

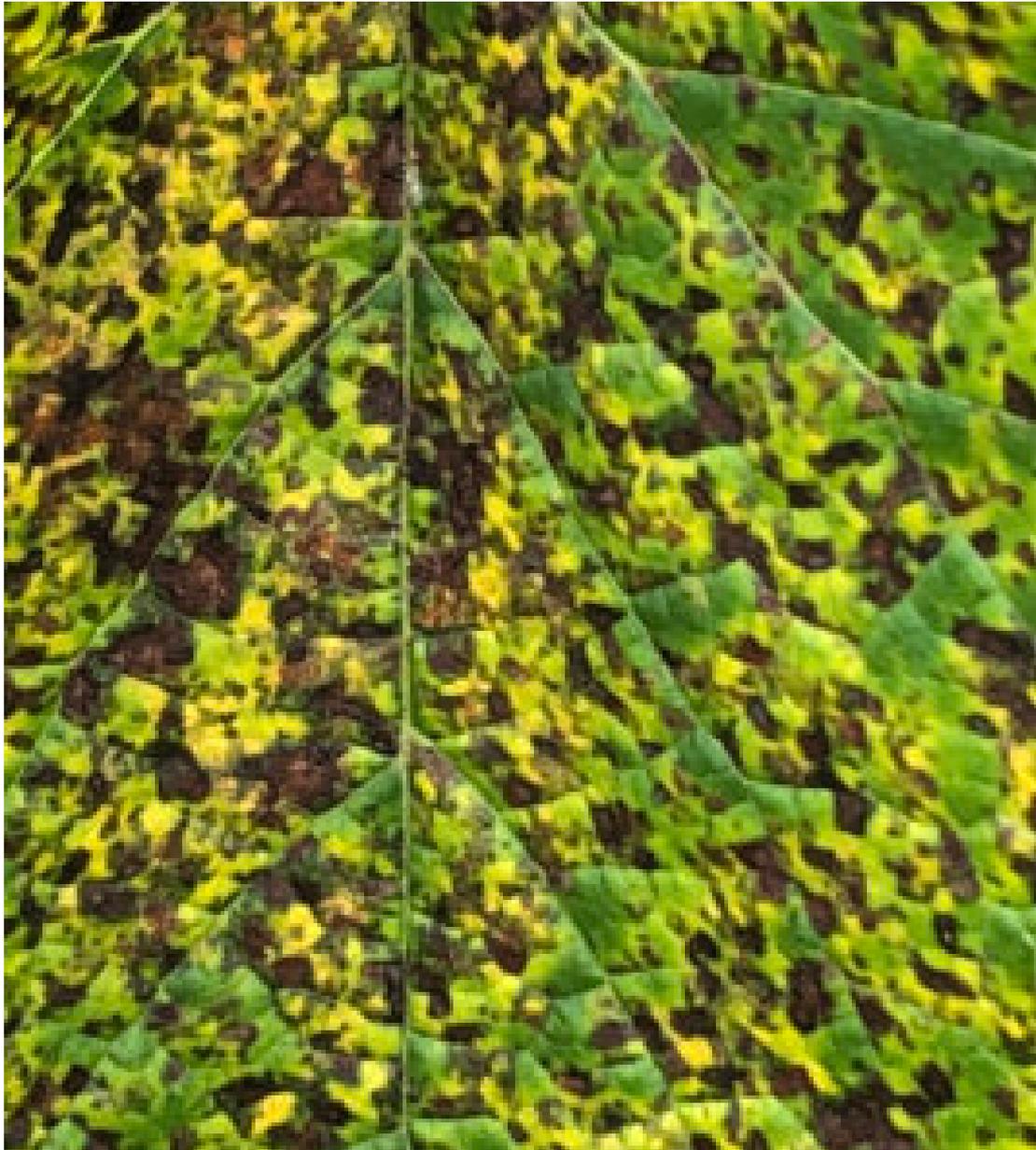
New Poetry by Patricia Hastings: “Dad”

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New Poetry from D.A. Gray: “Cactus Tuna”; “We Return from the Holy Land. God Stays”; and “Reverse Run”

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New Poetry by Chris Bullard: “All Wars Are Boyish”



THE MELTDOWN MEADOW / *image by Amalie Flynn*

All Wars Are Boyish

Autopilot on self-destruct,
we went joy riding on tanks
into the thermal wasteland.

The static of roentgens played
like parked ice cream trucks
on the detection equipment.

Playgrounds went incendiary

as squalls of cluster bombs
skipped over the pavement,

but our camo HAZMAT suits
insulated us from the acts
we had been ordered to take.

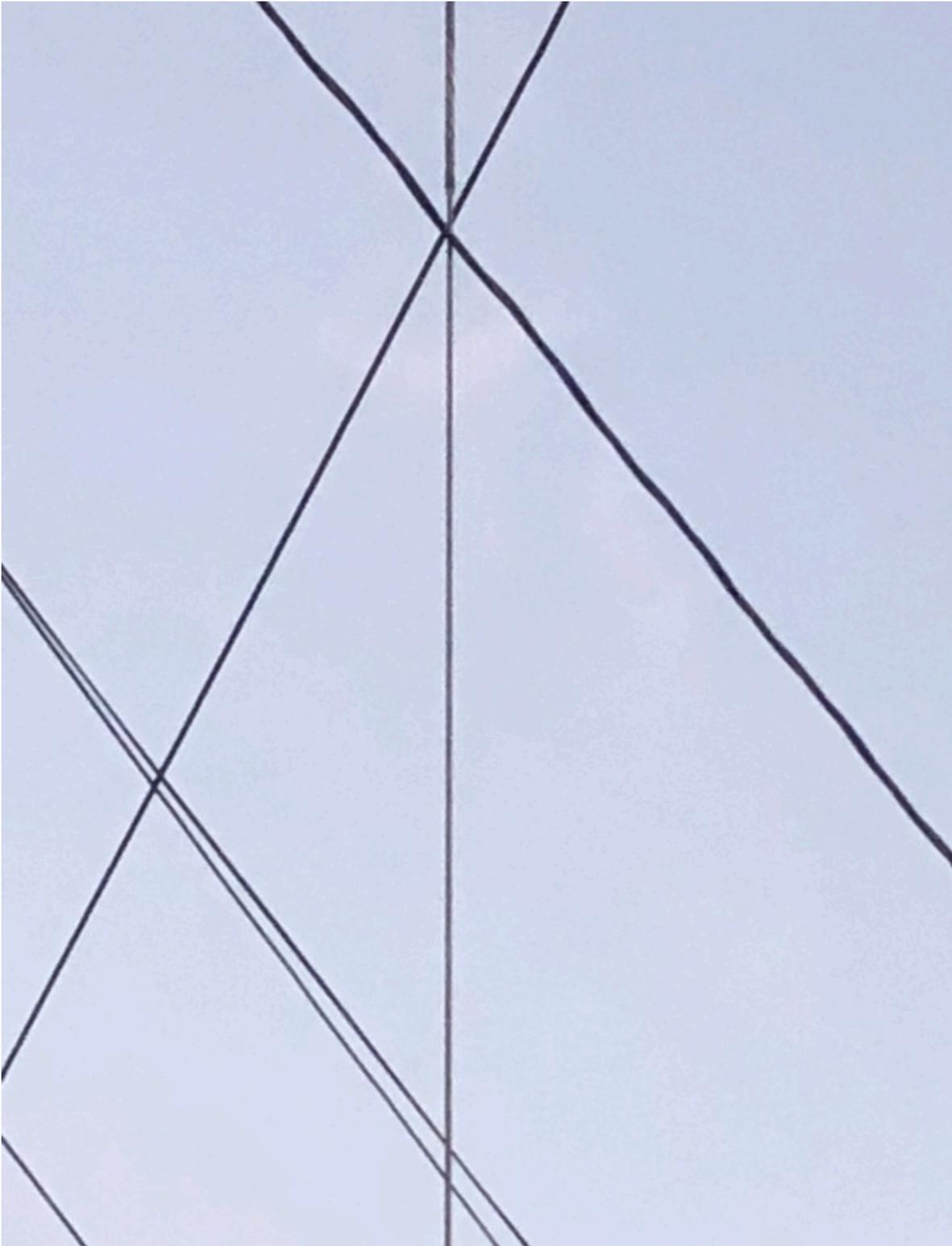
They were on the run, maybe,
or counterattacking. We took
rations beside a napalm campfire.

Jets among the sweep of stars,
scorched amphibians peeping
in the meltdown meadow,

what more could a kid ask for,
except dinosaurs? They were
already working on them in the lab.

New Poetry from G.H. Mosson: “Warrior With Shield”

after Henry Moore



AN X STILL / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Blasted, broken to frag-
ments, left arm won't-
both legs blown &
absent, the spaces abuzz
w/ anger-but I edge
forward, shield up

as leg-stumps toe
for foothold. My mouth
is an X. Still-
ness. Yet I see.
I've been left.

Moonlight empties
onto my chest,
rivulets down
in a branching sheen
& I swell w/ a hunch
I'll make it
as if an old tune
warms the heart,
as if I too
might sing
again to Shelly.

I've been
 some-
 one
else
 once
 some-
body
 other:
 a child.
Dandelion
 pods
 tumble
past my
 open
 palms.

**New Poetry from Ben Weakley:
“Checkpoint,” “There are 4
Ways to Die in an Explosion,”
“Good Friday,”**



PRAY FOR THE BLAST / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Checkpoint

The car came from nowhere, it came

from everywhere –

white blur and tire squall,
a four-door payload
of heat and pressure and steel.

When it is over, there is just
the tinkle of falling brass and a man
slumped
in a pool of broken glass
and coolant on hot asphalt,
calm as a corpse.

Doc cuts his shirt.
His face is weathered by years
of this. Layers
of skin and yellow fat pucker
from his open side.

He breathes.

In the trunk of the rusted-out sedan,
where the bomb
should be,

there are only two tanks,
an oxygen mask, and a box
filled with apricots and dates.

There are Four Ways to Die in an Explosion

First the blast rips limbs
from the torso. Throws tender bodies
against concrete walls. Pulverizes
bones against pavement. Those closest

to the bomb are never found
whole.

Then the fragmentation.
Little pieces of metal debris,
like the one that punched
an acorn-sized hole through the back
of Sergeant Gardner's skull.

Heat from the explosion starts fires.
Vehicles Burn. Ammunition
burns. People burn,
alive. When a driver is trapped inside
white-hot steel, prayers
must be said silently for the smoke
to take him first.

Pressure collapses
lungs and bowels. The bleeding
happens on the inside.
It can be hours
before the skin turns pale
and the bulk of a person
drops.

None of the anatomy is safe,
so when the time comes, pray for the blast
or fragmentation. Pray for the heat that vaporizes.
Pray for the kind of pressure
that makes the world dark and silent
before the bitter taste of iron
and cold panic.

Good Friday, Udairi Range Complex,

Kuwait

The first time I saw the sun
rise over the desert
it was 4 a.m.

Across miles of sand
and rusted hulks, the throbbing
of heavy guns echoed.

Over the horizon,
where the beginning and the end
meet and disappear, Friday arrived.

We saw the jeering crowds, the scourge
and spear-tip, the crown of thorns
and the crucifix, waiting.

What could we have known about atonement?
What did we know, then, of judging
the quick against the dead?

**New Poetry from Jacquelyn Cope:
“Mission 376: Patient X,”
“Prolonged Exposure Therapy,”
“Doxies and Rum”**



THERE'S EARTH INSIDE / *image by Amalie Flynn*

MISSION 376: PATIENT X

There's dirt in his mouth now

you

know that for sure.

There's Earth inside his bloated belly

you

know that for sure.

The worms might have eaten away his ragged skin by now

but the metal is still there.

Splayed on the satin or cotton lining

like sad coins of a wishing well.

His casket might be oak, or cherry wood

you hope it was something sleek
and aesthetically pleasing

you hope the flag was soft enough
for hands and cheeks that needed touching.

PROLONGED EXPOSURE THERAPY

Ten minutes staring at
a fountain pen stabbing,
scribbling paper.

A rocket hit a concrete wall
I told her.

Water spots on bifocal glasses
blurring iris's, flickering like
burnt out pixels on a screen.

A desk placard bolded
with professional credentials
hooraying the study of mental illness.

A rocket hit a concrete wall and

Tic-tacs shaking in my red purse
snapping the container at its neck
revealing the candied-mint nonsense
delaying my esophagus to stretch
in the direction of answer.

A rocket hit a C-130 fuel tank spraying
shrapnel

Her voice dives
down into the depths
of her vocal cords
pulling out
forced tonal sympathy
an octave of care.

*If
you'd like, I can prescribe you Zoloft today.*

The rocket hit a concrete wall
the metal
a rocket
hit
the fuel tank
a concrete
w
a
l
l

DOXIES AND RUM

My Dachshund

watches me pour

third

my

Coke.

rum and

His

bowed legs sit

firmly

under

his robust

chocolate colored

chest.

Eyes

beaming

not

in judgment

but acceptance.

Captain

Morgan's

leg
swung firmly

resting on

a barrel

he winks, opens his mouth

and

howls a whistling screech

a
rocket's screech.

A
hand over his mouth

I quiet

him.

Pouring
the rest in the empty glass

the
ice breaks up

dissolving
into

themselves.

Spice,
sugar, caramel,

washes away the
dryness in my throat

and
salt from the sinuses stuck there.

Salt that I refuse

to expel

any
natural way.

My Doxie jumps on
my lap

smelling
distinctly of corn chips

for
no reason at all.

He rests his head
in the crevice
of my arm
sighing deeper
than
I thought he could.

Poetry from Bryan Blanchard: “Pillar of Salt” and “The Mannequin”

Pillar of Salt

Raining fire, burning steel ...
And now I see haunted

Images of headless
Bodies bathed in bloodstained

Sand of a mannequin
Head with a swollen face

And lifeless eyes looking
Back at an explosion,

A disfigured Humvee
Staggering down the road,

A charred and gaping door,
A torso hanging out –



Sketch by Sarah Blanchard

The Mannequin

I am not a mannequin!
I am a pillar of salt!
I am the salt of the earth!
My heart is heavy with sand.

An earlier version of "Pillar of Salt" appeared in [O-Dark-Thirty](#), March 11, 2013.

New Poetry by Aaron Wallace



Blackhawk

Truck 2 is hit,
and they're calling
for the medic,
and I'm out of my truck
kneeling next to the driver –
I could hold his organs in my hands.

At the top of Stanley Road
Tim the Chip Man sings
steak and kidney pie,

*steak and kidney pie, oh my my,
I love steak and kidney pie
to the deep fat fryer.*

The lieutenant is mouthing
words over the radio as the rifles tap-tap-tap
like the pen in my hand signing the mortgage
to the only home I've ever had
and Cole is tap-tap-tapping a magazine
against his helmet to knock the sand out
before he reloads.

The lieutenant is mouthing
words over the radio as my wife
breaks the crest of the dunes
backlit by a burning ball of hydrogen on her way
to our altar on the beach,
while the driver bleeds in waves.

The lieutenant is mouthing words over
the radio while the VA doctor explains
that the war will kill us now
or some other time so I stick the driver
with too much morphine.

I walk with my wife and son
in Central Park. Trees are chirping—
the bird is on the way, the bird is on the way.

War Porn

After mission he sits covered
in sand, sweat, blood, then boots
up his laptop – listens to the whir of the hard
drive as he goes through folders and picks
his favorite girl, blonde with globular breasts
and gapped teeth, who bounces
her ass on the floor and looks up at him, her hands
braced against him while she moans

“Do it Daddy, give it to me, I need it.”

He turns away, uninterested, and thinks instead about the woman from the village, her supple voice babbling and crying while he kicks over pots and furniture—she eventually falls—reaching for anything, everything, to throw at him, cursing him, his family, his country, and he hears Bucky outside urging him to do it, *just fucking do her* – so he reaches down, undoes his fly, spits on his hand, thinking how lucky am I?

Photo Credit: Basetrack 18

Suicide and the Military

There are two substantial issues facing the American military and veteran community today. The first, a logical and narratively unified reaction to years of hero-worship, is a backlash against the impulse to thank soldiers for their service – a tendency, made explicit in recent media pieces, to vilify veterans and stigmatize them as prone to violence, hatred, racism, bigotry, and murder. The second issue is less dangerous than the first in absolute terms, but based on real statistics and empirical evidence: a growing problem with suicide.

This topic has been examined under a microscope. 22 soldiers and veterans die per day in America by their own hand, victims of some unknowable, tragically preventable plague. Especially tragic given the notion that a person who has cheated death should have some sort of inherent attachment to life. We

believe that a man, having avoided bombs, bullets, and grenades from determined foes as variable as the enemies we've faced over the last seventy years, should have a higher reason to live. We believe that a soldier-veteran, ennobled by the experience of having come close to an end to their existence, should far more than others be eager to embrace the world, to love life. We imagine that we, in our dull day to day lives, which include regret, and trifle, and petty annoyances, have got it bad, and that veterans have seen clear through to some transcendent truth. Like a sunset over the water after a thunderstorm, with rays of light reaching up into the heaven, and beyond ourselves. Like encountering a known limitation, and moving beyond it.



Of course veterans are people like everyone else. Different in the sense that they've made a choice many non-veterans think – wrongly – that they're incapable of making, fed on a steady diet of propaganda from movies, books, comics, video games, and history. Think, then, how disappointing it must be for a servicemember – a soldier, marine, airman, sailor, or coastguardsman (what do they call themselves?) – to discover that they won't see war? Or, having seen it, that there's no transcendent truth behind a dead face – friend or foe? Imagine that every meaningful assumption you'd made about the order of things was up-ended – good, generous, industrious and clever people died or were thwarted, while bad people, lazy and unscrupulous people profited and prospered? How would you feel, to know that life and death meant nothing?

I'm laying aside the question of faith in a higher power, and refraining from offering my own thoughts on the subject because a great many different ideas have occurred simultaneously in war on the topic of who believed what about which God, and praying to each of them seems to have had about the same effect (which is to say, nothing). Also, men of faith have taken their own lives, and agnostics and atheists have

done the same, and out of respect for their service to God and Country, I should like to imagine that their lives are better or easier now.

During my time in the military, I came to believe that one reason there were so many suicides – apart from the proportional wealth of toxic leaders I encountered who likely did much to encourage their soldiers to take their own lives – was that it's the single area over which the military has absolutely no jurisdiction. Each individual is instructed from the earliest moments in training that authority is violence, and violence is authority, and who can do the greatest harm to whom determines rank. A salute isn't just a gesture of respect, it's an acknowledgement of hierarchy. One person must awake at four in the morning to clean an area so that another person can walk over it with dirty boots. Infractions are punished. Individuality is punished. Thoughts are punished. Feelings are punished.

But suicide can't be punished. Threats of suicide and suicide attempts are taken seriously by military units – very seriously – with the offending soldier often being carted out to behavior health and instantly transformed into a walking pariah, at least to the extent to which that soldier is still allowed to be a part of their unit. The impulse or desire to commit suicide, vocalized, is the worst type of offense possible – likely because it undermines the possibility of corrective violence, which is the military's only organizational / institutional ability to correct misbehavior. For a toxic leader, who relies only on the threat of violence, suicide must be an evil. For a good or scrupulous leader, suicide is an unparalleled catastrophe.

Some people are afflicted with medical conditions that prevent them from taking any joy in life, or the world. Depression – suicidal depression – is a real condition. For these people, sights and smells and sentiments from which reasonable people would take pleasure offer nothing instead. These people

require help – medical assistance, psychiatric guidance – and should be in places, surrounded by professionals who are capable of giving them said help. I've had brushes with depression in my own life, had my share of beautiful summer evenings that unaccountably tasted like ash – enough to know that people who must live with depression, with existential crisis, on a daily, hourly basis are truly cursed.

But this is different. These active duty military service members are killing themselves not because of a biochemical predisposition toward self-murder, but as an alternative to a torture that must feel infinitely worse than the idea of painlessness.

Veteran suicide, meanwhile, points at a similar but more diffuse problem – the problem of finding suitable engagement for veterans habituated to being employed, accustomed to using themselves in a way that creates meaning and value for their societies (but unable to do that in the context of the military any more, for a variety of reasons). Society itself becomes the problem for which the only solution is painless release – a society where service members are allowed to transition out without having jobs ready for them, or livelihoods assured.

So long as the military has toxic leadership, and a promotion system that encourages toxicity, many service members will take their own lives. So long as society does not have adequate room for veterans who wish nothing more than a steady pay check and some sort of useful employment, veterans will take their own lives. Perhaps the answer to the scourge is not to vilify the preventable suicides – but vilify the systems that make them possible in the first place. Otherwise, the prudent solution could be to stop vilifying suicide in the first place – make it an acceptable option in the event that a person's life is truly unbearable. Of course, the system of financial servitude we live in could not bear such a situation – it would quickly collapse.