

New Nonfiction by Bettina Rolyn: “Why Did the Chicken Cross the Road?”



I have come to do a writing residency at the *Museum of Loss and Renewal* in Molise, southern Italy, in a remote mountain village to escape the distractions of Berlin. Just as every writer does when they go off for a residency, in this case, with the added burden of Covid having prevented me from escaping myself for eleven months straight. I had been fighting the need to flee from myself for years, yet Covid closed my usual escape route outwards and made me turn inwards. And towards depression. It wasn't just the desire for Mediterranean sun but the name of this residency that got my attention: Loss and renewal. I am working on a memoir about my

three-and-a-half-year stint in the US Army as an enlisted soldier during the early years of the American wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but it was not proceeding smoothly. For over two years, I reread my journals, wrote up notes and insights in fits and starts, fought back various pains, and despite writing fifty-thousand words, it wasn't moving forward after the bleak winter of lockdowns and isolation. I decided to focus on one chapter during my trip to southern Italy.

I arrive at the *Museum of Loss and Renewal* on a hot afternoon in July and after getting settled in my room, the curators show me around the little town. In the morning, I awake to the sound of tractors passing in the street below, the neighbor's chickens clucking, and roosters crowing as the village comes to life.

There have been periods of my life where every day, I consider my own death. *Should I stay, or should I go now?* Suicide is on my mind a lot. I can't remember the first time I thought about killing myself, but I was surprised to discover in my "self-research" that already as an angst-ridden teenager, I had written about it in my journals.

Watching the cult classic *Harold and Maude* as a teenager, I was less interested in the age gap between the titular characters and more in Maude's status as a Holocaust survivor and Harold's fixation on death by suicide. I spent several years in high school consuming every story and image I could get my hands on about the Nazi era. Photos of dead bodies, emaciated prisoners, piles of teeth, glasses, and shoes—it all fascinated me.

The iconic movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, traditionally aired on TV every Christmas, was also part of my childhood. The pivotal scene, of course, is where James Stewart's character wants to kill himself by jumping off a bridge because of the impending financial ruin of his community bank until his guardian angel intervenes. This is what crisis looks like: suicide as a

solution to our problems arises naturally in the human mind. Despite the taboo on discussing it and for its potential contagiousness, I'd like to think that I came up with the idea all on my own sometime around the age of nine or ten when I began contemplating my existence. You cannot contemplate life without death; being without non-being.

The curators of the residency have a well-stocked library and leave the novel *The Original of Laura (Dying is Fun)* by Vladimir Nabokov out on the table, somehow reading my mind. The book of notes for a work-in-progress was posthumously published by the author's son Dmitri, who wrote the introduction. Nabokov—who likes the em-dash as much as I do—always held a curious fascination. He also spent fifteen years writing in Berlin and lived a life of displacement; the loss of his homeland and the themes of sex and death echo in his work. In this story, the main character is an obese cuckold scholar who resorts to the pleasurable erasure of himself, a process that occurs in his imagination but fictionally appears real. “*The process of dying by auto dissolution afforded the greatest ecstasy known to man.*” By the end of the book, he claims, “*By now I have died up to my naval some fifty times in less than three years and my fifty resurrections have shown that no damage is done to the organs involved when breaking in time out of the trance.*”

I have suffered uncountable imaginary deaths. Sometimes by my own hand, other times in perfectly acceptable, nay, even understandable ways. Cancer is a top contender—even as loved ones die for real around me from the disease. There isn't a pain, bump, ache, odor, or other bodily irregularity or phenomenon that I don't suspect of being cancer at some point.

Although my ten-year-old self wasn't familiar with French philosophy, later, when I read that Albert Camus says in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, that the most fundamental question of

philosophy is whether to commit suicide, I thought, "Well, duh." Camus concludes that the most urgent of questions is the meaning of life because whatever higher purpose we ascribe to our lives will determine whether we will live (not kill ourselves) or even die willingly (in war) for that meaning.

In college, I took a seminar called "Theories of the Good Life," where we read, among other texts, Victor Frankl's famous book about finding meaning in life. He wrote it after surviving the Nazi death camps. He was already working on suicide prevention amongst students in Vienna before he was sent to Auschwitz, where his new wife and family were murdered. Later, he developed "logotherapy" and "existential analysis" wherein he identified three main ways of finding meaning in life: making a difference in the world, having particular experiences, or adopting particular attitudes. A helpful attitude may be, "The universe is fundamentally good." Or, "Every human being brings something unique to the world." I was down with that.

In the military, which I'd joined at the age of twenty-five seeking to "make a difference," I hoped to deploy and was prepared to die honorably, heroically even. I fantasized about stepping on a landmine in Afghanistan. I would welcome either death or to at least be rid of my right leg, which had been giving me so much pain during my enlistment. But because of the leg and back troubles, I instead was medically discharged.

With each episode of depression and crisis—when my suicidal ideation usually appears—I'm surprised at what challenges tear apart my ability to withstand the strain of existing in this human body, one that comes with so many pains and issues. One common denominator is that I have a tunnel vision of self-absorption and a warped sense of my place in the world. A

combination of "I don't matter" and, "I am the center of this universe of pain." The first such experience as an adult happened while I was in the pressure-cooker of army basic training. I had been under the special "tutelage" of a female drill sergeant who informed me that I was a piece-of-shit soldier one too many times. I snapped and believed her. I wanted to die. I considered how best to do so, and settled on our rifle marksmanship training, when we were given live ammunition. But I also wanted to take her out with me. There was even a moment when she crouched behind me on the firing line, ostensibly to help me make it through the test with a malfunctioning rifle and I could have turned around and shot her. I did not. Perhaps it was that spark of anger at her and the army for putting us both in this situation that got me through the ordeal with no-one the wiser about what had transpired in my head. By now, I have envisioned my own death in a million ways. Preferably an accident, but that's a fine line to walk. I used a lot of energy imagining my demise, and here Nabokov's description of Philip's exercise in *Laura* is apt: "*Learning to use the vigor of the body for the purpose of its own deletion, standing vitality on its head.*"

According to the various spiritual and religious beliefs toward suicide, it is considered either a sin, self-defeating, or ineffective. In the view of the world and afterlife that I was raised with, I knew suicide was frowned upon. It does not solve a problem; instead, it takes away the ability to solve it, ridding our souls of our body—which we need to live out this incarnation on earth. Later I learned the line, "Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem."

In much of the literature I have read about near-death experiences, when people return to earth and report on what they learned in their "preview" of the afterlife, the stories are similar. They say that souls who die by suicide are often tortured while stuck in between heaven and earth in a sort of

purgatory. They are unable to comfort those left behind nor move on to higher spiritual realms—for how long differs based on theology. Now, that's a bummer. This belief that our souls are eternal (and reincarnate) and the attitude that there's no quick fix to end it all kept me alive for a long time, but it did not prevent me from turning to such thoughts when in crisis. I have come to view the siren call of release from earthly chains now more as an indicator of how bad my situation has become. It's time to make necessary adjustments—even major ones that make other people unhappy, and also cause me to lose face. I must cancel plans, disenroll from school, seek help from professionals.

In 2012, I volunteered on a crisis and suicide hotline. I was contemplating a career change from linguist in the defense industry to therapist in the helping professions and wanted to get a taste for the job. Before being let loose on the lines, we trained in the Carl Rogers method of unconditional positive regard and learned that the fundamental goal of the hotline was to preserve life. One policy was that as hotline listeners—that's what we were called—we would not accompany people while they killed themselves. We were trained to intervene, by—in the most extreme cases—calling 9/11 and sending the authorities to the caller's house while we had them on the phone. This only happened once or twice during my tenure.

Figuring out how to answer people's concerns and know what to say was anxiety-inducing. I sweated through one hundred logged hours of answering the phones in a dank hospital basement in suburban Virginia, though the amount of time I spent on actual calls was probably only one-third of that. Those thirty hours were enlightening. Hunched over in a booth, organs on high alert as I strained to hear my way into the pain of another soul, I learned how a suicidal crisis goes in waves or cycles. The trick is to remove the means to implement the urge and

ride out the wave to safety.

During my hotline training, I also learned that in the US, more people kill themselves with guns than die in car accidents or homicides and I changed my views entirely on the second amendment. I learned compassion but also just how frustrating people who are in need can be. I was having a good year in many ways and ended by making a major decision to go to Europe to theological seminary and not study counseling. But a year or two later, amid a toxic relationship-induced crisis, I learned that it's difficult to do the trick of de-escalating on oneself, or rather, only possible to a point.

In late 2016, after deciding to take a year break from pursuing ordination into the priesthood after three years of seminary, I was searching for something to do for a year and processing a breakup. I decided to finally visit Spain for a week and check that off my bucket list, and on the descent into Madrid, we hit turbulence. It was the worst I'd experienced in all my years of flying. As the plane shook back and forth, up and down, and people cried out—I was perfectly calm and ready to die. I have done everything I came here to do, I thought as my stomach jumped up to my throat. I have traveled the world and followed my major impulses (to serve in the military and go to seminary). If this plane crashes, I won't have any regrets. And it was true, but it was also because I had ended a life chapter but wasn't yet 'out of the woods' to even see that I had been in a wood, much less a dark one. It took another year of wandering and contemplating the truth that although I had religion, as the expression goes, the more theology I got, the less I wanted to be a priest. A year of suicidal depression followed, and I realized I wouldn't go back to be ordained anytime soon.

In his esoteric lessons held in Berlin in February, 1913, the Austrian philosopher and mystic Rudolf Steiner said that God

is real and active where we see the destructive powers of nature; in autumn storms, in all shattering and disintegrating of things. I sat and watched the seasons pass outside my window and existed, being crushed by the manifestation of the divine. Slowly, once I let go of the idea of needing to do something meaningful in a foreordained, meditative, and godly way, moments of happiness returned.

When describing the difference between the “normal” everyday life versus the “esoteric” and supersensible one that can be accessed through meditation, Steiner issues a warning: “Exoteric life takes place in the world of cognition. We know something because we confront an object, look at it and make mental images of it. This changes the moment we meditate.” In advising the seeker of spiritual wisdom through meditation, Steiner cautions that “We shouldn’t immediately make ideas about what approaches us in this world [of supersensible reality]. We should just open ourselves, listen and feel what wants to stream into our soul.” In my case, however, I am not a very regular practitioner of meditation except for three years of attempting to know ‘higher worlds’ in seminary training. I already sense my mind’s existence astride the boundary of the exoteric and esoteric, between mental cognition and psychic reality. One in which often-unwilled thoughts of my own death are what stream into my soul, taking up an inordinate amount of “space.” When I opened the door further to this supersensible world, disorientation, depression, and death awaited. One evening last year, my ear began to hurt, and I thought immediately, “Oh, it must be some terrible disease and I will soon die.” I see signs in hypochondria. I read into my symptoms the hope that the journey is almost over. The plane is about to crash.

Steiner continues: “We must preserve absolute equanimity with respect to spiritual experiences, just as we should remain calm in everyday life with respect to all events, ideas, etc. so that we don’t get excited or upset.” Great tip, Rudolf.

When not describing the intangible world, Steiner does offer some practical advice for how to practice such equanimity, and it involves disciplining our soul's capacities for thinking, feeling, and willing. This much I have learned is true—there are ways to mitigate the inner emotional turbulence; but I have also learned to sense when I am in danger of being dragged down by an external situation, one that inevitably involves other humans. Why did the frog cross the road? ...

Because it was stapled to the chicken.

Sitting in my room in the village overlooking the Mainarde Mountains of Molise, I look down at my swollen fingers, the instrument of my intended work and they look foreign to me. No, not quite, they resemble my mother's leathery hands which are slightly swollen from arthritis and seventy-five years of work, but mine are now also covered in an angry rash of hives. The left hand has red bumps full of liquid bubbling up from my swollen flesh like poison ivy burns. Slowly bursting from the pressure after a few days, my body's juices ooze out of my finger like maples being tapped for their syrup. The itching on my hands and legs is maddening, coming in waves, triggered by even a slight mountain breeze upon my skin. Even many weeks later, the itching returns like the echoes of a bad dream. The first day I arrived at the residency, I must have encountered the cause of this reaction, but I have no recollection of what it might have been.

I have been in this situation before. In 2013, once I abandoned my career in the US defense industry and decided to attend seminary in southern Germany. First, I stopped by the eastern Mediterranean following an invitation to visit some pastors from my church who were holding an inter-religious peace camp in the hills of Galilee. After one night sleeping underneath the pine trees with the youngsters, I awoke with what I thought were mosquito bites all over my hands, feet,

and face. When they quickly turned into these oozing, itching sores, I saw the Kibbutz doctor who told me about the pine processionary moth. I was the only afflicted party in our group. This miraculous creature of the genus "Thaumetopoea," species "pityocampa" has microscopic urticating hairs in its caterpillar stage, which cause harmful reactions in humans and other mammals. The internet tells me that "The species is notable for the behavior of its caterpillars, which overwinter in tent-like nests high in pine trees, and which proceed through the woods in nose-to-tail columns, protected by their severely irritating hairs."

Although the name pityocampa comes from "pine and larva," the word pity seems most appropriate to me now. Pity-evoking is the only word for a skin rash. It's hard to hide and catches the eye. You can't help but be moved by either disgust or pity, in the best case. I am so full of self-pity it is literally oozing out of me. Did the pity come from feeling unattractive due to these angry hives swelling my limbs, or was it always there and just now coming to expression?

There are certainly many things that I am angry about but do not say. There are truths I want to shout out to the world that are unsightly and unpleasant about what I have done and experienced in my life. I am trying to write them in the form of a memoir, but I'm blocked. In the meantime, my skin will reveal it as literal and metaphoric markers and warnings. These are expressions of my attitude towards the world I've encountered.

One morning on the mountain, I read the introduction to *The Original of Laura*. In it, Dimitri describes how his father's downward spiral to death started with falling in the Swiss mountains while pursuing his hobby of lepidoptery, the study of butterflies. In the cooling late afternoon of that same day, I found myself walking up the hill to the last house in

the village on the left, where I had intended to visit Clara, an elderly woman recently widowed earlier in the year. She said to stop by anytime and meant it, but once I finally got myself up the single road, past the village's old houses, to ring at her door, she wasn't home. Later she told me she was picking out her husband's gravestone. I followed the road upwards on its rough-hewn sun-bleached cobblestones, which ran parallel to one of the many stone walls that crisscrossed the mountainside.

During World War II, the Americans came through here on their way north from Sicily, having beaten back the fascists in bloody battles throughout southern Italy. They fought the Germans here in the Gustave Line, which practically runs right through the village, in the winter of 1943/44. They even built a road still named after "the Americans" to access the remote mountains of Molise in the slimmest part of Italy's boot. The curators tell me about a Scotsman who fought against the Germans in southern Italy but upon returning home met an Italian from this village, and so returned to Italy for good. He stayed on the hill for the rest of his ninety-two years. That's one way to deal with the aftermath of war.

Along the white stony path, I found myself chasing butterflies to capture them with my iPhone camera, far from civilization, and contemplating the purchase of a house in this village that I had just left. There are many empty houses in the towns of the region. Many of the children of families who'd lived here for generations having long since moved to the big cities of Europe, though some continue to return to build more energy efficient houses or move to lower altitudes, where the winters are milder. The house I looked at came with a plot of land, upon which fig trees already grew. The idea of having an orchard and chickens providing fresh eggs daily and growing my own food in the garden captured my imagination.

If I wandered off the path here, I had been warned there might be shells, unexploded ordinance, and other nasty surprises

like scorpions and wild boars awaiting me. I had seen the boars already, hurtling through the underbrush uprooting everything in their path—hard to miss—but also the seemingly invisible moths and caterpillars which caused me grief. As I wrote and searched through my journals—trying to put them in some meaningful order in my memoir—plumbing the depths of my memory, I found undiscovered ordinances of thoughts and feelings, a seemingly endless supply of trauma and suicidal ideations that I had confided to my journals but otherwise hidden from those around me, and even myself for so many years. I had been mentally living a life on the edge for decades, where thoughts of suicide would lie waiting behind every bush, stone, boulder, or obstacle in my path. Whenever I was challenged and felt like I had no more choices out of a bad situation, I had thoughts of ending it all. And now I was stumbling upon them in my journals and wondering how I'd even made it this far without hurling myself off some cliff.

The rugged beauty of this landscape appeals to me because it is not just pretty, or quaint, or touristy, but real. Molise is beautiful in its wildness. It wasn't always quite so wild. It has been worked, yet it is a work in progress as the re-wilding of this region takes over. My hosts explained how over the past fifty years, nature has been slowly reclaiming these hills and hiding the many stone walls and paths that had been cleared over generations for small plots of land to be cultivated. In the photos of the area at the WinterLine War Museum in the nearby town of Venafro, the landscape looks vastly different. There is history here, but there is still potential amongst the rocky terrain and partly deserted villages. People like me are coming here in search of something quieter and safer, like the curators of the Museum who created such a residency for artistic reflection. Some things look better with the passage of time; others just appear different.

I imagine a life where I live in the house that I saw for sale

in the village. I have chickens in the yard and a garden, and I harvest figs. If I had chickens—whose lives I would worry about preserving—and a plot of land to care for would the incessant thoughts of my own mortality fade? Keeping busy certainly is one way of keeping the hounds of existential angst fed and quieted for a while.

I wrote a children's story about chickens once. I wrote it mostly in my head and like Nabokov, whose characters in *Laura* never get fully fleshed out, my chickens never saw the light of day on a page. They were inspired by real ones my sister kept in Pittsburgh for a few years. Her young children loved to chase them around the small backyard. Every night the hens went into their plastic coop, but one night, as my sister later relayed, several of them managed to flee into the uppermost branches of a tree in their yard. She had to chase them around in the dark for what seemed like an eternity, so intent they were upon staying in danger.

In my story, these imaginary hens escape their coop and have an adventure in the big city. The story began thus: Miffy, Laurel, and Hilary lived in the small backyard of a big house in a big city. Their coop was opened every day, and they had free range in the yard to search for tasty bugs and juicy caterpillars. They often flew up and roosted on the boughs of the big pine tree next to the house—especially when they got tired of being chased and hugged by their small human friends. From the tree branch, they could see into the big house. From high up, they could see over the fence into the neighbor's yard. They could also hear the shouts, whoops, cries, laughs, and bits of conversations about life out in there in the big city. One day, Miffy—she was always the one starting such debates—said to Laurel and Hilary: "What do you suppose it's like out in the big city?" And so off they went, out into the wilds of urban America, encountering curious raccoons, venomous vipers, pensive pigeons, and friendly foxes who share

with them how to stay alive in the big, scary, cityscape. Eventually, they return home, safe and sound.

Is it too obvious to say this story is an allegory? That I long to return to the heavenly coop is a simplification. I am not a mere chicken. I yearn for a sense of meaning in my life. Having pursued it in various external titles, roles, and institutions for years, I am on my own now.

There are many ways to deal with suicidal thoughts; the stigma attached to seeking help for mental health issues is thankfully disappearing. I also know from other friends and acquaintances, not just myself or suicidal exes, that while so many of us remain depressed, we are not alone in our suffering. We often need other humans to assist us with getting through the worst of the wave of crisis. Other times, we are being called to connect with our purpose. The Quaker theologian Parker Palmer writes about his depression in *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*—the title itself giving away the key to healing—and connects our ability to hear and thus speak the truth of our selves with maintaining our mental health.

My dad used to tell jokes around the dinner table. Here's one I remember: A man goes to a psychiatrist and explains that he thinks he is chicken feed. They work together for months until finally, the man comes to understand that he is not chicken feed. Just as he's saying goodbye, he says, "Wait, Doc, I have one last question. I know that I'm not chicken feed. You know that I'm not chicken feed, but what about the chickens?"

When do we label ourselves something like "suicidal"? Once you tell someone that you've had thoughts of suicide, they never look at you the same way again. After my formative experience in the military where I was constantly overworked, muscle fatigued, sleep-deprived, harassed, and pushed over the

threshold into suicidal ideation (all without deploying!), I learned to be wary of having everything taken from me or “giving my all.” It still happens that things become too much, but I remain protective of my internal and external resources, most importantly my soul resources. I try to avoid situations where I might be stuck in a situation that I do not desire; I always have an escape route. My life depends upon it.

Rudolf Steiner also said, in the same lecture given in Berlin almost 100 years ago, quite helpfully that the Gods protect those unprepared for what lies on the other side of the threshold of the visible world by giving us pleasure and enjoyment in creative activity in the physical world. So here I stay, on the haptic side of the line of consciousness and immateriality: writing, eating, and when possible, making merry. Besides writing out the truths of my life and turning hives into literary hay, I’ve learned to let the imaginary chickens save my life. Creatively sending the hens out on adventures or calling them home to roost again. Just getting to the other side can be enough. This is an attitude that Victor Frankl would endorse.

New Nonfiction from Bettina RoLyn: “Adjustment Disorder”

For thirteen years, I stored my boxes of army documents and medical records in various basements, closets, and attics, mostly not my own as I had fled the land for foreign adventures, eventually settling in Berlin. I couldn’t get far enough away from those boxes and what they reminded me of. But there, in those dark and musty corners, they waited patiently. Too hot in the summer and cold in the winter were my excuses

for not sorting through them. Some just-right day, I intended to look more closely at the documentation of my suffering, but there they stayed: neatly arranged from the outside, chaos and pain detailed within. I always had another excuse—if you're looking for one, any one will do, they say. Then came the novel coronavirus. Life halted. Riots erupted in the streets as America's own darker corners came to light, regardless of the pandemic. With the distractions of overextended social calendars and freedom of movement gone, out of that pause arose the cry for justice in America, for the truth to be known and the past unearthed.

When the plague hit, I was back in the States, my homeland, and got stuck for four months at my mother's while visiting her in rural Pennsylvania—living for free—but in close proximity to elderly and at-risk individuals. I couldn't join the protests against police brutality for fear of bringing the pandemic back to our small community. My hands were bound already without zip-ties or handcuffs. What could I do with all my pent-up frustration and time to spare? The attic beckoned. I braved the muggy heat and dragged down the box of medical records. Inside I found five large, white envelopes from the Department of Veteran's Affairs—a helpful guideline printed in all caps added clarity: DO NOT OVERFILL. Now you tell me.

My 3.5-year enlistment was one of the most intense periods of my life. It consisted mostly of a very long string of training events, bad romances, affairs, drunken flings, and physical and psychic pain. In retrospect, this might be the same for many civilian women in their late twenties, but my drama involved more early formations, uniforms, and abuses of power.

I enlisted after graduating liberal arts college at the age of 25 and went to basic training alongside 18-year-olds who had just finished years of high school football. They were used to being under intense physical strain and getting yelled at by coaches; I had been studying languages and philosophy! It was

a hard landing in basic training, which never wore off. From basic on, my muscles, tendons, and ligaments, and then gradually, my spine bulged and rebelled. Things continued to deteriorate in Advanced Individual Training (AIT), where I learned to be a prisoner of war interrogator. Another year of learning Persian-Farsi at the Defense Language Institute (DLI) only exacerbated my condition.

Glancing through the timeline of my military service as revealed in my medical records, I was struck by the evolution detailed in the list of medical treatments. It's a wonder I wasn't inspired to seek a career in medicine as I cycled through the specialties gaining valuable experience as a patient in each. It began in general and sports medicine, then neurology, dermatology, optometry, orthopedics, and internal medicine. There was even a short spell in obstetrics, which lead to emergency medicine and mental health; at some point, I graduated to the experimental pain clinics and more mental health centers. I spent a long time at pharmacy school. I had signed up to do my part in the war on terror but found myself seeing more of the benefits of socialized medicine than the frontlines of combat.

I always loved the idea of the army and yet when people learn about my military service, they are often surprised, and I find myself laughing too. Did I really do that? I tried not to think about it for years, but the reality of it—the context and timing of my enlistment at the height of the surge in Iraq, even many of the people I worked with—I hated. Of course, not all of the time, but I was often bored by much of what my job entailed. I was outraged that, with all my education and training as an interrogator and linguist—us linguists were often reminded of how many hundreds of thousands of dollars the Department of Defense had spent on our training—I was often relegated to sorting papers or white-washing rocks or taking orders from semi-literate superiors.

I tried to hide this snobbery of mine, but sometimes failed. I

would get yelled at for an arched eyebrow, that danged “attitude” of mine always found a way to creep onto my face, try as I might to suppress it. It was a love-hate relationship because despite my feelings of superiority in certain matters, I can see now how I desperately wanted the army to love me. This mattered so much because if the army loved me, then I could love me, too. But I would never rappel down a rope from a helicopter to storm a building or save a fallen comrade with a fireman’s carry. Not with this twisted spine. Try as I might to become a good soldier, I would never belong in the military, not really. And I would not be happy there either. There were some moments of glorious fun: That part of basic training when you get to throw a grenade or climb an obstacle course high above the trees come to mind.

I open another big white envelope and start reading about the stage when I finally was given a permanent profile restricting my physical activities. No more running, but I was permitted to walk the physical fitness test. Oh, the shame! Once I finally finished the endless AIT and language school phase, I got my orders to Ft. Hood, Texas, and was assigned to a Military Intelligence unit at West Fort Hood. Within a day, I was trotting around the Texas plains playing OPFOR—the bad guys—against our own troops who were training for deployment—and winning, a not so subtle sign of what awaited America in Iraq and Afghanistan. That was actually a lot of fun, getting to play a role that was not military, but the guerillas and terrorists who would reveal the allegedly invincible US military’s weakness. I would be rewarded in that role for my unique “solutions” and clever outside-the-box thinking.

I had wanted to be part of something bigger than myself; to pursue justice and be amongst the righteous. I wanted to be told I was good and doing the right thing. I performed well on standardized tests, and I loved being told “you done good.” I was an excellent linguist—top of my class even, earning an

achievement medal for my language test scores and good grades. I lived for praise and was crushed by criticism. "You're a piece of shit soldier," I heard from a few NCOs over the course of my training, for various reasons: Not being able to perform a buddy-carry because of an injured shoulder, or for crying during basic training. And gradually, I believed them. They were the experts after all, they ought to know who was a POS and who wasn't.

The military had seemed like a good place to get this sense of higher purpose I craved, of being in the right place, and "doing good." I didn't approve of invading Iraq, but genuinely wanted to minimize potential collateral damage with my language skills. But tolerating the inanities that the military is known for—mindlessly, obediently following orders—for example, was not my forte. My individuality strained against the inevitable petty exercises of military authority that abound where power is distributed to immature people. I had a knack for picking up on large and small injustices taking place around me. One roommate I had at Ft. Huachuca during AIT was a "holdover." She had accused a fellow student of rape and was forced to stay in the same unit as her rapist until an investigation was completed. Out of frustration and despair, she tried to make it all go away by rescinding her accusation and was then prosecuted under the UCMJ—for making a false accusation! I watched helplessly, but learned the important lesson: Do not report, do not resist. It is futile and will result in further suffering. For a time, I doubled down on attempting to conform and "exceed the standards," ignoring my increasing list of physical ailments.

I was reminded in my records, that already at DLI, I had gone to see the chaplain and confess my woes and frustrations. He informed me that women shouldn't be in the army anyway. He referred to a recent case of a female linguist who had killed herself in Iraq and said that the same fate awaited me if I didn't get out soon. Because he also claimed to have special

knowledge of impending doom, "The world would soon go up in flames when the Antichrist, a new pope, would start World War III!" he had informed me—amongst other conspiracy theories—it was easier to discount his views overall. But the seed of doubt about my ability to handle things because of my gender had been sown.

One day in 2005, in the oppressive heat of Texas at Fort Hood, I found myself in tears after some classic Army-scenario of humiliation. This meltdown was related to another one of my "transgressions," some injustice had been done to me—or another hapless private. I don't even remember whether it was me or someone else who was the target, but I couldn't keep my mouth shut and suffered in either case. As I attempted to maintain my military bearing and failed, a sweet sergeant from my squad, who had recently returned from Iraq, approached me afterward. While trying to calm me down, he said, "You know, you might have adjustment disorder. I'm taking Prozac for my PTSD; it seems to be the only way to make it through the day. They prescribed it to me after I bit a guy on the face. He came to my house, and I just bit him in the face. Yeah—adjustment disorder." He was a smallish, pock-faced man also in his mid-twenties and had been a gunner on a Humvee. I didn't ask him for details but knew he meant well with his tip.

I thought about my "disorder." I didn't want to bite anyone, but I sure drank a lot... Would I need to take medication just to exist in the military? Must I pretend that I had adjusted to it, when clearly, I had not? What does it say about a person who thinks it's normal to be yelled at? And did I want to become that person? I hadn't even been to Iraq yet. I knew enough—and was counseled by a psychologist—to avoid prescriptions that indicated mental health issues because of my security clearance as a linguist. There was a magic, red line that ought not to be crossed when discussing one's mental health. *No, I'm not hearing voices. No, I'm not going to kill*

myself or others. There probably was a clear line in the way security clearances were adjudicated, but that line remains a secret to those applying or even already holding such clearances. Nevertheless, according to my medical files and that long list, the number of medications prescribed to me by so many doctors in all those specialties in the last two years of my enlistment alone, was 29. But none of them were antipsychotics, *whew!*

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) which was released five years after my medical discharge, adjustment disorder and PTSD are classified as trauma and stress-related disorders. PTSD is triggered by an *overwhelmingly* traumatic event, whereas adjustment disorder is caused by “only” a stressful event or change in environment.

Already during my enlistment, I could see acutely how the very thing that made the military strong as a whole required the suppression of individuality and individual freedom. How could this be reconciled? I never figured it out. I couldn't turn off my sense of self and couldn't repair it either. So, I obliterated it in ways known to all soldiers: drugs and alcohol.

The truth is that I was high a lot in the army. When I got to my first real duty station at Fort Hood, my brigade's motto was “Always Ready.” They didn't specify what for. Most often, always ready to either drop everything to fulfill the whims of a superior—the so-called “Needs of the Army”—or to party, which meant binge drinking. On top of the doctors prescribed medications, a lot of us seemed to be self-medicating with alcohol.

Even with my favorite medication condoned and readily available, this constant state of readiness and being on alert—lest a male superior use the excuse of my rank insignia or beret being slightly crooked to talk to me and ask for my

number—drove me crazy. I was like a rat in a glass case. Always being observed and with nowhere to hide. When I got out for a minute, it was to be petted and stroked by my owners. Being female presented a constant set of challenges that I hadn't quite anticipated. The need to be extra "high-speed" all the time—lest I make all women look bad—made every occasion, even just walking down the street, a test. It was exhausting.

Already in the 1960s, psychologists developed a test for a person's "tolerance of ambiguity," which I took a few years after my time in the army. My score was not as high as I'd always assumed or hoped it to be. But it was finally official: I don't like not knowing what is happening next. I don't like "embracing the suck," or living, "always ready" for the unknown next catastrophe. I mistook my desire to serve my country for the ability to submit to the powerlessness of the enlisted world. But I didn't need Prozac to ease my mind. I could take an army doctor's prescribed muscle relaxant (for my back pain) and sleep for sixteen hours. I could take a Tramadol, down a few beers and go *chill out*. I often would check out of my pained body and tortured soul with pharmacological assistance; I could immobilize myself with permission for a few precious hours. And I would, except that there were consequences.

The higher I got, though, the further down I pushed my real emotions. There, under layers of uppers and downers, they festered, the fumes of my rage and pain oozing out as from a forgotten trash can. Maybe I really did want to bite someone? Instead, I self-sabotaged. When the high wore off, I cried. Eventually, I couldn't see the reason for staying in such a messed-up system with its outdated hierarchy and inefficiency in all things except matters of destruction. This was a system that took perfectly well-meaning people and turned them into the kind who would bite someone on the face because they don't know how to deal with the horrors they've witnessed.

I was also part of a rotten scheme: The military I was a member of was being used to implement an illegal war by a president who hadn't won the popular vote, and to oppress the powerless in multiple countries. I was both oppressor and oppressed—part of this system and equally suffering from it. I'm certainly not the first to observe this tragic conundrum.

I was a linguist, qualified in German, Spanish, Italian and newly trained in Persian-Farsi. I was getting paid extra to maintain four languages, but not doing anything with them. I had signed up to be an interrogator yet because of my physical issues could not deploy with my unit to Iraq. Nobody likes to feel incompetent and unqualified, and I felt like I was both. I was not going to save anybody with my precious language skills. But as every soldier knows, the only things worse than being a *Fobbit* (a soldier how doesn't leave base while deployed) is not having deployed at all.

Finally, in 2007, I was ready to acknowledge that the army wouldn't love me and to cut my losses. I accepted a medical discharge for back and shoulder injuries. But like some sort of institutional form of Stockholm Syndrome, it took me a long time to deprogram. Even after my discharge, I tried several times to deploy as a civilian. I turned down an assignment in Afghanistan because I was going through a divorce, but I still wanted to be a part of it all and prove that I wasn't just a POS soldier. I wanted that pat on the back, and to be part of that coveted club of (mostly male) war veterans. I was so caught up in my desire to be part of it all, that I only gradually realized that if things sucked stateside, they would only be worse downrange, as a civilian or a soldier.

But now, thirteen years later I saw what was recorded in my medical file and reminded that it was not just that kind sergeant who saw the obvious: My record of diagnoses did indeed include, "ADJUSTMENT DISORDER WITH DISTURBANCE OF EMOTIONS"—all caps. I hadn't realized it at the time, I was so eager to close that box of pains.

From what I can tell, things have improved for women in the military since my stint. I know that women, in general, are capable of all the things men are, but I still wonder how much I would have been capable of if the men around me believed I was or how much of my failings were due to my gender. The slow unpacking of pains on paper and through my writing has helped heal some of the issues on my long list, but practicing self-acceptance and love and rebuilding a sense of self is not a task to check off the To-Do list in just a weekend.