New Interview with Karie Fugett

I was first introduced to Karie Fugett through her gorgeous, heart-wrenching 2019 Washington Post *article "Love and War," where she detailed her husband Cleve's injury in Iraq, which ultimately led to an amputation, addiction to his prescribed painkillers, and multiple overdoses—including one that ended his life. Karie was widowed at age 24. I was taken with her story, her vulnerability in laying her grief bare, and also*

with her willingness to call out the institutions that failed Cleve as a wounded veteran and her as a full-time caregiver.

After several years spent writing and advocating (and navigating a pandemic and a few other things), Karie published her memoir, Alive Day*, this spring with The Dial Press. She was gracious enough to speak with me from the airport on the way to a book event. We chatted about military life, caregiving, writing, parenting, politics, pandemics, the fickle publishing industry, and, of course, her marvelous book.*

Lauren Kay Johnson: Congratulations, first of all! Huge accomplishment. It's been a long time coming for you, right? This has been in the pipeline for quite a while.

Karie Fugett: It has been. I haven't been writing it, like, every day since I started thinking about it or anything, but I did start thinking about it pretty seriously in like 2012. I didn't know what I was doing, and at that point I was just kind of trying to record memories and practicing putting memories into scenes and just learning how to do creative writing. And then from there it started to get bigger and bigger.

Lauren Kay Johnson: What was it initially that got you started writing? It sounds like you were doing some blogging during Cleve's experiences. Did that kind of naturally transition into just writing to process?

Karie Fugett: Yes, I hadn't really written before that other than, like, moody middle school poetry. Nothing serious. Just emotions. And then when I was in the hospital, I met some other caregivers. A couple of them were writing blogs. We were able to keep in touch that way, and keep tabs with what each of us were going through. So I jumped on that bandwagon and very quickly found that it was a really great outlet for a lot

of the things that I was feeling, because being in the hospital was really isolating. And even when I met other caregivers they would be moved to different hospitals, sometimes they'd be sent back home for a while, would be moved to different bases. So it wasn't like we saw each other every single day, and this was kind of a way for us to keep in touch. And also to just feel like we were being heard, because we were in this weird situation that I had never heard of. All these things I was seeing. I was like, *Oh, my God! I didn't know that people lived like this. This is crazy to me.* It kind of helped me blow off some steam. Keep in touch with people. When I didn't have therapy, it was kind of my therapy.

Lauren Kay Johnson: So was there a moment where you realized—You were kind of writing for yourself, and then there was a shift to *Hey, there's something here beyond me*, whether as a means of sharing information or finding human connection, getting your voice out in the world. Was that a cognitive shift for you?

Karie Fugett: When I first started writing it was just kind of a diary-type thing honestly, and the only people who were reading it were other caregivers, people that I knew. But after a few months, it was crazy; I would get up to 10,000 views a day. I was getting all these followers and emails. This was after a year or two. It just kind of blew up. And then there was a military spouses' website [that] offered to feature my blog on their website along with a few other military wives. And I was like, *Oh, people are interested in what's happening here!*

I wasn't familiar with essays, op-eds, whatever. I just immediately was like, maybe I should write a book about it. But I really didn't know what I was doing or take it that seriously. [I] just noticed people were paying attention, and that there might be something to the story.

Lauren Kay Johnson: The gestation period for a book is much

longer than the gestation period for a baby.

Karie Fugett: For sure. I mean for me, anyway. I feel like I have some friends that are like, “Book idea!” And then a few months later they’re turning in a manuscript. But I’m not like that.

Lauren Kay Johnson: Oh, I hate those people.

Karie Fugett: I do too. I really do.

Lauren Kay Johnson: Mine was 12 years. And same thing: not, like, actively working on it eight hours a day every day, but the thinking about it, and the writing, and the rewriting, and the submitting, and then the rewriting again, and then submitting and rewriting, and then the crying and banging my head against the wall and wondering what I’m doing with my life.

Karie Fugett: Right. There was a lot of existential dread, staring at walls, not doing anything productive. Probably more of that than writing If I’m being honest.

Lauren Kay Johnson: So how does it feel now that it’s out in the world? How is this first—not even a month. It’s still really new for you. How has it been?

Karie Fugett: It feels like a relief at this point. There’s so many unknowns. How are people going to respond? Especially with a memoir—is someone I write about going to recognize themselves, even though I changed all these details, and are they going to be upset? Which did happen once already, but I survived it, and it was fine. So now, a month out, people generally are responding well to it. And even the ones who don’t; it’s fine. We’re continuing on with our lives. It’s really not that big of a deal.

I guess for a long time it was like that was the peak for me. It just felt like this really, really big deal, which also

came with a lot of stress. And also I was unsure if I was even going to be able to finish it. There were points where I was like, Nope, not happening. I cannot do this. I'm burning it all. I'm gonna go be a flower farmer and hide in the country somewhere. But I did it! So, I'm proud of myself. I feel relieved.

Right now I'm just kind of giving myself permission to relax for a minute. Because, too, after writing this, it became very clear to me that I haven't had a lot of time to relax in my life, and part of that, especially recently, is self-imposed. So I'm like, *you don't always have to be productive, Karie! You don't always have to be proving yourself*. I'm taking a lot of naps right now and trying to spend time with my daughter. Thinking about where I want to live, maybe a business that I want to own.

Lauren Kay Johnson: Good for you. You have earned that, absolutely. Not that anyone needs to earn the right to take care of themselves and sleep. You mentioned that there were points where you felt like, *Ahhh!* And I don't want to put words in your mouth, but I imagine—I mean, this is such emotionally wrought content that you're writing about. And living it was such a huge part of your life—physically, mentally, emotionally. And then in writing it, you have to go back there in so many ways. Can you talk a little about what that process was like? You discovered *I have this book thing*, and then you got into the writing of it. What did that feel like once you actually kind of comprehended what that meant

Karie Fugett: It depended on the chapter or the story that I was writing. Sometimes it was a lot of fun. The parts in the book that are funnier or sillier or weirder I really enjoyed. The moments of joy between me and my husband I enjoyed thinking about in writing, because it felt like there wasn't that much of it in the story, because all this other stuff was going on. And learning how to write creatively was really cool to me. I love turning memories into scenes and writing

characters.

But then there was a lot for me, especially from my childhood and when I was younger, that I realized I was still carrying a lot of shame over. Decisions I made that I blamed myself for; I just really wasn't letting go of those things. I think it forced me to really look at those things again and think about them in a way that I hadn't really. I'd been pushing it away and just too afraid to look at it. That was one of the reasons why it took so long, because there were certain parts of my life that I felt very stuck and wasn't sure how to go there again. Luckily the end result—once I was able to do that, get it on paper and get past it—was actually very healing. I was able to forgive myself. I think I was able to visualize this—the word *journey* kind of makes me cringe—but in this journey that I went on and have a better understanding of why I made the choices that I made. And also it helped me remember I was a kid. I was so young. I think, as adults, sometimes we remember our past decisions. We hold on to them because that's still who we are, still a decision we would make, and we carry that shame with us.

Overall I think it's been good for me. It's helped me forgive myself, view myself with more compassion, and let go, which has helped a lot with this compounded trauma from over my life.

Lauren Kay Johnson: I always talk about memoir as, like, a really long, in-depth self-therapy session. It's often not comfortable to go back into those spaces and dig through the skeletons in your closet. But if you can do that effectively, not only does it make for compelling writing, vulnerable writing; it also can have that catharsis. And it sounds like it had that effect on you, too?

Karie Fugett: It did. And what's funny is that when I went to the MFA program—I think, when nonfiction writers, memoir writers, especially once you've been doing it for years, they

really want to emphasize the craft of it. And as soon as you start talking about how it can be therapeutic, they get a little weird about that conversation for some reason. But I really think that's a huge part of the process. Because if you're going to access what you need to access for it to be a story that connects with people, you're going to have to dig into some things that otherwise you could have ignored for the rest of your life. And that does something to you. That can change you if you're honest with yourself and are willing to look at those things square in the face and analyze them and try to figure out what happened and try to understand yourself and the people around you, beyond the action.

And that was the other thing—looking at people in my life that maybe upset me in the past and really sitting down and thinking: Why were they acting the way they were? What was going on in their life that caused them to treat me the way they did.

Lauren Kay Johnson: You mentioned you were so young. You and Cleve both were in your early twenties going through this horrific experience, and an experience that put so much weight on both of your shoulders to just kind of, like the military says, suck it up and deal with it, figure it out. You carried this expectation that it was your job to be a caretaker, and you were doing your duty. You were doing your service to this country in taking care of Cleve, and he was doing his duty fighting, getting injured in the line of duty, and then focusing on recovery. Can you talk more about that that dynamic, and particularly what that meant, being so young and feeling the weight of that, and being in this community where everybody was trying to do this impossible thing?

Karie Fugett: I was 20 when he was wounded. So, I'd only been an adult for a couple of years. And then I find myself in this situation—because of decisions that I made, but in this situation that is still just what I did not expect. And at that point, because I was married to him, it felt less like

decisions I was making, and I was just sort of being told what to do. Which in some ways at that age, because I didn't know what I was doing anyway, was a relief. I'm like, *just tell me where to go! I don't know what I'm doing right now.* Then I would end up in these situations, though, because I was just sort of blindly following.

You know how you hear stories about people following a GPS into a lake? How did you not see the lake? That's how it felt. Like: go right, go left, go backwards. And you're just trying to please these people that are kind of scary and intimidating and control your paycheck and your housing and everything in your life and just seem way smarter than you. So, why would you ever question what they're saying? But months go by, and suddenly you're looking around, and you're like, *something is not right. How did I get here?* And not having the brain—literally not having the brain cells—to figure out how to get back out of it. Who to ask, what to ask. Especially when it came down to PTSD, TBI, and addiction. Where does one end and one begin, and how do you fix it? How do you even have time to think about it when you're worrying about a leg that is infected or being amputated. It was just . . . it was a lot.

I think at the time I was just kind of following my orders. And then, by the time I was thinking *something's wrong*, I was so in it that I just kept following. It really took a couple of years before I started getting angry, but at that point it was kind of too late. He was overdosing. At that point I was like, *He's going to die. He almost died. What is going on?*

Lauren Kay Johnson: That's in so many ways representative of the way that the military operates. It's this "We're gonna tell you what to do!" You're joining the community; your life is dictated by us, and there's not a lot of encouragement of free will. They set it up in this environment and then if you get into uncharted territory—like you were in relatively early in the post-9/11 conflicts—there's not a manual for how to

handle that. There's resources available, but it requires proactivity to seek them out and advocates to help connect you with the right resources, and that all just sounds like it wasn't there in any kind of accessible manner for you.

Karie Fugett: I don't know if it's still the case, but there was this sort of underlying assumption that if you told them too much was wrong, you could get in trouble, and it was hard to know where the line was. Like, if you say you're addicted—What kind of details can I give you before you start saying it's my fault? There was this underlying thing that we kind of knew they were there to help us—mostly. But if we said the wrong thing they could absolutely ruin our lives. So it was scary to really be open and vulnerable and really talk about how bad things felt.

Also, you just want to prove yourself. You want to prove that you're strong enough, capable. At least that's how I felt. My husband did, too. He wanted to prove he's a Marine. He joined the Marine Corps. He can handle it. He's fine. He wasn't fine, nor was I, and by the time we realized neither of us were fine it was an absolute chaotic mess.

Lauren Kay Johnson: One of the things I loved about your book is we get all of that raw emotion, and the sense of overwhelm, and also the call to do your duty and to support this person that you love however you can. It's heavy stuff, but you do have these moments of levity. And a lot of that is based around really beautiful relationships that you've had in your life, the kind of transient life that you've led through childhood and the military. Not in the traditional military sense; you weren't moving around from base to base, but you were hospital to hospital, in kind of these micro communities. Can you talk about the role that that friendship has played in your life, particularly your healing process?

Karie Fugett: It was huge. Not just friendships, but mentorship later on. Really, when I think about the moments in

my life where I saw a beam of light, hope that I could get out of this darkness that I was in, it always involved someone being in my corner helping me out of it. I don't think there's any point where I saved myself on my own. I'm not going to discredit myself and say that I didn't make decisions and work hard and all of that. But all along the way, I just got so freaking lucky with human beings who were just dropped into my life and were exactly what I needed in that moment. Everything from during the deployment—The wife that I lived with while they were deployed, she was just exactly who I needed to help get my feet wet in this military wife life. Even though it was only a couple of months, all the things that you hear about military wives, how they'll drop everything for each other, how they bond so quickly—it's all true, at least with her. As soon as we started connecting, it was like, *this is my best friend; we'd do anything for each other*. I'm helping raise her baby while our husbands are overseas. It just happened so quickly, and she, without question, packed her baby in the car and drove me to DC [to be with Cleve in the hospital].

I've needed to crash on people's couches because I just could not do the basic things it takes to survive for periods of time. And I just needed someone to take care of me for a little bit. The [military] widows—They came into my life right when I needed them. I needed to feel less alone. I needed to see other people doing things that I was afraid to do. It's all been relationships.

Even once I got to college, it was the teacher who was the mentor and said that she saw something in my writing. I really just saw myself as a high school dropout. I felt like a wannabe. I wasn't sure if I had it in me to do this, and I could tell that she was serious. That was huge for me.

Lauren Kay Johnson: Reading the book it felt like, in a lot of ways, where the military in an ideal world was supposed to be there to support you, it was these relationships that were meeting that need. And also you give a big shout out to

nonprofits that have historically really filled that gap in care and support, both financially and emotionally.

Karie Fugett: Yes, those nonprofits keep people alive. End of story. There's a point in the book where I'm talking to someone about moving. And he's like, "Oh, you might as well just go through the nonprofit because it's gonna take longer if you go through the military." I wrote that casually. People bring that up so much now, though; they're like, "I cannot believe they were like, let's just dump it on the nonprofit!" But everything did take really long. And a nonprofit, they'd be like, what do you need? Sign your name on this piece of paper, and we'll process it in a couple of days. They understood that there were real urgencies and they were really quick to respond. They, at least back then, really didn't ask a lot of questions. They just wanted to help, and it was huge.

Lauren Kay Johnson: Particularly thinking about the moment that we're in right now, where people are in need of extra support in a lot of ways. If folks read your book and they're like, "I want to do something!"—What is your call-to-action for them? Is there a nonprofit that you would direct them to? Somewhere where they can get informed and provide support?

Karie Fugett: I actually think that the smaller nonprofits I prefer, the local nonprofits. Especially these days when it feels like there's so much going on, it feels very big and hard to know how to help. For me, personally, what I've realized is when you're trying to question how you can make a difference, you should look at your own community. There's veterans everywhere. There's probably a nonprofit in your community, or a VA, VFW, something like that. Reach out to them and see what they need and start there. None of us can fix everything, but it's those community-level things that I think individuals can make the biggest difference at. And they're the ones who really need that help.

Lauren Kay Johnson: I've been following you for a while, since

the *Washington Post* piece. One of the things that I connected to on your journey, because it paralleled mine in a lot of ways, is thinking about writing a memoir, writing about your life, when your life is still very much being lived and comes with these big shifts in external things and personal things that inevitably change your perspective—like becoming a parent and going through a global pandemic. All these big things. Did you feel that as you were writing? Since this has been a pretty long haul for you, did you have an experience where you felt like, I want to maintain the original rawness of this, but now I have this older, wiser perspective where I can reflect back. Were there things you changed, things you added?

Karie Fugett: I definitely did probably feel the biggest shift during COVID, partly because of the pandemic, but also because I was pregnant with my first and only child. So those were two sort of monumental things. I was in Oregon. We were isolating. My kid's dad—we had a farm, I had to stay in an apartment 45 minutes away. We weren't able to be together a lot. So I literally isolated by myself for days and days and days at times.

It was weird. My baby shower was via zoom. It was all weird. So, I wasn't writing. I was just sitting around thinking, *I'm never going to write this* because it felt like my brain was changing. It just felt like there was no way my brain was going to be able to do it ever again. And then I came out the other side, and I *was* changed, and having to continue writing this thing.

Interestingly enough, though, once I was able to get back to it and I realized, *oh, my brain can make sentences again,* and I started to get into the groove, it was actually easier. I don't know if it was that I had been sitting around by myself obsessing over this for two whole years—because at that point I had already sold it, too. I sold it February 25th or something, 2020, and then I went to Kenya March 4th, and then

everything started to shut down while I was overseas, and it was terrifying. But then I came back and was talking to movie producers, and everything was this big, cool, exciting thing. Then everything started to shut down, and then I got pregnant, and then I got depressed, and then I was just like, *Do you want your money back? Because I'm not going to write this book. There's no way I can do this.* It just felt so impossible.

But my editor was like, *No, just take two years off. There's a pandemic, and the whole industry is completely fucked right now. It'll be fine.* So I did that, and worried the whole time. And then when I came out the other end, it was actually easier to write some of it. What I was saying earlier about how writing it helped me forgive myself in a lot of ways, let go of a lot of shame—I think having a daughter also helped with that. I looked at her, and I was like, *Oh, my God! I was a baby once.* I started to think about all the mistakes she's going to make, and all of the things that she's going to regret at some point. And it was just like, *I'm still going to love you unconditionally. Nothing you could do could ever make me stop loving you.* And then I realized, why can't I give myself that? All of us deserve that. So that took some of the weight off and allowed me to write some of the things that felt really hard before that to even just admit and put on paper.

I will say, too, at that point, because I was a mom, I wasn't overthinking it, either. I was just like, I'm breastfeeding, and I'm writing a book, and there's a pandemic. Take it or leave it. I sent it to my editor. She ended up loving it, and I was like, *Are you sure?* So yeah, having a kid will definitely change you. So will a pandemic, apparently.

Lauren Kay Johnson: I feel like we should get a panel together of people who have had a book project interrupted by the pandemic and having kids. That's two major, epic universal shifts. It's weird.

Karie Fugett: It is. Even the way it affected my book publication. When it was originally sold, they were like, this is the next *Educated*. This is the next *Wild*. They were really blowing it up, and it went to auction with 15 editors. It got a huge advance for what it is. It made no sense to me, but they were really blowing it up. Producers were calling. It felt like this really big thing. The pandemic just squashed the shit out of it. And part of it is because memoir kind of just fell in popularity and was replaced with things like romance, fantasy.

Lauren Kay Johnson: Because life sucks! Nobody wants to read about real life!

Karir Fugett: Right? Who wants to read about my depressing-ass life when they could be reading about fairies having sex? That's basically what it came down to. And I think, too, TikTok really blew up and that started to shape the industry in a way that nobody expected. So, just that timeline—selling it and then publishing it five years later and seeing how the book industry can morph in a matter of years based on politics and pandemics and social media.

Lauren Kay Johnson: Yes, the political realm is a whole other layer of that too. There's so much pummeling us all the time. It's so hard to rise above the noise. There was a bit of a buffer time for you to kind of recalibrate your expectations, and also you had a few other things going on in your life, like raising a small human. Are you happy with how things turned out? Do you wish those producers would call you back?

Karie Fugett: I mean, I do. You know, everybody's motivated by something. Some people are motivated by money. Some people are motivated by popularity. For me, I think I'm motivated by feeling like I was successful at doing whatever I did. The problem with that, though, is my idea of success is, like, best-of-the-best-of-the-best, which is ridiculous. I've never been able to be the best of the best, and to hold myself to

that standard is insane. But it’s just hard for me to accept less than that, always, even though it’s easier now that I’m getting older, because I know it’s ridiculous.

But yeah, there was definitely a moment I could see what was happening in the industry. The publishing industry pushes books, right? They choose what’s going to be the next big thing, at least to an extent. They’re going to put all their resources behind certain books and not others. I could tell that mine was being bumped down on the list, and it hurt. I was like, *Oh, God, I probably wrote it wrong! I’m a shitty writer. I knew it!* I started to beat myself up. I ended up talking to my agent and editor about it, and they helped me understand that the industry is different. And this is just how things are now. *Wild and Wrangled*, that cowboy romance series—That’s the hot shit at our press now, and that’s fine. That’s what people want.

Lauren Kay Johnson: Is that your next project, in that realm?

Karie Fugett: I’m not saying that I didn’t think about it. I was like, *Well, how much money do you all get for that? Sounds really fun*. Well, not fun—I would be totally awkward with it. But, like, low stakes. You just write it and have a nice sleep that night. That’s not my experience with the memoir.

I will say, though, after a month or so I am happy with it. I mean, did I expect it to be more successful? Do I get bummed when I go into a bookstore and it’s not there? Sure. However, I have gotten so many messages from people saying how much it meant to them, for all different reasons. And even just saying, like, this is my favorite book this year. What more could I ask for? That’s such a huge deal to me, even if it’s just a couple of people. I’m also trying to remind myself where I came from, and none of this was anything within the realm of possibility for me at one point. Mostly I just feel really lucky.

Lauren Kay Johnson: Is there a particular message or element of your story that you hope people will latch onto or take away from reading your book?

Karie Fugett: I'm thinking about how we might be going war again soon. And the way that there tends to be very specific views on what a soldier is or what a soldier's wife is, and [people] kind of put them in this box. I hope that the people who read this, especially the ones who have never been in the military, when they think about going to war, that they are now thinking about who is being sent. That it's a very specific population in our country. And of course that's not everybody, but it is true that recruiters go into poorer towns. They go into places with military bases. They go into places where they have a higher chance of recruiting people, and you'll have a higher chance of recruiting people if they need things like healthcare and housing and livable wage, because then they don't have access to that otherwise.

If we do end up going to war, I just hope people remember that it's just kids. It's these kids that often didn't have other options. And they're trusting their government to take care of them and then sending them to these bullshit wars. And their only options are to either do it or to say fuck you, and then go back to where they came from, where they didn't have any options. That's what I'm thinking about a lot right now. I'm angry about it. I'm sad. I hope that people who read it humanize the people fighting.

Lauren Kay Johnson: One of the lines that that really stuck with me is: "Cleve had to sign up for war to get the things he needed to live." That just says so much. It was fascinating to me—fascinating in a horrible way. It's a cyclical thing: You look at people who join the military, and they're much more likely to join if they have a relative who served as well. Parents and siblings. While you didn't fit that exact mold, your dad was in the military as well.

Karie Fugett: And my grandfather.

Lauren Kay Johnson: And your grandfather! And part of the motivation was to be able to support a family. But then it also ended up not being compatible with family life. So, there's this weird push-and-pull dynamic that happens in there too.

Karie Fugett: Yes, there is. And that's actually something I didn't even really recognize until I started getting closer to the end of the book and started really probing, like, what am I trying to get across? Because I had a lot of things that I was like, *You need to hear this! You need to know this! I need to say this!* But then I was trying to distill exactly why I needed people to hear this, and I started doing more research and looking at the history of this war and the history of the military. I didn't know that there are certain communities where recruiters don't go. I just thought they went everywhere. They were at my school, so I just assumed they're in all the schools. It's not true. Some schools, kids never see a recruiter. It's just not part of their life. That blew my mind. And then things like the ASVAB [military aptitude test]—certain schools make kids think that they have to take it, even though they don't. I have a lot of friends who went to schools like that, where they were like, "Everyone, go to the cafeteria and take the ASVAB!" And they thought they just had to.

That's another example of the major difference between the haves and have-nots—people who have access to all the things they need to survive pretty easily and then people who know growing up their whole life, I'm not going to be able to get that unless I make the right decision. That could lead individuals down paths that they otherwise never would have had to go down. That's one of the things I learned about myself when I was writing the book, too. I was like, *Okay, what decisions could I have made?* And I'm thinking of the other decisions, and those very easily could have just ended

up down some other crappy path. You've got these kids that are like, here's three options that all suck, pick one.

Lauren Kay Johnson: Or maybe you don't know the extent of the suck of them. You're making decisions based on the knowledge that you have at that particular time of your life—which as a 17-year-old is not generally a ton of worldly knowledge. Especially when the story that you're getting is from a recruiter or from a particular news channel. The value of stories like yours is in presenting another perspective and a rounder picture of what that means. I consider myself fairly informed when it comes to military and veterans' issues, and I learned a ton from your book. I just want to say how much I appreciate all that you shared, being willing to be vulnerable. It blows my mind some of the things, like having to fight for the disability rating. I knew on some level that is a fight for a lot of people, but Cleve's in particular. It just seems so asinine that you had to justify that these were service-connected things. I was getting so angry reading it, and I think that's a good thing. I want people to get angry.

Karie Fugett: Yeah, I do, too. I think one of the best moments that I've had since writing it is the first reader who wrote me, like: I don't know anyone in the military. I have no experience with the military. I'm not connected to the military at all. And I picked this up for XYZ reason, and I wasn't really even sure if I'd like it. But she was like, *I have a whole new perspective on people who serve. I have new respect for them. I didn't realize how privileged I was to be completely detached from it.* That "why" that I was searching for—this is why, so that people like this can have access to this world and have a better understanding of the military industrial complex, the way certain groups of people just kind of get sucked into it. And how, in my opinion, that's all part of a bigger plan. They know what they're doing. If everyone had healthcare, if everyone had enough money to live, if everyone had a beautiful home, who the fuck would join the

military? Very few people.

Lauren Kay Johnson: We wouldn't need a warrior class.

Karie Fugett: No, especially not grunts. Cannon fodder, honestly. They know that these are people with no education. Their purpose is to have a gun, be a body on the ground. They need as many of those as possible that aren't going to ask a lot of questions and are just going to do as they're told and hopefully even feel excited about it. And proud of it. It takes a certain sort of person from a certain background. That's depressing. I started to get so depressed the more I researched it. I was so clueless when I was in it.

Lauren Kay Johnson: It is depressing, and it's kind of one of those unspoken secrets of America. You reveal that in such an emotional—and just human—way. And then also the because the carryover of that into the promises that are made when people make this commitment to be that cannon fodder that are then not always upheld. There's barriers in the way of getting access to benefits.

Karie Fugett: Fucking take care of them well, without them having to beg for it.

Lauren Kay Johnson: I don't think that this was explicitly mentioned in your book, or if it was in an article, but you can't get remarried and maintain your survivor's benefits. Is that correct?

Karie Fugett: Correct. And now that I have a daughter, too, it just puts me in a weirder position. Because it's a lot of money. [It's] one of the things that me and another widow were talking about, how fucked up it is. People have argued with us like, *well, why would they keep giving you money if you get remarried?* There's a lot of different reasons I just don't think that it should depend on whether or not you've got another man in your life. It just feels very sexist, because widows are more often than not women. So that's usually who

it’s affecting. But not just that; these are women who very often are widowed so young, and during that time that they were adults, they were focusing their lives around their husband’s work.

I just had military wife, very young, at a reading come up to me, and she was like, “How do you prioritize yourself when you’re a military wife?” I didn’t really have an answer, because I also just feel like that’s something that women in general struggle with, especially once you become a mother and you’ve got all these other things going on and it’s so easy to prioritize literally everything but yourself. So, you have to constantly just choose it, I guess.

But anyway, you’ve got these women who are that young. Their whole life has been about supporting their husband, and then their husband died. Their sense of purpose, everything went with it. And now they are starting from square one. Do they go to school? Do they start a business? Do they, whatever? But how many years does it take for them to do that? And then you add in the grief and any trauma that was involved. Therapy costs money! Even with health insurance, it costs money. And I guess in my opinion, as long as I have to be in therapy for the shit I went through. Y’all can pay me.

Lauren Kay Johnson: I mean, that’s a significant chunk of your life and your soul that was dedicated to the military.

Karie Fugett: And it takes a long time to get back on your feet. I would argue that just now I’m starting to feel normal-ish, or like my own person. I found my own path. But it took so much work to get to this point, to where I feel stable enough. I finally feel like I think I’m gonna be okay.