Praise for *The Yellow Birds*

‘Powers’ poetic gifts render the experience of Americans in Iraq with great emotional intensity. War has been a subject of literature ever since *The Iliad*. The best books transcend their time and circumstances to say something enduring and truthful about war itself. *The Yellow Birds* belongs in that category.’

Philip Caputo, author of *A Rumor of War*

‘The most recent war is much like the most ancient, torn bodies, cracked psyches, the emotional roundelay of pride, pain, confusion and sorrow. In *The Yellow Birds*, Kevin Powers has delivered an exceptional novel from the war in Iraq, written in clean, evocative prose, lyric and graphic, in assured rhythms, a story for today and tomorrow and the next.’

Daniel Woodrell, author of *Winter’s Bone*

‘We haven’t just been waiting for a great novel to come out of the Iraq War, our 21st century Vietnam; we have also been waiting for something more important, a work of art that illuminates our flawed and complex and striving humanity behind all such wars. At last we have both in Kevin Powers’ *The Yellow Birds*.’

Robert Olen Butler, author of *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*

‘Kevin Powers’ *The Yellow Birds* is written with an intensity which is deeply compelling; every moment, every memory, every object, every move, is conjured up with a fierce and exact concentration and sense of truth. The music of his prose has an exquisite mixture of control and then release which mirrors the action of the book, and the psychological and physical pressures under which the characters are placed.’

Colm Tóibín, author of *Brooklyn*
‘So heartfelt and so good that it not only reaffirms the power of fiction to tell the truth about the unspeakable, but also asks serious questions of a generation of writers – myself included – who have thus far avoided addressing these disastrous wars directly. Reading *The Yellow Birds* I became certain that I was in the presence of a text that will win plaudits, become a classic, and hold future narratives of the war to a higher standard. Impeccably structured and told with the poetry of a master, I often had to put the book down, close my eyes and savour the depth of the writing. Comparisons with Hemingway will be inevitable because of the brevity and economical style, and with Cormac McCarthy because of the author’s talent for landscape. But Powers builds on this literary foundation to create a style of his own. He writes without hauteur, and his insights into the post-traumatic condition have a degree of sharpness that frequently subvert the classical mode of his storytelling and leave the reader with heart hammering. This is a superb literary achievement. I urge everyone to read it.’

Chris Cleave, author of *The Other Hand*

‘Compelling, brilliantly written, and heart-breakingly true, *The Yellow Birds* belongs in the same category as Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* and Norman Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead*. Thus far the definitive novel of our long wars in the Middle East; this book is certain to be read and taught for generations to come.’

Philipp Meyer, author of *American Rust*

‘*The Yellow Birds* is the story of a man drowning. The brutal clamour of war is silent next to the anger, fear and guilt of the hero as he tries to process what it is he’s part of and what it is he’s become. Kevin Powers has conjured a poetic and devastating account of war’s effect on the individual.’

Damian Lewis, star of *Homeland* and *Band of Brothers*
‘This is a novel I’ve been waiting for. *The Yellow Birds* is born from experience and rendered with compassion and intelligence. All of us owe Kevin Powers our heartfelt gratitude.’

Alice Sebold, author of *The Lovely Bones*

‘*The Yellow Birds* is a superb novel. Call it a war novel or a first novel or whatever you’d like. Powers has created a powerful work of art that captures the complexity and life-altering realities of combat service. This book will endure. Read it and then put it way up on that high rare shelf alongside Ernest Hemingway and Tim O’Brien.’

Anthony Swofford, author of *Jarhead*

‘Harrowing, inexplicably beautiful, and utterly, urgently necessary.’

Ann Patchett, author of *State of Wonder*

‘*The Yellow Birds* is the *All Quiet on the Western Front* of America’s Arab Wars.’

Tom Wolfe, author of *The Bonfire of the Vanities*
The
Yellow
Birds

Kevin
Powers

SCEPTRE
A yellow bird
With a yellow bill
Was perched upon
My windowsill

I lured him in
With a piece of bread
And then I smashed
His head…

— Traditional U.S. Army Marching Cadence

To be ignorant of evils to come, and forgetfull of evils past, is a mercifull provision in nature, whereby we digest the mixture of our few and evil dayes, and our delivered senses not relapsing into cutting remembrances, our sorrows are not kept raw by the edge of repetitions.

— Sir Thomas Browne
SEPTEMBER 2004

Al Tafar, Nineveh Province, Iraq
THE WAR TRIED to kill us in the spring. As grass greened the plains of Nineveh and the weather warmed, we patrolled the low-slung hills beyond the cities and towns. We moved over them and through the tall grass on faith, kneading paths into the windswept growth like pioneers. While we slept, the war rubbed its thousand ribs against the ground in prayer. When we pressed onward through exhaustion, its eyes were white and open in the dark. While we ate, the war fasted, fed by its own deprivation. It made love and gave birth and spread through fire.

Then, in summer, the war tried to kill us as the heat blanched all color from the plains. The sun pressed into our skin, and the war sent its citizens rustling into the shade of white buildings. It cast a white shade on everything, like a veil over our eyes. It tried to kill us every day, but it had not succeeded. Not that our safety was preordained. We were
not destined to survive. The fact is, we were not destined at all. The war would take what it could get. It was patient. It didn't care about objectives, or boundaries, whether you were loved by many or not at all. While I slept that summer, the war came to me in my dreams and showed me its sole purpose: to go on, only to go on. And I knew the war would have its way.

The war had killed thousands by September. Their bodies lined the pocked avenues at irregular intervals. They were hidden in alleys, were found in bloating piles in the troughs of the hills outside the cities, the faces puffed and green, allergic now to life. The war had tried its best to kill us all: man, woman, child. But it had killed fewer than a thousand soldiers like me and Murph. Those numbers still meant something to us as what passed for fall began. Murph and I had agreed. We didn't want to be the thousandth killed. If we died later, then we died. But let that number be someone else's milestone.

We hardly noticed a change when September came. But I know now that everything that will ever matter in my life began then. Perhaps light came a little more slowly to the city of Al Tafar, falling the way it did beyond thin shapes of rooflines and angled promenades in the dark. It fell over buildings in the city, white and tan, made of clay bricks roofed with corrugated metal or concrete. The sky was vast and catacombed with clouds. A cool wind blew down from the distant hillsides we'd been patrolling all year. It passed
over the minarets that rose above the citadel, flowed down through alleyways with their flapping green awnings, out over the bare fields that ringed the city, and finally broke up against the scattered dwellings from which our rifles bristled. Our platoon moved around our rooftop position, gray streaks against the predawn light. It was still late summer then, a Sunday, I think. We waited.

For four days we had crawled along the rooftop grit. We slipped and slid on a carpeting of loose brass casings left over from the previous days' fighting. We curled ourselves into absurd shapes and huddled below the whitewashed walls of our position. We stayed awake on amphetamines and fear.

I pushed my chest off the rooftop and crested the low wall, trying to scan the few acres of the world for which we were responsible. The squat buildings beyond the field undulated through the tinny green of my scope. Bodies were scattered about from the past four days of fighting in the open space between our positions and the rest of Al Tafar. They lay in the dust, broken and shattered and bent, their white shifts gone dark with blood. A few smoldered among the junipers and spare tufts of grass, and there was a heady mix of carbon and bolt oil and their bodies burning in the newly crisp air of morning.

I turned around, ducked back below the wall and lit a cigarette, shielding the cherry in my curled palm. I pulled long drags off it and blew the smoke against the top of the
roof, where it spread out, then rose and disappeared. The ash grew long and hung there and a very long time seemed to pass before it fell to the ground.

The rest of the platoon on the roof started to move and jostle with the flickering half-light of dawn. Sterling perched with his rifle over the wall, sleeping and starting throughout our waiting. He jerked his head back occasionally and swiveled to see if anyone had caught him. He showed me a broad disheveled grin in the receding dark, held up his trigger finger and daubed Tabasco sauce into his eyes to stay awake. He turned back toward our sector, and his muscles visibly bucked and tensed beneath his gear.

Murph’s breath was a steady comfort to my right. I had grown accustomed to it, the way he’d punctuate its rhythm with a well-practiced spit into an acrid pool of dark liquid that always seemed to be growing between us. He smiled up at me. “Want a rub, Bart?” I nodded. He passed me a can of care-package Kodiak, and I jammed it into the cup of my bottom lip, snubbing out my cigarette. The wet tobacco bit and made my eyes water. I spat into the pool between us. I was awake. Out of the gray early morning the city became whole. White flags hung in a few scattered windows in the buildings beyond the bodies in the field. They formed an odd crochet where the window’s dark recesses were framed by jagged glass. The windows themselves were set into whitewashed buildings that became ever brighter in the sun. A thin fog off the Tigris dissipated, revealing what
hints of life remained, and in the soft breeze from the hills to the north the white rags of truce fluttered above those same green awnings.

Sterling tapped at the face of his watch. We knew the muezzin’s song would soon warble its eerie fabric of minor notes out from the minarets, calling the faithful to prayer. It was a sign and we knew what it meant, that hours had passed, that we had drawn nearer to our purpose, which was as vague and foreign as the indistinguishable dawns and dusks with which it came.

“On your toes, guys!” the LT called in a forceful whisper.

Murph sat up and calmly worked a small dot of lubricant into the action of his rifle. He chambered a round and rested the barrel against the low wall. He stared off into the gray angles where the streets and alleys opened onto the field to our front. I could see into his blue eyes, the whites spider-webbed with red. They had fallen farther into his sockets during the past few months. There were times when I looked at him and could only see two small shadows, two empty holes. I let the bolt push a round into the chamber of my rifle and nodded at him. “Here we go again,” I said. He smiled from the corner of his mouth. “Same old shit again,” he answered.

We’d come to that building as the moon flagged to a sliver in the first hours of the battle. There were no lights on. We crashed our vehicle through a flimsy metal gate that had
KEVIN POWERS

once been painted dark red but had since rusted over, so that it was hard to tell what part had been painted red and what part was rust. When the ramp dropped from our vehicle we rushed to the door. A few soldiers from first squad rushed to the back, and the rest of the platoon stacked up at the front. We kicked in both doors at the same time and ran in. The building was empty. As we went through each room, the lights affixed to the front of our rifles cut narrow cylinders through the dark interior, but they were not bright enough to see by. The lights showed the dust we’d kicked up. Chairs had been turned over in some of the rooms, and colorfully woven rugs hung over the windowsills where the glass had been shot out. There were no people. In some of the rooms we thought we saw people and we yelled out sharply for the people who were not there to get on the floor. We went through each room like that until we got to the roof. When we got to the roof, we looked out over the field. The field was flat and made of dust and the city was dark behind it.

At daybreak on the first day our interpreter, Malik, came out onto the flat concrete roof and sat next to me where I leaned against the wall. It was not yet light, but it almost appeared to be because the sky was white the way the sky is when it’s heavy with snow. We heard fighting across the city, but it had not reached us yet. Only the noise of rockets and machine guns and helicopters swooping down near vertical in the distance told us we were in a war.
“This is my old neighborhood,” he told me.

His English was exceptional. There was a glottal sound in his voice, but it was not harsh. I’d often asked him to help me with my sparse Arabic, trying to get my pronunciation of this or that word right. “Shukran.” “Afwan.” “Qumbula.” *Thank you. You’re welcome. Bomb.* He’d help, but he always ended our exchanges by saying, “My friend, I need to speak English. For the practice.” He’d been a student at the university before the war, studying literature. When the university closed, he came to us. He wore a hood over his face, worn khaki slacks and a faded dress shirt that appeared to be ironed freshly every day. He never took his mask off. The one time Murph and I had asked him about it, he took his index finger and traced the fringe of the hood that hung around his neck. “They’ll kill me for helping you. They’ll kill my whole family.”

Murph hunched low and trotted over from the other side of the roof where he had been helping the LT and Sterling set up the machine gun after we’d arrived. Watching him move, I got the impression that the flatness of the desert made him nervous. That somehow the low ridgelines in the distance made the dried brown grasses of the floodplain even more unbearable.

“Hey, Murph,” I said. “This is Malik’s old stomping grounds.”

Murph ducked quickly and sat next to the wall. “Whereabouts?” he asked.
Malik stood up and pointed to a strip of buildings that seemed to grow organically in odd, not quite ninety-degree sections. The buildings stood beyond the field at the beginning of our sector. A little farther past the outskirts of Al Tafar, there was an orchard. Fires burned from steel drums and trash heaps and sprung up seemingly without cause around the edges of the city. Murph and I did not stand up, but we saw where Malik pointed.

“Mrs. Al-Sharifi used to plant her hyacinth in this field.” He spread his hands out wide and moved his arms in a sweeping motion that reminded me of convocation.

Murph reached for the cuff of Malik’s pressed shirt. “Careful, big guy. You’re gonna get silhouetted.”

“She was this crazy old widow.” He had his hands on his hips. His eyes were glazed over with exhaustion. “The women in the neighborhood were so jealous of those flowers.” Malik laughed. “They accused her of using magic to make them grow the way they did.” He’d paused then, and put his hands on the dried mud wall we’d been leaning against. “They were burned up in the battle last fall. She did not try to replant them this year,” he finished brusquely.

I tried to imagine living there but could not, even though we had patrolled the same streets Malik was talking about and drank tea in the small clay hovels and I’d had my hands wrapped in the thinly veined hands of the old men and women who lived in them. “All right, buddy,” I said. “You’re gonna get your shot off if you don’t get down.”
“It is a shame you didn’t see those hyacinths,” he said.

And then it started. It seemed as if the movement of one moment to the next had its own trajectory, a thing both finite and expansive, like the endless divisibility of numbers strung out on a line. The tracers reached out from all the dark spaces in the buildings across the field, and there were many more bullets than streaks of phosphorescence. We heard them tear at the air around our ears and smack into the clay brick and concrete. We did not see Malik get killed, but Murph and I had his blood on both of our uniforms. When we got the order to cease fire we looked over the low wall and he was lying in the dust and there was a lot of blood around him.

“Doesn’t count, does it?” Murph asked.
“No. I don’t think so.”
“What’re we at?”
“Nine sixty-eight? Nine seventy? We’ll have to check the paper when we get back.”

I was not surprised by the cruelty of my ambivalence then. Nothing seemed more natural than someone getting killed. And now, as I reflect on how I felt and behaved as a boy of twenty-one from my position of safety in a warm cabin above a clear stream in the Blue Ridge, I can only tell myself that it was necessary. I needed to continue. And to continue, I had to see the world with clear eyes, to focus on the essential. We only pay attention to rare things, and death was not rare.
Rare was the bullet with your name on it, the IED buried just for you. Those were the things we watched for.

I didn’t think about Malik much after that. He was an incidental figure who only seemed to exist in his relation to my continuing life. I couldn’t have articulated it then, but I’d been trained to think war was the great unifier, that it brought people closer together than any other activity on earth.

War is the great maker of solipsists: how are you going to save my life today? Dying would be one way. If you die, it becomes more likely that I will not. You’re nothing, that’s the secret: a uniform in a sea of numbers, a number in a sea of dust. And we somehow thought those numbers were a sign of our own insignificance. We thought that if we remained ordinary, we would not die. We confused correlation for cause and saw a special significance in the portraits of the dead, arranged neatly next to the number corresponding to their place on the growing list of casualties we read in the newspapers, as indications of an ordered war. We had a sense, something we only felt in the brief flash of synapse to synapse, that these names had been on the list long before the dead had come to Iraq. That the names were there as soon as those portraits had been taken, a number given, a place assigned. And that they’d been dead from that moment forward. When we saw the name Sgt. Ezekiel Vasquez, twenty-one, Laredo, Texas, #748, killed by small-arms fire in Baqubah, Iraq, we were sure that he’d walked as a ghost for years through South Texas. We thought he
was already dead on the flight over, that if he was scared when the C-141 bringing him to Iraq had pitched and yawed through the sky above Baghdad there had been no need. He had nothing to fear. He’d been invincible, absolutely, until the day he was not. The same, too, for Spc. Miriam Jackson, nineteen, Trenton, New Jersey, #914, dead as a result of wounds sustained in a mortar attack in Samarra, at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center. We were glad. Not that she was killed, only that we were not. We hoped that she’d been happy, that she took advantage of her special status before she inevitably arrived under that falling mortar, having gone out to hang her freshly washed uniform on a line behind her connex.

Of course, we were wrong. Our biggest error was thinking that it mattered what we thought. It seems absurd now that we saw each death as an affirmation of our lives. That each one of those deaths belonged to a time and that therefore that time was not ours. We didn’t know the list was limitless. We didn’t think beyond a thousand. We never considered that we could be among the walking dead as well. I used to think that maybe living under that contradiction had guided my actions and that one decision made or unmade in adherence to this philosophy could have put me on or kept me off the list of the dead.

I know it isn’t like that now. There were no bullets with my name on them, or with Murph’s, for that matter. There were no bombs made just for us. Any of them would have killed
us just as well as they’d killed the owners of those names. We didn’t have a time laid out for us, or a place. I have stopped wondering about those inches to the left and right of my head, the three-miles-an-hour difference that would have put us directly over an IED. It never happened. I didn’t die. Murph did. And though I wasn’t there when it happened, I believe unswervingly that when Murph was killed, the dirty knives that stabbed him were addressed “To whom it may concern.” Nothing made us special. Not living. Not dying. Not even being ordinary. Still, I like to think there was a ghost of compassion in me then, and that if I’d had a chance to see those hyacinths I would have noticed them.

Malik’s body, crumpled and broken at the foot of the building, didn’t shock me. Murph passed me a smoke and we lay down beneath the wall again. But I could not stop thinking about a woman Malik’s conversation had reminded me of, who’d served us tea in small, finely blemished cups. The memory seemed impossibly distant, buried in the dust, waiting for some brush to uncover it. I remembered how she’d blushed and smiled, and how impossible it was for her to not be beautiful, despite her age, a paunch, a few teeth gone brown and her skin appearing like the cracked, dry clay of summer.

Perhaps that is how it was: a field full of hyacinth. It was not like that when we stormed the building, not like that four days after Malik died. The green grasses that waved in the
breeze were burned by fire and the summer sun. The festival of people on the market street with their long white shifts and loud voices were gone. Some of them were lying dead in the courtyards of the city or in its lace of alleys. The rest walked or rode in sluggish caravans, on foot or in orange and white jalopies, in mule-drawn carts or in huddled groups of twos and threes, women and men, the old and young, the whole and wounded. All that was the life of Al Tafar left in a drab parade out of the city. They walked past our gates, past Jersey walls and gun emplacements, out into the dry September hills. They did not raise their eyes in the curfewed hours. They were a speckled line of color in the dark and they were leaving.

A radio crackled in the rooms beneath us. The lieutenant quietly gave our situation report to our command. “Yes, sir;” he said, “roger, sir;” and it passed, at each level more removed from us, until I am sure somewhere someone was told, in a room that was warm and dry and safe, that eighteen soldiers had watched the alleys and streets of Al Tafar through the night and that X number of enemies were lying dead in a dusty field.

The day had almost broken over the city and the ridges in the desert when the low, electric noise of the radio was replaced by the sound of the lieutenant’s boots padding up the staircase to the roof. Mere outlines took shape, and the city, vague and notional at night, became a contoured and substantial thing before us. I looked west. Tans and
greens emerged in the light. The gray of mud walls, of buildings and courtyards arranged in squat honeycombs, receded with the rising sun. A few fires burned in the grove of thin and ordered fruit trees a little to the south. The smoke rose through a gently tattered canopy of leaves only slightly taller than a man and leaned obediently to the wind coming across the valley.

The lieutenant came up to the roof and lowered himself into a slouch, his upper body parallel to the earth, his legs chugging, until he reached the wall. He sat with his back against the wall and gestured for us to gather around him.

“All right, guys. This is the deal.”

Murph and I leaned against each other until the weight of our bodies found their balance. Sterling inched closer to the lieutenant and fixed his eyes in a hard glare that traversed the rest of us on the roof. I looked at the lieutenant as he spoke. His eyes were dim. Before he continued he let out a short, bright sigh and rubbed a rash the color of washed-out raspberries with two fingers. It covered a small oval from his sharp brow line down onto his left cheek and seemed to follow the rounded path of his eye socket.

The LT was a distant person by nature. I don’t even remember where he was from. There was something restrained about him, something more than simple adherence to nonfraternization. It was not elitism. He seemed to be unknowable, or slightly adrift. He sighed often. “We’re here until midday or so,” he said. “Third platoon is going to push
through the alleys to our northwest and try to flush them to our front. Hopefully they'll be too scared to do much shooting at us before we...” He paused and brought his hand down from his face, reached into the pockets on his chest beneath his body armor and fished for a cigarette. I handed him one. “Thanks, Bartle,” he said. He turned to look at the orchard burning to the south. “How long have those fires been going?”

“Probably started last night,” said Murph.

“OK, you and Bartle keep an eye on that.”

The column of smoke that bent beneath the wind had straightened. It cut a black runny line across the sky.

“What was I saying before that?” The lieutenant looked absently over his shoulder and inched his eyes up over the wall. “Fuck me,” he muttered.

A specialist from second squad said, “Hey, no sweat, LT, we got it.”

Sterling cut him off. “Shut the fuck up. LT’s done when he says he’s done.”

I didn’t realize it then, but Sterling seemed to know exactly how hard to push the LT so that discipline remained. He didn’t care if we hated him. He knew what was necessary. He smiled at me and his straight, white teeth reflected the early morning sun. “You were saying, sir, that hopefully they’ll be too scared to shoot before...” The LT opened his mouth to finish his thought, but Sterling continued, “Before we kill the hajji...”
The lieutenant nodded his head and slouched over and trotted downstairs. We crawled back to our positions to wait. A fire had begun to burn in the town, its source obscured by walls and alleys. Thick black smoke seemed to join from a hundred fires all over Al Tafar, becoming one long curl up toward heaven.

The sun gathered itself behind us, rising in the east, warming the collar of my blouse, baking in the salt that clotted in hard lines and snaked around our necks and arms. I turned my head and looked right into it. I had to close my eyes, but I could still see its shape, a white hole in the darkness, before I turned west again and opened them.

Two minarets rose, like arms, up from the dusty buildings, slightly obscured now and then by smoke. They were dormant. No sound had come from them that morning. No adhan had been called. The long line of refugees that snaked its way out of the city for the past four days had slowed. Only a few old men bent over worn canes of cedar shuffled between the field of dead and the grove of trees. Two gaunt dogs bounced around them, nipped their heels, retreated when struck, and then started in on them again.

And it began once more. The orchestral whine of falling mortars arrived from all around us. Even after so many months beneath them, there was a blank confusion on the faces of the platoon. We stared at one another with mouths agape, fingers strangling the grips of our rifles. It was a clear dawn in September in Al Tafar, and the war seemed nar-
rowly focused, as if it occurred only in this place, and I remember feeling like I had jumped into a cold river on the first warm day of spring, wet and scared and breathing hard, with nothing to do but swim.

“Incoming!”

We moved by rote, our bodies made prostrate, our fingers interlaced behind our heads, our mouths open to keep the pressure balanced.

And then the sound of the impacts echoed off into the morning. I didn’t raise my head until the last reverberation faded.

I looked over the wall slowly, and a din of voices shouted, “All clear!” and “I’m up!”

“Bartle?” Murph huffed.

“I’m up, I’m up,” I said quietly, and I was breathing very hard and I looked out over the field and there were wounds in the earth and in the already dead and battered bodies and a few small juniper trees were turned up and on their sides where the mortars fell. Sterling ran to the opening in the floor and yelled down to the LT, “Up, sir.” He moved to each one of us on the roof, smacking the back of our helmets, “Get ready,” he said.

I hated him. I hated the way he excelled in death and brutality and domination. But more than that, I hated the way he was necessary, how I needed him to jar me into action even when they were trying to kill me, how I felt like a coward until he screamed into my ear, “Shoot these hajjis!”
I hated the way I loved him when I inched up out of the terror and returned fire, seeing him shooting too, smiling the whole time, screaming, the whole rage and hate of these few acres, alive and spreading, in and through him.

And they did come, shadowed in windows. They came out from behind woven prayer rugs and fired off bursts and the bullets whipped past and we’d duck and listen as they smacked against the concrete and mud-brick and little pieces flew in every direction. They ran through trash-strewn alleys, past burning drums and plastic blowing like clumps of thistle over the ancient cobblestones.

Sterling yelled a long time that day before I squeezed the trigger. My ears had already rung out from the noise and the first bullet I released into the field seemed to leave my rifle with a dull pop. It kicked up a little cloud of dust when it hit and it was surrounded by many other little clouds of dust just like it.

Rounds by the hundreds shook dust off the ground, the trees and buildings. An old car crumpled and collapsed beneath the dust. Once in a while, someone ran between the buildings, behind the orange and white cars, over the rooftops, and they’d surround themselves with little clouds of dust.

A man ran behind a low wall in a courtyard and looked around, astonished to be alive, his weapon cradled in his arms. My first instinct was to yell out to him, “You made it, buddy, keep going,” but I remembered how odd it would be
to say a thing like that. It was not long before the others saw him too.

He looked left, then right, and the dust popped around him, and I wanted to tell everyone to stop shooting at him, to ask, “What kind of men are we?” An odd sensation came over me, as if I had been saved, for I was not a man, but a boy, and that he may have been frightened, but I didn’t mind that so much, because I was frightened too, and I realized with a great shock that I was shooting at him and that I wouldn’t stop until I was sure that he was dead, and I felt better knowing we were killing him together and that it was just as well not to be sure you are the one who did it.

But I knew. I shot him and he slumped over behind the wall. He was shot again by someone else and the bullet went through his chest and ricocheted, breaking a potted plant hanging from a window above the courtyard. Then he was shot again and he fell at a strange angle—backward over his bent legs—and most of the side of his face was gone and there was a lot of blood and it pooled around him in the dust.

A car drove toward us along the road between the orchard and the field of dead. Two large white sheets billowed from its rear windows. Sterling ran to the other side of the building, where the machine gun was set up. I looked through my scope and saw an old man behind the wheel and an elderly woman in the back passenger seat.

Sterling laughed. “Come on...”
He couldn’t see them. I’ll yell, I thought. I’ll tell him they are old, let them pass.

But bullets bit at the crumbling road around the car. They punched into the sheet metal.

I said nothing. I followed the car with my scope. The old woman ran her fingers along a string of pale beads. Her eyes were closed.

I couldn’t breathe.

The car stopped in the middle of the road, but Sterling did not stop the shooting. The bullets ripped through the car and out the other side. The holes in the car funneled light, and the smoke and dust hung in the light. The door opened and she fell from the old car. She tried to drag herself to the side of the road. She crawled. Her old blood mixed with the ash and dust. She stopped moving.

“Holy [REDACTED] that [REDACTED] got murdered,” Murph said. There was no grief, or anguish, or joy, or pity in that statement. There was no judgment made. He was just surprised, like he was waking from a long afternoon nap, disoriented, realizing that the world has continued uninterrupted in spite of the strange things that may have happened while you slept. He could have said that it was Sunday, as we did not know what day it was. And it would have been a sudden thing to notice that it was Sunday at a time like that. But he spoke the truth either way, and it wouldn’t have mattered much if it had been Sunday, and since none of us
had slept in a long time, none of it really seemed to matter much at all.

Sterling sat down behind the wall next to the machine gun. He waved us to him and took a piece of pound cake from the cargo pocket on his trousers as we listened to the final bursts of nervous firing peter out. He broke the dry cake into three pieces. “Take this,” he said. “Eat.”

The smoke rose and began to disappear. I watched the old woman bleed on the side of the road. The dust blew in languid waves and began to swirl slightly. We heard shots again. Beyond a building a small girl with auburn curls and a tattered sundress stepped out toward the old woman. Errant bullets from other positions kicked up the dust around her in dry blooms.

We looked to Sterling. He waved us off. “Someone get on the net and tell those it’s a just a kid,” he said.

The girl ducked behind the building, then emerged again, this time shuffling toward the old woman very slowly. She tried dragging the body, and her face contorted with effort as she pulled the old woman by her one complete arm. The girl described circles into the fine dust as she paced around the body. The path they made was marked in blood: from the car smoking and ablaze, through a courtyard ringed by hyacinths, to the place where the woman lay dead, attended by the small child, who rocked and moved her lips, perhaps singing some desert elegy that I couldn’t hear.

The ash from the burning of clay bricks and the fat of
lean men and women covered everything. The pale minarets dominated the smoke, and the sky was still pale like snow. The city seemed to reach upward out of the settling dust. Our part was over, for a while at least. It was September and though there were few trees from which leaves could fall, some did. They shook off the scarred and slender branches, buffeted by the wind and light descending from the hills to the north. I tried to count the leaves as they fell, removed from their moorings by the impact of mortars and bombs. They shook. A thin sheaf of dust floated off each one.

I looked at Murph and Sterling and the rest of the platoon on the roof. The LT walked to each of us and put his hand on our arms, speaking softly, trying to soothe us with the sound of his voice, the way one would with frightened horses. Perhaps our eyes were wet and black, perhaps we bared our teeth. “Good job,” and “You’re OK,” and “We’re gonna be OK,” he said. It was a hard to believe that we’d be OK and that we’d fought well. But I remember being told that the truth does not depend on being believed.

The radio came on again. Before long the LT would give us another mission. We would be tired when the mission came, but we would go, for we had no alternative. Perhaps we’d had them once: alternatives, other paths to take. But our course was certain then, if unknown. It was going to be dark before we knew it. We had lived, Murph and me.

I try so hard now to remember if I saw any hint of what was coming, if there was some shadow over him, some way
I could have known he was so close to being killed. In my memory of those days on the rooftop, he is half a ghost. But I didn't see it then, and couldn't. No one can see that. I guess I'm glad I didn't know, because we were happy that morning in Al Tafar, in September. Our relief was coming. The day was full of light and warm. We slept.