

Athens 2021 A.D.

BY WILLIAM HOLMES IV

In stark contrast to the ancient city that once flourished with ideas and commerce, today there is only the exchange of small arms fire and artillery shells within the city center, as the soldiers check their weapons. Reloading clips, stocking grenades, adjusting helmets and armor becomes ambient noise; a sort of requiem for the tight chests, clenched teeth and apprehension. In the basement of an unkempt house of old bricks, a single bulb above a large dinner table sheds light on a map and a meager squad of eight, including myself. The moldy space has offered us sanctuary from the relentless shelling and was at first cramped when we were a healthy squad of 15 a fortnight ago.

The barrage continues but unlike the others, this one is close, very close. The floor jolts, the table rattles and items fall off as the light swings from the cord. The men glance at their wrists incessantly because it's nearly time to leave. Those who aren't standing do so and with the crack and clank of old Russian-made rifles, rounds are sent to their chambers. Like the attire, the radios are dark. One final check. "It's time," we're told. It's midnight.

Downtown is only strategically important, an area where everyone is working security and the people are filthy from fighting in the humidity. The shells continue to fall around them as they climb the stairs and evacuate the house. Outside many of the buildings have toppled and sloshed in the streets as we dart into an alley and make our move toward the objective. An anthropomorphic symphony of our boots on the cobble stone, the cadence of our breath and the dull thud of explosions accompany us as we run past doorways and debris along a sewage canal infested with rats.

A dozen or so green flares are

suddenly shot up throughout the area exposing us as a vulnerable squad and part of a force attempting to occupy another Mediterranean stronghold. The iridescent light shimmers, illuminating the course of the alley as it becomes narrower. We slow down, this is a bottleneck, and the man on point signals us to halt as he proceeds cautiously with eyes scanning. He takes a step forward; there is a sharp click. We all hear it. A heartbeat later, the device ignites. A whirlwind of fire engulfs him, and there is a wall of flames blocking the path as though looking in a furnace with his form crumbling inside. Seven. We are horrified by the spectacle and stunned by the intense heat.

This ambush was well thought out. Rifles open up behind us with shouts in a foreign language filling the breaks in between. A heavy caliber bullet goes through the helmet of the man next to me as the rest of our six hearts beat frantically with adrenaline and fear. Through the chaos of trying to find a target in order to return fire, our stomachs twist to knots when we hear what sounds like bricks being dropped from the rooftops, but we know they are grenades. The shadows blink out of existence and the earth churns and turns over on itself disintegrating back to nothing with each burst. The senses grapple with reality, trying to tear away from a cubist's perspective. "Cover! Fall back!" commands are echoed.

I wake up with an unsuppressed scream. The veins in my neck are constricted and I feel my pulse trying to escape through my temples. I look to my side and see an empty bottle of liquor staring back at me, and that's when I remember she left. She left months ago, months after I returned. I was going to apologize for waking her up, again.

Cast

by Eric Bradley

I sit broken, burned and sore
feeling helpless and ashamed, suffered ache into my core.
I, the only one who's blamed, wonder what the 'morrow has in store,
hoping the weather to be tamed.
Don't know how I hurt so bad
Can't be freed from yesterday
I try to block what makes me sad,
with nothing fair to say.
I know in life, I have been had,
endless suffer I must pay.
Wishing I'd always had a chance,
to be alive without a stain.
To learn a mystic dance,
and never feel the pain.
To put me in a trance,
and nearly go insane.
So I sit here and I write,
about the sorrow in my past,
never able to stand and fight,
because my strength has left me fast.
So I reach towards the light,
Distant and in last
To be forever in a Cast.

Take Heed

by Daniel Byerly

A certain farmer went to sow his seed
And as he went some fell along the way.
It then got trampled down and became feed
For birds devoured it up that very day.
Some seed then fell on rock where there it grew,
It withered quickly from lack of rain.
Some fell in thorns and grew though it died too,
It soon was choked to death and brought no grain.
But then some seed fell onto good rich ground,
It grew and brought a crop a hundredfold.
If one will listen, life will here be found,
This mystery revealed from times of old.
Take heed the way you hear along life's way
For very unexpected comes that day.

Celebrating vendors
around the world

The second annual International Vendor Week, hosted by the International Network of Newspapers, took place Feb. 3-9. A variety of the 122 street papers across the globe participated in events that ranged from social media to celebrity "sell offs" to bring awareness to the hard work that the world's 14,000 street paper vendors put in every single day. Street Roots vendors used Skype to connect with their counterparts at Megaphone in Vancouver, BC, with coffee, donuts and a trivia game about the global street paper movement and traded sales tips. Look back at the IVW activity at storify.com/INSP/international-street-paper-vendor-week-2014

