

# New Poetry by Liam Corley

A VETERAN OBSERVES THE REPUBLIC AND REMEMBERS GINSBERG



Claes Moeyaert. *Sacrifice of Jeroboam*, 1641.

America, I've given you all, and now I'm less than one percent.

America, fourteen-point-six-seven-five years of service I can't characterize as other than honorable, three hundred ninety-one days pounding dirt in other people's countries, and one hundred seventeen sleepless nights per annum in

perpetuity,  
September 11, 2017.

America, I'm willing to renegotiate our social contract. I won't complain about the clean bill of health charged against me by the V.A., and you can stop involuntarily mobilizing memes of my demise in support of indecent campaigns. America, believe me when I say I'm not dead broke, I ain't so straight, I'm not all white, and I don't love hate.

America, when will you realize we are peopled with two-and-a-half times more African Americans than veterans, discounting three million souls in both tribes? Here I incorporate them all, the ones *hunted and penned in an inglorious spot*, survivors whose lives matter, because we both know the wary grief of looking at a uniform we paid for and wondering whom the man beneath has sworn to protect and defend.

America, into this veteran poem I will take all the graduates of Columbine and Sandy Hook, the ones who lived after having no answers for the warm muzzle of a gun, and their teachers, especially the ones who ran toward shots. The hall of the American Legion will overflow with such heroes, streaming like the blessed dead of Fort Hood and Chattanooga across the Styx in Charon's commandeered craft, the open door of welcome forced, as always, by warriors still living.

America, let's rent a cherry picker to take down the F in the V.F.W. sign, let *what is removed drop horribly in the pail*. Police will

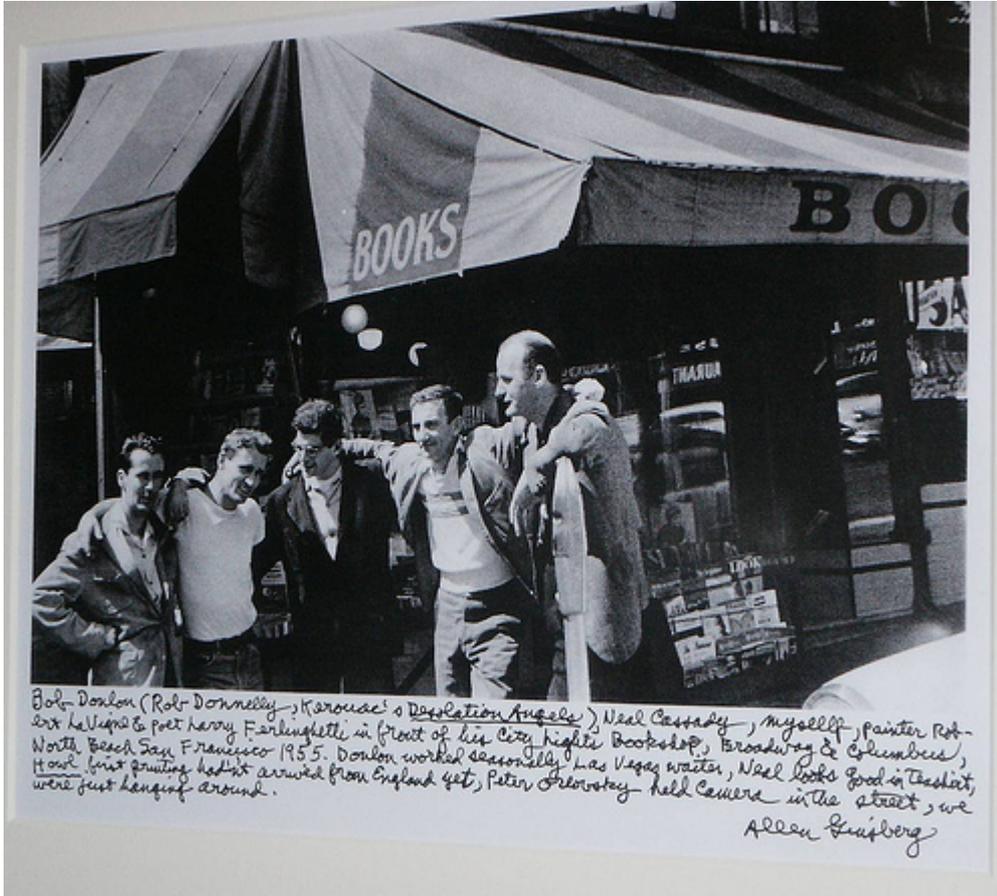
gather in their surplus riot gear  
and nod in understanding fashion, their years of service  
trailing them like a sentence,  
arming them with arcane questions of whether civilians we  
protected yesterday will kill us today.  
America, out of the sands of Kandahar and Ramadi, I go with  
them too.

Furthermore, America, in this election season, I go with  
righteous immigrants and refugees,  
fellow sufferers of long journeys in inhumane transports that  
leave them in permanent pain.  
O, my desperate ones, border-crossers of unwilling countries,  
you who pay taxes of sweat and fear,  
you are not alien to me, or my thirty-five thousand brother  
and sister dreamers in green and khaki  
fighting for something that isn't wholly ours in dangerous  
places where we simply do our jobs.

America, when will you give Cyber Purple Hearts to all who  
have had their lives taken  
out of your senile, digital grip,  
starting with the twenty-four million whose secrets you've let  
slip into China's voracious panda pocket?  
We shall update and tweet ourselves feverish with the chant,  
"Uncle Sam is my Big Brother"  
in protest of all those Xis and Putins and Snowdens and Kims  
and Transnational Criminal Elements stealing our binary  
essence.  
I'm not joking, America: I foresee the day when every iPhone  
will be issued with a trauma kit,  
every laptop with a liability release for unauthorized remote  
access.

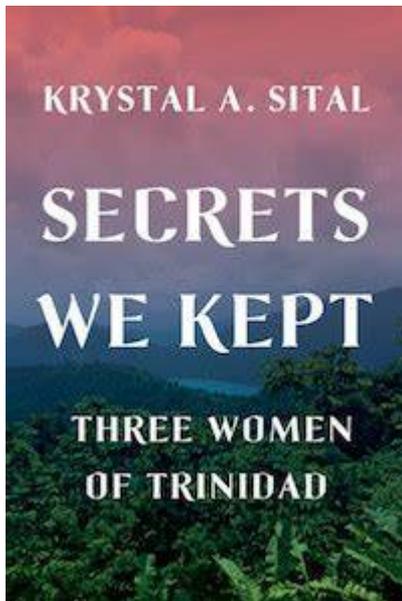
O America, my love, my burial plot, all this I will put in a  
phantom poem,  
my own republic, for you to receive, a sea bag of sights  
unseen

to tumble down the ramp of a decommissioned C-130,  
this empty box,  
this absent limb.



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## New Memoir by Krystal A. Sital: SECRETS WE KEPT



We are of Trinidad—my grandmother, my mother, and I.

Our island is located in the Lesser Antilles of paradise, a dot on the map that is often forgotten. *It like ah drop ah oil, some say, as doh somebody forget to wipe it ahwey.*

The bodies of water that seep into the island are as much a part of the island's identity as they are a part of ours, and everywhere we have come to settle after abandoning home has been with the proximity of the seaside in mind. Perhaps the openness of the sea soothes the inner turmoil of us island women, or perhaps it shows the island's inability to contain us.

While attending school in Trinidad—*hwome*, as we will call it for the rest of our lives, though we are all now settled in America—we're taught how Christopher Columbus discovered it in 1498. That the Carib and Arawak tribes were indigenous didn't stop historians from calling it a discovery. In conversation with Americans, I've heard my grandmother and mother draw the same facts from our elementary education, the same ones I mention to others today. *Do you know why it's called Trinidad? It's because of the three hills along the southern coast of the island—Morne Derrick, Gros Morne, and Guaya Hill. When Columbus first spotted the land on July 31 in 1498 he was*

*inspired to name it after the three hills—La Trinidad, the Trinity.* These ternate hills that peak above the clouds in mottled greens, picturesque, majestic, form a wall that breaks the patterns of the most ferocious hurricanes, a natural protection that no other island in the Caribbean owns. The Trinity represents our most powerful guardians.

Rising with elegance along the bluffs, the supple branches of immortelle trees stretch wide, their leaves on fire against the backdrop of a perfect Caribbean sky. Native to Venezuela, just off the coast of Trinidad, these mountain trees shine emerald all year round in their natural habitat. Once they were brought to Trinidad to cast shade over the cocoa plantations in the 19th century, they too, like all else touched by the islands, changed. Their roots burrowed deep, and they exchanged their greenery for fire petals that flicker orange and red along the regions of Trinidad and Tobago. Sown into the very history of the terrain, we choose what of the island we will share with others, and so the beak of a hummingbird dipping into the beaded nectar of an immortelle flower creates the ambiance for the stories we choose to tell. And so, like the fingers of a hand skimming the water of a glassy tide pool, you touch but the surface.

What we never say is how historians call the naming of Trinidad a “historical hoax.” Columbus had every intention of baptizing the next land he found La Trinidad. Its having three hills was either mere coincidence or a miracle. It depends on how one chooses to tell the story.

Most people shake their heads in confusion when we tell them where we’re from. *Where?* they ask. *Where exactly is that?* And sometimes those who have a vague familiarity with the Caribbean will say, *I thought everyone there was black.*

On our islands you will find descendants of the Carib and Arawak tribes, Europeans, Venezuelans, Chinese, Syrians, French, Portuguese, and Lebanese, but of them all, the two

largest groups by far are East Indians and Africans. Centuries before Trinidad became a British colony, before Sir Walter Raleigh discovered the natural Pitch Lake that gleamed the blackest blue along spools of water on Trinidad's knee, before Columbus spotted the island, Amerindians called it home. They called it Ieri- Land of the Hummingbird. But when Columbus sailed upon them, these people were captured, enslaved, and littered along the coasts of other Caribbean islands, forced to work for Spain.

Our island changed hands, and when the British captured it from Spain, they brought enslaved Africans to work the leafy grounds of the sugar plantations. This was the only group of people to exist on the island as slaves, and when slavery was abolished in England, the wealthy landowners in Trinidad then brought indentured laborers from India to replace the Africans on the plantations.

*At least we geh pay, the Indians now say, dem niggas an dem come as slave. They know the history but continue to etch in these lines drawn for them. They perpetuate a war, the East Indians and Africans, one group thinking they are better than the other, East Indian children rhyming in the schoolyard, Nigga nigga come foh roti, all de roti done, when de coolie raise e gun, all de nigga run. And Africans taunting, Eenie meenie miney mo, ketch ah coolie by e toe, when e ready let im go, eenie meenie miney mo.*

And so this enmity between Africans and Indians led them, and others, to maintain the perceived purity of their bloodlines, further carving hatred into our islands' history. Interracial couples and their multiracial children are still shunned as they were in my mother's childhood and my grandmother's. The blended are labeled mulatto, dougla, cocopanyol. These words are hissed and spat at my family: my grandmother is mixed, my Indian grandfather is not.

The shorelines of the islands are still unmarred by cement

skyscrapers, but throngs of tourists trample lands natives can no longer afford, and boardwalks, chlorinated pools, and lobbies adorned with plastic plants have been cropping up with the image of paradise being sold.

But the republic of Trinidad and Tobago is where coconut trees rise out of the land, their backs braced against the breezes, spines curved into C's all along the shores, and coconut husks ripped from their mother trees dot the sand on every coast.

Our stories are rooted in the Caribbean, our histories woven into its bougainvillea trellises with their paper-thin petals; the lone road winding round and round the mountain like a serpent strangling a tree, coiling up and down again to the virgin beaches untouched by hotels and tourists, crowds, and money; the foliage so dense and green it's a prismatic shade of malachite, almost as though the vegetation itself is choking the life out of the island. This is a place where the intoxicating aroma of curry drapes itself around you in layers; where bake and shark sandwiches are fried on the beach; where the main ingredient for every dish is the heady bandanya, our word for culantro—no, not cilantro, it is much stronger than that. Here, people devour every part of every animal from the eyeballs to the guts and lick their fingers and pat their bellies when they are through.

The island can be traversed in a day, less than that if you know what you're doing. A mere ten degrees north of the equator, it is a place of heat so intense it can drive a person insane, and yet the waves curling against the seashore deep in the valleys between mountains and the luminous rivers that seem to fall from the sky itself can quench that same person's soul for eternity.

Trinidad is our fears and our loves. There we discovered our beings, we dug deep and planted our roots assuming we would never leave, sucking on the armored cascadura with its silver-plaited shell, devouring the sweet flesh beneath, the only

fish the legend says ties you to the land forevermore,  
smacking our lips when we were done. We never thought we would  
have to leave this place, since our mothers and fathers  
planted our placentas beneath mango and plum, pomegranate and  
coconut trees.

But in the end we choose to flee.

We leave. We do. With no intention of turning back, we embrace  
America for everything Trinidad was not.

*From [Secrets We Kept](#) by Krystal A. Sital. Copyright © 2018 by  
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## New Poetry by Lynn Houston

### You Leave for Afghanistan

If I'm writing this, it means I can't sleep and that  
the rain outside my window drops blindly in the dark.

The crops need it, the cashier told me earlier, ringing  
me up for a pint of milk, making small talk, making change.

And now the tipped carton has marred the pages  
on my too-small desk. I'm trying not to make too much of it—

this mess, the disasters my life and pages gather.  
I'm trying to be kinder to myself, more forgiving.

Outside, a leopard moth lands on the screen, shudders  
to dry its wings. One touch from my finger would strip

the powdered coating that allows it to fly in rain.  
I wish it might have been so easy to keep you

from boarding the plane that took you to war.  
In the predawn, my neighbors still asleep, I am the only one  
to hear the garbage truck grind to a stop,  
its brakes the sound of an animal braying.

The rain has stopped, too. I look over the smudged papers  
on my desk. Nothing important has been lost.

When you come home safely to me in six months,  
we will be able to say, *nothing important has been lost.*



**You Send Very Little News**

*You don't know all the time I'm killin'.  
I watch it pass 'til nothing's left . . .  
I let my memory carry on.*  
–Buffalo Clover, “15 Reasons”

I try to imagine where you live now, try to read  
beyond what operational security allows.

You say it's dirty there and hot. There's sand  
everywhere. You have a French press for coffee.

Here, I keep things green for you—lie in the fresh grass  
with the dog until we no longer smell like walls,

make entire meals out of honey and peaches. I choose  
fields in Connecticut that remind me of the farm,

stare up at the now goatless clouds, imagine that the distant  
bird I see is the shape of the plane that will bring you home.



## **They Lie Who Don't Admit Despair**

*I'm trying not to think about you,  
but when this combine rocks and rolls,  
it shakes my mind and shakes my body,  
the way your leaving shook my soul.*

–Chris Knight, “Here Comes the Rain”

I've had some dark moments  
while you've been gone.  
Mostly I've been okay, having  
made up my bullheaded mind  
to just get through it.  
But last night you said  
that in a few weeks you will  
ask me to stop sending mail,

because you are that close  
to coming home. And I felt  
a lightness I haven't known  
since meeting you.  
From that first day,  
this absence weighed on us.  
When you return, we will  
be together for the first time  
without the threat  
of imminent departure.

I imagine you this morning  
with warm flatbread, steaming coffee.  
I imagine you smiling.  
I'm smiling, too, listening  
to the house creak.  
Imagining you here.

### **You Call from the Airport to Say You Are Home**

When we began, our hummingbird bodies  
did a thousand anxious pirouettes midair,  
dazzled and unfazed by the sour nectar  
we had to drink at end of season.

You are back now, and we will do it  
all again, but with sweetness.  
All the beauty of bodies in love.  
How generous is war  
to give us two beginnings.

### **At the Harbor Lights Motel After You Return**

The fish aren't biting on Key Largo  
the morning we spend together

after you return. You nap all day,  
sheets spiraled like a carapace  
around your torso and legs.

Next to you in bed, I touch your head,  
stroke the hair you've grown long,  
and ask what it was like over there.  
But you pull the blankets higher  
and turn away to face the wall.

Hours later, I call to you from the doorway  
to show you a snapper on my line. You dress,  
find me on the dock where we drink beer  
as the sun slumps behind the palms.

You sleep through the night, and in the morning,  
before you leave for a dive on a coral reef,  
you tell me that turtles sleep like humans do—  
you've seen them at night tucked into the nooks  
of wrecks, heads withdrawn into shells;  
you've seen their eyes blink open in the beam  
of your dive light; you've even seen one wake  
and swim away when a fish fin came too close.  
*They have nerve endings there, you tell me.*  
*They can feel when something touches their shell.*

When you return from the reef, I ask you  
again how it was over there, and this time  
you begin to tell me what you can.



## **The Persistence of Measurement**

*There'll be a thousand miles between us  
when I pass the border guard.*

*Is that thunder in the distance,  
or just the breaking of my heart?*

—Chris Knight, “Here Comes the Rain”

The morning he leaves me, my lover buries  
a lamb—a runt who'd only lived a few days—  
on a hill of the Tennessee farm where we met.

Does he think, as he digs the grave,  
as he presses his face to the cold wool  
to say goodbye, of the last time he caressed  
my hair or pressed his body against mine?  
Or are his thoughts already in Memphis, with her?

I wouldn't know. I was not given the dignity of a burial, just an email sent after he'd been drinking, blaming me for asking too many questions, asking too much of him, for failing to give him space.

In Connecticut, winter refuses to relent.  
It is still the season of waiting.  
I look out the window of the room  
where I waited faithfully for half a year,  
where I wrote him daily.  
The sky is cruel: clouds still take the shape  
of farm animals, and birds become the plane  
that never brought him home to me.

Part of me will always be waiting  
for the return of the man I met in summer,  
before the deployment changed him.  
But that man is thousands of miles away.  
He will always be thousands of miles away.

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## **An Interview with Krystal A. Sital, Author of SECRETS WE KEPT**



In her debut memoir, Krystal A. Sital paints a vivid picture of life in Trinidad, which to any tourist's eyes must seem like something of a paradise. Blue-green waters, intersected by rapid streams and jungle vegetation: the inhabitants of Trinidad are surrounded by the call of the Caribbean filled with carnivals, rum, calypso, and soca music.

For the people born and raised in this island paradise, of course life is littered with far more harsh realities. Extreme poverty, land unsuitable for farming or sustaining life, lack of education or opportunity, a caste system determined by money, race, ethnicity, religion, sex, and other accidents of birth.

The book begins as Krystal and her family, now living in the United States, learn that her grandfather, Shiva Singh, has suffered from a life threatening brain aneurism. As the reality of his condition grows more critical, Krystal is confused by her grandmother's reluctance to immediately approve of the suggested procedures recommended for his survival. In contrast, Krystal's mother, Arya, the daughter of Shiva, seems devoted to him and sits day and night by his side.

As the entire family grows more weary and distraught over the multiple surgeries and the harsh reality that Shiva will never fully return to normal, Krystal wants to know why her mother and grandmother have such wildly divergent emotions for him. One evening, she finds a way to question her mother.

*Secrets We Kept* is the story Krystal draws out in her gentle interviews with her mother and grandmother. The story is brutal and nuanced and unfortunately, timely. In the first pages, I am immediately reminded of the Rob Porter domestic abuse scandal in the White House, the #metoo movement, and even my own family's history we avoid thinking and speaking about—those times when our father beat the crap out of our mother and us, and how that treatment made life and love of him so confusing.

**Q: Did you have any idea that the release of your first memoir would come at a time when the topics it addresses would make it so political? Even if that timing wasn't taken into consideration, there must be some feeling that it lands when conversations around it bring it into a political space. How does that make you feel? What if any reaction have you had from it in this caustic political time?**

**Krystal:** It's both fortunate and unfortunate that this book comes out during such a politically charged time. Unfortunate because, as human beings, we are still viciously fighting about things like immigration, domestic abuse, and women's

rights and health; and fortunate because since there is still so much silence and inequality, a book like this helps sharpen the focus on important discussions and hopefully laws around these topics.

Now looking at it as a work of art in this particular political sphere is maddening. Arts and humanities are being obliterated across the US and so it makes it extremely difficult for books that deal with issues like violence against women and children, immigration, colonialism, race, and class to make it into the hands of the right people. The political climate we're caught up in right now is detrimental to the arts from every angle and so it's important we all fight for it. Art, at its most micro level, is a voice being heard and we need to make sure we never squelch that.

**Q: When I think of a Caribbean island, I imagine the beauty as a place to go to as an escape from the harshness of everyday life. That picture might serve as somewhat of a metaphor for the relationships your mother and grandmother lived. Strong, beautiful women who make choices they think will most help them escape the poverty of their circumstance, but instead land them in ugliness they cannot escape. Is that an accurate way of seeing this story?**

**Krystal:** That's such a lovely insight! Can I use that as though I'd planned it the entire time? I'm just kidding. It's very interesting hearing and reading how others interact with the characters and the islands, what readers bring to the table and what they thought my intent was.

Having lived in America now for more than half my life, I see how people here view the Caribbean. From here it is this place of intense beauty, a place you want to escape to, not from. And Trinidad is a beautiful island, the kind of beauty that absolutely takes your breath away, the colors so vibrant you wonder if what you're seeing is actually real. But the islands—both Trinidad and Tobago—are so much more than that

and so I wanted to use the island as both a character and a backdrop. While divine in its appearance, here was this island where horrific things happened and these horrific things were never spoken about except when passed from mother to daughter, this cycle of storytelling that's never been broken but also never recorded. And I think that's what bothered me the most about this—is that the stories of women *by* women were always lost in the Caribbean while men were the ones who dominated and dictated history and we, as women, didn't take our rightful place in the history of the Caribbean, of Trinidad and Tobago.

Questions like this is so fantastic for a classroom setting because it explores a body of work on multiple levels. My students and I often discuss the reader's interpretation of literature versus the authorial intent. How you manage those two becomes a very individual choice but I strive to find some kind of harmony there when I read books, balancing the author's purpose with my own response and history as a reader.

**Q: Some would read this story as a cautionary tale about the violence of men and yet, in the second to the last sentence in the acknowledgements of your memoir, you write; “My beautiful partner, my husband, Pawel Grzech, I love you. Thank you for creating a beautiful family with me.” That line makes me believe that you have been able to carve out a loving and respectful relationship with your husband which is so different from that of the older women in your life. How did their experiences help or hinder the family life you now have?**

**Krystal:** I have indeed been able to find love; respectful, honorable, egalitarian love, and the person with whom I spend my life with is everything I've said. While people often tell us we're lucky, I don't think luck has anything to do with it. I am with him for many reasons—too many to ever list—but my grandmother's and mother's stories played a vital role in my decision when I chose my life partner. Their tales were, as you've said—cautionary. As much as we were working together to

write women into Caribbean history, their first instincts were to arm and warn me. My grandmother didn't want to settle for what was prescribed for her, shunned to the outskirts of society, so she left and spent her life paying for her decision but she was able to make a choice, one that was completely hers and that is what she shared with her daughter. I won't give anything away from the book but those moments where Arya bears witness to her mother time and time again, are isolated and incredibly important because those are the moments that shape Arya and influence the decisions she makes when choosing a husband and then later on as a mother.

I very much feel as though I owe these women and the women before them, my life. This book, a small gesture in the grand scheme of things, is to honor and thank them for helping me become who I am today and allowing me to have choices, to grow up in a space where I don't feel forced into a decision because it's the best one at the time. They've endured everything for me and while there are narratives and lives that follow unbreakable and inescapable cycles, they've worked their entire lives to make sure I'm outside of that. That kind of altruism is powerful.

**Q: I grew up in a household where my father's violence made loving him extremely complicated. After my parents divorced, they both became happier people, but it was difficult to square the man he became without remembering the man he was, especially since he never admitted the violent and terrifying world he had created. After hearing the stories, how would you describe the emotions you have for your grandfather and father now?**

**Krystal:** Thank you for sharing that with me. I need to acknowledge your story because our voices and stories as women are often separate and though many of us hail from different cultures and places, when we come together, we realize how universal they also are.

My emotions for both men remain complicated. Even after writing this book and writing through some very difficult questions I found myself asking and attempting to answer, I've come to understand that we are not only shaped by our experiences but by that of our family members as well. That is something I would have vehemently disagreed with twelve years ago but now I bear the burden of inherited violence, history, and loss. At the same time, I've learned to step back and allow my mother and grandmother to narrate the experiences and relationships they've had with my father and grandfather. Those experiences have helped to mold me through their retelling but cannot define or influence my thoughts completely. Just as I give them space to be, they must understand that as a being wholly separate from them, the same people we've known throughout our lives can be very different to each of us.

I feel like I need to say I love my father dearly. We have a wonderful relationship and a very unique bond, quite similar to the type of bond I have with my mother but that can't come through in a book like this because in this book I am part historian, part daughter, part granddaughter, part storyteller (to name a few!), and there are only so many perspectives I was willing to take on. Our story—mine and my father's—is for another time.

**Q: Not only is this story about the highly charged domestic violence issue, it touches on the equally charged issue of immigration. By the end of the book, you ask your mother if she ever thinks she would live in Trinidad again. She answers with one word. Never. I know you wrote a piece that was published by the New York Times, [When Agents Came Knocking](#). As an immigrant in the U.S. today, how does the current climate make you feel about the America?**

**Krystal:** As an immigrant, I'm terrified! The US is not a very welcoming place right now and because I am a first-generation immigrant, I constantly feel as though I'm a part of several worlds which doesn't help because I don't feel completely

anchored here. But then I remind myself that the people who are making immigrants feel this way are no more native to this land than I am. Sure many of them were born here but their history with this place is much more explosive than mine ever will be. They are the descendants of immigrants and it's a fact that they keep forgetting. The only natives America has are the Native Americans. These two groups of people (one of which I am a part)—Native Americans and immigrants—are being attacked, murdered, mutilated, and forgotten. The thunderstorm of immigration, as you so poetically put it, is something that should touch us all. What is happening in this country right now has happened in other parts of the world throughout history and the reason we study history is to understand, learn, and prevent, something we're clearly not doing at the moment.

As someone who has lived here as an undocumented immigrant for a long time, I do feel a particular responsibility to others, especially to the DREAMERS. I could easily be them and they are frightened. Circumstances and political climates change but the fear of a child being left behind, a mother being ripped from her children, a father being torn from his family, remains the same. No one would want that for themselves regardless of how they came to be in that desperate situation so instead of carelessly throwing around blame, we need to stand by immigrants and Native Americans. As a race—the human race—we need to rediscover our humanity because I think we're losing it.

**Q: The cruelty of the violence is sometimes displayed as something through which the men experience pleasure. There are hidden smiles and other indications that these are not just bouts of temper. Have you come to any conclusions as to the source of this violence? Any opinions of what Trinidad or even the US can do to reduce or prevent such violence in men?**

**Krystal:** I have some theories. My grandfather was a product of the time, culture, society, history and that's not said to

excuse him in any way. He was also mentally unstable. It's just that no one was equipped with the language or skills to name it or treat it at the time. Acts of violence like beating your wife and children are things that are taught at home because children see their father or uncle or brother doing it. But my grandfather did it tenfold, with a grotesque intensity and satisfaction that no one should try to *understand* because then you run the risk of empathizing with his actions and his actions are and will always be wrong. He needed help and because of his status in the society he lived in and also the time, no one could offer that to him.

In Trinidad, the US, anywhere in the world, the only way to prevent or reduce violence is to always have a conversation about it. And that is definitely something I adore about the US—there is always open dialogue. Sometimes that dialogue can get a bit crazy and out of control but the freedom to have those conversations is always there. We need to provide a safe environment to address these conflicts and situations way before college. Women and gender study departments are crucial but they come too late in education. As a student who minored in that area my mind was blown when I realized that these things are talked about and studied. And now as a teacher of that as well, I can see my students feel the same way I did and I don't want that for them.

The key is in the literature. Choosing engaging and important texts that speak to our students and their experiences is one of the best ways to tackle this issue of violence and I know I'm not alone when I say we need to change the way schools are structured right now—to move away from testing and toward critical thinking. A step in the right direction is to change the assigned reading materials. Get some more diversity for one. That's always been lacking but also choosing books and texts that deal with the world we occupy. It's one way but I am certain it will make an impact and a difference. I see it in my own classrooms every semester.

**Q:** All of the dialogue in this book is written in complete island dialect. While at first it helped set the flavor of the story, it also made it difficult at times to understand what was being said. In a space where we are often told to stay away from dialect, how did you come to the decision to handle the dialogue in this way? Did you receive any pushback from your editors?

**Krystal:** You're actually the first person to say it was difficult to read at times. And your reaction is what I expected every time someone came into contact with my dialogue. I kept waiting for someone to object or try to change it but it never happened. In the meantime I studied Caribbean authors like Edwidge Danticat, Junot Diaz, Audre Lorde, Zadie Smith, Jamaica Kincaid, and Andrea Levy alongside African American authors like Toni Morrison and Zora Neale Hurston all of who paved the way for me to feel free when writing dialogue. I read and studied these authors and many more like them while at school and then I taught them to my own students. These writers teach us that our voices are important and they come in all different forms and should be celebrated.

I teach in the most diverse city in the US—Jersey City—so my classroom is a rainbow of faces, representative of my true America and I get to observe how my students react to language in these texts. They played a large role in helping me decide how much of it I wanted to use and where. For example, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* remains one of those books that changed my life from the language to the characters to the plot to the masterful storytelling. I accepted this as a fact until I taught the book years after reading it for the first time. Some students just couldn't read it the way it was written so they turned to listening to it and even then couldn't immerse themselves. I had to respect that this book and the way it was written was not for everyone. There were choices I would have to make about

dialogue that would alienate some. In the end I wrote it the way I did because the most important thing was the voices of the women. I couldn't claim to give voice to the voiceless if I didn't allow the women to speak for themselves.

**Q: Food plays an immense role in this story. Every major scene is laced with spices and flavors that stick to you in the same way the smells must conjure up so many memories for you. It also starkly illustrates how Indian and Hindu your family's culture is, something many people probably don't understand about Trinidad. I found myself wanting the recipes. How did food influence the writing of this story?**

**Krystal:** Food makes the world go round! At least my world. My mother loves to cook. It's like meditation to her and I understand this because she's passed that on to me. If I'm in the kitchen cooking up a storm my husband will ask no questions until I'm all finished and then reap the benefits of whatever was bothering me.

People often bond over and around food. Enticing and intoxicating, food takes away inhibitions and once I understood this, I helped create this environment for my mother and grandmother so they could tell me their stories. This proved the most effective way for me to help them open up. And along the way, I learned tons of new recipes.

Now I find it very interesting that you say it's definitively Indian. It's true that a lot of the food is Indian because it's just a fact of what they cooked but at the same time it isn't. Trinidad's cuisine, like many other places around the globe, is unique because cultures have come together to create something new and I was mindful of this. Many of the dishes I write about are the product of Indian, African, French, Spanish, English, etc. coming into contact in one place over time. Examining any one dish on the island from the way it is seasoned to the way it is prepared, then cooked, is fascinating because sometimes that one dish can have as many

as five cultures coming into contact with one another.

As for the recipes, perhaps that's a future project. Wink. Wink. (Though I'm not sure who I'm winking at).

**Q: Are there any other questions I didn't ask that you wish I had? Topics you would like to cover?**

**Krystal:** You didn't ask if I had any fun! Because while this was one hell of an emotional roller coaster ride, it was also so much fun. The characters you read about are people I created with so much care and they are people I hold close to my heart. As serious as this book is, it is also reflective of the life and desire and fun that exists in Trinidad and Tobago.

[Secrets We Kept](#) by Krystal A. Sital. Copyright © 2018 by Krystal A. Sital. Courtesy W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

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# **New Fiction by Helen Benedict: WOLF SEASON**

## **STORM**

The wolves are restless this morning. Pacing the woods, huffing and murmuring. It's not that they're hungry; Rin fed them each four squirrels. No, it's a clenching in the sky like a gathering fist. The wet heat pushing in on her temples.

Juney feels it, too, her head swaying, fingers splayed. She is sitting on the wooden floor of their kitchen, face raised, rocking and rocking in that way she has. Hair pale as a midday moon, eyes wide and white-blue.

"It smells sticky outside, Mommy. It smells wrong," she says in her clear, direct voice, no hint of a whine. Soldiers don't whine. And Juney is the daughter of soldiers.

"Nothing's wrong, little bean. Maybe we'll get a summer storm, that's all. Come, eat."

Juney is nine years old, the age of curiosity and delight before self-doubt clouds the soul. Fine hair in a braid to her waist. Bright face, wide at the temples, tapering to a nip of a chin. Delicate limbs, skinny but strong.

She lifts herself off the floor and wafts over to the kitchen table, a polished wooden plank the size of a door, where she feels for her usual chair and settles into it with the grace of a drifting leaf. Starting up one of her hums, she dips her spoon into the granola Rin made for her—sesame seeds, raisins, oats, and nuts, every grain chemical-free.

"More milk, please."

Sometimes, when Rin is not hauling feed, chopping wood, weeding, or fixing some corner of their raggedy old farmhouse, she stands and watches Juney with wonder, her miracle daughter, and this is what she does after pouring the milk; she leans against the kitchen counter, still for a moment, just to absorb her. Juney moves like a sea anemone, fingers undulating. She can feel light and sun, shadow and night, and all the myriad shades between.

"I want to go weed," she says when her bowl is empty, sitting back to stretch, her spindly arms straight above her, twiggy fingers waving. The scrim of clouds parts for a moment, just enough to allow a slice of sun to filter through the windows, sending dust motes spinning and sparking into the corners of the kitchen. She rocks on her chair inside a sunbeam, hair aglow, fingers caressing the air. She can hear their cats, Purr, Patch, and Hiccup, stretching out on the floor. Smell their fur heating up, their fishy breath slowing into sleep.

“Me, too,” Rin says. “Let’s go.”

Juney was born in the upstairs bedroom, amid Rin’s outraged yells and the grunts of a stoic midwife; she knows her way around their ramshackle house and land as well as she knows her own body. Rin only helps by keeping unexpected objects out of the way, as even the dogs and cats have learned to do. No tables with sharp corners; no stray chairs, bones, mouse corpses, or drinking bowls. The house itself might be a mishmash of added rooms and patchwork repairs, windows that won’t open and trapdoors that will, but everything inside has its place.

Out in the backyard, Juney stops to sniff the thickening heat—the clouds have closed over again, gunmetal gray and weightier than ever. “Itchy air,” she declares, and makes her way to the vegetable garden. Ducking under the mesh Rin erected to keep out plundering deer and rabbits, she squats at the first row of tomatoes. Weeding is Juney’s specialty. Her fingers climb nimbly up the vines, plucking off the brittle spheres of snails, the squishy specks of aphids. Her palms caress the earth, seeking the prick of dandelion leaves and thistles, the stubs of grapevine and pokeweed, and out they come, no mercy for them.

Her father loved planting. Jordan Drummond was his name, Jay to all who loved him. Jay, flaxen-haired like Juney, face white as a Swede’s, eyes set wide and seaglass blue. Tall and rangy, with enormous feet, and so agile he might have been made of rubber. He, too, was born and bred on this property, back in the time when it was a real farm. Helped his parents raise cows and corn all his life, until the farm failed and drove him into the army. When his platoon razed the date groves around Basra, acres of waving palm trees, their fronds a deep and ancient green, their fruit glistening with syrups—when they ploughed those magnificent trees into the desert just because they could, he wept as if for the death of a friend.

Now Rin arranges her days around forgetting, pushes through a list of tasks tough enough to occupy her mind as well as her muscles. Juney comes first, of course, but her wolves take concentration, as do her chickens and goats and vegetables. She has staked out her ground here with all her companions. If anyone wants to find her, they have to negotiate half a mile of potholed unpaved driveway, barbed wire, electric wire, a gate, and her four dogs, who are not kind to strangers. Not to mention her army-trained marksmanship.

Juney feels her way around the spinach and carrots, pulling and plucking. "Mommy, what are we doing today?"

"Going to town. The clinic. Not till we finish the chores, though. Come on, let's feed the critters."

"Which clinic?"

"Yours."

She hesitates. "Have I got time to do the birds first?"

Juney's favorite job is tending the bird feeder. Rin wanted to throw it out after that mama bear knocked it off its squirrelproof stand, plunked herself on the ground and dumped the seeds down her throat like a drunk—Rin watched the whole thing from the kitchen window, describing the bear's every move to Juney. But the feeder means too much to Juney to relinquish. She judges how empty it is by feeling its weight in her palms, plants it between her feet to hold it firm, fills it to the brim from the seed sack, and deftly hangs it back up. Then she sits beneath it, head lifted while she listens and listens. "Shh," she says this morning. "There's a nest of baby catbirds over there." A faint rustle, the quietest of hingelike squeaks. "Three of them. They want their breakfast."

Leaving her to sit and listen, Rin kicks the sleepy cats outside to make their way through the day and eases her car

out of the barn. The barn sits to the side of her house, on the edge of a flat field that used to hold corn. Beyond that, a hardscrabble patch of rocks and thistles meanders up a hill to scrubby hay fields and a view of the Catskill Mountains to the south. Otherwise, aside from her yard, the ancient apple orchard in the back, and the vegetable patch, she is surrounded by woods as far as the eye can roam.

Ten acres of those woods she penned off for her three wolves, leaving them plenty of room to lurk. Wolves need to lurk. They are normally napping at this time of morning, but the seething heat has them agitated and grumbling. Rin can sense their long-legged bodies moving in and out of the shadows, scarcely more solid than shadows themselves. Even her absurdly hyperactive mutts are feeling the unwholesome weight of the day, but instead of expressing it with restiveness like their cousins, they drop where they stand, panting heavily into sleep.



Frederic Remington. *Moonlight, Wolf*, 1909.

The entire compound is preternaturally still. The yard, the woods, the porch cluttered with gnarled geraniums and fraying furniture; the rickety red barn with its animal pens clinging to its side for dear life; the piles of lumber and rusting machinery—all are as somnolent as the snore of a summer bee.

Rin looks at her watch. "Time!"

Juney straightens up from under the bird feeder, wipes her earthy hands on her jeans, and walks toward her mother along the little path planted with lilac bushes, a path she memorized as an infant. She puts her head on Rin's chest, reaching the exact level of her heart.

She smells her mother's fear even before she hears it in her

voice. The sweat breaking out slimy and oyster-cold.

Juney was conceived in the back of a two-ton, Camp Scania, Iraq, under a moon as bright and hard as a cop's flashlight. A grapple of gasp and desire, uniforms half off, bra up around Rin's neck, boots and camo pants flung over the spare tire. Jay's mouth on her nipples, running down her slick, sandflea-bitten belly, down to the wet openness of her, the salt and the sand of her, the wanting of her, his tongue making her moan, his fingers opening her, his voice and hers breathing now and now and now.

Wartime love in a covered truck, that desert moon spotlighting down. His chest gleaming silver in its glare, eyes glittering, the scent of him sharp and needing her, the voice of him a low growl of yes like her wolves.

But even through the slickness, even through the wanting and wanting, she felt the desert grinding deep into her blood. Toxic moondust and the soot of corpses.

As Rin drives her rickety maroon station wagon along the rural roads that take her to town and the clinic, Juney hums again beside her, rocking in her seat, her warbly tune following some private daydream. The windows are open because the AC refuses to work and the sweat is rolling down Rin's arms, soaking the back of her old gray T-shirt, the waistband of her bagged-out work pants. She glances down at herself. She is covered with dirt from the yard. Probably has burrs in her hair. Once she was slim with just enough curve and wiggle to make Jay smile. Long hair thick as a paintbrush till she cut it for war. These days, squared-out by childbirth and comfort food, she looks and moves more like a lumberjack. Still, she should have had the decency to shower.

Juney is mouthing words now, rocking harder than ever to her inner rhythm. Rin should teach her not to do that—it makes people think she's retarded—but she doesn't have the heart.

Juney rocks when she's happy

"Tweetle tweetle sang the bird," she croons in some sort of a hillbilly tune.

"Tootle tootle sang the cat.

You can't get me, sang the bird.

I don't want to, sang the cat.

Tweetle and tootle, tweetle and—"

"Juney?" Rin is not exactly irritated but needs her to quit. "You're going to be okay at the clinic, right? No screaming like last time?"

Juney stops singing long enough to snort. "I was a baby then. And they stuck me with that long needle." She takes up her song once more, then stops again. "Are they going to stick me this time?"

"Soldiers don't mind needles. It's just a little prick, like you get every day in the yard from thistles."

"Yeah. Who cares about needles?"

"It's just an annual checkup to see how much you've grown. Nothing to worry about. They'll probably tell you to eat more, skin-and-bones you."

"That's 'cause you won't let me have candy. I'm going to tell the doctor to order you to give me candy."

This is an old battle, Rin's strictness about food. She is strict about a lot of matters. No TV, no cell phones. No radio, either, not even in the car. Yet there are limits to how much even she can cushion her daughter. Thanks to the law, she is obliged to send her to school, and there, as if by osmosis, Juney has absorbed the need for the detritus that fills American lives. Despite all Rin's efforts, Juney has

caught the disease of Want.

Rin wonders if Juney's daddy would approve of how she's raising her: Jay, the only man she's ever wanted, ever will want. Jay, gone for as long as Juney has been alive. And look what he left behind. A broken soldier. A fatherless daughter. The wolves who patrol the woods like souls freed from the dead, their thick-furred bodies bold and wild—the ones who won't be tamed, won't be polluted, won't be used.

It was Jay's idea to raise wolves. His plan was to do it together once they were done soldiering—he had always wanted to save them from extinction, the cruelty of zoos and those who wish to crush them into submission. "They need us, Rin," he said to her once, his big hand resting tenderly on her cheek. "And we need them." So when she found herself alone and pregnant, she decided to carry out the plan anyway. She tracked down a shady breeder over by Oneonta and rescued two newborn pups, blue-eyed and snub-nosed, blind, deaf and helpless, their fur as soft as goose down, before he could sell them to some tattooed sadist who would chain them up in his yard. One was female, the other male, so she hoped they would breed one day. As they did. "Never try to break wolves," Jay told her. "They've got loyalty. They might even love you, who knows? But we must never tame them. They're wild animals and that's how it should stay."

Her guardian angels. Or devils. She hasn't decided which.

"We're here!" Juney sings out. She knows the town of Huntsville even when it's midmorning quiet and raining: the asphalt steaming, the wet-dust funk of newly soaked concrete.

Rin drives down the main drag, a wide, lonely street with half its windows boarded up and not a soul to be seen. A Subway on the left, a Dunkin' Donuts on the right, its sign missing so many letters it reads, duk do. The CVS and three banks that knocked out all the local diners and dime stores. A Styrofoam

cup skitters along the gutter, chipped and muddied by rain.

Pulling up the hill into an asphalt parking lot, Rin chooses a spot as far away from the other cars as she can get, her stomach balling into a leathery knot. She hates this town. She hates this clinic. She hates doctors and nurses. She hates people.

Pause, swallow, command the knot to release. It won't. She sweeps her eyes over the macadam, down the hill to the clinic, over to the creek bubbling along behind it. Back and forth, back and forth.

"Mommy, we're in America."

"Yeah. Sorry." One breath, two. "Okay. I'm ready."

If Rin could walk with her wolves flanking her, she would. Instead, she imagines them here. Ebony takes the front guard, his coat the black of boot polish, eyes green as a summer pond, the ivory curve of his fangs bared. Silver brings up the rear, her fur as white as morning frost, her wasp-yellow eyes scanning for the enemy, a warning growl in her throat. And the big stately one—the alpha male, the one Rin named Gray, his body a streak of muscle, his coat marked in sweeps of black and charcoal—walks beside her with Juney's fingers nestled into the thick fur of his back, his jaw open and slavering, ready to tear off the head of anyone who so much as looks at her.

With her invisible wolves around her and her daughter gripping her hand, Rin plows through the now-strafting rain to the clapboard box of a clinic and up to its plate-glass front, on which, painted in jaunty gold lettering, are the words *Captain Thomas C. Brittall Federal Health Care Center's Pediatrics/U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs*.

"Department of Vaporized Adolescents," she mutters, pushing open the cold glass door and its cold metal handle. They step

inside.

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Naema Jassim is standing in the white starkness of that same clinic, suspended in one of the few moments of tranquillity she will be granted all day. Her hands, long-fingered and painfully dry from constant washing, press down on the windowsill as she gazes into the hot wetness beyond. The sky has turned an uneasy green, tight with electricity and tension. Even from inside her clinic office, the air smells of singed hair and rust.

“Doctor?” Wendy Fitch, the nurse, pokes her head into the room. “Your nine a.m.’s here. We have four more before we close. TV says the hurricane’s due around two.”

“Yes, the rain, it has already come.” Naema turns from the window, so slight she is almost lost inside her voluminous white coat, her black hair gathered in a loose knot at her neck. Face long and narrow, eyes the gold of a cat’s. A star-shaped scar splashes across her otherwise smooth right cheek.

Behind her, a sudden wind catches the weeping willow outside, sending its branches into a paroxysm of lashing and groaning. But the tightly closed windows and turbine roar of the clinic’s air-conditioning, set chillingly low to counteract the bacteria of the sick, render the premature storm as silent as dust.

Naema slides her clipboard under her arm and moves to the door.

Outside, the trees bend double and spring back up like whips. The clouds convulse. A new deluge drives into the ground, sharp as javelins.

A mile uphill, the wind seizes a tall white pine, shaking it until its ninety-year-old trunk, riddled with blister rust,

splits diagonally across with a shriek. It drops onto the Huntsville Dam, already thin, already old, knocking out chunks of concrete along its crest until it resembles a row of chipped teeth.

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Rin grips Juney's hand while they sit in the waiting room, her palms sweating as she scans every inch of the place: walls too white, lights too bright, posters too cheerful, a television screen as big as a door blasting a cooking show. But she refuses to look at the other women. Their calculating eyes. Their judgments. Their treachery.

The monologue starts up in her head, as it always insists on doing at the VA, even though she is only in an affiliated pediatrics clinic, not a full-fledged hospital full of mangled soldiers and melted faces. She fights it as best she can, trying to focus on Juney, on her wolves growling in their hot fur by her feet, but it marches on anyhow, oblivious to her resistance: *Where were you ladies when I needed you, huh? I saw you fresh from your showers; I saw you listening. Scattered, every one of you, like bedbugs under a lamp. Where were you when, where were you. . . .*

"Stop." Juney pulls Rin's hand to her chest. "Mommy, stop."

Rin looks for her wolves. They are crouched around her still, tongues lolling, their musky fur and meat-breath reassuring. She should have brought Betty, her service dog. She keeps telling herself she doesn't need Betty. But she does.

Juney lifts her nose and Rin can tell she is smelling the medicinal stinks of the clinic. All scents are colors to Juney, an imagined rainbow Rin will never see. The disinfectant in the wall dispensers, sickly sweet and alcohol sharp—this is her yellow. The detergent of the nurses' uniforms, soapy and stringent, she calls bright orange. The chemical-lemon odor of the floor polish: purple. The pink of

freshly mown grass, magenta of oatmeal, green-bright breath of their cats, black of their dogs panting. The glaring white of her mother's alarm.

Rin sends her mind to her hand, still clasped against Juney's narrow chest. Juney's heartbeat reminds Rin of the chipmunk she once held in her palm, soft and weightless, alive and warm—a tiny bundle of pulsating fluff.

Another soldier mother is squeezed into the far corner, holding a feverish infant to her breast. A second sits by the wall with her child, its back in a brace. A third walks in with her toddler daughter, whose right hand is wrapped in a bandage. The beams of the women's eyes burn across the room, avoiding one another yet crossing like headlights, smoldering with their collective sense of betrayal.

Time inchworms by.

Finally, a hefty nurse with frizzled blond hair steps through the inner door, the name fitch pinned loudly to her bosom. She runs her eyes over Rin and Juney and all the other mothers and children suspended in this stark, white room. "Rin Drummond," she calls.

Rin cannot speak.

"Mommy?" Juney lifts Rin's hand off her chipmunk heart and jumps down from her chair. "We're ready," she tells the nurse and pulls her mother's arm. She and Rin follow the nurse's broad back down the corridor and into an examining room.

"Just strip to your undies, honeypie, and hop up here," the nurse tells Juney. "Doctor Jassim will be here in a jiffy."

"Thank you. I know what to do. I'm nine years old and my name is June Drummond."

"Of course it is," the nurse says, unruffled.

“Did you say ‘Jassim’?” Rin asks, finding her voice at last. “Who’s he?”

“Doctor Jassim is a woman. She’s been a resident with us for half a year now. She’s very good, don’t worry.”

“Where the fuck is she from?” Rin’s hands curl up tight and white.

“Mrs. Drummond, relax, okay? She’s the best physician we have here. You’re lucky to get her.” The nurse leaves, closing the door with a snap that sounds more as though she is locking them in than giving them privacy.

Juney peels off her T-shirt and shorts and kicks away her flip-flops. Both she and Rin are dressed for the heat of the August day, not for the clinic’s hypothermic AC, so her skin is covered in goose bumps. Rin finds a baby blue hospital robe hanging on the back of the door and wraps Juney’s shivery body in it before lifting her onto the plank of the examining table, its paper crackling beneath her. She is so fragile, her Juney, a wisp of rib cage and shoulder blade, legs pin-thin as a robin’s. Rin holds her tight, not sure who is comforting whom.

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The wind rampages through woods and parking lots, streets and gardens, seizing sumacs, maples, and willows and shaking them until their boughs drop like shot geese. Up the hill, the rain-bloated creek presses its new weight against the crumbling dam, pushing and pounding until, with a great roar, it bursts through, leaps its banks and rushes headlong down the slope toward the clinic; a foaming wall of red mud, branches, and rocks flattening every shrub and tree in its path.

Inside, the air-conditioning hums. Voices murmur. Babies whimper.

Wendy Fitch hovers by the door of the examining room, checking her watch. Dr. Jassim might be great with her patients but the woman has zero sense of time. Whether this has something to do with her culture or is only an individual quirk, Wendy doesn't know, but the doctor needs to finish up here and fetch her son from his friend's house, the boys' summer baseball camp having sensibly closed against the impending storm. The rain is beating on the windows now and Wendy can feel the patients' parents growing more restless by the minute, as eager as she is to get back to their canned food and bottled water, their batteries and candles. Her pulse quickens. As a lowly nurse, she has to bear the brunt of the parents' ire, and these are no ordinary parents, either. They are all military veterans, half of them ramped up or angry. Like that pit bull of a woman, Rin Drummond.

"We better hurry, storm's coming on quick," Wendy says when Naema emerges at last from the first examining room. "Watch out for this one," she adds in a whisper, touching her temple. "Room three."

Naema nods with a resigned smile and walks toward the door.

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Rin can't believe they gave Juney an Arab for a doctor. Typical of the VA to hire the second-rate. The woman probably bought her certificate online, did her training on YouTube. Probably blew up some sucker of a soldier or two on her way here, as well.

"Mommy, what's wrong?"

Rin takes a breath. And another. "It's okay. It's just this place." She strokes her daughter's hair and pulls her close once more, feeling her frail body shiver.

A knock on the door. Gentle, yet it sends a spasm through Rin's every nerve.

The door opens and in walks a woman in a white coat, as if she's a real doctor. No head scarf, at least, but there's that familiar olive-brown skin and blue-black hair. She's carrying a clipboard file, which she reads before even saying hello, which Rin considers damned rude. Then she looks up.

A splattered white scar on her right cheekbone. Most likely a shrapnel wound. Rin would know, having some fifteen herself.

"Good morning," the doctor says to Juney, voice snake-oil smooth, accent not much more than a lilt but oh so recognizable. "You are June, right?"

But Juney isn't listening. Her head's up, cocked at the angle that means her mind is elsewhere. "Mommy?"

Rin is shaking. The face. The scar. Her breath is coming short and airless.

"Mommy?" Juney's voice is more urgent now. "I hear something."

"There is no need to be frightened, dear," the doctor says, and Rin can't tell whether she's talking to Juney or her.

"Mommy!" Juney jumps down from the examining table, her robe falling off, leaving her in nothing but white cotton underpants, skin and bone. "Something bad's happening!"

"Get out of here!" Rin yells at the doctor.

"What is the matter?" The doctor looks confused.

"No, not her!" Juney cries. "Run!" And she hurls herself into the dangerous air, unable to see the metal table covered with glass bottles and needles, the jutting chair legs on the floor.

Rin reaches out and catches her, but she wriggles free in true terror. "Let us out!" she screams, and the doctor turns around, bewildered, saying something Rin can't hear because at

that moment the window bursts open and a torrent of red water crashes through, smashing them against the wall, knocking them over, pounding them with a whorl of mud and branches and shattered glass. . . .

Rin's soldier training, her war-wolf heart, these are not in her blood for nothing. She struggles to her feet, seizes Juneey around the waist and forces the door open, kicking away the flailing doctor tangled in her white coat, her long hair, her scar, and her legacy.

Rin slams her face down in the water and steps on her, using her body to lever her daughter through the door and out of the water to safety.

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## **An Interview with Helen Benedict, Author of WOLF SEASON**

Helen Benedict is the author of seven novels, five books of nonfiction, and a play. Her most recent novel, WOLF SEASON, is this month's fiction selection on The Wrath-Bearing Tree.

WOLF SEASON "follows the war home," as a starred review in *Library Journal* puts it, examining war's reverberations on the lives of three women and their families. There is an Iraq war veteran named Rin, who keeps three wolves from a pack she

started on her land with her late husband; she is raising a daughter who was born blind, perhaps from lingering effects of Rin's service. There's Naema, a widowed Iraqi doctor who has come to the U.S. with her son. And there is Beth, a Marine wife raising a troubled son, who awaits her husband's return from Afghanistan even as she fears it.

Helen was generous enough to take the time to speak to me about WOLF SEASON, war, writing, the strengths of fiction vs. nonfiction to speak to specific themes, Charlottesville, and more.

**The Wrath-Bearing Tree (Andria Williams):** Helen, you've said that your newest novel, WOLF SEASON, is about "the long reach of war." Can you tell me a little more about that?

**Helen Benedict:** The Iraq and Afghanistan Wars have affected all of us in America, whether we know it or not. Our morality, our politics, our pocketbooks – all have been profoundly changed. But, of course, the most affected are those who have either served or suffered in those wars, and those who love them. Of the women in WOLF SEASON, Rin is a veteran of the Iraq War, Naema is an Iraqi refugee, and Beth is married to a marine deployed to Afghanistan. All three women are raising their children alone because of the fallout of war. Of the men in the novel, Louis is also a veteran, Todd the marine, and they, too, are profoundly affected by their experiences of war. The characters in WOLF SEASON personify the ways that war has permeated the little town of Huntsville, NY, the people who live there, and, in a sense, us all.

But I don't want to characterize WOLF SEASON as purely a war book, for it is just as much about tenderness, love, and hope. It is also about the way human beings can rise above through horror and trauma to find and help one another, even when the odds are against them.

**WBT:** To which character in WOLF SEASON do you hope readers

will feel most attached?

**HB:** I hope that all my characters are compelling in their own ways, but I suspect the answer to this has more to do with who a reader is than anything else. Already, I have heard a full range of reactions to the characters in *WOLF SEASON*: some readers like the women best, others the children, while yet others especially love the wolves, and some relate most to the men. One of the aspects of writing I love the most is seeing how varied the reactions of readers are, and how everyone brings their own interpretations to a book that can be quite independent from mine.



**WBT:** Helen, I've read that you grew up living all over the world, on islands in the Indian Ocean; in Berkeley, CA; and in England. You've said that during your years of island living you did not attend school and were allowed to "run wild," and I was instantly reminded of Margaret Atwood's youth, and her wild-and-free summers in remote camp sites with her entomologist father, her mom, and her brother.

Do you think the period of free time you experienced had an effect on your imagination, or somehow helped foster a writerly way of thinking?

**HB:** Yes! Largely because of these travels, I spent a lot of time alone as a child, so learned to read early and took comfort in books. I was an addicted reader by the age of six or seven, so much so that I'd be heartbroken when a book ended. Then I discovered I could continue the magic by writing myself.

I also learned about poverty and suffering by living on those islands, which were poor and disease-ridden at the time. Even at the age of three, I was profoundly saddened by seeing starving children and people living in shacks. Children

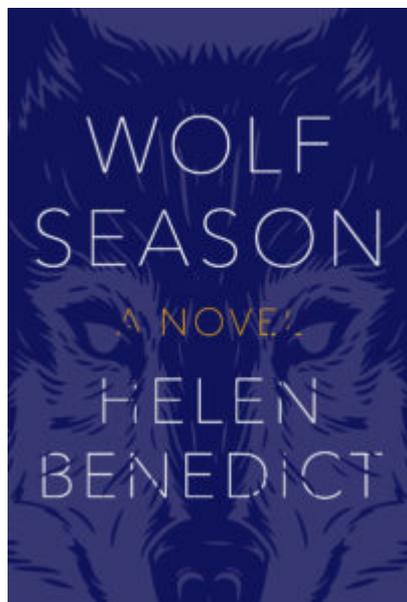
understand these things much more deeply than we adults realize.

**WBT:** With such an international childhood and youth, how did the issues facing women in the American military first come onto your radar? Your nonfiction book, *THE LONELY SOLDIER*, was the first book I read by an academic discussing female service members; if it was not the first, then at least it was the first one I heard of, with the largest impact and starting the most national discussion. Most academics I know, at least in my experience, rarely think about the military at all. What brought you to this topic, and with such conviction that you've continued to address it across at least three books?

**HB:** I am not really an academic, but a journalist and a novelist who happens to teach. The research I did for *THE LONELY SOLDIER*, which was indeed the first book to look at women who served in the post-9/11 wars, was essential not only for my journalistic work, but for my related novels, *SAND QUEEN* and *WOLF SEASON*. Over a stretch of more than three years, I interviewed some 40 women veterans of the Iraq War, and then later I also interviewed Iraqi refugees. These interviews, along with other research, informed my imagination, allowing me to plunge deep into the interior lives of refugees and soldiers to create my fictional characters; something I would never have dared do had I not spent so long listening to real people.

As for why I came to this topic, I'll start by saying that all my work, whether fiction or nonfiction, has looked at the powerless and the outsider, and much of it has especially focused on women. When I saw the U.S. invade Iraq for no reason and learned of the destruction and death we caused there as a result; and then also learned about the epidemic of sexual assault in the military and the moral injury that the war was causing to women and men, I had to write about it. I care passionately about justice, and the right of the oppressed to be heard.

As for why I turned from journalism to fiction – from *THE LONELY SOLDIER* to my novels, *SAND QUEEN* and *WOLF SEASON* – that is because I wanted to get to what war does to our interior lives, our hearts, our morals, our souls, our minds. That is the territory of fiction.



**WBT:** I first read *THE LONELY SOLDIER* as a relatively new officer's-wife, and to be quite honest, felt like I went through several stages of grief while reading. It was difficult to reconcile my husband's recent, major life decision, and his well-intentioned enthusiasm for it, with the book's description of the military as based on a model of predation, and occupied by, in essence, various levels of predators very graphically rendered (recruiters who force teenage girls, for example, to give them head in parked cars). It was also difficult to consider our family's new path from the perspective of my conviction that I was a feminist, with a deep concern for other women. How had I not known this was happening to female service members? I remember the striking detail that the women profiled in the book asked to use their real names, as a way of "fighting back." *THE LONELY SOLDIER* was the first step in a long and rather painful exposure of, what may not necessarily be my experience with the military, but what is the truth for many women.

I guess my question here is one that's bothered me to some degree for more than thirteen years: Do you feel that a person whose life work is spent within an institution like the U.S. military has chosen, in effect, to side with an oppressive regime? Is it possible to still be an ally to others, those often ignored or hurt by war and by institutionalized racism, sexism, and violence?

**HB:** I think this is a brave question, and in a way, my answer lies in *WOLF SEASON*, as well as my other related books, because my veteran characters are all struggling with questions like yours, especially how to push back against injustice and wrongdoing within the military, and how to feel like a good person when you have come to feel you were used to do wrong.

My veteran characters have been distorted by war and its inherent injustices, yes, but they also want to love, mend, and amend. This is the essential struggle in the aftermath of war for us all – how, having done a great wrong, we can grope our way back to doing some right.

Another path, and I do see veterans doing this, is to help the real victims of our wars: the innocent Iraqi citizens whose lives we have destroyed. This, too, is a theme in *WOLF SEASON*.

But going back to the earlier part of your question, yes, I do think that joining the military is to give yourself to an institution that usually causes more harm than good. But that said, I also think it's important to fight wrongdoing from the inside. Part of our duty as citizens of a democracy is to hold governmental institutions accountable when they go wrong, and to expose and fight and correct that wrong wherever we can. I know how much courage it takes the military from within, but I've seen active duty service members and veterans do it, and I admire them deeply.

**WBT:** You were in Charlottesville, VA, during the horrifying

neo-Nazi rally this past August. How did you end up there at that time, and what did you observe, on the ground? What, for you, did that event say about America circa 2017-18?

**HB:** [I have written](#) about that terrible day in Charlottesville before, so all I'll say here is that I was at an artist's residency nearby, so went to bear witness and counter-protest. The main point I made in this essay is that, as a writer and reader, I know that using one's imagination to put oneself in the shoes of others is the key to empathy and compassion. The racists, Islamophobes and anti-Semites who attended the rally that day refused to use their imaginations to do any such thing, thus freeing themselves to dehumanize the people they wished to hate. It was a sickening sight to behold, the screaming red faces of those who relish hatred; the opposite of what writers and artists stand for.

**WBT:** You've addressed themes of systemic violence through both fiction and nonfiction. How do you feel these genres are uniquely suited to addressing political issues?

**HB:** Nonfiction explains it, fiction explores it. In WOLF SEASON, as in any novel, I was able to plunge into a character's heart to show how it really feels to be the victim or the perpetrator or violence, and what that does to the human soul. The field of fiction is the human interior – our hearts, our minds, our morals. I love that. That's why I read novels, and that's why I write them.

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WOLF SEASON is available from [Bellevue Literary Press](#) or wherever books are [sold](#). A reading group guide is available for download [here](#). You can find out more about Helen Benedict's writing on her [web site](#).