. More astute. Harold thinks the war is about oil; she's not sure. Are these dark times, are they just beginning? Harold is more cynical, yes, but it doesn't feel like an unearned cynicism to her.

She watches her son outside, as he slowly marks the gray wall. Each mark made with care. She has raised good children and that is something; she doesn't have

to tell herself that anymore. She used to say it aloud to herself; she needed to hear it said. But now... watching her son signify the dead on a wall of the house, signifying the dead for the neighbors to see, so they too can bear a kind of witness... she knows he's a good child.

Harold thinks the boy is too dreamy, and that might be. But that's not bad. She wondered aloud to Harold when they first talked about the wall, wondered if they were bringing the big awfulness to their kids too young by doing it, as if maybe they should wait until some future time when a war started wrong can be explained, when a world of raging religion can be comprehended by a youngster in time to offset the fear that inevitably settles in once you pair a god and a gun. When is that time? When are you old enough for that?

Maybe he is dreamy, she thinks. Look at him pause with Sharpie outheld. Look at him regard the black mark he makes on the gray wall. What is he dreaming about?

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There were protests at home, we could see TV and we know.

But I talked to an older guy, a sergeant who worked in the infirmary and he remembers Vietnam and guys coming home to insults and protests and feeling like shit. He says it haunted a whole generation of guys back when.

But I don't think this one will be like that. People are too confused about everything. We all saw the planes enter the buildings at hundreds of miles an hour, we all can imagine jumping out of a building to escape sear heat; I would want to hold a woman's hand on the way down, even a woman I barely knew, even a woman I didn't think pretty, I would want to hold her hand all the way

down watching the street come at me, I think it the gray flat would come up to me slow and the feel of her hand in mine the slight tightening of fingers my last solace we all feel that, we all saw that and we all know that and nobody can get over it. So no, there will be no anti-war thing, no Vietnam thing. Not this time.

Also we feel like we are doing something better here in Iraq. Fuck Saddam. We feel that. But it is unimaginably hard on the people here. Just like planes into buildings, you don't know when a car idling up next to you might explode. It's hard enough on me, on us. But I have looked at these Iraqis and I don't know how they are going to live with it.

I saw a man shrieking over a dead child. Shrieking like you never will forget, these things that stay in the mind. Putting his hands out, palm up, looking at us as we held our weapons and stood back. Black hair, black eyebrows, black moustache, black eyes, palms up, waiting for someone to explain this to him.

That's his life now, without explanation.

The child was the age of my sister. Seven or so. Boy or girl, I don't know. The face was gone, the hair too. Clothes were black, still smoking.

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Today, Timmy and I walked again. He has a good laugh, it's warm in him then it makes warm in me. He tried to hold my hand but people might see. He doesn't have TV in his house and I ask why? He says his mommy says it's bad and I ask why? He says he doesn't really know and he watches it at Aaron's house and he doesn't see what's bad about it but his mom won't let the TV into the house and Timmy says serious, that's just how my Mom says it is, and I know that's true.

And we're just walking and I don't even notice where we're going, we just walk and it makes me happy just to walk I look at him as we walk and I've never been this happy ever ever before.

And Timmy says they have five newspapers in their house everyday and I said I didn't even think there were five newspapers in the whole world and why do you have five newspapers and he says we read them everyday to count the dead people.

And I say what dead people?

And he says the dead people in Iraq.

And I say that's the place my brother is. And he says you have to come see my wall.

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She's looking out the laundry room window at the wall. It is maybe 20 feet wide and ten feet tall. There's very little room left on it for black marks. They hadn't imagined they would run out of room, that the war would continue for years, that the dead would be so many. They hadn't thought about what to do when they ran out of blank wall.

She looks again at the picture on the front page of the newspaper. Then she let the paper fall down by her side and looked out again at the wall.

She felt odd, a naked feeling. True, the wall was so public, it was meant to be public. Their house sits right on the alley; and in that way of the neighborhood, it

is popular as a thoroughfare. It attracts joggers, walkers, people with pets, moms taking kids to the playground nearby. People going by see all the black markings, they have to wonder about it. Then they see at the top, just below the roofline AMERICAN SOLDIERS DEAD IN IRAQ and to the right, IRAQIS CIVILIANS DEAD FROM WAR. They see how very many more Iraqis are dead, and it is that impact on the passer-bys that she had wanted, people walking up the alley and seeing it and feeling it. Then walking on their way, touched a little by it.

She thought she would feel more pride as she unfurled the newspaper on the driveway: a front page story in the local afternoon paper, with her in front of the wall, and a story about her kids and the wall itself.

But it was different now. Her picture was staring up at her from the newsstand by the grocery store, her picture was downtown where she stopped to get coffee, it was by the bus stand as she drove by. Everywhere she would go for the next 24 hours, there her picture would be in front of a wall of chickenscratch, there she was there she was again and again.

So now she was something else.

She looks at the picture again and then out the laundry window.

And ambling up, there's her son, her Timmy, home from school, looking at the wall. And he has a little girl with him. She's so skinny, she's so blonde, she looks so familiar, from his class? The little girl is looking up at the wall, and her mouth has fallen open, the wall does that to people.

She smiles at the sight of her son with a girl. Timmy.

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Today, we are on the banks of the Euphrates.

Today, this torrid nothing, hot even for desert. Today insurgents like any other day, today I look for donkeys and furtive men on foot.

Today, my Kevlar, my body armor.

Today, I climb out of the Humvee and go out to the slim river, the quiet of sand here, the inferno.

Today I walk slow, out past the falling anonymous building that has not been checked for remote control bombs which are everywhere which explode at a force of 6000 miles per hour no shit today.

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Timmy's house is so different from mine, and his mommy is so different from my mommy. And this big room is a kitchen and a living room and it looks different, it smells different. On the four walls beneath the high roof, there are lots of pictures or paintings and everything is sort of brown.

And they have like eight plates on the big wall, plates with pictures or just color, do they take the plates down to eat on them, or do the plates just stay up on the wall?

There's a big picture of an Indian but he's all fuzzy looking. And there they are, five newspapers, including one with Timmy's mom on it and Timmy's very excited about that, look he says Roanne he says my name Roanne, look there's my mom and the wall I showed you and his eyes have happiness coming out of them

right into me and I like Timmy's mom but she doesn't smile at Timmy's happiness.

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My. Oh my. She watches the little girl gaze at her son. She finds herself swallowing a bit at the sight. Is Timmy in love *he's just in the second grade*. This waif girl can't take her eyes off of him, her nose just runs and runs but she doesn't seem sick. And she's just sweet and doesn't say all that much and Roanne is a pretty name, not current, but pretty and Roanne says her mom works nights at the Wal-Mart and so she calls and the moms agree that Roanne can stay for dinner because frankly it's just the cutest thing. Even though she's not sure what to make of it. She keeps it to herself, of course, not mentioning anything to Roanne's mom. It's getting dark and Harold would be home soon.

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Timmy's mom is making dinner and it smells sorta funny and I asked her and she said it was tofu stroganoff and I ask what is tofu and she said what it was but I didn't understand so I asked is that meat and she says no we don't eat meat and I said what? What? What?

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She looks down at Roanne's blonde head. Roanne had suddenly become so serious: pulling over a chair with great ceremony and standing up on it, intent on seeing what was being made for dinner, staring down into the skillet as if there was something mysterious in it and then staring up at her with a solemnity she'd never seen in a second grader and she likes this little girl and she hands Roanne a napkin for her nose and that's when it happened.

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I was standing on the chair next to Timmy's mommy, watching her cooking. Then it was a *boom* a big *boom* coming from the outside in and I looked at the wall and all the plates on the wall shake just a little bit *boom* the plates shake again something is hitting the wall on the outside making the plates jump a little now *boom* they jump and steady *boom* steady *boom* steady and one of the plates jumps off the wall and falls on the ground and breaks like dishes when my mommy drops them and she usually swears and *boom* and I look at Timmy and he looks scared and I look at his mommy and she looks scared and *boom* the whole wall is shaking now and the big picture of the Indian falls forward stiff and the glass is exploding and Timmy's mommy runs to the laundry door yelling stay in here but Timmy looks at me and follows his mommy outside and I follow Timmy outside.

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There in the slight light of evening she sees a man bent over at the waist before the wall.

And then he straightens, a man in a t-shirt and scuffed jeans, and lifts over his head an ax; it points up at the moon, then falls behind him cocked; with both hands on the ax, he brings it back over his head in a heave, burying it in the wall, then pulls the ax out of the wall ferocious and his arms draw back resolute, the ax up at the moon, then falling behind him and again the ax heaves against the wall hard and frightening and the wood is chipping and flying with every blow denting the black marks denting the gray paint showing the white of wood beneath the gray paint, beneath the black scratchings of Sharpie and she screams at the man to stop and he doesn't stop and the ax heaves again and he

has black hair and a white t-shirt and she screams at the man and he doesn't stop and then Roanne screams "Daddy please please Daddy."

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And my old man dropped his ax behind him as if the sight of her was a hurling shrapnel, hurling at him not me, and he backed away from Roanne and then tripped on the ax handle and stumbled, falling on his back. The old man's eyes were ghost wide and never left my sister's. She screamed Daddy again, her eyes so red, so frightened and uncomprehending Daddy Daddy Daddy.

His feet unsure, gawky; he stumbled up and his arms stuck to his sides. He couldn't say anything to the woman or her son and I could tell all he saw was the red eyes of my sister. And then he turned to run down the alley, past the golden back windows of houses at night, past the park still and waiting, past the line of eucalyptus at the park's edge and out to the quiet sway of corn fields surrounding the town like a fence. Running and running, his breath ragged like stubble; running away from her as he would so many times and in so many different ways in the grievous years to come.