This is not a book. This is an invitation, a container for unstable images, a model for further action. Here is the formula: Riley and his story. Me and my outrage. You and us.

Riley was a friend in college and later served as a nurse at Abu Ghraib prison. This is a container for Riley's digital pictures and fleeting traumatic memories. Images he could not fully secure or expel and entrusted to me.

Art can be a series of acts and challenges. Currently the artwork is an object in your hand — organized, mobile, tactile — a stable site to see information once elusive. The artist can mobilize information by provoking, listening, imagining, organizing and reorganizing. Right now, I am the artist. I want you to see what this war did to Riley.

Pay attention. This experience happens right in your lap. To make it happen, you must read compassionately, then actively. Then the experience happens wherever you take this container and whenever you respond to my invitation.

You and us, yes. Then you and another. This invitation is a model for veterans, families and friends to speak and share openly with each other. The artwork and artist are adaptable; you, the tactical reader, can use this object for your own device, or you can attend to another archive in need of careful attention. This is not a book. It is an object of deployment.

This PDF contains excerpts from

Riley and his story.
Me and my outrage.
You and us.

Overall I took around a thousand pictures. When I took them, I thought they were evidence. As I look at them now, they tell a different story. The role that photographs play changes every six months.


HAYMER

My head is so full of memories.

Sometimes my photos — at least the remainder of them after two crashed hard-drives and over 1000 lost photos — serve as a structure to recollect or re-collect my memories.

Many events during my time in Iraq were too complex, too horrific, or beyond my understanding. There were simply too many things I witnessed there on a given day to process, so I stored them as photos to figure out later.

Pictures create a concrete reality. At least I know these things happened. They continue to serve that purpose.

Then, there are the photos I don't remember taking. Even today, there is so much — huge chunks — that I can't figure out if the events really happened or not.

—— I always have this expectation that I can see things pretty clearly. Or, if I try hard enough I can understand things. But I've been trying for a long time now, and I can't piece some events back together.

——

——

It's like somebody asked you: do you remember what you did for Christmas last year? Well, probably not at first glance. But if you work at it, the holiday will come back and you can remember things. But I'm looking at these pictures, and I'm still not getting it. ——

Photos provide the chain of events that lead your mind into a state where it is okay to kill somebody. If you don't remember the sequence of events that took you there, you can believe you were a monster.

I took these photos while driving from Falluja
to Baghdad on a trip to collect medical supplies.


IN MIRROR ARE
HAN THEY APPEAR

I remember — and often re-live in dreams —
the sensations I had at that very moment.

An apathy toward life mixed with a desire for death. I believe these sensations and desires were new to me... but did not feel unnatural.

In this picture, we're driving underneath an overpass, and above is a guy in a dump-truck with a machine gun. We had no idea who he was.

Do we shoot him? I don't know.

Everybody in my vehicle thought about it. We all pointed our guns at him and thought about shooting him. But, he wasn't moving. He just kept sitting in the dump truck and we kept driving. I had no idea who he was. Was he with us? I still don't know.

At the time, it was early in our deployment — I was still excited and I was nervous. All I could think to do was to snap a picture.

If we were infantry maybe we would have gone up the embankment and found out who he was. But we were hospital people; our job was to just get through alive and pick up our supplies.

It's really strange to train hospital people — care givers — to run a convoy. At first it's difficult to get over the mindset, "I'm here to help people and not hurt people." Once you get past that it's surprisingly easy to make the switch and learn the tactics.

If somebody gets too close to your Humvee you run him or her over, and if a car gets too close, you knock it into the ditch. All war depends on these tactics — people believing, "Kill the other guy or he'll kill me."

But, this was early in our deployment. I thought, "I'm not going to shoot him, because I don't know what he's doing. But I have this camera …"

It was a stupid reaction, but I didn't want to kill the guy because I didn't know who he was, and no one else was shooting at him. So, I just recorded it.

I don't know.

I remember getting a smile on my face, and thinking, "Well, I'll just snap a picture. Record it."

The front windshield of a Humvee is a split windshield, so there's a left and right side. In these pictures, we're looking through the right — the passenger side. You'll notice in the top photo on the upper left hand corner it says, "police," but it's not reversed like it should be.

We cannibalized this windshield from a military police vehicle that got blown up outside the hospital, because we had trouble getting supplies and maintenance parts.

The first three to four months we were at Abu Ghraib, we didn't have, really, any support. There were just no supply chains to get equipment. We had — at that point — absolutely no armor on our vehicles; we didn't have doors, or roofs.

We'd just drive down the road with our legs hanging out the side.

I think we didn't quite get it yet. It hadn't sunk in that a big percentage of people were getting blown up on the roads.

We were in the phase of the deployment where we didn't draw the connection that it was our legs that would be blown off if there were a bomb.


POLICE

—— It seems to me that memories work on a few senses that are happening at the same time. You don't remember things because you experience them. You remember them because of some smell, some scent, music — something associated with the event. Then your mind connects all things together and creates a reality. For some events, I don't have any of those stored in my memory somehow. I can think back and smell the dust, or something like that, but that was always there and just the same every day. ——

The whole prison of Abu Ghraib is maybe two blocks by two blocks.

The sand smells like rotting flesh.

At Abu Ghraib everywhere we dug — and we dug four or five times — everywhere we dug we found human remains. I dug once to try and build a garden, we dug to build a shower, which ended up being the morgue. We dug to put in fences, to put cables down... Every time we dug, we found human remains. Every time. The prison is built on a mound of human remains. It's just disgusting.

Plus, before they built the prison it was a landfill. The water table — this is a side note — the water table there is only two feet below the surface. You would expect in a desert that it there would be no water, but the water table is really just below the surface. So it's like wet rotting trash and corpses.

That's maybe why... the smell.

Twice we had MPs or people who just happened to be walking around and just happened to find bones and brought them in to identify. One was a humorous, the arm bone, and one was part of a jaw, a broken-in-half part of a jaw.

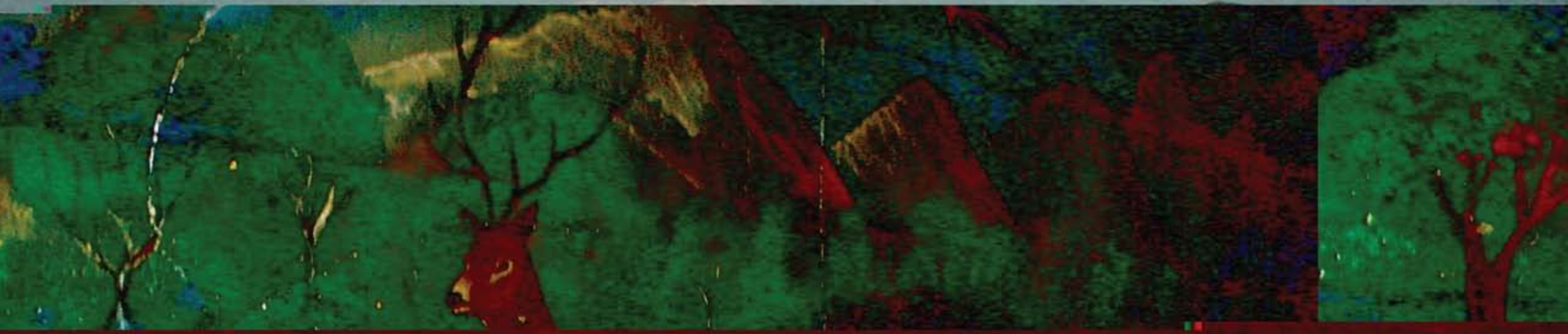

OFF
ON

The murals are actually in cellblocks where the prisoners lived. I've never researched it, but the story we got from the interpreters when we took over the prison was that the prisoners were forced to paint these murals inside their cellblocks.

Being from Minnesota and seeing pictures of caribou and a little baby deer, and some birds drinking out of the stream and a swan — I think that's beautiful. But, maybe it was some sort of cruel torture. These guys are in the desert; it's one hundred and thirty degrees and there are no deer that I'm aware of in central Iraq. There are goats and we saw a few cows. I'm sure there are deer up north... in the mountains.

But, maybe painting the murals in the cells were supposed to be calming to make people less violent.

We thought it was sort of ironic that the prisoners were painting these happy, playful scenes when there had been tens of thousands of people executed in this prison in the two years prior to us arriving at Abu Ghraib.



—— I often feel sort of terrified that I can't tell the difference between what's real and what's not in the past. I see myself as some one who generally understands how things work — a pretty reasonable person. I imagine this is how somebody feels when they first have Alzheimer's, or psychosis and they know that something is not right, and they know they're losing their mind. And... It's just terrifying. ——

Our two biggest mass casualty events were big mortar rounds that both landed in our camp at lunchtime, where the detainees were all gathered around food.

Fourteen days apart. Direct hits right into where the detainees were eating.

Strategically, that's why they hit at that time — to inflict the most damage.


SURGIPAD*
Combine Dressing
1 DRESSING
8 in x 7.5 in
SURGIPAD*
Combine Dressing

We were just like, “Holy shit, is this really happening?” So I just snapped pictures.




28/03/2004

Then, I see pictures that I can't remember at all.

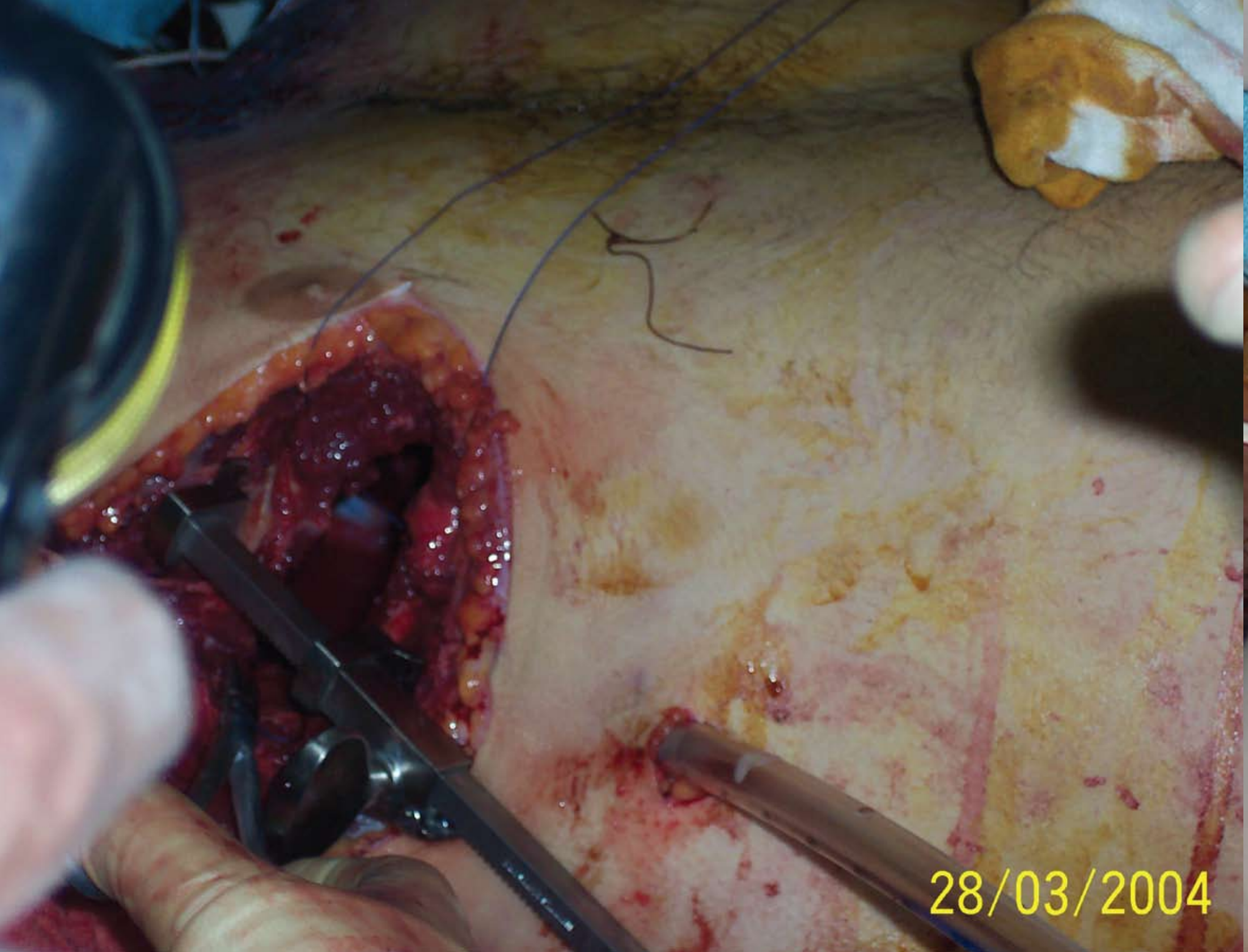
But I know the pictures are from my camera.
I took them. Or sometimes someone else took
them of me. But I have no memory of the patient
or event, or I feel that the memory comes
directly from the photo instead of recalled by it.

And I wonder again if this really happened at all.


TRAUMA
1
HANG ON
ZTA
BID-DAY
2003
For The Ride Of Your Li
Kodak X-Omatic cassette
REGULAR

It's like a blackout. Like a blackout when you're drunk. But, when you're drunk the events sometimes come back. These don't come back.


28/03/2004


28/03/2004

I remember the smell of dust and rotting blood on the floor.


TREATMENT
3
28/03/2004


SKIL CRAFT

I remember returning to the ER tent,
in the middle of the night, staring at the
walls of the tent,

trying not to care about anything at all,

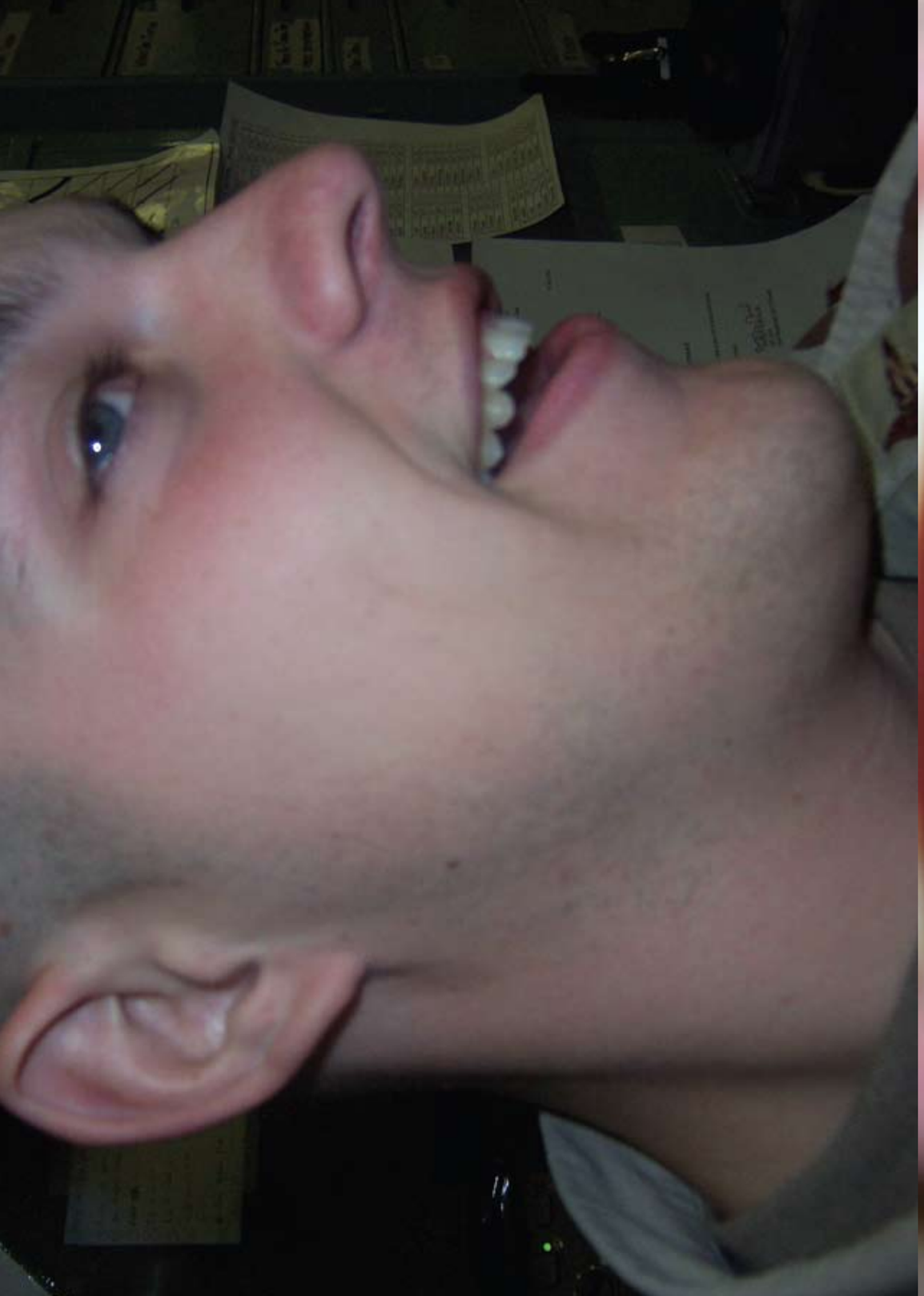
trying not to think about anything at all.

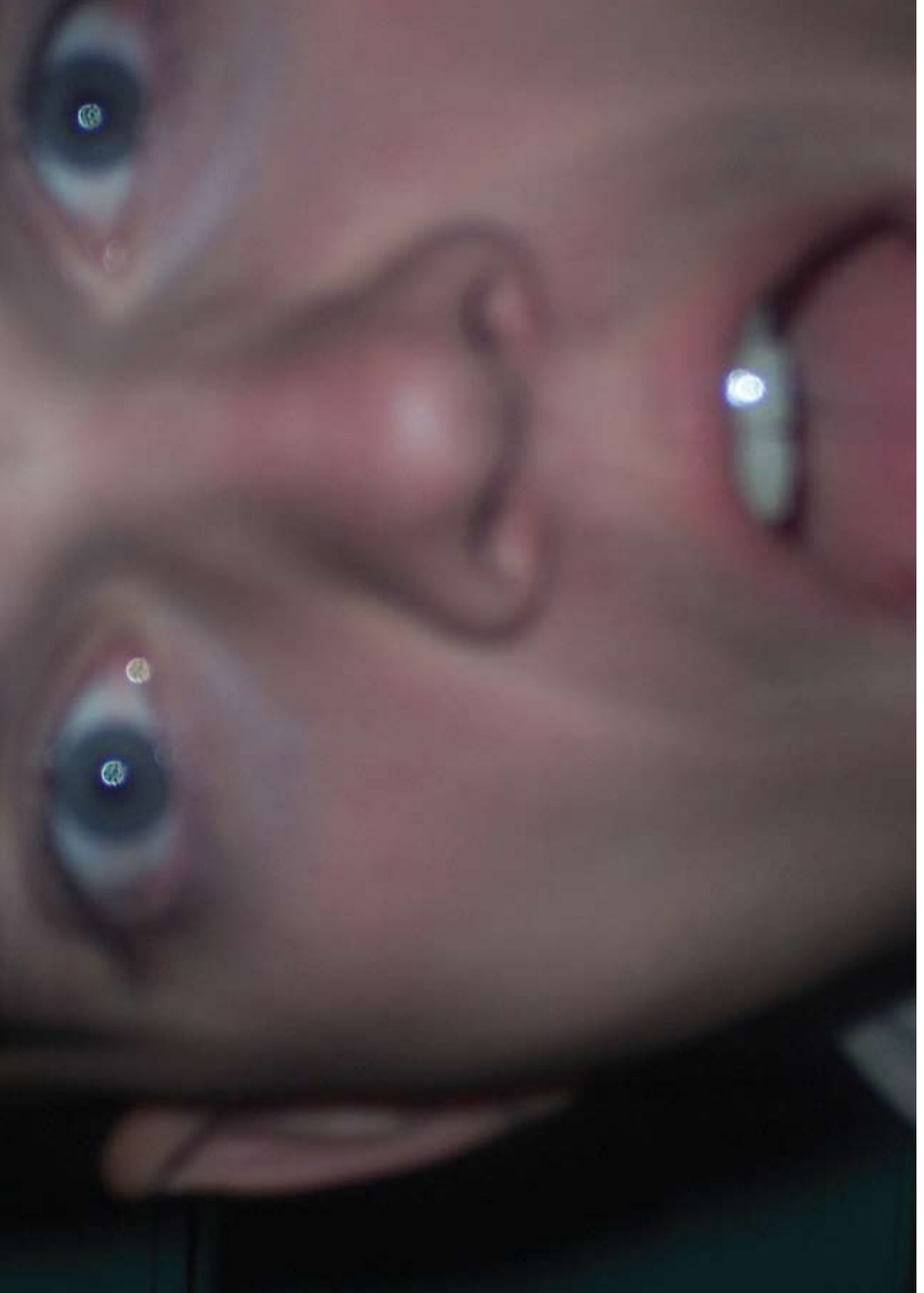
I remember having lengthy discussions with myself, trying to determine if this had really happened at all.

The tent floors smelled like rotten meat.

After about six hours of scrubbing floors and restocking, all of the sudden it hit us that there were no more patients left. They were all either in the med surge ward, or transferred, or back in the prison camps, or dead.

Then, there was a period of unwinding
and goofing around.





if I can't remember something like this. It's just terribly unsettling. It just makes me wonder if when my kid's born I'm going to forget to buckle his seat belt, or forget to wake her up in the morning. It's really terrifying. ——

—— Do you ever have that feeling when you're sick that your head is detached from your body? Sometimes I feel like this was somebody else's experience and I'm trying to put the pieces together after the fact. It makes me wonder if I'm capable of functioning in the world at all,

A lot of stories are compressed in this photo. There are three main events surrounding it: two mass casualties and the deaths of three marines. I don't remember the order in which these three events happened. I have checked my facts, but still they're not straight.

There are four or five still frames in my head from these three events — some are images I never actually took a picture of, of course. But apart from those four still frames all the rest of the events are just mishmashed together.

I have a super clear memory of Parker and I pouring ice on the marines' bodies that night.

While pouring ice on them, I noticed one marine's i.d. tags, which the marines attach to the laces on both boots. His birthday was three days after mine. His injuries were tremendous, having taken an RPG fragment to the head.

Since my return, this marine's identity has changed many times. He has been Parker, he has been my father, he has been myself.

I have tears writing about it. I have been much closer to death than that night on multiple occasions, but I have never been emotionally closer to death, and it haunts me everyday.

I remember the blood type that was on the dog tag attached to one guy's boot, but I can't for the life of me remember if the 85 trauma patients came the day before that, or the day after that — I have no idea.

I try to put things back in order and I can't. Or if I do — if I research and draw the sequence of events out on a time line — it makes sense when I looking at it on paper and then, the next day I can't remember the order again.

—— Still, it's hard to come up with any narrative when you can't establish any order. Once you lose track of dates, then you lose track of order and then you start to lose track of any facts at all. It's just this big jumbled blob of memories that don't have any structure. Then, the memories start to lose meaning and get intertwined with fictitious memories that aren't even there. Or that came up later, or came up through stories or through dreams, or whatever. ——


LEFT
LEFT

—— Processing and re-processing events is what you do when you're not distracted by other things.

——

——

I think somehow our forum of talking is the only forum where my mind feels comfortable enough to remember out loud, which is kind of nice. Because otherwise it just eats at me. Otherwise I just keep thinking about these half-memories over and over and over again — to get it out, write it down, then I feel like I can start to move past it. ——

These faces are blocked out because they are either detainees' faces or interpreters' faces. I wanted to send pictures home to show people what was going on and what we were doing.

The detainees' faces are blocked out because they are detainees, they're not prisoners. They've been accused of a crime and, no matter what their verdict was — and most of them were released with out ever being charged — if you put a picture of them blown up and handcuffed to the bed with their guts hanging out, they look guilty.

We detained them by blocking off an area after a bomb and arresting everyone in that area. In war, especially war in a setting where most people don't have identification, there's no other way to do it: A bomb goes off and you don't know who did it so you arrest everyone you see. You interrogate them, and detain them, interrogate them, release them. There aren't enough interrogators, so sometimes this takes a long time. If their stories don't match, you keep them longer. In the mean time, a mortar round lands in the detainee camp and they end up in the ER.

Blocking out their face is just sort of a human thing, not a rules thing.

The interpreters' faces had to be blocked out for their safety. Insurgents see their faces and kill them, or their family. The interpreters were, for the most part, just awesome people. The only responsible thing to do is to block them out and not get them killed. A whole bunch of them were killed anyway.


RUSCH

The people who delivered our food got killed — three weeks in a row.

One week our laundry didn't show up because they told us the truck had been shot up. At the time convoys were getting hit three to four times a day on the road from Baghdad to Abu Ghraib. Finally we got our clothes two weeks later, and they were all just riddled with holes. All my tee shirts had bullet holes or shrapnel holes in them.

Then about two months later our laundry ladies disappeared. And the story was that they were killed on their way to work. Somebody executed them.

Yeah.

A lot of them died.

Who else?

Our contractor who did the Iraqi contracting specifically for the hospital died. If we wanted something from a store in Iraq, he would order it and bring it to us. He became a pretty good friend to some of the soldiers. Well, our gate guards killed him.

He had been warned several times, “when you approach the gate, drive slowly.” Around two months after we’d gotten there, he didn’t drive slowly and they blew up his car with a machine gun.

They didn’t have a choice. They’d warned him, and it was a stupid deal. Totally unnecessary. And so, he died.

Well, his assistant manager was his best friend. So, here's this other Iraqi contractor who had been very sympathetic to our cause. He and his family had been beat up pretty bad under Saddam's government and he was putting his life on the line, too, to work for us.

But now we killed his best friend. So every time we saw him, his eyes were bloodshot and you could see he was heartbroken and furious and confused. He was still super professional. But... It's got to be tough. If another country came to take over the U.S., and I was working for them here and they killed my best friend, it would be hard to be friends with them still.


U.S.ARMY


THIS
IS A
HAT
AND
SALUTE
AREA


TASK FORCE ALCATRAZ

Some times we took pictures in order to send them back home to family. Two enlisted soldiers made a slide show of those pictures and some of mine were in it. It's interesting to look back on, because the video is probably forty minutes long and there is just one very short section of the hospital. The rest of it is like, Cinco de Mayo and parties and grilling steak. When we got home and started showing people this video, we thought "they're going to think that we were just screwing around the whole time we were there," because there are very few photos with anything medical in them at all. It was really kind of interesting. This was all they saw.

They created the video as sort of a yearbook —showing the highlights. Maybe the editing wasn't even a conscious act. So, maybe that's another reason we took photos: to decrease our families' anxiety.


MARTINOVICH


13 3 2004


1
2


13 3 2004


ENGLAND

These aren't the photos we're likely to find in grandma's photo album 50 years from now.

But it would be nice if they could just sit somewhere like that.


824
LOVE YOU
ALASKA

STRIKER
FEMME
CREW
SereNA

I mean, the pictures could remain on a disk somewhere. But they're more likely to just disappear as people's hard drives die out.

For the moment, this war is probably much more documented than other wars — or at least very randomly documented.


GUAM U.S.
CHAMORRO'S
ANTHONY
8-8-03

—— Empty memories — no, shells of memories — fill me with dread, because I feel that moments of my life have been lived by someone else.

——

—

In trying to put these memories into words, it seems that I no longer have the events wrong. ——

As I look at my photos now, sometimes I don't even see the subject in focus. I see the area behind it. And I remember another story.

No, these aren't the photos that we're going to find in the family photo album, but it would be nice if they could just sit somewhere like that.

Riley and his story.
Me and my outrage.
You and us.

Monica Haller / Riley Sharbonno
onestar press

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