

## **FALLUJA**

That unswerving trek inward after the air campaign  
convoy scarring sand into a road  
the city ahead, mirage of flames and liberated statues  
Allegheny, Pennsylvania 147 days behind him  
face glazed from desert wind and fear  
Hershey bar rations melting in a rucksack  
a buried memory rising to gird resolve beneath  
the mind's camouflage, that day behind the schoolyard  
coming upon two 9th graders hitting a smaller boy  
with a split branch, jaw against the pavement and already blood.  
He stepped forward to protect and assured himself  
this is what his father would do.

His regiment on the paved road into the city  
a radio dispatch of terrible numbers  
a decent commander's decision to minister  
children at what residents called the hospital,  
stone floor instead of beds for most, bags of fluid  
stacked on a tray, gauze streaked with unexplainable smears,  
a crowd of children upright or prone, eyes  
fixed on Americans entering, the soldier choosing  
one boy, since every mission opens with a first life,  
laying his rifle muzzle away from the boy,  
naked to the waist, hunger in the cheekbones,  
offering a Hershey bar misshapen in the heat  
that sharpens color in the boy's gaze when he sees it.

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The soldier unfolds the foil, then understands  
no, this young boy can do it himself  
and lays it in the bone of his hand  
that quickens and tears away the wrapper, he swallows  
everything down like today is the only day left  
and the soldier heartens seeing the eyes shift again  
until they roll white the other way, thin torso quivering now  
in the heat and without a cough falls forward on the bed sheet  
the lone doctor running over crying in Arabic  
while the soldier in English can say only chocolate  
and the doctor translates why, why you impossible  
heroes will never understand these children  
cannot survive a sudden waking of the blood.