

Michael Rakowitz: Backstroke of the West
The Ballad of Special Ops Cody

Where am I?

Why am I here?

Who am I?

What are these things doing here? Or why am I here?

I never knew stuff like that really existed. I thought things like this were only in pictures like that. In books. Not for real. But when you see these things up close and for real, something there aren't words for . . . you know? It's just something you feel. Something you know.

What's the last thing I remember? What do I remember? Oh, I don't want to . . . yeah, I don't want to think about that. No.

What else do I remember? I remember faces. I remember the faces. I remember it was back in 2005. It was February. This day was nice, and the day before had not been so nice.

My sarge said I did a really good job that day. He even told me very matter of fact, he said, "When those people that were working in there in admin, when they were too squeamish, they were too squeamish to do the retinal scans because the man no longer had eyes where eyes once were, they were too squeamish, they didn't want to touch the body of a dead detainee, a dead Iraqi," he said, "you jumped right in there. You jumped right in there. Took charge." And I did the entire workup alone. But I don't remember.

You guys ready to come out? You guys ready? On me. Let's go.

You look like them. Or they look like you. Laying there. With toe tags. The blood had ceased running through their veins. It had formed clots on the cots. The net webbing was full. And so it dripped. It dripped onto the floor. It pooled and it dripped.

I'm sorry. Why do you look at me like that? Like . . . like we're different?

Look, I said I was sorry. We're not different. I mean, we are. But we're also the same. Because both of us, all of us, we were created. We were sold and stolen—or stolen and sold—to a destination unknown that's not our home. We shouldn't be here. We have stories to tell, to our families, our friends, in our own native tongue. We have stories to tell. What's your story? I just keep talking. I just keep talking. I guess to myself, because you're not answering.

You guys! Why are you here? Don't y'all wanna go home? Be free? I can get y'all outta here. Now's your chance.

When I see you, your faces, I see your faces without eyes and I think of that day. They were broken but we destroyed them. You are broken so we keep you locked up. Fragile. Temperature-controlled. Humidity-controlled. Without the chance of human hands touching you, except for a quarterly dusting. But always gloved.

I will always be gloved, too. And never again shall blood course through my veins.