

New Fiction from J. Malcolm Garcia: "Love Engagement"

Noor and his wife Damsa moved to Paris when the Russians invaded Afghanistan in 1979. Twenty-two years later, after the collapse of the Taliban, they returned to Kabul and rented a house with a large backyard in District Ten on Taimani Street. Withered red, blue and white roses grew beside a bare concrete wall and geckos perched between the thorns, immobile, alert, leaping at the slightest disturbance into the branches of a poplar. Fallen leaves from the tree curled on the faded tiles of a cracked terrace. One afternoon, while he was watering the roses, Noor met his neighbor, Abdul Ahmadi, and invited him for tea.

Right off, Abdul noticed Damsa in the kitchen without a burqa. She looked him up and down without a hint of self-consciousness. Another woman stood beside her. She wore a burqa and turned away when Abdul glanced at her. Damsa carried tea and a plate of raisins and cashews on a tray and sat with Abdul and Noor and lit a cigarette. Abdul could not believe her behavior and turned to Noor. Noor shrugged.

It is no problem for a woman to smoke and sit with a man in Paris, he said.

Don't apologize for me, Damsa snapped.

I was not apologizing for you.

Yes, you were!

Turning to Abdul, she scolded, You are stuck in the old ways.

Abdul's face reddened with anger but he remained quiet. He closed his eyes as if the darkness would remove Damsa from his sight. When he opened them again, he ignored her and asked

Noor about the other woman. Was she his second wife?

No, Damsa answered and laughed.

I spoke to Noor, Abdul said.

Yes, and now I am speaking to you, Damsa said. She is my friend from long ago. We were in school together.

We are not in France, Abdul said, trying to control his temper.

Yes, but you are in our home, Damsa replied.

Please, Noor said.

No, don't please me, she snapped.

When neither Noor or Abdul spoke, Damsa continued: The woman's name was, Arezo. She was still not used to the idea that the Taliban were gone and she could now show her face to men. Slowly, slowly, Damsa said, she had been encouraging Arezo to relax and trust in the new Afghanistan.

Abdul understood her hesitation. He still had a long beard and wore a salwar kameez. His friends told him to shave but his mind did not switch off and on like a lightbulb. One day, the vice police were measuring his beard, the next day his friends were waiting for barbers to shave theirs off. It was all very sudden and as unbelievable as Damsa's behavior.

Excusing himself, Abdul returned home. He lived alone. During Talib time, when his father arranged for him to marry the daughter of a close friend, Abdul fled to Pakistan. The idea of marriage scared him, especially to a girl he did not even know. He had rarely spoken to any girl and never without an older person present. He had vague memories of playing tag with girl cousins in the back of his house when he was a boy but after he turned ten or eleven his father told him to play only with boys.

Abdul refused to come home until his father relented and promised not to force him into marriage but he did not speak to Abdul again. He moved around him like a detached shadow behaving as if he did not exist.

A tailor who owned a small shop in Shar-e-Naw hired Abdul as his assistant. When he died, Abdul took over. Then al-Qaeda attacked the United States and the Americans came. In the days and months that followed, Abdul would sit behind the counter of his shop beside a sewing machine and stare at the busy sidewalk traffic, incredulous. Young men strode by in blue jeans and button up shirts with bright flower patterns, much of their pale chests exposed. Girls wore jeans, too, and high-heeled shoes, and the wind from cars lifted their saris and they held the billowing cloth with both hands and laughed, their uncovered faces turned toward the clear sky, sunlight playing across their flushed cheeks. Abdul struggled to absorb all the changes that had occurred in such a short time.

One day a year after they had met, Noor called Abdul and told him Damsa had died. She had awakened that morning, stepped into their garden, lit a cigarette and dropped dead of a heart attack. He found her slumped against a wall, a vine reaching above her head. Abdul hurried to his house. When Noor opened the door, Abdul embraced him.

Well, now I can watch American wrestling shows on TV without Damsa telling me it's entertainment for boys, not men, Noor said. I can play panjpar^[1] with my friends and she won't tell me I'm wasting my time.

Two months later, Noor stopped by Abdul's shop with some news: his nephew, the son of his older sister, had become engaged. But it was not a typical engagement. He and the girl had decided to marry on their own. Their parents had not been involved.

My nephew calls it a love engagement, Noor said.

Their fathers do not object? Abdul asked.

No. Now that the Americans are here I think it is OK.

Noor left and a short time later Arezo walked into Abdul's shop and asked if he would mend a pair of sandals. She gave no indication that she recognized him. She still wore a burqa but she had pulled the hood from her face. Her hair fell to her shoulders. She would not look at Abdul directly but he noticed a smile play across her face when he spoke.



That night, as he got ready for bed, Abdul thought about Arezo. He wondered what it would be like walking beside her in public as young men and women now did. Just thinking about it kept him awake. When he finally fell asleep, he dreamed of them on a sidewalk together, their fingers almost touching. Then he leaned into her face and pressed his mouth against hers. As their lips touched he woke with a jolt.

Night after night Abdul had this dream. He always woke up after he kissed her. Eventually he would fall back to sleep and dream of Arezo again until the dawn call to prayer stirred him awake. Then one night the dreams stopped. He woke up feeling her absence, his head empty of even the slightest impression of her. The next morning, Noor called. His voice broke. He sounded very upset. He asked if he could come over. Yes, of course, Abdul said. When he let him in, he was shocked by his friend's sunken eyes, his unkempt hair and disheveled clothes. His lower lip was cut and swollen.

What's wrong? Abdul asked.

Noor did not answer. Abdul made tea and they sat on the floor of his living room. After a long moment, Noor sighed and began talking. Two days ago, he spoke to his nephew. What is a love engagement? he had asked him. It is the most beautiful thing, his nephew replied. Why do you ask? Noor told him he had

fallen in love with Arezo. Sometimes, accompanied by her father, she would stop by his house with food. Damsa would want to know you are taking care of yourself, she would tell him. Noor could not stop staring at her. He wanted to speak to her father about marriage. No, no, his nephew said. That is the old way. You must ask her yourself.

With his help, Noor composed a letter. He told Arezo he did nothing but think of her all day. When he watered the roses, when he walked to the bazaar, when he had tea. *I want you to be my wife*, he wrote. His nephew shook his head.

Be humble. Ask her if she would accept you as her husband.

Noor did as he suggested and signed his name. His nephew delivered the letter. The next day, Noor woke up and found a note from Arezo's father outside his front door.

Noor Mohammad, the letter began, Arezo loved your wife Damsa as a sister and continues to respect you as her husband. You are like a brother to her. She cannot feel anything more for you without betraying Damsa. In the future do not talk to Arezo again. I, as her father, Haji Aziz Sakhi, insist upon this.

Noor walked to his sister's house and beat his nephew, slapping him in the face until the boy's father threw him out. Noor stormed off to Arezo's house and pounded on the door. No one answered. He paced on the sidewalk until nightfall. Then he went home but his frustration was so great he was unable to sleep. This morning, he returned before the sun had fully risen and stood impatiently across the street. As a dry, lazy heat began spreading across the city, he saw Arezo walk outside with an empty sack and turn toward the downtown bazaar. Noor followed her. When she went down an alley, he called her. She stopped and looked at him. The hood of her burqa was raised and he saw her face, the uncertain smile creasing her mouth. He grabbed her and kissed her. She

stiffened in his arms, tried to shake loose from his grip and bit his mouth. He stumbled back and she ran, the burqa inflating like a balloon as if it might lift her into the sky.

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When he finished talking, Noor stared at his tea. After a moment, he looked up at Abdul, stood and let himself out without speaking.

Abdul followed him to the door. As he watched Noor enter his house, Abdul thought of Arezo. He hoped Noor had not scared her from his dreams. He would never hurt her.

[\[1\]](#) *A card game popular in Afghanistan*

Artist Profile: Musician Emily Yates

INTRODUCTION

Emily Yates joined the Army at 19, spent six years in, from 2002 until her “release,” as she puts it, in 2008, finishing as an E-4, and served two deployments to Iraq in 2005-06 and 2007-08. She calls herself a former “public affairs minion, writing heartwarming news stories about the Iraq War to help build fellow soldiers’ morale.” **1** She worked under David Abrams (author of the novels *Fobbit* and *Brave Deeds*), and as “the only snarky female specialist in his unit,” she sees some of herself in the character of Carnicle. She says that she wishes to “use my experience in the military to make my

civilian life richer . . . [and] help those who are struggling.” 2 As a self-proclaimed “eventual ukulele superstar” she often uses humor to express her concerns, and utilizes juxtapositions of joy and disillusionment, humor and aggression, and gentleness and vulgarity to communicate those concerns, whether they be about the VA, the precariousness of freedom, sexuality, the military, certain personality types, or how “not to be a dick.”



Yates works in a variety of media, also doing photography and writing. Her photographs run from “Food” to “Faces” to “Nature” to “War.” The latter document scenes from her time in Iraq, like “On Patrol” and “Perimeter Secured,” as well as scenes with children, often with soldiers. 3

Like the diverse subject matter of her photographs Yates’ writing touches on a variety of themes. In “A Veteran’s Affair: How Dealing With the VA is Like Dating a Douchebag” (2016) 4, she uses humor to highlight a serious issue. “Unfortunately, because only one percent (roughly) of Americans serve in the military at any given time, there’s a massive cognitive disconnect between veterans and, as we lovingly call the rest of the population, civilians. But there is hope for us yet to bridge the communication divide.” In the essay she points out the multiple ways that the VA falls short of expectations.

Two essays for *Truthout* also express her concerns. “American Propagander: Six Ways Paul Rieckhoff’s ‘American Sniper’ Column Deeply Bothers This US Veteran” (2015) Yates presents a scathing critique of Rieckhoff’s praise of Eastwood’s film. She feels that in his discussion of the film Rieckhoff exploits veterans and ignores the complexity of the war. In her view, he ignores the real story of the war, such as PTSD and veteran suicides (although to be fair, Kyle’s PTSD is depicted), and the complexity of American involvement. She

ends her essay “All of these points illustrate the larger issue that when veterans’ traumatic experiences are exploited as freely by veterans themselves as they are by the powerful few who send us to war, it’s a sign that we ourselves have internalized the destructive system that our bodies were used to support.”

In another essay, “Who Am I, Really?: The Identity Crisis of the Woman Veteran Returning Home” (2013), she describes the psychological split she and other women face trying to “recalibrate” their lives and “relearn” how to be a civilian. “I’m referring to the particularly awkward division between women veterans and women who have never been in the military – the division that leads to women like me getting out of the Army and finding it nearly impossible to relate to 99% of other American women.” 5

One of her poems, “I Am the Savage,” reflects on her war experience. She writes about the “rubble beside the Tigris river” and troops’ entering Iraqi homes, instilling fear in the citizens. But the military power she observes, wielded against ordinary citizens, is the source of her dejection:

*My job is to tell the story of victory–
victory!
Victory?
But I am defeated*

Another poem, “Yellow Ribbon” (also a song and video), is critical of civilians who refuse to see the reality of war, believing that a yellow ribbon on their cars and the formulaic “thank you for your service” excuses them. She feels that civilians are willfully blind to what is being done in their name, and are content to follow the trappings of patriotism. She writes “But you can’t bring back the dead by throwing a parade.” The poem closes: “Don’t make me your hero, just lend me your ear/Oh, and wipe the tears I cry/While I apologize for that goddamn yellow ribbon on your car.” 6

Yates is best known for her music. In 2012 she released *I've Got Your Folk Songs Right Here* and in 2014 *Folk in Your Face*. She also released a children's album under the *nom de musique* Fancy von Pancerton. In *I've Got Your Folk Songs Right Here* there is a humorous dimension to "Plant Some Weed," where growing marijuana is a better economic choice than working at McDonald's or taking tickets at a movie theater. "In Your Mind" and "Shut Yer Face" criticize ego-centric males who believe that they are "the best and the brightest/Your teeth are the whitest/Except that it's all in your mind." "Foreign Policy Folk Song" is reminiscent of Phil Ochs and protest songs of the 60's placed in a contemporary context:

Just bomb their country

Just bomb their fucking country

Kill all of their children and destroy their infrastructure

Just bomb their country, put holes in all their history

Then take all of their resources and bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb their country.

Folk in Your Face echoes many of the themes of the first album. There is the whimsical, upbeat "Porn!" ("Everyone likes porn!") and the more serious "Just a Little Cog," in which she declares that she will no longer be a cog in anyone else's wheel, whether it be in a relationship or the military: "I was just a little soldier in your war/I'm not fighting anymore/I'm no longer just a cog in your machine."

One of her strongest songs is "You're the Enemy," released on the 2018 *Women At War: Warrior Songs Vol. 2*, as a response to the prevalence of Military Sexual Trauma (MST) and her own assault, which she did not report "because I knew the investigation, if one even happened, would be even more demoralizing than being assaulted by people I knew." She is especially demoralized that there is no escape from the situation. She sees her attacker daily and the supposed trust within a unit is meaningless:

*I was trained to fight,
To kill and to die
But never thought that I'd be fighting
Someone on my side*

Yates has made numerous music videos, some of performances and others more illustrative of the songs. "Yellow Ribbon" (noted above) is set in front of a recruiting station, with Yates playing a banjo. The more-active "Land of the Free" (released July 4, 2017) is in "honor of those for whom this is not the 'Land of the Free.'" It is an attack on corporate greed, consumerism, militarism, and any force that restricts personal freedom. As Yates skips through Boulder's streets draped in an American flag, she sings "you'll be convicted for your convictions" and "you'll be tried for tryin' to speak the truth." The video ends with Yates bound with duct tape with a strip of tape over her mouth. On the strip is written "patriot," suggesting that in the current political climate the real patriots, the truth-tellers, have to be silenced and held in check.

What Emily Yates says about her work could also be applied to artists Vince Gabriel and Jason Moon: "Through my art, I express my many opinions and observations, casually brushing aside social stigma in the interest of breaking down communication barriers and shining light on the many ties that bind humans together."

1. <http://emilyyatesmusic.com/bio/>
2. Syracuse.com, August 16, 2013 (updated March 22, 2019)
3. <http://emilyyatesphotography.com/>
4. <https://brokeassstuart.com/2016/02/08/a-veterans-affair-how-dealing-with-the-va-is-like-dating-a-douchebag/>
5. <https://truthout.org/authors/emily-yates/>; site includes additional essays
6. <https://www.warriorwriters.org/artists/emily.html>
7. (<http://emilyyatesmusic.com/page/2/>)

INTERVIEW WITH EMILY YATES

Larry Abbott: To start, I was just wondering about your poems "I Am the Savage" and "The Yellow Ribbon." How did they come about?

Emily Yates: "I Am the Savage" was a long time ago now, but I was looking through photos that I had taken during my first deployment and thinking about how we had turned the city of Baghdad into complete rubble. Yet, we were calling the people there backwards, or savages, or just all kinds of derogatory names.

I was thinking how that was actually the opposite of what it was because only savages would go in and bomb a complete civilization, a city, a metropolitan area full of civilians. Then, mock or criticize those civilians for having to make the best of it.

I started to think about how we as American soldiers, as U.S. soldiers, were not any better than these individuals whose homes we were occupying. In fact, we were invaders. So, I had a lot of guilt and shame around my participation there, seeing a place where civilization was formed, the cradle of civilization at the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, being reduced to complete rubble.

As far as "Yellow Ribbon," it was really almost a gut reaction. I had been involved in a lot of conversations with other veterans right around the time I wrote that song, and talking about the disconnect between people saying thank you for your service and displaying these yellow ribbons, but then not being interested in hearing about our actual experiences or opinions about the war, or asking us how we were doing, or really saying anything other than "thank you, now move along."

The yellow ribbon, to me, was sort of emblematic of that attitude, even though I know there are plenty of people who

really mean it sincerely. I think many of those people are just as misled by our government as I was.

LA: You seem to be attacking the hypocrisy or phony patriotism of some civilians.

EY: Yes and no, because I understand the hypocrisy and the phony patriotism. To those people, it might not seem hypocritical or phony. They are products of a very effective national indoctrination system. They came by their perspectives honestly. I was pretty angry when I wrote that song and maybe didn't have as much empathy for those people as I do now. But it was more of just "pay attention." If you really want to be patriotic and say thank you, pay attention because none of this death and destruction needs to be happening, and it shouldn't be.

The military is a job. It's not a service. It's a job. We join because we need a job. We're told that it's some kind of noble job, but it's not. That's what they say so that we don't feel bad about all the horrible things we're being trained to do.

Some people do really have a willingness to serve, but they wouldn't do that shit for free. I think of the work that I'm doing now, speaking out, as more of a service than anything I did in the military. That was a job I did to get money for school and life security, to get out of my hometown and have some new experiences.

But it's a sacrifice of your own personal freedom, so I encourage people to acknowledge the sacrifice. But saying thank you, thank you for anything, it doesn't make any sense to me. You don't thank someone for working at McDonald's. They're actually feeding you. You don't thank someone for working in a nonprofit. That's service. You don't thank someone for going and picking up trash on the side of the road.

Why are we thanking anyone for not having any better option

than the military? Or for not thinking very clearly about what's going on? Maybe I'm sorry for your pain. Or, how are you? Or, welcome home. Or, I'm sorry you were deceived. I'm sorry you were used.

The thanking makes me uncomfortable because the military hasn't done anybody any favors. At all. Whether or not we're paid for it at all. We're not doing anything positive for freaking anyone. Other than Dick Cheney, maybe.

LA: You also do photography with a variety of different subjects. They seem to be a little disparate. You have some war photographs on one hand, and then nature on the other hand.

EY: Yeah. I try to think of myself as a multi-polar person. Maybe not bipolar. It's got such a negative connotation. I feel like too often, we humans are pressured to define ourselves as being one thing or another thing. I love butterflies, and I care about militarism.

I think that acknowledging the multiplicity of humans is something I try to do all the time. I try to give myself permission to be as many people as I need to be. I think the more we do that, the less we run the risk of erasing parts of people that we don't want to see.

LA: Your songs reflect that multiplicity. Some are cynical, some are critical, satirical, whimsical, political. Would this be accurate, that your songs have this multiplicity to them?

EY: I'm even veering into hopeful in the next album that I'm working on.

LA: How did you get into songwriting?

EY: I started writing songs just by accident, in a way. I was learning to play the ukulele and I had been listening to a lot of Kimya Dawson and Bob Dylan. I became aware of how songs can

be anything.

The thing I loved about Kimya Dawson's songs is that they sound so sweet and cute, and they often say such powerful and provocative things. Her song, "Loose Lips," was one that I first heard when I was deployed.

It was absolutely adorable and she had the lyric, it was, "My warpaint is Sharpie ink and I'll show you how much my shit stinks." Let's see. "I'll tell you what I think because my thoughts and words are powerful. They think we're disposable, well both my thumbs opposable are spelled out on a double word and triple letter score."

She had the line, "Fuck Bush. And I'll say fuck Bush and fuck this war." She said it so cutely, and I was like, yeah. Let's just say things cute. I listened to that and I was like, yeah. How do you be angry at that voice? How do you be angry at that song?

So, when I was learning to play the ukulele, I was practicing three different chords and thought, I bet I could put some words in here and that would make it easier to practice, and more fun. So, I did. I put in words that were an answer to the question people were always asking me at that time, as I had just gotten married.

Which was, "When are you gonna have a baby? Are you gonna have babies? Are you gonna have kids? When are you having babies?" I was just like, my answer was always, "I've got so much to do. How do you think I have time to have kids right now?" I would answer these questions over and over, and try to be polite.

So, when I was practicing my ukulele, I just started with, "I don't want to have a baby," and went from there, and wrote what I think is probably my most vulgar song that I've ever written.

LA: This is true.

EY: But it was cute enough to where people just kind of laughed, instead of hating me when I was done singing it. So, thank you Kimya Dawson for the influence, and thank you other people for asking me questions I don't want to answer except in a song.

LA: You've mentioned that it's better, maybe more powerful, to use humor in a song even though the topic is serious, rather than beating people over the head with a club about the topic.

EY: Yeah, I've always tried to use humor almost as a defense mechanism really because if you say things people don't want to hear in an aggressive way, then they become aggressive back. But if you can make it a joke, then they laugh a little bit and maybe the proclivity toward aggression dissipates a little bit. Maybe people are more open to hearing what you have to say if you can make them laugh while you say it.

LA: Were you a musical person growing up? What led you to the ukulele? You're a self-proclaimed "next ukulele superstar."

EY: I was not a musical person growing up, other than singing, which I did in choirs and such. My mom tried to teach me a couple of different instruments when I was a kid, but I didn't pick it up quickly. I didn't have very good hand/eye coordination. I didn't have any good rhythm, and my mom got very frustrated with me at a young age. I decided that I was just never going to be able to play an instrument, I guess.

Everyone else in my family played instruments. My brother is a fantastic musician. My mom plays cello and guitar. My dad plays hammered dulcimer and a bunch of other stuff. I never played any instruments.

Then, I started dating my now ex-husband, who was a musician, a multi-instrumentalist, and he happened to have a ukulele that he never played because he was always playing other

things. But he had this ukulele and I was like, "This is so cute. I want to play it!" He was like, "Okay. Here's how you play a couple of chords." I was like, "Great."

But I didn't have rhythm until one of his bandmates decided that he wanted to go on this trip to Africa, to Ghana, and record an album. Even though I was kind of pissed that he scheduled it during the time my new husband and I had taken for our honeymoon and invited him, I was like, all right. That's kind of rude, but sure, let's go to Ghana. Fine. I don't play any instruments, but I had never been there. Why the fuck not? Sure. Let's do that. Then, we'll go to Italy. Okay. Great.

So we went to Ghana. His bandmate had set up these drumming and dancing workshops that we had to get up ridiculously early for every morning. He had set up different levels of drumming workshops. The real musicians were in the advanced drumming. Then, the wives were in the beginning drumming class to keep us busy.

So, we did three or four days of drumming workshops, and it turns out muscle memory is a thing. I got rhythm, all of a sudden. I came back from Ghana, we went to Italy.

I picked up a ukulele at a music shop in Venice and I started strumming it. I was like, holy shit! I can strum! Neat. Then, when we got back, I picked up the ukulele again and started practicing, and wrote my first couple songs. No one's been able to shut me up ever since. Now, I also play the banjo, the bass. There you go.

LA: You called yourself a folk-punk singer. What do you mean by that?

EY: I've since learned that there's a term called anti-folk that a couple of other artists, like Ed Hamell or I think Ani DiFranco, probably relate to that is a better descriptor. I related to punk because I felt like punk rockers were also

putting messages in with their songs that a lot of people didn't want to hear.

I related more to that because a lot of folk songs I knew were very sweet and earnest. I'm very earnest, and I think my sound is kind of sweet, but I'm not really, because I tend to veer more toward sarcasm than actual deep earnestness in a lot of my songs. I tend to put a lot more winking in than a lot of my favorite folk singers. I was like well, I'm not quite folk. I'm kind of folk, but I'm not quite folk.

I love punk. I listen to the Dead Kennedys and the Ramones, and whoever. I related more to that sort of aggressive style than to "the answer is blowing in the wind," for example.

Even though I love Bob Dylan, misogynist though he is. That's a whole other conversation. Although that did inspire me to write some parodies of Bob Dylan's songs, called Boob Dylan.

LA: You said that you were influenced by Boob, I mean, Bob Dylan, but also Jonathan Richman and Eric Idle. What do you draw from those two?

EY: I feel like from Jonathan Richman, I draw a lot of openness and wonder, and a lot of I don't give a shit what you think about this style that I'm doing. I'm just gonna do it, and it might not be what you're expecting, but fine, with a lot of "wide-eyed here I am" type of vibe.

Eric Idle, I grew up with Monty Python. I grew up with the songs of Monty Python and the comedy of Eric Idle's songs. "The Galaxy Song," "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life," stuff like that that were very pointed and profound, but hilarious. I really feel like I need a solid amount of profundity in my ridiculousness. So, that's what I draw from Eric Idle. Also, just his lack of give-a-shit about who you might be pissing off.

LA: You were in the military for six years. What led you to

that decision?

EY: Well, it's funny you should ask because I just finished my book draft, which is inspired by a lot of questions like that, and details my journey. So as not to discourage you from reading it . . .it's essentially inspired by all the questions people usually ask me about being in the military. Why did you join? What did you do? What was it like being a woman in the military? What was it like being deployed? Did you see combat? Were you on the front lines? I feel like it's important to show people how there really are no front lines in the current occupations that the United States is involved in.

People usually ask this blanket question, what was that like? And I'm just like, well, buy me a drink and sit down. How much time do you have? Now, I was like, fuck it. I'm just going to put all of the answers in stories and show rather than tell. I don't want to beat people over the head with my opinions about my experience. I just want to explain what I went through and show what I went through. You can see for yourself how I came to the conclusions I did.

Last night I just finished editing my most final draft, as I'm calling it. I feel good about it and started to send it around to whatever agents, and try to work on getting it published.

It's around 53,000 words, so digestible, ideally. I'm not trying to write frickin' *War and Peace*. Maybe the condensed version.

Anyway, the military seemed like the best idea at the time, a way to get college money, the job training. I wanted to be a journalist. A recruiter offered me a job as an Army journalist, which is the alternate title for Army public affairs specialist, which, if I had actually been a journalist at that time, I would have been like, hey, those two jobs shouldn't be the same thing, actually. I learned the technical skills of journalism, but not the critical skills.

LA: You've said that you use humor or satire to express the serious. You wrote an essay, "A veteran's affair: how dealing with the VA is like dating a douche bag." The essay certainly uses humor to make your point. How did that essay come about and what were you trying to?

EY: You know what's so funny? I had totally forgotten about writing that until you mentioned it. I think I came back from a really fucking frustrating experience at the VA, and it felt like every bad relationship I'd ever had, because I couldn't get away from it. I had to deal with this entity that could be so much of a better institution than it is.

I have a love/hate relationship with the VA. I'm glad that I have access to healthcare from doctors and nurses who are familiar with the military experience. But at the same time, we don't have another option.

There's a push right now towards privatizing the VA. They're not coming right out and saying we're privatizing the VA. They're just contracting out and contracting out, and underfunding the VA, and understaffing the VA, and calling it things like the Veteran's Choice Program.

Well, if you can't get an appointment for months, you have this amazing option of going to one of our network providers. It's framed as this option, but what needs to be happening is the VA needs to be fully staffed and fully funded because there's absolutely no reason for it to take months to get an appointment. There's absolutely no reason.

And the reason we need the VA is because we need health professionals who are intimately and specifically acquainted with the experiences that veterans have. Most civilian doctors aren't, and you have to tell them all these things. You have to explain to them.

In the military, they pretty much train you to not take your own health seriously because any time you seek help, they act

like you're trying to get over and game the system, and to get out of something. So, soldiers specifically, because I don't really have as much experience with the other branches, are put in these positions where even if there's something legitimately, terribly wrong with us, we're forced to downplay it.

If we speak frankly about the seriousness of what we're experiencing, if we are able to actually give ourselves permission to have something wrong with us, half the time we're told that we're making it up, or we're exaggerating. Or, we're forced to exaggerate because we won't be taken seriously unless it's seen as a huge, huge problem.

If you go into the VA and you're like, "Hey, I'm having some trouble sleeping," they're like, "Well, what's your pain level on the scale of 1 to 10?" You're like, "Uh, I don't know. It's 1 or 2." "Okay." You immediately aren't taken seriously. If you're not in excruciating pain and you don't look like you're actually falling apart, they just stop caring or stop asking questions.

It's like, well, maybe you're not sleeping because you're plagued by thoughts about your experiences. Maybe you're not sleeping because you're depressed. Maybe your depression is legitimate because you were part of a machine that dehumanized you. You are never able to get to the root of the problem because if you were, then every single problem would come down to how you've been treated like—one of my veteran friends said it best—a cog in a machine that hates you. Or a natural outcome of being in these situations that nobody should be put in in the first place.

I think that the past administration, Obama didn't address the fact that literally every person who goes to a combat zone comes back with some kind of post-traumatic stress. It's not a disorder, it's a natural outcome. People are treated like they're broken because they have post-traumatic stress because

they've been in traumatic and stressful situations. That is an absolute dehumanization. It's an absolute denial of the fact that these situations are inherently traumatizing.

Trump created a war crime, as did Obama. Obama bombed Yemen for his entire eight years in office. He didn't end the Iraq war, he just privatized it. It's absolutely horrifying to see the way these politicians talk about the situations that they put actual human beings in and expect them to come out of it okay.

Nobody is okay. None of us are okay. Some of us are better at functioning than others. Some of us are more resilient than others. But resilience isn't a good thing. It's just some of us have gotten better at dealing with the impact of trauma, or we're not as traumatized, or we're not traumatized in the same ways.

Pretty much the whole reason I do the work I do is because I am wracked with guilt if I don't. I feel like I was a mouthpiece of the Evil Empire, and the only way I can make myself feel okay about it is by trying to correct that narrative, and use my entire life to do so.

I don't feel like I can go work for any person who isn't okay with me being extremely vocal about exactly what I'm seeing. That has made it pretty much impossible for me to have any other job other than myself, or any other boss than myself.

LA: You've said that, "I want to use my experience in the military to make my civilian life richer and to help those who are struggling." So, you feel that your music can help in that process?

EY: I feel like if it's helping me, then it's hopefully helping other people. Because I see the fact that most humans are a lot more alike than we are different. Nobody's experience is completely unique.

Yes, there are differences in the specifics of what we've gone through. But if I feel comforted by a thing, then I generally conclude that someone else out there in the world can also be helped. I see the work I do to heal myself as instrumental and my ability to be a better person in the world.

If the songs I write make me feel better, then that will hopefully reflect on the way I'm able to communicate with others and understand them. I'm still an asshole a lot of the time, don't get me wrong. And I'm working on that.

I feel like if I can write these songs that help me make sense of things, and if they can help anybody else make sense of things, and feel like someone else in the world understands and is able to articulate the fuckery of this shit better in a way that helps them communicate it to others, then that's a thing that I can do.

I don't really see any other purpose to life other than to live it, and to live it in the most authentic way possible. And to be as kind as possible, even though I do struggle deeply with kindness a lot. I feel like ideally, if I can write songs that help people, maybe that will make up for the times when I'm an asshole. I don't know.

LA: Let me ask about your music videos. One that struck me was "Land of the Free" because at the end, you're bound and gagged for your freedom of speech, or so-called freedom of speech. What were you trying to express in the song and the video?

EY: I was just trying to express what I've experienced. You get to maintain the illusion of freedom as long as you don't actually use the freedoms that you're told that you have. I happened to have a couple of new friends at the time who were a photographer and a videographer, and they believed in me.

I was like, "You know, Fourth of July is coming up. I've got this song I've been wanting to make a video of for a while. Why don't we get all America-ed up and go prance around in

downtown Boulder?”

LA: Your first album, 2012, *I've Got Your Folk Songs Right Here*, includes the “I Don't Want to Have a Baby,” which is probably responsible for your parental advisory sticker. Two songs, “In Your Mind” and “Shut Your Face,” reflect anger against a certain personality type.

EY: Well, the parental advisory thing, it was really just like, I just put that on there to be silly because I don't think of anything as being not for children.

I think if you can say it, say it. Truth shouldn't be restricted to adults. Kids are more honest than everyone. I just thought it would be a funny thing to put it on there. Especially because “The Bad Word Song” is also on there, which was inspired by George Carlin's bit about the seven words you can't say on television. I think I put every little word in this album that nobody wants me to be saying in front of their kids, so why not just do that?

But yeah, it was really a response... All those songs were just things that I had always wanted to say, and felt like I could just put them into a cute song and say them.

LA: “The Please Don't F with Me This Christmas” is along those lines.

EY: Yeah. I felt like I should write a holiday song. I got to get in on this holiday song market, but I don't feel like I want to say the same things everyone else does. Honestly, the holidays are a time of enormous conflict for a lot of people and I felt like that was something that I could bring to the table, and maybe other people would relate. I write the songs I write as a way of finding my people.

LA: In the “Happy Ever After” song, you seem reconciled to life's ambiguities, and to the ups and the downs of life.

EY: That one actually was the last song that I recorded with my now ex-husband, ironically before I realized we were going to be splitting up. I had started writing it a while back. Sometimes I just get lines in my head and start putting them down.

Then, a friend of mine, another musician, and his partner, who was also a musician, they were in a band together, had just split up. And another friend was going through some relationship issues.

The one friend was having a hard time, and I ran into him at a coffee shop. Before he left the coffee shop, he pulled out a piece of paper and said, "Here, write a song today." I was like, "All right. Well, here's an idea. You write down a line for me, I'll write down a line for you. We'll trade and we'll see what happens."

So, he wrote this line down and handed it to me, and I felt like I could use this to finish that song that I'd just written a fragment of. It all sort of fell into place. Then, I ended up recording it with his bandmate, who produced it. I sent it to him and said, "Here, maybe this will be comforting."

It was prophetic because I ended up going through a pretty horrible divorce after that, and actually released the song no longer on even speaking terms with my ex. So, it was interesting. It kind of forced me to come to a place of acceptance, honestly. Like oh, neat. I wrote my own divorce song. Great. Good job, Saul.

LA: You also did a kids' album in 2014, *Don't Kid Yourself*, using your alter ego, Fancy von Pancerton. Some of the songs are reassuring, like "Don't Be Scared" and "Happy Heart." "Go Out and Play" is about importance of imagination. "Just Because You Can" is a kids' version of an adult song, a couple of words changed. How did you come to do the children's

album?

EY: The children's album was a therapy project. After I was brutally arrested at a demonstration in 2013, I was feeling really cynical and despondent. When I was on tour that summer, right before that arrest happened, one of my friends had told me he wanted to come to my show but he couldn't because he was just going through a pretty nasty divorce and his daughter was having a hard time with it. I was like, oh man, that's terrible. I feel like I want to write her a song.

So I wrote "Sometimes Life," the shortened title of "Sometimes Life Sucks." I wrote that and I was like, man. This is actually a kind of song that I wish I had heard when I was a kid. What other songs do I wish I had heard when I was a kid? So, I just started writing songs for my own inner child, my own past self.

Then, after that arrest, I got back to California and a friend of mine was like, "Man, I'm just so sorry you had to go through all that. Is there anything I could do to support you?" I said, "Well, you seem to have this really cool little home studio that you've created as a hobby. Would you be interested in helping me record some of these songs that I've written for kids?"

Of course, he said, "Yeah! Let's do that!" I had only written four of them at the time. It was over the course of about a year, I'd go up to his place on Tuesdays and we would just track songs. My then-husband would come in and play all the different instruments. I had a couple other friends who played too.

It was really a labor of love and a therapy project. There are 13 songs. The last song in it, "Arise," is one that I had written with my friend Bonnie. This song is so sweet. It's just not like any of my other songs. I wouldn't put it on any of my other albums, but I bet it would work on this one. So, I

recorded it for the kids.

All in all, I didn't want to release an album for kids under the name Emily Yates, and have them Google me and come up with all the songs about porn, and drugs, and militarism, and get traumatized. So, Fancy von Pancerton emerged. I also decided to make a coloring book. So, the drawings I did for the coloring book were also therapeutic.

Yeah, it was a therapy project for my inner child that I've been giving to all my friends' kids. I made a little bit of money on it because I basically recorded it for free.

LA: On the opposite end of the spectrum is "You Are the Enemy," on *Warrior Songs*. There is a lot of anger and bitterness in that one.

EY: Jason [Moon] asked me to write a song about military sexual trauma and I tentatively agreed. At first, I was annoyed with him. I was like, how do you just ask someone to write a song about that? That's fucked up, it's terrible, it's traumatizing. Fuck!

As I started writing it, I realized that I couldn't put any humor into it. There's absolutely nothing funny about it. Absolutely nothing. Even just thinking about my own experience, I was just getting angrier and angrier. So, the song that came out was, I think, the only really purely angry song I've ever written that has no sense of humor and ends with a group primal scream because that was the only thing I felt like it could have. I specifically wanted other women musicians to play on that song with me. Michelle the drummer is absolutely fantastic, and Julie the bass player, they're fantastic musicians.

It was an intense song to record. I needed to smoke a lot of weed after that song, after I recorded it, and do a lot of long walks in the woods. But I was glad to do it.

LA: "Smoke Break" also recounts your military experience, where there is a split between having a cigarette and shooting the bull, and then a few minutes later, we go back to war.

EY: "Smoke Break" actually started as a poem that I wrote in a Warrior Writers workshop at an Iraq Veterans Against the War convention in Baltimore, I believe in 2012. We were just doing a workshop and the prompt was to take a small detail of your military experience and expand on it because there's so much power in the details.

I tend to write a lot about concepts, but I don't tend to focus in on details too much. The detail that immediately sprung to mind was sitting around having a smoke in a war zone.

It was like a tiny window of normalcy or mundanity in this absolutely surreal experience. The smoking area was right by the headquarters. We would just be sitting there and hear mortars land, and talk about who had been killed, and about our shitty bosses, and how this fucking war was like Groundhog Day, where today is just one shitty day after another, the same shitty day every day.

The smoke breaks were the only breaks that you were able to take. In the Army, you can't just be like, I'm going on break. That doesn't exist. You go on break to smoke cigarettes so that you don't start screaming at people, and that's respected. Okay, you've got a nicotine addiction, go take care of that. Please.

I smoked when I was a teenager in high school. It was the thing that kids like me did. But I stopped during reform school. Then, when I was in the military, my first year in the Army, everyone smoked. It was the only way to get to take a break.

So I started taking smoke breaks. They were the one opportunity to regain a tiny sliver of sanity in the day. I

don't smoke cigarettes anymore; I quit a couple of years after I got out. I smoke weed now.

I've actually started getting better at weaning myself off of that a little bit, as a dependency thing. I still love it, of course, but trying to not be as dependent on it as I have been.

LA: Just to finish up, what is the status of the "Try Not To Be a Dick" movement?

EY: Well, I still play the song every time in a show. I add new verses as appropriate to reflect current situations. The global "Try Not To Be a Dick" movement has a Facebook page, which I discovered is the way to start a global movement. You have to have a Facebook page and a hashtag, and you're good. I mostly use it to share pertinent relevant memes and articles that I think speak to the idea of trying not to be a dick, both the personal and the political, and the funny and furious ends of the spectrum, and all over the place.

I could post that on my personal page, and I do a lot of the time, but I feel like having this page where I share all that stuff takes my face away from it and puts the idea in the forefront, which I like better.

The Witch



These days they call me by name: Hope. By "they," I mean the people in our small dusty town, Masaka, where everyone knows everyone. When I was a little girl living with my grandmother, all I wanted was to be known by my name, but no, they'd call

me Little Girl. I'd be on my way from the borehole, where I often went several times a day for water, a heavy plastic jerrycan balanced on my head. The sun was so hot my eyes hurt from looking at it, the heat burned through my skin, and I'd hear them whisper, "Little Girl."

I walked by the women who sat on mats, their legs splayed out, peeling *matoke* and sweet potatoes, or pounding groundnuts as they caught up on the day's gossip. Men sat on low stools on their verandas drinking locally brewed alcohol through long yellow bamboo pipes dipped in clay pots. Children skipped ropes and played football. I walked along the winding brown dirt path in my short denim skirt and blue flip-flops with semi-circles in the rubber soles dug by my heels, which I continued to wear because they were the only thing that protected my feet from stones and thorns.

"There, Little Girl goes," they'd point as they whispered. Their whispers were loud enough for me to hear, and for their children to repeat when I tried to play with them. Whispers about my denim skirt which I wore every day, about my pantie visible beneath the skirt, whispers about grandmother.

I knew from the way they whispered that I didn't belong. This was no surprise. If you knew my story, you too would avoid my eyes that were always begging for help. My parents died when I was two. A car accident. I was left behind with my grandmother, who they said was a witch.

"Witch, witch," they'd shout when she ventured out of our iron-roofed house to check on her cassava, sweet potatoes, beans, and banana garden, and the two cows which were left to meander during the day, and tied with ropes to the mango trees behind our house in the evenings.

Grandmother did the best she could for me under the circumstances. The circumstances being: She was eighty years old, her health was failing, and she was thought to be a

witch. Our neighbors accused her of killing several people in the town. I say accused, because I never saw any evidence. Fine, I didn't ask for proof, but I never saw any of it, not the cowry shells, dry goat skins, drums, or a shrine. I never saw any of the things said to belong to witches.

"Look at her lion eyes," they'd whisper, "those eyes can't be human. Just look at her eyes, that's all you have to do."

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One case involved our neighbor, Namu. The fights with grandmother about their cows destroying each other's crops started the moment Namu married her husband. Namu, in her early twenties, had also had several miscarriages. The day she had her fourth miscarriage, she and grandmother had quarreled. Namu's cow had come into our compound and grandmother told me to tie it to one of the mango trees. When Namu came to collect the big milk-white beautiful cow with large kind eyes that watered when it was sad, grandmother chased her away.

"You devil incarnate. The devil lives in you, and sucks blood out of your babies. The devil kills them. This one too is going to die. You hear?" she shouted, her voice carrying throughout the town. Her eyes were bright orange. They got that way when she was very angry. She continued to murmur to herself as she spread ash around her homestead to keep the devil out.

It was a cold Saturday morning and a mist hung in the sky. A small crowd of people had gathered and silently watched. They were like flies on a pile of bananas. Many of them draped blankets around themselves. The sun had taken longer than it normally did to come out. They were waiting for something to happen the way people in small towns wait for things to happen. Nothing transpired that morning. Namu left, but grandmother continued to curse and cast the devil out of our home.

"Grandma, is Namu possessed by a devil?" I asked as soon as she came back inside the house.

"What nonsense? Of course not!"

"But you said..."

"I know what I said child," she chuckled. "There's no devil. Just greedy, nasty people. Remember that. Now, I am tired and cold," she said, and went back to bed.

That evening, Namu had another miscarriage. This time the clan elders decided to find the killer, and nothing would stop them. You see, in our town, no one died from natural causes. Someone was always responsible. If you were run over by a car, someone must have made the driver drive badly. If you fell from a tree and died, someone must have made you climb the tree. Accidents didn't happen. There was always someone who willed them. The elders ruled over the village like gods. They were in charge of the traditional courts that resolved civil matters, land, and family disputes. They weren't supposed to have anything to do with criminal cases, but they did, and their word was final.

News of the miscarriage travelled throughout the town like lightning. Within minutes, people had gathered outside in small groups with lamps to discuss the death, and speculate on who was responsible. The elders too. And so, it was that they turned up at our home.

"I didn't kill anyone," grandma said as soon as she opened the door, leaning on the stick that she used to support herself and holding a lamp in the other.

"We shall find out soon enough," said the elder with missing front teeth. The others nodded.

"What is there to find out?"

"We're going to slaughter a rooster. If it dies in front of

you, then you did kill the baby. If it doesn't, we shall leave you in peace," said Missing Front Teeth and the others continued to nod.

"You've come to kill me."

"No one has come to kill anyone," said the elder who made me think of the cunning gray monkeys with small white faces that descended on our town to steal bananas.

"Then what are you doing here?"

They looked at each other.

"God gives and takes life. Not you," Grandma muttered to herself and laughed her contemptuous laughter.

"There's nothing to be afraid of. If you've done no wrong, you'll be proven innocent," said the third elder.

"Ayaaa...", she scoffed. "Innocent? You've come to kill me. Why don't you just do it now? You don't need a rooster to pronounce me guilty," she said, looking beyond the elders to the people who had gathered to watch. "And you," she curled her lips towards them, "have come to witness a murder."

It was a clear night. There was a full moon. The sky was a bed of stars. Everywhere you looked there were stars. It was like they'd woken up to witness. Missing Front Teeth slit the rooster's throat and released it. It jumped frantically in front of our house spraying blood on the elders and the people gathered. Everyone except grandma watched the rooster as it fought for its life. I held my breath, expectant, but the rooster jumped further and further away from grandma. The rooster grew weaker and weaker. The silence deepened. The moonlight became brighter, and the stars grew larger. You could hear the sound of the wind. People who had blankets pulled them tighter around their shoulders. All eyes were fixed on the rooster, its white feathers soaked in blood. They

waited. The rooster finally lay lifeless in front of the elders.

Missing Front Teeth bent down, picked it, stood up and pointed his finger at grandma. "Its head is pointing in your direction," he declared.

Grandma burst into laughter. "You murderers. You touch me and I'll come for you from my grave," she threatened before she retreated into our house and locked the door. They didn't touch her. I think the elders were afraid of her. After all, she had just made a rooster die in front of them. They must have speculated on what else she was capable of. I saw it all through a tiny opening in one of the wooden windows of our house.

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Six months after the rooster incident Grandma died. Her health had rapidly deteriorated after the rooster business. It was especially horrible at night when we were the only ones awake in the town. The pain kept her awake and I stayed up to rub water boiled in herbs all over her body like she used to rub mine when I had fever. She'd scream out in pain and I'd cover my ears. Her cries travelled throughout the village, but they didn't come to help. Can you believe it? She screamed all night and no one even asked after her health. People had a limited supply of compassion. It didn't extend to a witch.

She died on the day I received my primary school results. I got straight As. I was elated and couldn't wait to show her. I ran the twelve miles from school. I must have called and shaken her maybe a thousand times. She never woke up. She was dead.

Within a day, my relatives appeared from the neighboring towns. Everywhere I looked, in the house, outside, there were aunties and uncles, wanting to help me. Can you believe it? I couldn't. And this wasn't the end of it. They wanted the

house grandma had left for me, but not me.

“What shall we do with her? We can’t leave her here by herself,” they whispered to one another.

“Marry her off. With her light skin, education and the grace of a giraffe, she will fetch a handsome dowry,” my eldest uncle decided. And until my marriage, they agreed that whoever took me would take the house. No one intervened. Not even the elders. I stayed in grandmother’s house until they found me a husband. I must say my uncle did well by me. He married me to the richest businessman in town, Tycoon.

Before the marriage, I was afraid of him, but my fear subsided the day I moved into his home as his wife and he took my hand, pulled me up from where I knelt to greet him, and said I shouldn’t worry, everything would be fine.

*

My name became Mrs Tycoon and I adapted to life as Mrs Tycoon. I was sixteen, his youngest wife, and the cherished one. To be honest with you, I didn’t treasure the position of being the favored one. Believe me, when you’re the third wife of a husband who is hardly at home, getting along with your co-wives is more important than his favors. For a few weeks, my co-wives were nice to me. They felt we needed to stick together to make sure our husband didn’t get a fourth wife. When he married wife number one, our husband had promised not to get a second wife without her permission, but then he had turned up with wife number two, and now me. Still, as soon as he left the house, they’d sit in the living room with bread and flasks full of tea and watch Nollywood movies as I cleaned the house.

I didn’t mind. I was glad to have a roof over my head. As it was, I could have ended up on the streets like so many other orphans. So I scrubbed the tiled floors of the triple-storied house. This took a big part of the morning. Once the cleaning

was done I'd wash clothes and cook. By the time it was evening I'd be so exhausted my entire body ached.

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A few months into the marriage, I got pregnant. Twins followed. Simon and Michael. Our husband was over the moon. He finally had the boys he had longed for. Boys he already saw taking over his business. Boys he himself would groom for this. He loved their orange eyes inherited from their grandmother. He brought bags and bags of toys and clothes for them.

"Don't buy too many clothes," I'd say to him.

"What's the money for?"

"But they're outgrowing everything so fast."

"We shall buy more."

What could I do? He wanted to spoil his boys. He'd play with them, bathe them. "My children," he said as he threw them up in the air and basked in their delightful giggles. He'd look at their toothless gums and declare them the most beautiful babies. This should have been fine; a father should be proud of his children. The problem was that he had three daughters, and he acted as though they didn't exist. He never showed any interest in them and insisted they go to boarding schools. True, children need to get an education; the problem was that they were still so young; four, five and six years old. My co-wives' arguments to keep the children at home fell on deaf ears. He insisted that boarding schools offered the best education, but this wasn't true. I had gone to a day school and I had learned to speak English and could add up numbers in seconds.

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The twins elevated my status in the household. And something

else happened. With the money I had gathered by saving bits here and there, I went to a salon and had my hair straightened with a hot comb. The hairdresser convinced me to buy pink lipstick. Our husband couldn't stop looking and smiling at me when he came home. Although it wasn't my night, he invited me to his bedroom. That night, he was a wild and yet tame lion.

He sent me to a driving school and bought me a RAV 4. I couldn't believe my eyes when he gave me the car keys. By this time I was managing the finances of our home. When my co-wives needed to buy household items they had to come to me. I was a fast learner and he started to involve me in his business, providing loan services to people in the town. I didn't ask for any of this. I didn't. And do you know what all this meant? More resentment from my co-wives. Frankly, this wasn't fair. Even if our husband had wanted to involve them in the business, they wouldn't have managed. They had never gone to school, couldn't read, write or count. As soon as he asked me to work for him, his business tripled. But this didn't matter; they declared war on me.

Their plan was to drive me out of our home. When you have lived the life I have, you either crumble or become thick-skinned. I got tough. When they ignored me, I ignored them. If they attacked me, I fought like a cat and wife number one got scars from my scratches. But this was nothing compared to what they both did to me. I will give you one example: A few months into the marriage, wife number two pushed me down the stairs and laughed as I tumbled down like a sack of potatoes. It's a miracle I didn't break a single bone that day. I think my grandmother's spirit was watching over me, but this isn't what saved me from my co-wives. I will tell you what did the trick.

Whatever my co-wives refused to do, I did. I'd remove our husband's shoes as soon as we got home and massage his feet, iron his shirts and trousers, made sure he had hot food even when he got back very late at night, and I sat with him as he ate. On the nights he was supposed to have sex with my co-

wives, if they locked him out of their bedrooms, I welcomed him into mine. Do you know what happened? He invited me to move into his bedroom. Yes, he did.

Once I started spending more time with him he opened up and told me about his childhood. He was the youngest of thirty-one children. Can you imagine thirty-one children? His father had no money but married four women and had a lot of children. He believed children were wealth. Many of them ended up homeless on the streets of Kampala.

He told me about endless days and nights without food, the fear of going to bed hungry and hearing his little siblings cry till their voices were grasshopper whispers. Their thin cries of hunger would stop only after they were fed. On many days, they were too weak to cry. He could never say which was worse. He talked to me about the hopelessness in his mother's eyes and the pact he made with himself to make a better life for them. When he was ten, he started to look for money, finding odd jobs here and there, but his passion was trade. At the age of fifteen he got his first stall, a tiny space given to him by one of his father's acquaintances, to sell sweets.

Because he had to work before running to school, he missed tests and exams, but he persisted and finished high school. Armed with a certificate and the ability to read, write English, and add numbers, he didn't see the use of further education. Besides, he was convinced that his knowledge of street life was the essential ingredient for a successful business. By then, his tiny space had expanded into a big grocery shop and some of his siblings worked there. He tried several business ventures but his big break came when he became a loan shark.

It was during these nights that I realized we both came from poor families. I also learned that his heart was tender and kind. It didn't stop there. He started to ask me about my life. One night, I told him how I longed to feel silk on my

skin and the following day, he bought me the most beautiful silk gown, the color of the sun.

But the people of this town had no ounce of compassion left for me. Jealousy and hatred is all they had. My co-wives didn't help matters. They spread rumors of what an awful person I was. Can you imagine? I, who couldn't even harm a mosquito! All because I was now driving a car and working in an office. Do you know what I was doing in that office? Managing the list of people who owed Tycoon money. Some of them would call me to re-schedule payments. I could have bought them more time. To be honest, I didn't mind my co-wives hating me. I was away all day and came home late in the evenings. But they started to say I and my sons were witches. Their evidence was that our husband was no longer thinking straight. Why else would he allow me to work, buy me a car, and neglect them?

This was dangerous. People had been stoned to death in this town because they were suspected of being witches. It reminded me of my grandmother. They had failed to prove she was a witch, and now they were after me. They stopped talking to me. My greetings were met with silence. "Why do you allow a witch into your shop?" the people of the town would ask the shopkeepers, shopkeepers who were interested in making money. "She's a witch, a witch," people I had never met would shout as I walked out with my groceries.

I wanted to remind them of when I was Little Girl, and when they didn't help with my grandmother and all of that. But I didn't do this. Instead, I let our husband send his goons to beat up people who owed him money. That's how he made sure he got paid. His bodyguards would either beat up the debtor until he produced cash or *visit* his family home. They'd turn up at the debtor's house at dinner time, join him at the dining table, and set down their pistols. They wouldn't say anything. They didn't have to. The debtor would send a brown envelope full of cash the following day. Our husband also took several

properties of those who failed to pay him. In the small town where news travelled like waves, everyone knew what our husband was capable of. I did talk to him about making too many enemies, begged him not to send the goons to the police commissioner. Nothing good would come out of becoming enemies with the police commissioner even though he owed him a lot of money. Our husband simply said business wasn't for the thin-skinned.

*

Sunday started as it always did. My co-wives prepared breakfast. They had fried eggs, made tilapia stew, rice, *matoke* and *chapattis*. I came down to make sure everything was as it should be for our husband. It was my job to make sure everything was perfect for him. His toast had to be brown and crisp. The pineapples, mangoes, and papaya cut neatly into small squares and placed in fruit bowls. The tea had to be mixed with a lot of milk, sugar, ginger and lemon grass, and brewed in the clay pot to give it an earthy scent. I wore a white dress and tied my hair with a cloth the color of tomatoes. We were going to church after breakfast.

Our husband came down as I paced around the dining table, adding a pinch of salt, sugar, cinnamon, coriander or red chili to the different dishes. I thought he was handsome in his white sparkling *kanzu* that looked like a dress, with his head full of white and black tiny curls. The *kanzu* fell on his belly. The twins followed me around.

"My stomach hurts," he said as he sat down, "and I've got a fever."

I touched his forehead and noticed he was struggling to keep his eyes open. Just then, he vomited, struggled to breathe, and clutched his throat. His eyes bulged, and he fell off his chair.

"Oh oh oh oh no no no no no," one of my co-wives cried. I

fainted. When I opened my eyes, I lay on the floor in the dining room. His eyes stared at me from one of the portraits we had taken on our wedding day and I was told the words that I didn't want to hear. After five years of marriage, he had left me. I cried until there were no tears left.

*

As soon as he was deep in the soil, they started to look for his murderer. The elders and the police commissioner were in and out of our home. They talked to my co-wives and stopped talking as soon as they saw me. I was the suspect. Can you believe it? I couldn't. I was going to be tried for killing the man who had saved me, the only person who had ever talked to me, who knew my name, the father of my children. Do you know what I was thinking as I sat before them? That I must have been cursed. First my parents, then grandma, my husband, and now this.

My trial was conducted by the same elders who had turned up at grandmother's house. This time, they had a white goat with them, having dispensed with roosters. After grandmother, they had declared them unreliable. The sun woke up very early in the morning, initially soft and pleasant, growing in intensity by the hour, and now it was intolerable. There were people everywhere; under the muvule trees and in the branches, at the town primary school compound, on the roofs, and in the classrooms. They had left their jobs and farms to watch.

Frail Little Elder cleared his throat to signal the commencement of the trial. All the murmuring stopped, hands fell on laps or at their sides, conversations halted mid-way, eyes shifted away from whoever they had been talking to and focused on the three elders, dressed in long white robes, sitting on the only furniture, three wooden chairs, in front of the crowd. Frail Little Elder explained that the trial would take a few hours. Everyone who wanted to say something would be allowed to do so. He spoke very slowly and regularly

paused to breathe and replenish his energy. The act of talking seemed to deplete his limited reserve of strength.

There were only six witnesses; my co-wives, the doctor, the police commissioner, and my children. It was supposed to be a straight-forward case. My husband had been poisoned. But the twins had told me they had seen the police commissioner give their father boiled maize that morning. With his large debt, the police commissioner had reason to want him dead.

*

My co-wives avoided looking at me as they testified. They said I was the one who had spent the night with him and served him breakfast. They said he was a healthy man, never fell sick, not even a headache. In the wildest accusation, they accused me of not caring about his death. Do you know why they said this? I will tell you why. Because I went back to the office a week after his death.

“His body isn’t even cold and she’s already back in the office,” said wife number one.

“She wants to steal his business,” said wife number two.

I hope you’re thinking this is crazy. This is what I certainly thought. I mourned our husband, did nothing except cry and pray, and most nights I lay awake because I wanted to be alert when he came back to me. You see, I was still hoping it was all a bad dream; he had gone to Dubai to conduct business and would return. But someone had to keep the business going and I was sure this is what he’d have wanted.

“She’s the only one who stood to gain from his death,” said wife number two.

“And her sons,” said wife number one.

This was true if all you thought about was money. Our husband had a will that left everything he owned to us. I hadn’t known

about the will until his death, but no one believed me. There was no doubt in my mind what they were up to; they wanted me out of the way so they could take all the money, the property, the business.

The doctor who conducted the post mortem confirmed that our husband had been poisoned. This corroborated what the twins had told me. The police commissioner said he knew the deceased and the accused. No, he didn't know the cause of death. No, he couldn't prove I had killed him. No, he wasn't investigating, he knew I had something to do with it. Of course I did. You remember her grandmother. We all knew she was a witch. You all know how many people she killed. The Witch had started early. Imagine how many people she'll kill by the time she's done. People are already reporting how she's transformed them into ghosts and made them weed her husband's plantations at night. No, he hadn't seen this, but so many people in the town had told him.

I stared at the police commissioner. If eyes could kill, mine would have killed him. I tried to speak out, to tell the truth, but the elders wouldn't let me. Accused people had no right to speak. And now the police commissioner was sowing the seeds that'd lead to my death.

The twins were the last to testify. It was Monkey Face who asked them to state their names, hold the Bible, and swear to tell the truth. Monkey Face talked to them slowly and explained what was going on. He told them they needed to find out who had killed their father. He asked them if there was anything they had seen or heard that could help to find his killer. Simon, the older twin, did the talking and his brother Michael, nodded in agreement. I knelt and held their hands.

"I can help," Simon said. "I saw him," he pointed at the police commissioner, "the morning father died. We were playing in the garden when he came by. Father joined him. They talked. He was eating boiled maize. He shared it with Taata."

Silence fell upon the town as he talked. Nothing moved. Not the houseflies, the birds, or the wind. No one blinked. It was as though people were glued to the red soil. They held their breath. It was the kind of silence pregnant with anticipation. The twins sat on my lap. I was relieved. It had all come to an end. The silence was broken by a gust of wind that covered us all in dust.

As soon as the air cleared, the police commissioner was up in a flash. He licked his index finger, rubbed it on the soil and swore on the grave of his mother that he hadn't seen our husband that day, the twins were lying. He raised both his hands up into the air and declared that God was his witness, he hadn't killed anyone, and if he was lying, may lightning strike him.

"Yes you did," I shouted.

"Why would I kill your husband?"

"You owed him money."

"Slaughter the goat," he demanded, "it'll die in front of the killer."

"What do the people say?" Missing Front Teeth shouted.

"The goat. Kill the goat. The goat must be slaughtered. The goat will be the judge," the people shouted back. All eyes turned towards the goat that immediately stood up and started going *baa baa baa*. It was untied from the *muvule* tree but it refused to move. Two men pulled the rope around its neck. The goat stood still until another group of men pushed it forward.

Our destiny had come down to this frightened goat that was fighting for its life. The men overpowered it, and held its head down. It must have known it was futile to fight, for it lay still. Our tear-fear filled eyes stared at each other. I wished it didn't have to die so I could live. Missing Front

Teeth's cut was swift and clean. Blood gushed out. The goat squirmed and shook its whole body violently, fighting death as I willed it to die far away from me. They released it, and it ran around in small circles away from me, its head dangling from its neck. My eyes were glued to it as it gave up the will to live. I sat straight as it suddenly turned around and faced me. It collapsed and started to crawl towards me. It had changed its mind. A few minutes later the goat succumbed right in front of me. It did. Can you imagine my shock?

I was up on my feet immediately. "I didn't kill him," I shouted

"The goat has spoken," the people shouted.

Straightaway, the sky darkened, puffs of winds started, and rain poured out of the skies in buckets. The sound of thunder and lightning petrified us all and we scrambled away in different directions.

*

Back at home, I moved into my children's room, locked it, pushed their bed against the door and waited for them to come for us. No one came. I spent the night calling my grandmother's spirit to protect us. In the morning, I told the twins to remain quiet and we huddled in a corner until there was a knock on the door. I jumped up, the twins screamed, and in a flash, I was back on the floor, my hands covering their mouths.

"Sh-sh-sh," I put a finger on my mouth.

"It's us," wife number one said, "please open the door."

"No," I said. "Come in here and I will kill you."

"Hope, please open the door. We need to talk to you," wife number two said.

"Am not opening the door. Talk."

"We just got news that the police commissioner and one of the elders died last night."

"What? If you're lying to me!"

"We're not lying. It's true. They found them dead, and no one can tell what caused their death," wife number two said.

It had rained cats and dogs, trees fell and houses were swept away, and lightning struck people. The sky must have been angry and had decided to unleash its vengeance on the town.

*

The people of this town now believe I am a witch. "Like grandmother, like granddaughter," they mumble. They mumble because they don't want me to hear, afraid I'll not help them out when they come to borrow money. I do not blame them though. Lightning striking people like that and the mysterious deaths of the police commissioner and the elder; surely I must have some powers. Every time I hear their mutters, I smile, knowing we're safe with our money and properties. They will never dream of touching us again.

Do you know what else happened? My co-wives have become our zealous defenders, telling anyone who cares to listen that we're not witches. Can you believe it? Truth be told, they're more frightened of being thrown out of the family home. Even though my fortunes have changed, I could never do such a thing, however, I enjoy watching them cater to my needs when I return from work. But when I ponder the whole thing, I actually believe in this witchcraft business. Surely, someone must have made me the richest woman in the town, otherwise how do you explain that?

New Poetry from Abby E. Murray

Gwen Stefani Knows How to Get Everything I Want

It takes a misdelivered *Cosmo*
to finally understand what I want
and how to get it. Gwen Stefani
tells the truth on page 89.
We believe in Gwen because
her apron of chainlink stars
sparkles over a black bustier;
star-spangled bondage, says an editor.
She slouches, holds the heel
of her right white Louboutin
in one hand as if to say Congress
respects my body, as if to say
rifles aren't worth shooting.
This is what I want and Gwen
is here to deliver. When she slips
into a red sport coat and jeans
she comes in loud and clear:
grant proposals that write themselves,
cartons of baby formula
sold from unlocked shelves at CVS,
eight days of rain over California.
Because Gwen knows how to get
everything I want, she can afford
to be an optimist. Pharrell is rad,
her mom is rad, the whole world
is rad. I agree, Gwen, I do!
And I'd be giddy too in that baby blue
jacket, its faux-bullet spikes screaming

peace talks and pacifism,
bubblegum fingernails that tell me
soldiers who drop my writing class
are only on vacation. She pulls
her Union Jack sunglasses down
with one finger. This means Ruth Stone
never died but went into hiding,
it means the grocery store lobsters
have escaped, it means I can refinance.
Gwen steps into a pair of fishnets
as if to say the 2nd Infantry Division
won't return to Iraq, as if to say minke whales
are singing on the Japanese coast.

Notification

This is how I imagine it.

A black Durango follows me to work,
then home, tracks me to King Soopers
where I buy peppermint tea and milk.

It idles in the parking lot,
the driver obscured by clouds
of bitter exhaust. I know it is a man
by his shoulders, his grinding jaw.

I know he has drawn the short stick.

He tracks me home and waits
until the faint clicking of our luck
slows and stops. He steps outside
on a current of aftershave
and starched polyester,
pulls another man in uniform
from the backseat: he will stay
to help me make arrangements.

They use the handrail on the wooden porch.
They expect to be wounded.

Happy Birthday, Army

I'm wearing lace this time,
gold trim over a black slip because
Happy Birthday, Army.
I offer you these blisters
in my black leather stilettos
with mock-lace cut-outs.
Tom says it's a short ceremony,
we'll be done by nine
but he tells the sitter eleven
and I wedge a book into my purse.
In seeing nothing I've read too much:
the empty-bellied howitzer
kicked up in the corner of the ballroom
points me toward the cash bar,
casts a shadow over the cream
in my Kahlua and turns the milk grey.
I drink it. I order a second
before the emcee tells the men
to seat their ladies.

Uniforms droop by the exits
on velvet hangers, gas masks
sag on wooden dowels.
Quick, boys! Post the colors!
The lights drop and the general
mounts the stage in a shimmer
of green and yellow spotlights,
tells us to enjoy ourselves for once—
but first these messages:
thank you to our guest speaker,
the anchor from ESPN,

thank you to our sponsors,
thank you to the sergeant major
here to recite "Old Glory"
in the center of the room:

I am arrogant.

I am proud.

I bow to no one.

I am worshipped.

We are dumbstruck,
his recitation flung toward us
like an axe through paper.
Tom finds him later
and pays for his beer.



Johann Wilhelm Preyer, "Still Life with Champagne Flute,"
1859, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, MD.

The chandeliers are champagne,
crystal brims sloshing with bubbles.
Someone's wife wins a kayak
and just when I think
a lieutenant nearby will surely jump
from his table to shake
a bag of limbs from his eye sockets,
a truckload of body parts
grey with longing for the soul,
a woman's voice whispers
from beneath the howitzer,
the rented microphone
on fire with song:
happy birrrrthday, dear arrrmy
a la Marilyn Monroe,
and we are all a bunch of JFKs
in our lace and heels
and cummerbunds and cords,
watching a five-tiered cake

piped in black and gold buttercream
being pulled between our tables
by a silver robot
and shrug into the silk of knowing
we could end all this
with the flick of a finger
if we wanted.

Majors' Mafia

They want us to call ourselves
the *Majors' Mafia* and by They
I mean We because the Majors
are our husbands and they say
very little about what is discussed
during cocktail hour
at the Commander's house
as if our words sound friendly
but are muffled by a closed door
and the Wives giggle as if to say
we are not exactly *thugs*
as if to say they would *never!*
and a knot of words loosens
at the bottom of my throat
like a paper lantern released
as if to say *get out*, as if to say
I am on fire, and I have a problem
with the gang metaphor
but also the possessive *Majors'*—
that bitch of an apostrophe
at the end of my husband's rank
like I am, we are, owned
the way farmers own turkeys
and we are just as articulate,
just as grand, just as preoccupied,
because farmers are in the business

of keeping turkeys alive until they aren't,
farmers don't keep turkeys warm
because turkeys have rights
and these women can't possibly
be standing in a half circle
around a stack of spangled cupcakes
generating ideas like these,
like names, like possessives,
like we aren't making ourselves
more palatable by forming a flock
and nibbling sweet things,
and the sugar stars in the frosting
remind me how one can trick
a headstrong bird into eating
by leaving shiny marbles in its dish,
like the bird will think *marbles!*
I love marbles! then forget to fast,
and these women can't possibly
be women, they must be birds,
they sound like a lullaby
when they say we need a group name
because we need a Facebook page
in order to *express solidarity*
and they say solidarity is a survival skill
for all Army Wives,
and the paper lanterns are rising
again up my neck toward the brain stem
and my spine is burning
and I'm thinking about the tomahawks
and sabers and rifles and hunting knives
on the walls here in this lovely home
and I'm thinking survival
is a bread that I can't eat here,
and I ask them to excuse me
for a moment so I can check
my face in the bathroom mirror
where I find a sugar star wedged

in my teeth and I'm thinking
I could use an ax to fix that.

When Tom Asks Me to Call the Incoming Major's Wife and Welcome Her to the Battalion

Hi is this Becky this is Abby Murray my husband
(different last name) is the S-3
in the battalion where your husband is being sent I
don't know what S stands for or
why 3 anyway Tom's leaving this position and your
husband will replace him soon
you sound nice anyway welcome do you
know if there's something I'm
supposed to say or help you with Tom just said
welcome her and I guess I have
I don't know what does it mean to feel welcome
as a woman I really can't say
every week I feel more at home in a compact mirror I
think I was asked to call you
because we are both women my dog doesn't even speak
when I tell her to but
she does bark a lot she likes to speak on her terms
anyway the
battalion mascot is a buffalo so people are really into
buffalos here buffalo hats
sweaters earrings umbrellas leggings there's a big dead
buffalo in the entryway to
battalion headquarters it was donated by a museum in
Alaska the taxidermist
even glazed his nose to make it appear wet like he
was snuffling the prairie just
seconds before a glass case sprang up around him and BAM he
had a few minutes to breathe
his last bits of air while the herd backed away my
daughter loves the buffalo but is

concerned about his lack of oxygen he's not the only
symbol of death in that hallway
there are rifles and sabers as well I'm sorry
I hope you like it here the
winters are mild and there's cedar everywhere it smells
good on the coast Tom
says you're from Texas that's nice I was in
Texas once it was Texasy
I should warn you your husband might ask you to do strange
things for reasons he can't
articulate like calling women because you are a
woman and we should all be welcomed
to the jobs we don't have if there's anything you need
 try Google or maybe call
someone who knows your voice I'm sure you'll be great
 you sound happy



Philippe de Champaigne, "Still Life with a Skull," 1671, Musee de Tesse, Le Mans, France.

"Notification" was originally published in Ragazine.

"Happy Birthday Army," "Gwen Stefani Knows How to Get Everything I Want," and "Notification" appear in [Hail and Farewell](#). Hail and Farewell was [winner of the 2019 Perugia Press prize](#).

"Majors' Mafia" and "When Tom Asks Me to Call the Incoming Major's Wife and Welcome Her to the Battalion" are previously unpublished.

New Poetry from Shana

Youngdahl

After the Maine Tin Min Company Prospectus, 1880

The earth has veins we can
open with our hammers.
Follow the cassiterite crystals
down where the iron dark
is picked by the swings
of men who name minerals
by the feel of them on damp
fingers, the bands of elvan
quartzite like the rough
footprints of mythical
man, or the smooth track
Of native silver, or gold
Ore floating in the salty
Rubbish of St. Just. Imagine
Fellow capitalists, what
Enterprise can find
Rose colored mica, purple
Fluor spar, tourmaline,
And a thin river of
Tin Ore imbedded among
calc spar crystals, follow
that river, I say, crack
the vein open.



To Find the Center of a Circle from a Part of the Circumference

Which is all I am really after, the path to the midpoint
and how to get there from this little arch

of my hand I'm told to *span the dividers any distance*
and with *one foot on the circumference*
describe the semi-circumferences: today pollen and blue sky,
book bound in navy cloth and draped with black
velvet. The ache in my wrist, throat and head dull
like the birdsong we stop hearing weeks ago.

I'm trying to find the center: the point I can cut from.
I pencil out two indefinite lines and lean
under this dome into the illuminated center.
Someone a very long time ago, told me to call *point P*.
There is comfort in such specifics, but still I feel
like all the unwound clocks that fill old buildings;
there is something I am supposed to do, but
in the fog I am unfocused, turn my head
to another arch and am led away.

—

1.

First or only?

My child is three—
wakes three times

a night
has no room

I would know. Wouldn't I?

Piling her piss-soaked
blankets on the wood floor
I leave them to fume,

wait for the calendar or the swelling.

8.

I know
and don't. I'm half-open
hungry, two days
from late.

I dreamt my name wrong.
I dreamt a boy laughing,
my girl pulling his

baby boots on, spelling
her own name that I
could read by water.

37.

Find
a stone to fit the palm,

our last iris, photographs of daughter's wet curls, half-
burned

and broken candles, recall when sister

believed the rainbow alive.

Collect your pebbles.

38.

I leak
dying larkspur and the strain
of mileage.

It's a glass night,
with clean towel,
and midwives in
the basement room
where spills won't
wet spines and this damp
brings the cool harness
of crying.

39.

We set out walking
the child grabs a stick
points at clicking marmots
shakes the trees and piñon
bleeds into her fingers
she twists it into her hair.
She is pitched
and dust rises like fire
billowing between sisters.

New Poetry from Janaya Martin

More Than Twice

She said you better hush
before he comes back in here

like she knew who she was
talking to but didn't

She was me and he was the
mistake you made more than twice

but he gave you a daughter who
gave you trouble, sometimes.

this is what women do, talk
nonsense and make trouble

all about the earth, but only
because no one lets them

keep things nice or clean
or quiet. let us just have

one damn thing.



Aretemisia
Gentileschi,
"Susanna and the
Elders," 1610.

First Wednesday Sirens

Working from home includes:
day-old coffee heated in the microwave,
snoring dogs and sometimes the desire
to add wine.

Yesterday, July 4, the incessant booming.
Today, Wednesday, the sirens.

Feels like a warning, a dry run, a war inside.
I feel like I should move the canned
goods to the basement, the bottled water too,
build a wall to keep all the crazy white men out.

Maybe I should have titled this poem,
Me + My Uterus = 4-ever.



Odilon Redon, "The Crying Spider," 1881.

Spider

my head feels heavy
so i let it hang like

a knot in a thread
and i drag it around.

i remember when i was 10
a spider crawled up my leg

i let it, even though i was terrified.
you are that spider.

how do i tell you that you
are that spider?

how do i tell you that i can hear
the words you do not speak?

how do i tell you that sometimes
i sit in the basement and listen
to the house, to the way
each foot plays a different note
across the floor.

The Ghosts Will Not Save You

My mother taught me that no house
is a home. Instead, each room is an opportunity
to be a statistic.
Instead, this is where you hide the pipe,
this is where you keep the bottles
and here, daughter, is where you keep
the secrets. All of them.
Stacked against the door, not as an offering,
but as a precaution or a reminder that you
will not leave here. At least not the way
you came.

**New Poetry: “What Great Grief
Has Made the Civilian Mute”**

by Jennifer Murphy



To watch soldiers load into planes on television

To ignore veterans who manage to make it home

To cry out when an airman murders four of your friends

To never question the valiance of combatants

To have visions of your father stabbing you to death

To lose your sight in vodka and cigarettes

To flee the western night for that big bright eastern city

To discover there is no such thing as relief in escape

To forget the names of the slain from your hazy youth

To remember in excruciating detail the site of their wounds

To learn there is nothing you can do to raise the dead

To spend your life writing the killed into existence

To read the greatest fear for men is being embarrassed

To understand that for women it's being murdered

To be the only female in the room of camouflaged men

To befriend the lonely fighter in the city of civilians

To love a Marine who became a decorated firefighter

To lose him in the North Tower that blue September

To watch soldiers load into planes on television

To embrace veterans who manage to make it home

*for Deborah, Amy, Melissa, and Heather Anderson
and Captain Patrick "Paddy" Brown*

Photo Credit: U.S. Army photo by Maj. Adam Weece, 3rd CR PAO, 1st Cav. Div.

New Fiction: “The List” by Andria Williams

✘ *Author’s note: I began this story in 2013, but eventually set it aside because I feared it would seem unrealistic, or possibly even quaint, to write a story about a Facebook group formed to [exploit female service members](#). This past year, for obvious reasons, I dug it up again.*

*

Green cornstalks rolled into the distance under a heavy midsummer sky. From her metal seat, peering out the small window to her right, Captain Jessica Aras watched a lone white jet-trail make its way through amnesiac blue. Then the door to the squadron building clicked open, and she saw Airman Blakely slip in with a Big Gulp sloshing in his hand, which surely he had refilled four times already and would prompt him to make half-hourly trips to the little boy’s room for the rest of the day.

She could understand how a person might drift away from the base on lunch break and have a hard time coming back, especially if that person were a nineteen-year-old male on his first stateside tour of duty after 180 days in Afghanistan. But as he approached her side of the room, the door shutting behind him, he took a leisurely, gurgling sip through his straw, and the ice cubes clattered all at once against their

plastic silo. This sound was the death rattle of Jessica's patience. Just because a tour in southern Illinois lacked urgency did not mean that someone could glide off and install himself for two hours at the mall's food court. Three times this week Blakely had come in late from lunch, and as she saw her other enlisted folks glance up, she felt a flare of irritation. She was his Captain, and his tardiness seemed a show of public disrespect.

Even though her better judgment told her to take him aside in private, she couldn't stop herself from standing and calling after him. "Airman Blakely," she said, "your break ended 45 minutes ago."

He pulled up mid-slurp and stared at her in startled silence. The straw twitched between his lips. When he lifted his head, the straw came up with it and he held it there as if unsure which would be less polite, to remove it with his fingers or to just let it dangle.

Everyone watched over the tops of their gray cubicles.

"Are we having a misunderstanding, Blakely?" Jessica asked, crossing her arms over the thick fabric of her cammies. He continued to stare, and she blurted, "Were you under the impression that lunch break was a free afternoon at the Chuck E. Cheese's?"

It was a stupid thing to say; it hardly made sense. Their local mall did contain a Chuck E. Cheese's, but no one called it "*the* Chuck E. Cheese's," "the" tacked like a small fart onto the front of the name. She glared up at him, this gangly kid almost a decade younger and a foot taller than herself, who a month ago had been pulling military police duty in some village in Afghanistan and now stood before her, red-faced, a florid pimple blooming beneath one nostril, the straw projecting from his mouth like a sprig of wheat, the ice shifting once more, loudly, in his drink.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” Blakely said. “It won’t happen again.”

And it did not. But in retrospect, this was probably how she first got on the List.

*

Jessica drove home every day with First Lieutenant Steve Hayes, her neighbor and a fellow officer. They both lived in town about fifteen minutes from the base. A coworker once accused them of being too good for standardized housing, and maybe they did think they were; they shared an unspoken aesthetic, she thought, preferring older, quality homes to the base’s sea of new beige construction. Of course, Jessica and her husband Halil liked the larger-than-base-housing backyard for their eighteen-month-old son, Omar, and Halil had a thing for crown molding and pocket doors. Jessica privately thought all these Victorian details were somewhat wasted on bachelor Hayes, whom she imagined hardly noticed them behind the flickering glare of his 78-inch TV and all his weight equipment, but perhaps he liked this side of town for its convenience to St. Louis, where he’d gone to college. He was in an MMA gym there, and he liked the comedy clubs.

Their tours at Bagram had overlapped by a couple of months, so she and Hayes had already known each other when they were assigned to the same security forces squadron in southern Illinois. He was blond, blue-eyed, and corn-fed, and Jessica had kept her distance when she’d first met him in Afghanistan, incorrectly assuming he was a frat-boy type. But he was more self-deprecating than she’d expected, and soon they were watching movies in groups on their off-nights and chowing on more Cinnabon than their perfunctory PT runs could comfortably support. Now that they were stationed here in Illinois, and neighbors, he’d suggested that they carpool together, alternating weeks—this week was her turn to drive. She found she rather looked forward to it. Hayes was single and had no kids, so he’d kept a lot of personal interests and hobbies and

did smart things like watch "Meet the Press." He also had a wise-ass streak she enjoyed.

So here he was, fiddling with her automatic windows and rummaging in his pocket for a toothpick which he popped between his teeth. He'd quit smoking since his return from Bagram, and there was always something in his mouth: gum, a toothpick, hard candy.

She wondered what he'd say about the incident with Airman Blakely: that her irritation was justified, but she should have spoken with the kid alone. Still, she feared that he might say something else, something like, *Actually, you were a little bit of a bitch.*

Instead, he said, "Did you hear there's a new food truck opening in town?"

"Yeah?" she said, relieved.

"Rico's Tacos," he said, spinning the toothpick between his teeth. "We getting some culture here in town, maybe?"

"I'll believe it when I see it," she said. She enjoyed their shared yearning for "culture," also a frequent point of commiseration for her and Halil.

He chuckled and sat in thought for a moment. "Oh, hey, did you remember?"

"Remember what?" Jessica slowed the car as the rural highway became the main road into town and cornfields gave way to gas stations, strip malls, a high school.

"Taco Tuesday at work tomorrow." His blue eyes grinned.

"Oh God, I always forget," she groaned. "Is it poor form if I just bring in a can of black olives?"

"You did that last week, Captain." He spun the toothpick

between his front teeth. "Lead by example. Anyway, the enlisted likes them."

"The olives?"

"The lunches." He examined the frayed toothpick, chucked it back through the open window, and pulled a clean one from his pocket. "Aw Christ, now here's the band."

The high school band ventured out into neighborhoods every summer to prepare for parade season, and here they were now, marching through the crosswalk to the measured rim-clicks of the snare drums. Their red-faced major, sweating continents into his T-shirt, held his hand to their windshield with grim, flushed solemnity, as if only this gesture kept Jessica from plowing into them all.

While the band crossed, Jessica prodded the bobby pins in her oiled bun, eager to get home and let it down. Her sunlit reflection in the car window showed the flat, rippled waves of hair across the top and sides of her head, like a shower cap made of satin and Kevlar. She liked her hair, its unique monochrome to her light brown skin, and wished it were the first thing people noticed about her. In reality, though, people probably noticed the broad, massed patterns of freckles across her nose and down her cheekbones, just one shade darker than her skin, like shadows through a screen above. She had nothing of her mother's smooth darkness or her father's peely ginger flush; and in fact, though she supposed they'd done their best despite their propensity for arguments and alcohol, she did not feel she was much like either of her parents in any way. After state school in Massachusetts she had joined the Air Force, and only her mother was left now, back in Boston near her Cape Verdean relatives, paranoid about "Arabs and Mexicans," smoking a pack a day.

Jessica said, "I love the band."

"Really?" said Hayes. "Why?" He squinted at the last of the

kids as they marched past the windshield. "Don't worry," he shouted out the window at the drum major, "we aren't gonna run over your goats."

The drum major stood stoically, resisting the urge to make eye contact, as if he were guarding Buckingham Palace.

Jessica clicked her tongue, chuckling. "Leave the kid alone."

"Speaking of kids," He glanced at her, cleared his throat. "You sure ripped that Jiminy Dipshit a new one today."

"You mean Airman Blakely? Did I?" she said, distressed. "No, I didn't. I said what needed to be said. He was coming in late every single day."

"Yeah..." Hayes waited for her to continue.

"He's only been stateside a few weeks. He was way out at some combat outpost, you know."

"The hell was he doing out there?"

"Beats me." Jessica chewed her lower lip. "Do you think he's having redeployment issues?"

"Maybe he's just bored."

"That, too." Jessica sighed, steering one-handed, her right arm across her lap.

"Those were good times," Hayes said, meaning when they were in Bagram. She suspected that not all of his times had been good—he'd been tasked to drive convoys for a provincial reconstruction team and admitted once that it scared him—but people chose what to remember. Her own security job had been so boring it felt like psychological torture. She'd pined bitterly for her son Omar, who'd been a year old when she left; cried over videos of him shoving one cereal puff after another into his mouth until his cheeks bulged while Halil and

his saint of a mother, who'd spent that year living with them through each of their deployments, laughed.

Jessica pulled up at Hayes's house and saw the ecstatic face of his terrier jumping again and again in the front window.

"Someone's happy to see you," she said, and smiled. He opened the car door, waved, and headed up the walk.

*

"Anybody home?" Jessica called in a singsong, minutes later, through her own front door, because this always made Omar squeal. "Oh, I guess no one's home. I'll just go back to work, then."

Omar tore around the corner at a toddler's breakneck speed, his legs kicking forward with a sweet, jerky, duckfooted motion as if not all their joints communicated with each other yet. Jessica picked him up, kissed his dark blond curls, brushed cracker crumbs from his cheeks.

The television was on in the large, mostly empty front room, still stacked with cardboard boxes in one corner, and toys tossed about as if one of those boxes had lightly exploded. She glimpsed the green of a baseball field on the screen, tiny figures running and diving, before it switched to a raucous commercial.

"Hello," Halil said from the couch. "We were just watching baseball and eating Ritz."

She set Omar down. "How was day care? Was there a good report?"

Halil made room for her. She perched lightly, still in her uniform and combat boots, with a long to-do list ahead of her before she could relax. "He had a good day," Halil said, and Jessica felt a smile spread across her face, "but he did not finish his lunch." Halil added, sounding almost sorrowful

about it: "He never eats the oranges."

"Oh, I don't care," Jessica said. "How was your day?"

"Not too unusual. I briefed the Colonel," he said. Halil was on an Intel watch floor, which meant twelve-hour shifts. His eyes looked tired and heavy-lidded.

"Were you nervous?"

"Not too. I don't really get nervous anymore."

"Do you feel like people are taking you seriously at work?"

He looked at her curiously. "I think so. Does that surprise you?" He gave a quiet laugh. "I don't think they say, 'Oh God, there goes that clown, Halil.'"

"I know. That's not what I meant. It was more about myself."

He frowned. "You think people don't take you seriously?"

"No, I think they do, it's just" – Omar was climbing her legs now. She swung them up and down while he clung to her shins, and he laughed.

"Well, you scare the living daylights out of me," Halil joked.

"Yeah, yeah." Jessica swatted him, unwound Omar from her calves, got up, and headed for the upstairs bedroom to change. Her laced boots felt ridiculously heavy and assertive, out of context, on the carpeted stairs. Omar followed her, wailing. Now that she was home, it was Mama or no one. She handed him her phone to play with while she changed: pried her feet from the hot boots, pulled bobby pins from her hair one by one. Her head was tender from insistent pinning. She rubbed her scalp, pulled her hair through a band, and carried Omar downstairs. He still clutched her phone possessively, so she let him keep it. Halil had tipped his head back on the couch and was dozing. As she gathered ingredients for dinner her phone

buzzed, and she pried it from Omar's hands just long enough to see a message from Hayes. "Don't let us down, Captain!" it said, with four taco emojis trotting along behind. "Go big or go home!," and then three American flags. Jessica chuckled and wrote herself a note so she wouldn't miss it in the morning.

*

The next day at noon, she set a long rectangular tray on the buffet table and peeled back its foil blanket, steam swirling up as if she were performing a magic trick.

Her airmen inched around the table. Rows of warm, gently folded corn tortillas spooned each other beside shredded lettuce cheerful as Easter grass. There was a mound of shimmering ground beef and a lake of thick, grayish beans, sprinkled with authentic-looking cheese. Jessica felt a glow of satisfaction. She had single-handedly taken Taco Tuesday up a notch. She stepped back, clapped her hands lightly together, and said, "Dig in!"

"Goddamn, I love Taco Tuesday!" someone behind her said. "You're the best, Captain!" She realized it was Hayes and ignored him.

Murmured thanks came from her crew as they filed into line. "I love this place," Airman O'Donnell said, and because he was not a wiseass like Hayes, she felt nearly dazzled by his effusiveness until she realized that he meant the chain restaurant from which she'd bought the tacos, and not their cinder-block building with its belabored air conditioning and sagging motivational posters. Still, the spread was an accomplishment. It sure beat the previous weeks' limp tortillas and bags of shredded cheese. People heaped their plates, poured fizzing cups of pop. Someone turned on the stereo.

Airman Mackenzie Stahl, with her severe bottle-black hair and thin overplucked eyebrows, was one of the few who did not seem

pleased. Stahl was somewhere around twenty. She always seemed to have such a chip on her shoulder. It had almost startled Jessica when she'd once seen Stahl out with friends at the movie theater on a Sunday afternoon, laughing and carefree in a Loony Tunes sweatshirt and pin-thin jeans. Stahl possessed none of that lightness now. She thunked a jar of watery salsa onto the far end of the table and stalked past Jessica as if the lunch were not an act of generosity but some kind of pitiable dog-and-pony show, as if Jessica were performing an office striptease. From the other side of the room someone muttered, "Where are the olives? We always have olives."

Truth be told, Jessica felt she'd never quite struck the balance between authority and generosity. The female officers who made the best leaders, who stayed in twenty years or more, seemed to err on the side of toughness and they were often, she hated to admit, the more mannish women. They had odd, inappropriate senses of humor and short, dry laughs; they were overly attached to horses or dogs. Maybe Jessica was finding her own way, a middle ground where she could be both boss and friend, man and woman. Then she overheard airmen Blakely and Stahl at the front of the line.

Stahl asked, "You hear we're getting a Rico's taco truck?"

Jessica was about to pipe up Yes! She had heard that! It was the talk of the town!, but Airman Blakely, pouring neon-orange queso from a jar all over the delicate flavors of the more-authentic takeout Jessica had brought, spoke up first.

"What'd you say? Pink tacos?" he asked, grinning.

"Shut up," Stahl said, laughing.

It was obvious Blakely was trying to be immature. Sure, it was uncouth, but Jessica was in the mood to let things slide. She wouldn't have given it a second thought if it were not for what followed.

Blakeley widened his eyes at Stahl in mock surprise and whispered in a breathy, innocent falsetto: "What? You mean this isn't an afternoon at the Chuck E. Cheese's?"

Stahl pushed him playfully and hissed, "Oh, take it easy, Cocoa Puff!"

At this, several airmen turned toward Jessica and then quickly looked away again. She wondered what this had to do with her.

"Shit," someone muttered.

And then Jessica realized—her face burning, tears sparking in her eyes—it was a nickname, their nickname for her.

Stahl turned and spotted Jessica, and her whole countenance changed. She ducked her head and, though there was only one tortilla on her plate, made a beeline for her cubicle. Blakely, his face red, did the same.

Jessica felt her body turn hot from her head to her toes. She poked at the pins in her hair, her eyes stinging. It's okay, she told herself, a habit under stress. It's okay, this is okay. It's normal to gripe about your boss behind his or her back. She would not cry over whatever stupid crap some kids from podunk towns said about her when they thought she wasn't listening. Maybe it meant her group had good camaraderie. But Cocoa Puff, Jesus. There was an edge to it she couldn't make herself think about. Her stomach turned.

Hayes, oblivious, wandered up with his own plate refilled and gave her a smile. "Hey, kiddo," he said. "This whole thing is a hit."

For a split second she wanted to grab his arm and demand of him: *Is this really what they call me behind my back? What else do they say about me? And please do not call your Captain "kiddo" in front of the airmen!* Instead she stood silently, relieved that, at least, her distress was not noticeable to

anyone else.

"You gonna eat anything yourself?" Hayes asked, landing a curved, beef-filled chip on his tongue and crunching loudly.

"Of course," Jessica said, though she could not imagine actually choking down anything. She turned back to the table full of food: pale-green lettuce dropped here and there, the beef leaking orange-colored oil, her spectacular, now-picked-over tray.

*

For the next few days, there were no incidents. Airman Blakely was nearly tripping over himself to be punctual, returning from lunch with minutes to spare and often with a quarter of a sandwich in hand, as if putting his concern for promptness on display. "Nice touch," Hayes whispered to Jessica with a smirk. "The sandwich."

Then the Major called her out of the blue for a meeting. He wanted her to meet him not at his own cubicle, but in one of the small conference rooms at the end of the building, which could not be good. She knew this would be about one of the airmen. At two o'clock she tapped baby Omar's sweet round nose in the framed photo on her desk, pushed back her chair and walked past the dark, reflective windows, pressing her bun into place.

When she opened the door Major Alvarez was already there, a dewy Diet Coke in one hand. He set it aside, stood to accept her salute, and apologized for interrupting her workday, as if Jessica had been doing something fascinating and totally unrelated to his instructions. Then he said, "We've got a little bit of an issue here with some of your men."

Her heart sank: more than one?

He asked, "Are you familiar with something called 'the List?'"

Jessica paused, mentally running through what might fit this name: a game show, a movie. Hadn't there been a self-help book of that name recently, some Christian thing? "No, sir," she said.

Alvarez sat down and Jessica did also. He said, "One of your airmen came forward yesterday. He said there's a, a game going around between a couple of the offices."

"Okay," Jessica said.

Alvarez cleared his throat. He was a fit man with salt-and-pepper hair who often bicycled to work wearing the sort of giant, iridescent sunglasses favored by those who took both sports and eye health seriously. He linked his fingers on his lap and Jessica saw the ropy tendons in his arms, his remarkably clean fingernails, white moons, the beds a pristine grayish-pink.

"They're keeping a list of the females in the offices, things they"—he paused delicately—"notice about the females, ideas of what the females might do."

Jessica could feel her heart accelerate as he explained: The men in question had started a Facebook group, which they joined under decoy names. The site was "organized around sexual requests and gossip," Alvarez said, "and inappropriate speculation." Worse, however, the group was linked to another site where service members were apparently posting nude pictures of women—some obviously posed for, but others seeming to have been taken without their knowledge.

She couldn't help but feel indignant on behalf of her men, in part for the absurd reason that the other squadron involved with whatever this idiotic game was had a much nicer, newer building with perfect air conditioning and sparkling, unchipped bathrooms. The airmen in the other building enjoyed such creature comforts all the time; what excuse did they have to idle their days away, dreaming up lewd nicknames and

distasteful scenarios?

"It probably started as blowing off steam," he said, "but it's become something more."

"All right," Jessica said. She felt almost dizzy and cleared her throat. "Well, what do we do?"

"Airman Wallace, the one who came forward, will allow us to use his account for the next couple of days so we can figure out exactly who is taking part in this." He scribbled something on a piece of paper and then handed it to her. "Here's Wallace's information so you can access the account."

"His account name is 'SexualChocolate?'" Jessica snorted, picturing Wallace's eggy white head, the way he seemed to stroke it into a point when he was thinking.

Alvarez denied himself the chuckle. "We'll go through it and identify who we can, and compare notes tomorrow," he said. "But wait until you get home."

Her protectiveness was replaced by a seeping disgust. "How many of my men are involved, sir? And what will the disciplinary action be?"

He counted in his head. "Right now I know of ten from your unit, plus fourteen from the other. There will be the typical non-judicial committee and appropriate punishment. And they aren't all men," he said, his eyes darting to her and away again as he stood and she did also. "Wallace says at least two of the participants are women."

*

It was Hayes's afternoon to drive. Jessica followed him out of the building and across the parking lot, which wavered black in the midday heat. His royal blue Mustang, brand-spanking-new the month before, was waiting. It was more car than anyone needed, with all the bells and whistles, but that was not

something she would ever say. Besides, being a grown man with no dependents, he could do what he liked.

"Another day bites the dust," he said, smiling faintly as they glided through the security gate, waving to Vargas and Swenson on duty. He glanced back in the mirror and switched lanes, his blue eyes light and sun-strained.

Jessica found it hard to keep up conversation, given the day's revelation. Alvarez had asked her not to speak of it before he took the issue higher up. She wondered if Hayes knew, if he'd heard anything from the enlisted guys. She wondered, yet again, if he knew what they called her behind her back.

"Going into the city Friday night," Hayes was saying. "Seeing the Cards game with some friends."

Jessica managed to ask who they were playing. The Reds, he said. Cabrera was coming back in off the injured list, but he wasn't worried. She saw his eyes in the rearview mirror again, just a flicker, and he drifted back into the left lane.

"Well," she said, feeling exhausted, "that sounds like fun." Then she touched his arm. "You're driving serpentine," she said.

"Oh, sorry. Old habit." He shook himself, moved back into the right lane as if out of superstition, forced himself to stay there. The effort made him twitch.

She nodded, looked out the window. There were the cornfields, a half-vacant strip mall with a tanning booth and a Verizon Wireless, a pro-life billboard with a baby in a denim jacket and sunglasses. Sometimes Hayes would joke, "I've been wearing this jacket since four days after conception!!!," which made her laugh.

"I know it's just a habit," she said. "But you don't have to do it here."

*

Later that night Jessica sat in the green glare of her computer, her heart pounding. She was doing what Alvarez had asked her to: scrolling through the List, jotting down the names of contributors she recognized. None of this was what she wanted to see, and yet it was impossible to look away. She felt as if her mind were unfurling.

There was plenty of tamely inappropriate stuff, shots of service women at BBQs in low-cut shirts, holding beer. Two female airmen Jessica recognized, tonguing for the camera, par for the course. Individual shots of women apparently oblivious to the commentary they'd inspired: *She a real ho slept with half the MPs. This one likes it up the ass. Bitch gives the best head in Illinois!!!*

She scanned through the page for links to specific pictures, trying to match her people with their aliases. Airman Rick Swenson called himself "Ron Swanson," she put that together pretty easily. There was Spaceballs, JFK, Matt Holliday. All these losers, she comforted herself, who would be found out, one by one. All she needed to see was there.

Airman Stahl was, optimistically, "Gisele." And it turned out she was quite active on the site, posting pathetic photos of herself in only lacy black panties, her scant breasts squashed together with her elbows in an uncomfortable contortion. Stahl posted these pictures even though the commentary was sometimes harsh – *You look like B-grade Victorias Secret, girl!*—or maybe because it was occasionally positive (*Super hot, keep 'em comin sweetheart!*). Then again, maybe she was getting money for them.

Jessica learned, too, that Airman Vargas had a real chip on his shoulder about an ex-girlfriend, a former servicewoman he referred to as "the evil bitch" so insistently that anyone wanting to see a picture of her called her that as well.

Vargas had uploaded nearly all of the evil bitch's Instagram account to the web site before she could shut it down. Jessica lingered far longer than she needed to there, riveted in a way that felt both vapid and inevitable. She scanned backwards through the evil bitch's life, through her parties and posing with girlfriends at clubs (and yes there was a lot of cleavage and her skirt was far too tight, but this was on the evil bitch's own time and Jessica would have had no jurisdiction); she scrolled past the evil bitch cuddling with a large pit bull, the evil bitch posing with a nephew. The evil bitch dolled up, the evil bitch fresh-faced on a lawn chair. Jessica felt startled when Vargas himself reappeared in this reverse-timeline—she'd almost forgotten he was involved at all, and wanted to shout, *Look out, don't you know that's the evil bitch?!—*he was oblivious, his arm suddenly around the evil bitch's slim shoulders as if they were on cloud nine.

She thinks she has privacy, Vargas wrote, but joke's on her! She blocked me from her Instagram means she basically WANTS a war now. Fine evil bitch, you want it you got it! P.S. \$\$\$\$ I got noodies on a film camera, will scan. \$\$\$\$

BIG MONEY, sonny!

Aw yiss , came the replies.

There was plenty more, things Jessica did not want to see. She found herself scrolling with a sense of distance, seeing all this from the outside. She tried to forget these were her people, that she had failed, that she had allowed such a germ to grow right under her nose—instead this was some unknown airman's strained, blurry dick before her eyes, some other unit's men who had paid one of their own to ejaculate on a hooker's face. There was no way these could be the people she worked with day after day. *Good morning, how are you, so-and-so* made fresh coffee, there's softball on Friday—

She had a strange memory of Hayes talking to her one afternoon

in the car, something he had seen on Bill Maher, saying—*A dick, if you ask me, does not translate well to film. Anyone who thinks otherwise is kidding himself.* And Jessica chuckling awkwardly at this non-sequitur, thinking, *Where did that come from?* But so far, to her relief, Hayes was nowhere to be seen on the List.

And here was Gisele, Airman Stahl, again. A post from a couple of weeks ago: *“Cocoa Puff’s Nipples – Black or Pink?!!!”*

Jessica felt the blood drain from her face.

Oh please no, she thought.

It was a popular post. People were making guesses. “Black,” “pink,” “vagina-colored,” they speculated, some obviously pleased with their own cleverness. One asked, *“Do you think she has splotches all over her WHOLE BODY TOO?”*

Jessica felt tears spark in her eyes. Her face burned.

But then Gisele/Stahl reappeared and put the guessing game to rest with a heavily cropped photo. It was blurry, taken with a cell phone Stahl had apparently set in her locker, but Jessica could see that the series of three photos were of herself.

The first was taken from behind and was unimaginably awkward: a surprisingly pale figure stepping forward into her PT shorts, the ass a sloping ramp, pocked with minor cellulite. Then it got worse: two frontal shots, the moment before she grabbed a towel, in which Jessica’s torso seemed to make a haunting, disapproving face at the camera. She wished the body had been mercifully headless but there was the lower half of her face, unmistakable, caught in what looked like a moment of mild strain. Her breasts hung dead center in the picture, like two startled, spacey eyes, while her unguarded stomach made its slack and gentle descent towards her crotch. For a moment she could not breathe. It was the worst way to be caught, in that wet, gravid moment between shower and towel, the moment

you rushed through because it was so ugly; and there she was, frozen in time, evaluated by countless eyes, judged for the horrors of her normal body. She felt captured. She felt lynched.

PokerFace—OMG this makes me so hot I need to jack off and then kill myself

Holler Uncle —At the Chuck E. Cheese's?

*JFK—KILL ****ME***** FIRST!!*

Spaceballs—oh God, I can't unsee it

PokerFace—Ladies and Gentlemen, you have seen the face of terror.

This, from a particular wordsmith— *the existance of the allusive Locker Room Sasquatch has now been prove. Approach with extreme caution!!!!!!! If it comes near you, throw food to it then back away. LMFAO*

Yet another—How can she do this to us?????

The responses ranged from that sort of prudish hysteria—as if the images had been thrust upon them from the outside, by a calculating third party, the pervert in the movie theater or the creep on the bus, and not sought out and encouraged by themselves — to a chuckling, jaded cruelty, a voice that was calm and sexually wise, somehow above the other banter. Jessica didn't know which was worse, and she couldn't bear it anymore anyway. She needed to get out of there.

She clicked back to the Facebook page and was about to close out when a new post caught her eye. Unrelated to the main content on the page, it was just a casual conversation between two members. But a sudden suspicion made her read on.

Spaceballs—Hey Matt Holliday you got those tickets for Friday?

Matt Holliday—yeah

Spaceballs— 8 of us right?

Matt Holliday— yup

Spaceballs— What, you didn't invite Cocoa Puff on the way home? LOL When you gonna bag that?

Matt Holliday— Shut up. You're an ass

Spaceballs— She's into you, you know it

Matt Holliday— proolly

This conversation had ended half an hour before. Jessica waited a few more minutes, but nothing else came up. She recalled seeing "Matt Holliday" elsewhere on this page; it was the name of a star Cardinals player and, she now knew beyond a doubt, that it was Hayes's moniker as well. She began scanning the list frantically for Matt Holliday's other posts. They were infrequent and rather passive, in occasional response to others. He had not commented on the more illicit items, including the naked pictures of herself. But he had seen them. He'd known about this for some time.

She resolved to click out once and for all, but the cursor in the top bar blinked like a challenge, a dare. *SexualChocolate, how are you feeling?* it asked, with all the saccharine remoteness of a non-human.

SexualChocolate—YOU ARE ALL FUCKING ASSHOLES she wrote, and closed out of the computer at once.

*

There was no way that she could sleep. She sat up with a glass of wine and tried to calm herself: the List would be shut down the next day. She'd watched it from the outside with a superior glow of knowledge, seen its deathbed tremor. Those

boys thought they were so clever, thought they could keep their fun little club on life-support, but it had only a few hours to live. And she had snuck in among them and deceived them, too.

Why had she expected Hayes to snitch on the others, anyway? She and Hayes carpooled to and from work because they lived a block apart; she'd been stupid to think they were *friends*. They did not get together on weekends or BBQ in her backyard or hang out in bars. But they talked, and something about the way their conversations bookended the day made her feel that these chats were significant; they checked in with each other because being in the military, in their squadron, having done a tour in Afghanistan, was like being in your own little country, a specific world that made you somehow equal. They were the yolk of an egg, she'd once thought, and the white of the egg was all the diffuse civilian-ness around them, the tanning booths and the Dairy Queen and the high school band and all that shit the military made possible for their indulged, beloved, oblivious citizenry to enjoy.

But right now, she hated him. She hated him more than she had hated anyone in her life.

Their service didn't make them equal. She'd always known that perfectly well, and just sometimes forgot. He'd sat by while people joked about her, while nude pictures of her scrolled before his blue, blue, American, baseball-loving eyes, as if what she didn't know could not possibly hurt her. But that was the *thing*, she thought tearfully, feeling bitterness rise up through her body. That was the thing about being a woman: what you didn't know did hurt you, over and over.

She tried to imagine how things would go from here: The List would be shut down, effective immediately. The transgression would be discussed at work in endless conferences and reprimanding e-mails, and everyone would be very, very serious. They would hold a non-judicial disciplinary

committee, and there would be docks in pay, maybe even someone getting held back in rank for a few years. For Hayes, as an officer, the punishment could be severe.

But these were her people, also, and there was a chance she would be punished as well. She was supposed to be in charge of them, to know what they were doing. She'd helped create a culture. Hadn't she?

*

She didn't sleep. Hours later she stood by the back door and watched the sun rise in a pink smudge from the direction of the base. A distant cargo plane climbed into the warm, heavy sky. Beneath it swayed the drying cornfields, waving their crinkled arms as if to remind everything above them that they were there.

Halil would be home in a few minutes from his night on the watch floor. When Omar woke up, Halil would toast him a frozen waffle for breakfast and take him to day care before falling finally into bed to sleep the day away.

By then, Jessica would already be at work. Hayes was coming by to pick her up soon, and he was always on time.

Photo Credit: United States Air Force

New Poetry by J.J. Starr

☒ Concerning whether or not I am a horse

I strap torso & press arms

to diaphragm with breath

deep the distressed
voice of mistress
mumbles wishes
amid plum trees
& white headlight
bum-rushes the alleyway—

Am I a horse

kicking at its leathers?
How many full rides & how should I count?

Thought made in moonlight appearing
cogent, succinct behind glass
what makes a full ride?

Pulling hard & pulling harder, making iron
break soil, dancing in dirt, hooves
wet, mane draping the strength of a neck—

Am I

if no bit made better a turning
head? No harm but tightened
hips? & if my breast hardened by use?
My rump sheened in sunlight

Am I a horse?

Many hands have made my length
& I've never been bought.

Many hands have made
my length. Many hands.

God Between Us & All Harm

Lighted hallway, delighted guest,
the television the
lens of it, lends itself to you.
Trump again, brackish, weighted
eyes dilated, throat-moaning

“The beauty of me is that I’m very rich.”

Beleaguered, who can even remember a face
these days? My grandfather used to say things
like you can drown in a teacup of water
if you fall right. He was gladly on his way out.

Sometimes I see his point:

LSU live tiger-mascot dies of cancer at age eleven
his empty cage strewn with flowers, paper cards
a student says, “nobody else had a live tiger.”

company shares tumble by 8%
top of the news feed
taking so much light
I’ve forgotten there’s war in Ukraine •

Afghanistan • Iraq • Nigeria • Cameroon • Niger •
Chad • Syria • Turkey • Somalia • Kenya • Ethiopia •
Libya • Yemen • Saudi Arabia • Egypt • India • Iran •
Myanmar • Thailand • Israel • Palestine • Philippines •
Colombia • Armenia • Azerbaijan • China • Bangladesh •
DRC • Algeria • Tunisia • Burundi • Russia • Mali •
Angola • Peru • Lebanon • Mozambique •

where &

& where else?

L asks what I think of the song

Listening with ears pricked upon
to Young Thug's Wyclef Jean
I cannot be sure where I meet it

when he says let me put it
& I think of course not—but then
fingering the hem of my skirt

do I reject his desire to squirt
his cum on my face slick as a ghost
because I'm honestly or dishonestly

deposed? I want my skin touched—
perhaps it's how he asks,
telling me to deny my desire to bask

In the wet filth & become
part perversion myself. Because it was me
that morning who told

my beloved to do it & yes, I did want
kneeling deep in the tub looking up
all my skin like a socket, drooling mouth

blossomed, filled like a pocket.
L said to me, You don't think
about the implication, the intention.

I said, I don't think
of the gesture as blind contravention
or anything more than body & mess

upon mess in the deluge of sex. I confessed

I want to be seen as a canvass.
She said, I don't want to be mean,
with the swat of her hand, but
he's no Jackson Pollack.

Photo Credit: [Cesar Ojeda](#)

Tomorrow Ever After: A Kinder Future

Here on *Wrath-Bearing Tree* we write a lot about ways in which things are imperfect—culturally, politically, institutionally. We often point out examples of things that go wrong. People who lie or use faulty logic to advance unethical or selfish agendas. We focus on negativity in part because we're combat veterans, and have seen bad consequences of lazy thinking and decision-making. The other thing that unites us, if anything, is that we share a basic conviction that things could be better. Especially when it comes to media, and entertainment.

It's not easy to create *ethical* and entertaining drama that uplifts at the same time that it provides laughter. Without resort to conflict—usually in the form of sex or violence—stories fall flat. Why consume an account of someone's perfect day? Few movies manage to leave a majority of their audiences feeling *better* (rather than exhausted), because it's very difficult to accomplish this. Recent examples include [Hot Tub Time Machine](#) and [Safety Not Guaranteed](#), both of which manage to deliver without relying much on violence or sex.

Violence and sex from the male perspective are hallmarks of most mainstream films. In the fourth week of April, I watched or re-watched four movies: *Star Wars: Rogue One*, *LA Confidential*, *American Beauty*, and the upcoming [Tomorrow Ever After](#). The first three movies are violent fantasies that appear to hate women and poor people, and maybe people in general. Characters in the film earn their punishments in a variety of ways, but those ways all come down to the alienation wrought by dissatisfaction with a society built on sexual exploitation and the urge to destroy. They offer dark visions of human nature, and are at heart nihilistic visions of the past, present, and future.

Tomorrow Ever After is different. In it, the principle conflicts that unfold within and between characters are existential, based on questions about their purpose—they are not transactional or punitive. Conflicts unfold within characters as they grapple with the constraints of living within a patriarchal, capitalist system. In this system (that of our present time—the movie is set in 2015) women are systematically oppressed by men, who are systematically oppressed by a system in which housing is not guaranteed, jobs are difficult to come by, and money is the mechanism by which people and items are valued. In *Tomorrow Ever After*, this period of human history is referred to as “The Great Despair.”

One of the film’s most impressive accomplishments is its ability to represent the problems posed by money in a realistic, relatable way, while simultaneously making it clear that this situation is unnecessary—ridiculous, even. The film’s satirical touch is so light that it’s almost unseen, but it guides everything, and fills *Tomorrow Ever After* with humor and optimism. A film about the evils of sexist patriarchy and capitalism sounds like it would be annoying or boring, but this is not the case with *Tomorrow Ever After*. I suspect that this is because it spends so little time moralizing, and because the director and actors are so good.

There are no cynical or clichéd moments where a character pauses to deliver some memorable line, no posturing, no *bullshit*. Given the conceit about time travel, this is nothing short of extraordinary.



In *Tomorrow Ever After*, the difficulty of providing empathy or compassion to strangers without resorting to sex or the threat of violence generates much of the positive motion in the plot and between the characters—successfully so

The pacing is wonderful. There isn't a single moment in the film where someone watching is lost or displaced, save for the very beginning (this is to be expected in a movie about time travel). Contrast this with *Rogue One*, or *LA Confidential*, or even *American Beauty*, all of which make themselves known only through repeated screenings, or by reading secondary material. *Tomorrow Ever After* is not interested in spectacle, nor is it particularly interested in rendering judgment—it is a parable about all of us, and how we live, and so there are no bad characters to murder, no suffering characters that do not themselves possess the means of their own redemption.

The most impressive accomplishment of *Tomorrow Ever After*, however, that its characters are believably written, and the actors capably bring them to life. Because the conflicts encountered by many characters are all basic and comprehensible, one finds oneself empathizing with *everyone* in the film. This accomplishment confirms what appears to be *Tomorrow Ever After's* chief hypothesis: that when we view each other with empathy, and treat each other with kindness, life becomes much more enjoyable and pleasant. In this way,

Tomorrow Ever After functions not only as a morale parable, but also as evidence that its hypotheses are true. After all, if it's possible to make a film that engages, inspires, and entertains without laser battles, sex, violence used as a vehicle for redemption, or murder—*Tomorrow Ever After* promises none of these elements—maybe, just maybe, it's possible to make a better world, too.