

Gregory Benford

A professor of physics at the University of California at Irvine, Gregory Benford is also regarded as one of science fiction's "killer B's" for the award-winning novels and short fiction he has written since 1965. His novel Timescape, winner of the Nebula and John W. Campbell Awards, mixed the themes of alternate history and time travel in its account of a physicist attempting to avert global disaster by manipulating events that happen decades earlier. Benford is considered one of the preeminent modern writers of hard science fiction for such novels as Earthworm which works cutting-edge astronomy into its story of first human contact with aliens in the 21st century. He has been praised for his explorations of humanist themes, notably in his Galactic Center sextet of novels of human-machine contact and human-machine interface comprised of In the Ocean of Night, Across the Sea of Suns, The Stars in Sky, The Great Sky River, Tides of Light, and Furious Gulf. His short fiction has been collected in In Alien Flesh and Matter's Skin. He is the author of Foundation's Fear, a novel set in Isaac Asimov's Foundation milieu; has collaborated on Beyond the Fall of Night, a sequel to Arthur C. Clarke's Against the Fall of Night; and has written a popular science book Time: How Humanity Communicates Across Millennia. His work as an anthologist includes Nuclear War, the alternate history compilation Hitler Victorious, and four volumes in the What Might Have Been series. The publication of his novel The Martian Race, about the first manned mission to the Red Planet, was timed to coincide with the 1999 touchdown of the Mars Polar Lander.

MANASSAS, AGAIN

THERE WERE WORSE THINGS than getting swept up in the first battle of the first war in over a century, but Bradley could not right away think of any.

They had been out on a lark, really. Bradley got his buddy Paul to go along, flying low over the hills to watch the group formations of men and machines. Bradley knew how to keep below the radar screens, sometimes skimming along so close to the treetops that branches snapped on their understruts. They had come in before dawn, using Bradley's dad's luxury, ultraquiet cruiser-over the broad fields, using the sunrise to blind the optical sensors below.

It had been enormously exciting. The gleaming columns, the acrid smoke of ruin, the distant muffled coughs of combat.

Then somebody shot them down.

Not a full, square hit, luckily. Bradley had gotten them over two ranges of hills, lurching through shot-racked air. Then they came down heavily, air bags saving the two boys.

They had no choice but to go along with the team that picked them out of their wreckage. Dexter, a big, swarthy man, seemed to be in charge. He said, "We got word a bunch of mechs are comin' along this road. You stick with us, you can help out."

Bradley said irritably, "Why should we? I want to--"

"Cause it's not safe round here, kid," Dexter said. "You joyriding rich kids, maybe you'll learn something about that today."

Dexter grinned, showing two missing teeth, and waved the rest of his company to keep moving into the slanting early-morning glow.

Nobody had any food and Bradley was pretty sure they would not have shared it out if they had. The fighting over the ridge to the west had disrupted whatever supply lines there were into this open, once agricultural land.

They reached the crossroads by midmorning and right away knocked out a servant mech by mistake. It saw them coming, hiking over the hill through the thick oaks and started chuffing away, moving as fast as it could. It was an R class, shiny

chromed.

A woman who carried one of the long rods over her shoulder whipped the rod down and sighted along it and a loud boom startled Bradley. The R mech went down. "First one of the day," the woman named Angel said.

"Musta been a scout," Dexter said.

"For what?" Bradley asked, shocked as they walked down the slope toward the mech in air still cool and moist from dawn.

Paul said tentatively, "The mech withdrawal?"

Dexter nodded. "Mechs're on their way through here. Bet they're scared plenty."

They saw the R mech had a small hole punched through it right in the servo controls near the back. "Not bad shooting," a man said to Angel.

"Itole you these'd work," Angel said proudly. "I sighted mine in fresh this mornin'. It helps."

Bradley realized suddenly that the various machined rods these dozen people carried were all weapons, fabrications turned out of factories exclusively human-run. *Killing tools*, he thought in blank surprise. *Like the old days. You see the dramas and stuff, but they've been illegal for a century.*

"Maybe this mech was just plain scared," Bradley said. "It's got software for that."

"We sent out a beeper warning," Dexter said, slapping the pack on his back. "Goes out of this li'l rig here. Any mech wants no trouble, all they got to do is come up on us slow and then lie down so we can have a look at their programming cubes."

"Disable it?"

"Sure. How else we going to be sure?"

"This one ran clear as anything," Angel said, reloading her rifle.

"Maybe it didn't understand," Bradley said. The R models were deft, subtle, terrific at social graces.

"It knew, all right," Angel said, popping the mech's central port open and pulling out its ID cube. "Look, it's from Sanfran."

"What's it doing all the way out here, then, if it's not a rebel?" a black man named Nelson asked.

"Yeah," Dexter said. "Enter it as reb." He handed Bradley a wrist comm. "We're keepin' track careful now. You'll be busy just takin' down score today, kid."

"Rebel, uh, I see," Bradley said, tapping into the comm. It was reassuring to do something simple while he straightened out his feelings.

"You bet," Nelson said, excitement lacing his voice. "Look at it. Fancy mech, smarter than most of them, tryin' to save itself. It's been runnin' away from our people. They just broke up a big mech force west of here."

"I never could afford one of these chrome jobs," Angel said. "They knew that, too. I had one of these classy R number meanmouth me in the market, try to grab a can of soybean stew." She laughed sarcastically. "That was when there was scraps left on the shelves."

“Elegant thing, wasn’t it?” Nelson kicked the mech, which rolled farther downhill.

“You messed it up pretty well,” Bradley said.

Dexter said, “Roll it down into that hollow so nobody can see it from the road.” He gestured at Paul. “You go with other party. Hey, Mercer!”

A tall man ambled over from where he had been carefully trying to pick the spines off a prickly pear growing in a gully. Everybody was hungry. Dexter said to him, “Go down across the road and set up shot. Take this kid-Paul’s your name right?-he’ll help with the gruntwork. We’ll catch ’em in a crossfire here.”

Mercer went off with Paul. Bradley helped get the dead mech going and with Angel rolled it into the gully. Its flailing dug fresh wet gouges in the spring grass. The exposed mud exhaled moist scents. They threw manzanita brush over the carcass to be sure, and by that time Dexter had deployed his people.

They were setting up what looked like traps of some kind well away from the blacktop crossroads. Bradley saw that was to keep the crossroads from looking damaged or clogged. They wanted the mechs to come in fast and keep going.

As he worked he heard rolling bass notes, like the mumbles of a giant, come from the horizon. He could see that blacktop roads leading to the crossroads could carry mechs away from the distant battles. Dexter was everywhere, barking orders. Bradley noted with respect.

The adults talked excitedly to each other about what the mechs would make of it, how easy they were to fool about real-world stuff, and even threw in some insider mech slang-codes and acronyms that meant very little to mechs, really, but had gotten into the pop culture as hip new stuff. Bradley smiled at this. It gave him a moment of feeling superior to cover his uneasiness.

It was a crisp spring morning now that the sun had beamed up over the far hill at their backs. The perfect time for fresh growth, but the fields beyond had no plowing or signs of cultivation. Mechs should be there, laying in crops. Instead they were off over the rumples, clashing with the main body of humans and, Bradley hoped secretly, getting their asses kicked. Though mechs had no asses, he reminded himself.

Dexter and Bradley laid down behind a hummock halfway up the hill. Dexter was talking into his hush mike headset, jumping with anticipation and concern. Bradley savored the rich scents of the sweet new grass and thought idly about eating some of it.

Dexter looked out over the setup his team was building and said, “Y’know, maybe we’re too close, but I figure you’re in too close as long as you have the firepower. These weapons, we need close, real close. Easier to hit them when they’re moving fast but then it’s easier for them to hit you, too.”

Bradley saw that the man was more edgy here than he had been with his team. Nobody had done anything like this in living memory. Not in the civilized world, anyway.

“Got to be sure we can back out of this if it gets too hot,” Dexter went on.

Bradley liked Dexter’s no-nonsense scowl. “How did you learn how to fight?”

Dexter looked surprised. “Hobby of mine. Studied the great Roman campaigns in Africa.”

“They used ambushes a lot?”

“Sometimes. Of course, after Sygnius of Albion invented the steam-driven machine gun, well sir, then the Romans could dictate terms to any tribes that gave them trouble.” Dexter squinted at him. “You study history, kid?”

"I'm Bradley, sir. My parents don't let me read about battles very much. They're always saying we've gotten beyond that."

"Yeah, that Universal Peace Church, right?"

"Yessir. They say-"

"That stuff's fine for people. Mechs, they're different."

"Different how?"

Dexter sucked on his teeth, peering down the road. "Not human. Fair game."

"Think they'll be hard to beat?"

Dexter grinned. "We're programmed for this by a couple million years of evolution. They been around half a century."

"Since 1800? I thought we'd always had mechs."

"Geez, kids never know any history."

"Well, sir, I know all the big things, like the dates of American secession from the Empire, and the Imperial ban on weapons like the ones you've got here, and how-"

"Dates aren't history, son. They're just numbers. What's it matter when we finally got out from under the Romans? Bunch of lily-livers, they were. 'Peace Empire'-contradiction in terms, kid. Though the way the 3D pumps you kids full of crap, not even allowin' any war shows or anything, except for prettified pussy historicals, no wonder you don't know what the end of a gun does the business."

This seemed unfair to Bradley but he could see Dexter wasn't the kind of man he had known, so he shut up. *Fair game*. What did that mean? A fair game was where everybody enjoyed it and had a chance to win.

Maybe the world wasn't as simple as he had thought. There was something funny and tingly about the air here, a crackling that made his skin jump, his nerves strum.

Angel came back and lay beside them, wheezing, lugging a heavy contraption with tripod legs they had just assembled.

Nelson was downslope, cradling his rifle. He arranged the tripod and lifted onto it a big array of cylinders and dark, brushed-steel sliding parts unlike anything Bradley had ever seen. Sweating, Nelson stuck a long, curved clip into all this freshly made metal and worked the clacking mechanism. Nelson smiled, looking pleased at the way the parts slid easily.

Bradley was trying to figure out what all the various weapons did when he heard something coming fast down the road. He looked back along the snaky black line that came around the far hills and saw a big shape flitting among the ash trees.

It was an open-topped hauler filled with copper-jacketed mechs. They looked like factory hands packed like gleaming eggs in a carton.

Dexter talked into his hushmike and pointed toward three chalk-white stones set up by the road as aiming markers. The hauler came racing through the crossroads and plunged up the straight section of the road in front of Bradley. The grade increased here so they would slow as they passed the stones.

Bradley realized they had no way of knowing what the mechs were doing there, not for sure, and then he forgot that pulse-quickenning sensation coursed through him. Dexter beside him looked like a cat that knows he has a canary stashed somewhere and can go sink his teeth into it any time he likes.

When the hauler reached the marker stones Angel opened fire. The sound was louder than anything Bradley had ever heard and his first reaction was to bury his face in the grass. When he looked up the hauler was slewing across the road then it hit the ditch and rolled.

The coppery mechs in the back flew out in slow motion. Most just smacked into the grass and lay still. The hauler thumped solidly and stopped rolling. A few of the factory mechs got up and tried to get behind the hauler, maybe thinking the rifle fire was only from Angel, but then the party from across the road opened up and the mechs pitched forward into the ditch and did not move. Then there was quiet in the little valley. Bradley could hear the hauler's engine still humming with electric energy and then some internal override cut in and it whined into silence.

"I hit that hauler square in the command dome, you see that?" Angel said loudly.

Bradley hadn't seen it but he said, "Yes ma'am, right."

Dexter said, "Try for that every time. Saves ammo if we don't have to shoot every one of them."

Nelson called up the slope, "Those're factory mechs, they look like Es and Fs, they're pretty heavy-built."

Angel nodded, grinning. "Easier just to slam 'em into that ditch."

Dexter didn't hear this as he spoke into his hush mike next to Bradley. "Myron, you guys get them off the road. Use power-override keys and make them walk themselves into that place where the gully runs down into the stream. Tell 'em to jump right in the water."

"What about the hauler?" Bradley asked, and then was surprised at his own boldness.

Dexter frowned a moment. "The next batch, they'll think we hit it from the air. There was plenty of that yesterday to the west."

"I didn't see any of our planes today," Bradley said.

"We lost some. Rest are grounded because some mechs started to catch on just about sunset. They knocked three of our guys right out of the sky. Mechs won't know that, though. They'll figure it's like yesterday and that hauler was just unlucky." Dexter smiled and checked his own rifle, which he had not fired.

"I'll go help them," Bradley said, starting to get up.

"No; we only got so many of those keys. The guys know how to use 'em. You watch the road."

"But I'd like to--"

"Shut up," Dexter said in a way that was casual and yet was not.

Bradley used his pocket binoculars to study the road. The morning heat sent ripples climbing up from the valley floor. He was not sure at first that he saw true movement several kilometers away and then he was. Dexter alerted the others and there was a mad scramble to get the mechs out of sight.

They were dead, really, but the humans could access their power reserves and make them roll down the road on their wheels and treads and then jounce down the gully and pitch into the stream. Bradley could hear laughter as the team on the road watched the mechs splash into the brown water. Some shorted out and started flailing their arms and rotors around in comic imitations of humans swimming. That lasted only a few seconds and then they sank like the rest.

Nelson came running back up the hill, carrying on his back a long tube. "Here's that launcher you wanted. Rensink, didn't look too happy to let go of it."

Dexter stood and looked down the road with his own binoculars. "Leave it here. We got higher elevation than Rens

Dexter took the steel tube, which looked to Bradley exactly like the telescopes he and his friends used to study the stars. Tentatively Bradley said, "If you're not going to use that rifle, uh, sir, I'd . . ."

Dexter grinned. "You want in, right?"

"Well, yes, I thought that since you're-

"Sure. Here. Clip goes like this," he demonstrated, "you hold it so, sight along that notch. I machined that so I know it's good. We had to learn a whole lot of old-timey craft to make these things."

Bradley felt the heft and import of the piece and tentatively practiced sighting down at the road. He touched the trigger with the caution of a virgin lover. If he simply pulled on the cool bit of metal a hole would-well, might-appear in the carapace of fleeing mech. A mech they would not have to deal with again in the chaos to come. It was a simple way to think about a whole complex issue. Something in Bradley liked that simplicity.

The mechs still had not arrived but Bradley could see them well enough through the binoculars now to know why. They were riding on self-powered inventions of their own, modified forms of the getarounds mechs sometimes used on street corners. These were three-wheeled and made of shiny brass.

They were going slowly, probably running out of energy. As he watched one deployed a solar panel on its back to catch the rising sun and then the others did but this did not speed them up any. They did not look like the elegant social mechs he usually saw zipping on the bike paths, bound on some errand. They were just N- or P-class mechs who had rigged up some extra wheels.

They came pedaling into the crossroads, using their arms. The one in front saw the hauler on its side and knew something was wrong right away and started pumping hard. Nelson shot at him then even though Dexter had said nothing. He hit the lead mech and it went end over end, arms caught up in its own drive chain. Angel could not resist and she took out the next three with a burst. Then the others came in with a chorus of rattling shots and loud bangs, no weapon sounding like the others and in the noise Bradley squeezed and felt the butt of the rifle kick him.

He had been aiming at one of the mechs at the rear of the little column and when he looked next the mech was down, sliding across the road with sparks jetting behind it, metal ripping across asphalt.

"Stop! Stop shooting!" Dexter called, and in the sudden silence Bradley could hear the mechs clattering to a halt, clanking and squealing and thumping into the ditch.

"Get them off the road-quick!" Dexter called. He waved Bradley down the hill and the boy ran to see the damage. As he dashed toward them the mechs seemed to be undamaged except for some dents but then up close each showed a few holes. He had time to glance at Paul, who was red-faced, breathing hard, his eyes veiled. There was no time to talk.

The men and women from across the road got most of the mechs started up again on override keys but one had suffered some sort of internal explosion and the back was blown off. Bradley helped three men tilt it up enough to roll off the general rounded asphalt, and once they got it going it rolled and slid into a copse of eucalyptus. They threw branches over it. Bradley looked for the one he had shot at but it was impossible to tell which that was now.

He felt a prickly anticipation, a thickening of the air. The fragrances of trees and grass cut into his nostrils, vivid and sharp. They ran back up the slope. Bradley found the rifle he now thought of as his and sprawled down with it in the grass, getting down behind a hummock near Dexter.

Bradley lay there just breathing and looking at the rifle, which seemed to be made of a lot of complicated parts. Dexter tossed him three clips and a box of copper-sheathed ammunition. The box promised that they were armor-piercing. Bradley fumbled a little learning how to load the clips but then moved quickly, sliding the rounds in with a secure click as he heard

distant growl of a tracked vehicle.

It was coming closer along the other road. The crossroads looked pretty clear, no obvious signs of the ambush.

The Mercer team had laid two mines in the road. They had a chameleon surface and within a minute were indistinguishable from the asphalt. Bradley could tell where they were because they were lined up with the white marker stones and from up here were smoother than the asphalt.

He wondered if the mechs could sense that. Their sensorium was better than human in some ways, worse in others. He realized that he had never thought very much about the interior life of a mech, any more than he could truly delve into the inner world of animals. But in principle mechs *were* knowable. Their entire perspective could be digitized and examined minutely.

The clatter and roar of the approach blotted this from his mind. "Activate!" Dexter shouted, his tight voice giving away some of his own excitement.

A big tracked vehicle came flitting through the trees that lined the black road, flickering like a video-game target. There were mechs perched all over it, hitching rides, and many more of them packed its rear platform. When Bradley looked at the road nearby the mines jumped out at him like a spider on a lace tablecloth. The entire valley vibrated and sparkled with intense, sensory light. Smells coiled up his nostrils, the cool sheen of the rifle spoke to him through his hands.

The mech driver would surely see the mines, stop, and back away, he thought. And the mechs aboard would jump and some of them would attack the humans, rolling down the road and shooting the lasers they had adapted from industrial purposes. Bradley had heard about mechs that could override their safety commands and fight.

He tightened his grip on his rifle. He was dimly aware of Dexter sighting along his tube-shaped weapon and of Angela muttering to herself as she waited.

"If they were like us they'd stop, first sign of trouble they see," Dexter muttered, probably to himself, but Bradley could hear. "Then they'd deploy fighter mechs on both sides of the road and they'd sweep us, outflank."

"Think they will?" Bradley asked wonderingly.

"Naw. They don't have what we do."

"What . . . what's that?" Bradley knew the wide range of special abilities mechs possessed.

"Balls."

The mechs perched atop the tracked vehicle were looking forward down the road and holding on tight against the road's swerves as they rounded curves.

Then one of them saw the mines and jerked a servo arm toward them. Some mechs sitting near the front began sending warning wails, and the track car slammed on its brakes and slewed across the road. It stopped at the lip of the ditch and made a heavy, grinding noise and began backing up.

Three mechs jumped off its front. Bradley brought his sights down onto one of them and the air splintered with a huge, rolling blast that made him flinch and forget about everything else.

The gunmetal hood of the transport seemed to dissolve into a blue cloud. The tailgate of the tracker flew backward with a sharp *whap*.

The air became a fine array of tumbling dots as debris spewed up like a dark fountain and then showered down all over the hillside. Thunks and whacks told of big mech parts hitting nearby. Bradley tucked his head into the grass. He yelped

something nicked his knee and something else tumbled over him and was gone. Pebbles thumped his back.

When Bradley looked up he expected to see nothing but small scraps left on the road. His ears roared with the memory of the sound and he wondered if he would be deaf. But through the smoke he saw several mechs lurching away from the disemboweled transport. There were five of them bunched closely together.

He brought his rifle up and shot very swiftly at the lead mech. It went down and he shot the next object and the next, seeing only the moving forms and the swirling blur of action.

Angel was firing and Nelson too, sharp bangs so regular and fast Bradley thought of the clack of a stick held by a boy as he ran by a picket fence-and in a few seconds there were no more mechs standing on the road.

But there were two in the ditch. Gray smoke billowed everywhere.

Bradley saw a mech moving just as a quick rod of light leaped from it, cutting through the smoke. He heard Angel yell and swear. She held up her hand and it was bloody.

Another instantaneous rod of light stood for a second in the air and missed her and then a third struck her weapon. It flew to pieces with a loud bang. Bradley aimed at the mech and kept firing until he saw it and the second one sprawl across the ditch and stop moving.

A compressed silence returned to the valley. The transport was burning but beyond its snaps and pops he could see nothing moving on the road.

Angel was moaning with her wound and Nelson took care of her, pulling out a first-aid kit as he ran over. When the doctor said that her wound was manageable, Dexter and Bradley walked slowly down to the road. Dexter said, "Bet that's the last party. We'll get strays now, no problems."

Bradley's legs felt like logs thudding into the earth as he walked. He waved to Paul, who was already on the road, but he did not feel like talking to anybody. The air was crisp and layered with so many scents, he felt them sliding in and out of his lungs like separate flavors in an ice cream sundae.

"Hey!" Mercer called from the transport cab. "They got food in here!"

Everyone riveted attention on the cab. Mercer pitched out cartons of dry food, some cans, a case of soft drinks.

"Somethin', huh?-mechs carryin' food," Angel said wonderingly. For several minutes they ate and drank and then Paul called, "There's a boy here."

They found Paul standing over a boy who was half-concealed by a fallen mech. Bradley saw that the group of mechs had been shielding this boy when they were cut down. "Still alive," Paul said, "barely."

"The food was for him," Mercer said.

Bradley bent down. Paul cradled the boy but it was clear from the drawn, white face and masses of blood down the front, some fresh red and most brown, drying, that there was not much hope. They had no way to get him to cryopreservation. Thin lips opened, trembled, and the boy said, "Bad . . . Mommy . . . hurt . . ."

Dexter said, "This ID says he's under mech care."

"How come?" Angel asked.

"Says he's mentally deficient. These're medical care mechs." Dexter pushed one of the mech carcasses and it rolled away, showing H-caste insignia.

“Damn, how’d they get mixed in with these reb mechs?” Nelson asked irritably, the way people do when they are looking for something or someone to blame.

“Accident,” Dexter said simply. “Confusion. Prob’ly thought they were doing the best thing, getting their charge away from the fighting.”

“Damn,” Nelson said again. Then his lips moved but nothing came out.

Bradley knelt down and brushed some flies away from the boy’s face. He gave the boy some water but the eyes went away and the lips just spit the water out. Angel was trying to find the wound and stop the bleeding but she had a drawn, waxy look.

“Damn war,” Nelson said. “Mechs, they’re to blame for this.”

Bradley took a self-heating cup of broth from Paul and gave a little to the boy. The face was no more than fifteen and eyes gazed abstractedly up into a cloudless sky. Bradley watched a butterfly land on the boy’s arm. It fluttered its wings in the slanting yellow-gold sunlight and tasted the drying brown blood. Bradley wondered distantly if butterflies ate blood. The boy choked and the butterfly flapped away on a breeze, and when Bradley looked back the boy was dead.

They stood for a long moment around the body. The road was a chaos of ripped mech carapaces and tangled innards and the wreck of the exploded transport. Nobody was going to run into an ambush here anymore today and nobody would move to clear the road.

“Y’know, these med-care mechs, they’re pretty smart,” Paul said. “They just made the wrong decision.”

“Smarter than the boy, probably,” Bradley said. The boy was not much younger than Bradley, but in the eyes there had been just an emptiness. “He was human, though.”

The grand opening elation he had felt all morning slowly began to seep out of Bradley. “Hell of a note, huh?” he said to no one in particular. Others were doing that, just saying things to the breeze as they slowly dispersed and started to make order out of the shambles.

The snap and sparkle of the air were still with him, though. He had never felt so alive in his life. Suddenly he saw the enclosed, abstract world he had inhabited since birth as an enclave, a preserve—a trap. The whole of human society had been in a cocoon, a velvet wrapping tended by mechs.

They had found an alternative to war: wealth. And simple human kindness. *Human* kindness.

Maybe that was all gone now.

And it was no tragedy, either. Not if it gave them back the world as it could be, a life of tangs and zests and the grit of real things. He had dwelled in the crystal spaces of the mind while beneath such cool antiseptic entertainments his body yearned for the hot raw earth and its moist mysteries.

Nelson and Mercer were collecting mech insignia. “Want an AB? We found one over here. Musta got caught up and brought along by these worker mechs?” Nelson asked Bradley.

“I’ll just take down the serial numbers,” Bradley said automatically, not wanting to talk to Nelson more than necessary or to anyone. There had been so much talk.

He spent time getting the numbers logged into his comm and then shoving mech carcasses off the road.

Dexter came over to him and said, “Sure you don’t want one of these?” It was a laser one of the reb mechs had used. Black, ribbed, with a glossy sheen. “Angel’s keeping one. She’ll be telling the story of her wound and showing the laser

maybe did it, prob'ly for the rest of her life.”

Bradley looked at the sleek, sensuous thing. It gleamed in the raw sunlight like a promise. “No.”

“Sure?”

“Take the damned stuff away.”

Dexter looked at him funny and walked off. Bradley stared at the mechs he was shoving off the road and tried to think how they were different from the boy, who probably was indeed less intelligent than they were, but it was all clouded over with the memory of how much he liked the rifle and the sweet grass and shooting at the targets when they came up to the crossfire point in the sharp sun. It was hard to think at all as the day got its full heat and after a while he did not try. It was easier that way.