



## VECTORS

*By Scott Petty*

I received many random letters from children while I was fighting in Afghanistan. I kept every one and stashed them all away, but one will always stand out in my mind. I had already been deployed eight months when it came. It was from a ten year old boy named Kevin. The letter began in a typical way: “Dear Soldier: Thank you for everything you do for our country.” Kevin wrote about his life in New York. He wrote about recent snow and the birth of his sister, then he asked me about my days. He asked about the weather and the food and what I liked to do for fun. Those types of questions always went through me. My replies were canned most of the time, if I replied at all. Then Kevin asked me if I believe in God. He asked more questions about the Army and the enemy, then he asked again: “Do you believe in God??” Two question marks. I got a letter from my mother not long after that. She asked the same thing, and not for the first time.

I wrote Kevin two letters in reply. The first letter was more of a physics lesson, inspired by war’s numbing effect on me. I did not care whether the boy understood or was entertained by my words. I wrote the letter for my own benefit. I wanted to spit out everything that had been going through my mind for months. I wanted to reveal the veined heart of the world, as I knew it. My second letter to Kevin followed tragedy.

“Viewed from above, war is all vectors,” I wrote in my first letter. “It is all lines depicting human and mechanical assets going from point A to point B and back to point A, sometimes to point C then to A, and so on. It is a comprehensive system in which seemingly divisive forces achieve vector equilibrium. Infantrymen and artillerymen and kitchen crew and black ops guys all play a part in a larger geometrical experience, heaving from one side of the grid to the other. Time is planned out on paper well ahead of the mission, whether it is just for a day or something long term, and in that plan the players are points and lines. They balance out. They are weightless in the grand scheme.” I explained to Kevin that, according to my experience, everyone in the world is behaving this way: following rules meant for an abundance of points and lines, trying to avoid pain, trying to maximize pleasure. That is the law. That is human behavior.

“Vectors equal mass times velocity. Mass and velocity are damaging, and this is a principle we rely upon in war. There is collateral damage. It is unfortunate, but as long as humans continue to be both predatory and exploratory, there will always be collateral damage. It is not in our control. It is a matter of destiny. Every event reveals. Every event is sized as it should be.” That is how I finished the letter. I was drunk on my words. I did not apologize for my beliefs or my presentation. I revised the first draft and wrote a second draft, but I did not reveal my belief in God.

On a gray and bitter cold day a week after I sent Kevin the letter, I was in a convoy rolling through a village near Kandahar City. I did not want to look out of the little window of my vehicle. I hated the world out there. I had a few months left in Afghanistan. I was already picturing the beautiful alternate life I was going to pick up and start living again. I had experienced the glory of war. I volunteered for it. My yearning had been romantic, natural but not logical, but I was done...or so I thought. My departure date was still too far away to start counting the days, though my buddies were already doing that. I told them that that was futile. They told me I was dull and pagan and needed to pray more often. They rambled wordily about God’s plan for our crew. I had not seen God in Afghanistan, and I was sure I was not going to see God in Afghanistan.



The convoy stopped in the middle of the village. It was unusual. I was in the rear vehicle. Everything was still for a few minutes. I listened to the radio chatter. There was a traffic incident ahead. I heard people screaming, but I did not hear any gunfire or other sounds of violence. "Not again," moaned a soldier across from me. He tilted his head back and closed his eyes. I noticed some stubble on his chin. It glinted in an impossible ray of sunlight. He was just as tired of war as I was. "Wake up," I said. I kicked his leg. Everyone got out and pulled security, as I instructed.

Troops were gathered ahead. I walked forward and found what they found. "The man was smiling," said the soldier who was driving the first vehicle. He pointed down at a bloody old man. "He was cut in half, but he was smiling. Look at him. It wasn't my fault. I know how to drive. I wasn't driving fast. I was watching for people, but he came out of nowhere. That's life. One second you're riding along on your bicycle, on the same route like you've done a thousand other days, the next second you're cut in half. I didn't even know I hit him. I never saw him. The guy driving behind me called me on the radio and told me to stop. Look at that smile."

The man did have a peaceful expression, though blood-filled. Perhaps I did as well, in the eyes of others, after being at war for so long. The man's eyes were wide open. He looked like he had been ready for anything, for a long while. We talked to some of the other villagers who saw the convoy coming and got out of the way, but they said the man was not watching where he was going. They said he was the local loon and was in another world. They said he was half-deaf. I took some close up pictures of different parts of his body, even his hands and feet. His torso was sliced clean. His guts were in place. He got caught underneath the sharp end of the mine-roller extension of the vehicle.

"Where do you think he was going?" asked the killer, my brother in arms.

"He was just headed this way," I said. "Same as we were."

When we drove through Kandahar City later that day it happened again. We were driving down a busy street, though traffic was not in a jam. Cars were pulling over so our convoy could pass. We stopped again. The soldier across from me laughed and cursed. There was another traffic fatality. I exited the vehicle. This time a man's whole head was crushed. His eyeballs were pushed out of their sockets. His tongue was flattened out. I never knew the human tongue was so long. The rest of him was intact, not a scratch. I took pictures of all that, and his hands and feet.

I scanned the crowd. I saw a full range of responses. Most people were simply intrigued then went about their business. I saw shock. I saw smiles and heard laughter. We interviewed the dead man's younger brother. He was fourteen years old. He told our translator that his brother was repairing a tire and lost his balance. He just fell backward right as the convoy was passing. As I listened to his story, I saw something else in the boy's face. I sensed a feeling of rejoice and relief. It was real, and it was pure.

I felt the same: rejoice and relief...from a discovery. I saw in the face of that child where the world went wrong, a long time ago. I could not prove it, but I believed that boy saw an opportunity for change and kicked his brother into the path of the convoy. Only God knows what the boy wanted to change. That is when I extracted God from the scene. From that point forward, I was content on being a simple point in a huge, but concise, plan. The very idea of a higher power was a fresh design. I felt a blast of air and flinched. It felt like a bomb, but it was just the winter wind.

That night I wrote Kevin another letter. I apologized for not addressing his question fully in my first letter. "We have religious services every Sunday," I wrote. "It helps, but I did not believe that God was alive in the world until I saw the face of death and the reflection of that face in the living. I always thought that God just gave us all these tools and ideas and left us to our own devices. He does, but there is so much more. I told you all about war being vectors. I think that is where God lives, in all the space between...which is what the universe is: the space between. A line is an abstract concept. It does not exist, yet we carefully walk the line. Everything I have seen on both sides of that line will give me nightmares for the rest of my days. It will control me."

I apologized again at the end of the letter, but I told Kevin it was the world revealed to me, and just for me, and that he should keep my letter and read it again when he is a grown man. I wrote my mother another letter that night. She deserved an answer to her question. I told her I had been laughing and telling jokes with my brothers in arms. I told her about all the crazy culinary creations possible with the food available. I told her of the many beautiful sunsets I had seen. I told her the truth.

## *THE TICKING*

*By Scott Petty*

I follow the ticking. It is the only sound in this dark house. It invites me to vent fury in the dreamy air. Nights are the worst. It is when the pain in my head is worst.

The ticking is all over this old house. There are ghosts in the noisy revelry, but they do not keep me awake. They drift from room to room, like me. They have their own secret nightmares.

The ghosts in my dreams scream. They hate the half-light of war. They exist frame to frame. They scream so loud. I ask God why, in ragged human prose. I get down on my knees and ask.

The screams are followed by a ticking. I do not follow that ticking. It leads to the bloodied faces of buddies. The blank sky rolls above. The bloody clock does not stop.

I still see blood inside my vehicle, proof of a brutal ceremony. There is blood on my hands. Blood covers everything. That snaky choreography bites. Always, there will be blood.

Tick. Bomb. Tick. Boom. The nightmare is my concubine. She is a rambling, discursive presence. She lords over a desolate city. I do not have the heart to tell her this.

Somewhere in this house is the real bomb. The one in the desert was a dream. I hope this bomb brings peace. I hope it brings the last blast. For now, I do not have the heart to find it.

My wife sleeps well. She does not hear the ticking. She tells our children daddy dreams bad things. She tells them daddy's head hurts. Her dreams are not as thick and intrusive.

I tell my children there are good ghosts and bad ghosts. I do not let my children see me cry. They hear the ticking, too. I see it in their faces. Their dreams burst into a run.

The ticking keeps away darker intrusions. It strips away the depravity of my creativity and replaces it with its own. It leads to dreamy lights. It does not slow as the world slows. It transcends the dirty devices of the world and its angels. It leads to a silent place.

I follow the ticking.

I follow the ticking.