

# ROUGHLY SPEAKING

by

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CHAPTER 1  
PSYCHATRIX

Vestibule

We abandoned the place we once knew as home and we journeyed for some duration to an ancient gulf, conveyed ourselves across that gulf, and at the opposite edge we found a desert. The desert unfolded like a topographical map of hunger and desire. In one direction we saw merciless crags, in another direction breathtaking drifts, and the horizon thrashed majestically under waves of heat and wind. The sun touched the earth, the sand became fire, and we gasped as one voice, "I have been here before."

The desert abounds with life. And so it abounds with death. Who sees? Who speaks? Lest we forget to ask. Who will discover whom, in the desert? Who will be hungry? Who will be hugged? Who will survive? We became *we* by no greater virtues than those established by the precedents and conventions of a phantasmic history that appeared ominously at the threshold of our birth, like the black-eyed republican knitting our fates with blood red needles, knitting, knitting, as implacably as wind and fire. By the time our bodies burst out in the world, the vengeance was already sown. In short, we never really knew what *we* meant. We still don't and don't want to. It shouldn't be a mystery and yet we cry the acid why because we must.

Viewing a vacant lot, on a winter's night, we find a boy huddled against the passenger door inside a white sedan with an old man's kindly eyes smiling after him in silent pursuit. Sallow light seeps through the snow-covered windows and falls across the old man's fist of glistening silver alongside his white sagging penis. We don't know how

to tell the story from here other than to say the boy survives. He is very much alive and shows his temper to the old man with a gaze that, for him, is entirely new. He's never cast or felt such force before. And suddenly the old man appears timid and crumbling as if his bones are disintegrating beneath his ashen skin. His smile flickers and fades from view.

The story ends here, more or less. But one detail emerges from this encounter that leans against the boy's memory in an unanticipated way. When he opened the door and climbed out of the car back into the night and the ice and the wind, the old man held out his fistful of silver again, and again it captured a shaft of sallow light. It was apparent in the old man's face, the meaning of this silver had changed, for him, but not for the boy, who was a survivor. A survivor—that's what he called himself. So this time when the silver was offered, he took it. There were still so many cold nights to come with covers and floorboards and muffled music floating up from *Papillon's* and now the candy he might afford. That's what a bit of silver meant to him.

It was this silver (in fact, just a few dollars in quarters), that alerted mother to the incident. She discovered the coins and pressed him for an explanation. The boy relayed the story reluctantly and in the days that followed was pressed again, several more times, by various counselor types and authority figures, all of whom were certain that he'd be scarred for life if not for their sage guidance. And yet none of them ever grasped the significance of this incident for the boy. None of them knew one thing about what he'd truly survived and was surviving still.

Even now, we find this brief encounter hanging in the boy's head like a minor stalactite, dripping slowly, indiscernibly, yet constantly plunking bits and sensations in a

well of thoughts, echoing softly, wearing the faintest impressions into his consciousness, eroding the surfaces of his perception as the years pass, and then decades, until his view of the world becomes shaped, in part, by the shape of the aperture formed by that minor dripping stalactite, slightly elongated over time, but seldom noticed in the darkness. It's nothing—the boy shakes furiously—completely beside the point! Don't they see? Don't they know by now? This was never intended to be a story of how bad things get. We already know they get much worse. But after all, the nervous system is nervous.

Life and death abound, in vacant lots, in white sedans, in borderlands and gulfs, and most especially, in our eyes, in the desert, though I often find it difficult to distinguish one from another. I sat down in a classroom in a circle full of strangers, each one of us sharing our stories in turn, and somebody said to me, "Don't be too sure." A number of others were nodding. It was a minor dispute. I certainly know the difference between *dispute* and *altercation*—believe me. Never mind what I've said before. This was a minor dispute. And I replied to all of them, "There is no such thing as healing. No home. No anchorage. No point on the map." I'll admit, in the moment, I wanted to belt someone in the mouth. So I suppose it's true, it was almost something more than a dispute, a quarrel maybe, but certainly not an altercation.

I took their advice, however, and I did a bit of writing. They said, "Let the words fall free, let them land on the page however they may, and you just watch what happens when you try to move them around once they've settled themselves into an order. See how heavy the words become." Fine advice, fine metaphor, but nothing I should take too much to heart. And as for the heft of a word, in this digital age, I can place a million words in the palm of my hand and delete them again with equal indifference and less

caloric output than the breaths it would take to utter them. I can copy deserts, cut crags, paste drifts and dunes, however endless they may be, and my story will still unfold exactly as I determine. And death will whisper feebly in my ear: “The turmoil of the day freezes in a thousand absurd postures. The little cloud drifting before their glorious sun will darken the earth as long as I please.”

I accept the weight of material circumstances and understand I must abide their rules, to one extent or another. But then again, what is left of the desert now? What remains for me to press my hands against and feel pressing back? Where are the gun trucks and the convoys? Where’s the scorched sand? Where’s the shrapnel that flew out, cut flesh, and lodged itself in vital organs? Where are the hulks and the carcasses and the toppled towns? And the people I knew in the desert, and the people I didn’t know, where are they? Where are their faces and appendages? Where is the muscle and the fat and the bone? Where is the blood? Where is the boy? They’re all gone.

But I know where to find them.

## Shamil

I fell into conversation with a teacher of mine, talking about work, sharing some ideas I'd been circling around. "This is what I want to do," I said, but he waved me away as though the ideas themselves were of no consequence and he answered, "Yeah, yeah... but can you write?" And I knew right away, he being a man of Rhetoric, that this was a rhetorical question, a question that I was neither intended nor authorized to answer. I would not be permitted to determine the value of my own words. Judgment had already been passed and the conversation came to an end before I could even respond. This was the voice of reason.

So I sought a second opinion from Shamil, the voice against reason, and I told her about these ideas I'd been circling around. "This is what I want to do," I said, but she waved me away as though the ideas themselves were of no consequence and she responded, "Yes, but can you write?" And I knew right away, she being a shadow of the fissures, that this was a question of possibility. Not only was I not intended to answer, I was not able to answer. I could never determine the value of my words since they would never amount to any calculable sum. The conversation would never end, only break constraints and reveal new vistas. And that, I believe, is the essence of *Shamil*.

Shamil is a recent figure in my life as both body and calculation. Practically speaking we're strangers, but she makes impressions on me that are difficult to elude and her appearance is both mesmerizing and haunting. She has only one arm and her head is crowned with translucent burn scars that cascade unevenly down over her face. Her good arm, wiry and blue with tattoos from her knuckles to an unseen shoulder, hangs



from a threadbare t-shirt and her legs remain indiscernible beneath a pair of faded blue jeans comically baggy and bunched around the tops of two deeply creased suede boots.

I saw her for the first time in a VA waiting room after she flung a chair at the receptionist with her prosthetic arm. The mechanism, still hooked to the chair, detached from her body, sailed over the receptionist's head, and smashed into a window on the other side of the room. The prosthetic limb fell to the floor and lay among the shattered glass, bloodless and still. Before anyone could make sense of the moment or call the police, Shamil was gone. I grabbed her arm from the scattered shards and ran outside to find her. After a few minutes of frantic pursuit, I spotted her standing at the edge of the lot, lighting a cigarette.

As I drew close to her disfigured form, I was abruptly confronted by a current of uncertainty and the unsettling question: How do I present myself to this person? What are the possibilities? Shamil's body confounds language in ways that make it difficult to know which part of oneself to broadcast or to cling to. Her presence disturbs the order of things, displaces assumptions, disrupts contexts, and throws meaning into disarray enough so that suddenly a tree is no longer a tree, an arm not an arm. Home is no longer a point on the map. So how do I speak in the midst of all that?

Shamil stared at me intensely with a cigarette burning wincingly close to her scarred upper lip. Her marred visage alone was enough to make one shudder. I pointed at the cigarette and attempted a civic disposition.

"You know what they put in those things?" She didn't answer so I held up the prosthesis and whispered almost inaudibly, "Well anyway...you left your arm inside."

She answered flatly, "That's not my arm. I left *my* arm in the desert."

I felt foolish when she put it that way.

Shamil says the only thing she really misses about her arm is the tattoo she had on it of a Jackson Pollack lithograph—no name, just a number, a copy of a copy—so she lets Sinjin’s son paint another rendition onto her prosthesis, another copy of the copy. I have to admit the boy is talented. He’ll be a fine artist someday. But Shamil never comments one way or the other. She never expresses approval or dissatisfaction. Is this copy as good as the last? Is it identical? You can’t make out an opinion from her face since, really, she has no face to make out. She just straps the limb back onto her body and stares at the boy’s accomplishment.

“Do you ever miss your hand?” I ask her. The thing about Shamil is that she doesn’t mind my questions, so I’m always asking her about one thing or another. I say to her, “I think I’d miss my hand because without it I couldn’t write.” Shamil doesn’t answer. She seldom does. So I tend to answer for her. Maybe that’s why she doesn’t mind my questions.

But now I’m more concerned with the previous question...*Can I write?* I have both my hands after all, so there really shouldn’t be any reason why I can’t. I’ve written some stories in my time, a few poems here and there, a memoir, a number of essays, and two acts of a play. I even tried my hand at a novel. I’ve shown them all to Shamil and she looks them over in her usual expressionless way and then hands them back to me.

“Well?” I ask her, but she never responds and sometimes, I’ll admit, it gets me in a rage. Why ask the fucking question (*Can I write?*) if you’re not willing to answer? I’m increasingly unsettled and the more I hear the question in my head, the more I scrawl feverishly in my notebook. It’s approaching paranoia or some kind of mania. You’re

damned right, I can write. Watch this! And I slam down some eloquent shit on the page. I think I might have even said it out loud, just that way, *eloquent shit* before I handed it over to Shamil. I think I must have because this time when she looked it over, she nodded and said, “This is some eloquent shit.”

*Shamil* is not her given name, not *her* name at all, but the name of a man from the desert, who she said we should call out to if ever we wanted to summon her. It wasn't a stolen identity, or what the man called an *appropriation*, but maybe a transformation, or a molding of her body into an echo. A fleeting monument, you might call it, hailing the forgotten figures of the desert.

“Don't call *me* Shamil,” she told us, “Call him. And if he doesn't answer...”

Then she'd fade away into her customary silence.

“What?” we'd stammer back. “What if he doesn't answer? What then?”

The trouble with Shamil was that she had no hair, and no arm, and no past, and she moved amidst a struggle that we couldn't quite fathom, always in the throes of some raging contingency with no apparent beginning or end. And despite my curiosity, and my nagging desire to press a hand upon her flesh and feel it press back, she left me with only a hunch, as though the hunch could be a sufficient end in itself. Well, maybe she was right. Maybe she was more valuable to me as an enigma than as an answer to any or all of the questions that she'd stirred up inside me. All the same, I should have understood her desire to vanish from the world from the moment she abandoned her name. It was but the first clasp undone in a ghastly striptease that culminated on the dunes of a small island called *Caye Alma*.

What happened to her real name?

I don't know.

She'd only give us partial stories and cryptic answers like, "I lost it in the desert."

Well, what the hell was that supposed to mean? I couldn't tell you. But to see her disfigured form...her jellied scalp, her flapping sleeve, her blackened eyes...you'd believe. You'd instantly believe her story, however farfetched. She told us that her eyes hadn't always been black, that there'd been a time, back in the day, when they were green or blue or hazel gray, I don't know, she didn't say. She wasn't one to explain herself—to anyone—she'd just leave us to steal glances at her from afar and wonder.

But Oscar, who was with us too, had already stopped looking. He said he wasn't playing her game anymore and he didn't give a damn what color her eyes used to be or how they turned black and frankly he wasn't even convinced that they were black at all, or, if they were black, he wasn't convinced that they'd changed. Either way, he wasn't convinced of something.

"And you," he turned to me, "What the fuck is going on with you?" He stared me up and down, then let his eyes rest upon my sunken face with scorn. Now this was a scorn, I want to tell you, that was meant to conceal a certain kind of fear, a fear that one feels in the presence of plague or some sort of contagion so powerful it can leap from body to body along even the slightest wisps of empathy.

"Necrosis, Oscar—that's what it's called. My flesh is falling from the bone." I narrate myself in a sickly tone just to agitate his terror all the more. "I'm being eaten alive Oscar. Pretty soon there'll be nothing left of me, nothing at all, not even a cadaver to bury or to burn." Oscar shrugs me off, of course, tells me I'm ranting, but that shrug

masks a shiver, like the scorn masks his fear, and to tell you the truth, I'm glad that it does.

On the other hand, we had Vannareth or *Big Van* as we used to call him. Before our journey to Caye Alma, he super glued a plastic Mary to my dashboard and stuffed a Bible in the glove box. I don't remember the man ever being so pious, but then again, I don't remember much about him at all, except all the ways we revered him. He was built to be a legend, lumbering among the multitudes with sprawling shoulders and long lean arms that stretched from the diamond deserts to the shining seas. He could sleep through any calamity, however raucous or horrific, and then wake up with a glazed indifference and a confounding smile that was both infuriating, and yet, curiously reassuring. There was something hidden beneath his perpetual insouciance that inspired a vague sense of hope. And for that he was our hero.

Now while Van had lost nothing in stature since our days in the desert he was quite evidently withering in spirit. His vast embrace slipped faintly from our brotherhood and his response to nearly every utterance, from a passing remark to a seething allegation, had descended to a slow and weary, "Yeah man." The words floated from his mouth like a chant, intoned more for the sake of the sound than for their meaning, and I took them increasingly as his notion of *amen...over and over...amen*.

Although the conversation about Shamil's lost name took place later on—I mean, it wasn't the first thing we talked about when we met—for me, it's the first thing that comes to mind whenever I think about her. I get lost in the question. What can it mean to have no name at all? She told us she preferred to remain nameless and that she'd just as soon never be called to again. Still, sometimes I yell out as long and as loud as I can,

“*Shamil!!*” until my lungs give out. And then I wait, gasping for air, looking out into the heat waves rippling across the horizon, hoping that maybe I’ll catch a glimpse of her walking, maybe walking towards me. But I know I’ll never see her again. She was always walking at a pace I couldn’t keep, in a direction I couldn’t follow, to a place I couldn’t go. And yet I still call out to her.

Can Shamil tell her own story if she has no name? What is the basis of a story other than experience? And what, if not one’s name, holds those experiences together? Jacobo Timerman, for instance, wrote a memoir about the dirty days of Argentina and the disappearance of oneself in the realm of torture and the collapsing of one’s universe into moments of excruciating pain. The book is called, *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*. But the title only holds true while the story remains untellable. It’s when he’s finally released and renamed that the memoir can then be written and published and that title can be applied as retrospectively symbolic of that which *might* have been, but ultimately was not. In the cell, he will always have no name and therefore no narrative, but in the narrative, he must have a name and a history that makes that narrative possible. To tell the story now, he must have always *had* a name, even when he was nameless in a numberless cell.

So, with this in mind, I’ve taken it upon myself to tell this story and, along the way, call to the Imam of the desert named Shamil whenever I mean to refer to that scarred tattooed body in the back of my truck with the painted prosthesis. We’re driving to a small island off the coast of Belize called Caye Alma. We have a map that’s marked with a red ink circle, but there’s nothing inside the circle, just empty blue sea. We have a letter that’s unsigned with a story of blessed water that can heal invisible wounds like

*The Well at the World's End* and even though we know it's just a story, we're driving on all the same, driving for the sheer possibility that the story presents.

On our journey southward through Mexico I periodically glance up into the rearview mirror. Shamil is curled up in the cargo area like a monk looking out the back window at the ground we've already covered. And Sinjin's boy is quietly curled up beside her still clinging to her prosthetic arm and staring up at her because he won't speak to or touch anyone else. Her face looks like a half melted candle has oozed across her eyes and every now and again I notice her looking up at me. I'll admit that over time this has become a comforting experience. But it wasn't always. Where Shamil's unpleasant appearance once made me gawk or quiver, I have begun to find quietude. It's a feeling that has ultimately melted her melted skin from view and her face has become, in its own way, unnamable.

Beside me in the truck is Big Van slouched back and clutching a Bible that he never reads and staring at plastic Mary to whom he never prays. And huddled into the reflection is Oscar, too, who remains half-asleep with sunglasses on, stirring periodically along the way to cast aspersions at the passing scenery and the people in it. And amidst all these faces in the mirror, is my own. And I think of this question, over and over...*Can I, or can I not, write?* Shamil turns to listen and Sinjin's boy turns, too, running his fingers silently along the copied lithograph on her fake arm. And it's in that moment that something occurs to me.

It's a memory from the desert...a place...a small abandoned town that we found in the Sugar Bowl. It had no name (as far as we knew), no faces, no inhabitants at all, so we assigned it a number, a target list number. *Juliet Papa One Nine Five Zero*. We called it a

ghost town and crept through the streets with trembling trigger-fingers anticipating the worst kinds of encounter. After six days of silence our vigilance sunk into lethargy and the old man wearing silver oak leaves on his collars stood in the courtyard holding court with one boot resting imperiously upon a pile of rusted rifles that we'd confiscated from the locals (who we could not find) and he wore an imperious smile as if to say, *I told you these people were bad.*

On the seventh day, a military-aged male appeared mysteriously in the town with his son, a child, roughly seven years old. The man and his son were holding hands and walking quietly down the street until they came, face to face, with a foot patrol that was shaken from its stupor and so rattled that they nearly emptied their magazines without thinking. But humanity must have gripped them abruptly because instead of empty magazines, the man was given an empty sandbag to place over his head, a shroud to mask his face. We claimed that these shrouds were used to disorient prisoners, but looking back now, I believe that the larger portion of disorientation was ours when their faces fell from view.

He and his boy were flex-cuffed and escorted to the local police station that we'd commandeered and we put the man with the masked face and his flex-cuffed son into a cell and slammed the iron gate closed. While I'm recounting this moment, Big Van nods his head with sleepy eyes and speaks languidly as we drift southward toward Caye Alma. He too remembers *Juliet Papa One Nine Five Zero*. He seems to be tumbling downward into the moment as he murmurs his own account of these events. His voice is low and hollow:



The guard, who resembled the shrouded prisoner more than any of us, sat listlessly in the shade of the doorway, utterly detached from his post, staring down into the pages of a strange book, whispering its words as if narrating a dream or a distant memory. "He never tires of the journey, he who is the darkest one, the darkest one of them all." He leaned away from the iron bar gate and looked away from us.

And inside the cell, from beneath the burlap sack, the father's muffled voice could be heard weeping, "Babylon is fallen, is fallen, that great city."

And the radio operator who sat close by with a radio propped between his legs and a long antenna shooting over his shoulder, raised his eyes upward ever so often and pleaded, "How long?.....How long?"

And the son inside the cell, un-shrouded, hands bound behind his back, sat beside his father staring at the iron bar gate, staring into our faces, never looking away, and speaking quietly, "Until the cities be wasted without inhabitant, and the houses without a man, and the land be utterly desolate."

And from the crackling radio propped between the radio operator's legs a voice could be heard, breaking apart, barely audible, coming in low and then high, clear and then raspy, and then gone again. "Lay hold on him, then put a chain on him, then cast him into the burning fire."

And then the rotund chaplain with ghostly white skin and wire framed glasses would approach on his rounds while intoning solemnly to everyone he passed, "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori."

And someone else who we didn't recognize sloped up beside us and peered into the cell and shook his head gloomily toward the concrete floor and said, "You do not honor the orphan."

And then the guard would drone on again, "He never tires of the journey, he who is the darkest one, the darkest one of them all."

And the others would follow in turn.

The father. "Babylon is fallen, is fallen, that great city."

The radio operator. "How long?.....How long?"

The son. "Until the cities be wasted without inhabitant, and the houses without a man, and the land be utterly desolate."

The radio. "Lay hold on him, then put a chain on him, then cast him into the burning fire."

The holy ghost. "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori."

The unknown soldier. "You do not honor the orphan."

All at once Big Van stopped speaking and all I could think to do was nod and mutter, "Shamil."

The Imam, as he was known in a time before this, was a prisoner without a name in a cell without a number in a site in the desert that they called *black*, which meant, I presume, that it could not *be* in the story—not in yours, or mine, or Shamil's. The tattooed shadow in the back of my truck was not yet scarred at the time, not yet one-armed.

"Classified," she said blankly, and she'd say little more about it.

"What do you care about their classifications?" I wondered aloud.

The Imam was an adversary. Shamil was always clear about that. There were brutal inflictions delivered upon his body and there was a pen and a pad of paper lying on the floor beside him. And with the inflictions there was always a promise that there'd be no further inflictions if only he'd pick up that pen and write something down.

Shamil heard a voice through the walls shouting at the Imam, "*Can you write?!*" And then came the sound of another infliction. The Imam did not speak and Shamil (who was not yet Shamil) rested her head against the wall outside the numberless cell and thought about that question. *Can you write?*

In one of those rare occasions, in which Shamil would speak, she commented briefly about that site in the desert that they called *black*. She spoke without sentiment. "*Black* means, in essence, a site where nothing is written down, not even the existence of the site itself." I understand this place as something like a black hole in the consciousness that draws everything inward with great force, creating its own void, growing larger, consuming more and more, until every detail, even light, even ideas are crushed into silence. What is the function of a pen and a pad of paper in a site called *black*? Shamil heard the voice on the other side of the wall shouting again, "*Can you write?!*"

And I think of that teacher asking the same question. This is a question that the Imam is neither intended nor authorized to answer as if the pen they'd given him had no ink. So, of course, the answer is no, no he cannot write. No, I cannot write. In a site where brutal inflictions are delivered and rhetorical questions are thrown down like gauntlets, the inkless pen and pad of paper are never implements of communication. They are the symbols of silence.

That is why we're on the road to Caye Alma. Oscar believes in the map. Van believes in the *Well at the World's End*. Shamil believes in something else altogether, the ineffable perhaps, or something unnamable. And the boy, meanwhile, has the bellicose blood of Sinjin, who is truly the darkest one of us all. I don't know what he believes, here and now, as he clings onto Shamil's prosthetic arm, or what he'll believe later, in the distant future, when the only thing left of Shamil is that pink plastic prosthesis and the copied lithograph.

So now I want to tell you the story of Shamil. I want to hear you inside her tattooed scarred skin, inside her hairless head, inside her one-armed body. I want to hear you calling from that site in the desert that they call *black*. I want you to reach into that blackness, through the underground walls into the cell with no number or name where one finds brutal inflictions and inkless pens and empty pads of paper. I want you to walk with the Imam and call to Shamil and burn up in fire. I want you to collide with all that and then listen to what comes next.

One night, the Imam and the tattooed one, through mutual assistance, escaped the black site and together they ran away across the open desert, silently, until they reached a point where they must part ways. They shook hands and clasped each other's elbows but neither one smiled. Our shadow in military fatigues looked into the Imam's black eyes and spoke to him for the first time. She asked his name and the Imam replied defiantly, "Shamil." His voice was like a sandstorm. Then without another word, he turned around and walked away. She stared after him as he slowly disappeared into the rising wind and rippling waves of heat. She stared until he vanished entirely.

At last she cried out, "*Shamil!!*" until her lungs gave out. But he was gone.

In the following days, she walked and walked and the desert sun beat down upon her body as she took her final steps and then collapsed. She wasn't conscious when an American convoy came past and found her lying in the sand. She didn't feel them pull her body up onto a stretcher and load her into a truck. Then there was a moment that she does remember. She opened her eyes vaguely and they asked what her name was and where she'd come from because, of course, in the black site there were no nametapes on uniforms, no identification tags worn, no record of the place or its inhabitants, no sign whatsoever of detainers or detainees. The place does not exist.

The Americans huddled around her torpid tattooed body and shook her shoulders. She looked up into their hazy white faces, they appeared expressionless to her, and she choked several times and whispered with faint desperation, "Shamil!" The hazy Americans cut away the nameless fatigues from her ink-covered body and administered an I.V. in that fleshy arm with the Jackson Pollock tattoo. She might have been okay had they made it to the hospital without delay, but there was a string of artillery shells buried in the sand beside the road a few miles ahead—a daisy chain, they called it—and it blew their truck sideways right off the pavement, and it blew some of the pavement off, too. Then the mangled truck caught on fire with Shamil still inside. Her arm with the Jackson Pollack tattoo was partially severed at the elbow and dangling down. She managed to drag herself from the burning truck, smother the flames on her face with handfuls of scorched sand and slowly crawl to safety.

There was another soldier lying nearby, already dead. He was thrown from the vehicle by the blast, leastways his torso was. Shamil managed to work the blouse loose from his legless body. She needed it to tie off her bleeding arm, which she managed to do

with her one good hand and her teeth. With the tourniquet secured, she rested her head on the ground, and from a combination of dehydration, a loss of blood, and probably shock as well, she soon passed out. She didn't see the helicopters arrive. She didn't know that she was the sole survivor. And the medical team that deployed from the helicopters didn't know any of these soldiers, or their faces, or their names.

They saw Shamil's faintly heaving chest, her burned head, and her severed arm with the Jackson Pollack tattoo, they looked at the nametape on the tourniquet blouse, and because her own blouse had been cut away earlier, they assumed that the blouse on her arm, and the name on the blouse, were both hers. There was nobody else alive to say otherwise. Added to which, her wounds were serious enough that she wasn't brought back to base where someone might have noticed the mix up and pointed it out.

Instead, she was transported directly to the combat support hospital, and then on to Landstuhl, and finally back to Bethesda. Nobody along the way knew her personally or was aware that they'd assigned her the wrong name. There was no reason to suspect confusion since she didn't appear on the convoy's manifest. Moreover, nobody at the base suspected anything, either, since they weren't aware that the convoy had picked someone up along the way. For all intents and purposes, Shamil was a ghost.

Meanwhile, she remained unconscious until the flight home. When she woke up, she was heavily sedated and so only partially comprehended the occasional references to her as *Jackson*. Jackson? The name swum woozily in her head. *Why do they keep calling me Jackson?* She glanced wearily down past her elbow to the place where her tattooed arm used to be. It was gone. And even as she regained her lucidity over the following hours and realized what had happened, she wasn't quite sure how to correct the mistake. The

first difficulty was that, as a figure of the black site, she had no verifiable existence in this theater, no performance of duties that she could ever mention, no legitimate claim to an identity at all.

The second problem was that she'd escaped that illegal (or extralegal) site illegally and, furthermore, freed the illegally detained Imam in the process. Officially, she was now an enemy of the State—a terrorist or a traitor, or maybe both. She knew all this, of course, and she felt content in the knowledge that she'd sacrificed her name so that the Imam might have his name back and tell the story of being a prisoner without a name, in a cell without a number, in a site in the desert that they called *black*. This was a story that otherwise could never be told.

At the hospital in Maryland, Shamil was reassured by doctors that her family had been contacted and that they'd soon be arriving. This was, in fact, the family of the dead man named Jackson. The doctors were puzzled when the family kept referring to their “son.” At any rate, the hospital had fitted her with a pink plastic prosthesis and the burns on her head and face had already begun to heal. So Shamil decided to abandon the hospital that was functionally no different than the site in the desert that they called *black*. That is how Shamil became the tattooed ghost in the back of my truck curled up with a prosthetic arm, with a copy of a copy of Jackson Pollack's unnamed lithograph.

Before she rendered herself absent without leave from the hospital, she wrote a brief note and left it on the bed: JACKSON IS DEAD. And she signed it *Shamil*. It was the first time she bound herself to that name. Shamil smiles from time to time at the confusion that her message must have provoked. And it doesn't seem to sadden her at all to think of the family of Jackson who never learned the truth about their boy. I steal a

glimpse of her now and again and wonder about this indifference. I want to ask her, *Don't you care?* But I don't dare. This is the one question I'm reluctant to ever ask, even if she won't answer. I suppose I'm afraid that someday she might.