

# Book Review: David Ervin on Jerad Alexander's 'VOLUNTEERS: GROWING UP IN THE FOREVER WAR'

As the United States marks the twentieth anniversary of the beginning of the Global War on Terror as well as an ugly end to the conflict's iteration in Afghanistan, it is a time for reflection. The war on the ground is over. The war of memory has begun in earnest. The canon of war memoirs from Iraq and Afghanistan is already considerable, and these works provide valuable insights into the physical and emotional landscape of the wars. Jerad Alexander's [\*Volunteers: Growing Up in the Forever War\*](#) (Algonquin Books, 2021) adds an enlisted voice to this chorus, and he goes further by using his experience to explore the societal and cultural forces that propelled segments of a generation to welcome and even seek out participation in these wars.



For Alexander, these forces were pervasive. He was raised in an Air Force family, enthralled by the sights and sounds of the F-16 his stepfather maintained and in awe of the airmen who worked with him. The ubiquity of action heroes in late-Cold War American entertainment added relish. When the jets flew to the Persian Gulf in 1990, his stepfather with them, audiences learn of the hardships imposed on military families through Alexander's detailed recollection of the time. The excitement of the war and real-life, televised action heroes balanced comingled with the poignancy, all lending to a turning point of which Alexander writes succinctly:

*"I became a zealot. It was hardwired into the landscape of my*

*life and ideas of what I was supposed to be. I had seen the footage of bombs and antiaircraft fire on television. I had seen the war movies. I had already pledged my allegiance and sung toward the waving American banner. It was easy."*

As Alexander aged his immersion eventually deepened to involvement, beginning with participation in the fringes of the American military in the form of the Civil Air Patrol. His discovery of Vietnam War literature left him wanting more still, the F-16s no longer scratching an itch, an M-16 holding sway instead. While exposure to the gravity of the Vietnam war lent him a far greater understanding of the tragedies and miseries of war, this knowledge did not deter his decision to serve. It only added a mystique that ratcheted up his desire to experience it. He found himself in the Marine Corps infantry shortly after graduating high school.

"Disillusionment," in Alexander's estimation, is a cheap word to describe what happens to an idealistic individual who serves. The author adeptly describes the grind of peacetime military life and how it ground down the ideals with which he enlisted. With the advent of 9/11, though, he saw a way out of the peacetime drudgery and a way into the experience for which he'd lived since boyhood, a reignition of those fantasies.

The author's rendition of his time in the Iraq War is interspersed throughout the book, an interesting and effective structural choice that allows him to touch on several themes of the war individually. He recounts in great detail several "firsts," as well as several revelations regarding the broader ideas he'd held about combat. Readers see his war within a rich and broad context, and thus the ideals that come to an end in the dust of western Iraq are well understood.

Alexander's expertly crafted prose keep the reader immersed and invested. The structurally unique work examines and ties several narrative threads together neatly, painting a complete portrait of a life lived under the looming shadow of the

American military empire and one of its eager participants. This intellectually and emotionally honest book will be a lynchpin in understanding veterans of the Global War on Terror and the society for which they volunteered.

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## **New Poetry by Ben Weakley: “In Some Distant Country” and “How Will You Answer”**



STRAW-BLONDE HAIR / *image by Amalie Flynn*

### **In Some Distant Country**

We have seen this before, in books  
and on the screen, like dust plumes rising  
in some distant country. Except,  
some distant country is Michigan –  
armed patriots (terrorists)  
in the marble halls of a statehouse.  
Long guns and body armor.  
Stars and bars on the flags they carry  
and nooses for the nervous traitors (lawmakers)  
who can read the signs on the lawn outside –  
*TYRANTS GET THE ROPE.*

Now they are here, inside  
the United States Capitol Building,  
these armed patriots (terrorists)  
smearing their urine and their fecal matter  
on the floor and the walls, roaming  
the halls with zip ties and body armor,

looking for traitors (lawmakers)  
to bind, to carry outside,  
where the gallows wait.

Their work is not finished.  
Tomorrow, these armed patriots (terrorists)  
will return to their homes, victorious,  
triumphant. They will return  
to towns across the fifty states  
where they work at hospitals and gas stations,  
at schools and police stations. They will smile  
when they greet us in the grocery store  
while they do their shopping.

They will tell us to unite.  
They will tell us to listen  
and be calm, that time  
will grant amnesty (without repentance).  
They want us to forget, but  
their work is not finished.

Who will tell us how to love  
our neighbors now?

Who can show us how to rescue  
our would-be executioners  
from the gallows they built?

### **How Will You Answer**

What is the word for *home*  
after houses become bombs  
as they did in Baqubah and Mosul?

One afternoon your wife  
has you drill pilot holes  
to hang a flat screen-tv on the brick wall.  
The mortar dust and shards of clay  
erupt from the spinning bit

like bone ejected from kneecap  
and skull in the Baghdad torture rooms.

At night, you put your son into bed  
and draw the blankets up  
over his freckled shoulders.  
You stroke his straw-blond hair  
and wonder, what  
is the word for *son*, now?

What can you call your son  
now that you've seen another man's son  
burning?

How will you answer  
when your son calls you *father*  
in the world you turned  
into ash and bone?

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## **New Fiction from Hadeel Salameh: "Everything Will Be Okay"**

### **1. Her Friend the Israeli**

**(Eli)**

Mais got a phone call from her parents in the occupied territories of the West Bank. I don't know what they told her yet; she's been too shaken to tell me. All she told me is that I needed to book her a ticket to Palestine. She wants to go through Jordan, cross the border and reach Sarta that way. I tell her I'll come with her, and that we'll go through Ben

Gurion, that it'll be quicker. She doesn't want to enter Israel.

She insisted she go alone, that it's not appropriate for her to bring a friend with her. I want to think she means it's inappropriate for her to bring her male friend to her parents', that if her family saw us together, they'd think we're an item, the thought of anyone thinking Mais and I could be together, that I'm not crazy to think we look good together, that it's not only me that can see it, is hopeful. But what I know what she means is it's not appropriate for her to bring an *Israeli* friend with her, although she won't admit this.

But I can't let her travel alone like this, feeling so distraught, so I insist I'll join her, say that I don't need to go with her to Sarta, that I'll visit my family in Tel Aviv while she's there. I want to be near in case she needs me. She didn't argue, and now we're waiting at a bus stop in downtown D.C to go to the airport, to Jordan.

I can feel the cold outside, making its way inside my bones. It feels as though the raindrops pouring on my skin are sinking through the surface, freezing once they pass each layer of warm flesh. Just as the blood flow seems to slow down in between the narrow veins in my arms, she tells me why we're going. Her brother attempted suicide.

She starts to cry.

I never met her family, and don't know much about them, only that she hasn't seen them for years. I don't know why, if it's because of the distance, or for some other reason, but I never thought much about them. It didn't seem she did, either. But now her crying is uncontrollable. "I should have never left, Eli. I left them," she says between breaths and cries harder. I don't know what to do, or how to comfort her. I don't know the situation. I'm afraid to make things worse and people

around us aren't sure if they should help me try and console her as I sit there, next to her on the bench, and listen. Others seem to decide to mind their business. They stand back and watch her cry, although some whisper. I don't know why she left, but I'm glad she did because I would have never known her if she stayed. I hate myself for this, knowing the pain she's in now for being here. I don't tell her she did the right thing by leaving, I don't know the situation and I'm afraid I'll say something to make it worse so instead, I stand by, too, and let her cry until the bus comes.

"I should have never left," I hear her say again, rocking gently. "I should have never left."

At the airport, Mais is calmer now, and I hold her, my Palestinian friend. I hug her tight and let her know I'm here, but she's cold and distant. When I let go, I feel she's glad I do. I even notice her shift in her seat a little, inching away from me. Did I do something? I think of everything that happened, if anything happened, and I can't think of anything.

She sighs. I notice her knee is shaking and, in my head, I raise my fingertips higher and intertwine them through her charcoal hair, brush away the fallen strands from her moist lashes as she starts to cry again. But I'm not sure if she would let me. I should, at least, tell her to calm down, to take a deep breath before her crying starts to build again. None of it would do any good, anyway. Fixing Mais's hair wouldn't change the once milky complexion of her face from pale. It wouldn't sooth the dark circles under her eyelids, and it wouldn't stop the trembling of her knees. Maybe it would only push her away. The tiny voice inside my brain is screaming louder for me to do something to calm her crying. It's growing larger and maturing more with every second we wait for the line to board, leaving us waiting on the cold, metal bench, but it's too late, she stands up and starts to pace near the window of the terminal.

Outside the terminal window is endless pavement where the plane we will board will take off. It's empty and around it only a plain field. It's unlike our city, but it takes me back to a day I spent with Mais last fall, when we spent Friendsgiving together at her place, just the two of us. We feasted on the canned cranberry sauce that day because I burnt the turkey. The smoke alarm had gone off and we needed to open the window to clear the air. It was a disaster. But there was a moment, between all that smoke and the cold air coming in from outside, her laughter uncontrollable as she threw herself into my arms, "you had one job," she said between sweet giggles and chattered teeth. I felt the goosebumps on her arms as I held her. And I knew that with the cold she felt it, too, the warmth between us, for when the smoke cleared she stayed in my arms, looked up at me with lips slightly open, wet, and eyes locked on mine. She watched me lean in under the dull lighting. She didn't pull away until after my lips touched hers.

She closed the window shut behind her when she turned away and I stayed behind a while looking out, watched the leaves continue to fall, one after another, listened to the bitter wind scratch at the glass.

I can tell when Mais's knees start to shake as she paces. It doesn't look good; her face is turned to the window and she occasionally looks up at the ceiling, tilts her head so that the tears don't fall. It's time to board so I stand in line, signal for her to come back. When she does, her eyelids are heavy and her cheeks are wet with tears, she doesn't face me. I ask her if she's feeling better and she looks at me as though she's disgusted.

"Am I feeling better?" she mocks me. "My brother could be dead, and you think I could feel better?"

I didn't mean anything by it, and I want to explain that but she gets heated and starts to hit me.

“Of course, you’d think that—”

She raises her voice. “I’m so stupid for thinking that you’d ever understand, to let you come with me. You’ll be in Tel Aviv, on the beach, when I’m going home to—” she starts to cry hard. She’s overreacting, people are looking at us.

“He could be dead and it’s because of you, your people burn everything to the fucking ground!” She pushes me and cries and then pushes me again and people behind us start to talk. “I know it! You Israelis ruin everything, kill everyone!” she pushes me again and again. “You take everything from us and now he’s lost even the will to live!” Her knees buckle and she falls to ground and wails until her breath is shortened.

The people behind us see her as a petite woman who falls to her knees with a larger man standing over her and assume the worst, I know it looks bad when I feel others step in to pull me away from her. I raise my hands when the security comes, step back. I look at Mais, wait for her to say something, to tell them that it’s a misunderstanding, that I could never hurt her.



When we board the plane, I give her space and even try to exchange seats with someone across from us, but Mais tells me it’s okay, admits she overreacted.

Now that she’s calm, I’ll talk to her. “Yes, a lot,” I say. Even though that’s not what I want to say at all. I want to say, “don’t worry about it,” that everything will be okay.

Auburn green and swollen hazy eyes glance up at me apologetically and for a moment I’m looking at her through windows of despair. A bulging lump of disappointment builds in the back of my throat and I feel I need to throw up. I can’t believe she blamed me. I don’t know what happened to her brother, how could I know why he tried to kill himself? But

the more I think of it I worse I feel. I know the situation, about the occupation and the *intifada*—it's chaotic over there, has been for years and nobody's known what to do about it—and that's enough to understand she feels worse than I do. But I think I just need some time to collect my thoughts.

I fall asleep and wake up to find Mais reading *Everything that Rises Must Converge*. I don't like how we left things, and I understand she's worried, understand she didn't mean what she said earlier before we got on the plane, but what if, deep down, she did mean it?

I can't help but wonder if that's how she really sees me, as her friend the Israeli? I'd much rather she see me as her friend, who happens to be Israeli. I'd much rather she just let herself look at me long enough and see that I can be more than that.

I want to try again, tell her everything will be okay. But will it? She needs truth, answers and ways to get there and I know it might be true, that she won't get the answers she's looking for. All I can offer her now is my unbending stone of a shoulder to lay her head on and wish for more.

"Everything will be okay," I say a million times in my head. "When you reach, you'll see he's fine," I say. "It'll be okay," I say. But then I open my mouth to say just that and I don't say anything. The words inch out and I swallow them back.

## **2. Her Home the Occupied**

**(Mais)**

Mais thinks back to a conversation she had with her mother five years ago, the summer before she left Sarta for America.

"Any ideas on what to cook tonight?" her mother had asked. Mais's uncles, aunts and cousins were coming for dinner.

"Anything works. Just try to cut down the coffee, okay? It's too much work keeping up with your caffeine." Mais laughed at how many times the visit would mean making tea and coffee.

Her mother laughed faintly, without much enthusiasm.

"As soon as our guests come, we offer them a cup of Turkish coffee as an appetizer, then there's dinner, and another cup follows that," Mais continued. "And then right after, I mean, before the dishes are even dried you guys are at cup two. And a few hours after that you will want another," Mais said. "I find it difficult to sleep at night just by watching you guys take all that caffeine in."

"We're Arabs," her mother said. "It's our water."

Mais smiled and there was quiet for a while.

"We'll miss you here."

"We still have all summer."

"It's going fast." Her mother seemed to take a moment to collect herself, "it's good that you're leaving," she said after a pause, "you'll have a beautiful life."

When the VISA was approved, Mais knew she'd miss Mejd the most. She liked being his older sister; it meant being looked up to, and that helped her with her work ethic. She wanted to make him proud, thought of ways to do so that he could learn from her and find ways to study himself—no matter the circumstances that stood in the way. That was back when the *intifada* started, when people were uprising against the Israeli occupation and, as a result, schools and universities were closing. If it wasn't for the way Mejd looked up to her, Mais would have never worked so hard to get that scholarship she got so that she could leave and make something of herself abroad. She would have never made it out of there.

She knew she'd miss Mejd the most because she was hesitant to

leave Palestine at all when she won the scholarship. With a ten-year gap between them, she worried for him more than most sisters worried about their brothers—she was the one that styled his hair on his first day of school, the person who helped with his homework and told him how to get other boys to stop bullying him. She was worried that he'd need her, and she wouldn't be around. More than that, she was worried she'd need him, and that it'd show, that she'd miss him so much he would know that she wasn't as strong as she seemed, that she was only strong because he looked up to her and needed her to be.

When she first came to America, she waited for the weekends to hear Mejd's stories. He told her everything—how he and his new friend, Hadi, climbed the top of Jabal Al-Shaykh and how he was excelling in school despite the village school's closure, despite the checkpoints crossings to other schools closing constantly—how he had found ways to go to a school in Nablus with Hadi, whose father had a permit to work in Israel and so could use the Jewish-only freeways.

As the years passed, Mais became busier with college, and with the difference in time zones, her calls home minimized. Mais didn't mean for this to happen. She had meant to call more often, never meant for the phone calls to stop when they did, but it became harder to keep conversation when she did talk to her family the longer she stayed in America. Her mother told her of gossip among the village and her father only cared to know about her studies—he seemed happy as long as she was excelling, and Mejd became less eager to pick up the phone as he started his teenage years. He was growing up, she understood, didn't need her as much, and with everything going on around her, she couldn't herself keep up, balancing both grades and a social life. There wasn't much in common anymore and the phone calls naturally stopped altogether somewhere between graduation from University and the start of graduate school. She no longer knew if Mejd was still going to that school in Nablus, but she kept watching the news, knew that in

Nablus things were better than in the villages around it, assumed there was no reason for things to have changed for him.

Now she thinks of home, remembers how badly things were when she left—reminds herself that it was why she had to go. She realizes, though, that she wouldn't have had the determination to get out if her brother didn't need her to find strength to carry on and study the way he did. And things change, of course everything does with time, even people, even Mejd. She wonders now why he stopped talking to her as much, what changes happened to him while she was away. If her brother didn't need her, she thinks to herself now, it would have been okay that she wasn't there.

When Mais had picked up the phone, she couldn't make out what her mother was saying at first. It sounded like she had been crying, but Mais couldn't be sure—when she asked, her mother told her to let her finish, first. She started to talk about Mejd and Hadi, how a few months ago, they were approached by three Israeli settlers, who she said had probably come down from the settlement miles away on the hilltops. She told her how these settlers started fooling around at first, how they walked between the copse near Hadi's house, picking olives from the trees, throwing them at one another and laughing.

Mais asked her mother why she was saying all this—asked what it mattered now. Her mother sighed, told her to listen. That what she was calling to say wasn't easy, to let her say explain it to her.

She went on to tell Mais how the settlers then started to throw olives at Mejd and Hadi. The boys got scared, started to walk away, but the settlers called them cowards, told them to come back.

Mais felt her face turn hot as her mother told her this. "Please tell me nothing happened," she said.

Then there was silence.

"Yama?" Mais called for her mother, told her again to assure her.

"They killed Hadi, Mais," her mother said. "They took him, one tightly held the boy in his arms as the other two threw olives at him. Then they started throwing rocks."

"Your brother was brave, tried to fight them off. Picked up rocks and threw them at the settlers that were abusing Hadi. But then they charged after him. Thank God he survived."

Mais felt as though her heart would collapse; she couldn't understand what her mother was saying—she couldn't believe anyone would harm a boy like that, only a teenager. "Tell me everything. What happened," Mais sobbed. "What did they do to Mejd?"

"They made him watch."

Mais hung up with her mother. Imagined her brother and his friend, imagined her little brother, with tears thick as oil running down his face, watching the settlers pierce sharp, heavy stones into his friend's skin, breaking bruises and burning blood with the dirt from the ground. She could not imagine what her brother must have experienced. She imagined that he and Hadi tried to be strong, that maybe his friend Hadi had tried to stay silent so the settlers wouldn't take joy in his pain.

Her mother had told her how it wasn't until a half hour after the incident that Hadi's father came home from work and found the boys nearby, Mejd screaming at his friend to stay awake. By the time they reached the hospital, he was dead.

Mejd survived, Hadi didn't. That sense of guilt seemed to stay with him. Her mother told her how, for months after Hadi's death, Mejd stayed home from school, as Hadi's father stayed

home from work. She said Mejd got angry when she told him it was time to go back. How he told her he couldn't—that he didn't want to see Hadi's empty seat in class. He didn't want to ride back in silence with Hadi's father, wondering if his father wished he had died instead for not having done anything to save his son—and most of all, he couldn't look out the car window and see a hundred olive trees.

Mais's mother told her she had found Mejd's body hanging inches from his bedside, from a rope attached to the fan on his ceiling. He wasn't conscious. Her mother needed to cut the rope quickly so she could bring him down and breath into his lungs, but nobody was home to get her a knife, so she stood on his bed and grabbed the rope, pulled so hard the entire fan fell.

### **3. My Friend the Palestinian**

**(Eli)**

I first met Mais three years ago, when I overheard her voice as she talked with a table of friends. A thick accent, with a sharpness in her words, something about the light way the l rolled off her tongue, sounded Israeli. Her voice caught my attention and when I looked back from the bar, I remember feeling electrified, like when the Tel Aviv sun burns the back of my neck after a cool swim. Her dark, curly hair draped down her shoulder was alluring in a way that made me nostalgic, and I couldn't look away. I looked at her and it felt like home.

I was foolish to approach her, too confident and sure of myself—not of myself, exactly, but of her—when she wasn't Israeli at all. When she turned out to be the farthest from it.

“Shalom,” I said. I must have looked so foolish to her, with a smile on my face. She didn't know my palms were sweaty, that I was hiding them behind my back and trying to wipe them off my trousers. If she knew, maybe she would have known it was an

honest mistake.

But how could she have known? She heard the words and thought it was a joke, that I knew she was Palestinian and purposely wanted to insult her.

“Is this your idea of a peace talk?” she snapped at me and folded her arms.

I had no idea what she meant, what her problem was, and the allure of her made me pull a seat over and sit down. She looked at me in a disapproving way, like I was a narcissist or something. I could feel her green eyes, pierce through me. She saw me the way she thought I saw her, *other*, as the enemy.

“Can I get you a drink?” I offered, genuinely. I didn’t know she was Muslim, that she didn’t drink. I still thought she was Jewish, and by the way she dressed, I didn’t think she was religious to keep kosher.

She got up and left, without boxing her meal and forgetting her keys. Her friends all looked at me like I was an asshole and I realized my mistake when I saw the red and green cloth braided together with white and black, a small, Palestinian flag hanging from her keychain.

I still don’t know how she talked to me after that.

I took the keys and ran after her, hoping I could explain I didn’t mean to be a jackass. I found her searching in her purse outside, by the parking lot. She looked angry and frustrated, turning her purse inside out and not picking up items that fell out.

I knelt and picked up her stuff, offered her keys to her.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

She yanked her keys from my hand. Rolled her eyes.

"I didn't know you were," I paused. "I thought you were like me—I mean, I thought you were Isr–Jewish. I'm sorry. I didn't know you were Palestinian."

Her arms folded again.

"Not that it matters that you are," I said. "I didn't mean—I'm sorry. Really, I'm sorry."

"No need to apologize. You're right," she said. "I'm not like you. I'm *nothing* like you—I would never pull a seat up to a table of people *already sitting there* and force my presence onto people who were just trying to eat their meal like they have been for the past hour."

She was uncalled for and unapologetically intimidating, and it captivated me. I never met anyone so bold. It was the sexiest thing I've ever seen in a woman, and I needed to know her.

"Look. You're right—that was *your* table, and yes, you were already sitting there. I shouldn't have intruded. I just wanted to sit by you." I wanted to tell her how beautiful I thought she was, how I thought she was even more beautiful after knowing she was Palestinian. But I didn't tell her that. I knew I couldn't. I knew then there were boundaries between us—like a wall—and that all I could hope for is a friendship, one built on trust and understanding, that our worlds are too far divided to come together. I knew then I could never let her know how I felt when she looked at me, how desperate and weak it made me feel when she talked. That she was stronger than I was, that she had a hold over me, occupying my thoughts with her dark gaze, firing shots into my chest, paining me the more I looked into her eyes, seeing how pure her distrust was in me.

I knew that no matter what, I couldn't let her know how badly I wanted her, that what I really wanted was to tangle my fingers in her hair and pull at it, bite her lips and taste the sweet bitterness of her hate and devour her. That I wanted

her like I never wanted anybody.

"We're in America; we don't have to talk about the Middle East," I said. "I just want to be your friend."

## **My Home the Occupied**

### **(Mais)**

Our plane from Dulles International Airport reaches Amman, Jordan, and it's time to part ways with Eli. As we get off the plane, he insists on holding my bags and wants to come with me to the King Hussein Border. It's nice of him to offer, I feel he's trying to be here for me, to show me that he's worried for me, and wants to make sure I reach safely. He cares, he's a good friend, and when I first heard the news of Mejd and everything that had happened, I admit I needed someone to be with me. I think I still do, even now, but I don't think it can be him, no matter how badly I want him to be the one I need. He couldn't understand what I'm going through, maybe back when we were in D.C, between diverse crowds of ethnicity and thought, I could pretend he understood, but here, I think is where we say goodbye.

It's late and we're both tired. He insists I stay in Jordan until dawn, that he call me a taxi to a hotel, and, when the night is over, a taxi will be ready to take me to the border. He says that it would be safer for a woman to travel alone under the morning light, and I know he's right, and I'm anxious to go back, too anxious to get any rest, though. So we go to a coffee shop and wait out the night there, instead.

Eli orders me an American coffee, black, no sugar or cream, without needing to ask. He's good at things like this, pays attention to the details, knows what I like and what I need. It makes me feel like I've known him forever, the way he pays attention to me. When I first met him, I was so insulted at his approach. What an asshole, I thought, when he walked up to me and sat beside me and my friends. Just started talking like

he owned the place. But that was before I go to know him; I soon realized he was just paying attention to the details then, too, but he had mixed up his details. In a way, it was charming—his awkwardness as he tried to explain himself, the eager way he took me out to coffee. He never once brought up Israel and Palestine, and I appreciated that. I never thought I could become friends with an Israeli, but something about him, the spark when our eyes met briefly, followed by the quickness in which he would look away, before I could smile at all, told me he was different than most men I had met. That he would look after me the way an older brother would want another male to treat his sister, that something in his mannerisms was familiar to me, that while he came from Israel, he couldn't have been Israeli at all, couldn't look at Arab women the way the soldiers looked at me when I crossed checkpoints to go to my aunt and uncle's. As something of meat.

Maybe he was just careful, all those years, to not look at me for long so that I wouldn't mistake his glances for something of passion or intimacy. Maybe he could just never see me in that way, and avoided looking at me in any physical way at all, maybe as an Israeli he couldn't see any beauty in me because of what I am. In the back of my mind, I admit, I hoped he'd never notice the way I longed for him, the way I longed for him to look at me just a little longer and see me. The way I couldn't look at him at all, too afraid he'd see the way I want to be seen by him. Maybe that's why we've stayed friends for all this time—I wanted him to see me, and he wanted a challenge, to see me, without having to look at all.

We smoke shisha and drink coffee. I try to calm my nerves. I don't think of home, not in this moment. I think of Eli, how he'll be in the same country as me, but a different state entirely. How we'll be so close, but there will be a thick wall between us, checkpoints and security zones that stretch miles and miles between us. When he booked my ticket, he had

booked two two-way tickets, assumed I would come back with him at the end of the week. He needs to come back for work, but I don't know if it'll be that easy for me. I told him I didn't know how much time I'd need, how much time Mejd would need to recover. I changed it to a one-way ticket.

He sips his coffee and asks if I'm sure I don't want him to meet me on the other side of the border. I almost laugh at how naïve he is to think we'll reach at the same time. Doesn't he know that Israelis will go on buses far before the Palestinians board? I think he's joking, or he wants to show me he's willing to wait for hours. Either way, I tell him that this is something I need to do alone. He nods and looks away.

When we finish our coffee and dawn creeps in, he orders a cab and helps the driver put my bags in the car once it reaches. He opens the door for me and then leans in and kisses me on the forehead, tells me to let him know if I need anything, anything at all. He says he'll miss me.

"Aren't you coming in?" I say.

He doesn't answer, and I think maybe I've hurt him by saying I need to do this alone. I want to reach out and grab his arm, tell him that I didn't mean it, but instead I watch him stand by the curb and force a smile at me.

I roll down the window and look hard into his eyes. The morning sun is angled right at his face, but his eyes are open wide, unsquinting as he looks directly at me. In that moment he is looking right at me, and I think he sees me. "I'll miss you, too" I say.

At the border, Jordanians and Israelis search me and look through my purse, my permit to leave and enter the West Bank is stamped, I pay, and I stand in line countless times.

On the bus, I fall asleep and wake up to go on another bus, where first I'm searched again. I sit and look out the window

for hours until the bus starts to move, flies hovering around my underarms.

When I reach the Israeli soldiers search my body and look over my documents, and then I go to look for my bags. I find them and go out to find a taxi.

When the taxi drops me off in Sarta, I walk on the main road to my parent's house. My family doesn't know I'm coming, I didn't tell my mother when we talked, couldn't say anything as I listened to her blow her nose between words.

I knock on the door and when my mother opens it and sees me, she hugs me hard, cries into my hair and I feel her tears tickle down my spine. It's a cold feeling even though her tears are warm. She then wraps her arms around me, holds onto me tightly, and I know she's holding me now to make up for all the times she couldn't the past five years.

I want to stay in her arms, feel her hold me, but I pull back, unsure why. Then, I see the way she looks at me, concerned and afraid, as though she cannot believe I made it home, as though it doesn't make sense to her that I came back. She must feel like it, maybe my guilt shows though, somehow, she knows I don't feel right being back after all these years. Even she must know I should have been here all along. But I wasn't; I was in America, getting a career of my own, putting myself first at the cost of her and her husband and her son. What kind of daughter does that make me?

I don't cry, but she brings her hand to my face and wipes at the dryness around my eyes. I hate myself, I should be crying, even she knows it. I'm sad and terrified but I don't allow it to show. My heart has become hard abroad, it has coped with distance and divided me from even my own self. This I know now as I feel her warm fingers wipe away my invisible tears, perhaps trying to see some heart in me. Trying to see me as her daughter.

Yet, she is crying, sad, and looks happy at the same time. She is happy to see me, even though she probably doesn't recognize me as the daughter she remembers. I reach for her tears, wipe them from her face so she knows I'm still in there, somewhere, that I'm back, I'm home, and I'm trying.

I then kiss her cheek and tell her I need to see Mejd. She nods, takes my bags inside as I walk over to his room. Mejd is sleeping when I go inside. I sit on his bed and look at him as he sleeps, look at his round eyes, the small hairs forming on his chin and the faint bruises on his neck.

My hand jumps to his and holds it, feels it cold and alone, and as though my own coldness inside me spreads onto his skin and jolts inside him, he wakes up at my touch. I feel him tremble as he starts to cry, as if he cannot believe I came back to see him. He sits up as to hug me and my body moves in to hug him back without warning.

My mouth is moving, my words are forming, tell him to lie back down, to rest, and my hands are working, adjusting another pillow for him to lean against. I don't know how he sees me and isn't upset, after all he went through, without me, perhaps through it all thinking I had forgotten about him.

I don't know what I can say now that would change what happened to him—days and weeks and months before—when I didn't bother to call him to say anything. But then, I think back to hours before this moment, I remember when our mother called, how horrible it was to feel the fear in her voice, how desperately I wanted to say something to make her feel better, but couldn't, and so, I left her to cry on her own. And then, karma, as though God was telling me I deserved nothing more than the coldness I give, when at the terminal, hours passed sitting on the bench and waiting in line, I thought I would never make it back home. That if I did reach, it would be too late, because Mejd would have hurt himself again in the meantime. How desperately I wished someone would have told me

things would be okay, even if it was a lie, how it would have felt good, at least for a moment, to hear that I wasn't feeling the pain alone—that someone else was with me, understood that the pain was too much for me to comprehend, knew that a lie might be right to take my mind off everything terrible that had happened. But nobody told me things were going to be okay, because I didn't deserve to hear it. I didn't deserve that beautiful lie, I only ever gave ugly ones to the people I love, ugly lies of silence, when inside I knew they wanted more—needed more. Maybe all this time Eli really did see me for what I am.

“I know things are bad now, but someday, maybe not anytime soon, but someday,” I start to say, but stop. I can't seem to finish what I want to say, what Mejd deserves to hear, that everything will be okay.

Instead, I say, “You'll remember a good time you had with Hadi.” I tell him to remember that, that Hadi loved him, that we all do, and that he would want him to live.

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## **New Nonfiction from Bettina Rolyn: “Adjustment Disorder”**

For thirteen years, I stored my boxes of army documents and medical records in various basements, closets, and attics, mostly not my own as I had fled the land for foreign adventures, eventually settling in Berlin. I couldn't get far enough away from those boxes and what they reminded me of. But there, in those dark and musty corners, they waited patiently. Too hot in the summer and cold in the winter were my excuses for not sorting through them. Some just-right day, I intended

to look more closely at the documentation of my suffering, but there they stayed: neatly arranged from the outside, chaos and pain detailed within. I always had another excuse—if you're looking for one, any one will do, they say. Then came the novel coronavirus. Life halted. Riots erupted in the streets as America's own darker corners came to light, regardless of the pandemic. With the distractions of overextended social calendars and freedom of movement gone, out of that pause arose the cry for justice in America, for the truth to be known and the past unearthed.

When the plague hit, I was back in the States, my homeland, and got stuck for four months at my mother's while visiting her in rural Pennsylvania—living for free—but in close proximity to elderly and at-risk individuals. I couldn't join the protests against police brutality for fear of bringing the pandemic back to our small community. My hands were bound already without zip-ties or handcuffs. What could I do with all my pent-up frustration and time to spare? The attic beckoned. I braved the muggy heat and dragged down the box of medical records. Inside I found five large, white envelopes from the Department of Veteran's Affairs—a helpful guideline printed in all caps added clarity: DO NOT OVERFILL. Now you tell me.

My 3.5-year enlistment was one of the most intense periods of my life. It consisted mostly of a very long string of training events, bad romances, affairs, drunken flings, and physical and psychic pain. In retrospect, this might be the same for many civilian women in their late twenties, but my drama involved more early formations, uniforms, and abuses of power.

I enlisted after graduating liberal arts college at the age of 25 and went to basic training alongside 18-year-olds who had just finished years of high school football. They were used to being under intense physical strain and getting yelled at by coaches; I had been studying languages and philosophy! It was a hard landing in basic training, which never wore off. From

basic on, my muscles, tendons, and ligaments, and then gradually, my spine bulged and rebelled. Things continued to deteriorate in Advanced Individual Training (AIT), where I learned to be a prisoner of war interrogator. Another year of learning Persian-Farsi at the Defense Language Institute (DLI) only exacerbated my condition.

Glancing through the timeline of my military service as revealed in my medical records, I was struck by the evolution detailed in the list of medical treatments. It's a wonder I wasn't inspired to seek a career in medicine as I cycled through the specialties gaining valuable experience as a patient in each. It began in general and sports medicine, then neurology, dermatology, optometry, orthopedics, and internal medicine. There was even a short spell in obstetrics, which lead to emergency medicine and mental health; at some point, I graduated to the experimental pain clinics and more mental health centers. I spent a long time at pharmacy school. I had signed up to do my part in the war on terror but found myself seeing more of the benefits of socialized medicine than the frontlines of combat.

I always loved the idea of the army and yet when people learn about my military service, they are often surprised, and I find myself laughing too. Did I really do that? I tried not to think about it for years, but the reality of it—the context and timing of my enlistment at the height of the surge in Iraq, even many of the people I worked with—I hated. Of course, not all of the time, but I was often bored by much of what my job entailed. I was outraged that, with all my education and training as an interrogator and linguist—us linguists were often reminded of how many hundreds of thousands of dollars the Department of Defense had spent on our training—I was often relegated to sorting papers or white-washing rocks or taking orders from semi-literate superiors.

I tried to hide this snobbery of mine, but sometimes failed. I would get yelled at for an arched eyebrow, that danged

“attitude” of mine always found a way to creep onto my face, try as I might to suppress it. It was a love-hate relationship because despite my feelings of superiority in certain matters, I can see now how I desperately wanted the army to love me. This mattered so much because if the army loved me, then I could love me, too. But I would never rappel down a rope from a helicopter to storm a building or save a fallen comrade with a fireman’s carry. Not with this twisted spine. Try as I might to become a good soldier, I would never belong in the military, not really. And I would not be happy there either. There were some moments of glorious fun: That part of basic training when you get to throw a grenade or climb an obstacle course high above the trees come to mind.

I open another big white envelope and start reading about the stage when I finally was given a permanent profile restricting my physical activities. No more running, but I was permitted to walk the physical fitness test. Oh, the shame! Once I finally finished the endless AIT and language school phase, I got my orders to Ft. Hood, Texas, and was assigned to a Military Intelligence unit at West Fort Hood. Within a day, I was trotting around the Texas plains playing OPFOR—the bad guys—against our own troops who were training for deployment—and winning, a not so subtle sign of what awaited America in Iraq and Afghanistan. That was actually a lot of fun, getting to play a role that was not military, but the guerillas and terrorists who would reveal the allegedly invincible US military’s weakness. I would be rewarded in that role for my unique “solutions” and clever outside-the-box thinking.

I had wanted to be part of something bigger than myself; to pursue justice and be amongst the righteous. I wanted to be told I was good and doing the right thing. I performed well on standardized tests, and I loved being told “you done good.” I was an excellent linguist—top of my class even, earning an achievement medal for my language test scores and good grades.

I lived for praise and was crushed by criticism. "You're a piece of shit soldier," I heard from a few NCOs over the course of my training, for various reasons: Not being able to perform a buddy-carry because of an injured shoulder, or for crying during basic training. And gradually, I believed them. They were the experts after all, they ought to know who was a POS and who wasn't.

The military had seemed like a good place to get this sense of higher purpose I craved, of being in the right place, and "doing good." I didn't approve of invading Iraq, but genuinely wanted to minimize potential collateral damage with my language skills. But tolerating the inanities that the military is known for—mindlessly, obediently following orders—for example, was not my forte. My individuality strained against the inevitable petty exercises of military authority that abound where power is distributed to immature people. I had a knack for picking up on large and small injustices taking place around me. One roommate I had at Ft. Huachuca during AIT was a "holdover." She had accused a fellow student of rape and was forced to stay in the same unit as her rapist until an investigation was completed. Out of frustration and despair, she tried to make it all go away by rescinding her accusation and was then prosecuted under the UCMJ—for making a false accusation! I watched helplessly, but learned the important lesson: Do not report, do not resist. It is futile and will result in further suffering. For a time, I doubled down on attempting to conform and "exceed the standards," ignoring my increasing list of physical ailments.

I was reminded in my records, that already at DLI, I had gone to see the chaplain and confess my woes and frustrations. He informed me that women shouldn't be in the army anyway. He referred to a recent case of a female linguist who had killed herself in Iraq and said that the same fate awaited me if I didn't get out soon. Because he also claimed to have special knowledge of impending doom, "The world would soon go up in

flames when the Antichrist, a new pope, would start World War III!" he had informed me—amongst other conspiracy theories—it was easier to discount his views overall. But the seed of doubt about my ability to handle things because of my gender had been sown.

One day in 2005, in the oppressive heat of Texas at Fort Hood, I found myself in tears after some classic Army-scenario of humiliation. This meltdown was related to another one of my "transgressions," some injustice had been done to me—or another hapless private. I don't even remember whether it was me or someone else who was the target, but I couldn't keep my mouth shut and suffered in either case. As I attempted to maintain my military bearing and failed, a sweet sergeant from my squad, who had recently returned from Iraq, approached me afterward. While trying to calm me down, he said, "You know, you might have adjustment disorder. I'm taking Prozac for my PTSD; it seems to be the only way to make it through the day. They prescribed it to me after I bit a guy on the face. He came to my house, and I just bit him in the face. Yeah—adjustment disorder." He was a smallish, pock-faced man also in his mid-twenties and had been a gunner on a Humvee. I didn't ask him for details but knew he meant well with his tip.

I thought about my "disorder." I didn't want to bite anyone, but I sure drank a lot... Would I need to take medication just to exist in the military? Must I pretend that I had adjusted to it, when clearly, I had not? What does it say about a person who thinks it's normal to be yelled at? And did I want to become that person? I hadn't even been to Iraq yet. I knew enough—and was counseled by a psychologist—to avoid prescriptions that indicated mental health issues because of my security clearance as a linguist. There was a magic, red line that ought not to be crossed when discussing one's mental health. *No, I'm not hearing voices. No, I'm not going to kill myself or others.* There probably was a clear line in the way

security clearances were adjudicated, but that line remains a secret to those applying or even already holding such clearances. Nevertheless, according to my medical files and that long list, the number of medications prescribed to me by so many doctors in all those specialties in the last two years of my enlistment alone, was 29. But none of them were antipsychotics, whew!

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) which was released five years after my medical discharge, adjustment disorder and PTSD are classified as trauma and stress-related disorders. PTSD is triggered by an *overwhelmingly* traumatic event, whereas adjustment disorder is caused by “only” a stressful event or change in environment.

Already during my enlistment, I could see acutely how the very thing that made the military strong as a whole required the suppression of individuality and individual freedom. How could this be reconciled? I never figured it out. I couldn't turn off my sense of self and couldn't repair it either. So, I obliterated it in ways known to all soldiers: drugs and alcohol.

The truth is that I was high a lot in the army. When I got to my first real duty station at Fort Hood, my brigade's motto was “Always Ready.” They didn't specify what for. Most often, always ready to either drop everything to fulfill the whims of a superior—the so-called “Needs of the Army”—or to party, which meant binge drinking. On top of the doctors prescribed medications, a lot of us seemed to be self-medicating with alcohol.

Even with my favorite medication condoned and readily available, this constant state of readiness and being on alert—lest a male superior use the excuse of my rank insignia or beret being slightly crooked to talk to me and ask for my number—drove me crazy. I was like a rat in a glass case.

Always being observed and with nowhere to hide. When I got out for a minute, it was to be petted and stroked by my owners. Being female presented a constant set of challenges that I hadn't quite anticipated. The need to be extra "high-speed" all the time—lest I make all women look bad—made every occasion, even just walking down the street, a test. It was exhausting.

Already in the 1960s, psychologists developed a test for a person's "tolerance of ambiguity," which I took a few years after my time in the army. My score was not as high as I'd always assumed or hoped it to be. But it was finally official: I don't like not knowing what is happening next. I don't like "embracing the suck," or living, "always ready" for the unknown next catastrophe. I mistook my desire to serve my country for the ability to submit to the powerlessness of the enlisted world. But I didn't need Prozac to ease my mind. I could take an army doctor's prescribed muscle relaxant (for my back pain) and sleep for sixteen hours. I could take a Tramadol, down a few beers and go *chill out*. I often would check out of my pained body and tortured soul with pharmacological assistance; I could immobilize myself with permission for a few precious hours. And I would, except that there were consequences.

The higher I got, though, the further down I pushed my real emotions. There, under layers of uppers and downers, they festered, the fumes of my rage and pain oozing out as from a forgotten trash can. Maybe I really did want to bite someone? Instead, I self-sabotaged. When the high wore off, I cried. Eventually, I couldn't see the reason for staying in such a messed-up system with its outdated hierarchy and inefficiency in all things except matters of destruction. This was a system that took perfectly well-meaning people and turned them into the kind who would bite someone on the face because they don't know how to deal with the horrors they've witnessed.

I was also part of a rotten scheme: The military I was a

member of was being used to implement an illegal war by a president who hadn't won the popular vote, and to oppress the powerless in multiple countries. I was both oppressor and oppressed—part of this system and equally suffering from it. I'm certainly not the first to observe this tragic conundrum.

I was a linguist, qualified in German, Spanish, Italian and newly trained in Persian-Farsi. I was getting paid extra to maintain four languages, but not doing anything with them. I had signed up to be an interrogator yet because of my physical issues could not deploy with my unit to Iraq. Nobody likes to feel incompetent and unqualified, and I felt like I was both. I was not going to save anybody with my precious language skills. But as every soldier knows, the only things worse than being a *Fobbit* (a soldier how doesn't leave base while deployed) is not having deployed at all.

Finally, in 2007, I was ready to acknowledge that the army wouldn't love me and to cut my losses. I accepted a medical discharge for back and shoulder injuries. But like some sort of institutional form of Stockholm Syndrome, it took me a long time to deprogram. Even after my discharge, I tried several times to deploy as a civilian. I turned down an assignment in Afghanistan because I was going through a divorce, but I still wanted to be a part of it all and prove that I wasn't just a POS soldier. I wanted that pat on the back, and to be part of that coveted club of (mostly male) war veterans. I was so caught up in my desire to be part of it all, that I only gradually realized that if things sucked stateside, they would only be worse downrange, as a civilian or a soldier.

But now, thirteen years later I saw what was recorded in my medical file and reminded that it was not just that kind sergeant who saw the obvious: My record of diagnoses did indeed include, "ADJUSTMENT DISORDER WITH DISTURBANCE OF EMOTIONS"—all caps. I hadn't realized it at the time, I was so eager to close that box of pains.

From what I can tell, things have improved for women in the military since my stint. I know that women, in general, are capable of all the things men are, but I still wonder how much I would have been capable of if the men around me believed I was or how much of my failings were due to my gender. The slow unpacking of pains on paper and through my writing has helped heal some of the issues on my long list, but practicing self-acceptance and love and rebuilding a sense of self is not a task to check off the To-Do list in just a weekend.

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## **New Fiction from John Milas: “Burning the Dragon”**

Stautner wasn't my friend anymore. He didn't get promoted with the rest of us on the first of the month. Now a fire burned between us. Stautner was a shitbag. Everyone knew it. He was a shitbag and we weren't. For this reason, it was his job to burn the day's garbage in a trash barrel, and today it was my turn to babysit him and make sure he didn't singlehandedly burn down Camp Leatherneck. We spent the evening burning MRE boxes and Stautner had tried several times to start conversations about times we'd gotten drunk together as boots, old Saturday morning cartoons, or times in high school we tripped on salvia or whatever else. He and I were the same age, so we had a few things in common. We had lost our virginity at about the same time, for instance, which he tried bringing up again. But talking about alcohol or drugs only made me want to get fucked up, and sex talk reminded me of my ex and the rumors that she was about to have a kid with someone else back home in Savannah, which I didn't want to think about. I wasn't having any of that shit, so I sat apart from Lance Corporal Stautner and chain smoked while ignoring

him as best I could. All I wanted to do was smoke and sleep until the day I could use my GI Bill for trade school.

Our smoke pit was like any smoke pit in Afghanistan, a Hesco barrier courtyard set up by the combat engineers behind our battalion headquarters. We all spent time there hanging out in our little cliques, but the deployment was dragging on and we were getting sick of each other and sick of all the strange bullshit happening every day. We knew strange things happened all over, but things were different here. The feel of being alive was different, and there were small things too, like the rain. The rain was especially different. I tried explaining it to my parents over the rare email or phone call when I had the time, but they didn't understand and didn't seem to want to understand, so instead I carried all of it inside me as if I were a shaken up bottle of coke.

The sun was down and everyone had hit the rack except the gate guards. Stautner sat across from me with his elbows on his knees as I finished a Newport and flicked it into the trash can. I pulled out another cigarette so he wouldn't think I was watching him, but before I could light it the smoke pit door flew wide open and slammed against the plywood wall. I turned around to see Sergeant Hodges stepping out of battalion HQ into the orange light of the garbage fire. In his arms he hugged a stack of flat cardboard boxes. A worn out spring whined and yanked the door shut with another bang and I thought I saw Hodges blink his eyes at the sound.

"Coleman, come get these fucking boxes," he said, so I got up and took the boxes from his arms before he could say it a second time, which he was liable to do if I moved too slow. He took off his eight-point cover and scratched the top of his head, then he talked in a low voice so Stautner couldn't hear us.

"Care packages for the platoon," said Sergeant Hodges. "Battalion passed 'em down, but I swear if I see Fat Body with

so much as a fucking Tootsie Roll in his pocket I will hem your ass up, you hear me? I don't give a shit if he's your buddy from MOS school or wherever the fuck."

"Good to go, Sergeant," I said in a monotone voice. It wasn't the first time Hodges had chewed me out about Stautner not making weight at the battalion weigh-in last week. He had yelled at me the very morning it happened. The word spread fast. It was something everyone in our unit considered to be a big deal, even though plenty of people in the Marines were technically overweight based on BMI requirements. Stautner wasn't alone in that. Now that I was a corporal, Hodges could blame me for someone else's problems. Fuck him. I didn't know where I would end up after this, if I'd become an electrician, a plumber, a carpenter, or whatever, but I knew I had more to offer the world than Sergeant Hodges did. I thought he was about to leave, but he had more on his mind.

"God, look at his face," Hodges said, so I did. Stautner's ass chewing at the weigh-in had been much worse than mine. It felt like everyone in the room was getting yelled at because the battalion sergeant major himself had taken one look at Stautner and thrown a tantrum directed at Sergeant Hodges, who subsequently directed his own tantrum at me. For what it's worth, I didn't blame Stautner. It was easy to skip the gym with our twelve-hour shifts on the flightline, and we had access to some serious food between the main chow hall and the twenty-four-hour sandwich shop in LSA3 with its unlimited supply of any breakfast cereal you could imagine.

"Listen," said Sergeant Hodges. "As a fucking corporal it would behoove you to unfuck your marines. He's in your fucking fireteam, right?"

"Yes, Sergeant," I said, wishing I had my cigarette lit so I could blow smoke in his face. How was I supposed to pull extra hours of the day out of my ass in order to PT Stautner or do whatever needed to be done to motivate him to lose weight? It

was bullshit. Every sergeant in my life was like a bad parent who treated their kids like shit just because their parents had treated them like shit, which brought to mind the belts and wooden spoons of my childhood. It was an endless cycle of shit and Stautner was still at the very bottom of the hill waiting for it all to roll down on him. Even I saw him differently as soon as I picked up rank, and I wasn't the type to be like that, or at least I didn't think I was. But I started to get annoyed when Stautner's uniform looked dirty or if his chevrons were chipped. I didn't think I was brainwashed, but it was like a switch flipped in my head and I was now slowly becoming a sergeant. I figured Stautner would hold me back from getting promoted again if I hung around him when we weren't on duty, so I stopped playing Counter Strike or watching movies with him. I didn't need him either way, as a friend or anything else. What did he have that I needed? The battalion sergeant major on his back? That was not something I needed.

Hodges grunted and turned to walk back inside, but stopped short and said, "By the way, have you seen my hot sauce? I left it in the office and now it's fucking gone."

"No, Sergeant," I said, but I was lying to his face. I was the one who stole it. Of course I did. I sprinkled it on the shit food they brought us for noon chow at the flightline, and I wasn't about to share with anyone. I could have asked my parents to send me some hot sauce, but I didn't want to owe them something later, so I took the bottle and hid it behind a shelf in our office all for myself. No one else knew.

"My fucking wife sent me that shit," said Sergeant Hodges. "Someone knows where it is." He glanced at Stautner one more time and then he disappeared through the door, flinging it open and saying, "Go Longhorns, bitches," before walking through and letting it slam shut again. He was always starting shit like that.

"Oh, that motherfucker," I said as his heavy footsteps trailed off on the wooden deck inside. Stautner heard me and laughed, but I stared back at him and told him to take the boxes from my arms just as Sergeant Hodges had told me to do. Stautner set the boxes on the ground, which is what I would have done with them if I hadn't made him do it.

"Let me see your Gerber," I said, and he handed it over. I was pissed at everyone, but I didn't have a plan yet. I popped the knife out of Stautner's Gerber multitool and I knelt down. I cut through the packing tape and I handed the knife back before I opened the box. In the dim light I could see a sudoku book on top of all the other crap that someone back in the States thought we needed. There were socks and bags of candy and a stack of blank loose leaf paper torn from a notebook. I picked the box up with two hands and dumped it out.

"Pick up all that candy and throw it in," I said, pointing at the barrel.

"What?" Stautner narrowed his eyes and said, "In the fire?"

"Make me say it again."

"Come on, man," he said.

"Don't talk to me like I'm your friend," I said, which sounded worse than I thought it would, but I stood up and folded my arms like I was in charge.

He gathered the bags of candy together and whispered something. I should have called him on it, but I didn't want to be up all night getting this done, so I let it slide. He could say what he wanted as long as I didn't hear him. Stautner stood up straight, his hands clutching bags of chocolate such as Hershey's, Reese's, the stuff that goes real quick.

"Really?" Stautner said.

“Burn it,” I said. “Save the socks and the razors. Wait, cancel that,” I said. “Burn that too. Burn everything.” Fuck it, I thought. If we stayed comfortable, then we would never want to leave this place.

Stautner didn't move at first. He stood with his fingers curled around bags of candy instead of a rifle, his body soft under his uniform instead of lean and hard-edged. I shook my head. I ripped the bags of candy from Stautner's hands and I threw them into the trash barrel. Twinkling sparks surged up from the fire after me.

“Now dump out the other ones,” I said, pointing at the remaining boxes. He had taken a step back, but then he got his Gerber out again. I went back to the first pile and sifted through it for shits and giggles. I grabbed the sudoku books and a package of pens I initially thought were black, but were in fact blue, worthless to us because only black ink could be used for official logs and documents. What was I supposed to do with the blue pens, write a fucking poem? A letter home? Yeah, right.

Stautner dumped the second box on the ground and I watched him separate the candy. Sorting through it was pointless once I decided we would throw it all in, even all the shit the kids made for us. Both boxes held collections of drawings mailed in by school children. I sorted through the drawings of battleships and airplanes and people in camouflage holding machine guns. Happy families stood together in front of their houses, waving goodbye to us. The drawings reminded me of grade school art class, but I tried not to think about that.

“Thank you for your service,” I read aloud from a postcard written in sloppy handwriting. I flipped to another one. “Thank you for my freedom and thank you for killing the Germans. Jesus Christ.” Stautner chuckled. I crumpled up the drawings and threw them in.

"Damn," Stautner said. "The kids' pictures?"

"Fuck the kids," I said. I looked over the edge of the barrel. A brown wave washed over a crayon drawing of a airplanes as the paper curled up. These kids didn't know what was going on here. They didn't know who we were, how bad we were, or what we were doing. They didn't know I wanted to kill people. I hadn't just been trained to kill people, I had been trained to *want* to kill them. But I worked in logistics and us pogues didn't have a release valve like the grunts did when they were outside the wire.

"That's fucked up," said Stautner.

"Do the other boxes," I said. I threw in a few bags of tortilla chips and a rubber-banded clump of number two pencils. I found several bags of beef jerky when Stautner dumped out the next box and I threw them into the barrel. There were a few stuffed animals scattered around. I grabbed a little gray bulldog with a frown on its face. Two soft white teeth poked up from the dog's lower lip, its blank plastic eyes reflecting the fire. Bulldogs were the mascots of the Marine Corps. In fact, most of the mascot bulldogs I'd seen outranked me, literally. I dropped the bulldog in the barrel and watched as the flames swept over. It squirmed and then turned black and shriveled into ash.

"Here's a dragon," Stautner said, holding it up in the dull light. I took the plush purple and black dragon from his hands. It felt soft like a dragon should not. A red line squiggled from its mouth, either its tongue or a pathetic little flame. Look at all this shit, I thought. No one even cares to understand. They think we need puzzle books and stuffed animals. I flung the dragon at the trashcan but it bounced off the rim, one of its plastic eyes smacking against the metal. I was still as bad at making free throws as I'd been on the junior high basketball team.

Stautner sorted through a pile of cheap razors and brown boot socks. I grabbed a stack of paperback novels and dropped them into the fire without checking the titles and then a leather-bound Bible with gold-gilded pages caught my eye. It looked expensive like a gift and I knew burning a Bible would piss off my parents, but there were plenty more at the chaplain's tent, so I spiked it into the barrel as if I'd scored a touchdown. I dodged a surge of fluttering embers that shot out in response. Stautner shook his head, but worse things had happened here and we all knew it. Who cared about this junk? No one would miss it. The pile of burning garbage shuddered. I thought about making a list of things people could mail. Most of us wanted the same shit: booze, cigarettes, porn. I'd take the substances any day, but porn would make me sad.

"What are you doing?" I asked Stautner. He was making little piles of things like he was saving it for later. I told him to stop fucking around and I started grabbing everything he had organized. He looked at the trash barrel and then back at the razor blades and tooth brushes. I picked them up and stuffed them into an empty box and then dropped the box in the fire.

"All this shit makes us soft," I said. "What good is that? What's the fucking point?" Stautner's hands hung at his sides. He didn't answer me. He glanced at the postal boxes burning up and he looked at the other care packages stacked on the ground. I could tell he didn't get it yet. I told him to come with me and we left the smoke pit fire unattended for a moment.

I flung open the wooden door to the building and let it slam against the wall as Sergeant Hodges had done. Stautner followed me down the hall where I burst into battalion HQ. The officers and senior enlisted were all asleep now, but a few clerks sat at computers like drones, working a late shift through the night because of bad luck. They slowly turned their heads in our direction as if they were tranquilized. They did not ask why we were there, so I got to work

immediately. I began unplugging computer monitors and CPUs from the unoccupied wooden desks around the clerks until I cradled several computers in my arms. I told Stautner to grab as many as he could carry.

"Help us or sit there like assholes," I told the clerks, all lance corporals. They stood up in a daze and ripped out the cords of their own computers and gathered them up with their monitors and keyboards. We carried it all out and stuffed it in the trash barrel and shortly after we could smell the fumes of melting plastic, which I felt made no difference considering all the smoke and diesel exhaust we breathed daily. Then we went back in and ripped out the VoSIP phones and tossed them in. We took every phone in the building, including the XO's and the CO's, even the sergeant major's.

We didn't discern between official and personal items either. The CO had a poster up in his office from the tiny D3 school where he played defensive back. I didn't have to tell the clerks to tear it down and burn it, and I told Stautner to dump the sergeant major's challenge coin collection. He didn't have a problem with that. We took the swivel computer chairs from all the offices, rolled them out, and stacked them in the barrel. I needed junior marines jumping on top of the fire to cram the whole pile in, otherwise we would never fit everything.

"Fuck Sergeant Hodges," I called out. "Fuck the sergeant major." The junior marines cheered. More of them had joined us. They woke up in the commotion and carried their sleeping bags to the barrel and burned them. They folded up their cots and burned those too. Marines from every LSA in Camp Leatherneck showed up. They lined up for a quarter mile along the road, waiting to burn their books and their candy and their personal laptops. We dumped our ammunition in a pile off to the side and burned our empty magazines in the barrel. We carefully lowered in our M16s and it felt wrong to be without them at first, but then it felt wonderful. We burned our boots

and our cammie blouses and trousers. Our brass rank insignia melted in the flames. Some of the marines had illicit drugs and paraphernalia. They threw it all in the barrel, the joints, pipes, pills, needles for injecting steroids in their thighs. We even threw in our cigarettes and dip, and that was tough because everyone was addicted. We collected all our cash together in one thick rubber-banded stack of green bills and we dropped it into the burn barrel. Our wallets followed with our IDs, credit cards, insurance cards, family photos. Everything we could fit, we stuffed it in and watched it burn. And there was nothing we couldn't fit. We had a system going.

We were almost done, but I noticed we had forgotten the packages that had kicked this whole thing off. There were still two. I grabbed the first box and dropped it in the barrel. It was heavy and something rolled around inside, but at this point I was too tired to care what it was. Then I noticed the other box was addressed to a specific individual, unlike the others which were meant for everyone. Why did we end up with someone's personal mail? We were going to burn it anyway, why wouldn't we? But I held it close to take a look. It was addressed to some pogue lieutenant. I didn't feel like caring, but I was curious to know what was inside this one.

"Fuck officers," I said, and I meant it. The junior marines around me cheered because we hated officers with their convertibles and their mansions and their AmEx golds and trophy wives. They thought it was us who weren't welcome on their turf, at their special beaches, in their special clubs, in their suburban neighborhoods, or in "Officer Country" aboard a Navy ship. Wrong. It was they who were unwelcome among us. So I wondered, what did people mail to officers, to future lawyers and doctors and airline pilots? What could they possibly need that they didn't already have?

"Fucking lieutenants," I said. "What do we think is in here?" I held the box up in the air for everyone to see. Our uniforms were long gone and we were naked in the garbage fire light,

bare skin coated with dirt. My nostrils were dry and full of dust and I missed the nourishing ocean breeze back home. There was not a trace of home here. The flames crackled as the others watched me. I cried out again. "I bet it's full of credit cards and investment portfolios!" They cheered, so I kept going. "I bet there's a hundred investment portfolios in here!" Now I had them riled up and snarling. If I didn't open the care package soon I knew this pack of rabid dogs would tear me and the box to shreds.

Stautner waited nearby. He wasn't keyed up like everyone else, so I handed him the box and told him to open it because he was part of this too. A helicopter rotor thumped somewhere far away as he hesitated. Everyone waited for something to happen. I tried to convince him that he *wanted* to open the box. I read the lieutenant's name.

"Look," I said. "Just another officer who spent the deployment making twice as much money as you. You feel bad for him? He's probably back home already." Stautner held the box, but he didn't move. The trash fire crackled inside the barrel. Someone in the crowd uttered a low growl and the generators hummed around the base. I checked the address label. I knew the lieutenant's unit; they had returned to the States before our unit had arrived here.

"See?" I said. "They've been gone for weeks. He's not even in country anymore. Someone forgot to give him his mail before he went home to his house in the Hamptons." I took the box from Stautner and threw it on the ground. He was still holding his Gerber. We would burn that next, but I took it from him again and I ran the blade through the packing tape. Stautner stepped away from the box as if it would explode, so I opened the cardboard flaps myself. The inside smelled like perfume and I almost smiled. There was a large envelope on top with a red lipstick kiss smeared across the front, and I thought it might be full of glossy nude photos. We would burn them, absolutely, but not before passing around the collection. I tore open the

envelope and reached in. There were indeed glossy prints stacked inside, but when I pulled them out I found that it was a stack of sonograms. The crowd watched me flip through the images in silence. There was really no shape to them, but I knew there was an infant hidden somewhere within the fuzzy blur.

“I’m gonna go take a shower, Corporal,” Stautner said. Actually, he wasn’t. We had thrown all the shower heads into the fire. He realized this before walking away and then he looked at the ground, defeated. He didn’t want to be near me anymore, but he had no excuse to leave. I wondered if all we had been was drinking buddies, not real friends, and if so whose fault that was. I dropped the sonograms into the fire. Then I dropped in the Gerber. Stautner didn’t react at first, but finally spoke up as the crowd dispersed a bit. They were getting bored.

“Why didn’t he get his mail?”

“I don’t know,” I said, and I wasn’t lying, but I guessed that this particular officer had probably gotten killed and the people left behind didn’t know what to do with his belongings. Maybe it wasn’t that bad, but I didn’t know how else a box of mail could get lost. Mail was one of the few things you could count on here. Many of us either forgot what went on outside the wire or we never knew to begin with. Things happened out there that we couldn’t comprehend from our seats around the smoke pit. Turns out a bottle of hot sauce was all it took to distract me from that. I thought about my ex and my parents and my old friends and I wanted to burn my memories. I realized this would be the first year of my life missing the St. Patrick’s Day parade back home and I wondered if it would matter to anyone that I was gone.

The burn pile collapsed and settled inside the barrel. A few embers trailed into the air. The flames reached out and beckoned for more, but we had burned everything except the

stuffed dragon. Somehow we missed it. I should have chewed out Stautner for his poor attention to detail, his lack of situational awareness. Not acceptable. Unsat. It was my job to behave that way towards him, but I walked over and picked up the dragon, patted dust off its black wings and purple tail. There was probably a kid outside the wire who wanted it, if there truly were kids running around out there. We had no place left to keep it, so I just held on for a moment. I kept the dragon low at my side, but then the crowd saw it in my hand. They closed in around me as Stautner pointed at the fire.

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## **New Poetry by Naomi Ruth Lowinsky: “In And Out Of Time,” “In The Wake Of Our Lady Of The Double-Edged Axe The Notorious RBG,” “Prepping For Apocalypse,” “Sideswiped,” and “The Queen Of Souls”**



THE ALWAYS HOVERING / *image by Amalie Flynn*  
IN AND OUT OF TIME

In the fire-eaten land  
in the smoke-drenched air

I dream

Crystal Lake  
square raft afloat  
at the center

I in my clodhopper shoes  
in the patchwork circle skirt  
I made myself  
in my hippie days

have jumped in the lake  
to show  
my solidarity

with forest  
mountains  
ancestors

with glittering Crystal Lake  
I swam as a girl  
whose raft was sanctuary

from Father's far-flung furies  
from head-smacked howling brothers  
from tongue-lashed weeping Mother

This simple handmade craft  
of wood of nails  
floats me out of time

holds me  
in the great blue round  
of lake of sky

the green surround  
of pines  
where the always hovering

Old Ones

who knew me then  
who dream me now

give me the words  
to write myself back  
                  into time

in my waterlogged  
clodhopper shoes  
  my patchwork skirt

back to the fire-eaten land  
back to the smoke-drenched air

                                  my handmade craft

  my raft

**IN THE WAKE OF OUR LADY OF THE DOUBLE-EDGED AXE  
THE NOTORIOUS RBG**

*(Erev Rosh Hashana    in the year 5781)*

The shofar wails

*She's gone  
from her body   gone  
from her seat on the court   gone  
from her grip on what's equal   what's just  
gone  
from her fierce resolve  
to keep breathing  
until January 20<sup>th</sup> 2021*

*Everything hung on her small   frail   frame  
What will we do without her?*

Once I forgot I was real  
a daughter of earth and sky  
forgot what the angel

had told me at birth

Once I had holes in my tongue  
from biting it  
had blood on my hands  
from broken glass  
on the top of that wall  
There was no escape

Throttled by custom by law  
I spat my teeth on the road  
My fire was used to burn me up  
My body did not belong to me  
a vessel for lust for seed

But you our soft-spoken battle-ax  
our mother who was a falcon  
had the cunning the courage the ken  
to seize the keys to the castle  
the plantation the prison  
to deliver us  
from gender's cages  
the shackles of race  
from those scoundrels in power  
who steal from the poor  
and ransack the earth

The shofar wails

*She's become one  
of the Holy Ones  
No longer can everything hang  
on her small frail frame*

*Too much for one body to bear  
It's your fight now*

Bless us O falcon-headed soul  
of the notorious RBG

Our Lady of soaring sight  
of focused attack  
Our messenger  
between the worlds

Sit on our shoulders  
Hunt in our dreams  
for the courage the cunning the keys  
the double-edged axe  
we'll need  
to end the mad king's reign  
and rouse your spirit in us

all over this land

## **PREPPING FOR APOCALYPSE**

*for Alicia*

requires the pursuit  
of toilet paper avocados gluten-free bread  
He needs blueberries with his yogurt  
You need mushrooms with your eggs  
Both of you stuck in lockdown

So surrender  
Hang yourself upside down  
Be the bat who sees in the dark Smell  
the terror cruelty carnage Hear  
the echoes of the ancestors

*Pandemic is pandemonium  
the world turned into a charnel house  
The sinister rider on his pale horse  
has rolled us all up in The End of Days  
like a medieval map ringed with dragons*

A Revelation is at hand The sun  
gone black The moon



when we were slaves in Egypt But who knew  
when I made that left turn a big black Beamer  
would hurtle toward you Lola we almost  
made it before it hit you in the right rear  
I thought it was just a fender bender  
They'd fix you up at the body shop  
like the surgeon fixed my hip

But the man in the Beamer leapt out shouting  
*It's all your fault!*

I can still hear him shouting  
while his kind quiet  
wife  
asks for my registration

*What's that?* I think  
my mind in fragments

Later I'll gather the flame raisins  
dates apricots and almonds pulse them  
into small bits in the Cuisinart knowing one needs  
to break things up to make that rich sweet

Middle Eastern paste charoset  
that's meant to bind us together  
when vessels shatter

Later the total loss claims man will pronounce you  
totaled You Lola  
who had the *saichel* to feed your own battery I'm still  
reaching  
for your slow-down lever grasping thin air forgetting  
I'm driving a clunky Chevy rental  
on my way to retrieve the layers of umbrellas shopping  
bags  
shoes in case of earthquakes maps we no longer use  
flashlights whose batteries likely died in all those  
years

before you started losing oil  
before the black Beamer sideswiped you  
before the man began to shout

before the total loss man  
pronounced you worth more dead dismembered  
for spare parts instead of resurrected one last time  
at the body shop the buff young woman  
commiserates with me helps me carry  
the detritus of our years together  
to the clunky Chevy

It's Easter week and Passover  
We remember the ones who've passed on  
We light candles for my children's father  
Dan's children's mother my mother  
the bedlam that erupted in her wake  
*O my separated kin will you ever join us again?*

We name the plagues Old Pharaoh flings at us  
as we gather our *mishpocheh* on the way to freedom  
We name what plagues our own shattered times  
Stolen Elections  
Separated Children  
Hatred of Strangers  
Greed  
School Shootings Sanctuary Shootings Police  
Shootings Street Shootings  
Homelessness  
Climate Chaos  
Species Extinction  
Family Feuds

The youngest one adds  
*People who cannot forgive*  
  
*Pass the charoset*

## THE QUEEN OF SOULS

*O Lady, Lady of the changing shapes,  
help me remember...*

—Judy Grahn

Some souls are shy      They hide out      behind the shutters  
of your eyes  
Some souls are soggy      like the earth after rain      like a  
woman      after a good cry  
Some souls get born to sass the universe      listen to them  
snicker

in the back of the class

Some souls can never be satisfied      Give them three wishes  
they want five  
They eat your heart out      send your spirit packing      You  
forget  
who brought you here      You question your every breath  
your spirit guides      your mother's milk

Some souls have rocks in their shoes      drag you down  
to the bottom of the slough      where earthworms squirm  
and you are sunk      spat out      for what terrible deed  
in what former life?

Some souls insist      on dance      Some need poems      Some will  
make you  
map out a whole world      of characters      who'll take over  
your inner chambers      Won't stop talking      until you write  
them down

Some souls keep singing      even in the eye of the storm      even  
at the bottom  
of the pit      where the Queen of Souls      She who harrows  
your bones      knows  
even black holes      even dead trees      grow mushrooms      host

baby birds and snakes

Some souls live in sandcastles  
until a wave knocks them down  
The child forgets what she built

Some souls have feathers and claws  
Some souls can shed their skin  
Some souls become jaguars in your sleep

Some souls surf atmospheric rivers wrangle tornadoes  
ride nightmares glide and glitter  
amidst rays of the sun in the redwood grove

Some souls are old and lonely Can't remember

the last body  
they were in

They hover in the rafters watch the infinity loop  
of lovers impatient for that last passion cry  
for the deft dive of sperm into egg hungry to leap  
into new life

Some souls remember themselves as tears as pearls  
on the throat of the Queen of Souls  
When your time comes She'll weigh

your heart your balance of feather and claw  
Maybe She'll give you a glimpse  
of your soul's flight wings aflame

way to your stars

on the