

Riley and his story.
Me and my outrage.
You and us.

This is not a book. This is an invitation, a container for unstable images, a model for further action. Here is the formula: Riley and his story. Me and my outrage. You and us.

Riley was a friend in college and later served as a nurse at Abu Ghraib prison. This is a container for Riley's digital pictures and fleeting traumatic memories. Images he could not fully secure or expel and entrusted to me.

Art can be a series of acts and challenges. Currently the artwork is an object in your hand — organized, mobile, tactile — a stable site to see information once elusive. The artist can mobilize information by provoking, listening, imagining, organizing and reorganizing. Right now, I am the artist. I want you to see what this war did to Riley.

Pay attention. This experience happens right in your lap. To make it happen, you must read compassionately, then actively. Then the experience happens wherever you take this container and whenever you respond to my invitation.

You and us, yes. Then you and another. This invitation is a model for veterans, families and friends to speak and share openly with each other. The artwork and artist are adaptable; you, the tactical reader, can use this object for your own device, or you can attend to another archive in need of careful attention. **This is not a book. It is an object of deployment.**



Overall I took around a thousand pictures. When I took them, I thought they were evidence. As I look at them now, they tell a different story. The role that photographs play changes every six months.



HAYMER



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My head is so full of memories.

Sometimes my photos – at least the remainder of them after two crashed hard-drives and over 1000 lost photos – serve as a structure to recollect or re-collect my memories.

Many events during my time in Iraq were too complex, too horrific, or beyond my understanding. There were simply too many things I witnessed there on a given day to process, so I stored them as photos to figure out later.

Pictures create a concrete reality. At least I know these things happened. They continue to serve that purpose.





Then, there are the photos I don't remember taking. Even today, there is so much — huge chunks — that I can't figure out if the events really happened or not.



— I always have this expectation that I can see things pretty clearly. Or, if I try hard enough I can understand things. But I've been trying for a long time now, and I can't piece some events back together.

—

It's like somebody asked you: do you remember what you did for Christmas last year? Well, probably not at first glance. But if you work at it, the holiday will come back and you can remember things. But I'm looking at these pictures, and I'm still not getting it. —





Photos provide the chain of events that lead your mind into a state where it is okay to kill somebody. If you don't remember the sequence of events that took you there, you can believe you were a monster.



I took these photos while driving from Falluja to Baghdad on a trip to collect medical supplies.

















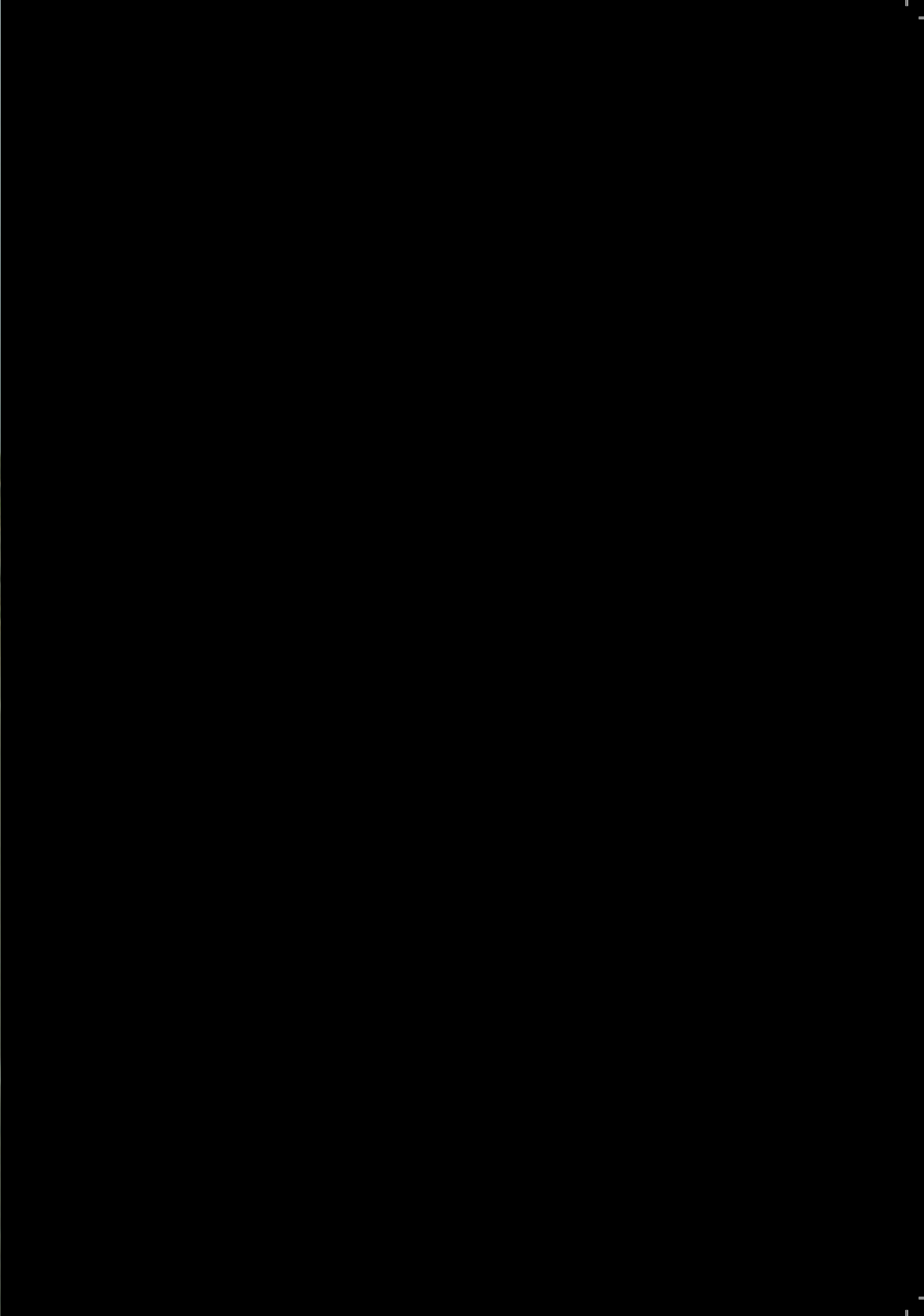




I remember — and often re-live in dreams —
the sensations I had at that very moment.

An apathy toward life mixed with a desire for
death. I believe these sensations and desires
were new to me... but did not feel unnatural.







In this picture, we're driving underneath an overpass, and above is a guy in a dump-truck with a machine gun. We had no idea who he was.

Do we shoot him? I don't know.

Everybody in my vehicle thought about it. We all pointed our guns at him and thought about shooting him. But, he wasn't moving. He just kept sitting in the dump truck and we kept driving. I had no idea who he was. Was he with us? I still don't know.

At the time, it was early in our deployment — I was still excited and I was nervous. All I could think to do was to snap a picture.

If we were infantry maybe we would have gone up the embankment and found out who he was. But we were hospital people; our job was to just get through alive and pick up our supplies.

It's really strange to train hospital people — care givers — to run a convoy. At first it's difficult to get over the mindset, "I'm here to help people and not hurt people." Once you get past that it's surprisingly easy to make the switch and learn the tactics.

If somebody gets too close to your Humvee you run him or her over, and if a car gets too close, you knock it into the ditch. All war depends on these tactics — people believing, "Kill the other guy or he'll kill me."

But, this was early in our deployment. I thought, "I'm not going to shoot him, because I don't know what he's doing. But I have this camera ..."

It was a stupid reaction, but I didn't want to kill the guy because I didn't know who he was, and no one else was shooting at him. So, I just recorded it.

I don't know.

I remember getting a smile on my face, and thinking, "Well, I'll just snap a picture. Record it."



The front windshield of a Humvee is a split windshield, so there's a left and right side. In these pictures, we're looking through the right — the passenger side. You'll notice in the top photo on the upper left hand corner it says, "police," but it's not reversed like it should be.

We cannibalized this windshield from a military police vehicle that got blown up outside the hospital, because we had trouble getting supplies and maintenance parts.

The first three to four months we were at Abu Ghraib, we didn't have, really, any support. There were just no supply chains to get equipment. We had — at that point — absolutely no armor on our vehicles; we didn't have doors, or roofs.

We'd just drive down the road with our legs hanging out the side.

I think we didn't quite get it yet. It hadn't sunk in that a big percentage of people were getting blown up on the roads.

We were in the phase of the deployment where we didn't draw the connection that it was our legs that would be blown off if there were a bomb.

POLICE







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In these pictures you can see that the sun is almost faded out. Those aren't clouds; that's dust in the air. It's not really a full-blown sand storm. But it's horrible stuff. It's not like sand on the beach; it's like talcum powder. Our helicopters would land on it and slam their bellies into it and the skids would be buried two, three feet into the ground. It was impossible to walk through, and it invaded every part of your body. Even if your face was totally covered – if you had a paper mask or scarf on, your nostrils were just black at the end of the day.

And the sand smells like death.

— It seems to me that memories work on a few senses that are happening at the same time. You don't remember things because you experience them. You remember them because of some smell, some scent, music — something associated with the event. Then your mind connects all things together and creates a reality. For some events, I don't have any of those stored in my memory somehow. I can think back and smell the dust, or something like that, but that was always there and just the same every day. —



The whole prison of Abu Ghraib is maybe two blocks by two blocks.





The sand smells like rotting flesh.



At Abu Ghraib everywhere we dug — and we dug four or five times — everywhere we dug we found human remains. I dug once to try and build a garden, we dug to build a shower, which ended up being the morgue. We dug to put in fences, to put cables down... Every time we dug, we found human remains. Every time. The prison is built on a mound of human remains. It's just disgusting.

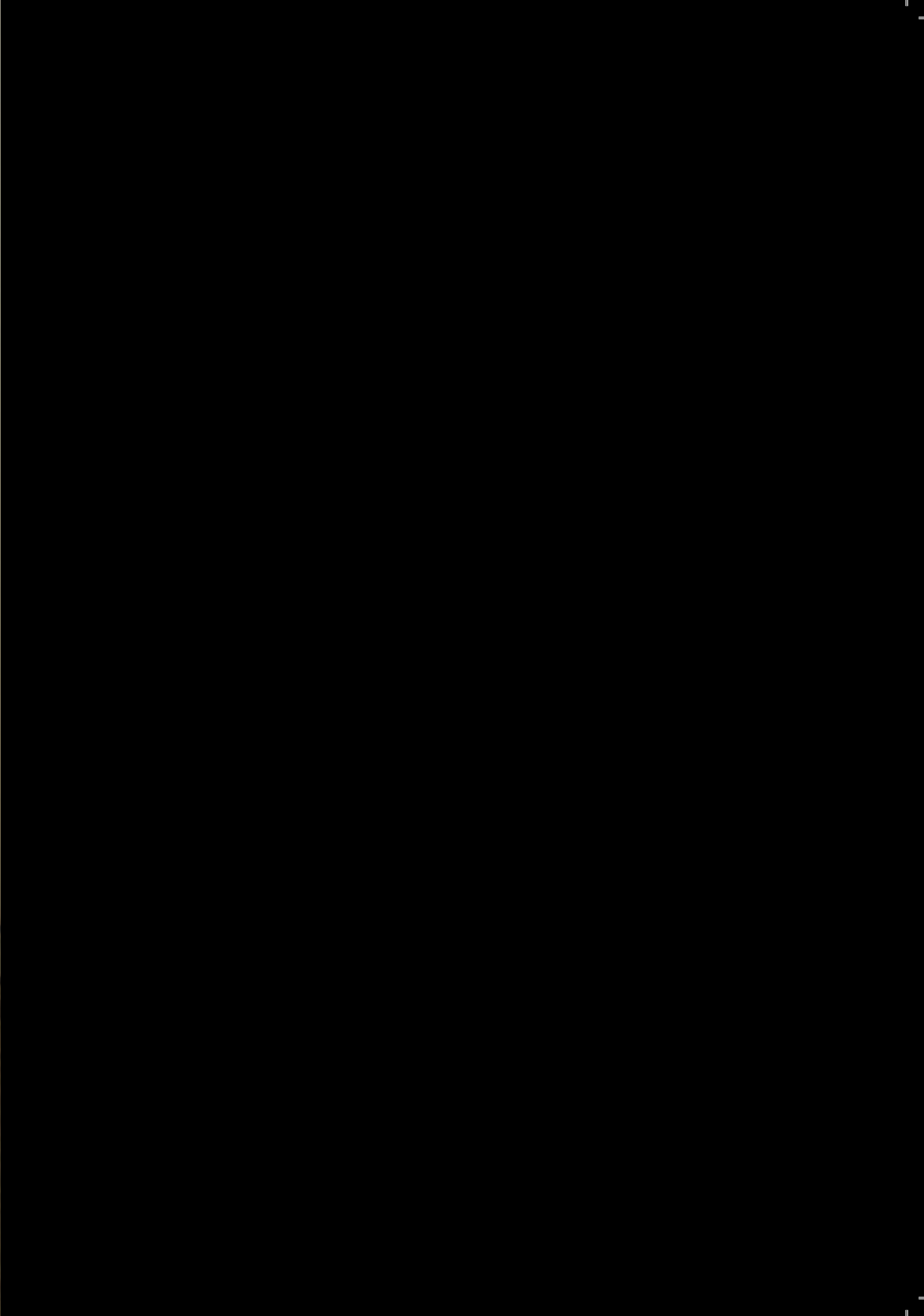
Plus, before they built the prison it was a landfill. The water table — this is a side note — the water table there is only two feet below the surface. You would expect in a desert that it there would be no water, but the water table is really just below the surface. So it's like wet rotting trash and corpses.

That's maybe why... the smell.



Twice we had MPs or people who just happened to be walking around and just happened to find bones and brought them in to identify. One was a humerus, the arm bone, and one was part of a jaw, a broken-in-half part of a jaw.







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The murals are actually in cellblocks where the prisoners lived. I've never researched it, but the story we got from the interpreters when we took over the prison was that the prisoners were forced to paint these murals inside their cellblocks.

Being from Minnesota and seeing pictures of caribou and a little baby deer, and some birds drinking out of the stream and a swan — I think that's beautiful. But, maybe it was some sort of cruel torture. These guys are in the desert; it's one hundred and thirty degrees and there are no deer that I'm aware of in central Iraq. There are goats and we saw a few cows. I'm sure there are deer up north... in the mountains.

But, maybe painting the murals in the cells were supposed to be calming to make people less violent.

We thought it was sort of ironic that the prisoners were painting these happy, playful scenes when there had been tens of thousands of people executed in this prison in the two years prior to us arriving at Abu Ghraib.



People were killed there. And there is death all over. Every time we dug we found human bones.

Within the Iraqi consciousness... when you say the word Abu Ghraib, everyone fears it. It's this horrible place where political prisoners go and don't come back. And so the fact that these prisoners were forced to paint ponds and lotus and little huts by the waterfall is eerie.





In this picture Lt. Carpenter is standing in the foreground. The painting is of Saddam wearing a leisure suit. In that same room there are around ten murals of Saddam. The prisoners were also, apparently, forced to paint those. There was "Saddam as the statesman" with his fancy suit on. And "Saddam as the warrior" with his military, class A, dress uniform. And there was another one of him with an AK47, and "Saddam on the beach."

The best that we could come up with was that the murals were a kind of manipulation game. So, these people were in prison, a lot of them for political reasons. There were rapists, murderers, criminals there, too. But, there were also a big number of political prisoners, and it was a way of punishing them.



"So, you're anti-Baath party? OK then, why don't you spend the next ten years painting pictures of Saddam." And they weren't just any pictures of Saddam; they were pictures of Saddam in pimp sunglasses, a white suit, and smokin' a cigar. Super propaganda.

The portraits are just a brilliant punishment. It must be the worst punishment in the world for somebody who is really a revolutionary and hates what is happening.









— I often feel sort of terrified that I can't tell the difference between what's real and what's not in the past. I see myself as some one who generally understands how things work — a pretty reasonable person. I imagine this is how somebody feels when they first have Alzheimer's, or psychosis and they know that something is not right, and they know they're losing their mind. And... It's just terrifying.
