

RED FIELDS: POEMS FROM IRAQ

by Jason Poudrier

(Mongrel Empire Press, 2012. 82 pages. \$14.00. ISBN 978-0-9851337-1-9)

A review by Julie Hensley

Writers such as Brian Turner and Kevin Powers have already lyrically illuminated the horror of the initial invasion of Iraq, the military conflict in which poet Jason Poudrier served in 2003 and about which he writes in his debut collection, *Red Fields*. Such texts have become so common that readers might wonder just how much literary terrain is left to explore surrounding that war; however, *Red Fields* finds new ground. For Poudrier, who was awarded the Purple Heart for his service, the healing of his shrapnel wound was only the initial challenge in full recovery. Like ten to thirty percent of veterans, he suffered post-traumatic stress disorder, and these poems, with honesty and concision, clarify how equally debilitating that portion of healing can be.

The collection is divided into three sections, “Post-Theater,” “While We Were Waiting,” and “Welcome to Iraq.” By anchoring these poems with “Post-Theater,” Poudrier ensures that readers move with him from the life he has recovered—Oklahoma’s “Bar-nestilled soil” and the 2011 Rush Springs Watermelon Festival—back to his deployment: the tedium of sand-blind convoys and T-rat dinners, as well as the shock of artillery-burnt corpses and blood-soaked gurneys (“Red Fields” 2). This structure creates a sudden funneling where the presumed safety of the present (farm chores, blackberry cobbler, cinema, kids playing soccer) collapses into the stress of combat, an implosion that is directly illustrated in many of the opening poems. Once the inevitability of this movement is established, Poudrier creates a holding pattern in “While We Were

Waiting,” stalling readers in a convoy and desert encampment where both the pranks and the ingenuity of the young men shimmer, oasis-like, as each narrative presses readers closer to direct engagement. And when, in “Welcome to Iraq,” that action finally arrives, readers feel even more paralyzed by the violence, as if they, like the speaker and sergeant in “Blackhawk Medevac,” are “strapped down / face down / forced to watch...yearning for / ...limbs and / flesh left / behind” (2-3, 14-17).

Most of the poems in *Red Fields* are free verse, employing simple diction enriched by military terminology for which a glossary is provided. Stark black-and-white images, photographs taken by fellow soldiers in the Ninety-Fourth Infantry, enhance the narrative arc. Occasionally Poudrier employs traditional forms with great success. For instance, in “Post-gratification Disorder,” the sonnet form casts a rich irony when the after-glow of a veteran’s romantic encounter is interrupted by a night terror. Poudrier pays homage to literature which has influenced him with “I Heard a Fly Buzz,” which beyond the title’s direct allusion, channels Emily Dickinson in the use of white space and dashes, as well as in the sharp wit inherent in the final turn. The collection’s concluding poem, a villanelle entitled “What Makes the Green Grass Grow,” is reminiscent of Wilfred Owen’s challenge to the romanticizing of war.

Poudrier’s sharp humor, at times dark but never crude, is best illustrated with the poem “Artillery Kill”:

I flipped a switch:  
The rocket launched  
And landed with an  
ACME cartoon cloud.

Then we drove,  
Tracks over sand,  
To where I shot  
And found bodies  
Unanimated.

Clever diction makes the final line carry such weight. The single word picks up the allusion to the Looney Tunes Roadrunner and instantly conveys the disconnection of contemporary weaponry, the youth and relative innocence of much of the infantry, and the overall “lunacy” of war. In addition, the movement inherent in these stanzas reinforces the collapsing effect that is central to the depiction of post-traumatic stress disorder throughout the collection.

Generally, the poems in *Red Fields* don’t rely on heavily layered imagery or figurative language, but Poudrier is capable of stunning symbolism, evidenced in poems such as “We Called Him Martha Stewart.” This poem lures readers into a gentle character sketch, fostering respect for a sergeant who plants flowers in artillery holes and fashions “dressers / from discarded MRE boxes” (7-8). The detailed description of the fly-catchers which that character designs—inverted water bottles baited with pieces of Euphrates River fish—initially functions as further evidence of his resourcefulness. Then, suddenly, the reader is inverted as well, just like those water bottles, and just like those soldiers they represent: “cut off / flipped upside down, / and placed back in” (17-18). As swiftly as that connection clicks, it shifts and intensifies again, casting the soldiers (and perhaps readers) as “the white desert flies and fleas / that could get in but couldn’t get out” (20-21). Such control is typically the mark of a more experienced poet, as is Poudrier’s rich empathy.

Through out-of-body ruminations ignited by roads named after soldiers killed in action in “Fort Sill’s New Housing Division,” or through the grief-induced fantasy of a war widow in the persona-epistle “Your Voice,” Poudrier always writes with deep understanding and identification. He is able to move beyond the confines of his own experience and consciousness into that of the Iraqi people and that of the family members soldiers leave behind. This expansion never feels contrived, and it demonstrates the intense fall-out inherent in post-traumatic stress disorder.

*Red Fields* is destined to become part of the growing canon of literature surrounding the United States’ wars in the Middle East

because it illuminates so clearly not just the immediate horror of war but also the slippery climb away from that trauma.