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# Homecoming

Shane Book

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SHANE BOOK

*Homecoming*

Beside me a woman moves her lips  
and I wonder if she's praying.  
With his stunted machine  
gun the checkpoint soldier waves  
us down, stilling the drum and creak  
of the *tro-tro* bus. In front of me  
tightly strapped to a woman in bright  
aqua homecoming cloth, a baby  
stops gurgling, lays his head  
down on her brown back,  
closes his eyes. We file out into  
heat and red dust to a field.  
A guardhouse, thin and shaky  
like the soldiers, crumbling mud  
walls, tin roof half ripped open  
like a can of smoked oysters.  
From somewhere, more guards  
appear, more guns with taped-on  
crescent-shaped magazines.  
The one who waved us in walks  
down the line, stopping at a watch,  
a shirt collar, a face, as though  
inspecting troops in the Independence  
Day parade. Reeking of palm  
wine, he sways and his dented  
gun sways. Beside me a woman  
moves her lips and I wonder  
if she's praying. Someone's got  
enough of what the soldiers want  
and what is it. From her cloth bag  
I smell the pepper smoke of dried fish.  
The noon sun hits. Who among us  
won't get back on the bus?  
The soldier peering at the sandals

of a child, over-corrects and hits  
the red dirt hard. We don't say  
anything. Another soldier shouts  
and points at the fallen man  
and the soldiers all laugh.  
The one on the ground curses,  
leans heavily on his gun  
like a field hockey player getting  
back on his feet. But he's  
not a hockey player.  
And that's when it starts.