**The Heat of it All**

Shane Griffin

Iowa, August, summer humidity. Weathermen call it

*Weather you can wear*. My t-shirt sticks to my chest.

Sweat rolls down my spine like rain on window glass,

sending a strange chill through my body. High noon.

The hazy sun bathes the corn I walk through,

with its heat, its energy. The dark green leaves of corn

absorb the light and reach high for it, reach out across

the rows and touch my arms and legs. We are all made

of it. The energy of all things. We keep our own suns

burning inside.

What is it that haunts me? I hear a voice, I turn,

but nobody is there. But yet my ears still ring,

like a child’s high-pitched distant scream.

In August, Ramadi was hot too. *It’s a dry heat*,

they said. Watch out for taxis too, anything

suspicious. Taxis are everywhere.

Thousands of them blend in

like stars in the night. Nissans, Saabs

painted orange and white.

Look into the faces of the drivers,

look for their sweat, anxiety in their eyes.

Trust your instincts. They may be packing

a bomb—hundreds of pounds of plastique—

waiting for the right time to press the trigger.

They keep their suns in the backseat.

My platoon rebuilt a school in Al Habbinayah.

We patched bullet holes with tan clay plaster.

We replaced shattered windows with frag-

proof glass. We gave the kids school supplies

and backpacks they stuffed full. They walked

to school like little sherpas, hunched over

from the weight of it all. Their futures waiting

for them. They waved when they passed

us, they waved so hard we set our rifles down

in the sand and hugged them when they kissed

us on our cheeks. I made a friend. Her name was

Hibba. She was six years old. *You’re as beautiful*

*as the sun,* I told her. She held my hand and we walked

to the new school together in full light.

Unarmed, unafraid, like we were home.

I thought the taxi driver kept the sun. Before he let it loose,

I looked into his eyes when he passed me,

by the mosque, with blue teardrop minarets

under the hot sun, in the middle of Ramadi,

by the sacred mosque, in the middle of a traffic circle.

Before he disappeared into his own light,

I thought I saw the face of Jesus, or was it Mohammed

driving that taxi? But it was his heat that burned us.

My ears bled. I heard distant screams through bleeding, broken

eardrums. Dizzy from the energy that hit me in the chest,

in the head. I couldn’t stand. The concrete burned through

my clothes and sticky cold sweat. The sun hazy

from the smoke of the burning taxi, now nothing

more than a crater. The violence of it all from the heat

he packed in the back seat.

I heard from the SEALs that all the school kids died

when a JDAM missed its target. Smart munitions

make mistakes sometimes, they told us. It’s not their

fault. They have no eyes because they cannot cry.

Was Hibba outside at recess when it hit? Did she hear

the whistle as it fell? Did she look up into the sun, blinded

by its light so she could not see the moment when it reached

down and touched the earth?

Years later, I am reminded of her in my daughters’

pain. My hands shake when I clean their little cuts.

I hear them scream when I run water over burns.

They cry when they are sick with fever. I shiver

when I wring out and fold damp washcloths to place

on their heads. I have to turn my head so my good ear

can hear them talk and so my eyes can read their lips.

I have to do this because of all of the suns we use against each other.

We pack our own suns, bring our own heat,

and unleash all of it onto the world.