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SF PERUSALS

The Body of an American

Dan O'Brien

Inspired in part by the book
Where War Lives by Paul Watson

A Samuel French Acting Edition

SAMUEL FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830

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THE BODY OF AN AMERICAN was first produced at Portland Center Stage in Portland, Oregon on October 2, 2012. The performance was directed by Bill Rauch, with sets and costumes by Christopher Acebo, lighting by James F. Ingalls, projections by Eamonn Farrell, and sound by Casi Pacilio and Eamonn Farrell. The Production Stage Manager was Jeremy Eisen. The cast was as follows:

PAUL . . . . . William Salyers
DAN . . . . . Danny Wolohan

The Body of an American is winner of the inaugural Edward M. Kennedy Prize for Drama, the Horton Foote Prize, the PEN Center USA Award for Drama, and the L. Arnold Weissberger Award

The play was commissioned and developed with support from The Playwrights' Center's 2009-2010 McKnight Commission and Residency Program, Minneapolis, MN

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CHARACTERS

Two actors play all the roles here – ideally one actor in his 30s, who plays **DAN** most of the time, and an actor in his 50s to mostly play **PAUL**.

The older of these two actors has the first line of the play, and with each new character-heading the actors alternate.

PLACE & TIME

Scenes 1-7: various.

Scenes 8-10: the Arctic, the present.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

The stage directions within the script are suggestions of photographs, maps, moving images, etc., to be projected somewhere prominent onstage; as well as suggestions for occasional sound design. All of the photographs listed are by Paul Watson or the playwright or unknown, except where noted.

All of the photographs listed are by Paul Watson or the playwright or unknown, except where noted, and can be obtained by contacting the author's agent: Beth Blickers, Abrams Artists Agency, 275 Seventh Avenue, 26th Floor, New York, NY 10001.

I do want to hear this because
you're another person in this story.
Um, and each, each person in this story
ends up telling his own story of what
I call – the working title for the book
I'm writing is *Where War Lives*. From a quote
of Albert Camus when he was keeping
his notebooks pre-World War Two. And a friend
wrote to him saying, you know, I'm grappling
with this philosophical question, Where
does this vile thing, war, live? And Camus said,
he's in Algiers at the time and he says,

I look at the bright blue sky and I think
of the guilt that I feel from not being
in a position where I, I can die
with them, while at the same time wanting to
be as far away as I can from it.

—Paul Watson in conversation with Dr. Joseph LeDoux, January 2006

1: Fresh Air

PAUL. My name's Paul Watson.

PAUL. I'm Paul Watson.

TERRY GROSS. This is Fresh Air,

TERRY GROSS. I'm Terry Gross. Remember that famous 1993 photo?

PAUL. I was a reporter who happened to—

DAN. Dear Mr. Watson. I don't usually email strangers like this.

TERRY GROSS. This is Fresh Air.

DAN. I was leaving Princeton.

PAUL. New Jersey?

DAN. Where I had this fellowship.

PAUL. You had a what?

DAN. A residency—

PAUL. Which means you do what?

DAN. Well I was supposed to write a play.

PAUL. A play.

DAN. Yes.

PAUL. About what?

DAN. Ghosts.

PAUL. Ghosts?

DAN. Yeah. Ghosts.

PAUL. What kind of ghosts?

DAN. Historical, ghosts.

PAUL. And they pay you
for this?
DAN. Sort of. Definitely. I'm really
grateful to them—
PAUL. Is it scary?
DAN. My play?
I don't know. I hope so. To me it was.
TERRY GROSS. This is Fresh Air,
TERRY GROSS. I'm Terry Gross. Let's start
with a description of that now famous
Pulitzer prize-winning photo:
PAUL. I was
a reporter who happened to carry
a camera, a 35 mm
Nikon I bought because my editors
wouldn't buy me one.
PAUL. We were on the roof
of the Sahafi, where the journalists
were staying,
PAUL. *if* they were staying.
PAUL. You could count
on one hand who was still there.
PAUL. I'd have to
count on one hand because my other hand
PAUL. isn't really a hand at all.
PAUL. I was
born this way.
PAUL. A bunch of us were drinking
beer.
PAUL. Did you see that light?
REPORTER. What light?
PAUL. Behind
that chopper there. It just went down behind
that hill.

DAN. Chaos ensues. *[Image: white light.]*

PAUL. A 16-hour
battle raged through the night between US
Army rangers, special ops, Delta Force
and Somali militias. It started
as an arrest operation trying
to abduct commanders in Mohamed
Aideed's militia. They were trying to
track down Aideed and arrest him for
allegedly organizing attacks
on UN peacekeepers.

PAUL. When I woke up
on the hotel floor, still dressed, hung over,

PAUL. 18 American soldiers had been killed
and 75 wounded.

PAUL. Clouds of smoke
billowing up from burning tire barricades,
dead bodies in the street.

PAUL. American troops
were trying to get the rest of their force
back alive, and in so doing they'd killed
more than 600 Somalis so far,

PAUL. including women and children, huddled
in the darkness as bullets or shrapnel
pierced the tin walls of their shacks.

PAUL. Gutale's
my translator. He hurries through the gate:

GUTALE. They are shooting everything that moves now,
even donkeys!

PAUL. He gets 30 dollars
a day.

PAUL. My driver and bodyguard get
a hundred.

PAUL. That's always been the hardest
part of my job: convincing good people
who get none of a byline's ego boost
to risk their lives because I've decided
a story's worth dying for.

GUTALE. They're shooting
people on sight! Even people with no
weapons!

PAUL. Mogadishu was beautiful
once, white-painted Italianate villas
in the capitol of the most stable
state in Africa.

PAUL. Now you see women
grocery shopping with militias firing
machine guns up and down the avenue,

PAUL. children playing on the front lines, running
water and bullets beside their mothers
to keep the gunmen supplied.

GUTALE. They shot down
a Black Hawk! They are taking a soldier
with them from street to street, perhaps alive,
perhaps dead!

PAUL. They threw me in the back seat
of the car,

PAUL. a Toyota Cressida
that nobody outside of the safe zone
would recognize,

PAUL. and made me hide my face
between Gutale and my body guard
Mohamed.

PAUL. With another Mohamed
driving, and a gunman in front cradling
an AK-47,

PAUL. we drove through
the gates and crawled from street to street. Passing
the corpse-collectors, men carrying bodies
by their hands and feet, glaring at us through
the filthy windshield.

GUTALE. Has anyone seen
a captured American soldier?

PAUL. Some said,

GUTALE. They've seen him. He says he's alive, tied up
in a wheelbarrow.

PAUL. A wheelbarrow?

GUTALE. No,
this man says he's dead. He's most definitely
dead.

PAUL. I took a few pictures of some kids
bouncing up and down on a rotor blade
in the smoldering tail section of that downed
Black Hawk.

GUTALE. Have you seen the American
soldier?

PAUL. The entire crowd pointed,

GUTALE. This way.

PAUL. Each time a Black Hawk thundered past people
would shake their fists and curse at it.

PAUL. We drove
all over the city for two hours and
were about to give up,

PAUL. when the driver
makes a u-turn.

GUTALE. He sees something.

PAUL. A mob
of 200 Somalis, moving down
an alleyway.

GUTALE. What is it?

MOHAMED. This is bad,
too dangerous.

GUTALE. Go slowly.

PAUL. What's he saying?

GUTALE. He's a coward. He's worried about his
car.

MOHAMED. This guy's going to get us killed!

GUTALE. Shut up!

PAUL. Gutale gets out:

GUTALE. Gamay's in the car,
you know Gamay!

PAUL. Gamay is local slang
for cripple.

GUTALE. Little man! No hand! He's not
American, he's Canadian! You know
Gamay. He just wants to take some pictures.
Can he?

PAUL. The crowd parts around me.

PAUL. I look
down at the street:

PAUL. and I meet Staff Sgt.
William David Cleveland.

GUTALE. Take the picture
quickly.

PAUL. I've taken pictures of corpses
before, many of them much more fucked up
than this man.

GUTALE. Hurry, Paul!

PAUL. I bend over,
shoulders stiff.

GUTALE. Take it now!

PAUL. With a camera
in front of your eye, you cover your face
and you focus only on the good shot.
PAUL. You shut everything else out.
PAUL. Everything
goes quiet.
PAUL. Despite the noise of the crowd
and the helicopters,
PAUL. everything goes
completely silent. And I hear a voice
both in my head and out:
CLEVELAND. If you do this,
I will own you forever.
PAUL. I'm sorry
but I have to.
CLEVELAND. If you do this, I will
own you.
PAUL. I've sought psychiatric treatment
in subsequent years. And my psychiatrist
says it's my superego. I believe
it was William David Cleveland speaking
to me.
TERRY GROSS. And what did he mean?
PAUL. Well, Terry,
I took it as a warning.
TERRY GROSS. A warning
of what exactly?
PAUL. I have to do this.
PAUL. I don't want to do this.
PAUL. I don't want to
desecrate your body.
CLEVELAND. If you do this
I will own you forever.

PAUL. I took his picture.

PAUL. While they were beating his body and cheering. Some spitting.

PAUL. Some kid wearing a chopper crewman's goggles shoves his way into the frame. His face is all screwed up in rapturous glee while giving the dead man the finger.

PAUL. An old man's raising his cane like a club and thudding it down against the dead flesh.

PAUL. Wind's blowing dirt and the stench is making me gag.

PAUL. For weeks I'd hated UN peacekeepers like this man, who killed from the sky with impunity.

PAUL. But now it was us against them.

GUTALE. Get in the car, Gamay!

PAUL. The men holding the ropes that bind the soldier's wrists are stretching his arms out over his head.

PAUL. They're rolling his body back and forth in the hammering morning light.

PAUL. I feel like I'm standing beside myself.

PAUL. I feel like I'm somebody else watching myself take these photographs,

PAUL. somebody named Paul, doing this crazy thing,

PAUL. shooting pictures.

PAUL. Asking, Did I put the batteries in?

[Image: Paul Watson's full-length photograph of Staff Sgt. William David Cleveland.]

PAUL. *Click.* *[Image: another*

PAUL. The bullet wounds are in his legs: *shot from this series.]*
did they shoot him in the street, did he die
before he crashed?

PAUL. *Click.* *[Image: another*

PAUL. His body's so limp *shot.]*
he must have just died.

PAUL. *Click.* *[Image: another*

PAUL. Maybe he's still *shot.]*
alive? Is that why I can hear his voice?
If you do this,

PAUL. *Click. Click.* *[Image: another*

PAUL. I will own you. *shot.]*

PAUL. *Click. Click. Click. Click.* *[Image: another*

PAUL. You poor man. Who are you? *shot.]*

GUTALE. We must go. Let's go. They don't want us here
anymore.

PAUL. The car door's shut.

PAUL. Soft idling
of the engine. The muffled mob.

PAUL. It's like
I've stepped out of Mogadishu into

PAUL. a wobbling canoe years ago in *[Moving image:*
Sudan, *water at dusk.]*

PAUL. drifting downriver at dusk with

ANDREW. Andrew Stawicki,

PAUL. a Polish émigré
photographer who snaps a picture of
boys running naked like a snake along
the river's blood-red spine. That's going to be
a great picture.

ANDREW. They won't print it.

PAUL. Why not?

ANDREW. The kid's dick is showing!

PAUL. In my mind's eye
I see Sgt. Cleveland's Army-issue
green underwear, the only clothing left
on his body.

PAUL. The underwear's slightly *[Image: Paul's full-body shot.]*
askew, so you can just make out a piece
of the dead man's scrotum.

PAUL. Open the door!
Open it!

PAUL. This time I framed it better:
the body from the waist up.

PAUL. A woman *[Image: Paul's famous half-body shot.]*
slapping him with a flattened can.

PAUL. That boy
with the goggles shoveling his face through
the mob,

PAUL. laughing at us.

PAUL. Men with bloodshot
eyes notice me.

PAUL. It would be like squashing
a cockroach to kill me, this infidel
who can't take a hint.

GUTALE. Look, he's leaving now!
See? We're leaving for good! Thank you!

PAUL. The squeak
of the hotel gate always let me breathe
easier. As if a few sleepy guards could
actually keep us safe from everything
happening out there.

PAUL. I take the service stairs
two at a time to my room, stuff the roll
of film between the mattress and box spring,
switch on the broken AC,

PAUL. and collapse
on my bed with my eyes closed and I cry
for a very long time.

TERRY GROSS. This is *Fresh Air.*
The AP printed it, and so did *Time*
magazine.

PAUL. That's right. AP moved the half
-body shots, which appeared in newspapers
all over the world. What *Time* magazine
did, which I find fascinating, is they
digitally altered the underwear
so you can't see any genitals. But
you do see horrific desecration
of an American soldier.

TERRY GROSS. This picture
had incredible impact.

PAUL. Yes, Terry,
that's right. Because immediately the heat
was on President Bill Clinton to do
something. And that something was to announce
the immediate withdrawal of American
troops. Then, when it became time to decide
whether or not the United States should
lead an intervention in Rwanda,
where 800,000 people were killed
in a hundred days, President Clinton
decided not to use the word genocide
so we wouldn't be *forced* to intervene.
And we know without a doubt Al-Qaeda
was there in Mogadishu. It says so
on indictments in US Federal Court,
bin Laden's bragged about it, his minions
have bragged about it. But what disturbs me

the most is that Al-Qaeda learned a lot
from the propaganda impact of that
photograph. 18 American soldiers
were killed that day. Which is nothing compared
to what used to happen on a bad day
in Vietnam. And it's only relatively
bad compared to what's still happening these days
in Iraq, or Afghanistan. I think
it's safe to say, take all of the events
that happened, but remove the photograph,
and Al-Qaeda would not have chased us out
of Somalia, bin Laden would not have
been able to say to his followers, Look
we're able to do this, we only need
small victories to defeat history's greatest
military. After my photograph:
9/11, and this never-ending
war on terror.

TERRY GROSS. My guest today has been
war reporter Paul Watson. His memoir
about reporting from war zones is called
Where War Lives.

TERRY GROSS. We'll talk more after a break.

2: Who Was He Talking To?

DAN. I was listening to this podcast. Writing *[Google map: Princeton, NJ.]*
my play about historical ghosts. Packing
up all our things. It was the very end
of August. It was the end of New York
for us. It was the end of something else,
what? our youth? In Princeton. Which is just so
beautiful this time of year. Every time
of year, really. All the trees and leaves. All

the squirrels. All of the privileged children,
including myself, in some ways. I was
sad to leave. It had been a rough few years.
I'd walk around the campus late at night
and feel almost good about myself. Smart.
Of value. And of course I felt guilty
too, to have had this library. These trees
and squirrels. The beautiful young women
to watch. Unlimited laser printing.
While you're off in Iraq, Paul. Or Kabul.
Or Jakarta, that's where you live, Paul, right? *[Google map: Jakarta.]*
And Jakarta's in Indonesia. Right?
There was this hangar-sized Whole Foods nearby, *[Video image: verdant window in Princeton.]*
lots of Priuses, and bumper stickers
celebrating the date when Bush would leave
office. I'd go running in thunderstorms
sometimes. I'd sit on the back porch sipping
vodka, cooking meat on a charcoal grill.
Watching swallows swoop out of a twilit
sky into my maple tree. And your voice
got to me. It's your voice:

PAUL. I tend to be
solitary.

DAN. This is you speaking, though
it might as well be me.

PAUL. I like to stay
home with my wife and son.

DAN. Dinner parties?

PAUL. I tend to stay away. I've spent enough
time around people who do what I do,
and in my opinion, and I include
myself foremost in this group, we're a bunch
of misfits, people who are seeking self
-esteem through risk.

DAN. I felt you could have been talking about playwrights. Without any real risk. You were mad:

PAUL. I'm sick of being lied to. And I take it as a challenge to make sure nobody's lying to me.

DAN. I felt like I knew you. Or I was you in some alternate reality.

PAUL. Men start wars because it helps them to make sure that women aren't laughing at them.

DAN. You were funny. Sort of.

PAUL. I'm more comfortable with the weak than I am the powerful, growing up in this condition.

DAN. We should talk about that, your hand.

PAUL. Should we?

DAN. Why not?

PAUL. It's helped me out a lot. In Kosovo in food lines, they'd think I was a wounded war vet and give me all kinds of free stuff.

DAN. And as I'm packing and listening to you I'm wondering if I feel so moved because you sound so messed up,

PAUL. If something's risky and we probably shouldn't do it, I'll say, Don't worry about me, I'm already dead.

DAN. Or because you scare me. The haunted often sound like ghosts, in my experience.

PAUL. I just have this sense I've already lived much longer than I should have.

[Image: Paul Watson preparing to take a photo; his deformed hand is prominent. (Andrew Stawicki)]

DAN. You poor man,
who are you?

3: Q&A. Or, Got To Go

PAUL. I have no idea who my father was.
DAN. He was a soldier, right?
PAUL. I've got to go.
Take care. Paul.

[Image: Watson Family photo, 1960; Paul is in the baby stroller.]

DAN. I just wanted to say thanks
for writing me back. I got your email
on my wife's BlackBerry halfway across
the country, at this tumbleweed rest stop
on an Indian reservation somewhere
outside Tulsa.

PAUL. Dear Dan, I just got back
from Kabul. Where I found out it's easy
to buy stolen US military
flash drives at an Afghan bazaar outside
Bagram air base. And these flash drives are full
of classified information, social
security numbers of soldiers, maps
of Taliban and Al-Qaeda targets
in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

[Google map: Kabul.]

[Images: ID photos of US soldiers, maps of air strikes in Afghanistan and Pakistan, 2008.]

DAN. Wow.
PAUL. Sorry, what were we talking about?
DAN. Your dad.
PAUL. Stormed the beach at Normandy. Died
a few days shy of my second birthday.
DAN. And you were born when?
PAUL. 1959.
How old are you, Dan?

DAN. I'm younger than you.
I could be your nephew, or a younger
brother maybe.

PAUL. My father didn't die
in the war though.

DAN. Of course not. How did he?

PAUL. He had PKD, or Polycystic
Kidney Disease.

DAN. Which is what?

PAUL. Like it sounds:
cysts start growing all over your kidneys
till eventually you die. I have it
too.

DAN. Will it kill you?

PAUL. I've got pills for it.

DAN. So, what you mean when you say you don't know
who your dad was, is you don't remember
him?

PAUL. Do you?

DAN. Do I remember my dad?

PAUL. Do you know who he is?

DAN. What do you mean?

PAUL. What did you think I meant?

DAN. He was around.
I mean my father was always around,
every day. He never spoke to us. If
he did, well then it was just to tell you
how fucking stupid you were.

PAUL. Is he dead?

DAN. I don't know.

PAUL. You don't know?

DAN. Wait why are you
asking *me* questions?

PAUL. I've got to get back
to Kabul. I'll email you.

DAN. I'm staying
in this condo in a renovated
schoolhouse. Sometimes I hear ghostly children
laughing. This gland in my neck is swollen
and aches. I'm Googling the symptoms. Let's Skype
or Facebook. Are you on Facebook?

PAUL. I don't
know why but I'd rather keep emailing
like this. I don't know why. But it's almost
like a conversation.

DAN. Yeah but it's not
a conversation.

PAUL. Yeah but it's almost.
Are you in LA?

DAN. I'm in Madison, *[Google map:*
Wisconsin. *Madison, WI.]*

PAUL. What? Why?

DAN. Teaching.

PAUL. And writing
about ghosts?

DAN. Sure. Still.

PAUL. Is it snowing there? *[Moving*

DAN. It hasn't stopped snowing since I touched down *image:*
in January. Cars are abandoned *falling*
in the middle of highways. I don't leave *snow.]*
the condo much.

PAUL. I'm home in Jakarta, *[Moving*
in case you're wondering. There's a thunderstorm *image:*
and my little boy's asleep. He's always *lightning,*
asking me, How long will you be gone, Dad? *rain.]*
He's seven, so he doesn't understand

time just yet. Few weeks back we were lying
in bed together and he asked me, When
you're dead will you still be watching me? Where
were we?

DAN. We were talking about fathers.

PAUL. So then Ray enlisted at 17,

DAN. You call him Ray?

PAUL. faked his eye test. He was,

SOMEONE. Tall. Splendid physique.

[Image: family photo again, Paul's tall father.]

PAUL. That's what someone wrote about him, in one of his files. It said, Ray is:

SOMEONE. Frank. Pleasant manner. Decisive style of thinking.

PAUL. This one story I know,
there's only one story I know for sure,
they were taking a medieval city
in France, twisted streets, churches and houses
made of stone. My father takes a bullet
in his thigh. Watches one of his soldiers
trapped in the long grass. Ray can't do a thing
but watch his friend die. Each time this man cries
out for help, a Nazi sniper shoots him
till he's dead.

[Map: Villons-les-buissons, France, 1944.]

DAN. How do you know this?

PAUL. Research.
My mother told me.

DAN. Yes. Good. What's she like?

PAUL. She's the strongest woman I know.

DAN. Okay,
fine. What else?

PAUL. They were sitting together
on a streetcar. The bang of a pothole
and he's gone. She gets off at the next stop

and walks home, and sits down on the front step.
And waits for him.

DAN. Sounds like PTSD.

PAUL. I've got to cut this one short.

DAN. Can we talk
about your hand again?

PAUL. My hand?

DAN. You know,
your lack of a hand.

PAUL. I'll be in Sulu,
in the Philippines.

DAN. Outside my window *[Moving image: snow falling.]*
a freight train rolls past every night. Its bell
tolls over and over again,

PAUL. Seven
civilians have been killed by Philippine
troops, including two children.

DAN. as the snow
piles higher on Lake Monona, burying
the sign Obama stuck in the ice: *Yes*
We Can!

PAUL. Reading glasses, check. Sensible
shoes, check.

DAN. Spring break. *[Image: bright light.]*

PAUL. —Hey, Dan! You were asking
about my hand. It doesn't bother me
much. My mother used to always tell me,
Nobody's perfect!

DAN. How'd it get that way?

PAUL. The kids would crowd around me at recess
and the bravest ones would reach out and touch
my stump,

KID. How'd it get that way, Paul? Huh? Huh?

PAUL. This was when I remember first thinking:
This is not me.

PAUL. This, that body belongs
to somebody else.

PAUL. The day I was born
I had these nubbins instead of fingers *[Image: that picture again of Paul preparing to take a photograph. (Stawicki)]*

PAUL. and the doctor just snipped them off.

PAUL. The hand's
attached to a wrist that bends, with a palm
no bigger than an infant's.

DAN. Did your mom
take thalidomide?

PAUL. Everyone thinks that,
but no she didn't. It's a mystery,
something in the DNA.

DAN. Is that why
you're like this?

PAUL. Like what, Dan?

DAN. Oh I don't know,
a war reporter?

PAUL. iPod, check. Satellite
phone, check. Laptop, check. Endless tangles of
cable, check.

DAN. Two people have been murdered
near where I'm staying,

PAUL. Some bars of Dettol, *[Image: Joel Anthony Marino.]*
disinfectant soap for microbes.

DAN. a man
my age. A girl. On different days.

PAUL. Check.

DAN. Both *[Image: Brittany Zimmermann.]*
were stabbed repeatedly. In the middle
of the day, at home. I go out running
on the icy roads past their stained faces

on telephone poles. Just like I used to
jog past the makeshift morgue outside Bellevue
that long-ago September.

PAUL. Sorry, Dan,
I've been out of touch. I was in Christchurch
on vacation. Where were we?

DAN. Your perfect
childhood.

PAUL. Yes, my street was Princess Margaret
Boulevard, my school was Princess Margaret
Public School.

DAN. Who's Princess Margaret again?

PAUL. We had a milkman, mailman, paperboy.

DAN. How many siblings did you have?

PAUL. Four. You?

DAN. Five.

PAUL. Wow, you really are Irish!

DAN. Nothing
bad happened in your childhood? other than
your absent father and your absent hand
that never bothered you?

PAUL. My brother Jim
liked to take my father's old Lugar out
of hiding. Sometimes he'd let me hold it
and I'd imagine myself as the man
who'd once held his finger on that trigger.

DAN. You mean your father?

PAUL. No, the dead Nazi
he got it from!

DAN. Did you have any friends?
You sound lonely. You sound kind of like this
really lonely kid.

[Google map: Princess Margaret Blvd., Etobicoke, Ontario, Canada.]

PAUL. I was in a band
called Eruption? I was the manager
of the band, because of my hand. We did
a shitload of drugs: Purple Microdot,
California Sunshine—

[Music: Pink Floyd's "Brain Damage."]

DAN. What's that, acid?

PAUL. My best friend Richard and I listening
to *Dark Side of the Moon* in the middle
of this circle we'd burnt into a field
of grass behind my house, high as two kites.
Richard turned me on to Camus. We'd chew
peyote before gym class

[Image: Paul Watson as a teenager in the '70s: plaid bow tie, plaid pants. Long hair.]

PAUL. and get off
on the psychedelic rainbows trailing
behind high-jumpers and kids doing flips
off balance beams.

PAUL. Oh, I remember one
thing that was somewhat disturbing: our friend
Andy blew his brains out at his parents'
summer cottage.

DAN. Just somewhat disturbing?

PAUL. It was hardly surprising. He was stuck
outside himself.

DAN. Were you, Paul?

PAUL. I hung out
with this dealer, he must've been 30.
At a motel he pulls out a bottle
and a baggie full of pills. Up or down,
my choice. I wash down a few with a belt
of whiskey.

DRUG DEALER. You took some heavy downers,
man.

PAUL. Who cares?

DRUG DEALER. That's the trouble with chicks, right?

PAUL. Right!

DRUG DEALER. Hells yeah!

PAUL. An hour later he's carving his arm with his knife.

DRUG DEALER. Bitches always want perfection!

PAUL. Then he's slinging my body over his back like I'm some medevaced soldier on TV in Vietnam. Dumping me in a taxi.

DRUG DEALER. He's my little bro, man. Just take him home.

PAUL. Alone and puking through the chain link of a construction site as the taxi spits gravel.

DAN. You were fucked up, Paul. Maybe you were depressed. Maybe you were low on some brain chemical like serotonin, dopamine, whatever, and this kind of crazy behavior was your way of feeling normal.

[Image: close-up of that photo of Paul as a teenager in the '70s.]

PAUL. But I was also having fun. Didn't you have fun in high school, Dan?

DAN. Sorry, I've got to go teach. My students are trying to learn how to write with conflict and stakes and something remotely real.

PAUL. I had this one teacher I loved. He took us all on a field trip once. There we were floating in our canoes in Algonquin Provincial Park, under a canopy of stars. With my classmate Stephen Harper, future Prime Minister,

[Moving image: river at night. Stars.]

no kidding, paddling behind. Thinking, Who could *not* love Albert Camus? And that's how I ended up winning the Pulitzer.

DAN. Wait. What? I don't get it—

PAUL. I've got to go, this time it's an emergency. Turn on your TV and you'll see. *[Google map: Burma.]*

DAN. I've got to say, Paul, I can't help feeling you're not being entirely honest with me here. I mean, I don't mean that you're lying, per se. But everything has this kind of Hemingway patina to it. This kind of old school journalistic swagger. It's like you're trying to impress me.

PAUL. I got into Burma on a tourist visa. With the Tribune execs measuring the column inches we produce, not getting into Burma to cover the cyclone devastation would've been career suicide. Hiding by day in the hull of a riverboat in the Irrawaddy Delta. Among the hundreds of corpses bobbing at dusk in the sea-soaked paddies is the body of a child. In pajama bottoms with teddy bear cartoons on them. The bleached skin's like rotting rattan. The leg bones are green. The stench is unbearable, but the people on shore don't seem to notice. My fixer explains that Buddhists believe the body *[Image: this image, perhaps.]*

FIXER. is nothing more than an empty vessel, and the soul has already been reborn as someone new. *[Moving image: river at night. Stars.]*

PAUL. After several stiff drinks
that night I lay on the roof of our boat
staring up at the universe,
PAUL. listening
to Laura Bush give forth with earnest pleas
to the junta on Voice of America,
PAUL. and I imagined myself as nothing
more than a passenger on this rotting
vessel of my body. And it felt good,
I felt free.
DAN. That freight train's approaching fast,
its headlamp swallowing the churning snow.
The chiming bell, the shrieking horn—
PAUL. Dear Dan,
I've been meaning to say: you sound kind of
depressed. Don't let that get ahold of you.
Trust me. Maybe you should talk to someone
besides me? Or take a pill. Has it stopped
snowing yet? *[Moving image: falling snow.]*
DAN. Nope.
PAUL. Medication. Calculate
estimated time away, multiply
by seven pills a day for depression,
blood pressure, PKD. Toss in extra
in case I get kidnapped. Check.
DAN. Where are you
going this time, Paul?
PAUL. A few chocolate bars:
85 percent cocoa, for the dose
of flavonoids the TV doctor says
will give me an extra 3.5 years
and fight heart plaque.
DAN. Where are you now?

PAUL. My son
is sleeping. It's the rainy season here
again and lightning's lighting up his face
like a strobe. I lean in close to his ear
and whisper,

PAUL. Don't be afraid.

PAUL. I'll come back
home soon.

PAUL. Do not be afraid.

PAUL. Japanese
green tea for the antioxidants. Corkscrew
for the cheap Bordeaux I'll purchase en route
at Duty Free,

DAN. I've got some more questions
for you, Paul—

PAUL. more antioxidants and
some liquid courage to help ease the pain
of these five-star hotel room blues.

4: The Ghosts Are Getting Closer

But I'm whining, Dan.

DAN. Okay, let's get back
to the story. You win the Pulitzer
Prize.

PAUL. I was in Rwanda when I heard
the news. As everybody's aware now,
300 Tutsis an hour were being
beaten to death with these large wooden clubs
with bent nails and heavy spikes sticking out
of them. Real prehistoric shit. Homemade
machetes. Just a few thousand UN
soldiers with air support could've washed all
those maggots away.

PAUL. We were getting high *[Moving image, sound: waterfall.]*
on the bridge over Rusumo Falls.

PAUL. We
is not the royal we, we is someone
I don't want you to meet just yet.

PAUL. Khareen
and I watching refugees spill over
the border to Tanzania. Watching
corpses spill over the waterfall down
into this brown whirlpool, smashing against
the rocks.

PAUL. In a house we found children piled *[Sound: files buzzing.]*
like sandbags on a bed.

PAUL. There's a baby
down at the bottom. Its tiny hand is
bloated, its severed head cracked open like
an eggshell. Did the older children try
to hide him in here?

PAUL. Outside the back door
I slipped on a bunch of school books. One book
had been covered neatly with a color
publicity shot of the *Dynasty*
show cast. With John Forsythe's fucking
grinning face.

PAUL. The ghosts are getting closer.

PAUL. In Gahini, a 16-year-old named
François Sempundu sat on the grimy
brown foam of his hospital bed.

TRANSLATOR. He says
Hutus hacked up his mother and siblings.
He says he hid beneath the kitchen sink
for a week, beside his family's rotting
corpses.

PAUL. François Sempundu was speaking
so calmly.

TRANSLATOR. He says, By then if someone
had come to kill me I wouldn't have cared
much. *[Sound: cicadas, crickets.]*

PAUL. At a church near Nyarubuye
we pushed open a gate on a courtyard
like Auschwitz. Like Sarajevo. They'd come here
hoping God would protect them somehow, but
it only made things that much easier
to get butchered.

PAUL. In Zaire a girl stands
at the roadside. Rows of buzzing corpses.

PAUL. At a Rwandan refugee camp.

PAUL. She's
looking for the toilet,

PAUL. which was a field
where a hundred thousand people would shit
and piss and die.

PAUL. This girl stumbles barefoot
into a ditch of bodies, some rolled up
in reed mats. She's looking everywhere and
now she begins to cry.

PAUL. As if hoping *[Sound: this child crying, as if far away.]*
somebody will help her.

PAUL. But nobody's
coming.

PAUL. I thought to myself, This would make
a great picture.

PAUL. This is a beautiful
picture, somehow.

PAUL. I raised my camera, stepped
backwards to frame her with more corpses and
I stepped on a dead old woman's arm.

[Image: this child lost among corpses of Rwandan refugees in Zaire.]

PAUL. It
snaps like a stick.

PAUL. Then a few days later
I'm at Columbia University's
Low Memorial Library. In this room
like the Parthenon and the Pantheon
confused. Cornucopias of hors d'oeuvres
on aproned banquet tables, wearing tight shoes
and a navy blazer, wool slacks picked out
this morning at Brooks Brothers. John Honderich,
my boss at the *Star*—

HONDERICH. Watson, you don't look
so hot.

PAUL. I guess I just feel bad about
that soldier's family.

HONDERICH. Have you thought about
finding his wife, or his mother? hunting
them down?

PAUL. Had I?

PAUL. Had I?

PAUL. Kevin Carter,
who just last month was snorting Ritalin
off the floor of my apartment before
rocketing off into the townships,

PAUL. wins
for feature photography:

PAUL. a vulture
waiting for a Sudanese girl to die.

PAUL. Always a popular category.

PAUL. Carter comes back to the table:

CARTER. Hear that applause, Watson? I kicked your arse!

PAUL. Two months later I'm back in Rwanda. Honderich calls me on my satellite phone:

HONDERICH. Carter killed himself last night. Parked his pickup truck in Johannesburg, duct-taped a garden hose to the tail pipe. Left a suicide note

PAUL. that I'll paraphrase:

CARTER. I have been haunted so now I'll haunt you.

HONDERICH. Paul?

HONDERICH. Paul?

PAUL. I don't care about him.

PAUL. —Who cares?

PAUL. I don't care!

PAUL. With so many people suffering all over the world who want nothing more than to live—?

PAUL. That man is a coward!

PAUL. If you can't do your job then get out of the way so someone else can.

PAUL. Of course I've wanted to kill myself before. But the truth is I've always lacked the courage.

PAUL. So I tell myself:

PAUL. Just go someplace dangerous. Let somebody else kill you.

5: Shrinking

GRINKER. O-kay. So. You are 35 years old,
you are male. You are a reporter for
the *Toronto Star*, and you're stationed here
in Johannesburg.

PAUL. You have a real talent *[Image:*
for stating the obvious. *dark bookcase.]*

GRINKER. Are you shaking?

PAUL. Am I?

GRINKER. You have sweat all over your face!

PAUL. Let me catch my breath.

GRINKER. O-kay.

PAUL. It's just that
I've never been to a psychiatrist
before.

GRINKER. And what are you scared will happen
to you?

PAUL. I'll lose my edge.

GRINKER. What does that mean,
your edge?

PAUL. Being crazy.

GRINKER. You think I could
cure you of that?

PAUL. Being somewhat crazy
is a requirement in my line of work.

GRINKER. If you leave I won't charge you anything.
You wouldn't be the first to change his mind
about psychiatry. But you called me, Paul,
and told me you've been feeling paranoid—

PAUL. That's not a psychiatric disorder,
in my opinion. People don't deserve
to be trusted.

GRINKER. You are irritable,
small things will make you cry. Interestingly
you deny nightmares. No psychiatric
history prior to this. Congenitally
deformed arm. Don't smoke. Self-medicating
with lots of alcohol, marijuana—

PAUL. Look
all I want from you is some feel-good pills
to patch me up. "O-kay"?

GRINKER. O-kay. We can
find you something, I'm sure.

PAUL. Thank you.

GRINKER. But first
you'll need to talk to me. Medication
targets symptoms: we will need to target
your soul as well. You find that funny?

PAUL. Yes.

GRINKER. What's your mother like, Paul?

PAUL. She's the strongest
woman I know.

GRINKER. And have you known many
women?

PAUL. One.

GRINKER. You've known only one woman?

PAUL. I've been in a relationship with one
woman. On and off. Khareen.

GRINKER. Careen?

PAUL. Ha!

GRINKER. What a name! Tell me, what's this Careen like?

PAUL. She loves rococo art. Homemade knödles
and beer for dinner.

GRINKER. Ha ha ha! Sounds nice!

PAUL. Her father is this German bureau chief,
and one time she was sitting on his lap
in front of me, smiling, with her bare arm
up around his neck, like this. She's the one
who needs some therapy, don't you think? She flashed
her tits at me once down this long hallway
in her father's condo—I don't know why
I feel the need to keep talking about
her father. She's blonde. Great body. Sexy
voice. Calls me Paulie. She doesn't let me
have sex with her though. We share a house but
I pay the rent. I live in a closet
-sized room off the kitchen. I'm happiest
on her leash, so to speak. I like to sit
with her when she takes a bath or lying
in bed with candles lit, drinking wine or
smoking a joint, while she gets herself off
beneath the covers. It's not sex, she says.
It's only for comfort, Paulie. She likes
to tell me that. One time she let this guy
into our yard to watch through the window
while she fucked this other guy. She described
this at breakfast, in great detail. She wants
to be a war reporter, so we went
to Rwanda where we met this handsome
aid worker named Laurent. Who was building
latrines for refugees. And there I was
with my camera in my one hand. Shooting
pictures. By that evening she was lying
in his tent, under his netting, writing
in her diary. He got a hotel room
underneath ours. With grenades exploding

in the shanties and the death squads spreading through the streets, I call downstairs. She answers laughing,

KHAREEN. Paulie?

PAUL. We have to go.

KHAREEN. Not now, Laurent.

PAUL. They're killing people outside.

KHAREEN. Get off me please, Laurent!

PAUL. He's living with us here in Johannesburg. They fight and then fuck all the time.

GRINKER. Why don't we stop for the day. I'm going to write you a prescription for 450 milligrams of moclobemide.

PAUL. Okay. Is that good?

GRINKER. No, that is bad. You're clinically depressed and you have post-traumatic stress disorder. It's good that you've come. Do you have someone at home? Besides that sick woman, of course. These drugs will take some time to change your brain chemistry, and we don't want you killing yourself in the meanwhile.

PAUL. —Do you believe in ghosts, Dr. Grinker?

GRINKER. Well, I believe people are haunted.

PAUL. What if I told you I came to you in the first place because I'm haunted. Cursed.

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