

# New Fiction from Bailee Wilson: “The Sun Burns Out in Vietnam”



*Vietnam, 1969*

The world appeared like a ripple in a puddle- a Jell-O jiggle spreading across dark green jungle water. The scene came together but would not hold still.

Caleb did not know where he was. His vision swirled, and his chest hurt, and his lungs seemed full of water. His hand searched for his chest. Found it. Wet. Found it. Empty. A finger sank into it. Wiggled a moment. *Mud*, he thought. *Mud at the bottom of the puddle.*

There was a wall behind him. He braced himself to move, clenching his teeth tightly, and then slid himself against it, propping himself up. He let out a growl, and a twinge of nausea passed through his stomach. He nearly threw up, but he held in the bile, thinking of a man he'd seen throw up at a state fair once- thinking about how embarrassing that must have been. A grown man vomiting. He could do better. He squinted into the horizon. The nausea faded, and solid shapes began to take form.

He was in a village. A rural village. A smoking village. The huts around him were on fire; their woven roofs blazing orange and deep red, like the flesh of the Gac fruit he'd seen a young boy devour at a rural market in the eastern part of the country. Across from him, a hand lay, palm up, fingers sprawled, totally still. Slender brown wrist and jagged nails. The hand was connected to an arm. The arm was connected to nothing. Its severed edge, too, resembled the wet red meat of

the Gac fruit. Caleb couldn't remember whose it was. He wished he hadn't seen it.

The air was smoke and fresh-turned dirt, tinged with feces, urine, and metal. Whether the metal smell was blood or guns, he could not say.

Caleb coughed, and a spray of red shot from his chest. *So I've been shot*, he realized. *I've been shot, and I've been left for dead.*

A groan split the space in front of him. He rolled his head toward the sound. "Hello?" he gurgled. He coughed again. Stronger: "Hello?"

There was a young Vietnamese man sprawled at his feet. The man lifted his head.

Opened and shut his mouth three times, bubbling like a fish. "Do you speak English?" Caleb asked him.

The man stared at him with fish eyes.

Caleb rolled his eyes. "Of course not." *Damn Gook*. He pointed at the hole in his chest. "Are you hurt?" he asked. He pointed at the man. Pointed back at his own chest.

The man rolled his body to the side, revealing a wet, red cavern in which bits of flesh hung free from bone, swinging like sheets on a clothesline. He sank back to the earth with a grunt.

Caleb nodded. "We're both goners, you know?" The man blinked. Sputtered, "Xin Loi." "Gibberish." *Jesus*.

Caleb rubbed his fingers together. He wanted a cigarette. He grimaced. "I'd kill for a drag," he told the man. He'd killed for less before, but what did it matter now.

The man bared his teeth in a rugged smile. "Xin Loi," he said

again. Caleb tilted his head towards the sky.

The wall he was leaning against was part of a crude hut. When he shifted his weight, it crackled. A twig wiggled loosely above his head. He snapped this twig off and put it to his lips. He softly sucked in, gritted his teeth, and blew out. He offered this twig to the Vietnamese man, who pretended to take his own hit and then passed it back.

"Nothing like a Pall Mall," he sighed. He took another drag.

On his exhale, he pointed at himself and slowly pronounced, "Caleb Millard." The man pressed his hands to his sternum and said, "Do Hien Minh."

Caleb pretended to tap ash from his twig. "Where are you from, Do?" Do stared at him.

Caleb shifted his weight, winced at the movement, and then settled his shoulders lower against the wall. "I'm from Iowa." A bird played lip harp in a distant tree. "America." He eyed a big sow nosing through the turmoil beneath a burning hut. "Got a lot of pigs there, too."

Drag from the twig. "My family kept a cow, but no pigs." Do bobbed his head as if he understood.

"I had a dog for a bit," he told Do, "but she died. Never had a pig." Do patted the dirt at the base of Caleb's boot.

"How old are you, Do? Can't be more than twenty." Caleb raised an eyebrow. "My brother is twenty. He went to college, so he didn't get drafted." Caleb felt a bead of sweat forming on his forehead. "I didn't go to college, so I got drafted. Now I have a damn hole in my chest."

Caleb met Do's eyes again. "We're both gonna die dumb, you know that? Dumb and uneducated. And young." Caleb shook off a gnat. "And covered in bugs."

“You ever ate a bug, Do?” Do’s face was covered in sweat. “I bet you people eat bugs all the time.”

Caleb rubbed his chest. “I can’t breathe so well. I never could breathe in this country. You must be dumb to stay in a country where you can’t breathe. What’s the point?”

Caleb squirmed against his inhale. “It’s like breathing under-damn-water. Are you a fish, Do?”

Do moved his hands together, intertwining his shaking thumbs and fluttering his fingers like butterfly wings. He flew his hands towards Caleb and grinned.

Caleb muttered, “This is serious.” Do settled his hands under his chin.

“You got a girl, Do?” Caleb asked. “I swear, if a bastard like you has got a girl, then God can take me now.”

Do’s pinky finger twitched under his chin.

Caleb pursed his lips and made a kissing noise. With one hand, he drew the outline of a woman with generous curves in the air. Pointed at Do. “A girl?”

A soft smile spread across Do’s face. “Cô gái xinh đẹp,” he said.

“I bet you’ve got an ugly little thing,” Caleb mused. “Beanstalk tall and scrawny, with crooked teeth. Or no teeth.” He licked his lips. “There was a girl named Nancy back in the States who I always wanted to go with.” Caleb shook his head. “I never even wrote her a letter.”

Caleb scratched at his chest. “But man, was she beautiful. All-American, with blonde hair and the pinkest lips I ever saw. Always wore a red dress to Sunday service. And man, she loved to sing. Especially sad songs. Sounded just like Doris Day.”

Do repeated, "Doris Day." "That's right, Do."

Do began humming.

Caleb recognized the tune. "Que sera, sera," he half-sang. "Whatever will be, will be." He dropped his eyes to the dirt. "That's real nice, Do."

"Do you reckon that letters ever make it out of the jungle?" Caleb wished a cloud would cover the sun. It was too damn hot. "I don't see how anything makes it out of the jungle."

It was quiet for a moment, aside from the two men's dueted breathing and the rumble of a burning hut collapsing. "When you die, your body will sit here and rot. That's a given. But what happens to my body?" Caleb sucked on the twig. "Will they come looking for me? Will they find me? My parents may never know what happened to me. They'll hold out hope, I know. But I'll be gone. Rotting, with no name. No meaning." Caleb looked at the severed arm. He threw the twig away. "It's sick."

Do followed his gaze to the arm. Then Do looked back at him. "Caleb," Do said. "Not me," Caleb said. "I didn't do that."

Do patted the dirt again.

"It's so hot." Caleb squinted. He tried to shake the sweat from his head. "Do you think that's the sun we're feeling, or the light at the end of the tunnel?"

Do shielded his eyes from the sky.

"That's the spirit, Do. Don't look at it. Don't look at it either way."

Caleb wanted a cup of cold water, or a root beer. The air was thick with humidity- practically liquid- but his thirst remained unquenched. He wished that he had drowned. At least then he wouldn't be thirsty.

He sat back and watched smoke pour out of a hut. There was searing pain in his throat. "To die in a place like this... Well, it isn't Christian. Do the souls of those whose bodies are eaten by stray dogs still make it to heaven?"

Do coughed up a sticky string of blood. It sank into the dirt at the base of Caleb's boot. "Damn it," Caleb said. "Damn it all."

"What's the point of this anyways? Why am I talking to you?" Caleb was dizzy. He thought again of the state fair. The vomit. "What's the point of me prattling on and you not knowing what I'm saying? Do you know what I'm saying?" Caleb kicked at Do's hand. "Can you feel what I'm saying?"

Do's face was pale. "Doris Day," he said.

"That's right," Caleb let out a low whistle. "Que fuckin' sera, sera." Do rolled in the dirt.

"I killed a man who looked like you, just east of Bo Tuc." Do's hands curled into claws.

"And another just north of here."

Do's mouth opened into a near-perfect circle. "And another, north of that."

"When my dog got ill, my father shot her in the side," Caleb's chin began to tremble. "She rolled that same way, rolled until my father shot her a second time. Shot her in the head." Caleb held a finger gun to his temple. Pulled the trigger.

Do jerked sharply, arching his back into the shape of a mountain, and then fell flat against the earth. He became still on impact, save for his fingers, which twitched and twitched like the wings of a gnat. His eyes locked on Caleb.

"Thing is, I think I'm sorry for what I did. But this is war. I don't know how to feel sorry. They tell me not to feel

sorry. I'm not sure that 'sorry' cuts it anyways."

"Do I pray for you?" he whispered. "Does it make a difference?" Caleb swallowed. "What can one do?"

Do's earthquaking hand extended back towards Caleb's shoe, traversing the dirt like a snake stalking prey. The hand met the boot and encircled it. Squeezed once. Then his eyes glazed over.

Eyelids half shut, mouth agape. A gnat landed on his thin lip. He was gone.

Caleb felt tears well up in his eyes. He resigned, "What can one do?"

He struggled for breath. He touched his chest again and found that the wet had expanded. His vision was a tunnel. He saw Do at his feet. Saw only Do. The gnat on his lip. The look of sleep on his face.

Caleb trembled. He knew what would happen next. He'd be a casualty of war with no story. No one- not his commanding officers, his parents, his brother, Nancy, no one- would know what had happened to him. The fire from the huts would spread, his flesh would fall to ash, and he'd be gone. There'd be no story, no burial, no resolution. Nothing. Forever, nothing. Alone in the jungle for the rest of time. For what? Nothing, nothing, nothing. What can one do?

Alone, but not alone. Do's hand on his boot was a message. "It's alright," the hand said, "we're in this together. We're going to die, but we're not alone. It might be for nothing, but we're not alone."

He saw it now. *Xin Loi. I'm sorry. At least we're together.*

That gave Caleb as much peace as he could hope to get. That evening, the sun went down as it always did, but for Caleb, it burnt out. The jungle dirt lapped up his blood the same as it

did anyone else's. After all, all blood tastes the same. All blood nourishes the same. Caleb was still in the jungle night, with Do's hand on his foot and a gnat crawling on his lip.

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## **New Nonfiction from J. Malcolm Garcia: "Othello Avenue"**



In the cold autumn dawn shadows blanket Othello Avenue, the parked cars and vans little more than gauzy, damp lumps, like furniture hidden beneath old sheets in a darkened room. The rising sun reveals a towering red sign with white lettering promoting, Wentworth Automotives, like some sort of beacon to the new day, and the increasing light penetrates the San Diego fog until it offers a display of dewy windshields and the dented metal of damaged bumpers and wet, warped cardboard in place of broken windows. In a 2003 VW station wagon, Robin sleeps on her right side, mouth open, the back of the front seat pushed down so that her body can conform to this rough and barely endurable estimate of a bed, and in a white Chrysler Town and Country behind her, Michael lies prone where there once had been a passenger seat. Out of the open passenger window of an RV rise the sounds of sleep from another man, Steve, snoring amid a disaster of discard-castoff shirts, pants, cereal cartons, plastic bottles, generator cords, pop cans, stained styrofoam plates, magazines and mountains of crumpled paper.

Across the street behind a Target two cats, a Siamese and an orange tabby, stare out the windshield of a 1982 Chevrolet P30 Winnebago. Its owner, Katrina, rouses herself from a bed in the back, stretches, yawns and presses the heels of her palms against her eyes.

She found the Siamese cat tied up in a plastic bag in bushes behind Target. She can't believe what some people do. Her boyfriend, Teddy, still asleep, rolls onto his side. He manages a gas station and gets off at six in the morning. Husband, Katrina calls him. Marriage a ceremony neither can afford and perhaps the fragility of their lives warns them against. Tweakers both of them but clean now. She looks out a window at the cracked street still wet from the calm night. A block away, the silence is being nibbled away by cars on Interstate 805, soon to be a madness of rush-hour traffic. Not long from now Katrina will awaken to other noises. She wonders what those will be. Some traffic, sure, this is San Diego. Every city has traffic but maybe she'll hear birdsong, too. Waking up to birds as she did as a child. Imagine. She and Teddy recently found an apartment through the housing authority. Of the nearly 8,500 homeless people in San Diego County, more than 700 live in vehicles. Almost 500 emergency housing vouchers became available in 2021 to address housing insecurity worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Katrina and Teddy got one of the vouchers, but it took them nearly a year to find a place. One landlord told her, All people on Section 8 have bedbugs. She felt he was just lumping her into a stereotype. In her opinion, there're the bums who are content being homeless, and then there are people like her and Teddy who are working but don't have a place to live.

The landlord who finally accepted their application rents apartments on Loma Way. She offered Katrina and Teddy a two bedroom with brown linoleum floors. Much better than that cheap brown carpet so many apartments have, especially with

cats. Katrina checked it out on Google Maps and thought it looked like crap. But the photo she saw was old. When she and Teddy met with the landlord they found that all of the apartments had been recently remodeled and freshly painted. Nine hundred and fifty square feet. Beats the thirty-two square feet of the Winnebago and the leaky roof. When it rains, water pours into the bedroom and kitchenette. Teddy will shove her to one side of the bed so he can stay dry, her body pressed against the frayed particleboard of a cabinet. The other day, her mother called from Utah and said a foot of snow had fallen. Tell her we got a foot of rain inside, Teddy said. When they were using drugs they draped tarps over their tent to keep out the rain. One night, Katrina had to be life-flighted out of a riverbed near the golf course behind Fashion Valley Mall because of flooding. She was detoxing from speed and shaking so bad she couldn't climb out ahead of the rising waters.

The landlord did not hold the history of drug arrests and convictions against them. As long as you tell me the truth before I do a background check, you'll be fine, she had told them. They can move in two weeks. Hard to imagine having a place after living in the Winnebago for a year. No, eighteen months. A year and a fucking half. She and Teddy didn't sleep much when they lived on the street before the Winnebago. Afraid who might walk up on them. Katrina knows three people who died, one stabbed, two OD'd. Bad stuff. If you make someone mad they can hide anywhere and come for you about just stupid stuff. Could be a guy touched someone's backpack. People are nuts about their packs. This one dude took a guy's pack because he owed him money. The pack had his heart meds and he died that night of a stroke. At least that's what the paramedics said. Scary out there.

Robin stirs, opens one eye and watches a man walk past her car wheeling a garbage can. He picks up pieces of paper with a trash picker, peers at her, glances away and moves on in a desultory fashion suggesting that the sight of her provided only a temporary diversion from the mindless tedium of his task. She sits up, opens both of her eyes wide, squints, opens them again allowing the morning to sift around in her head until it settles into the beginning of yet another day, then she pulls the door handle, gets out and stretches. She wears a faded, green sweatshirt and gray sweatpants. Short, stocky. A wrestler's build. Her brown hair falls around her cheeks. She holds a hand over her eyes against the sun. No clouds. Down the street toward The 805, a sign promoting Hawthorne Crossings shopping center shines in the sun as do the names of stores listed beneath it: Staples, Cycle Gear, Ross, Book Off, Dollar Tree.

The staff at Cycle Gear throw away bike helmets like confetti. The slightest dent and scratch and they're tossed into a dumpster. Robin has seen Teddy collect them to recycle. Teddy's out there, a hustler. He says he even finds Rolex watches but he's got to be bragging or lying or both, right? C'mon, Robin tells herself, selling just one Rolex would get him off Othello. But he and Mike keep the tweakers away. Othello Avenue is quiet for the most part but if someone parks here to get high, those two are on them and get them gone, they sure do. Robin doesn't know Katrina and Teddy well, or Mike for that matter. Talks to them but not all the time. What's the point? Get to know people and then they leave. Katrina and Teddy aren't staying. If all goes well, she won't be far behind them.

Robin has lived in her VW for about a year. Stick shift. Saving for a new clutch. She has a clutch kit but needs someone to install it. The car is her everything. It's a mess of Burger King wrappers and coffee cups but it ain't horrible. She's not a packrat like Steve. When it becomes a mess, she

cleans it and when it turns into a mess again, she cleans it again. Like her life. She works as a caregiver for a grandmother and her two-year-old granddaughter. The child's mother lives on the street turning tricks for crack, a toothless, emaciated figure peering wide-eyed into the slow trolling cars. In four weeks, Robin will move in with a man who needs in-home care 24/7. She has known him for eight years. Not well but they talked a lot over the years. A Polish guy, Harold. In his sixties, maybe seventies. He lived next door to a mutual friend. He sorted mail at a post office before he retired. He wanted to be a cop but, he told Robin, in those days the San Diego Police Department wouldn't hire a Pole. Injured his hip on the job and it's given him problems ever since. He's in Carmel Mountain Rehabilitation & Healthcare Center now. Comes out in about four weeks. She's ready to move in with him, ready for a room of her own. She'll sleep a lot the first couple of days, she's sure.

The median home price in San Diego County has surpassed \$500,000 and the median monthly rent is almost \$2,800. Some studios downtown rent for \$2,000 a month. With prices like those, Robin feels grateful for the arrangement with Harold. It won't be her place but it'll be better than living in the VW, and she'll still have time to help the woman with the grandchild. With two jobs, she should do all right. She used to clerk at a day-old bread store for four years until she screwed up. Was going through a divorce.. Was going to casinos and losing money. She stole one hundred dollars from a cash register at work one afternoon. Got caught, got fired. Then one night at a casino she lost what little money she had left and in her fury she punched the window of a slot machine and broke it. Damn window must've been pretty wobbly because she didn't hit it that fucking hard. Prosecutors charged her with a Class A misdemeanor for destruction of property. Had to pay \$1,800 for that little bitty window plus the one hundred dollars she owed the bread company. People in charge don't play. Stuff follows you. Background checks screwed her when

she put in job applications. She left her apartment with only her clothes and took to the streets. When she got tired of being in her car, she pitched a tent in one of the many canyons around the city. She tried to think of it as camping, but she missed her bed.

Mike sits in the driver's seat of the Chrysler, left elbow out the window like a bored taxi driver waiting for a fare. His blonde hair falls to his shoulders. One side of his scruffy beard skewed from sleep. Heavy set, he looks much younger than his sixty-one years. Thick body, his belly spills over his belt buckle. His black shirt, speckled with dandruff, stinks of his unwashed body. The stale air within his vehicle carries his funk. He rolls down the passenger window and feels the breezy crosscurrents. Steve appears in his side mirror walking up from behind the Chrysler, a skinny little dude the same age as Mike, T-shirt and jeans sloppy with wrinkles hanging off his body. He pauses, pokes his head in, Hey. Mike. Says he'd gone to Target for coffee and dropped his phone but someone found it and gave it back to him. Pretty lucky, huh? Stressed him out. Feels exhausted. Gonna take a nap. See you, Mike. He walks to his RV, turns to face Mike again as if to fix him there. Mike makes a face, folds his arms and looks down and shakes his head. Steve'd lose his arms if it they weren't attached to his shoulders. He's OK. Harmless. Suffered a head injury in a motorcycle accident, or so he says. Might have TBI. Mike considers himself lucky that he doesn't have it. Or maybe he does. He can be forgetful. When he was in the army, a tank hatch cover fell on his head. Dropped him like a stick. He receives VA disability, about a \$1,000 a month.

The other day, he saw Katrina, and she told him that she and Teddy had found a place. They don't talk much but if he splurges on a pizza, he'll offer them a slice. Steve and

Robin, too, if he has enough. Good for them. So many homeless people. Mike keeps his head down, minds his own business. If he sees someone shooting up in their car or loading a pipe, he writes the license plate number and calls the cops. They show up eventually. He tells the tweakers, I know what you're doing. Get out. He doesn't yell at them. That'd be a good way to get a gun in his face. Teddy always backed him up. Now, Mike just might have to settle for calling the police and leave it at that.

Every morning he drives four or five blocks, gets something to eat. He has received tickets for being parked in one place too long. Five of those and the city will tow him, and then where'd he be? Carl's Jr., it's close. Gas costs too much to go far. He has up-to-date tags so he's good there, and insurance, he's got that too. It's hard to get insurance being homeless. He lies. Gives the DMV an old address. They don't check. He loves to cook but can't in his car, of course. He warms soup at a 7-Eleven. McDonald's, Denny's, Jack in the Box, they're not too expensive. His doctor says he has high cholesterol and type 2 diabetes. Blood pressure off the charts. Well, doc, I eat nothing but fast food. At Costco, he gets grapes, cherries, and water. Bananas, too, but on hot days after hours in the car they begin to turn brown and spotty. In cold weather he'll buy up to six bananas. If he eats one a day, they'll be gone before they spot.

He worked as a home healthcare aide for his old man for thirty-eight years after a driver ran his dad off a highway in Arizona. It was 1979. The old man had dropped Mike off at a boy scout jamboree near the Grand Canyon and got hit on his way back home. Never did catch the guy. Mike was something like a junior in high school at the time. Yellow paint from the driver's car etched into the old man's passenger door. He flipped into a ravine. His headlights tunneled straight into the night sky. He broke about every bone that could be broken and remained in St. Joseph's Hospital in Phoenix for a year.

Came out a paraplegic but he didn't quit living. He met a woman from San Diego, got married and moved with her to California. Mike stayed in Arizona, married his high school sweetheart and joined the Army. Bootcamp at Fort. Lewing, Washington. Served three years on the DMZ in South Korea. That was enough. Came home, got his wife pregnant. He worked at KFC, Jack in the Box, and Jiffy Lube. Bounced from one job to another. Eight months later, he and his wife divorced. Young love gets to be old love and then no love at all after a while. He had gotten into speed by then. The old man told him to come to San Diego. Mike had nothing keeping him in Arizona, so he moved, settled next door to his father in Oceanside. In 1986 he began taking care of him full time after the old man's wife left him. Like father, like son. Shot speed with his sister, who lived in Santee, a suburb.

The old man died in October 2018. Eighty-nine years old, three months shy of ninety. Had dementia in his final years. He served in Korea during the war, won a Bronze Star, three clusters. Before he got dementia in 2011, he volunteered at the VA. Mike didn't know about the medal until he sorted through his dad's things. That sort of bothers him. After so much time together, they shouldn't have had secrets. He thought they were as tight as Siamese twins. Guess not. Goes to show. He's not sure what but it does. The old man never talked about the war to anyone so he didn't deny Mike anything he hadn't denied others. And he never confronted Mike on his drug use. Fair's, fair. But Mike wasn't anyone else. He cared for him for decades even when he was high. So much for family. Caring for the old man for so long, Mike didn't have much job experience. No résumé that'd count for shit. By May 2019, nearly a year later, almost out of money, he moved into his Chrysler. He's not using drugs now but his sister still is so he won't stay with her even if she offered to take him in which she hasn't. He stares out his windshield at Steve's RV. Steve has two grown sons. They aren't offering him a bed. So much for family.

Steve stirs from his nap as the draft from a passing car rocks his RV. He has so much crap he can't open the side door. To get out, he wriggles through the sliding window that separates the cab from the back of the RV squinching his nose, and while still on his stomach, sprawled across the driver and passenger seats, his legs bent, toes balanced against the driver's window, he opens the passenger door and crawls out to the sidewalk. Loose tennis balls and a fishing pole, follow him. He bends and tugs at his belt and a man walking past glances at him and keeps going. Steve picks up the pole and tennis balls and drops them on the passenger seat. He went fishing the night before, caught one small fish, and threw it back. Watched it swim crookedly to the bottom and felt bad he had hurt it. He decided not to fish again giving up a diversion that began in his childhood. Loved the rhythm of tossing the line, reeling it in. Kind of hypnotic. Almost disappointed when a fish took the bait and broke the spell. He was born in San Diego but spent a big part of his childhood in a Fresno ranch house. He just saw it after God knows how many years, decades really. Super cool. He had driven his niece, Nicole, to Washington state where her husband was stationed in the Navy. She had been visiting friends in San Diego and needed a ride. When the bottom fell out of his life, Steve lived with Nicole for a time in Liberty Military Housing – Murphy Canyon until her husband was transferred to Washington. He keeps in touch with his sons, Jacob and Gabrielle. Gabriele is in the Air Force in New Mexico. Jacob lives in University Heights, San Diego. Computer guy. Steve uses his address for mail. Jacob lives with his daughter, Scout, 7, and his girlfriend. Not enough room for Steve, at least that's what he assumes. Jacob gave him one hundred dollars one time. That was nice. He wants to believe his boys have faith in him. He doesn't pull alarms. He doesn't complain.

Steve was on his way back to San Diego after he'd dropped Nicole off when he decided to stop in Fresno and check out his old childhood place. More developed now, nothing like it was in 69' when he was kid. He had pulled over and just looked at the low-slung brown house, closed his eyes and his memories played out like a movie. He took a bus to school, walked down the long driveway when it pulled up. Cows nearby strolled in their heavy, head-bobbing way, pausing to pull at grass, and chickens wandered fields. That night as he slept in his RV, someone stole the generator he had strapped to the bumper. In the morning, when he realized what had happened, he shook his head with the innocence of someone who could not fathom how such a thing could happen anymore than how he could comprehend inadvertently injuring that fish. He continued his drive back to San Diego and Othello Avenue.

The morning progresses. Emaciated weeds grow through cracks in the sidewalk, vine-like and pale green. Palm trees sway. The noise of children and women drift from the Target parking lot. Gulls bob on currents staring down at the confusion below them and a few alight on the hot pavement of Othello Avenue snagging a speck of something before flapping their wings and rising again.

Katrina starts work at ten in the morning, stands behind the counter of the Häagen-Dazs store in Fashion Valley Mall and opens a box of paper cups. She wears a black T-shirt with the Häagen-Dazs logo and she ties her long hair in a ponytail. This is her time, the early hours. Gets more done working by herself, restocking for the afternoon and evening rush.

You have chocolate? Someone asks, poking their head in the door.

Of course.

I'll be by after lunch.

I'll be here, Katrina says.

She has worked part-time at the store for about a year and earns about \$1,600 a month. A customer, a four-year-old girl named Sophie, recently asked her to be her best friend. Katrina smiled and agreed. Another asks for pumpkin ice cream, a combination that sounds disgusting to Katrina. She has gotten to know a hairdresser and her three daughters. Another customer said he'd miss her when she told him she had applied for a job at the Target store where she and Teddy park. It would be a wonderful opportunity to work there and so convenient. Even after they move, it would be closer than Fashion Valley and better pay with benefits.

She finds a stepladder and climbs onto the bottom rung so she can reach a box of styrofoam bowls from a shelf. Raising her arms, she arches her back. Her body curves, her shirt and pants tight to her body. A man pauses by the door and admires her. She grins. It's good to be noticed. Good to feel attractive. Good to like herself, her figure. She pulls the box and sets it on the counter. Reminds herself to call her mother. She normally does every morning but she was running late today.

Katrina was born in Orem, Utah, and moved to Huntsville, Utah, when she was eight. She liked Huntsville, a small, quiet town. No weirdos. As a little girl she could hang out with friends in a park at night and play hide-and-seek near their elementary school. Rode their bikes. In the winter they met at the ice-skating rink. Father a diesel mechanic. She has two brothers in Washington near the Canadian border. Can't recall the town. Another one still lives in Utah. Doesn't hear from

any of them.

Her senior year in high school she met a guy and got pregnant four months before graduation. She doesn't know what she liked about him. He was cute: she was in love. They were young and she thought he was perfect. Even when she realized he wasn't, she stayed with him. Her parents had divorced and she didn't want her kids to grow up like that.

Stupid, she says to herself.

He didn't work, sold drugs and introduced her to heroin and pills. In 2016, they divorced. She kept the kids until her mother informed the Department of Social Services about her drug use. Katrina had tried to hide it from her, but she knew. She saw her hanging out a lot with a crowd that looked like they hadn't bathed in a month. Katrina didn't allow her to see the kids because she didn't want her mother to see her. So, yeah, she knew. Her ex-husband's aunt ended up raising the children. A blessing, Katrina thinks now. They've done better without her. A twenty-year-old son joined the Marines; her eighteen-year-old son is about to graduate high school, and her thirteen-year-old daughter joined the girls' eighth grade wrestling team. She hasn't spoken to them in two, three years. The last time they talked, it didn't go well. Pissed off at her for leaving them. They'll come around. She's different now. She writes letters and sends gifts, tries not to beat herself up. Does it hurt? Yeah. Does she feel bad? Yeah, but she can't change the past. Guilt makes her want to get high. She's no good to them high. That's how she lost them. A lot of tweakers don't quit. Or they do but just for a minute. They stop and look around and all they see are the bushes and dirt where they live. They start thinking about the mess they've made of their lives and they get high to stop thinking. So, yeah, she feels bad but she's happy for her children. And for herself now.

Katrina did four months in a Utah prison for theft and other

charges resulting from her drug use including prescription fraud. When she got out, she met a truck driver whose route included California, Colorado and Utah. He'd stop at the Flying J Truck stop in Ogden where Katrina panhandled for drug money. The trucker bought her a sandwich from Denny's every time he came through. They became good acquaintances if not friends and after five years, he told her if she ever cleaned up he'd put her up in his San Diego home. In 2017, she got on a Greyhound bus and took him up on it. He died a year later at sixty-two of cancer. Katrina started using meth again and stayed in Presidio Park. She met Teddy about the same time outside of a 7-Eleven, tall, skinny and handsome and high on speed. He had just done a ten year stretch for drug crimes. He kept getting busted until his most recent release from prison in January 2019 when he decided to clean up. He told Katrina he was through with drugs and had even stopped smoking cigarettes. He wouldn't see her unless she also quit. She did. When they received their housing voucher Teddy told her to leave him, that she'd have better luck finding a place alone. His extensive prison record, he said, would hold her back. Why would I leave you when you helped me get clean? she asked him.

With Katrina at work Teddy awakens alone. On his off days, he hustles with the instincts he honed scoring drugs. He found twenty-six helmets from the dumpster behind Cycle Gear one night. Abandoned shirts, pants and jackets he sells at swap meets fifty cents to a dollar. Jewelry, iPhones, he finds it all. He buys aluminum cans from homeless people, a penny a pop, and sells them to recycling centers. He has \$250 worth of cans in the Winnebago. The cats squat on the sacked piles like royalty. His babies, Teddy calls them. Coils of tattoos snake down his arm and both sides of his neck. Braided hair down his back. Not like he was when Katrina met him but filled out. Buffed. A presence. He stops shoplifters busting out the back

doors of Target with carts full of stolen stuff. One man yelled at him, At least let me keep the shoes! He didn't. Teddy runs Othello Avenue.

Robin knows a lot of people, even a few with homes. There's a woman she works with now while she waits for the postal worker to get out of rehab. She helps her raise a two-year-old granddaughter. The girl's mother runs the streets. This woman, the grandmother, used to live on the streets. Just got a place. Everybody Robin knows needs a little bit of help, and she's not afraid to help herself. Robin loves to work. Never once was she on welfare. Always found some kind of job even if it was only day labor. She passed those values onto her daughter, now thirty-years old living in Colorado working as a teacher's aide. Married with two kids. Robin can go out and see her anytime but she ain't no beggar. She'll visit when she has money. She's never been like the guy she sees now on the sidewalk by the shopping center, flat on his back, using his T-shirt to cover his face from the sun. No, never that bad. She always had a tent, a stove, and a good place near a highway or in a canyon when she got tired of the cramped conditions of her car. Police charged her with vagrancy more than a few times. She probably still has bench warrants from all her citations. Was it vagrancy or trespassing? She doesn't know. Whichever, it's not worth the time of any cop that's not an asshole to bother her about it. She's met all kinds of homeless people: the desperate, the meth heads, and the general trouble kind. One guy slammed her face with a rock in a Starbucks parking lot in Clairmont. Crazy. What did she do? Nothing. Still sees him jabbering to himself. Robin knows she's a mess but she's not crazy. A little touched maybe. Takes that to survive out here.

Steve has a 1973 sHonda CT90 in a carrier on the rear of the RV. Sweet little ride. Nice orange job. Sort of a keepsake, he guesses, from his good, younger days. He was into motorcycles as a kid. In high school, he rode a Honda Cl 175. He loved the way it turned, getting low to the road. Wind in his hair bugs, in his teeth. It was all that. Not a team sport, really, motorcycling. Just him and his bike and the road. All that. He moved up to a BSA DB350 and then a Yamaha RD 400. It was fast but heavy, it felt like he was riding a bus. He traded it for a Yamaha RD 350. Smooth better handling. Nimble. An extension of himself. His wife Sandi would sit behind him, arms wrapped around his waist. First date with her was on the last day of his senior year in high school, 1979. Pretty as all get out. Captain of the drill team. They had a history class together. Married in 1985. He scrolls through old photographs on his phone. There he is in a blue helmet showing all his teeth in a wide grin; there he is crouched low over the handlebars; there he is posing with a white Labrador retriever, his two young sons and Sandi, her mouth open with the same tooth dazzling smile he has.

Steve stopped riding after he crashed his 350 in November 1988. He was out with his buddies on California-78 and Banner Grade when they stopped for a break.. A beautiful day. One of those clear days where the sky stretches forever. The road ran into a flat stretch flanked by scrub and desert. Steve had a sip of a friend's beer, put his helmet back on and said, I'm going to see the rest of this road. Sightseeing, staring at distant mountains going eighty miles an hour. Not paying attention. He skidded, lost control and hit the pavement striking his head, brains scrambled. He remained in a hospital for three weeks. Sandi had just given birth to Jacob three months earlier. Steve tried to return to work but he couldn't focus on any one task for very long. He forgot what he was doing almost as soon as he began it. At home, he tried to help

Sandi with Jacob. He understood he needed five scoops of formula to make his bottle but he couldn't remember how to count to five.

He lost his job but found another as a maintenance man with a packing company. His boss wrote down what she wanted him to do so he wouldn't forget. He was named an employee of the month one year but was laid off a short time afterward. In 2009, after years of taking odd jobs, he went on disability. Eight years later, he found a love letter to Sandi in the glove compartment of her car from another man. Steve called her all kinds of names and she slapped him and he shouted, Hit me like you gotta pair, bitch! She moved out the next day. He remained in the house until 2019 when they sold it, and then he moved in with a woman he had met on an online dating site. After two months and endless arguments, he left her and stayed with Nicole and her husband. When they left for Washington, he settled into his RV. He doesn't know where his money from the sale of the house went. He believes the IRS took thousands of dollars for back taxes but he doesn't know why and amid all his junk he can't find any documentation to confirm that. He cashed out some of his savings with the idea of moving to Mexico but he thinks he left the money in a bag somewhere or did something else with it. Whatever. He doesn't have it. He knows that much. Some days, he scrolls through his phone and looks at old family photos. He sends angry texts to friends condemning Sandi. *She's a narcissist, cheated. I discovered her dirty, little secret.* He looks at pictures of his bikes like a lover. My beloved RD350. My beautiful RD 400. My gorgeous Super Sport 750 Ducati.

This morning, he considers the mess inside the RV. He has an older brother, Joe, in Las Vegas, a retired maintenance man. Move in with me, Joe has suggested. His son, Joe Jr., runs a pest control business in San Antonio. Steve could work for him. They've talked about it but he can't decide. Should he move to Las Vegas and be with his brother or San Antonio and

work for Joe Jr? He doesn't know. He feels so overwhelmed sometimes his head hurts. Today, I'll throw away trash, he tells himself. He needs to do something.

A damp breeze tosses crumpled food wrappers across Othello Avenue. Pigeons strut, pecking at the ground. A slow moving semi-truck rattles a rusted sewer lid as it turns into the driveway of Wentworth Automotive. The driver swings out holding a clipboard and walks with a determined stride toward a door. Clouds collect in the distance above downtown .

A man pauses by Mike's car.

Two guys tried to break into my ride.

What they look like? Mike asks.

No idea. Had gray hoodies. When they saw I was in it they ran.

Thanks for the intel.

Be careful, the guy says.

Same to you.

Mike sighs. A tweaker robbed him at gunpoint not too long ago. Ninety-five percent of the time Othello is quiet but not that day. Bastard got seven dollars, his eyes the size of dinner plates. Fucking tweaker.

Maybe it was payback for his own drug-addled days. When he was twenty-seven and doing speed with his sister, her neighbor, also a speed freak, accused him of abusing her fourteen-year - old daughter after he told her he had no dope to give. She hangs around your house a lot, she said. Maybe that's because you're fucked up all the time. She filed a complaint and the police arrested him. A public defender told him to plead

guilty and she'd get him five years probation. You know what they do to child abusers in prison if you're convicted? she asked him. Scared, he took the deal. He thinks now that his lawyer screwed him to make her job easier. He checks in with the police once every thirty days. Has done that for thirty-six years. Nothing else on his record but parking tickets. He can forget about finding housing and a job. A background check will take him out faster than he can say, I didn't touch that girl. Othello Avenue allows him a kind of peace. Here he experiences no judgment.

Teddy scours neighborhoods on blue days, the days of the week when households put out their blue recycling bins. He knows the hotspots. One week he made \$1,000, and he and Katrina bought the Winnebago. He was ten years old when he arrived with his mother in San Diego in 1993, refugees from poverty and civil war in Ethiopia and devout Muslims. His mother tried to steer him away from the street, but he saw drugs as a fast way to make money and followed a different path than the one she had chosen for him. He had money and women until he didn't. Before he met Katrina, he lived for four years camped in a parking lot. He has two kids in grammar school, one son at Georgia State University. His wages are garnished for child support. He doesn't complain. Past is past. He won't say more. Doesn't need just anyone to know his business. He lives for the future. He changed course, follows a different path.

The cats in the Winnebago settle on the dashboard and watch Katrina walk toward them after a coworker dropped her off from

work. She opens a door and they rub against her ankles until she scoops food from a bag into their bowls. After being on her feet all day she would like to sit and relax but she knows if she does that she wouldn't get up again. Instead she finds a broom, goes back outside and begins sweeping the sidewalk, her way of showing appreciation for being allowed to park there 24/7. Teddy found a perfectly good generator in a dumpster that she'll use later to power a vacuum and clean the Winnebago. They purposely work opposite shifts so one of them is at the RV at all times to prevent a breaks-in. Once they move into their apartment, they'll try to work the same hours so they can spend more time together.

When she lived on the street, Katrina spent her evenings at a soup kitchen downtown. After she quit using drugs, she stopped by to show the staff she had changed. She wore makeup, had on a perky pink blouse and designer jeans. Teeth fixed. Told everyone to call her by her full name instead of her street name, Trinny. She wasn't that person anymore.

It'll be so good to get off Othello. People drive down it at seventy miles an hour, tow trucks barrel ass. What if someone hit the Winnebago while she was in it? There was an accident one time in the Target parking lot. A guy's car got smashed in a hit and run. Katrina heard the noise inside the Winnebago. The guy whose car got hit was dazed but unhurt. The airbag had knocked him almost cold. At first he didn't know where he was. She comforted him until the police came. He was so grateful that he invited her to his beauty parlor and did her hair.

She rummages for a jar of peanut butter to make Steve a sandwich. He forgets to eat sometimes. And Mike and Robin. They might want one. She won't be back here, she knows. She won't forget about them, but there's no need to return. She'll no longer be bound by the experience that now connects them. Being homeless isn't a group sport but they do look out for one another. So, while she's here. While she's homeless. Sheltered homeless, as social workers call it because she

lives in a vehicle. She supposes that sounds better than plain old homeless but whatever they call it, it still sucks. A distinction devised by people who haven't been on the street, she's sure. She reaches for a loaf of white bread, removes six slices. After she makes the sandwiches, she puts them in a bag maneuvers around the cats and steps outside.

Thank you, Steve tells her in a breathless voice that reminds her of a child.

Thank you, Robin says.

She stops at Mike's van.

Thank you, he says taking the last sandwich.

I'll see you tomorrow.

I'll be here.

Shadows spread over Othello Avenue as late afternoon progresses into evening. A clear night concealing in its depths the sounds of desolate, unsettled sleep in the cramped confines of vehicles. Except for Katrina. She looks at the clear, night sky and stares into the light of one star until its yellow glow is all she sees. Her mind clears. She dreams in that kind of emptiness. Dreams quiet dreams of a yard, birdsong, and a cute little garden. Something small. Something clean. Something safe.

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# New Nonfiction from MaxieJane Frazier: “A Military Liberal Education”



The scored green vinyl seat inside an Air Force Bluebird bus at the base of the “Bring Me Men” ramp at the U.S. Air Force Academy was slippery under my jeans. On this 1987 June afternoon, I was wearing my acid-washed Levis and the shortest haircut I’d ever had. The Naugahyde stink of the seats with the warm, nervous bodies made my already churning stomach a witch’s brew. In some ways, these nerves felt like they were happening to someone else. I was a distant observer of a movie scene where military recruits were about to enter basic training. I felt my damp hands opening and closing as if forcing my body to move would prove to me that I was still myself.

To my right, I saw the glass and metal dormitory windows of Vandenberg Hall blindly reflecting the sun. A line of tables with boxes set up on the open concrete pad beneath the windows stood between us and cadets fiddling with folders. They were wearing green fatigue pants and tight white t-shirts with dark blue cuffs, their last names and USAFA screened onto the left-hand side of their chests. The ones near the bus folded their arms and their tight faces under their molded blue berets showed nothing. Not one person on the bus with me said a word under the idling rumble of the diesel engine.

The whoosh of opening doors made me whip my head forward. A muscular demon of spit and sound boarded the bus yelling “Basics, I am Cadet First Class ....” but I wasn’t hearing the details, only coming back into my body and noticing that every muscle there was vibrating. *It’s starting.* A smile played

around my quivering lips: nerves coming to the surface, that ingrained response to please that would become the bane of my existence. He growled "...if you have any doubts about this, *whatsoever*, do NOT get off this bus." When I stood, gripping my small bag with my pre-purchased and broken-in combat boots and my underclothes, a guy a few rows back from me stayed seated.

Under screams of "Go! Go! Go" we hustled off the bus and over to the tables where other cadets handed us cards on strings to wear around our necks. With a checklist to complete, we snaked off in a single-file line through medical stations, unwittingly signing up for a life-time membership with the Association of Graduates, taking armloads of issued uniforms. We all received haircuts even if our hair was already cut; men were shaved bald and women had to have hair above their collars and less than one-inch thick. I misread that fact as less than an inch *long*, arriving with woefully short hair they still cut. We looped up and down hallways and through rooms that would become familiar in the coming years but were a blur without meaning on this first day.

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Thirteen years after I trailed in my brother's footsteps through a yellow jacket's nest outside our Oregon childhood home, I followed in his same footsteps to the U.S. Air Force Academy. The movie *Top Gun* was one year old by the time I stepped off the Bluebird bus, but my brother and his freshmen-year roommate visited our home the previous summer just as the movie came out, radiating that same cocky confidence that made the characters in that movie so enviable. I wanted that power, too, so I pursued their confidence all the way to the Air Force Academy. I didn't notice that Kelly McGillis's Charlie in *Top Gun*, was a civilian. That she never flew a plane or wore a uniform or served much purpose beyond being arm candy for Maverick. I just continued to believe that I could do anything my brother could do.

My beginning on this journey into the military was as an annoying little sister. I tried almost everything he did. And if trying the same stunts hurt me, I had to make sure he didn't see me cry. In fact, I just *didn't* cry by the time I was a teenager. I was his groupie, his cult follower, his worshiper. I learned that hiding my weakness was a badge of honor. That skill, at least, was great preparation for the Air Force Academy.

On the day I arrived at that steel and glass fortress for Basic Cadet Training, BCT or Beast, my brother was nowhere around. The large painted footsteps that taught basic cadets to stand in formation might as well have been made in his image. Somehow, I knew that this military college was small and that any failure on my part would be passed on to him. I'm sure I was feeling all of the emotions people around me were feeling: fear, anxiety, inadequacy, probably not in that order. I pushed them down so hard that I can't remember them.

Faking my way through the physical demands of Beast wasn't an option. My bravado was an act, and I wasn't sure about my ability to follow through in reality. Up to this point in my life, I set goals and I achieved them. Straight A's in high school? Bam. A four-year scholarship to Washington State University? Done. And that high school senior spring break, after visiting Cameron at his college, I decided I would apply there as well. Too late to be accepted to the Air Force Academy immediately after high school graduation, I took the scholarship to Washington State University for a year. When I applied to the Academy, I think I was expecting someone to finally tell me no. But they said yes.

Who leaves a nearly free ride at a state party school for a strict military college with payment in kind for military service when I finished? Apparently this girl.

The Bluebird bus was hours ago, now. At some point, after we dumped our pile of issued uniforms into our basic squadron

dorm rooms and came out dressed in polyester tight shorts and white t-shirts with our last names scrawled in felt pen over the USAFA, I stood at attention studying *CONTRAILS*, the small book of knowledge we had to carry and memorize. An upperclass cadet woman leaned in and asked, "Do you have a brother?"

A smile ghosted my features as I said, "Yes, ma'am," one of seven basic responses I was allowed to give.

"Wipe that smile off your face, Basic," she hissed. "What do you think this is, a tea party?"

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The next morning, the first real morning of Beast, bleary from a lack of sleep, I stumbled out into the brisk Colorado dawn making rows and columns with my peers, my arms locked at my sides, my feet in military-issue running shoes, splayed out duck fashion in my attempt to be at the position of attention. My hair was so short, the chilly, soft breeze didn't lift it. Cadets only two years ahead of us, but every bit adults in our eyes, were yelling instructions. As a group, we learned the basics of marching the afternoon we arrived. I was a member of the award-winning Montesano High School marching band. I wasn't worried about that part.

But almost everything else worried me. My alternately grinning and serious face gave no clear clues to my interior turmoil while my head spun with self-doubt. Could I make it through the physical training? Cameron joined me on a joint run and doing some push ups only a few days before I boarded a flight away from home for this challenge.

"You're not going to make it," he said with frank eye contact and raised eyebrows.

Now as I faced the test of the first morning, I could feel the pre-breakfast acid trickling through my stomach. Punch drunk on minimal sleep, terrified someone would see I didn't belong,

I clenched my hands to avoid shaking in the fresh, scentless air.

Even though we kept our eyes "caged" without looking around us, marching band taught me to sense my neighbor's state of mind by the smallest of body movements. Every last one of us, even the cadet cadre training us, was exhausted by the "oh-dark-thirty" fire alarm that sent us all stumbling out of the dorms and waiting across the street.

Hunched against the night air, the gaggle of brand new recruits looked like hundreds of mental patients in our pale blue Air Force-issued pajamas, velvety dark blue robes, and slippers. Upperclass cadre wore civilian pajamas and did their best to herd us into accountability. I, for one, wondered if the sense-splitting shriek of the fire alarms was the usual wake up call. They took away our watches and, for all we knew, it was time to get up. I knew so little about this training, and what I did know had an air of the ridiculous. We never found out if that first night's alarm was a prank or a real alert, but we never woke up in Beast that way again. After what felt like an hour, we returned to our rooms to sleep until reveille. I'm sure I wasn't the only one who waited in bed, plank stiff and staring at the ceiling, ready for the real wake up that would kick off the six grueling weeks of training.

There were about 120 of us in my Basic Cadet Training Squadron, almost 1400 new freshmen in total spread evenly over ten squadrons. The Basic squadrons were named by letters and each combined four groups of freshmen divided into flights. I didn't realize, at first, that the people in my flight would be in my numbered squadron in the school year.

For morning runs, they sized us shortest to tallest to make sure the people with the shortest legs, mostly women, were setting the pace. I was surrounded by other C Squadron "Cobras" of the third Basic Cadet Squadron when we received

the order to "forward march." As we stepped off into the chill air, I wondered for the first time why that order, when the commander shouted it, sounded like, "Forward, HARCH!" In another few steps we heard the call, "Forward at the double time...HARCH!" In that pause before and during the final sharp directive we growled like animals showing our enthusiasm for the physical effort awaiting us.

We scuffed off across the pebbled-concrete Terrazzo, a square which connected the buildings of the campus. If I could have been a falcon, the school mascot, that morning, flying at 10,000 feet, I would have seen the 10 basic cadet squadrons filling one side of the concrete, jogging beside Vandenberg Hall toward a massive ramp burnished with the metal words "Bring me Men" on the back side, just where we were dropped off by Bluebird buses the day before.

So far, our movement was flat or downhill. I could make it.

I learned that the Academy clusters in the foothills of the Rampart Range at an altitude of 7,258 feet above sea level... "far, far above that of West Point or Annapolis" we learned to say. Signs in the sports complex warned rival teams "The Air is Rare." Viewed from the air, USAFA is unique with its sharp angles, shining metal, and glittering glass. The architect intended a wholly modern space to represent this new military branch.

The massive rectangular space was lined with Terrazzo-pebbled concrete and marble strips with a grass square east of the chapel and between the dorms. From a falcon's height, the old fighter planes punctuating each corner of the grass became tiny models and the corner closest to the dining hall was a hill with the patently unbelievable myth that it covered the bones of the earliest cadets. Between that hill and Fairchild Hall, was the Air Gardens, with hatched terrazzo-style paths slicing the grass. Perfect, architect-model Honey Locust trees representing each graduate who died in the Vietnam War led our

eyes to the Eagle and Fledglings statue facing the dining facility, Mitchell Hall, instructing on its brown marble front: "Man's flight through life is sustained by the power of his knowledge."

When I felt the slope of the ramp dropping away under my feet that were slapping in time to our cadre's rhythmic call "Left, left, left-right-left," I heard a tall blond leader wail out the notes in cadence "C-130 rollin' down the strip," and I became part of a machine answering this call and response: "C-130 rollin' down the strip!" My breath was taken away in the enthusiasm of the music of this military jody—the song forming some military complaint that was to take our minds off the running and keep us breathing. As I began gasping in the effort to sing and jog, even downhill, I was swept up in the camaraderie and sheer military-ness of the moment. I was doing it.

"Airborne Daddy gonna take a little trip."

"AIRBORNE DADDY GONNA TAKE A LITTLE TRIP!" our hundred-plus voices already knew that we needed to drown out the other 9 squadrons singing different jodys around us.

Later our required, rote freshman knowledge informed us that each of the USAFA building names belonged to a man famous in making the Air Force a distinct branch of the military or for his honorable and heroic service. In fact, my basic cadet summer marked the first year a woman showed up in our required memorization, even if there were still no massive structures honoring women's achievement. This 1987 summer, only seven years after the first women graduated, we were supposed to memorize a quote by Amelia Earhart from our small *Contrails* book of information Air Force doolies carried on our person at all times. We memorized the book from cover to cover by the time the year was over. Back then, I didn't bother to learn what Earhart said, already trying to inhabit these guys' values: to devalue women who I was already seeing as "other."

I wouldn't find any value in the wisdom that pioneering woman was meant to impart to us. What could a woman teach me?

During that freshman year when a faceless upperclassman yelled, "Give me Earhart's quote," we recited in a high-pitched wail, "Sir, Amelia Earhart's quote is as follows: *I was lost when I wrote this.*" We were ridiculing a groundbreaking aviator's disappearance. I recently rediscovered the intended words, and learned that Earhart, who was also a poet, wrote: "Courage is the price that life exacts for granting peace." Perhaps the eloquent, thoughtful words were too sophisticated for the juveniles meant to know them. If only I had memorized her words, held onto them as a form of rebellion instead of conforming to the older cadets' blind misogyny. I wish I had known who I would become instead of trying to be like everyone else, mostly men.

We trotted down the Bring Me Men ramp and then across the short leg of the road north of Fairchild Hall. Straight and farther down another ramp, we leveled out on the Cadet Parade Field, soon to be named Stillman Field for the male first Commandant of Cadets. In the third of 10 squadrons, I ran in the squishy tracks of the columns in front of me, and they reeked like an overflowing toilet underfoot. Across from the bleachers, we formed up into position so that all 10 squadrons faced the empty seats. The leaders gave us an order that spaced us out for calisthenics, and we went through the paces of jumping jacks and stretches before finding ourselves prone in the mud doing leg lifts and pushups. So far, so good. I could do all the physical work. I felt my confidence boosted. Later, we learned that the stench was from the non-potable water used to water the grass, cold and leaching through our clothes. The stains never came out of our white t-shirts.

When we finished a series of body-weight exercises, we formed up for the run back up to the Terrazzo. We circled the parade field once and headed up the ramps.

That first morning, I kept right in step, laboring under the absence of oxygen at this altitude but relieved to discover I was up to the task. On other mornings, those short people up front proved that having shorter legs didn't mean they weren't fast. Sometimes sprinkler saturated ground meant the mud sucked at our shoes and hindered our strides. Probably about the second week of training, our leader growled and turned us away from the ramp after the first lap. Soon I didn't always keep up with the formation. I also didn't always drop out, but some mornings I just couldn't get enough air.

Others dropped out of some runs, too, but I had no energy to notice their struggles. My ability to finish with the group, or not finish with them, still seems random to me. Some mornings I could keep up with the formation. Other times I was left gasping with my hands on my knees. Any time I dropped out of a run because I couldn't breathe, I found that, once I caught my breath, I could run at the same pace as the squadron behind them. I could keep running at the squadron's pace until we arrived back at the dorms at the top of the hills. This last trick infuriated the unfortunate cadre member staying back with me who hissed, "If you can run this fast now, Torrens, why can't you make it with your classmates?"

"Sir, I do not know." One of the seven basic responses I was allowed to give. And I was telling the truth.

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## **New Fiction by Rachel Ramirez: "The Witness"**



I am in the grand room of the High Commissioner's Residence in

Manila. A crystal chandelier hangs from the ceiling, intact. Not even one crystal looks to be missing. The building itself didn't escape the war. I saw the damage as the car approached. The right wing must have been bombed. Blackened walls. Blown out windows. The building lost its symmetry. But this room looks untouched. It still has its high ceiling, its big windows, its fancy chandelier. How can this be when my own home was burnt to the ground? Now I live with my wife and children in a makeshift dwelling built on its ashes.

Captain Pace calls me to the stand.

The room is wall-to-wall with Americans, soldiers in tan uniforms. An audience of white faces is staring, quiet, except for the odd cough, the clearing of a throat. They are waiting for me to speak into the microphone. Sitting at a long wooden table, facing the audience, are five men—the Commission. I am close enough to see their sunburnt foreheads. One of them has his head propped up on his hand like he's bored. Maybe he's just not used to the heat. To my right, a dark-haired woman sits at a small desk. Behind me, a large map of the country is pinned up onto a board. There is a stenographer, his hands curled into position.

I do plan to tell them the truth about that day. At least most of it. Some details are too horrid to repeat. I see those details most nights, wake up sweating, sometimes screaming. Belen, her body turned away from me, pretends to be asleep. In my ears, there is still a constant hum. And during the day, the details drift into my mind like dark clouds.

I see them now, the pair in black uniforms, sitting opposite me at the end of the room.

The Accused, they call them. I find myself looking away from them, looking down at my shoes. My shoes match my borrowed

Americano and tie. The Americans dressed me for the occasion, in a suit too big for me. It's like my body inside it has deflated. I want to leave this place. I want to run out the door. But each door is guarded by a soldier. Each soldier wears a hard white hat and stands with their hands behind their back. I wipe my wet palms on the sides of my trousers. I straighten my tie.

Captain Pace also stands with his hands behind his back, his pelvis leaning forward.

"Give me your name, please."

"Dr. Fernando Reyes."

"Where do you live, Dr. Reyes?"

"Bauan, Batangas."

I almost don't recognise my own small voice. I hear the captain's thick accent and wonder where in America he is from. I wonder if he was something else before all this. He has the look of a school principal, like my father. He is tall, taller than me, and older. There is grey mixed in with his straw coloured hair. He has kind eyes, perhaps deceptively so. His eyes are the brightest blue I've ever seen. I'll try my best to answer each of the questions, I tell him, without the need of the translator.

I begin. "On February 28, 1945, while we were having our breakfast..."

I heard the town crier on the street outside the house. He was telling everyone—men, women, children—to gather at the church. There had been many meetings like this. Some of them held in the Plaza, hours spent standing beneath the scorching sun. At least, I told Belen, we'll be in the church, out of the heat. Belen wanted to bring baby Dedeth with us—our youngest. In the end, we left

her behind with the maid. It'll be easier without her, I told her, and hopefully we won't be long. We headed out without finishing our breakfast, three children in tow, all dressed in church clothes. Miguel, our eldest, had recently had a growth spurt. He was proudly wearing my old linen trousers.

"We went to Bauan Church around 9:30 in the morning," I say slowly into the microphone.

It wasn't long after we got to the church that the women and children were told to leave. They were being sent to the Elementary School. Before she left, my wife bowed at the Holy Cross and blessed herself, just as she always did. Then she held my hand and squeezed it. She took two of the children with her. Miguel, passing for a young man in my trousers, stayed with me at the church.

We sat in the pews, eight in each pew, and waited. It was strange to see even the priests sitting amongst us. Then the Japanese soldiers told us to stand so they could search us. One soldier padded me down, looked through my pockets. In my back pocket, he found money, Mickey Mouse money we called it, neatly folded. He told me to take off my watch, my wedding ring. He took it all. He searched my son too. Miguel looked worried although I knew he had nothing on him. Then the soldiers told us to sit again and wait. As we sat there, I looked around at the people in the church. I knew most of them—neighbours, friends, patients. I could hear my son's stomach growling. He told me he wanted to go home. He told me he wanted his mother. I put my arm around his shoulders to comfort him.

Then we were sent out in two groups. We were in the second group. They told us we were going home but led us about 300 yards away, to Sebastian Buendia's house. I knew the house well, had admired it for years, the finest house in the town, beautifully made. Mr.

Buendia, I knew, had left years ago for Mindoro, just after the Japanese had invaded. People said he was afraid they would think he was an American sympathizer. He did a lot of business with the Americans. In the good days, before the war, I'd visit Mr. Buendia's house with my wife, to attend his lavish parties. I'd admired the tastefulness of his home's interior, the dark wood furniture. My wife tried to decorate our own modest home after his. It cost me a fortune, only to have much of it taken away, bit by bit, by the Japanese. By the end our house was like an empty shell.

Mr. Buendia's house had also been emptied. Most of what I'd admired, all but the hardwood floors, had been removed. There was a Japanese sentry standing outside the door where Mr. Buendia would have stood to greet his guests. He'd be holding a cigar in one hand, his other hand resting on his big belly.

We were told to walk through two doors, down to the basement of the house, where there was already a group of men. We were ushered into the space by soldiers armed with rifles, gesturing with their pointy bayonets. It was dark inside the space. We were packed inside like sardines. I was glad for the dark—at least my son wouldn't see my fear. I was truly afraid then. The windows were shut. The doors were locked. There was no way to flee.

I could hear shouting upstairs. They were shouting words I didn't understand. I held my son close to me, up against my chest. He nestled his head into the nape of my neck like he used to do as a child. I could feel his heat and a heart beating, not sure if it was his or mine.

The familiar bells of Bauan Church rang out at noon, followed by a sizzling sound.

Then, an explosion. It must have knocked me out. When I opened my eyes, I was on the ground. I heard people—grown men—calling out for their mothers. Miguel was no longer in my arms. I

desperately crawled around looking for him. Then, another explosion. A splash of flesh. I was half naked, my ears ringing, hell all around. Bodies tangled in shards of floor. None of them my son's. I shouted out his name. I couldn't hear my own voice. I froze when I saw the soldiers. One of them was pouring kerosene. Another was bayoneting bodies on the ground. I panicked. I saw a gap where there once was a wall. I crawled to it. Then I ran. I didn't stop until I got to the bomb shelter. There were people inside the shelter already dead, covered in blood. I called out my son's name. I cried out. I was shaking, ashamed, too much of a coward to go back for him.

"Did you help the guerrillas?" Captain Pace asks. His question takes me by surprise. I

feel my heart quicken. I try to stall. I thought of the houses I visited in the dead of night, outside the town, the injured men I treated. I couldn't just let them die. Belen said it was the Christian thing to do. I was a doctor after all. I cleaned and dressed their wounds. I removed bullets, bits of metal from their flesh. I didn't ask how they got them.

"There are no guerrillas in Bauan."

"Just answer the question, Dr. Reyes. Did you help them?"

I take a deep breath, "No, Sir, I did not." I look away from his piercing blue eyes. A

lie and an omission. I don't tell them about my son.

"Did you go back to Mr. Buendia's house later on?"

"Yes, Sir...on March 28. I was appointed by the Colonel to bury the dead."

The Colonel sent me along with the mayor, the policemen and labourers. He told us

to gather the bodies and bury them. It was like God, disguised as an American colonel, was punishing me for leaving Miguel behind.

We found bodies on the roads, outside houses, in buildings, in the shelters, on the outskirts of town. We carried them in ox-drawn carts. We wheeled them to a mass grave—a large hole the labourers dug at the back of the local cemetery. We buried them there. No funeral. No priests. Most bodies already blackened. We wore handkerchiefs on our faces to cover our noses and mouths. We still got sick, most of us vomiting from the sight and the smell.

“How many dead persons did you find?”

“I think 250.”

“Can you give me their names?”

I list the names I can remember. I start with the priests. Then I begin to name the civilians. Pablo Castillo. Jorge Magboo. Jose Brual. Aldo Delgado. We found Lolo Aldo in his chicken shed. Nothing left of the chickens but stray feathers. We found Lolo Aldo's white-haired head on the ground a few feet from his body.

Belen told me that she waited for hours at the school with the other women and children. She said some of them ran outside when they heard the explosions. She stayed in the school, hid with the children under a teacher's desk. She said she eventually heard planes flying above. She thinks the planes saved them—the Japanese soldiers fled. She found bodies in the playground—the women and children who tried to run. There were more bodies in the streets. The streets were filled with smoke. She walked by the church—burning but still standing, its tower untouched. She said when she reached home, our house was on fire. Just inside the gate, she found our maid. Beneath the maid, she found our baby girl. Both bodies were covered in blood. I didn't tell Belen what I heard—the Japanese soldiers threw babies up in the air, catching them as they fell, on the tips of their bayonets.

Captain Pace interrupts me before I can finish my list. “That is enough Doctor.”

I watched the labourers dig out the bodies from Mr. Buendia’s house. I almost couldn’t bear it. But I forced myself. I sifted through the remains. I never found my son. Belen said I should have died that day along with him. If only Captain Pace was armed, I’d lunge forward and grab his gun. I’d shoot myself here in front of everyone.

“We have no further questions.”

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## New Poetry by Sharon Kennedy-Nolle: “Soundings”



HOLE IN ME / *image by Amalie Flynn*

### SOUNDINGS

Things,  
your black b-ball shoes,  
loose-laced, open-tongued,  
curse one corner;  
your books, benched, titles turned down;  
your trophy array, glitterings speechify  
—steering far from the sirenic  
roar of your closed room—

The tulips drip,  
yellows slackening,  
some randomly red-lined  
with a quirky genetic scrawl,  
into a drinking glass  
you left ...

Listen, all I can do  
is endure for a word  
in edgewise.

However I heave and haul,  
the lines come back hooked empty.

So fuck it,  
boots, shoes, shirts, books  
Throw them all in  
the hole in me,  
landfill in  
free fall  
spiking off  
the split bark of winter trees  
down fire-escaped stories  
through the uneasy laps of whitecaps,  
to thud some sandy bottom  
where you came to tossed rest.

Such depths, no fathoming?