

Joe Eldridge

## He Looks at Clouds

Flight home from Frankfurt to Chicago  
in the dead of day—light blasting  
through the rounded windows  
like paparazzi exploding flashbulbs  
fades the overhead monitors  
into a pixilation of pastels;  
but then nobody in the cabin really cares  
about the movie, no, not this cargo of non-coms  
in their best desert camouflage  
heading home from Ramstein for R&R.  
So merry at first this group acts whooping it up  
like midnight in Times Square  
chugging champagne minis  
as easily as Coca-Cola from a can.  
A sergeant, right arm in sling, tells me  
they were part of the company  
that took Kandahar before moving  
on to Kabul, then mentions  
the Big Macs they've all been missing.  
A private, a bit on the pudgy side yet promising  
to be handsome once he achieves adulthood,  
sits spine-stiff in a coach seat  
staring out at the clouds we're passing.  
Another private, even more adolescent  
in appearance, sleeps nestled in the quiet  
familiarity of the cloud-looker's shoulder  
but then leaps out of his seat shrieking  
like a little boy who's just fallen off  
a jungle gym & busted his chin.



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Reaching out by rote, the cloud-looking  
soldier grasps his buddy's head  
between his palms, holds it firmly  
with all the certainty of a faith-healer  
holds it hard so as to squeeze the howling out  
then once calmer, ever so gently strokes  
the nape of his comrade's neck tenderly  
& with a—*hush now*—pulls him back  
onto the pillow part of his chest.  
This all done while staring out the window.  
This all done without taking his eyes off  
the snow-blinding clouds.

