I.

The boy sends home three letters from Basic, where they are making him into something. His words are pieces, insect legs in sandy loam.

He takes to the military quickly, memorizing the Soldier’s Creed, believing the religion that all things can be improved. He eats their good food and wakes to their song. Wasn’t it only yesterday that he sat in a wooden chair on the first day of kindergarten, his fingertips inside the dry spine of a picture book? He’s over six foot now, the same child in a different uniform. Says he should’ve been born into his ACU trousers instead of skin.

Patriot, gunfighter, warrior. He works a strange tongue, though he hasn’t yet left for Afghanistan. Fire rate. Recoil. Electronically enhanced M16. He has buddies now from Texas and South Dakota, places he’s never been to or thought about. Battle buddies, he calls his friends, the second word to soften the first.

Each morning he slips an abridged bible into the pocket over his heart. When he was a kid he believed in Kurt Cobain and vampires. Late nights in the trailer, he would kneel on a brown carpet and say his prayers to a dusty ceiling fan.

It’s been four months now, three letters and a photograph on Face-
book. Shorn down to stubble, he is fresh born. Faded slightly in his uniform, like a daguerreotype. The hair is gone from his face. No more music, no huffing. No weed.
    For the first time ever, he’s standing up straight.

II.

You can’t trust what you don’t understand, and what you don’t understand are those skinny boys hanging around the sliding glass doors of Walmart and the tech schools, sitting with their hands hidden under folding tables. If you don’t mind, they’d like to ask you a couple of questions about your future.

    They came in the spring, when the first flowering pears were bursting like snow clouds. They asked you about your plans, and when you said your plans were to burn a flag while flipping David Petraeus the bird, they asked you about your boyfriend’s plans.
    “He’s my little brother, shithead. What makes you think I have a boyfriend?”
    The one with the purple face laughed.
    You were going to tell them to fuck off, but the boy answered them. He took shiny brochures and cards with their names. They shook his hand and offered a solid imitation of respect. A lopsided smile crept up the boy’s face.

III.

That summer at the movies, the Army commercials played before the previews. Troops standing in formation. Between tight shots of soldiers’ faces, soft and blank as cotton, there were men and women in camouflage fatigues boarding a helicopter. Repelling down an icy cliff. Hoisting the American flag.
    “What bullshit,” you whispered in his ear.
    “You don’t understand. It’s about sacrifice. It’s about something greater than yourself.”
    “What’s greater than yourself?” You choked down a fistful of popcorn and stared at the greasy jut of his chin. “What else do you have if not yourself?”
“Country.” He said it like it was a girl’s name, some girl he had a
crush on, someone he followed home after the street lights popped on
along Bucktown Lane.

What about college? You couldn’t even ask. He was never going to
college, any more than you were.

The voiceover meant business. Army Strong.

He’s right. You don’t understand. You don’t see the sense in giving
your children away, getting a flag in return. A dinner napkin with sharp
corners. Some consolation prize.

IV.

There are rules for receiving letters in Basic, like in prison.

He does twenty-five push-ups before they’ll hand him the first one,
warm Southern earth blooming between his fingers. When you forget to
use a flag stamp, they yell into his cheek while he does a fifteen minute
hold. The human table.

From his bunk, he memorizes the staccato drilling of a woodpecker in
a longleaf pine. He takes a mental inventory of the contents of his sack:
sleeping bag, tent, helmet, canteen, shovel, bullet resistant.

The boy doesn’t tell you this, but he has convinced himself he is a
machine. He feels the euphoria of being dismantled and reconstructed,
of becoming part of a platoon. He loves these people more than he’s ever
loved anyone, including you, including Mama and Daddy. Love that
burns up all memory. You are only his sister, a peripheral nothing. Of you
he thinks: Go back to Olive Garden and the Startown Cineplex, where
you make sense.

You stare at a maroon stain on one of his letters. Is it food or blood?
When you sent him a beer cake it took you four hours to make, they made
him run six miles after watching his squad leader eat it. Not even a bite.

The platoon is pretty cool, the food pretty good, nothing is too bad
so far. He adds “so far” to the end of almost every sentence, like a con-
stant flinch. He jokes about getting killed but says he’s having a good
time and he hopes you are too. You think he must be high. You pretend
he’s at extreme summer camp.

He doesn’t know who won American Idol or So You Think You Can
Dance? Those are the kinds of things you write about in your letters.
Alyssa Milano’s pregnant. The new Batman movie has that beautiful
French girl with the gap between her teeth. It looks awesome, even with-
out Heath Ledger.
His world in the bottom of the country is divided into heat categories and quarts of water consumed, his overlords drill sergeants who seem tall and empty at the same time. They take pains to learn how to say his name, allowing him one chance to correct them. His name is all he gets to keep.

V.

Three months before Basic, he slept with a girl. He wouldn’t talk about it, but you knew she was his first. First girlfriend, first everything.

Summer Belue. Porn star name, but a good girl from decent parents. Her mother worked at a Wells Fargo, chubby fingers sliding twenties through a metal drawer. The girl’s father did something at one of the plants, another man inside the roar of machines. There were two or three Belue brothers you would see now and then, pumping gas or buying cigarettes Friday nights at the Walmart Super Center, trying to start up conversations with people in line.

The first time you saw Summer, you and the boy were eating at Ryan’s Buffet. She came in with her parents, stood behind them holding a warm plate against her chest, her hands clouded by the steam of mashed potatoes. A reedy blond ponytail, jean shorts with heart pockets, flip-flops smacking against the dirty bottoms of her feet.

A vein pulsed in the boy’s neck.

“That your girl?”

“Shut the fuck up.” He shoved a dinner roll in his mouth.

Summer sat with her parents near the door, but she kept coming up for more corn on the cob. She looked at the boy through the foggy glass of the buffet, smeared with two hundred spaghetti plate dinners. The boy’s acne scars lit an angry red.

You’re pretty sure he had sex with Summer Belue. You don’t know when, or if he used anything. Sometimes they’d just go in his room and hold hands with the door open, listening to old Nirvana bootlegs, playing video games. “No ma’am,” Summer would say if you offered her iced tea or Pizza Bites. You’re only six years older, but still: No ma’am.

One night, maybe two weeks before he delivered himself to the military, he came out of the room, his hair stuck to his neck like streaks of oil. Summer emerged shortly thereafter, a fresh coat of makeup painted over her chin. You clicked off the remote and stared at them. Outside on the gravel lot, the day laborers’ kids were setting off fireworks three weeks late.
They both looked at the floor as Summer walked to the kitchen to dump a half finished can of Sprite down the sink. “See you at Mozer’s,” she said to him. After she left, he went back in his room and shut the door.

You thought for a while maybe Summer Belue was enough to change his mind. Maybe he’d stay behind, stay inside her on her parents’ sticky water bed, trading kisses. Maybe he’d fuck up and get her pregnant, help raise the bay-by.

She couldn’t hold him. Nor his friends, his drug dealer in the vintage Mustang, the endless cans of Four Loko and dub sacks you left on his bed.

You were grateful when Summer Belue came to the mall to say goodbye. Even if she didn’t say anything to you, no “no ma’am,” no nothing, just sat there holding his hand under the table, smacking her flip flops against the soles of her feet. She stared at a group of shrieking girls in front of the Game Stop.

The recruiter handed him a clipboard. “Pretty girlfriend.”

“She’s not my girlfriend,” the boy said.

VI.

In a month, he’s in the weeds.


Time shares in a computerized Iraq City, where he learns to clean houses. Be a sharp shooter. Collect badges like a Boy Scout.

He warns you not to respond to his letters because he’ll no longer receive them. He tells you, don’t worry, he has war heroes watching over him, guiding his hand when he removes the idiot proof plug on his rifle. Patton, Schwarzkopf, McChrystal.

While you ferry bread baskets and lunch plates to old women at Olive Garden, he ferries ammo across a broken bridge. Both of you fake your way through it. Faking runs in the family. Mama pretending she could raise children. Daddy bluffing his way into bed with a bottle blonde surveyor, even before he divorced Mama. Nothing is real, no ma’am.

The boy wants to graduate to live fire, to three days in the woods of Victory Forge. Laser tag and buddy team movements. Men streaking through the bones of dead trees, their hearts baptized in a stream sullied with sediment, blessed by the flicking tongues of unseen animals.

He is proud when he tells you of his worst twenty seconds. Twenty seconds in a real CS gas chamber, gagging, nose dripping, eyes burning.
He managed to cough out his name, social, and rank better than most. He endured. He thinks if he can survive that, Victory Forge will be a piece of cake.

You take that letter from your pocket and feed it down the garbage disposal at work. You push it deep, down past sodden noodles and cold grains of rice. When Javier asks if you have another batch of dishes for him, you don’t answer. Your fingers are bleeding.

VII.

Is he hiding? What is his fear?

VIII.

Summer Belue’s got another boyfriend, but you don’t write that in the letters. Some guy who looks exactly like her brothers, works as a smoke-jumper. Walks around town with his knuckles digging between her shoulders, like he’s feeling for a lost key at the bottom of a lake.

IX.

It was one year ago Daddy came over with his girlfriend while Mama was at work. You all watched The Hurt Locker. Daddy and the boy ate peanut butter cups on the couch with the cat between them, swishing her fat, gray tail. That cat used to attack the boy in his sleep, claw his face bloody, until Daddy kicked her across the room.

When the movie was over, they sat at the kitchen table, Daddy telling stories of Vietnam. Growing up, he would always get quiet when you asked if he ever killed anyone. Just give you a look, like you ought to know better than to ask. He sat there talking about the soldiers in The Hurt Locker, his face like an old sea captain. There was chocolate all over his chin, but no one said anything.

You felt bad for the bottle blonde surveyor standing around by herself in the kitchen, locked out of the conversation, so you went over next to her but there was nothing to say. You could never remember her name. Mama called her “that bitch with the tripod,” and for the life of you, that’s the only thing you could think of. This woman standing on street corners, orange metal legs splayed out in front of her.
“I want to work EOD,” the boy said. “I think that’s my calling.”
You smacked him on the back of the head. “That was a movie.”
“No one asked you. I’m gonna be EOD, diffuse bombs.Fuck yeah, I am.”
“That James was a cowboy,” Daddy whined, “that ain’t like it is in real life,” but there was no convincing him.
His eyes had turned. You knew that he’d stopped thinking. That he was becoming. Eater, killer, death bringer.
Daddy got quiet, disappeared into the bathroom for a long time, kept flushing the toilet and washing his hands. The Tripod brought him some gin and closed herself in with him, and they commenced whispering for five or six minutes. They left soon after when Tripod convinced him to go for a drive, Daddy looking as ashamed as he had when he kicked the cat.
When everyone was gone, you locked the door and closed the blinds.
“I swear to fucking God, I will kill you before you set one foot in the military.”
The boy sat there quietly eating the rest of Daddy’s peanut butter cups, kicking the legs of the table where you used to wipe your boogers.
“I’m not joking. I will beat the shit out of you before I let you blow yourself into pieces because of some goddamned Hollywood movie adrenaline-junkie death wish.”
He wouldn’t answer. He squeezed the candy wrappers in his fists.
You washed dishes, listened to him kick the table. The neighbors were just coming home, their headlights crawling across the yard, past the monkey grass, over Mama’s wormy cabbage heads.
“You care if I eat this last one?” he asked, his mouth full.

X.

In his letters, he writes that he is fine so far. He is going to the ranges all the time in preparation for Victory Forge. He is proud, having just run two miles in 15:15. He is taking a step forward, but he doesn’t say where he’s going or how long it will take him to get there.
His first letter was signed “Love, Brian.” The last he signed with only his name.