

New Fiction from Lisa Erin Sanchez: “Signatures of Ghosts”

He had one scar when I met him, a single blow to the back of his neck in the soft fleshy space between head gear and body armor. He liked to say, I’ll tell you this for free. I’d move in close and listen. His voice was a lyric tenor. A murmur, a whisper, sometimes a songbird’s call. In the medic’s kit were the trappings of his profession: butterfly clamps, a triangular scalpel, and three items for clearing a blocked airway. He packed these into a metal case the night before he left.

Another case was filled with antibiotics, antifungals, and the antimalarial drug Mefloquine, which caused one soldier to have a psychotic break and go on a rampage in Qandahar. In the third and final case, he kept morphine, oxy, and a handful of drugs whose names I can’t recall.

That whole case was reserved for pain. He was constantly having to refill it.

The medic had a silver star, a purple heart, and an enormous pair of jump wings. On his neck, he had one scar. I wasn’t his wife or life partner. I was just his girlfriend but I loved him. For six blissful months I loved him. In the Carolina woods, on the Roanoke dunes, under moonlight and firelight, in oceans and cars. We had our own special places, our own secret codes. We had summer and sand, and autumn and wind. We had indigo and sepia, and waves and retreats.

By Thanksgiving I learned to play first-person shooter games. *Left 4 Dead*—his favorite.

I’d get shot or lose a limb. He’d pick it up and replace it.

After that, he packed his metal cases. The first month of his tour passed quickly. He called to say his team had arrived safely somewhere between Kabul and Khost, but soon they'd have to move. South, I figured, then we lost contact.

I spent the next few months feverishly knitting. I didn't know how to knit, but I couldn't think or stop thinking, so I taught myself to knit and I made three sweaters. By the time he called, I had started an afghan blanket. It was the color of a storm cloud, between black and white.

Mela? he said.

He drew out the vowels in his sing-song voice. He knew not to say Philomela. My parents had been cruel to name me after the bird-princess who lost her voice, and let's face it, I was no princess. Still, I felt some affinity with the bird-like qualities of the fallen Athenian. I admired her metamorphosis and had chosen for myself a perfect match: an airborne army medic who could heal people and fly.

I could hear the medic breathing and pressed my ear to the phone.

Mela, he said. Can you please pick me up?

I drove to airborne headquarters, parked my car, and ran to him. We crashed into each other like dive-bombing birds tangled in flight. He cut his lip on my kiss; I tasted his avian blood.

Yes, I did pick him up, but we didn't quite make it home. We stopped at a co-op for migratory creatures where we loved for hours on end. He brushed a lock of hair from my eye. It caught on an eyelash, which was thick with mascara and fairy dust and moonbeams and tears. I mirrored his motion, sweeping his brow. That's when I noticed a fresh scar. I ran my finger along the jagged edge. It fell from his face but I caught it. I was cradling his wound in the palm of my hand. I wanted to mend

his cut, put everything back in order, but I couldn't.



Leda and the swan, from ruins at Argos.

For the next six months, we tried to remember. We took long walks in the steel blue fog of the Great Smoky Mountains, but only the ravens and the falling leaves spoke. We drove to Roanoke Island and waded in the sea foam, but the cold bit our toes and a massive cloud formed, dumping hard wet rain atop our two heads.

By spring, the medic started train-up. All the things a smoker loathed: running, climbing, jumping out of planes. Schlepping his shit through the Carolina swamplands. For weeks, he was a tortured, exhausted, sweaty mess.

Then came the desk sergeant with the paperwork.

Death preparations, the army called it. Where was his property? Who was his beneficiary? Who was his next of kin?

The closer it got to go date, the more detailed the process became. What type of casket would he like? What song should be played at his funeral?

He came home furious that day. He'd picked a tune by Alice in Chains, it was my favorite, too, but the admin didn't know it, so he told her to play Bad Romance. Lady Gaga, he'd said. Play fucking Gaga.

Nowhere on the forms was a place for my name. I wasn't his wife or the mother of his child. I was just his girlfriend and that's the way the army liked it. Stateside commanders had learned a thing or two since smiling housewives were used to sell war bonds and make hungry young men think they wanted to fight. Girlfriends, they reasoned privately in their secret quarters, were cheap. Why buy the bird when you can rent the feathers?

I didn't care about any forms. I held my lover's wound in the palm of my hand.

When it was time for the medic to redeploy, I drove him to post, went home, and picked up my afghan. The thing was ten feet long by then, witness to my waiting.

I thought about giving it to a family member or friend, but what would they do with a woolen blanket? I considered this for several minutes before deciding I would send it to no one. The blanket was a harbinger, more salient for the absence it signified than the object it had become. Each stitch echoed the promise of return, and even though the medic had left voluntarily, I felt like he'd been taken.

Halfway through his second deployment, the afghan had grown another ten feet. Why hadn't he emailed or called? Was he sick? Was he hurt? Had he lost his men or his mind? I scoured the internet for information. If you can estimate a soldier's whereabouts within a fifty-mile radius, you might get some information. You might find a newswire about a firefight or an ambush. A special missions team can usually survive those. What you don't want to find is an accident like a Humvee over a cliff or any kind of explosion. What you don't want to find is a roadside bomb planted by a starving Afghan who's been paid ten times as much to blow up your boyfriend as the Afghan National Army can pay him to guard bases.

I sat at the computer with coffee and cigarettes, digging for an Associated Press report or two sentences from a military embed. All I could find were things like, *Predator drone kills twenty civilians in South Waziristan*. Or, *Suicide bomb kills eight U.S. soldiers in Khost*, followed by, *A spokesman says the attack was waged in retaliation for the death of twenty civilians killed in South Waziristan*.

With no further contact from the medic, I decided to take action. I purchased the sequel to *Left 4 Dead*, threw myself

into the zombie apocalypse. When I could fight no more, I went back to my knitting: knit two, yarn over, slip slip knit, knit three. I had altered the pattern midstream and now half of the blanket had the tightly-woven look of knit stockings and the other half was an intricate lace with empty spaces forming the shape of inverted wings. The transformation had come about quite by accident. I had slipped a stitch and decided to work in the mistake. It was pleasing to see the little holes, I wanted it to be more transparent. This is what I was thinking as I held the afghan to the light, and when I did, I realized I could see my way through, and I felt a charge in my body, a quiet yearning followed by something more vexing. The sensation was overwhelming. It had a distinctive taste and smell, a clean, utilitarian scent with an aura of hand wringing and finality, of having been useful to the entire enterprise.

The medic would understand this, I thought. For, he had been utilized too. Except, I never told him anything. When finally he called, I had traveled very far and had reached the state of Catatonia, overcome body and soul by a force with the strength of an entire army.

Still I picked him up. This time we didn't go to any hotel, co-op, or Outer Banks beach. The medic was exhausted so we went straight home. He stumbled through the door and fell on the bed, a heap of defeated manhood, nothing but feathers and bones. I took off his Danner desert combat boots and his jacket. He was still wearing his bird tags: name, social security number, blood type, religion. All the important stuff.

I removed the tags and set them on the nightstand. I'm not going to tell you his name but I'll tell you this for free: somewhere downrange, his wings had been soldered to his armor and he'd converted from Catholic to Holy Order of the Jedi Knights. Said so, right there on his tags.

I removed the rest of his clothing—his army gray t-shirt and ACU combat pants with the pixilated universal camouflage pattern, a mix of desert sand, urban gray, and foliage green, which made him invisible in any battlefield, all contingencies covered.

His feathers came off last. That's when I saw the scars. Every inch of him was marked, and there was a deep black gouge beneath the skin, on his soft, fleshy heart, which was barely beating.

I reached for a salve and rubbed it over his body, counting the scars, dividing wounds over time. There were exactly three thousand scars, a thousand a year for his travels, each one concerning a distinct war story. How could his commander have missed these? I decided I was the only one who could see them or the only one who cared.

Another season changed and it started again. Fourth deployment for him, third for me. The medic dragged himself to train-up, this time coughing and hacking, sweating alcohol from his pores.

Did I forget to mention his drinking?

He came back nine months later. Families were gathered in the parking lot of the great airborne fortress, waiting for their beloved songbirds. Some came home walking, some were sitting in wheelchairs, others were missing entirely.

I stood beside my car as the medic ambled toward me. A line of cars extended behind me, each one with a lone woman sitting in the driver's seat. The line wrapped all the way around the garrison and out the gate to Bragg Boulevard, a yellow ribbon of girlfriends all the way to the

Atlantic Ocean, not one of them crying because, let's face it, who would hear?

The medic got in the car.

Paddy's? I asked.

He nodded. I drove.

We walked inside and sat at the bar. He motioned the barkeep and then he looked at me and then I looked at him.

How was your tour?

Not good.

I missed you.

Me too.

I sent you an email.

The internet was down.

Where were you?

Can't say.

Did you receive fire?

We had an accident. And the team hit a roadside bomb.

The bartender stood before us, arching his brow.

Straight up, the medic said, and knocked twice on the bar.

The man poured two glasses of whiskey and the medic downed them both. You should find someone else, he said. He had nothing left to give.

I cleared my throat but I couldn't speak. *He* had nothing to give?

He put his hand over mine. He was staring into an empty glass like he wanted to dive in.

What'll you have, he asked.

He drank another shot before I could say beer then knocked once more on the bar.

My eyes traveled the room. Photos of fallen team guys lined the walls, their names carved for posterity like signatures of ghosts in the great mahogany countertop.

The bartender poured another whiskey and the medic turned to me. Light or dark, he asked.

I knew which one I wanted but my vocal cords were frozen, and as I watched him swallow, I thought about flying away.

Your beer, he said. Light or dark?