EXPLORING THE FUNCTION OF RAPID TRUTHING IN PHIL KLAY’S

**REDEPLOYMENT**

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“Humor is what happens when we're told the truth quicker and more directly than we're used to,” writer George Saunders observes in his analysis of the gallows humor in Kurt Vonnegut's war novel Slaughterhouse Five. “The comic is the truth stripped of the habitual, the cushioning, the easy consolation…This rapid-truthing is what Vonnegut does with the war.”

Katie Watson “Gallows Humor in Medicine”
“We shot dogs.” This is the first line of Phil Klay’s 2014 short story collection, 
*Redeployment*. This line is compelling for obvious reasons: it is clear; it is jarring; it is simply 
hard to argue against the compulsion to keep reading. The question that is most haunting, though, 
is why? Why does a line saturated with violence grab the attention of readers so effectively? 

*Redeployment* is a collection of twelve short stories with twelve distinct narrators 
relaying personal accounts associated with the war in Iraq. Each story provides a different 
viewpoint and allows a glimpse into the various experiences related to wartime. The temporal 
structure varies from stories told from the battlefield to stories told from retrospective 
perspectives; the themes include encountering violence, coping with the loss of a friend, 
surviving traumatic experience, attempting to reintegrate back into “normal” life, feelings of 
helplessness, and a few other instances in between. The collection, at its core, attempts to capture 
the ways in which trauma permeates both combat in real time, as well as how it trickles down 
into the quotidian. 

The use of the word “trauma” can be traced back to 1694 where it was first only defined 
as a physical medical condition.¹ In 1860, physician John Erichsen identified symptoms of 
trauma associated with railway accidents and spinal injury.² Eventually, trauma expanded 
beyond solely the physical and became associated with the mind and emotional shock, which 
was considered “the hysterical shattering of the personality consequent on a situation of extreme 
terror or fright” (Leys 4). While originally a very female oriented diagnosis, according to Freud, 
World War I resulted in so many cases of mental neuroses that male diagnosis became

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¹ See *Oxford English Dictionary* definition entry on “trauma.”
² I encountered this information from Ruth Ley’s *A Genealogy* where she provides a surface 
level description of this historical moment. For a more detailed description on
impossible to dismiss, though many were still accused of malingering (Leys 4). While events such as World War II and the Holocaust repeatedly recorded a multitude of individuals experiencing traumatic symptoms, interest in traumatic experience and representation was not regarded highly enough until the post-war results of the Vietnam War, during which the DSM finally recorded PTSD an official recognition.

Representation is a problem that trauma theorists often encounter due to the widespread belief that traumatic experience cannot be fettered by language. It is often believed that these types of experiences are “unsayable,” “unspeakable,” or “indescribable,” which creates a paradoxical task for those attempting to write and explore trauma; they must try to describe an indescribable experience. The problem behind representation stems from the very nature of trauma and how it functions alongside memory. “Traumatic memories are dominated by sensory, perceptual and emotional components, components which are harder to integrate into the conscious narrative as they do not normally have verbal components” (Hunt 119) and these properties make for very difficult conditions to translate into an appropriate form of narrative. Certain emotions, such as paralyzing fear or totalizing sadness, are so sensory based that they can become more difficult to accurately verbalize.

What becomes apparent through the examination of trauma theory against Klay’s text is the need for a wider paradigm to encapsulate all the different facets of trauma. In trauma theorist Michelle Balaev’s “Trends in Literary Trauma Theory,” she begins with: “A central claim of contemporary literary trauma theory asserts that trauma creates a speechless fright that divides or destroys identity” (Balaev 149). In fact, Balaev points out that some theorists, specifically Sigmund Freud and Kali Tal, believe that trauma produces a temporal gap in knowledge and
because it precludes knowledge, it also precludes representation. Due to this belief, many people categorize trauma and the explicit components of traumatic experience to simply be “unrepresentable” in their very nature. Therefore, often the goal of these writers is to be able to garner an appropriate affective response compromising the sensory, perceptual and emotional components. However, the problem that arises still when attempting to reach this goal is the difficulty of representing the “unrepresentable.”

In order to circumvent the “unrepresentable,” Klay participates in what George Saunders, author of The Braindead Megaphone calls “rapid-truthing,” which occurs when “we’re told the truth quicker and more directly than we’re used to” (Saunders 80)—and this often results in producing a more all-encompassing affective response. The underlying reason for this affective response is due to the way rapid-truthing participates in a violation of our internal mental expectations and patterns. In this essay, I am going to analyze how this violation functions in Klay’s text. He incorporates rapid-truthing through the inclusion of humor, narrative gaps, and a lack of closure; these literary devices function on both a micro- and macro- scale. His incorporation of this narrative device works to subvert the expectation that trauma is not representable by circumventing description. Rapid-truthing allows Klay to speak volumes by writing one thing that actually encapsulates much more. I will provide a glimpse into how his narrative style participates in rapid-truthing through a close analysis of three of his stories: “War Stories,” “After Action Report,” and “Frago.”

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3 For a more in-depth look at the pathology behind how trauma affects the dissolution of the self and knowledge, see Balaev’s “Trends in Literary Trauma Theory,” or see Ruth Ley’s Trauma: A Geneology for a brief, yet productive, analysis on traumatic narrative’s relation to explicit and implicit memory. Her analysis might provide some complementary insight as to why traumatic instance could prelude narrative representation.

4 I originally encountered Saunders term, rapid-truthing, through Katie Watson’s “Gallows Humor in Medicine.”
Prior to introducing his stories, I will lay out the framework through which I will analyze how Klay participates in rapid-truthing through these multiple narrative methods. The first type of rapid-truthing Klay implements is through the inclusion of humor, and more specifically, through the inclusion of gallows humor. Bioethicist Katie Watson provides a thoughtful analysis on the use of gallows humor in medical settings. Much of what she says about the relationship between humor and failure in medicalized settings is applicable to Klay’s use of humor in combat settings due to the contextual similarities. Both the medical sphere and combat zones can be sites of death and sorrow and thus the use of gallows humor in one will likely complement the use of gallows humor in the other. She examines the multiplicity of ways that gallows humor functions in this process of rapid-truthing. She begins with an anecdotal story about a few young residents sitting in an emergency room late at night, wondering why their pizza order is taking so long. Moments later they are informed their delivery boy was shot right outside the ER and these same residents fail to save his life. After a few moments of silence, one of the residents proceeds to ask, “What happened to our pizza?” If this question is not already inappropriate enough, after they find the box outside on the ground, in the same spot he was shot moments before entering the ER, another resident asks, “How much do you think we ought to tip him?” to which the others laugh; then they eat the pizza (Watson 37). She then launches into a lengthy analysis on the functional benefits of this type of humor in the face of “serious, frightening, or painful subject matter” (Watson 38) and I believe Klay’s use of this humor mirrors her analysis.

Here, I will provide a more thorough examination of Watson’s discussion of gallows humor in order to develop a fuller argument about its use in Klay’s text. Watson describes gallows humor as “humor that treats serious, frightening, or painful subject matter in a light or satirical way. Joking about death fits the term most literally, but making fun of life-threatening,
disastrous, or terrifying situations fits the category as well” (Watson 39). She quickly makes an important distinction between gallows humor and cruel humor, quoting a physician she spoke to who framed the difference between humors as synonymous to “the difference between whistling as you go through the graveyard and kicking over the gravestones” (Watson 39). While this metaphor might feel somewhat excessive, it highlights the difference between humor having a reparative function and having a destructive function. While the distinction between cruel humor and gallows humor might be difficult to discern at face value, examining the context will aid in illuminating their function. For example, Klay’s inclusion of humor might at first teeter the line between appropriate and cruel, but upon further consideration into individual moments of his text, I will demonstrate how the reparative function becomes apparent through Watson’s descriptions of gallows humor.

The second narrative device Klay succeeds in using is the language of silence. Psychoanalytic theorist Annie Rogers et al. explore this concept of the “unsaid” in their article entitled “An Interpretive Poetics of the Languages of the Unsayable.” Their argument provides useful analysis for why Klay’s writing is able to produce such a vast affective response through short episodic fiction. They elucidate how meaning is often derived from what is absent, how “what is said depends on what is not said for its full significance. An analysis that considers only the spoken, no matter how complex, risks overlooking an essential aspect of expression and meaning” (Rogers et al. 80). They identify four types of “language of the unsayable”: negation, revision, smokescreens, and silence. I will highlight specific moments in the text where Klay uses the language of smokescreens and the language of silence to participate in rapid-truthing. Additionally, Marxist Pierre Macherey’s critical interpretation of the “explicit” and the “implicit” in textual analysis will provide another useful lens through which I will read Klay’s
use of narrative gaps. When reading any work critically, he first suggests that we must thoroughly examine the use of shadowing over knowledge: “does it denote a true absence, or is it the extension of a half-presence?”[…]“an accidental hesitation or a statutory necessity?” (Macherey 82-83). These inquiries have led me to theorize about the function of the silence in the text while simultaneously producing uncertainty on whether silence equates absence or if it potentially does the opposite.

Upon deeper analysis into Klay’s text, we must accept that silence rejects absence and is, in a way, performative. Macherey’s analysis begs the question: why cover particular moments in silence? To answer this, we must be able to acknowledge that “the silence of the book is not a lack to be remedied, an inadequacy to be made up for. It is not a temporary silence that could be finally abolished. We must distinguish the necessity of this silence […] [i]n its every particle, the work manifests, uncovers, what it cannot say. This silence gives it life” (Macherey 84). I will apply his analysis on top of the “language of the unsayable” to emphasize individual moments of narrative silence that stand out and how they function as rapid-truthing.

The final narrative tool Klay incorporates is the refusal to provide closure at the end of each story. We are creatures of narrative and this is proven by our extensive history of storytelling—a process in which we are constantly participating in. Nigel Hunt examines the use of narrative in his book *Memory, War, and Trauma* during which he states, “storytelling is not optional—it is something we have to do; we are compelled by our nature to create narratives” (Hunt 115). He goes on to say that “personal stories are not just about telling stories; they are the means by which identities can be fashioned and developed. People need to make meaningful sense of their experiences through the use of language and stories” (Hunt 115). This stems from our Aristotelian nature, “insisting upon any storyteller’s observation of the ‘rules,’ upon proper
beginnings, middles and particularly ends” (Brooks 4). Each of Klay’s stories ends rather abruptly and leaves the reader with a sense of feeling incomplete. The reason for this is not—though could be mistaken as—related to the problem of representability. Instead, it is yet another form of rapid-truthing. By refusing to provide the reader with closure or a sense of finality, he causes his readers to participate in their own interpretive work—similar to how we might critically approach a narrative silence. Due to our need to make sense out of stories, Klay actually forces us to come to our own conclusions by refusing to provide us with his own.

I. After Action Report

*After Action Report* follows, mainly, the relationship between an unnamed narrator and his friend, Timhead. The men experience an IED\(^5\) vehicular explosion and they are immediately fired at after they collect themselves post-explosion. As Timhead and the narrator are under fire, Timhead’s instincts take over and he shoots into the scattering dust. After the dust settles, they realize he has shot and killed a thirteen-year-old boy who had been holding an AK-47. After the killing, the rest of the men think the narrator is responsible for the death and Timhead asks the narrator to take the responsibility for the kill as his own. The story continues to unfold and the narrator absorbs the congratulatory responses, the hesitations, and the indications of respect from his fellow Marines of a kill he can never truly claim, all the while attempting to access an affective or emotional response of any kind from Timhead. He tries and fails at five instances throughout the narrative to get Timhead to talk about what he is feeling because “he’d killed somebody. He had to be feeling something. It weirded [him] out, and [he] hadn’t even shot the kid” (Klay 38). Right before the close of the story, the narrator informs the reader that one of

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5 An IED is an acronym for “improvised explosion device” and they are most commonly used as roadside bombs. They are responsible for a large number of war casualties.
their fellow Marines had been shot in the neck and lived. The “bullet barely grazed him. A quarter inch to the right, he’d be dead” (Klay 51); the next day he was showing off his wound and bragging about the Purple Heart that would be awarded to him as well as how it would get him laid. Then, on the final page this conversation occurs:

“Harvey’s so full of shit,” he said. “Mr. Tough Guy.”

I ignored him and started pulling off my cammies.

“I thought he was dead,” said Timhead. “Shit. He probably thought he was dead.”

“Timhead,” I said, “we got a convoy in five hours.”

He scowled down at his bed. “Yeah. So?”

“So let it go,” I said.

“He’s full of shit,” he said.

I got under the covers and closed my eyes. Timhead was right, but it wouldn’t do either of us any good to think about it. “Fine,” I said. I heard him moving around the room, and then he turned off the light.

“Hey,” he said, quiet, “do you think—”

That did it. I sat up straight. “What do you want him to say? He got shot in the neck and he’s going out tomorrow, same as us. Let him say what he wants.”

I could hear Timhead breathing in the dark. “Yeah,” he said. “Whatever. It doesn’t matter.”

“No,” I said. “It doesn’t.” (Klay 52)

It is at this pivotal moment where Timhead might finally be ready to talk about how he is feeling, but the narrator cuts him off and refuses to entertain the potential behind his question. We are left to wonder why, after the entire narrative was devoted to uncovering what he was feeling, the
narrator—and Klay himself—refuses to allow any sort of closure. What does Klay gain from ending this story this way? Cutting off the story at this moment implements rapid-truthing through the “language of silence” as well as a refusal of closure.

To truly uncover why the “language of silence” in combination with the refusal of closure is so important, there is another layer of analysis I would like to apply to this moment that will help make the implicit meaning behind this scene shift into the explicit. I would like to introduce trauma theorist Cathy Caruth’s claim about “the way in which one’s own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another’s wound” (Caruth 8). This story emulates her claim as we see the narrator not only absorbs the responsibility of the kill but Klay includes instances to show that he is seemingly absorbing Timhead’s emotional response to the trauma as well, as if it were his own. At first, the narrator claims that, “every time [he] told the story, it felt better” which gives validity to the theory of healing through narrative expression. However, the narrator’s experience of claiming this kill continues to follow a steady decline while Timhead appears to lack any real, raw emotional response. Even when their friend, Mac, dies a week later, the narrative is focused on this one kill in particular. After an emotional ceremony, a man approaches the narrator and says, “At least you got one. One of those fucks,” to which the narrator internally responds, “Except I killed hajji first. So it was more like Mac for

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6 I have come across many pieces of literature discussing the healing properties of narrative. For a more comprehensive understanding of how this process works, see Patterns of Natural Language Use: Disclosure, Personality, and Social Integration (2001) by Pennebaker and Graybeal or Trauma Theory and Hemingway’s Lost Paris Manuscripts (2005) by Marc Seals. Additionally, Klay even includes this in his writing. In “War Stories,” one of the characters is working on a project and she says: “We’re working with a group of writers from the Iraq Veterans Against the War. They’ve been doing workshops, a sort of healing through writing thing” (221). By including this small tidbit, Klay is participating in the validation this healing process.
hajji. And I didn’t even kill hajji” (Klay 37). Not only is this moment reflective of his guilt and potential belief surrounding his own implication in his friend’s death, but it also contains a brief divergence into dissociation, which is evocative of the original paradigm of literary trauma. The narrator’s thought process originated with the thought “except I killed hajji first” where he makes a referential mistake by referring to himself as the true killer.

In addition to the referential mistake, he alludes to the possibility that the death of his friend was payment for the death of the Iraqi child. While this cannot be an accurate or logical thought, his initial response of blaming himself shows a lack of awareness and distorted thinking, both of which can point to traumatic affect. The responses do not stop there; the narrator eventually must smash his Nintendo PSP, which he plays because he cannot sleep at night, because he realizes that if his mind is not sharp due to lack of sleep, he might end up killing more of his friends. He has become so affected by this one moment that he cannot even afford himself the smallest of pleasures, one as small as a handheld video game, due to his inability to rationalize what he should and should not do. At one point, he even threatens to shoot a fellow Marine when he jokingly prods him after they diffuse a bomb; this jittery attitude and debilitating anxiety eventually causes him to go to the chaplain to search for answers behind what he is feeling. His behaviors reflect that of someone reeling from the aftermath of a traumatic experience. However, the narrator did not kill anyone and yet the affective response is still present somehow. His deterioration is representative of both how trauma situates itself between individuals and also the ability of trauma to permeate through shared experience. By the end of the novel, the transfer of traumatic affect from Timhead to the narrator has become so

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7Michelle Balaev, through her own research into trauma theory, recognizes these symptoms as being related to traumatic experience
apparent that we are able to see through this language of silence and participate in our own version of meaning-making.

*After Action Report* contains another important moment of rapid-truthing with the inclusion of a joke. After the narrator has attempted to move beyond his own affective response while simultaneously attempting to connect to Timhead, there is a scene where he is told to fire into the darkness after men that were running away; he could not see the after-effect of his actions but he feels confident he may have killed someone. Immediately after this scene ends, the following scene opens with a joke that Marines often tell each other: “‘What is it like to kill a man? What do you feel when you pull the trigger?’ The Marine looks at him and says one word: ‘Recoil’” (Klay 47). Klay’s decision to include this joke following a very apparent decline from a stable temperament shows more by the silence that surrounds it than the explicit words that are used.

This is a clear example of Klay implementing a “language of smokescreen.” This language functions so that “what is said, the ‘screen,’ becomes the figure, while the unsaid serves as the ground” (Rogers et al. 88). The language of the underlying truth functions as the foundation upon which the joke can be built. This type of language is labeled as “language of smokescreen” for apt reasoning. A smokescreen is *just* what it sounds like, a cloud of smoke covering up something else we cannot see. But the properties of smoke are not immovable; smoke will inevitably clear. Therefore to use language of smokescreen actually suggests that the underlying meaning has the potential to be uncovered with patience and effort. The joke appears to be making one claim, but behind this claim there lies an even greater implicit meaning.

The obvious joke is that Marines should feel nothing emotionally when they fire a gun; they simply feel the physical sensation of the gun recoiling. If this had been placed at the
beginning of the narrative, its function would differ; it might simply operate as a way to situate Marines as emotionless and robot-like. However, its location at this moment in the story engenders a more powerful affective response due to the irony of its juxtaposition with a kill scene. The entire narrative until this moment had been built around the narrator’s reaction to a kill he does not execute, yet claims as his own, and the resulting trauma. To include this joke immediately after he finally might have recorded his first actual kill leaves a very open space for interpretation.

This open space of interpretation leaves us with a plethora of questions to examine. We are left to wonder if this means that after he does finally kill someone, is this less emotional? Is it easier because he was unable to see the damage he had done, whereas the body of the original kill in the beginning was entirely visible to him and the rest of his platoon? What does this say about the relationship between visibility and responsibility? Instead of giving us insight into his emotional response to pulling the trigger, Klay leaves us with this:

It’s like when you’re with a girl and you realize neither of you has a condom. So no sex. Except you start fooling around and she gets on top of you and starts stressing you out. And you take each other’s clothes off and you say, We’re just gonna fool around. But you’re hard and she’s moving and she starts rubbing against you and your hips start bucking and you can feel your mind slipping, like, This is dangerous, you can’t do this.

(Klay 48)

This is an extension of the language of smokescreen. Instead of attempting to produce the appropriate language for describing what it might be like for one individual to take the life of another, Klay leaves us with this metaphor. The Oxford English Dictionary defines metaphor as “something regarded as representative or suggestive of something else, especially as a material
emblem of an abstract quality, condition, notion, etc.” (“Metaphor”). In its most basic application, metaphors allow the reader to make something that is, at first, abstract or ambiguous into an accessible and understandable feeling. The need for this metaphor highlights the impossibility of finding the appropriate descriptive language needed to capture the mentality of killing someone, which in certain cases might feel an impossible task. This particular metaphor is attempting to connect the similarities between having unsafe sexual relations with pulling the trigger on a gun aimed at another human. At first, these two might seem completely irrelevant of one another. One regards intimacy and one regards death. One takes life away and one produces life. However, both regard a certain type of danger associated with the precariousness of life. Both contain an intense build-up that contains mental and physiological responses. In both examples, the individual knows they want to execute a specific action, but they are not sure if they are prepared for the repercussions. The metaphor ultimately succeeds because the affective response to each situation is comparable and thus it succeeds in providing contextual information quicker and more effectively than attempting to describe the feeling of killing someone. Additionally, this metaphor is particularly useful because it is far more likely that a reader has experienced the emotions behind an encounter of intimacy than the emotions behind shooting someone. This metaphor provides greater access into what the narrator might be feeling.

Lastly, I would like to return to the final scene: why does the narrator cut off Timhead at the first potential moment of true discussion? Why set us up for this final conversation only to refuse giving us access in the end? The answers to all of the questions this text has produced—while important—are not related to the true function of these narrative silences. Marxist Pierre Macherey is able to provide addition insight to the “language of silence” through his claim that the “silences shape all speech” (Macherey 85) which means that the purpose of the language of
silence is to produce these questions. The silence provides a space for thoughtful provocation and this stems from the ability to produce a surplus of questions through the simple inclusion of these moments of rapid-truthing.

This narrative strategy also participates in creating a paradox regarding the belief of trauma as being knowable or unspeakable; trauma is an inescapable trope of war fiction. The inclusion of the silence, at first blush, might cause the reader to assume that the text requires it because it is unable to fetter the language of the truth behind traumatic experience in words and can only be read through the gaps in the text—through what it does not or cannot say. However, if we read Macherey’s argument against the silences of this text, then Klay’s use of silence actually creates a larger space for dialogue regarding the experiences because “spoken words tell only part of a person’s story; even a verbatim account does not capture the part of the story communicated in or through gesture, facial expression, shifts in emotion, or silence” (Rogers et al. 81). Therefore, it gives the audience a chance to personalize their reactions to filling in the narrative gaps because “speech eventually has nothing more to tell us: we investigate the silence, for it is the silence that is doing the speaking” (Macherey 86), and it is left to us, as the readers, to interpret what the function of each silence is.

II. War Stories

“War Stories” follows another unnamed narrator and his friend, Jenks, inside of a bar waiting for two women. One of the women they are waiting for is writing a war play and Jenks is going to tell her his story for the first time. The story opens with the narrator conversing with Jenks. Jenks has “so much scar tissue and wrinkled skin” that the narrator “never [knows] if he’s happy or sad or pissed or what. He’s got no hair and no ears, so even though it’s been three years
after he got hit, [he] still [feels] like his head is something [he] shouldn’t stare at. But you look a man in the eye when you talk to him, so for Jenks [he forces his] eyes in line with his” (Klay 213). This is the second paragraph of the story, so the reader has become immediately aware that this character is physically injured and the damage is very visible—perhaps even horrifying—but there is still uncertainty surrounding exactly what occurred. The men begin discussing the success rate of picking up women with “war stories” and Jenks assures him that the only reason they were so successful was his presence. The narrator responds, “Who’s gonna call bullshit when you’re sitting there in the corner looking all Nightmare on Elm Street?” (Klay 214).

This moment of mockery at the expense of a physical injury is the epitome of Watson’s description of gallows humor as well as a prime example of rapid-truthing. Freddy Krueger is a fictionalized character from A Nightmare on Elm Street, his face is badly burned and disfigured and he is a nightmare serial killer, meaning he kills people in their dreams and this results in their real death outside of this dreamscape. Freddy Krueger is physically repulsive and he literally scares people to death in his fictional world. To be physically compared to such a terrifying horror movie icon “says” a great deal more about Jenks’ appearance—as well at the potential social implications and responses it might elicit—than a simple description of his burns. The first description of his skin and missing parts gives the reader information and a working framework for what Jenks looks like, but to compare him to Freddy Krueger gives us an immediate working comparison. This comparison not only participates in rapid-truthing of his physical injury but it simultaneously coats his physical appearance with an aura of negativity and even with the symbolism of death and destruction.

The joking does not stop after the Freddy Krueger comment. The men laugh together at the comment and then move to why him looking this way affects women so much. The narrator
Witte says, “Even the antiwar chicks—which in this city is all of them—want to hear you were in some shit” to which Jenks responds to by pointing at his face and saying, “Some shit” (Klay 215). Their reactions and quips to one another elucidate that this type of banter has moved beyond any cruel intentions and actually might be acting in multiple reparative ways. Watson notes that “joking and laughing together can establish or affirm intimacy…it means that we are alike in some way, that we see the world similarly” (Watson 39, 41). She identifies this type of behavior as “backstage” joking; it’s how people talk “when it’s just [them]” (Watson 38) which allows this type of joke to shift from inappropriate humor to appropriate humor due to its ability to strengthen their relationship through the affirmation of intimacy. The joke’s potential offensive nature falls by the wayside as long as both parties are actively participating in this type of “backstage” humor and implementing it as a tool for self-preservation rather than for destructive purposes. In fact, Watson suggests that it may also provide space to defend oneself against the feeling of diminishing power because “if we can get other people to laugh with us, we might feel our relative power grow” (Watson 40). For instance, someone who has such a stark facial injury is likely to be the victim of constant voyeurism and side-glances from nameless strangers, so to include a joke that so blatantly calls attention to his face almost acts as a subversive tactic to restore power and autonomy to Jenks. Thus, this “backstage” joking allows for a shift in power dynamics, giving Jenks more relative power over his injury which might otherwise render him powerless and dejected.

However, this issue surrounding power dynamics deserves an additional lens. Holocaust theorist Frederica Clementi poignantly identifies a problem that surfaces in response to this type of humor: who is permitted to laugh? She writes about the use of humor in *The Diary of Anne Frank* and how, for Frank, humor speaks “to the power of laughter as an extraordinarily
subversive technique of resistance against moral, psychic, and civic annihilation” (Clementi 258). Her analysis suggests that Frank’s inclusion of humor in her diary, which she identifies as a performance piece, acts as a symbol of preservation because “Producing art—and laughter—during the war was a way for the victims to array creativity, civilization and pacifism against the brutality of genocide” (Clementi 258). However, after she identifies many key aspects of humor and its reparative function, she makes a sharp turn in her analysis. She questions whether or not someone from an outsider’s perspective has the right to use the humor in the same way Anne Frank did, coming to the conclusion that “this is our conundrum, not the victims” (Clementi 264). This leaves us to question our role, as a reader, peering behind the curtain into this “backstage” humor. Jewish studies scholar Steve Lipman poses a similar question in his compilation of anecdotal stories arising from Holocaust survivors entitled Laughter in Hell. He too asks, “whether we, who did not share the victims’ pain, can fully share their laughter” (Lipman 9). Their analyses provide a space for thoughtful provocation in response to Klay’s text. It highlights the possibility that Klay’s use of humor truly does function more importantly at the level of rapid-truthing and contextualizing. In fact, taking both Clementi and Lipman into consideration, we are left to wonder if these moments are humorous at all. However, I think we must look at the benefits of laughter and back to the function of gallows humor before we come to the conclusion that these “jokes” are not funny and thus can only function as a source of surface-level information. Lipman actually provides a counterpoint to this theory by suggesting that the absence of laughter “is a result of the tragedy itself and a sensitivity displayed by the post-Holocaust generation[…]‘Even so, can laughter be restorative in a case as extreme as the Holocaust? That something so slight should alleviate the burden of something so gigantic might, on the face of it, be a joke in itself. But then, humor counts most in
precisely those situations where more decisive remedies fail” (Lipman 7). When taken into consideration and put into conversation with Watson’s piece on gallows humor, we must acknowledge that to be able to laugh in these moments, “offers a way of being sane in an insane place” (Watson 40). Thus to participate in the joke, to laugh and to feel an emotional response, is actually a mechanism for identifying the insanity or cruelty of the situation and subverting it with opposition through a brief moment of happiness. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that “sometimes we joke not for distance but for connection” (Watson 39) and this can be further applied to both connection between the characters and connection between the text and the reader. As previously mentioned, the “backstage” joking between characters functions as a way to establish intimacy. It also has the potential to establish accessibility to a reader that might not fit “backstage”, the reader that Lipman and Clementi are referring to in their analyses. By this, I mean that many of Klay’s readers will not have participated in combat or experienced anything like these two characters have, but it is more than likely they have experienced what it feels like to joke. Due to this, a quicker and more direct line of access forms between Jenks and an “outside” reader through the established common connection: laughter. Therefore this brief digression into what at first might appear as cruel commentary actually functions to provide contextual information, establish connection, shift balances of power and lastly, provide comedic relief.

III. Frago

Another brief but poignant example of gallows humor occurs in his second story, “Frago.” The story opens in the middle of a team of Marines attempting to clear a house. One of the soldiers, Sweet, gets shot in the leg and is bleeding profusely and the narrator notes the
gravity of the situation based on the movements and decisions of the doctor working on him. He sees “Doc’s already pulled out the QuikClot and put it on the wound. A bad sign, and that QuikClot shit burns” (Klay 20). The wounded soldier seems to be following the thought process of the narrator, also noting the severity of the situation, and responds by saying, “Hey, Doc, you wanna give me a BJ while you’re down there?” (Klay 20) to which the doctor does not respond to physically or verbally. This joke does multiple things for this scene. Watson states that, “Freud claimed that joking about death (and other anxiety-provoking topics like sex, excrement, race, and religion) releases psychic tension through laughter” and follows this with a quotation from Viktor Frankl describing how “humor, more than anything else in the human make-up, can afford an aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation, even if only for a few seconds” (Watson 40). Similarly, for Sweet the joke functions as an immediate release of the abundance of anxiety he is feeling at the uncertainty of his situation and potentially the uncertainty of his death. It serves as a psychological barrier to the extreme fear and pain that he is experiencing from both external and internal obstacles. Somehow, a simple, crude, and perhaps even offensive comment opens up a discourse to elucidate the insanity of their situation through the incongruity between a request for sexual intimacy—which can function as a symbol for procreation and pleasure—while they are struggling to survive inside of a place that is saturated by death and pain. Toward the end of Watson’s analysis of gallows humor, she makes a poignant claim about the butt of this category of jokes. The butt of gallows humor is not the individual in question. It’s death. Sweet’s joke “is a macabre summary of” (Watson 42) the unintelligible aspects of combat, most of which the Marines are fully aware of but would prefer not to explicitly refer to in this moment of high intensity. Additionally, this is a joke wrapped inside a request for an action that can be categorized as a desire. While this specific desire is sexual in nature and could be
categorized as crude, the simple fact that it is a form of desire clarifies that he is in need of something. The content of the joke works as a screen to his true needs, but allows those surrounding him know that he truly is in need. The multiplicities behind what this joke does for this moment go beyond comic relief, it contextualizes Sweet’s response and provides the reader with information more rapidly than a full paragraph of physical description could.

Consequently, the doctor’s lack of response posits even more contextualization. The line following Sweet’s joke reads: “Doc doesn’t look up” (Klay 20). Those four words reflect yet another example of the “language of the unsayable.” This is a very apparent use of “the language of silence.” Rogers et al. write that, “the significance of shapes and substances that are present depends on what is absent” (80). His refusal to acknowledge Sweet’s joke immediately affirms the severity of the situation. The absence of his response suggests a few things. First, it suggests he has no time to respond because if he loses focus, Sweet might lose more than that. Second, by ignoring him, the doctor refuses to let Sweet acknowledge that he is in need. That is not to say that Sweet is not in need. Later in the story, the narrator talks about keeping his cool throughout their clearing of the house and says, “Your Marines see you fucked up over this, then they start thinking about how fucked up it all is. And we don’t have time to deal with that” (Klay 23). So while it is very clear that Sweet needs serious medical attention, by blanketing his joke in silence, Doc refuses to allow Sweet and his other men to see any sign of emotion. This signifies that he needs the other Marines to remain calm because every second of combat matters and that he refuses to let fears of death take over their thoughts.

Finally, Klay ends this story in a similar fashion to his other stories—inconsequentially. Throughout the story, the men clear a house, deal with a serious injury, kill two insurgents, shot a third through the face, find two brutally tortured allies, and return back to base. The narrator
and the man who shot the third insurgent are sitting across from one another. The narrator looks at him and notices, “he’s looking at his ice cream melting into the cobbler. No good. [He puts] a spoon in his hand. You’ve got to do the basic things” (Klay 27). The story ends here. We are left with no insight to what will happen to these men nor does Klay leave any indication of whether or not this man will be able to handle the remainder of the war, perhaps even the remainder of the evening.

This man, Dyer, watching his ice cream melt into his cobbler is a powerful image, mostly due to how easy it is to relate to. While not every person has experienced trauma, I do not think it would be an egregious statement to assume that almost every person has experienced extreme sadness. This moment is so generalizable to sadness that almost anyone can insert themselves into this state of mind and this is what makes narrative such a powerful tool for expression; “without narrative we cannot understand either the personal or the social world” (Hunt 197). Therefore, while this conclusion might feel like it lacks closure, like it cuts off without any warning, it actually provides a moment of connection and personalization. Any reader who has felt intense sadness to the point that they feel they can no longer participate in the basic activities—such as eating ice cream—has the ability to connect to this character. Once we recognize the ability to connect is present, we are able to gain insight into the story beyond what Klay can put into words; we are able to feel something that is indescribable.

**Rapid-Truthing: A Larger Scale**

Klay’s entire collection is 288 pages long, a length that might be considered typical for a novel. But Klay specifically works with short stories, or episodic fiction. A short story is defined as “an invented prose narrative shorter than a novel usually dealing with a few characters and
aiming at a unity of effect and often concentrating on the creation of mood rather than plot” (“Short Story”). Two hundred and eighty-eight pages is likely long enough to provide rich character and plot development, but when attempting to fit twelve individually written but thematically related stories into that range, it feels as though many of those important elements have the potential to become lost. Klay’s task is to somehow encompass the most important aspects of a successful narrative in about twenty-five pages or less. Thus, while he participates in rapid-truthing within each story, each individual story is yet another form of rapid-truthing, but on a larger scale. Health and social psychologist Nigel Hunt writes on the complexities of narrative, suggesting that good narratives include a number of elements. One of these elements is “cohesion, so that the story hangs together in a meaningful way” (Hunt 115). One review of Redeployment in the New York Times states, “it’s the best thing written so far on what the war did to people’s souls” (Filkins, “The Long Road Home”). To suggest that Klay’s collection has surpassed the task of representing war but delved into something deeper—such as text that reaches the level of the soul—is a far greater feat than to simply call it a successful war collection. Even though it is a series of separate stories, his collection has cohesion in the form of emotional affect. This is because each and every one of Klay’s stories could be examined like the three that I have chosen to analyze. Every story has its own use, it provides something different and contains its own individual viewpoint of trauma and how it trauma has a different relationship with every individual it encounters.

At its very core, Klay’s collection guides us to the understanding that trauma is inherently plural. Trauma is something that can be felt by a collective, but trauma is not collective and “the assumed casual link between collective and individual experience obscures the different forms of violence, torture, and abuse that can produce different responses in different individuals” (Balaev
16). When Balaev’s claim is paired with Klay’s text, the plurality of trauma becomes evident. In fact, Klay participates in what I would like to call a “meta-commentary” on how the book functions as a whole. He includes a plethora of individual moments throughout his collection that could be removed from the text and read at an individual level to provide commentary on what it is like to write *Redeployment*. Each of these moments function as rapid-truthing with larger implication, as they encompass a series of important observations on the process of writing about war. To use Klay’s words, “the point of the thing isn’t to be pro- or antiwar, but to give people a better understanding of ‘what’s really going on’” (Klay 222). By including small insertions such as this one into the narrative, he is able to provide “meta-commentary” on war narratives without an explicit pro- or anti-war stance.

One instance that I would like to emphasize occurs in the middle of “War Stories.” Jenks is beginning to talk about what he remembers of his injury and mentions he thinks there was a lot of screaming, but he does not remember. The woman interviewing him turns to the narrator and asks, “What do you remember? Do you remember screaming?” to which the narrator responds, “Maybe. Who cares? […] A thing like that, if you got ten people there, then you’ll have ten different stories. And they don’t match” (Klay 226).

This one sentence successfully encapsulates why Klay needed to write about the war in Iraq in the form that he chose to do so. He did not choose to write in twelve distinct voices simply because he wanted to show the range of experiences one might encounter in war; rather, he needed twelve different voices. He needed these voices to avoid “reducing a complex psychological experience that we do not fully understand”—an experience that is affected by a multitude of factors—“into a monocular concept with a limited application” (Balaev 23). Klay evades falling into the trap of painting trauma as a monocular concept because each story has its own version of trauma and none of these stories claim to be the right or only version—they
simply claim to be one version. In addition to refusing to reduce trauma to a monocular experience, it simultaneously validates the individuality of experience. If you line up ten individuals who experienced the same explosion, you would receive ten personalized stories. This is because previous experiences, ideologies, cultural backgrounds, coping mechanisms, and personal disposition are a working internal network that influences future experiences. Nigel Hunt provides an apt summary of this need when he wrote, “life stories should be pluralized because we have alternative versions for different people and situations” (Hunt 115). To assume ten individuals in a singular explosion will produce the same response is not only incredibly reductive but simultaneously disrespectful. If this were true, then trauma would have a singular definition, a singular response, a singular cure and a singular narrative. But what Klay has proven is that \textit{trauma} is impossible to describe but \textit{traumas} are not—because trauma has been and always will be multiple.
Notes

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