

Dear U.S. Army



Jeffrey Armadillo Forker

Dear Sergeant Slaughter, I need my knife back. It was given to me by my granddad, who carried it in Vietnam. It's only a chewed-up old K-Bar, but actually is much more than that—a symbol of family honor. Do you recall the day you asked for a knife and I handed it to you? Less than a minute later, you were lying in the dirt, in a pool of your own blood, waiting for the MEDEVAC chopper, as Doc frantically worked and cursed over you? I remember it all, and need that knife back, to cut away that and other memories.

Dear Lieutenant Ruphrangier, I need my mind back, or some degree of control over said instrument. I need the ability to think straight and focus on simple tasks, to keep my hands from shaking, and hearing and seeing sounds and images from Falluja and Tikrit—memories that everyone tells me I should just toughen up and forget. But no one tells me how. And you also never put me in for that Purple Heart, like you said you would, or that Silver Star. I don't know if it would help my leg, the way it itches all the time, but it couldn't hurt.

Dear Captain Bludundgutz, I need my dog back. She was just a stray scrounging for food near the FOB, where we found her just outside the wire, looking all emaciated and scraggly. I thought she would have bolted away the first time I approached her, calling out in two alien languages—English and baby-talk—but she was too weak from starvation to run. Our friendship was born of desperation on both sides. She slept beside my bunk for months, in a bed I made for

her out of an MRE box and an old poncho liner, until that morning you ordered Sergeant Nuttsaq to “take it outside and shoot it.” Something tore inside of me then. I heard it tear, *felt* it, whatever it was, as they took her, my dog, dragged her outside, and you ordered me to “stand down!” Johnson held me back, kept saying, “don’t do it, dude! It ain’t worth it!”

Dear Top, I need my boys back—my buds, my friends, the guys I trained and faced war with, those guys, with whom I stood in formation more times than I could ever count, as you bellowed out orders and called off names. We knew them all, every one, better than family. I remember them all, even those who did not come back, especially those who did not come back, as I know you do too. Every one.

Dear Major Payne, I need my sleep back. I cannot seem to find or get anywhere near it anymore. When the sun goes down, no matter what time of night it is, or what I watch or read, no matter how much I drink or fuck, I can’t seem to get more than an hour of restless sleep. I get two hours on good nights, interspersed with several hours of frantic pacing, my mind exploding with torturous images, while packs of cigs disappear in one long marathon drag. I always end up finally falling back asleep sometime near dawn, clutching one of my pistols like a brother.

Dear Sergeant-Major Gunn, I need my morals back, my sense of right and wrong, a sense that there is a right and wrong. I need a way to forget about all the shit we shot, the doors we kicked and all the dudes we hooded and threw in the back of gun trucks for later interrogation and disappearance, often knowing or suspecting that

some were not and had no intel about al-Qaida or Taliban or any other group of terrorist motherfuckers, that we were simply settling some old debt or feud. I need to know, to believe, that our ends, at least sometimes, justified the means.

Dear Colonel Helen Bakk, I need my leg back, or a means to call it out, get it to step forward, to sound off. I'm no whiner, anyone will tell you, and I don't mind these crutches too much, or being on the VA's waitlist so long for a prosthetic. But I can still feel it. So I know it's there, hiding somehow, using the shadow of my other leg to stay out of sight, afraid to show itself. Of the two, that leg always did better at camouflage and concealment, and was a bit more skittish. But if it's gone, why is it still tormenting me?

Dear General Reager Mortess, I need my wife back. I am talking here about the same woman who I have known since we were kids and now claims that she does not know me anymore. I would appreciate it if you would call her parents and see if they would tell you where she is. They won't tell me a damn thing. There are things I need to explain to her about my nightmares and memories, and how sorry I am that I exposed her to all the night screams, the violent revenge fantasies, rifles in the bedroom and pistols in the pantry—my own private hell, which I struggled to keep private. I joined up for her, for us, to make a better life, because freedom ain't free, at least that is what they used to drum into us. If only she would answer my emails or tweets, my prayers or pleas. I just need to look into her eyes and not see that pain and confusion, which mirrors my own, and feel her hold me like she used to.

Dear Secretary of Defense Azhatt, I need the last four years back, years that I cannot seem to sort out or understand, years that were comprised of so many days blended and decomposed into one long presence patrol, endless hours watching Hajis file through the Entry Control Point, the eye of the needle, the front gate. We spent nights watching the surveillance cams, monitoring the radios and standing in the guard towers, watching those wild Afghan stars chase each other across malevolent night skies.

Dear President Layimduq, I need my best friend, Bobby, back. He's the one who should be writing you all of these goddamn letters. Not me. He was a better dude than me—smarter, more educated and honorable. Chicks loved him. But he walked point the wrong day and after that IED disassembled him, we had trouble finding all of him. Most times when I close my eyes, I can still see his shattered, leaking head, and that surprised look on his disfigured face, which seemed to want to say one last something.

Dear Secretary of Veterans Affairs Phucwatt, I need you to stop drowning me in letters, forms and online applications. Give me some meds for this pain, which the doctors say is all in my head, and for the insomnia, for which my physical therapist claims I just need to exercise more, and the hallucinations, which my landlord says I ought to be thankful for—she pays good money for hers. I need someone who cares more about wounded warriors than they do about job security or tribal politics. I need to be able to drive or walk past random bags and clumps of trash, dead animals, or over wires, without having a panic attack. I need new glasses, new boots, a new outlook. I need someone to explain this veterans' game to me, what

exactly a vet is, and how I get my affairs in order, with or without your support, which doesn't seem to be forthcoming.

Dear U.S. Army, or should I call you Uncle Sugar, or Big Green Weenie? I need my life back, or some semblance thereof. I know you get lots of similar pleas and letters. Not from all us former soldiers, but from many of us. And I don't need back my old life, just some semblance of a life, one with a home and a family and a job that I can wake up to each morning, knowing that all of that blood and pain and sacrifice was worth it. All I wanted to do was to be a soldier. No one told me of the loss and pain. Do any of you motherfuckers read my letters, hear my pleas or know that I still exist? I've lost track of how many there've been or even when I began sending them.

Dear God, next time around I want to come back as a dog. But not in Iraq.