

# Apparitions of the Mind

By Joshua R. Ingram

*Have you ever shot anybody? What's it like to take someone's life?*

It's like barely sleeping, trapped in an endless, waking dream.

Or is it a nightmare? I descend into darkness and picture their faces.

I close my eyes and see theirs staring back as they release their last breath.

I profess countless repentant words but none can remove the stains on my soul.

I wake to screaming, surprised to discover it's me. I wait for death to collect my debt.

*If you live by the sword, you die by the sword.* That must mean my debt

is to suffer through existence until my light is snuffed away. *An eye for an eye, a life for a life.*

The consequence of my actions brought to fruition. A *hero* pays the toll with every breath.

I am told that I twitch and kick in my sleep. I rant and rave as I dream

but remember nothing. I feel like a hollow puppet strung along, void of soul.

As I walk through halls, passing strangers by, I fasten a false smile onto my face.

Most people won't know what it's like—to see light fade from eyes as blood drains from faces.

A burden carried in the pit of my stomach and depths of my being. By contract, I am indebted to those that fight beside me and the country I serve, but neither may have my soul.

This is the state of my existence. An endless waltz with destruction has become my life.

Maybe tonight will be different and I will lose myself in the beautiful mindscape of a dream.

It's a nice thought...as I ready for bed, I crawl into the blanket with hopeful breath

that a different outcome will occur this time. I silently watch my wife breathe

as she falls asleep. We drift away together and, for a moment, worry leaves my face

while I watch the rise and fall of her chest and feel warmth spread through me. A dream

like this is real and not crafted by my mind. The one where I am loved without debt

and cared for by someone so kind. My ice-encased heart melts as I see purpose to my life:

to return that love to my family. This is the path to regaining my soul.

The scars and scrapes may never fade, but, with gradual gestures of love, my soul

can be remade. Slow and steady, I take one step at a time. With each breath,

I make strides to atone, though my transgressions were no crime. Life

is what you craft it to be, but before I can affect the world, I must start with me. I watch the face

of the clock, as seconds tick by, and I tell myself, all I have to do is try. My debt

is not one that is so dark and grim. It shatters the schema and resurrects my dreams.

So you may ask again, *what's it like to take a life*, and I will say, *It's like a bad dream*

*that I can finally put away.* My hands may not be clean, but the iniquities left my soul.

Now I live my days feeling a little more whole. Memories may haunt me, but my debt

has been paid. Moving forward, I make efforts to be better with each breath.

The lump in my throat, I no longer hold back. I release tears down my weary face.

My existence is not a punishment for my deeds. It is a beautiful life,

a life filled with dreams. Ones I can face without the screams.

I know in my soul, my debt has been paid, and with each

breath, I am stronger and no longer afraid.



Soldiers with Company C, 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment, cover the body of a dead insurgent 16 September 2004 in Baghdad. The insurgents were preparing to fire a mortar at Forward Operating Base Falcon when one of their rounds exploded in the tube. (Photo by Bill Putnam, ZUMA Wire/Alamy Live News)