

**GABE HUDSON** BY DEBORAH TREISMAN

**WRESTLING MONKEYS, GULF WAR SYNDROME, AND ONE OF THE YEAR'S MOST PROVOCATIVE SHORT STORY COLLECTIONS**

**DEBORAH TREISMAN:** Your book, *Dear Mr. President*, just out from Knopf, is a collection of satirical stories inspired by the Gulf War. Why did you choose that subject?

**GABE HUDSON:** It seemed compelling to me in the context of the war narratives that we, the younger generation, had inherited. The Gulf War [in 1991] was a hundred-hour virtual type of war, where barely anybody fired a weapon, and it stood in

such stark contrast to a war like Vietnam, where more than 50,000 Americans died. It was frightening at first, but then at some point people were just drinking beer, watching the war on TV and making jokes about it. I wanted to capture the surreality of that experience.

**DT: Weren't you in the Reserves at one point?**

**GH:** Yes. In 1992, I was at the University of Texas at Austin, and I was basically a soft, privileged col-

lege kid. I grew up playing the violin pretty strenuously, and there was no TV in the house. I felt as if my parents had conducted some kind of experiment on me, so I signed up to be a rifleman in the Marine Reserves, partly to exasperate them.

**DT: How was boot camp?**

**GH:** If you have a sense of humor, it's really kind of hilarious—just elaborate performance art.

**DT: Had a lot of people in your unit served in the Gulf War?**

**GH:** Yes, they were my best sources for scuttlebutt—military rumors. And I saw some things for myself, too. One time I was knocked off a tank and really hurt my back. When I got back to the medical center, I reported the accident because I was concerned about any lasting effects. Later, I saw that the medic had wadded up my report and thrown it in the trash, [laughs] which obviously made me feel important.

**DT: The military filing system.**

**GH:** Yes. But that's partly why I became interested in Gulf War Syndrome. There were people who were really, really sick, and the government had all these techniques for deceiving them. If someone needed to see a doctor, for instance, he'd be assigned to one who was 600 miles away. It was heartbreaking. The idea of Gulf War Syndrome became, to me, a unique metaphor.

**DT: It was a virtual war for most of us, but you must have heard about a more vital part of it.**

**GH:** Yes. It was also important to me to write a different kind of war story, to talk about who the people actually were. Men in uniform can seem like robots, and I wanted to give them an inner life. During the Gulf War, there were a lot of soldiers just sitting around and thinking about their personal problems.

**DT: It's army as therapy?**

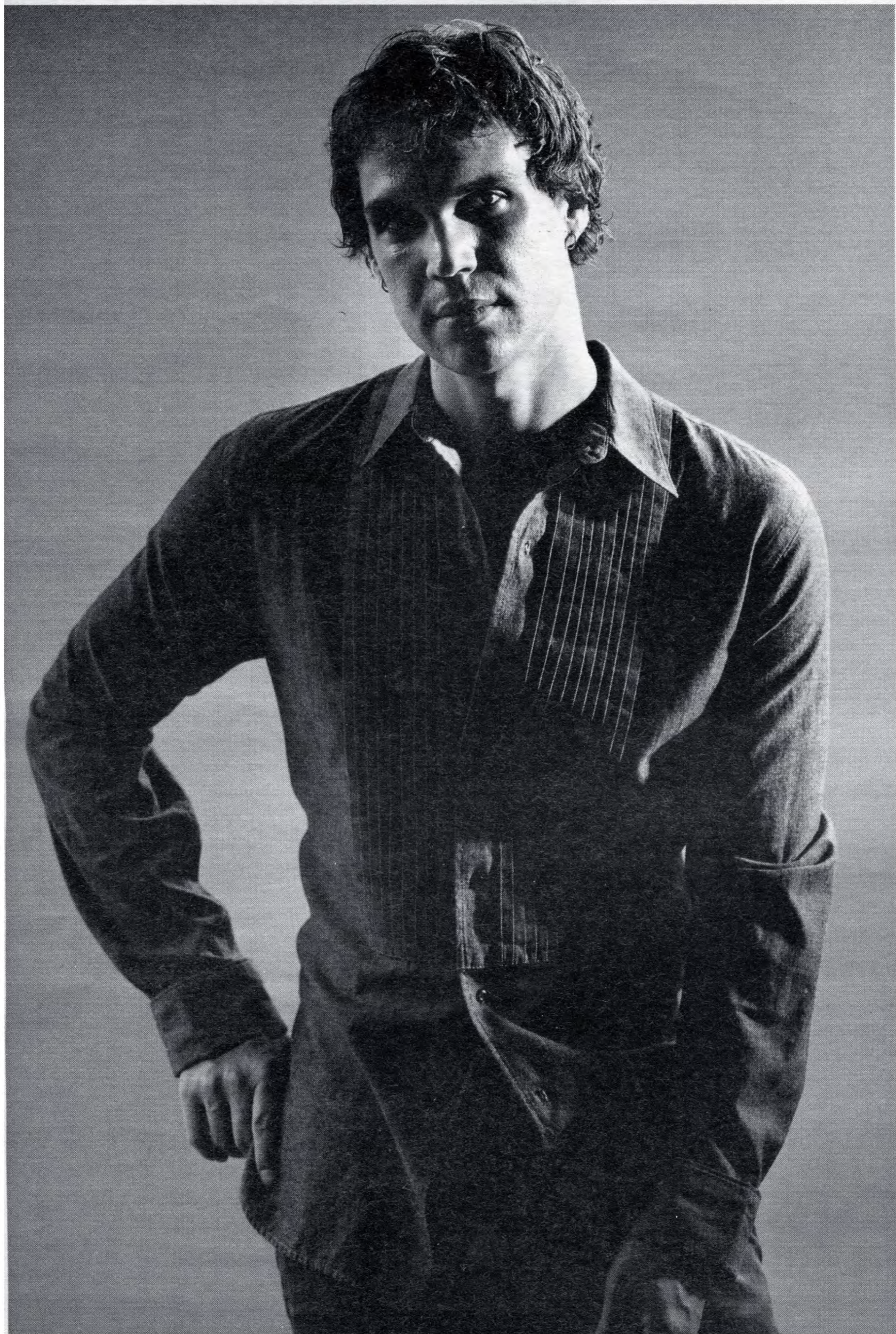
**GH:** Yeah, you should give it a try. It's probably not too late for you to enlist.

**DT: Did it help you that way, or did you go through it all with an ironic detachment?**

**GH:** You kind of have (more Hudson page 112)

---

**Above: Gabe Hudson wears a top by A|X ARMANI EXCHANGE. This page and next, photographs: NICOLAS WAGNER.**



(continued from page 110) to. My time in the Reserves was a device, a magic trick—I got to disappear for a while. That experience is a mysterious thing to carry around with you. People you meet afterward can't quite put their finger on you. Everybody expects me to be this stocky guy with a lot of testosterone.

**DT: When in fact you're a violin-playing sissy.**

**GH:** Exactly.

**DT: You write about a lot of grotesque and unhappy things, and yet most of the time you manage to make them funny.**

**GH:** I never set out to be a funny writer. In fact, I suffered from Donald Barthelme's angry-young-man syndrome. Then I realized that all my life people had laughed at me at the most

inappropriate times, when I was being the most sincere, *[Treisman laughs]* like right now. At a certain age I figured out that I could use that to my advantage, so a lot of my writing is really serious but it also seems to come out funny.

**DT: When you take a character who is suffering from severe war trauma and have him get into wrestling matches with monkeys, there's a certain level of comic satire there.**

**GH:** *[sighs]* Gosh, the monkeys! Yes, there is satire there, but he's also quite earnest in his attempts. Most of the time, if I'm making fun of a character, I'm actually making fun of myself.

**DT: You wrote most of these stories before 9/11, but I can't help thinking that recent events will change how people read them.**

**GH:** I set out to write about a war that was not in the public consciousness in any way, and now that's obviously not the case. Last fall, I'd flip on the television and see images of rangers dropping out of airplanes over Afghanistan, and meanwhile I was trying to write about special operations in the Gulf. There was an uncomfortable overlap between my work and the horrific reality of the time.

**DT: You're teaching a survival course?**

**GH:** Yeah. I started teaching this course at the School of Obligatory Survival, or S.O.S. We have a state-of-the-art training facility in the West Village, built out of stealth fighters, and there's a mini zoo with eagles and tigers, so if you want to do body transference, S.O.S. can do that for you. The philosophy behind obligatory survival is that being alive is a humiliating circumstance, but being dead is humiliating, too. So we've created this new way of being somewhere between life and death. We call it "leath." It's ultimately a patriotic endeavor.

**DT: That might be your next book.**

**GH:** It might well be.

---

**Deborah Treisman is a deputy editor at *The New Yorker*. Above: Top by POLO JEANS CO. RALPH LAUREN. Jeans by 55 DSL. Styling: JOSEPH WILLIAMSON/AdFinem. Grooming: ELIZABETH MORACHE/Trafikink.com. For fashion and photo details see page 247.**