

“An Ode to Mat”

by Ryan Hunke

who at first I must confess I didn't really like very much
mostly because he was someone I was trying very hard
not to be associated with: he was fat and slow and nerdy
in the company of lean and fast and brainless army boys
and body-fat composition or the speed at which you ran
two miles shouldn't be virtues by which one's overall worthiness
was judged yet—yet we were, literally, weighed
and measured and sorted accordingly by crusty army vets,
who took their charge of grooming children for warfare
quite seriously, and in between the fat-measuring and running
were pumped full of vainglorious war stories that certainly never
actually happened and toxic tough-guy platitudes that we didn't know
were just small men hiding deep insecurities, and after four years
of this we were ranked and sorted and awarded our futures and

I was first and distinguished,
and Mat was dead last.

which quite pleased me because it seemed everything
was going according to plan, according to the plan in which
I'd been told was how things ought to be in that if you were lean
and fast and didn't think too hard you had all the tools needed
for success and I was certainly certified against *those* metrics,
just a high-speed low-drag *what-makes-the-green-grass-grow*
blood-blood-blood et cetera jingoism-spouting war machine
just really the, you know, **chef's kiss** prototypical boot douchebag.

despite my prototypical douchiness and unrelenting conceit
our cohort was small so even the first and last were friends,
more or less, but in retrospect the reality was that he was a good friend
to me and I was, I don't know, sometimes not an outrageous twat to him
even though I privately felt compelled to because he just *refused* to conform:

he was content to date his high school sweet-heart
and stay in his hometown and he wanted to have kids
and get a job in IT and spend time with his family and learn
to play the guitar and maybe even program a video game.

like I said, just bizarre.

and we graduated and Behold, as wild asses in the desert,
went we forth to our work; only the work as described
was not the work as encountered and not to Seinfeld
this but after ten years of soldiering and warring—yadda-yadda-yadda—
we are all, we wild asses, fucked or fucked up in some spectacular
fashion or another: G— went nuts and quit the army after his wife banged
their pediatrician (jody gonna jody), J— went to Leavenworth
as a literal war criminal, and I’m in a poetry workshop,
which isn’t necessarily a bad thing but most in the profession
of arms would consider my choices indicative of serious mental illness.

but you know what? over those ten years of all of us fucking around
and finding out who we actually were, Mat just stayed Mat: a little fat,
a little slow, and just a super nice guy who never really had a bad thing
to say to any of us, even though he should have. over those ten
years Mat stayed in touch every week—and I literally mean every single week—
with inane life updates: he learned to play the Aelda song on the piano.
his daughter had a soccer game. he saw a neat lizard. and it’s not like
he was spared the soldiering and the warring either, in fact
Mat went to war before most of us and said it sucked
but we didn’t believe him, not until we fucked around and found out ourselves
he was right and I guess it was then that I first started to see Mat a little different
but it was just the weekly messages—every single week for ten years—
that really, finally, *finally* helped me realize what I was too dumb
to recognize for an embarrassingly long time: I quite like Mat,
and I’ll be damned but I earnestly hope to be like him one day.

And I’m sorry to the workshop, I’m sure this is much too much, but
I wrote all of this because I just got my weekly message from Mat. It reads:

*“It’s been a crazy 24 hours. I found out my cousins mom died.
She was my aunt, but then they got divorced. I liked her she
was always nice to me. And today my wife is in labor.*

So it’s been a tumultuous day.”

And, as I revised this, I receive a short update:

“It happened all at once. Spencer was born at 9:45 p.m.

What a roller coaster.”

indeed and—some of that was sad, but mostly:
I’m just finally happy—happy to be sitting here free, happy to be writing shitty poetry
and just beaming with fucking joy at hearing some happy news from my good friend, Mat.

Ryan Hunke served on active duty from 2010 to 2020 as a Military Intelligence Officer. He transitioned to the Reserves in 2020 to teach Army ROTC while returning to school. He's now an aspiring writer, Army ROTC cadre, current English Professor at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, TX. He is a veteran of Operation Enduring Freedom. Connect with him on Twitter @rehunke