

# New Poetry from Nestor Walters: "Homecoming"



FLATTEN TO BREATHLESSNESS / *image by Amalie Flynn*

*Only the dead have seen the end of war –Plato*

he lies down, finally to rest.  
grey light bands his closed door  
with no silver at the edges. They said he left  
one foot in the sand. wait, a head  
no, a hand. the pale orange bottle, only  
dust at the bottom, slips from his  
fingers. one missed his mouth  
small, white, and round, it  
shines from the dark floor like  
a little moon. In the space  
between shadows and dreaming  
his way to death, he smoothes a dressing on  
the hole in Seth's neck, he wraps  
a scarf on Nick's face, still  
burning with chemical fire, he  
lowers Jeremy's hand, still gloved,  
into a black trash bag. His  
pupils sharpen to pinpoints, his  
chants flatten to breathlessness, these,  
his friends' names, hammered into  
cold steel necklaces  
Jeremy, Seth, Nick  
beckoning  
from darkness

won't someone tell him  
*you're not crazy*  
*you should want to go home but*

*stay a while  
stay and be here with me*

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## **“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 dowers 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/hypervigilance 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 multi-faceted.

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](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](http://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/>

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**New Poetry from Sheila Bonenberger: “They Gave Their**

# Lives”



UNDERGROUND FORGETTING / *image by Amalie Flynn*

The brass buttons are piled in a bowl  
that sits on the shop counter  
beside the cash register,  
so I buy one,  
watch as the clerk drops it  
into a paper bag, gently  
folding the open end over  
so the button doesn't fall out.

Such are the tender considerations  
we resort to when it comes  
to Union buttons mined  
from Marye's Heights, the field  
blood transformed into a massive  
trauma center, and those many  
soldiers, hastily tipped into graves  
scratched higgeldy-piggeldy in the earth  
and quickly left, without markers,  
abandoned to the underground,  
earth's crowded room,  
to work its magic on the soldiers  
and their uniforms under  
the same gibbous moon  
shining down on life going on,  
so that one day a treasure hunter  
turns the detector's sensitivity  
to high, reaching well past  
unreadable trash,  
finally capturing a deeper  
signal to shovel through grass,  
past stones and worms, into dreams  
of wealth or glory, pulling up

a solitary, now verdegris button  
bent slightly as the soldier  
fell hard perhaps against a rock  
that would sleep unchanged beside him  
until the treasure hunter conspired  
to craft a stranglehold on history  
proclaiming that this discovery  
announced an end of sorts to the story  
of a fallen soldier,  
one that can be labeled,  
one you can put a price on,  
but the truth is that buttons  
cannot be counted on  
to hold a jacket snug, can even  
loose their hold on the fabric  
of dignity, on the fable  
of victory, if what they hold  
has been released to flourish  
underground forgetting  
that perfection is elusive  
and we are not perfect  
though we hurl ourselves at it  
again and again.

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## **New Fiction from Brian Castner: The Troll**



John Gurdenson's legs weren't what they used to be, and though the veteran charged hard on the forecheck, he was slow, too heavy and slow, and all of us in the arena groaned as the puck

slipped down the ice away from him again.

The opposing defenseman took control, easily stepped away, beat Gurdenson along the wall, and made a crisp first pass. The rush headed back the other way. Gurdenson swung his stick at the legs of the Pittsburgh defenseman, gave him the look and the head nod—we knew the signal and a few of us started to clap in anticipation—but the other player ignored him and skated away. Gurdenson drifted back to the bench for a change.

First line out. Taylor hopped over the boards and sprinted into the offensive zone. We all stood, every time Taylor hit the ice. His skates churned the surface with each step, as if he was grabbing great fistfuls of ice and pulling himself along, climbing a rope with his strength alone. It was beautiful to watch. Taylor was just a rookie who had found his spot in the lineup halfway through the season, after Gurdenson broke his ribs. . We loved to watch him fly, plus he had a nose for the net, and was tough and squirrely and just a bit of a pest, the kind of guy you definitely want on your team and not theirs, which made us cheer all the more.

Gurdenson waited on the bench. Another change, and another. Third line, second line, first line, goal. Amirov, from Taylor, off a cagey steal in the offensive zone. A pretty play, the announcer said, muscle to finesse and a big finish.

We threw our hats on the ice in a shower of New Year's confetti. The home crowd, the sound we made, it was the din of starving men gorging at the master's table. We were up 4-1. We wanted five. We wanted ten. We wanted to feast until we puked. After years of losing, we couldn't get enough.

"Gurdsy, Renault, Scotty, you're up," the assistant coach yelled, calling the line.

Off the faceoff, the puck skipped past Gurdenson, his feet always stuck in cold oatmeal, but then, behind the action, an opportunity. The young defenseman never saw the thick tree

trunk fall. Gurdenson's check caught him on the hip and shoulder, flipped him sideways, all legs and outstretched arms so he spun to the ice like an unbuckled passenger tossed from a moving car. The noise in the arena hadn't dimmed since the goal, but now we found a new octave. We stood up as one, pounded our seats and our fellow fans because we knew what was coming. The Troll had been our champion for a decade.

Gurdenson skated backwards away from the fallen man. A dancing partner from the other corner approached. They shook off their gloves and each grabbed a hunk of sweater and turned on the two piston engine. We were incensed. The fighters traded right hands.

A spectacle at center ice, and all eyes on Gurdenson.

Our man absorbed three fists to the side of the head before his helmet went flying. His challenger's helmet stayed on though, and good thing too, the announcer would say. Gurdenson bloodied the lip of his younger opponent with a right and the kid went woozy and his knees buckled. Gurdenson shifted his weight, leaned back, kept the boy upright with the left hand, didn't let him fall, and then delivered another right to the mouth. Teeth flew. Gurdenson's hand split between the knuckles and his grip with his left started to falter. The kid was all limp dead weight, lights out, but Gurdenson didn't hesitate, swung and connected twice more before the unconscious boy finally slipped free, his helmeted head bouncing off the ice when he landed.

Gurdenson stood over him for a moment, and then skated away even before the referees approached.

Nineteen thousand of us chanted "Troll! Troll! Troll! Troll!" As many cell phone cameras flashed. Gurdenson pointed a finger at the Pittsburgh bench, picked his next victim, gave a "see-you-in-the-playoffs" nod, and we roared even louder. Two minutes for roughing, five for fighting, and a game

misconduct. Gurdenson's night was over. He skated to the door, shuffled back to the dressing room, and waited for the rest of the team. The third period would end soon.

Gurdenson sat in front of his stall. He was the only one in the room. He gingerly removed his jersey, stretched a shoulder, checked a bruise, shook out his right hand and stuffed it in a bag of ice that quickly turned pink.

He sat and waited for his team, and it was there, alone, helmet and shoulder pads off, towel over his neck, that it happened.

The general manager walked in from the side door that led to the executive offices. A tie and cologne and a red face and slicked back hair. It was just the two of them.

"You've been traded, Gurdy."

Gurdenson looked up at him, a moment, and then back down between his skates.

"You're headed to the Island, effective immediately."

Silence.

"You can get dressed." Pause. "Thanks for everything you've meant to this organization."

The general manager walked out. Gurdenson's deliberate breath and the creak of his tightly laced skates and our dull rumble muffled all until the double-swinging locker room door burst open and crisp sticks and shouts and clatters from the team and the crowded arena behind.

The game was over. Gurdenson didn't move. The coach gave a speech and the team congratulated young Amirov on his first hat trick and slapped Taylor's back and Gurdenson sat and stared a hole in the plush carpet. Water bottles and the showers and sticks checked and re-taped. Then slowly, at a

level below the operational clamor of full professional locker room, restrained voices passed the news from player to player. They glanced over. Gurdenson met no eyes.

The others gathered their gear and put on their suits and ties, but as they left the room, one-by-one each man walked up to Gurdenson where he still sat with his skates on, tapped him with the blade of their stick, under their breath:

“Tough one, Gurdsey.”

“Good luck, Gurdsey.”

“See you around, Gurdsey.”

The coach put a hand on his shoulder. Gurdenson couldn't see him shake his head.

“It's a tough deal, Gurdsey. It's a business now, eh, but it's a tough deal. You take care of yourself.”

The coach was the last to leave. Gurdenson again sat alone in the empty dressing room. He sat there for a long time. Then he got up, put on his suit without showering, and left out the back door of the arena where no one was waiting for him.

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*OCTOBER 1996, SAULT STE MARIE, ONTARIO, SOO GREYHOUNDS RADIO BROADCAST:*

*Knights recover the puck, slip it along the halfwall, lose control, now they have it back, and dump it into the Soo zone.*

*Robert with the puck, finds his man, Soo coming away, long pass to Paquet and OH MY Ballard just stepped into Paquet at the Soo bench.*

*Paquet had his head down and Ballard just freight-trained him!*

*Paquet never saw it and he's hurt. Paquet is down.*

*Play continues, puck slides into London's end but now there's some chirping going on and it looks like Gurdenson is challenging Ballard.*

*Gurdenson, in his first game here with the Soo, he isn't wasting any time and they throw down the gloves and here they go!*

*Gurdenson and Ballard!*

*Gurdenson grabs on and starts throwing rights in there!*

*Ballard can't get his head up, Gurdenson's pummeling him with the right!*

*Ballard hasn't even swung yet but now he does and both men are swinging away. Ballard and Gurdenson!*

*Ballard connects on a right and another one but WOW Gurdenson just caught him square on the nose. Gurdenson KO'd Ballard and he's stunned. That nose has gotta be broken, Gurdenson dropped him like a sack of potatoes.*

*But now here comes McCarthy. You knew he was going to get involved.*

*And Gurdenson has got to be exhausted. He's got to be just spent, after the tilt with Ballard and Ballard is one tough customer but he is still down on the ice and you can see the blood now pooling at his knees.*

*They need to get in there. The officials need to get in there and stop this. Gurdenson just fought and he's got to be spent but the linesmen are distracted with Paquet and Ballard and the scrum in front of the Soo bench.*

*Well, McCarthy has taken exception and Gurdenson isn't backing down and so here they go.*

*Gurdenson and McCarthy!*

*Gurdenson is giving up twenty pounds easy and McCarthy has his grip with the left and here he comes with the right, over the top.*

*And Gurdenson is still trying to get a hold and McCarthy comes in with another right and another.*

*He's firing the right and Gurdenson can't get his grip and he still hasn't swung and OHHHHH McCarthy popped him right on the button! He caught him square with a right!*

*But Gurdenson is still on his feet somehow and now he comes back with a right. And another!*

*Both men just firing the punches in there and now Gurdenson frees his left hand and switches sides and starts going overtop with the left.*

*He surprised McCarthy and he caught him with a beauty and McCarthy looks dazed.*

*Gurdenson has McCarthy's jersey up over his head and now the left and an uppercut and another, Gurdenson is working the side of the head and down to the ice they go!*

*WOW!*

*Gurdenson, the young kid from Detroit, a troll from below the Mackinac Bridge, makes his mark in the Soo!*

*He's fighting like a troll out there.*

*Ballard still hasn't gotten up yet and the trainer has come out and I can't see his face but it has got to be a mess. McCarthy has gone straight to the dressing room with a huge cut over his eye and that's gunna need*

*stitches.*

*And this crowd is on their feet here in Sault Ste Marie as Gurdenson is still squawking at the Knights bench.*

*Welcome to the league, Troll!*

\*\*\*\*\*

“You know, Bobby, I can’t even believe I need to make this phone call.”

“Oh lay off the bullshit, Tom. I’m not buying, you can stop selling. You and John both knew this was coming. Or you should have.”

“My client’s been with you twelve years. That should count for something.”

“It does. It means we’ve paid him a lot of money and he should be grateful for it.”

“He was with you in thick and thin, Bobby, and there was a lot of thin. And this is how you treat him?”

“For fuck’s sake, we’re making a run. You can see that. I have to do what’s best for the team.”

“John Gurdenson is best for your team. He’s given his body and soul to this team and this city and now, on your best shot at the cup in thirty years, this is when you move him?” Silence. “This game used to be about loyalty, Bobby. What happened to loyalty? What happened to veteran leadership?”

“It’s a different game, Tommy. I need goals.”

“You need leadership and toughness.”

“I need goals and toughness. You can’t have one or the other anymore. Did you see what Taylor did last night?”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“He destroyed his check and then set up Amo. I never saw John make a play like that, never. That Tailor kid can fight but he can also hit and pass and ...”

“And he’s only played what, fifteen games for you?”

“Yes, and so he makes fucking half what Gurdenson does! Fifteen games, four goals, five assists. For half! We needed the cap room. This is our year, Tommy, this is it.”

“The fans love him.”

“The fans love winning. The fans love the cup.”

“True, but not like John. He’s old time. He does things the old way. He’d do anything for the cup and you know it. You’ve seen it. The things he’s endured for this team. This is like, like...” He searched for the word. “... a banishment or something. You can’t do this to him.”

“Listen, Tommy, I like you. I like John. It would have been nice to keep him. If it was like a couple years ago, you know, he used to be able to chip in a couple goals a year. He had what, ten, in ‘08? Those days are long gone, Tommy, you know it. Tailor has nine points in fifteen games. John hasn’t had a point in the last twenty, at least. And he’s not nearly as tough or durable as he thinks he is. With the injury troubles too, John should consider this a hint.”

“A hint for what?”

“I wish him all the best. Tailor is our man now. Tell Gurdsy good luck.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Gurdenson read the rule book six times, but there was no loophole or caveat or mercy clause to find. The league was

explicit and direct. To get your name on the cup, you had to be in the series final or play forty one games that season.

Gurdenson looked at the schedule. Sixty two games so far, but he missed two with a hip strain, seven with a busted hand that was still broken when he came back. And then the ribs, cracked in practice when Taylor hit him on a non-contact drill. Over-excited or deliberate or what, didn't matter, Gurdenson went out five games, Taylor went in, earned a spot in the lineup. After that, the worst, the *coup de grace*, ten games as a healthy scratch. Ten games gone so Taylor could play.

Gurdenson did the math. Sixty two minus twenty four was thirty eight. Thirty eight games. Three short.

Three short, no cup.

They'd win it this year, everyone knew it. Three short. No cup.

Taylor would only have thirty six, but he'd be in the cup final for sure.

Gurdenson took another drink.

The ribs. Taylor. Three short, no cup.

He checked the schedule again, noted every game left for his old team, saw that the Island wasn't on it, and then he picked up the phone and called his agent.

\*\*\*\*\*

The closest we came to the Stanley Cup was the year before. We made it to the conference finals, the last step before playing for it all. We hadn't made the playoffs in five years, hadn't won a series in twice that. But now we had a young and up-and-coming team, a bench full of draft picks still in their diapers; only Gurdenson had endured the previous long years of toiling in fallow fields.

The first two rounds were a breeze, but in the third round the team encountered an older and tougher squad. We were hesitant and unsure, exposed as pretenders merely playing dress-up in our father's clothes. We lost that series in only five games, but no true fan among us would forget that our team's tender spines only bent and did not break, that our will was not permanently dashed, because of the actions of John Gurdenson in game three.

Our boys had been out-muscled in the corners, out-bruised in the paint, stripped and pushed off the puck, knocked about and we boo'd them hard until, as a final humiliation, our goaltender was sent sprawling, a blind hit from behind. Somehow his mask hit the pipe on the way down. He didn't move for several minutes. The shame was not that he went to the hospital for a brain scan, but rather that every man on ice watched it happen and did nothing.

The coach was planted behind the bench as an unvented furnace. He grew red and silent. No more shouts and mocks and cajoles of the line of smooth faces before him. He put out Gurdenson. We all knew the reason why, for the Troll but to do and...well, you know the rest.

When the puck was dropped Gurdenson ignored it. He skated directly to the opposing bench, discarding his gloves as he went. We knew what was coming, we started our chant for the Troll. His target knew as well, and was half out of his seat when Gurdenson arrived and grabbed his sweater by the outside of the shoulders and pulled him over the boards and onto the ice. The man hit awkwardly but was up quickly. He had bent over goaltenders before, and knew how to stand tall to answer for the taking of liberties.

We always loved Gurdenson because he fought like he had nothing to lose, like he wouldn't earn his supper if he didn't take his licks. The newspaper said he fought like a bareknuckle boxer in the hidden back room of a speakeasy,

betting the rent money on himself. That he fought to win, not to prolong a show until a referee might step in. Fans knew that a Gurdenson fight meant blood and broken orbitals.

That night, when Gurdenson got to that bench, eleven years of losing poured on the head of his opponent. He pummeled the man and discarded him, but then a second contender approached, and a third. More hands reached out from the bench, grabbed Gurdenson's elbows and collar. His left arm was pinned. He lost his grasp on the other man's jersey. A fist swung.

There was a time, not that many years before perhaps, when John Gurdenson would have ducked his head, broken free, twisted away at the last second. But no more. The years hung from him as invisible weights on his ankles and wrists. The right hand hit him in the temple, providence fled, and then surely nothing but a few dim stars amidst the void.

Gurdenson staggered. The rest of his team watched as he was pulled into the opposing bench and gang tackled. Two men pinned his lower half, many more on top. Gurdenson never said what happened to him at the bottom of the pile; it was hidden behind the boards, away from the cameras, never appeared on a highlight reel or replay. It took several minutes for the referees to pull everyone off, and all anyone ever saw was the result.

When Gurdenson emerged he was unrecognizable. He head and face were lumpy, like a thawed Thanksgiving turkey just taken out of the packaging. Blood pooled in unnatural places behind tight skin. His eyes were swollen to blindness. His left arm hung. We were quiet. No Troll calls in the arena. He was guided to the locker room to be treated by the doctors, and would spend two days in the hospital.

The coach stalked behind the bench, slammed a heavy palm against the glass behind him, and finally opened the coke oven door:

"Now you sons of bitches will believe we're in a war!" he roared.

\*\*\*\*\*

"You know Tommy, we could have talked on the phone," said Tampa's general manager, a round balding man with a stubbly goatee. "Why not that? Why fly down?"

The waitress came over and filled the two water glasses. She spilled a few drops perilously close to the big man's lap and he looked up and gave her a face but she didn't notice.

"And they don't even offer sparkling instead," he mumbled to himself. And then, louder, "Tommy, why are we here?"

"Maybe I just missed seeing your face?" Tom said, and took a sip.

"The trade deadline is tomorrow and I have work to do. Why did you come down here?" he asked again.

Tom closed the menu.

"We're here because you record your calls. I'd rather not have a transcript of this business when we're done," Tom said.

"Well, spit it out then. You have my attention," the other man said, and closed his menu as well and placed it on the stained linen.

"I need you to trade for John Gurdenson," Tom said.

"He just went to the Island."

"The Island isn't going to work for us."

"Why would they trade him to me?"

"We've already worked that out."

"Well, what if I don't want him? He's a has-been."

"We'll make it worth your while."

"We? Who's we? The Island is trying to put fans in the seats, they need a small time showman. I, on the other hand, am trying to win hockey games here. Your man's got nothing left in the tank. My team's trying to make the playoffs. You can't make it worth our while."

"I said we would make it worth *your* while."

Everything went quiet.

"Tommy, what are you doing?"

Tom looked down and smoothed the table cloth with his large hands. His wrinkled fingers looked like overboiled sausages left out too long on the plate.

"I'd rather not say," Tom said finally.

"How many other GMs have you approached?"

"Three."

"Did they all tell you to piss off?"

"Basically."

"And you haven't given up yet?"

"I read in the paper about Melissa's latest court filing, and I thought I'd give it one more shot."

Silence again. Tom took a drink of water.

"It's a shame about Melissa and the kids," Tom said. "I'm sorry. I never thought it would get so ugly with you two. I can only imagine the legal fees."

The man sat and stared at his empty plate a long time before answering.

"Will the Island play ball?"

"Sixth round pick. You won't even miss it next year. And my client is in the line-up the rest of the season."

\*\*\*\*\*

*CHICAGO SPORTSRADIO 720 POST-GAME SHOW:*

*PARKER: I think he planned it.*

*WHITE: Oh, you can't be serious.*

*PARKER: He went into tonight with the idea. Two games left in the season. We're the top seed. They're going nowhere. He's going nowhere. This didn't just randomly happen in the heat of the moment.*

*WHITE: You don't think the booing got to him.*

*PARKER: Everyone gets booed when they come back to play a game in their old building against their old team. Even after twelve years, it happens. No, that can't be it.*

*WHITE: Well, this is a big charge, planning to do it. What's your proof?*

*PARKER: Go back and look at the replays of his shifts. He's completely distracted, oblivious. He's not involved in the play, he's not chasing down pucks...*

*WHITE: He hasn't been a scoring threat in years. How can you tell the difference?*

*PARKER: ...he's not doing anything except waiting for that Taylor line to get on the ice. In the first period he stretched his shifts, and when that didn't work, I think he iced it on purpose. To lure them out.*

*WHITE: Well, I'll say this, and they showed it on the*

*broadcast, he had no one around him when he finally recovered the puck at the end of that long stretch in their own zone. He could have skated it out, to get his line off, but he didn't, he iced it instead. And the announcers questioned that decision at the time.*

*PARKER: Of course they did. It was a bad play. But it meant he was stuck out there, and that we were going to put out the top line in the offensive zone, which is exactly what he wanted. That was the first time all game that he and Taylor were on the ice at the same time.*

*WHITE: Is that right? Can we check that?*

*PARKER: This is what I'm saying: John Gurdenson meant to do it. These guys, and especially him, we saw this last year, they will do anything for the cup. But now he's gone, traded. What does the code say?*

*WHITE: The code says you handle it on the ice, but this went way beyond the hockey code.*

*PARKER: Well, code or not, he handled it on the ice alright. And someone, the league, the police, someone, is going to ask him. Did you plan to do this? Was this the plan all along? And I'm telling you, the answer is going to be yes.*

\*\*\*\*\*

And then there stood Taylor, on the side of the scrum, against the boards, back turned.

Gurdenson skated alone from center ice, eyes on his target only, skating more quickly now, silently gathering momentum as a pendulum released. At the last moment he pushed off, left his feet, and raised his elbow. Taylor's back was still turned. Gurdenson caught him at full speed, full body, along

his left shoulder and hip, Gurdenson's elbow on the young man's left temple. Tailor's face hit the glass, he momentarily went unconscious, and in that second, fell to the ice like a butchered cattle carcass let off the hook.

In the arena, we shouted and jeered. Tailor was our man now, and we pointed at the officials to intervene and yelled for our boys to step in. Gurdenson shook off the hit. Hands clutched at him but he jerked loose an elbow and swung at his restrainer behind him and dropped the shocked and unprepared referee. Every other player was paired off with an opponent, locked in entanglements of gear and jerseys and arms and legs, wrestling or recovering.

Gurdenson was alone, free. He loomed over Tailor, who was still face down, groaning and only slowly moving to his hands and knees.

Gurdenson raised his stick and then swung it like an axe down on the back of Tailor's head. The stick shattered and Tailor's helmet flew and he dropped to the ice again. Gurdenson carefully took off his gloves and picked the kid up by the sweater and spun him so they were face to face. Tailor was in and out. He tried to get his hands up but he was too limp to fight back and he fell at Gurdenson's first blow. So the big man rolled the kid over and sat on Tailor's chest and began to beat the boy's unconscious face with his bare scarred hands. Tailor came to and started to twitch but he was pinned. Sweat and spit and snot and then nothing but blood, a wet slap with every impact. Gurdenson threw rights until he felt the bones in Tailor's face yield to gritty mush. He didn't stop, not even when the nose tore, revealing a cavern, and boiling blood erupted everywhere.

Tailor screamed.

Gurdenson never slowed. He swung again and again and again and his jersey dripped gore. We stared in silence. Tailor's cries

rang in the rafters and then faded to a gurgle, and his red hot blood melted the ice beneath his sprawled body. The benches emptied, and security ran on the ice, but not in time. The Troll leaned over and whispered into what was left of Taylor's ear.

"No cups for us."

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## **New Nonfiction by Abena Ntoso: Memorial Day**

There are four ways of telling what happened.

1. Just tell the truth. Some stories are told just once; others are told over and over again, like myths and legends. We remember such stories not because they are memorable, but because they have been told. Like the well-crafted, witty, searing, suspenseful story of Odysseus and the Cyclops ... *"Nobody's killing me now by fraud and not by force!"* Such a story of human suffering. *"Nobody's ruining my life!"* We grow breathless and sweaty, gasp for words and air, just trying to explain things. It's happening, it's real, and yet no one can really see it or feel it but you. And, let's face it, you certainly aren't doing a great job of explaining it to anyone else.

2. When we think, speak, and behave, we do so while mixing up the past, present, future, imagination, dreams, and paranoia. Our personal concept of "reality" is more warped than we realize.

3. We may decide to editorialize what we think we know.

4. Or, I decide I have to tell the stories, but I can't beach my existence on the shores of the past or along the jagged coastline of paranoia. I invite you to subtly explore and question your truths, but you must remember that everything I say is a tale. I'm spinning fictions and poems to entertain us both, and to hopefully provide catharsis. It's also best if I tell you this up front, so that you can voyage with me and not worry that we may end up stuck in one place. I am a mental wanderer; and you are also free to wander wherever you please. I have enclosed a map for your convenience.




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I have a daughter, and I have a son. I have bags that are always empty, and bags that are heavy and full. Books, binders, cellphone chargers, laptops, dishes, Tupperware, blankets, pillows, paint brushes, colored pencils, lavender-scented trash bags for the trash can with the lid that closes. I have usernames and passwords. Lots of them. I have hair and skin. All over. These things make me a lot like other people .

I tried to write a book in grade school; I wrote a 40-page chapter book in a black and white marbled composition notebook. A good piece of fiction, but I don't remember what it was about. Someone in the house threw it away. Perhaps it was me.

 In high school in the 1990s, I wrote poems on a Smith-Corona word processor, and then on a Packard Bell computer. I wrote my deepest secrets and my mundane musings in a large purple hardcover journal that went everywhere with me, except for school. We didn't write in school, except for half-heartedly scribbling hasty essays to no one in particular about this or that novel or historical event. In college I did slam poetry, and I wrote my poems in several hardcover spiral-bound writing journals that I ended up throwing away

when it was time to “grow up.” Writing was not part of waking up and being a real adult.

Twenty years later, a writing workshop for military veterans shook me awake and reminded me to write, and write again and again. Every day now, I’ve been waking up on Earth and filling notebooks.

It’s 2020; in my imagination Earth is a drunk bowling ball, rolling around on the rocky edge of the highest cliff, constantly shifting in precarious circles, nauseous and peering unsteadily, unable to comprehend whatever is below or beyond the precipice of history. I am watching this spectacle, and I’m writing this book.

How can one possibly chronicle the various permutations of a redesigned relationship with reality? A disease ravaging human physiological and societal structures has written so many people deeper and deeper into distinct forms of suffering that can swallow a person whole—hunger, illness, isolation, unemployment, martyrdom, the sudden and lonely deaths of loved ones ... and yet there is also an awakening, an introspection, a forced freedom to wonder how we will revise our lives in an apocalyptic invitation to survive today and the remainder of this century. Acutely mindful of the present, we draft new possibilities for our future. Left with few options, we explore everything.

The kids build a multi-blanket fort in the living room, and the youngest introduces a brilliant piece of legislation, using magic marker to draft a sign which alerts potential visitors of the new law: “No farting in the fort.”

Representative Ocasio-Cortez from New York eloquently demonstrates that misogyny and verbal abuse are pervasive and very real. Other very real things that are often minimized: poverty, homelessness, systemic racism, domestic abuse, sexual harassment, violence, rape.

Standing on the concrete balcony before sunrise, I count 10 stars to the east, and let's just say that I am not telling you everything because it's simply just too much. I walk back inside, turn on the silver lamp and sit down at the dining table to write.

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My mental explorations lead to interesting observations and dialectics about the nature and meaning of anything and everything. I am acutely aware that exploration is a luxury, although I maintain the belief that all human beings should be able to enjoy enough personal safety and security to be able to explore, whether physically or mentally. In that sense, I don't think of travel—physical or intellectual—as a luxury, but as a requisite for opening one's mind.

I sit down not knowing where to begin. Mental travel is not a pragmatic endeavor; it is disheveled and eclectic, authentic and impure, sagacious, sobering and silly. My thoughts, ideas and observations wander throughout the universe, and my daily writing is an incomplete account of these creative and intellectual escapades.

I grasp at words and attempt to say ideas and emotions that cannot be said. Language is a chunky and viscous medium for the flow of an authentic existence.

I pen an ode to customer service:

*The joy and peace you bring is underrated*

*underappreciated,*

*like Jesus, a savior I can't see,*

*except you start off every conversation*

*with "My name is \_\_\_\_\_. How can I help you?"*

*and I am usually not down on my knees,  
my eyes are not closed,  
in fact, I may be multitasking, or staring  
at the equipment or correspondence that  
seems to be the source of a particular kind  
of problem today,  
problems that are usually solved by the end of our  
discussion; you may have just performed a minor  
miracle. If only prayers worked that way.  
But then again if they did, we would probably take  
God for granted too.  
You deserve a raise,  
or at least, more praise.*

The streaming recollections of my most vivid dreams are usually written down without interpretation. In one dream, "I was invited to fly an old-school Amelia Earhart-type plane with another young woman and two men, and it was unclear whether we should wear shorts or a cover up over our bottoms and legs, and the bathroom where we were changing was semi-outdoors and had dirt floors so it was muddy, and I was holding my breath, and sometimes I had sandals and sometimes I did not."

At times it is difficult to write creatively, especially when I am inundated with the more mundane or administrative aspects of life. During such weeks or months, I struggle with "maintaining my dimension of creativity, curiosity, playfulness, self-expression, and observation despite the pull

of other dimensions.” I make a commitment to re-establishing balance, and sometimes I feel like a rebel when I write needy and nonsensical poetry, release an incessant flow of thoughts and emotions, or paint pictures that look like masterpieces by a 3-year-old. After much deliberating about the nature of work, I decide that this too is worthy of my time. Perhaps this is evidence of a quotidian brand of nonconformity.

I feel overloaded with responsibilities, and I escape to the park to find mental energy. Seated cross-legged in the gondola I write, “I feel like I’m seeing through a different person’s eyes, a depressed person’s eyes. I am in a depressed person’s mind, walking in their sad, sad shoes, and there’s the woosh of cars along the road and birds calling in the various ways they all do (a hooting, a squeaking, a trill, multiple voices and languages), but somehow I don’t see with wonder and delight, it’s like my brain is tired and that part has been clubbed and is lying unconscious in a ditch and everything else that is walking, sitting, staring, yelling, crying—all of it can’t find the missing part that has been beaten and left for dead.”

Some aspects of quotidian life do become quite amazing. On one occasion I marvel at the habit of taking a shower. “Mostly an everyday experience except for those occasional days when you don’t take a shower, you skip a shower for one reason or another, and it gets to the end of the day and you just give up on showering. Does the frequency of this say anything about you? Something about your personal motivation or lack thereof? Your ability to end on a high note? Your nonchalance? Your personal commitment to conserving water? Your blasé approach to personal hygiene? Your work ethic, coupled with your level of exhaustion?”

I think about what freedoms I can explore as a poet; I try capitalizing the first letter of every single word I write, “Just So You Would All Know That All Of My Words Stand For Something, None Of Them Are Extra Words Or Filler Words, They

Are All The Point, They All Introduce And Elucidate, And I Am Not Complacent When I Write.”

I write about dirty words. Violence. Abuse. I sip coffee and attempt to process trauma and the human response to it. Sexual harassment: why do we collectively mumble excuses and ignore it? Verbal abuse: why do we simply shrug our shoulders, an outward sign that we simultaneously condemn and condone? Child abuse, domestic abuse: why are we afraid to say that all people should feel safe in their homes? Why are we afraid to name a source of pain that comes at the hands of someone who is supposed to love and protect? What would it be like if we stopped ignoring violence and abuse in the home, if we started addressing it as a serious public health and safety concern? Would this also make us better at preventing it in our public institutions and in the street?

I write about the word pilgrimage. I write about the abbreviation “IRL.” I find it interesting that there is even an abbreviation for the phrase “in real life” ... is this something that we now find ourselves saying so often that we have to abbreviate it? I paint, experimenting with mixing colors for a variety of flesh tones.

I do not know that on Memorial Day a man will be choked to death in front of a crowd. I sing happy birthday to my mother, and I hug my children. It is days later when I first hear about what happened to George Floyd. It is almost a week before I finally take a deep breath and listen to *The New York Times* news report.

Over the next few weeks I write pages and pages about my frustrations with humanity, racism, sexism and violence. I wonder what my mother’s birthday will be like in subsequent years. Next year I am going to write a poem for my mother and have it framed.

“In poetry, just as happens constantly in our own minds, the

biggest kinds of thoughts about life and the world can shift with ease into very personal and intimate ones, and back again.”

–Matthew Zapruder

I scribble words. Paradoxes. Parables. Panegyrics. Bona fide and exigent matters for consideration. What does it mean to love and be loved? Why was this woman scorned? Why was this child slammed? Why was this man murdered in the street? How do we right this? How do I write this pain? How do I spell it out?

I read and re-read Rumi first thing every morning, prepare to open up my heart for human business. I savor words and language. I copy quotes that make me pause and think. I pull out my oil colors—yellow ochre, cadmium red, ultramarine, viridian—paint my mother with a newborn baby in her arms, wrapped in a blanket of Adinkra symbols for strength, humility, knowledge, and learning.

I write about dreams before I forget. The river in this one is iridescent, blue, turquoise, bright green, glowing. We are floating down this river with magical properties to heal a deadly and infectious skin disease; the river was full of people, and at first I had a full army-issued diving suit with a mask like the gas masks, and I was underwater, but then I came up and there was an African guy, in his 40s and bald, and he took off his mask and we were all crying because we knew he would get infected, and we were all floating down the river and it was nighttime, and when we got to the end of the river there were lots of people whose skin was raw, exposed subdermis, and we were crying and screaming; Dawn was there, and we were afraid of the people and for them, we thought they were infected and dying, and we floated around and were on our way back, and the river was crowded and we were trying to avoid the infected people with exposed skin, and then we felt our own faces and realized that we were like that too, our

skin was raw, everyone, everyone; we were screaming and scared and continued floating back, and when we got back to the shore at the other end of the river we were suddenly healed, and there was a tree in the river that had flowers on it, and we were so happy and grateful that we survived and were healed, and Dawn and her daughter were already at the shore, and we picked the delicate flowers for our hair, and the water was iridescent, blue, turquoise, bright green, glowing. The river was supposed to heal us, and it did.

There is a current and a past; for most of us, it is difficult not to confuse the two. So it is with writing fiction; the flow between the imagination and reality is as natural as a dream.

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“Caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar.”

Traveler, there is no road; you make your own path as you walk.

—Antonio Machado

If life is a frighteningly intricate tangle of experiences, how do we cope? How do we find our way amid a complexity and vastness that we cannot even begin to comprehend? At any given moment, we are busy splitting atoms, mapping the DNA of viruses, and calculating distances between galaxies in the universe. Or maybe we are making a bologna sandwich while arguing with our mate. It is quite possible that we remember attending our sister's college graduation and watching our children play in the water fountains on campus with their cousins; maybe we heard about what happened several days ago on a street corner in Minneapolis, Minnesota; perhaps we have also studied the various conquests and movements that have transpired over the past few centuries or millennia. We might dream of a hot pink crape myrtle tree blooming and tossing confetti petals; imagine the star-spangled fabric of a nation

ripping into two; think about what it must be like for our mothers to watch us leave over and over again. There is a chance we are fretting over the possibility of being robbed of our possessions, or considering drastic measures to protect ourselves amid the fear of losing much more. Maybe we plan for our upcoming vacation; maybe we don't see retirement as a viable option, and maybe we predict that we will all be working tirelessly to save our planet or inhabit a new one.

In real life, we flow through our thoughts and actions so rapidly that we rarely take the time to think about where they are taking us. Most conversations and nonfiction writings often reflect our valiant attempts to convince ourselves and others of what we refer to as "truth." Few of us realize, let alone care to admit, that our stories and language float in an ocean that is always everywhere all at once. What an adventure it can be to acknowledge this and embark on a mental journey!

This ability to wander and explore is the reason why I write poetry and fiction. I write to ponder humanity and nature; I write to probe paradoxes and dilemmas; I write to peek into the universe. I write poetry to expand my thinking, to find wisdom and authenticity; I write poetry to record the beats of a moment or thought, and then to question the music. I like to be mindful of the infinite ocean of natural thinking, and so I write fiction because it is how I allow my mind to play.

Freedom to play with words and language, to traverse past, present and future, to intersect these with dreams and imagination, to clothe our worries in questions, and to don multiple perspectives ... this is the freedom we experience when we read and write poetry and fiction. Perhaps in tumultuous times it would be especially wise to consider that this freedom of thought is a blessing that we should not forget about or squander. To appreciate poetry and fiction is to sense that, as Rumi puts it:

"Love is the reality,

and poetry is the drum  
that calls us to that.”

Writing poetry and fiction is a way in which we can consciously alter the amount of influence that each mind state has on our psyche or our social and political interactions at any given moment. With these two literary forms, when we write, we can usually be incredibly honest with ourselves about what is real and what is made up, what is past, what is present, what is imagined, and what was in our dreams. If asked to parse our own literary work, we would be able to literally drop words and phrases into each of these mind-state categories as they relate to the story that we are attempting to tell or the experience we are trying to create.

Furthermore, when people read poetry or fiction they know it's just that ... there is no expectation of needing to believe something, agree with something, or debate its validity. We are aware that the author has made all of this up for our entertainment, and we can comfortably take the stance that we are allowed to decide what we think.

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In her mind, a civil war is brewing, but no one wants to call it a war. There is a paranoid anguish in watching America implode, an anguish of wanting everything to be alright, but knowing that it isn't, and not having any idea how to make it so. The nightmare of polarization mixes with the immense pressure that the past exerts on the present—both personally and politically. The impotence of watching the present reminds her of a child's innocence, the struggle to make sense of the world when she wants to fix it but realizes that she can't—that this world is simultaneously larger and more minute than she can possibly comprehend.

*And so begins the memorial story,*

*this meandering tale of vainglorious battles  
in which the author takes up sundry pens and portable devices  
with lofty hopes of celebrating peace among the paradoxical  
parties  
of humankind, the protests and propaganda  
littering the sometimes crowded, sometimes deserted streets  
of a weaponized post-war people.  
This wayward wordsmith awkwardly commences her wandering  
while seated at a small and sturdy dining table from Ashley  
Furniture,  
aided by the glowing filamentous light  
of a brushed nickel folding lamp she used in graduate school,  
along with a generous mug of coffee chased  
with a copious amount of caramel mocha coffee creamer,  
an international delight indeed. Two score and one year have  
passed  
since life first illuminated her adventurous spirit,  
and yet amnesia eclipses the first few years that followed  
birth,  
that event which was likely quite traumatic—for what ripened  
babe  
and exhausted mother do not grow somewhat at odds  
with one another and the gods, so much so that the mother has  
little choice  
but to force the ready human from her loins? And yet*

*this miraculously celebratory disagreement which triggered her adventures in vitality seems to have little bearing on the psyche with which she now attends to her craft.*

Her own dogmatic approach is the dreamy and desperately futuristic optimism of thinking, “we can do better than this.” Until violence hits closer and closer to home ... then perspectives, mind states and time periods don’t even matter ... She just wants to protect, and she’s stuck thinking “this shouldn’t be.” Small details from her life catch her attention; she imagines being held down and injected with something; she imagines a leather belt raining down on her daughter as she cries out cowering in a couch; she imagines her son’s thick hair and dark skin on a grown man who is running. She would run too. She has run—several times—and she would probably do it again.

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## **New Poetry from Mack Freeman: “Death Row Butterflies”**



DEATH ROW BUTTERFLIES / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Gossamer wings glint  
Razor wire gleams in sunlight  
Death row butterflies