

New Interview from Larry Abbott: “The Visual Diary of Danish Soldier Henrik Andersen”

Art After War: The Visual Diary of Danish Soldier Henrik Andersen

As the memory of U.S. participation in the Afghanistan War fades in the minds of most Americans (the report on the exit fiasco notwithstanding), there was probably even less awareness that the military did not “go it alone” but had NATO allies, including Denmark (which entered the war 2001), one of the twelve founding nations in 1949. In Afghanistan the Danish military suffered 43 deaths from combat injuries, with 214 wounded in action. The raw number is low compared to the U.S. but was the highest number of deaths any country suffered if considered per capita, and so had an outsized impact.

That the Danish participation in the war still looms large in the country is reflected in an installation at The Danish War Museum in Copenhagen, which developed *A Distant War – A Danish Soldier in Afghanistan* over 10 years ago. It reflects an on-going presence of the war and its aftermath, a memory embodied in a physical space.

Mai Stenbjerg Jensen, the curator, told me that “the exhibition was made in collaboration with the Danish Armed Forces, more precisely with soldiers from ISAF team 10. Objects in the exhibition have all been brought home directly from Afghanistan. The exhibition shows the Danish soldier’s journey during a deployment to Afghanistan. The story is told from the soldiers’ perspective” (personal communication, July 4, 2023). The exhibit follows a ternary pattern of a soldier

going to war, in country, and back home.

The return home to civilian life can be problematic, as soldiers of any country's forces can be affected by PTSD. In the same way that the war for the American public is largely forgotten, the effects of war on the individual are likewise ignored or misunderstood by the broader civilian population. This can lead to a sense of dislocation and alienation. For many vets, the arts can offer a pathway to understanding their feelings of estrangement upon return by creating a visual or verbal representation of those feelings. Another intention of veterans' artistic creation is to share their work with both the general public and with other vets. The artwork can provide the non-vet with a window into the veterans' war and post-war experiences, helping to bridge the vet/non-vet divide, while sharing their work with other vets can both inspire and create a sense of community, thus reducing that sense of isolation and estrangement.

Henrik Andersen, now 40, served in the Danish army for 15 years and was deployed to Kabul, Afghanistan from February to August 2017. He had the rank of Specialist. When he returned home he was eventually diagnosed with PTSD. He decided that he would use artwork as a way of dealing with the various levels of how the diagnosis affected his daily life. Starting on January 1, 2022 and until December of that year he created a new watercolor each day. He notes in an artist's statement: "Follow my painted diary for better or for worse with my daily companion PTSD. A new picture every day in 2022 that both describes my world in and around me."



Photo courtesy of Mads Ullerup

Andersen told me that “the diary concept was one my wife came up with, and for me a way to express myself daily through both good and bad days with a troubled PTSD mind, the thoughts, the emotions and sense of things which made an impact that particular day. I usually made the picture at the end of the day to make sure I got the most important impact of the day down on paper. It’s sometimes really hard to go to a mentally neutral place when you’re filled with anger, depression and loneliness. To empty your mind of judgmental thoughts and emotions and find that one thing that mattered just that day, that in itself can become therapeutic.”

He continued: “It would be really nice for me to be able to reach as many veterans as possible with my art. I hope that it will make a difference and maybe even inspire others and others like me, who are battling with the aftermath of their

deployment, to inspire others to find new ways to express their daily struggle. Even though I have my Instagram account, I've still not reached out to as many as I would like to. I do think it is an important message to get out to veterans and their families, that there are other ways to express yourself than you might think. My artwork is very personal to me, and it was a big deal for me to go public with it. It is meant as a daily diary in pictures and every day a new picture in 2022. My wife convinced me to make it public through Instagram, so I would post a new picture, describing my day emotionally or physically."



Photo courtesy of Mads Ullerup

Andersen is not a formally-trained artist. He was adept at drawing and painting from childhood and was influenced by an eclectic mix of comics, the figures in *Warhammer*, movies, and

the classical sculptures and paintings in museums. Regardless of the medium or the genre he was always interested in how a thought, a question, or an emotion could be expressed. To him, the work begins with an idea and then the manner of expression evolves from the initial idea. The finished product, he says “comes from trial and error, both so rewarding and frustrating.”

He does not plan any of his daily images but rather allows spontaneous moments to guide his work. The images are diverse, ranging from the relatively realistic to surrealistic to expressionistic. Even though they are created to reflect what Petersen is experiencing on any particular day they are not merely solipsistic and self-referential; they become a visual correlative that take on a broader meaning. The titles to the works help in this regard.



Photo courtesy of Mads Ullerup

The early pictures set the tone for much of the rest of the year. “Angsten og Vreden del. 1/The Anxiety and the Anger part. 1” is dated January 2, 2022, and depicts a fragment of a face in profile, just a nose and a wide-open mouth in a scream, with a ball of reddish-colored smoke emanating from the mouth.



“Selvvalgt ensomhed/Self-selected Loneliness”

“Selvvalgt ensomhed/Self-selected Loneliness” (January 3)

depicts an empty chair in a barren room; a day later, "Fjernsynet viser ingenting/TV is Showing Nothing," a TV set in a bare gray room has a blank green screen, connoting that there is nothing worthwhile being presented. Each depicts a sense of emptiness and the inability of some vets to reintegrate into the broader civilian society. "Mareridt i rodt, derefter sort/ Nightmare in Red, Then Black," completed a few days later, shows a bleak, war-torn landscape with a few burned trees in red, mirroring a burned-out psychological landscape.



"Stenen i maven, mørk og varm/ Stone in the abdomen, dark and hot"

The January 5 work "Stenen i maven, mørk og varm/ Stone in the abdomen, dark and hot" refers to the physical impact of PTSD, and suggests that PTSD affects the vet not just psychologically but also physically.

As the year progresses the imagery takes on different dimensions. A few works show recognizable scenes, like the river and bridge of "Ude for at se verden/ Out To See The World" (February 21), a floodlight on a lone power pole ("Sidst i rækken/Last in line," March 6), steps going down a tunnel ("Sidst i rækken/ What happens if you look inside," April 15), a dilapidated house with collapsed roof ("Ja der er brug for genopbygning/ Yes rebuilding is needed," October 11), and an isolated cabin ("Hyggeligt uhyggeligt/Cozy Cozy," October 14). Interestingly, none of these scenes include people, and even in "Cozy Cozy" there is a sense of isolation and remoteness, while in "What happens if you look inside" there is an intimation of foreboding as the steps lead to emptiness.

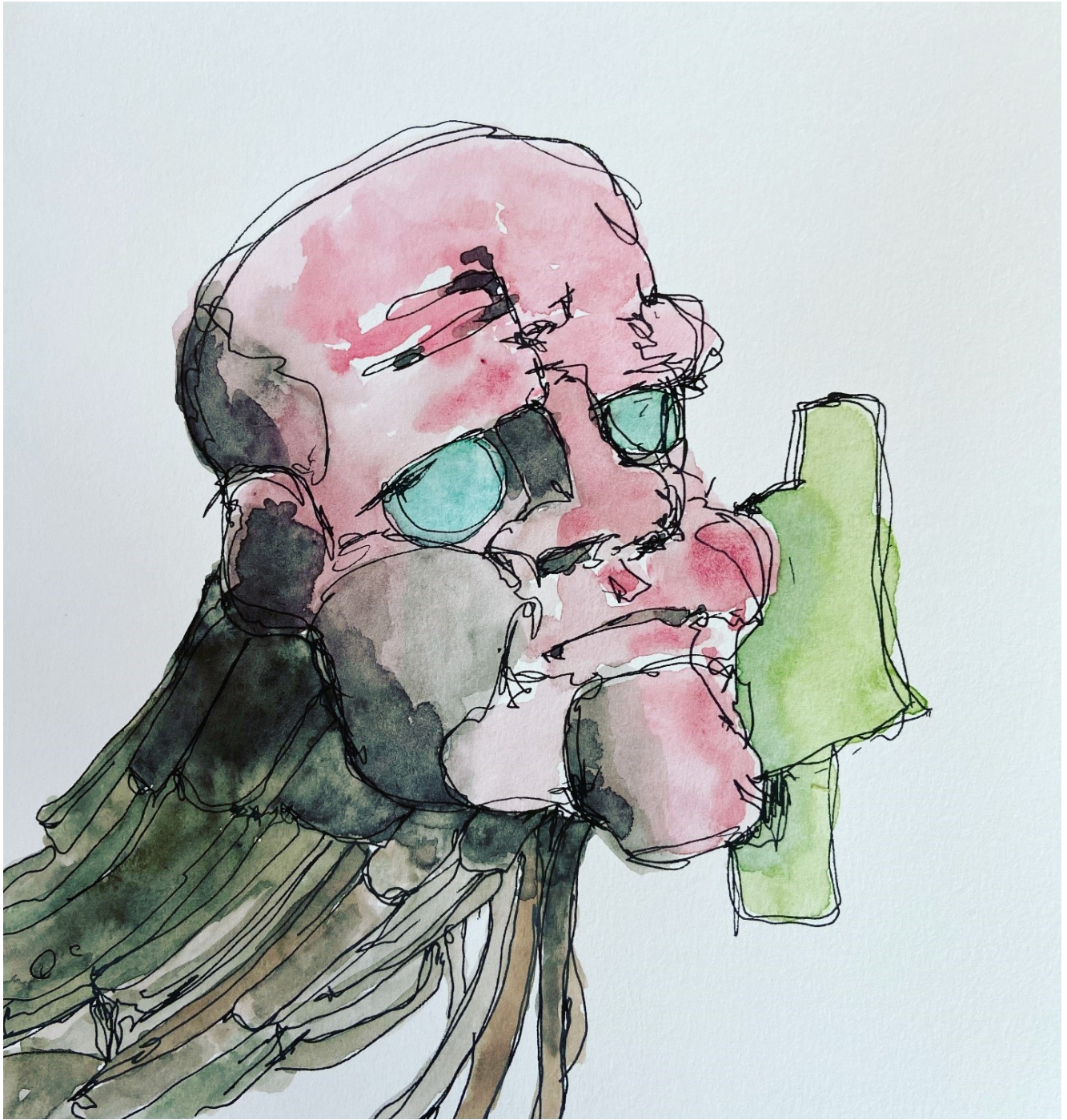
Faces, especially the eyes, and stylized bodies figure in a number of works, a few of which are self-portraits. "Sidder her bare del. 1, 2, 3/Just sitting here sharing 1, 2, 3" (August 26, 28, 29), is a triptych of sorts. The first two panels depict a skeletal figure sitting on a rock leaning its skull on its right "hand." In 1, the background is a washed-out gray. The same figure is in panel 2, but some color has been added. In the third panel the figure is in the same posture but is now fleshed out in green. There are three human figures in the October 21 "Bare en fornemmelse/Just a Feeling." The figures, in foreground, midground, and background, are dressed in brown and wear neckties, but are faceless. The two closest figures have flames around their feet, while the figure in the background is engulfed in flames. The figures appear impassive, accepting pain and death. "Sådan føler jeg mig/This is how i feel" (October 30)

is a self-portrait. The figure is fleshed, not skeletal, yet the posture is reminiscent of the skeletons in "Just sitting here sharing 1 and 2." The eyes are wide and the face anguished, suggesting the pain caused by PTSD. Although the title "Trivialiteten er skræmmende/Triviality is scary" (February 8) might be considered a bit strange, it points toward the inability to fully reintegrate into the daily minutiae of civilian life. In this self-portrait, the predominant feature in the multicolored, somewhat blurred face are the eyes. Similar to other works, the eyes are wide, staring, fearful. In the July 23 "Selvportræt/Self-portrait" the face is disembodied, outlined in gray and framed by red, and seems to be floating in the clouds over mountains, leading to a sense of disconnection and alienation from the world.



"Tabt forbindelse/Lost Connection"

There is also a self-portrait entitled "Tabt forbindelse/Lost Connection" from October 11. There is a disembodied head attached to tendrils with a green object next to the cheek. Both of these works connote a sense of loss, even a dissociation from one's own body.



“Drukner på land/Drowning on land”

Much of the work has an abstract quality. “Drukner på land/Drowning on land” (November 10) depicts shapes of blue and brown, yet the title reveals a sense of struggle and suffocation. The November 2 “Tankespin/Mind spin” is a burst of reds, and represents both the explosions of war on the battlefield and in the mind. “Hvor brænder det ?//Where does it burn?” (August 20-22) is another series in three parts. In

each piece, stylized and intermixed dark and lighter blue smoke rises from what could be hills. Looking closely at the first panel one sees what could be disembodied eyes in the smoke. In part 2 the eyes become a bit more pronounced. In part 3 an outline of a face in dark red, with what appears to be bared fang-like teeth, is revealed in the smoke. There is an agonized expression on the face. Again, the burning can refer to the destruction of war and also to a mind on fire.

Not all the watercolors represent negative emotions. The March 8, "Et sælsomt lille væsen er mødt op/A happy little creature has appeared" shows a rabbit in a field. In "Foråret kommer nu/Spring is coming" from March 9 a sprig of green grows out of a finger on a green hand, showing the regenerative power of Nature. There is the playful "Guleroden er der, jeg kan se den nu/ The carrot is there, I can see it now" (April 4); a teddy bear is the subject of the October 18 "Ren kærlighed/Pure love"; likewise, a bird is the subject of "Maskot/Mascot" (November 10). These more "gentle" works indicate that even with the traumatic aftereffects of war there is the possibility for beauty and clarity.

As he looks back on his visual diary he told me "this picture [the April 1 "Hænderne, der skaber og ødelægger/The Hands that Create and Destroy"] and others like it, of a withered, sick hand, gives a new meaning after I tried to take my own life in February 2023, and the attempt left me with exactly that, and really makes me think about the dual meaning in a lot of my pictures. I'll admit that I didn't succeed every day, but it was just as important to some days paint through a veil of tears or immense anger. I haven't continued in 2023 with the diary but I am still painting, it is my little safe zone through the day and it has a calming effect to put paint on paper, the colors and the brush don't expect anything from me, and as long as I don't try to force something on to the paper it's very fulfilling and stressless. My pictures surprise me

in ways I would never have imagined.”



“Hænderne, der skaber og ødelægger/The Hands that Create and Destroy”]



The range of Andersen's images offers a broad insight into the post-war experience, including the effects of PTSD. His images reveal the uncertainty and tenuousness of what any particular day will bring. At the same time, the very act of creation becomes a shield or bulwark against this uncertainty and provides a sense of order, not only in the finished product but also in the process itself, which provides a structure that my otherwise be lacking.

All statements by Mr. Andersen were from correspondence with him on October 7, 10 and 11, 2023.

All artwork images courtesy of Henrik Andersen.

All photographs of Andersen courtesy of Mads Ullerup.

Images available on Instagram: [henrikerladetmedptsd](https://www.instagram.com/henrikerladetmedptsd)

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Mads Ullerup, "With Paintbrush and PTSD," October 22, 2022, <https://www.veterancentret.dk/da/nyheder/2022/med-pensel-og-ptsd/>

The Oscar-nominated Danish film *Krigen* (A War; 2015, directed by Tobias Lindholm), with echoes of "*Breaker Morant*," examines the moral quandaries that war occasions and reveals that these dilemmas occur regardless of the size of a nation's forces. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/05/movies/tobias-lindholm-narrates-a-scene-from-a-war.html>

New Nonfiction by Larry Abbott: The Photographic Self-Portraits of Ron Whitehead

There Is No Such Thing as an Unwounded Soldier

Ron Whitehead works in a variety of photographic series: *Eye of the Storm* are impressionistic visions of war to give a more

dynamic view of combat than a strictly documentary approach. One work shows a flaming parachutist plunging toward the ground; another shows a jet fighter in a lightning storm; a third shows a helicopter and tank silhouetted by flames; *Looking Back* focuses on the impact of the past on the present, specifically the transition from his military experience to civilian life; *My Lighthouse* was inspired by a song by the Rend Collective and expresses his commitment to the Christian faith and how his commitment can calm the inner storm and offer a sense of healing; *Art of Healing* expresses the ways that art can be instrumental in the post-war healing process but also that this process is tentative; the images in *Fight for It* reference the brutal nature of war; *American Dream* is ironic in that the photographs show more a problematic re-adjustment rather than a return to a perfect life.

Although his oeuvre encompasses a variety of imagery, including some where the camera itself is the subject, Whitehead's reflexive self-portraits are the predominant images in his work over his career, not in an egocentric way but as an artistic mediation of how he negotiates the past and the present. The photographs suggest that, post-war, Whitehead is "in pieces," no longer a unified whole, but also that he is searching for ways to re-establish an integrated self. The self-portraits negotiate the space between the past of war and the present of job, home, family, community, and the larger society. His work objectifies the inner conflicts between "the face of war" and "the face of after-war." The photographs express T.S. Eliot's concept of the objective correlative (1921), in that they represent Whitehead's emotions, thoughts, and perceptions. The self-portraits appear in many forms, some literal, some abstract, some surrealistic, some humorous, but each expresses the effect of his return to post-war life and provides the viewer with an insight into these perceptions. He occasionally blends text to complement the image. In her discussion of the ways that the arts, particularly poetry, tell us about war, Janis Stout

(2005) writes that “literature and other cultural products offer an indispensable means of gaining impressions of war . . . not only are such cultural products ends in themselves, they are also means to the end of gaining insight into how the war was experienced and perceived by specific human beings” (2005). Whitehead’s self-portraits reveal how *his* war, and *his* return, were experienced.

One of the themes that emerges from the self-portraits is that of the split self. There is a schism between the self that went to war, the pre-war self, and the sense of self after war. Whitehead began exploring this theme photographing a colleague, Harry Quiroga. In “Still Serving” (2013), an early work from the *Art of Healing* series, Whitehead’s photograph of Quiroga’s face is split (the same image appears in “Love a Veteran,” which includes a quote from Welby O’Brien: “It takes an exceptional person to love a warrior/especially a warrior whose war will never cease”). In the photograph Quiroga, dressed in a business suit and tie, stares into the camera. One side of his face is “normal,” representing the apparent seamless transition back into the world of work and formality. The other side of his face retains the camouflage paint from the war, suggesting that even back in “the world” the soldier retains the indelible “paint” of war. In another iteration of this image (2013) the photograph is “torn” down the center, with the “now” side in color and the “war” side in black and white. The idea of the split self appears in a number of other works. “Smoke and Mirrors” (2014) takes another angle on the split self. Whitehead’s face is in profile, enveloped by wisps of smoke. Superimposed on the profile is an image of his smiling younger self in his Army uniform. The past is never far from the present. In a 2018 work from *My Lighthouse* Whitehead is centered in the frame. On the right-hand side a lighthouse beam brightens half of his face. On the left, his face is darkened by the smoke of battle in the desert. The photograph highlights the stress of living in two antithetical worlds.

In "Two Face" (2013) there are mirror images of Whitehead's face looking at the viewer. Half of the face on the right is "normal," while the other half is in camouflage. The face on the left is again split, with the right side of *that* face in camouflage; Whitehead adds a twist with his "normal" face in profile on the left side. "Two Sides" (2017) extends the theme of the split self. In the photograph there are two identical and connected faces in partial profile looking in opposite directions. Razor ribbon coils around the faces.

The expression of duality emerges with some variation in such works from the *Looking Back* series as "Mask," "Mask 2," "Façade," and "Façade Mask" (each 2018). In these Whitehead places a mask of his face on or near his "real" face. In "Façade 2" Whitehead is in black and white, while the mask he is putting on and the hand holding it is in color. In "Façade Mask" Whitehead is looking at the camera while, ambiguously, pulling a mask over his face or, perhaps, removing it. Is he removing his "face to the world" to reveal his authentic self? Or is he in the process of pulling down the mask to hide that self? Superimposed on the image is a scene from Desert Storm with burning oil fields. Likewise, in "Mask," oil fields burn in the background while he holds a mask in front of him. Each of these "Mask" portraits speaks to the tension between the memories of the war which affect the present and the need to forget the war and reintegrate into society. As the text in "Remembering" (2014) states: "Remembering Is Easy. It's Forgetting That's Hard."



Other portraits are more abstract but still reveal the psychic dislocation he felt after his discharge and return to the States. "Looking Back 2" (2017) borders on the surrealistic.

In this work Whitehead creates a distressing and baffling effect by using horizontal strips to break the image of his face into incongruous components. Each "strip" is a different part of his face that do not align connoting, again, a sense of psychic disharmony. The same effect is seen in "Parts" (2017). In this work the strips, smaller but more numerous, re-arrange his face. "Torn" (2018) is a variation on the use of the strips. In this work Whitehead's face, in black and white, is facing the viewer, superimposed over a desert scene. However, a strip is "torn" across his eyes, revealing eyes, in color, staring at the viewer. This creates a contrast not only in the blend of black and white and color, but also an opposition between past and present. "Ripped" (2018) also uses this motif. There is a close-up of Whitehead's face in grainy black and white. A strip is torn off to reveal his eyes, in a horizontal panel, in color. This smaller panel is superimposed on the desert scene of burning oil wells. He is looking out from the war, and that only the war provides any color. (In "Rear View" [2015] the point of view is from a driver looking out of the car's windshield. The road ahead and the surroundings are in black and white; in the rear-view mirror is a group of Whitehead's fellow

soldiers, in color). "Bullets" (2017) is another variation on the use of the strips. In this case the strips are bullets, and his facial features are on the shell casings. "Broken 1," "Broken 2," and "Explode" (each 2018) use the same image of his face. In "1," part of his face is shattered, looking like exploding shards of glass. In "2," the image of the exploding face is superimposed over a tank. In "Explode" the impact of the war is more explicit. Whitehead's face is on the right side of the frame; the exploding shards are smaller, and as the image gives a sense of movement from right to left the shards blend with the smoke and flames of burning oil wells.

[RW 1](#)

"Picking Up the Pieces" (and the related numbers "2" and "3," each 2018) are similar to the portraits using the strips. In each of these Whitehead's face becomes a jigsaw puzzle with pieces detached from his face, making his appearance enigmatic and fragmentary. In the first work part of Whitehead's face in black and white is dimly seen behind other parts that are in color. Two jigsaw pieces of his eyes, in color, are where his eyes should be. But are they to be placed into the puzzle of the face, to make the face whole? In "2" Whitehead, holding a hand in front of his face, stares at the viewer through eyes that are jigsaw pieces. There are empty spaces in parts of face where the pieces are missing, revealing blue sky and clouds in the background ("Hands 6" [2018] is a variation on the motif). "3" references the war more directly. Whitehead stares at the camera and reaches toward the viewer with a jigsaw piece, on which are an eye and a scene of battle. Other pieces have desert scenes, with a burning desert in the background. By handing the puzzle piece to the viewer Whitehead may be trying to bring the war out of

his consciousness and share his experience. “3” is an attempt to put all the pieces of his life back together and to represent in these photographs Lois Lowry’s words that are embedded in another photograph, “Sacrifice” (2014): “The worst part of holding the memories is not the pain. It’s the loneliness of it. Memories need to be shared.” Art is a way of sharing painful memories, a cathartic process. By offering the viewer the puzzle piece Whitehead shares his memories.

[RW 2](#)

“Just Another Day” (2018), from *American Dream*, is a portrait that reveals by what is *not* shown. There is a figure in a medium shot, dressed in a suit and tie, representing the “uniform” of the civilian world of work. However, in place of the head is a white cloud (perhaps smoke from a battle). The headless figure “wears” a tanker’s camouflage helmet on which is perched dark goggles, symbolizing the military world. The title suggests both the repetition of the civilian world of the “daily grind” and also that the memories of war uneasily co-exist with the civilian world. The absence of the face, replaced by the smoke, suggests that these two disparate worlds somehow neutralize one’s identity. Whitehead was an infantryman in the 1st Armored Division and became a Bradley Fighting Vehicle (BFV) driver in Desert Storm, and a particular vehicle, nicknamed “Terminator,” is pictured in some photographs, like “Driver’s Eye” and “Globe 2” (both 2018).

[RW 4](#)

There is a humorous undertone in some photographs with Whitehead in the pose of Clark Kent ready to take off his civilian clothes to reveal his real identity. In "Still Serving Office" (2018) Whitehead is dressed in suit and tie (with tie "blowing in the wind"), with a city scene of office buildings in the background; opening his suit jacket reveals an image of his smiling teenage self in his army uniform.

SM_BDU (2018) uses the same image of Whitehead in suit and tie, but the background is a lightning-flecked American flag.

He opens his suit jacket to show his army uniform. Whitehead is conveying the idea that the formal dress is a type of camouflage; underneath the suit and tie, hidden from the view of the civilian world, is the most meaningful self. On a more serious note, Whitehead in suit and tie also appears in one of the works in *My Lighthouse*. An image of a lighthouse is revealed on his chest when he opens his jacket. Whitehead is superimposed on a battle scene with a map of Kuwait. The lighthouse represents the delicate balance of hope and stability while the war still rages in his mind.

[RW 5](#)

Eyes and hands are an important part of Whitehead's self-portraits. In a number of photographs eyes and hands are disembodied, existing on their own. In "Hands" and "Hands 4" (both 2018) two hands with open palms are centered in the frame. The skin and lines on the hands have been replaced by images of Whitehead's fellow soldiers from Desert Storm. Behind the hands is the familiar desert scene with smoke and flames from the burning oil wells. Similarly, in "Hands 2" (2018) his hands are crossed, and on the palms is an image of a tank in battle; the background is a desert scene resembling a maelstrom or a tornado. The memories of the war are literally imprinted on the soldier's body. The flesh, the

“reality” of the hands, is erased; the memories and perceptions take over. In “Hourglass” (2018) two hands hold an hourglass. The sand in the top bulb creates an image of a tank in a burning desert. The sand passes through the neck into the lower bulb; in this bulb an image of Whitehead’s face is gradually formed by the sand. The war “sand” creates Whitehead; the two bulbs are symmetrical, each connected to the other. The war is being poured into Whitehead. In “Contain” (2018) Whitehead grips a glass globe in his two hands. (On his left wrist he wears a bracelet he made from his Combat Infantryman’s Badge). Inside the globe is desert scene of war. The photograph suggests that Whitehead is attempting to “contain” or control the forces of war in which he participated. “Hand in Mirror” and “Mirror” (both 2015) are similar. In the former, Whitehead stands at a bathroom mirror and extends his hand toward it. However, his image is not reflected; the image in the mirror is a scene of war, and part of his hand seems to disappear into the mirror image, again suggesting that memories and perceptions of one’s war experiences are inescapable, and that there is a desire to reach back into that experience. In the latter, he stands at the same mirror. This time, the reflected image is Whitehead . . . as a teenager dressed in fatigues, seeking perhaps an impossible connection between past and present. Whitehead follows this search for connection in two untitled 2022 works. In one, he stands in front of a brick wall with an image of a war scene, as if on the other side of the wall. He is reaching through the wall toward the scene. Utilizing a similar image (without the wall), a crucifix is suspended over the war scene. He is reaching toward the cross. Taken together, the two photographs reveal the tension between the desire to reconnect to the war experience and the desire for peace which the cross evokes. Can the two desires portrayed in the images co-exist?

The eye as a subject in itself becomes an important part of the self-portrait, as the eye both looks out while at the same time takes in. Like a photograph, the eye records, and this visual document can be permanent. "Paper Eye" (2018) shows a scene of a desert aflame with burning oil wells. A strip torn from the image reveals an eye staring back at the viewer. "Eye" (2018) shows an extreme close up of an eye. Superimposed on the pupil is a tank, and smoke and flames blow through the sclera. In "Looking Back Flame Eye" (2017) the pupil emits a large flame. Within the flame is a disabled tank. A similar image is in "Looking Back Flames" (2018). In this work the pupil is engulfed in flames while an invasion map of Kuwait emerges from the flames. In "Pop Out" (2018) there is a close-up of an eye in profile superimposed on a burning desert. The eye explodes outward in fragment that resembles a map of Iraq. Imprinted on this fragment is an image of the teenage Whitehead in his Army uniform. "Eye Lens" (n.d.) is a variation. Again, there is a close-up of an eye with a scene of a burning desert. But in a twist, the pupil is a camera lens, suggesting that the images of war become permanent photographs in the mind. "Broke" (2018) shows a close-up of a pupil shattered like glass; inside the pupil is a tank. Surrounding the broken pupil is a length of barbed wire. In "Camera" (2018) there is a close-up of a Canon Eos. In the camera's lens there is a human eye with images of captured enemy soldiers. The scene of death is so powerful that even the camera lens explodes, sending pieces of glass toward the viewer. The uneasy relationship between war and post-war lives emerges in a work in the *My Lighthouse* series. On the right side of the frame a cross is superimposed on a close-up of an eyeball; on the left is a lighthouse casting a beam of light on the eye. The lighthouse rises from a war scene in the desert.

RW 7

It might be unusual to consider a skull as a form of self-portrait but this image appears occasionally in Whitehead's work. "Skull" (2017) is one of his more disturbing, yet more powerful, self-portraits. Whitehead is in medium shot framed against the background of burning oil wells. However, most of his face is a skull with a vacant eye socket and clenched teeth; superimposed over his neck and part of the face is an American flag. There is an uneasy relationship between life and death. For the combat soldier the line between life and death, living flesh and the fleshless skull, shifts by the minute, by the second, by feet and inches. The skull also figures in three untitled works from 2023. Two of the photographs use similar imagery. Whitehead, in jeans and t-shirt and carrying a backpack, is on a highway, moving toward a skull in the distance, set in a desert of smoke and flames. Is this a rendezvous with death even after thirty years? In another untitled photograph a skull is in profile with its top and lower jaw missing. A burning desert is superimposed. The empty skull holds a dozen small paintbrushes. Whitehead suggests that death and war could be transformed by, and into, art.

RW 8

Some recent untitled work takes a different approach to the self-portrait. Three photographs from 2021 show him facing the camera or in profile, and what looks to be a primal scream emanates from him. The smoke and flames of a burning desert are superimposed around his face. In two photographs

Whitehead seems to be on fire. In another close-up the screaming face, with a reddish tinge, is speckled with black flecks, giving the appearance of ashes. In another work he stands in the desert like a colossus. In one work from 2022 Whitehead looks up at a sky of smoke and flame; in two others his body is partly composed of Polaroid One Step 60-second snapshots, creating an ambiguity of who is the “real” figure and who is a disembodied group of snapshots (another photograph shows the camera printing a photograph of his younger self in the Army). In a more surrealistic work his head is tilted forward over a desert scene. His face is not flesh but comprised of the browns and greens of camouflage, which drips into a sinkhole in the sand. It is as if Whitehead’s identity is melting into the sand.

[RW 9](#)

A 2021 untitled photograph shows Whitehead, with a philosophical, thoughtful expression, against a backdrop of a Desert Storm scene. The text embedded on the left side of the frame reads, as if Whitehead is pondering the message, “You Live Life Looking Forward/You Understand Life Looking Backward.” This phrase reflects one of the major concerns of Whitehead’s work. The bulk of his photographs explore the interaction of past and present, and seek, through the artistic image, an understanding of the past, especially war, and its continuing impact on his life today. It is an on-going search for unity and coherence. His art is a type of bulwark against chaos, and attempts to recapture memories and make sense of the past as it impacts the present, and to commemorate that past, although painful in certain aspects, to make permanent the evanescent, and to reconcile opposites in that search for unity.

Ron Whitehead joined the Army right out of high school, serving for four years as an infantryman. He was initially stationed at Fort Polk in Louisiana and then to Bamberg, Germany. He deployed to Iraq in 1990 and fought in Desert Storm with the 1st Armored Division. After discharge he joined the Maryland National Guard and entered Messiah College in Pennsylvania. He has an undergraduate degree in Art Education and a Master's degree in Instructional Technology from Western Connecticut State University. He has been teaching high school art in Ossining, New York, for almost thirty years. He continues to work with veterans whenever he can. One of his passionate endeavors is to bring students to the VA hospital in New Haven, CT. The students listen to the stories of vets and turn those stories into art as a way to honor the veteran.

A selection of Whitehead's work can be viewed here:
<https://sites.google.com/view/ron-whiteheads-portfolio/home>

Eliot, T.S. "Hamlet and His Problems," in *The Sacred Wood*, 1921. "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.
https://www.academia.edu/796652/Hamlet_and_his_problems, p. 4

Stout, Janis. *Coming Out of War*. Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2005, p. xiv.

New Review from Larry Abbott: “Corn, Coal & Yellow Ribbons” and “Midnight Cargo”



Corn, Coal & Yellow Ribbons. Poems by Kevin Basl and Nathan Lewis. Trumansburg, NY: Out of Step Press, 2021.

Midnight Cargo: Stories and Poems. Kevin Basl. Trumansburg, NY: Illuminated Press, 2023.

Corn, Coal & Yellow Ribbons is a chapbook of 11 poems, a collaboration between Kevin Basl and Nathan Lewis, who seek to answer the question “why did you join the military?” Although the question pertains to them and to their unique individual circumstances, the question also has a broader resonance.

Basl, from rural Western Pennsylvania, joined the Army in 2003, first went to Iraq as a mobile radar operator in 2005, and then was stop-lossed, returning in 2007. Lewis is from upstate New York. He joined the Army at 18 and deployed on an MLRS (Multiple Launch Rocket System) Artillery crew to Iraq in 2003, just in time for the invasion.

“Corn” and “Coal” represent not only the specifics of family background but also the regions that the poets hail from. “Yellow Ribbons,” of course, is the near ubiquitous symbol of freedom during the Iran hostage crisis and continuing to the first Gulf War

In the introduction, they try to, if not fully answer the question of “why” a young person joins the military, at least present the conditions that lead to enlistment. They take a different approach, “an oblique perspective,” to the “why”: “More often overlooked are the cultural and economic conditions that push kids toward military service, an experience that will fundamentally change them, sometimes in tragic ways.” The genesis of the book was a workshop that involved discussions with veterans from rural areas, and although the poems are written for vets they make aspects of the military experience accessible to the civilian.

The poems alternate between Basl and Lewis (except for two consecutive by Basl) and often complement each other. The poems, part reminiscence and part search for understanding about the past, use finely-tuned details to show the impact of that past on the present.

“Rust Belt Fed” by Lewis makes the connection between the socioeconomics of a hardscrabble region which “seems to grow only feed corn and soldiers” with military recruiting; ironically, the ground is fertile for the production of generations of soldiers. Recruiters in essence prey upon the vulnerable youth of the area who are precluded from exploring more expansive options:

The combine strips the corn from the fields,
the recruiter's van strips the youth
from our schools, churches
Like metal scrappers pulling wires and pipes
from a foreclosed home

The image suggests that the recruiting process has virtually a criminal motive, with the only purpose being to "feed" the war machine with "kids with computer skills . . . /To be made into precise cyber warriors" and "Athletic kids dense enough to be/turned into blunt weapons,"

Basl's poem "Mouth of the Abyss" echoes some of the imagery of "Rust Belt Fed." The poem begins with the destruction of a farm, "clawed away for stripping," by "Whitener Brothers Coal Incorporated." A way of life is expendable; nature and the human residents are beholden to the forces of despoilation. Coal mining destroys a way of life in the same way the recruitment process destroys the young. The mining strips the land; the military strips the young.

The speaker, a seven-year old boy, is able to watch the mining "canyon" expand, and one day goes to the "mouth of the abyss" with his father, who warns him of the potentially-fatal dangers of the crater. As the poem ends the boy wonders if it is possible "to witness man's work/and live to talk about it." The same could be said of war.

Lewis's "First Ambush Mission" and Basl's "Resume Builder" both connect a youthful event to later Army experiences. In the former, Lewis recalls the "Ragweed insurgencies, nightly raccoon attrition" that plagued his parents' corn field. He and his twin brother decide to lie in wait through the night with their shotguns:

Pulling triggers interested me more than pulling weeds

Out back in a kid-built shack called "The Fort"

Twin brother and I on an ambush mission

Raccoons standing in for guerillas

After their unsuccessful foray—one shot at "Something moving in the shadows"— they return from the fort in the morning and unload their shells on the kitchen table. As the poem ends there is a correlation between the events of the night and his military future:

My wet sneakers squeaking on linoleum—

Had my ears not been ringing

I would have heard

Desert Army Boots crunching gravel

It is as if his soldiering was preordained; he was one of the young men "stripped" from home by the "metal scrappers."

The idea of a preordained military future is echoed in Basl's ironically-titled "Resume Builder." In this poem the speaker recalls Mr. Floyd, a somewhat notable member of the community ("Lifetime member of the Hallton Rod and Gun Club./Two-time winner of the American Legion turkey raffle") and a long-time high school gym teacher. He has little tolerance for students with "zero athletic aspirations" and despises "Phish-phans, Juggalos, skaters, and scummies." The ending of the poem reveals Floyd's recognition that the military may be the only option for those with a foreclosed future:

Counselor of numbskulls when he tells them

there may be a place for you yet

faraway at basic training

Bastard prophet, when you realize, damn, how he nailed that

last one.

Although Floyd, whose own life is mundane, is an object of ridicule to the students, he is also that “bastard prophet” who knows that his students’ lives will basically go in one direction.

Overall, the 11 poems in the book show a side of the military that is far from the heroic ideal. The authors note that the “book’s cover was handmade from pulped U.S. military uniforms” (with the cover image by Christopher Wolf of a tank plowing through a cornfield), showing that as swords can be made into plowshares uniforms can be made into art.

Each author’s post-military life has shown that commitment to the arts. Basl holds a Master of Fine Arts in fiction writing from Temple University. He has worked with Warrior Writers and Frontline Arts to conduct art workshops and is an accomplished paper-maker and musician. He was featured in Talia Lugacy’s 2021 film *This Is Not a War Story*. He has written numerous essays and articles about various aspects of the veteran experience. Lewis, Like Basl, has conducted writing and papermaking workshops for veterans since 2009. His artwork has been shown in many galleries across the country, including the Brooklyn Museum. He appeared in the film *The Green Zone* (2010) and *This Is Not a War Story*. He is one of the founders of Out of Step Press. The name of the press is an ironic twist on the precision of military marching along with a connotation of non-conformity

Midnight Cargo is a collection of three stories and eighteen poems, many of which derive from specific events during Basl’s deployment. Although trained to be a radar operator (14J) Basl was re-classed, at various times, as a cavalry scout, security escort driver, laborer guard, and, less excitingly, deliverer of trash to a burn pit. The book’s title references another one of his jobs in Iraq, that of the nighttime loading of the remains of deceased service members onto C-130 cargo

planes. The poem "Sacrifice" is most closely aligned with the meaning of the book's title. He describes the loading of "those long metal boxes" for the final journey home. However, the loading and imminent departure is unsettling, as the reality of death breaks through the impersonality of the task. The plane itself is like a coffin, "exhibiting the skeletal hull/wires and nets/vining the walls –"; it is "an inglorious vessel," lacking the solemnity that the occasion requires,

set to carry home

the cold weight

of a friend's absence

the cold weight

of a mother's depression

housed in a coffin

wrapped in a flag.

The loading of the bodies occurs at night, which reflects the secretive nature of the event, as if there can be no acknowledgement of death.

The first poem in the book, "The Red Keffiyeh," and the following story, "Occupations," pivot on the object and symbol of the keffiyeh. In the poem, the keffiyeh was a gift from a boy in Iraq whom the speaker became close to, and which now represents the memories of his tour, especially his interactions with Iraqi civilian workers at Camp Anaconda. The keffiyeh "now lives in an unfinished hardwood case," unopened for years "till last night." As he tries on the scarf he notices that the "checkered fabric had frayed," analogous to the fraying of his memories of Iraq. There is a sense of loss and regret in the poem's final lines:

[I] gazed in the mirror at my weary face

and, still gazing, went on to consider sadly

its beauty and how old the boy would now be . . .

"Occupations," which can be seen as a companion work to the poem, details the narrator's interactions with Iraqi laborers employed for "hootch fortification." The story is told in third-person, but focuses on a Sergeant Adams, who develops a relationship with a boy, the teen-age Gabir, whose brother and father were laborers. As section 2 of the story opens, Adams asks Gabir to buy him a keffiyeh for his wife's birthday. His wife is a musician and he feels that she could wear the keffiyeh while she played cello and sang: "The perfect gift. Their marriage might survive this deployment after all." He gives Gabir money for the purchase. Gabir agrees, but in the ensuing days is elusive about the scarf, and one day Gabir and his family fail to appear at the camp. Two weeks later, though, a new laborer shows up at the camp and gives Adams the keffiyeh. Adams attempts to get information on Gabir and his family from some Iraqi workers but they are reticent to offer any specifics, only saying that the family "went north." He gives the men a message of thanks to Gabir, but the men are noncommittal. As the story ends Adams, still deployed, receives a photo of his wife wearing the scarf. However, after he returns home, he "never saw her wear it—on stage or anywhere." And a year later, after they divorce, "he found the keffiyeh buried in a box of clothes and jewelry she returned to him."

Both the poem and the story are linked through the kaffiyeh; the story also illustrates that what is meaningful to one person is simply a disposable object to someone else.

Two poems that use the cleave structure are "Art Therapy" and "The Agency's Mark." The lines can be read down the left column, the right column, or across, giving a sense of three poems. The juxtapositions are similar to stream of consciousness, with new meanings revealed depending on how the

lines are combined by the reader. “Art Therapy” was inspired by George Bush’s *Portraits of Courage* paintings, and a note explains the Right to Heal Initiative that the poem also references. The left column alludes to Bush’s paintings, while the right column begins:

Cops march into position
protestors in pepper spray goggles
unfurling a hand-painted banner

We Demand the Right to Heal!

Similarly, “The Agency’s Mark” interweaves two parallel experiences. The left-hand column limns a painting by Haeq Fasan entitled *Horse Dance*, while the right-hand column critiques the CIA’s secret funding of art that would “counter the Soviet’s promotion/of ‘socialist realism’—” by providing money and venues for art that would reflect American values. In a note to the poem Basl cites an article from *Newsweek* in 2017: “The CIA weaponized art as a form of ‘benevolent propaganda,’ intending to show the world that capitalism, not communism, produced better—and more—work.”

Another poem with an interesting structure is “God Mode.” The lines are relatively short, separated by backslashes and white space, giving a sense of a computer or machine spitting out phrases. There is also the suggestion of an omniscient, impersonal armed drone operator watching his dehumanized potential victims on a screen: “your body of pixels/ is the target of my wrath/ your heat/is a death signature/ your name/ is irrelevant/ . . . ” War becomes a computer game, albeit with human lives at stake.

Where “God Mode” shows the impersonal aspect of war conducted from a cubicle, “Rules of Engagement” focuses more on the individual in a situation where violence saturates one’s daily existence; the potential, and almost need, for violent

readiness is everywhere. The phrase “‘Deadly force authorized,’” visible in every camp, becomes part of “your foretold madness. . . . Your rifle will become a phantom limb.” The poem ends, though, with a question apparently addressing his fellow soldiers, positing that the individual has lost agency and any sense of choice:

You ought to question, hero, before the rounds go flying

Whose hand really does the authorizing?

The ramifications of this “foretold madness” takes a chilling turn in the poem “Terror,” which describes the psychic dislocation engendered by “Deadly force authorized.” The terror becomes what is internalized *from* this environment:

Someone you think you know

Free falls through darkness . . .

In the greasy smoke

a mirror to greet him

fractured

opaque

two eyes not his own:

the violence he has sown

now feeds on his days.

The story “The Bugler” has echoes of the black humor and absurdism of, among others, Joseph Heller, Tim O’Brien, and David Abrams. The story concerns Specialist Jenkins who, although unable to play the bugle, is called upon to be the bugler to play “Taps” at a funeral ceremony for a World War II veteran. Jenkins is issued “a special bugle . . . ‘It has a little speaker inside’ . . . You push a button and “Taps”

plays.'” Much of the story then concerns the bumbling attempts at a rehearsal for the ceremony. On the day of the funeral the preacher gives the standard encomiums about the deceased, the 21-gun salute was “coordinated and crisp.” After the volley Jenkins takes center stage, raises the bugle to his lips, presses the button, and a “tinny, nasally . . . lifeless” “Taps” issues forth. He is “embarrassed for the family . . . sad and embarrassed for himself.” The widow, however, to Jenkins’ chagrin, praises his playing. As the story ends, Dave, a Vietnam vet, apparently an acquaintance of the deceased, asks to see the bugle. He removes the speaker and plays a few notes. He hands the instrument back to Jenkins and urges him to play. Surprisingly, after a feeble attempt, Jenkins does blow a “satisfying” note. As the story ends, Dave calls an elderly couple (who had a wreath with a yellow ribbon attached) over “to come see what the noise was about, to come learn the truth for themselves.”

What is the “truth” to be learned? Is it that the ceremony was part sham? Is it that belief, expressed by the preacher and the yellow ribbon, is hollow? Or that belief is more important than truth? There is a note of irresolution about what constitutes the “truth.”

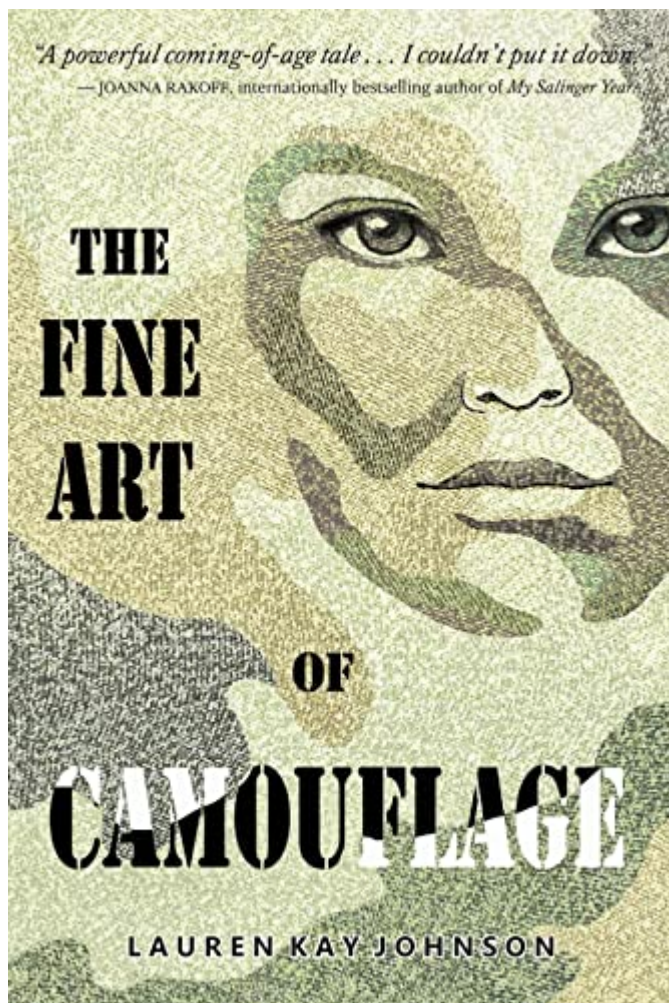
The work in *Midnight Cargo* was inspired by a range of subjects, from the writer’s memories, experiences and observations of war broadly defined and his time in Iraq, to his return to the States and feelings of discord, to post-war endeavors like making paper from cut up uniforms, to cultural events, like the 2023 Rose Procession in Chicago. Overall, through this prismatic lens, Basl emerges, as he writes in the poem “Presence,” as “the person who is here now.”

For further background:

Outofsteppress.com

Kevinbasl.com

New Review from Larry Abbott: Lauren Kay Johnson's "The Fine Art of Camouflage"



Camouflage can exist on a number of levels. There is the basic military definition of disguising personnel, equipment, and installations to make them "invisible" to the enemy. There is

the idea of blending into one's surroundings to be unobserved, hiding in plain sight. There is the connotation of pretending, concealing, falsifying. One could add that there is also self-camouflage, where one pretends or conceals or falsifies to others and even the self. These latter connotations are more relevant to Lauren Johnson's *The Fine Art of Camouflage*. Indeed, her epigraph is a quote from Bryce Courtenay's *The Power of One*: “‘I had become an expert at camouflage. My precocity allowed me, chameleonlike, to be to each what they required me to be.’” The book follows the familiar three-part pattern of going to war, being in country, and coming back home. The twenty-five chapters in five major sections, utilizing copious flashbacks, interweave all three phases of her military experience, along with the gradual peeling away of self-camouflage leading to a more truthful vision of self and others.

Lauren Johnson comes from a line of familial military service. Her grandfather, his two brothers, her mother's father-in-law, and her mother, all served. When Johnson was seven, her mother deployed to Riyadh in December of 1990 as a reservist Army nurse in the first Gulf War. These months were a time of uncertainty and stress for the young Lauren. She feels emotionally disconnected and, of course, worried about her mother's safety. However, when her mother returns in March of 1991 “the world was whole again.” It seems as if everything has returned to normal: “Then, gradually, the Army faded into the background again, one weekend a month, two weeks a year. The blip, Desert Storm, followed us all like a shadow, not unpleasant, but always there.” Her mother would give Veterans' Day talks at local schools, and Johnson felt immense pride about her heroic mom. However, what Johnson did not recognize at the time was her mother's struggle to re-integrate into “normal life,” the camouflage her mother wore psychologically upon her return: “She didn't discuss her terror at nightly air raids, or her aching loneliness, or her doubts about her ability to handle combat. I didn't know she carried trauma

with her every day, . . . I didn't understand her earnestness when we made a family pact that no one else would join the military, because one deployment was enough." Later in the book, her realization of her mother's war experiences comes again to the fore: "I saw the infallible hero that I wanted to see. I saw what I was allowed to see; because we needed her, and because she knew no other good option, Mom spent twenty years swallowing her trauma."

Eleven years after her mother's return, during Johnson's senior year in high school, that pact is nullified by 9/11. Upon hearing news reports that day she writes that "Something inside me awakened" and she feels "a latent patriotism, the subconscious pull to serve, like my grandfathers had before me, and to emulate my hero, my mom." She takes and passes a ROTC exam and eventually signs a contract to become a cadet during her four years in college. After graduating as an Air Force 2nd lieutenant she has a month-long post to Mali. Finally, in 2009, after three months of training, she deploys for a nine-month tour to Afghanistan. She is optimistic about the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) objectives, working with locals and actually helping people. At the same time, she is torn, because going to Afghanistan "felt like a betrayal . . . because part of me . . . wanted nothing more than to be a good daughter." The theme of split emotions is one of the major motifs in the book and reflects the idea of camouflage, putting a positive spin on a less than ideal situation. In one email to her family she raved about her living conditions at FOB Gardez in Paktia Province, but she also admits to herself that "Other details, like the knot corkscrewed around my stomach and the choke hold of fear on my mind, I left unsaid." Similarly, she also fears that, despite outward appearances and newly-minted rank, she would not measure up: "I was afraid I wouldn't be good at taking or giving orders, that I would fail, somehow, as a military officer, and in doing so I would betray my family history."

The book actually begins in May of 2009 while Johnson is undergoing three months of training at Camp Atterbury in Indiana to prepare for deployment to Gardez. She is an Air Force public affairs officer, a self-described “desk job chick,” now armed with an M9 and M4. As a member of a PRT headed for Paktia she is not expecting combat, but the team has to be prepared for any eventuality. In this particular exercise she has to clear a village. The exercise ends on a mixed note: as she charges into a plywood room a “bomb” of pink paint explodes and covers her, leading to her new nickname, Combat Barbie. Even though there is laughter and a hint of humiliation in this result, at the same time the incident was a catalyst, giving her a sense of accomplishment: “When I charged into the room, I looked professional and confident, like I belonged. And for once since arriving in Indiana, I didn’t feel out of place. I didn’t feel like a displaced Air Force desk officer, or a city girl, or even a woman. I felt like a soldier.” Her feelings of achievement and optimism in pre-deployment training will gradually give way to doubts about her role and what exactly the mission in Afghanistan is all about.

For example, she writes an op-ed and a commentary about the August 2009 Afghanistan elections (“I commended the success of the Afghan security forces and the bravery of the voters”). In the back of her mind she seems to recognize that there was a discrepancy between the successful appearance of the elections as presented in her articles and the reality of what actually occurred: fraud, violence, desertion by the Afghan security forces. Her generally rosy view was countered by Thomas Ruttig, an observer for the independent Afghan Analysts Network. In his response he calls her articles “‘plain propaganda.’” She writes that in September of 2009 she disagreed with his assessment but, she adds, “In April 2010, I agreed.” This is the start of her questions about her role in the mission to “win hearts and minds.”

Another incident illustrating the dissonance between “good news” and reality involves an elderly detainee who is being compassionately released and sent home. She looks forward to interviewing the man, with coalition forces radio DJs, because he could be “an ally in our information war.” He could speak to local citizens about the merciful Americans and tell how thankful he was for his release. However, the man is not the terrorist she expected but an old man who did not know why he was originally detained. She admits: “And all I felt was pity.” The interview turns into a disaster and the public affairs team has to edit out awkward details from the interview. Johnson later writes a blog post which puts a positive spin on the incident by writing that the “detainee spoke kindly of his treatment,” adding “that his eyes ‘were also thankful,’” but admits that “I don’t know if it was a conscious lie. . . . Mostly, though, I simply wanted that line to be true. . . . More importantly, I needed the line to be true for myself.”

In October 2009, around the time of her 26th birthday, she helps prepare for a visit by the American ambassador (who never shows) by diverting resources and personnel to give the appearance of safety and progress (“For the ambassador, we flipped the notion on its head: our security mission was to *create an illusion*”). In addition, there was a communications failure in attempting to develop a media training session for government officials. She takes the brunt of the attacks on this failure. Gradually, as the negative incidents, blaming, and finger-pointing cascade she concludes that her duties were becoming more and more meaningless at best, counterproductive at worst, “the claims [the PR team were making] were starting to feel exaggerated, the efforts sleazy.” The title of chapter 14 succinctly represents her outlook on “the mission”: “F*#K.”

Part Four/chapter 16 opens in spring 2013 after she is well out of Afghanistan. But as she watches *Zero Dark Thirty* with a

friend she flashes back to December 2009, the deaths of CIA agents at Camp Chapman, which puts a chill of paranoia, loss of trust toward Afghans, and anger on Gardez. In January, 2010 threats escalated, including a possible suicide bomber at Gardez and mounting civilian casualties. She tells, in an extended sequence in chapter 18, "The Fog of War," of a joint U.S. and Afghan raid to capture a suspected insurgent. Unfortunately, three civilian women, one pregnant, were killed, and initial reports blame the Taliban for the deaths. However, as the story unfolds, certainty turns into ambiguity. As the possibility arises that American troops were culpable, she has to produce euphemistic reports: "I hated the way the words tasted coming out of my mouth, and how easily they came, even when I fought against them. I hated that there was nothing I could do but tap dance, stall, and repeat hollow command messages." She is in a continual psychological battle between telling the truth and loyalty to the mission ("Even when my emotions ran counter to the tasks of my job, duty always won out"). She continues: "A new kind of fear stalked me too. Maybe I was not only not changing the world for the better; maybe I was actually making it worse. What if my IO messages, radio broadcasts, and media talking points—all promoting support for the war, the American military, and the Afghan government— what if those messages sent ripples. And what if, on either side, people got caught in those ripples. And what if people died. My job isn't life or death, I'd always told myself. But what if it was?" As the chapter ends, though, she cannot bring herself to tell the truth, writing "I still wanted to be a good officer."

On March 2, 2010, replacements arrive at Gardez, she departs a week or so later, and after nine months in country arrives in Tampa, and 18 years from her mother's deployment reunion she re-unites with her family. Hovering in the background, though, is a sense of alienation. She writes that the first two weeks back, before returning to PA at Hurlburt, were "a period of numbness . . . driving aimlessly around town . . . my brain

lingered in Afghanistan." She is caught between two worlds and unable to reconcile either. She is hit hard by the deaths of friends, two by car accident in Scotland and two by a plane crash in Afghanistan. While earlier she was able to emotionally distance herself from death, she is now haunted by the faces of the dead: "Now, faces swam like holograms across my vision. Ben, Amanda, the seven CIA agents, the pregnant Afghan woman, the seventeen Fallen Comrades of Paktia Province."

She takes a short trip to Seattle as a "lifeline" but receives orders to South Korea. She faces a dilemma: report, or decline the orders and finish her military career. She chooses the latter, and "would be a civilian by Christmas." She also learns that U.S. forces were responsible for the deaths in the Gardez raid. This information, among other factors, begins her downward spiral into depression, excessive drinking, and PTSD. When she returns to Florida she decides to get help. The counseling seems pro forma and she does not immediately return for a second session, although the counselor does recommend that Johnson talk with her parents about her experience. Her "confessions" are the first step in regaining control of her life and stripping off the camouflage: "Talking to my parents was a catalyst for a conversation that would go on for years to come: an open discussion with my mom and often my dad, sometimes my siblings and grandparents, about our wars: how they'd affected us, all the ways they were different, and all the surprising ways they were the same." She also realizes that "War, I was starting to understand, was part of my inheritance too." Another step she takes is to pursue an MFA in Creative Writing from Emerson College in Boston. Her writing has appeared in a number of newspapers, magazines, and journals, and in the anthologies *Retire the Colors*, *The Road Ahead*, and *It's My Country Too*.

In her Epilogue dated August, 2021, she writes of the traces that PTSD left on her: "In many ways, my brain has spent the

eleven years since my deployment withdrawing from Afghanistan." She adds: "Still, the military always bubbled under the surface." This included a dysfunction marriage to an Army veteran. It takes her five years to get her "bearings."

As the book ends the "bearings" seem to have held: she is remarried and has two-month old twin daughters. But images of Afghanistan still cast a shadow. The year she became a mother was the year of the withdrawal. Reflecting on her daughters she recalls photos of Afghan children being handed over from their families for evacuation. She writes, "I try to wrap my head around the kind of desperation that would lead a parent to surrender a baby." She wonders if her life took a different turn would she be standing on the tarmac of the Kabul airport; perhaps she would be interviewing heroic Marines and writing uplifting press releases. She wonders if she could, or should, dissuade her daughters from following in her military footsteps, and she wonders further about the young Afghan girl she met eleven years ago, and her musings speak to the unreconciled questions raised by "the mission": "She must be a young woman now, likely with children of her own. I hope she experienced a glimpse of the brighter future we promised. I worry she is among those seeking refuge, and that she may not find it." Have the promises, and the hopes, been fulfilled? There is no way to tell. But there is a lasting truism: wars are never over.

In 1939 Vera Brittain, in her notes to "Introduction to War Diaries," ponders her World War 1 experiences as a nurse and how those experiences affected her post-war sense of self. She writes: "For myself to-day I feel sorrow no more; my grief is for those I have known & loved who were cut off before their time by the crass errors of human stupidity. I can only give thanks to whatever power directs the seemingly unjust and haphazard course of human existence that I have survived the sad little ghost of 1917 sufficiently long to know that the blackest night – though it never ceases to cast its shadows –

may still change, for long intervals of time, to the full sunlight of the golden day” (16). Over eighty years later Lauren Johnson echoes this sentiment in “War and Peace of Mind,” one of the final chapters in *The Fine Art Of Camouflage*: “In the eerie quiet, I thought about the ripples I sent in my IO job, imagining them joining with other ripples sent by other naïve soldiers and aid workers, feeding a tsunami that swept across the country, swallowing people like Ben and the seven CIA agents and the pregnant Afghan woman. I couldn’t close my eyes without seeing their faces, or conjuring other nameless faces yet to be swept away.” Yet she also speaks, if not of Brittain’s “full sunlight of the golden day,” of a dawn that can dispel the darkness of Afghanistan, depression, and PTSD.

[The Fine Art of Camouflage by Lauren Kay Johnson, Liberty, NC: Milspeak Foundation, 2023.](#)

Website: <https://laurenkayjohnson.com/>

Brittain, Vera. *Chronicle of Youth: The War Diary 1913-1917*. Ed. by Alan Bishop and Terry Smart. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1982.

New Nonfiction from Larry Abbott: Review of Joy Damiani’s “If You Ain’t Cheatin’, You Ain’t Tryin’”

A person in a military uniform is shown from the back, wearing a camouflage cap with a name tag that reads "JOY DAMIANI". The person's hair is pulled back. They are standing in front of a large American flag. The image has a collage-like, torn-paper aesthetic.

JOY DAMIANI

**IF YOU AIN'T
CHEATIN'.
YOU AIN'T
TRYIN'**

**and other lessons
I learned in the Army**

Joy Damiani: *If You Ain't Cheatin', You Ain't Tryin' (and other lessons I learned in the Army)*

[Available on Amazon in Kindle and paperback versions](#)

You will hate this book. You will hate being compelled to finish Damiani's story in one sitting (you're excused if it takes two). You will hate spewing coffee (or other beverage) onto your computer keys if you are reading the book on Kindle, or sopping a few pages of the paperback, because of Damiani's humor and sarcasm. And you will hate that the story she tells is, regrettably, true, not only about her personal experiences but also about her analysis of military culture in general and the Iraq War.

Formerly known as Emily Yates, the author now goes by Joy (her middle name) Damiani (her family name). She "traded in" her "old name" to put closure on her divorce and to move ahead with new projects. As a musician and songwriter she has released a number of albums and music videos; a recent music video, a lively romp, is entitled "Brains in Meat Suits." She is also a poet. "I Am the Savage" relates to her time in Iraq, while "Yellow Ribbon" criticizes the empty patriotism of civilians who feel that a yellow ribbon on their car absolves them of complicity in war. Damiani has published essays on veterans' issues, especially the difficulties faced by women vets returning home.

She now turns to memoir. *If You Ain't Cheatin', You Ain't Tryin'* (Joy Damiani Words & Music, 2022), "Dedicated to every veteran who has lived these lessons and to every young person who learns them for the first time here," is divided into thirteen chapters that describe Damiani's teenage pre-military years, the reasons she joined the Army at age 19, her six years in the military, with two Iraq deployments writing "Army news" as a Public Affairs Specialist, and concluding chapters that assesses her experiences and offers a bit on her immediate post-deployment life.

The book begins with a brief mention of 9/11 and then a flashforward to 2004, where Damiani, as a nineteen-year old Public Affairs Specialist, has to revise the post newspaper to include a KIA report and a photograph. She “mechanically considered” the change, “calculating the dead in terms of column inches.” Then she learns that the KIA was actually a friend, Tuazon; he had only been in Iraq for two months. She had learned to separate herself from any emotions about her stories, especially about those killed, but she realizes her well-crafted professionalism is starting to crack when she thinks of all the dead and that she is just repeating a script: “A wave of nausea washes over my body . . . I was so proud of my well-rehearsed presentation—showing no sorrow, always professional! But now I seem to be playing the part without trying.” She smooths over the crack with Jim Beam.

Damiani’s journey to the Army is somewhat circuitous. Her sarcastic bent and dislike of authority lead her parents to more or less spirit her away to the Family Foundation School in order to cure her of her sins of sarcasm and rebellion. (The Family Foundation School, in Hancock, New York, closed in 2014 amid lawsuits and accusations of physical, psychological, and emotional abuse of its teenage students). In the eighteen months plus she spends at the school the only bright spot is a class in folk music, where she develops an “affinity” for Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Kris Kristofferson, among others, and writers Jack Kerouac and Hunter S. Thompson. Sure cures for rebellion! Unfortunately, Damiani is not suitably cured of her sarcasm, and she faces another six months of “supervised rock-picking.” Eventually, she decides to leave the school and hitchhikes back home to Syracuse, where her parents put her on a strict regimen in order to live at home. She also enrolls in a local community college and after six months back home gets a call from an Army recruiter, offering her, for a five-year hitch, a journalism, or “Public Affairs Specialist,” opportunity. It takes Damiani all of twelve seconds to answer in the affirmative.

She goes to Fort Jackson, South Carolina for basic training. She stumbles through, with sprains, blisters, a broken nose, and two black eyes, but compared to her time at the Family Foundation School she writes that, "the Army's attempts at indoctrination seem almost quaint." Her rebellious tendencies are still in evidence: She does qualify in marksmanship but names her M16 A-2 rifle "Bungalow Bill" after the Beatles' song. She also pokes her finger in the eye of the Army in other ways: "The drill sergeants ignore me when I hum 'The Times, They Are A-Changin'' while on guard duty, or when I use my turn calling marching cadences to lead the platoon in a rousing chorus of 'War! What is it good for?'"

The next chapters detail Damiani's first deployment to Kuwait for training and then to Iraq. When she finally reaches Baghdad her job "is to put out a decent newspaper . . . I've come to take it seriously." Although she is still a rhombic peg in a triangular hole she does have the commitment to do her best; "the option of apathy has never even been on the table before." She has integrity about her work even as she remains cynical about the "big picture." At the same time her dream of being a real "war reporter" is evaporating: "Now, I feel defeated, rotting away in a combat-zone cubicle, waiting-wishing-for one of those incessant mortar attacks to successfully explode the headquarters." After her complaints, bordering on insubordination, Damiani does get the opportunity to go out on joint U.S. and Iraqi patrols. Unfortunately, that assignment is short-lived. Because of her criticism of an incompetent co-worker on the journalism team, she is removed from her associate editor position and basically has to cut and paste articles from Google searches. She still has seven months to go.

After a year in Iraq Damiani's cynical side begins to emerge more and more. She writes: "I've already spent the better (or worse) part of twelve months in Iraq as part of what I have come to recognize as an illegally-invading force." She notes

that Orwellian language needs to be used to present everything in a positive light. “‘Interrogation’ becomes ‘intelligence-gathering’”; the “occupation” is “‘reconstruction’”; the “war” is a “‘peace-keeping mission’”; “suicides” become “‘non-combat-related deaths.’” She feels herself to be a “foreign invader.”

Interspersed with her time in Iraq, Damiani uses flashbacks to chronicle her disastrous marriage. She was married a few months before deployment and right before her return to the States after a year in Iraq she realizes that the relationship had devolved further, that she has become “expendable.” As she sits alone in her trailer at Camp Liberty she reaches her nadir, writing that she “eyed my assault rifle and let my mind wander . . . absentmindedly measuring the distance from the trigger to the barrel, the distance from my fingers to my head.” Damiani does return home and the marriage hits bottom, involving her arrest for domestic violence and a stay in a psychiatric hospital after suicide threats. She is released after seventy-two hours and returns to work at [what base?]: “The information war must go on. The war inside my head will have to wait.” Her resentment over assignments grows: “I’ve come to accept that by the time a typical day is over, I will want to cut someone open and feed them their own intestines. I see this as a step forward in my quest for self-realization and inner peace.”

When there appears to be light at the end of the military tunnel the threat of stop-loss is the oncoming train, to paraphrase poet Robert Lowell. Damiani believes that she will be out before stop-loss takes effect, and if she re-enlists she can choose her duty, but the Army comes up with a creative way to hold on to her. They devise an Orwellian “do-not-retain,” but still deployable list, albeit a falsehood, which is a method to guarantee her second deployment to Iraq. Damiani agrees (without really agreeing) to return, and it is worth a look at her reason: “The thought crosses my mind that

I would feel like a jackass if I tried to get out of the Army on time while everyone around me shipped out. Even if it was an option, could I bring myself to be that soldier? I'm not deploying because I want to, or because I think it's a good idea. I'm doing it because deep down, I believe that if I don't do it—if I get out of it on a technicality—I will be making light of everyone else's sacrifice. I'll be saying that I am special, that I deserve to stay home when my fellow soldiers pack up and go to war, and that the contract I signed is negotiable . . . Without realizing it, despite every effort to resist the Army's conditioning and retain control of at least my own mind, I have suddenly become the kind of soldier the Army has always wanted: even when given the choice, I can't quit the team."

She returns to Iraq for fifteen months, and the Public Affairs duties are not much better. Damiani's major project is photographing visiting morale-boosting cheerleaders. She also details the secretive drinking and an attempted sexual assault by two soldiers she thought were friends. Faced with an extended deployment, she decides on the (not so) subtle course of annoying her superiors ("Intimately aware of the drastic repercussions for out-and-out revolt, I've swiveled my sights in the familiar direction of subtle rebellion. The delicate dance of expressing my displeasure while also staying out of trouble requires more finesse than I usually can claim").

This entails including quotes from Hunter S. Thompson and lyrics from Bob Dylan in official emails, to the consternation of a major and a colonel, and creating a custom-made ID badge with a decidedly unserious face.

As the memoir winds down, Damiani becomes more critical and somber about the whole enterprise, seeing failure everywhere. She writes: "As far as I can tell, five years after the 'surgical' airstrikes flashily-nicknamed 'Shock and Awe' leveled the nation's cities, government, and infrastructure, our presence in Iraq is a clear indicator that if an exit

strategy ever existed here, it has to have gone horribly awry. Either that, or—I shudder at the thought that I don't want to believe—this whole debacle could be intentional.” As a kind of bookend to the death of Tuazon mentioned at the beginning of the book, she learns of the death of a friend from her first deployment, Mele, killed by an IED. Choking back tears she is left with one thought: *“What is the fucking point of this? What. Is. The fucking. Point? Nobody is winning here.”*

The book closes in 2011, three years after Damiani's return to the States. She is twenty-nine years old. She spends some of her GI Bill at Cal Berkeley, where one of her courses includes study of the Iraq War. Her fellow students are ten years younger. To them, the war is an object of study; to her, it is still “present tense.” She writes: “My friends are still fighting it, after all. Sometimes I wonder if I am, too.” She begins to second-guess herself with “what ifs?” and “maybes.” But after all is said and done, she ends with the recognition that “The Army didn't make me blind. My sight is the clearest it's ever been.”

Although she might protest my estimation, Damiani is the type of soldier the Army *needs*. She refused to take the easy way out, to fall victim to simply “playing the game” to make her time more agreeable. Even with the disappointments, the misery, the betrayals, and the lies that she endures, sometimes with humor, sometimes with rancor, she retains the integrity of her commitment.

For further reading:

“Joy Damiani, Writer, Podcaster, Musician, and Army Veteran,” Interview with Frank Morano, <https://wabcradio.com/episode/joy-damiani-writer-podcaster-musician-and-army-veteran-11-11-2022/>

A selection of music videos:
<https://www.youtube.com/c/JoyDamiani>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/joydamianmusic/>

<https://www.wrath-bearingtree.com/2020/09/artist-profile-musician-emily-yates/>

Interview with Navy Veteran and Artist Skip Rohde, by Larry Abbott

[Skip Rohde](#) was an officer in the Navy for twenty-two years, with four submarine deployments and service in Desert Shield, Desert Storm, and Bosnian peace-keeping operations in 1996. After retirement (as a Commander) he attended the University of North Carolina at Asheville and received his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in painting in 2003. He opened a studio in Asheville and became a full-time artist. After five years of civilian life in 2008 he was tapped by the State Department to go to Iraq for eighteen months as a Program Management Advisor to manage reconstruction programs in country. He then went to Afghanistan in the fall of 2011 for a year to again help the citizenry with government and business management. While in Afghanistan as a Field Engagement Team Advisor he sketched the faces of various individuals, like merchants, local officials, and elders during meetings, which led to some eighty drawings and pastels in the *Faces of Afghanistan* series.



These works are now in the Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of American History. He has said about these works, *"For an artist, these people are fabulous subjects. They have wonderfully unique faces, great dignity, passion, and expressiveness."* Rohde returned to the States in 2012 to resume his career not only as an artist but as a teacher and mentor to young artists.



His oeuvre is diverse, but one of his primary interests is the human face. In addition to the Afghanistan series he has a series of portraits of men, women, and children. To him, faces are revelatory and can uncover the truth of the person's experiences and disclose their inner lives. He feels that faces can reveal the individual's story and has noted that he draws and paints people "to tell their stories. Not mine." The Model in the Studio paintings follow up on this interest by

depicting figures in various poses. The Stories and Mysteries series go in a bit of a different direction, although the human figure is still predominant. "The Three Primary Graces" references Greek mythology. "Aftermath" shows an apparently carefree young woman in a summer dress walking on a dirt path with a destroyed city in the background, while "The Conversation" is ironic in that there is no conversation portrayed. With echoes of Hopper, a woman sits in a chair in isolation, aloof from those around her. He has said about these paintings: "Stories come to me from all sorts of people and places. Sometimes they are very real: the actual people involved in the actual situation. Other times they may come from something I need to say on my own. And sometimes, I don't know where the hell they come from. But they do."

Many of these works capture a moment of human emotion that resonates beyond the canvas.

Although he feels that the works in the Twisted Tales series lack relevance, I would argue that although the paintings are a "moment in time" they are far from mere curiosities of a bygone era. Ann Coulter is still a presence in contemporary culture (for good or ill). Although the reputation of George Bush has been somewhat rehabilitated in the eyes of some, he is still responsible for the Iraq War, and the aftereffects of that war are still being felt today. I would also argue that Karl Rove's legacy of divisive campaigns is responsible for state of politics today. He is also a commentator on Fox News so his "philosophy" is not a thing of the past. And Dick Cheney? Well, avoid duck hunting with him. In "Pleasantville" and "Ma Petite Femme" the presence of guns as a normal and essential part of American society has more bearing today, perhaps, than in 2008.

In the former work, the smiling family of dad, mom, son, and daughter (and dog) pose happily in their suburban backyard (with razor ribbon strung on the property's fence) holding M-4's. In the latter, the painting looks like an

advertisement for a high-end handbag("Fine Leather Accessories") but in place of the purse is an M-4. There is also ironic juxtaposition in some of these works. "American Style" could be a postcard image ("Let's Go!") as it depicts a snazzy red 60's coupe with a snuggling man and woman out for a cruise. In the near background, however, is a burning tank, and further back there appears to be smoke rising from a bombed-out city. Similarly, "American Acres" depicts the entry to a gated community ("A Halliburton Development") with an American flag on the massive stone wall with "No Trespassing" prominently posted on the padlocked gate. However, behind the gate is the Statue of Liberty, inaccessible, co-opted and for sale by Bush and Company to, presumably, the highest bidder.

The *Meditation on War* series is Rohde's most powerful. The eighteen paintings in the series depict various aspects of war, about some of which he says "I found that the quiet things are just as important as combat itself." Some show the effects of war on places, such as "The Wall, Gorazhde" which shows the side of a building, windows blown out, bullet holes in the bricks; in "Terminal" a bus sits by the side of the road, a derelict hulk; the lone building in the ironic "Welcome to Sarajevo" has its roof blown off. Other casualties of war are more compelling with their human subjects. "Warrior" depicts a legless veteran in his Army uniform in a wheelchair looking at the viewer. Are his eyes asking us not to look away? The human costs of war are also shown in the diptych "You Don't Understand." On the left side of the canvas, a woman (girlfriend? wife?) stands with arms folded, looking away; on the right-hand side a seated soldier in uniform (boyfriend? husband?) also looks away.



At first glance the painting might suggest irreconcilable differences with neither figure able to “see” the other. However, the soldier’s cover is in the woman’s frame, while he holds a piece of her clothing. Perhaps there is hope for mutual understanding?

“Lament” is Rohde’s most poignant piece in the series. An African-American mother cradles her dead son, still in uniform, who lies upon an American flag. Although the painting may reference the Iraq War the visual analogue to Michelangelo’s *Pieta* transcends a specific war to become more universal: a mother’s grief over her fallen son, the irreclaimable loss of life.



These paintings suggest that war doesn’t end with treaties and troop withdrawals, or end with dates and tidy proclamations. Instead, a son is dead, a mother suffers, and her suffering will continue well beyond the official pronouncements about “Mission Accomplished.”

Rohde's landscapes are at the other end of his artistic spectrum. These are usually unpeopled natural spaces of rivers, mountains, rural dirt roads, vistas, sunsets, and animals. There is a sense of calm and repose here that are counterpoints to the scenes of war and destruction, the dark irony of the *Twisted Tales*, and the anxiety and unease in numerous portraits seen in other work. "Clouds Over the French Broad River" has echoes of the Hudson River School with the billowing clouds of pink and white, while "Old Church on the Hill" recalls an earlier more peaceful time. Rohde calls these paintings "liberating," with *"usually no carefully thought-out narrative, no ulterior motive, just the enjoyment of trying to capture the essence of a particular place at a particular time."*

This idea of particularization is important in a consideration of Rohde's work. Whether an image be of war and its aftermath, or models in a studio, or faces, or scenes of nature, he grounds his images in a specific time and place while at the same time creating a sense of the universal.

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LARRY ABBOTT: What was your military experience and background?

SKIP ROHDE: I went to Navy OCS in late 1977. After commissioning, I spent four years as a surface warfare officer. Then I transferred to the cryptologic community and had a wide variety of assignments: surface ship and submarine deployments, field sites, and staffs afloat and ashore. I was at sea during Desert Storm and later was part of the Bosnian peacekeeping mission. I retired in late 1999 with twenty-two years of service.

ABBOTT: How did that influence your work?

ROHDE: Some of the influence was obviously in military-related subject matter I'd say the biggest influence was in how I think and in how I approach a new artwork. Twenty years of military life made me a very linear and logical thinker. The military has no time for ambiguity: it's "make it clear and make it concise." And that's how I tend to think about subject matter and how to paint it. I've had a difficult time trying to back off that approach and give viewers more room to find their own interpretations.

ABBOTT: What are you working on currently? *A Possible Future* is scheduled for Spring 2022.

ROHDE: There are several lines of work going on right now. I have a show scheduled for spring '22 with the working title *A Possible Future*, which I think is accurate but a terrible title and I'm wide open to suggestions. The theme is what this country might be facing in the future if we don't get our collective acts together politically, economically, and ecologically. Admittedly, it's a bit of a "Debbie Downer" theme, but one I think about a lot. The show will include paintings done over many years as well as some new ones. Another line of work is that of wedding paintings. I'll talk about that more in a minute. And a third line are my figurative works, some charcoal and pastel, others oil. Those are personal works, trying to capture a specific individual's personality, or capture an emotion.

ABBOTT: What is your art training/background?

ROHDE: My parents were very supportive and enrolled me in private art lessons starting in about the sixth grade and continuing through high school. During my first time through college, back in the 70's, I was an art major for a couple of semesters, but they weren't teaching me anything and I thought artists were just weird. I got a degree in engineering and went into the Navy. I continued to take classes when I could while on active duty. After I retired, we came here so I could study art at the University of North Carolina at Asheville. I graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, with a concentration in painting, in 2003.

ABBOTT: You also do commissions and "event paintings." What is your approach to these?

ROHDE: I've always done portrait and other commissions. About four years ago, I had a lady call me up and ask if I could be the live event painter for her sister's wedding. I said absolutely, I could do that and would be happy to. Then I was immediately on Google trying to find out what the hell a "live event painter" was. I wondered if it was too cheesy or kitschy, or if I'd even like doing it, and whether it was something I really wanted to try out. So I did a couple of trial runs, making wedding paintings based on photos that I already had of the weddings of friends and relatives. I decided it seemed like fun, so I gave it a go, and now it's an ongoing line of business. Yes, it's kitschy, but it's also a celebration of one of the biggest moments in somebody's life. If I do my job right, this will be something that will hang on their wall for years, and be handed down to their children, and then *their* children, and in a hundred years somebody might be saying "that was great-grandma and grandpa when they got married way back in 2021." That's a pretty cool thought. I do about eight or nine events a year. I turn down a lot more than that. If I do more, it will turn into a "job," and that will suck the life out of it.

ABBOTT: You seem to have great interest in the human form and faces, like in *New Works 2016-2021*. You've said they are "more than just simple figure drawings," maybe more "stories and mysteries."

ROHDE: It's all about people. I like talking with people and finding out about who they are and what they've seen and done. You can walk down the street and have no clue that you're passing people with some of the most amazing stories you'll ever come across in your life. Trying to capture some of that on paper or canvas is what really excites me. And yes, that applies to the wedding paintings, too.

ABBOTT: Related are the sketches "*Faces of Afghanistan*," which depict the people you interacted with. How did these come about?

ROHDE: In 2011, I went to Afghanistan for a year as a temporary State Department officer. I was stationed in a remote district in Kandahar Province to be a "governance advisor." And no, I don't know anything about governance. Our mission was to help the local government and businesses to improve their capabilities to run their district and improve their lives. I was regularly in Afghan-run meetings as an observer, supposedly taking notes. Afghans have the most amazing faces. These are people who'd been in a war environment almost constantly for over thirty years, and who lived in a very difficult environment on top of that. So instead of taking notes, I'd often wind up sketching the men in the room. Sometimes I'd give the drawing to the guy I'd drawn. Maybe a little "diplomacy through art"?



ABBOTT: What were you concerned with in the *Meditation on War* series? I thought that “Lament,” “Warrior,” the diptych “You Don’t Understand,” and “Empty Boots” were extremely powerful.

ROHDE: The paintings you noted were all done around 2006-8. I started doing paintings about the Iraq conflict in 2005. This was early in the war and there was a lot of effort in trying to build up enthusiasm for going over there and kicking ass. It was “you’re with us or you’re against us,” questioning your patriotism if you thought it was a mistake (which it was). My intent with *Meditation on War* was to say “look, if you want to go to war, here’s what it means: people die or are mutilated, stuff gets destroyed, things go wrong, and it never, ever, goes to plan.” The paintings were based on my own experiences in Desert Storm, Bosnia, and military life in general. “Warrior” is a man who really has lost his legs. “Lament” is based on Michelangelo’s *Pieta*. Every military member who’s been deployed, especially to a hot zone, has lived “You Don’t Understand.” “Empty Boots” were my Desert Storm boots. The individual in “Saddle Up” was a Marine sergeant in the Au Shau Valley in Vietnam in ’67-68. I still add more paintings to this series whenever a particular idea comes to me.

ABBOTT: On the other end of the spectrum are the landscapes. What is your interest in these “unpeopled” spaces?

ROHDE: These are more relaxing than my people paintings.

They're just paintings for the sake of painting, to capture a moment in nature, experiment with getting the effects of light while using paint, working fast while trying to get it done before the light changes and always failing. But that experience feeds back into my other paintings. So maybe it's a form of painting exercises.

ABBOTT: What was the impetus behind *Twisted Tales*? There is a bitter edge to them, like "American Style," "Pleasantville," "American Acres," "A Pachydermian Portrait," and "Ann's Slander," referencing Ann Coulter.

ROHDE: Anger and sarcasm go together, don't they? And where can you learn sarcasm better than from your military compadres? Most of those were done around 2005 when I was really angry about the country's direction. I eventually had to stop. To do those paintings, I had to get really pissed off and stay that way in order to get the emotion into the artwork. Plus, they were very much of a specific moment in time. The "Pachydermian Portrait" was about George Bush and the Iraq invasion, but Bush has been gone for years and who cares anymore? A lot of work went into each of those paintings and they aren't relevant anymore. In '06, I decided to shift to something that was more timeless, about military life in general, and that started the *Meditation on War* series. Regarding "Ann's Slander," Coulter had just published a book called *Slander* (2002) in which she said that people like me were traitors. I took that very personally, so I called her out on it in paint.

ABBOTT: Any final thoughts on your art—where it's been, where it's going.

ROHDE: I'm very fortunate to be able to do what I do. I really am. I'm trying to follow the guidance that my parents instilled in me: to leave things better than the way I found them. I'm doing some paintings that are celebrations of great things, and some paintings that are cautionary tales, and some

that are just my own impressions of the way things (or people) are. Sometimes they turn out well.

New Interview from Larry Abbott: Suzanne Rancourt on Poetry, Myth, Nature, Indigenous Life

Suzanne Rancourt's new book of poems, *Old Stones, New Roads* (2021) builds on the work of her two previous books (*Billboard in the Clouds*, 2014, and *murmurs at the gate*, 2019). She dedicates the book to her grandmother, Alice Pearl, "who told me stories of where each stone came from that she used to build the hearth at the camp on Porter Lake." The "old stones," the stories, link past to present, and are both literal and symbolic, representing not only one's personal past but also the psychological markers of family, relationships, art, history, culture, and heritage. In the same way that Alice's stones are laid and build, "braided," to create the hearth, Rancourt's poems create a braid of the natural world and the human world, memory and the present, and myth and history. The "old stones" are also the poems from her earlier work that create a pathway to the present and the future.



The first poem in the collection, "Tunkashila" (which means grandfather in Lakota), links the natural and human worlds. As a child, Rancourt "becomes" an eagle as she climbs a white pine, going further into the sky: "I climb to teetering ethers/I stretch as mist/along the silver thread thrown down from the heavens." As the poem ends she hears her mother and father calling her name, and "my grandfather/calling." The connection to nature is also revealed in "Cyclops Fermata." As Rancourt prays she observes the animals around her and recognizes a symbiotic relationship with them: "We listen to one another even when everyone goes silent/for the hawks who wait for me/to place fingers in my mouth and whistle back."

In "When the Air is Dry" from *Billboard in the Clouds* Rancourt writes "these memories are distant/yet as shadows leak through pine needles,/ . . .they continue to seep . . . through my mind/into my children's lives." Memories are not compartmentalized and bracketed, but bear, in both positive and negative ways, on the present. Memories of childhood experiences and family relationships go hand and hand with memories of trauma and loss. She develops this theme in "In My Mother In Me" from the new collection. She recalls some familial details about her mother, but more importantly shows how deeply her late mother's presence is embedded in her and the family: "You are in the bowl of consciousness everyone feeds from/at family dinners, birthdays, and wakes./You are in my heart and hand that grips the sword."

In one of the best poems from the new collection, "Ode to Olivia, Mumma, and Me," she develops similes based on personal memories to express recognition of the "jolting screech" of death: "ceased engines from pistons thrown/or the menacing zing of circular saws at Grampa's lumber mill/stopped solid by hardwood knots" At the same time she understands that "My dreams/Mum's dreams/are a place where this one moment/is all moments/an electric arc of connections"

Myth and place are also central to Rancourt's work, where ancient regions bear on the present. She locates some poems in Greece and weaves myth with her sensations and observations. In "Acropolis Oya Overlooks the Bay" she writes: "More ancient than these chiseled stones/spit forth from the annals of Khaos—I remember and return—"

Methana, a Greek town on a volcanic peninsula, holds special import. Poems such as "Leaving Methana" and "The Shores of Methana," where "A Poseidic wave draws love from my chest," use place to connect their ancient stones to new roads.

Similarly, in "Voyage," she imagines a return to primal beginnings: "I would slip across cold waters to warm shores/archetypical images of real lives, hardships

fossilized/in the caves of Innis nan Damh rumbling/in the hollow rib cage of the oldest known cave bear skeleton . . .
" The imaginative memory takes her to Ullapool and Achadh Mealvaich and "braids me with the Norse Moors of Scotland."
She ends:

*I would go there again as my ancestors
Travel gulf stream waters to New Brunswick, Nova Scotia,
Where the Red Paint people curled into the shape
of an ear to earth we listen
as our ochre painted bodies—our blood painted bodies
return to life*

The poem is a way to show a reciprocal relationship with her ancestors. For Rancourt the myths and stories of Greece and Scotland shape her life in the same way that indigenous myths and stories shape that life. Rancourt, like Whitman, "contains multitudes." The interlaced braids of one's existence, Rancourt suggests, should not be unwound, for to do so would make a counterfeit of life. Her poems remind us that, as much as we might wish, we are not just "of today" but are the living legacy of the "braided stones" of our past and will become a "braided stone" for the future.



I discussed some of the poems with Rancourt. That conversation follows.

LARRY ABBOTT: What is the importance of Greece and Greek myths, like in the poems “Acropolis Oya Overlooks the Bay,” “The Shores of Methana,” and “Akhelios Comes to Shore”?

SUZANNE RANCOURT: Everything! My need to travel is about collecting all the parts of me while honoring all of my ancestors, experiences, and the sense that maybe this isn't the first time I've lived through these experiences. The poems you mentioned are layers of memories, experiences, and sensations that aligned in one moment of enlightenment and from that emerged the poems. For example, in “Acropolis Oya Overlooks the Bay,” there is a real, physical place that I go to in Greece, called Methana, for the natural volcanic, outdoor, sulfur baths. Methana is technically not an island, however, the land bridge is barely a two lane road. Thus, it holds its own identity which hails its support for Sparta – back in the day. There is this phenomenon referred to as “collective consciousness,” which can feel like a *deja vu* experience or a slight vibration or recognition that may not make sense but is quite real. Methana does that for me and by giving myself permission to bathe in this resonance, healing can occur in my recognizing a familiarity or kinship or existence or “I've been here before.” The Greek spelling of “Oya” is “Oia.” It is pronounced “EE-yaa.” It is this literal sound of the name that aligns, in a calibrating manner, cultures, my own lived experiences, metaphors, temperament, traits, and ancestors. My family has a history of lightning. My three military enlistments. Three marriages. The role and strong attributes of Oya (Santeria) in my contemporary life are significant. The cover of the new book is a photo of the altar at Acropolis Oya, which is a real place. As a writer, a witness, I gave myself permission to feel this place and its power. At times, overwhelming, but nonetheless what emerged were the alignments of emotions,

memories, and “aha” moments that as writer I crafted into this poem. First, the initial write to allow the synchronicity to emerge naturally, organically. Then, I allowed the poem to inspire and guide further research. War is as ancient as the beginning of time and thus warriors are equally ancient. And if war and warriors are as old as the beginning of time, so is PTSD, and so is the need for healing, and so is the migration to sacred springs and sulfur baths and to bathe in waters that Spartans had bathed, to walk to the Acropolis Oya to the altar stone and spring to overlook the bay, well, that’s pretty damn powerful.

In “The Shores of Methana” the tone and imagery create the in-between space where I, as a simple human being, am easing into the power of place. Wherever we travel, for whatever reason, a significant part of understanding history, people and culture, is “feeling” the environment, the power of place. It usually takes me a bit of time to “settle down” enough to ease into to place. Listening to the space, employing spidey senses, or dowsing – whatever you choose to call it – is step one. Giving yourself permission to acknowledge any recollections, memories, while taking note, literally, where in your body you feel this is significant. Self- forgiveness is a biggie in my world, and in the world of survivors’ guilt along with the “should’a, could’a would’a” shit. Healing takes time – lifetimes.

Regarding “Akhelios Comes to Shore,” on trans-Atlantic flights I always carry a small journal with me. I simply free write. I take note of sights, sounds, smells, gestures. It is good practice, in general, leading to spatial awareness, situational awareness. Later, I’ll go back and see what emerges. There is a lot of truth in the world of absurdity because truth can definitely be absurd. I gave myself permission to honor the tone of this poem’s narrator. The poem was inspired by a real person on a very long trans-Atlantic flight. I let the poem sit for a bit and then out of

curiosity I wanted to know if there was a Greek deity that was a shark. And guess what I found? Akhelios. And guess what? People make billions off wars.

LARRY ABOIT: "Ode to Olivia, Mumma, and Me" is one of the best poems, with strong similes. There is a merging or weaving of past and present: "this one moment/is all moments." Can you discuss the poem?

SUZANNE RANCOURT: Time, and its concept, isn't just a singular, linear event. Perhaps for folks whose vagal system has not been awakened by threats of death and other trauma intensities that flip sensory systems on, or people who have not experienced death in what some refer to as Near Death Experiences (NDE), perhaps life is one-dimensional. For those who have experienced the scenarios previously mentioned, "time" and "life" are multi-dimensional with layers of events occurring synchronistically. Western medicine, for the most part, doesn't acknowledge this perspective. My Indigenous, cultural perspective, elders, and traditional ceremonies do. So did Einstein. The line you sight is a line describing the moment where a calibration clicks in. These moments can be disconcerting. They are fleeting and an individual can begin to "chase them." Don't do that as the present moment is gone. Instead, acknowledge, to the best of your ability, in a mindful manner, to the best of your ability, what that "aha" sensation literally felt like in your body. Focus on that for a moment. This poem was indeed inspired by the dream described in the poem. This is a non-fiction poem. In my culture, dreams are powerful. Write them, sing them, dance them, paint them – people need your art, need to hear that their experiences are not isolated. Remember – lifetimes of wars equal lifetimes of warriors equal lifetimes of PTSD, grief, comradeships, unified purpose, service, loss, moral dilemmas and needs for healing. Pay it forward by sharing your experiences in an honest manner. Be authentic. Be yourself.

LARRY ABBOTT: In “Voyage” what is the Scottish and Red Paint People connection?

SUZANNE RANCOURT: This poem is another true-events-and-facts poem where in my travels I am not only honoring all of my ancestors, but in so doing I am regrouping the scattered fragments of my identity, humanness, and personhood. The poem addresses the synchronicity of overlaid time and events. Again, some of these natural experiences can be disconcerting. However, the Northwest Highlands are naturally mystical and that’s where I actually was, physically hiking the land. This poem speaks of my ancestors and tribal clans from Scotland. Keep in mind, that the waters of the Northwest Coast, Scotland, are Gulf Stream currents that carried ancient peoples back and forth all the way into Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Maine. Their use of ochre in burial rituals is also connected to the constellation Cygnus, as well as the Milky Way. Seafarers were keenly knowledgeable in the areas of navigation by stars. A voyage can be lifetimes. All my ancestors are of warrior class. Navigating the home journey can be rough. For me, understanding where I come from clarifies my forward motion. I am never alone and my ancestors are always present.

LARRY ABBOTT: What are the “humming strands of DNA” in “When Your G String Breaks”? Native and European heritage? Any other poems along these lines?

SUZANNE RANCOURT: The Vibration Principle. Quantum Physics. Hair carries DNA. Among Indigenous people hair is especially sacred and is only cut in rare circumstances. It has always been, and continues to be taught, that hair connects us to our ancestors and that long hair is special. I was prohibited from cutting my hair in Basic Training, MCRD, Parris Island. I’m grateful for that. This poem was inspired by my actually needing to change the strings on my 12 string guitar because, yes, the G-string broke. Literally, the strings looked like long hair draping over the body. I gave myself permission to

use all of my senses, to feel, remember, and to simply free write. This poem was not written in one session. I would let it season and then go back in to further explore, do more free writing, even when the surprises surfaced. Because the guitar is a vibrational instrument, the metaphors emerged naturally. As a writer, I researched various science fields for language that fit both the concrete and abstract metaphorical aspects. DNA is a code in the most microchip data concept imaginable. It is an ID, a tracking device, storing our personal history record; constructed to make certain we don't truly lose ourselves; every single cell of our physical body carries this information. Our bodies remember everything, and whether we cognitively acknowledge those memories or not, our bodies do. Thus, being in places, doing particular things, "awakens" memories. For healing purposes, where we go, what we do, and with whom we travel, matters. There are some places I have an aversion to.

LARRY ABBOTT: What is the importance of these specific places, like in "In the Regions of High Metamorphism"?

SUZANNE RANCOURT: First off, I found the similarity between amygdaloidal and amygdala fascinating. One references the geological phenomenon creating vesicles that form in igneous rock, or cooled lava, and the latter, references the almond-shaped part of the brain significant in regulating fight, flight, or freeze emotions and survival responses. Of course, metamorphism is changing the shape of things. I had to travel far from certain environments to change something, to heal something, to appreciate something. For me, to set out of chaotic conditions, I was drawn to Methana. I stood inside a volcano's lava tube. I gave myself permission to feel with my body, to receive a vibration, perhaps, to give myself permission to live, to heal, to receive life while honoring who and what I am as a human being. High Metamorphism.

LARRY ABBOTT: "Swan Dive" a concrete poem. I don't recall you've done others like this.

SUZANNE RANCOURT: I mentioned the constellation, Cygnus, also known as the Northern Cross, earlier. It is significant for navigation. This poem also asked of me as a writer to have a shape. It is a poem about letting go of the various types of control that keep memory doors shut, compartmentalized and finally, feeling safe enough to open them. We white-knuckle our shit as though we're the only ones who have had certain experiences and while no two people have the identical experience, it is also true that as human beings we can relate through emotional context. For example, most humans have lost a loved one to death. We can find areas of common emotional experience when we are honest with ourselves. This takes courage and often times, proper support. This poem for me is a type of resolution that finally I feel I have explored all my nooks and crannies of shit and, finally, I'm o.k. with knowing where I've been because I'm here now. Something about the sulfur baths washed clean many haunts.

*

Old Stones, New Roads, Main Street Rag Publishing,
www.mainstreetrag.com

murmurs at the gate, Unsolicited Press,
www.unsolicitedpress.com

Billboard in the Clouds, Curbstone Press/Northwestern University Press, <http://nupress.northwestern.edu/>

See also:

Rancourt's [website](#)

[*Native Voices: Indigenous Poetry, Craft, and Conversations*](#),
ed. by CMarie Fuhrman and Dean Radar, Tupelo Press.

Larry Abbott on Warrior Songs, Vol. Three: “The Last Thing We Ever Do: Vietnam Veterans Speak Truth”

Warrior Songs is a series of albums created under the direction of Iraq War veteran Jason Moon, profiled [here](#) in Wrath-Bearing Tree (October 2020). With the release of Warrior Songs’ third CD, this time focused around the Vietnam War, journalist Larry Abbott wanted to revisit this collective effort among veteran-musicians to create musical anthologies around their experiences.

[The Last Thing We Ever Do: Vietnam Era Veterans Speak Truth](#) will be officially released on August 8 to coincide with the 57th anniversary of the passage of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. The CD, featuring 14 cuts, is a collaboration of 19 Vietnam vets with 21 professional musicians and songwriters to create an eclectic compilation of rock, jazz, blues, and blue grass-inspired stories of the war and its aftereffects. The project involved 81 studio musicians and 14 studios in the United States and Vietnam. A total of 109 artists, 17 of whom are Vietnamese, were involved in creating the CD. The diversity of musical styles mirrors the diversity of the stories, from the Selective Service System to combat to coping with returning to the U.S., civilian life, and moral injury. In all, the songs on the CD chart the three stages of war: “going, there, and back.”



“Conscription” tells of the “going” phase of war and was a group effort by members of Vets on Frets and Lisa Johnson. The original poem was written by John Zutz and concerned the anxiety of waiting for one’s draft notice or lottery number. The question of going and returning (or not), is at the core of “Conscription,” the first song on the CD. The narrator duly signs up for the draft at age 18 and as the lottery approaches his “nerves are taut as wires.” He has seen the war on television and the conflict that looked so far away could suddenly become *his* reality, a reality of “Rice paddies, helicopters, Agent Orange and a jungle trail, . . . ”

Reminiscent of Creedence Clearwater's "Fortunate Son" the song also takes a jab at the privileged who scheme their way out while "The rest of us stuck in the draft are left without a plan" and have to wait for Uncle Sam's decision. There is a tone of resignation in the refrain "oh, conscription."

Other songs tell of perhaps unexpected experiences, like "Seawolf 7-6" by Kyle Rightley and Bill Martin. Martin was a helicopter gunship pilot with the Seawolf Squadron whose call sign was Seawolf 7-6. On his stops in various villages he entertained children with magic tricks and quickly developed a rapport with the youngsters, especially at an orphanage near his base. The song recounts his experiences performing his shows. At one performance a girl approached him "with unmistakable fear in her eyes" and told him that the VC were coming and that he and his crew had better leave. "This brave girl/Saved my life on that day." His experiences stayed with him: "Seawolf 7-6, in the end, it's all about the kids/And I fly my gunship high through all of my dreams./Seawolf 7-6, what a magical life I've lived. . . . "

Another song takes a different approach to the war experience.

It does not deal with combat but with a subject that could be of equal importance: music. Doug Bradley served in Vietnam as an information specialist. While a professor at the University of Wisconsin (from which he recently retired after three decades) he and Craig Werner co-authored *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: The Soundtrack of the Vietnam War* (2015), which discusses the music of the times and the impact of the music on the "grunt." His song, "Look Out Sam," created with Kyle Rightley, shows that music was a survival mechanism by providing an escape, however temporary, from the constant presence of injury and death : "Albums, tapes, DJs played on the AFVN/And just for a while they would help you feel at home/Look out Sam we're staring down a gun/Running through a jungle that you can't outrun/But far from home the music gave us grace/And we all sang 'we gotta get out of this place.'"

The song also shows that music can create a bond among troops and be instrumental to the post-war healing process.



The after effects of war, moral injury and PTSI, felt upon the return home, is the subject of "Disquieted Mind" by Jeff Mitchell and Steve Gunn. Gunn, who was a combat medic, talks of his moral injury but also holds out the possibility of healing and recovery, however tenuous. In what could be a memory of destruction Gunn writes "I did not look back to study your face/ And all that we were leaving behind/But now I see you/And I know what we've done/For I have a disquieted mind" But he also avers that "I can build you something out of my love . . . " even if it might take the rest of one's life.

Similarly, "Face Down," by the Mambo Surfers, posits that the effects of war can last a life time, but also that the effects can be mitigated and lead to healing. The song, based on the story of a Marine Corps vet, tells of his sexual assault when first arriving at his combat team. After the incident he was able to psychologically survive, lead his men, and regain his true self. He still carried the experience but was able to turn the experience around to help others. His story into song generates healing:

*If betrayal or deceit has left you in pain, hopelessly broken
And indifference or denial have left the wounds weeping and open*

I want to reach you with this song, soothe what hurts and make it good

I want to reach you where you hurt, walk away from the edge with you

"Cracks and Patches" is based on Brent MacKinnon's battle with the effects of Agent Orange. MacKinnon was a corporal in Vietnam from 1966-68 and was exposed to Agent Orange. As cancer took hold he sought to heal his soul through the arts and connecting to other vets. One aspect of this journey was *Agent Orange Roundup: Living With a Foot in Two Worlds* (2020), a book co-written with fellow Marine Lieutenant Sandy Scull. "Cracks and Patches," by Paul Wisniewski and Aaron Baer, uses a

final conversation with his estranged daughter to show that even though Agent Orange has taken his life there is still hope for reconciliation: "After all these lonely years,/Cancer did what I couldn't do./It built a bridge that spans between us/And it brought me back to you."





The most ambitious song, "Seeds of Peace," is by Warrior Songs founder Jason Moon, who participated in Vietnam vet Chuck

Theusch's Children's Library International 20-year anniversary trip to Vietnam. The song is about the importance of reconciliation work in healing moral injury. The recording is Warrior Songs' first multi-national effort. Son Mach, conductor of The United Saigon Orchestra, completed recordings in Saigon and Da Nang. Vietnamese school children sang the lead vocals. The song was finished in Madison, Wisconsin with traditional American instruments and a local student choir. "Seeds of Peace" was inspired by Moon witnessing a meal in Duc Pho shared by Theusch and other U.S. Vietnam war veterans with former Viet Cong. The two groups had fought against each other 50 years ago in that province. In fact, during the meal at the school where Theusch built a library Theusch pointed to a hill "over there," where during the war the two "enemies" fought and killed each other. Now they are building libraries. Moon wrote the song while riding a bus in Viet Nam, thinking about the meal he witnessed and the children who benefit from the libraries.

The new CD not only brings forth the experiences of women and vets of color but is also international in scope. Pauline Pisano composed "Orange Lipstick and Pink Uniform Taxes" from the testimony of women vets. In "Welcome to the World," Parthon explored the experience of African-American vet Calvin Wade, who faced racism after returning from war. Actor, writer, and producer Elvis Thao created a song about the experience of Hmong veteran Chai Cher Vue entitled "Bloody Mekong."

Warrior Songs was founded in 2011 by Iraq War veteran Jason Moon, who, diagnosed with PTSD, attempted suicide. He began to write songs about his experiences, and in 2010 released the CD *Trying to Find My Way Home*. This led to performances at educational sessions for non-vets and veterans' retreats, which in turn led to vets sharing their stories with him. He realized that music could be an agency of healing for others if he could transform the stories into songs with the help of

professional musicians and songwriters. He founded Warrior Songs in 2011, and the first CD, *If You Have to Ask . . .*, with Moon as executive producer, was released in 2016. The CD *Women at War: Warrior Songs Vol. 2* was released in 2018 and represents the first time in the history of modern music that a full length CD was created from the testimony of women veterans. Eighteen women veterans and two Gold Star family members supplied testimony. 17 songwriters and 64 professional musicians brought the songs to life. 13 engineers, working in recording studios across five states, created the final recordings. In total, "Warrior Songs Vol. 2: Women at War" was produced by the collaboration of 95 people, of whom 49 were women. *Women at War* won the Wisconsin Area Music Award Album of the Year for 2019.

Moon has long-range plans for Warrior Songs. Volume 4 featuring songs by veterans of color is scheduled for a 2023 release. Future themes are "Family, Friends, and Support," "Native and Indigenous Voices," "Injured and Disabled Veterans," "Rainbow Warriors/LGBTQ ," "Tales from the Combat Zone," and "Women Veterans of Color." By 2030 he hopes to release volumes 1 through 10 as a full box set. A supplementary 11th volume will explore the experiences of survivors of US wars.

The new CD, as well as volumes 1 and 2, are free for veterans and are available from Warriorsongs.org. A preview of the CD can found at: www.warriorsongs.org/WSV3

The following are some of the contributors' notes on songs found on the album.

"Conscription"

Neil O'Connor: John Zutz wrote the poem "Conscription" about his experience with the Viet Nam draft lottery. He and Lisa (Johnson) then collaborated on writing it as a song, with Lisa creating the music. Lisa and I were acquainted through both

musical and non-musical interests, and she asked me whether Vets on Frets would be interested in recording the song for the upcoming Warrior Songs III CD. We were, and we started on the project in December 2017.

Lisa provided a copy of the lyrics and a basic recording of the song. I shared it originally with Vets on Frets members Danny Proud and Mark Loder, since the three of us were the only members with access to digital/virtual recording equipment. Danny, an experienced songwriter, revised some of the lyrics, and we rehearsed the parts separately until we could set up a virtual server; that server (Jamulus) allowed us to rehearse the song together in real time. We then cut our separate instrumental and vocal tracks in our homes, which Mark mixed on his mixing equipment. We needed a 3rd voice on the verses, so we recruited Rick Larson, one of the original Vo F members; we also asked Lisa to sing on the refrains. All the tracks were sent to Paradyme Studios in Madison, WI, where Jake Johnson fine-tuned the instrumentals, and Rick, Danny, Lisa and myself recorded the final vocal tracks in April. We sent the finished song to Jason, and it will be on the CD.

I'm also old enough to have been subject to that draft lottery in 1971, so John's description of the lottery experience was very real for me (I was 52 when I served in Iraq; that's a whole 'nother story). The song very accurately communicates the uncertainty and foreboding of the times; it felt like life was on hold until you got that lottery number. I'm of the Viet Nam veteran generation, so I've always felt connected to their experiences, especially with the music of the time. My Iraq experience felt like it had some parallels with the Viet Nam vet experience, though our treatment upon returning home was infinitely more positive.

Vets on Frets came about when Danny and Mark, both Guitars for Vets instructors at the time, invited three of the recent graduates to informal jam sessions to encourage their

continued growth as guitarists. They chose to have these sessions at the Madison Vet Center where I worked as a clinical social worker; the sessions were held on the one evening a week I staffed the Center. Rick Larson (Navy-Viet Nam), and brothers Jim (Army-Viet Nam) and Joe (Army-Europe) Ballweg formed the origin of the group. After a year, Danny and Mark challenged them to perform together in public at a Guitars for Vets fundraiser in a local venue. That was a real success, and they continued with that annual event for several years. About six years ago, they asked me to join them, since I played 12-string guitar and they wanted an additional voice in the group. We expanded to play at a number of local venues, and any donations/monies we earned went to local vets' organizations (which continues to this day). Three years ago Thomas Hopfensberger (Air Force-US) joined us on guitar and vocals. COVID saw us on hiatus for 18 months, and we've just restarted performing in public again. We also recorded a song about the pandemic, co-written by Rick and Danny, titled "Swept Away"; it's been played on a couple of local community run radio stations, and been submitted to our local public radio station for an airing.

John Zutz: I was born in 1949 and served U.S. Army April 69 – April 71, Vietnam 1970. I drove a dump truck and covered the central third of South Vietnam pretty well. I was assigned by Jason Moon to write a song about the draft. I'm not a musician so he asked Lisa Johnson to work with me. I began working on the words, the message. Later Lisa provided the tune. Due to COVID distancing we worked separately with only one or two direct contacts over the computer. Vets on Frets came later, and made a few changes. So the song is the work of a committee that never met. I'm amazed at how well it turned out. The band communicates the feelings of loneliness and loss, the pressures we were under at the time.

Lisa Johnson: John and I conferred via Zoom a couple times, and he gave me some more background on his experience as well

as emailing me a copy of the poem the song was to be based on. I am a board member of Warrior Songs and Jason had asked me to work with John to develop the song (I had previously done a song on the volume 2 CD with stories from women veterans). I hardly feel like I should take any credit for this one; it is a lot of John's verbiage (and Vets on Frets added some great lines and context as well). I just put it in a kind of sequential order that rhymed, gave it a chorus and came up with a melody. I just wanted it to be as true to his experience and poem as I could. I sang/played the song over Zoom for John. It is critically important when Warrior Songs does a story-to-song project like this that the veteran whose story it is agrees that the song reflects the feeling and experience he/she had. John suggested a few changes that VOF was able to work in at the studio, and we were good to go. I had the idea that because each verse was about a different facet of the conscription process that it would be nice if different people sang each verse, and if they were veterans themselves, so much the better. Vets on Frets immediately came to mind. I knew of Neil through a concert VOF did at a local folk music cooperative, the Wild Hog in the Woods Coffeehouse where I volunteer and because his wife took my master gardener volunteer training course. As it was during the pandemic and we couldn't meet in person to have me play and record the song, Neil was very helpful (and patient!!) in helping get me set up with Jamulus software and a set of recording headphones so that I could play/record the song for him online. This took a couple weeks since I had to order various pieces of equipment, download Jamulus, and have Neil walk me through setting it all up, with various technology-related snafus along the way. Once recorded, VOF members listened to it and took it from there. They added a couple important phrases including John's suggestions and gave it their special sound. I even got to sing on the chorus when we finally did get to go to the studio! I am grateful to have had the opportunity to meet/work with everyone!

“Seawolf 7-6”

Kyle Rightley: I met Jason Moon several years ago at a folk music event called Wild Hog in the Woods when I was first doing solo acoustic music. We hit it off, and pretty soon we were getting together regularly to write songs. He mentioned his vision for the Warrior Songs project, and I was interested in participating as a songwriter, even though I’m not a veteran. That eventually led to the song “Brothers” on the first compilation disc. “Seawolf 7-6” is the story of Bill Martin. He piloted a gunship in the Mekong Delta during the Vietnam conflict, but he was also an amateur magician who would perform for children in the local villages during his downtime. Jason Moon put me in touch with Bill, and I interviewed him over the phone and by email since he lives in New Mexico and I’m in Wisconsin. Bill has lived a very full and colorful life, and really my challenge was picking the most interesting stories to focus on for this song. I would write some initial lyrics and musical ideas, and Bill would give me feedback about what was working and what wasn’t. Eventually, the song came into focus. Working on these Warrior Songs projects has taught me the power of narrative in a song. The process of telling someone else’s story through music makes me look at my own music through a different lens. Even if I’m not telling a literal story, I try to make any new song have an emotional arc with a beginning, middle, and end.

Bill Martin: I met Jason Moon at Winterfest in Angel Fire. He was performing and my group <vetsandpats.org> followed him. He wanted to include a song about me in Album 3 of Warrior Songs. His particular interest was that I performed magic shows in the villages between fire fights. I flew helicopter gunships in Vietnam with the famed Seawolf Squadron. Flew over 500 missions and popped into the villages in my sector more than 50 times. I would set up and do a show while my gunners walked around making friends and gaining trust. Occasionally I would fly to my maintenance base for repairs. There was an orphanage

with 200 orphan girls next to the base. I loved doing magic for them. I was slightly involved in their rescue from the clutches of the Vietcong during the fierce fighting of the Tet Offensive. My knowledge of trick escapes saved me from capture when two Vietcong tied me up on a jungle trail while I was performing in several villages during the Children's National Holiday. My unit was made up of all volunteers. We were there to provide close air support for the River Patrol Boats (PBRs). My call sign was Seawolf 7-6. Most of my scrambles were called by Dick Godbehere. He was a boat captain leading from two to six boats on patrols and special ops. His call sign was Handlash Delta. He was the bravest sailor I have ever met. He took the fight to the enemy and never backed down. He would carry the flag into narrow canals, expecting to get ambushed, but knowing that the Seawolves would be there when scrambled. Dick had one boat shot out from under him. He and his crew were seriously wounded on their last mission, and medevaced to the States. Because of our close interaction under extreme situations, we have maintained contact, Dick became the Sheriff of Maricopa County. He is now a high-end home builder in Hawaii and elsewhere. I think that Kyle did a wonderful job on the music. I asked if we couldn't put more of the combat into it, but Jason was more interested in the magic. I can understand that, since it is a bit unusual and has human interest. Nightmares followed me for many years. But the memories of the kids laughing keep me on track. I am honored just to be included in volume 3.

"Look Out Sam"

Jake Froelke: In terms of the collaboration with Doug, we had some phone calls and I read his book. I took ideas from our conversations and the book and put a song together. "Look Out Sam" refers to "Uncle Sam", our nickname for the government and its relationship to the military and the men and women who put their life on the line for them. It was another dark time in our country's history. I wasn't born yet but it was my

parents, and aunts and uncles, generation. I've met and talked with quite a few people in that age group. This is the first time I took a specific subject and did research in order to create a song. Usually my songs come in other ways and are more personal. The point of view through different eyes made for a stretch in my songwriting. It's good to get out of the comfort zone once in a while. This was a different approach, an interesting take on the songwriting process.

Doug Bradley: All credit goes to brother Moon for organizing this collection (and his earlier two). We wouldn't be having this conversation if he wasn't working his magic. That said, he connected me and Jake. We had a brief chat, I told Jake to read *We Gotta Get Out of This Place* (which he did), and then we drilled down a bit on what my Vietnam was like in the rear in 1970-71. As I told him more than once, music, lots and lots of music. Jake went off and did his thing, then sent me a demo. I gave him some minor (key) feedback and he wrapped it up. I believe Sam is Uncle Sam but maybe Jake has a different take?

"Disquieted Mind"

Jeff Mitchell: I've known Jason Moon for years from our overlapping time in the Oshkosh, WI folk music community and our many mutual friends. I've followed Jason's work with Warrior Songs since its beginnings. I was looking for a few things from my experience, including an opportunity to be of service, to explore my personal thoughts and assumptions on war and those involved, and also for a spur to creativity as I'd been in a songwriting slump. So, I filled out the volunteer application and (happily) was accepted.

The collaborative process with Steve Gunn started with reading assignments (chief among them *War and the Soul* by Dr. Ed Tick) followed by a long initial telephone conversation. Steve was very generous in sharing his experiences of the war in Vietnam and his subsequent path to healing from what many mental

health professionals now refer to as “moral injury.” After this call, I began my writing process, which occurred mostly during a series of hikes near my home in Milwaukee. Over the course of developing the song, Steve and I would check in and he kindly answered my follow-up questions and provided important guidance on the lyrics and the feeling of the recording. It is of utmost importance that the song should reflect the thoughts and lived experience of the veteran directing the project. I hope that I have at least somewhat approached that goal.

Steve’s healing process involved reaching out to those around him and offering his resources and talents in service of others. It seemed that the choral approach would reflect the importance of connection and community in the path towards healing and reconciliation. On a personal note, this song was created during the isolation of COVID-19. Pulling in collaborators was a wonderful way to connect with many of the dear friends I’ve made over the years of making music.

Previously, I have often centered my songwriting on my own experiences and emotions. While this song was still created through my personal process, the explicit goal was to share Steve’s story and valuable insights which may help others in their own struggles with moral injury. I can’t help but think this has expanded and deepened my creative process. I guess that remains to be seen! My main hope is that Steve’s honesty and generosity of spirit will bring some aid and comfort to at least a few of his fellow veterans.

Steve Gunn: I served as a conscientious objector combat medic with the 101st Airborne Division. I served with Delta Company, 2/506th, in the last major campaign of the Vietnam War, the battle for Fire Support Base Ripcord. My recovery from PTSI and Moral Injury involves daily meditation, service to my international meditation organization, the Self Realization Fellowship, playing music (guitar and vocal), serving with a

Veteran/Community listening circle, and mentoring people recovering from addiction. I travelled to Vietnam twice with Ed Tick and a group of veterans and engaged in philanthropic projects there as a part of my recovery from Moral Injury. As a part of recovery from Moral Injury and service to fellow veterans, I gave a TEDx talk on the subject. I am a retired social worker psychologist and personal coach. Prior to retirement, I worked for 40 years in children's behavioral health services as a therapist and administrator. I said yes when Jason Moon asked me if I was interested having a songwriter write a song about my experience. He assigned Jeff Mitchell to me and we began collaborating. Jeff and I conversed on the phone and I sent him photos, poems, [my TEDx talk](#) and he wrote the song based on that resource information. The major themes of the song are moral Injury and recovery.

"Face Down"

This contributor wishes to remain anonymous.

I am the Marine responsible for "Face Down."

It's the story of a young man who trained diligently for war and a Marine Recon team by foregoing dates and fun in high school and training by running from my home out to the prairies, doing countless pushups, sit ups, and studying metaphysical writings to prepare mentally. I then moved to Colorado after graduating and climbed 14,000 ft. mountains on my days off from working on a ranch in the Collegiate Range.

Then I joined the Marines and went through all the training and into Marine Recon school at Camp Horno. I also went through sniper school and worked with the ideas of the spiritual qualities of precision and accuracy rather than killing.

We were subjected to the brainwashing of objectifying ourselves and the enemy. We were asked to pray to kill and to

scream “kill” over every obstacle. I reversed the objectification with the spiritual reality that I could not kill the spiritual essence of anyone.

When I arrived at my combat team I was sodomized in the dark under the guise of initiation. I had no idea of what was coming until it was over. Then I had to physically fight them all. That whole team went out and they were all killed.

I still had thirty long range missions to run to find and interdict enemy infiltration coming off the Ho Chi Minh trail out of Laos and into South Vietnam. At times I had to use my weapons to protect my team but for the most part I prayed for the enemy and our team so as not to ramp up the killing and for everyone’s protection. I did not accept the objectification that I was taught as I saw the enemy as real people and not “Gooks.” I felt much remorse when killing took place and I vowed that I would not go through life as a Marine but as a conscious Being. It’s not fair how 18 year old kids were indoctrinated into war and hatred. It doesn’t just go away and then we have to work on it for a life time. Refusing to hate and oppress . . . supporting the interconnectedness of us all and all life forms . . . being as gentle and gracious as we can be with ourselves and all others. It’s a privilege to be on this plane of existence and only Love can take us where we need to go. This is not a criticism of individual Marines at all. It is an explanation of the brutality of war and what it does to our young people.

“Cracks and Patches”

Paul Wisniewski: Jason Moon sent me a handful of writings by Vietnam veteran Brenton MacKinnon. The instructions were to write a song about Agent Orange. MacKinnon’s writings were jarring to read and were primarily about Vietnam and its effects. However, it was a few paragraphs about his evolving relationship with his daughter that really stuck in my mind. I thought this relationship could be used to express his story

in a way that non-veterans could more easily understand.

Mackinnon had the following line in one of his writings:

“Cracks and patches in the ceiling plaster floated and danced above me in beautiful patterns sketching a map of my long journey from Los Angeles to Nong Son.”

The words “cracks and patches” grabbed my attention as a description of his life and relationship with his daughter. I think it also accurately describes most of our lives and relationships, so I wanted to use it as the basis of the song as well as the title.

My collaborator is Aaron Baer. Apparently I don’t get very far in my phonebook when looking for help . . . hahaha.

“The Last Thing We Ever Do”

Jason Moon: Anyone who came home who had PTSD knows something. These guys are home maybe 40, 50 years and they have some wisdom. The goal for the CD was to get that wisdom about how to live before they passed. The focus was to capture that wisdom and the different ways they processed their experiences. It’s like leaving a road map for the younger generation.

The songs are personal and express first-hand testimony. The songs are really about truth-telling. Vets are not a monolithic group. There is diversity among vets and we tried to show that. Originally the CD was planned as a double album because of so many vets we wanted to honor and to show that diversity, but COVID put a stop to that.

It was important to have an international dimension, like in “Seeds of Peace,” to show the reconciliation efforts. In Wisconsin, probably as elsewhere, there is a lot of ignorance and racism about the Hmong. I’m not sure many people even know about the sacrifices the Hmong made. It was important to have

Elvis Thao's song, "Bloody Mekong," as a voice for them. I wanted that story.

New Film Review from Larry Abbott: "This is Not a War Story"

Timothy Reyes (Danny Ramirez), a young Marine Lance Corporal veteran, spends his days riding subway trains throughout New York City. As he travels he pops more and more pills, surrounded by uncaring strangers oblivious to his plight. Eventually he is found in a deserted subway car, dead from an overdose. Dave Van Ronk's song "Luang Prabang" provides an ironic counterpoint to Reyes' suicide.

This sequence opens Talia Lugacy's new film *This Is Not a War Story*. The four-year project, a collaboration which she calls a hybrid narrative, stars Lugacy and Sam Adegoke, and features veterans from the Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq wars who have found that the arts, music, poetry, and especially paper-making, prints, and handmade books, offer a chance to reconnect to others and to the broader society. Paper-making is a collaborative process with a tangible result, a transformation of experience, often traumatic, into art.

Lugacy plays Isabelle Casale, a Marine MP who, newly returned to the States from Iraq, cannot regain her footing. Her relationship with her brother is tentative, and her mother has rejected her, telling her before her deployment that "I don't want to know nothing about you. You're not mine anymore." Incidents she observes on the street lead to flashbacks about her experiences in Iraq.

Lugacy is not a veteran, but she prepared for the role by immersing herself, she says “twenty-five hours a day, eight days a week” in the company of veterans at Frontline Paper. She continues: “I found the Frontline artwork online, and I was very moved by it. I got in touch with them and chased after them until they agreed to be in the movie. The genesis of the film goes back to when I was writing a script that was contending with suicidal ideation and trauma. I had characters that were dealing with those issues. I gravitated to personal accounts by veterans and realized there was a lot of cross-over in their experience and mine so I thought I’d dig into that.”

In a search for some sense of community, Isabelle reluctantly joins a veterans’ paper-making workshop. In the workshop old military uniforms are cut up into small sections and become the base material out of which paper is created. Eli Wright, a former Army medic, one of the paper-makers, tells Isabelle that the vets “make handmade paper from military uniforms. We want vets to tell their own story in their own words and images.” She admits that she “needs to be around people,” and gradually becomes more involved in the workshop activities but hesitates at first to cut up her old uniform. Although it represents the pain and suffering she and others feel, the uniform is also a connection to a definitive part of her past. She leaves the workshop, non-committal.

Another participant in the workshop, Will LaRue (played by Sam Adegoke) is a three-tour veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan. He too has returned home unsettled. In order to regain a sense of meaning he became a peer-to-peer mentor for Timothy Reyes. Will feels intense guilt over Reyes’ suicide, thinking he should have prevented it. Even though Will’s peer-to-peer mentor, a Vietnam vet, tells Will that Tim’s death “ain’t on you,” this doesn’t absolve his guilt. The remorse interferes with his ability to maintain personal relationships.

The stories of Isabelle and Will intersect when he becomes her

teacher in the workshop. On her second visit she ambivalently cuts up her old uniform and adds the shreds to the slurry, and Will tells her “everything goes into the vat . . . blood, Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, South Carolina, sweat, Panama . . . ” All of these elements of individual and national military experience are incorporated into the final product, embedded in the paper, a visible record of war and its aftermath.

She looks to Will as a type of savior who will help her learn how to live again. Lugacy notes that “the confrontations and the bond between Will and Isabelle propel them into a deeper questioning of themselves, and into what it means, finally, to want to live.” Lugacy was deliberate in casting Adegoke, and indeed herself, in lead roles. She believes that it was essential to have a Black man portraying a more humanized vet than usually seen on screen. “The fact that our lead is a person of color representing the veteran experience makes the film extremely rare – almost all American films about veterans feature a white male protagonist and deal with the war through this lens.” She also felt it was important that the character of Isabelle not suffer from Military Sexual Trauma. She wanted her character not be defined by MST but to reveal how women “suffer, hurt, fight, and feel remorse and guilt for actions in war, no less than men do.”

Isabelle gradually opens up to Will and the other vets. She tells of her confusion at checkpoints when her CO said that the “only way to tell the good guys from the bad guys . . . the bad guys don’t stop.” But she realized that the good guys, fearful of imprisonment, might not stop either. She also talks about her interaction with detainees that she had to deal with in Iraq, and the guilt she feels for putting sandbags over their heads and confining them for questioning. In a poem she reads to the group of vets, “Detainee” (written by Kevin Basl), she says “I felt the black hole open . . . now they’re ghosts in my thoughts.”

Midway through the film she arrives announced at Sam’s rural

home in upstate New York, still seeking his help. "Show me how to fucking live," she asks him, "I don't want to be dead." He is unable to be the guide she hopes for, but they do become closer and tenuously break down the barriers of guilt and confusion. Before she leaves, they inscribe Timothy's name on luminaria and set them afloat at dusk on Seneca Lake, commemorating his life and in a way letting him go.

After she returns to the city she tries again to re-establish a relationship with her mother. In an emotionally-wrenching scene, her mother barely acknowledges her, more concerned with her makeup than her daughter. Isabelle leaves, distraught, and walks the streets of Brooklyn while a voice-over by Vietnam vet Everett Cox talks about his PTSD and thoughts of suicide ("I could not cross a high bridge without thinking of stopping and jumping. I must have spent a thousand hours on the George Washington Bridge"). As Isabelle wrestles with her psychological turmoil there is a parallel-action shot to Eli Wright cutting off Cox's uniform for the next round of paper-making, what Wright calls "a rite of passage," a virtual ceremony signaling a transition from the military world to the civilian world. He adds, "while cutting Everett's uniform off in the film, I said something about how we must expose the wounds in order to treat them. I approach the cutting of a uniform with care and compassion, just as I was trained to do as a combat medic."

Isabelle's stops on a bridge, staring down. Is she pondering a jump? The final shot of the film is her return to the workshop, choosing life, however painful, over death. There are no perfect resolutions.

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Lugacy has said of her film that "a person who views it will have their heart stirred awake and their mind charged with thoughts and questions. The film isn't telling you how to feel or what to think. It's capturing an experience of trauma, and

an experience of people trying to deal with trauma. The viewer goes through the emotional experience rather than being told what to think or believe.” A few lines from Jan Barry’s poem “The Longest War” could be a coda to the film: “The longest nightmare/Never seems to/Ever/Quite come/To/An end.”

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Lugacy was born and raised in New York City, and started watching movies seriously in her early teens. She worked in various positions in film production in her mid-teens, from production assistant to assistant director to writer, actress, editor, producer, and director. She graduated from high school a year early and received her degree in film from the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. Along the way, she was influenced by such directors as Andrei Tarkovsky, Stanley Kubrick, Ingmar Bergman, Robert Altman, Roman Polanski, and David Lynch.

Lugacy is currently Assistant Professor of Screen Studies at Eugene Lang College of the New School. She made her “breakthrough” film in 2007, *Descent*, starring Rosario Dawson. *This Is Not a War Story* is featured at the San Francisco IndieFest until February 21 and can be screened virtually. (<https://sfindiefest2021.eventive.org/films/5fd0240a140bcb0075ea380e>).

Cast Interviews:

Jan Barry, a Vietnam vet from “the class of ’63,” is a writer, editor, and activist. He is the co-editor of two seminal anthologies of Vietnam veterans’ poetry, *Winning Hearts and Minds* (1972) and *Demilitarized Zones* (1976). In 1981 he edited *Peace Is Our Profession*, in which artists and writers confront the threat of nuclear war. More recent work includes *Life After War* (2012), *Art Work in Progress* (2015) and *Hudson River Views* (2015).

Kevin Basl served in the Army as a Mobile Radio Operator with

deployments to Iraq in 2005 and 2007-08. He co-edited the 2014 *Warrior Writers* anthology, and co-wrote *Warrior Writers Guide: How to Facilitate Writing Workshops for Veterans* (2018), and is the author of numerous essays about veterans. He curated "Rendezvous with Death: A Century of War Poetry by Veterans" for the 2019 National Veterans Art Museum Triennial. Basl received his MFA in fiction writing from Temple University.

Eli Wright was deployed to Ramadi, Iraq in 2003-04 with the 1st Infantry Division and served as a combat medic. His poetry appeared in the 2008 and 2014 *Warrior Writers* anthologies. As a social justice activist he worked as a medic at Standing Rock in 2016 as part of a contingent of veterans. He now teaches paper-making to vets.

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Larry Abbott: Can you describe the collaboration process for writing the script?

Kevin Basl: Talia approached us a few years ago, interested in including a papermaking workshop in a film she was writing. Over a couple years, she regularly visited our art groups in New Jersey and Ithaca, NY. We would simply talk, make paper—just do what we usually do. She brought drafts of her script and we would give her feedback. In some instances, she asked us to create new work for the film. For example, Nathan and Eli made a couple silkscreen prints—one was a memorial to a friend who had died by his own hand during the writing of the film. I wrote two poems for Isabelle's character, "The Detainee" and "The World You Once Loved." I also wrote the song "The Wound That Will Not Heal." So the process was fruitful for all involved. Incidentally, most of the dialogue between the veterans in the film is improvised. We're just being ourselves. It's all very personal.

Eli Wright: Talia consulted extensively with me and the other

vets involved in the film to develop improvisational dialogue with very loose guidelines, and then allowed us to just be ourselves when the camera was recording. The dialogue represented our typical conversations when hanging around the studio space and doing work together. The bulk of the script was written primarily for the two main characters Will and Isabelle, which she wrote and revised for nearly two years before shooting.

Larry Abbott: What is the importance of the film to Vietnam vets? Current vets? Civilians?

Jan Barry: It provides a window into the anguish of PTSD and survivor guilt and some creative ways of coping in collaboration with other vets and allies.

Kevin Basl: The film, hopefully, challenges a lot of cliches about veterans. Our attitudes toward military service are layered, nuanced. Many of us are not proud of what we did in the military. Hopefully the film will serve as a history lesson of sorts, too. I'm continually shocked by how little American citizens know about the post-9/11 wars—like the fact that we're still fighting them.

Eli Wright: I think the importance of this film for both veterans and civilians is that it portrays an often unrecognized or under-represented story— that many of us carry home a deep sense of betrayal and moral injury related to our combat experiences which has rarely been honestly or accurately portrayed in the polished patriotic propaganda that Hollywood has given us over the years. This film finally challenges that convention by casting real veterans to tell our own stories, instead of exclusively casting actors to tell our stories for us.

Larry Abbott: Do you see similarities between Vietnam vets and today's vets? In the film there seemed to be a feeling of camaraderie between the generations.

Jan Barry: Yes, there was a lot of camaraderie in this process of making art together. In many cases, vets of current wars are sons/daughters of Vietnam vets.

Kevin Basl: Many Vietnam War veterans have been mentors to us post-9/11 veterans, especially in anti-war activist circles and artist communities, precisely what's represented in *This Is Not a War Story*. I've learned a lot from Jan and Walt [Nygard], the Vietnam veterans in the workshop in the film. We've sat in many writing workshops together, protested together, turned a lot of uniforms into paper together. What you're seeing on film are natural conversations we had while the camera rolled, totally impromptu. It's exactly the sort of conversations you'd hear if you stopped in at a papermaking workshop on any given Sunday.

Eli Wright: The camaraderie between generations that you see in this film is authentic because the elder veterans understood the anger and confusion that so many of us were struggling with when we first came home. We consider them as wise uncles and mentors who have helped guide us back to "the world" and divert us away from some of the self-destructive habits which were so rampant among their generation. They have taught us how to survive the biggest threat we face: ourselves.

Larry Abbot: In the film, paper-making is a path toward healing, transforming experience into art, finding new meaning. Jan, you've done some music with Darden Smith. What is the importance of the arts to the "healing process"?

Jan Barry: In making paper together from combat uniforms, vets often are triggered by an experience, which they may share with the group. The discussion then focuses on how to tell that story—visually, in writing, some combination. And work is done on it collaboratively. This is very different from vets getting together in a bar and feeling one has to top each other's war stories. Making art suggests there are creative

ways to deal with life's current problems.

Kevin Basl: Art encourages people to see the world afresh, to transform things, to learn, to teach, to collaborate, to survive. In this sense, the process of traditional hand-papermaking is not only a great metaphor, but is literally all of those things happening simultaneously. In my experience, art, writing and music especially, have allowed me to explore my memories, my conscience, my dreams, and my political convictions in a way I've not been able to elsewhere. I often write and make art with friends, but it's also a private, daily practice for me, like meditation. And like meditation, it can be as frustrating as it is rewarding. But it always keeps my mind working, always keeps me moving forward, and often takes me to interesting places. It reminds me that life is worth living.

I've been a musician since I was a child. I played hand bells in church, then later drums in the school marching band and guitar in jazz band. I also played in a rock band with friends in high school and college before the Army—playing bars, festivals, parties. I always had a guitar with me in the Army.

I started writing as a teenager, but didn't start taking it seriously until after the Army. What's important about the Army and deploying to Iraq in my artistic development is that my military experience actually gave me something to say. I learned a lot about myself and my country in that five years' time. After I got out of the Army and finished my MFA in writing, I got connected with a lot of veterans through Iraq Veterans Against the War and Warrior Writers who were using art to express themselves and build their own community and culture. It was a natural fit for me, and I got completely immersed in that world for about five years. I'm still deeply involved, but during those years that work is all I really did. Perhaps most importantly, I made a lot of great friends during that time.

Eli Wright: The work we do has always blurred the lines between art and craft. I've always seen papermaking as an important bridge between worlds. Through the craft of papermaking, we learn to build connections between communities, between individuals, between cultures, and also between past, present, and future. Through the art we create on our paper, we've learned ways to make meaning out of complicated and difficult experiences. We've learned how to express through images that which cannot be said in words. Many of us tend to shy away from portraying this as a "healing" process, because it doesn't necessarily serve that purpose to everyone who engages with it. But for me, it has been incredibly helpful in processing trauma and grief, learning the value of mindfulness through a simple and repetitive creative process, and teaching me the value of solidarity within a community of fellow survivors. I've never claimed this work will save anyone's life, but it certainly saved mine.

Larry Abbott: Any final thoughts?

Kevin Basl: I sing "The Wound That Will Not Heal" in a bitter sort of voice—a voice often found in the poetry of veterans of unpopular wars. It's meant to be a confrontational song. It's meant to haunt the listener. The song is my answer to the question: why are so many veterans killing themselves? My answer—perhaps an unpopular one—has to do with the shame of participating in an unnecessary, costly war and then having the society that sent you want to simply move on as if nothing happened. No lessons learned, no change of course. Such circumstances can create a profound dissonance, warping a veteran's sense of justice, sense of virtue, sense of purpose. It can lead to self-loathing, and can really make a person feel like an outsider unless they get connected with a group of like-minded people who can help a person understand and give voice to such sentiments in a healthy way.

Eli Wright: I would like to point out something that I think

is relevant about the recent storming of the U.S. Capitol. In the film, I tell a true story of how a large formation of vets, myself included, peacefully faced down an angry mob of riot cops at the 2008 DNC protests, without any injuries or arrests. So far, approximately 25% of those arrested for storming the Capitol are veterans. For far too long, many of us have been fighting against the stereotype that we're all a bunch of crazy right-wingers who love violence. If you compare footage of our standoff in 2008 versus what recently happened in D.C., it's clear that we are not the same. *This Is Not a War Story* shows the world that veterans are not a monolith, we are complex and unique individuals just like anyone else. Many of us who've been to war and experienced the worst of humanity have been fighting like hell to make peace in the world through the disciplined practice of non-violence. I hope this film can show the world that we exist, we've always been here, and, sadly, we're not going away.

“Art-Making is My Light:” An Interview with Poet Suzanne S. Rancourt

As Suzanne Rancourt notes, her work is a bridge between disparate worlds, attempting to make connections between these worlds, whether they be the Indigenous and Anglo worlds, or the worlds of the veteran and the civilian. Her poetry (but not only her poetry) reflects a healing process that involves artistic creation as a method of “finding our way back home.”

Her first book of poems, *Billboard in the Clouds* (2004), evokes the prevalent themes in her work: the continuity of the

past and its impact on the present, the interaction of childhood and adulthood, Nature, the enduring strength of family and heritage, relationships, and cultural loss.



For example, in the poem "Even When the Sky Was Clear," she recalls childhood experiences of observing her father's connection to and understanding of Nature: "I would watch him/through my mother's kaleidoscopic den windows,/ . . . I would watch my father/stand in the center of the dooryard appropriately round/ . . . Even in the summer/he'd look to the clouds, to the sky/at dawn, at dusk." Her father was able to read Nature for knowledge of snow, rain, and wind. As an adult she stands "in a circle" and sings "to the clouds/in the language/my father/taught me." In this way both the family and the broader cultural heritage are remembered.

The idea of the continuity of memory is also shown in "Thunderbeings." In this poem Rancourt recalls her "Parisienne farm woman" grandmother, Dorothy, whom she called Memere. Memere, killed in a freak lightning strike in 1942 (before Rancourt's birth) while touching a post of a brass bed, was an artist who "painted in oils/the light and dark of all things-" Rancourt recalls that as a child she would trace the brushstrokes on the paintings, "wondering where these ships were sailing/in my Memere's head." Then, forty years later, the adult Rancourt discovers the bed and polishes the "spokes and posters," with the bed transformed into a "brass lamp" which "illuminated images of a woman/I never knew." As the poem ends Rancourt writes: "For years I slept in this bed,/and often heard her/still humming in the brass." Rancourt creates unexpected connections through visual imagery and forges a link between the grandmother she never knew and her adult self, between past and present.

That the link endures is also shown in "Haunting Fullblood." Memere represented Rancourt's European heritage, while in "Haunting Fullblood" Rispa is the Native "Grandmother to grandmothers" who embodies her Huron/Abenaki heritage and speaks to her "through the generations/ . . . Were you anything more than a photograph ?/Oh, yes, Rispa, Grandmother, my subtle bridge/over flooding time-shhh-/I am

breathing proof.”

Her second book, *murmurs at the gate* (2019), extends and develops the themes in the first. In “Harvesting the Spring” she reflects on past springs and recalls how frozen ground would thaw so that she could “sink my feet into” the mud and how spring would blend into summer and the longed-for wild strawberries. She ponders the familiar memories, the certainties, of childhood, that often stand in contrast to the confusions and losses of adulthood. The poem concludes: “I long for wild strawberries/and the little girl/who used to pick them.”

There are also meditations on Nature in such poems as “Along the Shore—Five Miles,” “Grace” (“Gazing across the valley, across the Sacandaga, across the surface/ . . . drinking the self/drinking the Universe”), and “Swimming in the Eagle’s Eye.” In this poem she sits by a “secret” pond in quiet observation. She would lose herself in the “reflections of backward worlds” and, echoing Thoreau, “I recognized something/in this Eagle’s eye/this everything and/nothing/striking calm.”

However, she is more explicit in *murmurs* about the violence of war and her military experience. “When We Were Close” details a lover’s PTSD. “The Execution” uses “the photograph I grew up with,” Eddie Adams’ photo of the execution of the Viet Cong prisoner on the streets of Saigon, to ask about this incident, which is metonymic of the brutality of war, “You will remember, won’t you? Won’t you?” “Iron Umbrella” notes that “The burden of war is strapped to the backs of the survivors.” Other poems address her MST, as in “Against All Enemies—Foreign and Domestic.” The anger at her violation is palpable: “I wanted to kill you/assailant/because you violated my home—my body.” The story “The Bear That Stands” discusses in more detail her rape and its aftermath.

Rancourt also utilizes music to express her experiences.

"Sisters Turning," (co-written with Anni Clark, who also did the music), is based, as the liner notes indicate, on the "testimony and writings of Army and Marine Corps veteran Suzanne Rancourt." In the song she recounts her military sexual trauma (MST) as a "naïve Marine" at the hands of a Navy man. This is her first betrayal. She tells another woman what happened, but is initially not believed. This, she writes, is her second betrayal. The song suggests that healing from MST can be facilitated by women trusting in the truth of the others' experience: "Where do we turn/if not to each other . . . If we lose each other/we'll never get home."

Rancourt utilizes music, dance, photography, writing and other modalities to help others heal from various types of trauma, substance abuse, domestic violence, and Traumatic Brain Injury. Using her education, life experience, and training as a photojournalist and information specialist in the Marine Corps she created an integrated Expressive Arts program that promotes healing. She lives in rural New York State and works locally with veterans in a peer to peer program but also travels internationally to work with others to help them regain a sense of home.

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The novelist Henry James wrote that "A writer is someone on whom nothing is lost." If I expand James' aphorism to include any creative artist, then Suzanne Rancourt is that artist "on whom nothing is lost." Through memory, emotion, and observation Rancourt reveals the truths of her experience in all its dimensions.

LA: Let's start with discussing your new book of poems. How does it continue or differ from previous work?

SR: My third book of poems, *Old Stones, New Roads*, has been picked up by Main Street Rag Book Publishing and is scheduled for release in Spring of 2021. *Old Stones, New Roads* differs

from previous work in that I am further down the road in age and healing. The continuation aspect is seen in the things that simply remain the same, my spirit, temperament, how and where I was raised, my culture, and various trauma events. All of these factors propel my continued self-exploration, figuratively and literally. For example, this book is dedicated to my father's mother, Alice Pearl, who collected stones. I clearly remember, as a child, sitting beside my grandmother in front of the stone hearth at the Porter Lake camp. I was incredibly young. I recall Grammie pointing to each stone and telling me where it came from and who brought it to her. Each stone had a story, a life, a history. Since a small child I have also collected stones.

I come from independent people who enjoyed travel. Mobility was supported at young ages: hiking, bicycling, driving, travel in a variety of vehicles, learning, exploring something about resonance of place and how some places "feel" more than others. I was encouraged to observe, ask questions, take note of how people lived, to respect differences and similarities and to figure things out. It is interesting to me, and hopefully readers, how where we come from is always brighter the further we travel from it. Part of this phenomenon helps me take a look at what is identity narrative and what is trauma narrative. Post-traumatic growth, for me, is being able, first, to recognize what is a trauma "story" and accept that that trauma "story" is not my identity, and then to ask, how do I transpose the trauma stories, tones, and images into syntactic stones, and new discoveries?

LA: Various themes emerge in your work: relationships, family/history, Nature, Indigenous heritage, impact of the past on the present, loss.

SR: The themes that emerge in my work are simply the themes of life that everyone has in various intensities and manifestations. It is in our commonalities, our collective consciousness, and shared experiences, that metaphor can rise

up into our forebrains. Sometimes this happens subtly and sometimes not. Part of traveling to ancient and sacred sites strikes me as collective resonance. Maybe this is a type of empathy?

Perhaps there is something about dowsing. As you may know, I come from a family of dowsers and was taught to sit quietly in the woods, to be attentive. This clearly supported my multi-modal sensory development and still does. Some folks may refer to this as situational awareness, or Zanshin, or synesthesia or being present. Either way, it isn't by living in the past that I explore the past. Au contraire. I must be firmly in the present to view the past, present and future. This is why stacking wood is one of my favorite meditations; I'm in constant movement while fully conscious of the past, present and future. I am willing to step into all the memories to find the beauty, the strength, and yes, grief and rage, and then emerge. I don't heal or get stronger by denial, or by pretending that something never happened, or that I wasn't involved in something. I am but a part of the natural world and the natural world is a part of me. No more, no less. Perhaps this is a way of annealing the Soul.

Furthermore, life isn't linear. That is a Eurocentric perspective. Life is circular, non-linear. Some people experience life as an upward rising spiral, as opposed to Dante's *Inferno*; we traverse through levels and layers of increased awareness that each experience offers in support of our progression. What stays the same? What changes? My writing is always a journey, an exploration, always something to learn, and yes, things can get pretty dark. One of the most profound lines of poetry I carry hails from a fortune cookie: "It is better to light one small candle than to curse the darkness." Art- making is my light.

LA: Part II of *murmurs at the gate* seems to be more about military experience with reflections of the Vietnam War, like in "The Hunt," "Iron Umbrella," "Tsunami Conflict," and "Ba

Boom.” In “Throwing Stars” a “hyper-olfactory” stimulus sets off a memory of a traumatic event.

SR: *murmurs at the gate* is a deep exploration of events, memories, incidents, character development that ultimately reflects decades of exposure to war trauma in some variant form. Part II indeed dove into war and conflict experiences. All things in the physical realm change molecularly, atomically, when under pressure, and the intensity of fire. Elders always taught “that all truth is found in nature” if we know how to simply see that which is before us, no matter what the environment. My concreteness of a metaphor’s abstraction is always the natural world and/or my current environment. For example, when I taught creative writing at Clinton Correctional, the windows still had that old blue glass with the bubbles in it and it had the same thickness and blue hue as my Grandmother’s old Ball canning jars, the ones that had a rubber seal and a latch to hold the glass lid. The lessons of seeing what is before me, the environment, whatever that environment may be, offers an endless vocabulary for metaphor, similes, tension, meaning. Images and lessons from nature fuel my questioning that hopefully inspires others to question, wonder, consider.

As a writer, I distinctly recall being extremely young, fully open, and experiencing with all my senses, the outdoors. I had the good fortune of no video games and incredibly limited TV. For some reason, Western society attempts to lead us into a false belief that there is a magic this or that to eliminate memories and residuals of trauma. From my individual trauma survivor perspective, my experiences are what bring depth to my humanness. My poem “The Execution” is a true event, both the execution and my seeing the corner of the photo as a writing prompt. **1** I was trained in the Marine Corps as a photo journalist/journalist/public relations person. This training has made me keenly aware of how words and photos can spin propaganda, politics, and deliberately mislead the

masses. That's what this poem is about and when I read this poem at events, I read it once through without commentary. Then, I ask how many people recognize the photo I described. I follow that up with questions about the two main people in the photo. I follow that up with the truth about the individuals, the complete story to properly place the image in its true context. We have to look at the era, what type of film and photo equipment existed, and how point of view and images out of proper context can be manipulated to mean the exact opposite. The poem is a warning as much as anything. I end the brief discussion with a re-reading of the poem and note the measurable change in the audience. Think about it.

I believe the artist is a witness. This is my mission and perhaps this has been the mission all along right up to this specific moment for you to ask these questions and to whoever is reading this word literally, right now. I want people to ask questions. Many of the poems you have mentioned are true word for word. Some poems hold a person, image, of event that is nonfiction and then I enter into it and allow the narrator to question, answer, apply the "what ifs" without editing, just the freedom to express. This is where the surprises can emerge in the movement. Telling our stories is a bridge. Telling our stories is an action that connects generations, human to human. This is healing, this is "medicine."

LA: How much does your military experience figure in poems like "The Hunt," "Iron Umbrella," "Tsunami," "Throwing Stars," and "Ba Boom"? You were in both the Marines and Army.

SR: My most recent time served was from '05 – '08 in MEDCOM. In "The Hunt," for example, one place I was working at was an Airlift Wing where I had to pass through a hanger of Black Hawks. They seemed so docile cycled down and their prop blades really did remind me of the long ears of hunting hounds I grew up around as a kid, "their hound dog props pick up to attention/at the sound of clips, bolts, boots." Also, worth noting, I know the difference between a clip and a magazine.

Clip refers to snaffle-type or carabiner-type clip. Everyone was always on alert, always training, training that triggered rapid response. Sounds, smells, heart rate, respiration, everything in response to a hunt. A hound dog sound asleep only has to hear a minute sound and they're by the door and fully alert. "Iron Umbrella" was inspired by a black and white photo prompt of an indigenous father and son clearly in a tropical country that, of course, was in the throes of violent conflict. I gave myself permission to ask questions of those characters and let my narrator respond freely. I allowed my military experiences and being a parent to inform and fuel my narrator. In this way, the tone remains authentic, the story plausible and real. The poem "Tsunami Conflict" is what I call truth-inspired because the shell is a gift that a Viet Nam era vet gave me decades ago. It was something that he acquired when on leave and carried in his A.L.I.C.E. [All-Purpose Lightweight Individual Carrying Equipment]. I still have the shell. It is on my desk and I can reach out and touch it even as I write this. I hold the shell, sometimes. It brings comfort, simply brings comfort. "Throwing Stars" is a true account. Smells. "Twenty years later when I'm at the park at Saratoga,/You'd hardly notice that I knew anything./And if it weren't for my hyper-olfactory,I would have forgotten you." Some smells one can never scrub clean of. "BA BOOM" is a tone poem that is driven by the adrenalized beating of one's heart – hard, strong, the type of beating you hear from the inside of your body, the type where it feels like your heart will explode violently through your chest. The title, in bold capital letters, when spoken is one's heartbeat, you know, that onomatopoeia thing, while also exploding. There is a tension of hypervigilance in this poem that hopefully helps people who have never felt such things, to feel with their bodies via the vagal system, primitive brain, not the forebrain.

All of my experiences get transposed into an "experiential" vocabulary for my art- making. A metaphor requires two parts:

a bass line and a melody, concrete and abstract. Our bodies are naturally wired to remember sights, sounds, smells, air tension displacement and much more than we are even consciously aware of, like the situational awareness/hyper-vigilance combat and other threatening situations require. How could I not draw from my military experiences? Or any of my life's data? Writing as craft is the skill of shaping, forming and transposing these stories into a form that people can receive.

My military time is what they refer to as broken time, meaning I was in, out, in again. When I first went into the Marine Corps, the times were way different. I am an MST survivor, veteran, and have been the spouse and partner of combat and non-combat veterans. Thus, my military experience is multifaceted.

My MST happened while in the Marine Corps attending my photo journalist/ Public Affairs/Information Specialist training. Things went downhill rather quickly after that. My next stint was in the Army because back then I would have had to give complete custody of my child over to someone else. I declined. My second MOS was a Medic. I fulfilled my commitment and moved on after also working as a Chaplain's Assistant. My most recent time in was from 2005 – 2008. By then a whole lotta shit was catching up with me that I had never addressed. That's when I connected, for the first time ever, with Travis Martin's organization [Military Experience and the Arts](#), now headed up by David Ervin. My life changed significantly and for the better. I'm still in contact with many of the folks from that first MEA 2012 Symposium. *murmurs at the gate* is what I refer to as my heuristically-inspired "poetic dissertation." It was the first time in my life that I could safely acknowledge how much the military was, and still is, who I am. The word is validation.

LA: In *Native Voices* the editors note that 'Fabric' and 'The Smell of Blood' are fine examples of her ability to intertwine

personal experience and communal history.” 2 Is this what you try to do in your work? What is your creative process?

SR: Ahh, my poem “Fabric,” so much love and loss in that poem. Better to have had some good love than none. I wrote the first version literally decades ago and was told by an academic that it was garbage. I did not throw the piece out as suggested. I trusted something deep inside me that said no, that it was a strong poem and I held onto it. I held on to myself. In 2015 I was invited to write a piece for a special women veteran’s issue of *Combat Stress* magazine 3 [released January 2016] entitled, “Women Veterans and Multi Modal Post-Traumatic Growth: Making the Tree Whole Again.” By then I had experienced several failed marriages, lost so many people that I had truly loved, been retraumatized in a variety of ways linked to unresolved military experiences, that I rediscovered the poem. I renamed it “Fabric.” As a result of new connections with the military community, I had finally been receiving the help I needed to make sense of things and recognize unhealthy patterns and beliefs. And, I was always writing. I tweaked the poem and added the last two lines about accepting life, love, and loss. I am a human being and so are my readers. The causes of our specific experiences, i.e. love, loss, violation, may be vastly different, however, our humanness connects us. By diving below the surface of self, into the currents of hurt and love, I give myself permission to validate with words and images. And this, I feel, lets others know that they are not alone in their existence. We see each other. Indigenously, if I say, “I see you,” it means that I see ALL of you and it has really nothing to do with your occupation or your wealth or poverty. I see who you are. I see you. We see each other. Sometimes it is but a flicker in one’s eye or a microexpression, but the soul is there. This reflects my work experiences with people in comas, or people who are quadriplegic – this skill of seeing isn’t really about using my eyes to visually see. Recognition is something far deeper than that.

Because of the types of trauma that I have experienced, coupled with a rich memory base of the powerful smells from the natural world, and also my quirkiness, I have always had a strong sense of smell. Bears can be like that. I did not sit down with the intention to write "The Smell of Blood." It could have been something as subtle as passing a person in a store who wafts a certain odor or literally a restroom with old trash. I used my writing to release the reaction that became a list poem of sorts. When I do the first write of a piece I just let 'er rip. Patterns, rhythms, meter – all that reveals itself in the rereading and editing process. I am an honest writer, meaning, I just say it. This poem offers an opportunity for people who have not experienced trauma to feel on a cellular level anxiety, a triggering event, run-away thoughts. As a writer I had to be responsible of the climactic curve and tempo. This poem had to have that final line to allow for breathing, release, resettling. When a person's PTSD is triggered, it doesn't make sense to most folks. This poem lets people know that I hear them. It offers validation. We are not alone here, in the in-between "...in the lives outside of reasoning."

LA: You mentioned that you were influenced by Robbe-Grillet, Samuel Beckett, and Eugene Ionesco, among others. What impact did they have on you?

SR: My mother used to sing that Cinderella song to me, the one that goes "In my own little corner...I can be whatever I want to be." As a young child this is possible. However, one hits a certain age in child development and realizes the outer world can be quite cruel. That's when creativity gets shut down and injured on so many levels and in so many ways. Much later in life I reignited my creative self. This rebirth, if you will, was definitely fanned by the freedom that Robbe-Grillet, Beckett, and Ionesco said yes to. Trauma, especially when it occurs to children, can close us up. The innocence of being open is no longer safe. As I matured intellectually,

spiritually, physically, I discovered healthier ways to be open and safe. Some folks may refer to this as “self-regulation.” To finally have the go-ahead from significant creatives to ask questions, explore and discover through art-making, I was finally able to feel comfortable in my own essence as writer and human being. Just think of me as an example of the 100th Monkey, the one that breaks the pattern, walks point, changes the outcome, someone has to do “it” first.

LA: What do you mean by “I Am My Own Evidence”?

SR: I am my own evidence. Yes. And my evidence and experiences are as valid and, in some cases, more so than any individual in any hall of academe or therapeutic field. My experiences as a kid, my theories, came from very physical experiences, often pain-related, like profound migraines, for example. Only within the last decade has neuroscience been able to offer data that I frequently wrote about in various fields in the 80’s, ‘90’s, and early 2000’s. I am multi-modal, which is no different than cross-fit training. I am making sense of my world through the senses and art-making modalities available to me and that includes what is culturally specific, whatever those cultures may be. Be authentic. Be yourself. Let your narrators tell the story because there is absolutely no way your own experiences will not find their way through your narrator. For people who would like to research this more, look into Heurism as research method. A fantastic text is Clark Moustakas’s book, *Heuristic Research: Design, Methodology, and Applications*. **4** This understanding and method is one reason why I refer to **murmurs at the gate** as my poetic dissertation.

LA: You work in various modalities: poetry, song, photography, dance, drum-making. How do these all connect?

SR: The various modalities that I express and create through connect within myself as a human being and also as a living,

neurological organism. Each modality has a predominant or primary sense that it requires for expression. For example, dance for me is physical and relates to all that movement requires, singing actively engages my auditory mechanisms including self-soothing, photography fires up my visual cortex and all that that requires, and so forth. Writing is like the piano for me in that to learn the piano one learns all the keys and therefore can read music for all instruments. Writing is my primary modality where I can use all sensory mechanisms to better engage the reader and/or listener. This is my cross-fit training and I do include actual physical fitness! The connection is the whole person that is me. It has taken time for me to get here and I certainly didn't get here on my own. I had to ask for help and thankfully there have been and still are really good people who are there for me. This is called Community, with a capital C.

LA: You did some songs with Songwriting with Soldiers: "Running Out of Flags" and "Just This Side of Freedom." How did these come about?

SR: It took me a long time to get up the courage to apply and attend the Songwriting with Soldiers retreat in New York. Those two songs were written in 2015 and I had just finished up about a year and a half of seriously intense work with the MST doc at the local VA. I was still pretty squirrely. An Air Force woman vet and I were teamed up with James House to write "Running Out of Flags." Again, I brought what I know to the table. I am the recipient of two of our nation's casket flags. I know what it's like to have people in dress blues show up. I know intimately that grief that I still carry. I lived through the Vietnam War. I remember the Kennedy assassinations, MLK assassination, Civil Rights movements, war, violence, more war, more violence ... what are we creating? How many generations will forever be scarred by our actions?

*Oh oh they're running out of flags
How many more are they gonna have to make*

*Another one flies in the cold at half-mast
Take a thousand years to call out all the names*

“Just This Side of Freedom” is a song that came forth when I was paired up with Darden Smith. 5 There are two versions of this song. I brought to the table my original version to which Darden applied his professional songwriting skills to create the second, Songwriting with Soldiers version. The first version I titled “Sacred Light” and it emerged from one of my lowest life points. I gave myself permission to let the weight of my plight flow. I wasn’t in a good place. I was on the verge of being homeless. No job. Life was bottoming out and shitloads of unresolved trauma – decades worth – was all bearing down on me. I have had trauma events where I was dead, without life, and had to be brought back. Western medicine doesn’t talk much about this type of death experience phenomena with trauma survivors or even acknowledge it. So, one aspect of the song was to give voice to that in-between place and to validate my fellow in-betweeners. Western medicine will call us crazy when, in fact, what we’ve experienced is most real. The “Sacred Light” version speaks of a clear memory of one of my experiences. My Indigenous ceremonies that I participate in and conduct are what bring comprehension to my experiences that I offer up for others’ validation: you’re not crazy; when the Soul, spirit, life force – whatever you want to call it – leaves the body, it is a type of self-preservation; and, I’m still here because you need to hear what I am telling you, we can get through this too. You are not alone.

After I wrote the song, I would listen to it from the inside out. I felt the chords, the incredibly slow tempo, the tone. I was too close to an edge. This song is when I realized I must get help. When I play this song out in public, I always pay attention to the people who respond to it and have even stated generally to the audience my story and that we are not alone on this journey. There is help right here. Right now. There

will always be wars. There will always be warriors. There will always be warriors, both men and women, coming home and therefore there will always be a need for an empathetic Community to welcome them home, validate their experiences, be present in the Coming Home process, which for some of us has taken decades if not lifetimes.

I have also had the great experience of working with Jason Moon's program, Warrior Songs, where I teamed up with Anni Clarke for *Women at War Warrior Songs Vol. 2*, "Sisters Turning." **6** Ironically, Jason didn't know that I was from Maine when he paired me with Anni Clarke who attended U.M.F. [University of Maine at Farmington] at the same time I did. Synchronicity...is it?

LA: Can you talk about Expressive Arts Therapy? How does art help "find your way back home?" How does art lead to healing?

SR: Expressive Arts Therapy **7** is a relatively new field for Western/colonized societies.

Positive psychology, I have found, focuses so intently on keeping all things positive that it negates and fails to validate the trauma experience of the trauma survivor. Granted, this method creates a bubble-pack buffer zone around the therapist/counselor that better protects the therapist/counselor from client trauma transference; however, from a military trauma survivor perspective, especially military sexual trauma, this active practice of only perpetuating the positive exacerbates the "same ol' shit" of non-validation wielded stringently when attempting to report rape in the military system. I mention this to better clarify that Expressive Arts Therapy draws more from the Phenomenological and Heuristic philosophy schools where we use a variety of art-making modalities in safe, respectful settings that support the natural emergence of experiences via the art modality in action. There is indeed a sound paradigm from which methods of application are skillfully employed. The

process remains fluid within a frame designed to support the modality being used, the participant(s), and the experience as a whole. Healing is usually an uncomfortable and sometimes painful experience. Just because we deny its existence, doesn't mean it isn't constantly working in the back ground like some software worm. *murmurs at the gate* is what emerged when I delved into those hurtful places. There are also poems of profound beauty and sensuality in *murmurs at the gate* that emerged from the darkness of trauma. Neurologically, the brain is a fascinating mystery that Expressive Arts Therapy is accessing when application practices are comprehended. I was way ahead of my time with multi-modal practices and the more I worked with adult survivors of Traumatic Brain Injuries, the more I realized I had to keep learning. Hence, this learning led to numerous degrees, certifications, cultural immersion, and a reclaiming of identity, because back then there simply wasn't anything close to Expressive Arts Therapy. My entire life is the validation of existence and all my experiences that have brought me to this point and wherever I travel to next. A friend in the Army, a very long time ago, called me "Pathfinder."

LA: In your essay for *Combat Stress*, you mention your 1978 MST. How does trauma and the experience of the military and war come out in your work?

SR: I'm more of a Wilfred Owen fan because he describes the in-between weirdness of PTSD along with what we now refer to as moral injury. No fanfare. His work offers what he sees and what he feels, not what he interprets...Holding on to the concrete is a way to remain "in body," so to speak, to remain present in the unreality of trauma events swirling about you. When brain chemicals are released *en masse* and tsunami into your physical body...shit happens...sometimes literally. This neurochemical wash of neurotransmitters can be akin to dropping acid. There are specific things that happen that only another who has experienced may recognize. I recognize this

in Owen's work. I also recognize this in Rod Serling's *The Twilight Zone*. When I've read and watched documentaries of J.D. Salinger, I also recognize behaviors that reflect experiences, perhaps, from his WWII trauma, and I wonder if Salinger wasn't attempting to deliberately trigger this neurochemical dump to comprehend or re-create a tone or a sensory experiences. Neuroscience has indicated that trauma can change our DNA. Perhaps that's where my idea for a PTSD equation emerged from. [(trauma event over intensity) **x** (duration over frequency)] **x** by length of time, i.e. 1 week, 3 mos., 18 mos. 2 yrs., 20 yrs.

I'm finally at an age where all of my experiences are a part of me and I'm O.K. about that. Therefore, to quote another one of my favorite writers, "How not?"

LA: How has your work evolved over the last 20-30 years?

SR: My work has evolved because I have evolved as a human being. I never give up. Giving up is never an option. It's just who I am, it's my temperament. In this process I have become more informed in my professional fields and more accepting of who I have been, am now, and becoming. Outward Bound winter survival when I was sixteen. Wow. Then Parris Island. Again, I am alive because somehow my upbringing and who I am was able to transpose events into strength. I still do Aikido and Iaido. This quarantine is profoundly difficult for many and I miss my Dojo. Ceremonies have helped me make peace with being solo. The natural world, my land, I remain in relationship with. Self-discipline is crucial. Being in recovery essential. The last 20-30 years I have gathered tools.

I have had, and continue to have, some amazing elders, mentors, editors, and my family who have painstakingly kept me going. I will always have profound gratitude for my family and the future of my family. Being able to ask for help and then being willing to receive help is key not just in my survival,

but in my thriving. As a writer my craft is strengthening and changing. I love it. I never know what will emerge, what new relations will I meet and make, and where will this next thread take me. The wind, you see, it's always in the wind.

8

1 The poem appears on pp. 50-51 of *murmurs at the gate* and refers to Eddie Adams' famous photo. See, for example, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/01/world/asia/vietnam-execution-photo.html>

2 *Native Voices: Indigenous American Poetry, Craft and Conversations*, ed. by Marie Fuhrman and Dean Rader, North Adams, MA: Tupelo Press, 2019, pp. 270-279.

1. *Combat Stress*, Vol. 5, No. 1, January 2016, https://stress.org/wp-content/themes/Avada-child/lib/3d-flip-book/3d-flip-book/?mag_id=16192, pp. 72-86.
2. Clark Moustakas, *Heuristic Research: Design, Methodology, and Applications*, Sage Publications, 1990, Moustakas, Clark. *Heuristic Research: Design, Methodology, and Applications*. United Kingdom, SAGE Publications, 1990.
3. See Songwriting With: Soldiers video: <https://www.pbs.org/video/klru-tv-their-words-songwriting-soldiers-episode/>; web site: <https://www.songwritingwithsoldiers.org/>;
4. *Women at War: Warrior Songs* Vol. 2, available through warriorsongs.org
5. See <https://www.ieata.org/>
6. Suzanne Rancourt website: <https://www.expressive-arts.com/index.html>; books: *Billboard in the Clouds* (2004), Curbstone Press, <https://nupress.northwestern.edu/content/curbstone-books>; *murmurs at the gate* (2019), Unsolicited Press, <http://www.unsolicitedpress.com/>; *Old Stones, New Roads* (forthcoming, 2021), <https://www.mainstreetrag.com/>

Artist Profile: Larry Abbott

Interviews Musician Vince Gabriel

INTRO: Vince Gabriel has been making music since his high school days in New Jersey. Born in South Amboy on September 16, 1947, he learned the guitar after his father brought one home. Influenced by the rock music of the early and mid-1960's, The Rolling Stones in particular, Gabriel played in rock bands in and after graduating high school. He was drafted in 1967, completed basic training, and deployed as an infantry man, 11 Bravo Vietnam, in January 1968, arriving just before the start of the Tet Offensive. He soon found himself in the jungle, engaging in his first firefight after only a few weeks in country. He bought a beat-up guitar, and a photo from 1968 shows him in his helmet, cradling it, M60 style. He notes, though, that he never took the guitar on patrol but that it traveled with him to base camps, where he would play with some other guitarists when he was out of the bush.



Gabriel kept playing music when he returned stateside in 1969. He lived for a time in Connecticut, California, and Massachusetts, playing in clubs, working with “name” artists, and becoming more serious about his music. After moving permanently to Maine in the 1990’s he rejuvenated his Blind Albert persona and formed the Blind Albert Band.

In 2000, he released the CD *11 Bravo Vietnam*, which chronicles his war and post-war experiences. Liner notes dedicate the CD to his brothers in arms Howard Spitzer, Richard Gibson (“Spitzer and The Winemaker”) ¹, Nicholas Saunders, Robert Caplan and “all those who gave the ultimate sacrifice and to all veterans who served.” The album served as the foundation for a documentary he created a few years later, *11 Bravo Vietnam—A Soldier’s Story*, which he calls “‘a virtual scrapbook of one young man’s experience in combat from the day he receives word of his induction to his homecoming.’” ²

The song “Draft Card” is emblematic of his irrevocable life change, happening virtually overnight, from playing music in California after high school to receiving his induction notice and going to basic and infantry training. “Spitzer and the Winemaker” is a first-person recounting of an episode in which Gabriel is rotated off point with Spitzer taking the lead with Gibson. As the patrol moves out, with Spitzer and Gibson a hundred or so yards ahead, they hear an explosion. They learn that Spitzer and Gibson walked into a minefield, with Spitzer killed and Gibson wounded. “Homeward Flight” is an instrumental; words aren’t needed to express the relief of riding home on the “freedom bird.” The album concludes with the plaintive feel of “Beneath the Shelter” and the relentless bass line of “Shellshock–PTSD” (included on CD 13 of . . . *Next Stop is Vietnam*). In the former, Gabriel takes on the persona of a homeless vet telling his story. He says that “I died inside but kept on living.” He realizes that there will be “no more parades with ticker tape or marching bands” and that in society’s eyes “I’m just a wino.” In the latter Gabriel describes the personal effects of the war: his

divorce, the inner demons, the reliance on “weed and whiskey” in order to get through the day. He sings in the refrain that “the war never ends for the soldier, you come home and it all just begins.”

In 2002 he released an eight-cut CD entitled *Boyish Man* (playing off Muddy Waters’ 1955 song “Mannish Boy”), on which he played guitar, harmonica, and percussion, as well as doing the back-up vocals. The album is more straight-ahead rock and blues with no ostensible references to his military service. Gabriel, at 72, continues to write songs, and perform solo and with his band. He has his own recording studio with which he produces the albums of other musicians.

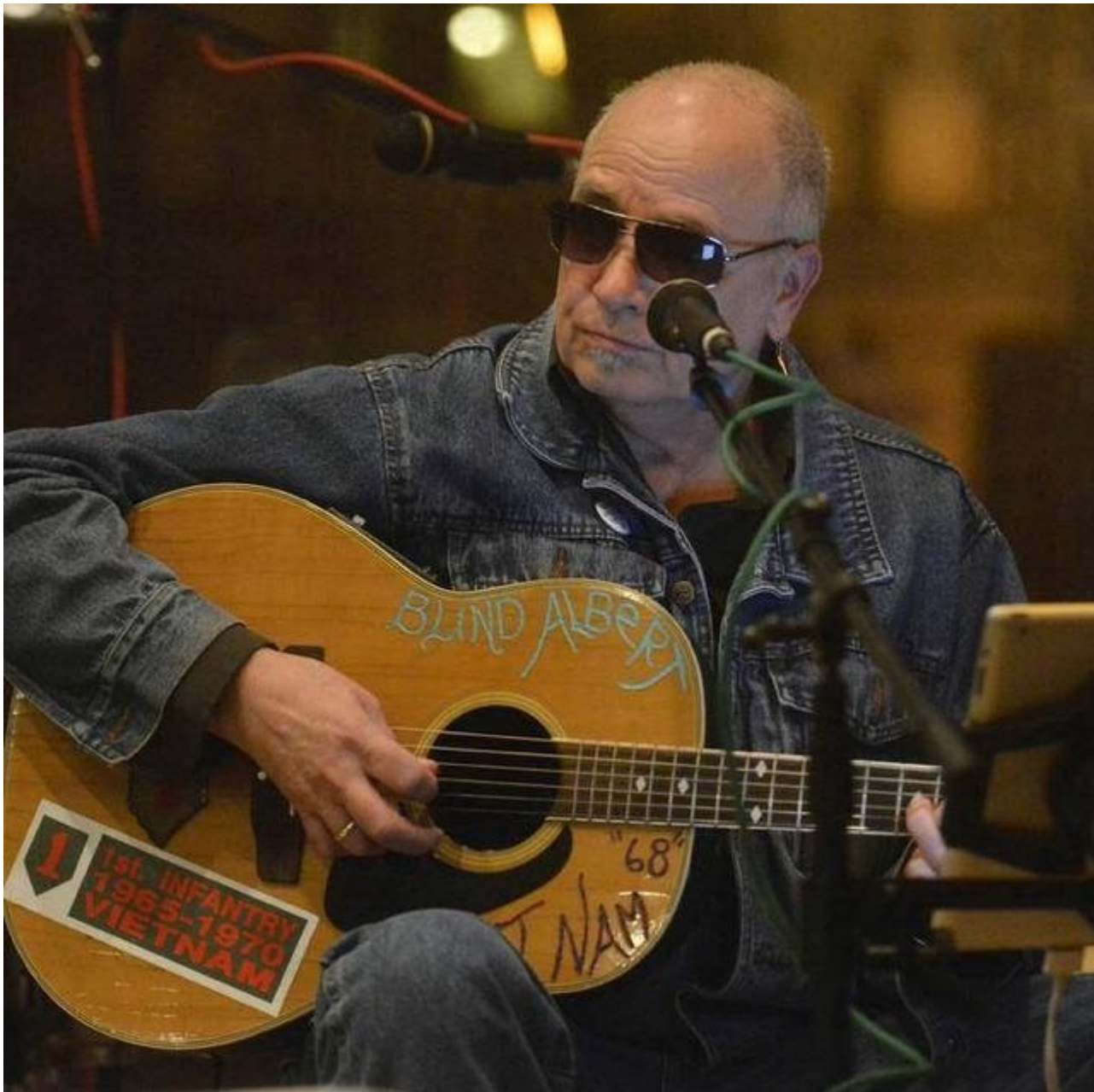
- For recordings, see: <https://www.reverbnation.com/vietnamcombatveteranblindalbert/songs>
- Hugo Keesing, . . . *Next Stop is Vietnam: The War on Record: 1961-2008*, Hambergen, Germany: Bear Family Records, 2010, pp. 238-239.

Larry Abbott: In *We Gotta Get Out of This Place*, Bradley and Werner write, “music is a path to healing. Music can help heal psychological wounds.” 1 Does your music have a therapeutic or a healing dimension?

Vince Gabriel: Well, my music was written about my experiences in Vietnam, so I don’t know how therapeutic that would be. The concept for the CD (*11 Bravo Vietnam*) was to give someone an idea of what it was like without actually being there. I mean, that was the only way I could pass that information along. When I give someone the CD, I say, “You don’t want to play that at a party, if you’re trying to get the party going.” [laughs] Because it’s not party music. It’s about being in combat, and it’s basically about from the time I got my draft card until the time I came home. Each song is attached to whatever I was going through at the time. I do believe that music is a soothing method of dealing with stuff, but I

wouldn't consider this soothing. It's more of an audio documentary, I would say. You can put it that way.

LA: Your songs tell stories, as you mentioned. Do you consider yourself a storyteller?



VG: In this regard, I do. I've written a lot of songs from experiences, not only Vietnam, but just life experiences. Some would tell a story, but I'm basically writing about feelings, and I don't know that that tells a story or not, you know? But the Vietnam CD is definitely a story. A true story.

LA: One thread or dimension in your songs is social

commentary, like “Land of Dreams,” “The Common People,” and “Hey, You,” which seem to reference more of what’s happening in the world today, like global warming or government lies.

VG: Yeah, I guess I could call them protest songs, about what was going on at that particular time, the early 90’s. It’s just my way of putting out how I feel without actually getting on Facebook and ranting and raving. [laughs] ‘Cause that doesn’t work sometimes. I would say I’ve got five or six songs that are similar to that.

LA: How did those songs come about?

VG: There was a period of time I was writing when I wrote those types of songs because I figured, I got to get some stuff out because it’s really bugging the hell out of me. They were just a commentary on what was going on at the time. “One Way Street” took in a couple of subjects: veterans, the oil, fighting for oil. Every one of those, my protest songs, came from a need to get those feelings out. The best way I know how to do that is to write a song about it. That’s how that stuff came about. I don’t know if anybody liked what they heard, or how many people listened, but it was important that I put it out. If somebody got something from it, then that’s good.

LA: In some of those songs you have a female chorus, “We need hope . . . we need the promise that things will change.”

VG: Well, actually, the female chorus was me. [laughs] I just sang in a really high falsetto voice. I didn’t have time to go looking for a female singer. I don’t think I knew too many at the time, so I figured well, I’ll just do it. And so, it’s kind of a joke because I go by the name of Blind Albert. I call them the Blindettes. That’s my backup singing group.

LA: On that note, how did Blind Albert come about?

VG: Well, this isn’t a really long story, which is good. I used to live in Cape Cod before I moved up here and I had a

studio in my apartment. I was working on a blues project. I was writing blues songs, and I needed to come up with a fictitious blues name for it. My middle name's Albert and I needed something in front of that. I didn't want to be Deaf Albert or Fat Albert, or any of these others. I figured Blind Albert. That sounds like a blues guy. I used it for that project, but then I didn't use it anymore.

Not too long after that, in '89, I moved up to Maine because a good buddy of mine who I had played with back in the '70s was living up here. I moved out to Islesboro, and kind of aired out for about a year 'cause I had just gotten a divorce, and I needed to regroup.

I didn't play music for about a year. I didn't play in clubs for that year. I started to gradually book stuff, and realized I couldn't stay on the island anymore 'cause I was off the island more than I was on the island, playing. I put a band together and needed a name for it. Blind Albert was in mothballs and I figured, hmm, Blind Albert. I had already come up with that. I might as well use it.

And so I started to use that. And the funny thing about it is, because of the name, everybody pegged me as a blues artist. That's still the case now. But I do play some blues, but I wasn't originally a blues artist; I was a rock guitar player and singer, which I still am.

LA: I think you're known more as Blind Albert than Vince Gabriel.

VG: Oh, that's true, because I'll be talking with people and mention that I play in a band. And they'll say, "What band do you play with?" I'll say, "Blind Albert." "Oh, I saw you guys in Bar Harbor a couple of years ago, yeah." And if I told them my real name, they wouldn't know who the hell I was. So, I'm kind of stuck with it. I've been stuck with it for 25 or 30 years now.



LA: What led you to making the *11 Bravo Vietnam* documentary? You intersperse your songs with narration and images.

VG: I was actually asked by a friend of mine, who was in college at the time, if I would mind if she interviewed me about playing music in Maine. I said sure, 'cause this was a project for her and I figured I could help her out. 2 During the course of the interview, the subject matter turned to Vietnam, and it was eventually called "Vietnam Blues." I didn't really give it much thought. She told me that she had sent the interview to a couple of radio stations. I just said, okay.

And then, about two weeks later, she contacted me and said that there was a public radio station in Idaho or somewhere that wanted to broadcast it, and I said well, that's good. I still didn't take it seriously. Then about a week later, she said, "We hit the motherlode." I said, "What do you mean?" "NPR picked it up on the Sound Print program. It will be

broadcast all over the United States.” And that’s when I started taking it seriously.

I began to get emails from people I didn’t even know about that piece. I was overwhelmed by the response. I just thought, this is her college project, no big deal. But because of the broadcast I put a live performance together based on the songs on the Vietnam CD and then I decided to put together a documentary

The band rehearsed, I don’t know, for two or three months. A buddy of mine who’s a drama teacher took snippets of notes that I had written about everything I could remember about Vietnam. I had notebooks full of notes. I didn’t know what I was going to do with it, I just wrote it. I just kept writing until I couldn’t remember anything else.

When I started to put this performance together, I figured, well, now I know what I’m going to do with all that stuff I wrote. I’ll take parts of what I wrote that are kind of connected to the songs and we’ll get a narrator and have him narrate each portion. They were only about three or four minutes long, and we’ll play the songs that are related to the narration. Then we’d go onto the next song and he narrates that. The performance continued through all of the songs.

So, I booked the theater in Waldoboro [Maine] and told them I got this thing that I want to do. I don’t know how it’ll turn out or if anybody will even care. We did some advertising and while we were at the theater getting ready, I’m thinking nobody’s showing up ‘cause it’s about Vietnam. I said, who’s gonna care? And before I knew it, the whole place was full of people. [laughs] So, I said man, there’s like a lot of people here. I hope we don’t screw it up.

We went out and played. It went off pretty good. I got such an overwhelming response from the audience that it was like an emotional moment. I had thought, nobody’s really going to give

a shit about this. As it turned out I had veterans coming up to me who were in the audience who said you got to keep telling this story.

So I thought, okay. I don't know how long it was after that, I got this brainstorm about bringing the show into the high schools. But because the performance was so long, it was over an hour and a half, the live performance didn't really work in that setting. What I decided to do was shorten it and make a documentary that was about an hour long.

I started to contact some high schools, and wound up going into four or five. I went to a school in Thorndike [Maine] like five years in a row and showed the documentary, and then I would open it up to questions. I said, you guys can ask me anything you want about Vietnam, I don't care what it is. You want to ask me about the drugs, I'll tell you about the drugs. I said, there's nothing that you can't ask me. That was the best part of the whole thing because we were all interacting with the story. It was great. I loved it.

So that's how the documentary came about, the DVD version. I did the live version maybe four or five other times in different places. After I put the documentary together, I kind of slackened off with the live performance. I might still do one, but right now I'm not. But I do have the documentary. The documentary is still available to do something with. 2

And that's how it all came about. It's kind of a roundabout story.

LA: It was a long story short, or a short long story.

VG: Yeah. A long story long, or something. [laughs] But, yeah.

LA: In "Spitzer and the Winemaker," you ask, "Why am I here and his name is on the wall?"

VG: Right.

LA: And you pose some reasons: luck, skill, karma, God. But then say, "nah." Have you answered that question, or is that an unanswerable question?

VG: I guess it was all of those. I don't know. I mean, it could have been any one of the guys or all of them but I still don't know. Usually I tell people I'm just happy to be here.

That's how I answer the question because I'm just happy to be here, man. 'Cause I could not be here. A split second could make a difference, you know? I think it must have been all of those reasons 'cause I don't think just one of them would have got me back home. I guess something was working for me. And I don't know what it was, but I'm glad that it did. I'm glad to be here.

LA: You see that frequently not only in the writing of the Vietnam era but also today's wars, the idea of randomness, pure chance. You step here and you're okay, but your buddy steps there and he gets blown up.

VG: Yeah. I guess that's why I ask the question why I'm here and he's not? There you go back to the luck thing 'cause it had nothing to do really with skill. Well, some of it. A little bit of skill was involved because the guys who were there longer than I was would tell you, for example, don't walk on the path. You want to listen to what the hell they're telling you.

A small amount of skill and a large amount of luck, because my buddy, Spitzer, was killed when he was walking point. There were occasions when I also walked point, but not that day. You question why, why that happened. I don't know why that happened. It's just the way it worked out. It's a matter of stepping in one spot or not stepping in another spot. Or being told to walk point that day but not being told to walk point another day.

I don't know what you call that. That's a random act, I guess, or happening, event, or something. But you're going to stop and wonder why it was Spitzer and it wasn't you, you know what I mean? That's just the way it was.

LA: Do you see your songs as having relevance or connection to vets returning today?

VG: The wars are different, but I think all the veterans and those involved in the wars now are going through the same thing. You might be fighting house to house, like they do in Iraq. When we were fighting, we were in the jungle, going through hooches. It was different but it was the same. You still didn't know if you were going to get injured or if you were going to get killed from one second to the next. You were still in combat. It doesn't matter the place; it was combat. You play it, no matter how you look at it.

And the other thing is the problems that you suffered after you came home were the same. PTSD, suicides from PTSD, whatever. If you compare everything, they're pretty similar.

The wars were different, but I think some of the things that occurred to each veteran who was in these different wars were really the same thing. A bullet can still kill you. That isn't any different.



LA: To me, one of your most moving songs is “Beneath the Shelter.” It seems to be more generalized about homeless vets, but you sing from the “I” point of view. And one of your lines is, “Yes, I am a veteran. I died inside, but I kept on

living.” In the documentary you connect the song to the art of Derek Gundy. Can you talk about that connection and how that song came about?

VG: Well, that had to do with the homeless veteran situation, and it was a while back when I wrote that song. The situation is still going on today. I mean, it’s a major problem. I’ve never really been homeless. There were some times when I didn’t have a place to live for a little while, but basically I was trying to put the information out that there are veterans who are homeless, that don’t have a place. It’s a long-lasting problem. I wanted to put that information out in a song. Maybe it will have more impact than just presenting statistics.

And Derek, who is a great artist, asked me if he could do a visual rendering of the song and I said, yeah, you can do that. He did a great job.

I didn’t have any statistics when I wrote the song. But I knew there were homeless veterans out there. I placed the song in a scene, under a bridge. There are all kinds of reasons for people to be homeless. And they’re not all alcoholics.

The plight of homeless vets was something that bothered me and I decided to write about it. I guess that’s what it boils down to.

LA: What’s your general process of writing a song? Do you have a rough idea and then keep honing it until you get to a finished product?

VG: Well, for me, I need to write the music first. Some people write lyrics and then put music to it, but I can’t do it that way. I need to come up with an emotional connection with the music. The music is what connects me to song.

Even before the lyrics, I need to come up with the music. Then, I’ll write how I feel. I need to feel the emotion first

and it's the music that I get that from.

LA: Another song that I thought was one of your best had a bit of a reggae beat, "A Camera and A Curious Mind," where you write, "Once Vietnam gets in your soul, it keeps you coming back for more. The sounds you hear, the smell of death, the images you can recall." And you retrace the steps in your mind, and toward the end of the song, there is the sound of a helicopter.

VG: A gentleman asked me if I could write a song for this short documentary that somebody did about him. He was a Vietnam vet and a photographer. I watched the video and took it from there. I wrote the music first and then I wrote the words.

It's something that, after you write it, you're not really sure how you came up with it. That's always a mystery to me how that happens. I don't know where it comes from. He liked the song. I wrote it and recorded it in one day, and I gave it back to him.

He asked me, "How long did it take you to write this?" "It took me a day." And he says, "You're kidding me?" I said, "No, it took me a day." I said, "There's the song. Do you like it or not?" [laughs] And he did. I did it to see if I could do it. That's how that song came about.

LA: You have a song, "Shellshock – PTSD," with the idea of the war lasts forever. Could you talk about how that one came about?

VG: I think what triggered that was not necessarily my experiences, but the experiences of the veterans who were in Iraq and Afghanistan. It definitely has to do with Vietnam, too.

It was probably the last song I wrote for the CD. It came a long time after I got back from Vietnam. Having PTSD, but not

suffering as much as some Vietnam vets do, I mean, mine was bad enough, and it's still bad enough 'cause I'm taking medication for it, but it was a subject that I had to write about because I hadn't written about it.

I needed to write something, I needed to write my feelings about that subject because I hadn't done that. Until I had, the CD really wasn't complete.

Before I wrote this song, I thought, oh, it's missing one thing. It's missing the residuals that come from war and that we're all, you know, all of us who were in combat, are going through right now. The residuals are part of the whole tour.

A buddy of mine made a comment, "We had no idea that our tour was gonna last a lifetime." And I said, "Yeah," and asked him, "Can I use that?" [laughs] And he said, "Sure." So I did. It opens the documentary.

But it's true. There's the coming home part which, believe me, I was overwhelmed and overjoyed to be back alive. But then, there's all the other stuff that starts coming up after you've been home.

And you deal with it every day, and that's like still being on tour. You're not getting shot at or anything, but mentally you have a lot to deal with. You've been affected by it. You know, we're all taking medication for it. Some have it worse than others. Some of them have committed suicide because of it.

So it's really an ongoing tour, mentally, and maybe even physically, too. Not in the true sense of being over in a combat situation, but you're fighting, you're fighting this stuff every day.

LA: One of the other threads I see seems to be about relationships and love/lust. "There's Always Someone Out There," "You Started Something," or "Four Alarm Fire."

VG: What's really funny about that is, I don't know what happened. My voice somehow changed. I have no idea what caused it. Well, I might have an idea about what caused it. I might have been smoking weed at the time. I don't know if I should say that, but, uh, that's what happened. And it changed my voice.

All of a sudden, I could start hitting these higher notes that I couldn't before. That's where that group of songs came from. And I can't duplicate the vocals on them now because I don't smoke weed anymore. My voice is back to where it should be.

It was just a period of time where I used that voice change and took advantage of it, and wrote some songs that I could sing in that way. It was the weirdest thing. I don't know where that came from, but I can't duplicate it anymore. [laughs]

I don't know that those songs were written about anything I had been through, but they were just, you know, thoughts.

I put those thoughts to music. I don't even know where this stuff comes from, you know? It's better not to try and come up with an answer to that. [laughs]

- Bradley, Douglas, and Werner, Craig. *We Gotta Get Outta This Place*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015, p. 2.
- National Public Radio Soundprint "Vietnam Blues," produced by Christina Antolini, December, 2004, aired January 2005, <https://beta.prx.org/stories/3436>
- 11 Bravo Vietnam. 2011, Vimeo <https://vimeo.com/31821165>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JKSA0TrxCQw>

Artist Profile: Singer-Songwriter Jason Moon

Jason Moon served in Iraq with a combat engineering battalion. He returned to the States in 2004 and was eventually diagnosed by VA psychologists with depression, insomnia, and adjustment disorder. Despite medication his condition worsened, leading to a suicide attempt in 2008, which resulted in a diagnosis of PTSD. This diagnosis started his healing process, which actually led to his creative resurgence. Apart from his own music, Moon founded Warrior Songs [1](#), with the goal of using music to help veterans integrate and transform their military experiences into song. To date Warrior Songs has produced two CDs. The first, *If You Have to Ask . . .* (2016), features fourteen cuts by Army, Air Force, and Marine vets of Iraq and Afghanistan, with a little help from Vietnam vets Raymond Cocks and Jim Wachtendonk. The second CD, *Women at War* (2018), contains fifteen cuts by a variety of women vets.

Moon's breakthrough CD is *Trying to Find My Way Home* (2010). The genesis of the album is his work with film director Olivier Morel, whose 2009 documentary *On the Bridge* features current veterans telling their stories of war and post-war life. Moon says that Morel "encouraged me to work on these songs that I'd begun when I returned from the war but had been unable to finish." As the title suggests, the album expresses Moon's attempt to regain a sense of "home." However, the return is problematic due to feeling disconnected and alienated, as the title track indicates: "The child inside me is long dead and gone/Somewhere between lost and alone . . . It's hard to fight an enemy that lives inside your head" "Alone With Me Tonight" continues the theme of the inability to reconnect to others and to society. He recalls

“the mystery and marvel of a smile on a face” but this has been replaced by “broken dreams and empty bottles.” All he sees are ghosts. “Happy To Be Home” takes a bitterly ironic tone when he writes that “all this ‘welcome home, we’re so proud of you, good job’ bullshit is wearing thin.” “Thank you for your service” from well-meaning civilians only goes so far until the phrase becomes an empty cliché. Other songs discuss his psychological numbness and need to self-medicate. The album ends on a cautiously hopeful note. Although the effects of PTSD are overwhelming he tells himself to “hold on” as there is always the chance that tomorrow, or the next week, or the next month, will bring him relief.

As Moon’s music developed it became more optimistic. Although *Love & Life* (2014) reveals some of the same themes as the earlier work, there are more hopeful signs. While the title track and “Railroad Song” touch on loneliness and alienation, in “My Child, My Boy, My Son” Moon finds joy in the fatherly role, giving his son “life advice” to help guide him through life’s ups and downs: “Now what can I say except, somewhere along the way, You may find yourself on a road that you had never known. And this road may be rough, and this road may be long, So keep with you always in your heart this song.” “Family Song” tells the story of his family when he was growing up and the importance of home and family to him today.

His newest album, his fourth solo CD, is entitled *The Wolf I Fed* (2020). Again, there are undertones of isolation and loss but out of those arise a growing sense of hope and reconnection. In “Wisdom of the Wound” Moon writes that because of the war “that person I once was, is now a distant memory.” The memories of his war experience “brought him to his knees.” However, the song takes a positive turn when he realizes that in order to be free from the burden of the past he (and by extension, all veterans) has to tell his story, and that civilians need to listen: “And if you share our story then our healing can begin. Now the next chapter can begin.”

That healing from trauma can emerge from sharing one's story and starting a "new chapter" is seen in other songs on the album. In "You Didn't Say Goodbye," Moon looks back from a twenty-year vantage point at a failed relationship. For most of the song he is wistful and rueful, writing, "sometimes late at night I still hang my head and cry, when I think back on the day that you didn't say goodbye." However, as the song ends, Moon is happy that the relationship ended because he is happy with a wife and family. "The Sweetest Little Thing" is a whimsical lullaby to his daughter, revealing his joy in getting her to sleep. 2



Jason Moon and co-performer.

Another aspect of Moon's healing journey is *7 Things You Never Say to a Veteran*, a live presentation in which he uses songs and narration to discuss PTSD. Having given over 200 presentations from 2010 to 2015, Moon made a video of a 2016 performance at a jail health care conference in Wisconsin. About *7 Things You Never Say to a Veteran* he writes that "unable to keep up with the ongoing requests to give this presentation, I offer this DVD with the hope that it will serve to equally inspire and educate. PTSD is not a weakness, you are not alone, and we do not leave our wounded behind." In the film he tells his story as a way of educating the civilian audience about his post-war experiences and subsequent diagnosis of PTSD. Using his songs from *Trying to Find My Way Home* as a counterpoint, he tells of his cycle of depression and drinking, isolation, and inability to sleep. He discusses the physical and psychological effects of trauma generally, and war trauma in particular, which led to his suicide attempt in 2008, which he says was an attempt to "eliminate the threat. I am the threat." The film ends with seven statements that the well-meaning civilian should not say with six points that are helpful. His overall message is to share the burden and share the story as a way to heal oneself. **3**

1. www.warriorsongs.org; info@warriorsongs.org; jasonmoon.org; fullmoonmusic.org
2. Liner notes, *Trying to Find My Way Home*, Full Moon Music, 2010; all lyrics quoted from fullmoonmusic.org
3. *7 Things You Never Say to a Veteran*, 2016, produced by Julie Olson, distributed through warriorsongs.org.

Interview with Jason Moon:

Larry Abbott: Just to start with, what were your musical influences?

Jason Moon: Growing up, the most influential was Bob Dylan. Then I got turned on to John Prine. Another big influence was kind of an unknown songwriter named Jason Eklund, who my friend Little Rev from Milwaukee turned me onto. Lil' Rev **1** was like a musical mentor who I knew locally. He actually taught me some chords and notes and a lot of what I know about music and performing. But the big one, Bob Dylan. That was when I understood that you could do something with words.

LA: How would you say your music has evolved? You've been writing and performing for over 20 years.

JM: When I started out I just wanted to write songs because I wanted to be like Bob Dylan. Then I started writing songs to express emotions, and they became like a musical diary to me by the time I was in college. Then the war happened. I wasn't really able to write songs for a while. And now they've become a tool to help others have that catharsis of hearing your feelings and story in a song. It's a release from trauma.

I started learning music for fun, writing songs for fun, got into singing for my own life trauma, then went to war, started using music to heal myself from more serious war trauma, and now I use it to help others.

LA: Do you see then your songs as stories?



Singer-songwriter Jason Moon

JM: Yeah, almost all my songs are stories. They're almost always stories. If they're not, then they're just snapshots of a story. But they're almost always a story.

LA: What would you say are the key themes in your songs/

JM: Healing, self-discovery, transformation, and truth in terms of looking at the human experience and trauma we all go through.

LA: What would you say is your songwriting process? You've written, what, 50-plus songs?

JM: It depends on what type of song you're asking about. The

type I write for warrior songs, I have a different process than when I write for myself. Generally, with the warrior songs, I help other veterans turn their trauma into song, and that's usually a collaborative process. Normally, I'll do it with a group. I was just at a retreat with thirteen women veterans who had been raped in the military, so I listened to all their stories and we threw a bunch of words up on a whiteboard about who they were before they were traumatized and who they were afterwards.

And then I took those words and what I had heard of their testimonies of their trauma and crafted that into a song. There's a process that's creating a story, an arc, and making sure that you're using everyone's words. The hardest part is when you sing it back to them, the thirteen of them, and then ask them honestly: "Did all of you hear your truth in this song?" And then all said, yes, they had all heard something, something unique to them in the song we wrote. The new one I just wrote is called "See Me" **2** from that retreat.

That's the magic, listening to those traumatic stories and then finding the light and arc and the theme, and making sure everyone's voice was included.

LA: So, you would say music, as well as the other arts, is instrumental, no pun intended, in the healing process?

JM: Absolutely. The way it works with war trauma, what I'm seeing . . . you have to remember, I don't have a degree in this; I just healed myself through songwriting and then started healing others, and through my music I've prevented thirty-three suicides. What I do is purely based on what's working. The trauma that is caused by the military is so large and so outside the ordinary. The average person just doesn't experience what someone who's been to war or what some of these women who were victims of MST. It's beyond normal comprehension, so it is, of course, beyond normal verbalization through standard language, because it's outside

of the contextual norm of our civilization.

When war trauma happens to people, they have no way of expressing it to their peers, so they're forced to carry it internally. The arts provide a way to bridge that gap between our unverbilized emotions. It's like, I hear a Christmas song by Bing Crosby, and I get a warm feeling. There's a memory attached to a song that I wouldn't be able to really tell you about. It's the same concept.

Veterans who've had traumas beyond explanation, they have to carry that alone. But when you give them a tool to explain it to their peers, to their community—we use the arts for that—it does two things: it allows the community to hear it. It's easier for people to listen to a song or look at a painting or hear a short poem than it is to listen to a testimony of a gruesome, traumatic event. That's easier on the civilian side, on the community side.

As for the veteran's side, it's also easier to use the arts because if I start talking about times and dates with you, I'm going to have an onset of PTSD symptoms, and it will cause me to stop talking, because I recall the memories. But when I'm allowed to just recall pain from a memory, or the sadness from a memory, or the fear from a memory, which you can do in the arts, and just say "paint your fear," then I don't have to necessarily touch the linear, fact-based triggers that would be normal in a therapeutic setting, where I would tell you about the time and the date and the place of the trauma. That'll cause the veteran to be triggered and have PTSD, which is why so few of us want to talk about our shit, because it hurts us to allow that process to happen.

The music, the arts, can heal the veteran. The veteran can express the trauma, the civilian can hear the trauma. I actually think it's one of the most important things for healing, for trauma, and probably all trauma, and I wish I had a better way of proving that scientifically.

LA: So, you would say then that the song or the artwork or the poem is able to transform the trauma or the pain into something that is easier to express?

JM: Yeah, so it's more digestible, I guess, is one way to say it, easier to carry, because the veteran has discovered that the trauma that she couldn't talk about in normal words now has a way to be expressed. It kind of lives outside of them to some degree, and they feel a little lighter. I actually have testimonies from the veterans who come to our workshops that say those exact words, "I feel a lot lighter," because they put their trauma into the art.

When the civilians see it, they actually carry a little bit of it. But it's a lot lighter now and it's easier for all of us to look at that. That allows the individual who, by nature of that trauma is outside the normal context of our cultural realities, they get to come back now into the community. That's what happens once they express themselves through the arts, once they talk about that horrible thing that they've never been able to talk about, once they express that and civilians hear it, then all of a sudden they start to get back into community.

When they start to heal, that's where most of our suicide prevention and most of our success stories happen. Someone was frozen. They were in the darkness—it was PTSD, drinking, self-harm—and we teach them to self-express. We show them they have the power to speak. They put it out there. It's outside of them. Civilians have heard it, and then they start to heal. They start to move back towards the light.

LA: In a way, the arts are a bridge from the veteran world to the civilian world, but also the civilian world into the veteran world?

JM: It's the point where their trauma separated them from their community. They are no longer home. They may come back

to the USA, but until they are received back into their community, they are not home. And that does not mean integration into the community, that means received “as they are.” It’s a necessary step. All of this is based on the work of Dr. Edward Tick **3** from Soldier’s Heart, who had this idea, partly based on Joseph Campbell, about healing from war trauma. But, yeah, it’s that bridge between those two, and that bridge is the final piece of all those veterans coming home, really coming home, where they get to stand before their community and say, “Hey, I went to war, and it was more horrible than anything anyone in their room has seen, but I need to tell you about it or I can’t really be home because then I’m just carrying it alone.”

But when you put that experience into art, now it’s easier for the veteran. It’s not as traumatic for them. It’s not as triggering. And it’s easier for the civilians. You’ve heard some of the songs we’ve written, right?

LA: Yes.

JM: I think most people would say it’s easier to hear that and for me to say, “Listen, I’ve heard...” If you go on our webpage now under “unreleased songs” and look at “See Me,” you listen to the stories of thirteen women who were raped in the military. You’ve heard their truths. That was four and a half minutes for you to do that. It took them lifetimes to do it. But it’s the easiest way to get those two things. Each of the women had ten minutes to tell their story of MST at this retreat, and it took four hours. That’s four hours’ worth of truth on sexual assault in the military distilled into four and a half minutes and made palatable—as palatable as it can be. I mean, they’re right to be cautious. It’s not easy, but it is easier.

When I’m staffing a retreat, I’m sitting there listening to these horrible stories. But I can tell you it’s much easier to listen to that four and a half minute song than it is to sit

in that room with an open mind and open ears and a heart and hear how these people have been hurt. But know that these four and a half minutes come from four hours spent listening to thirteen women who have the collective wisdom of over 100 years of recovering from military rape trauma. Songwriting is distilling 100 years of collective trauma and wisdom into four and a half minutes of raw truth.

LA: You did *Women at War: Warrior Songs: Volume 2* (2018). What led you to do that?

JM: As I was collecting stories for volume 1, *If You Have to Ask . . .* (2016), I was hearing a lot of these stories from women that were similar, that I wasn't hearing from the men. The women were being passed over for promotions and not being respected, having someone see a veteran sticker on their car and ask, "Did your husband serve?" or "Who's the veteran?," always assuming their husband. It made me angry and I thought it should be addressed, but there were just so many that spoke to MST and sexual assault, being assaulted, being harassed, being punished for reporting. It was so many, so many of them.

And then I started to look into it, and the more I got involved and learned about it and talked to women veterans, the more I realized it was worse than most people imagined. That's when I just thought, we need to talk about this. So, we finished up volume 1. We began working on volume 2 while we were finishing up volume 1. That was our first CD, and I got a lot of criticism for it. Most of the veterans were men. It was very male, very white. So, that's generally how I answer criticism, by addressing it.

So, we did volume 2 with women. Volume 3 is with Vietnam veterans. Volume 4 is veterans of color. We're talking with the Native American music community, maybe do one on Native voices. I think I want to do ten volumes total.

LA: Are volumes 3 and 4 in the works or are they out?

JM: Volume 3 is just beginning. We have it mapped out. We have the songs assigned. Some of them are done. One's recorded and it'll be about a year and a half. The fundraising is in progress, and we have to get all the participants in the studio. Volume 4 we just announced, so we're starting to think about what stories need to be told

With each volume we learn how to make them a little faster and a little better, and figure out what needs to be done.

LA: Let's look at some of your albums. Your first album, *Naked Under All of These Clothes*, came out in '96?

JM: That was my first one. That was a big deal back then, to have a CD.

LA: It struck me that at least one of the songs, "American Dream," was an expression of anger at society and the plight of the underclass.

JM: Yeah. I was 16, I think, when I wrote that, and my older brother and his friends were all excited to go off into the workforce. We were all a little bit on the poor side, so a lot of them were dropping out and doing manual labor. It just started to look unfair to me, growing up pretty poor and wondering what it was all about.

And facing that, at least at that time, the reality was that I would probably have to join the Army if I wanted to go to college. That was something that, even as a 16-year-old, I started to realize, "Hey, this world's unfair, and I'm not gonna get the same shake as the other kids in the town. And, oh look, those kids with the brown skin, they're gonna get an even worse time than we are. I've gotta join the military to go to college. What do I get out of that? I get to work for 40 years."



LA: Was your second album *Poverty* from 2006?

JM: Yeah, that was the second one that was officially released. It wasn't done in the studio. Once I started trying to be a full-time musician, it doesn't pay well, so it was always hard to be in the studio when you need the money that you're making from your shows to pay the light bill.

I think that one was after I got back from Iraq in 2004. I had been struggling to write new songs, and one of the things I thought was, maybe if I released these old songs that were supposed to be on a CD that I could never afford to fully produce, put it out as a bootleg and kind of clear the palate. Maybe if I had a bunch of blank pages, I'd write some new stuff.

I didn't really know what was going on with me back then. I had been home two years. I just released it. I was broken from the PTSD. I called it *Poverty* because I was too poor to ever finish all these songs. And now I've actually had a chance in

some of the most recent CDs to redo some of those songs.

LA: It seems like “Catch a Ride” has a satirical edge to it. “St. Thomas Blues” seems to be more about disconnection, alienation. “Let’s Be Passive” is an attack on complacency.

JM: Yeah, although it was a little more of an easier time for me back then. Those are the pre-deployment songs, so they’re kind of a younger protest. I was kind of disillusioned. I went to college. I left that small, ignorant, kind of backwoods town of Eagle River, white trash, poverty—we didn’t live in a trailer park, but we were poor and ignorant.

When I got to college I was expecting it to be a lot of people really wanting to do important things, change the world things. Instead, it was just a bunch of people partying, getting drunk and getting ready to be cogs in the machine. So, I was a little disillusioned by that whole experience. I’ve always been a little disillusioned by that “go to college, work, die” script. What’s it all about? I guess that’s what happens when you have a philosophy degree!

LA: In your documentary, *The 7 Things You Never Say to a Veteran*, you have the song “Trying to Find My Way Home,” which is also the title of the other CD. That song seems to be more explicitly about PTSD. You sing, “It’s Hard to Fight an Enemy That Lives Inside Your Head.” What were you were looking to do in that song?

JM: So, I got home in ’04, and I couldn’t write. Something was clearly wrong with me, and I didn’t know what it was and nobody told me. It was PTSD. It affected my songwriting. I wasn’t writing songs. That’s why I released *Poverty*, all these unreleased old songs, because I didn’t understand why I couldn’t write any new songs. It had been about five years not writing, except this song I had written, “Trying To Find My Way Home,” and that was heard and shared, and then it was heard by Olivier Morel, who did the documentary *On the Bridge*

(2010). **4** He asked me if I had any more songs about the experience of going to war.

I had started a bunch, but it always led to the same thing. I'd have some emotion that I'd want to purge through a song. I'd try to write it and it would make me really sad and symptomatic, and then I'd drink or avoid thinking about it for as long as I could. I had all these notes and half-started songs about the experience. So, finally I sat down and wrote that whole CD. It was about that five years of coming home in 2004 and then just not having any idea what was happening to me. That's what I was going for.

LA: In *On the Bridge* you were featured as one of the seven participants. Toward the end of the film you sing "Hold On." You mentioned that you wanted to stay away from the song; it was screaming and ranting. But it was also about holding on for one more day.

JM: I had been working on finishing that one about five weeks before I attempted suicide, so that was always a difficult one. That's the song that affects the most people because that's not specifically about PTSD; it's about depression and sadness and suicidal ideation. I get the most emails about that one from people who aren't military. They say that listening to that made them understand they're not alone and got them through a tough time.

LA: Some of your songs are about PTSD and the military, but they can expand to trauma or depression.

JM: Yeah, and oftentimes those are emotions that overlap. Insomnia or depression is something that people with PTSD suffer from, but people without PTSD suffer from it. And sadness, feeling like you want to end it all, is something that, unfortunately, a lot of people have felt to varying degrees and for varying reasons.

The goal now, as I write new songs, whenever possible or as

I'm producing the CDs, I always try to make them as vague as possible to reflect as many situations as I can. But that song really was just about sadness. I didn't have a lot of thought into the other songs back then, as I did with "Trying to Find My Way Home." That was just pretty much raw emotion. I just opened my mouth and "hold on" came spilling out.

LA: Maybe we can talk about the CD *Love and Life*. You have some songs about loss and disconnection, but others are a little more hopeful.

JM: *Love and Life* was 2013, the one after *Trying to Find My Way Home*, and that was when I started traveling the country. *Trying to Find My Way Home* came out in 2010. I start traveling the country and doing all the work with Warrior Songs and helping veterans, and I'm hearing all these stories and collecting all these stories for volumes 1 and 2, and it's just a lot to deal with. I'm not trained in PTSD or trauma work. And I'd just survived a suicide attempt in '08, so it got to be a bit much.

I was trying to separate my work helping trauma recovery through Warrior Songs and my own Jason Moon stuff. Where's the line between the fact that I write songs about traumatized veterans for a living? Am I still entitled to write a song about smiles for fun? Where do I put the fun songs, or the funny songs, or the love songs? And I actually found myself writing more of those because I don't need to deal with sad topics, because I do that at Warrior Songs. So, my songs that I was writing personally were becoming more and more happy.

That CD, *Love and Life*, was intentionally an attempt to take a sharp break from Warrior Songs, and I just made a CD of positive songs. They're not all happy, but they're not sad.

LA: They talk about family and relationships.

JM: Yeah, and it's essentially supposed to be, "here's what you get. Here's why you do all the hard work." *Trying to Find*

My Way Home is about pushing through all the horrible shit you suffer from after a deployment to war. Well, why would you want to push through that? Well, you get what's on *Love and Life*. "Rise Up" is on the new CD that comes out this February.

LA: What's the title of the CD? Is that *The Wolf I Fed*?

JM: It's a personal album. It's a Jason Moon album, but it's the first time I've tried to integrate the veteran side with the personal. It's not released through Warrior Songs, but on my personal label, Full Moon Music, but it's got some stuff about the work I do with veterans. For the first time I tried to integrate the whole experience. The individual Jason Moon is not like *Love and Life* where I'm all happy. I'm inundated in veterans' work all the time because of what I do at Warriors. I was trying to figure out, I don't know, where I stop and where the work begins.

That's how it's different. This is the first time I've integrated the healing work I do with veterans into my own person music and not kept them separate. And I've also tried to take an honest look at like: how did I go from a young man who just liked to party and play guitar around a campfire to someone who runs a nonprofit that's helped some thirty-three suicide preventions? What's the road you walk to go from a poor kid who has to join the Army and isn't really going anywhere fast to nationally recognized veterans advocate known for preventing suicides? That's kind of what the song is. The CD is an exploration of how I got here.

LA: I really appreciate your time to discuss your work.

JM: Yeah, no worries. I thank you for looking into it. I'm hoping that more of the world will wake up to the understanding that we can do a lot of good healing trauma through the arts.

▪ See <https://jasoneklund.com/> and <https://www.lilrev.com/>

- <https://warriorsongs.org/track/1906473/see-me>
 - For example, see Edward Tick, *War in the Soul: Healing Our Nation's Veterans from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (2005) and *Warrior's Return: Restoring the Soul After War* (2014)
 - Olivier Morel, *On The Bridge* (<https://www3.nd.edu/~omorel/jason.html>)
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Artist Profile: Musician Emily Yates

INTRODUCTION

Emily Yates joined the Army at 19, spent six years in, from 2002 until her “release,” as she puts it, in 2008, finishing as an E-4, and served two deployments to Iraq in 2005-06 and 2007-08. She calls herself a former “public affairs minion, writing heartwarming news stories about the Iraq War to help build fellow soldiers’ morale.” ¹ She worked under David Abrams (author of the novels *Fobbit* and *Brave Deeds*), and as “the only snarky female specialist in his unit,” she sees some of herself in the character of Carnicle. She says that she wishes to “use my experience in the military to make my civilian life richer . . . [and] help those who are struggling.” ² As a self-proclaimed “eventual ukulele superstar” she often uses humor to express her concerns, and utilizes juxtapositions of joy and disillusionment, humor and aggression, and gentleness and vulgarity to communicate those concerns, whether they be about the VA, the precariousness of freedom, sexuality, the military, certain personality types, or how “not to be a dick.”



Yates works in a variety of media, also doing photography and writing. Her photographs run from “Food” to “Faces” to “Nature” to “War.” The latter document scenes from her time in Iraq, like “On Patrol” and “Perimeter Secured,” as well as scenes with children, often with soldiers. 3

Like the diverse subject matter of her photographs Yates' writing touches on a variety of themes. In "A Veteran's Affair: How Dealing With the VA is Like Dating a Douchebag" (2016) ⁴, she uses humor to highlight a serious issue. "Unfortunately, because only one percent (roughly) of Americans serve in the military at any given time, there's a massive cognitive disconnect between veterans and, as we lovingly call the rest of the population, civilians. But there is hope for us yet to bridge the communication divide." In the essay she points out the multiple ways that the VA falls short of expectations.

Two essays for *Truthout* also express her concerns. "American Propagander: Six Ways Paul Rieckhoff's 'American Sniper' Column Deeply Bothers This US Veteran" (2015) Yates presents a scathing critique of Rieckhoff's praise of Eastwood's film. She feels that in his discussion of the film Rieckhoff exploits veterans and ignores the complexity of the war. In her view, he ignores the real story of the war, such as PTSD and veteran suicides (although to be fair, Kyle's PTSD is depicted), and the complexity of American involvement. She ends her essay "All of these points illustrate the larger issue that when veterans' traumatic experiences are exploited as freely by veterans themselves as they are by the powerful few who send us to war, it's a sign that we ourselves have internalized the destructive system that our bodies were used to support."

In another essay, "Who Am I, Really?: The Identity Crisis of the Woman Veteran Returning Home" (2013), she describes the psychological split she and other women face trying to "recalibrate" their lives and "relearn" how to be a civilian. "I'm referring to the particularly awkward division between women veterans and women who have never been in the military – the division that leads to women like me getting out of the Army and finding it nearly impossible to relate to 99% of other American women." ⁵

One of her poems, "I Am the Savage," reflects on her war experience. She writes about the "rubble beside the Tigris river" and troops' entering Iraqi homes, instilling fear in the citizens. But the military power she observes, wielded against ordinary citizens, is the source of her dejection:

*My job is to tell the story of victory—
victory!
Victory?
But I am defeated*

Another poem, "Yellow Ribbon" (also a song and video), is critical of civilians who refuse to see the reality of war, believing that a yellow ribbon on their cars and the formulaic "thank you for your service" excuses them. She feels that civilians are willfully blind to what is being done in their name, and are content to follow the trappings of patriotism. She writes "But you can't bring back the dead by throwing a parade." The poem closes: "Don't make me your hero, just lend me your ear/Oh, and wipe the tears I cry/While I apologize for that goddamn yellow ribbon on your car." 6

Yates is best known for her music. In 2012 she released *I've Got Your Folk Songs Right Here* and in 2014 *Folk in Your Face*. She also released a children's album under the *nom de musique* Fancy von Pancerton. In *I've Got Your Folk Songs Right Here* there is a humorous dimension to "Plant Some Weed," where growing marijuana is a better economic choice than working at McDonald's or taking tickets at a movie theater. "In Your Mind" and "Shut Yer Face" criticize ego-centric males who believe that they are "the best and the brightest/Your teeth are the whitest/Except that it's all in your mind." "Foreign Policy Folk Song" is reminiscent of Phil Ochs and protest songs of the 60's placed in a contemporary context:

*Just bomb their country
Just bomb their fucking country
Kill all of their children and destroy their infrastructure*

*Just bomb their country, put holes in all their history
Then take all of their resources and bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb
their country.*

Folk in Your Face echoes many of the themes of the first album. There is the whimsical, upbeat "Porn!" ("Everyone likes porn!") and the more serious "Just a Little Cog," in which she declares that she will no longer be a cog in anyone else's wheel, whether it be in a relationship or the military: "I was just a little soldier in your war/I'm not fighting anymore/I'm no longer just a cog in your machine."

One of her strongest songs is "You're the Enemy," released on the 2018 *Women At War: Warrior Songs Vol. 2*, as a response to the prevalence of Military Sexual Trauma (MST) and her own assault, which she did not report "because I knew the investigation, if one even happened, would be even more demoralizing than being assaulted by people I knew." She is especially demoralized that there is no escape from the situation. She sees her attacker daily and the supposed trust within a unit is meaningless:

*I was trained to fight,
To kill and to die
But never thought that I'd be fighting
Someone on my side*

Yates has made numerous music videos, some of performances and others more illustrative of the songs. "Yellow Ribbon" (noted above) is set in front of a recruiting station, with Yates playing a banjo. The more-active "Land of the Free" (released July 4, 2017) is in "honor of those for whom this is not the 'Land of the Free.'" It is an attack on corporate greed, consumerism, militarism, and any force that restricts personal freedom. As Yates skips through Boulder's streets draped in an American flag, she sings "you'll be convicted for your convictions" and "you'll be tried for tryin' to speak the truth." The video ends with Yates bound with duct tape with a

strip of tape over her mouth. On the strip is written “patriot,” suggesting that in the current political climate the real patriots, the truth-tellers, have to be silenced and held in check.

What Emily Yates says about her work could also be applied to artists Vince Gabriel and Jason Moon: “Through my art, I express my many opinions and observations, casually brushing aside social stigma in the interest of breaking down communication barriers and shining light on the many ties that bind humans together.”

1. <http://emilyyatesmusic.com/bio/>
2. Syracuse.com, August 16, 2013 (updated March 22, 2019)
3. <http://emilyyatesphotography.com/>
4. <https://brokeassstuart.com/2016/02/08/a-veterans-affair-how-dealing-with-the-va-is-like-dating-a-douchebag/>
5. <https://truthout.org/authors/emily-yates/>; site includes additional essays
6. <https://www.warriorwriters.org/artists/emily.html>
7. (<http://emilyyatesmusic.com/page/2/>

INTERVIEW WITH EMILY YATES

Larry Abbott: To start, I was just wondering about your poems “I Am the Savage” and “The Yellow Ribbon.” How did they come about?

Emily Yates: “I Am the Savage” was a long time ago now, but I was looking through photos that I had taken during my first deployment and thinking about how we had turned the city of Baghdad into complete rubble. Yet, we were calling the people there backwards, or savages, or just all kinds of derogatory names.

I was thinking how that was actually the opposite of what it was because only savages would go in and bomb a complete civilization, a city, a metropolitan area full of civilians. Then, mock or criticize those civilians for having to make the

best of it.

I started to think about how we as American soldiers, as U.S. soldiers, were not any better than these individuals whose homes we were occupying. In fact, we were invaders. So, I had a lot of guilt and shame around my participation there, seeing a place where civilization was formed, the cradle of civilization at the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, being reduced to complete rubble.

As far as "Yellow Ribbon," it was really almost a gut reaction. I had been involved in a lot of conversations with other veterans right around the time I wrote that song, and talking about the disconnect between people saying thank you for your service and displaying these yellow ribbons, but then not being interested in hearing about our actual experiences or opinions about the war, or asking us how we were doing, or really saying anything other than "thank you, now move along."

The yellow ribbon, to me, was sort of emblematic of that attitude, even though I know there are plenty of people who really mean it sincerely. I think many of those people are just as misled by our government as I was.

LA: You seem to be attacking the hypocrisy or phony patriotism of some civilians.

EY: Yes and no, because I understand the hypocrisy and the phony patriotism. To those people, it might not seem hypocritical or phony. They are products of a very effective national indoctrination system. They came by their perspectives honestly. I was pretty angry when I wrote that song and maybe didn't have as much empathy for those people as I do now. But it was more of just "pay attention." If you really want to be patriotic and say thank you, pay attention because none of this death and destruction needs to be happening, and it shouldn't be.

The military is a job. It's not a service. It's a job. We join because we need a job. We're told that it's some kind of noble job, but it's not. That's what they say so that we don't feel bad about all the horrible things we're being trained to do.

Some people do really have a willingness to serve, but they wouldn't do that shit for free. I think of the work that I'm doing now, speaking out, as more of a service than anything I did in the military. That was a job I did to get money for school and life security, to get out of my hometown and have some new experiences.

But it's a sacrifice of your own personal freedom, so I encourage people to acknowledge the sacrifice. But saying thank you, thank you for anything, it doesn't make any sense to me. You don't thank someone for working at McDonald's. They're actually feeding you. You don't thank someone for working in a nonprofit. That's service. You don't thank someone for going and picking up trash on the side of the road.

Why are we thanking anyone for not having any better option than the military? Or for not thinking very clearly about what's going on? Maybe I'm sorry for your pain. Or, how are you? Or, welcome home. Or, I'm sorry you were deceived. I'm sorry you were used.

The thanking makes me uncomfortable because the military hasn't done anybody any favors. At all. Whether or not we're paid for it at all. We're not doing anything positive for freaking anyone. Other than Dick Cheney, maybe.

LA: You also do photography with a variety of different subjects. They seem to be a little disparate. You have some war photographs on one hand, and then nature on the other hand.

EY: Yeah. I try to think of myself as a multi-polar person. Maybe not bipolar. It's got such a negative connotation. I

feel like too often, we humans are pressured to define ourselves as being one thing or another thing. I love butterflies, and I care about militarism.

I think that acknowledging the multiplicity of humans is something I try to do all the time. I try to give myself permission to be as many people as I need to be. I think the more we do that, the less we run the risk of erasing parts of people that we don't want to see.

LA: Your songs reflect that multiplicity. Some are cynical, some are critical, satirical, whimsical, political. Would this be accurate, that your songs have this multiplicity to them?

EY: I'm even veering into hopeful in the next album that I'm working on.

LA: How did you get into songwriting?

EY: I started writing songs just by accident, in a way. I was learning to play the ukulele and I had been listening to a lot of Kimya Dawson and Bob Dylan. I became aware of how songs can be anything.

The thing I loved about Kimya Dawson's songs is that they sound so sweet and cute, and they often say such powerful and provocative things. Her song, "Loose Lips," was one that I first heard when I was deployed.

It was absolutely adorable and she had the lyric, it was, "My warpaint is Sharpie ink and I'll show you how much my shit stinks." Let's see. "I'll tell you what I think because my thoughts and words are powerful. They think we're disposable, well both my thumbs opposable are spelled out on a double word and triple letter score."

She had the line, "Fuck Bush. And I'll say fuck Bush and fuck this war." She said it so cutely, and I was like, yeah. Let's just say things cute. I listened to that and I was like, yeah.

How do you be angry at that voice? How do you be angry at that song?

So, when I was learning to play the ukulele, I was practicing three different chords and thought, I bet I could put some words in here and that would make it easier to practice, and more fun. So, I did. I put in words that were an answer to the question people were always asking me at that time, as I had just gotten married.

Which was, "When are you gonna have a baby? Are you gonna have babies? Are you gonna have kids? When are you having babies?" I was just like, my answer was always, "I've got so much to do. How do you think I have time to have kids right now?" I would answer these questions over and over, and try to be polite.

So, when I was practicing my ukulele, I just started with, "I don't want to have a baby," and went from there, and wrote what I think is probably my most vulgar song that I've ever written.

LA: This is true.

EY: But it was cute enough to where people just kind of laughed, instead of hating me when I was done singing it. So, thank you Kimya Dawson for the influence, and thank you other people for asking me questions I don't want to answer except in a song.

LA: You've mentioned that it's better, maybe more powerful, to use humor in a song even though the topic is serious, rather than beating people over the head with a club about the topic.

EY: Yeah, I've always tried to use humor almost as a defense mechanism really because if you say things people don't want to hear in an aggressive way, then they become aggressive back. But if you can make it a joke, then they laugh a little bit and maybe the proclivity toward aggression dissipates a

little bit. Maybe people are more open to hearing what you have to say if you can make them laugh while you say it.

LA: Were you a musical person growing up? What led you to the ukulele? You're a self-proclaimed "next ukulele superstar."

EY: I was not a musical person growing up, other than singing, which I did in choirs and such. My mom tried to teach me a couple of different instruments when I was a kid, but I didn't pick it up quickly. I didn't have very good hand/eye coordination. I didn't have any good rhythm, and my mom got very frustrated with me at a young age. I decided that I was just never going to be able to play an instrument, I guess.

Everyone else in my family played instruments. My brother is a fantastic musician. My mom plays cello and guitar. My dad plays hammered dulcimer and a bunch of other stuff. I never played any instruments.

Then, I started dating my now ex-husband, who was a musician, a multi-instrumentalist, and he happened to have a ukulele that he never played because he was always playing other things. But he had this ukulele and I was like, "This is so cute. I want to play it!" He was like, "Okay. Here's how you play a couple of chords." I was like, "Great."

But I didn't have rhythm until one of his bandmates decided that he wanted to go on this trip to Africa, to Ghana, and record an album. Even though I was kind of pissed that he scheduled it during the time my new husband and I had taken for our honeymoon and invited him, I was like, all right. That's kind of rude, but sure, let's go to Ghana. Fine. I don't play any instruments, but I had never been there. Why the fuck not? Sure. Let's do that. Then, we'll go to Italy. Okay. Great.

So we went to Ghana. His bandmate had set up these drumming and dancing workshops that we had to get up ridiculously early for every morning. He had set up different levels of drumming

workshops. The real musicians were in the advanced drumming. Then, the wives were in the beginning drumming class to keep us busy.

So, we did three or four days of drumming workshops, and it turns out muscle memory is a thing. I got rhythm, all of a sudden. I came back from Ghana, we went to Italy.

I picked up a ukulele at a music shop in Venice and I started strumming it. I was like, holy shit! I can strum! Neat. Then, when we got back, I picked up the ukulele again and started practicing, and wrote my first couple songs. No one's been able to shut me up ever since. Now, I also play the banjo, the bass. There you go.

LA: You called yourself a folk-punk singer. What do you mean by that?

EY: I've since learned that there's a term called anti-folk that a couple of other artists, like Ed Hamell or I think Ani DiFranco, probably relate to that is a better descriptor. I related to punk because I felt like punk rockers were also putting messages in with their songs that a lot of people didn't want to hear.

I related more to that because a lot of folk songs I knew were very sweet and earnest. I'm very earnest, and I think my sound is kind of sweet, but I'm not really, because I tend to veer more toward sarcasm than actual deep earnestness in a lot of my songs. I tend to put a lot more winking in than a lot of my favorite folk singers. I was like well, I'm not quite folk. I'm kind of folk, but I'm not quite folk.

I love punk. I listen to the Dead Kennedys and the Ramones, and whoever. I related more to that sort of aggressive style than to "the answer is blowing in the wind," for example.

Even though I love Bob Dylan, misogynist though he is. That's a whole other conversation. Although that did inspire me to

write some parodies of Bob Dylan's songs, called Boob Dylan.

LA: You said that you were influenced by Boob, I mean, Bob Dylan, but also Jonathan Richman and Eric Idle. What do you draw from those two?

EY: I feel like from Jonathan Richman, I draw a lot of openness and wonder, and a lot of I don't give a shit what you think about this style that I'm doing. I'm just gonna do it, and it might not be what you're expecting, but fine, with a lot of "wide-eyed here I am" type of vibe.

Eric Idle, I grew up with Monty Python. I grew up with the songs of Monty Python and the comedy of Eric Idle's songs. "The Galaxy Song," "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life," stuff like that that were very pointed and profound, but hilarious. I really feel like I need a solid amount of profundity in my ridiculousness. So, that's what I draw from Eric Idle. Also, just his lack of give-a-shit about who you might be pissing off.

LA: You were in the military for six years. What led you to that decision?

EY: Well, it's funny you should ask because I just finished my book draft, which is inspired by a lot of questions like that, and details my journey. So as not to discourage you from reading it . . .it's essentially inspired by all the questions people usually ask me about being in the military. Why did you join? What did you do? What was it like being a woman in the military? What was it like being deployed? Did you see combat? Were you on the front lines? I feel like it's important to show people how there really are no front lines in the current occupations that the United States is involved in.

People usually ask this blanket question, what was that like? And I'm just like, well, buy me a drink and sit down. How much time do you have? Now, I was like, fuck it. I'm just going to put all of the answers in stories and show rather than tell. I

don't want to beat people over the head with my opinions about my experience. I just want to explain what I went through and show what I went through. You can see for yourself how I came to the conclusions I did.

Last night I just finished editing my most final draft, as I'm calling it. I feel good about it and started to send it around to whatever agents, and try to work on getting it published.

It's around 53,000 words, so digestible, ideally. I'm not trying to write frickin' *War and Peace*. Maybe the condensed version.

Anyway, the military seemed like the best idea at the time, a way to get college money, the job training. I wanted to be a journalist. A recruiter offered me a job as an Army journalist, which is the alternate title for Army public affairs specialist, which, if I had actually been a journalist at that time, I would have been like, hey, those two jobs shouldn't be the same thing, actually. I learned the technical skills of journalism, but not the critical skills.

LA: You've said that you use humor or satire to express the serious. You wrote an essay, "A veteran's affair: how dealing with the VA is like dating a douche bag." The essay certainly uses humor to make your point. How did that essay come about and what were you trying to?

EY: You know what's so funny? I had totally forgotten about writing that until you mentioned it. I think I came back from a really fucking frustrating experience at the VA, and it felt like every bad relationship I'd ever had, because I couldn't get away from it. I had to deal with this entity that could be so much of a better institution than it is.

I have a love/hate relationship with the VA. I'm glad that I have access to healthcare from doctors and nurses who are familiar with the military experience. But at the same time, we don't have another option.

There's a push right now towards privatizing the VA. They're not coming right out and saying we're privatizing the VA. They're just contracting out and contracting out, and underfunding the VA, and understaffing the VA, and calling it things like the Veteran's Choice Program.

Well, if you can't get an appointment for months, you have this amazing option of going to one of our network providers. It's framed as this option, but what needs to be happening is the VA needs to be fully staffed and fully funded because there's absolutely no reason for it to take months to get an appointment. There's absolutely no reason.

And the reason we need the VA is because we need health professionals who are intimately and specifically acquainted with the experiences that veterans have. Most civilian doctors aren't, and you have to tell them all these things. You have to explain to them.

In the military, they pretty much train you to not take your own health seriously because any time you seek help, they act like you're trying to get over and game the system, and to get out of something. So, soldiers specifically, because I don't really have as much experience with the other branches, are put in these positions where even if there's something legitimately, terribly wrong with us, we're forced to downplay it.

If we speak frankly about the seriousness of what we're experiencing, if we are able to actually give ourselves permission to have something wrong with us, half the time we're told that we're making it up, or we're exaggerating. Or, we're forced to exaggerate because we won't be taken seriously unless it's seen as a huge, huge problem.

If you go into the VA and you're like, "Hey, I'm having some trouble sleeping," they're like, "Well, what's your pain level on the scale of 1 to 10?" You're like, "Uh, I don't know. It's

1 or 2." "Okay." You immediately aren't taken seriously. If you're not in excruciating pain and you don't look like you're actually falling apart, they just stop caring or stop asking questions.

It's like, well, maybe you're not sleeping because you're plagued by thoughts about your experiences. Maybe you're not sleeping because you're depressed. Maybe your depression is legitimate because you were part of a machine that dehumanized you. You are never able to get to the root of the problem because if you were, then every single problem would come down to how you've been treated like—one of my veteran friends said it best—a cog in a machine that hates you. Or a natural outcome of being in these situations that nobody should be put in in the first place.

I think that the past administration, Obama didn't address the fact that literally every person who goes to a combat zone comes back with some kind of post-traumatic stress. It's not a disorder, it's a natural outcome. People are treated like they're broken because they have post-traumatic stress because they've been in traumatic and stressful situations. That is an absolute dehumanization. It's an absolute denial of the fact that these situations are inherently traumatizing.

Trump created a war crime, as did Obama. Obama bombed Yemen for his entire eight years in office. He didn't end the Iraq war, he just privatized it. It's absolutely horrifying to see the way these politicians talk about the situations that they put actual human beings in and expect them to come out of it okay.

Nobody is okay. None of us are okay. Some of us are better at functioning than others. Some of us are more resilient than others. But resilience isn't a good thing. It's just some of us have gotten better at dealing with the impact of trauma, or we're not as traumatized, or we're not traumatized in the same ways.

Pretty much the whole reason I do the work I do is because I am wracked with guilt if I don't. I feel like I was a mouthpiece of the Evil Empire, and the only way I can make myself feel okay about it is by trying to correct that narrative, and use my entire life to do so.

I don't feel like I can go work for any person who isn't okay with me being extremely vocal about exactly what I'm seeing. That has made it pretty much impossible for me to have any other job other than myself, or any other boss than myself.

LA: You've said that, "I want to use my experience in the military to make my civilian life richer and to help those who are struggling." So, you feel that your music can help in that process?

EY: I feel like if it's helping me, then it's hopefully helping other people. Because I see the fact that most humans are a lot more alike than we are different. Nobody's experience is completely unique.

Yes, there are differences in the specifics of what we've gone through. But if I feel comforted by a thing, then I generally conclude that someone else out there in the world can also be helped. I see the work I do to heal myself as instrumental and my ability to be a better person in the world.

If the songs I write make me feel better, then that will hopefully reflect on the way I'm able to communicate with others and understand them. I'm still an asshole a lot of the time, don't get me wrong. And I'm working on that.

I feel like if I can write these songs that help me make sense of things, and if they can help anybody else make sense of things, and feel like someone else in the world understands and is able to articulate the fuckery of this shit better in a way that helps them communicate it to others, then that's a thing that I can do.

I don't really see any other purpose to life other than to live it, and to live it in the most authentic way possible. And to be as kind as possible, even though I do struggle deeply with kindness a lot. I feel like ideally, if I can write songs that help people, maybe that will make up for the times when I'm an asshole. I don't know.

LA: Let me ask about your music videos. One that struck me was "Land of the Free" because at the end, you're bound and gagged for your freedom of speech, or so-called freedom of speech. What were you trying to express in the song and the video?

EY: I was just trying to express what I've experienced. You get to maintain the illusion of freedom as long as you don't actually use the freedoms that you're told that you have. I happened to have a couple of new friends at the time who were a photographer and a videographer, and they believed in me.

I was like, "You know, Fourth of July is coming up. I've got this song I've been wanting to make a video of for a while. Why don't we get all America-ed up and go prance around in downtown Boulder?"

LA: Your first album, 2012, *I've Got Your Folk Songs Right Here*, includes the "I Don't Want to Have a Baby," which is probably responsible for your parental advisory sticker. Two songs, "In Your Mind" and "Shut Your Face," reflect anger against a certain personality type.

EY: Well, the parental advisory thing, it was really just like, I just put that on there to be silly because I don't think of anything as being not for children.

I think if you can say it, say it. Truth shouldn't be restricted to adults. Kids are more honest than everyone. I just thought it would be a funny thing to put it on there. Especially because "The Bad Word Song" is also on there, which was inspired by George Carlin's bit about the seven words you can't say on television. I think I put every little word in

this album that nobody wants me to be saying in front of their kids, so why not just do that?

But yeah, it was really a response... All those songs were just things that I had always wanted to say, and felt like I could just put them into a cute song and say them.

LA: "The Please Don't F with Me This Christmas" is along those lines.

EY: Yeah. I felt like I should write a holiday song. I got to get in on this holiday song market, but I don't feel like I want to say the same things everyone else does. Honestly, the holidays are a time of enormous conflict for a lot of people and I felt like that was something that I could bring to the table, and maybe other people would relate. I write the songs I write as a way of finding my people.

LA: In the "Happy Ever After" song, you seem reconciled to life's ambiguities, and to the ups and the downs of life.

EY: That one actually was the last song that I recorded with my now ex-husband, ironically before I realized we were going to be splitting up. I had started writing it a while back. Sometimes I just get lines in my head and start putting them down.

Then, a friend of mine, another musician, and his partner, who was also a musician, they were in a band together, had just split up. And another friend was going through some relationship issues.

The one friend was having a hard time, and I ran into him at a coffee shop. Before he left the coffee shop, he pulled out a piece of paper and said, "Here, write a song today." I was like, "All right. Well, here's an idea. You write down a line for me, I'll write down a line for you. We'll trade and we'll see what happens."

So, he wrote this line down and handed it to me, and I felt like I could use this to finish that song that I'd just written a fragment of. It all sort of fell into place. Then, I ended up recording it with his bandmate, who produced it. I sent it to him and said, "Here, maybe this will be comforting."

It was prophetic because I ended up going through a pretty horrible divorce after that, and actually released the song no longer on even speaking terms with my ex. So, it was interesting. It kind of forced me to come to a place of acceptance, honestly. Like oh, neat. I wrote my own divorce song. Great. Good job, Saul.

LA: You also did a kids' album in 2014, *Don't Kid Yourself*, using your alter ego, Fancy von Pancerton. Some of the songs are reassuring, like "Don't Be Scared" and "Happy Heart." "Go Out and Play" is about importance of imagination. "Just Because You Can" is a kids' version of an adult song, a couple of words changed. How did you come to do the children's album?

EY: The children's album was a therapy project. After I was brutally arrested at a demonstration in 2013, I was feeling really cynical and despondent. When I was on tour that summer, right before that arrest happened, one of my friends had told me he wanted to come to my show but he couldn't because he was just going through a pretty nasty divorce and his daughter was having a hard time with it. I was like, oh man, that's terrible. I feel like I want to write her a song.

So I wrote "Sometimes Life," the shortened title of "Sometimes Life Sucks." I wrote that and I was like, man. This is actually a kind of song that I wish I had heard when I was a kid. What other songs do I wish I had heard when I was a kid? So, I just started writing songs for my own inner child, my own past self.

Then, after that arrest, I got back to California and a friend of mine was like, "Man, I'm just so sorry you had to go through all that. Is there anything I could do to support you?" I said, "Well, you seem to have this really cool little home studio that you've created as a hobby. Would you be interested in helping me record some of these songs that I've written for kids?"

Of course, he said, "Yeah! Let's do that!" I had only written four of them at the time. It was over the course of about a year, I'd go up to his place on Tuesdays and we would just track songs. My then-husband would come in and play all the different instruments. I had a couple other friends who played too.

It was really a labor of love and a therapy project. There are 13 songs. The last song in it, "Arise," is one that I had written with my friend Bonnie. This song is so sweet. It's just not like any of my other songs. I wouldn't put it on any of my other albums, but I bet it would work on this one. So, I recorded it for the kids.

All in all, I didn't want to release an album for kids under the name Emily Yates, and have them Google me and come up with all the songs about porn, and drugs, and militarism, and get traumatized. So, Fancy von Pancerton emerged. I also decided to make a coloring book. So, the drawings I did for the coloring book were also therapeutic.

Yeah, it was a therapy project for my inner child that I've been giving to all my friends' kids. I made a little bit of money on it because I basically recorded it for free.

LA: On the opposite end of the spectrum is "You Are the Enemy," on *Warrior Songs*. There is a lot of anger and bitterness in that one.

EY: Jason [Moon] asked me to write a song about military sexual trauma and I tentatively agreed. At first, I was

annoyed with him. I was like, how do you just ask someone to write a song about that? That's fucked up, it's terrible, it's traumatizing. Fuck!

As I started writing it, I realized that I couldn't put any humor into it. There's absolutely nothing funny about it. Absolutely nothing. Even just thinking about my own experience, I was just getting angrier and angrier. So, the song that came out was, I think, the only really purely angry song I've ever written that has no sense of humor and ends with a group primal scream because that was the only thing I felt like it could have. I specifically wanted other women musicians to play on that song with me. Michelle the drummer is absolutely fantastic, and Julie the bass player, they're fantastic musicians.

It was an intense song to record. I needed to smoke a lot of weed after that song, after I recorded it, and do a lot of long walks in the woods. But I was glad to do it.

LA: "Smoke Break" also recounts your military experience, where there is a split between having a cigarette and shooting the bull, and then a few minutes later, we go back to war.

EY: "Smoke Break" actually started as a poem that I wrote in a Warrior Writers workshop at an Iraq Veterans Against the War convention in Baltimore, I believe in 2012. We were just doing a workshop and the prompt was to take a small detail of your military experience and expand on it because there's so much power in the details.

I tend to write a lot about concepts, but I don't tend to focus in on details too much. The detail that immediately sprung to mind was sitting around having a smoke in a war zone.

It was like a tiny window of normalcy or mundanity in this absolutely surreal experience. The smoking area was right by the headquarters. We would just be sitting there and hear

mortars land, and talk about who had been killed, and about our shitty bosses, and how this fucking war was like Groundhog Day, where today is just one shitty day after another, the same shitty day every day.

The smoke breaks were the only breaks that you were able to take. In the Army, you can't just be like, I'm going on break. That doesn't exist. You go on break to smoke cigarettes so that you don't start screaming at people, and that's respected. Okay, you've got a nicotine addiction, go take care of that. Please.

I smoked when I was a teenager in high school. It was the thing that kids like me did. But I stopped during reform school. Then, when I was in the military, my first year in the Army, everyone smoked. It was the only way to get to take a break.

So I started taking smoke breaks. They were the one opportunity to regain a tiny sliver of sanity in the day. I don't smoke cigarettes anymore; I quit a couple of years after I got out. I smoke weed now.

I've actually started getting better at weaning myself off of that a little bit, as a dependency thing. I still love it, of course, but trying to not be as dependent on it as I have been.

LA: Just to finish up, what is the status of the "Try Not To Be a Dick" movement?

EY: Well, I still play the song every time in a show. I add new verses as appropriate to reflect current situations. The global "Try Not To Be a Dick" movement has a Facebook page, which I discovered is the way to start a global movement. You have to have a Facebook page and a hashtag, and you're good. I mostly use it to share pertinent relevant memes and articles that I think speak to the idea of trying not to be a dick, both the personal and the political, and the funny and furious

ends of the spectrum, and all over the place.

I could post that on my personal page, and I do a lot of the time, but I feel like having this page where I share all that stuff takes my face away from it and puts the idea in the forefront, which I like better.

An Interview with Filmmaker Jordan Martinez

First Sergeant Russell Tuason faces a dilemma: does he deploy once again to Iraq to lead the troops he has been training, or does he take a meritorious retirement from the Army and begin a family with his wife Krissy?

His best friend, Sgt. Emmanuel Sanchez (Ramon Rodriguez), tells him that he has already proven himself and has no need to return to battle, that he can “ride off into the sunset.” However, In Jordan Martinez’s 2019 film *The Gatekeeper*, Tuason feels that if he retires he will be abandoning his duty and his men, sacrificing his honor, but if he deploys he will be jeopardizing the hopes and dreams of his wife Krissy (Jennifer Marshall), and the promises he made to her. In an argument with his wife, he says, “If I don’t finish what I’ve started, then what kind of leader does that make me?,” a conflict that is at least as old *The Odyssey*. Tuason is torn between what he “wants to do” and what he “should do,” between family and duty. He chooses duty.

The Gatekeeper, Jordan Martinez’s first short film, begins with this conflict. Martinez explains that he “wanted to convey that going back is a choice. Russell doesn’t have to go, but he feels his sense of purpose or duty is to ensure the

safety of his men.” Later on, we discover that Russell’s sense of duty isn’t the only thing compelling him. “Perhaps in his mind he believes he is choosing duty for the right reasons. Or is he lying to himself?”



The character of Tuason is portrayed by Christopher Loverro, an Army veteran of a 2005 deployment to Iraq, former SWAT Team member, and founder of Warriors for Peace Theatre. He remarks that he “struggled with suicide when I returned from Iraq, so much of what the character was going through were things I could relate to in my personal life. Everything my character in the film experienced were things that I could relate to or experienced personally or someone I served with experienced. I pulled from my own personal military bio or used soldiers and leaders I served with to pull from.”



The action shifts to Iraq, circa 2004, with Tuason's company in a firefight with insurgents (shot at Blue Cloud Movie Ranch in one day of production). As Tuason enters a courtyard scanning for the enemy, camera work and special effects lead to a sense of spatial and temporal dislocation, creating disorientation and uncertainty. He hears the faint cries of a woman and enters a door which leads into a church. In a flash forward, he sees a flag-draped coffin (his?) and a woman, who in a later scene is shown to be his grieving widow.

Martinez, born in 1990, served for 10 years in the Army, which he joined at 17, training as a paratrooper and eventually becoming a Civil Affairs Specialist, with a deployment to Afghanistan. He says, "I was attracted to the military as a child. My sister was in the military at the time and I wanted nothing more than to go on an adventure and see the world. When I was about sixteen years old I knew my goal would be to

join after high school and I wasn't afraid of going overseas even though the wars were going full speed."

After he left the service, Martinez had some jobs in various film productions. He learned about the graduate program in Cinematic Arts at USC and "made the second best decision of his life" to apply. He was accepted, and thus Martinez fulfilled a life-long dream to make movies, which began when he was eight years old growing up in Southern California. Brian DePalma's *Scarface* (1983) made a significant impact, as did *What Dreams May Come* (1998), starring Robin Williams. The Wachowski brothers' *The Matrix* (1999) and Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010) were influential, he says, for their conceptual frameworks. While at USC, Martinez studied with such top industry professionals as Robert Nederhorst, Visual Effects Supervisor on *John Wick 3*, Academy Award Winner Michael Fink, and John Brennan, Virtual Production Lead on *The Lion King* (2019). *The Gatekeeper* is ground-breaking in utilizing on such a small project "motion-capture previsualization," a type of digital storyboarding which allows complex scenes to be created before shooting, thus saving time on the set. All told, the film came to fruition over a year and a half, from the script to post-production to screenings at film festivals. *The Gatekeeper* is Martinez' final project for his Master of Fine Arts in Cinematic Arts from USC. He graduated in December, 2019.

As the firefight continues the company is pinned down, and Tuason, now in command, faces another choice: return to the base or maintain its position and take the fight to the enemy. He decides that they will "stand our ground," a fatal mistake that leads to the deaths of everyone in the company except Tuason. When he returns stateside he suffers from intense survivor's guilt and believes that he "should have died there with them . . . They all died because of me." At his best friend's, Sanchez's, funeral, shot at the Los Angeles National Cemetery, he hopes to obtain absolution from Sanchez's widow,

but she tells him that her husband is dead “all because you wanted to be a hero,” and referring to their daughter: “and now she has to grow up without hers.” This sends Tuason further into depression.

As he contemplates suicide, he is visited by Sanchez’ ghost. Sanchez is an emissary, but from where? Heaven? Hell? Is he the gatekeeper? As Tuason makes a final pact with Sanchez, he has visions of his childhood, his men, his wife and their newborn daughter being given up for adoption. The final shot of the film is a close up of Tuason’s face, eyes questioning, searching. Martinez provides no answers, preferring ambiguity and individual interpretations.



The film has been called a “military thriller” and a “psychological thriller,” but Martinez says “it could be a military thriller, a psychological thriller, a supernatural

thriller, a drama, a war film, and in all honesty it can be all of these. It just depends on your perspective. This was my initial goal in making the film because no one wants to be told what to believe. I really wanted it to start a conversation, perhaps even pose the question, 'What did I just see?'"



Martinez, left, during his Army service.

Martinez wanted the film to be accurate in military aspects. Even though he was in the service for 10 years, he relied on Retired Army Sergeant Daniel Stroud to insure authenticity.

In a twist, Stroud was Loverro's First Sergeant in Iraq in 2005 and Martinez's Command Sergeant Major in Afghanistan in 2012. The casting of veterans in major roles and the use of veterans behind the camera was crucial to him, not only for realism but also to allow vets to tell their stories in the non-stereotypical ways he sees in many big-budget films. "Veterans were in front of and behind the camera," he

explains. "Veterans are the first to destroy a film for its lack of authenticity since they are trained to find flaws. Therefore, they are the hardest to please. I wanted to ensure I had extra attention to detail to make sure they were immersed in the experience since bringing them back to those memories of service was extremely important to me." He notes that he's received many emotional responses from military wives and veterans. He adds, "it's an honor to be able to connect with those closest to the material." His sentiment is shared by the film's co-star, [Jennifer Marshall](#), a Navy veteran from Denver, CO, who notes that she has occupied many roles related to the military: she has served, she has been a wife at home while her husband deployed, and she has lost friends both while serving and then to PTSD after coming home.

"I was honored to play the role and bring my real-life experiences to making her a real person." Marshall adds, "It's essential that veterans in Hollywood work with other veterans and bring our stories to the forefront. The alternative is Hollywood telling our stories for us . . . often times riddled with errors and half-truths."

Loverro says, "War veterans offer an understanding and breadth of knowledge that give them an advantage a civilian actor or director might not have. That's not to say civilians can't make great films about war, obviously many have. However, during the making of the film we felt what we were telling 'our' story and that process in and of itself was cathartic."

Beyond authenticity, Martinez's overarching reason for making the film was to address PTSD and the human toll as a result of war, and by extension other types of trauma. Having lost friends to suicide, he wanted to show that an extreme decision has ramifications beyond the individual. He points out that civilian rates of suicide are also high and that many of those who have committed suicide had experienced trauma. "I think this film can touch on trauma of all types and that those experiences can negatively influence our judgment, leading us

into a treacherous depression or a dangerous thought process.”



He hopes the film can start an honest conversation about what the military does to people, and that the purpose of the military can be both fighting wars and also healing those who fight in wars, and better preparing them for how war changes them as well as helping veterans readjust to civilian society. Aspects of the military mentality can take a toll not only on vets but also family members and he believes that more discussion in the country as a whole could help prevent veteran suicide.

Martinez's long-term plan is to obtain funding to make a full-length feature of *The Gatekeeper* and receive theatrical distribution. He has a treatment for the entire film that he is ready to pitch to major studios. His goal is that the film will bring this conversation to national and international audiences.

The following is an interview between professor Larry Abbott and filmmaker, Jordan Martinez.

LARRY ABBOTT: Can we start with a bit about your background and how you came to be a filmmaker?

JORDAN MARTINEZ: I was born in 1990. I'm from Southern California. I grew up all around the area when I was a kid. My mom was a single mom. She moved around, county to county pretty much. I enlisted in the Army in 2008. Once I joined, I became a paratrooper, joined Civil Affairs, and eventually became a Civil Affairs Sergeant. I was deployed to Afghanistan in 2012 to 2013, in Kandahar Province.

After that, I was still in the Reserves, all the way up until last year. The last couple years, I started working in Japan for USFJ. I officially got out last year, a total of 11 years, most of it Reserves.

I started getting into film in 2013, when I got back from Afghanistan. I met a couple veterans who brought me to some organizations in Hollywood, got me some jobs here and there, and I started doing a lot of background production assistant work.

I realized that that was not the path toward becoming a director, which is what I always wanted to be from childhood. It's a very difficult journey to become a director. There was a lot of opposition, but if I wanted to have a chance, I needed to get educated. I had my Bachelor's Degree in Communications & Film, but I didn't feel like it was really a substantial degree. I didn't feel like it really taught me the technical skills I needed to work in an evolving film industry.

I entered the film program at USC and I've been there for the last four years. I learned a lot about the technical side, and I met a lot of great people, and got more experience. That's exactly what I wanted, to have more stuff on my reel, build my

network, learn more about the technical skills that are involved in filmmaking.

I had the opportunity to be mentored by an Academy Award winner, one of the visual effects supervisors for *John Wick: Chapter 3*. He was a great mentor of mine and still is. He helped me out with making *The Gatekeeper*, as far as telling me where I was going wrong, what I was doing right. *The Gatekeeper* was definitely the pinnacle of my work at USC.

ABBOTT: Why did you decide on a military theme?

MARTINEZ: I realized early on that military films are not really being told. It's funny, because I didn't really think, when I started in the film industry, that I was going to be a director of military-related films. I didn't think that was my path. I didn't think much about that genre-wise.

When I started going to USC I really started to think: Okay, I need to double-down on this because there's no one else doing the job. There are no movies, in my opinion, that are really, at the moment, doing a lot of justice to the experiences of serving in post-9/11 wars. I started getting my feet wet with that.

2016 was very divisive. I really feel like it was similar to—maybe not quite the same, because I wasn't born in that era—but similar division-wise to the Vietnam era. You had a lot of protests. You had people who just didn't like the military. It's unfortunate, but you get a lot of this in strongholds like Los Angeles and New York.

Regardless of all that, I made military-related films when there were people who didn't really like the underlying messages, who thought they were controversial. But I told them that they were accurate and often based on actual events that happened to people.

I work very hard to get my films as authentic as possible

because I know, as a veteran, how much we are willing to totally tear apart a movie. We look at something like *American Sniper* or all these high-budget movies and we say, "Hey, you had \$100 million. Why couldn't you get this shit right? Why couldn't you hire someone, a veteran, to help you out or even tell the story?"

I think that's part of the disconnect that I hope we'll see change. We already are seeing "veteran" being its own diversity category. We're not really being represented in the film industry at all. If you look at the demographics, veterans are the least represented in the film industry.

I think that this is changing, and I've already seen the beginnings of it. I hope it continues to change because veterans want to be able to tell their own stories. They want to be able to enjoy films that are accurate and that honor the sacrifice that veterans have made in service to this country to further the ideals of freedom and democracy that have really been under attack for quite some time.

I'm not political in any way. I'm very independent-minded, but I do believe in America. I do believe that the sacrifices of our veterans are being misunderstood and not really being taken in total account.

We look at Veterans Affairs, we see tons of suicides. For me, I've known people who have either attempted or actually committed suicide in the military. It totally turns the world upside down for everyone around them. Friends and family are destroyed. I think, for far too long, it's been brushed under the rug.

The idea of *The Gatekeeper* began in 2015, believe it or not. It was my first film at USC. The original idea started when I saw *What Dreams May Come*, which is a Robin Williams film. It's something that many of us think about in the military. It's a military ideology: Valhalla, Warrior Heaven, and all that.

In the film Robin Williams' character goes into hell to save his wife. I felt this was a keen idea of film in general, an interesting concept, and I combined that with the ideals of the military and the genre of the military itself. I think it is its own genre at this point. My film is not really a thriller. It's not really military. It's not really a drama. It's all of those combined.

When I made the short film, sort of a prequel, I didn't have enough money. Back in 2015, I didn't have the assets. I did it for my first project at USC. It's a very, very restrictive time constraint. You have five minutes! But it was really well-liked. A lot of people liked the concept, but it just wasn't a big enough production. It didn't have enough screen time. It didn't have all those things that are necessary for a film.

USC is a very, I would say, liberal-minded campus, nothing wrong with that, but they are not into seeing the military in a positive light. I'm not making the military positive or negative. I'm making it authentic.

That's something that I think is not being recognized in Hollywood. The military is either portrayed as super evil or super good. That's just not what it is at all. It's not super good. It's not super bad. It's just an ideology that people fall into who are supposed to support the Constitution and the country of the United States.

That's the perspective that I didn't see represented, so I decided to keep making films that show what it's like being overseas as a soldier. I made a second film about Afghanistan. It was about a child suicide bomber. It got a lot of heat. A lot of people didn't like the fact that I was getting into controversial things about the war.

I said, "Okay, cool. I'm hitting a button here. I'm hitting something. I'm getting a reaction out of people, which is, for

better or worse, good." As long as it comes from truth, I think that that's a good place. Eventually, through my time at USC, I learned more and more, and I became known as "the military director."

ABBOTT: How important is authenticity?

MARTINEZ: Eventually, I was getting close to the end of my time at USC. I was there for four years, from 2016 until December of 2019. The process for making a thesis film is really about three semesters, a little over a year, and the script for the thesis film was really pretty much the same thing as my original short, which was essentially the same concept as *The Gatekeeper*. I have the same main actor, who's a good friend of mine, Chris Loverro. He himself is a war veteran. He's an amazing patriot, amazing veteran, amazing theatrical actor. My relationship with Chris is so strong I knew that I was going to be able to pull this film off with him.

For *The Gatekeeper*, he was instrumental with helping me build the firing range shown in the film, with helping me get right certain things that a high-ranking soldier would do. Even though I was in the military for ten years, I couldn't know everything. I think that's where Hollywood gets it wrong. They have directors who have spent zero time in the military, and then they don't even listen to the military advisor that the studio has provided for them.

I really tried to make the film as authentic as possible, as military people will totally rip apart any little thing that's incorrect in a movie. It's like, hey, if I'm going to be known as a military director, I better make sure I have this complete on lock the weapons, the uniforms, the jargon, the tactics, everything single thing has to be completely on point.

ABBOTT: How did the actual shoot progress?

MARTINEZ: We filmed *The Gatekeeper* in six and a half days. That was all we could afford within our budget. I was lucky enough to be able to get some financial help. I did spend a lot of my own money to get the project going, which I saved during my time in service, and then also I got scholarships and grants. I was very fortunate to get help from the Robert Rodriguez Scholarship, as well as a few other people that were kind enough to donate as well.

I built a lot of connections within my time at USC as well, so the weapons and the locations and everything like that, a lot of it I got for free or next to nothing, which was a huge help in being able to pull this thing off.

I had great help from people who chipped in their time, chipped in their energy, a lot of veterans that I knew within Hollywood that I had built a relationship with who knew me came out of the woodwork to make this film come alive. Jennifer Marshall, she's probably the most well-known actress in the film. She's been in *Stranger Things*. She's been in *Hawaii Five-0*. She has her own television show on CW called *Mysteries Decoded*.

It was a long and grueling process, but also a great process to collaborate with cast members who are veterans. I wanted to make this movie after I learned that a friend of mind had committed suicide around May 2018. I found out that he had hanged himself. It finally struck me that veteran suicide is a big problem. Essentially, I wanted to be able to convey to veterans, in their own language, how suicide is not the answer, no matter how depressed one is. Anybody can be susceptible to suicide.

ABBOTT: How does this concern come out in the film?

MARTINEZ: The lead character, Tuason, is the highest-ranking member in the platoon, the first sergeant. Even he can be susceptible to depression. That's what I wanted to show.

You're not weak for showing guilt.

A lot of this movie has to do with my own experiences. Some of the characters reflect my own perception about how the military really functions. Too many times we hear things that are not helpful to soldiers. I think there can be some change within the military to help people.

In my opinion, it's definitely against human nature to kill one another and see one another killed, and it can cause quite a lot of damage psychologically and spiritually to people.

That's the thing a lot of people don't see, too, especially from the outside, is that the experience is not all sobs and horrors. It's also very exhilarating and addicting. I virtually don't know any veteran who wouldn't go back overseas. I honestly don't think I know one. Every veteran I talk to, if you asked them today, "If you could put your gear on and you could go back to a war zone, would you do it?" I would guarantee you 75%, if not more, would say that they want to.

Once that feeling is in your blood, once that level of excitement is in your blood, it's impossible to top. Risky behavior, driving a fast car—that's why you see a lot of veterans on motorcycles, because that's the closest they can get to the type of thrill that makes them feel alive.

There's absolutely a psychological effect that combat has on people. Whether it's addicting or thrill-seeking, or whether it's a combination cocktail of all of those things, there is that element that you see in *The Gatekeeper*.

For me, I think there are a lot of similarities in the cultures of religious ideology and military ideology. There's loyalty. There's the idea of seeing each other in the afterlife. There's the idea of a higher purpose, of renouncing the individual self for the group.

That's what I wanted to show in *The Gatekeeper* as well. The whole scene, to Tuason, is about him believing that he's going to see his friend in the afterlife. This is something that is absolutely real in the military.

LA: Sanchez, Tuason's best friend, does appear as a ghost. What exactly does the title refer to?

JM: The title refers to multiple things, but the main thing is the gate between heaven and hell. That's what Sanchez' character in the afterlife is supposed to portray. It also has a dual meaning because the main character is somebody that essentially keeps the enemy at the gates as well. That's the big question: Who is really the gatekeeper? It is Tuason or is it Sanchez?

I also wanted to make this film connecting to people that believed in theism or people that were non-theist. That was very important to me. I wanted it to be connected on both sides. There's a huge religious element to the film, even in the beginning, when he says, "You're gonna send these guys to the afterlife." It's very strong in the narrative.

What I wanted to convey with this is that Tuason's belief system is, in my opinion, religious. The United States is still a Christian religious country.

LA: What were you after at the end of the film?

JM: At the very end, did he go to hell, or was it a hell he felt psychologically? You can perceive it in both ways. We all share this one thing that's on our minds more than others: the thought of death and the thought of going back into the earth, if there is life after death, and all of these other types of constructs. The life-after-death construct is definitely heavy—and has always been heavy—within the warrior mentality, because there's just so much of it within that culture.

I definitely had a very deep philosophical angle that I wanted to show. The main thing is that a lot of veterans are suffering and they are not only feeling guilt, but there is also the ideology of honor that is in the military ideology.

I think honor's great. It's great that people have the Medal of Honor. And the ideas and concepts of honor are good in a lot of ways. But I also think, in other ways, when we start to really look at it, it can have negative effects. How do you define honor? Can honor be fully achieved? What is the effect of lost honor?

I don't think people in the very strongholds of Hollywood care, to be honest with you. I don't think they really care about the veterans' suffering. I think they believe that the wars are evil. I think that this is a huge, how do I say, misfortune. It's a huge misfortune for all of us, because we're not getting movies like *The Gatekeeper* that can ask more questions. I want the audience to ask questions. I don't want to tell you what exactly it means. I want you to find a deeper meaning to it.

For me, my deeper meaning is: When we tell somebody they need to aspire to a sense of honor, and then you take it all away from them overnight, all these ideas of being a soldier, with the Tuason character, he didn't feel like he had achieved that honor, and that's where the guilt comes in, where he felt like he wanted to go back to combat, because he wanted more of this experience. This can absolutely crush and destroy people.

LA: The ending of the film is ambiguous. Tuason goes to the hospital and talks to Sanchez. You use some special visual effects.

JM: Not to give away any of this, but what I was trying to say with that—the veins, the choking—is it really does feel like we cannot communicate with the rest of the world. The pain he was feeling throughout the film suffocated him. That is much

more common and much more real: the war within the self.

Tuason joins the firefight to save his troops, which is definitely an honorable thing to do, but he makes the decision to not retreat and essentially go for revenge, for the satisfaction of killing the enemy and completing the mission. It doesn't work out. More of his men are lost because of his decision. He loses everything, including his own mental health.

You can't talk to the military about PTSD or you will be yanked from your command. All sort of repercussions would happen if you had any psychological disruption, especially during that period in Iraq of the '03-'05 era.

The military has definitely gotten better at this, but Tuason felt that he couldn't to talk to anyone within the military or within his family. He's being psychologically choked. He can't breathe at that moment because he's being pulled back into hell as well. So, there's a supernatural element combined with the element of his being suffocated, in so much pain, with this depression, this guilt, not being able to connect with anyone. It's a dual feeling that I was portraying there.

And then, with him at the very end, I wanted to add some suspense if he was going to kill himself or not. I wanted people to see what it is like to be in that suicidal state so they don't get to that state. I want veterans to feel what it would actually be like to be in that state—you're probably not immediately going to die in any certain circumstance. I don't care if you jump off a roof. You're probably still going to be conscious for some period of time, according to scientific data.

Even if you shoot yourself in the head, you're probably going to feel that pain of not being able to go back, the real regret. Who knows what goes on at that point? We don't know what kind of ideas and dreams you have before you leave this

world. I wanted to show that Tuason felt the pain, he saw the pain, of leaving his wife and have her shatter to pieces. She'll never be the same person again after her husband's death.

LA: When she's in the hospital bed, giving birth to the child she always wanted, the image of her is in black and white and her face is distorted.

JM: She's distorted. That's what the underlying message is that she's a shell of what she could've been and he gets to see the baby girl. He gets to feel the real pain of his ultimate decision, which is irreversible, of killing himself. That's what I want veterans to see.

And not just veterans. I wanted to connect with everyone. Even though this film is centered toward the veteran, I think a lot of people can understand the suicidal impulse. It doesn't matter if you were a first sergeant in the Army. That doesn't matter. What matters is that we all feel trauma. We all feel pain. We all sometimes feel like quitting, especially right now, with this coronavirus situation. There's a lot of depression, I'm sure, going on. The real tragedy is to give up and to give in. Taking your life is something that will affect all of those people around you in many different dimensions.

I wanted to be able to send that message to the big screen, because we're just seeing too much of this happening in our society. It's really an epidemic, maybe a pandemic, but there are is a shocking number of veterans who are committing suicide. I've seen it happen too many times. We've see the data.

LA: What were your influences growing up, filmmakers or otherwise?

JM: I'm a huge fan of *Scarface*. When I was eight years old, in 1998, I saw *Scarface* for the first time, and that's when I knew I wanted to become a filmmaker. There was something about

that film that made so much sense to me. It was just such a beautifully directed film.

Obviously, it was a little beyond my time. I was very young and the movie was probably ten years old at that point, or whatever, at least. But I just connected with it in such a way, and I kept watching it and watching it and watching it. It's a three-hour movie. I just fell in love with the artistic side of that film.

The Matrix was also a favorite film of mine from my era. There's a sleekness to *The Matrix* that I tried to emulate—being in another world, different dimensions. That's kind of what you see in *The Gatekeeper*. I tried to combine that sleek and slickness as much as I could.

LA: *The Gatekeeper's* structure is certainly non-linear.

JM: Exactly. The whole movie is really jumping between timelines. That's something I picked up from *Inception*. It's not my favorite movie by any means, but I do appreciate the non-linear “what's real, what's not real” element. I liked the concepts it was trying to master, and I borrowed a lot of those things, as much as I could, to put into *The Gatekeeper*.

Every film borrows ideas from others. We all know this. It's just what happens. There's a lot I borrowed from *What Dreams May Come*. You could arguably say *The Gatekeeper* is *What Dreams May Come* meets *American Sniper*. That's really what it is.

There's this whole ideal in the military “sweat more, bleed less.” But death can come to anyone in the military. Under bad leadership, everyone can be vulnerable to death.

But you are also vulnerable under good leadership. It could be an unfortunate event. It's really your perspective. Death is random. It's the luck of the draw. It doesn't matter sometimes how skilled you are. It can matter, but it's multitudes of things. We all like to think—and we are all trained in the

military to believe—that it's not luck, that it's really how well-trained you are.

I think we have to talk about these tough things in order to really bring change. We can't have them taboo forever. We've been so under the spell of "Oh, yeah, you can never talk about politics. You can never talk about religion. You can never talk about veteran experience, because they're all sacred."

I don't buy into that. I think when we don't talk about those issues, it leads to this toxic cocktail of isolation. Veterans in the Vietnam War and the current wars, too, have been forced to kill children. We see a little bit of this in *American Sniper*. People are using children as soldiers, and that really can screw up the psyche of a soldier, being forced, essentially, to kill children. That's just one example—women, children, innocents.

So, if we don't talk about it, if we're barred from talking about it and we're being forced to live within this illusion, that has repercussions and can damage veterans.

LA: Have you shown the film to other veterans? Any feedback from them?

JM: I have. I did a screening, an educational screening, in downtown Los Angeles, where USC is. I showed it to a bunch of veterans. We had a huge amount of people come. It was the first actual screening of the film. I had people cry. I had a woman whose husband was a Vietnam veteran, and she said there was so much of that film that she, as a wife, could connect to. So, that was really powerful for me to see her so emotional from this film.

I've shown it to other veterans as well. They have been very emotional after seeing the film, knowing that I tried to show the truth in the way that veterans think, and that veterans within our communities are essentially silent when they kill themselves.

Honestly, I don't think I've had a veteran who hasn't understood the film at some level. Combat veterans love the film. They totally get it—Army, Marine Corps. It doesn't matter what era, because the movie is showing what the ideals of military service are.

But the film is not just for vets. I wanted to be able to connect with civilians. I think they are emotional through it, in a sense, and they can see how war can have negative impacts overall on people's mental health. Suicide is not just a veterans' issue.

I would love to be able to get this in front of people in Washington. I've been working toward that as well. But if I can get tapped in to Washington, I think there could be some great ideas in being able to work together and promote content that is more accurate to mental health issues.

LA: You've said, "I want to make a difference and start a conversation. I think *The Gatekeeper* can save veteran and civilian lives."

JM: That's the overall goal of the film. You could call it a deterrent. Sure. But we use deterrents in society all the time. We have police deterrents. You can't go to the beach right now in LA. You get a \$100 ticket.

So, deterrents aren't necessarily a bad thing. They can be used for good, especially when society needs to be pushed back in the right direction.

You take somebody who's had an enormous amount of power, enormous amount of respect and responsibility, and then they get out of that world. Maybe they hated aspects of it and maybe they loved aspects of it, but now there's nothing. We couldn't really get into it within the film. There just wasn't enough time. But that element of nihilism, that's what I firmly believe is the number one killer. I think what a lot of veterans go through is a sense of needing direction and

purpose.

I want to stop them from killing themselves and make other narratives that are better. It's a huge thing for me to be able to hire veterans. I hire a lot of veterans with my own money. I don't live in a mansion over here in LA. I live in a very small apartment. But I paid a lot of veterans to be able to come out, help me out, and make a film that, overall, is essentially a deterrent—specifically for veterans, but it could also be for everyone in these dark times.

LA: You see that theme of the difficulty of returning to the civilian world in a lot of the films and the novels and the stories. In *War*, Sebastian Junger mentions Brendan O'Byrne, who comes back to society and nothing is life and death anymore, whereas, in war, an untied bootlace could mean your death. You come back to the civilian world and nothing has that import anymore.

Tim O'Brien writes about a buddy of his, Bowker, who comes back from Vietnam but can't fit in anywhere. He drives around and around in circles all day, before finally killing himself.

You see this in Hemingway's story "Soldiers Home." Krebs comes back and he can't fit into the family anymore. He can't fit into society. Religion fails him. At the end of the story, he just leaves; he can't bear being back home again.

Anyway, your film is notable for using 3D motion capture and digital storyboarding. How important was that to you?

JM: I'll put it this way: there were not enough hours in the day to finish the film without that previsualization, because it's so important from a production angle.

It is a storyboard on steroids. Using that technology would've probably cost me \$30,000 in Hollywood, at least. But, because I used USC's technology and the information that I learned from being a student there, I was able to plan every single

shot of my movie. We shot all the Iraq war scenes in one day. That was an incredible amount of footage to be able to capture in one day. Everything was planned because I had that previsualization.

A lot of the process of movie-making—even George Lucas talks about it—is to keep it in the parameters that you have, the resources, the time, the ability. I was able to mobilize all the various components—and you know what the beauty of it is?

My experience in the military is all about planning. It's all about preparation and then execution.

So, because of my background, I was able to have that discipline and plan the film out as much as I possible could. I think *The Gatekeeper* looks a lot closer to a Hollywood film than a lot of student projects because of that reason, because of my background. My military training helped out a lot.

LA: You have multiple settings. There is a cemetery, the interiors, a hospital, battle scenes, a rifle range.

JM: The VA actually allowed me to film at the West LA National Cemetery. I filmed the range out in the middle of the desert. I actually built that range with my bare hands and help from my command sergeant major and a couple other Marines.

The film was impossible to do without the veteran community. When we all come together, when we all have a common goal, and when we all know that this problem is eating away at our society, we can accomplish great things. That's what I want to do.

LA: You co-wrote the movie. Could you talk a little bit about your co-writer?

JM: Connie Siu was the co-writer. I wanted to have a civilian help me make it more understandable, and she was great in helping out with the female character. In the early stages of the scriptwriting process, there wasn't enough substance for

the Krissy character. I wanted to have a strong woman, because you need a strong woman for a strong man like Russell.

I didn't want to screw that up, because women, especially in the military films, are not really represented that well. I didn't want to be branded that way. But, at the same time, women are not in the infantry, so you've got to have a realistic story. I just had to toe a line in being able to convey that wives have a huge role to play, during and after deployment. After he's done with the military, he's got to have, hopefully, a family to develop and look forward to. The same could hold true for a woman in the military with a civilian husband.

I wanted to have a woman on the team in the writing stage that could really help out with not only me asking her, "Does this make sense to you as a civilian?" so I don't go too far into the military jargon. She also helped with getting things done as well as a producer.

LA: How much did you create or work on the musical score?

JM: I wish you could see it in theaters because that's really where you can hear the score to its fullest. It kills me to have to show it to people online, but you've gotta do what you've gotta do. The score was a huge part. I was very connected to the score. I probably had about five sessions with the composer, and those sessions probably lasted about three to four hours, on average.

It was a live score. We recorded it live with many musicians and opera singers. It was an amazing experience. It was probably one of the greatest experiences I've ever had to have an actual score on the film.

Mateus de Castro Machado Freire graduated from USC last year. I knew of his work. His music is like—you listen to it and you automatically think of Steven Spielberg's films.

I reached out to him. He's from Brazil and was living there at the time. After he saw the rough cut of the film, he said he would fly up to California and make the score, and that's exactly what he did. He flew from Brazil, came to California, and just slaved away at the score. You've got to understand that there are a lot of deadlines. There are a lot of time constraints. I loved what he did. We worked very hard on the score. I will probably work with him in the future for the right project.

I think my favorite part of the score is the war scene. That's the longest song. It's about four or five minutes long. He's just a master at transitioning the tone of a film. That's really important. It switches tone from thriller to war to almost like horror in one moment. He did a spectacular job. He was a composer in Brazil before he went to USC. He was a violinist for many years. He's just a true artist, a great friend.

LA: To wrap up, the film touches on many issues, such as the returning veteran and the transition to civilian life, the military mindset, the aftereffects of war. What are your concerns beyond the film?

JM: I think many returning vets feel a loss of purpose. I think art can restore purpose. Chris Loverro, who plays the main character, Tuason, is a huge advocate for acting as a therapeutic method for veterans. If he can get veterans into showing their emotions again, I think it is freakin' phenomenal. For so many years, you're being told no emotions, kill without emotion, operate like a machine, be a machine, lean like a Marine machine—all of this propaganda that you are just a cog in a machine.

That works well for the military environment, but when you get out, your emotions being gone can lead to extreme mental damage. When you're fearful of using your emotions, never use them, and to be like a savage—which is kind of the culture of

the military, I would say—I think there should not be a ceremony but maybe an exit—maybe more focus on that, focus on, “Hey, these things that we taught you in the military may not help you in the civilian world.”

We can't talk about women in society in the same way that you do in the military. The military is a fraternity. You can't treat people in civilian society the way you do in the military. It just doesn't work. You would be chained up. You can't treat other people like machines. That's what you did as a sergeant in the Army or Marine Corps. You're copying like Mr. Smith in *The Matrix*. You're making more mini-clones of yourself.

That mentality is hard to come out of when you've been so impressionable to it. I joined when I was 17 years old. I was a paratrooper by my 19th birthday. What I'm saying is that it can help you in many ways and it can really damage you in a lot of ways. It's taken a while in order to overcome the negative things that I learned within the military.

I didn't really have a father. I grew up pretty much with a very distant father, you could say. The military was more of an impressionable father figure than my own father. The things that they taught me were not good in a lot of ways. They were good for being in the military, but they weren't good for being a civilian in other ways.

Leadership? Yeah, okay, that's good. So, anyway, what my point is at the end of this is that maybe the military can adjust. Maybe they can—whether it's at the exit of your time in service or maybe they just adjust the culture, just in general, to be in a way that is less—I guess you could say trusted, especially to the youth, the people that are the youngest.

If you're an officer and you join the military, you're probably 22 or 23, because you have to go to college first.

So, in that time, you're able to develop your own philosophy. You're able to have more life experiences. And you may not be totally susceptible to an onslaught of demeaning, horrible treatment and ideology, because you're a lieutenant. You're kind of above all of that.

I'm a big supporter of the military, but I also believe in change. I think that there's change that has come, and I think there could be more change that will be able to come.

Military rape is a huge problem—huge, a huge. How are you going to be comfortable sending your daughter into the military when you hear that rape is so prevalent, especially in certain branches? We've got to change the military culture.

That's a whole other conversation, but the actress, Jennifer, is very open about being raped in the military. That's horrible. People shouldn't have to go through that. How can you be raped by another Marine, soldier, sailor?

You can't do the things that you did in the service that were celebrated. Society, especially in liberal society, will make you a total outsider, a total outcast, and you'll suffer.

With that, the wars have drawn down. We're not getting a huge influx all at once of people that have just come straight out of the battlefield. I think if we improve these things we can have less suicide. We can have a better military force. We're always going to need a military force. There's no way around that.

The other ideology of the liberal doctrine, in my philosophy, thinks that we don't need a military. The military is belittled and people think that vets are a bunch of wackos and killers. That's not the way to think about that, either.

Hopefully there can be a middle ground, a neutral position, that can understand that we need the military but at the same time see veterans in a more positive, welcoming light.