

# New Nonfiction from Andria Williams: Reading Joan Didion in August 2019

In the summer of 1968, while starting several of the essays that would comprise her collection *The White Album*, Joan Didion began to suffer from a series of unexplained physical and emotional ailments. After an attack of “vertigo and nausea,” she underwent a battery of tests at the outpatient psychiatric clinic at St. John’s Hospital in Santa Monica, CA. In *The White Album*’s title essay, she shares some of the professionals’ feedback:

*Patient’s [results]... emphasize her fundamentally pessimistic, fatalistic, and depressive view of the world around her. It is as though she feels deeply that all human effort is foredoomed to failure, a conviction which seems to push her further into a dependent, passive withdrawal. In her view she lives in a world of people moved by strange, conflicted, poorly comprehended, and, above all, devious motivations which commit them inevitable to conflict and failure...*

A month later, Didion was named a *Los Angeles Times* “Woman of the Year.” It did not seem to matter to her much. Instead, what she remembers of that year:

*I watched Robert Kennedy’s funeral on a verandah at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel in Honolulu, and also the first reports from My Lai [in which more than 500 Vietnamese civilians, mostly women and children, were murdered by American soldiers]. I reread all of George Orwell...[and also] the story of Betty Lansdown Fouquet, a 26-year-old woman with faded blond hair who put her five-year-old daughter out to die on the center divider of Interstate 5 some miles south of the last Bakersfield exit. The child...[rescued twelve hours later] reported that she had*

*run after the car carrying her mother and stepfather and brother and sister for “a long time.” Certain of these images did not fit into any narrative I knew.*

She adds, a few pages later: “By way of comment I offer only that an attack of vertigo and nausea does not now seem to me an inappropriate response to the summer of 1968.”

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Julian Wasser/Netflix

Hyper-awareness has always been both Joan Didion's secret

weapon and her *hamartia*. Circa 1968, being seemingly everywhere at once, observing and recording at an unforgiving pace, there is no way the world could not have felt kaleidoscopic, splintered. In *THE WHITE ALBUM*, she attends The Doors' recording sessions (but not for long), visits Huey Newton in jail and Eldridge Cleaver under house arrest. She analyzes the California Governor's mansion, and the Getty Museum (which she sees as an artistic flub, "a palpable contract between the very rich and the people who distrust them least"); she rhapsodizes about water. The Manson murders, happening just down the street to people like her and the subject of her rumination in the title essay, seem a symptom of this summer of dread.

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That summer, Didion also, improbably, starts watching biker films, a habit she continues over the next two years. "A successful bike movie," she declares, "is a perfect Rorschach of its audience."

*I saw nine of them recently, saw the first one almost by accident and the rest of them with a notebook. I saw Hell's Angels on Wheels and Hell's Angels '69. I saw Run Angel Run and The Glory Stompers and The Losers. I saw The Wild Angels, I saw Violent Angels, I saw The Savage Seven and I saw The Cycle Savages. I was not even sure why I kept going.*

But she does know why she keeps going, and despite the humor of this absurd list and the thought of Joan Didion investing the time to consume it all (did she ever remove her sunglasses?), she begins to wonder what these storylines are giving their audience. "The senseless insouciance of all the characters in a world of routine stompings and casual death takes on a logic better left unplumbed," she muses.

But then, of course, she plumbs it, and what she observes, given the current political climate, feels almost prescient.

*I suppose I kept going to these movies because there on the screen was some news I was not getting from the New York Times. I began to think I was seeing ideograms of the future...to apprehend the extent to which the toleration of small irritations is no longer a trait much admired in America, the extent to which a nonexistent frustration threshold is not seen as psychopathic but a 'right.'*

I begin to imagine if the heroes of these bike movies had had Twitter. I decide to stop imagining that. They are people, Didion writes in closing, "whose whole lives are an obscure grudge against a world they think they never made. [These people] are, increasingly, everywhere, and their style is that of an entire generation."

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Throughout all these mental roving runs Didion's usual vein of skepticism and aloofness. Danger, for her, is personal, never institutional. It's the threatening man on the street or the hippie at the door with a knife. She's not a revolutionary, not exactly a liberal (though she was one of the first to, in a 17,000-word essay for the *New York Review of Books*, advocate for the innocence of the falsely-accused Central Park Five). Visiting Huey Newton in jail, she mentions that "the small room was hot and the fluorescent light hurt my eyes." A reader can't help but think, at least for an instant, Suck it up, Joan! But mere pages later she's on the campus of San Francisco State, which has been temporarily shut down by race riots, and her shrewd eye sees the truth: "Here at San Francisco State only the black militants could be construed as serious...Meanwhile the white radicals could see themselves, on an investment of virtually nothing, as urban guerrillas."

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Here in the summer of 2019, I can, in at least some minor ways, relate to the dread Joan Didion felt in the summer of

'68. Today, it is August 10<sup>th</sup>. On the third of this month, 20 people were killed and 26 others injured by a gunman who walked into a Walmart in El Paso, Texas at ten-thirty in the morning and began firing with a semi-automatic Kalashnikov-style rifle, aiming at anyone he suspected to be Hispanic. Hours later, nine more people were killed and 27 injured in a mass shooting in Dayton, Ohio. The Proud Boys are marching in Portland and the President of the United States has denounced only those who've come out to oppose them. (It should be noted that these are grown men who call themselves "boys," and that is the least alarming thing about them.) A little over a week ago I watched Private First Class Glendon Oakley, a US soldier who had saved several children during the El Paso shooting and wept openly about not having been able to save more, stand at parade rest while the President pointed at him on live television and said, "The whole world knows who you are now, right? So you'll be a movie star, the way you look. That'll be next, right?"

Oakley looked stricken. "Yes, sir," he said.

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Now it's August 13<sup>th</sup> and there is a rally at the police station in downtown Colorado Springs. Ten days prior—the same day as El Paso—nineteen-year-old De'Von Bailey was shot seven times in the back while fleeing Colorado Springs police. I watch the unbearable video, circulating on the local news outlets, taken from an apartment security camera across the street. De'Von Bailey, young, short-haired, skinny as my son, runs across a sweep of pavement just like any you'd see in any suburban town. He doesn't pull a weapon or even turn back to look over his shoulder. Two armed cops enter the frame not far behind him. Then, he falls, skidding in a seated position, staying briefly upright. For a moment, from this distance, in a still image, he could be merely relaxing, sitting with one arm propped behind him. Then he crumples forward and the police

close in, cuffing his hands behind his back before rendering aid. In the hospital, De'Von Bailey dies.

Today, the attorneys for De'Von Bailey's parents are holding a press conference outside the police station downtown. The Pike's Peak Justice and Peace Committee has put out a call for citizens to show their support for the Baileys and their demand for an unbiased investigation. I like the Justice and Peace Committee, a group of tenacious old-timers who sometimes, at unpredictable intervals, convene to hold a giant sign in front of the Air Force Academy that reads, "WHAT ABOUT THE PEACE ACADEMY?" They mostly get yelled at from car windows. They have used the same sign for years; the phone number at the bottom has been whited over and repainted several times; it is canvas, more than five feet tall and probably ten feet long, printed with perfect spacing and propped by two wooden posts, so as to be quickly unrolled and then rolled back together for a quick exit as necessary. I joined them in a protest once, this past April, when Donald Trump spoke at the Air Force Academy commencement. I held one end of their sign. I was the only military spouse there, though there were a couple of long-haired Vietnam-era veterans. A man offered me eight hundred dollars to help pay our rent if my husband would divest from the military. "Just until he can find other work," he said. He said he was helping another service member get out now, a chaplain. This man was incredibly earnest, thin, gray-haired, in jeans and a flannel shirt, with no pains taken over shaving or hygiene; I believed him. I thanked him, knowing full well my husband, an officer, is comfortable in his job and does not want to leave, knowing this man would be disappointed in what that says about us; and he shook my hand and said to call him, the church would help get us out when we were ready. I did not know what church he meant, but I am sure its people are good.

So if the Justice and Peace Committee wants me to show up for De'Von Bailey's family, I will. I scrawl a hasty sign on a

piece of foam core I bought at King Soopers: "NO POLICE BRUTALITY." On an investment of virtually nothing, I drive downtown to the corner of Nevada and Rio Grande to see the street blocked off with traffic cones and police cars, a crowd visible already in front of the brick police station. Parking on a side street, I take my sign and head there on foot, along sidewalks with cracked concrete and sun-bleached grass growing up between the paving. I try to face the words on the sign away from scrutinizing traffic. I pass the bail bonds shop from which Dustin and Justin Brooks, 33-year-old twins, set forth a week prior, wearing bulletproof vests and brandishing their handguns, to confront these same protestors. (Dustin and Justin Brooks are what Joan Didion might call men with an obscure grudge against a world they think they never made.) That was three days after De'Von Bailey's murder. The brothers intimidated the predominantly black gathering until finally being arrested, shouting "All lives matter!" as their hands were pulled behind their backs. Seventeen riot police were dispatched in the skirmish, standing behind plexiglass shields. Hopefully the irony was not lost on anyone that a black boy had been killed for running from police unarmed and two white men could walk around waving handguns and shouting in a crowded area and simply be arrested, off to live another day. If the Dustin-Justin brothers hadn't been shouting, they may not even have been arrested. Colorado is an open-carry state. Who feels safe in an open-carry state varies widely depending upon circumstance. On November 27, 2015, shortly after we moved here, an armed, agitated older white man was seen pacing around outside the CO Springs Planned Parenthood building at 11:30 a.m. Concerned employees and passers-by called the police, but were told there was nothing they could do. "It's an open-carry state," police said. Eight minutes later, the man, 57-year-old Robert Lewis Dear, Jr., burst into the building, shooting three people dead and wounding nine others. One of the employees killed was a Filipina-born Navy wife, who had enjoyed her new job in the Springs, her husband's duty station. The Planned Parenthood location here

has been changed at least three times, and the address is not advertised on their web site.

All this crosses my mind as I walk toward the police station. I do not feel at all in danger, and I know that statistically, I am very safe – far safer in virtually any situation than the other protestors, mostly people of color, gathered on the sloping space of lawn. Still, because of men like Dustin and Justin Brooks and Robert Lewis Dear, Jr., I have left my children at home.

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The rally is peaceful, and sad. Greg Bailey and Delisha Searcy speak about the loss of their son. Their lawyers reiterate a demand for an independent investigation. Young boys hold signs: “Please Let Me Live Past 19.” “Hands Up Don’t Shoot.” Several signs say, “Imagine If It Were Your Son.” The black families console one another, embracing. Three black reverends are there. Their mood is markedly sadder than that of the “allies” like myself who have shown up and for whom the event, though attended with the best of intentions, could be described as almost recreational.







Rally for De'Von Bailey, downtown Colorado Springs, CO, August 13, 2019. Photo by Andria Williams.

A prominent local Unitarian clergywoman – lean, energetic – is there in street clothes and her rainbow stole, wearing sunglasses, her short gray hair spiked. If not for the stole she might be some fitness celebrity, or a badass chef. There's a contingent from Colorado College. A tall, thin young white man holds a sign that says, "JAIL ALL KILLER POLICE." The Justice and Peace Committee is scattered around (I don't see my military-liberator friend from back in April), but they have (appropriately) left their "Peace Academy" sign at home.

After half an hour or so, as the press conference seems to be wrapping up, the crowd is less quiet, some people whispering to one another. I strain to hear the voice of an obviously distraught black woman who's questioning the Baileys' white attorneys. "How do we know," the woman is asking, "that any investigation will be impartial? How can it possibly be fair?"

(Next to me, three of the "Moms Demand" moms ask a bystander to take their picture. They turn, their blond ponytails swinging, to beam at the camera with the crowd behind them. I feel, almost desperately, that this is not the right time.)







Rally for De'Von Bailey, downtown Colorado Springs, CO, August 13, 2019. Photo by Andria Williams.

"How will we know it's fair," the woman calls over the crowd, "if the committee is made up of all white men?..." Suddenly her voice catches, and a pause hangs in the air for just an instant. "...White women?"

She sounds so hopeless, so angry, so deservedly frustrated and hurt. I can feel the sharp point of tears gathering in my throat. I report this not so anyone will feel sorry for me but because it happened. I can't hear what response the woman is given. People begin to drift away. It was the last question.

For the rest of the afternoon, I cannot get that moment out of my mind, the way the woman's voice caught, her split second of hesitation before she said "women." Before she said "white women." What was it that gave her pause; was it some vestige of sisterhood-loyalty that she realized no longer applied?

I'd been hoping to briefly throw white men under the bus, let them take the fall. I wanted to huddle in my sense of at-least-some-shared-experience. It would have eased my discomfort. My discomfort does not need easing. My discomfort is no one else's problem to solve. Anywhere from 47 to 53 percent of white women, depending on whose poll you believe, voted for the current president. 95% of black women did not. When she let the word "women" out, when she let the words "white women" out, it was the tiny slap-in-the-face of realizing the intersectionality you champion may not want you back. I am glad she said it. And for a moment— and I think it's okay to say things we are ashamed of — I'd been hoping, so badly, that she wouldn't.

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That night I chat with my husband about Joan Didion and the late sixties and ask him if he thinks the upheaval we're feeling now is anything like what people must have felt in

1968, when it must have seemed in some ways that the world was ending. He was a history major in college, so he tends to have a good perspective.

"No, not at all," he says almost immediately. "Because think about 1968. Think about the instability. I think it was much worse then. The draft was still going strong. You could basically be called up from your own house and have to go fight a war with no choice at all."

I recall Didion's essay "In the Islands," which I've recently finished, one section of which she spends watching the funeral of a young soldier at the military cemetery in Oahu, in the dip of an extinct volcano crater called Puowaina. He was the 101<sup>st</sup> American killed in Vietnam that week. 1,078 in the first twelve weeks of that year. That essay, however, was written in 1970. Maybe 1968 felt somehow quaint by then. Maybe, by then, people were wishing they could go back.

"And you had Martin Luther King, Jr.'s death, RFK's," my husband is saying.

"And the Civil Rights Act had only been signed four years before," I add. I have always liked brainstorming.

"Sure. Now I think it's the onslaught of information, all this instantaneous, inflammatory news, that makes us feel that things are really unstable."

I think he's right. This is no summer of 1968. I start to believe that Joan Didion, less threatened by the events of the time than many, but more observant than most, held up pretty well, considering. And over time at least a few of the problems she was experiencing, some attributed to a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis and treated with lifelong prescriptions, waned. Others didn't. She's not a calm person by nature; she's anxious; I imagine she cannot turn off her brain. She's 84 now. She's survived the loss of her husband and her daughter.

I'm not sure how. I do know that ten years after the events she describes in the title essay of *The White Album*, finally completed in 1978, she ends with the admission, "writing has not helped me to see what it means."

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Even later that night, as she has all summer, my youngest daughter wakes me at exactly three a.m. She appears by my bed in pajama pants and a short-sleeved shirt, clutching her stuffed animal. The animals change nightly. Tonight it is Joey, a seafoam-green sheep. She whispers, "I have to go to the bathroom."

She does have to go to the bathroom. But more than that, this is her new ritual, exciting for her, a very mildly transgressive foray into the dark of night, in which I stumble groggily behind her and she switches on every light in the house as she goes, Joey under her arm, chatting up a storm. It's as if the hours of sleep she's had already have bottled up a torrent of potential communication, and she wants to tell me everything. She had a dream where she was drawing faces on paper plates. She had a dream that we all got ice cream. She talks and talks, all shaggy red hair and freckles like tiny seeds scattered across her sleep-pinked cheeks; expressive, energetic eyebrows. Her mood is tremendously good. She washes her hands, dripping water even though I say dry them all the way, please, and I switch off lights as I go to tuck her back in. She is perfectly happy to go back to sleep; this was all she needed, this little check-in under the pretense of a bodily function; and so I have made no move to curb this new habit, and in fact almost look forward to it, sometimes waking up just moments before she comes into my room.

As I start to shut her bedroom door she calls out, "I'm excited for tomorrow!"

I turn around, laughing. "Why?!"



She laughs, too. “I don’t know!”

I quietly close her door and wander into the kitchen, where there’s only one light still on, above the sink. I stand and look at the few dishes and mugs there, then out at the dark, flat yard. There is no way I can go back to sleep, and it does not, now, seem to me an inappropriate response to the summer of 2019.

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# Wrongful Appropriation of the Soul

*In regard to cruelties committed in the name of a free society, some are guilty, while all are responsible.*

*Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel*

## One: Complicity

Every time I read another account of sexual assault in the armed forces—most recently, when I read Senator Martha McSally’s recent statement that she’d been raped by a senior officer, hadn’t reported the assault, and continues to support leaving the prosecution of sexual assault cases in the hands of military commanders—I think of the last thing that poet Audre Lorde ever said to me.

I said goodbye to Audre one night shortly before her son Jonathan and I reported to Naval Officer Candidate School

in 1988. I didn't know then that it would be our final conversation: the breast cancer she'd survived a decade earlier had metastasized in her liver, but homeopathic injections prescribed by a doctor in Switzerland had been keeping the tumors under control for four years. Audre was a warrior, and at that time she seemed invincible.

Still, she never wasted time or words. If she spoke, what she said mattered. One listened with respect, and remembered.

She put her hands on my shoulders and looked directly into my eyes: "Jerri," she said, "don't let the Navy steal your soul."

In the decades that followed, I often wondered if I'd honored my promise or if the culture of sexual harassment and assault in the armed forces had stolen my soul. Like Senator McSally, who commissioned a few months before me, I was sexually assaulted on active duty. Like her, I did not report the assault. And like her—like almost every military woman of our generation, if we're being honest—I was complicit in a culture that enabled systemic misogyny and abuse.

## **Two: Assault**

Unlike Senator McSally, I was not raped. My assailant was not senior to me. He was a foreign midshipman and I was a lieutenant, three paygrades senior to him.

The midshipman was a foot taller and at least fifty pounds heavier than me. He drank enough at a shipboard dining-in to imagine

that I was interested and he was desirable. He followed me to my stateroom, pulled me inside, slid the pocket door shut, and grabbed me in a nonconsensual liplock. I waltzed him around until I could push the door open, and tossed him out so hard that he bounced off the steel bulkhead on the other side of the passageway.

I didn't report him. In the summer of 1994, the first women to be permanently assigned to American naval combatants had just been ordered to their ships. I didn't want my experience to be used as an argument that women didn't belong at sea. The midshipman, like many of the men who harass and assault military women, was technically proficient and behaved professionally when he was sober. His entire career lay ahead of him, and he had potential to contribute to the defense of his nation and to our alliance. Most importantly, I didn't want to tarnish the success of a joint mission with an important ally, or diminish my own contribution to it. Like all good military personnel, I prioritized mission accomplishment over personal inconvenience.

And by the time I was assaulted, I'd been groomed to accept abuse and to remain silent about it.

## **Three: Grooming**

Military culture grooms women

in uniform for abuse like a perpetrator of domestic violence  
grooms a partner  
for victimization. Military women are too often isolated from  
each other,  
desensitized to sexual aggression, encouraged to accept abuse  
of power as the  
norm, rewarded for compliance, and then silenced if they dare  
to object. Commanders  
would consider those behaviors unacceptable and inexcusable if  
they occurred in  
any other criminal offense against another servicemember.

Military culture mixes rewards—camaraderie, a sense of  
belonging, the right to see oneself as successful and  
strong—with elements of  
abuse. The grooming process isn't linear. The techniques of  
desensitization  
vary, but they're familiar to anyone knowledgeable about  
domestic violence and sexual assault.

Grooming often begins in accession training.

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I met my first  
military sexual predator at Naval Officer Candidate School in  
Newport, Rhode  
Island. Our first eight weeks of training included a class in  
maneuvering  
board, a system of solving relative motion problems  
graphically and  
mathematically. The instructor, a chief boatswain's mate, made  
no secret of his  
contempt for women. We were of no use in his man's Navy;  
women's sole purpose was  
gratification of male sexual desire.

Another officer

candidate, a prior enlisted woman who'd served as an operations specialist on an oiler, whispered to me in the passageway outside of the classroom that the best way to handle him was not to draw his attention. *Don't ever get caught alone in a classroom or deserted passageway with him*, she said. She didn't need to say *Don't bother reporting him*. He was still an instructor: one needed to know only that to read between the lines. I'd survived a violent sexual assault two years before I joined the Navy; I was so uncomfortable around that chief that I choked on the final maneuvering board exam and failed it.

The cadre brought me before a board to discuss whether I should repeat just the exam or the entire first eight weeks of training. I claimed that a relapse of bronchitis kept me up all night before the test, and showed them that I could estimate a target angle—a basic maneuvering board skill—using the photo of a destroyer on the wall. They allowed me to retake the exam. A different instructor proctored it; I passed easily.

I assumed that the horny chief was an outlier. Some of the men in my class didn't exactly approve of my presence, but none of them behaved unprofessionally. Listening to women in the know and avoiding the occasional bad apple seemed to be reasonable

strategies for sexual assault prevention—which I understood to be my individual, personal responsibility. I didn't realize how many bad apples were in the barrel; that a network of street-savvy, collegial women didn't exist everywhere in the Fleet; or that some men worked hard to prevent women from trusting each other and sharing information.

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Several months later, I attended the Intelligence Officer Basic Course in Dam Neck, Virginia. The only other woman in my class of twenty had a girly-girl name and an open, friendly smile. She spent Friday and Saturday nights at the officers' club at Naval Air Station Oceana, home to hundreds of Navy fighter pilots.

Our male classmates told me, *She's always talking about the pilots who take her out to dinner: where they go, what they eat, and how much they spend on her. She's just in the Navy to find a husband. And if you pal around with her, people will think you're fucking every pilot at Oceana too. You're a professional, though, aren't you? You're one of the good ones.*

It didn't take long to figure out that sailors laud promiscuity among men and loathe it among women. I learned never to use the phrase "double standard" to describe this phenomenon; every man who heard it changed the subject to

complain about gender  
differences in scoring on the physical fitness test.

I wanted the  
men I worked with to consider me one of the *good*  
*ones*, even if it meant being judgmental about another woman's  
love life, isolated  
from other women, and often lonely. I stayed cool and distant  
around the other  
woman in my class. She showed even less interest in getting  
acquainted. I  
wonder now what our classmates told her about me.

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In December 1989, I reported to my first duty station at the  
Antisubmarine Warfare Operations Center (ASWOC) at Lajes, a  
village on the island of Terceira in the Azores archipelago. I  
was one of two women naval officers in the command; both of us  
were young, junior in rank, and single. The command's mission,  
straight out of *The Hunt for Red October*, was to locate and  
track Soviet submarines transiting the central Atlantic using  
P-3C Orion aircraft.

In addition to  
serving as the station intelligence officer for two years, I  
was to earn  
qualifications to be responsible for the safety of the  
aircraft in flight, and  
to debrief the missions and report submarine contacts back to  
intelligence and  
antisubmarine warfare headquarters commands in Norfolk,  
Virginia, and  
Washington, DC. Although 10 USC § 6015 still prohibited women  
from flying  
combat aircraft in 1989, the P-3C community had accepted women  
in support roles  
for several years and was considered to be less aggressive and

hostile toward  
women than the carrier aviation community.

The first  
person I met at the ASWOC was a Limited Duty Officer ensign,  
formerly a senior  
enlisted man. He shook my hand and asked, "Are you going to be  
like our last  
female intel officer, and sleep with the commanding officer of  
every squadron  
who comes through?"

By then I'd  
learned the value of a snappy comeback. I batted my eyelashes  
at him and  
simpered. "Why—I don't know! Do you think that's a good idea?"  
Then I turned  
away and walked past him as if he didn't exist.

Later he and some  
of the other watch officers introduced me to that day's duty  
air crew. "I'm  
Lieutenant N-.," said a grinning pilot. "the plane commander  
for Crew Six. Are  
you like our intel officer? She only sleeps with O-4s and up."

I shook my  
head and stomped my foot a couple of times like a Navy  
instructor who wants students  
to remember something important for an upcoming test.

"Gentlemen," I  
said, "I am not out here to get laid. I'm out here to catch  
Soviet submarines.  
When's the next mission?"

First  
assignments in the Navy are, as the saying goes, "like  
drinking from a fire



hose." I told myself that I had no energy for sneaking around and no time to be lonely. And since the men I worked with apparently had the right to police my relationships, I decided that dating and sex were out of the question altogether for the next two years. I earned my qualifications as fast as I could, stood my watches, and learned to write intelligence reports and personnel evaluations. I dated one man, an Air Force logistics officer, in the last few months of that assignment.

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One of the P-3C crews deployed to Bell's first duty station let her fly the plane for 15 minutes—with the mission commander in the copilot seat, and the vertical autopilot on. Said Bell, "I'd have stayed in that seat the whole mission, if they'd let me."

Women could fly

on P-3C missions as long as the crew wasn't expected to drop torpedoes on an

enemy submarine. My supervisor in Lajes, the operations officer, wanted me to

fly as often as I could. For my first flight, the detachment officer in charge assigned

me to ride with a crew that always read the same excerpt from a fifty-cent book of pornography aloud after they completed the preflight checklist. While the plane commander chanted a graphic sex scene, I tried not to think about the implications of being locked in a flying tin can for the next ten hours with a dozen men who'd just gotten themselves all hot and bothered. I refused to look down, and attempted to make eye contact with every member of the crew. Some wouldn't meet my gaze. Others squirmed and looked away.

One asked quietly afterwards if their reading had bothered me. I smiled and said, "The bodice-rippers I read are hotter than your crew's shitty porn."

I didn't complain. If women wanted respect, we had to act tough and never, ever spoil the guys' fun. The crew's porn ritual, just words, didn't hurt me. Acting tough and depriving bullies of their fun generated a lovely dopamine rush. I refused to think too hard about the effects of accepting bully behavior as the norm.

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On another day, a pilot invited me to the hangar to learn about the squadron duty officers' responsibilities. When I arrived, he and another lieutenant called me into the squadron duty office and told me to shut the door. On the back of the door, they'd hung a *Penthouse* centerfold of a naked blonde (I am also blonde) sitting in a spread-eagle split. My face was

exactly level with her crotch. I could count her short-and-curlies. Suppressed snickers confirmed that the placement had been deliberate.

Looking the poster up and down slowly, I considered the options. If I complained, every man in the command would label me a “bitch” and a “whiner.” If I ignored the behavior it might stop—or the aviators might choose to escalate the harassment in hopes of getting a reaction. If I pretended that the prank was no big deal or made a joke of it, I might convince them to think twice about messing with me. I might even win their approval.

I turned to  
the smirking lieutenants, shrugged, and pointed my thumb over  
my shoulder in  
the direction of the poster’s focal point. “I think she dyes  
*that*, too.”

When I left, I waved cheerily at the centerfold. We had something in common, but for years I didn’t want to think about what it might be. Many of the strategies women use to access and retain some of the power men try to exercise over us and over our bodies become maladaptive. Even damaging.

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When Bell commissioned, she had little idea that her career in the Navy would, at times, resemble a gauntlet of sexual advances by superiors, peers, and subordinates. In spite of this, she was able to maintain her faith in the United States, and confidence in her mission.

Over the

course of the two-year assignment to Lajes, three of my married colleagues

propositioned me. Each time I declined: *Flattered,*

*but not interested.* They accepted the

rejections with grace; I had no problems continuing to work with them.

I never told anyone  
about the propositions. Certainly not the married colleagues'  
wives, who  
already suspected me of sleeping with their husbands—or trying  
to—just because  
we worked and traveled together.

In a “he said,  
she said” situation, either the men or their wives might  
accuse me of having  
invited the propositions, or accused me of sleeping with a  
married man—conduct  
“prejudicial to good order and discipline” and a violation of  
the Uniform Code  
of Military Justice. I told myself that I had too much self-  
respect to hook up  
with guys who cheated, and that I deserved better. I allowed  
myself to feel  
morally superior to my colleagues, and to pity their wives.

But I never  
learned to feel comfortable with the old Navy adage about  
detached service, *What goes on det, stays on det*. Officers  
are supposed to follow a code of honor and report violations  
of the Uniform  
Code of Military Justice. Every time I lied by omission, I  
felt like I’d ripped  
off another piece of my integrity and flushed it down the  
shitter.

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For weeks before the summer antisubmarine warfare conference,  
held that year in Lajes, the only other single woman officer  
in the command (the administrative officer) and I endured  
repeated badgering from the executive officer and my  
supervisor, the operations officer, about who our “significant  
others” would be for the Saturday night dining-out event at a



local seafood restaurant. The executive officer wasn't satisfied when we told him we were going stag. Practically licking his lips at the picture of two young women paired with two hot-to-trot pilots, he ordered us both to bring significant others to the dinner.

At the Friday night reception, the admin officer and I cornered the two admirals attending the conference. We explained the situation, and asked them to be our dates for the dining-out. One had to depart for a family emergency, but we picked up the other from the VIP Quarters, stuffed him into the admin officer's little two-cylinder hatchback for the drive out to the town of Praia da Vitoria, and arrived at the restaurant a few minutes late.

We made a grand entrance on the admiral's arm and announced: "XO! OPSO! You ordered us to bring significant others to the dining-out. We're high achievers, so we brought the most *significant* other we could find. Will this one do, gentlemen?"

Everyone laughed but our supervisors, who turned bright red. They left our love lives alone after that.

The master's tools might not have brought down the master's house, but taking a whack with them from the inside and knocking down a little plaster afforded us the illusion of success.

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Bell's solo campsite on the summit of Serra da Santa Barbara, Azores, July 1990, looking north across the caldera. Her military experience was not unpleasant, but it was, by necessity, more solitary than that of her many male peers.

In the summer

of 1990, a married pilot deployed to Lajes heard that I planned to go camping

on Serra de Santa Bárbara, the crest of Terceira's largest extinct volcano. He

invited himself to go with me. He insisted that he would join me even after I

told him several times that he wasn't welcome.

I didn't complain,

but my fellow watch officers overheard him and offered to straighten him out if

he was scaring me.

I thanked them,

but told them I could handle it. *If the*

*pilot gets anywhere near the top of my volcano, I said, I'll just push him off the side of the mountain*

*and watch him die. With pleasure. I meant it literally.*



I went camping  
alone and kept watch on the one-lane road up the mountain  
until sunset. Not  
even a Navy pilot would risk the hairpin turns with no guard  
rails, the  
three-thousand-foot plunge to the sea. The pilot never showed.  
I slept  
fitfully.

I told my  
colleagues that I'd managed the situation and enjoyed the  
campout.

Not all  
empowerment stories are true. Mine wasn't. But I told it so  
many times that I  
began to believe it. *Fake it 'til you  
make it.*

\*\*\*

A naval flight officer, a lieutenant commander known for  
harassing women—especially enlisted women—returned to Lajes  
for a second deployment.

Both the watch  
officers and the enlisted sonar technicians assured the women  
in the command  
that they wouldn't leave any of us alone with him. The sonar  
techs wouldn't  
even go behind the sonar equipment racks if I sat at the  
debriefing table with the  
lieutenant commander.

During one  
mission debrief, he put his hand over mine and leered at me.  
Every enlisted man  
in the room stopped working to glare at him.

I didn't smile. His hand, I moved firmly off my body and out of my personal space. Then, with eye contact and a facial expression, I indicated that he'd better not do it again. He shrugged and grinned: *Can't blame a guy for trying*. I didn't report him.

The next day, the operations officer—the supervisor who'd teased me about bringing a “significant other” to the dining-out—called me into his office. The sailors had told him about the handsy lieutenant commander. He asked why I hadn't reported it. He'd already arranged for the squadron's commanding officer to put the lieutenant commander on the first flight back to Rota. He insisted that he would never tolerate sexual harassment.

I pretended to see no irony in his statement. I considered myself lucky to work with men who were pranksters and occasionally bullies instead of rapists. I wondered what would happen to the women at the antisubmarine warfare operations center in Rota, and what might already have happened to the women in the deployed squadron. I didn't wonder too long: they weren't in my chain of command.

I'd completed the qualification process for “handling it.”

## **Four: Silence**

In 1991, the same year I began congratulating myself for being tough enough to handle

military misogyny, Navy helicopter pilot Paula Coughlin reported sexual assault and misconduct at the naval aviation community's "Tailhook" professional conference. I admired her courage in speaking up, and saw her as a role model.

The Navy had one more lesson to teach.

In her essay "Cassandra Among the Creeps," Rebecca Solnit describes concentric rings of silence, through which women who dare to speak up against powerful men descend. Navy women watched Paula Coughlin descend, and we learned.

Almost immediately, most Navy men—even the Naval Investigative Service personnel charged with investigating the allegations—either dismissed Coughlin's story or attempted to discredit it.

Then they began to discredit Coughlin herself. The Navy grounded her and questioned her mental health. Suddenly, everybody knew somebody who'd known her: in ROTC at Old Dominion, at flight school, in the squadron, on the staff. They said she was brash, foul-mouthed, promiscuous (why else would she have gone to Tailhook in the first place?), and a shitty pilot. Claiming that she hadn't earned the honor of being an admiral's aide, those same men reasoned that the job had been given to her at better pilots' expense because the Navy was pushing to integrate more women into naval aviation. That was the first year I heard the term "political correctness."

Speaking up in Coughlin's defense was a one-way ticket down to the next level of silence: bullying and intimidation. *Are you one of those feminazis like Pat Schroeder? It takes a special kind of man to be a Navy pilot—what happened at Tailhook's just the culture in naval aviation. Do you think this*

*investigation will actually change anything? Coughlin's career is toast, whether or not she wins her case. And the witch hunt is ruining the careers of good aviators who cost the taxpayers thousands of dollars to train. Would you ruin a man's career over something like that? It's not like she was raped or anything.*

I disagreed.

*Aw, we thought you were one of the good ones, Lieutenant.*

Lesson learned: no woman would be awarded the Medal of Honor for jumping on the sexual assault grenade.

Coughlin resigned her commission in the Navy. I decided to stay, took another big gulp of the Kool-Aid, and jumped feet-first down to the bottom of the pit. The need for silence, I internalized as a personal survival strategy. I didn't speak up in support of Coughlin again. Women who challenged military bullies and predators risked criticism, ostracism, lower marks on performance evaluations, or trumped-up misconduct charges that could lead to discharge from the service—even dishonorable discharge. Few senior women were around to serve as role models or mentors; those who would discuss sexual harassment advised us to keep our heads down and pick our battles. We couldn't rely on women who agreed with us in private to stand with us in public. Men were even less likely to offer support.

In 2005, my graduate fiction advisor suggested that I write stories from the perspective of women in uniform. "Military women don't ever tell those stories," I replied. "That would just make things worse for every woman still serving." That had been my lived experience, and I believed every word when I said it. I didn't start writing about the Navy for almost another decade.

## Five: Barriers

Senator McSally needed years to decide to break her silence about her assault. Many of us do. If you'd asked me when I retired in 2008 if I'd been sexually assaulted on active duty, I'd have said no: I'd handled the incident with the handsy midshipman and moved on. Senator McSally may have thought she'd handled her sexual assault, too.

An admission of complicity in the culture that permits and encourages gender and sexual violence in the armed forces, and the realization that there is no contradiction in being both the victim of abuse and an enabler of it, can take much longer. Responsibility for sexual harassment and assault in the military rests squarely and solely on the shoulders of the perpetrators; staying silent to survive, or to remain employed, in no way equals consent to being assaulted. But men and women who served and are still serving bear the responsibility for tolerating and perpetuating an abusive culture that creates conditions in which sexual assault can occur more frequently, in which victims who come forward are routinely silenced, and in which those who courageously insist on being heard are denied justice.

Complicity costs us a fortune in integrity. Worse, when we fail to recognize and acknowledge the ways in which we individually enable toxicity in the culture, we pass some of the cost on to other victims. Military sexual trauma factors significantly in

depression for many veterans, female and male. It's a risk factor for substance abuse and homelessness. It's almost certainly implicated in the suicide rate of women veterans (250 times the national average for women). Complicity allows the culture of gender and sexual violence in the armed forces to appropriate our souls—or to steal them outright.

Audre Lorde wrote in her final book *A Burst of Light: And Other Essays*: “While we fortify ourselves with visions of the future, we must arm ourselves with accurate perceptions of the barriers between us and that future.” Visions of an armed force in which gender and sexual violence is prevented to the extent possible, and properly addressed when it occurs, must begin with accurate perception. This begins with an understanding of how the culture of sexual harassment and sexual assault functions in the armed forces. It's a slippery slope that leads from inappropriate stressors in training, to the acceptance of gender-based harassment and sexual abuse as norms. Military leaders must also develop an accurate perception of how toleration of sexual harassment and assault, and silence about it, have for too long been the price of approval, acceptance, camaraderie, and privilege in the armed forces, especially for women.

Senator McSally's task force will need to develop accurate perceptions of the systemic barriers to reducing gender and sexual violence in the armed forces. Department of Defense leaders resistant to change and jealous of their authority, and conservative pundits with an antiquated understanding of strength and of sexual violence, will likely attempt to reward the task force for tolerance of the status quo and continued

complicity in the  
culture of harassment and assault. Members of the task force,  
and Senator  
McSally, must refuse to allow their integrity to become the  
price for approval,  
acceptance, camaraderie, and privilege. I wish Senator McSally  
and her task  
force all success in tackling the challenges of sexual  
harassment and assault  
in the armed forces, and welcome her, with sadness and regret,  
to the circle of  
those who have finally found the courage to break our silence.

*Jerri Bell is the Managing Editor for O-Dark-Thirty, the literary journal of the Veterans Writing Project. She retired from the Navy in 2008; her assignments included antisubmarine warfare in the Azores Islands, sea duty on USS Mount Whitney and HMS Sheffield, and attaché duty at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, Russia. She also served in collateral assignments as a Navy Family Advocacy Program Officer, Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) Program Officer, and sexual assault victim advocate. Her fiction has been published in a variety of journals and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize; her nonfiction has been published in newspapers, including the Washington Post and the Charleston Gazette-Mail; in journals; and on blogs. She and former Marine Tracy Crow are the co-authors of It's My Country Too: Women's Military Stories from the American Revolution to Afghanistan.*