

MATX 690: Documentary
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Response Paper 2

Whiskey Tango Foxtrot by Ashley Gilbertson

I am finished and relieved on multiple levels to be out of *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot*. I felt nauseous by the time I had escaped from Falluja. Gilbertson meant to convey the experience of American marines, Pesh and Iraqi forces, Iraqi civilians, and journalists caught in the daily struggle to survive. I find myself angry that he has done it. It is a truth, like so many other truths, I would rather not know.

We are involved in a war that will cost the soldiers involved in it their sense of safety, cause them to question who they have become, and fill them with images of horror and pain, causing them to mourn the knowledge of evil unleashed, even within themselves. Sometimes such a price is worth exacting for a noble cause. But somehow the mission has gone awry. And there is only the interminable damage.

Gilbertson's writing is lean and dense with fact, like the hard-muscled bodies of the soldiers he photographs. He manages to capture the small details that speak volumes about the unintended consequences of the war and forces me to see them in all their complexity – “frenzied men with armfuls of cash wrestling free from crowds trying to rob their booty” (14); journalists bribing marines with beer for access to key areas (16); the Iraqi uncle apologizing that he cannot offer tea despite the fact that there has been no water or power for weeks (17); the unmedaled Iraqi Lieutenants Mahdi and Kadhemi who “used the one tool at their disposal: speed” to disarm IEDs (65); the toll of unexpected re-deployments (116); “Iraqis [soldiers] stealing anything of value in front of the guarded civilians; Americans kicking in doors when they could as easily have turned the handle . . .” (119). He writes in rapid fire, clipped sentences, like the bullets at his heels. “Everything unfolds in slow motion. I watch bullets kick up under the heels and soles of my boots as I run. I watch the bullets miss marines in front of me by inches. I see men hit. I see men fall. Other men grab and drag casualties from the street, leaving trails of blood behind them.” He appears to be talking to us in jagged breaths as he runs.

He is vigilant at capturing the conflicting emotions of the American soldiers – “Other marines wondered aloud, why the fuck should they die while trying to help people who didn't want them there?” (121). But just when we begin to categorize him, he describes what they found in Falluja – “. . . huge piles of mines, surface to air missiles, ammunition. Other units found car bomb factories, insurgent propaganda offices containing computers used to edit beheading videos, torture rooms, and tiny dark prisons with shackles and chains and wheelchairs used to strap down kidnapped hostages” (194).

Gilbertson speaks movingly of the damage suffered by his own psyche. “My memory of the battle from that point on was hazy for a long time. Some events still are. I don't know how I photographed the marines running through the phosphorus, or what I was thinking when I moved through Falluja's alleys trying to keep in line with the marines, photograph them, and not get killed. I can't recall entire scenarios even while looking at the pictures I took of them. I can't

remember some conversations I had with marines moments before they were killed. Now that enough time has passed I recall things I sometimes wish I could forget . . .”(185).

And he was not alone. “As marines filed in, they fell against walls away from windows and doorways. Many were now completely oblivious to the heavy fire coming into and going out of the building. Around me marines slumped against walls, unable to speak, occasionally crying, staring into nothing. They looked into a void: the thousand-mile stare. I didn’t really notice it at first. I was in the same headspace as they were, in a daze thinking, that was the most fucking dangerous thing I have ever done” (186). He masterfully captures the aloneness men feel. “Combat is strange: you’re with 160 men . . . but you feel so alone. If you’re under fire, you’re allowed talk but can barely hear yourself think; if there’s a lull, you’re not allowed to talk because any sound might give up your location. You have to find a space inside and discipline yourself, make yourself small and quiet – as invisible as possible” (189). He grapples with his survivor’s guilt as he blames himself for Miller’s death. “We wonder what would have happened if we had done things differently, made different choices. We wonder whose lives could have – and should have – been spared. I still wonder” (195).

Gilbertson’s photographs deepen the affective impact of his words - the stark beauty of the deep blue-gray sky in contrast with the utilitarian mounds of rocks and bags at the out post near Fallujah (23); the chilling juxtaposition of the young boy’s smile as he points a “toy” gun directly at the photographer, underscoring the danger in trusting anyone (27); the close-up views of burning bodies and vehicles (33, 93); the respite of glee in the American marine sliding down the marble banister in Saddam’s palace (48-49); the tender prayers of a Kurdish refugee at his mother’s grave upon his return home (57); the daunting task of having to go out on patrol with no translator, captured in the photo of the piece of paper with Arabic phrases wrapped around a soldier’s rifle stock (69); a doctor’s reflection in a pool of blood (80), the shame and fear of Iraqi civilians captured in photos over and over again (87, 168, 221); the juxtaposition of the photo of Mahdi and Kadhem disarming an IED, sans suit or helmet or equipment, with the photo of an armored American checking out a suspicious battery after a robot has preceded him (98 – 99); likewise the photo on the next page of an American soldier searching for IEDs with an unsuited Iraqi boy acting as his guide (100); the sheer exhaustion on the faces of Marines (144,); brief opportunities to mourn their missing comrades symbolized by the missing body in the display of helmet, rifle, dog tags, and boots (148-149); the internal conflict over their mission symbolized by the message one soldier wrote inside his cap, “Fuck Iraq” (151).

The photos in Falluja are grizzly and bespeak the extreme mental and physical toll taken on the marines. They are cumulative in nature and the impact of the battle climaxes in the expressions of three soldiers staring into space, grappling with what they have seen (218-219).

Gilbertson is left with little hope for Iraq and partially blames the American invasion. “America invaded Iraq, and it stood aside as the country plunged into chaos. The occupation steadily inflamed the insurgency and turned Iraq into the number one destination for jihadists across the world. America armed militias on all sides, and then shrugged as civil war broke out, proclaiming it to be an Iraqi issue. The Americans lost the war, and in losing it, turned Iraq’s people against each other with greater fury than what had been exacted on them for the last four years. They broke Iraq apart, and its people are devouring the pieces – and themselves” (241). The cover photo speaks volumes. It is the shot of an armed soldier, descending down a flight of stairs with no beginning or end in sight (162).