

“The First Gulf”

by Ruth Q. Leibowitz

His first photograph shows
a forearm sticking out of a mound of sand.

He watches me, the would-be healer
for signs.

They did not give the dead proper burial.
This haunts him more than the deaths themselves.

He takes another black and white from the file in his backpack.
A disabled tank tilts,
main gun’s muzzle pointed at the viewer.

He is a talented photographer,
a natural for this job they gave him –
to capture for all time

graveyards of abandoned vehicles
blackened by flame and smoke,
shattered windshields,
part of a boot by the roadside, foot far away, this
wreckage of Highway 80 farther than the eye
or the world can see.

But even someone of his talent could not capture
the stench he will always remember,
sand everywhere in his pores, his lungs,
the creases of his cortex, the lagoons of his limbic system.

His question echoes into
coiled silence:

Can you understand?

This much I understand:
The Highway of Death has no clear end.
It begins 1991 in Kuwait City or Basra, Iraq

winds today through the kitchen where he eats breakfast with his children,
descends onto the bed where he sleeps with his wife
meets his feet when he opens the door each day to step
into the cool green streets of his neighborhood.

And now he's taken a maybe crazy risk to transport it
into this room of sunlight, lamplight and living eyes.

I begin to sense its textures, its contours.
Honesty is the only pathway without a detour.

*I can stay in this room with you.
I can look at these images and keep my eyes open.
I can feel an echo of your feelings and not run away.
I can never know what you have known.*

In the gulf within the room furtive
possibility
peers out from the wreckage.