

# **New Poetry by Michal Rubin: “I Speak Not Your Language” and “Omar Abdalmajeed As’ad of Jijlya”**

I, born from the womb of  
my mother’s remembrances  
wrapped in the cocoon  
of her story[...]

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## **New Fiction from Cameron Manning: “Glory Chasers”**

*May 3, 2009*

After Captain Short returned from his training with the Australians, he scheduled himself to take leave the following week, which meant he’d be gone all of May. While I waited for him to go, I didn’t do shit except play Axis and Allies with the guys and cook for everyone.

Until this morning, that is. At about oh-three-hundred, I jumped out of my bed to the sound of gunfire and a helicopter. When I ran outside, I found Sargent Doran and a few of the soldiers peering over our northern Hesco barriers through their Nods. The noise was coming from Shahr-e Safa, and I darted to the Tracker in my truck to see if there were any blue icons on the screen. There weren’t.

Short came over to me, dazed and confused. “What’s going on,

Lieutenant?"

"I think it's the Colors," I said without hiding the enthusiasm in my voice. If I was right, this was exactly what we needed. No use in relying on a mismatched team of weekend warriors to exterminate the enemy when we could depend on the most elite fighting units ever developed. Maybe the Colors had caught some Taliban traveling through Shahr-e Safa. More dead Taliban meant a securer Jaldak. If Taliban were staying over in Shahr-e-Safa, maybe the Colors could also tell us who was hosting them—or being *forced* to host them. I called Zabul Base, but they didn't know what was going on.

While our soldiers geared up and started the engines, Zabul called back a few minutes later and told us to stand down. Thirty minutes later, I got a message confirming it was the Colors, and I asked for more information on the nature of their mission and who they'd engaged—maybe they killed the Dad—but they had nothing else to share. I called Dickson later in the morning, but he said he didn't know about any operation in my area either.

Around oh-eight-hundred, our mixed patrol of Cobra soldiers and Jaldak police walked into Shahr-e Safa and up the beaten path to the top of the hill. Instead of running up to us asking for candy, the children avoided us this time, and the ones who came out of their huts were crying.

"What happened?" I asked a cop.

Rocky translated. "He says the U.S. came in helicopters and murdered six men from the village last night."

"Murdered?" I said.

"Martyred," he said, before immediately correcting himself again. "They were *killed* when the U.S. broke into the compounds of the men and shot them."

“The men they killed lived here?”

“Yes, sir.”

“They lived here?”

He confirmed again with the cop. “Yes, sir. They lived here with their families. They were part of the Dad’s team.”

*What the fuck?* “Where’s Ghani?” I scanned the crowd and the mud huts looking for the man we’d so often relied on to provide us with Taliban intel—nowhere.

“Sir, this is very bad,” Rocky said. “An Afghan’s home is his sanctuary. It’s a terrible message you’re sending to the people here. You need to tell your people to stop raiding homes at night and killing villagers.”

*Un-fucking-believable. We’ve been living next door to six Taliban families this whole time.*

On our way up the hill, two women burst out of a nearby hut and ran over to us, with crying children following after them. They tore the heads of their burqas off and began screaming and yelling. Two of the cops stood between them and us, and Short kept walking forward. I drifted toward the women, though. One was old—a mother of the dead, I assumed—and the other was younger than me. The old one shouted and wailed at the cops and me, wagging her finger as tears ran down her face. I didn’t need to speak Pashto to understand the vulgarity streaming out of her mouth. And then she stopped to spit on me. It hit my forehead and began rolling down my cheek, and I wiped it off with my sleeve and headed back toward the front of the patrol.



My stomach ached as I remembered marching with Freeman through Kakaran and the home of Abdul Kabir and the Dad, listening to

their mother yell at us and our police. That had been satisfying, rewarding almost. But this was different now. Here I felt guilty and sick. But why? The men we'd just killed were no different from any of the others who'd tried to kill us. Or the ones who murdered their fellow Muslims in the streets.

And then it hit me—no matter how justified the killings were, we shouldn't have been here. Our patrol shouldn't have been taking a victory lap. Spiking the football right in the villagers' faces. Taking a self-congratulatory tour of the destruction we'd caused. Freeman would have known better than to come and do this today. He would have sent the cops instead and brought the village elders back to talk. I should have known our presence now would feel like a spit in the face.

When we got to the top of the hill, close to where the groundbreaking ceremony for the well had been, Short approached a village elder. It was Razaq—the father of Naney the pedophile—and he asked what we could do to help in the aftermath.

I wished we could have killed his son, too.

I walked to the well and looked up at the top of the tower where the solar panels used to sit.

*Fucking bastards.*

Even though I knew what would happen, I pulled the lever on the faucet beside the well and watched as nothing flowed out of it, symbolizing my failure. I headed over to Doran and Lane.

*How could we have been so close to the motherfuckers?* For almost a year, I'd slept next door to a village of insurgents. These guys weren't Taliban from Pakistan traveling through the area, forcing villagers to feed and host them—they were our fucking neighbors. After eight years, we hadn't even "cleared" the village beside our base. "Clear, hold, build" my ass. And

if there were six Taliban living in Shahr-e Safa, guys whose children I'd spent a year throwing candy to, how many lived in the other villages in Jaldak? *Jesus Christ, they're everywhere. They'll never leave this place.*

"It's pretty fucking hot, LT," Lane said.

"Yeah, pretty fucking hot."

"We gonna be out here for a while?"

"Look, dude, I don't know. Pull security."

He made a face and headed off.

I walked back to Rocky, lost in my own fog of disgrace. "Let's get names of the Taliban killed," I said as I handed him my notebook.

I watched as he stopped a policeman and talked to him for a while, writing in the notebook. When he returned, I scanned the list of names but didn't recognize any of them. Across the way, I noticed that Short was still talking to Naney's father.

"The police are saying the U.S. who came in the helicopters stole a bunch of weapons and explosives from the men they killed," Rocky said.

"Stole?"

"I mean confiscated."

*Fuck this.*

Rocky turned to leave, but I grabbed his shoulder. "They were bad guys, Rocky. Taliban. If they had guns and explosives and—"

"It doesn't matter, sir." He pointed to a boy standing beside his older brother, both of them crying. I got the message.

I surveyed the mud huts on the slope of the hill we'd just hiked up. These were the people we'd been trying to make life better for? The people we fed and provided running water for and whose children we built schools for? The people who'd never told us about the six Taliban living in their village—the village that neighbored us?

But why would they tell us? These men were their sons and fathers.

*This is fucking hopeless.*

By now, Short was done talking to Razaaq, and we headed back down the trail to the highway, where I put myself on the south side of the patrol. The side away from the woman who'd screamed and spit on me on our way up. But there was no escape—more women came out of another hut and started in on me and the cop beside me, wailing and cursing in Pashto, more orphaned children behind them. Their bare faces streaked with tears, they made wide menacing hand gestures whose meaning I could only guess at. I could feel their hatred just like I could feel the heat of the sun.

*Fuck all this.*

At the road, Ghani was waiting for us. I ran to him, and Rocky scurried along after me.

“Did you know these men?” I demanded.

There was a pause.

He said something to Rocky. “Yes, for many years.”

I glared at Ghani, the crooked bastard. All this time I'd thought he was the kind of guy we needed to save this place from Taliban, but he must have only been using us because he hated Zahir. Not because he hated Taliban.

“Why?” I stepped forward, my face close to his “Why not tell

us?"

Rocky didn't hesitate. "He knew them well, sir. They were part of his clan."

Ghani just stared back at me sheepishly.

I wanted to spit on him. Instead, I turned and walked down the driveway as our crooked fucking cops opened the wire gates for us.

All this work for the sake of the women and children and this was the result? A police force corrupt to the core and a well that didn't work and a generation of fatherless sons and daughters? Sons who would grow up to join the Taliban and kill us if we were stupid enough to still be around? Daughters who would be forced into marriage as soon as they menstruated? Imprisoning their faces behind those suffocating burqas for their entire godforsaken lives?

*Why the fuck are we still in this place?*

The people would never support the police as long as we were here. But if we left now, the Taliban would replace the police force we did have. Every man and woman who died in this country for the sake of this war would have died in vain. None of it would mean anything, to anyone. Vietnam all over again.

What a tragic fucking joke.

I kept walking, leaving the wailing and cursing behind. If only till the next time.

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Back at base, we debriefed in the Toc even though it was hotter inside than out and there were just as many flies.

"You see how empty the whole place was?" Kilgore said.

"The elder I talked to said just about everyone's left, and

tomorrow they'll *all* be gone," Short said.

I slapped a fly on my arm. "The business owners *and* the villagers?" I grabbed the flyswatter from my desk and waited for the next one.

"Everyone. They're all afraid of U.S. in helicopters coming to kill their sons and husbands again."

"Well, if their sons and husbands are fucking Taliban trying to kill us, stealing solar panels—"

"God, you really got a hard-on for that solar panel thing, don't you, LT?"

Kilgore laughed.

"If they're fucking Taliban, they ought to die," I said, glaring at him, knowing that I wasn't going to bother trying to explain to him the complicated truth I'd just learned. The fact that we'd just given every child in that village a once-in-a-lifetime experience that would shape their decision-making for the rest of their lives. The invaders had just killed their fathers and brothers, and they'd gladly take up arms against us as soon as they got the chance. The truth that killing more bad guys could never be the answer to winning this war.

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## **New Nonfiction by Carol Ann Wilson: "Live Oaks"**

'Tis a fearful thing

to love  
What death can touch.  
To love, to hope, to dream,  
and oh, to lose . . .

by Judah Halevi  
12th century philosopher and poet

June 1991. I'm half-way up a seventy-foot rock facing at Camp Hale, Colorado, my body pressed against the hard, cool granite. My fingers search for purchase on what feels like a polished surface. I'm ascending one of the rock towers the Tenth Mountain Division, a unit of 15,000 men, scaled when preparing for mountain and winter warfare during World War II. CIA secret operatives trained here, too, including Tibetan freedom fighters in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Inside me, my own war rages. I took the lead instructor, David's, suggestion that I climb blindfolded, because I trust him. But under normal circumstances, even trusting an experienced instructor, I wouldn't climb this giant slab for love or money.

These are not normal circumstances. Yet, a niggling bit of fear keeps me vigilant, which puzzles me, since I know nothing can possibly hurt me now. I'm invulnerable to pain or injury, my heart and soul already shredded. Why would my body matter? My greatest fear is trying to live life as usual when I see only a void in my present and future. Living at all these past few weeks since my sister's death is hardly bearable. Caught, as I am, in limbo, between life and death. If Susan is dead, how can I be alive? We were so close. Attached at the heart, we liked to say. Yet this little inkling of fear causes me to wonder if something in me wants to win this battle, this struggle for meaning in my life, something to live for.

The shock of the diagnosis, stomach cancer that had metastasized, was all the greater because we'd thought it a benign tumor. That "we" included the surgeon. Like thinking

your feet are on solid ground, only to feel that ground fracturing into an infinite abyss, taking you with it. When the doctor told me, I could only stare at him as my whole body began shaking. My teeth chattered, top hitting hard against bottom, jarring my vision, making my words stutter. The shaking wouldn't stop. A nurse led me to a bed and piled hot blanket after blanket on me. Still I shook.

This hard, bare surface threatens to defeat me, but my fingers find a tiny crevice I can use to pull myself upward. I rest for a moment, surprised by the comfort this small indentation brings. My breath slows, and I begin searching for the next fingerhold.

Through a harness, I'm attached to a rope that's anchored at the top of this cliff. It will save me from crashing to the ground below, but it will not save me from a terrifying experience of dangling in space, far above the ground—my particular nightmare. Nor will it keep me from bashing against the rockface.

Suspended. That's how I felt in those early hours of the morning, alone in the deserted Spokane airport. No bustle, no aroma of coffee brewing, not even the airline desks were open. Only a gray emptiness occupied the space. My brother's call had come only a few hours earlier, fueling my need to get to the closest airport, find the first flight available, get back to my sister, because she was going downhill, and quickly.

A month ago, I was in Idaho as part of a team reviewing the state's teacher preparation programs, a trip that had been scheduled for months. Susan and I had talked about whether I should go. Since we thought we had months ahead of us, given the doctor's prognosis of possibly a year, we agreed I should honor the commitment. I did so reluctantly, weeping all the way to the airport. Our brother, Bruce, was with her, our mother on her way from Florida, and I would be back in a week. We all thought it would work out for that short period.

My foot explores the available area up a notch, in synch with my fingers, to push and pull simultaneously. Actions that could be in opposition with each other, as they are deep within me. But here on the rock, they work in concert, and I've gained a few more inches.

Our team had been in Moscow, Idaho when Bruce called in the middle of that dark night. A colleague borrowed a car and drove me to the nearest airport, sixty-eight miles away. We arrived about 2:00. I found a phone booth and called Bruce to tell him I was getting the first flight out, at 6:30. In a voice low and contained, he said, "It doesn't look good."

We agreed I would call every hour to check on Susan's status. I stayed in the phone booth, close to the phone that was my link to Bruce—and to Susan.

My fingers find another tiny indentation and tug to test. The rock crumbles and I pull my hand back, then feel around for another. I hear voices above me, encouraging me on. "You're really close! Take your time but keep on coming!"

Finding a few more indentations, I hear a voice say, "We're here if you need us to pull you this last bit."

At 6:00, I phoned again, the last call before I was to board the flight. Bruce's voice sounded far away, as if it were coming from some foreign place. "Susan died, minutes ago," my brother told me. It was ten days, not even close to a year, after her surgery.

My fingers investigate the surface area within reach, find a place to grip, and with a final thrust from my feet and pull of my fingers, I feel someone's hand touching mine. Balancing against the rock, I take the hand and, with a grunt and a push, I plant my feet on solid ground.

Pulling off my blindfold, I greet my belayers, one of whom gives sweaty me a hug. "Congratulations! You did it!" she

says. I smile and hug her back before she says, "Now you can rest until you're ready to rappel back down."

I look at the rope and the huge sturdy rock around which it is tied. The anchor. My anchor. It will help me make it back safely to the ground below, to thank the people who have been rooting for me, classmates, friends, and the trustworthy David. But will it help in my effort to climb out of this grief, or at least to accommodate its accumulation?

I hadn't been particularly excited about this week-long Outward Bound course, the culminating component of a year-long community leadership program. But I'd loved the rest of it, the seminars, the community projects, the other twenty-four people in the group, the coordinators and seminar leaders. Still, knowing some of the Outward Bound activities would include heights, I wasn't sure I could participate. But when the time came, just four weeks after Susan died, I figured, what the hell? What difference does height make now?

It makes no difference. As I prepare to rappel down, I listen to the belayer review my instructions. Holding the guide rope in my left hand, my right hand ready to work the rope and the carabiners to control the rate of my descent, I step off the cliff backwards. Strangely, it feels like the most natural thing in the world. I am descending and in a controlled way. I know how to do this. I walk myself down the sheer rockface, sans blindfold. It's exhilarating.

Back on the ground, I join a group of classmates and instructors who cheer and pat me on the back. Then we turn our attention to others making their way up the rock.

We were surrounded by rock formations, some accumulations of dirt, dust particles and magma, some resulting from layers of sediment and sustained pressure. I remember thinking of my own pressure, my own accumulation of grief and heartache. Susan's death had ignited all that and more. The accumulation, I see

now, had threatened to crush me. Would there be a metamorphosis for me, I wondered, as there had been for some of these formations?

While suspended on the rockface, I'd begun to think about what had brought me to that point of despair and hope. Then, with my feet finally on the ground, my mind settled on a particular day, fifty-five years ago, on a landscape populated not with rocks, but with trees.



1966. A November afternoon, outside a small cement-block house near a Florida bay. Wind rustled dead sycamore leaves across a sleeping lawn. It gusted through the trailing Spanish moss growing in the towering live oak's branches, and sougled through places where songbirds sought refuge from storms. The tree's limbs plunged to the ground before sweeping upward toward a low gray sky.

Ron and I drifted across the expanse of lawn and sand we called our yard. In our early twenties and married four months now, our hands entwined, we moved slowly, dreamlike. Ron seemed pensive though, distant from his usual buoyant self.

He paused and I paused, too. Looking into my eyes, his own seemed pools of uncertainty, of puzzlement. My breath held itself while I waited for him to break the silence. He did so, slowly, as if he were considering every word.

"I've been having strange feelings lately," he said. "They're not like anything I've felt before, and I can't seem to get rid of them."

His tone sent a chill down my spine. "What kind of feelings?" I wanted to know.

"Disturbing ones. Like something bad is going to happen. I

can't think of a way to describe it other than that expression 'like somebody's walking over my grave.'"

He ran his hand over his military-short, sandy brown hair before continuing. "I've always thought that saying was ridiculous, but now I know what it means. Or worse, how it feels."

A chill spread throughout my entire body. Fear darted through me like a small animal and, for moments, I couldn't conjure words, only images—Ron in his flight suit, in his officer's uniform, in planes—all part of his jet pilot training. There was such danger in all of that, and worse, danger lurking in his almost-certain posting to Vietnam.

Pushing these perils away was a constant in my life. Dislodging the fear with thoughts of his love of flying, the thrill he found in each stage of the training, his sense of duty, all were essential for restoring my peace of mind, so capricious those days. But this? Was this his own grave he was thinking of?

Ron's voice slipped through my thoughts. "Why don't you call your dad? To see if he's alright. If he's still planning to come for Thanksgiving."

I was reluctant to leave him, even for a moment. But I turned to walk toward the house and, as if the wind had timed it, a blast hit my back just as my fear found a new target—Dad. My dad who was alone and lonely, with a difficult divorce from my mother only a couple of years behind him. My dad, whose health wasn't great after two heart attacks some seven years ago. My dad who meant the world to me, with whom I'd always felt a visceral bond.

Twenty-three years into a troubled marriage, my parents separated, then divorced. Wrenching for me, that parting, because it meant parting with Dad, who returned to his small business in the Florida panhandle, our family home during my

early years. My mother stayed in Colorado, the place she loved, and where I was in college. But less than two years later, when Ron and I married and moved to Pensacola for the first phase of his flight training, we were only three hours from Dad.

Dialing my father's number, I tried to push every trace of panic from my mind, not wanting him to hear it my voice. When he answered on the second ring, he sounds strong, expectant. A surge of happiness buoyed me.

"Ron and I wanted to check to see if you're still planning to come for Thanksgiving," I said.

"You bet I am," he assured me. "Do you think I'd miss your first Thanksgiving dinner as the cook?"

I grinned at the phone as I told him Ron and I both had to work on Friday—me at my uninspiring receptionist job and Ron on aircraft carrier landing practice. Dad was fine with that since he could stay just the night.

"A couple others will be here," I told him. "You remember Steve, Ron's close friend from college?"

"Sure. Best man at your wedding," he said.

"Yep. He's in flight training, too, in helicopters, in the Army. Stationed in Texas. He's coming over for the weekend to see us and some other friends."

"That's great! Who's the other?"

"John, a newer friend in prop training here." He and Ron met during the first phases of training and became instant friends. "You'll like him, too," I said.

I remember the relief of talking with Dad, how the light-hearted exchange cheered me. Even so, deep down, I knew it was only a momentary respite from the vague but ever-present

unease, an abstraction of a war that could instantly come too close, too vivid, if I let it. War. Constantly in the news, often the topic with Ron and friends. Sure, I knew there was a slight chance Ron wouldn't have to go, that John and Steve could be assigned elsewhere. But the odds were against it. Yet, I still clung to a slim hope.

That dinner was all I'd hoped it would be. I roasted a turkey, prepared mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, and green beans. The day before, I baked a pumpkin pie. So much work, but my anticipation of the day kept me at it. Excitement in preparing my first holiday meal in my own home interlaced itself with the anxiety of wanting everything to be just right for that singular gathering.

Sitting at the table before the spread I'd conjured, the fragrance of roasting turkey not yet a memory, with my father, husband, and two men whose friendship I treasured, I savored their compliments and light banter. Steve had been a part of my life almost as long as Ron had, since the two were virtually inseparable in their college years. My dad seemed happy getting to know Steve a little better, and he took to John, as well. Ron, he'd always loved.

Leaning forward, light dancing in his eyes, he said, "Seems like you three have us covered in the air. Jets, choppers and props."

"Yes, sir, I think we do," John said, raising his glass to Ron and Steve.

Dad was hooked, wanting to know all about flying helicopters and planes.

Flying. The war. We all knew the risks. Sometimes I thought the higher the risk, the heartier the humor in how these three military pilots found ways to make light of danger. In some odd way, I found that reassuring. Joking and laughing could turn a gale into a soothing breeze for me.

I watched my dad and my three pilots smiling and relaxing together. The winds that evening were all warmth and affection.

It was a leap from Thanksgiving dinner to work the next day. Since we had only one car, Ron dropped me off at the office on his way to the base.

At work, the huge office building seemed a ghost town with most people off for the holiday. But someone had to answer the phones, and that someone was low-ranking me. Being a receptionist for a large corporation that made chemical fertilizer wasn't my idea of rewarding work, but it was all I could find for the short time before we moved for Ron's next phase of training.

I tackled a stack of filing when the ringing phone broke the silence, surprising me. I was surprised even more when I heard my Aunt Rubye's voice.

"Carol, I hate to tell you this," she said in her soft, southern syllables. "Your daddy had a little accident on his way home. He's at the hospital in Crestview. He passed out driving home, and his truck went off the road," she said. "Someone from the hospital called me since I'm still his emergency contact."

"But is he okay?" I asked, desperate for a reassuring answer.

"They said nothing's broken, but they're keeping him for tests. Can you get away from work? Do you have some way to get over there?"

I thought for a moment. I could take the bus. Company phones be damned.

I remember staring out the window of the Greyhound, willing the bus to go faster. My eyes took in the passing live oaks, welcoming the sight of those trees with their almost continuous gift of green. They shed for only a short time in the spring, when their leaves replace themselves. The oaks seemed a hopeful sight, contrasting blatantly with leafless sycamores, cypress and dogwood trees. Those bare branches reflected the starkness and anxiety I felt deep inside— moss clinging to those tree limbs like the worry hanging on my heart.

I inspected the other passengers reading, sleeping, or gazing out the window. They seemed remote, as if I were seeing them through the wrong end of binoculars.

At last we reached Crestview.

The details of how I found the hospital and Dad's room have blurred, but the image of him in that hospital bed, pale and out of place has never dimmed.

He wore the ubiquitous faded green hospital gown; a blanket covered all but his shoulders. An angry gash on his forehead, possibly from where it hit the steering wheel, accentuated his pallor. Despite that, his face lit up when he saw me, his smile a salve for my anxious self. But his vulnerability took my breath away.

Leaning over to give him a kiss, I felt his warm skin and noted his shallow breathing. He started to speak, but instead began coughing. When the cough subsided, I ask how he was feeling.

"Woozy, I guess. This cough takes over every now and then and saps the little strength I have."

He told me that the doctor on duty said he had too much sugar

in his system, which is what caused him to black out. He had late-onset diabetes. "I think I'll be okay if I rest a while," he says.

His pale, injured face, his unsteady voice punched holes in my heart. His vulnerability was mine, too.

That day brought another twist. Given the holiday, the small-town hospital was understaffed and had no one qualified to read the film. Someone in DeFuniak Springs, thirty miles away, could, but the hospital couldn't spare anyone to take it, so the nurse asked me.

I did as she requested, but on those bus rides, the bewildering string of events pushed my thoughts in a direction I'd been trying to avoid. My mind latched on to old Mrs. Harper, my childhood friend's grandmother. Mrs. Harper was the first person I knew to die.

As a nine-year old, I had no frame of reference for such a situation. Our family, and the community in general, didn't discuss difficult matters. Perhaps that was why it made such an impression on me.

I could easily call up the front parlor the day of Mrs. Harper's viewing. How strange it felt to walk into that dimmed room where my friend and I had spent so many happy hours playing with our tea sets and dolls. The casket rested in front of the bay window at the far wall, the dark, heavy draperies a backdrop to the somber scene. The room felt foreign, and I felt an intruder. I stayed close to the doorway; the thought of seeing Mrs. Harper's body filled me with dread, and I could not make myself look.

After that, I avoided funerals. Even the thought of going terrified me, made me feel as if I were sinking into the cold dark with the dead.

Ron arrived with the evening. His presence and firm hug reassured me in a way I'd been hungry for all day. Some of the day's strangeness dissipated as I watch Dad and Ron together.

"Are you feeling any better?" Ron asked.

Dad smiled. "Not enough to dance."

The warmth of their interaction comforted me until the nurse returned to say visiting hours were over. I kissed Dad goodnight and promised to be back first thing in the morning.

Drained, I slumped in the seat of our little Volkswagen bug as Ron drove us through the thick southern darkness. I saw a few stars through the clouds, but no moon. The cold outside was damp and pierced to the bone. I felt the darkness inside me and the cold settling around my heart. I tried to speak but my words turn to sobs.

"It's going to be alright." Ron said. "They're taking good care of him and you'll see him in the morning."

I nodded, but all I could do was cry. I knew I'd never felt that kind of gut-wrenching, uncontrollable weeping. Bending forward, my whole body shook as tears flooded my face. I felt I was drowning in them. Something dark and unfamiliar consumed me.

Finally in my warm bed, exhausted, I fell into a deep, dreamless slumber. I wanted that escape from the nightmarish day. I wanted my life to return to normal. I wanted my dad to be well.

From the depths of sleep, I heard the phone ring. Fighting my way back to consciousness, I looked at the clock, registered that it was midnight and knew immediately what was behind the ringing. Ron handed me the receiver and put his arms around me. I heard only fragments . . . a heart attack . . . sparked

by pneumonia not detected.

For months after, fog shrouded my memory. In the midst of that devastating loss, some images stood out: my dad's funeral in the little church where, as a child, I attended Sunday School, the ride to the cemetery, the emptiness of his house, the endless details to attend to.

My anger seemed endless, too—anger at the world, at the fates, at luck, at whatever took my dad away. And anger at those who tried to tell me I would be okay, because I couldn't imagine how I would. Anger at those who told me it was part of God's plan. Anger because I wanted no part of their god.

Anger was an animating force, but I ran out of the energy to sustain it. I didn't know how to grieve, how to accept what had happened. I can now see I knew only how to push the hollowness away, not realizing how temporary that would be.



Bob Wilson, 1963, Golden, CO

In October, 1968, we'd been in Southern California several months, and Ron was set to go to Vietnam. Steve had been there a month, and John had left a couple of weeks ago. I remember the night before John shipped out. Ron and I were with him and others at El Toro's officers' club. A surprisingly festive atmosphere infected our group, and we danced, laughed, and drank as if there were no tomorrow.

Margaritas were favored. After John finished one, he'd slam the bottom of the glass on the tabletop in such a way that the cup would break cleanly from the stem.

"Maybe that's not a good idea, John," someone said. "You could cut yourself."

“What the hell,” John shouted. “I’m going to war.”

Soon everyone was trying it, broken margarita glasses piling up on our table, the glitter of little glass shards sprinkled around like stardust. Caught between visions of stardust and thoughts of John leaving, I watched him break another. The moment the cup parted from the stem, something cracked inside me.

Ron’s departure was quieter, with the two of us spending the afternoon at the beach, then having dinner at home. We talked about the future, about when his commitment to the Marines would be over, and what we wanted to do with our lives.

I remember how Ron suggested I return to Colorado for the spring semester and work on that degree in English literature I longed to finish. He knew how much I needed my time to be productive; how working in the bank’s accounting department was interesting, but only held a space for something more important, something useful. And that without my feeling useful, the bare branches inside me would languish in waiting for their leaves to reappear.

When the time came for him to go, he gathered me into his arms. “I’m already looking forward to being back home with you,” he says. “It’s only thirteen months, and then we have the rest of our lives together.”

I knew I couldn’t trust myself to speak. He told me he wanted me to be happy. That if something happened to him, he hoped someday I could be with someone else. Maybe someone like Steve.

“But I don’t want someone like Steve,” I said. “I want you.”

He smiled, kissed me, and then he was gone.



Carol and Ron Meridian

Our letters sustained us. We planned for the future, chose a simple, elegantly shaped china pattern, and exchanged news of close friends. I wrote about Kimmy, our beloved Siamese cat, and my work in the bank's accounting department.

What I didn't tell was breaking the beautiful opal ring he'd sent, how the opal cracked when I slugged an overly friendly coworker when doing inventory in the bank's vault or how the myth about opals bringing bad luck played out for that guy.

Ron's letters brought news of his life there, how he sometimes sat around in the drab rainy weather, bored, waiting for the clouds to clear enough for him to fly. At one point he recounted a recent scramble in which his wingman scored a direct hit on a camouflaged truck. A huge secondary explosion indicated it had been loaded with ammunition.

But he also wrote that he hated working targets in that place, the Ashau Valley. "It's right on the Laotian border and is surrounded by five-thousand-foot mountains. The NVA [North Vietnamese Army] holes up in the mountains and puts up a hail of fire when you fly near one of their hideouts—and you always pass near one when pulling off a target."

This letter shook me, just as the one in which he told me about the big rocket attack on Chu Lai. His jet, which he'd named Jefferson Airplane, took a hundred-twenty-two-millimeter rocket and was blasted to smithereens. But when it happened, he was in Japan, part of a group flying new aircraft back to Chu Lai.

His letter reminded me that A-4 Skyhawks, those small, nimble jets that carried only the pilot, always flew in pairs. I'd heard more A-4s were shot down than any other jet. That wasn't something I wanted to know.

I did want to know what his life was like, what he was

experiencing, but knowing so much left me full of fear—my stomach in knots and my mind spinning out the worst scenarios. Trust his optimism, I told myself. I thought that would get me through his tour. Knowing that in a few months I would return to Colorado and to school also helped. Meanwhile, I distracted myself with work, my cat, and friends. And I counted the days.

Ron had been in Vietnam only two and a half months that November of 1968 when he wrote telling me to meet him in Hawaii for R&R, the rest and recuperation leave military personnel usually got half-way through their tour. He'd been approved for an early one, hoping that meant he would get a second. Not common, but possible, and Ron loved trying to beat the odds.

I arrived in Honolulu before Ron. The soft, warm air greeted me, and so did a young Hawaiian woman, who placed a lei of lavender flowers around my neck, welcoming me to the island.

Standing at his gate and inhaling the flowers' fragrance, I felt the minutes doing a slow dance, out of time with my eager self. I'd had too much waiting those last months. I wanted to see Ron. I wanted to hear his voice, its warmth and wonder. I wanted to touch him, to remember he was real. And then, there he was.

We had candlelit dinners under the stars, walks along the beach, playful dunking in the waves, and we held each other tightly in the night.

Our visit to the USS Arizona Memorial at Pearl Harbor turned somber despite the sparkingly beautiful day. Lush foliage met deep blue water, blossoms asserted their splendor as we listened to the guide tell us about that December day when more than a thousand sailors and Marines died. When our small tour group entered the compact submarine on display, I felt I was entering a metal trap. The air close, the contrast to the

outside complete. A sense of foreboding stirred in me, which I tried to push away.

Later, in our hotel room, Ron seemed pensive. When I asked what he was thinking, his reply took me aback. "I don't know if I should talk about this," he said.

My antenna started to rise. "Please tell me."

After a long moment, he said, "I guess being at that memorial today stirred it up again."

Taking a deep breath, he told me, "Most of the guys are great. They know the power of their aircraft, and they take great care with what they do." He rubbed his forehead and continued. "But some of what I've seen troubles me. War itself is more than troubling, but some things make it even worse."

He spoke of incidents, of bombs and napalm dropped by accident or carelessly, of attitudes, arrogance. Of how Al, a pilot who went through training with him, dropped napalm in error on a village, with horrible repercussions for the people, but little for himself. Of how Al tried to brush it off. Matters both vague and specific weighed on his mind.

"I didn't know I was signing up for this, and I don't know what to do about it."

"I know you'll do what you think is right," I said. His words lay in a lump in my stomach. "Just take care of yourself. Be careful."

"I'll do my best."

Will that be enough? I wondered. But I did not say it. Seeking reassurance, my thoughts turned to my brother, who had been a Marine and in Viet Nam. On the ground, he'd been in the midst of horrific action and had made it through. And three uncles had fought in World War II, in dangerous situations. All survived. But this war seemed different. Exactly why were we

there? Yet, I wanted to believe there was a purpose.

The week flew by. On New Year's Day we had to part. Ron's flight left before mine, so we headed for his gate. I tried to be cheerful, to think about new beginnings, but it didn't feel like a new beginning with our week at an end. Ron, who could read me well, saw through my efforts.

"Everything will be okay," he told me. "We'll have another week together in a few months, and after that, it'll be no time before I'm home."

That encouragement made a smile possible as we said our goodbyes. But it lasted only until Ron boarded his flight. When I could no longer see him, I was overcome with a sense of despair. That strange, uncontrollable sobbing I knew in Florida, driving home from the hospital that night in our VW bug overtook me. Was this a premonition? The thought that it might be terrified me. I couldn't stop the racking sobs, yet I had to catch my flight. Knees weak, body trembling, I made my way to the gate, vaguely aware of people's stares. But I didn't care.

In January, 1969, only weeks after the Hawaii trip, I moved back to Colorado. Kimmy and I lived with my mom, the three of us settling into a comfortable routine. My classes stimulated and the professors encouraged, and I felt cheered knowing I was making good use of a difficult time. One blustery February day, I returned from class to the ringing phone. The surprise and delight of hearing Ron's voice were short-lived.

"I have some bad news."

"What is it?" I asked, my breath on hold.

His words tumbled out, "It's John. His plane was shot down

south of Da Nang. He didn't make it."

Reeling, I thought of John, his mischievous grin, his blue eyes, the mountain of broken margarita glasses. Stardust.

I felt broken, too, as if someone had shattered my inner being and shards floated inside me, stabbing my heart. How to think of John dead? I tried to hold together for Ron, but once the receiver was back in its cradle, grief took over.

During that long month after Ron's call, I found it difficult to focus on my studies. I welcomed new leaves clothing branches in tender green, the fragrance of early lilacs, and air teeming with bird song. Spring signals a new beginning, or so I thought at the time.

The last evening of spring break, my brother and I went to a club in Denver's Larimar Square to hear a Dixieland jazz band. Revelers jammed the club that Friday evening, but we found a table and ordered drinks. Sound assaulted us—jovial patrons bantering in high decibels, glasses clinking, and strains of "Basin Street Blues" flavored the cacophony. Bruce and I joked and tried to talk above the noise.

A waiter approached, and I thought he was checking on our drinks but, instead, he looked at me and asked, "Are you Carol Layton?"

When I nodded, he told me I had a phone call. I was puzzled. Only our mother knew we were there. My insides knotted as I followed the waiter, but I told myself it couldn't be anything serious.

The twenty-minute drive home seemed an eternity. My mind spun. My muscles tensed. I tried to breathe as I gripped the steering wheel.

In the living room, my mother sat across from two Marines in uniform. They stood when I entered, and I sank into a corner of the sofa. I knew.

"We're very sorry Mrs. Layton," one said, his eyes meeting mine.

My world had ended, yet the other man continued, "Your husband had been flying close air support, protecting his fellow Marines. His Skyhawk came under enemy fire and went down. It all happened quickly. He wouldn't have suffered."

The first one again, "Your husband was a brave man," he said. "A hero."

No. This was just a script, I thought. My whole body rejected the very notion. A chasm opened and I was falling. But I was frozen and couldn't feel, couldn't think. But I knew. I didn't want to know. But I knew.

Morning came. It took everything I had to drag myself from bed. The day dark, rain poured from the heavens, matching the leaden feeling in me. Scooping out cat food, I heard the phone ring. I was surprised to hear my sister's voice. In college in Pensacola, she had no phone. Mom and I had wondered how to get in touch with her.

"Carol, are you alright?" Susan asked, concern flooding her words.

"Oh, Susan," I answered. "No." Forcing the words, I told her about Ron, about the Marines who were there last night.

I could almost feel her listening. In my mind's eye, I could see her long, dark hair framing her face, a look of total focus signaling she was taking in every word.

"But are you okay?" I ask. "Why are you calling?"

"I dreamed about Dad last night," she said. "He was worried about you. He said I should call."

The days did pass but, too often, I had to force myself into them. Every movement felt as though I were pushing through molasses. My mother was distraught, the light and fire in her eyes had given way to a somber dullness. She loved Ron deeply. His open-hearted, fun-loving nature and his caring for me won her over early in our dating days. He was drawn to her adventurous spirit, a reflection of his own. She felt her own grief, yet she tried to comfort me. Now I realize how shattered she was, both by his death and by my loss.

The military allowed me to request an escort for Ron's body home, and I chose Steve. With John, then Ron, dead, I wanted Steve out of Vietnam. Two long weeks elapsed before he arrived. But, finally, he did.

Steve called before he came to the apartment, and I could hardly wait to see him. When I opened the door, he opened his arms, and I stepped to fill them. Bound even more tightly through loss, we held each other for a long moment. For an instant, I told myself, when I open my eyes, it will be Ron holding me. Then I felt the disservice to Steve and held him for who he was, my cherished friend, and Ron's.

Steve's presence was a comfort. His steadiness steadied me, though he was hurting, too. But there was little he could do when we went to the funeral home and I saw the casket holding Ron's body. A flag arranged across its curved surface, it was not to be opened. The words of the telegram flashed before me. "Remains are not viewable." As if I were a feather pulled by gravity, I sank to the floor.

In the mortuary chapel, I sat beside Steve in a special

curtained section with Ron's family and my mother and brother. Despite the somberness of the chapel, inexplicably I felt giddy. I wanted to say something outrageous, defy what was happening. But I suppressed those urges and glanced at Steve. Something in his eyes suggested he was battling the same impulses. Was this a symptom of denial? Or maybe an acknowledgement of Ron's own impish nature?

I was barely aware of the ride to the cemetery in the funeral limousine that smelled, nauseatingly, of lilies, but I was glad for the clear day. Jets flew in formation overhead and guns fired three volleys. I was numbed by the ceremony, by seeing the casket again, by the jets and the guns. A lone bugler played "Taps" as two Marines removed the flag, folded it, and handed it to me. A confusion of feelings hit me. That flag represented Ron's death, and I wondered if it was worth it. Yet, I knew I would keep it forever.

Finally home, my mother and I spotted several large boxes by the door. I open one to find the china Ron ordered while in Japan.

A letter from Ron came, too. His clear, bold handwriting told me, "Today is 'over-the-hump' day. My tour is exactly one-half over. Now everything is downhill."

The emotionally fraught days brought a sense of relief when Steve's orders sent him, not back to Vietnam, but to Monterey, California for his remaining months of service. We stayed close through phone calls and visits. He voiced concern for me and, looking back, I can see why. I'd lost my bearings, felt untethered. Lacking the ability to focus, I dropped my courses, determined to take them up again in the fall at the Boulder campus.

For the most part, my professors showed kindness and understanding. One took me under his wing and advised me on a

course plan. He asked me to be his undergraduate assistant in the fall, which encouraged me in a way nothing else had. Another asked me to marry him. Repelled and disoriented, I thought he was untethered.

One day when Bruce and I were out, we saw a funny little car. "What's that?" I asked.

"It's a dune buggy," Bruce said. "It has a Volkswagen engine and a fiberglass frame. I know a guy who makes them."

"I want one," I decided on the spot.

My dune buggy was a frosty purple with a yellow and white striped canvas top that folded down. I took it to a nearby area where people rode and jumped motorcycles. Speeding up and down the steep hills, I pressed to see how high off the ground I could get. Danger was nothing to me. What did it matter if I got hurt, or worse? Bruce told me, "I'm not riding with you if your main purpose is to catch air. That's crazy."

He was speaking of more than the dune buggy. He knew I was truly uncoupled. I respected his wishes, when he was with me. But when I was alone, I sailed through the air undaunted. It wasn't a jet, but I welcomed the sense of danger. With each jump, I tried for more air.

Against Bruce's advice, my neighbor Annie, a young teacher who'd become a good friend, and I decided to drive the dune buggy the thousand miles to California. At the time, I couldn't understand Bruce's concern. I'd driven across vast parts of the country alone during Ron's various phases of flight training. And because Annie I planned to visit friends in my old neighborhood and then go north to Monterey to see Steve, I thought our plan reasonable.

On the way, we drove through Phoenix to visit John's parents, with whom I'd been in touch. Bunny and Jim Meyer lived outside Phoenix in a modest home.

Annie and I stayed only a few hours, but they were tender, poignant hours. Bunny, Jim, and I shared stories about John and looked at photographs. A deep ache filled me, seeing these shattered parents, seeing myself reflected in them. But, unlike them, I ranged between shattered and defiant. I couldn't push away the reality of Ron's death, but neither could I let myself give in to what it meant. I didn't know how to make a place for the pain, how to let it in, how to accept it. It was too big, too horrible to fully acknowledge, and so I didn't. I knew, though, I was trying to fool myself, for when I saw someone in a crowd who even remotely resembled Ron, for an instant, I believed it was him, that it wasn't my husband in that closed casket. Then, crushed again, I'd come to my senses.

Annie and I drove across a desert that was searingly hot and empty. Sometimes it seemed as if we were the only humans for miles. Sagebrush, cacti, and small hills were our only companions, the sage infusing the air with its earthy-mint scent. The dryness and emptiness of that land was a metaphor I didn't want to recognize, yet I felt as if I were looking in a mirror. A vast blue sky contained only a few small drifting clouds. I wondered, was I drifting toward something, or was I just drifting?

We shared the driving, Annie and I, stopping at the occasional gas station to change drivers and get cold drinks. At one stop, we saw a sign telling us there would be no services for thirty miles. Annie, the more practical of us two, asked the attendant if he would look at the engine given it hadn't been running all that smoothly.

"Do you think we can make it to Palm Springs?" she asked.

“Probably, if you don’t push too hard,” he said. “Maybe stop every now and then and give it a rest.”

Knowing we were heading into a long stretch without services, Annie suggested we get a bucket of ice to put on the passenger side so it could cool the air coming through the vents. A kind of air-conditioning.”

“Great idea,” I agreed. “We can put some drinks in, too. What shall we get?”

We looked at each other, chuckled, and bought a couple of six-packs of beer. Then we were off again, floating down the highway on waves of heat our bucket of ice mitigated. Annie opened a can of Coors, handed it to me, and opened one for herself. We laughed and sang to the cacti, “We all live in a yellow submarine, yellow submarine . . .”

Before we were half-way through our beers, the buggy gasped to a stop, giving me just enough warning to pull to the side of the road. Since there was nothing to do but wait till someone came along, I raised my beer can to Annie, then to my mouth. The malty liquid slid down my throat, and I relaxed into our wait.

Waiting wasn’t a problem. Time stretched in all directions, as did the vast openness. Heat waves danced in the distance. But for Annie and the beer, I had nothing to respond to in that moment. I had nothing that mattered anyway, that could fill the untethered vastness, the emptiness inside me. Would I find my way out of my desert? I wondered if there were an oasis to be found. I wondered what an oasis would look like for me.

In the distance, I saw shapes moving toward us, and as they came closer, I realized it was a military convoy—eight huge trucks, with big brown canvases covering the back sections. My mind didn’t know whether to recoil from the military reminder or welcome the likelihood that soldiers would help us.

When they spotted us on the side of the road, tall, blond Annie and small, dark me leaning against the buggy, both of us in colorful sundresses, the whole convoy stopped. One of the soldiers jumped out and walked toward us.

“This is a heck of a place to break down,” he said, grinning and eyeing the beer cans in our hands. “Want me to take a look at the engine?”

“Yes, please,” I said. “Thank you!”

He walked back to his truck to tell the driver what was going on. The driver seemed to have radioed the other trucks, because several men climbed out of the vehicles and walked over to where we were standing.

While two soldiers conferred over the buggy’s engine, several others chatted with Annie and me. They couldn’t believe we’d driven the vehicle all the way from Denver, or that we’d wanted to. Just like my brother. In minutes the engine was running again, but they turned down our offer of beer. Not while on duty.

“You should be okay now,” one of them told us. “But just in case something happens, we’ll escort you to Palm Springs.”

The image of our entourage—the little purple buggy chugging along behind two huge dirt-brown Army trucks and in front of six others, still makes me smile. In Palm Springs, saying our appreciative goodbyes to our unlikely rescuers, I understood the world could still offer surprise and kindness—its own kind of oasis.

The trip proved a welcomed adventure, a timely distraction, given the various places we went, from San Diego to Hollywood then me to Monterey, and despite the numerous times the dune buggy broke down. Looking back, I realize it also marked the

beginning of the longer search for myself.



Carol with Dune Buggy

I decided to fly to Monterey to see Steve. Greeting me at the small airport, he seemed more relaxed than the last time I'd seen him. Over seafood lunches, he talked about how much he liked this part of California yet was thinking of what would be next. I wasn't surprised his mining engineering degree had nothing to do with it. "I'd like to keep flying," he told me. "Maybe cargo planes."

That evening, while he mixed gin and tonic, I turned the television to the news. War protesters filled the screen, some carrying signs— "Give Peace a Chance." Next President Nixon began speaking, and I moved to change the channel. But when I heard him say "Vietnam," I froze, remembering his campaign promise to end the war.

He said, as he'd said before, that we wanted to end the war honorably. But then something shifted. I listened as the president told the world that from now on, the U.S. would begin handing over military defense efforts to the Asian nations themselves. He pledged to complete withdrawal of the first 25,000 troops by the end of August.

It took only a moment to register, "But it's too late," I cried. "Why now? Why not earlier?"

Steve hurried across the room and put his arms around me. Gasping from what felt like a gut punch, I moaned, "Why not sooner? Why couldn't this have come sooner?" A seed I'd barely noticed took root. What did Ron die for? The question only magnified my loss.

I treasured my time with Steve, cherished our years of shared history and that we cared deeply for each other. We were united in our grief for Ron, and that was a powerful bond. Yet, when he embraced me, the unbidden thought returned: it was Ron holding me. And there was confusion in my mind that Ron wanted me to be, not just with someone like Steve, but with Steve himself.

Back in Colorado, I began searching for an apartment in Boulder, dumbfounded when one landlord said she refused to rent to widows. But eventually I found the perfect apartment, a one-bedroom full of light and within walking distance of campus. With each other for company, Kimmy and I settled into our new lives.

I threw myself into the coursework, relieved to be doing something challenging, focusing my energy. And I was beginning to realize a need to make up in some way for Ron's absence in the world. Finishing my degree would be a start.

One class, Oral Interpretation of Literature, a requirement for English lit majors, involved performing prose and poetry as spoken word, vocally expressing the meaning of a piece, as classmates critiqued performances. The professor handed out short selections for the first readings.

My turn came, and I read Robert Frost's "Nothing Gold Can Stay." After I read, a student asked, "How do you feel about this poem?"

Puzzled by her question, I told her that I liked it, I liked Robert Frost.

"I ask because the feeling of the piece didn't come through to me," she said. "Could you read something with more emotion next time? Maybe Amy Lowell's 'Patterns.'"

"That's a good suggestion," the professor concurred.

I didn't know the poem but agreed to give it a try. I was stunned when I found it, this poem about a young woman waiting for her lover, her fiancé, only to learn he's been killed in battle. Though taken aback, I felt I had to read it—if I could.

The next week, as I read, I tried to evoke the scene—a noble-woman walking on a patterned garden path, observing patterns in her richly-figured dress and the garden, thinking of her lover to whom she was to be wed in a month, and the letter she has hidden in her bosom. She longs for him to free her from the stays that hold her in—to make love to her. I focused only on the words, I couldn't let myself dwell on their meaning. Entering the final stanzas, I intoned:

*In Summer and in Winter I shall walk*

*Up and down*

*The patterned garden-paths*

*In my stiff, brocaded gown.*

. . . . .

*Gorgeously arrayed,*

*Boned and stayed.*

. . . . .

*For the man who should loose me is dead,*

. . . . .

*In a pattern called war.*

*Christ! What are patterns for?*

The professor asked me to read it again, with more feeling. I

looked at the poem, then at him. "I can't."

His puzzled look asked for an explanation. "My husband is dead," I whispered, "in this pattern called war."

In the stunned silence that followed, I realized I couldn't loose the stays on my emotions. If I did, they would consume me. Instead, I pulled them tighter. I wondered if I would ever be able to loose them.

On May 4, 1970, during a demonstration at Kent State University, National Guard fatally shot four students. One a young woman on her way to class; another, a young man shot in the back. The shock and horror of it jettisoned any denial of my growing aversion to the war. I joined with students across the nation boycotting classes. One professor dropped my semester grade to a B; I later learned her brother worked for the State Department. I joined every anti-war protest I could. To the bumper sticker, "America. Love It or Leave It," I said loving it is not enough. Loving it will not prevent unnecessary war, unnecessary death. And I asked, why can't we learn from what we've lost?

Later in the fall, Steve completed his commitment to the Army and took a job in Dallas. He was happy to be flying cargo planes, and he reconnected with a woman he'd dated before he went to Vietnam. Ron and I had met her before Steve shipped out. I liked her, and what I liked best was that Steve seemed happy.

With a full class load, I was home writing a paper for my Shakespeare class when the phone rang. It was Wayne, Steve's older brother. I heard him say, "I wanted to tell you myself, knowing how close you and Steve were."

*Were?* I thought. "What's happened?" A too-familiar chill seeped through my body as I tried to take in Wayne's stumbling

words.

“His plane went down outside of Dallas,” he said. “Mechanical failure. Steve died.”

He told me he would call when he knew more. “I’m so sorry, but I thought you would want to know right away.”

But I didn’t want to know. I didn’t want to know that Steve, my dear, caring, friend, was gone. Steve, who loved Ron, who loved me and whom I loved, was dead. I wondered, how many times can a heart break?

I mumbled condolences and placed the receiver back in its cradle. Reaching for Kimmy, who was rarely far from my side, I stroked her soft fur. Holding her close, I felt her warm little body breathing in and out, her gentle purr like a small engine. I closed my eyes and was in the Volkswagen again, driving through the cold Florida night and the darkness I could not name—and my father dies. Ron calls from Vietnam to tell me about John. Two Marines stand in my living room. Wayne calls . . . until I was the only one left from Thanksgiving dinner.

For years I avoided Thanksgiving. I made sukiyaki for family and friends, traveled to San Francisco where Susan and I ate Indian food in a lovely restaurant by the Bay. I went to the movies.

There were other men in my life, men I was attracted to and cared for, men who cared for me and I stayed with for years. But it seemed I could let myself care only so much. I didn’t make the commitment needed for a truly close and lasting connection, I didn’t allow myself to be vulnerable. And so, I kept leaving those relationships.

For the twenty years after my dad died—and then John, Ron, and

Steve within the next three years— through therapy and reflection, I worked to chip through the barriers I'd erected. And like water that slowly carves new canyons, time, with its gentle assurances began to help me open.

Then, Susan died. Unimaginable, unthinkable, yet there it was. Two decades after that Thanksgiving dinner, her death broke my heart completely. Her death cratered me, broke me wide open to the grief of all those losses. I was completely defenseless and floundering.

That was when I found myself on the rockface searching for hand holds. It may have been there that I first realized my love for her and the joy I felt when she was alive were worth the heartbreak when she was gone. From there I believe I began to open enough to chance grief again. Open enough to let David, that trusting and trustworthy Outward Bound instructor in, to eventually become my life partner.

In our early years together he and I went on week-long backpacking trips in southern Utah. We carried everything we needed on our backs and hiked deep into canyon country. When it rained, we found an overhang. On clear nights we slept under the stars. When we encountered a swift river, we found solid sticks to balance us as we crossed. On those outings, we took life as it came, and it was a lesson for me, one that took a near-lifetime to learn.



Carol and David-Ticaboo Canyon-2003

Fifty-four years after that Thanksgiving dinner, my first as the cook, I visit that small cement-block house near a Florida bay where Ron and I lived. It has changed slightly. It looks more weathered, a little worn, and the carport sags slightly. But the sky is as I remembered, the gray sky and the Spanish moss hanging from live oak branches.

Those live oaks are larger, fuller now. Rooted in salty soil where little else thrives, they do. They shed their leaves many times, only to replace them again and again. Their graceful branches bend toward the earth before turning skyward for the light.

I'm grateful for what they've taught me, the greatest lesson that Susan's death finally opened me to. Their ability to endure, through storms, through the years, always offering refuge to birds seeking it. The storms I've experienced, the many deaths of loved ones, have battered and tested me. But most importantly, what I finally learned was, like those strong, supple branches, rather than resist, to move with the force of the wind, to live more fully by opening myself to all of life's dimensions.

These many years on, my heart open and hopeful, I can see myself with Ron, walking across the expanse of lawn and sand we called our yard—and the house where once I made Thanksgiving dinner for four men I adored. I can, finally, welcome that memory.

How does loss shape our lives? Does it cause us to falter or to muster resolve to give the world at least some of what was lost to it? Does the absence of a dear one affect us in equal measure to their presence in our lives? Life after a death changes in countless ways, impossible to predict. Yet, for many of us, some things are inevitable. We flail. We search. We hope. And in our yearning, we turn toward the light.



Susan at Hastings School of the Law circa  
1979

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# New Review from MaxieJane Frazier: “Mapping Fault Lines in Kate Schifani’s *Cartography*”



Kate Schifani’s memoir, *Cartography*, maps faulty practices and question of fault over her year serving in Iraq as an advisor and logistician to the Iraqi military. In her dangerous deployed experience, she excels in her ill-defined, nearly impossible advisory role while serving during the context of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” repeal that personally affected her as a gay woman. The everyday events she details build to bigger questions about the U.S. role in the Middle East and our country’s culpability for its impact on Iraq.

Schifani’s gritty, no-bullshit narrative places her voice within the scope of widely varied war literature such as M.C. Armstrong’s *The Mysteries of Haditha*, Brian Turner’s *My Life as a Foreign Country*, Teresa Fazio’s *Fidelis*, and even Tim O’Brien’s classic novel *The Things They Carried*. A confident and unforgettable narrator, Schifani brings us down to the paperclips, dried-up Wite-Out, government pens, and the Saddam lighter in her desk drawer sketching the details of a convoluted conflict. *Cartography* leaves us grappling with the figurative (and sometimes literal) fragmented remains of the

people the American military should have been protecting: Iraqi citizens acting as interpreters for the U.S. military; innocent Iraqis caught in the midst of this conflict; American servicemembers' and their families' lives disrupted by seemingly unnecessary deployment; the LGBTQ+ members of the armed forces, and more.

*Cartography* is a series of connected, chronological essays that highlight the *Catch-22*-esque absurdity of Schifani's experiences in Iraq which waver between outlandish cultural differences with her Iraqi counterparts to painful dissonance with her homophobic American peers. Keeping her sexual identity hidden in an inevitably misogynistic, hyper-sexual deployed environment leads readers to question if there is anywhere that this young Air Force captain does *not* face threats. The Air Force sends "a B-52 aircraft maintenance officer serving here as a logistician embedded with two dozen Green Berets" or as she puts it, "the least qualified person for this job" as an advisor to Iraqi military. She only mentions her career experience and barely highlights the possibility that these men will not listen to a young woman. Reading how she earns respect is one of the most satisfying aspects of this memoir.

We bump along early in the account through humorous stories of a forklift that turns only one direction and outdated Iraqi gym weight loss equipment that jiggles the user on a 1950s belt. Then she shifts us into more serious and heart-stopping moments as the humor behind her experience dissipates. The absurdity never changes. The worst of Schifani's many meetings with the Iraqis she advises happen in the middle of the night, and we are like a film audience begging characters not to check out a noise in a horror movie. But she unfailingly performs her mission in the hours of darkness and pre-dawn hours, bumming rides when they lose transportation, and coming up with successes against all odds. She finds mattresses and air conditioners and all sorts of items the Iraqi military

needs, even as the American people she works with marvel at her ingenuity. The tension in *Cartography* builds with such a subtle trajectory that we find ourselves longing for her tour to be finished, for her to leave this unpredictable and unwelcome deployed mission, because the bigger shoe feels constantly ready to drop.

Military readers will recognize the tightwire act Schifani negotiates of gender discrimination from all fronts during a deployment where she's making an impact and doing her job surrounded by men and hiding the fact she is gay. Already, only a few years after her experience, we're coming to believe things are better for women and for gay servicemembers. They probably aren't.

In a theme common with so many other women writing about the military, Schifani explores the sense of indoctrination into an outdated boys' club mentality. Military units, especially deployed units, flatten out individuality and make juvenile, worn out jokes about "no homo" and "your mother" along with a table-top, full-size poster "of a woman entirely naked except for a pair of shoes and a bandolier that sits between her obviously augmented breasts" unquestioned, common practices. Schifani's masterful dialogue is one of the best places we witness this smart, capable woman navigating the discrimination bombarding her from all sides. One exchange between an Army lieutenant colonel, embarrassed and unbudging, ends with her quiet victory, only marred by the overheard "Motherfucking air force cunt waltzes in here with some haji motherfucker and tells me how to fucking count." The stream of obscenity trailing down the hall after her feels as if it could sum up most capable young women's military experience. But we can tell Schifani shrugs off this and most of the rest of the hostility she faces. She saves her emotions for when they matter most.

*Cartography* wins us over in the details as if Schifani has drawn out a treasure map with dashed lines of her experiences

drawing the relatively unscathed pathway through the landmines of her deployment. Still, we dread what we'll find when we reach "X" marks the spot. Yet, every time a sentence begins with "We shouldn't be allowed to," Schifani joins a chequered and popular lineage of military people doing what it takes to complete their mission while skirting around the more restrictive rules. O'Brien's young soldiers giggle over tossing a smoke grenade between them and Fazio's deployed boyfriend cuts deals to obtain air conditioners from the logisticians, to name just a few instances. We know there is a long history of military stories about people shouldn't have done something, but they do it anyway. With Schifani, we learn it's a way of life.

Schifani becomes competent at something other than her Air Force trained career path and, though she wouldn't say it outright, damn good at her job in a way that constantly surprises her immediate superiors but that seems second nature to her. She makes the phone calls, listens in meetings, and comes up with "the goods" when everyone seems to expect her to ignore the requests. In a quiet way, she proves her gender and sexuality have nothing to do with her outstanding performance.

If the book is a map of experiences, the sense of place and movement is hard to follow in a reader's head, mostly because her deployed location was surely classified or adjacent to a classified compound. We drive off places with Schifani, but we're not always sure what is part of her compound, what is out in the unprotected space beyond the compound walls, and what locations are important to pay attention to. When she takes us to a partially built building as the narrative is coming to a close, we're not sure if it's in her compound. Knowing the layout and proximity of this scene is essential to the plot. At this building, her story abruptly ends. While Schifani could be enacting the sudden way the U.S. ended the mission at her location, readers might wonder what she means when she says in those final lines "I think I did this." How

metaphorical is her intent?

Schifani's memoir is a vivid book that places readers in a combat zone for a glimpse of the mind-numbing dullness punctuated with moments of paralyzing fear, the circular nature of huge bureaucracy, and the thrill of life that wavers on and off a razor-sharp edge of uncertainty. In a palimpsest of individual experience, she maps fault lines in the U.S. military Middle East involvement through the ingrained cultural narratives of misogyny from the American military and from the Iraqi people.

*Cartography* is a must-read to understand more about deployed military experiences. The unspoken questions are just as important as her richly rendered narrative—who lets this situation happen? Who allows both the Iraqi and American soldiers act toward this woman? Who thinks any of this is normal? And, finally, who is at fault?

Schifani offers a quiet and clear criticism of our role and influence in Iraq, questioning her own culpability for what happens in the country. As she might say herself, after her deployed experience there, *Insha'allah*.

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## **New Fiction from John P. Palmer: "Lasting Impacts"**

Johnny felt the oak floor tilt sharply below him. He had no idea what was happening or why, and he was frightened.

The tilt was steep, so steep that he felt himself sliding, then falling. He wanted to cry, but he was so terrified that he couldn't make a sound. Suddenly he fell right off the floor

and landed on the next oak floor right below the one he was falling from.

As he was landing on it, that floor tilted in the opposite direction, and he began sliding again, uncontrollably in that direction.

He fell again, to another floor, and that floor tilted back. His fear intensified. Finally he was able to cry out, but the see-saw tilting and sliding wouldn't stop! Worse, the room began to spin, and Johnny was totally disoriented. The falling and sliding and spinning sensations were new to him; he wasn't hurt, but he was more terrified than he had ever been. He couldn't stop crying.



As he slid downward from level to level across the tilting, sloping floors, Johnny looked up and saw his father laughing, and that frightened him even more. This man was his father; he wasn't supposed to be a man who made floors tilt and who made Johnny fall from one tilted floor to another. But there he was: Johnny was falling from sloped floor to sloped floor, and his dad was laughing while Johnny was crying.

\*

The memory of this trauma haunted Johnny for years. When he was a toddler, he woke up after having nightmares that his crib was tilting and he was sliding back and forth on it.

When he was six years old, Johnny woke up at 4AM from a completely different nightmare. In this one, his dad was grinning at him. That was all – it was just a grin, but in his dream Johnny saw it as menacing, and he couldn't get back to sleep. It rekindled the old nightmares from his infancy.

When his mother woke up, she saw his bedroom light on. "Johnny," she asked, "Why do you have your bedroom light on,

and what are you doing up so early? What happened?"

Johnny knew his mom loved his dad, and so he didn't feel free to say anything. He knew she would pooh-pooh the nightmare. After some hesitation, he mumbled, "I had a nightmare."

"What happened?" she asked again.

Johnny wouldn't tell her.

\*

Johnny's dad died at the age of 43; John was only 15.

John missed his dad, but not a whole lot. They had never been close. His dad was a respected man in the community, and he did many of the usual fatherly things with John, but there was always a barrier between them. John had always been a little afraid of him. John didn't think about the nightmares of his infancy or childhood very often, if at all, but they had affected him.

One day shortly after John turned thirty, he spent an entire day closeted in his office at work. He didn't answer knocks on the door, he wouldn't answer the telephone, and he didn't go to lunch with his co-workers. He just sat at his desk all day, talking with his dad, trying to imagine a day-long visit and conversation. It wasn't until then that he realized his dad had grown up the middle boy in his own family, not particularly well-loved and maybe even half-rejected by the rest of his family. Only then did he begin to understand that his dad was shy about showing emotions and had never learned how to give or show love to his son. And John realized, finally, that his dad had loved him deeply but didn't know how to do it. He felt at peace with his dad.

At least he thought he did.

Many years later, his older sister and he were talking among some friends when she mentioned that alcohol had been banned

from their house as they were growing up. She and John laughed about the religious conservatives in their neighborhood, but his sister added, "No, there was another reason. Dad had some men over one night and they all got drunk. Mother threatened to leave him and said he was never allowed to have alcohol in the house again."

That night John understood. And felt sad. And missed his dad.. again.

He understood that during that drunken party, his dad had been tossing him in the air and laughing with his drunken friends. John's nightmare of sliding on tilting, sloping floors wasn't a nightmare at all; it had been real. Up and down, up and down, and around and around. The world really had been spinning and falling away from him.

John tried to talk to his dad again that night. He tried to forgive his dad, "I know it wasn't malicious, Dad. I know."

And he wept silently.

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## **New Fiction from Colin Raunig: "What Happened in Vegas"**

Since getting back from deployment, Frank had gone soft. He was still a massive block of muscle, but the edges had rounded. Too much time off. Too much food and booze. He saw it in his reflection of the Vegas penthouse suite window that overlaid the view of the pre-dawn casino lights that blighted out the stars and blazed like a midnight sunrise. Frank had

woken up too early and couldn't go back to sleep—he couldn't sleep well after he drank.

On deployment in Iraq, Frank's body had been perfect. The life was perfect for it. Go on patrol, work out, eat, sleep, do it again. Just what the body needed. Out on patrol, while Frank sat in the Humvee or ran through a door or while he stood there and the guys loaded him up with extra ammo belts and gear, a tucked away part of both Frank's body and mind would be waiting for the point when they, together as a pair, would return to the FOB and he would go to the gym. When he would swap cammies for his issued olive green Marine Corps PT gear and a gallon jug of water and leave the plywood box of his bunk for the one with the stacks of weights.

Frank would slide the weights onto the bar and into each other with a clang, position himself horizontally on the bench and beneath the bar as he readied himself for the energy transfer of metal to muscles. The results spoke for themselves: in the mirror and in the eyes of his fellow Marines, who *oorah'd* his massive frame starting day one of boot camp. The bodies who had observed him, and he them.

So many of those bodies, on deployment, had been hurt, disfigured, lost. So many minds of those bodies, from deployment, had been hurt, disfigured, lost.

Not Frank, though. No. He was all right, just hung over and tired and not out of shape, but slipping.

If Frank hit the hotel gym now, he could get in a full workout before Cameron woke up. Cameron, whose streak at the craps table the night before had gotten them two nights comped, was sprawled out on the couch—pants on, but no shirt—his half-belly half-hanging over his belt line, the tattoos on his torso like scars across his body.

Frank put on his PT gear, grabbed his room key, and slipped out the door.

\*

Frank and Cameron walked side-by-side, just narrow enough to manage the busy Vegas sidewalks. The sun baked them. Frank's muscles were alive with a buzzing soreness, but he hadn't done quite enough in the gym to burn off the effects of the night before. As he walked, he stared at his flip-flopped feet through his wraparound sunglasses. He thought of how his toes had their own little toe lives, every one of them.

Frank had met Cameron and his raspy, high-pitched Texas drawl at boot camp. They had been together ever since—after boot camp, infantry training, all the liberties out town, deployment, and, now, leave, in Vegas. From cradle to grave, literal or figurative—one way or another, everyone, eventually, left the Marines.

It was Saturday and was their second to last day of a long weekend in Vegas. Tomorrow, he and Cameron would drive back to Camp Pendleton, just north of San Diego. After getting back from Iraq, Frank made a quick stop to see his parents and some high school friends in Oklahoma, then went right back to the unit. Back to his routine. But then Cameron cashed in on the promise Frank had made on deployment. Frank wasn't much of a Vegas guy, but he was Cameron's friend, and he kept his promises.

Frank made his Vegas promise the night after a squad from a nearby platoon had been out in a Humvee and hit an IED. In an instant, four died. They were alive and then they weren't. This was halfway into Frank and Cameron's 12-month deployment. The next evening on base, as the sun went down and they waited for their mission, Frank and Cameron smoked cigarettes and drank Rip It, which would get them through the night and were the sole vices that Frank allowed his body—they helped keep him alive.

That night, Cameron, his face and helmet a shadowy blur in the

dwindling light, grabbed Frank by his flak jacket.

“I swear to fucking God, when we get back, we’re going to Vegas,” Cameron, desperation in his voice, had told Frank. “You’re coming with me. And don’t you die before we make it back. Or I’ll kill ya.”

“Okay,” Frank said.

Doing so, Frank knew, meant that he couldn’t die, so, the next morning, when they got back from patrol, Frank hit the gym with a vengeance, pushing weights he had never pushed before, trying to take not just the energy from the metal, but their very essence, and make it his. An IED could tear through flesh and bone, but not iron.

After a while of making their way down the Vegas strip, Cameron stopped walking and looked out over a small blue man-made lake. On other side of the lake was the Bellagio hotel, a tower of smooth concrete and tinted windows. It was built as if specifically to view from the spot where Frank was standing.

It stood in stark contrast to the charred remains of the buildings in Iraq, the ones militants had burned or bombed or the ones the United States had burned or bombed. When Frank had driven by them in the back of the Humvee, they all looked the same: charred and black. Just as the bodies had been equally burned, so much that it was hard to believe they had once been alive and human. They might have been mothers, fathers, daughter, sons; they might have been Suni or Shiite or American. But to Frank they just were as they looked: charred black over bone.

“What the fuck?” Cameron said.

“What?” Frank replied.

“Where are the fountains?” Cameron asked. “There are supposed

to be fountains.”

“Where?” Frank asked.

“Where? Right fucking there. In the lake.”

“All the time?” Frank asked.

“I don’t know,” Cameron said, upset. “I just know they are supposed to be here. And I don’t fucking see any.”

Frank grunted in response to Cameron.

“Hey,” Cameron said.

Frank looked down at Cameron. Most everyone was shorter than Frank, Cameron especially. “What?” Frank replied.

“The *fountains*,” Cameron said, incredulous.

“Must have just missed them,” Frank said.

Cameron reached over the side of the wall and tried to touch the water of the lake. “The fountains restores youth to those who bathe or drink from it,” Cameron said.

“We’re only twenty-two,” Frank said.

Cameron, not able to reach the water, stood back up. “Whatever,” Cameron said. “People pee in there, you know.”

Frank wondered if Cameron was talking about himself. Cameron had built up Vegas over deployment for so long that there was no telling how far he would go to achieve his vision of what it was to be here. There was Cameron’s luck at craps the night before. And the woman whose hotel room he stayed at the night before that. Who knew what tonight would bring.

“Oh, look at the beautiful toes!”

Frank was surprised by a man who was bent over and looking at his feet. All Frank could see of the man was his headful off

frizzy hair, like a brown brillo pad.

“They’re wonderful! They are such little treats!”

Frank was confused. Cameron jumped back.

As the man stood up, two people in black came walking towards Frank, one short, one tall. The short one Frank could take. The tall one, too.

As Frank sized up the situation, and looked at the man again, who was standing now, he registered the hair, the bronze skin, the light in his eyes, a gold silk shirt over white pants, the joyfully high register of his voice, when Frank realized who it was: it was Richard Simmons.

“Is everything ok?” the shorter man whispered into Richard Simmons’ ear, eyeing Frank at the same time.

Richard Simmons looked at Frank while he responded to his body guards. “Oh, I was just saying hi to these boys,” Richard said.

\*

The Bellagio Baccarat Bar and Lounge was a cool reprieve from the hot strip, though just as bright. The pillars were made of white and gold marble, the chairs red velvet, and there was a glass statue that looked like a blue mix of a bouquet of flowers and jellyfish and gold flames made of glass that shot towards the sky. Richard greeted the hostess by name and kissed her once on each cheek. He was directed towards a set of closed oak sliding doors, which, when opened, revealed a large, circular marble table in the middle of a room. A large blue and purple chandelier hung over it.

Frank, who felt severely underdressed, was the first to sit at the table, which had about twenty chairs surrounding it. He sat in one. Cameron sat on his left, Richard on his right. A woman in a dark blue suit and wearing rectangular glasses sat

to Richard's left. The bodyguards were nowhere to be seen.

Frank couldn't really believe he and Cameron were here. With Richard Simmons.

A waitress appeared at the table, dressed in black and her thin, blonde ponytail pulled back.

"So, what'll it be?" Richard asked the table. "It's on me! It's the least I can do, for what you did."

Neither Frank nor Cameron had told Richard they were in the military, but they looked like they were, and they were.

It had been four years since Frank enlisted, right after high school in central Oklahoma. In high school, Frank had developed a smaller version of his current ox-like breadth as a freshman in high school, and had quickly been recruited by nearly every coach. He had accepted his fate with casual grace, excelling at varsity football, wrestling, and baseball, pleasing his coaches and classmates and teachers, if not himself. The glory of the field was nice, but he wanted something more. When colleges tried to recruit him, he balked at their offers. He wasn't ungrateful, just uninterested.

Frank didn't know what he was interested in—until one fateful school lunch in fall of his senior year. After Frank got his food and as he walked to find his table with his lunch tray, his eyes locked with the Marine Corps recruiter that stood by a table with an olive green drop cloth over it. The recruiter wore his dress uniform was built like a bulldog. His eyes widened at the spectacle of Frank. Frank walked over. As Frank stood there and pawed his two meatball subs off of his lunch tray, the recruiter spoke to Frank, using words like:

*Honor*

*Loyalty*

And the phrase the Marine Corps was known for:

*Semper Fidelis*—always faithful.

These words stuck with Frank. They were the words Frank would use to tell his parents when he told them his plans. Once Frank joined, they were all the words he needed to not quit and stay the course and get ready for war and, by doing so, staying faithful with his fitness. As a Marine, Frank got bigger, faster, fitter. The Marines always use a guy like Frank. And smaller guys like Cameron could use a friend like him, too.

And it had been nearly four years since Frank had enlisted for a four-year contract. In a few months now he would have to decide whether to stay or go. Same with Cameron. Frank didn't know what he would do. He wasn't sure what Cameron would do, either. Cameron was the type to stay in the Marines forever. Or maybe not. Frank had a hard enough time weighing the intentions of himself, let alone others. If he and Cameron went their separate ways, then so be it. Everything eventually ended, one way or another.

But Frank did know what he wanted to drink. "Jack and Coke for me," Frank said to the waitress.

"Make it two," said Cameron.

"Make it four," said Richard.

The waitress disappeared and left the four of them at the table. They all sat there in silence.

"Well, thank you, Mr. Simmons, for having us," Cameron said. Frank was surprised with Cameron's politeness.

"Mr. Simmons!" Richard said, delighted, "Mr. Simmons is my dad's name, and *he* didn't like being called *Mr.* either. I had to call him Sir."

"Really?" asked Cameron.

"Not Dad. *Sir*. The one thing I have in common with the military. Well, one of the things."

"Oh yeah?" said Cameron.

"You both know, like I do, the importance of being fit. I'm fit," he repeated, bringing both his arms so that his biceps were parallel to the floor.

Richard did look fit. His arms were tanned and toned, with a small amount of loose flesh that could be excused given his age, and the fact that he also seemed to be on vacation. The Jack and Cokes couldn't have helped, but then Frank was having them, too. This was Vegas, after all.

Richard gestured with his hands and scanned the room while he talked. "60 years old and I don't feel a day over 30. I have my gym still. In LA. I can't move like I used to, but I can keep up with most people. And it's fun! I put on some music and we all have a ball. But that's the first thing I noticed about you, how fit you are. But made in the real world, not just the gym."

Frank was suddenly made aware of how much time he had spent in the gym.

Cameron motioned to Frank with his thumb. "Frank's the real fitness freak."

Richard looked at Frank. "The strong, silent type, I can tell," said Richard. "Frank, what's your routine?"

Richard turned towards Frank and looked up to meet his gaze. Frank and Richard were sitting so close to each other that Frank thought he could see himself in the pupils of Richard's eyes, in the black mirrors of his pupils. Frank grew shy under the intensity of Richard's gaze and looked away.

The waitress returned.

"Oh, thank you!" Richard said to the waitress, who put the tray of drinks on top of marble table closest to Richard's assistant, who began passing them around. The drink Frank had thought was for Richard's assistant was also for Richard.

After they all got their drinks, Richard lifted his two glasses in the air. "To the troops!" Richard said. Frank and Cameron lifted their glasses in the air and after they all clanked them together, they drank.

"Bench," said Frank, in response to Richard's previous question. "Deadlifts, clean, pullups, dips, all that."

Richard was drinking when Frank responded and was initially confused by, then registered, the response, both with deliberate movement of his eyebrows.

Now that he had answered Richard's question, Frank took a sip of his Jack and Coke. It went down smooth. He had drank way too many of these over the past couple of weeks.

"Wow, and all the military training you do, too," Richard said.

Frank nodded. "70 pound rucks, not to mention the gear. Jumping out of trucks, hiking, running, sprinting up stairs, night missions. Really takes its toll on the body. All the stuff in the gym helps with that. But I'm kind of taking a break now. We just got back from deployment two weeks ago."

"Two weeks," Richard said. "So you really just got home, didn't you?"

Richard made eye contact with Frank again, and, as Frank met it, he was suddenly struck with a familiar feeling.

Frank had never particularly followed the career of Richard Simmons, but Richard had been popular enough at the prime TV watching age of Frank's youth that it would have been almost impossible to avoid his presence. Frank remembered the clips

of people who were desperate in their situation, those who felt hopeless to make any meaningful change in their lives. Those were exactly the kind of people who Richard had wanted to help, who Richard sought out and went into their homes and sat right next to them and looked right into their eyes with genuine concern—the same genuine concern that he looked into Frank’s—and took their hands into his as he told them everything was going to be *all right*. And afterwards, for many people, it was. Their lives became better. Simply because they had met Richard Simmons.

Frank broke Richard’s gaze, grabbed his drink with his right hand, and took a long sip.

The waitress soon walked into the room again, holding another tray full of Jack and Cokes. Frank didn’t remember anyone ordering another round. Richard flagged her down even though she was already heading to the table. Once the drinks were again passed around, Richard gave the waitress his phone and asked her to take a picture of them.

After she took the picture, and after they finished their second round of drinks, but before they all departed, Richard asked for Frank’s and Cameron’s number, and he texted the picture to them.

When Frank received the text and looked at the picture, he looked at Richard, whose mouth and eyes were open and joyous as he stared into the camera and now met Frank’s gaze. Richard looked happy.

Cameron, who looked as he always did for the pictures they took on deployment, had a blank face, one devoid of emotions, except for the emotion he used to look hard. It was the face that Frank would put on when they were geared up and ready to go out on patrol or when he was at the gym and about to put up serious weights.

But that’s not the face that Frank had in the picture. He had

the tinge of a smile and his face was relaxed. Frank didn't look as in shape as he would have liked, but, like Richard Simmons, he looked happy, too.

\*

"Do you think he's gay?" Cameron asked.

Frank and Cameron sat on black leather seats in the back of stretch yellow Humvee that had been promised to Cameron over the phone.

After drinks with Richard Simmons, Frank and Cameron went back to their hotel, but not before Richard asked them to meet up later that night. While Cameron began to shake his head, Frank said they would think about it, and they departed. When they got back to their hotel, Frank watched Cameron lose money at blackjack, then slots, then they went together to the hotel buffet and ate plates of meat and potatoes. When they were done, they went back to the room to freshen up, then Cameron called the number for Larry Flynt's Hustler Strip Club, which sent the stretch yellow Humvee they were now sitting in.

"Who cares?" Frank replied to Cameron's question. "Why does it matter?"

Cameron fiddled with the power windows of the limo.

"It doesn't," Cameron said. "I'm just asking, damn."

"Well, if it doesn't matter, then it doesn't matter."

"He did ask us to go dancing with him tonight."

"He was just being nice," Frank said.

"Whatever," Cameron grunted.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Frank asked.

"Nothing," Cameron said. He stared out the window.

Frank hadn't been to very many strip clubs. He didn't like to party like Cameron and the guys. They let Frank off easy because he looked like he could beat them up, which he probably could, even though he had never tried.

Most male Marines looked like Cameron, only a little taller, and lived a similar lifestyle. Pudge on top of muscle. They balanced a steady supply of cigarettes, alcohol, dip, energy drinks, burgers and fries, with pull-ups, running, cross fit, the weight room, and protein shakes. They looked like it, with thick necks and torsos that were tough, meaty, and tattooed.

Not Frank. There was no balance, only exercise. Not a drop of ink to found on him or alcohol in him. The other Marines would make fun of him for it if they weren't so impressed or scared or jealous. The saying was "every Marine a rifleman," the rifle their weapon of choice. Frank was a rifleman, too, but his body was the weapon. And the fortress. An impenetrable shell. But that wasn't why Frank worked out. He did it to feel whole. It didn't quite work, though, so maybe there was something to way Cameron did things. He'd give it a try, at least.

The stretch limo dropped Cameron and Frank off under a giant open rooftop that was held up by green fluorescent pillars. They were ushered through the front door and entered a long, black hallway that lead to a black door. On Cameron's suggestion, they got the VIP pass, which gave them two free drinks and a lap dance, and they went through the door and into the club.

Frank entered the club behind Cameron. As soon as he did, he was overwhelmed by it all: the ivory white bar the sea of white leather chairs to his left, the poles everywhere, the pulsing hip hop.

A hand touched Frank's elbow. He turned and was met with the steady gaze of a blonde woman. Her skin and hair glistened

under the light. She gestured to his right ear, which he bent down towards her.

“Vanessa,” she said.

“Frank,” Frank replied.

“Do you want a dance?”

“Okay.”

She took him by the hand and began leading them up the stairs to the second floor. Frank looked for Cameron, who stood by the bar sipping his drink and watched as three of Vanessa’s coworkers gathered around him and contended for his attention.

When Frank got upstairs he was led to a booth, where Vanessa began to give him his dance. She stood in front of him and danced and then began to straddle him. He was allowed to touch her torso as she danced for him, which he did, with both hands. While she danced, he couldn’t help but notice her perfect hair and makeup, her slim and toned muscles and abs. And that look. The perfect combination of seduction and admiration, as if he was perfect.

Frank wondered what she had done to get everything so perfect as she did. And he wondered what she would do when it was no longer perfect anymore, when her body or mind wasn’t able to do this anymore, from age or exhaustion. When Vanessa got to that point, would she think that she best used her time now, or that it used her? Will she consider her life over, or that it had just begun?

Toward the end of the latest song, Vanessa leaned over so that her hair draped over him. She again spoke into his right ear.

“You’re body’s so hot,” she said.

Frank was excited despite himself—he liked women, but this was nothing but a transaction, and he knew it.

Out of the corner of Frank's eye, he saw Cameron leading a petite brunette by the hand past Frank and Vanessa and into a back room.

Vanessa stopped dancing. She stood up, flipped her hair, and asked if Frank wanted to continue. Frank said yes. Vanessa said they should go into the back room. When she answered how much it was, Frank said that they should just stay where they were. She walked away and came back with a credit card reader. It was still too much money, but Frank swiped his card, and she started her routine all over again.

At the end of her next dance, Vanessa again asked Frank if he wanted to go into the back room. Frank said no. She asked if he wanted another dance. Frank said no. She said thanks, smiled, and walked downstairs.

Cameron was still in the back room, so Frank went downstairs and to the bar. Frank didn't want to leave Cameron, but didn't want to spend any more money on dances. He went to the bathroom and checked his phone. He had two missed phone calls from Richard Simmons. Frank looked at the time. It was nearly midnight. Frank shot a text to Cameron to ask him where he was. Cameron didn't respond. Frank then thought of calling Richard back, but it was late, and his phone was almost dead.

When Frank got out of the bathroom, he saw a phone charging station next to the bathroom and attached to the wall. He swiped his card in the charging station and hooked up his phone. As he stood there, Vanessa and a co-worker walked by him and down a hallway. Neither of them seemed to notice Frank. In fact, no one did. Frank was in a bubble he could stand in, safe from the obligation of interaction. He would stay here.

From the hallway that Vanessa and her co-worker had walked down, a red head walked towards him. She glanced nervously from one side of the hallway to another. Her hair and makeup

was overdone and she walked in heels and a black coat that came down to her knees. She held a sparkling black bag in the crook of her right arm and continued to shift her focus from one point to another as if she was scanning for something she had lost. Then her focus settled on Frank.

Frank looked away, but it was too late. She was headed right for him.

“Hey,” she said. She stood right next to Frank.

“Hey,” he replied.

“Sandra,” she said.

“Frank,” Frank replied.

She held out her phone, whose screen was black. “My phone is dead,” she said. “Would you be able to call me an Uber? I can pay you.” Before Frank had a chance to respond, she opened her bag, stuck her hand inside and pulled out a stack of one-dollar bills that were carefully folded in half. She held them out to Frank. “That should cover it,” she said.

Frank took the money, put it into his pocket, and touched the screen of his phone to bring up the Uber app.

“Where are you going?” he asked, and when she told him, he told her how long until the driver would arrive. She thanked him and then they both stood there, both of their bodies facing each other, but neither making eye contact.

Sandra began to shake her head as she looked at the ground. “I just failed my audition,” she said. She glanced at Frank then back at the ground as she used her right hand to put her hair behind her ears. “They want me to lose twenty pounds and to get work done. I mean, I could lose some of the weight, but I won’t get surgery. I didn’t have to do any of this shit in Portland.”

"I'm sorry," Frank said.

They both looked at each other now.

"It's different here, in Vegas," she said. "The competition. The standards. Everyone wants you to be something you're not."

"I think you're beautiful," Frank said to her. He meant it.

"Thanks," Sandra said. She said it like she had heard it a thousand times before.

Frank didn't know what to say anymore. "Don't let them change you," he said. He had heard someone say that once.

Sandra touched his arm. "Thank you," she said. She smiled and looked at him sincerely. "What are you in Vegas for?"

"Just got back from Iraq," Frank said. "Here for some R & R with my buddy."

Sandra instantly threw her arms around him. Frank, surprised, kept his arms by his side. Sandra let go and stepped back and looked sheepish, as if she had violated his personal boundaries. "Welcome back," she said.

"Thanks," Frank said.

Frank's phone buzzed in his hand and when he looked at it, he saw that Sandra's ride was here. She hugged him again and thanked him, and this time he hugged her back.

"Thank you for helping me," she said into his ear, as she still embraced him. He inhaled the smell of her hair and perfume. "You're so sweet."

Frank was moved by her comment, and found Sandra attractive. This, whatever it was—he didn't want it to end.

"Can I come with you?" Frank whispered.

Sandra looked neither surprised or offended. She shook her head. "Not tonight," she said.

"Okay," Frank said.

Sandra hugged Frank quickly again and left. Cameron still hadn't come downstairs yet. It was just past midnight. Frank remembered the two missed phone calls from Richard Simmons. He figured it was too late now to call back.

Frank stood at the bottom of the stairs for another twenty minutes or so as he waited for Cameron to come down, and when he didn't, he ordered an Uber for himself back to the hotel.

After the Uber, arrived, a black Honda Accord, Frank sat in the back. He pulled up the picture that Richard had texted him. Frank looked at Richard's face again, the one where he had thought Richard looked so happy.

But when Frank looked at the picture now, he looked into Richard's eyes as they looked back at him and saw the sadness that no amount of acting happy could hide.

As the Uber driver drove and talked to Frank about NBA basketball, Frank tried calling Richard Simmons. The phone rang and rang and then went to voicemail.

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Frank woke up early the next morning, hung over. He walked to the windows and looked out as the rays of the sun took over duties from the lights of the strip. Cameron was passed out on the sofa, shirt on, but no pants. Frank hadn't heard him come back last night.

Frank put on some clothes, grabbed his room key and phone, and slipped out the door. He was on the Vegas strip in minutes.

At this hour, the streets were deserted, except for the occasional pairs of older couples or friends who walked with purpose. Frank took his time— check out time wasn't for hours.

His muscles were calling for the workout he was sure to miss that day, but he tried to ignore their signals and the ones that called for food and water. He kept walking. He had spent too much time in his life sealed off, untouched by the secrets the wide world had to offer.

Frank took in the sights. The tall hotels. The fake pyramid and fake Eiffel tower. The people. He tried to think of the contrast between this and the streets of Iraq, but nothing came to him. When he thought of Iraq, he thought of working out, or of waiting to work out. Sometimes of bodies and the minds of bodies. Of the charred and black. But when his mind went to that, he thought of working out again.

Frank's phone buzzed. He took it out of his pocket and saw that it was Richard Simmons. He answered.

"Hello, Frank," Richard said to him. He sounded disappointed. Frank and Cameron had blown off Richard's invitation last night. Frank didn't want Richard to be upset.

"Hi," Frank said.

"I know it's early, but I woke up early. I had trouble sleeping."

"I'm up early, too," Frank said. "I'm sorry about last night. We did appreciate your invitation."

"What are you up to?" Richard asked.

"I'm out walking the strip."

"Oh, you are?" Richard asked. He sounded less disappointed now. "Where?"

Frank looked around him as he held the phone to his ear. "I don't know. By some hotels."

"Are you hungry?"

"I could eat."

"Come to the Bellagio. They'll send you to my room. How does that sound?"

"Okay," Frank said.

When Frank got to the lobby of the Bellagio, an open expanse of marble ceilings and floors, and rainbow colored decoration, he looked for a hotel clerk to speak to. Frank realized he didn't know where Richard's room was. Someone tapped him on the shoulder, and he turned to see a man in a burgundy coat and white gloves.

"Are you here for Richard Simmons?" the man asked.

"Yes," Frank said.

"Right this way," the man said. He stepped backwards and to the side and extended his right arm in the direction of where he wanted Frank to walk.

When Frank got to Richard's room, the door was slightly ajar. Frank walked in. Richard sat alone with his back to the window, facing the door, and at the head of a glass dining room table in a yellow chair. When Richard saw Frank, he gave a tired smile. He wore a red sequin tank top and white pants.



"Frank. Come in."

The place setting for Frank was at the head of the table opposite Richard. In the middle of the table, there was enough food for a platoon: French Toast, muffins, eggs, bacon, potatoes, prime New York steak, smoked salmon on bagels, carafes of coffee and orange juice. Richard hadn't touched the food yet. Frank took his seat.

"I got a little of everything," Richard said.

"I can see that," Frank replied.

"Shall we?" Richard asked, and gestured towards the food. A genuine glow lifted his face and body.

Frank dug in. He put enough on his plate for at least two. Richard then got some food for himself, a small portion of eggs and potatoes and bacon. While Frank ate, he poured rounds of coffee and juice and water for himself.

Frank was done almost as soon as he began. Frank then looked at Richard, who ate his food gently and took his time. This was in sharp contrast to Frank, who, now aware of that fact, was embarrassed, but tried not to show it. Richard didn't seem to notice, and was focused on the simple act of eating. Frank got some more food and ate it slowly enough that he wouldn't finish before Richard did.

"How was it?" Richard asked. Frank was in the last chews of his second round of food.

Frank wiped his face with his napkin. "Really good," Frank said. "Thank you."

"Of course," Richard said. He cupped his coffee cup with two hands, brought it to his face for a sip, then put it down. "Did you have a nice night?"

"We went to a strip club, actually," Frank said, who wanted the words back as soon as he said them.

Richard must have sensed Frank's embarrassment and waved away his concern. "It's Vegas. I'd be worried if you *didn't* go to a strip club."

"I was worried to tell you, actually," Frank said.

"There's nothing you've seen that I haven't. And I've seen *everything*. Did you have a good time?"

Frank thought about it.

"I don't know," Frank said. "Maybe not."

Richard gave a slight nod and a little shrug of his shoulders. He understood.

"What about you?" Frank asked.

Richard rolled his eyes and smiled as if he had already explained it to Frank. "Oh, I found the party, but the party didn't find me, if that makes sense."

It didn't, really, to Frank, but he nodded anyways. Frank was deeply aware of the bounty of food he currently held in his stomach. He wasn't going to throw up, but he was worried he might burst.

"Do you ever get tired of it all?" Frank asked Richard.

Richard put down his coffee cup. He was curious about Frank's question. He put both of his elbows on the table in front of him and gestured with his hands to the majesty of the room around him. "Of this?" Richard asked. He meant it sincerely.

Frank felt bad, that he had overstepped. "No, sorry," Frank said.

"Oh, I can get tired of this," Richard said. "It's marvelous at first—and it is marvelous—but after a while it just becomes normal. So then you look for something new to give you the feeling that the first marvelous thing did. After a while, when you get tired of all that, you just want what was normal to begin with."

"And are you tired of it now?" Frank asked.

Slowly, Richard swiveled around in his chair and looked out the penthouse window. Down below was the small, blue man-made lake. "Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Sometimes yes, but then I

take a break, and then I'm good again. But the breaks have gotten longer over the years."

"I think I'm getting to that point," Frank said. "Of being done."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-two."

"Ha!" Richard's laugh rang out like a shot. He continued to laugh as he swung around in his chair. When he faced Frank, he covered his mouth with one hand and waved towards Frank with the other, as if trying to apologize for his behavior. Frank couldn't help but feel a little embarrassed. Richard's laugh trickled down into a sniffle.

"I'm sorry," Richard said. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Frank said.

"I wasn't laughing at you," Richard said. "I just --"

"It's okay."

Richard stood up, walked over to Frank, and sat in the chair that was to Frank's immediate left. He looked in Frank's eyes, with the same gaze that had cast Frank into a spell the day before.

"You've been through a lot, haven't you?" Richard asked.

Frank looked at Richard and nodded. "And so have you," Frank said.

Richard was surprised by Frank's comment. He looked away from Frank and furrowed his eyebrows, not in disapproval of Frank, but in reaction something that only he could see. Richard stood up, walked over to the window, and looked out it. He stood there for a while.

Frank thought of when he had typed "Richard Simmons" into YouTube last night, when Cameron was in the shower, getting ready for the strip club. The first YouTube result was an hour long video of Richard dancing with a roomful of people, titled, "Sweatin' to the Oldies." Frank clicked on it and it was what he had expected: Richard and a roomful of his followers, all in leotards, dancing to the oldies. Frank exited the video and clicked on the second result, which was one of Richard's David Letterman's appearances.

In the video, Richard wore a turkey costume made of red and yellow feathers. The audience howled their approval of his costume, and Richard basked in their approval. Letterman smirked. Richard seemed to purposely annoy Letterman and Letterman responded by making fun of Richard—this was their routine. Richard then wanted Letterman to give him a kiss on the cheek, then he stood up in his red and yellow feather outfit and walked over to Letterman to try, and Letterman stood up carrying a fire extinguisher and sprayed Richard with it. Richard yelled at Letterman to stop but Letterman continued spraying him. The audience went wild. The video ended.

Frank felt conflicted by the video. Fitness wasn't about celebrity. It was about fitness. Frank worked out to get strong and to look strong.

But then that wasn't fully true. He worked out to kill. He worked out to distract himself from killing and dying and death and the charred and the black. Frank worked out to save himself. And while it was true he would eventually leave the Marines, one way or another, it wasn't true that the Marines would leave him. Once a Marine, always one.

Maybe it was similar for Richard. His body would only allow him to work out for so long. But whatever happened, he would always be Richard Simmons.

Richard continued to stare out the window. Down below, Frank knew, were the fountains that he hadn't seen.

Frank's phone buzzed in his pocket. He pulled it out. Cameron was calling him. Frank let it go to voicemail.

Frank looked at Richard. "Hey, what's up with those fountains?" Frank asked.

"What do you mean?" Richard asked.

"Do they work?"

"Yes," Richard said.

"Yesterday when Cameron and I went by they weren't on. And they're not on now, too."

"Well, they start only after a certain time. Four o'clock, something like that. What time is it now?"

Frank looked at his watch. "Nine A.M.," he said.

"We'd have to wait for a while then."

"I'll be gone by then," Frank said.

Richard, still looking out the window, nodded.

"I've never seen them," Frank said. "In person, I mean. I've seen them on YouTube or whatever."

Richard whirled around on his heels. "You've never seen them?!"

"No."

Richard walked quickly past Frank and in the direction of his bedroom. "Frank, what are we going to do with you? Hold, please."

Richard slammed the bedroom doors shut behind him. Frank heard

Richard's muffled talking. After a few minutes, Richard opened both doors at the same time. He was glowing. "I've got good news!" Richard said. He started walking.

"They're going to turn on the fountains?" Frank asked.

Richard pointed at Frank. "Bingo," Richard said. Richard walked past Frank towards the window. Frank followed.

"How'd you do that?" Frank asked.

Richard put out both his arms and shrugged his shoulders like *aw shucks*. "One of the perks."

Frank walked to the window and stood next to Richard so that they were shoulder to shoulder. They both stared out the window and onto the lake below.

"Any second now," Richard said.

"Okay," Frank said.

"What about your friend?" Richard asked. "Should we stop the parade and invite him?"

Frank stayed silent for a few moments as he thought of his response.

"Cameron doesn't like fountains," Frank replied finally.

"Oh," Richard replied. "Oh, okay."

As Frank and Richard waited for the fountains to come, Frank could see both of their reflections in the mirror.

Richard, who looked through the window with anticipation, seemed tired, but content. Compared to the one Frank had seen in the YouTube video on Letterman, his face was older, obviously, not quite as full of youth and vigor. But it was Richard's.

Frank then looked at himself and his rounded edges. He didn't look like he used to. But he looked like who he was. He looked like Frank.

Suddenly, from the blue lake below, two circles of fountains of water shot up from the lake, then, in the middle of both those circles, two towers of water shot up into the sky, so high up, that they seemed like they would never come down again.

Richard gasped.

Frank looked at his own reflection. "Don't be scared," he said.

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## New Poetry by Scott Hughes: "Still"



THE FAULT LINES / *image by Amalie Flynn*

### STILL

I never thought of you  
as a hopeless romantic; this was news to me.  
Are you still meditating? Meditate  
on this:  
You can take the Mulholland Highway across  
the ridges of two counties  
and stay high a long time.

We parked there once in your subcompact  
in love and unconfined.

From the afternoon shade of a scrub oak  
I remember the ridge route home,  
the silhouettes of Point Dume and your profile  
in the afterglow.

Since then I have been a jack of all trades  
and a master of nothing:  
unremarkable, unsubstantial, undignified;  
unresolved, unremembered, unconceivable;  
unqualified, unpublished, unreadable.

I looked for you in the county beach campgrounds  
where you went with surfers from your high school.  
I looked for you in all the places I heard you were in love.  
I looked for you where rumors sent me.  
I looked for you in the hills of Northridge  
where we walked around the fault lines.  
I looked for you among the barstools  
from Venice to Ventura.  
I looked for you in old Beach Boys songs.  
I looked for you in stacks of photographs.  
I looked for you in the bottom of a glass.  
I looked for you stranded after a concert.  
I looked for you at the Spahn Ranch.  
I looked for you in the bittersweet words in books.  
I looked for you in unsold manuscripts.  
I looked for you in the margins of old college notes.  
I looked for you in every woman who looked at me.  
I looked for you in dharma talks.  
I looked for you in shrines.  
I looked for you in my next life.

I don't think my karma is right.

Forty years on the hard roads of two counties  
and I am

still.