

# Japanese Poetry Never Modifies

August 2011

I remember when you first joined, I used to tell you that the Army would be four years, the way that college had been four years, and that really used to help you. These days, I'm not so sure. You called me this morning on my way out the door. You know the routine, the sun's still not out yet so I go out onto the landing looking down on the parking lot to wait for the carpool of teachers so we can drive the hour north to Clinton. Closer to Mississippi than Baton Rouge, but we don't pick where we're assigned, you of all people know that. I was smoking my morning cigarette—God, I'm turning into my mother—when you called me and told me you'd killed a man. I didn't know what to do with that—I don't know what to do with a lot of the things you tell me. So I told you to wait, wait until you got home. We would deal with it together. You said you didn't feel anything, weren't you supposed to feel something? But then Jimmy and Becky and Mormon Rick showed up in the carpool, headlights jumping at the speed bump and I told you I had to go. You said you knew. Hung up.

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So why did I stay with you? Maybe because I remember the string lights hanging above us like torch flies when we'd kissed. The smell of the East River as you'd walked me to the train. The sound of your voice after midnight, how it felt like biting into something alive. The vacuous kinds of things people with marriages that never last say. Maybe because I looked at you, and there was a sadness on your face that you'd been born with, like the freckle beneath your eye or your fullness of your lips.

You told me about your mother, your father during the war, and I envied them. I thought your parents took up so much space in your heart, and I wanted to take up as much as they did, to be carried as you carry them. Maybe I'm just another white girl with a savior complex, but then, all those Peace Corps kids can always go home. It can't be like that for me; I need you. I'm struggling to figure out why. If you would just talk to me again in that open way you do like when we'd first met and it was like I'd known you all my life, if you'd topple those walls of sandbags and pull away those spirals of razor wire you put up around you, if you'd fucking say just one honest thing to me instead of going out there every day, rifle in hand, and pretending like you're doing something good even though you know you aren't.

When I hear your voice, I know that something else sits there in your heart, beside yours parents' memories. I should've known it was never them—a woman I'd met twice, and a man I'll never meet—who'd, like a festering tumor, plastered itself to that beating organ. It was always war, wasn't it? It grew, it grows, it will grow, and one day it'll kill you. I shouldn't have to compete with something so big for possession of you. Any sane woman would be long gone. But I wonder if that's what love is, a kind of insanity, an irrational urge to never wash your pillowcase and sleep in the dip you've left in the mattress. A mnemonic kleptomania of the way your hair feels between my fingers, the way your sweat smells stuck to all those worn out shirts, the way your eyes look in the sun—not black, but a deep, warm brown masquerading as the absence of color. A manic episode of binging on the way you smiled. A depressive plateau when I realize I may never see that smile again. I hoard these pieces of you and each one slices into me, bleeds me. It's the only thing that's real anymore, the pain of it. And I fear if I ever let go, I'll be letting go of a piece of myself.

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## Things That Quicken the Heart

(After Sei Shonagon)

How fewer egrets there were after the oil spill. Imagining you with an infant on your chest. Laying down to sleep and dreaming about waking up from this life into another. Looking into a broken mirror that splits me in two. A beautiful woman with a simple request who makes me forget you for just a moment. The weight of a camera, to spool a ribbon of cellophane into it and walk out onto a strange boulevard somewhere, and even if I'm nowhere special, I feel a drunken kind of pleasure knowing I can capture thirteen moments in time. After all this waiting, on a night someday soon, knowing that, like the summer rain, you'll come back to me and drown the stifling sun with the heat or cold of your body, making my heart quicken.

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You disappear for days or weeks at a time, and when I don't get an email or a phone call, I'll make whoever is driving us to work or home turn the radio to NPR so we can catch the BBC World Service or Steve Inskeep and Renee Montagne read the news. I'll hear things like, *five dead in Kandahar, drone strike in Helmand, bombing outside the embassy in Kabul*, and Becky or Mormon Rick might say, *oh God*, but I'd tell them it had nothing to do with you—probably. I often stew over their ignorance, tell them for the fiftieth time you're in Wardak province, *Wardak goddammit*, and they forget again the next time, but I guess I can't really blame them. They don't have maps of Afghanistan pinned to the walls of their bedrooms.

There was the week you sent me a short email, told me to check the news, and I looked up the *Times* and there was a developing story about that helicopter full of SEALs that'd been shot down, how it was the biggest loss of life in a single day since the beginning of the war. You called when you got back,

told me how, on the last day there in that valley, you'd killed that dog—a *bitch* you called her. But then you surprised me and said you wished you hadn't. You said there were pieces of men scattered all through the branches like Christmas ornaments; how the valley smelled like raw crab and you didn't think you could ever eat crab again. I didn't know what to say, then. I guess I don't know what to say still.

Then there was the day bin Laden died. I came home, turned on the news, watching those fraternity bros and sorority girls partying in the streets. I thought, they're the ones who should get drafted and they're the ones who should be sent over there, because I wanted you back here with me. It should be them, not you, over there fighting. But you don't know that, do you?

We say so little when we talk, always speaking around and past and between one another. You want to know more about home, and when I tell you what's happening in Louisiana, back home in New York, it only makes you seem further away than ever. I want to tell you, instead, how tragedy magnifies beauty, how this pain stitches us together, how I hope that someday all this distance and lack and yearning will be useful, one day. I want to tell you that you need to survive so we can start a family together, like we always wanted. I want to tell you that I know you'll be a good father, no matter how afraid you are of becoming one. Instead I just talk about the radiators in my classroom cranked up to eleven and phone bills and what so-and-so said at that party I'd half forgotten because I drank too much. If I could go back, change anything, I think I'd like to say what I feel more often.

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At the beginning of your tour, when we spoke on the phone, it felt like you were right next to me. Now you sound like you're on an entirely different planet.

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July 2011

When you told me Sergeant Finley died, I thought of his straw-haired wife, that EMT. I wondered if she would get a flag at his funeral, seeing as they'd been divorced. Or would they give it to her boy? I wanted to give you all the time and space in the world to grieve, I wished you would cry, if only to remind me that the man on the phone was the same man I'd fallen in love with. It's selfish, I know. But you didn't, so I cried for you.

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*There's still time*, that's what I kept thinking the whole time you were on mid-tour leave. Then it ran out and we missed our chance. Now, with all this—a dead man on your conscience, all that fighting, all those moral compromises that have shaken you, I can't help but think of where I went wrong, what I could've done differently to persuade you to run across the Canadian border. Now I worry that even if you make it home in one piece, it wouldn't matter, because I've already lost you.

I know there would have been consequences if you had run. Maybe you would never be able to come back to the States. But it was never your country—not really—anyone could see that. Just a flag and a bunch of stupid rules everyone agreed to. But then again I'm not one to talk, am I? I pay my taxes and have a bank account and drive a car to work every day, I follow the rules just like you, like everyone else. Sometimes I wonder if you think I'm a hypocrite, turning my back on my convictions. You used to say my life was politics, but now, I wonder if you think you couldn't trust a college anarchist who'd once shouted about abolishing the state, only to become one of its many drones. Maybe I'm projecting. Maybe telling you to run was selfish of me, a way for me to stay true to the woman I'd used to be. Or maybe this was a way to keep you all

to myself.

I thought I knew your heart well enough—you were always selfless in a way that you refused to see—and if you didn't do it for yourself (how could I ever believe you'd do something for yourself?), then at least you'd do it for me. I forgot about your boys. You were thinking about them after Finley died, weren't you? What you could have done differently. But if you'd gone AWOL, you wouldn't have been there and it wouldn't have been your fault and you wouldn't have to carry that around with you.

I also forgot about Afghanistan. The first few weeks you were there, you'd write me, saying that you hoped there'd be peace soon so I could see it. *No place as beautiful in the world*, you'd said, *you could understand how people believed in God—just seeing how small it makes a man feel*, you'd said. Sometimes you'd write angry e-mails or be flustered on the phone over how the people around you refused to see the Afghans as people. Mothers and fathers and children just like us. You'd wanted to do everything to help them, and I was proud of you, but now I wish I hadn't told you that, because I know your heart is over there, and not here with me.

Sometimes, I dream that you did run off, go AWOL. I see you rowing the little aluminum boat up Champlain, going north, and I'm worried you'll get lost or caught, but I'll remember that you're a soldier and I should have faith in you. In the dream, I wait months or years—impossible to say in that floating life—but I find you, we start our lives over. I go on teaching, you become an artist, we start a family—in Montreal, maybe. I dream our kids have miraculously red hair and wide smiles and you see them and forget all about that faraway country and the mountains that made you feel small. I dream this dream, and when I wake up, I half expect you to be in the kitchen making coffee, frying eggs.

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I worry sometimes that you'll kill yourself and leave me all alone to put the pieces back together. Maybe you wouldn't do it by your own hand, but let the enemy do it for you. That way you get to die a hero. I think about you, sitting on the bank of the Mississippi in New Orleans, before you deployed. We watched the barges and container ships easing past as slow as honey. You joked that if you were killed over there, I'd be able to pay off my student loans with the life insurance money.

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I've been thinking of writing poetry, like Shonagon's *The Pillow Book*. I like the idea of a book composed of lists. I like the way that, in Japanese, every word stands on its own.

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June 2011

When you were on leave, we developed rolls of your film and I saw all those smiling girls in the school you've been helping to support. I wish I could speak Dari and I didn't have asthma and I could come to Afghanistan and teach in your girls' school. I would teach math, just the same as I do here, teach them to make cranes from square sheets of paper, how to make garlands of them to hang in the classroom. We might have to share the same discomforts and dislocations and disappointments, but at least we would be sharing them together. At least that way, I'd be making a difference. Not like teaching to a test my kids will fail because they've got bigger problems, like grandparents on dialysis and electricity getting turned off and their unemployed parents and the revolving door of principals at the school.

If we actually did what we said we were supposed to—get kids to graduate and go off to college and rise out of this backwoods Jim Crow town, that'd put this whole white savior factory out of business, wouldn't it? I fantasize about flying

away from this place every time I go to the dollar store to buy school supplies to send you. When I pack boxes full of crayons and notebooks and pens and coloring books, with a carton of cigarettes or a can of shag tobacco on top for you, I feel like I'm sending myself over there piece by piece. I wish that were truly the case; that I could just mail myself out of here.

I used to look forward to teaching, but these days I'm just looking forward to the end of the week. One of my kids has been acting up since her father left, and one day poured a soda out on one of her friends. I didn't want to send her down to the vice principal's just to get smacked around a bit. I told you about the vice principal, didn't I? Has this big paddle hanging on the wall with air holes drilled into it and a handle wrapped in leather. My student's grandmother, who has taken over raising her, told me just to whup her right there in front of the whole class. That's what she'd said, *whup*. Said if I didn't want to do it, she knew enough teachers who'd be glad to. I thanked her and hung up. When I told it to one of the other teachers—a scab like me—she said I should've let the vice principal take care of it. *These kids can be animals*, she said. Her eyelids have become a sleepless shade of red, her skin—I used to marvel over how it was so clear she never had to wear foundation—was caked to cover up the way her skin looks like spoiled milk from all the stress. When she said, *animals*, there was a rusty creak in her birdsong voice. We were all so idealistic when we'd started. How much a year can wear on you.

I don't think you remember when I told you this on one of the nights we talked. Our conversation lasted only a few minutes—you'd just gotten back from a long patrol rotation. You didn't say much, but when you spoke, I heard that creak in your voice too.

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May 2011

After you started helping that Afghan school, I felt something else. A little worse than envy. It seemed like your work was the most important thing in the world and I took a back seat. You, playing the man, the savior, the martyr, the hero. You get to be Odysseus. I'm typecast as Penelope.

You fucker, can't you see how hard I've tried, how much work I've done for you? I do the taxes, I pay the bills, I go apartment hunting, I manage the bank accounts. I'm the one on the phone with the rear-detachment commander every time we get a red message, a white message, seeing if there's anything I can do for the families of those dead and wounded boys. I'm not some shrinking violet in the damn wives club, and even if I were, they've got kids to raise while you men are off playing GI Joe. Can't I be the hero of my own story?

But I don't suppose you know that. A little like how I can't know what combat is like, how I can't feel it in my veins. So how could you ever know what it's like waking up every morning and wondering if today will be the day two men arrive on my doorstep to tell me you're dead? How do we balance the two? How do we reach across these shores?

If I were the hero of this story, it would be the war at home, not the one over there that I'd fight. We'd march on the Capitol, throw off the government and hang the profiteers and politicians from their neckties, line Pennsylvania Avenue with their corpses and leave them for the crows. I'd build schools where we taught girls and boys that life isn't money; it's clear September days and the way the leaves are most beautiful before shedding in death and how finishing a book is as bittersweet as saying goodbye to a friend. If I were a hero, I'd go over there and rescue you, my damsel, and all the soldiers toiling and bleeding and dying. If I were a hero, I'd have a little agency, a choice to make, a journey with arcs and morals and an ending well earned, but this isn't that kind

of story.

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March 2011

Here is a List of Things That Make My Heart Lurch:

- Strangers' footsteps in front of my door.
- The country code +93 before a number beckoning on my phone.
- The word *Afghanistan*.
- The words *America* and *liberty* and *freedom*, and how I don't know what they mean anymore.
- The words *Standardized Testing*.
- How the word *rifle*, which figures so heavily into the stories you tell me, is so violating, as if a stranger goes through my things each time I hear it.
- A scowling parent and/or guardian.
- The sounds of police helicopters overhead and how I look up and wonder if you too are looking up at a metal bird beating its wings.
- The way I sometimes confuse your dismay at what you're doing over there with my dismay at what I'm doing here.
- Other couples with their cliches, couples who wonder if their lovers are looking up at the same moon. For you and me, that's impossible. The moon can't show its face to both of us at once, and my day is your night.
- Sleep deprivation combined the hour long commune to East Feliciana Parish at 5am.
- What waiting feels like.

-What nothing feels like.

-What knowing that no matter how hard I try, I'll fail feels like.

-The nightly news.

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February 2011

There's one memory I save for special occasions. I hide it away, use it sparingly to keep its blade sharp. It comes out when I'm alone and the night is cold like it had been the night we'd met. When I see a couple all tangled up in one another's arms. When the news reports six dead in a suicide bombing at a remote forward operating base. In it, you walk me to the train. I wear your coat. You even swiped onto the platform to see me onto the car. Then I gave you my number. Then the train took me home. You forgot to take your coat back. Then you called the next day. No one does that.

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January 2011

I wish my great-grandmother Ada were still alive today, so she could tell me what it was like to see her husband enlisted in the Navy and sent off to the battles on the Atlantic. I wish I were as lucky as she; to learn that the war had ended ahead of schedule, sparing my great grandfather, sparing the generations that followed from meeting our ends at the hands of a German submarine captain. I'd want to ask her what was in my great-grandfather's heart when he'd sworn that oath of enlistment to a country that hadn't considered us Jews any more American than they consider blacks or Latinos or anyone or Vietnamese. I'd want to know what my grandfather's skin felt like when they reunited, if the sun had tanned and cracked his face, if ropes had calloused the palms and

fingertips his large hands, if there were other changes—in his heart for instance—which took years to undo, changes which could never be undone.

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November 2010

I sometimes wonder if it was right to follow you to this place. I wondered it the day you left, and I saw you march to the buses that'd take you to the plane that'd take you away. I had to drive the two hours back to Baton Rouge to get to work on time, and I got lost in a cornfield because I couldn't stop crying long enough to notice I'd taken a wrong turn, and I thought why the fuck did I follow you here? I don't mean Louisiana.

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October 2010

I hadn't been able see you when the whole brigade assembled on Honor Field, patchy with carcinomas of dead grass and barren dirt. You said you you'd be in the first rank, and that may have been true, but I didn't see you. You said you saw me there, in my green dress with my Yashica in hand, waiting to snap a six by six of you, my soldier husband. I thought I'd show it to our children one day, and they'd say it was funny how daddy's body blended into the bodies around him, your uniforms melting into the half-dead landscape. A hot day, and the medics had their hands full with soldiers passing out from standing in the sun so long. Everyone wore those bladders of water on their backs, and you seemed less like brave soldiers and more like brigade of hunchbacks. They played some Sousa march from speakers hooked up to a CD player. It reminded me of high school football games. I thought of our future children again, and what you said to me when your orders came through for Afghanistan—there was more danger here, in America. That I ran a higher risk of dying in a car crash than

you did in combat. Look at the numbers, how few people died anymore. Saved by the wonders of modern medicine, all the clotting agents and cargo planes turned into ICUs and little strips of velcro and ballistic nylon used to stem blood from severed limbs. You told me about all these things that were meant to reassure me, but didn't. You marched past and I couldn't find you, so I snapped a photo of a row of soldiers, their heads turned to face the reviewing stand.

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September 2010

At the cavalry ball, you men all wore your ridiculous cowboy hats and silver spurs on your shoes as if they made you like those horse soldiers on the plains, as if they tied you to history. It would've been amusing if I was drunk, but I stayed sober so I could drive us the hour home. I stewed. At our table, Barker kept making jokes about the red snapper, and I told him to shut his mouth. I think his wife, Kelly, smiled at that, but I can't be sure. She didn't say anything all night.

You sang your damn songs and waved your damn flags, and I thought it was all a nice bit of trickery, all this ceremony and pomp. What is it Napoleon said, that he could persuade a man to die for a pretty piece of ribbon? You were getting drunk with your soldiers, who had their arms around you, pulling you towards the dance floor, and I could see how uncomfortable that made you; how you couldn't tell where the line was between fraternal love and fraternization. But they were—we all were—just a bunch of dumb kids.

I didn't talk to the officers' wives; we didn't have anything in common, not really. Tupperware parties and boozy breakfasts and needlepoint or whatever it was they did with their time. The enlisted wives—who were covered in tattoos with jobs as bakers or smile-worn shop girls or soon-to-be de facto single mothers—all reminded me of people back home, a little creased

and windswept, even though they were, for most part, youngish. Two of them were still in their teens; they could've been plucked out of the graduating class of my anemic Upstate high school. They were both knock-kneed and vine-armed and clinging to each other while their husbands—barely old enough to drink themselves—fed them booze for what I'm sure they thought would be a romantic night. They reminded me too much of home, so I kept to myself. I was alone, even then, even with you just a few yards away. That's not why I came to shindig, to sit by myself and watch a bunch of grown men act like kids who'd broken into their parents' liquor cabinet.

You and I used to sit in laundromats and make up stories about strangers passing by the big storefront window or eavesdrop on diners in the restaurants we could barely afford, whispering jokes about their problems and arguments and bougie sensibilities. We'd been so sure we would never be those people. I remember once, it had rained while we were out buying books and it didn't let up, so we'd had to spring to the L and rode home soaked. You put my book—I can't even remember what I'd bought—and stuffed it under your jacket so it wouldn't get wet. We stripped out of our clothes when we got home and you made tea. I lay in bed naked, thumbing through a graphic novel—*The Photographer*—and there was something about all those images, the real contacts sheets and fictive illustrations, and the way the protagonist cried that'd given me the idea to give you a camera to take with you over there. You brought in the tea and we drank it. Got under the covers of your thin twin mattress, and stayed up talking about all the nothing we'd do after you were done with the Army, talking about where we'd live and what our kids might look like—if we wanted them. We'd talked about how, sometimes, the most important thing in an image wasn't its subject, but what lay just outside the frame. We'd talked until we stopped, and we stopped because we slept, and we slept through the soundless night in your windowless room and it felt like the world had ended and it was just the two of us in our abandoned

city. When I woke, I was disappointed to hear your roommates shuffling around outside the door, to hear that life had continued without us.

Here it was again, all this life around me marching forward, but this time I was alone. Your men kept pressing drinks on you, and each time you refused, but took it anyway, and you were all were singing, *I wanna be in the cavalry, if they send me off to war*. So I went to have a cigarette, out in the air, which was somehow as sticky hot as inside, and found a bench out front. I hadn't noticed that Barker had followed me out. He asked me if I was okay, and I just shrugged, and didn't say anything. I gathered he wasn't used to that—not being listened to. He started talking about my dress, if this was one of those ironic things people my age did. Something about making a statement by dressing like a flapper instead of wearing a ball gown like all the other women. It was an A-line, a formal mid-century modern piece I'd found in a thrift store, but I didn't bother to correct him. I was a little afraid of him, the way he looked at me, the way he swayed ever so slightly. He was drunk, and I might be able to throw a mean punch, but he's a large man and we were basically alone. I crossed my arms, like I was cold. He offered me his jacket, which I didn't want. He sat down beside me, fanned himself with his Stetson. He said I shouldn't worry, he'd do what he could to bring me back. He said it'd be hard, what I was about to go through, told me how when he'd come back after Iraq, *things with Kelly, well they'd never gone back to the way they'd been before*. I thought these were just the musings of a drunkard who'd stayed in the Army too long, who'd lost touch. These days, I wonder if he was trying to warn me.

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~~Here is a List of Things I Would Do if I Left You:~~

Here is a List of Things I Would Do if You Died:

~~-Drink~~ Find something less cliché to do, something warm and numbing, something that feels like early-onset dementia—and permanent.

-Find someone new to sleep with and feel nothing.

-Gather up a handful of blow-flowers and instead of doing what the name commands, set them on fire.

-Think about suicide without making a plan.

~~-Eat a handful of pills.~~ I *could* eat a handful of pills, but someone would find me because I'm a broke-ass teacher and we share everything, like cars and bar tabs and apartments and a pool of school supplies which always comes up short when you go looking for another manila folder or calculator battery—and yeah, we share pills too—so that's out.

-Think about suicide and try not to look at the Huey P. Long bridge—the second smaller one, its steel bones oxidizing to death—or the Mississippi. Think about how stupid people are when they believe water will somehow be softer than concrete at that height.

-Go to the funeral.

-Push everyone away.

-Quit TFA and leave all the future politicians padding their resumes and the twenty-two-year-old scabs who don't know better and the white saviors with their Jesus complexes behind.

-Nothing.

-More nothing.

-Enough nothing to get behind on the rent, which, as you know, is not at all like me.

-Live out of my car for a while.

-Consider moving to Arizona like my doctor had suggested when I'd been hospitalized for asthma for the fifth time in a year. Consider doing something with turquoise, maybe. Remember how much I hate sand and heat and the sun and fucking turquoise.

-Move back in with my parents.

-Climb the Adirondacks

-Try not to think about suicide when I make a climb in the rain. Try not to hope for an accident, a slip, a broken neck, a painless death.

-Write poetry, let one be titled: *Here is a List of Things I Would Do if You Died.*

-Write a poem titled: *Here is a List of Things I Would Do if I Left You.*

-Burn everything I'd written.

-Never write poetry again.

-Never shave a hair on my body again.

-Never date another man again.

-Never look at anything that reminds me of you.

-Never start wearing makeup.

-Never date.

-Never say never.

-Drink, and try to think of less cliché things to do with grief.

-Apply to every job that'll take me to the place that took you from me.

-If rejected from every job for which I'd applied: book a

ticket to Kabul anyway.

-Make a list of things to pack. A camera will be at the top of it.

-If visa to Afghanistan gets rejected, buy a ticket to Pakistan, plan to sneak across the border.

-Come home alive or die there or never come home at all or abandon all those plans—I haven't decided yet.

-Buy a hairless cat, name him/her/they Gefilte Fish. (I've always wanted a cat.)

-Live longer than my cat; remember that nothing lasts, especially not love.

-Find the shoeboxes and musk-laden clothes and books and 35mm negatives that remind me of you and start a fire and burn it all and immediately regret what I've done.

-Find some small town—preferably in Vermont—with an empty role to fill, a need, a lack. Occupy that unoccupied space, and with time, become a familiar fixture, a woman with graying hair, a woman past her prime and alone. Become someone everyone wonders about, worries about. Become an enigma, a mystery. Let them say, *there's Old Lady Fishman, off to the library/animal shelter/schoolhouse/tollbooth, what a sad story*—even if they can only speculate. I'll put my lights on at Halloween and give out full-sized candy bars. I'll put out food for all the neighborhood strays and the town will try to stop me, but they won't succeed. I'll teach a class to the local kids on how to photograph, just like I'd taught you; I'd teach them to think about the picture plane and what lies outside it and how absence is sometimes more poignant. Maybe I'll find another lonely woman, let her fall in love, never her tell her anything. (She'll leave eventually.) And when I'm in my autumnal years, I'll think of how trees are most beautiful before they die and think about you and not think

about suicide and fade and fade and finally go, and I'll die thinking that if I can let you go in this life, it'll make the next one, our next meeting, our next reunion, that much more sweet.

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March 2010

Our honeymoon was one night in a fancy hotel. The next day, you drove two days south to your new unit.

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Our wedding day, in the living room of my parents' creaky old farmhouse, was a string of mishaps. It was rushed. So much went wrong. My mother was sour that we hadn't asked the rabbi to conduct the ceremony, but a county judge. At least he looked Jewish, she said. When your family arrived, your grandmother brought me a jade bracelet as a wedding present, but it wouldn't slip over my knuckles, not even with a little grease, so I couldn't accept it. Then I heard your little brother whisper to my brother how he'd just enlisted, and to not tell you, because last time you saw him, you'd told him not to join. Then we even saw each other before the ceremony, and my mother rushed you back into my bedroom where you were changing. It's a stupid tradition to keep bride and groom apart, but I guess that's what I'd signed up for. Some anarchist I am. Just to make sure, you practiced breaking the glass under the *chuppa* half a dozen times, and each time you did it perfectly.

But then none of it mattered, because I saw the tears in your eyes and heard the shudder in your voice when you recited our vows. I wasn't thinking of tomorrow or the next day, just this moment together. If you weren't wearing your dress blues, we could've pretended we were just like any other couple in the world. But I hold onto that moment, that idea that a wedding ring represents infinity—I hoped, for once, one of these damn

symbols would hold up. My father put the glass on the ground. You brought your foot down on it, but it slid off, breaking only the stem. I wonder now if it was an omen, but you'd always been the superstitious one, not me.

#

After we got our marriage license, we threw ourselves a little engagement party. You were on leave. The old rad crew was all there, belting out *Defiance, Ohio* songs and dancing like the tomorrow would never come to that indie electronica garbage you like so much. There were gifts, even—like we were real adults. Sara brought us that Spanish wine that we didn't know would turn to vinegar during the move to Louisiana. Daria brought us pralines from New Orleans without knowing I was allergic to all those tree-nuts. We got a few cards, a leather-bound edition of *Arabian Nights* from Ranya, which, if you're wondering, I call dibs on if we ever get divorced. I don't know why I joke like that. I don't know if I could've stood any more gifts than that, and thank God all our friends lived on day-old bread and bottles of Four Roses and were too broke to give us anything but their presence—or pretended to be that poor, at least.

Everyone marveled at how we were getting married, how young we were—I was 21, you were 22. I guess we're still young, in a way. I know some people judged us for it. Judged me, really. They were my friends, anyway. All those dreadlocked boys with their bandannas tied around their necks like their convictions and girls who'd thought freeing the nipple was the first step towards the revolution. That's the thing, we were so young, believed so ardently that things like matrimony and jobs are quaint antiquities that belong in museums. But that's not real life. They didn't have to worry about the things we did to pay for college like holding three jobs or joining the military, and still leaving with tens of thousands of dollars in student loan debt. If I told them how it is now, waking up in the night, thinking there's a knock at the door, and two men in

their blues are waiting outside, what would they say? If it were them, what would they do? Anyway it was my choice.

Arianna was there. You already know all about us. You already know she was never right for me. But she's loyal, and my friend, and I couldn't just throw that away. She watched the two of us dancing our asses off, dancing and drinking because it all hurt so much was already on our shoulders. I found her crying in the stairwell, her voice bouncing off the breezeblocks. She'd told me she asked you why you were doing this—the Army and all that. You said you had to go. She told me, *he's got you, Mir, and now what're we going to do?* I didn't know what she was talking about, but she was drunk, and I pulled her up and folded her into my arms. She held the hug for a little too long, pressing her nose into my hair. She pulled back and looked at me with her head tilted to the side, her eyes half-closed. I don't know when I'll ever get around to telling you this, Dave, but she tried to kiss me. Like it was the easiest thing in the world to get me back, like real life and marriage and hardship and poverty were quaint things best left in museums. I dragged her back inside, told her she was drunk.

#

November 2009

I decided we'd get engaged, there in the whispering gallery with all those Metro North commuters buzzing past. We were going to my Aunt's place in Westchester. You were on pass; flown in from Armor School for Thanksgiving. I was thinking how we had so little time, how fast life was moving—and wasn't it crazy that two kids had to rush like this? But it wasn't rushing, it was the right time. How we knew, and couldn't explain it, but we did. I was thinking, *at least if he gets hurt, I'll get to come to the hospital. At least if he dies, I'll get a folded American flag. A Gold Star in my window. The excuse of a lifetime.* I was thinking how I'd look in a black

dress and a black veil and what it'd feel like to watch your body lowered into the ground and how selfish I was—that's what came to mind, selfishness—to fantasize about your death.

And/or I was thinking of simple things—the ways your eyes snatch the light out of the room, how your face opens up when you see a film, the way your hair feels between my fingertips. How our words curl and nest into each other's and I feel like something missing had been found. Does that make sense? Let me try another way of saying it. When you speak, I can't help but listen. When I talk, I can't help but feel heard. And without you, I'm mute to the world, deaf to its music. How no one else in the world can do that to me. Fuck me, I'm drunk and you've got me talking all purple. I've always hated over-qualified language. But it's always the small things, the details.

I thought these things, and decided—in a split second—to tell you to stand in one corner and press your ear to the tiled wall. I hushed my words up the vaulted ceiling and over the bustling commuters' heads and into your ear. I slipped those words in like my tongue, and I could almost taste the bitter wax and delicate hairs when I said *marry me*. I thought about how I could stick my tongue in your ear, and that's all I needed to get you going. I was thinking how much like foreplay it was. How our children might look, what features they'd steal from you, from me. What your body would look like beneath a closed casket, because I can't imagine it being anything but closed. How there'd be a hunk of me carved away and how I'd wake up each morning you were gone and be surprised that I'd waken up at all.

#

October 2009

As a birthday present, I sent you a copy of Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*. You said it was the best gift you'd ever received. Then, you sent me the diary you'd filled since you'd

started training. I was dismayed at how often you'd sketched scenes of your own death.

#

August 2009

You went back and forth between the city and all those joint bases and forts and posts where you'd trained. Each time, you'd come back to me a little changed—though I don't think you'd noticed. After Fort Benning, your manner had stiffened. You told me how one of your training sergeants said you were too polite, that it just wouldn't do in combat. They asked which branch you'd been assigned to, and when you told them Armor and Cavalry, they laughed. No room for good manners among tankers and scouts, they'd said. Still, you spent nearly all your pay on flights back to me when they gave you the rare weekend pass. I thought that'd be enough to keep us—this—going.

#

July 2009

There's a photo you took of me in Montana, on the first leg of our cross-country road trip. That was supposed to be our send-off. The last hurrah between college and the real world. We'd agreed that this was how our relationship would end. I look at that photo now; I use it as the backdrop for my computer, and sometimes I think it's a kind of self harm, like I'm carving hatch-marks into my skin every time I set my eyes on it. I'm the subject in the photo—a strange sensation. I'm wearing your plaid flannel, cleaning my camera. There's a layering of images—you're on the other side of the motel window, the reflection of a parking lot of cars superimposed on our room, the ghost of your silhouette imprinted on the pane of glass. I see me as you see me, and that makes the distance harder. Don't ask me to explain how that works. I'm looking at the photo, and it's only been a year, but I'm already thinking, *I*

*used to have such good skin, I'm already thinking, we used to be so young.*

We went out to dinner that night at the motel bar, where they served us steak and fries, and when we were done, we got a six-pack of that skunky beer they called Moose Drool, which I hated, but which you liked just fine. When we finished it, we had sex on the motel bed with a movie flickering on our bodies, and it felt desperate, like something out of a neo-noir film, like we were on the run from gangsters or cops or both, and of course they'd all have ridiculous accents. *Cawfee. Shawtgun. Brawd.* I wished it was real—that we were on the run, I mean. And if the villains caught up to us at the end and we made our last stand in some seedy parking garage staring down a dozen goons with automatics, that would be fine by me.

At the time, I was thinking about how far we'd come to just end it. It couldn't; I couldn't. We saw Ohio and all that flat farmland, Chicago on the shore where you reached down and dipped your hand into Lake Michigan, the Twin cities where we imagined ourselves settling in a brick house if New York ever sank into the Atlantic, the Crow Reservation where I wanted to go one day, to teach, and past Billings and Bozeman and Butte and Missoula and into the Rockies. How much further we'd go. Past the mountains, into Idaho, through Coeur d'Alene, where you'd be terrified of the way down, coasting the whole winding descent. We'd strike forth into the Eastern Washington scrublands and desert, into the Redwood forests and onto the coast, the briny-aired Pacific coast. And I'd imagine it'd be a new beginning, just the two of us. I would've let that air stay in my lungs forever if I could, but it wasn't the start of a new life, just a brief interlude.

When you reported to your first duty station—a temporary posting to train cadets, just like you'd been a year ago—I flew back to New York to my para job at PS 21 and the ICP gig. You'd given me all those rolls of film and all those moments

from our trip, and when I developed them, I was surprised to see how many you'd taken of me. That image of me in your flannel, the ghost of you on the window. I thought about asking you to marry me.

I'm thinking about that damn photo, and thinking about taking it down, replacing it with a black field, because when I look at it, I remember that what I'd felt when we drove across the mountains and forests and plains and cities of this God-forsaken country, how I felt like the last woman alone left on Earth with the only man in the entire world, and that hurts, Dave, you can't imagine how much that hurts.

#



May 2009

I gave you my dad's old 35mm before we graduated, and we went out into Carroll Gardens to practice shooting. You didn't load the film right—the sprocket holes hadn't lined up. I took it to the dark room and found one long, empty strip. I still have photos of you from that day—you on top of a traffic light control box, you at the edge of the F and G train tracks, you in front of Rocketship Comics aiming your lens at me. You thinking you'd captured all these moments.

#

I try writing about things, like they'll make them easier to say. All that comes out is bad poetry, fragments of memories.

#

Do you remember how you'd been saying that you knew distance was hard? You never said you were thinking about your parents, about the day your dad had left.

#

Do you remember our first date, not the time we met at the Waverly, but our first real date? Film Forum was showing *Sans Soleil*. You left the theatre in a haze.

#

I can't seem to describe a sun as a sun unless it's radiant. A spring is not a spring unless it's limpid.

#

I remember the first time you said, *I love you*. It wasn't when you thought, not at the top of the Williamsburgh Savings Bank, but in your sleep when you came to stay the night in the dorm where I RA'd.

#

January 2008

I follow my friends to your place for a party, a rent party they called it. There you are, thinking you're so smooth, but you're drunk off your ass. Handsome in your own awkward kind of way, and not stringy like all the beanie bearded hipsters. At least you're not dangerous. At least I've got my friend around me. You ask if I'm Jewish, and I think that's an odd kink. I want nothing to do with you; I'm looking to hook up with another girl. I'd broken up with Arianna a few days before, but I won't mention that. And you're still here, acting like a schmuck. The music's playing, some David Bowie cover band. You pour me a beer that's ninety percent foam, grinning at me the whole time.

A few minutes later, I witness you making out with someone else. (Did you forget you'd been hitting on me?) You had the nerve to come back, trying your bungling German pickup lines (I'd told you I spent a semester in Berlin). I was a little down, and hell, you ask nicely, so I let you kiss me. We make out, and it's nice because I can forget about my two jobs and

student debt and financial aid and Arianna. I can forget, and you've got wide, soft lips, and the press of your fingertips just wrap me up in this second. You try to convince me to stay the night. I laugh, tell you I've got work in the morning (I lie). Just a little make out session, that's all it's supposed to be. That's all I need. But you sober up. We talk a little, dance a little, there's a DJ on now. When I want to go home, you offer to walk me all the way to the train in the snow. It's not snowing, but it's a nice flourish, and that's how I'll choose to remember it.

You wear your flannel shirt, and I wear your workman's coat. The streetlights all take on fuzzy haloes and toss our shadows far ahead and behind us. You tell me you listen to electro-clash and hip-hop and folk music. I stare at the warehouses that go for blocks, the ones under demolition and the fishbowl condos taking their places. You tell me how when you hear Pete Seeger play Frank Proffitt's "Going Across the Mountain" the banjo sounds just like a *dan nguyet*, how that song about the Civil War might as well be a Vietnamese song. We're all wrapped up in history, I say, and you ask me if you can hold my hand and I say yes. A hipster dive is still open on North Fifth. A Polish bar is still open on Bedford Ave. But they'll be closed soon. We're racing daylight for a few hours of sleep. The warehouses end on a block of vinyl-sides row-houses and shutters shops and restaurants. I expect you to leave at the corner of the station, but you walk down. I expect you to say goodbye at the turnstile, but you swipe in. We wait on the platform and I tell you about folk-punk, which you think sounds a little funny, but say makes sense anyway. You apologize for being so forward at the party, and ask to see me again.

The train won't be here for another fifteen, and you tell me about your future, what the next couple of years hold. The Army. I write my number in the notebook I find in your coat pocket, a fresh one with a few sketches—a dead rat, a woman

holding a child, the facade of a brownstone being demolished, but the rest is still fresh, blank. It's the empty sheets of paper which appeal to me the most. I say I'd like to see you again, but what I say is overpowered by the announcement that the train is here. It howls into the station and the doors open and I enter and you're on the edge of the platform and I'm on the edge of the car and for a moment that's nothing between us and you ask to kiss me and I nod but the doors close. I try to tell you that we have all the time in the world for a kiss, but the announcer is too loud, the doors too thick. Then the train takes me away.

*"Japanese Poetry Never Modifies" first appeared in the [Columbia Journal](#), November 12, 2018.*

Photo courtesy [goodfreephotos.com](#).

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## New Poetry by WBT Editors

This special September Poetry & Fiction issue brings you poetry by WBT Editors Adrian Bonenberger, Drew Pham, and Matthew J. Hefti.



Photo Credit: [philmofresh](#)

# Poetry by Matthew J. Hefti

## Poet,

Why do you speak of beauty?

Why do you invest

in currency that pays no dividends,

in one drop of dew on a thirsty blade of green grass?

Why do you search for sweet simile,

like a myopic infant rooting for her mother's breast?

Why pine for the radiant jasper of the New Jerusalem

in one perfect metaphor?

Why agonize over an alliteration that accompanies

the princely prancing of your perfect pet,

or the comrades, cots, cannons, and killings

you can't seem to forget?

Why do you expend the energy

of the world's strongest man, chained and bridled,

pulling a rusty green Volkswagen van with his teeth

just to capture one singular image?

Why do you abdicate the embrace of the sun

and the caress of the wind

to seek pleasure in the squeaky office chair,

the cracked coffee mug, and the sticky backspace key?

Why do you carelessly drop

the dingy cotton bathrobe of your self  
to leave your own wounded soul on the white page naked,  
obscene, hairy, and a little overweight?

Poet,

Why do you sate yourself with words  
while the world falls apart around you?

---

## Poetry by Adrian Bonenberger

### The Dogs

Four soldiers stand atop a fort's broad walls,  
grandsons of an itinerated lot,  
alert for local mischief, native grief,  
the hostile truth beneath provincial eyes,  
they watch, Hellenic marble statues all,  
aloof, scanning the hills around, flex backs,  
gulp coffee, water, soda, more-chew bread,  
defeat the empty seconds one by one,  
with puffs on Pakistani cigarettes.

An enterprising soldier yells and marks—  
*The Afghan dogs are out! Amid the shit!*  
the fort's high pile of refuse teems with dogs,  
they've risen unexpected from the dross,  
ten mottled muzzles nestle, snap, and gnarl,  
yip and growling, which to scarf the most,  
their hoary feral stomachs brook no pause,  
as heavy, reeking discharge spurs them on.

One man can stop the plunder, one look-out:  
the sergeant bounces out to shoot them off  
astride a monstrous four-wheeled greenish toy,  
and punctures every canine, clatters full  
each heaving hairy breast with hotted lead,  
then roars the iron steed back through the gates,  
his purpose-full demeanor purpose-slakes.

Below, the sergeant by his noble mare  
reminds the picket of its evening task:  
*Don't let them take us unaware again,  
to eat our trash, our shit, it's just not right,  
therefore you must keep circumspect, all night,  
to triumph in this brutal, dry campaign.*  
to underline his will, the sergeant points  
at each young soldier in their trembling turn.

But as the sergeant's kingly finger falls,  
the ablest soldier lifts his voice anew:  
*The Afghan dogs are back, let loose the cry!  
They've come again, in greater numbers yet,  
a host of mutts now twice the normal size!*  
This new band feasts on the dead dogs' hot guts,  
barking and howling blissfully anew,  
paw-deep in dysentery's awful stench,  
they tear and bolt the corpses of their kin.

The sergeant's iron steed has frozen stiff,  
appalled at the uncivilized repast,  
it coughs and stutters, mocks the sergeant's hand,  
while loud, ecstatic crunching echoes near.

*Fire, the sergeant yells, don't stand there, shoot!  
these hellish curs cannot be let to root  
among their fallen mates, the dead to loot!*

Two of the guards align the fort's defense:  
machine guns drum and spit their lethal pills,  
entrail the feasters, shred their wolfish snouts,  
flake howls of pleasure into howls of pain,  
remorseless hammered argument unchecked,  
until the routed lot, abled, retreats.

The sergeant eyes his men, now, sees their stock,  
*too little ammunition, says his gut  
to guard this place from any more attacks.*  
No time to state this knowledge, for, a shout  
compels his vision to another place:

*The Afghan dogs again! Now from the East  
and North they lope, hundreds of feral curs  
a bolder pack, unlike we've seen before!*

Light dew bedecks the sergeant's upper lip,  
he bids it leave, as more slides down his brow,  
the shuddered knee he firms, puts fist in mouth  
then climbs atop the wall, aims at a face:  
*make each shot count, he calls, and flames the dark.*

Dauntless the dogs press on, now used to death,  
they've seen their comrades slain and know the why,  
ignore the feculence and blood beside,

united in their newfound quest: the fort.

Rifles, machine guns stutter out their waltz,  
then one by one fall quiet, bullets spent,  
a rug of twitching paws and fur-filled forms  
becoat the fort's encircling, emptied glebe,  
their numbers thinned, the pack drives on despite.

As growls and barks the solid gateway near,  
a lusty vengeful wave prepares its swell,  
high-howled crescendo jars the stolid walls,  
beats fear beneath the helmets lined above.  
One soldier turns, *what feud have they with we?  
Surely this cannot be because our crap  
is of such value to the savage tongue—  
how could what we reck little, they think great,  
and fling their precious lives away for dung?*

The sergeant claps the soldier's nervous arm,  
draws out that old device they'd boggled with:  
the bayonet, tool of a bygone age,  
salvation to the military eye.  
*Like Patton, George and Chamberlain before,  
we've but to show these strays our steel, once tamed  
by brave display, they'll trouble us no more.*

With that he knifes the rifle's edgeless front,  
urges the four young soldiers follow suit,  
so armed by five crude spears the team descends,  
the sergeant's thrice-swept clout compels their haste,  
beyond the iron gate to stand athwart.

Outside the fort's immense protective shell,  
those great chthonic wire-basket stacks,  
a gibbous moon now lights the dusty sea,  
non-Euclidean shade titanic grows ,  
strikes mute the men, a vast nocturnal blank:  
the cunning foe has vanished in the night,  
and spurned the group's aspiring gameful blades.

No dogs patrol the garbage hole, munch trash,  
lap crud-incrusted metal bowls behind;  
none harvest corpses of their fallen mates,  
nor swarm the fort in hundreds, hunt for blood,  
The desert's bare of life beyond the five.

*Well lads, that's done* the cheerless sergeant sighs,  
deflated by the mission's sudden lack,  
*we should feel happy, for, we've won,* he says,  
then slumps, slouches back to the peaceful post,  
til safe, they wait within the pebbled pen.

*They won't soon bother us again, I think,*  
one soldier claims, *we showed them mongrels good*  
then jumps—a booming, mournful howl erupts,  
and farther in the higher hills is joined  
by all the weary province, near and else.

---

# Poetry by Drew Pham

## War is a Place

(after Yehuda Amichai)

What did I learn about Americans  
Once, only glimpsed on TV screens  
in blue jeans  
The first ones I saw came out of the air  
spilled onto the earth by mechanical dragonflies  
They wore clothes the colors of earth and leaves  
They bore every possession on their chests and backs  
Like traveling peddlers selling nothing  
but a presaged defeat  
trailing each man like a wavering pennant  
And they took homes  
And took fathers  
Though he arranged my marriage to a stranger  
I did not wish that he disappeared in the night

What else did I learn. To smile always  
A smile could buy a clicking pen or sweets  
If it might save my brothers from my father's fate  
I smiled  
In refugee camps a smile meant  
a quart more of cooking oil  
traded for a clamshell of rouge  
There too, Americans  
Faces like night or the moon  
Eyes hypnotized by a screen, fingers on  
keys Smiles can end with visas, plane tickets

Above all I learned in America, war is a place  
Terrible, always, but also somewhere else  
Not here, but across a sea  
I saw the ocean for the first time in New York  
Once, I thought the mountains were great  
Now I know they are meager rocks  
compared to walls of water and salt  
Now I see America  
Why they found us  
Why they seared the earth  
Why they took my fathers  
Took me  
One day Americans will take my son  
he will go over the ocean, just a blue field  
And to him the mountains will be immense and  
endless

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## Poetry by Matthew J. Hefti

### What Poetry Is

When I was a prep-school student,  
I translated, "Gallia est omnis divisa in partest tres"  
from the dead  
ancient language.  
But I didn't care how they plundered and divided Gaul,  
so I scratched evidence of my presence  
into the cheap clapboard desk.  
Its underside was covered in chewed bubble gum;  
its top side was covered in names,  
and that was poetry.

I moved on to university  
and read Keats and Wordsworth and Shakespeare and Longfellow  
and more *dead*  
ancient language  
in musty, highlighted, used textbooks.  
But that too was dreadful,  
so I scratched my feelings  
all over college-ruled notebooks with black and white  
spotted covers,  
and I sometimes spilled beer on the pages,  
and that was poetry.

I read and I dreamed and I read,  
but soon everything I wrote bore a certain resemblance  
to all the *dead*  
ancient language.  
So I stopped writing,  
all except the occasional haiku in magic marker  
on the forehead of my passed out, red-headed roommate.  
I melted into the velour flower sofa  
and watched a whisper of smoke at the end of a pipe  
climb up to heaven like a prayer  
or a whimper,  
and that was poetry.

Somewhere and sometime after that, life happened,  
and wars happened,  
and we dropped blood onto sand,  
and that was poetry.

I traveled around the world countless times (eight to be  
exact),  
and I visited countless countries (twenty-three to be  
exact),  
and I lost countless friends (twelve to be exact).  
I woke up in starts in cramped economy seats,

always with a dry uvula and a chin covered in drool.  
Each cattle-car airplane was the same  
no matter which exotic desert we flew from,  
and it was impossible to rest.  
So I'd scratch the names  
of the dead  
on frequent flier ticket stubs,  
and this was poetry.

Then for years I just tended the lawn  
and plugged ear buds into my head  
and turned the music up way too loud  
to bury my own thoughts  
and the dead  
as I made perfect passes along the front of my perfect  
stateside house,  
alternating directions each week to make the green really  
pop  
the way the carpet pops after a fresh vacuuming,  
stopping only to drink more beer and admire the straightness  
of the lines.  
And that was poetry.

It wasn't long before I caught a fever,  
and the music wasn't loud enough to bury anything,  
let alone the dead,  
so I bought notebooks with black and white spotted covers,  
and I let them pile up on my shelves  
until the tilted stacks nearly collapsed.  
But there was potential in those blank pages  
and I could feel it,  
and that was poetry.

Now I light the same nag champa incense every night because I  
once read an article  
that said to create you must create a Pavlovian response in

your writing  
environment.

I light the incense and sit with a chewed up ball point pen  
in hand  
and I scratch a bunch of drivel into the notebooks;  
i.e., the college ruled notebooks with black and white  
spotted covers,  
and I sometimes write something that somehow  
buries all the dead,  
and that is poetry.

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## Resistance                      Dispatches: Foreign and Domestic



Every American soldier takes an oath to support and defend the Constitution against all enemies. Since I left the service, I wondered who those enemies truly were. Once, I thought they were those disciples of God in the mountains of Afghanistan. When we went to war, the newsreaders told us that the Taliban buried women up to their necks and crushed their skulls with stone. It was a war on American ideals, because it was a war on women. They locked them away like prisoners, forced them into marriage, scarred their faces with acid. Though I cannot say what this had to do with airplanes pitched into our monuments of commerce and battle, I went to war to fight in the name of women whom I never saw. The closest I ever came was when we killed the men and heard the mothers, sisters, and wives wailing behind the *qalat* walls. The saccharine thrill of

combat turned to lye in my mouth. Only after years of contemplation can I ask myself if I was just another man waging war on women, simply on another front.

When we elected the 45<sup>th</sup> President, I felt as if the war had followed me home. It seemed like everyone was looking for an enemy. For those who won the election, the enemy occupied the space of the foreign—the sexually aberrant, culturally diverse, economically anathematic to the so-called American Dream. My enemy, on the other hand, was domestic—that man elected President and the bigots he enabled with hate speech.

I welcomed a fight. It was a respite from my self-imposed exile from the people around me. Sharing the beauty, pain, and trials of my time in Afghanistan was like speaking an alien tongue. Gone was the collective purpose that I took for granted in the Army, but now the threat of that man in the high castle galvanized people into action. I also must admit that there was comfort in the tumult and panic—the pain of others seemed to lessen my own—helplessness and isolation were now part of the emotional vernacular. So when the call went out to march on the Capitol, I volunteered. Many of the protesters drew from a well of deep moral wounds, structural oppression, or strength to march. If I am honest, in that moment I approached the Women's March as a soldier, and this was simply another battle to fight.



Ksenia V. CPT, USAF (sep.)

I traveled with my friend Ksenia, a former Air Force Captain. We planned to march with Common Defense, an organization of progressive veterans opposed to the new president. On the drive south, she told me that many of the people with whom she served opposed her politics. Many of them cut ties with her when she made public her intention to march. I watched the nude trees outside my window, passing too fast to distinguish

branches. So many of my former comrades and fellow veterans also spoke against the protestors. I found people I love on the other side of this new conflict. Would I have to count them among my enemies as well?

*Give war a chance*, one of them wrote on Facebook.

*OPEN YOUR small minds, you whining losers, wipe away your tears, and open your malicious hearts, AND JOIN IN GIVING GOVERNMENT BACK TO THE PEOPLE!* wrote another.

At the time, I did not realize that I would have to carry their reputation with me—that others would see me as the same as these angry veterans. I buried my phone in my pocket for the rest of the ride. At rest stops, I watched the nursing mothers in pink hats and elder matriarchs with their signs in windows. These were the people my one-time comrades railed against? I cried in front of my soldiers, fought beside them, triumphed because of them. Would they see my decision to march as a betrayal?



Abuse of power comes as no surprise

I muffled my doubts. When we arrived, I reunited with old friends. We smoked and drank too much, dancing the way the young do because they do not yet understand they will die. To celebrate with people I loved felt novel, like learning how to whistle, and for the first time in years I thought I might name something happiness. Voices too loud from liquor, hands fluttering, and wide eyed, we looked forward to a march, organized by women of color, Muslims, and queer women. It appeared that the organizers had made good on their claims to place intersectionality at the fore.

In the morning, I pinned my medals to my jacket, took up my sign. *VETS VS HATE*, it read. Demonstrators inundated the subway platforms. Trains passed, one after another, bringing

more people. The station choked with bodies, it was almost impossible to move. Cheers coursed through the crowd, amplified by the arched concrete enclosure and I worried if the huddled voices might rattle the station walls apart and bury us alive. There were so many people underground, it was difficult to breathe. Above-ground carried the same sense of unease, the overflowing streets patrolled by national guardsman and police, yet as people gathered, even they were hemmed in and immobilized. I grew up in Alexandria just across the river, and I never saw the streets so full. The place I planned to meet Ksenia and the other veteran protesters was too crowded when I arrived. I looked for her, but I couldn't move more than a few feet, wriggling through the assemblage. I thought, if we all wanted to, we could take control of the city.

Demonstrators wore the near-ubiquitous cat-eared pink hats, held their signs—their political convictions aloft for the world to see. I too performed my identity, but as a veteran of the War in Afghanistan. Some of the demonstrators looked at me the way I once had looked at Afghans—*friend or foe?* There were many men there—fleece-clad fathers pushing strollers, boyfriends and husbands clinging to lovers or spouses, waving rainbow flags, but I was the only one who trespassed into the territory of threatening. Being a veteran may have evoked images of violent American Legionnaires at rallies during the election. *Man, soldier, medals*—symbols of masculinity, patriarchy.

*Yes, I'm a veteran,* I told them, *yes I'm here in solidarity.* I could not choose between removing my hat and my medals, or shouting at the top of my lungs *I'm one of you.* I told myself that it was important to show that those that served were not props for hate. I told myself that this day was never about me. Yet there was something else. Most of the faces around me were white. There was a group of Muslim students, a smattering of people of color, but each of us—all of us, were surrounded.

I made calculations—was I using the right speech pattern? Was my posture sufficiently unthreatening? Did my expression say *I don't want any trouble*? I've been told that I'm too self-conscious, that I should *just relax*, but anyone who said that never had to live a life of color. I remember one childhood summer in Philadelphia, fleeing from a white teenager brandishing a baseball bat. In Louisiana, I lived on a block where I let all my white neighbors know that I owned guns because they spoke as if blacks still belonged under the lash. They only spoke to my white wife, as if I wasn't there to hear them—that I served on active duty seemed to make no difference to them.

Yet I was still a man among hundreds of thousands of women. They came to the Capitol because of a misogynist and bigot. Where the sense of urgency brought my friends and me together, at the march, my anxieties might have played off those of the other protesters, creating distance. White or not, that we all feared for our bodies should have been enough. We were all there together, after all.

The rally started—a mixture of cheers, punctuated by bouts of silence from a crowd that appeared uncertain of what to do next. Demonstrators shouted their adoration for celebrity speakers like Gloria Steinem, Michael Moore, and Ashley Judd. Though situated among vital voices from marginalized groups, the biggest voices were white ones. An hour passed, then another. More speakers, musical interludes. Those in attendance looked at their watches, waiting. I looked up at the signs, held aloft like pikes. *It's not Feminism if it's not Intersectional*, one read. I did not know whether this was lip service or a rallying call.

By the third hour, many of those assembled chanted, *Let us march, let us march*. I too was tired, my back ached from tensing against the shifting crowd. National Guard and paramedics ferried the ill through the throng, parting it for ambulances that crept forward like giant flashing snails. In

the shuffle, I found Ksenia. We had been so close the whole time, but could not see one another because of the mob around us. *Let us march.* The words nearly drowned out the speakers.

Tamika Mallory, one of the national co-chairs took the podium.

“To those of you who have for the first time felt the pain that my people have felt since they were born here with chains shackled on our legs—today I say to you, welcome to my world,” she said.

Moved though I was, those words did not seem to sit well with many around me.

They began again, *let us march.* I too wanted to move, but the urgency of the narratives told on the stage held me there. Yet another hour passed. Though I am young, years of carrying half my body-weight in body armor and ammunition had ravaged my joints, which started to ache. I cannot imagine the pain of the elderly among us. Impatient voices became angry. Louder they said, *let us march.* Many did not carry the chant, yet it only took everyone else’s silence for a few to reenact the silencing of people of color, Muslims, and the LGBTQ community. What had they done to earn such ill treatment? It was imperative to stay and listen, yet I am ashamed that I wanted to leave and take to the streets. The anxious current infecting the thousands around me took a hold of me too. The women telling their stories asked of us a mere four hours of our time. The marginalized wait all their lives to be heard, and so many never live to have the chance.

ution will not be televised

Some booed as the organizers announced each subsequent performer and speaker. They booed before Alicia Keyes arrived on stage, but the cheered when they heard her name. When Janelle Monet performed with the mothers of Eric Garner,

Mohamed Bah, and Dontre Hamilton, everyone knew better than to chant or jeer, but it did not stop them from complaining, as if they were waiting too long for a cup of coffee rather than paying tribute to the women on stage. No one booed or chanted when Amy Schumer and Madonna took the stage. Some even yelled for people to lower their signs so they could see the performance. Madonna said she thought about blowing up the White House, but only a white person had the luxury of saying that without repercussion. I thought of what Tamika Mallory said.

“This is not a concert.”

Ksenia and I broke away to find our group. As everyone set off on the slow walk around the Mall, we left the rally like the recently concussed. I could not reconcile the words I heard on stage with the behavior of the throng. As we made our way to the rendezvous we passed through the crowds. I tried to chant, to rouse the crowd, but few followed my lead. A few demonstrators plugged their ears. Ksenia mused that she was not yet ready to be out as a veteran. Despite everything she suffered, everything she achieved, she felt she could not show the rest of the world who she was. I thought of the entitlement I had to wear my medals. To be a male veteran is acceptable. To be a woman veteran is transgressive. I wondered if blending in was a matter of survival for her, like my own habit of dialect hopping.

Ascending the low hill at the Washington Monument, I saw the immensity of the movement below us. The great swathes of humanity streaming through the Capitol's marble canyons resembled the masses fleeing strife across Africa and Asia for the unwelcoming shores of the West. Who would dare oppose such a force? Then, if the right wing vilified the biggest humanitarian crisis since World War Two, of course they would also vilify us. The light retreated from the day. Ksenia and I stood there, watched. An immigrant from the Soviet Union. A son of Vietnamese refugees. Vestiges of the last long struggle

watching the embers of the next.

We found our group, after everything ended. We spent the night celebrating, commiserating, mourning. The fatigue of the day softened with the comfort of old friends and new comrades. The veterans of Common Defense spoke in practical terms—lessons learned, future collaborations, the long road ahead. Among that small group, I saw the vision for the march that felt so elusive during the rally. Women leading a movement, men in solidarity. People of the First Nations, people of color, Muslims, queer folks, alongside whites—united.

“Veterans issues are women’s issues,” one of the organizers said to me. “When we talk about [Military Sexual Trauma], when we talk about the repeal of [Don’t Ask Don’t Tell], when we talk about women in combat, these are women’s issues. These are veterans issues.”

When I heard this, I felt so short sighted. I understood then, that whatever this movement becomes, we are no longer siloed into labels like *Anti-War*, *Racial Justice*, or even *White Feminism*. The old guard of activism must give way to this generation, a large interconnected spectrum all concerned with justice. We parted ways, and for the first time all day I felt hopeful that we would overcome.

I crossed the city to meet my college friends again. The drive took us across the city. Demonstrators continued marching in ragged informal lines. Trashcans brimmed with discarded signs. I met my friends at Comet, an establishment made famous by a fantastic scandal that began with wild speculation and ended with a deluded man armed with a weapon bent on violence. When I first heard of the so-called Pizza Gate scandal, I could not fathom why so many subscribed to such a spurious narrative. That folly felt little more than a fever dream that night. Protest signs leaned against every wall. Among the patrons, staff, my friends, I felt the relief of taking the first small steps down a long difficult path. Eyes ringed by fatigue from

the march, everyone in our party welcomed sleep.

As we departed, the flashing lights of police cars and the garish banners of the Westboro Baptist church greeted us—*HOMO SEX IS SIN, Got AIDS Yet?* The police scrambled to get between the zealots and the Women's Marchers. Men yelled, by bullhorn, over the bullhorns. I thought to defy my old habits of resorting to anger. In Afghanistan, anger sustained me, protected me even. A policeman between us, I spoke to one of the men on the picket line. I asked to talk, to tell me why he was doing it on his terms. I told him that we were not so different, both Americans. I served for him to have freedom of speech, I said.

He called me crazy. Someone filmed the exchange, draping us in harsh white light. Another man screamed over my shoulder.

"That guy didn't ever do shit for his country. He never had to give anything up." He pointed at the evangelist, "Fuck you buddy."

"Why am I crazy?" I said.

The man behind me pointed to a black church member.

"There's some real self-hate going on there."

The man behind me was white.



Westboro protesters at Comet Pizza

The evangelist ignored the commotion, gaze fixed on me. I remembered—these people protested soldiers' funerals. Dead soldiers. These wild-eyed men with their long beards activated an old familiar heat in my chest. I moved through the crowd. Music played, and my friends dancing. Beat and rhythm carried through the revelers like the sway of wind through water. Protest signs held aloft like boughs overhead. Rainbow flags like falling leaves. The man with the bullhorn singled people

out, women he deemed un-weddable, men he called sexual deviants. They flipped him off, or cursed at him, but they kept their smiles, bodies still moving.

When it came my turn, the bullhorn man jabbed a finger at me.

“You, I know your kind. You’re doomed to hell. Hell waits for you.”

“I’ve been to hell,” I told him. “We had a name for people like you in Afghanistan—*munafiqeen*.” The false pious.

“Hell,” he went on, “hell for your kind.” I wanted to reach past the policemen, tear the beard from his face. After everything I gave, this is what I defended?

“You motherfucking Taliban.” I screamed back.

A woman chided me.

My anger broke. Present, but not blinding. Cooler now. Around me, that moment of rage did nothing to dampen the mood. Two women kissed. Children cavorted atop patio tables. This was what I hoped to return to after my war ended, yet in that moment I watched as if I never came home.

I drew back into the crowd, tried to unfold the seams of that brief glimpse back into my past. Against what did I swear to defend? Once, it was enemies from without, students of God hiding in the mountains. Yet, the Taliban never sought to destroy America. I learned over there that even the worst of them believed that they were simply defending against invaders. No, America’s real foes were always at home. The bigots, kleptocrats, and the new President among them. We must disabuse ourselves of biases, entitlement, alienation. The road ahead needs cooperation, joy, and compassion. If I am to be ready for the future, I must defend against enemies domestic—at home in my cities and fields. Home in my heart of hearts.

Photo Credit: Drew Pham

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## Sebastian Junger with WBT's Drew Pham on "Tribe"

How can a society so disconnected from its wars welcome back its fighting women and men? What do we lose when we privilege individuality over collectivity? WBT Writer Drew Pham joined in a panel discussion with Sebastian Junger on his book *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*, alongside Columbia University Professors Beth Fisher-Yoshida, Peter Coleman. Venera Kusari of the Negotiation and Conflict Resolution Program at Columbia moderated.

**Watch the recorded discussion below:**

**Sebastian Junger** is the New York Times Bestselling author of [The Perfect Storm](#), [Fire](#), [A Death in Belmont](#), [War](#) and [Tribe](#).

As an award-winning journalist, a contributing editor to *Vanity Fair* and a special correspondent at ABC News, he has covered major international news stories around the world, and has received both a National Magazine Award and a Peabody Award. Junger is also a documentary filmmaker whose debut film [Restrepo](#), a feature-length documentary (co-directed with Tim Hetherington), was nominated for an Academy Award and won the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance.

**Dr. Peter T. Coleman** specializes in the field of conflict resolution and sustainable peace. Dr. Coleman holds a Ph.D. in Social-Organizational Psychology from Columbia University, where he today serves as Professor of Psychology and

Education. He directs the Morton Deutsch International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution at Teachers College, and is the Executive Director of the Advanced Consortium on Cooperation, Conflict and Complexity at the Earth Institute.

**Dr. Beth Fisher-Yoshida** is a faculty member and the academic director of the Negotiation and Conflict Resolution program, Director of the Youth, Peace and Security program and Co-Executive Director of AC4, all at Columbia University. Dr. Fisher-Yoshida teaches classes in conflict resolution and related fields and conducts participatory action research, and research in the areas of conflict and conflict resolution with a focus on intercultural communication, transformative learning and Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM). She received her Ph.D. in Human and Organizational Systems from Fielding Graduate University in Santa Barbara, California.

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## **The Long March Ahead: A Veteran's Place in Resistance**

The day after the election felt all too familiar. It felt like 9/11. Then, as now, that day only promised a long road ahead. The years that followed, I dreaded a war I felt duty bound to fight. I was only twelve on 9/11, but I came from a family of Vietnamese refugees, for whom war and resistance is as much a part of the fabric of our lives as family reunions and weddings. We have always fought for whichever country we called home, Vietnam under the French, both the communist north and American-backed south, and now the United States. My brother and I both fought in Afghanistan, and my family shed no tears when we deployed because for us it was inevitable—we fight.

Before all of that, on 9/11, amidst the anguish and strife, I somehow had the presence of mind to think:

*Welcome to the rest of the world, America.*

I thought the same thing the day Trump claimed victory. Yugoslavia came to mind that morning. My friend Sara, a Croatian-American writer, likened a [Trump presidency to the election of Slobodan Milošević](#). The hate-speech and ultra-nationalism of the Trump Campaign were the same starting points for ethnic cleansing and genocide in the Yugoslav wars. To many, Yugoslavia was once a paragon of multi-culturalism, but we witnessed a model society descend into conflict distinguished by crimes against humanity. In *Love Thy Neighbor*, Peter Maas writes that before the Bosnian War started, Yugoslavs thought the brazen inhumanity that occurred would be impossible. They satirized and lampooned the idea of a civil war on national TV. All it took were a few—a small, cursed, hateful few—to throw a once great nation into turmoil.

My wife and I spent the whole day texting, asking, *what are we going to do?* She told me that she wasn't going to be one of those Jews that waited in Berlin until the day they put her onto a train; she wasn't going to just wait and see. Some part of me wondered if we were being irrational, these epigenetic memories of pogroms and falling napalm—surely these nightmares would never come to fruition? We have middle class jobs, a rent-stabilized apartment, we vote in local elections—surely it would never come to violence? I asked myself if everything I worked towards—my art, my family, my dreams—would be cut short by another conflict. The soldier in me yearned for the comfort my M4 carbine gave me in Afghanistan, but I didn't fight for an America ruled by the rifle rather than the ballot.

I was told by white men in my life to be patient, wait for the smoke to clear because it cannot be as bad as everyone thinks. One man told me that the campaign's bigotry might subside,

that it was only a tactic to get into power. He said that the adult thing to do now was to build bridges, as if my anger at the election's result was childish—now wasn't the time to take up arms. I remember thinking that no one would come for him for being the wrong skin color, for saying the wrong thing.

I knew then that resistance was my only option. I struggled with that decision. I wondered if I was just contributing to a deeper division in a country that seemed split nearly straight down the middle. Right wrong or indifferent, we elected Trump president—by action or inaction, we are all responsible. Yet it can't be just about healing, because the people that brought Trump to power seem to have little interest in bridging the divide given the uptick in hate-speech.

My wife and I took to the streets Wednesday, the ninth of November alongside thousands. We flooded Union Square. A city in despair called out, voices echoing through glass and concrete canyons. Those voices became one. Though we disrupted the organized chaos of Manhattan rush hour, bystanders cheered us from their city buses, honked their horns in solidarity, even joined us. Rain fell, but we were warm. When the night was over, I felt purged of despair. I am wary of emotionally cathartic experiences, because poverty, illness, and war have taught me that catharsis can be a cheap illusion, but I thought I felt something genuine.

That Saturday, I marched again. There were thousands more demonstrators on Fifth Avenue, where veterans had paraded with their flags and patriotic banners just the day before. There was something subdued about the demonstration, contained—police barriers formed a fence between us and pedestrians shopping at upscale retailers or couples leaving from brunch. The mass of protestors stretched for dozens of city blocks—it was hard to see where the huddled bodies began and ended, but there were times when the slogans and chanting stopped, falling into a cowed silence. It had only been a few days, and I worried that the collective passion that compelled

us to gather had somehow subsided.

The closer we came to Trump's tower, the closer the police hemmed us in. A block away, the demonstrators were penned in on all sides by barricades. I speculated on how many of the men and women the NYPD would be called on to enforce the systemic cleansing of the country proposed by Trump and his cohort. How many would relish it? Would I count them among the enemy soon?

*It's just a job*, most of the officers said when I asked them why they joined the force.

The black officers laughed when we started chanting, *Fuck Giuliani*.

I told one sergeant from the Seven-Seven out of Prospect Heights that I was sorry they had to spend their Saturday out here.

"At least it gets us out of Brooklyn," he said.

When we reached the police blockade below that glaring, obsidian edifice, Trump supporters—young men in their twenties perhaps—heckled the crowd. These men—or boys—were not the white working-class poor, those rust-belt disenfranchised that the new media looked to scapegoat after the election. They were patricians, dressed in expensive oxford shirts and high-end outdoor jackets. I can't remember what they said; I just remember their smug self-assuredness. While the others around me tried to ignore them, I yelled back. I wore a hat that read *Operation Enduring Freedom Veteran*, with a Combat Action Badge embroidered at the center.

"Motherfucker," I said, "why don't you go down to the recruiting station and put your money where your mouth is."

While his friends backed down, one of them leaned over the barricade and shouted louder. I didn't hear what he said over

the sound of my own voice responding in kind. As we marched past I slung insult after insult until they were out of sight. I used my status as a veteran to humiliate him, and some part of me is ashamed, because I forgot that I didn't just fight for my idea of what America should be, but his as well.

By that point, my friends were tired and hungry. Everyone's enthusiasm had dissipated. As we wriggled out of the pen, street vendors hawked cheap light-up toys out of granny carts and high-school kids took selfies, while an activist festooned with leftist pins and patches performed for a news anchor on the other side of the corral.

Free of the crowd, I watched the spectacle from the perspective of the cameras and passers-by. I remembered that they protested in Yugoslavia too, but tens of thousands had to die before Milošević was brought to justice. Almost everyone hoped for a peaceful resolution—everyone but the ultranationalists who laid their genocidal plans. In *Love Thy Neighbor*, Maas captured the laments of Bosnians caught unprepared for the violence that would beset them for nearly three years. As I watched the crowd disperse, I wondered if I too would be caught underprepared—outgunned, outmanned, starving. I wondered how many of these women and men around me would be willing to take up arms. Perhaps my greatest asset as a veteran was my capacity for violence, my ability to fight and kill, but the idea dismayed me.

When my train crossed the Manhattan Bridge, my wife texted me.

*Traffic is totally fucked on bway/ in the 20s*

*Good job* ☐

Social media, the news, my friends—they all noticed the stand against hate. The whole country watched—continues to watch those that struggle for equality. I understood then that as a veteran, I am not an asset because of my capacity for destruction. We veterans seeking to fulfill our country's

promise of liberty and justice for all are assets because of our capacity to organize. Going forward, we must exercise and teach our acumen for strategic decision-making, our ability to marshal resources, our ability to lead. If America is to resist the threat of mass deportation, hate crimes, and free-speech suppression, it will need its veterans.

Perhaps the day will come when we must defend our communities against violence, but violence is a tool of last resort. We would do well to remember that organizations like the Black Panther Party, Young Lords, and the American Indian Movement were populated and led by veterans who sought to build community, contrary to the popular narrative that they were terror organizations. Veterans are already standing up to Trump's vision for America. Organizations like [Common Defense](#) are speaking out against misogyny and homophobia, and [Veterans for Peace](#) are standing in solidarity with Muslim Americans in their #vetsvshate social-media campaign.

University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Professor and Albert Einstein Institution founder Gene Sharp outlined [198 methods of non-violent action](#) to resist the threat of hate looming before us. For now, mass protests are important to show the country how many of us oppose racism, sexism, and homophobia, but there is more work to be done. What stands out about these methods is that in aggregate they amount to the formation of an alternative society. Nonviolent methods can be performed by any of us, from members of the government to workers and consumers. Sharp's protégé Jamilia Raqib gave a [TED talk](#) on using these nonviolent methods to disrupt and ultimately dismantle tyrannical regimes like Daesh, but they could easily be applied to a Trump autocracy. She says, "The greatest hope for humanity lies not in condemning violence but in making violence obsolete." Our country needs us again, whether infantry, mechanics, or logisticians—our skills can build that alternative society together.

There is already so much hate in our country, and those of us

who fought know that war is not a vicious cycle, but a downward spiral. The challenge before us is not to respond to hate with violence, but to foster a society that values community above enmity. My friend, Ali Dineen, a musician and activist, told me that we should not seek to call our adversaries out; rather we should call them in. I might have asked that Trump supporter to talk instead of berate him. I might have simply asked him what his name was, undoing bigotry is a long process that starts with a [conversation](#). In the coming years I fear that resistance may come to mean armed conflict, and though my soldier's heart sometimes yearns to fight again, I don't want to fight my own countrymen. Violence can only deepen the deep divide in America, but making violence obsolete, having a vision for the future that includes our enemies, that kind of resistance can bridge the divide in our country. I spent four years in the Army practicing the art of war; now in revolt, I have the chance to build rather than destroy.

Photo Credit: Ken Shin

Correction: A previous version of this essay stated that Gene Sharp was a professor at NYU.

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## Each Soldier a Thread



The violence that reached our shores left me at a loss—every attempt to conceptualize these tragedies failed to capture the emotions moving me. I tried to make sense of San Bernardino and Orlando by writing, but after a dozen drafts I realized that failure is at the heart of my shock and sorrow. We bore witness as attacks ravaged Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Iraq, and

Turkey. I watched each attack unfold, felt each death defeat me. We fought for Afghanistan, for America, but it was for nothing.

My friends that served in Iraq echoed similar sentiments in the spring of 2014 when Daesh captured swathes of Iraq and Syria. They watched everything they struggled for fall apart. It was a cruel turn to watch ISIS flags fluttering from American Humvees. We were warriors in the world's most powerful military, but most of us were helpless to act. More than six thousand of our brothers and sisters died, more than fifty thousand wounded—what will their legacy be?

Like many of my brothers and sisters that served in Iraq and Afghanistan, I poured my heart and soul into this war. I knew we were fighting an uphill battle when I joined, but I thought if we fought for the Afghan people, maybe the terrorism they faced wouldn't come home with me. I failed. I remember reading a [Washington Post article](#) about my area of operations—the Jalrez Valley in Wardak Province—mere months after we returned home in the fall of 2011. When we arrived, two girls' schools thrived just outside our outpost, our Afghan counterparts enjoyed good relations with the locals, and many local villagers helped us fight the Taliban shadow government. One girls' school is ruined now, the other beset by drive-bys and bombings. The article said Jalrez was named “the Valley of Death.” My Afghan comrades—with whom I broke bread and bled alongside—despair that the population threw their lot in with the Taliban. The valley is theirs now, how long until they seize the province? The nation?

The day after Orlando was warm and sunny—the summer felt garish and irreverent against my frustration. I tried to explain to a civilian colleague what I felt, and she asked me how I could feel responsible for the attack. She said it seemed so removed from my deployment in 2010. Many of us were brought up in the military schooled in counterinsurgency, which taught us that what the “strategic corporal” did on the

ground impacted the whole war. Indeed, leaders on the local level like Colonel H.R. McMaster influenced national policy. I learned that war is not just red and blue symbols on a map, but a complex and entangled system that includes every one of us. Each raid, each dollar, each soldier a thread in a web. It connects a rifle to a villager, a villager to a valley, a valley to a nation—each strand leading to another variable, another effect. What implications did losing Jalrez have on the war? I can't pretend to know what Omar Mateen thought of the war on his family's country, but if it was mine I would be full of rage and sorrow. I can't say where those feelings would take me, and maybe that's why I can't make Omar into the enemy no matter how hard I try. Every attempt to understand his decisions dropped me into a void. I told my colleague that I couldn't draw a line from Jalrez to a mass murder, only that I felt responsible.

In a society so divorced from the implications of war and foreign policy, veterans not only bear the physical and emotional costs of war, but shoulder the moral responsibility as well. Only during the Global War on Terror has the term "moral injury" entered into the lexicon of [mental health and trauma](#). One need only look to the International NGO Safety Organization or Team Rubicon to see veterans' commitment to duty and social responsibility. If one thing can be said of veterans it is our need to act, but there's something else driving us. In the words of Chris Hedges, war is a force that gives us meaning. Danger makes life simple—survival supplants wardrobe choices and cocktail selections. There is a singularity of purpose and a definition of clarity I have found nowhere else. It joins us irrevocably. Sebastian Junger's new book *Tribe* examines the bonds that come from collective hardship in wartime—one woman in the book, Nidzara Ahmetasevic, was evacuated from Bosnia only to make a harrowing return trip back to Sarajevo because it was too hard to keep going while her family suffered. "We were the happiest," she told Junger. "And we laughed more."

Like her, I miss much of my war. My brother, an active duty Infantry Sergeant and OEF vet, says he wishes he was back in Afghanistan. He holds out hope for another deployment, another opportunity to get back into the fight. The thought terrifies me, I don't know what I would do if I lost my little brother. At the same time, another part of me wishes I could go back with him. War gave me camaraderie and meaning, but it was an addiction. Karl Marlantes called combat the crack cocaine of adrenaline highs, with crack cocaine consequences.

I look at the attacks at home and abroad, and I wonder if the source of my despair isn't the tragedy of each event, but a yearning for combat. We said we were in Afghanistan to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan people, but when fighting season came I savored the fighting. It came to eclipse the desire to build infrastructure, capacity, and governance in Afghanistan. It even eclipsed the beauty of the little girls that welcomed us into their schools. I lost Jalrez because I was too intoxicated by the smell of gunpowder and the power of calling Apache gunships to raze the valley. I kept the Afghans I was supposed to serve at rifle's length out of fear, alienating them. When I came home I tried to pay penance for my blood lust by working for veterans non-profits and by working with refugees to the U.S. I thought if I could save enough lives, make a big enough difference, then I could eventually make up for leaving Jalrez in chaos. For a while I told myself I was doing good work, making a difference. Then a car would backfire or the neighbors would set off a string of firecrackers—I would break into a sweat, my glands taking me out of reality and back into the fight. After that the pathways addicted to adrenaline reactivated like reopened wounds, a bitter reminder of internal war between my compassion and savagery.

After Orlando, it feels as if there may be no way of erasing my guilt because we brought home the dualism we took to war. In many ways, the contradiction of duty and conscience against

violence and war reflects the contradictions in our national narrative. When we invaded Afghanistan and Iraq, we said it was to liberate the oppressed. At first that held true: many Afghans and Iraqis welcomed us, welcomed the opportunity we appeared to herald—though our collective desire for revenge colored the decision to engage in both wars. The product is the despair of a failed enterprise of our own making. We say that all men are created equal, but black Americans are still murdered with impunity. We call for an end to violence in Iraq and Syria, but our only action is to drop bombs. We brought other things home—our police forces mutated into paramilitary organizations, our xenophobia morphed into something that politicians actively encourage to win elections with. Perhaps this will be the legacy of the war on terror that so many of us veterans and countless more civilians suffered for.

My good friend and confidant Kristen is a fellow vet, a Florida native, and identifies as part of the LGBTQ community. In the days following Orlando, she said,

“I fought for them. For the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. And it’s come to this.” Her tears fell.

I projected all my guilt, all my failure onto those words. In my head, I listed people I left behind in Afghanistan, the people that have to live with my mistakes. My guilt was immobilizing me into inaction, another failure. Kristen said something else.

“Why aren’t we celebrating the resilience of gay communities? Why aren’t we celebrating the lives of the people of color killed in this hate crime?”

I despair because I am complicit. We all are, yet despair and failure alone cannot define us. We must take ownership of our wars and their effects to face the future. We saw the consequences of war because we answered the call. For us, duty doesn’t end when we take off the uniform. We must share our

experiences lest we leave the nation deaf and blind. Tomorrow, we build. Leading voices like Phil Klay, [call on veterans to make art](#) for the urgent cause of cultivating a more responsible body politic. Our definition of community must shift from the brotherhood of warriors to include voters, fighters, and victims of these conflicts. Then, we avenge the victims of these hate crimes, these terror attacks.

Then, when we fight it won't be for nothing.

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## The Burn Pit Registry



It started with a cough none of us could get rid of. Sure I smoked. Lots of us smoked but the non-smokers had it too, even the fitness nuts that worked out all day. We all had that cough. Whatever refuse we had, we burned in a shallow pit at the center of our outpost. We burned expended radio batteries, the non-rechargeable lithium ion kind, dirty mattresses, and food waste. Anything that might benefit the enemy, we burned. Anything we didn't want, we burned.

I didn't think much of it over there until my wife said that my cough worried her. Running was always hard, but it was harder when I came home. Before we deployed, I thought that the men who fell out were weak. It pissed me off when other platoons passed us during runs because we had to slow down or circle back to pick up a straggler. When we came back from Afghanistan, the number of men who couldn't keep up increased. Some of them used to be PT studs.

Our unit's physician assistant wrote about as many prescriptions for sleeping pills and anti-depressants as

asthma inhalers and sleep apnea machines. We made fun of the contraptions. Darth Vader masks for the mouth-breathers, the booger eaters, the sham-masters—we thought they wouldn't mind since they were sure to receive high disability ratings from the Army and VA. I coughed and hacked all the way through post-deployment leave, into winter holiday leave. I cut back on smoking but it continued. I had to take one of my wife's inhalers because running in the cold weather burned my lungs hard and closed up my throat the same way a bad allergic reaction might. Fuck it, I thought. I still maxed out my PT test. I thought I was just fine—cough or no cough.

Other things seemed more immediate. The men in my platoon all left the Army, or left Fort Polk for other units. The anti-depressants the Army prescribed made me erratic and impotent, straining my marriage. I went off my meds and drank as much as I could get away with. That year at Mardi Gras in New Orleans I watched the parades while sipping from a box of wine with a straw in it. I spent too much money, to the point that I had to ask my mother for extra cash so I could go out and party. I cheated on my wife. I got an article fifteen for mishandling property. I tried to kill myself.

Despite everything my wife stayed with me and kept me together. Despite the suicide attempt, the article fifteen, the adultery, and the alcohol, I left the Army with my rank and an honorable discharge.

There isn't one singular reason that drove me towards self-destruction; like the war I fought the true answers are complex and messy. I will say that one component of my condition was the guilt I felt over the violence Afghan civilians endured because of the fighting I willingly participated in. I failed in Afghanistan. Trash wasn't the only thing we burned while we were there.

After a string of failed interviews and a souring experience working with veterans non-profits, I found out that there was

a resettlement agency where I could help refugees, many of them Afghan. Maybe this would be atonement, at least in some part. I took a position as a casework volunteer as soon as I could.

I languished for three seasons without a paying fulltime job. From our apartment in Brooklyn every morning I climbed the steps to the elevated subway track at Myrtle Ave. It was nice in the warm months, but as time passed and the bills stacked up, my breathing became labored, and my heart pounded in my ears. The colder it got, the harder it was—but I chalked this up to bad nutrition, lack of exercise and the stress of watching our savings account shrivel and wither.

The volunteer work at the resettlement agency was hard and thankless, but it was one of the few good things I did, even if it was as simple as advocating for a client at the food stamps office or processing paperwork. Sometimes the refugee families even thrived, although most didn't—the odds were always stacked against them. They were like my parents in many ways, just trying to get by so my generation had a chance to prosper.

I told my parent's story to clients every time they seemed to lose hope or when the obstacles seemed insurmountable. Eventually they became engineers, and owned a house in the suburbs, I said. I left out being house poor, the domestic violence, and abandonment. It didn't fit the American Dream. An Afghan family with two girls comes to mind—everyone in the office wished they would one day have everything they wanted from life. It was hard enough for the family to adjust to American life and make ends meet without the childhood blood-cancer that afflicted one of the girls. She had a smile that made my heart bleed, but she didn't have a single hair on her head, and fatigue from her treatment protocol meant she was conscious for precious few hours during the day. I remember the resettlement supervisor had to find an affordable apartment close to a cancer treatment center—apartments near

NYU or Memorial Sloan Kettering were an impossibility. Can you imagine refugees in Murray Hill or the Upper East Side? So they settled in the Bronx near Montefiore, but far from everything else. I remember holding that little girl in my arms carrying her up and down the steps to their fourth floor walkup. I sang *Boats and Birds* by Gregory and the Hawk to her.

*If you'll be my star*

*I'll be your sky*

*You can hide underneath me and come out at night*

*When I turn jet black*

*And you show off your light*

*I live to let you shine*

*I live to let you shine*

When I held her, face on my shoulder for a pillow, her arms limp at her sides, I knew that I was responsible for her illness. Maybe I didn't drop any depleted uranium bombs, or institute the practice of burn pits, but I didn't do anything to stop it. I was only a teenager on 9/11, but I wanted revenge. As an adult, I didn't vote responsibly, or stage any substantive protest—I wore my convictions as a fashion accessory. If I couldn't atone for those things that I was only indirectly responsible for, how would I ever atone for the things that I did? I remember that day well because after I carried her down the steps to the bus stop, I needed to sit down and rest. I caught a flu that wouldn't go away, and if I so much as walked at a brisk pace, my heart beat in my ears again. That family left New York City for better prospects in a state with better jobs and lower rent.

A few weeks later my flu persisted, and I developed a painful abscess. Every passing day stairs were harder to climb, my breath harder to catch. By then, I knew no amount of cough

syrup or acetaminophen could shake the fevers, so I went to the VA hospital's ER, hoping they would give me some medicine and send me on my way. I expected to spend a few hours there, I knew how slow hospitals could be, but the doctors had to call a hematologist to get a second opinion on my labs. Even the nurse commented that my blood looked so thin she didn't need a microscope to know that I was anemic. I panicked. I was supposed to be in good health. Anemia seemed serious. When the doctor finally came back, he said he was almost positive that it was cancer. Those labored steps, that unending flu, my heart beating in my ears—it was leukemia, a cancer of the blood that begins in the bone marrow.

My wife and I lived from moment to moment during those months, living on a shoestring. We applied for disability and Medicaid to make ends meet. I was ashamed; I never thought I would need Medicaid. Some days our budget was so tight and the chemo was so difficult that I wished I died in Afghanistan.

Our friends were there at first for us at first, but by the end most stayed away. I don't blame them—it's hard to be giving all the time. After I reached remission, friends I hadn't seen in a long time would say, *look at all your hair, or you look so healthy*, but it felt like they were saying *I'm glad it's over, let's not talk about it*. I don't blame them, but like a fellow survivor said to me, *cancer is like a criminal record that follows you around for the rest of your life*.

A friend of a friend had leukemia too—he didn't go to war, he never smoked, never smelled a burn pit his whole life. Just bad luck I guess. After chemo and a failed bone marrow transplant, his doctors attempted a new radical procedure using a modified HIV virus that taught his immune system to kill the cancer cells in his body. From all accounts it was a difficult battle. The procedure took a heavy toll, but once it was done he was cured. Although the doctors said there wasn't a single cancer cell left in his body, he died anyway.

Pneumonia. After destroying his defective lymphoblasts, his immune system was too exhausted to fight off a simple infection. It happened so fast. I only knew this man through stories my friends told about him, and the one email I sent his way offering him my moral support. I knew that he was an artist. I knew that he loved his son. That is all I will ever know of him, that friend of a friend. How many people disappear like him? How many become unremembered names, night, and fog?

I don't know what happened to that Afghan girl I sang to, I only know that our war trash didn't disappear when we burned it. We sowed the air with poison. Afghanistan and Iraq's capacity to treat victims of American burn pits dwindles with each day the war continues, especially as the security situation deteriorates. Only in 2013 did the VA recognize burn pit related illnesses, more than a decade after the war started. At least my name will be recorded in the Burn Pit Registry. It is a pyramid of human maladies—a dozen different cancers, Crohn's disease, COPD, hypertension, hepatitis, chronic bronchitis, infertility, lupus, the list marches on. Who will list the names of that little Afghan girl, and everyone like her, still dying?