

# **New Nonfiction from Kristina Usaite: “Against a Cruel Society, I Came Out to Myself”**

When I was losing myself, the only thing that saved me was immigrating to America. Only then, with great effort and sacrifice, I was able to come out to myself and do what we all have to do for ourselves – to be who we are. Condemnation, fear, physical injury, loss, death – these are the first words in response to the question of how L.G.B.T.Q.+ people survive in post-Soviet countries. Many of us have been beaten or killed in one form or another. Where I’m from, Ukraine, fear lives in every vein. When you are a woman who loves another woman or a man who loves another man, this is included in the category of things people don’t talk about. I grew up where the words *lesbian* or *gay* were not spoken, but other words were said I would not dare to say aloud. The traditional family was the only concept I grew up with, even though I can’t connect myself to this concept. From an early age, I realized I had unusual feelings towards women, which I couldn’t find a name for. The L.G.B.T.Q.+ topic was out of reach; I didn’t know what questions to ask to understand who I am. I didn’t know such questions could be asked.



In high school, others found me different. The stereotype that girls should wear skirts didn't leave my classmates, but it never took root in me. I was often asked when I'd look like a girl. I didn't know how to answer this question because I didn't understand it. I was already a girl. In my student years, the concept of my love was becoming clearer. But that didn't mean I could afford it. All my girlfriends lost their virginity, and I couldn't allow myself to be looked at differently. Even a bottle of vodka didn't help me to undress and go to bed with a man. After every unsuccessful attempt I had to lie to my friends. I had to carry condoms in my bag and show them with obvious visibility, so that no one had doubts creeping in. The fear that friends would start to despise me has always hung over me. There is a certain mentality of concepts and stereotypes that make you think that you should do the same as everyone else. In Ukraine, it is easy to surrender to society and miss the opportunity to discover who you really are.

In my second year at university, I had my first relationship with a girl. We hid in dark corners where we could finally

breathe. We could only hug briefly when meeting in public. Our hands met in places where there were no eyes. We often had to run away, to go to other cities where nobody knew us. Where we could look at each other and hold our gaze, not arousing too much attention with the smiles we exchanged. We loved loving each other, but we could only love in lies. We even lied to ourselves, saying these feelings have no life. I wanted to believe it was not so. But she couldn't help succumbing to society. She continued to love me, but at a distance with another man. I was sure this was the future that awaited me every time. There was no one who could tell me otherwise. No one who could talk to me at all.

At the time I met my second girlfriend, she was engaged to a man. Our relationship began soon after and a month later she had to get married. The fate of our relationship took the same turn as my previous one. We kissed behind the trees. We spoke words of love through messages and then immediately deleted them. We sent her fiancé to the store to find a moment alone, hugging each other, touching our hands. She wanted to leave him, but her attempts were unsuccessful. She said, "What am I going to tell my family? What will they think of me? I love you, but I have to marry him." I was maid of honor at her wedding. Kissing him, she kissed me too. Everything happened only because we believed these feelings had no place in this world.

Nobody knew I was a lesbian, including myself. I often denied my feelings and inclinations, and questioned if I was normal. Suddenly people began to understand who I was before I knew it. By deception, I was met in the courtyard where I was met by a few men to show me their strength in opinion. After regaining consciousness from beatings behind garages, I quickly came to the conclusion this was not my place to be. It was useless to go to the police, knowing they were not involved in such matters. They would've shaken the hands of those who beat me for who I am. I had no one to expect help

from. I no longer wanted to wake up behind garages. I decided to immigrate to America.

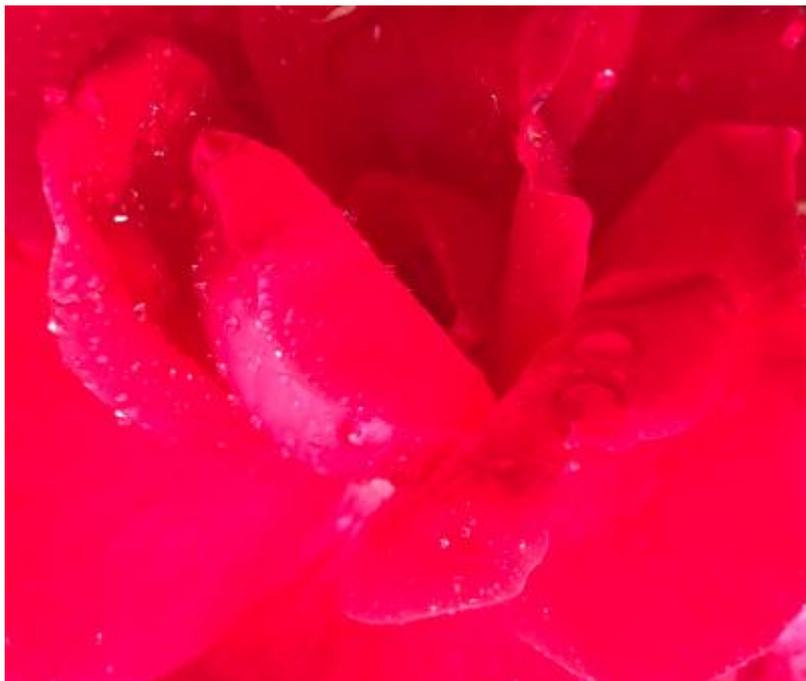
I had to study everything again after immigrating. I learned to speak openly. I learned to feel openly. I learned not to be afraid to feel. But it took a long time. I saw L.G.B.T.Q.+ communities in America and, at first, rejected them because fear lived deeper and stronger and didn't allow me to be touched by who I was. At my first job, an employee asked me if I was a lesbian. I immediately blurted out "no." It was the first time the word *lesbian* was applied to me in a positive form. For the first time, I heard in my head "I think I'm a lesbian." Later I found out half of our staff was gay. I didn't deny myself anymore.

My mother didn't know what I was struggling with. I couldn't lose her. In America I met many people from different countries, mainly Russia, who were disowned and abandoned by their parents. The pain the loss inflicted was unbearable. For a very long time I prepared to tell my mother who I was. She and I were very close, and in the absence of such large and significant information about me I didn't feel complete. On the phone, a year after I moved to America, the conversation happened. Having said I have a girlfriend, my mother's first question was, "Is everything good between you?"

No, you can't be silent. You can't give in, giving yourself up to people. You can't play by the rules and be convenient for others. I'm glad I'm on my side. It feels good to say – I am a lesbian. What is finally more important to me is that I feel. It took a large part of my life, and chasing a new one, to finally come out to myself.

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# New Poetry from Alita Pirkopf: “Roadkill,” “Sounds of the Past,” “Spring,” and “Unhealthy”



BLOOD IN BUCKETS / *image by Amalie Flynn*

## **ROADKILL**

I bring you blood in buckets,  
a heart that I hear, a palsied hand.  
It has been eight, ten  
years, my issue.  
The same as twenty years ago  
when your father felt  
about me as you do now.  
I felt the world shrink  
but I thought something,  
not necessarily the world,  
would end. I had not thought  
the world lay flat, as Renaissance

cartographers mapped it.  
But now, like an automobile tire  
not only flapping, flattening,  
parts of it, or me, lie on the shoulder  
of my road with dead things and dirt.

## **SOUNDS OF THE PAST**

She thought she had found  
soft music and warm dialect,  
a sunny sort of near-Italian soul,

But surfaces surprise.  
She found out. She found  
that underneath pounded  
a martial drumbeat  
vibrating still

from Vienna's center,  
his childhood years  
under the Third Reich,  
a father fighting  
occupying Yugoslavia  
with others  
missing  
the village polkas,  
his son.

A burst of marches,  
explosions, still resounding.  
All of us hearing  
pounding steps and hearts.

## **SPRING**

Shreds remain—  
unraveled weavings  
of brown grasses and mud—  
in branches a bird eyed

for her family tree.

The rest, the nest,  
that we had watched  
through last week's window,  
fell.

The dog found  
blue broken eggs  
in the grass.

Families, all of us  
consider seriously.  
Upsetting winds  
come to nests.  
It is spring  
and windows  
open views  
and dooryards fill  
with the ambiguity  
of lilacs.

## **UNHEALTHY**

I loved my doctors  
until one  
played sick games,  
touching and taunting,  
and knowing of rules  
I didn't know.  
Telling jokes  
I didn't understand.  
Dismissing me  
for my naivete—  
stupidity.

The years passed,  
and he operated  
on me appropriately,

savingly. Later he  
mentioned dining  
together or going out  
for coffee, but didn't ask,  
and got angry for reasons  
I didn't know, saying  
I hadn't said I'd go.

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## **New Nonfiction from James Warren Boyd: “The Ecstasy of Sister Bernadette”**

In seventh grade my Catholic elementary school received a new principal, Sister Bernadette, who strode onto the blacktop that first day like Darth Vader walking down the ramp of an Imperial shuttle. Her determined expression and alert eyes matched her gait, punctuated with her stylish yet sensible thick-heeled, closed-toe pumps. She wore what I would come to know as her signature look: a midnight-blue, knee length, A-line dress trimmed with an immaculate white collar and matching slightly flared cuffs. The fact that she voluntarily chose to wear the now-optional veil long after all but the most senior nuns had abandoned them read radically - conservative.

My experience as a child of the '70s in Southern California was that you could tell a nun's temperament by what she wore. Younger nuns (and some of their older allies) in our parish wore breezy blue polyester separates, tried fervently to be groovy and relevant, and were admirably committed to social justice. Older nuns who wore THE VEIL with matching black or

dark blue habits were often mean and more than occasionally violent; they generally, as I saw it, dwelled in the dark recesses of the convent and emerged to discipline and punish.

But it was these same veiled authoritarians who provided the protection I needed as an obviously queer child. In my first weeks after beginning the third grade as a new student, the boy that would become my nemesis, David, stole my thick tortoiseshell glasses, wearing them in the back pockets of his blue corduroy uniform pants, and taunting "Yeah, try to catch me, butt-face." I was an easy mark; in part because I started 1<sup>st</sup> grade a year early, I was always the youngest and frequently the shortest in my class. Most damningly, though, I was nelly: one of those little boys with neither the ability nor the inclination to butch it up to avoid ridicule. My parents—my mother, consumed by guilt for the queer son she thought she was responsible for creating, and my father emotionally checked out and gone a good part of the year for business—weren't much help. As a family, we seemed to be universally ashamed rather than outraged about my being bullied, convinced somehow that I or we had brought this social embarrassment upon ourselves.

Sr. Bernadette, fortunately for me, ignored and missed nothing. As we filed back to class after early-morning assembly, she witnessed one of the boys in David's posse hit another student on the back of the head simply because he was standing in front of him. Sr. Bernadette pulled both boys out of line, got our attention, and shouted in exasperation, "*This* boy," pointing at the attacker, "just HIT *this* boy," pointing at the victim, "for *no reason*. What is WRONG with you people??!!"

My admiration and respect for Sr. Bernadette deepened in her duties as the English instructor for the advanced class of our grade. While other students complained about grammar drills, essay revision, and impromptu verbal quizzes on irregular verb

tenses, I savored them. I relished the diagramming of sentences, especially ones that had incredibly long phrases and clauses of Sr. Bernadette's own creation with their compound subjects, transitive verbs, overly-modified nouns, appositives, and riots of prepositional phrases. I found those graphic organizers with their sideways houses and attached ladders beautiful landscapes of thought and syntax.



I think my enthusiasm for writing and grammar put me in Sr. Bernadette's good graces, which was a blessing since she proved immune to my usual sycophantic ploys. Fortunately, she

seemed to dislike David and his clan of bullies as much or more than I did—if this were possible. Plus, although clearly a bit of a jock herself, who unlike me seemed as comfortable on an athletic field as in the classroom, she didn't seem overly impressed by David's athletic abilities. She was actually *helpful* to students like me who needed a bit of coaching (since our school had no PE teachers), and sometimes spontaneously joined us on the field and blacktop to participate and instruct.

On one such occasion she offered to be the pitcher for our kickball game. I think she enjoyed expertly fulfilling the variety of polite pitching requests from the kickers (e.g. "slow giant bouncies, please" or "fast baby bouncies. please"). Sr. Mary Bernadette even did some fielding in her dress, veil, and pumps, deftly catching fly balls and scooping up grounders while she pitched for both teams. When it was David's turn, a tense hush fell over players on and off the field; we all knew that mortal enemies were facing off. David took his time getting to the plate, trying to unnerve Sr. Mary Bernadette with his swaggering, lackadaisical lope. Despite this, her, face-framed by a few wisps of hair which has escaped the side her veil—remained unchanged; in fact, her polite half-smile may have increased slightly at the corners like a Grinch grin. Her thick dark eyebrows remained neutral, her forehead unfurrowed. Her body was still, save the slow rotation of her neck which allowed her gaze to follow David to the plate; her steely stare focused on David like a panther stalking prey. When he finally arrived at the plate and looked up from the dirt at her with a smirk, the corners of her half smile quivered ever so slightly.

"How would you like your pitch?" Sr. Bernadette asked evenly. She took a breath, and rolled the ball as requested with perfect accuracy. David watched the incoming pitch: as it neared, he rocked back on a crepe heel of his brown suede Wallabee knockoffs before taking a few leaning stutter steps

toward the red rubber ball and kicking it with all his might using the inside of his foot. His kick bulleted on the ground toward Sr. Bernadette. Despite its great speed and a weird, high bounce, she caught the ball confidently above her head with a resounding, "thwap." We held our breath as she lowered her arms, the ball now firmly gripped in a single hand, and looked at a gaping David. She arched one eyebrow and waited for him to run. David trotted towards first, haltingly, eyes locked with hers; then he broke their gaze and sprinted. Sr. Bernadette cocked her arm with the ball back slowly, seemingly wanted to draw out David's cringing as he ran, and when David caught her eye directly across from her, she launched the ball like a trebuchet, hitting David so hard he stumbled with its impact.

Amidst the cheers from those outside of David's retinue, Sr. Bernadette walked back to the mound with a laugh we had never heard. Her subtle, sardonic chuckle was familiar, but this was an unbridled, throaty laugh from deep within. She lifted her face sightly to the sun in elation for a brief moment, her veil tipping back, punctuating her ecstasy. When she arrived at the mound she had regained her composure, and she turned toward David who had returned to the sidelines and asked, "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," David groused, rubbing his shoulder.

Sr. Bernadette nodded at him, and then scanned the field to see who had the ball. She made a beckoning motion to the student, and caught the throw in the air solidly with one hand.

She smiled and scanned David's team, "Who's next?"

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Years later I went to visit Sr. Bernadette at the motherhouse on a trip to see family and friends in Southern California. I waited in the quiet, immaculate, oddly corporate-feeling

lobby, until she strode around the corner, and exclaimed brightly, "James Boyd!" She seemed only a bit older, and I realized at that point how young she must have been when she became our principal. Gone was her signature habit-esque dress replaced with business casual separates. Gone too was the veil; she had combed-back salt and pepper hair in a short, flattering style. We exchanged hellos (my recollection is that we shook hands) and she invited me to sit with her. I asked her if she remembered our class, and she said, diplomatically, we were "a difficult class but at least we had energy." The classes who came after us, she said, were "hard to get to do anything."

As she reminisced, I looked into her eyes—framed now with soft wrinkles—still marked with a fierce intelligence, eyes that never missed a bully's blacktop trick. But gone was the sternness I surmise was necessary as a school administrator who valued order and fairness. What was in abundance now was the once rarely seen glint of approval she gave students when a verb was conjugated or a sentence diagrammed correctly. And in the corner of her eyes as we sat evaluating each other anew was something I hadn't seen or noticed as a child: a playful glint.

She asked about me. I told her I had moved to San Francisco and was pursuing a master's degree in English. I told her that one of the reasons for my visit was to thank her for being the person who first got me to love the subject.

"I'm happy to hear that," she replied with a smile, "You know, I'm not teaching anymore."

"Really? Why not?" I think my expression might have revealed how unfathomable I thought this was, since in my mind she was *the* English teacher.

"A few years ago, the order needed someone to be the accountant and I stepped up to do it."

“Do you like it?” I asked.

She shrugged, “One of us needed to do it.”

After a few more moments of conversation, she stood up and extended her hand again. “Well, good luck to you, James,” she said, shaking my hand, “and good luck with your studies.”

“Thank you,” I said. “Nice to see you.”

Sr. Bernadette squeezed my shoulder maternally and gave me a warm, genuine half smile before she turned and walked out of the reception area without looking back, her footsteps echoing in emptiness and deafening quiet.

I stood still for a moment in the vestibule—not wanting to move or make a noise, not wanting that pause after to end—before exiting the motherhouse to my car. As I walked, I wondered what she thought of these periodic visits of the adult specters of children past. What must it be like to meet her historic fan base, surely the former students most motivated to visit? I regret that I didn’t ask her if she, too, remembered that sunny afternoon on the kickball field when she transformed into a superhero.

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**New Poetry from Jesse  
Frewerd: “Symphony”**



OUR TARGETED HEADS / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Ballistic medleys project ambition, while dancing tones find their pitch. There is unexpected buoyancy in our youth. March, advance, train, drill, prepare, disseminate. It's the 4am ensemble, time to crescendo awake for guard duty. Report to post, front gate, alert and ready. Hours, minutes, seconds, tempo depends on the action. The symphony begins with an RPG flying over our targeted heads. Return fire. Bullets staccato the enemy location. A cappella commands over the comms. Write the counterpoint, execute. Threat neutralized, they retreated. Though my heart is playing allegro, via adrenaline. Dynamics decrescendo the scene, bringing it to normalcy. I return to my life as it is, my new normal cadence amid syncopated pop-shots, RPG's, mortar rounds, and IED's.

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# **New Fiction from David P. Ervin: “Currents”**

Grant crouched on the sandstone and leaned on his fishing pole. The sun warmed his shoulders as he stared through the clear, green water of the Sand Fork River. Shadows of particles on the water's surface glided across the submerged, algae-covered rocks. A dragonfly buzzed over the water. There were no fish in the pool. His boots gritted against the rock as he stood. He took a deep breath.

He looked down the narrow valley as the hot breeze buffeted him. The green walls of the gorge hemmed the river into a space barely a hundred yards wide. Hemlock and sycamore branches shaded the whitish-tan rocks that formed its jagged banks. The water meandered around the boulders for two hundred yards before it dropped below the horizon into a rapid he could only hear.

He liked the river best when he was alone. There was only what he brought with him – no bustle, no people and their motives. No one trying to show off. No one trying to scare anyone. There was just the river and its own cacophony.

He listened to all the layers of sound. The river's whoosh echoed off the sides of the gorge. The water lapped in a steady rhythm against the rock on which he was standing. It gurgled and tinkled around an exposed log a few feet away. Further down it poured between two rocks in a sloshing sound heavier than the gurgle. Then there was a steady thundering down at the rapids that reminded him that the river could change.

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“This next one’s a bit crazier than the last one, man, but you’re doing good so far. Just keep it up,” said Brandon.

Grant looked behind him. Brandon’s tall frame was perched on the back edge of the three-man raft, eyes intent on the rapids ahead. His freckles were conspicuous on his fair skin. The swollen, muddy river stretched along the valley behind him. Spring had so far brought only rain. The valley was dead except for the evergreens and the beginnings of red and green buds on the other trees. They glided down a calm stretch between two rapids.



“Yeah. Right,” said Grant. He wedged his left foot tighter between the floor of the raft and its side. The roar almost a

hundred yards ahead of them grew as they drifted toward it. "Man, are you sure we shouldn't just walk the raft around this one? There's nobody else out here if we tip over."

"Nah, man. We'll be totally fine. This one's intense but it's fuckin' epic. Trust me," said Brandon. He sat down and jammed his foot under the side. He nodded at Grant with a faint smile, then locked his eyes downriver. Grant said nothing and turned around. He gritted his teeth and shivered, wishing the clouds would break. He cinched the chinstrap on his plastic helmet.

He wondered how the hell he'd gotten here.

He'd run into Brandon on the campus of the state university. They'd graduated high school together, and he was a familiar face even though they'd run in different circles then. It was the second day of classes, the second day as a new college student just a few days removed from four years in the Army infantry and a tour in Iraq. The second day of bewilderment in a sea change. They got together on weekends through the spring semester, and Brandon took him the most laid-back bars, showed him the best grocery stores and hiking spots. They talked and bonded.

When Grant spoke of Iraq and a little of combat, Brandon spoke of being a whitewater rafting guide. It was a lot like war, Brandon had said once. He'd read a lot about it, World War II mainly. You had to keep it together to survive. That took balls. This would, too. The river was like that. He'd invited him to take him rafting before the season opened, just them and the river. It'd be epic, Brandon had said.

It sounded like it could be fun. Brandon had showed him a lot so far that was. Maybe it would be like the cool parts of the Army, the air assaults and live-fire exercises. The adrenaline.

"You sure you've gone down this one when it was this high?"

said Grant. The booming rapid had grown louder. "You're not bullshitting me, are you?"

"We'll be fine, man," said Brandon. "If you get thrown out, just curl up in a ball. You won't get stuck under a rock that way. The current will just push you downriver."

The image flashed through Grant's mind of being pinned against a rock by the force of the river and his mouth went dry. Brandon stood in the raft behind him. The rubber squeaked and the raft rocked. Grant turned around. Brandon was mumbling to himself and scanning the rapid ahead, eyes wide.

"Yeah," said Grant and faced front again. He pushed out a breath. The look on Brandon's face had tensed him up. It was always worse when the guy in charge was scared. His limbs felt warm despite the chilled water that hadn't yet dried from the last rapid.

Brandon dropped to his seat and the water sloshed underneath. "Okay, man. Comin' up! You ready?! We're hitting it from the left."

Grant rolled his shoulders and gripped the tee handle of the paddle. He jammed his foot further into the crevice until it pinched his toes.

"Got it," he said, adding force to the words. He couldn't see the course of the rapids, only a drop twenty-five yards ahead and a scattering of worn boulders. The whoosh had grown into a thundering. He crouched low. "Yeah I'm ready."

His heart thumped in his chest. He heard Brandon behind him taking deep, deliberate breaths.

"You fuckin' nervous, man?" said Grant. "Shit."

"Huh-uh, nah. Remember, dig with that paddle. Push hard," said Brandon. "Okay, let's go two left!"

Grant put his paddle in the water on the left side, ensuring the entire paddle head was submerged, and pulled. They veered to the right, pointing at a narrow passage between two boulders. He dipped the paddle in the water and pulled once more.

“Okay, rest...Let’s do it, man!” shouted Brandon over the intensified roar in front of them Grant stared straight ahead. He heard Brandon’s paddle hit the water, then the current sucked them into the rapid.

“Left! Dig!” Brandon screamed over the din of the crashing water. “Now right!” Grant switched hands on the paddle and hunkered low as he dug the paddle into the water on the right of the raft.

They shot through the crevice. The front of the boat dropped and Grant felt weightless for an instant before it smacked the surface of the water. He stopped breathing when water came in the boat, dousing him, and then a gasp filled his lungs with air that smelled of mud. Boulders jutted out of the water and swirled all around them.

“Left, left!” said Brandon.

A wall of water to his left rose several feet above his head. His paddle was horizontal.

“Right! Right!” He flipped his hands around and leaned over the right side of the boat to get the paddle in the water. His left foot came loose. A wave underneath the boat bounced him out of the rubber seat. He scrambled to shove his foot back into the side and righted himself as the boat shot down the rapid. A wave threw the raft to the left and into a rock, stopping it and tilting them at an obscene angle.

This was it, thought Grant, and his heart fluttered.

“Back left, back left! Oh fuck back left!” said Brandon. Grant

plunged the paddle in the water and pushed backward and his arms burned. The bottom of the boat hit rock then broke loose and bounced against another boulder. It sent them hurtling down the river to the left.

“Two right and two left!”

Grant caught a glimpse of calmer water further ahead as he paddled. A wave crashed against the left side of the boat and drenched him. He blinked the cold water out of his eyes.

“Two right, two left again,” said Brandon with a voice that had evened. He took a breath and paddled. The raft bobbed in the waves, and Grant heard the sucking sound underneath as it passed over them.

The raft slid down the remaining rapids, mere bumps, and reached the calm. Brandon whooped behind him.

“Holy shit, man!” he said. “We made it! Was that not awesome?!” Grant turned around in the boat. Brandon was taking off his helmet. Water streamed from his face and through his short, red hair.

Grant looked at the rapid behind him, growing quieter as they drifted, and traced the path they’d taken with his eyes. His stomach churned at the sight of the water pounding the sides of the boulder against which they’d bumped and the tremble began.

“Okay dude, you see that rock over to the right? Let’s take a little break there,” said Brandon, pointing to a long, flat rock that jutted into the water. Grant nodded and paddled.

The raft scraped against the rock as they approached it, then made an abrupt stop. Grant still felt the motion of the waves rocking him. He propped the paddle against the wall of the raft and unsnapped the chin strap. He lifted the light helmet off and ran a hand through his wet hair. Brandon got out

splashed past Grant. He tossed his lifejacket onto the rock and put his hands on his hips, regarding the rapid behind them. His chest rose and fell with deep breaths.

When Grant climbed out of the boat his legs were wobbly. He sat back down on the edge of the raft and fished his water bottle out of the dry bag.

"That, my friend, is some fucking whitewater rafting," said Brandon with a satisfied smile. "You okay man? Looking a little pale over there."

"I'm fine," said Grant. He tensed his jaw. He took the life vest off and his sodden shoes squished as he stood. "Man, fuck. Is that it?" He took short, shallow breaths.

"Yeah that's the last big one. The rest of them are babies, nothing like that. Just an hour's worth or so until the takeout."

Grant nodded. "I almost came out of the goddamn raft," he said.

The old fear had returned in earnest, the gut-churning sense of doom like passing a pile of trash on an Iraqi road and wondering if it would explode and kill you or nail your best friend's Humvee behind you.

"Ha! Yeah. Glad you didn't," said Brandon. "We'd have been screwed."

"Yeah, especially with no fucking medevac," said Grant. He wanted to scream at him for subjecting him to some kind of cruel, pointless trick, a measuring contest he'd never entered into. "At least in the Army we were smart about shit."

He stared at Brandon, whose smile ebbed.

"Well, I didn't know it'd be this high, but still, rocks doesn't it? Figured you could handle it."

Grant shook his head, feeling the blood rushing to his face and his back stiffening. "I sure fucking can. What are you trying to prove, man?"

"What?" said Brandon. His eyebrows shot up. "Nothing, dude. This is just fun. We beat the river, you know?"

Grant glared at him. Brandon shook his head, and then walked over to the raft and dug in his bag for a Power Bar that he ate in silence.

Just fun, thought Grant. Exactly. The war wasn't just fun. It had a point. He'd gone because people had flown planes into towers his senior year, and someone had to step up and do hard things. It wasn't about fun at all. All that fear – on the roads of Iraq, the raids, the incoming – it was about serving something other than ego.

"You hear that?" said Brandon with his mouth full. He nodded towards the rapid they'd just come through. "Listen close. That real low rumbling."

Grant cocked his ear toward the rapid. He homed in on the deep booming of the water. His eyes narrowed as he focused on the sound.

"I hear it."

"Know what that is?"

"No," mumbled Grant. It was unmistakable now, a low, rolling knock beneath the higher pitched sounds of the rapid.

"Those are rocks moving along the bottom. That's how powerful that current is. I forget the numbers on the volume of water the Sand Fork pushes, but yeah, it's that powerful."

"Rocks? Really?"

"Yeah man. This river's no joke," said Brandon.

Grant listened to the deep booms under the surface.

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That was almost the last time he'd seen Brandon. He'd taken up his invitation for a celebratory drunk at McNally's pub the night after the trip. Grant thought it could smooth things over. Maybe he'd overreacted, misread things when his blood was up.

The Sam Adams had gone down nicely. Easy conversation flowed. And they'd noticed a couple of attractive, seemingly single girls. This could be epic, too, Brandon had said. They sidled up to them at the long wooden bar and offered them shots. They accepted, but that was all. At the first sign of their disinterest, Brandon had regaled them with tales of the river, at how they'd nearly been killed if not for his expertise and calm. Should have seen how scared Grant was, he'd said. They weren't impressed. And neither was Grant.

He'd avoided him since. He needed no measuring contests. He needed peace.

Grant picked up his fishing pole. He listened for the rumbling of the rocks along the river bottom but did not hear them now. He unhooked the lure from the pole and flipped it into the water. The ripples dissipated as they were carried downstream.