

Music Both Sacred and Profane

*I am bound to walk among the wounded and the slain
And when the storm comes crashing on the plain
I will dance before the lightning to music sacred and profane
—Stephen Schwartz*

Dissonant shadows and sunbeams sparring,
chiaroscuro dancing in the sky.
Staccato thunder cracks, my hair rising

to brush against the clouds. The wind screams, warm
no more. Alone against the tempest, dripping
tears and dreams, eyes narrowed, I face the storm.

A *forte* beat of phosphorescent rain
lashes down, a *vivace* piece performed
across my tense back and rolling wicked plains.

Dark seas cascade, waves of watery wind
howl in a raucous timbre. Marked by Cain,
I roam the earth, angry, forever pinned.

In each drop, illumination imbued
reflects my sad face—stained by ancient sin—
and copies crystal lightning, split and skewed.

Roiling trees snap all chords, tossed by the air;
percussive bullets spit from onyx hued
skies. Will God still hear my tainted prayers?

I forsake fear and dance before the damning
dawn. Clouds churn and red light catches a rare
smile: I face the spray, *mancando*, laughing.

ELYSE SCHULER-CRUZ

This is What You Asked For

Gillam's ears still rang from the first RPG that took out the
Glead humvee in the convoy, and from the second RPG that
destroyed the rear vehicle. Sgt. Roper screamed for the grunts to
pile out and seek cover. He grabbed Gillam's collar and chucked
him out before the gate was even down. After scrambling
through the door of the shop in front of him, Gillam found him-
self alone. Not a single Iraqi was in the shop; maybe they knew.

Gillam peeked out of the doorway and saw some of the other
grunts taking cover in an alley, peeking into the window of an-
other shop and crouching behind chest-high walls. Rifles popped
in an irregular rhythm. Gillam heard a zip, pop and fizz near his
face followed by a spray of tiny stone bits. He ducked back into
the shop and his rifle's charging handle.

This is it, he thought. This is what you asked for.

He poked his right side out of the doorway and sighted in on
the men on the rooftop ahead of him. They wore no uniforms, no
flak, no Kevlar. He could count them on his fingers and still have
digits to spare. Three with AK-47s taking controlled shots at the
Marines. One had slung his rifle across his back so he could fire
an RPG-7. Gillam held his breath and squeezed his trigger. Three
pops, and the rounds seemed to miss their intended targets. One
of the men pointed his way and the other raised the RPG to his
shoulder.

Gillam ducked back into the shop and dove behind the
counter. He heard the RPG explode into the wall and doorway.
Chunks of stone rammed into the counter, sending shards of wood
flying. Bits of wood and rock pelted him. His flak and Kevlar hel-

met protected him though something grazed his cheek. It nicked his skin and droplets of blood crept out of the abrasion.

He crawled back to the doorway determined to make his first confirmed kill. It would be his souvenir he could show off to his buddies back at their tents. When he returned to Okinawa and then to Hawaii, he could regale the boots, those baby Marine fresh from the School of Infantry, with the story of how he had become a real Marine. They'd see his ribbon rack and know that he was somebody. He wouldn't be PFC Gillam the boot anymore. He envied the guys with the huge stacks of ribbons. Flashes of color they wore over their heart that meant they had been somewhere, done something.

As he neared the doorway, he saw a couple of Marines advance through the street to close in on the enemy. Moments later, one of the Marines in the shop across the street stumbled out of the doorway, looking down at his hands. He pulled the pin from a grenade, flipped the spoon off and threw wildly like a tired pitcher. He ducked back into the shop without bothering to see where his grenade landed. First, there was shouting, then there was the bang of the grenade, and finally a scream.

"Corpsman!"

Doc Ferdowski sprinted past the shop and the smoldering row of trucks. When Gillam arrived at the crumbling remains of the door and nearby wall, he looked out and saw Doc dragging someone towards him. He shifted to the window near the door and sighted in on the men on the rooftop again. He squeezed off a shot and watched as the man with the RPG, reloaded and ready, crumpled. The man next to him turned to his fallen comrade. Gilliam squeezed the trigger again and that man dropped like a ragdoll. The other two ducked down and out of sight. Doc dragged the wounded Marine through the door and laid him out on the floor.

"Grab his I-fak," he screamed to Gillam. Then to the wounded Marine, he said, "What's your name?"

"Glen McCoy."

"You gonna be okay, Glen McCoy. We'll fix you up. What day is it?"

Gillam emptied McCoy's I-fak. Bandages, QuikClot, burn ointment, water purification pills and a tourniquet scattered on the floor between him and McCoy. He recognized that name, the square jaw and the bright green eyes. McCoy was in his boot camp platoon. He was an Eagle Scout and a contract PFC. He marched off the parade deck at graduation as the honor graduate with a meritorious promotion to lance corporal. They went to

SOI together. Some Sundays they played basketball either together or opposing, depending on how the teams worked out. He looked at McCoy in his bloody cammies with shrapnel lodged into his flak. McCoy wasn't screaming in pain but staring at the ceiling. Gillam took a moment to admire his toughness. Then he saw the mess of blood, fabric and sinew that had become McCoy's right forearm.

"July...July..." McCoy trailed off each time he began.

"Shit," Doc said. "Elevate his feet."

Gillam took McCoy's Kevlar and put it under his feet. Doc pulled out a pair of scissors and cut the sleeve of McCoy's blouse. He grabbed the tourniquet and began cutting off circulation a couple of inches above the wound. McCoy reached over to touch his wounded arm, but Doc pushed his hand away. The thought of toughness faded from Gillam's mind as he loosened McCoy's flak and clothes. He dipped a finger in McCoy's blood and wrote a "T," for tourniquet, on his friend's forehead. Next to it, he wrote the time and date.

"I need security," Doc said to Gillam.

Gillam readied his rifle and took up security by the window. He watched the rooftops and streets as he listened to Doc Ferdowski tell McCoy that everything was going to be okay. Gillam repeated this mantra to himself. It's going to be okay. With his rifle shouldered, he looked out over the iron sights, resisting his gnawing urge to look back at the "T" on McCoy's forehead.

It's going to be okay.

There had been a coppery taste in Gillam's mouth, but that was beginning to fade. In its place, he could feel his cheek sting where the bits of rubble had nicked him. He raised his shoulder and wiped the blood away. His line of sight was clear, and outside, the firefight was dying down. The time between shots grew longer.

It's going to be okay.

Then, there was stillness. The Marines across the street ventured out from their cover, walking tall and invincible. One of them howled into the air. He shouted, "Combat Action Ribbon, baby!"

Gillam slumped down away from the window. Doc Ferdowski knelt over McCoy, holding the wounded Marine's hand. Gillam could see McCoy's eyes; they were still open, gazing around like he was trying to figure out what had happened. He was hanging on. At least there was that. Gillam ran the fire fight through his head, trying to reconstruct the fractions of moments. He searched for his mantra, but all he could think was, *This is what you asked for.*