



VCU

Virginia Commonwealth University
VCU Scholars Compass

Mighty Pen Project Anthology & Archive

Mighty Pen Project

2021

Énouement

Miko Yoshida

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/mighty_pen_archive

© The Author(s)

Downloaded from

https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/mighty_pen_archive/143

This 2001-2020 Marines is brought to you for free and open access by the Mighty Pen Project at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mighty Pen Project Anthology & Archive by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.

Énouement Miko Yoshida

The first thing you did when you woke up was touch your weapon. Before you knew what time it was, or even where you were, you made sure it was there. In your total of twenty-three months in Afghanistan, your digs varied from a courtyard covered in sheep shit to a personal can with wi-fi and AC that ran 24-7. In every place, the rifle grab was your confirmation that you were alive and had the means to keep living.

They taught you the rules. Treat, never, keep, keep.¹ You knew these rules by heart and probably always will. You cringed at the action movie star running across rooftops, finger curled around the trigger, primed for a negligent discharge. When the too-cool-and-too-good-looking-for-his-own-skin detective was clearing a room, you thought: There are rules, damnit, stop flagging your battle buddy.

They taught you how to shoot. Lying prone, sitting cross-legged, and standing up, you used your thumb to gently guide the upper part of the butt stock to the perfect niche between your deltoid and chest. Each time your shoulder pocket would cradle the weapon perfectly and position your body to absorb the recoil. The configuration of your legs, torso, hips, and arms felt awkward at first but over time, like a practiced yogi, your body adapted and became a rifle stand. It knew how to move around the weapon so it would be optimal for employment. Employment as in killing. You killed the shit out of those dog targets—shaped like a human’s shoulders and head—at 300 meters. In Afghanistan you killed actual dogs. Because they were going to attack you. Because they might’ve given away your position. Because you trained to shoot to kill, and you just wanted to kill something after your buddy lost part of his leg—not to a dog, but to those pesky IEDs. Your practiced skills came in useful when you found yourself bored on post. Like the range, you were cool, calm, and collected as you sighted in on the farmer tending to his

¹ Treat every weapon as if it were loaded. Never point your rifle at anything you do not intend to shoot. Keep your finger straight and off the trigger until you are ready to fire. Keep your weapon on safe until you are ready to fire. Know your target and what lies beyond it.

Énouement Miko Yoshida

crops. You knew he was harmless, simply working to feed his family. You imagined pulling the trigger, hoping one day he'd give you a reason. After all that training, not to shoot at something would be like not taking the test you studied for all this time. You would get distracted and think of other metaphors about not being able to shoot: sparring without bouts, cooking without eating, sex without climax. This passed the time as you stood and stared into nothingness, forgetting you were fantasizing about murder for no reason but boredom and fear. Or did they train you to do this?

They taught you how to breathe. Inhale, pause, exhale. You learned to raise your sights just above the target, wait for the natural pause as the sight post moves down, and gently squeeze the trigger; don't anticipate the recoil. This soft pull could put a bullet on a human target at 500 meters, and every marine trained to it. You never paused to think about the connection between the small movement of your pointer finger and the death it could dole out, squeeze by squeeze. When you actually encountered the enemy, you scanned and saw only dust as the rest of the marines opened fire. You never shot at anything but once that IED went off, you saw one of your own with a missing limb, again. You rushed over to him and watched as he struggled for air. You felt like he'd be all better if he could just get that leg glued back on and get a nice shower and change of clothes—then he could breathe.

They taught you how to take care of it. To disassemble it and clean it, put it back together and conduct a functions check. Each piece was essential, but they stressed to you: don't be the asshole who loses the firing pin. You learned to pack a fat lip of dip while you did it, for instant credibility. It made you sick at first, but over time you could take apart and clean your weapon with your eyes closed and pack cancer into your lower lips like a real marine. The tobacco stung your gums, but you didn't care.

Énouement Miko Yoshida

They taught you that it was more important than you. Losing your mind was fine, but if you lost a rifle, you were fucked. A lost rifle had you walking with the entire company online inside the training area until it was found. They berated the marine who belonged to that rifle. You learned it was more important than you because it would keep you alive. Killing notwithstanding, your weapon actually made you, you. You were a rifleman, every marine was. You knew the right amount of pressure it took to push the pins to separate the upper and lower receivers for disassembly. You forgot which buttons not to press when having a spat with your girlfriend. It never ended well. Between the marines and the woman, you thought you knew which was more important. You didn't.

They taught you when you got there to never shoot warning shots; to shoot to kill. You stared out at the tree line hoping someone would pop out with an AK-47. But it was just a shoeless kid signaling you to toss a water bottle. So, when another marine shot an old man with corn husks in his turban, you went to look. The bullet left a tiny hole in his skull and the real confirmation was the blood that slowly darkened the dirt. You felt a tinge of jealousy. Your higher-up chalked it up to an unarmed enemy combatant since the last few days they'd been throwing improvised grenades over the courtyard of the house you took over. They'd told you not to let anyone get within hand grenade range and to stop giving out bottles of water. That's what they packed explosives into before launching them over the wall. What about sling shots, you thought of asking. But you'd already been told to not be a smart-ass, so you just kept it to yourself. Also, what was hand grenade range? You thought about the high school quarterback who could launch a pigskin fifty yards, no problem. He dated the prom queen and went to an Ivy. He had his own start-up by the time he graduated. It's okay, though. You had your rifle and could kill anyone you wanted to at that very moment—no warning shots.

Énouement Miko Yoshida

They didn't teach you about coming back. When you return to home base the last thing you do is turn in your rifle at the armory. Get that done, and your family and friends are waiting for you with tears and hugs. You feel guilty at that moment for missing your weapon more than your family. You go home that night and meet the bottom of the whiskey bottle. Your buddy got it for you. He thinks it'll make you feel better; you think so, too. You wake up and panic when you reach for your weapon and it's not there. You start sleeping with the semiauto pistol you bought when you were just a trainee. Not the same, but it's good enough. They didn't mention the separation anxiety part when training you to love your weapon.

You're out. You seek employment; not the killing kind, the kind that makes you a productive member of society, that helps your family stop worrying about you. If the conversation goes there and they ask, you tell people you never shot someone in combat. You feel slightly ashamed, as if your credibility is somehow reduced, so you think of compensating by explaining that your job was lethal, but in different ways—that you had to shoot artillery and call for rockets and drop bombs; that if the grunts couldn't get to it with their long guns, you could summon an actual Hellfire, or worse. But you realize that's a bit unhinged, so you chuckle and resort to self-deprecation. Yeah, I'm not a badass and I'm not one of those crazy ex-marines, so don't worry. You're tired of fucking doing this over and over again. You're sick of seeing the singularly labeled PTSD-riddled ex-military guy showing up on the TV screen. That's why he's a vigilante, channeling his pain and rage for justice. It's so badass. They eat it up. A Hollywood veteran can hyper focus on avenging his buddy's death, or coldly kill for money as a hired gun, or inexplicably access his homemade bunker and armory to set up a base of operations for a heist with other war buddies who drop everything to join him and provide sniper overwatch from a

Énouement Miko Yoshida

skyscraper. Also, they're somehow always former special forces, sport righteous beards, and look like they live at the CrossFit gym. You've been saying all this out loud and the people around you are looking a little uncomfortable. When's the last time you could hyper focus on anything, like just sitting at a bar and having a drink? You take a sip of the heavy IPA you always order and change the subject. You're still more in than you're out.

You slowly figure out how to avoid these conversations altogether. You don't offer up any information that needs explanation. You've been out of the marines longer than you were in. Your hair is longer; you don't present like one anyway. You've dropped the sirs and the ma'ams, the rogers and the wilcos. You've stopped saying female and vic, but sometimes forget that bathrooms aren't heads anymore. When people find out you were in the military and say things like, "You're pretty short for a marine," you ignore it despite wanting to show them that you can still reach them with a nice left hook, no problem. You put your pistol in storage because your best friend told you it's probably not good to have it laying around, especially around yourself. It's out of sight, but unavoidably not out of mind.

You quit drinking because what respectable thirty-three-year-old gets in fistfights at a wedding afterparty? You quit smoking, too, because if all the burn pits and engine exhaust you inhaled doesn't kill you, that certainly will. No respectable corporate citizen would be caught with dip and a spit bottle, but you still have a pinch or two outside the bar with another vet. It helps you with your sobriety.

The marines are way past you now. But when you're lying on the beach with your girlfriend you still get paranoid that someone could come up behind you and smash your face. You don't have any weapons and think about how to protect yourself; you're listening for footsteps behind you on the sand. You try to focus on the sound of the ocean in front of you, but

Énouement Miko Yoshida

your mind drifts back. You think about the random acts of violence against Asian Americans that flood your news feed because of the ‘Chinese’ virus. You could be the next Vincent Chin, only reversed. He was of Chinese descent killed for appearing Japanese. But the killers, those men weren’t the type of people they sent to jail.² Three years before you were born, in the country you went to war for, one could kill a Chinese American for a \$3,000 fee, according to its criminal justice system. Now, in 2021 you don’t let anyone get behind you on the platform waiting for the train, just like you did each time you came home from Afghanistan. You know it’s not reasonable to be on edge this much, but your body reacts nonetheless. You remember you have a pen from the crossword puzzle you do to ease your anxiety. Order is soothing on the black and white grid; everything has its place. It’s a puzzle but it’s not impossible, and the choices are limited to twenty-six letters. But the inkstick you use to scrawl them can pierce anyone’s throat with enough velocity. You click it a few times and tuck it beside your thigh where your Marine Corps-issued pistol used to go.

Another mass shooting. You go down a research black hole. You come across the Wikipedia page for the deadliest shooting to date. In 2017 a man killed sixty people in Las Vegas, injuring hundreds in the process. What would compel someone to go on a rampage and murder innocent people with a weapon of war? You discover that one third of your country’s mass shooters during your lifetime had some sort of military training. You know nothing will change. You know they’ll stand by their rights, the rights conceived in a time by men who believed that any human with a shade darker than white was subhuman. They say to protect the national border, they’ll need free access to these arms. You know they’re the same guns we take overseas, ignore borders, and wage war with for twenty straight years. As you scan the victims of

² <https://www.history.com/news/vincent-chin-murder-asian-american-rights>

Énouement Miko Yoshida

the Las Vegas massacre, you see one of the dead was your elementary school crush, a mother of three. She was married to a marine. You know there will be more senseless sprees.

Everything they taught you aimed at death. Shooting was just the most obvious method you trained for. They showed you that with good sight picture and proper sight alignment, it's as easy as applying some pressure to a piece of metal. You remember this pressure as you wrap the floss around a curled finger each night. They made killing muscle memory, so you didn't have to think about it when the time came. Trouble is, you think about it even if the time doesn't come. You wonder how many more are learning how to do this. You wonder how they'll carry this knowledge in their body, in their minds, now and until the end. You wonder if they think the about same things you think about because they are training the same way you did. You think about the next marine who was issued your rifle, and if they took care of it. If they used it to shoot someone, or themselves. Accidentally, or on purpose. You wonder, when they get out, how they'll apply the skill of marksmanship, killing, in a world that will likely never ask them to use it. You'll die one day, still knowing how to carry, shoot, and clean the weapon, even if you can't physically do it; even if you wish you didn't know how. And just before you pass, you'll realize that the gun will outlive you, they'll outlive us all.