Sleepless Nights and Ghost Soldiers

by Matt Borczon

Sleepless Nights and Ghost Soldiers

Sleepless Nights and Ghost Soldiers
by Matthew Borzon
ISBN 978-1-897180-90-7
online edition 2020
1st Edition June 2017, 100 copies
all rights remain with the author

Layout and Cover by Jordan Fry
© grey borders books 2020
greyborders.com

some of these poems have appeared in Rasputin, Pressure Press, the Beatnik Cowboy, Between Hangovers The Bitchin Kitch, Drunk in a Midnight Choir, Dead Snakes, Anti Heroin Chic, Your one phone call, Nixes Mare, the yellow chair review, Duanes Poe Tree.

journal entry

In my
journal
I always
wrote the
date and
weather
I worked
day or
night shift

I wrote
a list
of injuries
I saw
and the
number of
people
who died
then I
wrote what
I ate
for dinner
and if
I talked
to Dana
or my
kids

in one
entry
somewhere
before the
middle of
my tour
of duty
I wrote
one extra
line simply
asking myself
if I
thought I
should be
worried that
this all
feels so
normal.

Tattoo

everyone
asked me
if I
planned to
get a
tattoo as a
remembrance
of the
war no
I say
but I
will tattoo
anything
you like
if it
will help
me forget
the war
but what
about the
names of
the soldiers
you worked
on who died
they ask
there is
not enough
room on
my body
besides
I never
learned their
names only
their faces
and where
we sent
their bodies
to.

Finished

I sometimes
imagine
what it
would be
like to
be done
to have
nothing
left to
say about
that war
that hospital
those ghosts
those nightmares
no more
words for
the dead
children and
no words
to describe
the texture
of a
skin graft
or a
stump or
the smell
of a
colostomy bag
no more
words about
death and
fear and
smoke and
ash or
dreams that
fill my
reality like
home movies

to put
this down
not for
a minute
but forever

to have
finally
said it
enough times
that even
I have
to believe
that its
over and
its time
to move
on.

what we never talk about

For Brian, Frankie, John and Ryan

stubby cigars
and 118
degree heat
in a
hootch just
off the
enlisted tent
we talked
about life
work outs
sex and
the Navy
anything
other than
the 12
hour shifts
soldiers and
children or
detainees that
were our
whole lives
at the
time but
I sometimes
wish we
had talked
about the
weight of
all we
saw the
blood and
dead civilians
the amputations
and burn
wounds the
dead and
the better
off dead
we saved
for reasons
I still
question

every day
I wish
I would
have asked
what do
you think
home will
be like
after all
of this

and now
years later
when we
talk no
one ever
says they
don't sleep
or admits
to nightmares
or voices
or child
ghosts and
no one
says they
hide their
hands in
restaurants
afraid that
everyone
can still
see the
blood and
I never
ask what
they say
to all
the people
who call
them a
hero
thinking
that it
will make
all of
it just
disappear.

survivors

I process
my nightmares
in an
oil filled
puddle
reflecting rainbow
light but
black in
the center
like a
starless night
flat like
a rooftop

if history
belongs to
the winners
then I
guess all
that's left
for the
survivors
are screaming
and amputated
ghosts in
Technicolor.

Sleepless nights and ghost soldiers

today
the weight
of my
world is
60 pounds
of Kevlar
you get
used to
it but
never don't
feel it
or forget
its there
its as
big as
my memories
of my
dead father
and no
today I
don't want
my medication
some things
never reach
therapeutic
level just
like some
faces neve
leave my
dreams and
today I
can't drink
it out
of my
head and
there is
no pledge
or serenity
prayer loud
enough to
drown out

the screams
of ghost
soldiers
begging me
nightly to
give them
something
to make
the pain
go away.

Ghost Stories

I have
learned in
my years
since the
war that
ghosts never
give answers
or forgiveness
no reasons
no redemption
the dead
children of
Nagasaki will
not tell
the descendants
of the
bomb makers
it was
all OK
no skinny
emaciated Jewish
ghosts will
ever explain
Auschwitz to
the children
of their
German captors
and no
dead soldier
will ever
wake me
at night
to say
I know
you did
everything
you could.

never let your ghosts be your therapist

I have
been told
there are
lessons
in everything
if you
look or
maybe light
incense or
roll the
Mongolian dog
bones your
aunt sent
you or
meditate
on meaning

sit in
the sweat
lodge of
your nightmares
activate your
triple heater
and eventually
all will
be revealed

but so
far my
nightmares
only point
out pain
and the
ghost soldiers
don't surrender
wisdom and
even the
few things
I liked
about my
time in

Afghanistan
are sure
to kill
me eventually

so maybe
thinking there
are answers
to be
found in
painful memory
or night
terrors coming
from the
mouths of
ghosts is
as unlikely
as it
is to
think you
can
find a
reason for
this or
any war
or find
any answer
from any
survivor
still living
in the desert
of his
memory.

Oxycodone

spent a
sleepless night
swallowing
ghosts of
dead soldiers
as bombs
exploded on
my TV
and oxycodone
numbed pain
from a
tooth I
had extracted
after it
shattered
under the
blue glove
of an
oral surgeon
I have
drank enough
blood in
one day
to last
a lifetime
this time
at least
it is
my own.

somedays I feel like a train

today my
chest is
an empty
freight car
the rails
hum outside
and everything
is moving
fast against
the tree
line but
inside of
my body
and mind
my flesh
and tired
bones
everything
is hollow
and empty
today
the ghost
soldiers are
not haunting
anybody
they just
form up
front to
back around
me as
we march
route step
back to
our mother
the war.

Burn

the world
turns blue
through my
wind shield
on this
snow less
morning I
drive past
bare trees
looking like
Ohio wood
tip matches
and if
today I
can find
the will
the flame
a little
of what's
left over
after 50
years and
a war
I can't
get past
with its
nightmares
and ghosts
and painful
memories
and PTSD
if there
is any
of the
old me
left somewhere
inside my
head then
I will
light that
match and
laugh as
I watch
everything

burn to
the ground

because sometimes
you need
to scorch
the field
before anything
new will
grow.

Getting your hands dirty

a young nurse
took a long
long time
picking out
a towel to
wrap the
child's corpse
and when we
got to the
isolation room
I could see
she didn't want
to touch it

so I wrapped
the body and
gave it to
the parents
I changed
the sheet and
disinfected the
mattress all
the while I
was thinking
about a fall
day when I
found a cat
dead against
my fence
it had been
there a long
time and I
had to peel it
away from the
metal before
I could stuff
it into a
trash bag .

The secret lives of ghosts

in the
years since
the war
I have
learned
a lot
about the
secret lives
of ghosts
I can
distinguish
their voices
from rain
or the
tires squeals
that cover
their words

and I
can tell
who they
are by
where I
find them
in my
house
the children
are in
my daughters
room and
the detainees
and local
nationals are
always in
the kitchen
the ghost
soldiers
and Marines
are everywhere
and will
go anywhere
as long
I don't ask

them to
leave

I have
learned to
see past
their dead
eyes their
wounds and
stumps their
pain and fear
medication
can't make
them leave
they only
get thin
and quiet
enough to
make me
question if
they are
real and
this scares
me more
than they do

my therapist
says I
can make
them leave
any time
I want
since I
made them

only I
didn't make them
the war
made them
the sand
made them
the fighting
bullet holes
and bombs
made them
the helicopters
and stretchers
bloody equipment

sleepless nights
body bags
and missed
calls home
made them
the constant
fear you
can't do
enough to
save any
of them
made them
the same
way it
made me.

end date

I'd sit
outside in
112 degree
heat too
tired to
clean the
blood off
my boots
no shade
no music
no plans
but to
wait
until the
next shift
and start
it all again
but at
least I
had an
end date
a specific
number
of days
until I
would leave
Afghanistan

it was
a rope
to hold
on to a
rosary to
pray
a pot
to piss
in a
pot to
watch until
eventual
boil

this month
I've been

back for
5 years
and what
I wouldn't
give to
have a
day in
sight when
I could
believe
this war
was gonna
end and
I would
finally get
to go
home.

Ghost on a train

I am
a ghost
on a train
a drunken painter
using his hat
to make clouds
on canvas
a memory
of a war
long over

I am
the schizophrenic
neighbor yelling
at speeding cars
the unhappy
wife making
scrambled eggs
through hot tears
a soldier
with one leg
walking through
nightmares

and I am
what is left
when death
enters a
room and
everything else
even God
leaves

Helmaund

I want
simple love
empty dreams
uncluttered
hallways in
gutted houses
of the soul

I want
air between
my nightmares
and silence
in my sleep

I want
a truce called
and the
ghost armies
sent home
the dead
buried and

the wounded
cared for
and cleaned
for transport
in silent
helicopters

I want
the battlefield
scraped and
burned
a garden
planted and
water gathered

I want
a place
that's better
once we
leave.

A king sized bed

tonight our bed
is a life raft
where you pull
me ashore sunburned
and grateful

yesterday it was
an airfield where
ghosts offload casualties
in my screaming nightmares

last week our bed
was a prayer rug
where we meditated
beside our sleeping children

last month in was
the epicenter of
an earthquake
made of love

last year our bed
was a coffin
I tried to bury
beside my fathers

in 2010 it was
an airport where
you held me
before I left for
Afghanistan

and once it was
a sunny meadow
where we held hands
and talked about family

and you slept
against my skin
your leg over mine
and I think we thought
it was just a bed to lie on

as we dreamed
of the life we
thought we'd have
before life gave us
all of this instead.

When the doctor asks what do I want to talk about today

a laundry list
of barking dogs
ghosts in
desert camo
a babies single
tooth left
on the pillow
an orange
rotting sun and
a coffin sized bed

a trembling nightmares
of boots full
of camel spiders
an infected sore
a suction pump
a morphine drip
a helicopter full
of wounded marines

dead children
falling from the
sky like rain
suicidal ideations
drunken accusations

the tears of
my children
the ghost of
my father
my hand on
my collar bone
the sound of
phones ringing
inside my head

panic like a
kick in my balls
and the tension
that comes not
from the idea

it may all
happen again

but from certainty
that is still all happening
daily
despite our discussions
and all the medication
 you give me.

VA appointment

my hips
have a
cyst where
the bones
rub together
and my
neck can't
turn left
without pain
they offer
medication
for comfort
my psych
doctor wants
me back
on Celexa
my therapist
can't imagine
me improving
without it
it's a
short fix
to a
problem
with no
solution

but no
medication
has ever
made the
ghost soldiers
stand down
never found
the missing
body parts
never saved
the child
never fixed
the broken
friendships
the night
terror helicopter
panic attacks
that leave
me running
out into
the street
at 3 am or

the paranoid
screaming at
the people
who still
manage to
love me

and for
them I
wish it
would work
I would
gladly
swallow them
all like
candy or
lovers lies
all of them
until I
was whole

but so far
meds have
changed
nothing no
dream or
flashback
no outburst
or river
of tears
no anger
fueled accusation
no nights
spent sweating
and crying
into stained
sheets

nothing changed
but my
ability to
care about
it or
anything
and that
numb inability
to feel
is what
brought me
here in
the first
place.

more of me than me

at first
I would
just sit
hoping
the chair
would curl
around me
and I
would remember
what it
used to
feel like
sitting here
all those
years before
the war
the way
it felt
to rock
my children
or nurse
a whiskey
to kiss
my wife
this chair
was my
favorite
place in
the universe
my zen garden
mountain peak
happy place
my deep
inhale my
sense of calm
all gone
now beneath
a cloud
of memories
of sand
and smoke
from burning
human waste
and bloody

hospital sheets
of missing limbs
and babies cries
of burning flesh
and mortar shells
IED's and
rifle shots
chopper blades
and the
stink of bleach
everything
my senses
absorbed and
brought home
and no
amount of
therapy or
medication
has been
able to
help me
let it go
to unhear
or unsmell
or unwind
as I
sit in
this chair
that now
holds more
of me
than I do.

Killing Ghosts

In shaking
and sleepless nights
in flashbacks
brought on
by triggers
I barely recognize
in paranoid rituals
I follow like
a road to salvation
in the moments
between awake
and asleep
I walk with ghosts
ghosts of soldiers
with no names
of Marines
with no legs
of children
with missing hands
and open wounds
from playing
on the battlefields

of burn victims
black as pitch
who could be
men or women
soldier or civilian
adult or child
all crumbling
in front of me
like charcoal

some carry equipment
suction pumps
and IV stands
with dirty dressings
over infected skin grafts
and I have found
nothing in 5 years
to make them
want to leave

so they stay
inside my head
behind my eyes
in the darkest
corners of my life
because even
after 5 years

I still can't
find a way
to even try
to kill the ghosts
of people
I was supposed
to save.

Matthew Borczon

is a nurse and Navy Sailor from Erie Pa. He served in Afghanistan from 2010-11 in the busiest hospital in the war. His book A clock of Human bones was published by the Yellow Chair Review in 2016, his second book Battle lines came out through Epic Rites press in 2016 his third book Ghost Train will be out from Weasel press in June of 2017. He works as a nurse in a social services agency and raises four children with his wife of 20 years. His struggle with PTSD continues.