

# Nonfiction from Jennifer Orth-Veillon: “From Death Threats to a French Dandy, Afghan Contractors Abandoned by the U.S. Struggle to Find Asylum Abroad”

LYON, France—When the Taliban shoved him out of the sedan with the butts of their Kalashnikovs, Medhi could barely walk. For eight hours, they had blindfolded him, kept his hands tied behind his back, and beat his legs with plastic pipes.

“To kill you is our right for two reasons,” he says the Taliban members shouted at him. “One, because you are working for the Americans and therefore against Islam. Second, because you are [Hazara](#) and not a pure Muslim.”

The Taliban are [Sunni Muslims](#), mostly [Pashtun](#), who have a history of persecuting the Hazara Shias.



Medhi poses in

front of a rosebush at Bagram Air Base. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

This was the third time the Taliban had threatened Medhi for his work as a security guard with the U.S. military on [Bagram Air Base](#). They indicated they wouldn't let him survive a fourth.

After seven hours, the Taliban offered Medhi a deal: "I could live, but it was my responsibility to help them sneak six of them into Bagram so they could plan an attack," Mehdi tells The War Horse. "I had 24 hours to get security uniforms and make up lies to infiltrate them. I had no choice but accept,

and they let me go.”

He never went back to Bagram.

Rather than betray the Americans he worked with, Medhi went straight to the apartment where he lived with his mother and four younger siblings.

“My mother told me that whatever happens, I would be killed,” he says. “I knew that if I carried out the Taliban’s orders, I would be executed. And if I didn’t, I would be executed anyway. My father had disappeared, and I didn’t want my family to be targeted.”

Medhi’s mother called his uncle, who arranged for him to leave Kabul the next day.

It’s possible that Medhi’s decision saved numerous American lives at Bagram.

## ‘The Rights of Man’

Medhi, whose name has been changed to protect his identity, tells this story from Lyon, France, where he fled—taking a circuitous, potentially deadly route—after leaving Afghanistan. There, his request for asylum has been rejected twice. If it is rejected again, he will have few choices: to try again in another European country with perhaps the same results; stay in France illegally, which means spending his life hiding from authorities; or, if caught, be deported to Afghanistan, where he will most likely be threatened again or even killed by the Taliban.

“France was supposed to be the country of the *droits de l’homme* (rights of man),” Mehdi said.

And America?

After Afghans risked their lives working with the Americans as

interpreters, guides, sources, and guards—sometimes assuming the United States would keep them safe in return for their help—they've instead been denied visas by the thousands. This comes even as the U.S. military members they served with say they worry about the consequences both to the Afghans and to future generations of U.S. service members.



U.S. Marine Corps Lance Cpl. Kevin Rincon, left, and Lance Cpl. Zidan Sheabar, both with 2nd Platoon, Company I, Battalion Landing Team 3/8, teach interpreters attached to Company I how to apply a tourniquet at Forward Operating Base Price, Afghanistan, in 2011. Elements of 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit deployed to Afghanistan to provide regional security in Helmand province in support of the International Security Assistance Force. Photo by Gunnery Sgt. Bryce Piper, courtesy of U.S. Marine Corps.

In Afghanistan itself, there is no hope: Tens of thousands of people who worked as Mehdi did to help the United States fear the [Taliban will hunt them down](#) the instant American protection leaves.

Rather than face rejection by the United States or likely

death back home, Mehdi pins his hopes on a French dandy named Walid.

## **A Silk Scarf, Artfully Draped**

Walid presides at the center of the table under the intermittent snapping fluorescent ceiling lights of a convenience store. No one ever catches Walid without suede shoes and a silk scarf draped artfully around his shoulders. Like his look, his smell is unmistakable: Dior cologne, cumin, and a lingering scent of the Cuban cigars he smokes with his cognac when the sun goes down.

“My ex-girlfriend is the former Miss Lithuania,” Walid tells us, tossing back his long salt-and-pepper hair with a wave of his impeccably manicured hand.

He flips through his cell phone looking for pictures of the courtship.

Everyone in the Lyon community of Afghan refugee applicants knows that, when all else fails with French immigration, it's time to call Walid. In addition to providing friendship and food, he runs a free-of-charge service to assist refugees like Mehdi navigate the notoriously cumbersome French paperwork.

His work with them is a testament to the reality that Afghans have been fleeing war and violence in their country in waves for almost half a century: first the Soviets, then the Taliban.



Walid smokes a cigar outside his shop. Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

Walid, an Afghan refugee himself, comes from a different generation and socioeconomic class. His well-off family escaped to France in the early 1980s as his father, an intellectual and critic of Afghanistan's government, was threatened by the communist regime. They were granted asylum easily.

Walid tells *The War Horse* Medhi represents the face of many caught up in a sordid phenomenon of the Afghan refugee crisis that will be exposed further as U.S. troops leave: Working alongside Americans provides little guarantee of gaining refugee status. However, it is certain that Afghans who worked in any capacity with the military and have remained in the country confront retaliation from the Taliban.

# 'I Was Afraid There, Too'

Mehdi felt a sense of hope—for himself and for his family—when he took the job at Bagram.

At first.

In 2014 when U.S. and NATO forces began to wind down their 11-year-long occupation, Medhi checked entering vehicles for explosive devices. He'd heard about the post while selling produce from a cart in Kabul where he didn't earn enough to take proper care of his family. The job, obtained through a U.S. contractor called [Anham](#) and managed by the Afghan Ministry of the Interior, came with a high monthly salary. Medhi says he couldn't refuse.

"The experience was a good one overall," Medhi says. "However, I never even thought about living anywhere else than Afghanistan. When I took the job, it was for economic reasons for my family only."

He would spend three days at Bagram, where he slept, and return to Kabul to see his family for the remainder of the week. He worked with Afghans and men from places like Nepal and China. Even though he was employed there for two years, he had almost no contact with Americans. He didn't speak English, and the few exchanges he had with the Americans were through his boss, who had a translator.

"I had some problems with my work for Americans," Medhi says, sheepish about saying it in front of an American.

The first was the payment system. His paycheck was automatically deposited into a bank account, rather than paid in cash, and he had few opportunities to withdraw it. It was dangerous to take out money from banks when he was alone, so he relied on the head of his group at Bagram to take employees to the bank in groups for safety.

Sometimes, "I didn't trust what Americans were doing," he says. At Bagram, he was assigned to scan under trucks for bombs as they entered the base. He was also supposed to look inside the vehicles, but only Americans were authorized to unlock and open the doors for the guards during the security checks, Mehdi says. Once or twice a week, when he asked to open the doors, drivers would refuse, he says, telling him they had orders to allow access only to Americans.

"They didn't let me do my job," he says.

But something else was at stake. At this point in the interview, Mehdi stops speaking in English and asks Walid to translate his words. Mehdi suspected the trucks he was forbidden access to, which came from various Afghan provinces, carried pillaged items of historical value to his country that would later be sold and exploited in museums around the world, he says through Walid. After the trucks entered the base, helicopters or planes would airlift the cargo containers from those vehicles away from Bagram.



U.S. Army Lt. Col. William J. Butler, commander, 2/503 IN (Airborne), and Lt. Col. Sher Mohammad, commander, 6th Kandak, Afghan National Army, and their staff during an assumption of command ceremony for Lt. Col. Sher Mohammad at Forward Operating Base Joyce, Konar province, Afghanistan, in 2010. Photo by Sgt. Corey Idleburg, courtesy of U.S. Army.

No evidence today points to the veracity of this claim, but, as Walid explains, his misgivings are understandable. “No one can forget the [Koh-i-Noor diamond](#),” he says.

Even the least educated person in Afghanistan knows about the cultural damage caused by widespread Soviet looting or the theft of the 105-carat Koh-i-Noor diamond that sat on the crown of the Queen Mother, Elizabeth of England. It is now on display in the [Tower of London](#). While Britain’s East India Company used underhanded tactics to obtain the gemstone from the 10-year-old Indian Maharaja Duleep Singh in 1849, it once belonged to what used to be part of Afghanistan and the country has made several claims for its return.

After Medhi was kidnapped by the Taliban, he fled in the back of a pickup truck with a group of people who huddled together for warmth. It took him 15 days to cross the southwestern [Nimroz Province](#), known as Afghanistan’s “Wild West” due to its reputation as a smuggling hub into Iran.

“I was in Iran one day, and everyone told me I’d be sent back, so I went to Turkey,” Mehdi says. “I was afraid there, too.”

When he got to Greece, he boarded one of the [special trains the European Union](#) provided in 2015-2017 as part of their [Emergency Relocation Scheme](#) to transport refugees north into various countries. He got off in Austria, but after two years, immigration services there rejected his asylum request.

“I decided I wanted to become a chef in Austria,” Medhi tells *The War Horse* as he sips tea in the back of a small convenience store with other Afghan refugees. “But France is a good place for that too.”

Spending long weekend afternoons over tea with friends is an Afghan custom, but it is also decidedly French, a people who are world-famous for their cafes where, for a \$2 coffee, customers can linger at their leisure. Lyon has also been recognized by [UNESCO](#) as the world gastronomical capital and is seemingly abound with cooking opportunities. He could fit in here. If France would let him.

Things started out well for him when he got to France. He made friends with other Afghan immigrants and hit a stroke of good luck: He was chosen through a lottery for a place in a temporary residential center for asylum seekers. The French Office of Immigration and Integration also provided him with 210 euros per month for food and other expenses. He was later transferred from Paris to another residential center in Bourgen-Bresse, a city about 50 miles northeast of Lyon. He shares a room and living space with asylum seekers from around the world. The common language in the centers is English.

“I can talk to Americans now,” he jokes. He has also learned French.

But over the last year, things have gone downhill.

At a slender five-foot-three, and with a soft voice and ready smile, Medhi, who turned 25 this year, doesn't cut the traditional figure of a security guard assigned to the largest U.S. military base in Afghanistan.

In France, officials from [l'Office Français de Protection des Réfugiés et Apatrides](#)—the immigration office—don't believe he worked for the Americans in Afghanistan. At first, they didn't believe he was Afghan.

“I think nobody believes me because of my size and face,” Medhi says.

And even though he has provided a work contract, identity card, and photos of himself with colleagues at Bagram, his

application for asylum has been denied.

After his second rejection in early spring 2020, the French immigration ordered him out of the country—but then extended his visa because of the Covid-19 crisis. With borders doubly enforced because of the pandemic, Medhi doesn't know which country will let him in next.

His time in France is running out.

But while visiting an Afghan friend in Lyon one weekend in the fall of 2020, he met Walid, who restored in Medhi the most he could ask for: a fragile sense of hope.

## 'Who Will Work With Us Again?'

American veterans say they thought that hope would come from their own country—in the form of a nation they thought they were helping to rebuild.

"My objective was to go and visit the families of the interpreters I knew and have tea or dinner with them in a stable Afghanistan one day," says [Adrian Bonenberger](#), a decorated combat veteran, of his deployments there. "That's what would happen. But it's not."

Bonenberger, who wrote *Afghan Post*, expresses the disappointment of other members of the military who served in the war. Bonenberger served in Afghanistan for 25 months on two deployments.

"I would have loved to go back as an artist," echoes [Colin Halloran](#), who served with the U.S. Army in Afghanistan 2006 and is now an award-winning poet. "I really believe they were the most soulful, artistic people with a giant sense of hospitality that stems from their faith."

Instead, they both fear those visits will never occur. Worse, their "soulful" friends may not live to witness a time when

such a thing could happen.

“Many of the Afghans who have worked for and supported the American presence in their country over the past two decades face a life-or-death dilemma,” states a [recent Costs of War report](#) authored by Noah Coburn of Brown University’s Watson Institute of International and Public Affairs. “Many of these military interpreters and other civilian workers are no longer safe in their own homes, threatened by anti-government fighters and criminal groups.”

But they haven’t found help elsewhere, either.

Medhi came to France after the two rejections in Austria. After the second rejection in France, he decided to contest it, a process Walid is helping him navigate. This will be his last chance.



Walid, who immigrated from Afghanistan to France during the Afghan-Soviet war, helps recent Afghan refugees with their visa applications. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

The Dublin Regulation, a European Union law that determines which member states are responsible for handling asylum seekers under the rules of the Geneva Convention, allows an adult applicant to stay in a country for six months after they submit their legal file. They have the right to appeal a negative decision, which grants them an extended stay. If they are rejected twice, immigration officials ask them to leave the country and the refugee may travel to another European country to reinitiate the process.

But the circumstances of fleeing a country, as many refugees do, can make the process harder, as it has for Mehdi. Politics haven't helped him, either.

"This wasn't only a U.S. war," Halloran says. "There were NATO forces, but it was mostly American. We have a responsibility, and the U.S. needs to step in and help these people get asylum."

Former President Donald Trump placed historically low caps on accepting refugees. By 2020, [15,000 were authorized](#)—down from 110,000 in fiscal year 2017, when former President Barack Obama set the cap. To protest Trump's cap, which became known as the "Muslim ban," Halloran helped organize an event in Washington with other veterans and writers.

"We found refugees from each of the eight countries on the State Department's Muslim ban list and let them tell their stories to highlight the danger they'd faced and to show what extraordinary human beings they were," Halloran tells The War Horse.

President Joe Biden has just raised the limit to 62,500—half of the 125,000-person cap he originally pledged. In February, an executive order from Biden allowed for private sponsorship, [the process that allowed](#) some Jews to come to America from Europe during WWII. They're still working out the details for the new order. Congress has allotted [more Special Immigrant Visas](#) to be granted to Afghans and Iraqis whose lives were put at risk because of their service with the U.S. military. But the process that's required by law to take no more than nine months is expected to [increase to up to four years](#). Waiting times have been exacerbated [because of the Covid pandemic](#).

In the last three months of 2020 alone, State Department statistics show [1,646 Afghans were denied](#) one of the special visas, and more than 18,000 Afghans await decisions on Special

Immigrant Visas applications, according to [The New York Times](#).

In addition, the U.S. Special Immigrant Visa application for Afghans [demands a long list](#) of documents, such as identity papers, a letter of recommendation, and verification from a human resources center.

Those documents are hard, if not impossible, to file while fleeing, as Medhi did, from an imminent death threat. While Medhi had most of these items at the time he left, getting a transatlantic flight from Afghanistan to claim asylum would have been impossible. He didn't have a passport and the ticket cost was exorbitant. But Europe is accessible by land, so that's how he traveled.

And, when Mehdi fled, the special visa didn't cover everyone who worked with Americans.

"Many Afghans were not employed by the U.S. military or affiliated missions but by private contractors or subcontractors who, in most cases, could issue no official promises about opportunities after their service," Bonenberger says.

The latest May 31, 2021, report from the U.S. Department of State's Refugee Processing Center shows that in the 2019 fiscal year, 1,198 Afghan were admitted as refugees. In 2020, it dropped to 604, most likely due to Covid restrictions. As of May 31, the United States has admitted 248 Afghans in fiscal year 2021.

If the United States doesn't take more action to help these threatened Afghans, Halloran says, it could influence the way foreign countries view our future military efforts.

"In the future, who will work with us again?" he says. "Why would anyone want to risk their lives or their family's lives if we don't step in?"

# 'I Cook Afghan Food for Them'

While the United States has stemmed the flow of Afghan refugees in the last four years, the number of Afghans filing for asylum to get refugee status in France has increased five-fold in five years. Until May 2021, little protection existed even for Afghans who worked with the French army.

As portrayed in a book and a recent graphic novel, [\*Traducteurs Afghans. Une Trahison Française\*](#)—translation: Afghan translators. French treason—only 250 of the 800 Afghan translators who worked with the French army between 2001 and 2014 as part of NATO forces were granted refugee status through asylum. Those who weren't were forced to go into hiding with their families as they had a Taliban bounty on their heads. In May 2021, in response to the worsening situation in Afghanistan, the French [government announced](#) it was issuing immediate asylum status to an additional 600-plus Afghans who had worked with the French military.



Sher Hasan, a local Afghan worker on Forward Operating Base Fenty, Nangarhar province, Afghanistan, uses a saw on concrete blocks during a construction project in 2009. Locals who worked with U.S. troops now fear the Taliban will kill them as Americans withdraw from Afghanistan. Photo by Sgt. Corey Idleburg, courtesy of U.S. Army.

But this won't help Medhi or thousands of other Afghans

awaiting responses from French immigration. The situation in France has catapulted into a crisis for all Afghan refugee seekers. Homelessness and reports of increased police intervention [are on the rise](#).

Which is why what started out as helping on weekends and evenings a few years ago has become an almost full-time job for Walid—a one-man show that’s becoming harder to pull off. He has just passed the test to become an official interpreter for the French court system and is awaiting final certification. This job, in addition to managing the shop, will eat up more of his time.

“I help them with paperwork, but I also cook Afghan food for them,” he says as he offers a taste his succulent [Kabuli palaw](#), an Afghan dish made in several steps with lamb or beef, fragrant rice, carrots, almonds, and raisins. “I reassure them. They take a drink or smoke here, and I tell them everything’s going to be OK.”

At least for a few hours on a winter evening in Lyon, Walid provides a safe place for Medhi and the other Afghan refugees. He’s placed a large wool Afghan blanket over the makeshift table set up by the refrigerated section, and the men pull it over their knees and hands for warmth.

## **‘We Go Back to the Roots’**

“When age goes up, we go back to the roots,” Walid replies when asked why he helps the young Afghan men. He’s 47.

He pulls up to his convenience store on most days midmorning in a shiny black Mercedes, which stands out on the narrow one-way street in a mostly pedestrian area in a trendy Lyon historic district. His car, combined with his designer clothing—and the group of haggard young Afghans who congregate around the fruit stand outside the shop from noon to as late as two a.m.—have made him the target of suspicion in the

neighborhood, he says. The gossip heard by The War Horse at neighborhood gatherings over the years includes accusations of being a Mafia boss, money laundering, human trafficking, and keeping an opium den in the basement.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

After the communists in Kabul threatened Walid's father for the first time in 1979, he went to Dubai right away to build a new professional life that would allow him to bring his family from Afghanistan. In 1980, when he returned to Kabul to fetch them, the government put him on home arrest and he faced certain execution.

After Walid's family home was raided, his father fled once more. At the end of that year, Walid's uncle paid someone to smuggle the rest of the family to Pakistan, where they obtained fake passports and flew to Dubai. The [Soviet-Afghan war](#) was in its second year and made traveling through rural parts of the country to cross the border perilous. Walid's family had to change cars and buses several times to avoid being caught.

Walid recalls that poor children from the countryside brought his obviously well-off family food and bread as if they were royalty. He also remembers being frightened by bombs and other sounds of fighting as the family made its way across the border, but, Walid admits, "Compared to most, our way of fleeing Afghanistan was luxurious."

Walid's father couldn't have foreseen that the family would land in Lyon in 1985, but at that time, it was easy for Afghans to enter. As Walid jokes, a look at the history of the [Silk Road](#) and wine draws the two cities together. In the 17th century, Lyon became one of the global epicenters for silk weaving.



Afghan police recruits man AK-47 assault rifles while providing security in eastern Zhari district, Kandahar, Afghanistan, in 2012. Photo by Sgt. Stephen J. Schmitz, courtesy of U.S. Army.

“All fine fabrics traveling from Asia, including from Afghanistan, came through Lyon,” he says, pointing to an open window on the second floor of the shop’s building through which can be seen an apartment with wood-beamed ceilings. The shop is in one of the old silk-weaving structures, called *les canuts*. The 13-foot-high ceilings created enough space for the large silk looms.

“And the best French wine is Persian,” he adds. A fine wine connoisseur, he boasts his wine cellar contains fine French reds, but he upholds the legend that the French Syrah grape [originated in Iran](#), near the Afghan border.

Having been educated in French schools in Kabul, Walid integrated into French public education in Lyon. After university, he opened two computer businesses in Lyon. He met his wife in India, and a few years after their wedding, she

moved to Lyon and the couple had three children.

“I managed big companies and I handled big budgets, but to manage the emotions of three kids who lost their mom was horribly difficult,” he says.

In 2014, at the height of his career, Walid’s wife died at 35 from breast cancer. With three young children and aging parents to take care of, Walid sold the businesses he had acquired in Lithuania, Dubai, Hong Kong, and Manama, Bahrain, to stay in France full time. To earn extra cash and maintain contact with the world outside during his family crisis, he decided to open a small convenience store.

“OK, I’ll sell food, because if there’s an economic crisis or not, whatever happens in the world, people should eat,” he says. “And this is what the Covid crisis has proved to me: to always be in service to the people.”



Atiqualla Rahin, U.S. Marine Chief Warrant Officer Bruce Johnson, and an Afghan contractor walk around the grounds of a new building site for a men's detention facility in Lashkar Gah, Afghanistan, in 2010. Photo by Lt. j.g. Jennifer Franco. Courtesy of U.S. Marine Corps.

Since he speaks French, English, Persian, and Arabic fluently,

he serves as a translator for the nebulous legal terms that obstruct communication. But this task goes beyond word-for-word exchanges. France has a reputation for one of most circuitous bureaucracies in Europe, and translating also means wading through the language of the cumbersome paperwork that accompanies every file.

“For every small thing, you get a paper,” Walid explains. “If I could show you my boxes of letters. For every small thing, you have some letter and most of the time it’s nothing. And so, I read these letters to them and tell them everything’s OK. Most of what I do for them is basic.”

Other tasks are more complicated. He helps place them in residences and he intervenes whenever they have trouble with the police, which is often the result of some cultural or linguistic misunderstanding, he says. Since Medhi’s asylum application had already been rejected by France, Walid is in contact with a lawyer and has served as a liaison between French immigration and private legal counsel. He is also regularly in contact with people he knows in Afghanistan to obtain birth certificates, work contracts, and other documents attesting to the truth of the stories the men tell their asylum caseworkers.

But he recalls the poor children from the countryside who brought his family food while they escaped Afghanistan.

“They had no food, but they still wanted to help me, and now I feel like I’m giving back,” he says. “I was too young to recall much about Afghanistan, but I feel I need to help people who need it. All the kids I help were thrown out at critical times in their lives.”

Even though these asylum requests are processed in the Afghans’ native language, Walid has to do it for most of them because of their low education level. Many who come from the poor and working class have few years of formal education and

struggle to write a one-page letter.

Medhi lived in Afghanistan until he was 20 and spent only two years total in school. Before arriving in France as a young boy, Walid had seven years of elementary school in Afghanistan. "My education in Persian stopped when I was 10 in Afghanistan, but my writing and reading skills are far superior," Walid explains.

Walid is also inspired by his father, who has helped in raising the three children while organizing local outreach efforts to help educate Afghans from a distance. Walid's uncle, his father's brother, is the head of a larger organization with a similar goal based in California called [Afghan Education for a Better Tomorrow](#) that gives distance-learning courses to students in Afghanistan.

"Humanity is his religion," he says of his father.

## **'I Fear the Worst for Him'**

Just as in the United States, a growing strain of French public far-right sentiment is less favorable to [economic migrants than to political ones](#), which is magnified by a fear of [admitting Islamist radicals](#) into the country.

Since Mehdi isn't an economic refugee, he has a better chance of succeeding than other Afghans Walid advises. Walid refuses to follow through with some asylum cases because the men change their stories too many times. Some lie about their age, and others borrow money from him only to disappear. Others schedule meetings with him and never show up. He had to bail one refugee out of jail.

"One night, I get a call around 7 in the evening," he says. "One of my guys blocked Bellecour metro station for hours. Police were everywhere."

After his second rejection, the young man in question tried to

kill himself by throwing himself in front of a Lyon subway. Bystanders banded together and stopped him, but the police detained him, and that has jeopardized his case in ways Walid can't assist.

"They don't have the same reality as I do," Walid says when discussing the gap in education and socioeconomic status with the Afghans. Some of the young men get angry at him if he can't help them or won't lend them money. But he cooks Afghan food for them once a week and allows them to gather at his shop to drink, smoke, and reconnect with their country. Sometimes fights break out and he plays an objective referee. For example, an older man who believed communism was beneficial for Afghanistan almost came to blows with a younger Afghan who saw his family's rural livelihood destroyed by the Soviet-backed government.

"But we are human beings," Walid concludes. "Right is right. Good is good. I won't let a difference of education or vision come between us."

Mehdi, however, is polite, even-tempered, and willing to help in Walid's shop. His story has been consistent for six months. Walid has never worked harder on a case, he says.

Getting someone to believe that Medhi worked for years on the Bagram base is likely the only way he will be granted asylum by any government in Europe or elsewhere, Walid says. The War Horse has contacted the contractor, Anham, but has received no response.

"He's like my son, and I fear the worst for him," Walid says.

## **'They Already Have Voices'**

Medhi's story, in many ways, is not only Walid's story but the story of all the Afghans who have been persecuted due to wars on their soil for more than 40 years.

“Their voices need to be amplified,” Halloran says. “They already have voices that can be heard, but those voices need to be amplified. This is the role that we can play.”

While waiting for a response to his renewed asylum request, Medhi spends time at Walid’s on the weekend doing odd jobs.

“I offer him money for his services, but Medhi always refuses it.”

He continues to learn English and French at the refugee residence in Bourg-en-Bresse near Lyon that houses several families, also waiting for updates to their status. When the weather is nice, they have group cookouts. If he gets his papers, Mehdi says, he might try to become a chef somewhere in Lyon. If not, he is trained not only as a security guard but also as a tile layer—and there is a demand for this skill in the Lyon area.

“I cannot change my life,” Medhi says. “But I can try.”

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**Reading Camus’ ‘The Plague’  
in 2020: A Dispatch from  
Lyon, France, by Jennifer**

# Orth-Veillon and John Tyrrell

*“It is as reasonable to represent one kind of imprisonment by another as it is to represent anything that really exists by that which exists not.”*

20th-century French writer Albert Camus chose these lines penned by Daniel Defoe as the epigraph for his novel, *The Plague*. It may come as a surprise that they hail from Defoe’s 1719 fictional work *Robinson Crusoe*, about a slave trader who escaped after, in an ironic turn of events, he was taken prisoner and became stranded on a remote island for 28 years. Defoe’s 1722 book, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, which is based on real historical events and a family member’s diary kept during the 1665 Great Plague of London, would seem the more logical choice. Camus studied Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* along with other pandemic narratives as he conducted research for *The Plague*, but he decided ultimately that his plague story should be introduced by a statement emphasizing imprisonment rather than illness.



Albert Camus

When Camus began writing *The Plague* in 1942, he planned on calling the germinating novel, “The Prisoners.”<sup>[1]</sup> The Germans had begun their invasion of southern France and the Allies had landed on the coast of North Africa. At the time, Camus was convalescing in southeastern France after another bout of tuberculosis, an illness he had battled since childhood.<sup>[2]</sup> He was blocked from returning home to Algiers and his wife, Francine. While most consider Camus a French author, he saw himself as Algerian and the forced separation from his terra mater undoubtedly stoked the novel’s dominant themes of isolation, exile, and separation. “The Separated” was also among the working titles.



Original 1947 The  
Plague edition by  
Gallimard.

Editions Gallimard

The struggle of individual imprisonment was nothing new to Camus. In 1942, he published his absurdist story *The Stranger*, which chronicles the downfall of Meursault, a man who is convicted and sentenced to death not because he killed an innocent Arab on the beach but for not crying at his own mother's funeral. In that same year, his philosophical essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" appeared, which lays out his basic theory of the absurd. Like Sisyphus who continues to push the rock up the mountain despite its inevitable fall, humans will always search for meaning. What counts is not so much the struggle to push the rock up, but the walk back down the mountain while contemplating renewal.

*The Plague* marks Camus' shift in focus from the individual and the absurd to the collective and what he calls the literature of "revolt." Around the beginning of 1943, he wrote:

*I want to use the plague to express the way we have all suffered from suffocation and the atmosphere of threat and exile we've all experienced. At the same time. I want to extend this interpretation to the notion of existence in general. The plague will give an image of those who shared the reflection, the silence of moral suffering.*<sup>[3]</sup>



Cover of the  
French 1947  
special edition of  
The Plague. Cover  
design by Mario  
Prassinis.

Editions  
Gallimard.

*The Plague* tells the story of a bubonic plague outbreak that strikes the French-Algerian town of Oran, decimating the population. It begins with sick rats coming out to die in the streets. When the rats disappear, the disease moves on to infect humans. At first, most of the inhabitants, with the exception of the character of Dr. Bernard Rieux, refuse to believe that the disease is dangerous. Rieux works tirelessly not only to save sick victims, but also to mobilize a movement against the plague by calling on others to help in the fight against it. As the city closes its gates, Tarrou, Grand, le Père Paneloux, Rambert, Castel, and Othon are among the characters who risk their lives to care for the victims of the unrelenting epidemic.

In 1943, Camus joined the French Resistance as an editorial writer for one of the most influential underground publications, *Combat*, and became its editor-in-chief at Liberation. He wrote moving articles inciting citizens to resist and then detailed the shock of the painful return of Jews and political prisoners who had been deported to concentration camps. Despite the fact that, in aiming for universality, Camus erased the most explicit references to the Second World War, the French recognized themselves in *The Plague*. As such, in 1947 the book became known as *the* novel about Nazi occupation, the Holocaust, the Resistance, and Liberation.<sup>[4]</sup> When Camus signed a copy of *The Plague* for his friend and fellow resistor, Madame Jacqueline Bernard, he wrote "To J., survivor of the plague."<sup>[5]</sup> She was deported to Ravensbrück concentration camp in 1944 and that same year her husband died on the way from Paris to Auschwitz.



Cover of underground French Resistance publication that Camus

edited, Combat.

Almost 75 years later, it could be said that Camus' vision of *The Plague* gaining a more universal significance has found renewed focus with COVID-19. For Camus, the pandemic virus symbolized not just Nazism but was supposed to serve as an allegory for any omnipotent force that imprisons people and inflicts human deaths in arbitrary ways. Since February of 2020, *The Plague* has made the bestseller list in countries such as South Korea, Italy, and France, and, in some places, has sold out on Amazon. When reading it, it's impossible not to wonder how someone writing in 1942 could have foreseen so accurately how things would play out in 2020. The general disbelief and denial of the severity of the virus, the unwillingness of government authorities to enforce prophylactic measures, the hoarding of goods, profiteering, quarantine, lack of medical supplies—these themes play out in *The Plague* as they do today.



Albert Camus

While these comparisons are striking, some of the less-sensational parallels of today's crisis with *The Plague* delve into the heart of the book's deceptively simple message – it is a story about acquiring a sense of love and duty for all humankind that functions outside of personal, moral, religious, or ideological motivation. It's about breaking out of a certain kind of individual imprisonment and isolation to combat a collective imprisonment and isolation.

### ***Le métier d'homme, le devoir d'aimer, and abstraction***

Two major terms from Camus' lexicon give shape to this concept: *le métier d'homme* and *le devoir d'aimer*. *Le métier d'homme*, loosely translated as “humankind's profession,” means that all humans have a job, tailored to each individual, that involves combating misfortune in the world to reduce

suffering. What drives *le métier d'homme* is *le devoir d'aimer*, the “duty of love” not just to one’s partner or family but also to humankind. Camus said, “love is the right and duty of each human” and “the only duty” he knows is “that of love.”<sup>[6]</sup> It is only this conception of love and duty without moral or material motivation or compensation that can heal plagues, imagined or real.

At first glance, *Le métier d'homme* and *le devoir d'aimer* appear to be simple concepts that any decent human being should be able to enact humbly. However, throughout *The Plague*, Camus demonstrates that this becomes nearly impossible in times of massive catastrophe due to the third major term from Camus’ lexicon—*abstraction*. Different abstractions allow the citizens of Oran to avoid confronting the horrible reality of the plague’s spread and impact. At its most simple, abstraction means turning the concrete into the immaterial or ideal, and it’s the different forms of abstraction that individuals employ—both wittingly and unwittingly—that become obstacles to the city’s efforts in countering the plague. As long as they create abstractions, humans cannot love or do their duty in preventing the suffering of humankind.

\*

The rest of this article will be devoted to dissecting the different ways the characters of *The Plague* generate abstraction while comparing these with a few ways different, real actors in today’s world have avoided confronting the most severe impacts of COVID-19. The authors—Jennifer Orth-Veillon and John Tyrrell—both residents of Lyon, France, who can’t go further than one kilometer from our homes for more than one hour a day, are seeking to resist the abstraction of this pandemic in textbooks (years from now), or on social media (minutes from now). To that end we have interviewed two real people close to us who have, against the odds, won their own personal battle with abstraction and helped, or rather loved,

humankind during this crisis.<sup>[1]</sup>

## **Abstraction and *The Plague***

In 1955, eight years after the publication of *The Plague*, the French journal *L'Express* published an article by Camus entitled "Le métier d'homme" in which he presents his recurring idea of "humankind's profession." He speaks of the human need for meaningful work, without which "life suffocates and dies," a theme he explored in *The Plague* through the actions of Doctor Rieux. In the article, he also addresses humankind's "duty to love" ("devoir d'aimer"), which drives Rieux, and undoubtedly motivates today's health care professionals as they work tirelessly and selflessly to protect lives against the onslaught of an invisible and deadly adversary. As a nurse in Lombardy, Italy, expressed to New York emergency-room doctor Helen Ouyang in early April when the city registered 47,440 cases, the merits of the profession can't be understated. "Please, don't give up," she wrote. "Our jobs are difficult but are the most beautiful ones."<sup>[2]</sup>

As with this nurse, Dr. Rieux's task – performing his "duty to love" – gives meaning to his existence. However, no lofty aspirations brought him to his calling. By his own admission, he entered his profession "abstractedly," as it was a desirable career "that young men often aspire to." Subsequently, as a young doctor, he was exposed to the hard realities of human suffering and death. The injustices he witnessed outraged him, challenging his capacity to see his patients abstractedly. Indeed, it was his inability "to get used to seeing people die" that spurred him on. But later, faced with plague in Oran, he found a new purpose for the abstraction of reality in allowing him to take on an unprecedented number of critical patients. He observes that "an element of abstraction, of a divorce from reality, entered into such calamities." However, he finally comes to the conclusion that he can never completely let down his guard and

give way to abstraction, as he proclaims, “when abstraction sets to killing you, you’ve got to get busy with it.” For Rieux, fighting his own abstract view of the plague becomes almost as difficult as fighting the plague itself.

Somewhat like Sisyphus, Rieux rarely wins the uphill battle with the plague. While a few make what he views as miraculous recoveries, most succumb to a violent end as the plague attacks in horrific ways. Their buboes ooze, their fevers soar. As the plague continues its rout, a group of men let go of their abstractions and join Rieux in helping the communal effort. The journalist character, Rambert, decides to stop illegally planning his escape from Oran to join his lover in Paris. Since the outbreak, he has tried bribing officials and finally resorted to engaging the services of some shady characters to smuggle him out. For him, the plague was not about the arbitrary deaths of thousands of humans, but about his individual sadness. When he abandons the quest to escape and instead joins the rescue teams, he admits to Rieux “I belong here whether I want it or not. This business is everybody’s business.” Rieux tells Rambert that he didn’t blame him for wanting to pursue happiness with his lover. At this moment, it’s easy to forget that Rieux has been separated from his wife too. “But it may be shameful to be happy by oneself,” Rambert confesses.

Rieux and his friends fight the plague—and their abstractions of it—until cases diminish and an effective serum is found. About a year after the first case appeared, the gates of Oran reopened and the citizens flooded the streets and cafés to celebrate. It is just then that Rieux is shattered by the sickness and death of his friend Tarrou, who has contributed greatly to the efforts. As Tarrou dies, Camus resists imposing an emotional reaction on his readers, yet the impact of the episode on Rieux is clear. Unable to be of any use to his friend, the doctor nonetheless remains steadfastly at his side, recording the details of their interactions during

Tarrou's final hours. The tragedy of this death, all the more poignant for having occurred as the plague was receding from the town, finally forces back the protective shield of abstraction which had permitted Rieux to carry out his duty so assiduously and for so long. It is the first moment since the onset of the epidemic in the town that he puts aside the others who are sick to stay with his friend. And it is the moment where the reader is presented with the real human cost of the ravages of the plague, free from all abstraction.

The next day, when Rieux receives the telegram informing him of his wife's death, it is hard not to wonder how he will carry on. Yet we know he will, as will the suffering. Rieux admits that "He'd been expecting it, but it was hard all the same. And he knew, in saying this, that this suffering was nothing new. For many months, and for the last two days, it was the selfsame suffering going on and on."

### **Abstraction and COVID-19**

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, abstraction has also been an important coping mechanism. For the general public, abstraction comes in the form of harsh realities in hospital wards reduced to news headlines and data points on graphs.. For front line medical professionals, it's the daily struggle to manage the waves of emotion resulting from unprecedented sickness, death, and deprivation of contact with loved ones. Like Rieux, some of those doctors and nurses have found that allowing the mask of abstraction to slip can be desirable in the face of such monumental difficulties. Italian E.R. doctor Andrea Duca said, "I realize now that keeping the emotions outside of me can help to manage the shift and the stress, but I need to be human to keep working."<sup>[3]</sup>

However, opening the floodgates to those emotional realities can also have devastating consequences. New York E.R. Doctor Laura Breen tragically took her own life following weeks of fighting the virus in others, and had even recovered from it

herself. According to her father's account in *The New York Times*, "She had described to him an onslaught of patients who were dying before they could even be taken out of ambulances." He said, "She tried to do her job, and it killed her."<sup>[4]</sup>

If ongoing mitigation measures are successful, it's likely that the vast majority of the global population won't contract COVID-19, or even have direct experience of it via immediate family and friends. This means that for most of us our experience will remain an abstraction, limited to what we see and hear on TV, radio, websites and social media in the form of soundbites, statistics, graphs, and their various interpretations through each channel's unique prism. As Camus suggests in *The Plague*, "we tell ourselves that pestilence is a mere bogey of the mind, a bad dream that will pass away."

Today, the bad dream plays out on screens at home and on mobile phones, adding a further stage of disconnection with reality. Many are looking hopefully towards a better future post-pandemic, in terms of improved health systems, sustained reductions in urban pollution, or more flexibility in remote working for example. The mass-scale abstraction of the pandemic, however, could prove to be a hindrance to such positive outcomes. If COVID-19 doesn't directly touch a person's life, it's easy to ignore its reality, deny its impact and believe that there's nothing that needs fixing.

In *The Plague*, Camus says that discussing humans as being good or bad citizens in times of crisis misses the point. Rather "they are more or less ignorant." He suggests that "the evil that is in the world always comes of ignorance, and good intentions may do as much harm as malevolence, if they lack understanding." It follows that to counter ignorance and gain this all-important understanding, people require information. But it needs to be correct information. This is challenging when facts depend on the way they are collected, and truth is subjective depending on the channel through which it is

transmitted. In his story, Camus describes the “epical or prize-speech verbiage” employed by the media beyond the walls of Oran when describing the situation within. This grates on Dr. Rieux because it fails to capture the reality of the “small daily effort” made by so many to sustain the lives of the afflicted.

It’s possible to imagine that some Italians reacted in a similar way to the sensationalist reporting in British media in early March when COVID-19 began to exert its deadly grip on Northern Italy.<sup>[5]</sup> Fast forward to April, when the infectious tide rose to similar levels in the UK, and the tone of reporting in popular newspapers was muted in comparison. At times, it leveraged the distraction of Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s own battle with the virus to keep the worst domestic horrors from the front pages.<sup>[6]</sup> It appears that it’s only a sensation when it’s happening to someone else.

Meanwhile, one debate currently raging in our communities and news media concerns the medical efficacy of wearing masks to protect ourselves and others from COVID-19. This might be missing the point, however. Camus goes straight to the heart of the matter, recording an exchange in which Tarrou hands a mask to Rambert the journalist, who immediately asks if it is really any use: “Tarrou said no, but it inspired confidence in others.” Our leaders frequently speak of community responsibility and the vital role that everyone has to play in mitigating the worst impacts of COVID-19. Staying at home and following social distancing guidelines is vital, but for any who share Camus’ view, the action of wearing masks is equally of value. It requires investment in modifying behavior to extend greater respect and understanding to those who share this world, its streets, and places of work and play. How people behave – whether or not they wear a mask, for example – has a very real impact on the level of safety or anxiety felt by others.



In Lyon, a sign reads “Stay home, that’s all.” Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon

In the high-score, high-stakes world of COVID-19 statistics, the relative differences of individual country’s approaches are laid bare. Every commentator has a different take, but it’s hard to claim that a country like South Korea has a lower infection rate because it lacks the freedoms of western liberal democracies. Sweden, for example, has achieved remarkable results. Some observers credit this to the heightened sense of social responsibility that saw Stockholm city centre foot traffic reduced by 70% without any enforced lockdown.<sup>[7]</sup> As COVID-19 takes its permanent place in the world’s ongoing reality, time will tell whether people are willing to invest in their communities through the wearing of masks and other perhaps inconvenient new behaviours as we seek to, as Camus suggests, “inspire confidence in others.” Such communal social responsibility is the manifestation of Camus’ “duty to love,” and its value should be embraced more than ever in trying times.

For individuals to grasp the importance of behavioral change and their wider social duty, it’s vital to break through abstraction and connect meaningfully with them. It’s here that the power of personal stories is paramount. The story that Camus told in *The Plague* is a fiction, but there are many narratives today that mirror its events, and it is those that must be elevated. By doing so, we can reveal the truth of Camus’ words when he says of the contagion, “it doesn’t always pass away and, from one bad dream to another, it is men who pass away.” And we can begin to better understand our shared duty of love.

We have come to know two individuals whose stories are relevant and valuable in the context of Camus’ discussion of abstraction in *The Plague* and our city’s experience with

COVID-19. Yasmina Bouafia and Walid Feda are two French citizens who, against great odds, demonstrate “le métier d’homme” and “le devoir d’aimer.”

### **Yasmina Bouafia, 6eme Arrondissement, Lyon**

“With *The Plague*, Camus has given us the copy that we have cut and pasted into today’s Covid-19 France,” claims Yasmina Bouafia, a 38-year-old French-Algerian woman living in the Charpennes neighborhood in the southeastern city of Lyon. Yasmina’s parents are Algerian, but she and four of her nine siblings were born in France. “It’s hard to find an Algerian of my generation who hasn’t read *The Plague*.”



Yasmina Bouafia serves Algerian mint tea.  
Courtesy of Yasmina Bouafia.

The pandemic has shed light on an aspect of Camus that she hadn’t previously grasped in his work. Camus, although he became known as a French writer, had always considered himself Algerian, despite having joined the French Resistance, and eventually settling in France after Algeria won its independence in 1954.. Almost all of his writings spring from his place of birth, and when he was forced to relocate to France after the Algerian War, he chose to live in the south of France because the intensity of the sunlight there most resembled that in Algeria. Yasmina, born in France, to a family steeped in Algerian tradition, has always considered herself French.

It has been from her position as an outsider that she has been able to help women in Algeria improve their health. Two years after giving birth to her twins, she divorced her husband and found herself almost exclusively responsible for raising her five children under the age of 11. Uncertainty and stress about her family’s future caused Yasmina to reach a weight that threatened her well-being. Through a combination of

meditation, nutrition, and exercise, she regained her health, and went on to create a foundation co-sponsored by French and Algerian organizations, to help women in Algeria combat the rise in obesity and its related problems. Gyms, yoga studios, and nutritionists are easy to find in France, but in Algeria, they are rare and inaccessible to most women. Even though she is unable to go to Algeria now, she stays in contact with the women in her program, who have, Yasmina admits, struggled since being confined to their homes due to COVID-19. She tells them they have to hold out at least until September when she will be able to help them again in person.

Reading books like *The Plague* in the time of COVID-19 have allowed us to believe more in fiction than in reality, she says. She's taken to watching the British series, "Black Mirror," and sees parallels in the way technology has taken over during the pandemic. Technology, she intimates, has made an abstraction out of the world and replaced real experience: "There's no more kissing, no more hugging, no more face-to-face meetings." Reality happens through the "black mirror" of our phones and screens.

Yasmina, worried about technology's influence over reality, believes the screens and the media are masking stories many don't want to be told. "I feel like the media is in competition for whoever tells the most sensational story, even if it has to do with pseudoscience." For example, it's rare to hear stated a truth that she believes most politicians don't want to admit: months ago, President Macron's government consistently crushed and criticized the Gilets Jaunes (Yellow Vest) Movement that involved working and middle class citizens protesting what they saw as the unfair decline in their standards of living. These people included nurses, farmers, truck drivers, and grocery store employees. They are the same people who, despite the dangers of contracting COVID-19, have been asked by the French government to continue working as they are considered "essential" to the nation. Their weekly

protests throughout France have been forbidden, which probably “suits the government.” “The values have reversed,” she says.

She cites another underrecognized issue in Algeria. Many people in Algeria work, as she describes, “day to day,” meaning they leave for work in the morning in order to make enough money to eat in the evening. With the stay-at-home order, they can’t leave their houses. This is especially difficult during Ramadan. In one particularly hard hit commune, Blida, military service members have been delivering meals to struggling families at night to break the fast, a response made possible by donations of food from over 1,000 households.<sup>[1]</sup>



Algerian Ramadan specialties prepared by Yasmina Bouafia.  
Courtesy of Yasmina Bouafia.

In France, Yasmina has managed her family’s food budget by dipping into her savings. As a single mother of five children, she benefits from a reduced lunch fee at the school cafeteria. Even if her children don’t eat much at night, she is reassured that they had at least one good meal with meat and vegetables during the day. With the children at home, her food budget has more than doubled and she worries about providing proper nutrition on a daily basis. In addition, she is limited from buying the necessary quantity of food since it is impossible for her to go out each day with all of her children and she doesn’t own a car. In France, it’s not permitted to go outside without a government-issued justification citing for example exercise, shopping for necessities, or seeing a doctor. There is also a one-parent-to-child obligation. Each time Yasmina went for a walk with her children, the police stopped her and ordered her home. Her older sister decided to move in with her to help ensure the children’s outings could continue.

Instead of taking her sister’s help as a cue to let down her

guard, Yasmina decided that the extra pair of hands at home would finally allow her to do what she felt was her “human duty.” While her sister watched her children, Yasmina went to the local chapters of the Salvation Army to prepare meals for the poor and homeless. She wore gloves, a mask, and protective clothing and declined to help distribute due to risk of infection. However, she reported each day to the centers until she severely sprained her ankle, forcing her to walk with crutches and stay home until the injury healed.

The task of fasting has become a greater challenge during Covid-19 due to the fact that Muslim families and friends can't visit each other during the day. This is especially painful in the early evening as the fasting draws to a close and they prepare to eat for the first time in over twelve hours. Yasmina explains, “In the Maghreb culture, we are used to taking a walk to visit family and friends after eating the evening meal and we talk late into the night. It's a time to reunite with people. Now I have to eat alone.” Most of Yasmina's children are too young to fast during the day and her evening Ramadan ritual has felt less celebratory as she eats in isolation.

A few days ago, her children surprised her. As if they had inherited their mother's selfless, benevolent impulse, they surprised her as she prepared their breakfast – they announced that they had all decided to join her in fasting for the day. And, in spite of a few grumbles, they made it to sundown. Instead of the traditional Ramadan soup, *chorba*, or orange-flower blossom pastries, her youngest begged to go to McDonald's, which is one of the restaurants that hasn't stayed open for take-out or delivery. “If McDonald's were open, I would have definitely taken him,” said Yasmina, still flabbergasted by her children's resolve.

For Yasmina, Camus' novel is valuable because it isn't about Algeria. It's not about France either. “It's a novel about humankind.” As she explains, this is what Camus meant by

“métier d’homme.” Yasmina isn’t helping Algerians or French. She’s helping humans.

### **Walid Feda, 1er arrondissement, Lyon**

“The most negative word of 2020 is positive,” pronounced Walid Feda, owner of the Lyon neighborhood convenience store, Panier Sympa (The Friendly Basket).



Walid Feda, owner of Panier Sympa convenience store in Lyon, waits for customers. Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

Since high school, Walid has read *The Plague* several times, reflecting his lifelong interest in major global pandemics in history. Every 100-400 years, he reports, the world faces something like COVID-19, be it Bubonic plague, cholera, or the Spanish flu. Still, he never thought such a thing would affect him at all, either positively or negatively.

In his shop, Walid sells the basics— fresh fruits and vegetables, canned goods, sodas, chips, candy, cold beer, bleach, toilet paper. He also sells more high-end goods like expensive champagne, aged cheeses, vintage wines, and cured meats. In normal times, both the bourgeois and working-class flock to Panier Sympa on Sunday afternoons or as the sun goes down, when regular supermarkets are closed. His store is never overcrowded, but there’s always at least one person purchasing something and a few others hanging around the fruit and vegetable stand at the entrance as permanent fixtures. On summer nights, the smell of exotic spices wafts through the neighborhood and we know that Walid is not only cooking things to sell – he is also preparing meals for his friends and neighbors, free of charge.



Walid’s storefront in Lyon. Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

Walid was born in Kabul, Afghanistan. His mother was a schoolteacher and his father civil engineer and well-known intellectual. They were both outspoken community leaders against the regime and, as such, their lives were threatened. When he was 10, Walid and his parents were granted asylum in France and settled in Lyon. Walid was educated in international schools in Lyon and Dubai, and after gaining a degree in computer science in Lyon, he returned to Dubai where he led several technological and commercial enterprises. When he met his wife in India, his business was doing well, and together, they had three children—two boys and a girl, and lived between India and Dubai. When his wife fell ill with breast cancer in December 2007, they made the decision that she should pursue her treatment in Lyon, where cancer treatment facilities were cutting-edge. In 2008-9 the subprime crisis and the Arab Spring hit his businesses hard and they folded in Dubai, Bahrain, and China. With his children, he moved back to Lyon. His wife still sick, he used his remaining money to open the convenience store because, as he told himself, “people always need to eat.” The store limped to modest success until 2014 when his wife’s cancer returned and she died, leaving Walid alone with his three children. He floundered economically and emotionally. Luckily, his parents agreed to help with the children and he found himself back on his feet again in late 2018.

Things were starting to look up until March of this year when the rapid spread of COVID-19 imposed a lockdown of citizens. Considered by French law as an “essential” business for the health of the nation, Walid has been allowed to remain open. However, he knows that his sales of foodstuffs are anything but essential. “The seniors in our neighborhood see me as security,” he says. “They come here once or twice a week to buy a few things but really they come to talk. For some, I bring them their groceries. If I close, I’m scared they will fear the worse and succumb to their isolation. I look after them.” Walid explains that he orchestrated placing a local

woman in an assisted-living facility just before the pandemic because no one could take care of her. He calls and checks on her each day to make sure that the new Coronavirus hasn't invaded the facility and that she remains in good health.

Finally, he's remained open not because he offers essential food, but because he offers a service for those who are in danger in falling outside of what the French nation considers legal. For some time, Walid has helped asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants process governmental documents related to obtaining French legal status. Among the bleach bottles and disposable hand wipes stacked in the back of his shop, he's set up a card table and chairs. A pot of hot tea and cups sit among the scattered papers along with a few empty beer cans. Prior to Covid-19, he had cases that helped fill the occasional monotony of afternoons before the shop's business picked up in the evening. Today, however, he has a steady string of customers. The French government has decided to extend visas to all immigrants awaiting decisions regarding their permanent status. While this may appear to be good news, it presents a lot of unknowns—not only on the part of the immigrants, but also on the part of those who are sometimes unaware of the new rules. For example, if a pharmacist is not aware of the visa-extension law, they may not understand that the client still has the right to a lower price for medicine. This gets especially complicated when the immigrant in question doesn't speak French or English.



In the back of his shop, Walid helps two men from Afghanistan with their papers. Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

Nowadays, Walid accompanies these people to pharmacies to argue in their favor, and helps them fill out paperwork that guarantees the extension of their rights on French territory. "They have legal status that not everyone knows about. That's why I have to be there," Walid explains. "My religion is my

humanity. So, no matter where they are from, I help them. It's more important to do something good for humanity."

Walid charges no fee for this service. "It's my heart, my humanity that does this."

Walid has remained open for business and, no doubt, he has helped many, but his business has paid an enormous price. "My debit and credit cards are maxed out," he reports. "My bank has blocked me. I use the cash I make from shop purchases to buy stuff to replenish stock. I let my oldest son work here so he can have some pocket money and feel independent." The French government has promised to help struggling businesses during COVID-19, but only those who were doing well before the crisis will get immediate and substantial aid. Walid was just getting back on his feet after recovering from his wife's death when the pandemic exploded. He fears the worst. With three children who will all encounter the rising costs of French higher education in the next few years, he hopes he and his family will be spared. His oldest son has his eye on an aeronautical engineering school and, besides his work in the shop, fixes smartphones for pocket money.

When we asked Walid if he would respond to a few interview questions, he requested a few days to reflect. After this time, he produced a narrative of eleven handwritten pages. Here is, fittingly, the abstracted version of some of his most pertinent reflections on Camus:

*Today, we are living in a historical moment of our lives. In the world, we are observing certain ideological and political discriminations within our own communities and even families. The virus is forcing us to come back to a notion of family again by enclosing parents with their kids. Are we seeing that our relationships have become more virtual, making us express even our gratitude to the ones we love only on screens? When I come home from work, I want nothing more than to hug my kids, but I have to take off my clothes and shower first. My clients*

come into the shop – we have always been friendly, shaking hands or giving the French “bise” – a kiss on each cheek. Now, behind masks, we nod heads coldly. But, at the same time, my actions for others come from my solidarity and my responsibility is to my humanity.

## **The Rats Will Rise Up Again**

French writer Roland Barthes took issue with *La Peste* in 1955, claiming that Camus’ use of allegory muted rather than exposed the catastrophic reality of the Holocaust.<sup>[8]</sup> But only reading *The Plague* as an allegorical mirror of the COVID-19 masks its fundamental message about humans helping humans. By not speaking directly about real events, *The Plague* allows for this more universal meaning, which is especially relevant for today’s COVID-19 world.



Outside of Lyon, France, quarantined Yellow Vest protestors hang their symbols outside their windows. Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

If we believe that *The Plague* can only stand for political totalitarianism or health crises, we will have too quickly dismissed one of the essential functions of the book, which is to provide a blueprint for both identifying and overcoming the kind of abstraction that prevents us from performing our “métier d’homme” and our “devoir d’aimer.” With *The Plague*, Camus has created a neutral space from which the rise of catastrophe and collective resistance against it can be staged. Walid and Yasmina are but two of thousands of individuals who have played their part and we can only hope that more faces and names like theirs are revealed as the COVID-19 crisis marches on, and indeed the next one lies in wait. Because Rieux, in the last lines of *The Plague* warns

that these kinds of fights are far from over:

*And, indeed, as he listened to the cries of joy rising from the town, Rieux remembered that such joy is always imperiled. He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city.*

## Notes:

[1]

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Pages 165-173 | Published online: 09 Jul 2010 Taylor and Francis

[6] Albert Camus. *Les carnets*. 1942-1951

[1] For a description of France's restrictions see this article in [The Local](#)

[2] Read more of Helen Ouyang's harrowing article about her experience in her *The New York Times* article, ["I'm an E.R. Doctor in New York. None of Us Will Ever Be the Same."](#)

[3] Quoted in Ouyang's article, listed in footnote 2

[4] See article on Dr. Breen, ["Top E.R. Doctor Who Treated Virus Patients Dies by Suicide"](#) in *The New York Times*

[5] For more on the UK coverage of Italy, see the article published on itv, ["Italy's soaring coronavirus death toll and Covid-19 panic buying in the UK dominate Monday's headlines"](#)

[6] For more on the coverage of Johnson's illness see the article ["How the newspaper front pages reacted to Boris Johnson in intensive care"](#) published on *Yahoo News*.

[7] For more on Sweden, see ["Sweden disputes accusations of lack of coronavirus action"](#) in *The Local*.

[8] Barthes, Roland. *"La Peste: Annales d'une épidémie ou roman de la solitude."* *Œuvres complètes*. Ed. Eric Marty. Vol.1. Paris : Editions du Seuil, 1999, p. 540.

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**About the Authors:**



**JENNIFER A. ORTH-VEILLON**, who holds a Ph.D in Comparative Literature from Emory University, curated the [WWrite](#) blog for the official United States World War One Centennial Commission from 2016-2019. She has published her translations, fiction, and non-fiction in *Les Cahiers du Judaïsme*, *L'Esprit*, *Storysouth*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Wrath-Bearing Tree*, and [The New York Times](#). Based in Lyon, France, she teaches university courses in literature, philosophy, and communication in international programs. She is polishing her novel manuscript, *The Storage Room*, based on the WWII experience of her grandfather, a concentration camp liberator.



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# New Fiction from Jennifer

# Orth-Veillon: Marche-en-Famenne

*The following is an excerpt from Jennifer Orth-Veillon's work-in-progress, The Storage Room. Here, she intersperses real letters from her grandfather (italicized), an American soldier who fought at the Battle of the Bulge, with her own imagined accounts of the stories behind the letters.*

*The Battle of the Bulge, which ended 74 years ago on January 25, 1945, was the largest and deadliest battle fought by Americans in WWII and the second-deadliest battle in American history.*

*All photos provided by the author. – WBT Editors*



*Three American soldiers in Europe, WWII, taken by the author's grandfather. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Orth-Veillon.*

*January 12, 1945*

*Somewhere in Belgium*

*My Darling,*

*You are probably sore at me as you read this. I'm sorry. I write as often as I can, and even then, Uncle Sam doesn't handle the mail service over here like he does at home. I admit I laughed at the way you gave me hell in one of your letters. In fact, I read the letter to the boys.*

*To bring you up to date: we are fighting with the 7th Corps in the north who are using the pincer maneuver. "Pincer" is just*

*like it sounds—a military tactic that actually “pinches,” meaning we flank the enemy on both sides and press in. We pinch them. It works beautifully. We are planning to trap some Jerries in the drive.*

*I hate missing holidays with you. Did I ever tell you about our Thanksgiving Day in Geronsweiler, Germany? It was Roosevelt’s best T-day yet. Jerry had an artillery observer in the town, and we hit him hard. Still, we took a pounding for the several days we were there. We were stationed in a central building that the Jerries bombed so regularly we timed our trips to the john according to their schedule.*

*Often, I daydream about you. Sometimes it’s so real that I can almost feel you in my arms. Dreaming of you is one of two things I do other than work. The other is dreaming about good food. Incidentally, the Christmas cookies and peanuts arrived in good shape.*

The November wave of muddy battles around the Siegfried Line that carried Brillhart and the Railsplitters, the 84<sup>th</sup> Infantry, east in December 1944 turned to ice at the Belgian border. They had to blink to keep their eyeballs from freezing, but the cold muted the smell of rotting. A few Christmas lights hung in some little town squares, softening the browns and greys tracks from tanks that stained the new-fallen snow. Frozen mud and dirty snow, brown and brown-grey stains dominated the colors of the Bulge landscape, blurring the contours of quaint villages with pointy church spirals and red clay roofs so they almost looked intact after the intense bombing.

Unfrozen mud could swallow bodies and fill holes, but against the backdrop of snow that spanned the flat fields and streaked the Ardennes, nobody could completely disappear. The cold preserved the dead in seconds, the look of horror or peace seemed almost chiseled on their faces by the precise hands of ice. The bodies reminded Brillhart of sculptures he saw in the

Paris Tuileries Gardens and he caught himself studying corpses as the snow dusted their bloodied clothes. Wounds frozen in time. The snow would never stop falling, blanketing the bodies, until spring turned the statues into fertilizer, humus for revitalizing the battle-ravaged soil.

Brillhart and his men shuffle-kicked and stomped their way through the Ardennes forest moonlit snow towards a Belgian farmhouse in the distance. Translucent smoke poured from its great stone chimney. The more the soldiers pounded the ground, the less likely that Brillhart, the battalion surgeon, would have to cut frostbite away from their feet, with amputation the eventual outcome. The thermometer registered thirteen below Celsius. They had to find a warm place for the night or freeze to death by morning.

*I am sorry you cried at Christmas. I felt a little low myself. I can imagine the menu and it must have been wonderful. You should see me – I look like a coal miner, judging from the slack in my pants. But don't worry. It won't take long to get my figure back once I start eating your cooking.*

*Snow! When I was a kid, I always loved the snow. It's nearly a foot thick in the fields here. There's less in the forests, which are beautiful but show battle scars. Belgium is a beautiful country. The Belgian people are simple and homegrown. They live quiet lives and never seem to be in a hurry. All along the way they gave us delicious apples. You want to fight to help these people. Already, they have been invaded twice by the Boches – we are here to prevent a third.*

Over their thick wool uniforms and insulated helmets, Brillhart and the other Railsplitters were still wearing the long white winter underwear to camouflage themselves in the snow. During the past few days of the Bulge, wearing long underwear on the outside of their clothes became protocol. The

disguise had helped them win the last yards of the town of Marche-en-Famenne, a three-day fight. The story told through the ranks was that, a few nights prior, the Railsplitters, wearing the outer layer of long, ghostly underwear, spotted two Germans cowering behind leafless trees in the winter forest lit by the full moon. Hunching over in the dark, the GIs first thought they were frightened bears. "Hände hoch!" one of the battalion sergeants had called, apparently mangling the German order with his strong Texan accent. The Krauts must have heard them coming but made no effort to run or fire. They raised their hands without protest as the Railsplitters surrounded them. Both Germans—now prisoners—had officer status. What were they doing alone in the woods in enemy territory? Rumors surmised that Krauts were tired and wanted to get caught by any ally before they had to confront the Russians again—American POW camps were said to be more humane. The two captured Germans had led the entire ghostly American battalion unnoticed away from five enemy squadrons and into the heart of a strategic Belgian village.

The rest of the Krauts didn't see the GIs coming at them from all sides and were forced to capitulate. Brillhart tried to get the American generals who implemented the rule to honor the insignificant private from his company who came up with the idea, but his superiors refused to admit that a boy who hadn't been to military school or even college was that smart.

White soldiers on white snow. A small town, big victory. A thousand men lost. The Bulge was far from over.

*My birthday, Jan. 6, was spent in a town that I can't name – but I had French-fried potatoes (with salt!) and fried chicken (with salt!). I also heard a Kay Kiser radio program. What a treat! Kelly – the guy I told you about before – is still a Lieutenant. I found out why he wasn't promoted to Major: apparently, he hasn't got the guts, brains, foresight or desire. Personally, I have no respect for Kelly, but I play along to get what I want. Then there's the translator, Urban –*

*we call him "Burpin Urban"—who asks to be evacuated every time he has some damned minor ailment. The whole regiment will rejoice if he gets really injured and leaves.*

*We get decent food from time to time, but what we really want is a bath, clean clothes, and a shave. I am glad to hear you are working on a scrapbook of our relationship. I wish I could send you something for it.*

Brillhart and his men reached the farmhouse with the chimney. As he prepared to knock at the door, he realized that the orange light of the hearth would illuminate the blood and dirt stains on the white underwear covering their uniforms. They would look like murdered ghosts rather than American saviors. Brillhart instructed the men to shed the outer layer, then knocked. A toothless man with a hollow, dark-stained mouth answered. He uttered something Urban couldn't understand and slammed the door shut. Brillhart's stomach squeezed with hunger at the brief blast of heat and glimpse of the stove. He ordered the men to put their frozen C rations on the ground in front of them as a peace offering.

A string of obscenities rose from the men. *Goddamn frog. Goddamn Belge.*

*Goddammit, there was booze in there.* Brillhart kicked at the door with his boot. Urban was a wiry nineteen-year-old with chronic indigestion and a Canadian mother. He tried to talk to the Belgian man when he re-opened the door, but the man shouted, waved his hands in the air, and slammed the door again. Brillhart kicked harder, shoving Urban in front of him. The Belgian opened again and gestured wildly. He held up all ten fingers, made fists, held up two more, and pointed to his crotch. Brillhart looked at Urban, his eyebrows raised. "What in the hell is he saying?"

Urban, useless, shook his head. "I can't understand this accent, Doc. I get one word out of ten."

The Belgian man held his hands to his chest in the shape of a woman's breasts. Still speaking quickly, he pointed to his crotch again and thrust towards the door as if he was taking a woman from behind. Then ten fingers, fists, and two more. More thrusting.

*Oh! And I'm glad you like the perfume I bought you at Guerlain. Tell Aunt Bessie she'd better stay away from it, that cow!*

*The further along you get with the pregnancy, the more I wonder about whether you are taking care of yourself and if you are being careful. I wish I could have seen you at Christmas. We would have had so much fun together—shopping, packing, mailing presents.*

*Belgium at the present is wrecked with war. I don't know what kind of Christmas they had, but the people don't seem to mind. They realize that there must be some destruction in liberation.*

"What's he saying, Doc, that he's a woman?" shouted Lt. Kelly, the short redhead Irishman from Chicago. "He wants to fuck us? What the hell? Tell him, sure! We'll make sweet love to him in exchange for a bed and some booze."

Brillhart turned around and drew his finger across his throat, looking at Kelly and the others. He shoved Urban forward to the door again. "Ask him to speak slowly. And ask it slowly."

*"Nous comprenons rien, Monsieur. S'il vous plaît, nous comprenons rien. S'il vous plait, parlez plus lentement. We don't understand you, Sir. Don't speak so fast, please."* Urban held up a can of C rations and a pack of cigarettes. He knocked the can against the house's stone wall to show that it was frozen. The man held up his palm and said slowly "Attendez. Stop." He pulled the door partly closed but left it open a crack. Brillhart moved closer to the sliver of heat coming from the house.

"Wait, he says wait," Urban said.

The Belgian man appeared at the door again, offering Brillhart a framed photograph. Twelve somber-eyed children dressed in white stood between a younger version of the man and a plump woman in black. Her lips were pressed so tightly that Brillhart wondered if they could soften into a kiss.

"He has twelve children sir," Urban said, "*Douze enfants, c'est ca, Monsieur? Pas de place, c'est ca?*" The man nodded vigorously and smiled, revealing several brown teeth lingering at the back of his mouth.

"Doc, we can't stay here. He's got twelve kids. No room. No food."

"Thank him and let's move out," Brillhart said. All twelve were probably sick and undernourished. He had dealt with enough depressing scenes over the last days and couldn't fathom caring for anyone else without a few hours of sleep.

Brillhart felt his men's disappointment and reminded them to keep rubbing their hands together to keep blood flowing.

"Son of a bitch."

"*Merci, merci Monsieur. Au revoir. Bonne nuit,*" Brillhart said, mangling the few French words he learned.

"*Et merci. Merci à vous, nos sauveurs. Que Dieu soit avec vous jusqu'à la fin,*" said the man, bowing his head and then saluting.

The door closed. The emptiness of moonlight in the snow silenced them. Their hunger deepened, but they left the C-rations for the family in front of the house. *When you talk about buying diapers for Junior, I wonder about the name we should choose for him when he's born. I'm at a loss. I have considered every single name in and out of the family, and even some girl names just in case. Belgian names like Colette,*

*Therèse, Jeanne, but I still can't hit it. I think about cigarettes, too. I've got more than a carton left, but I give so many to civilians. They need them more than I do.*

Still stomping and kicking at the snow, Brillhart felt the heat at the bottom of his veins dwindling. His blood was slowing. Little knives of cold dug in. He was minutes from frostbite. Nothing could stop the necrology of frozen tissue.

When the Railsplitters first arrived in the region, he found the rolling mountains of the Ardennes comforting. They brought back pleasant memories of snow-covered hills in Kentucky after football practice when he would walk home to the wood stove and hot food. As the star of the team, he ran miles, back and forth on the practice field, crushing himself against other players and smelling dirt as he hit the ground. After practice, he stayed in the hot shower longer than the others, feeling the gentle pull of his muscles recover. He knew that he wanted to spend his whole life studying the body's power. Back then, all he knew of war were the medals his grandfather won in 1917 from the Meuse-Argonne. His grandfather was strong and quiet although he cried at odd times.

While poor, he was a nobleman in the coal mining town. Everyone respected him. Before the Bulge, it had never crossed Brillhart's mind that his grandfather saw things like uncoiling intestines.

But within days of the Battle, the Ardennes appeared squat and bulbous under a gray sky that faded or darkened according to the amount of smoke rising from arms fire and shelling. Only at night could Brillhart see a few stars. Now, in leading his freezing men in search of another house, Brillhart decided he wanted to live in an isolated, beautiful place like pre-war Belgium, alone with June and Jr., away from everyone, away from the cities and people. He would build a beautiful Belgian stone house from the rubble.

*Since you always ask, I'll tell you about the old farmhouse in Belgium we stayed in. It was typical of Belgian farmhouses in that the barn and house were located together, but the Belgians are very clean people. It was clear that Jerry had used the house as an aid station a few short hours before we arrived. Fresh piles of dirt indicated that a few dead Jerries were buried outside.*

The men almost passed by the next farmhouse. There were no lights, and no smoke rose from the chimney, but it was quiet. Brillhart switched on his flashlight and shone it across the stone walls. Bullet marks dotted the façade, but no other sign of significant structural destruction was visible. He knocked on the door, prepared to wait, but the it swung open. The men stepped inside and swept their flashlights across the rooms.



A Belgian farmhouse during WWII, perhaps the one mentioned in these letters, or another. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

As their eyes grew accustomed to the dimness, they saw soiled gauze, empty morphine ampoules, discarded scalpels, and shards of disinfectant tubes littering the floor. Sofas, chairs, and a piano with missing keys had been pushed towards the wall and the large kitchen table had been dragged into the center of the living room. The top of the table was slick with frozen blood and icy bits of flesh.

“All clear Doc,” called Kelly from the kitchen. “Not even any dead ones lying around. Think they’re all outside already, buried and frozen, so they won’t stink us out. God, I love German efficiency.”

Though it was a hygienic disaster, the house would do for the night. Brillhart and his men decided to light a fire in the

stove, eat, sleep a little.

The soldiers found enough logs stacked in the small barn adjoining the house to make fires in the kitchen stove and in the living room fireplace. Slowly, their hands and C rations thawed. A few portraits hung on the wall, but the subdued eyes and high-buttoned collars inspired little empathy from the hungry men, who were more concerned about the unpleasant taste of canned rations. The flames revealed details of their physical condition— all the fat chiseled from their cheeks, chins peppered with dirt and stubble, eyes like dull moons. They looked to Brillhart like the coal miners limping into a diner in Loyall, Kentucky after days underground. Brillhart remembered thinking that no amount of sunlight could erase the miners' ashen pallor as they drank coffee and ate toast with pork gravy. The color was stain, not dust.

Every meal for Brillhart and the medics had become a guessing game since the labelling disintegrated in the wet snow. Tonight, they opened three cans of meat and potato hash, two meat stew, four meat and beans, and five cellophane-wrapped fudge bars. They added two instant coffees and nine pressed sugar cubes. Except for the chocolate and sugar, all had the same soft, morbid taste of over-salted metal. They had eaten the same range of things for almost two months. It calmed but never vanquished their hunger.

Kelly stubbed his cigarette out in the viscous film of meat hash left in one of the cans. "Well, that was disgusting, as usual. Anyone want to go with me to find the cellar? They've always got something stored away in those basements. Maybe even booze."

Urban followed him. Brillhart stayed upstairs and smoked one of his last cigarettes.

Kelly's trip to the basement reminded Brillhart of Christmas when he and some other Railsplitters had spent the holiday

with a Belgian family in the town of Comblain La Tour. During the meal, Monsieur Colson, the father, recounted the town's proud history. It was famous for its picturesque houses along the quais of the river Ourthe, and for its steep granite cliffs, called Le Rocher de la Vierge. After dinner, when Brillhart thought he had eaten and drunk everything the family had to offer, Monsieur Colson stood up and announced he was going to the cellar for the rest. He disappeared and then re-emerged with one arm full of dried sausages. In the other, he carried a bucket sloshing over with a thick dark red liquid. "*C'est du boudin. C'est du sang. Pour le nouvel an.*" He set it in the middle of the kitchen, rolled up his sleeves, and pulled out strings of sausage links. "Blood sausage. For New Year's.

As he stared into the bucket of blood, Brillhart his eyes swirled. In the messy pail, he saw intestines spilling out of downed men. Blond curls belonging to a private he lost back at the battle at Geilenkirchen in December swirled together with the intestines. His vision blackened and he fainted, falling off of his chair to the floor. He came to as Kelly pinched his cheeks and announced to everyone that Brillhart had never been able to hold his liquor. He hoped that Kelly would come back from the basement in this deserted house with something more appetizing than blood sausage.

*In the basement of the house, we found two girls— one around 18 and the other 8 – and a smaller brother who was blind and badly crippled. Jerry had locked them down there. They hadn't eaten for four days, it was very cold, and upstairs, the parents had been shot dead. The mother and father were still in bed under the covers. We brought the kids upstairs and gave them food and hot coffee and blankets.*

"Doc, you'd better get down here," Kelly called from the top of the basement stairwell, breathless. Urban panted behind him.

The soldiers' flashlights made a flickering kaleidoscope of yellow dots as they thundered down the stairs, then formed a bright circle around three children, two girls and a boy, propped against the far end of the basement wall. Pale and shivering, tears traced lines down their fear-pinched faces, but they didn't move. The younger girl whimpered as the men moved closer.

Brillhart pointed to the red cross on his sleeve and then to the sleeves of all the other medics as he approached. He motioned to Urban, who said, "We're doctors. We're here to help you. Don't worry" and then, "*Nous sommes médecins. Nous sommes là pour vous aider. Ne vous inquiétez pas.*" Despite their tears and dirty faces, he noticed the two girls were beautiful, with heart-shaped faces and thick wavy brown hair. They huddled around the boy. Brillhart elbowed Urban in the back when he fell silent. "Keep talking, Goddammit. They need to know they can trust us."

Urban jumped and repeated "We're Americans. We're allies," several times.

Finally, the girls unlocked themselves from around the boy and the young girl looked at the men with a faint smile. *Nous sommes Américains.*

The eldest girl began to get to her feet as if to move toward them, then fainted, her hand sliding down the wall as she hit the floor. The other two children bent over her, screaming, *Germaine, Germaine!*

"Sh, shhhh. It's ok." Kelly moved forward and gently slid his arms under Germaine, while Brillhart took her feet. Despite the fullness of her face and lips, her body was almost emaciated. She seemed to weigh almost nothing. Together, they made their way up the stairs. Urban stayed with her as she recovered in the kitchen while Brillhart and Kelly went to get the other sister and the boy, who could barely walk.

Brillhart put more C rations on the fire and melted clean snow for drinking water. The children brought the food and water to their mouths in swift, jerky movements, and it was gone in minutes. The men searched their bags for more cans. Brillhart saw a bit of color return to the childrens' faces and realized they were more beautiful than he thought. With a bit of regained strength, the girls looked tearfully around their devastated house.

Brillhart felt grateful when he learned the boy was blind. At least he couldn't see the blood and dirt covering his family home, or how the lace curtains had been torn from the windows, probably used for tourniquets.

The younger girl, Colette, sprang up from the table and ran toward the stairs leading to the second floor.

"Non!" Germaine cried. She lunged forward but teetered and gripped the table for balance. "Please, stop her. She's looking for my parents are up there. She can't see that."

Brillhart caught Colette and lifted her up as she kicked her legs in protest. He set her by Germaine, who enveloped her sister with her arms. Colette shuddered and buried her head in Germaine's shoulder.

*"Maman, Papa,"* she sobbed.

Germaine, who had begun to cry again, dug her lips into Colette's hair and muttered quick, soft French until she calmed. Brillhart dug in the rations and pulled out all of the pressed sugar cubes that the men used to make the terrible coffee somewhat drinkable.

"Look," he said, holding a cube up to Colette's face. "It's magic." He stuck out his tongue and placed one of the white squares. He pulled his tongue back in, scrunched his face for a few seconds, and stuck it back out. The square had transformed into a smaller, rounded lump. He stuck his tongue

back in again and repeated the process two more times. Finally, the sugar cube disappeared and his clownishness had drawn a weak giggle from Colette. He offered the box to the girls, who mimicked him. He gave one to the blind brother, Jacques. He had steadied them enough for now. He would give them the chocolate at the next outburst if necessary.

While Jacques and Colette sucked and played with the pressed sugar cubes, the older girl, Germaine, who spoke excellent English, stood in a corner out of earshot of her siblings and quietly told Brillhart the story of the last few days. The Jerries had arrived in the middle of the night, kicking open the front door, waking the whole family, but it was too late for them to hide. The children ran to the room where the parents slept, and they hugged each other in fright as the soldiers climbed the stairs. The soldiers kicked the bedroom door open, ordered the children out, and shot the parents. They made the children take them to the cellar. The Jerries were tired of their own rations too. When they found nothing, they locked the children inside. That was four days ago.

According to Germaine, the cellar had done little to muffle the sounds of battle that raged around them and of the makeshift hospital the Germans had made in their home. Shelling shook the house for hours at a time and the children were sure they would be buried alive when the walls caved in. The screams they heard came in waves, followed by silence. "Either they died, or the morphine kicked in," Brillhart explained. Germaine had heard someone calling for his mother.

*The scene was a tear jerker. Unfortunately, I've seen things like it several times.*

*What can you do? Curse Jerry and carry on. When we left, we notified civilian affairs and made sure the children had some food. And then we looked to our next job.*

Brillhart made a bed out of the Army blankets next to the

dwindling fire in the stove for the children, who had barely slept while locked in the cellar. Germaine sung to Jacques and Colette until they closed their eyes.

"It's a miracle," Germaine said. "I can't believe they're sleeping. Thank you."

"You should sleep too. We're not going anywhere right now. It's safe." Brillhart handed her the blanket he was going to use for his own bed. She wrapped it around her shoulders. Colette whimpered in her sleep. Germaine placed her hand on her sister's head to soothe her and then closed her own eyes.

Once the children were all asleep, curled in their blankets next to the stove, Brillhart went upstairs, harboring the stupid hope that the mother and father had somehow suffered only surface wounds, and were still alive. When he found them, he understood why Kelly overlooked the scene. He was surprised to find the parents' room neat, untouched, except for minimal bloodstains on the floor and the pungent odor of decomposition that they had all gotten used to. Under a pristine white blanket two figures, a set of shadowy lumps dappled with moonlight appeared to sleep.

Once, when his father had rare a day off from the railroad and slept the whole night at home, Brillhart woke before sunrise and tiptoed to watch his parents sleeping. They snored in soft, cacophonous bursts. His mother's snore was deep and throaty, while his father exhaled shrill, nasal blasts. He watched them hopefully, willing his father to get up and go outside to the pond with him to catch the early-biting fish.

That morning, his mother awoke to her young son standing in the doorway of her bedroom. Instead of shooing him away, she lifted the covers, and Brillhart crawled over her into the warm space between his parents. He pressed his back into his mother and let the snoring lull him back to sleep.

When he pulled back the blankets on the bed in the Belgian

farmhouse in Marche- en-Famenne, Brillhart was relieved. The gunshot wounds on their heads were dried. The blood had drained from the backs of their heads into the pillows and mattress. The Germans had made a perfect, thorough shot. Madame and Monsieur Jacques Bourguignon. A mother, a father asleep with the knowledge, Brillhart hoped, that their children had been spared.

It had only taken a few months of combat for Brillhart to understand what he now called German logic. Unlike the French, the Germans were exacting, methodical. When he checked German medical bags left on the field, he found them to be impeccable, well- stocked, with clean instruments. The tanks, the weapons, the burp guns fired precisely. The Germans spared no one, not even animals got in the way of the mission or the order.

Few traces of life sprouted back after their destructive path. The rumor was, though, that they were also tired. Americans were fresh from two decades of peace. It was their main advantage.

Brillhart couldn't understand why the Jerries had let the children live. This bedroom looked like someone had tucked the parents in. If the parents were trying to protect the children or vice versa, some kind of struggle must have ensued. Sheets on the floor, nightstands knocked over blood and brains everywhere. Someone had taken care to clean up, to recreate a peaceful diorama. Given his take on German behavior, the scene both dumbfounded him and made perfect sense. He placed the covers back over the couple's head, went downstairs, and ordered Kelly and Urban to take the bodies to the barn outside before the children woke up.

*I read your letters over and over to make them last longer. It is darned nice of you to write so often. Mother never writes, but I guess she is busy with her sister and can't find time. I should be in bed right now, but I wanted to write to the*

*dearest person in my world.*

A few hours later, in the kitchen, they were awake, hovering over the stove to keep warm. Jacques plunked away on a piano with a few keys missing. Colette was the only one still sleeping. Brillhart and his men talked intermittently with Germaine.

In 1914, the girls' father had stopped trusting Germans after losing his entire family to the first World War. As soon as Hitler annexed Austria, the father dug a hole in the basement floor, barred it with a wooden plank, and covered it with dirt. Day after day, he filled it with his hunting rifles, ammunition resistance, yards of dried sausage, pork fat, dried potatoes, jars of apples, bottles of beer, and candles. He was determined to see his family survive the second coming of the Germans. That's why, at first, the children weren't worried when the Germans locked them in the cellar. But when they tried to get to the supplies, they found that the ground was hard and frozen. They didn't have the strength to dig all the way through.

"Why didn't you tell us when we were serving you that horrible army crap?" Kelly cried.

Germaine shrugged her shoulders and blushed. "It wasn't that bad."

In minutes, the GIs were chopping away with axes they found in the barn. Within two hours, pork fat and potatoes sizzled in a heavy pan. Apples bubbled beside them. The soldiers drank the thawed beer and gnawed on the sausages, giddy that they outsmarted the Germans with this treasure trove of food. Thanks to their father, these children would survive on the surplus through the rest of the war. Colette started to cry again and run to the stairs, but Brillhart brought her back and gave her chocolate, which she had never tasted. The novelty quieted her briefly.

For the second time, Brillhart entertained the idea that June, his wife, might give birth to a girl. If so, he would name her Germaine. Jacques felt his way to the piano and played a song resembling Yankee Doodle Dandee on the remaining keys. Blind and crippled, he seemed the least affected by the parents' death or perhaps he was just used to other people taking care of him so he trusted the soldiers. Brillhart, Kelly, and Urban laughed as the boy sputtered the words to the song. How did he know? they asked. "Papa taught it to him and told him to play it as soon as the Americans got here," Germaine explained.

"Well, shit," Ramsey, a medic from Georgia said, "Your Pops had his damn head too far up north. Shove over boy, let me play you the real song." Ramsey sat next to the boy and pounded out Dixie. Even with the missing keys, Ramsey managed to render an accurate version. After hearing it that one time, Jacques replayed it perfectly.

"He's a goddamn Mozart," Ramsey said.

His sisters smiled shyly "He can do it with almost any song," Germaine said.

The GIs all sang the southern hymn of Dixie together and then returned to the food.

After more apples, potatoes, sausage, beer, and coffee, Brillhart sat down and talked to Germaine again. Germaine told them how Monsieur Bourguignon had put away money for at least one of his children to go away and study something other than farming. Since his only boy was blind and crippled, he decided Germaine would be the best educated of his two girls. The schools nearby didn't have a spot for her, so instead, she spent six months in Amsterdam studying to become an English teacher, which explained why she hardly needed any translating from Urban. She had a second cousin in Amsterdam, who lodged her in exchange for housecleaning and goods from the farm in Marche-en-Famenne that Monsieur Bourguignon brought once a

month.

The mention of the Netherlands made Brillhart remember the package nestled under his coat. He had been carrying a slightly-torn Dutch comic book that he found in another house weeks ago. He understood none of the words – he just knew it wasn't German – but the pictures of the animal characters made him smile. He ruffled Colette's hair and pulled it from his leather satchel, spreading the pages out on the newly-clean kitchen table. Colette seemed transfixed by the critters jumping over the pages and giggled when Brillhart snorted like one of the pig characters. When she pointed to a horse, he neighed and stuck his upper teeth out. She giggled again. Germaine leaned over the table, too, smiling at the comics and at her little sister.

Brillhart announced that he would return in a few minutes. Germaine nodded and waved. He heard Jacques still puttering away at Dixie on the piano. He couldn't see the children's faces when he said goodbye. Perhaps the first overwhelming stirrings of fatherhood. Germaine, Colette, and the boy almost felt like his children, as if he owned them, as if they owned him. If he could wrap them up and send them to June, he would. They would love America. He envisioned a bustling household full of the adopted French-speaking children and his own. Germaine could be the nanny and go to school. He pictured the crippled boy sitting in the sun by the pool he hoped to build one day. Water exercises would be good for atrophied legs. If he stayed with them any longer, he might stay forever. Brillhart kept walking.

When he reached the main road, he saw the line of surrendered German soldiers, many carrying litters of wounded. They filed past Brillhart as he went to the battalion station in the center of town. Kelly would have yelled obscenities at the prisoners, but Brillhart kept his head down.

That afternoon, the Railsplitters moved on to another town,

another battle. A few days later, they came back through Marche-en-Famenne. Brillhart had let civil affairs know about Germaine, the two younger children, and the dead parents. Brillhart walked into the center of Marche-en-Famenne taking photos for June, though few of the buildings rising out of the icy rubble remained intact. The Town Hall with its Romanesque and Gothic facades, the Mosan church and belfry, made of red brick with ornate white trimmings, and the classical columns of what had been a bank, represented Old Europe. This was what June would want to see. This was where she dreamed that Brillhart ate and slept each night. He tried to aim the camera so that it didn't capture the hungry townspeople or piles of broken homes. Sometimes, without taking pictures, he let the camera linger in front of his face to hide his eyes that searched everywhere for Germaine and the children.

He paused in front of a modest, partially-caved-in church and observed a small cemetery with a group of civilians gathered by tombstones that had been knocked sideways by shelling. A priest crossed his hands over the bodies of the dead before closing their makeshift caskets. Brillhart recognized, among them, Germaine's mother and father. Next to them was a hole that Brillhart knew had taken hours to dig in the hard ground. He looked into the crowd for the children but still didn't see them. He hoped they were drinking Red Cross hot chocolate and eating doughnuts under warm blankets.

*Today, I saw townspeople burying bodies in a churchyard. Amid the rubble and ruin, a small group surrounded a priest who was quietly conducting the ceremony. Some of our boys helped to dig the graves. The parents from the farmhouse were among the bodies.*

*There is so much ruin. It's hard to imagine the Belgian people regaining the quiet lives they once had. And at the same time, it's easy to see how this destruction feeds all our hatred of the Germans. It makes us want to kill more, and take fewer prisoners, to grind every German deep into the soil. Sometimes*

*I am afraid of how you will react when I return. I hope and pray that you'll still know me, but that the memory of this ruin will stay vivid enough that we will never let the German or any belligerent nation get a foothold again.*

*We thoroughly enjoyed the cookies and the Readers Digests you sent, as well as the tuna fish, knackers, sardines, and saltines. Thank you. My darling, I must stop now. I have a big day ahead of me. I will try to write more often, but regardless of how busy I am, I'm never too busy to remember you and the things we've done together, to think about our plans for the future. I love you more every day. Brillhart.*



Brillhart's wife upon the birth of their first child, a girl, in April of 1945. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

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## **An Interview with Jennifer**

# Orth-Veillon, Curator of the WWI Centennial Blog, by Andria Williams

**Andria Williams:** Jennifer, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with Wrath-Bearing Tree.

We are all huge fans of the WWrite blog, which features posts from writers investigating a variety of aspects of the events and legacy of the First World War. Since 2016, you've had close to 100 contributions on topics such as the portrayal and care of wounded veterans and their rehabilitation; German battlefield cemeteries; writer-soldiers of the War; and more. It's truly a feat and, taken as a whole, a remarkably intelligent way to explore the effects of WWI on art, literature, citizens, and the public imagination.

How did you get the idea to start the [WWrite blog](#), and how did you go about it?

**Jennifer Orth-Veillon:** Over a glass of Beaujolais wine. Seriously. In 2015, for family medical reasons, I packed up my life in the US and moved with my French husband and small daughter to a small village, Cogny, in the wine-making region of the Beaujolais, located in southeastern France not far from Lyon. Prior to the move, I held a 3-year-long postdoctoral fellowship in communication and literature at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta where I initiated the first student veteran writing group.



Jennifer Orth-Veillon

During these three years, I also taught a class on war literature and veteran memoirs. The students began by studying

the literature of WWI as it was one of the first major conflicts that happened on foreign soil. For the returning soldiers, this meant an even greater gap to forge between the civilian community and their war experience. WWI also marked a break with traditional war narratives. Before WWI, these acceptable narratives communicated a sense of patriotism, triumph, and noble sacrifice. The strong soldier fought bravely and didn't complain. The weak soldier was a coward and a criminal. While patriotism, triumph, and heroic sacrifice are certainly important aspects of the combat experience, they do not paint a complete portrait of the long-lasting effects of war on soldiers, on families, and on the community. It could be said that WWI writing, for the first time in history, was responsible for exposing the severity, variety, and complexity of war wounds to the public. Hemingway's sparse prose and Wilfred Owen's grotesque images and irony did something revolutionary.

And why did it take WWI to do this? It inevitably had to do with the unprecedented elements this war introduced to an unsuspecting world—the unbreakable nationalistic alliances formed by powerful empires, the misery of inch-by-inch trench warfare, masses of soldiers suffering deep psychological damage (“shell shock”), new weapon technology that disfigured the human body beyond recognition and razed entire cities in seconds, entire populations wiped out not only by war, but also by the Spanish flu epidemic that swept the continents. In combat, Russia, France, the British Empire, Germany, and Austria lost close to a million soldiers each and their wounded nearly doubled that number. America officially entered only in 1917 but lost around 53,000 soldiers in combat during just seven months in 1918. The Vietnam War serves as an interesting point of comparison—this conflict lasted fourteen years and the combat dead totaled around 47,000. In addition, WWI-era's Spanish flu epidemic cost Americans another lost 63,000 lives by Armistice.

My class at Georgia Tech also read memoirs and war literature through the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, including works by Seth Brady Tucker, Kayla Williams, Brian Castner, and Brian Turner. I was fortunate that these authors were so accessible – Seth Brady Tucker and Brian Castner both had Skype sessions with my class, which was fantastic! And, after we finished the reading, the class, for their final project, had to write a multimedia memoir on a veteran from Georgia Tech or from the Atlanta community. When the students asked Tucker and Castner about their writing influences, both immediately mentioned the writing of WWI for many of the reasons I discussed above. Seth Brady Tucker went as far to say that, while studying Wilfred Owen in an Iraqi foxhole, he learned to both read and write poetry (Incidentally, his post for WWrite is entitled [“Discovering WWI Poetry in an Iraqi Foxhole”](#)). In addition, many of the contemporary veterans who became subjects for my students’ memoirs cited WWI literature in their interviews.

I left the US, but I knew I couldn’t leave my work there entirely behind. I know that living in a golden-stone medieval village in the middle of French vineyards sound like a dream to any American, but the reality was that moving to France was professionally and personally a new start for me. And I wasn’t in Paris. It’s one thing for people living in this beautiful, rural region to encounter tourists. It’s altogether another matter if someone from the outside wants to come in and be part of the community. The Beaujolais is full of families who have lived there for generations and finding ways to integrate was an isolating challenge. Yet I did find traces of my previous life. I would spend many days driving from village to village looking for work and writer/artistic communities. I didn’t find either. However, each village’s, each town’s center features a monument to the WWI dead.



Beaujolais war monument in the village of Saint Julien, with the names of the dead on the side. Photo by Jennifer Orth-

Veillon.

What I learned was that, even if the monument was small, the place's loss was enormous. I would often get out of my car and count the number of dead and then go to the village municipality to see what the population count was in 1914-1918. One village lost 9% of its population. Another lost almost all of its young men. November 11<sup>th</sup> isn't Veteran's Day but Armistice Day – a national holiday for commemorating WWI only.



WWI monument in the village of Sainte Paule in the Beaujolais. Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

Once, after a car accident, I had to go to the police station to finish filing the report. While waiting, someone called to report they had found an unexploded WWI shell while digging a pool in their back yard. After the police officer said he would send someone over and hung up, he looked at me and said "happens all the time." It's worth mentioning that no WWI battle took place in the Beaujolais region. This anecdote illustrates how central the Great War is in the French memory and imagination.

Which is why what I discovered over my glass of Beaujolais was so startling. I was in the town of Vaux-en-Beaujolais, otherwise known as Clochemerle, the setting for a famous French satirical film written by [Gabriel Chevallier](#). Each village in the Beaujolais makes its own wine and has a central wine bar/cellar for tasting it.



A painting of Vaux-en-Beaujolais by Gabriel Chevallier. Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

I was chatting with the barman pouring me the wine about

possible translation work for the town's tourist brochure when he asked me about my work in the US. I started to tell him about the veteran class [at Georgia Tech], thinking that it would have no relevance to his world and that he would listen because he felt sorry for my loneliness. However, he went to the door of the bar and asked me to follow him. Glass in hand, we went next door, which turned out to be a Gabriel Chevallier museum.



The entrance to the Chevallier museum in Vaux-en-Beaujolais, France. Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

A part of the small museum was dedicated to the famous *Clochemerle*, but a larger section featured Chevallier's WWI experience and his novel, *La Peur*, translated as *Fear*. As I learned through the collections of drawing Chevallier did during the war and the pages from the manuscript, *Fear* was nothing like the satirical *Clochemerle*. It has nothing to do with winemaking, socioeconomic class, or religion; it was a book that spared nothing as it described the ghastly details of the ways men were killed and maimed during Trench warfare. It was published in 1930, but like many works of art that criticized the Great War in France and elsewhere, it was censored. Today, *Fear* represents all that we know well about WWI found in books like *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Guns of Steel*- it was a senseless, barbaric massacre.



As it was the only thing that resembled my literary work in the US, I visited the village, the museum, and the bar several times after that. No one was ever looking at Gabriel Chevallier and that's when I realized that, in the middle of a huge national narrative about WWI, holes existed and were ignored. Amidst the monuments, the parades, and the days off, a real discussion of the Great War and the damage it did to

France was missing. Everyone knows about the monuments. No one knows that Gabriel Chevallier wrote anything other than *Clochemerle*.



Self-portrait of Chevallier. Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

This was the theme I found in so much of the war literature I studied with my classes. Veterans from every past or present war we studied – the celebrated icons of war– felt neglected by the public narrative. This did not stop with WWI. In fact, these same veterans, including contemporary ones like Tucker and Castner, had even expressed that this phenomenon was first brought to our attention by WWI writers like Owen and Hemingway. I realized that today's war writers owed something like a debt to WWI writing and, with the imminent Centennial, I wanted to explore that idea. I contact the United States World War One Centennial Commission with my ideas. At the time, they had no substantive information about WWI literature although I found such sites elsewhere. Looking not just at WWI literature, but at how WWI can continue to shape literature, writing, and thought today seemed original. They accepted my proposal and I started work in April of 2016. The first blog post went in January 2017. And it's been going ever since.

**AW:** Where did your personal interest in WWI begin?

**JOV:** WWI has always been both a personal and professional interest for me. I realized WWI had more importance than the few pages about alliances in my history textbook when I started working on my first novel, which is based on a lifelong friendship between my grandfather, a WWII battalion surgeon, and a concentration camp prisoner he liberated, a Dutch artist. I read the 1,000+ letters my grandparents wrote each while he was gone and one struck me as very important. It was a letter from August 1945, a few months after VE day in Europe. With his war over, he finally had the space to digest

the horrible scenes from combat and he had terrible crying spells and nightmares. That's when he told my grandmother that he finally understood why one of his close relatives, who had served in WWI, was always "crying at nothing." Before that, he had considered this relative weak and unmanly. I knew that to understand WWII, I need to better understand WWI. That's why I jumped at the chance to be TA for a study abroad summer class on WWI and literature taught by James Madison University English professor Mark Facknitz, my former mentor. I was living in Paris at the time working on a Master's Degree at the French University on WWII and Holocaust literature. Concentrated on Paris and the Nazi Occupation, I had never explored WWI in a deep way. With Mark and about 15 students and other TAs, we traveled in vans across the WWI battlefields and memorials in France, Belgium, and England. We read literature and essays and then applied the ideas about cultural memory and war narratives to the different public memory sites – the American cemetery at Belleauwood, the French ossuary at Douaumont in Verdun, Kathe Kollowtiz's famous statue "The Grieving Parents" in a German cemetery in Flanders. I did this for two summers and came to realize that WWI was present everywhere. It's end was one of the reasons for the turmoil in the Middle East today, it advanced feminist movements, shed new light on racial issues, and shaped many US federal programs today. I believe that to grasp any geopolitical issue today, you have to dial back to WWI to fully understand it.

**AW:** I know that no one can pick favorites, but I'm curious which contributions or posts surprised you the most, gave you new information or made you see something from a wholly new angle.

**JOV:** That's like asking which child you love most! I have valued, loved, and learned so much from every single blog post and its author. That's what's so great about the blog – not only the variety of different kinds of posts, but the

incredible quality of the writing. I have never been disappointed by a post and each time I get a new one, I feel so lucky to have discovered this author and their work. I guess that before the blog, I felt like a fair amount of knowledge about trench warfare, the events of combat, the major battles, the perils of nationalism, the poetry, the literature, the culture of commemoration. However, I knew much less about the role women, African Americans, Native Americans, and immigrants played. And, sadly, I came to learn how much they had been forgotten. Chag Lowry's post on his graphic novel about Native Americans, [Soldiers Unknown](#), Tracy Crow's post about female [Marine Sergeant Leila Lebrand](#), Peter Molin on [Aline Kilmer](#), Joyce Kilmer's wife, [Keith Gandal](#) on the treatment of African Americans after the war, and [Lorie Vanchena's](#) post about German immigrant poetry provide a few examples. I also have a new perspective about WWI in other countries, even in enemy countries through Ruth Edgett's short story about Canada, ["Hill 145,"](#) Andria Williams' (your!) post on the British ["Black Poppies"](#), Michael Carson on [Victor Shklovsky](#) and the Russian Revolution, [Mark Facknitz](#) on German POWs in Japan, and [Benjamin Busch's](#) post about finding a British WWI cemetery in Iraq. From an ideological perspective, I was struck by Elliot Ackerman's post on Ernst Junger's [Storm of Steel](#). Through Junger, Ackerman argues that we live in society that pushes us to thrive on violence rather than mourn war and hate death. But again, these just come to mind at the moment. If I had space and time, I would list every post as one of my favorites. Every post has given me new information and angles.

**AW:** What has been the biggest challenge in curating the WWrite blog?

**JOV:** I've had two major challenges. The first is the technical side of the blog and issues of design. I'm not a coding expert and I have to make everything fit the platform requirements of the WWICC site. I think it is much more sophisticated than I

am. Formatting takes an incredibly long time. I've spent an hour on getting a picture inserted, margins adjusted, etc. But, I think this is an issue that many artists have to confront today. The digital medium is necessary but requires extra training and patience. The second is convincing writers that they are, in fact, influenced by WWI even if they don't think they are. Sometimes I'll contact a writer and, even if they are interested by the project, they say no because they don't know anything about WWI. I beg to differ! Everyone is touched by this war in some way. It just takes a little digging. For example, I met an actor/writer in Atlanta named Darryl Dillard. We talked about the project and he basically said, good luck! But later he came back to me because he realized that African American WWI soldiers faced horrible racism, similar to what they faced on stage at the time.

**AW:** Woodrow Wilson famously (after H.G. Wells) called WWI "the war to end all wars." How do you find the study of this war significant in our modern approach to conflict? Are there any particular lessons you think humanity stands to learn, or does WWI paint only a bleak picture in terms of the way history repeats itself?

**JOV:** I don't know if history is repeating itself or it's just the present asserting itself against things that haven't changed but should have throughout history – like nationalism, economic inequality, class inequality, gender oppression, emasculation, misogyny, racial oppression, using technology to kill masses of people – these things at the heart of WWI's tragedy haven't gone away. They are still present and still cause harm. So, yes, it's a very bleak picture.

However, I do believe that's it's not irreparable as long as we can take action by engaging in a fight to make these issues better. Remembering and commemorating war is not enough. As the French say, we need *engagement*.

**AW:** What is your favorite piece of art or literature to have

come out of World War One?

**JOV:** Once again, picking favorites is hard. I think the work that has stood out for me most recently is Mary Borden's *The Forbidden Zone*, which was, of course, censored because it was considered too ghastly and graphic. As a nurse, she wrote this surreal memoir about the war during a period when most war memoirs were written as conventional autobiographies.



Using images and other aesthetic strategies, she seems to show that conventional language wasn't enough to capture WWI combat. Conventional autobiography cannot push the limits of human experience the way war can. I admire her battle to challenge us with language, to show that there are parts of war that are unimaginable, that don't fit into proper punctuation or sentence structure. The work is indeed ghastly, but it is so much more that I come up against my own limits of expression when I try to describe it to anyone. And, it's in that incapacity to describe that I know her writing comes from where no one can go and survive intact – no man's land, the space between the trenches. She uses language to take on that space. It's a battle.

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Write Blog contributions by *Wrath-Bearing Tree* editors:

Adrian Bonenberger: [Brest-Litovsk: Eastern Europe's Forgotten Father](#)

Michael Carson, ["The October Revolution, Russian Occupation of Persia: WWI Soldier Viktor Shklovsky's Sentimental Memoirs"](#)

Rachel Kambury, ["War Without Allegory: WWI, Tolkien, and The](#)

Lord of the Rings”

Andria Williams, “Black Poppies: Writing About Britain’s Black Servicemen”