

Three Poems

KERRY JAMES EVANS

Blanket Party

Because Private *Shit-bird* Jenkins
wore underwear in the shower,
we camouflaged soap in pillowcases
and marched single-file
to the first platoon barracks.

The fireguard slept. All of eighteen,
we strapped Jenkins to his bed
by the four corners of his blanket
and we beat his body.
I rammed a sock in his mouth.

It was a quiet beating without
cadence. The next morning,
Jenkins showed our work
to the drill sergeants. They
smoked us. We stood, hands

out to our sides for one hour.
There was no mail call.
When asked to address the company,
Jenkins declined, kept
his bruises beneath his boots

and BDUs—looked at us, third platoon
—our motto: *Third herd—last in line,
first to die*. The drill sergeants
gave Jenkins the go-ahead.
Fired up, he marched us to the pit.

We learned hand-to-hand combat,
throwing our merciless bodies
against recycled tires and sawdust,
each of us taking a shot in the gut
from Jenkins. I spat blood,

asked for more. I called him a pussy-
who-couldn't-fight, and since
our heads were shaved to fend
off ticks and lice, I didn't pull
his hair, only planted my elbow

into his temple. He passed out.
One month later, he was discharged.
The barracks blackened with sleep,
and that darkness was broken
by a bugle. We'd killed our own.

Burial

Not that I served. I served, and what? When a blanket—
when a blanket wakes you early, its hands
hemmed at your neck. It is an old quilt.

I hung it on the wall for you.
I gave it your names. It was vanity. I served
There was a quilt. What?

Rip the seams from the sky for your wives.
It is what they want.
To a woman, a man is what he does.

Bury us. I served. Not that I served,
but a burial by twenty-one gun salute
deserves a body. I won't be that body.

Too early to complain. Too early for light.
I once held the sun
between my teeth for a woman.

Clasping a steak with tongs, she cooked
it while I napped. We weren't talkers.
When she slept, the blankets meant nothing to her.

The quilts of my family. Nothing.
She drooled on the pillow.
Kissed me with that mouth.

Her teeth were like children's teeth.
She would never be my wife.
Behind her stood many like her.

You served, she said. Not that I care.
I served. Because she is living,
she cannot carry the night. Not from me.

When the blankets—when I wake alone, and you
will understand this. Death is the forgotten
image of a dream, the cotton field undressing.

Volcano

I've seen the Mojave, but I've never seen the desert.
In training, I swept for mines, but I've never seen

my brother's leg destroyed after detonation;
I've seen the legless soldier walking with a prosthetic

across town, through the grocery store, at drill,
trying to hold on for one more year, for pension.

I've seen the different phases of training: crawl,
walk, run, and I've seen the failure of battalions

at each phase. I've cleared a path, myself,
and marked, with flags, the safe zone;

and I've walked through such a minefield.
I've witnessed the Volcano, a machine, scatter

nine-hundred-sixty anti-tank mines
over one kilometer of sand, but never have I

seen the battle, or the desert, or those mines, or TOC
calling a precision bombing air strike across the line.

I've dismantled many mines, winnowed Russian mines
from French mines, but I've never seen the mines

on television; I've known soldiers who have seen
those mines; soldiers caught under fire, blasting cap

clenched in the mouth, the jaw gone missing;
and that must be what it means to see the desert:

to see the land laid out before you erupting, a face
charred, blood dried and stuck to bone: sandstorm.