men as trees walking

poems by Kevin Honold
And he cam to bethsayda, and they brought a blynde man unto him and desyred hym, to touche him. And he caught the blinde by the honde, and ledd hym out off the toune, and spat in hys eyes and put hys hondes apon hym, and axed hym yf he sawe enythinge, and he loked up and sayde: I se men, For I se them walke as they were trees.

Tyndale’s Newe Testament, 1526
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The Velvet Revolution, 1989–1990

There was hope back then. In the motor pool with an early discharge application in my pocket, I listened to good news on Armed Forces Radio. Everywhere, armies were disbanding. In the high latitudes, a man stepped out of a cell on Robben Island, shook the guards’ hands, took the ferry home and ran for office. In Dresden a soldier threw a grappling hook over Stalin’s iron shoulder and handed the rope’s end to some idle kids. Policemen holstered their truncheons and granted safe passage to candlelight vigils in Leipziger Square that rivaled Nuremberg’s torchlight parades from the days before it was flattened by night bombers. Rumor spread of a Soviet ruse as we drove to the border where we met columns of westbound East Germans and found a worker’s family smiling beside a brokendown Trabi whose two-stroke engine had died of a thrown cylinder, just this side of the fence. We traded Marlboros for chocolate cake and aluminum pfennigs stamped with the hammer-and-sickle, smiled for pictures, as the Guards Armies drove back to Russia with ten billion in Deutsche Marks and a parting assurance to Bonn that they would buy decent housing (and some food um Gottes willen!) for the officers’ kids and the soldiers’ wives. What did I care how they spent it? I was waiting for a plane ride back to the world, to start my real life with GI Bill money and unspent leave pay. Then I saw a white squirrel on the barracks’ commons and the Slovenes started digging weapons pits and the Club of Rome gave mother earth fifty years to live and I found you sitting heartbroken on the bunk because
all the early releases had been cancelled, all enlistments indefinitely and peremptorily extended. There wasn't much to say. Six months later we sat crosslegged on a dune at night and watched the oil well fires, the livid suture of the skyline. My heart felt wattled together from pig hair and mud and straw and I couldn't bring myself to tell you how fucking beautiful it was.
i. Nuremberg, 1990

We bought hash off the Turks and cocaine and walked the snowcovered cobblestone lanes to the lowlit places that never closed. I drank until I couldn’t feel drunk anymore though its warmth made strangers kinder and we ended up in the alleys where women shivered, leaning their pale faces from the windows. Their hair smoldered with the rooms’ blue light as they dropped friendly questions to the GIs on the street. Hey, soldat, is it cold to you? On the U-bahn back to the barracks the few scattered riders slouched at the windows counting station lights and we deboarded at Riyadh International and stood on the puddled tarmac breathing jet fuel fumes, humidity, palms. My friend watched a fighter-bomber taxi, lift, and bank away and its blazing tail was a little gold jag buried in the damp of each eye.
ii. Sortie

We sat in the sand beyond
the perimeter ditch and kept
long intervals of silence between us,
the scarlet and brickdust-colored clouds

at sunset like rain sheeting down a window.
The bombers’ sweptback wings glinted
with the last light,
like signal mirrors.

They banked in a lazy wheel across
nations of sky, then returned
as if they’d forgotten something.
I imagine holding in my hands

a tiny instrument, like the ones
that guide the bombers home. The thin
black needle shivering on the dial. The unlikely
weight of the lodestone in my palm.
iii. Men as Trees Walking

A truck storms out of the desert hauling cases of bottled water and a laundry sack full of letters. A sergeant stands in the truckbed and calls names.

Atencio  Hobart  McGrath  Lee

We listen in green camouflage, disguised for an unlikely season, for a land of trees and treeshadow. The called ones smile like they’ve been found.

Palmerton  Pfeifer  Womack  Salinas

When the last name is read, the unlucky walk off in any direction, fatigues of mottled foliage drifting into the desert, hands in pockets,

searching for quiet spots to root. Somewhere are cars parked on a steep hill, a collection of out-of-state beer cans, a buffalo nickel.

Thirteen dollars I once found sweeping out a bar. A hideout I built in the woods with scrap pressboard and eight-penny nails.
iv. Across the Border

Flights of rockets arc the sky, balling
through the sound barrier and tracing grand trajectories.
Engineers touch off explosives, blast an esplanade

through the house-high berm. They rise in a fallout of sand
and huddle to discuss the hole they’ve made.
We tear off name and regimental patches, pocket crucifixes
and medallions of saints Anthony or Christopher.
As we idle in column I picture a landscape
scarred with trench lines and antitank ditches and wonder

who’s waiting on the far side of the sand wall, an army hunched
beneath a fall of rockets, angry men gripping rifles
in countless rifle pits. Tanks buried turret-deep in the sand,

barrels raised to test the wind. Kilometers of concertina wire.
But when we roll in single file through the gap we find a similar des-

ert,
the same stillness we left behind, nothing for several miles. And then

a lone Iraqi soldier standing to the side of the column with his
hands clasped together. Unshaven,
without a helmet. Pleading for his life, or a ride.
v.

The M1s’ wide tracks kick up breakers of sand like tractor trailers barreling down a flooded turnpike. A row of T-62s and BMPs mills on a ridge, rolling into position or turning away, very short on time to find the range.

The M1s’ main guns fire, knocking at the sky and the incandescent rounds travel so slowly across the sand you can follow with your eyes as the shot trails away to its target. Smoke columns tilt before the breeze. We pass their half-buried armor, and a tank whose turret lies upsidedown beside it like a hat blown off in a sudden wind. Fighter bombers dive out of the clouds and the air shudders with Gatling gunbursts, antitank cannonfire. Bareheaded enemy crewmen run without weapons across the desert, toward the far side of the horizon. Helicopters beat through the smoke, casting no shadows as they race above the ground.
vi. Rearguard Action

A low ceiling of ash from the burning wells buries the stars. Scattered hulls of vehicles burn and black smoke chuffs from turret hatches. An APC rumbles in a jar of gold light, a fiery semblance of itself, broken and pieced back together with flames. In the morning the Iraqi troop carrier rolls toward us on its broken wheel, steel lambent with rain, the sun a chinese lantern behind the smoke. The M1 takes aim like a proper authority over a broken horse. A bright round strings the desert, the carrier rocks once in place and burns, and no one climbs out. The round is a white trace across the windshield. A helicopter rockets the flames.
vii.

The helicopters approach low to the ground and their blades buffet the air. They hover head-high, specters on the desert, just visible through seventy meters of darkness if you look left-of-center, blink, and hold your breath. Pilots’ fingers hardwired to rocket tubes, heat sensitive as moths, registering the lime phosphorescence of our bodies through nightvision, our chemical suits as green as any enemy’s jacket.
The sergeant shouts into the handset identify friendlies on the ground, friendly forces to your southwest but there’s no response and we step away from the vehicles and wave our arms for recognition at the pilots who are holding fire, trying to figure us out.
viii. Convoy

As we pass through a town near Nasiriyah small boys
spill from doorways, drawn from sunless
rooms by the novelty of traffic.
They rush the column and line the track, exhaust and dust,
big shy smiles for any army,

for big guns on parade.
They hop a pantomime of gunplay and wave, loose
shouts of hunger and greeting. Pulled back
by their mothers from the roadside, shaken, scolded
with harsh lectures, they vanish

in the folds of black robes. An old man in a suit coat,
his head wrapped in red cloth, stands at the end
of a deserted lane, singular as a post.
Lone women wave their gloved hands and plead
for food or redress, name us behind their veils.

Ration packets are tossed from windows and turret
hatches, and some packets
are slung with a will and find marks.
A woman’s leg, a boy’s chest. The boys gather the packets up
with puzzled smiles. Helicopters buzz the town,

tailbooms lifted high, the air throttled in the low sweep.
ix. Ceasefire with Smoke and Sunspots

The sun dim as a pocketwatch lid through the carbon, flawed with three dark spots like dints from a finish hammer.

Vehicles burn. The wind wrestles the pillars of black smoke to the ground. Enemy soldiers walk from a field of burning armor with their hands on their heads or arms spread wide to signify emptiness. They grimace at the cigarettes and ration packets we give them, teeth bared in a chronic flinch. Their faces set in a dull ache as they sit crosslegged in the sand, concussed to silence, lolling, wired. Early afternoon, we stand in blowing sand, bandannas tied banditwise around our faces. In the green shadow of the oil smoke we try to make out the president’s speech on the shortwave but the wind takes most of the words away. Maybe there was a panic about the spots on the sun and he was speaking to the nation’s fears, relating the science as he knew it, reiterating the constancy of the stars, so we drive further over a plain crosshatched by hundreds of treads, past the burning armor, past the crewman sprawled facedown in the sand.
singly among the dunes, lost in our thoughts,  
composing verses about stones and birds.  
We’ll be happy to the roots of our hearts,  
and have no idea why we’re crying.
Notes


“The Groves of Ba’al.” After Lamentations, iii, iv.

“Birds in March.” ‘the good spirits of the bells.’ From The Waning of the Middle Ages, by Johan Huizinga.

“Jupiter of the Wabash.” ‘doe-eyed bride of the monarch of the realms of the dead.’ From Bulfinch’s Mythology.

“Elpenor.” First line adapted from Pound’s “Canto I.”