

A Graveyard of Faces

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Some nights I can't sleep. I keep myself up, worrying about this thing or that, my problems becoming convoluted and irreconcilable to my tired mind. I'm hardly unique in this way. There must be a hundred solutions to this problem, most of which go well with tonic. My solution is newer than most of these, but no less effective. I search the Internet aimlessly.

Taking care to avoid my bookmarked sites, I while away the time by following search engines and links, seeing where they take me. This is not some profound search for truth, but a concerted effort to distract myself. The results are often obscure, sometimes bizarre, never uninteresting. After a few hours of such meandering, I conk out like a light.

One marvellous thing about the Internet as a medium is that it will seldom catch you off-guard. Whereas television and radio have the occasional curveball to offer, the Internet is often a much more controlled experience: you know where you're going, you go there, you move on. With an appetite for the regular schlock that crops up so readily online, I found myself unprepared for what I would encounter.

I came across a Washington Post feature entitled "Faces of the Fallen." The site follows the casualty count of American soldiers in Iraq, which stands at 2,061 as of recent reckoning. Though for the most part a standard coverage of the war's statistics, one feature of this site is remarkable: a chronologically anthologized portrait gallery of these fallen soldiers, providing a place of birth, a means of death and a final age. Fuelled by a macabre curiosity I began flipping through these photographs.

Three hours later I was still at it. I had given up any hope of sleep, driven by a commingled sense of shame and duty. These faces provided me with a wholly separate perspective than the one I was used to, and events that would otherwise seem commonplace were thrown into sharp relief. I realized how disassociated I was from the actuality of war. Reading a headline like "seven killed by a car bomb in Fallujah," I would make a mental note, perhaps make mention of it during conversation, and ultimately leave it behind. Here it reads like a mantra: Lance Cpl. Holly Charette, killed by a car bomb in Fallujah. Cpl. Chad Powell, killed by a car bomb in Fallujah. Pfc. Veashna Muy, killed by a car bomb in Fallujah. Seven times, seven names, seven faces. The spectre of seven dead.

I recognize that the news media have a tough time following war. Without caution and compassion, it's easy for media reports of war dead to seem like a number game, the callous math of a zero-sum equation. It's equally easy to focus solely on the icons, boiling down the presence of war into a few digestible portraits. From Jessica Lynch's now-infamous rescue from a hospital in Iraq to the dour pug-face of Lynddie England following the Abu Graib photo revelation to the recent figure of Casey Sheehan, Cindy's valiant, wasted son. It is easier to find these icons (or in the case of Ms. Lynch, construct them) and portray them as symbolic of the experience as a whole. The faces shown on the Post site will never earn this distinction. The soldiers displayed seem eerily common, ranging from acne-ridden youth with wispy moustaches to balding, dough-faced adults. These are not the soldiers of icons - they are people, plain and simple, the sort you'd expect to find working cash at a convenience store or sitting beside you in class.

As I scanned the site, a part of me wanted to disengage myself entirely from this roster. After all, I thought, this is not my war, this is not my nation's war. These are not my brethren. While such an attitude might be maintained elsewhere, here it simply couldn't stand. I felt my politics wash away from me, leaving behind discussions of WMDs, of oil, of shocking and awing, of terror and the terrified. All that mattered here was the litany of names, a story told over and over like a bad joke without a punch line.

Spc. Mathhew Gibbs, 21. Sgt. Jerry Ganey Jr., 29. Lance Cpl. Christopher Dyer, 19....

Just war or otherwise, I found myself thinking – 19 is a lousy time to die.

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