Black Metal Band

By: J.D. Horn

You shake the hand of the man standing in front of you. You had been sitting in the audience, listening to him read from his book of poetry about what growing up Muslim in America, after September eleventh two thousand and one, was like for him. Wrapped around your wrist is a black metal band, scarred in white ink, with the name of the person that died fighting next to you in Afghanistan, and the names of those that killed themselves after you all came *home*.

This memorial band has become a commonality among veterans of your generation. Many teenagers and young adults have been killed in action in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many more have killed themselves, either back *home* or on foreign soil. A common statistic in the veteran community is "twenty-two a day," as in, twenty-two veterans kill themselves every day. You know that number is low. Twenty-two a day doesn't count those that kill themselves slowly; alcoholics and drug addicts, or those that hide their suicides as simple tragedies in other ways; like the woman your ambulance was called to two years ago after she wrecked her motorcycle. Two weeks before her wreck, in your group therapy session, she mentioned that she wasn't sure she belonged here anymore. She wanted to go back to Iraq. Though the therapist wasn't concerned, you've heard people talk like that before. You stopped the woman on the way out, tried to talk to her, and she ignored you. Your pleas for the therapist to do something to help fell on indifferent ears. You haven't been back to therapy.

The man, whose hand you notice you're still holding while your mind runs away from you again, his poetry was transcendent. When he would describe how the shade of mud that made up his childhood house in Pakistan would change between the kitchen and the bedroom he

shared with his sister, you felt more at *home* than you'd felt in a decade. Having been born in a small Pakistani village, his life wasn't the same as life in the Horn of Panjwai in the Panjwai district of Afghanistan, where you spent eight months fighting the Taliban and Pakistani mercenaries, yet his poetry transports you back. His village was just outside of Chaman, a name you recognized while he was reading his poetry because it is so close to the Pakistan and Afghanistan border where you spent so long fighting.

From the poems he read, you didn't know how he came to live in New York, only that he was ten when he did in nineteen ninety-nine. You were seven. Some of the poems he read were about the names that other children, and some adults, would call him while he was growing up. His poems were about the times his nose was broken and rebroken when someone would slam their fists into his face because they didn't like the color of his skin; they didn't like that he was still learning a new language and so he had an accent. The only people with accents like his, they would tell him while blood flowed out of his mangled nose, staining his clothes, were terrorists. Terrorists, a word his poems told you he learned when his former best friend called him that after nine-eleven with tears in her eyes because her father died in the south tower and that's what her mother called people who looked like him on TV. His poems were about how he refused to fight back. His poems were about how the world saw him as one thing when all he ever wanted to be was a violinist with enough talent to play in Carnegie Hall, his favorite building in New York.

After he finished reading his poems, you got in line to meet him, to shake his hand, and to say thank you. You didn't want to tell him that you were thanking him for bringing back such vivid memories of your time in Afghanistan before the killing and the dying started and your wrist found itself wrapped in its black metal band. It didn't take long before you realized that most people in that line wanted to meet him for different reasons. They wanted to meet someone

who grew up in America, being called the same things they were, and treated like they were. They wanted to meet someone that took trauma born from hate and put it into words that could heal. You only wanted to say thank you. You decided to wait off to the side.

When the line of people to meet him finished you were still standing around looking at your feet. You finally looked up and you noticed he was watching you. You remembered your legs work and you lumbered forward. You held out your hand, which he met with his, and you said, “thank you.”

He shook your hand and said, “you’re welcome,” while he looked into your eyes for just a moment too long; a moment too short.

His eyes didn’t seem to hate you like you hate yourself. The compassion you could see in his eyes made you want to cry. This isn’t about you. This isn’t your time to cry. You can cry when you get *home*, pour yourself some Glenlivet twelve year on the rocks, and bite your pillow in between sips to keep the screaming inside of your head trapped there. This isn’t about you.

“I’m glad you could come,” he said, pulling your hand toward him, slowly, methodically, showing you, it was useless to try and pull away.

You wanted him to tell you that it was okay. You wanted him, a man on the other side of a war you wished you could take back, to forgive you. You’ve felt yourself so close to becoming your own statistic, maybe forgiveness from him would cleanse the blood from your soul. You shove the thought away. He puts his other hand around your back in a half hug and says, “I hope you have a meaningful night.” They were the same words he ended his Q and A with. He wanted everyone to have a meaningful night. And some part of you knew, you wanted your night to end meaningfully with him.

You thought about saying something smart, impressing him, convincing him that you needed him to stick around and reveal the secrets of happiness. He's a poet, you thought. He must know. He looks like people you were taught to hate, to kill, and how could you ever hate him, can't he, you stopped yourself. He can't. He can't forgive you and thinking that he could, wanting him to forgive you because he looks like someone you've hurt, is no better than giving him hate he doesn't deserve. A hate no one deserves. You're no better than the monsters in his poems, you thought. And while you were losing the little left of your mind, he had let go of you and disappeared. And so, you walked away, into the harsh, dry air that comes with winter nights. And you wondered if you wanted something from him or simply wanted him.

Walking *home* you played out the conversation in your head. You thought about what you would tell your therapist if you were still going to see them. But even in your head this stranger steered the conversation and asked you what you do for work. You explained that you work as a paramedic while going to school. He asked what you were studying, and you lied. You told him pre-medicine instead of writing. And like so many people do when you tell them you work in medicine, he asked about your worst call. Feeling safe enough in your own intrepid dream, you tell him about your worst night, your worst call.

You were working night shifts. One slower night, you had time to sit down and scroll through Facebook while your partner and you sat in the supervisor's office, and they carried on a conversation. You were enjoying the new recliners with their soft leather, easy to fall asleep in. Which, even in an office that wasn't yours and had other people in it, you would've happily done in a few minutes if something hadn't come across your feed that made you jump up, sprint to the patio, and vomit.

Outside, on that second-story patio, you picked up a light, gray, chair. You wanted to throw it over the railing, maybe yourself with it. You had just read that a friend you went to Afghanistan with killed himself.

He was a great man. He was a good man. He used to play Xbox with his roommate in your barracks; third floor, last room on the left. You and he got to the unit around the same time. You stayed around each other for three years, never in the same platoon or spending time after work alone together. You were both machine gunners and would have to go to extra overnight training, at times. He loved it. You hated it. You found yourselves becoming closer there. Sometimes you would spend time with his roommate, who would share his Rolling Rock because you were too young to buy your own, better beer and he would say "you're old enough to die, you're old enough to drink." And while he would complain about his divorce and child support, he would never allow you to give him a penny of your own money to pay for your share of the Rolling Rock. "We're brothers," he would say. You, and your now dead friend, used to call him Rolling Rock.

The worst part of your worst working night, you told the poet inside your head, was when you found out about your friend. You were lost in grief on a summer night standing on a second-story patio when your radio reminded you that you were at work.

The tones went off and a page went out for your ambulance, telling you that there was a one-month-old choking and to respond with your lights and your sirens. You set the chair down and ran, which you never do, to the ambulance. Your partner drove to the house of the choking infant where you found that they were fine. New parents had thought a normal reaction to receiving a bottle; a cough, and some spit-up, were signs their baby was choking and panicked. Your partner was happy to explain there wasn't anything to worry about. She was happy to give

them a piece of paper to sign that released your company from liability for not transporting someone to the hospital. She was happy to explain that the new parents could always call nine-one-one and that we never mind finding a baby to be healthy and safe.

She wasn't happy when you asked her to drive back to base even though it was your turn to drive, and you spent that time staring out the window. She wasn't happy when she backed into the ambulance bay and you put your head on the dashboard, choosing to stay in the truck. And then she was happy again when the supervisor came down to the truck and sent you *home*.

"You don't have to tell me what's wrong, but you aren't fit to work. Sleep it off," the supervisor said. Everyone else assumed you were drunk, as they often knew you to be when you weren't working. He knew you weren't. So, you went *home* and drowned yourself in Facebook posts and scotch, half a bottle, hoping it would help you forget. It didn't even help you sleep.

You wanted to end your conversation there, so you told the poet, "That infant was my worst call because it was the worst day of my job."

The poet wouldn't release you. He asked, "And how did the next day go?"

Short of the willpower to say no, you continued. You told him that the next day, you were forced to explain yourself. It was a scheduled day off, but you walked into work, still smelling like the thing that couldn't put you down the night before and explained to the boss of the boss who sent you *home* what happened. They understood. They asked if you knew when the funeral was. It was in two days. They told you, "Then go. I'll fill your hours. Go see your friend off."

You learned that the funeral was in Virginia. Arlington. His *home.*

And in a blink, you found yourself climbing off a plane in the Washington D.C. airport, getting a rental car, and driving to a Hilton because it was the only hotel available. You spent the night before the funeral getting drunk in the hotel bar and telling anyone that would listen all about your friend, about your time in Afghanistan.

You slept through the nine-a.m. visitation the next day, checked out of the hotel, and made it an hour early for the funeral at two p.m. Your friend's widow was the only one there. She stood over his closed casket. You re-introduced yourself to her, having met her years ago back in Washington, and she didn't remember you, "but that could be from all the stress," she said.

"I understand," you said, "and it's perfectly all right." You and she talked about your friend, her husband, in bits and pieces while she led the conversation. When it was hard, she talked about growing up in Virginia and you listened. Eventually, her father showed up with her child, your friend's child, and you walked into another room, giving everyone space.

The funeral wasn't short. Your friend's preacher spoke about how devoted your friend was to his faith. Your friend's preacher talked about how he knew, he simply knew that your friend was in heaven and, it's because he was such a good man that God would have made the exception to let him into heaven. "The manner in which he got there, doesn't matter," your friend's preacher said. "It's an ugly thing. But God will have made the exception for this devout man," he continued to say over and over how "the manner in which he got there doesn't matter." You held in your anger because your friend's funeral isn't about you and you thought about how your own anger at God doesn't justify ruining your friend's funeral.

You found yourself in the funeral procession and at Arlington National Cemetery for the burial. The Color Guard wore their dress blues, and you wore a suit. Your dress blues didn't fit your ascitic stomach. The color guard carried your friend's coffin that had his urn filled with ash inside, and after the preacher finished another sermon that outlasted your patience, the color guard buried that urn, lowering what was left of your friend into the ground by cranking a handle to the right. Taps was played. You wanted to stand at attention like in the old days, to salute your friend, but it didn't feel right.

The funeral ended and you went *home*. The first thing you did when you got *home* was plug the names of those you lost during the war, and after the war, into a website where they engraved the black metal band you now wear on your wrist. The inside is engraved with The Mearing of Life because at eighteen your tattoo artist fucked the "n" in meaning up with his shitty cursive. You didn't notice it until you went back to the barracks and had a beer with Rolling Rock. His roommate saw your tattoo and laughed. You'll never get it fixed.

You find now that your imaginary conversation lasted your mile walk. And though the poet inside your head is now silent, you knew the real poet's words held power over you tonight. They were a sledgehammer of hope, wielded to put a crack in your walls. And you know now that it's time. Tomorrow you will wield your own sledgehammer, tear down those cracked walls, and with the ashes, build a new home.