THE TICKING IS THE BOMB

A MEMOIR OF TORTURE

BY NICK FLYNN

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This black-and-white photograph in my hand is an image of my unborn daughter. This is what I’m told. It is actually a series of photographs, folded one upon the other, like a tiny accordion. I was there when the doctor or the technician or whoever he was made it with his little wand of sound. I sat beside him, looked into the screen as he pointed into the shadows—Can you see her nose, can you see her hand? Can you see her foot, right here, next to her ear? I was there when each shot was taken, yet in some ways, still, it is all deeply unreal—it’s as if I were holding a photograph of a dream, a dream sleeping inside the body of the woman I love, this woman now walking through the world with two hearts beating inside her. This is the glass-table shot, the technician said—right there, that’s her clitoris.

At this same moment, or outside of this moment, outside of us, somewhere out there in the world, exists another set of photographs, photographs of prisoners and smiles and shadows. These photographs also have the texture of dreams—they seem so unlikely, yet I have held them in my hands.

HERE’S A SECRET: Everyone, if they live long enough, will lose their way at some point. You will lose your way, you will wake up one morning and find yourself lost. This is a hard, simple truth. If it hasn’t happened to you yet, consider yourself lucky. When it does, when one day you look around and nothing is recognizable, when you find yourself alone in a dark wood having lost the way, you may find it easier to blame it on someone else—an errant lover, a missing father, a bad childhood—or it may be easier to blame the map you were given—folded too many times, out of date, tiny print—but mostly, if you are honest, you will only be able to blame yourself.

One day I’ll tell my daughter a story about a dark time, the dark days before she was born, and how her coming was a ray of light. We got lost for a while, the story will begin, but then we found our way.

who died and made you king?

If, one Saturday afternoon, watching cartoons when you really should be outside (why not bike to the beach, or to a bridge, why not stand on the railing, watch the tidewater pass below, why not step off into the air, why not jump?)—if, without taking your eyes from the television, you call out for a glass of water and your mother, stirring some onions in a pan, answers, Who died and made you king?—it might make you wonder if you were, in fact, a king—unknown, unrecognized, but still, a king.

Or if you call out for a glass of water and your mother, as she passes you on her way out, answers, Who was your slave yes-
like how every time spook appears, he tries to escape, and you showing her pussy to the world. In school you are studying the civil-rights movement, but you aren’t interested in civil rights. You are interested in the Middle Ages, a time of kings and dungeons, which they don’t teach in school—medieval, you like to say the word, it has the word evil in it. Today the teacher is talking about Martin Luther King—every year you learn the same four things about Martin Luther King—but you are thinking about Nebuchadnezzar, the king of ancient Babylon. God took away his kingdom in order to punish him for his pride, and then God condemned him to live in the woods like an animal. God, apparently, doesn’t like one to have pride. For seven years Nebuchadnezzar lived without society or the ability to think—he grew all over his body, his nails became claws. You look at your own hand, stretch your fingers out.

Martin Luther King sat in a Birmingham jail, locked up for supporting the right of a man to order a sandwich whenever and wherever he damn well pleased. Your father is in prison, your mother told you so, the prison is in Missouri, but that’s all you’ve heard. From the big map on the wall, the one you stare at when you’re supposed to be listening, you know Missouri is in the middle of nowhere. The teacher says that while in prison Martin Luther King wrote a letter—you were supposed to read the letter for homework. Can anyone tell us one thing he wrote in his letter? She looks straight at you as she says this—you blur your eyes and she dissolves.

WHEN YOU WERE YOUNGER, for a year or so, your brother believed he was a termite. At a restaurant, when the waiter asked what he wanted, he’d answer, “Wood.” You decide right then and there that you have to be something else as well, so you decide to be a monkey. For some months afterwards you run around the house dragging your knuckles, answering only in monkey—monkey sounds, monkey yells, grunts taken from Saturday-afternoon Tarzan movies. How else would you know what a monkey sounds like? Maybe from cartoons—Magilla Gorilla, maybe, though didn’t he speak in full sentences? A distant relative has a spider monkey as a pet, you are alone in the same room with it once, you can’t remember how you got there or why. What you remember is that it jumped on you and held on to your head with its little hands, and you stopped being a monkey after that.

Your mother sends a letter your father has sent you from prison. In it, along with the one-page letter, you find a clipping from the newspaper of The Wizard of Id. Spook is chained to a wall, a hooded man holding a whip stands behind him.

If you asked your mother why your father is in prison, she might say, Your father is a reprobate, and since you don’t know what a reprobate is, you might think it’s a type of king. But it’s more likely that you’ll think it’s a type of spook.

One day you will learn that Babylon is now called Iraq, and years later, after your country invades, its king, its president, will be found, some months later, hiding in what will be called a “spider hole”—his beard gone wild, his nails grown long. And some time after this, after he is sentenced to death, he will be hung by the neck by jeering hooded men. You will watch his execution the same day you see photographs of a lost pop star showing her pussy to the world. But now it is still that beautiful summer day, and you are still inside, staring into your box of shadows. Now it’s The Three Stooges—Curly’s head is in a vise again, Moe is cutting into it with a hacksaw. Moe, it seems, is forever trying to carve his way into someone else’s body.

**Welcome to the Year of the Monkey**

(2004) I hear word of the photographs before I see the photographs, I hear about them on the car radio. The man on the radio has seen them, he talks as if they are there in front of him, as if he is thumbing through them as he speaks—*The photographs are from our war*, he says, and they are very, very disturbing.

I’m driving north from Texas to New York in a 1993 Ford Escort wagon—good, reliable, unsexy, cheap—a basic a-to-b device, bought in Texas with the idea of taking it north because, unlike the northeast, a used car from Texas will be unlikely to have rust. I hear about the photographs again and again even before I make it to the city limits. What connects the photographs, the man on the radio says, is that each depicts what appears to be torture, and that the people doing the torturing are wearing uniforms, or parts of uniforms, and that the uniforms appear to be ours.

The man on the radio says the words *abu ghraib*, words I’ve never heard before—at this point I don’t know if “abu ghraib” is one word or two, a building or a city, a place or an idea. The man on the radio describes the photographs—there are prisoners, there are guards, there are dogs. Hallways and cinder blocks and cages. Leashes and smiles. Many of the prisoners are not wearing clothes, he says, and the reason for this is that there appears to be a sexual element to what is happening, as I float past a church the size of a shopping mall.

The man on the radio is a reporter. The first time I heard his name was nearly forty years ago, when he broke the story of a massacre in Vietnam—My Lai—the name of a hamlet that came to symbolize all that was wrong with that war—nearly four hundred unarmed civilians, mostly women and children, rounded up, herded into ditches (ditches? isn’t that how the Nazis did it?), and shot (did the U.S. soldiers see those earlier photographs as children and later imitate them?). Photographs document that day as well, and the photographs eventually made their way to the pages of *The New York Times*. **Welcome to the Year of the Monkey**, banners over the streets of Saigon read that spring of 1968.

I finally break out of the vortex that is Houston, and now I’m driving east on I-10, approaching the exit for New Orleans, where I’d planned to stop, as I haven’t been there for years, but I decide to push on, to make it to Tuscaloosa before nightfall, where friends have offered me shelter. And I never get to see New Orleans again.

**As We Drive Slowly Past the Burning House**

When a siren—police car or fire truck or ambulance—would puncture my Saturday-morning cartoons, twisting the blue from the sky, my mother would tell me to go start the car, *Let’s see what’s happening*, and we’d drive to the place the sirens called us to.

What was she hoping to find, what was she hoping I’d see? It could be argued that she was teaching me to pay close attention to the world. Or it could be argued that she was teaching me to pay close attention to the afterworld. Or, as we drove slowly past the burning house, it could be argued that at least it wasn’t our tragedy, that we were at least able to step outside our house for an hour, into the fresh air, witness something outside ourselves. To empathize, or to practice empathy, even though

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terday?—it might mean something else. Or it might mean the same thing, for kings, after all, often have slaves, the two often go together, you know this.
we never knew the people who’d lived in the burning house, nor did it seem we cared to, even after their house was gone.

Or maybe she simply wanted me to practice, like other families practiced fire drills, so that when the sirens came for her, I’d know what to do. I’d get in my car and drive, toward the sound, whatever it was—fire or heart attack, car crash or suicide—get out and stand on the sidewalk or on someone’s lawn, or not even stop, make it a slow drive-by while the stranger is carried away on a stretcher.

In mythology, Scylla and the sirens called the sailors to strand their ships on the shoals—it could be argued that our sirens were merely calling out to strand us as well, to crash our ship, only it would take years to know that that was what we were doing. Where do you drive to when the siren is outside your own house, when the strangers on the sidewalk are looking at you?

**YOU DON’T TAKE PICTURES**

(2004) On the day the photographs appear, a veteran of the Korean War is interviewed on the radio in a coffee shop in Tennessee, and it seems as if he is thumbing through the photographs as he speaks. By now the photographs are in every newspaper in the world. You know, he begins, slowly, searching for his words, stuff like this happens in every war. It’s hard to tell if he’s disgusted or merely baffled. He pauses, and his voice gets slightly more indignant—but you don’t take pictures.

**the magic monkey**

The first book I could call mine, my first book, was a picture book, *The Magic Monkey*—it was adapted from an old Chinese legend by a thirteen-year-old prodigy named Plato Chan with the help of his sister Christina. The monkey in the story, as I remember it, was a misfit—lost, wandering, aimless, trying to find his way home. He manages to finagle his way into a walled school and there finds that he has magical powers, powers of transformation—he can change into a tree, a bird, a waterfall—but each thing he transforms into has a price, a complication. The tree becomes rooted, the waterfall slips away, the bird must constantly fly. I’m making this all up now from memory. I have the book on my bookshelf but I’m

**ARTIST DANIEL HEYMAN’S** first series of paintings about torture were based upon the now-notorious Abu Ghraib pictures. Yet Heyman soon decided that he wanted to show the former prisoners as men—not just victims. So beginning in March 2006, he began accompanying lawyer Susan Burke on fact-finding trips to Jordan and Istanbul to interview former Abu Ghraib prisoners and other Iraqis who were allegedly tortured while in American custody for a lawsuit Burke is filing on their behalf against CACI, an American military contractor accused of abuse at Abu Ghraib. (See page 29 for details.) Much like a courtroom artist, Heyman paints the former prisoners while they are being interviewed. In between questions, he fills in the white space around them with portions of their statements. Heyman’s watercolors, along with a series of etchings, are now exhibited at the DePaul Art Museum in Chicago.
afraid to open it, in case I find out that the power it held over me proves to be thin, silly, superficial.

İstanbul

In August I fly from L. A. to New York, to connect to another airline that will carry me to Paris, then on to Istanbul. Istanbul, I know, is far away—half in Europe, half in Asia—but still, I didn’t expect it to take three days to get there, and it wouldn’t have, if the jet from L. A. hadn’t run out of gas on the way to New York. I’d never been on a jet that ran out of gas, it felt like when I was sixteen and would put fifty cents in my tank to make a run to the package store. We had to touch down in Rochester to refuel—“touch down,” the pilot said, but seven hours later we were still stranded, and I had missed my connecting flight.

By the time I make it to Istanbul, I’m so jet-lagged, so bone tired, that in the taxi to the hotel I’m almost hallucinating. We pass men in their underwear swimming in the Bosporus, we pass fields of weekend picnickers sprawled out on ornate fabrics in the sun. Traffic sounds, a muezzin, the pop song on the radio—everything is calling us to prayer.

Not only am I jet-lagged, but, if I am to admit it, I’m a little freaked out, though at this point I haven’t acknowledged the depths of my freak-out, not to anyone, not even to myself. Part of the unease comes from the fact that the lawyer I’m meeting has been joking that now that we are in contact, my phone is likely tapped, my e-mails being read. By coming here, she makes clear, I am now on a list—a blacklist.

In my exhaustion I can almost convince myself that a jet running out of gas is part of a conspiracy to keep me from Istanbul, a bit of paranoia that will thankfully dissolve (nearly) in the morning light. I will wake up with a line from Billy Bragg in my head—If you have a blacklist, I want to be on it. I can’t say exactly what it is I’m doing here, beyond that it seems important.

IN PLATO’S ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE, prisoners are locked up in such a way that they cannot look away from the wall they are facing. Even their heads are fixed, somehow, in that one direction. Behind the prisoners, some still children, there’s a walkway, slightly elevated, and along this walkway the jailers, or their assistants, carry various objects back and forth. And beyond the walkway there is a fire burning, continuously, a large fire, and this fire casts light onto the objects, which then casts shadows on the wall for the prisoners to contemplate. The object may be something benign—a bunch of carrots, say, but as a shadow the carrots become something frightful, because each could be a knife. Or an apple could be a rock that could crush a man’s hands, or his son’s testicles. Or a jar of milk could be a jar of acid, if all one sees, all one is allowed to see, are shadows. And the jailers make sounds, grunts and snorts and such, which echo off the walls, and so appear, to the prisoners, to come from the shadows themselves. And don’t forget the fire, which makes another sound, and which heats their backs, perhaps too much, and fills the cave with smoke, making it hard to breathe. It must seem a little like hell, with its silent goons carrying menacing shapes, with your head strapped into place, though this allegory comes well before we invented the concept of hell.

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A FEW DAYS AFTER THE TOWERS FALL, our vice-president, the second in command, who some claim is the first in command, goes on television to make a pronouncement—It’s going to be vital for us to use any means at our disposal. We’re going to have to work toward the dark side, in the shadows, if you will.
A few weeks after the vice-president invites us over to the dark side, a man named Ibn Shaykh al-Libi is sent, via a secret program called “extraordinary rendition,” to a dungeon in Egypt, where he utters a lie about chemical weapons and Saddam and Osama, a lie that will be used to justify a war, a lie extracted under torture. A year later Colin Powell, who is believed by most to embody a preternatural form of integrity, will repeat this lie, he will repeat it on a world stage, and most will believe him. I will believe him, for a moment, until a document, folded into the same lie, referring to the purchase of something called “yellowcake,” reveals itself to be a clumsy forgery.

**THE ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE** is often read as an allegory of perception, how we come to believe that the shadows on the wall, which terrify or entertain us, are real. But how did we end up in a cave, how did we end up, hour after hour, day after day, staring at shadows on the wall? Why don’t we simply look away? And why are we so afraid?

If Plato had seen me standing outside my burning house in my ghoulish pajamas that summer night, what would he have said? What would he have written if he had seen me spending day after day watching the Three Stooges pummel one another in my box of shadows? What insight would he have if he saw me standing in a Best Buy on Broadway before a bank of televisions, watching the first tower fall, when I could have simply looked south and seen the real thing? Would he say I was caught up in the world as it appeared, unable to enter into its essence? Would he say my eyes were having trouble adjusting to the light?

**saint michael and the dragon**

At my friend Monica’s birthday party recently, in her study, I saw a print of Saint Michael and the Dragon. In Christian iconography, many saints are depicted slaying dragons. You’ve likely seen versions of this—a young man on a horse, or sometimes on foot, a dragon beneath his boot, or his lance just piercing the dragon’s flesh, or its point pushing into the beast’s open mouth. Milton wrote about Michael in *Paradise Lost*, the archangel who does battle with Satan in the Garden of Eden, just before he escorts Adam and Eve out. This image, this Michael, has followed me for years—from Athens to Krakow, from Mexico City to Budapest—for some unknown reason this dragon keeps finding me, or maybe I’m simply drawn to it. One reason is that this dragon, this Satan, though subdued, is always still alive. He comes from that edge of perception where our shadow selves are almost tangible—we can never really kill this dragon, this shadow, not forever, because with it we will kill a part of ourselves. The trick is how to live with it without consuming us, without allowing it to rise up so much that it takes charge. Underfoot, subdued, it keeps us in balance, it reminds us of the darkness we come from, the darkness we are made of.

The version of Saint Michael that Monica has on her wall is one I’ve never seen before. This Michael is without armor or weapon, and the dragon is more of a man—black leathery skin, huge wings, claws—clearly Satan. Satan’s clawed hands are reaching up Michael’s legs, almost caressing him, and Michael and this devil stare into each other’s eyes—it is almost as if they are each looking into a mirror, one illuminated, one in shadow.

**my teufelberg (bewilderment)**

I have been on this train, heading south along this river, the river off to my right, forever it seems. I can’t complain, really. I got on early, so I got a window seat, and if I want to, I can look up and see the river and what is washed up along its banks and the little fallen houses that I still imagine one day I will wander through, one with its door left open, as if someone walked out for a look at the river on a day like this, a warm day, and simply never came back. Today is the anniversary of my mother’s death—happy deathday, I say, though I am alone on the train.

**MY MOTHER TOLD ME** a story, just once, of how as a girl she’d been tied to a chair, the chair balanced at the top of the attic stairs, teetering, her captors threatening to send her end over end, tumbling down. I don’t know if they did this more than once, and I don’t know what they wanted—a question answered, a promise made—beyond the usual childhood cruelties, or if they ever got it.

And then there’s my father, and the stories he tells. The two are nearly inseparable by now, my father and his stories—the same handful over and over again, his repertoire, always told the same way. A liar always tells his story the same way, I’ve heard said, except that some—most—of my father’s stories have, improbably, turned out to be true. The story of his father inventing the life raft. The story of the novel he spent his whole life writing. The story of robbing a few banks.

One of his stories, one I found too bizarre to engage with at all, is of being locked up in federal prisons for two years, which is true, but while there, he claims to have been tortured—experimented on, sleep deprived, drugged, sexually humiliated—and I don’t know if this is true or not. Understand, it is hard and getting harder to get a straight answer from my father, as his alcoholism slips into its twilight stage. When I ask him about his prison time now, he looks wildly around the room or park or coffee shop and whispers, I can’t talk about that here.

**my teufelberg, the devil’s mountain, all the junk of the war**

This morning I find in my in-box this note from Julia, my friend in Berlin—“I was standing on the Teufelberg (*The Devil’s Mountain*) with a friend last night, listening to Patti Smith playing in the stadium below, and I thought of you. The Teufelberg is made from all the junk of the war, the broken houses and so on. It is a big mountain, and we stood there looking out over my strange and terrible and beautiful city. Where are you?”

Here I am, I think, writing about my mother (again), and here I am, writing about my father (again), writing about my shadow, writing about my unborn daughter, building my own Devil’s Mountain, piling up all the junk of the war. When asked, I’ll sometimes say I’m writing about torture, but I’ve found that when I say the word *torture*, many go glassy-eyed, as if I had just dropped a stone into a deep, deep well. When asked, I’ll sometimes say I’m writing about the way photographs are a type of dream, or I’ll say that I’m writing a memoir of bewilderment, and leave it at that, but what I mean is the bewilderment of what it is to wake up in an America that has legalized torture.

What I don’t say, what I should say, is that what I’m really writing about is Proteus, the mythological creature who changes shape as you hold on to him, who changes into the shape of that which most terrifies you, as you ask him your question, your one simple question—the question is often simply a variation of How do I get home?
I had a dream about this room before I found myself here. In the dream the room was the size of a barn, with six spaces divided by hastily built half walls. In each room there was a shackle screwed into the floor, nothing more than a large eyebolt, really, and I worried that this eyebolt wasn’t strong enough—it needed to be strong enough to hold a man. It needed to be like the shackles I had seen in the photographs, cemented into the floors. The rooms were dark, empty, the prisoners hadn’t been brought in yet. I thought to leave a candle, and a lighter, but then I thought the man would use the lighter to set fire to his shackles, or to himself, or to the whole barn. I ended up leaving the candle and lighter in a corner, and if the man could reach it, if he knew to look, then come what may.

BY THE TIME I FINALLY LAND in Istanbul I’m a day late—everything has already started. The taxi drops me off at the Armanda Hotel. I check in and ask where the lawyers are, and within a few minutes I knock on the door to room 223. After brief introductions I find myself sitting next to a man telling the story of how he ended up in a photograph, a photograph I have seen many times by now, a photograph the whole world has seen. A photograph is like a house—one it is made, we then start counting the days and then the years from when it was made. My eyes take a moment to adjust to the light. Tell me what happened next, the lawyer whispers.

The room turns out to be utterly mundane—well lit, carpeted, a hotel room that one could find in any major city. The bed has been removed, and in its place is a table. The lawyer sits at the table, across from the ex-detainee. She is here to gather his statements as part of a lawsuit against an American company that has allegedly profited from torture. Another lawyer sits next to her, typing out the transcript of the conversation on a laptop. The translator sits at the head of the table, between the lawyer asking the questions and the ex-detainee. There is also an artist present, seated away from the table, near the window, painting a watercolor portrait in a large book, its pages folded like an accordion. When he isn’t painting the portrait, he fills in the white space around the painted head with bits of what is being said. The seat next to the ex-detainee is empty, and this is where I sit, my notebook open.

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day, a year later, Achmad shakes his head as he looks at the photographs of himself from that time—I cannot recognize myself as that man, he says. Can you?

two dogs
Two dogs live inside me, a woman in Texas tells me, and the one I feed is the one that will grow. She tells me this as a way to explain why she won't have coffee with me, ever—married, kids, happy, but sometimes her mind wanders, sometimes she thinks that another man, one that looks at her with kindness, one that seems to listen, is the answer, though she is unsure of the question. The thing is, her husband does all these things for her—he listens, he's kind, there is desire, they make love often, everything's fine. But still, still, she's got these two hungry dogs inside her.

But wait—this woman didn't say her dogs were hungry, but aren't all dogs hungry? Here Shadow, here Thanatos. Here Eros, here Light. The one she feeds is the one that will grow, but does that mean that the other one will grow smaller? Will it grow so small as to vanish? Do the dogs that live inside her come from some Alice-in-Wonderland world? Are they fighting inside her, does she love them both, does she sometimes think if one died it would be easier? But then she will have one dog inside her and the corpse of another dog—what good would that do, in the long run, what with all the other corpses we eventually end up dragging around inside us?

istanbul
There is a moment in Achmad's story when words are not enough, as there will be in every story, a moment when the only way to tell us what happened is to show us what they did to his body, and at this moment he pushes back from the table and stands—They hang me this way, he says, and raises his arms out to his sides as if crucified in the air. There is something about him standing, about his body suddenly rising up, that completely unhinges me, something about it that makes his words real in a way they hadn't been before. The word made flesh. At this moment I get it: These words are about his body, it was his body this story happened to, the body that is right here beside me, in this room I could barely even imagine just yesterday, his body that is now filling the air above our heads, our eyes upturned to see him. Achmad stands there like that, arms outstretched—the scribe has nothing to write, the painter has nothing to paint, the interpreter has nothing to interpret, the lawyer's eyes are fixed on his eyes, all his words have led to this moment, when his body is finally allowed to speak. The lawyer shakes her head slightly. And what happened next? she says softly, and he lowers his arms and sits.

mexico
I have a packet of photographs from when my grandparents were first married, before they had children, or maybe they simply left the kids at home. The photographs are of a road trip to Mexico, clearly from a time before everything fell apart. In each of the photographs, they are smiling—maybe it was after my grandfather got back from the war, or else it was just before. It could have been in the thirties, they had money in the Depression, they could have afforded a road trip. These few photographs reveal more about their early life together than anything either one of them ever told me. In one blurry photograph my grandfather is flat on his back on a hotel bed, a bottle of what I imagine to be tequila rising straight up from his mouth to the ceiling, as if a flower is growing from his mouth, as if he is going to finally fill himself completely. I imagine my grandmother took this shot, and I imagine her laughing gleefully as she did, having just taken a pull herself.

lexington, kentucky
Here’s a story my father tells about his time in federal prison: “They left me alone in a dark room for days on end, shackled to the floor, and when they moved me, which they did constantly and for no reason, they shackled me even more—penis included.” What? Did he say penis included? This is one of his stories that I’d turn away from, it seemed too far-fetched, but as I learn more, I am not so sure.

One day I hear a history professor on the radio, talking about the CIA’s fifty-year involvement in developing the torture techniques we saw enacted in the Abu Ghraib photographs. The most effective technique, they found, was to combine sensory deprivation with self-inflicted pain—think of the iconic photograph of the man on the box, hooded, his arms outstretched. This position is not new. It’s called the “Vietnam.” At one point he mentions the medical wing of a federal prison as the site of early experimentation. Federal prisoners were used to test the limits of what the body, the psyche, could withstand. Two of the main sites of these clandestine and illegal experiments were the prisons in Lexington, Kentucky, and Marion, Illinois, both of which my father passed through during his stint behind bars.

all living things have shoulders
I worked in New York City public schools for a few years as an itinerant poet—Crown Heights, Harlem—lugging a satchel heavy with books on the train every morning. These were the years of unprecedented wealth in the United States, and if you wanted to find the worst public school in any city, you just had to look up the one named after Martin Luther King. Much of what I taught was directed toward finding out what the students saw every day—it was a way to honor their lives, which isn’t generally taught in public schools. The beginning exercises were very simple: Tell me one thing you saw on the way to school this morning, tell me one thing you saw last night when you got home. Describe something you see every day, describe something you only saw once and wondered about from then on. Tell me a dream, tell me a story someone told you, tell me something you’ve never told anyone else before. No one, in school at least, had ever asked them what their lives were like, no one had asked them to tell about their days. In this sense it felt like a radical act—I tried to imagine what might happen if each of them knew how important their lives were.

In the schools I’d visit, I’d sometimes pick up a discarded sheet of paper from the hallway floor, something a student had written in his notebook and then torn out. Sometimes I could tell that he had been given an assignment, and that he had tried to fulfill it, and by tearing it out it was clear that he felt he had somehow failed. Out of all the ephemera I’ve bent down to collect from black-and-green elementary— [continued on page 120]
The Ticking Is the Bomb
continued from page 83 school linoleum floors over the years, one has stayed with me. Likely it was part of a research paper, likely for biology. I started with a general statement, which was, I imagine, to be followed by supporting facts. The sentence, neatly printed on the first line, was this: *All living things have shoulders*—after this there was nothing, not even a period, as if even as he was writing it, he realized something was wrong, that he would never be able to support what he was only beginning to say, that no facts would ever justify it. All living things have shoulders—the first word is pure energy, the sweeping All, followed by the heartbeat of living—who wouldn’t be filled with hope having found this beginning? Then the drift begins, into uncertainty—things—a small misstep, not so grave that it couldn’t be righted, but it won’t be easy. Now something has to be said, some conclusion. I can almost hear the teacher, I can almost see what she has written on the blackboard—*“Go from the general to the specific”—and what could be more general than “All living things,” and what could be more specific than “shoulders”? He reads it over once and knows it can never be reconciled, and so it is banished from his notebook. *All living things have shoulders*—this one line, I have carried it with me since, I have tried to write a poem from it over and over, and failed over and over. I have now come to believe that it already is a poem. All living things have shoulders. Period. The end. A poem.

Istanbul
All the men we meet have the wrist tag they were issued and required to wear while in prison. The wrist tag has their name, birthdate, date they were arrested, and who arrested them. It also lists where they were held—Abu Ghraib, Camp Cropper, Camp Bucca. Surprisingly, each wrist tag also has a tiny headshot of the man, which makes it easy for us now to verify their identity.

First it was the businessman, then it was a taxi driver, then a cleric (the translator calls him a “preacher”), then an ex-soldier, then a taxi driver, then a cleric (the translator calls him a “preacher”), then a shepherd, the week goes on and on—the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker—could they be any more ordinary?

Now it is a thirty-year-old student, telling of being picked up in a sweep, part of the recent “surge”—beaten and shackled and hooded and thrown from Humvee to helicopter, to eventually arrive at a building he now believes is near the airport, either in Mosul or Baghdad. Once inside he finds himself in a large room, maybe the size of a gymnasium, filled with black boxes lined up in rows. Maybe a hundred boxes, maybe two hundred, hard for him to say—he was hooded constantly and quickly lost track of night and day. The boxes are about two and a half feet wide, six feet long. He is thrown into one of these boxes, for days that turn into weeks, unable to straighten his body, barely able to breathe. Every twenty or thirty minutes a soldier kicks the box, or hits it hard with a club, and it makes his shackled body jump. Around him he can hear the screams and pleadings of his fellow prisoners—those with stomach pains, those with infections, those slowly going mad. Among themselves the Iraqis call these boxes *taw-abet aswada,* or *nash aswada*—“black coffins.” *Nash aswada,* black coffins—I can’t help thinking of them as the shadows of the flag-draped coffins we aren’t allowed to see.

During a break in the interview, the artist tells the student how handsome he is. The student listens as this word, “handsome,” is translated, smiles slightly, and murmurs, *Shukran.* One sometimes needs to be told that one is still beautiful.

The falling is the rain
The week after I get back from Istanbul I go on a meditation retreat with Thich Nhat Hahn, the Vietnamese Zen master. I’ve been studying with him off and on (mostly off) for eighteen years now. I will sit for a week in silence, listen as he speaks, but I end up talking more than planned. My dharma discussion group’s focus is addiction, and a handful of us addicts climb a great maple tree each afternoon to talk among the branches until sunset.

Thich Nhat Hahn says it is a mistake to say, “The rain is falling,” to say, “The wind is blowing.” *What is rain if it is not falling?* he asks. *What is wind if it is not blowing?* The falling is the rain, the blowing is the wind. The next day, in the tree, I bring it up. He’s talking about impermanence, someone says. *It’s the same reason we climb trees,* someone else offers—*it’s that we were once monkeys.*

Let’s say you’re a soldier
In Iraq, assigned to a military prison. You’ve been told to soften the prisoners up, to get them ready to be interrogated the next day. Give them a bad night, you’ve been told, so you give them a bad night—you strip them naked, you throw cold water on them, you do not let them sleep. The rules have changed, you’ve been told, the gloves have come off. One guy, whenever you kneel him, he cries, “Allah”—it becomes a game to see how many times you can make him cry Allah.

Let’s say you’ve been trained as an interrogator, you’ve been told that one of the thousands before you has the answer that will save an American city from an attack. It might be the city your wife and child live in, you don’t know. You walk into a room, a man is hanging from the ceiling by his wrists, a sack over his head. You’ve been told that a bomb is ticking, and in this room you swear you can almost hear it. You remove the sack, you take hold of the man’s shoulders, you look into his eyes.

In order to continue you need to be certain of the outcome, you must push aside any bewilderment you have, ignore any questions besides the one question. The falling is the rain, the blowing is the wind. As our president said before the bombing of Baghdad, “The outcome of the current crisis is already determined”—this is the kind of certainty you need to continue.

The falling is the rain, the blowing is the wind. If the Zen master were in that room with you, would he say that the ticking is the bomb? Telltale heart, would he ask if you were willing to set your house on fire to stop the sounds in your head?

So here I am, the man before me is Proteus. As I hold on to him, as I ask him my question, as I listen for his answer, he transforms, into a dog on a leash, into a man dancing with panties on his head, into a dance into a madman, into a waterfall, into a cockroach in a bowl of rice. Into a man strapped in a chair, into thirty men strapped into chairs, refusing to eat, thirty tubes forced down their noses.

So here I am, holding my own head, dunking it into a bathtub full of water, repeating a meaningless question over and over, knowing that I will never get the question right.

And here I am, holding my breath, and then letting it go.

Immersion
Swim until the world becomes water, swim to the center of the pool, practice hanging, practice drowning, raise your arms above your head, let your body sink. Think of it as practice for when they come—there is only so much they can do with your body. Swim to the ladder, hang from it as you catch your breath, let your arms hang behind you like wings, then sink slowly into the water—your arms will raise to shoulder height behind you, to your ears, any farther and they will dislocate. No one is forcing you to do this, you do it because you have heard that it is done to others. Sink further and you will sign the confession, you will give names, you will say whatever they tell you to say. But when they check your story, it will be water, it will slip through their hands. On the confession you will have signed the name “bird,” because that’s what you think of, hanging there with your arms behind you. All living things have shoulders, you think, hanging there.

Slow-moving lava
A friend tells this story: While living in Hawaii, a volcano erupted near his village, and after the initial blast, which destroyed the top of the mountain and those villages in the vicinity, the lava continued to slowly ooze out over the next several months, so slowly that you could walk up to the wall of it, reach your hand out, press against it, feel its warmth. How high was this wall? I imagine twenty feet, more or less—so high that you’d have to tilt your head back to see the sky. The village my friend was staying in was downhill, spared the initial blast, but the lava kept oozing out, and the scientists came, to cal-
calculate its movement, how long it would take
to reach the village, which house would be
the first to be swallowed, to ignite, beneath
the slow-motion wave. Is this better than a
flood, better than a fire? It gives you time to
move everything, if you are able, but it also
gives you time to wonder if it’s a waste of time
to move, to wake up day after day and hope
that the disaster won’t reach you, in spite of
what the scientists say. If you are able, if you
had the resources, you could move the en-
tire house, put it on a barge and float it to the
next island. But I got the idea that the houses
were not much more than thatch and mud, I
got the idea that most simply went each day
to the wall of lava, put a hand to it, hoped it
would slow down, hoped it would run out of
juice, hoped it would simply stop.

My grandmother does have one story she tells
about that trip to Mexico, though she never
mentions my grandfather when she tells it. She
was walking down a village street, the village
in the shadow of a volcano, and a boy came
running up to her with a ball of hot lava in his
hands, and he shaped it into a monkey right
there in front of her. On one of her shelves sits
a small statue of a monkey, and she holds it in
her hands as she tells the story, as if it were still
warm, as if she could still transform it.