

New Fiction by Benjamin Inks: Contract

On Monday I wore a cowboy hat to work—just to see if I could.

Employees at Brick Albert seldom break the unspoken dress code of a Costco button-down paired with either khaki, black, or navy-blue slacks. Once you get pegged as dressing a certain way, any deviation only invites conversation, and I don't like talking about myself.

New Poem by Nathan Didier: “Hearts and Minds”

New poem by Nathan Didier: “Hearts and Minds”

New Poetry by Celeste Schueler: “In Oklahoma, Another Air Force Spouse Tells Me Starlings Are An

Invasive Species” and “I First Compared You To A Blue Jay”

Three years before we met,
Friends tell me to stop reading
Virginia Woolf after my suicide
Attempt and an ex-boyfriend
Gifts me a burned CD of
The Beatles at Easter—

New Poetry by Benjamin Bellet: “What Was It Like?”; “Zero Five Thirty”; “West Point”

New poems by Benjamin Bellet

New Poetry by Nathan Didier: “Hearts and Minds”

New Poem by Nathan Didier: “Hearts and Minds”

New Fiction by Robert Miner: Shades of Purple



Danny Llewellyn hadn't shit himself since he was a toddler, back when nobody minded. Since then, he'd joined the Army, gone to war, left the Army. He was, by most people's estimations, a man, especially because his exit from the service had been hastened by injuries sustained in combat. All the pain meds during his hospital stay had stopped him up, and things down there never quite got back to normal. That was part of the reason the accident took him by surprise—in those days, each bowel movement was a protracted trauma of its own.

It happened at the Veterans of Foreign Wars hall in Overland Park, Kansas. The VFW had a bar room. The bar room had a vinyl floor, and the walls were covered in photographs, unit insignia behind glass, and certificates of appreciation for good works in the community. The bar itself was u-shaped, made from teak like the deck of a boat, light and polished. It was the nicest bit of anything in the whole building, which makes a lot of sense when you think about it.

The winter sun had just set. Friday. Danny walked the mile from his apartment to the VFW through wind and gray slush. He had plans to get blind drunk, and he didn't want to drive home. When he arrived, there were three people in the bar room. Two of them, both men, sat next to each other in chairs on the right side of the bar. Their backs were mostly to Danny, and he couldn't see their faces, but they looked older. There was white hair and wrinkled necks and the broad, uneven shoulders which become under the weight of a hard life lived.

Only the bartender saw him come in. She was in her forties, and she didn't take good care of herself, but she had great big tits, and she wore low cut shirts because she knew the fellas liked something to look at. She pitied most of them for what they'd seen and done.

The bartender told him to have a seat anywhere. The man in the chair nearest to Danny swiveled to see who she was talking to. He had a bushy gray mustache and wore a ball cap that identified him as a Gulf War veteran. Danny limped to the side of the bar opposite the men. The limp was the result of the explosion that had sent shrapnel up and down the right side of his body. The damage to his thigh and hip was especially bad. The doctors said he'd probably limp for the rest of his life, even as the pain got better.

Danny took off his jacket and sat. He ordered a Miller Lite while trying not to stare at the bartender's cleavage.

"What's with the hitch in your giddy up?" It was the mustache in the Gulf War hat. "You get that over there?"

Danny nodded. He hadn't yet figured out how to talk about what happened to him, and he didn't like to lie, so when people asked about it, he said as close to nothing as he could.

"Iraq or Afghanistan?" This time it was the other man asking. He was a head shorter than his friend, so he had to lean over the bar to be seen.

Danny told them Iraq.

The bartender brought his beer in a smudged glass. There was a lot of foam. Danny went for his wallet, but the bartender waved her hand.

"First timers get one on the house. Thank you for your service."

Danny looked down and thanked her.

The old guys held up their drinks, so Danny did the same. His hand shook, and a little foam spilled over the edge of the glass, but the occupational therapist at the VA had told him he had to practice if he ever wanted the tremors to get better.

He took a big gulp of the beer and came away with a foam mustache. He wiped it off, willing himself not to think about shit-burning detail, but the sensation of something on his upper lip brought him right back with such force that he could practically feel the rough edges of the metal picket in his hands.

Before higher headquarters dropped the chemical toilets, his unit had been shitting in wooden outhouses. Each one had a hole in the floor positioned over a 50-gallon drum. The setup worked, but something had to happen to all that waste. Pour in some jet fuel, light on fire, stir. Danny always seemed to draw shit-burning detail. It wasn't so much about the odor (jet fuel masks the smell of shit as well as anything), but his cackling squad mates had photographed him more than once with the Shitler mustache that inevitably takes shape under your nostrils after breathing in the smoke. All the while, other guys were out on the glamorous missions.

The two old vets were back in their conversation now. The first guy, the one closest to Danny, was doing most of the talking. He spoke with an intimidating energy. Intense. Fatigueless.

The bartender came around and asked if Danny wanted another. He said he wanted two. The fast talker was out of his chair now. He had the body of a marathon runner and the shiny cheeks of someone who still shaved every day. He was telling a story about a helicopter crash in which he'd been the pilot. He described the sound of bullets piercing the cabin, the feeling of losing control of the stick, the centrifugal force as the Kiowa plunged spinning towards the ground.

“I was sure I was going to die, of course.” He put both hands on the back of his chair and leaned. “In flight school, they tell you right off that helicopter crashes only have a twenty percent survival rate.”

The pilot had actually been in two crashes. The second one was during a training exercise. Mechanical failure. Danny didn't know any of this, nor would he have been able to do the mental math on the odds of surviving two crashes, but he was still enthralled. His focus was the result of admiration and jealousy. Look at his joie de vivre! This was what happened to soldiers who never pulled shit-burning detail.

Danny was astounded that the bartender and the other veteran seemed bored. She was looking at her phone. He was paying more attention to the rim of his glass. Even if Danny assumed—as he did—that they'd heard this story a hundred times—as they had—it still deserved reverence.

Danny drank fast, and the beer sat heavy in his stomach. Foamy, so foamy, on top of whatever else had built up in there over the last few days. Panda Express. Frozen pizza. More Panda Express. He groaned a little, enough to draw attention.

“Say—” The pilot was looking at him. “What's your name, young buck?”

Danny said his name.

“I'm Sal. This is Glenn. And the lovely Tina, of course.”

Danny said hello.

“What'd you do over there, Danny?”

Again, Danny did his best to avoid the question. Rather than say what he did, he told them what he'd been trained to do. Often as not, that's what people meant when they asked about war. He told them he was an 11 Bravo. Infantry.

Sal's expression brightened. "Glenn, you've finally got another knuckle dragger to talk to." To Danny he added, "Glenn thinks infantrymen are the only real soldiers."

"I hate it when you speak for me," said Glenn. Sal the pilot shrugged.

Glenn stared straight ahead and took a drink. Truth was, he believed that anyone who volunteered to serve deserved as much reverence as a Medal of Honor winner. Heroism was mostly a question of circumstances beyond any soldier's control. He'd won a Silver Star in Vietnam—his was one of the decorations hung on the wall of the bar room—and the citation read like a Hollywood script. But so what? He didn't like talking about what he'd been through either, though his reasons were different from Danny's.

Now on his fourth beer, Danny slid right past tipsy and into drunk. He hadn't eaten since breakfast when he'd poured some questionable milk over a bowl of Raisin Bran.

"Got any war stories?" Sal asking again. "Good ones get another beer on me."

Danny looked down. The pattern of the wooden bar was lovely, soft waves of amber and tan and brown running lengthwise along the planks. They reminded him of Iraqi dunes, which made him think of the day he'd been blown up. He'd been in and out of consciousness, but the view of the windswept sand out the door of the MEDEVAC chopper stuck in his memory.

Danny told them there wasn't much to tell.

"There's a story behind that limp."

Tina the bartender sucked her teeth. "Sal." She seemed to have some power over Sal, because he sat next to Glenn and was quiet for a while.

Of course, there was a story, it just happened to be one that

Danny never wanted to think about, much less tell to a couple of war heroes and a bartender whose tits he planned on thinking about while he jerked off later.

But could he omit the embarrassing details without inviting more questions he'd have to avoid? Probably not. The embarrassing parts seemed like the whole thing.

They'd had the chemical toilets for about a week. A week of shitting in luxury—no risk of splinters in your hamstrings, flies kept mostly at bay by the thin plastic box around you, the smell of other soldiers' waste muted by the blue concoction in the tank below. A little hot, maybe, but so was everything else. So was shit-burning detail. And now that was done forever. Danny had begun lingering in the new toilets. Five minutes. Ten minutes. Fifteen. Locking the door to the stall was like shutting out the war.

It was the middle of the night, and Danny's bladder woke him up. Before, he might have just pissed into an empty two-liter plastic bottle and gone back to bed, but now the new toilets beckoned. He took an issue of Hustler from the stack under his cot and grabbed his rifle and stepped out of the sleeping bay.

The sand of the unimproved road looked blue in the moonlight. The concrete Texas barriers, too. It was a short walk to the row of chemical toilets, newly laid gravel at the edge of camp crunching under his unlaced boots.

None of the toilets were occupied. Danny chose one at the end of the row, because even though the likelihood of a midnight rush was low, he liked the idea of not having guys on both sides of him while he did his business.

Danny stepped into the toilet and closed the door. He waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness before dropping the black PT shorts to his ankles. He took an effortless shit. His last one for years. From the sound, it must have knifed into the water below like an Olympic diver. He sighed. He opened

the Hustler and stared at the glossy body of a girl with curly red hair.

That was the last thing he remembered until the fractured visions from his evacuation to the hospital in Balad. No matter how many times his squad mates told him how gruesome, how badass his injuries had seemed when they found him, Danny could only ever imagine himself strapped to a litter in the MEDEVAC chopper with his t-shirt on and his dick flapping in the rotor wash. The psychologists told him that was probably because of what he'd been doing when the mortar hit. Knowing hadn't yet helped.

Danny's stomach made a sound like a bullfrog. He was too drunk to care about the current of discomfort that shot through his groin. Besides, he was used to ignoring pain. He ordered another beer and drank it and ordered another one.

"You're not driving are you, hon?" asked Tina.

Danny told her he wasn't. He smiled, but he could tell the smile was crooked. Tina gave him the beer anyway. It was nice that she trusted him.

Sal was talking again. Danny didn't know about what. He heard a few words here and there, but his drunk brain was busy trying to overwrite his memories. Maybe there was a way to change his perception of the past. Then there wouldn't be any dishonor in lying.

Through the densifying haze of his vision, Danny saw Glenn's eyes. They were focused on him. Unnervingly focused. Glenn got up and walked over to Danny. Sal was still talking. He didn't seem to mind a mobile audience.

"Not my business, I know," said Glenn, "but that's a lot of beers in not a lot of time."

Sal was still talking in the background. Danny nodded his

agreement.

Glenn patted Danny's shoulder like he was afraid it might break.

"Just to say, we'll be here all night, you know?"

The pain that swept through Danny's gut gave no warning. It stabbed at his stomach, puckered his asshole. Sweat erupted on his forehead. He sprang to his feet, and his chair toppled backward. It smacked the floor—*Bang!* Glen started to ask what was wrong, but Danny was already waddling to the door where he'd come in, only to realize he didn't know where the bathroom was.

He stopped in the middle of the room, holding everything tight, afraid if he opened his mouth for directions, he would fall to pieces.

Tina, Sal, and Glenn looked at each other. They all thought he was going to vomit.

Tina said, "Go ahead, baby. It's alright."

Danny collapsed to his knees. Release. The heat of it running down his hamstrings, spreading across his skin and soaking his jeans. He could hardly believe the stench.

"Stay back," he said.

And then a new memory, a clear one, struck him in the middle of the forehead like a sniper shot. He'd said the same thing, or tried to, when he felt the hands of his comrades on him, lying in the wreckage of the chemical toilet, cut and broken and dying. What if another mortar fell? What if people died because he'd lingered after a satisfying shit?

They ignored him of course. They lifted him up, uncaring about the smells and the stains his blood put on their clothes. They carried him for hundreds of meters to the helipad. They

reassured him the whole way.

You're not going to die. We won't let you.

They hoisted him into the chopper and strapped him down and told him they'd see him soon. They squeezed his good hand.

He remembered all this for the first time, sitting there in his own filth. And then he was levitating again, as Sal and Glenn hoisted him to his feet. They guided him toward the bathroom.

"Thanks," said Danny.

They agreed it was no trouble at all. Danny had his arms around both of them, and he thought that Glenn was sturdier than he seemed, and that Sal had a more tender touch than he'd expected.

Tina waited until they'd gone out of the bar room before she pulled another pint for Danny. She set it in front of the chair next to Sal's seat. She figured that's where he'd be sitting when they returned.

New Poetry by Joshua Folmar: "Sudoku"

New Poem by Joshua Folmar: Sudoku

New Poetry by J.S. Alexander: “Sabat”

New Poem by J.S. Alexander: “Sabat (Loyalty)”

New Review by Michael Gruber: “The Myth of the Clean Air War”



A review of Kimberly K. Dougherty's *Airpower in Literature: Interrogating the Clean War, 1915-2015*

One of war's most pernicious myths is that new technology will not only hasten its outcome but lessen its brutality. Paul Fussell describes this delusion in the first pages of his text *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War*, where he recounts American propaganda images from the 1940s showing “the newly invented jeep, an elegant, slim-barreled 37mm gun in tow, leaping over a hillock.” Such “agility and delicacy,” Fussell contends, conveyed the impression that “quickness, dexterity, and style, a certain skill in feinting and dodging, would suffice to defeat pure force” (1). Subsequently, as World War II began, “everyone hoped, and many believed, that the war would be fast-moving, mechanized, remote-controlled, and perhaps even rather easy” (1). The muck, grime, and hellish attrition of Guadalcanal, Okinawa, Iwo Jima, the Hurtgen Forest, and Anzio testify to the contrary.

This myth is not merely restricted to land. Although the airplane has been deployed since the Great War, the enduring fable is that technology has advanced to such a degree that new airframes, because of their sophistication and speed and precision, will end wars quickly, cleanly, and with minimal loss. Such conceits show surprising longevity, being as old as the military use of the airplane itself, and have massive implications for aircrews, the bombed, and especially our beliefs about how modern wars are fought. In her text *Airpower in Literature: Interrogating the Clean War, 1915-2015*, Kimberly K. Dougherty takes these beliefs to task. Her central aim is to contrast these beliefs with various portrayals of the so-called "clean air war" in war literature. In doing so, she puts forward a compelling argument that airpower is an enterprise that is not only slow, messy, and deadly, but has even greater unseen costs, and is spoken about in such ways that the true price of its deployment remains always cloaked in euphemism.

Ironically, Dougherty's "interrogation" is effective for its precision. She makes many keen observations about these unseen costs, noting that during war, for example, the bodies of air crews are often "hidden" from view by virtue of their manner of death, being incinerated or blown out of the sky, rendering their remains unrecoverable. Sometimes, these same air crews are presented as "becoming one" with their aircraft, such that what flies are not aviators but a kind of Frankenstein's monster that is half man, half machine. Another insight is that in the numerical tally of an air war's casualties, it is the number of aircraft shot down that seem to be given primacy over human casualties. She notes the long history of airpower's description by military planners and strategists as being "above" the earth, in the domain of the sky, giving it a kind of omnipresence, and where it also gains omniscience, as aircraft can purportedly observe battlefields in ways unavailable to the mere mortals constrained to the ground. All these mythologies, says Dougherty, conspire together to

present aerial warfare as “clean,” powerful, godlike, and unencumbered by the grotesque violence and terrain of traditional warfare.

Dougherty also makes much of “discursive distancing,” which originally refers to a kind of Foucauldian rhetorical analysis that assesses how subjects are allegedly dissociated from hegemonic social systems through discourse, despite ostensibly being benefactors of those same systems. Basically, her point is that the discourse surrounding the use of airpower contributes to its reckless mismanagement. Key to her exploration are two texts, Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* and Tim O’Brien’s *Going After Cacciato*, which both provide “stunning portraits” of helicopters, “the machine perhaps most associated with the Vietnam War” (145). She notes that the helicopter enjoyed special intimacy with the troops they ferried, being close to the ground and slow, and as such “this intimacy, perhaps, makes it all the more important to separate human from machine, as the borderlines becoming increasingly blurred” (145), and as such they merit a special kind of profile about how the rhetoric of airpower contributes to its inevitable misuse.

But it is Dougherty’s concern over this melding together of man and machine that is, in my opinion, the apex of the book, as it leads her to surmise that the rhetoric surrounding the deployment of airpower lends itself to certain beliefs about technology and its use in war. As Dougherty so capably demonstrates, the infatuation with “clean” airpower is naturally sourced in its innovativeness. The trajectory of this infatuation is an alleged “technological war prosecuted solely by machines, with no threat to one’s own population” (145), where the human cost of war will have been supposedly entirely eliminated. This reflection becomes especially prescient when one considers the ongoing war in Ukraine, or the 2021 war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, where the use of lethal drones have been notably effective. Additionally, so-

called "drone swarms," theoretically composed of thousands of remotely controlled unmanned aerial vehicles, so designed to overwhelm enemy air defenses, have gained currency in the thought of future military planners, both in the West and with our foreign adversaries. While it is not hard to see how Dougherty's bone-chilling vision will manifest, given recent evidence, it is also not hard to see how her description of "clean" airpower's trajectory—that is, its culmination into a supposedly bloodless "technological war," fought primarily with machines—will be anything but another fable in the sprawling compendium of historical fables that have always surrounded how "the next war" will be fought. Propaganda will continue to assert the next war's supposed "cleanliness," highlighting how new technological innovations eliminate the need for the pointless suffering of those archaic and barbaric wars of decades past, only for the "on-the-ground" reality to offer different evidence—that is, the evidence of tens of thousands of mangled corpses of 18, 19, and 20 year-old kids.

All being said, a natural rejoinder to this—which I admittedly found myself asking as I read this text—is "so what?" Is Dougherty's counterargument really that we should not substitute machine for man, given the capability? Or that Dresden or Tokyo should not have been bombed because the Allies unfairly privileged the lives of its own service members over unarmed civilians? Should a future defensive war fought by the United States not privilege its own service members over the unarmed civilians of belligerents, given such a tragic choice? It seems ludicrous to demand that wars only be fought by one side unilaterally leveraging itself into a potential disadvantage. The Second World War in particular was an existential struggle between mutually exclusive and competing visions for the world, the role of the state, societal organization, and how natural resources should be utilized to serve those ends. It's not hard to see how Dougherty's musings feel like a luxury good given this environment.

But I suspect such a rejoinder misses the point. Dougherty's point isn't to say such things are right or wrong merely—it's that wars are fought with elaborately constructed mythologies about the use of technology (such as airpower), and that military planners and service-members alike not only believe these mythologies, but sometimes even believe them despite knowing they are myths. The cost of believing in such myths is unimaginable brutality and the loss of life to millions of people, as various truths are obscured or unable to be recognized because of the political nature of the war. The geopolitical environment of the Second World War, for example, not only made realities like the humanity of the enemy impossible to recognize, but exaggerated their costs and contributed to immense suffering both among the bombed and the bombers. Such calamity is worth recognizing.

On the more pedantic side, I sometimes found Dougherty's emphases and language distracting, if anything because she too strongly relies on the kind of intersectional analysis and related academic jargon that dominates contemporary humanities publications. In one section, she also provides a summary of the causes contributing to the Spanish Civil War that are laughably uncritical and overly generous to the Republicans and the Popular Front, which made me suspicious of her framing of other historical events. But these are rather nitpicky when her broader contributions are taken into consideration. Dougherty has ultimately produced a razor-sharp text that attacks the fictions we all too easily attach to the role of technology in warfare. In uncovering beliefs about airpower's "cleanliness," she has produced something worth celebrating.

New Poetry by Jennifer Smith: “So This is My Career?”

New Poem by Jennifer Smith: “So This is My Career”

New Fiction from Lucas Randolph: “Boys Play Dress Up”



When visiting

a friend's grandpa, the Boy learned that the grandpa liked watching football games on the weekends instead of the black and white western movies. His favorite football team was the Kansas City Chiefs. Their team colors were—red, white, and yellow. Some of the fans had feathers on their head and they chanted and made a chopping motion with one of their hands when the game started. Sometimes a man who was dressed up in a pretend costume would beat on a giant drum. The grandpa said it was tradition and traditions were good. The Boy asked the friend's grandpa if he ever watched western movies, but he said those were all fake and weren't worth the copper they were printed on. That's why he liked watching football. Real men. Real blood. Real consequences.

None of that fake cowboy horseshit.

Sometimes, though, if it was late at night, the friend's grandpa said he liked to watch military documentaries, but

only if everyone was already asleep. The Boy didn't ask why. The grandpa had an American flag that hung from the front porch of his house—red, white, and blue. The Boy's own grandpa didn't have one. Neither did the Boy's father.

Were you in the War too?

No, my parents wanted me to go to college. The same college my daddy went too. In fact, we even played ball for the same team. That's my old jersey there.

The friend's grandpa pointed to the wall. Two framed black and white photos with wooden frames that bent and curved all fancy like hung next to each other. The Boy knew one photo was older because it had a football team where they all had leather helmets on, and the image was faded. There was also a framed football jersey on the wall with the same last name that his friend had with stitched together letters on the back of it. The team colors were—green, gold, and black.

I almost volunteered for the military. I wanted too—hell, they almost got me in the draft! Maybe I wish they would have. Just wasn't in the playbook, I guess. Your grandfather was in the service? World War II?

Yes sir. Well—no, he fought in Korea. My dad too. Air force. He didn't fight in any War, though.

That's okay son, you should be damn proud. We all have our role to play. That's what my old man used to say.

I'm going to join too—when I'm old enough, anyway.

The grandpa smiled and put a hand on the Boy's shoulder.

That's a good boy.

The grandpa reached over and grabbed an old football that sat on a wooden mantle with some sports memorabilia underneath the old photos and the jersey. He held it in front of the Boy's

face close enough for him to smell the aged pigskin leather, letting his eyes wander over the scars from the field of battle. When the Boy's hands moved to touch the football, the grandpa reached back in an old-school football pose like the quarterback does and threw the ball across the room to his grandson who caught it above his head with both hands.

Nice one! Just like your old man!

He lost

his favorite coffee mug. The Old Man poured dark roast into a short glass mason jar mixing it with the golden liquid already left waiting at the bottom. It wasn't meant for hot liquids and the Old Man reached for a red trimmed potholder with a green and yellow wildflower pattern to hold it with. He sat down into his favorite corduroy rocking chair, one hand against his lower back for support. He smiled with the jar between his legs letting the glass cool, the steam from the roasted beans rising to his nose. Smells of earth and sweet honey warmed the room. The sting of diesel was nearly absent.

Please, just one-story Grandpa. I promise I won't ask for more. Please—

Well shit, you're old enough by now. I promised your dad I wouldn't, but hell in my day you could drive a tractor at ten, and you're nearly that. It can be our little secret. What do you want to know?

About the War, about—Korea. Like, what kind of gun did you use?

A few, but mostly the ole Browning M1919. I bet you don't even know what that is, do you?

The Boy shook his head no.

It's a light machine gun. L.M.G. It took two of us to shoot and two more to carry everything. It was a real son-of-a-bitch to get around.

Did you have to shoot it a lot?

I never shot it once, to tell you the truth, not at anyone anyway. See, I just fed the ammo to keep it firing. Do you know what that means, to feed the ammo?

The Old Man didn't wait for the Boy to answer.

I was what they called an assistant gunner. Corporal did all of the shooting and stuff for us. He liked that kind of thing.

The Old Man grabbed the hot mason jar from between his legs and took a long drag of his coffee. The rounded glass edge burned against the crease of his lips, but he drank it anyway. He remembered the Corporal well. They grew matching mustaches; they all did. The lieutenant dubbed them his "Mustache Maniacs," which later got shortened to just "M&M's." It was a real hoot with the men. The Old Man shaved it shortly before returning home. He felt stupid with it by himself. It didn't feel right without Corporal Lopez and the rest. He wouldn't tell that story today, though.

They didn't deserve it, the people. Not too different from us you know—some of the best God-damned people I've ever met, actually. They fought side by side with us. Those Koreans, real God-damn patriots. We suffered together; I remember how hungry they were. How hungry we were—and cold, for shit's sake was it cold. Colder than a well digger's ass, if you ask me. You have to understand, it's a different kind of cold they have there in Korea. It's all any of us thought about most of the time. We weren't ready for any of it. It was a terrible War.

Why were you fighting then Grandpa? If they weren't bad?

It wasn't them we were fighting; it was those god-damned Reds! You see, retreat was never part of the plan, hell, War was never part of the plan—we just killed that other bastard five years earlier! You have to imagine, when they first came over them mountain tops, millions of 'em, I swear to God, the God-damned ground disappeared. I don't know if they shot back, or hell, if they even had guns. Corporal [REDACTED] just kept firing. There was so much smoke you couldn't see more than a few feet in front of you. I loaded until my hands charred like wood. We could hear them breathing they was so close. A wave of glowing lead to the left. A wave of glowing lead to the right.

The Old Man's arms followed waves of bullets from one side of his body to the other in a repeating pattern. The aged wood from underneath his corduroy rocking chair snapped with the weight of his story. Liquid from the mason jar in one of his hands splashed over the rim.

The Boy breathed hard, too afraid to look away.

We screamed for the runners to bring more ammo; I don't remember when they stopped coming. The Reds didn't. They never stopped. When they were right God-damned on top of us, Corporal [REDACTED] handed me his pistol, a Colt 1911. Just a small little thing. He picked up that son-of-a-bitch Browning with his bare hands and we fired until we both had nothing left. And then, we ran. We all ran. Everyone did. And we kept running. When the order finally came to stand fast; we already made it to the God-damned ocean.

The Old Man drank from his mason jar again, the amber glow of liquid not able to hide behind his lost porcelain coffee mug. He nearly spit it out when he started laughing from somewhere deep down in his belly. He had to use his free hand to cover the top of the jar to keep the liquid from spilling everywhere.

You know, when we finally did stop, there were these two supply crates, just sitting there waiting for us. One had ammo, one had food. We hadn't had a single round of ammunition to fire in over a week and no one had eaten in at least double that amount of time, probably longer. But wouldn't you God-damn believe it, I was the only shit-stick dumb enough to go for the ammo first. I was more scared of those god-damned Reds than I was of starving to death. Go for the ammo first, that's what Corporal ██████ would have done, so that's what I did. He always knew what to do.

Invitation to a Gunfighter, starring Yul Brynner and George Segal, played at a low volume in the background on a black and white television screen. The film ends after the hero takes a shotgun blast to the chest and one bullet through the stomach. The hero manages to jump from his horse in a dramatic roll before single-handedly disarming the bad guys in one swift motion. An entire town watches from the side. The hero then spends the next two minutes and thirty-four seconds forcing the bad guys to apologize in front of all the town's folk for their crimes against their own neighbors. Eventually, the hero succumbs to the injuries and the people carry him away on their shoulders. The Old Man and the Boy sat in silence until the credits finished and the screen turned to black.

The Boy wasn't sure what was meant to be funny about the ending to his grandpa's story. He waited for the rest of the story to finish, but it never came.

The Sheriff

first met the Boy when he was still just a boy. The Sheriff took the Old Man away but said he could come back home once he was feeling better. The Old Man said it was the bitch's fault. The Sheriff also gave the Boy a pack of Colorado Rocky

baseball trading cards and a golden sheriff's sticker that he could put on the outside of his shirt. The Boy wore it to school the next Monday and everybody wanted to know where he got it from but he told them it was a secret.

New Nonfiction from MaxieJane Frazier: "A Military Liberal Education"



The scored green vinyl seat inside an Air Force Bluebird bus at the base of the "Bring Me Men" ramp at the U.S. Air Force Academy was slippery under my jeans. On this 1987 June afternoon, I was wearing my acid-washed Levis and the shortest haircut I'd ever had. The Naugahyde stink of the seats with the warm, nervous bodies made my already churning stomach a witch's brew. In some ways, these nerves felt like they were happening to someone else. I was a distant observer of a movie scene where military recruits were about to enter basic training. I felt my damp hands opening and closing as if forcing my body to move would prove to me that I was still myself.

To my right, I saw the glass and metal dormitory windows of Vandenberg Hall blindly reflecting the sun. A line of tables with boxes set up on the open concrete pad beneath the windows stood between us and cadets fiddling with folders. They were wearing green fatigue pants and tight white t-shirts with dark blue cuffs, their last names and USAFA screened onto the left-hand side of their chests. The ones near the bus folded their arms and their tight faces under their molded blue berets

showed nothing. Not one person on the bus with me said a word under the idling rumble of the diesel engine.

The whoosh of opening doors made me whip my head forward. A muscular demon of spit and sound boarded the bus yelling "Basics, I am Cadet First Class ..." but I wasn't hearing the details, only coming back into my body and noticing that every muscle there was vibrating. *It's starting.* A smile played around my quivering lips: nerves coming to the surface, that ingrained response to please that would become the bane of my existence. He growled "...if you have any doubts about this, *whatsoever*, do NOT get off this bus." When I stood, gripping my small bag with my pre-purchased and broken-in combat boots and my underclothes, a guy a few rows back from me stayed seated.

Under screams of "Go! Go! Go" we hustled off the bus and over to the tables where other cadets handed us cards on strings to wear around our necks. With a checklist to complete, we snaked off in a single-file line through medical stations, unwittingly signing up for a life-time membership with the Association of Graduates, taking armloads of issued uniforms. We all received haircuts even if our hair was already cut; men were shaved bald and women had to have hair above their collars and less than one-inch thick. I misread that fact as less than an inch *long*, arriving with woefully short hair they still cut. We looped up and down hallways and through rooms that would become familiar in the coming years but were a blur without meaning on this first day.

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Thirteen years after I trailed in my brother's footsteps through a yellow jacket's nest outside our Oregon childhood home, I followed in his same footsteps to the U.S. Air Force Academy. The movie *Top Gun* was one year old by the time I stepped off the Bluebird bus, but my brother and his freshmen-year roommate visited our home the previous summer just as the

movie came out, radiating that same cocky confidence that made the characters in that movie so enviable. I wanted that power, too, so I pursued their confidence all the way to the Air Force Academy. I didn't notice that Kelly McGillis's Charlie in *Top Gun*, was a civilian. That she never flew a plane or wore a uniform or served much purpose beyond being arm candy for Maverick. I just continued to believe that I could do anything my brother could do.

My beginning on this journey into the military was as an annoying little sister. I tried almost everything he did. And if trying the same stunts hurt me, I had to make sure he didn't see me cry. In fact, I just *didn't* cry by the time I was a teenager. I was his groupie, his cult follower, his worshiper. I learned that hiding my weakness was a badge of honor. That skill, at least, was great preparation for the Air Force Academy.

On the day I arrived at that steel and glass fortress for Basic Cadet Training, BCT or Beast, my brother was nowhere around. The large painted footsteps that taught basic cadets to stand in formation might as well have been made in his image. Somehow, I knew that this military college was small and that any failure on my part would be passed on to him. I'm sure I was feeling all of the emotions people around me were feeling: fear, anxiety, inadequacy, probably not in that order. I pushed them down so hard that I can't remember them.

Faking my way through the physical demands of Beast wasn't an option. My bravado was an act, and I wasn't sure about my ability to follow through in reality. Up to this point in my life, I set goals and I achieved them. Straight A's in high school? Bam. A four-year scholarship to Washington State University? Done. And that high school senior spring break, after visiting Cameron at his college, I decided I would apply there as well. Too late to be accepted to the Air Force Academy immediately after high school graduation, I took the scholarship to Washington State University for a year. When I

applied to the Academy, I think I was expecting someone to finally tell me no. But they said yes.

Who leaves a nearly free ride at a state party school for a strict military college with payment in kind for military service when I finished? Apparently this girl.

The Bluebird bus was hours ago, now. At some point, after we dumped our pile of issued uniforms into our basic squadron dorm rooms and came out dressed in polyester tight shorts and white t-shirts with our last names scrawled in felt pen over the USAFA, I stood at attention studying *CONTRAILS*, the small book of knowledge we had to carry and memorize. An upperclass cadet woman leaned in and asked, "Do you have a brother?"

A smile ghosted my features as I said, "Yes, ma'am," one of seven basic responses I was allowed to give.

"Wipe that smile off your face, Basic," she hissed. "What do you think this is, a tea party?"

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The next morning, the first real morning of Beast, bleary from a lack of sleep, I stumbled out into the brisk Colorado dawn making rows and columns with my peers, my arms locked at my sides, my feet in military-issue running shoes, splayed out duck fashion in my attempt to be at the position of attention. My hair was so short, the chilly, soft breeze didn't lift it. Cadets only two years ahead of us, but every bit adults in our eyes, were yelling instructions. As a group, we learned the basics of marching the afternoon we arrived. I was a member of the award-winning Montesano High School marching band. I wasn't worried about that part.

But almost everything else worried me. My alternately grinning and serious face gave no clear clues to my interior turmoil while my head spun with self-doubt. Could I make it through the physical training? Cameron joined me on a joint run and

doing some push ups only a few days before I boarded a flight away from home for this challenge.

“You’re not going to make it,” he said with frank eye contact and raised eyebrows.

Now as I faced the test of the first morning, I could feel the pre-breakfast acid trickling through my stomach. Punch drunk on minimal sleep, terrified someone would see I didn’t belong, I clenched my hands to avoid shaking in the fresh, scentless air.

Even though we kept our eyes “caged” without looking around us, marching band taught me to sense my neighbor’s state of mind by the smallest of body movements. Every last one of us, even the cadet cadre training us, was exhausted by the “oh-dark-thirty” fire alarm that sent us all stumbling out of the dorms and waiting across the street.

Hunched against the night air, the gaggle of brand new recruits looked like hundreds of mental patients in our pale blue Air Force-issued pajamas, velvety dark blue robes, and slippers. Upperclass cadre wore civilian pajamas and did their best to herd us into accountability. I, for one, wondered if the sense-splitting shriek of the fire alarms was the usual wake up call. They took away our watches and, for all we knew, it was time to get up. I knew so little about this training, and what I did know had an air of the ridiculous. We never found out if that first night’s alarm was a prank or a real alert, but we never woke up in Beast that way again. After what felt like an hour, we returned to our rooms to sleep until reveille. I’m sure I wasn’t the only one who waited in bed, plank stiff and staring at the ceiling, ready for the real wake up that would kick off the six grueling weeks of training.

There were about 120 of us in my Basic Cadet Training Squadron, almost 1400 new freshmen in total spread evenly over

ten squadrons. The Basic squadrons were named by letters and each combined four groups of freshmen divided into flights. I didn't realize, at first, that the people in my flight would be in my numbered squadron in the school year.

For morning runs, they sized us shortest to tallest to make sure the people with the shortest legs, mostly women, were setting the pace. I was surrounded by other C Squadron "Cobras" of the third Basic Cadet Squadron when we received the order to "forward march." As we stepped off into the chill air, I wondered for the first time why that order, when the commander shouted it, sounded like, "Forward, HARCH!" In another few steps we heard the call, "Forward at the double time...HARCH!" In that pause before and during the final sharp directive we growled like animals showing our enthusiasm for the physical effort awaiting us.

We scuffed off across the pebbled-concrete Terrazzo, a square which connected the buildings of the campus. If I could have been a falcon, the school mascot, that morning, flying at 10,000 feet, I would have seen the 10 basic cadet squadrons filling one side of the concrete, jogging beside Vandenberg Hall toward a massive ramp burnished with the metal words "Bring me Men" on the back side, just where we were dropped off by Bluebird buses the day before.

So far, our movement was flat or downhill. I could make it.

I learned that the Academy clusters in the foothills of the Rampart Range at an altitude of 7,258 feet above sea level... "far, far above that of West Point or Annapolis" we learned to say. Signs in the sports complex warned rival teams "The Air is Rare." Viewed from the air, USAFA is unique with its sharp angles, shining metal, and glittering glass. The architect intended a wholly modern space to represent this new military branch.

The massive rectangular space was lined with Terrazzo-pebbled

concrete and marble strips with a grass square east of the chapel and between the dorms. From a falcon's height, the old fighter planes punctuating each corner of the grass became tiny models and the corner closest to the dining hall was a hill with the patently unbelievable myth that it covered the bones of the earliest cadets. Between that hill and Fairchild Hall, was the Air Gardens, with hatched terrazzo-style paths slicing the grass. Perfect, architect-model Honey Locust trees representing each graduate who died in the Vietnam War led our eyes to the Eagle and Fledglings statue facing the dining facility, Mitchell Hall, instructing on its brown marble front: "Man's flight through life is sustained by the power of his knowledge."

When I felt the slope of the ramp dropping away under my feet that were slapping in time to our cadre's rhythmic call "Left, left, left-right-left," I heard a tall blond leader wail out the notes in cadence "C-130 rollin' down the strip," and I became part of a machine answering this call and response: "C-130 rollin' down the strip!" My breath was taken away in the enthusiasm of the music of this military jody—the song forming some military complaint that was to take our minds off the running and keep us breathing. As I began gasping in the effort to sing and jog, even downhill, I was swept up in the camaraderie and sheer military-ness of the moment. I was doing it.

"Airborne Daddy gonna take a little trip."

"AIRBORNE DADDY GONNA TAKE A LITTLE TRIP!" our hundred-plus voices already knew that we needed to drown out the other 9 squadrons singing different jodys around us.

Later our required, rote freshman knowledge informed us that each of the USAFA building names belonged to a man famous in making the Air Force a distinct branch of the military or for his honorable and heroic service. In fact, my basic cadet summer marked the first year a woman showed up in our required

memorization, even if there were still no massive structures honoring women's achievement. This 1987 summer, only seven years after the first women graduated, we were supposed to memorize a quote by Amelia Earhart from our small *Contrails* book of information Air Force doolies carried on our person at all times. We memorized the book from cover to cover by the time the year was over. Back then, I didn't bother to learn what Earhart said, already trying to inhabit these guys' values: to devalue women who I was already seeing as "other." I wouldn't find any value in the wisdom that pioneering woman was meant to impart to us. What could a woman teach me?

During that freshman year when a faceless upperclassman yelled, "Give me Earhart's quote," we recited in a high-pitched wail, "Sir, Amelia Earhart's quote is as follows: *I was lost when I wrote this.*" We were ridiculing a groundbreaking aviator's disappearance. I recently rediscovered the intended words, and learned that Earhart, who was also a poet, wrote: "Courage is the price that life exacts for granting peace." Perhaps the eloquent, thoughtful words were too sophisticated for the juveniles meant to know them. If only I had memorized her words, held onto them as a form of rebellion instead of conforming to the older cadets' blind misogyny. I wish I had known who I would become instead of trying to be like everyone else, mostly men.

We trotted down the Bring Me Men ramp and then across the short leg of the road north of Fairchild Hall. Straight and farther down another ramp, we leveled out on the Cadet Parade Field, soon to be named Stillman Field for the male first Commandant of Cadets. In the third of 10 squadrons, I ran in the squishy tracks of the columns in front of me, and they reeked like an overflowing toilet underfoot. Across from the bleachers, we formed up into position so that all 10 squadrons faced the empty seats. The leaders gave us an order that spaced us out for calisthenics, and we went through the paces of jumping jacks and stretches before finding ourselves prone

in the mud doing leg lifts and pushups. So far, so good. I could do all the physical work. I felt my confidence boosted. Later, we learned that the stench was from the non-potable water used to water the grass, cold and leaching through our clothes. The stains never came out of our white t-shirts.

When we finished a series of body-weight exercises, we formed up for the run back up to the Terrazzo. We circled the parade field once and headed up the ramps.

That first morning, I kept right in step, laboring under the absence of oxygen at this altitude but relieved to discover I was up to the task. On other mornings, those short people up front proved that having shorter legs didn't mean they weren't fast. Sometimes sprinkler saturated ground meant the mud sucked at our shoes and hindered our strides. Probably about the second week of training, our leader growled and turned us away from the ramp after the first lap. Soon I didn't always keep up with the formation. I also didn't always drop out, but some mornings I just couldn't get enough air.

Others dropped out of some runs, too, but I had no energy to notice their struggles. My ability to finish with the group, or not finish with them, still seems random to me. Some mornings I could keep up with the formation. Other times I was left gasping with my hands on my knees. Any time I dropped out of a run because I couldn't breathe, I found that, once I caught my breath, I could run at the same pace as the squadron behind them. I could keep running at the squadron's pace until we arrived back at the dorms at the top of the hills. This last trick infuriated the unfortunate cadre member staying back with me who hissed, "If you can run this fast now, Torrens, why can't you make it with your classmates?"

"Sir, I do not know." One of the seven basic responses I was allowed to give. And I was telling the truth.

New Fiction by Rachel Ramirez: “The Witness”



I am in the grand room of the High Commissioner’s Residence in Manila. A crystal chandelier hangs from the ceiling, intact. Not even one crystal looks to be missing. The building itself didn’t escape the war. I saw the damage as the car approached. The right wing must have been bombed. Blackened walls. Blown out windows. The building lost its symmetry. But this room looks untouched. It still has its high ceiling, its big windows, its fancy chandelier. How can this be when my own home was burnt to the ground? Now I live with my wife and children in a makeshift dwelling built on its ashes.

Captain Pace calls me to the stand.

The room is wall-to-wall with Americans, soldiers in tan uniforms. An audience of white faces is staring, quiet, except for the odd cough, the clearing of a throat. They are waiting for me to speak into the microphone. Sitting at a long wooden table, facing the audience, are five men—the Commission. I am close enough to see their sunburnt foreheads. One of them has his head propped up on his hand like he’s bored. Maybe he’s just not used to the heat. To my right, a dark-haired woman sits at a small desk. Behind me, a large map of the country is pinned up onto a board. There is a stenographer, his hands curled into position.

I do plan to tell them the truth about that day. At least most of it. Some details are too

horrid to repeat. I see those details most nights, wake up sweating, sometimes screaming. Belen, her body turned away from me, pretends to be asleep. In my ears, there is still a constant hum. And during the day, the details drift into my mind like dark clouds.

I see them now, the pair in black uniforms, sitting opposite me at the end of the room.

The Accused, they call them. I find myself looking away from them, looking down at my shoes. My shoes match my borrowed Americano and tie. The Americans dressed me for the occasion, in a suit too big for me. It's like my body inside it has deflated. I want to leave this place. I want to run out the door. But each door is guarded by a soldier. Each soldier wears a hard white hat and stands with their hands behind their back. I wipe my wet palms on the sides of my trousers. I straighten my tie.

Captain Pace also stands with his hands behind his back, his pelvis leaning forward.

"Give me your name, please."

"Dr. Fernando Reyes."

"Where do you live, Dr. Reyes?"

"Bauan, Batangas."

I almost don't recognise my own small voice. I hear the captain's thick accent and wonder where in America he is from. I wonder if he was something else before all this. He has the look of a school principal, like my father. He is tall, taller than me, and older. There is grey mixed in with his straw coloured hair. He has kind eyes, perhaps deceptively so. His eyes are the brightest blue I've ever seen. I'll try my best to answer each of the questions, I tell him, without the need of the translator.

I begin. "On February 28, 1945, while we were having our breakfast..."

I heard the town crier on the street outside the house. He was telling everyone—men, women, children—to gather at the church. There had been many meetings like this. Some of them held in the Plaza, hours spent standing beneath the scorching sun. At least, I told Belen, we'll be in the church, out of the heat. Belen wanted to bring baby Dedeth with us—our youngest. In the end, we left her behind with the maid. It'll be easier without her, I told her, and hopefully we won't be long. We headed out without finishing our breakfast, three children in tow, all dressed in church clothes. Miguel, our eldest, had recently had a growth spurt. He was proudly wearing my old linen trousers.

"We went to Bauan Church around 9:30 in the morning," I say slowly into the microphone.

It wasn't long after we got to the church that the women and children were told to leave. They were being sent to the Elementary School. Before she left, my wife bowed at the Holy Cross and blessed herself, just as she always did. Then she held my hand and squeezed it. She took two of the children with her. Miguel, passing for a young man in my trousers, stayed with me at the church.

We sat in the pews, eight in each pew, and waited. It was strange to see even the priests sitting amongst us. Then the Japanese soldiers told us to stand so they could search us. One soldier padded me down, looked through my pockets. In my back pocket, he found money, Mickey Mouse money we called it, neatly folded. He told me to take off my watch, my wedding ring. He took it all. He searched my son too. Miguel looked worried although I knew he had nothing on him. Then the soldiers told us to sit again and wait. As we sat there, I looked around at the people in the

church. I knew most of them—neighbours, friends, patients. I could hear my son's stomach growling. He told me he wanted to go home. He told me he wanted his mother. I put my arm around his shoulders to comfort him.

Then we were sent out in two groups. We were in the second group. They told us we were going home but led us about 300 yards away, to Sebastian Buendia's house. I knew the house well, had admired it for years, the finest house in the town, beautifully made. Mr. Buendia, I knew, had left years ago for Mindoro, just after the Japanese had invaded. People said he was afraid they would think he was an American sympathizer. He did a lot of business with the Americans. In the good days, before the war, I'd visit Mr. Buendia's house with my wife, to attend his lavish parties. I'd admired the tastefulness of his home's interior, the dark wood furniture. My wife tried to decorate our own modest home after his. It cost me a fortune, only to have much of it taken away, bit by bit, by the Japanese. By the end our house was like an empty shell.

Mr. Buendia's house had also been emptied. Most of what I'd admired, all but the hardwood floors, had been removed. There was a Japanese sentry standing outside the door where Mr. Buendia would have stood to greet his guests. He'd be holding a cigar in one hand, his other hand resting on his big belly.

We were told to walk through two doors, down to the basement of the house, where there was already a group of men. We were ushered into the space by soldiers armed with rifles, gesturing with their pointy bayonets. It was dark inside the space. We were packed inside like sardines. I was glad for the dark—at least my son wouldn't see my fear. I was truly afraid then. The windows were shut. The doors were locked. There was no way to flee.

I could hear shouting upstairs. They were shouting words I didn't understand. I held

my son close to me, up against my chest. He nestled his head into the nape of my neck like he used to do as a child. I could feel his heat and a heart beating, not sure if it was his or mine.

The familiar bells of Bauan Church rang out at noon, followed by a sizzling sound.

Then, an explosion. It must have knocked me out. When I opened my eyes, I was on the ground. I heard people—grown men—calling out for their mothers. Miguel was no longer in my arms. I desperately crawled around looking for him. Then, another explosion. A splash of flesh. I was half naked, my ears ringing, hell all around. Bodies tangled in shards of floor. None of them my son's. I shouted out his name. I couldn't hear my own voice. I froze when I saw the soldiers. One of them was pouring kerosene. Another was bayoneting bodies on the ground. I panicked. I saw a gap where there once was a wall. I crawled to it. Then I ran. I didn't stop until I got to the bomb shelter. There were people inside the shelter already dead, covered in blood. I called out my son's name. I cried out. I was shaking, ashamed, too much of a coward to go back for him.

"Did you help the guerrillas?" Captain Pace asks. His question takes me by surprise. I

feel my heart quicken. I try to stall. I thought of the houses I visited in the dead of night, outside the town, the injured men I treated. I couldn't just let them die. Belen said it was the Christian thing to do. I was a doctor after all. I cleaned and dressed their wounds. I removed bullets, bits of metal from their flesh. I didn't ask how they got them.

"There are no guerrillas in Bauan."

"Just answer the question, Dr. Reyes. Did you help them?"

I take a deep breath, "No, Sir, I did not." I look away from his piercing blue eyes. A

lie and an omission. I don't tell them about my son.

“Did you go back to Mr. Buendia’s house later on?”

“Yes, Sir...on March 28. I was appointed by the Colonel to bury the dead.”

The Colonel sent me along with the mayor, the policemen and labourers. He told us to gather the bodies and bury them. It was like God, disguised as an American colonel, was punishing me for leaving Miguel behind.

We found bodies on the roads, outside houses, in buildings, in the shelters, on the outskirts of town. We carried them in ox-drawn carts. We wheeled them to a mass grave—a large hole the labourers dug at the back of the local cemetery. We buried them there. No funeral. No priests. Most bodies already blackened. We wore handkerchiefs on our faces to cover our noses and mouths. We still got sick, most of us vomiting from the sight and the smell.

“How many dead persons did you find?”

“I think 250.”

“Can you give me their names?”

I list the names I can remember. I start with the priests. Then I begin to name the civilians. Pablo Castillo. Jorge Magboo. Jose Brual. Aldo Delgado. We found Lolo Aldo in his chicken shed. Nothing left of the chickens but stray feathers. We found Lolo Aldo’s white-haired head on the ground a few feet from his body.

Belen told me that she waited for hours at the school with the other women and children. She said some of them ran outside when they heard the explosions. She stayed in the school, hid with the children under a teacher’s desk. She said she eventually heard planes flying above. She thinks the planes

saved them—the Japanese soldiers fled. She found bodies in the playground—the women and children who tried to run. There were more bodies in the streets. The streets were filled with smoke. She walked by the church—burning but still standing, its tower untouched. She said when she reached home, our house was on fire. Just inside the gate, she found our maid. Beneath the maid, she found our baby girl. Both bodies were covered in blood. I didn't tell Belen what I heard—the Japanese soldiers threw babies up in the air, catching them as they fell, on the tips of their bayonets.

Captain Pace interrupts me before I can finish my list. “That is enough Doctor.”

I watched the labourers dig out the bodies from Mr. Buendia's house. I almost couldn't bear it. But I forced myself. I sifted through the remains. I never found my son. Belen said I should have died that day along with him. If only Captain Pace was armed, I'd lunge forward and grab his gun. I'd shoot myself here in front of everyone.

“We have no further questions.”

New Nonfiction: Review of Christopher Lyke's “The Chicago East India Company”



Gravitational lensing – as half-remembered from an article I read years ago, as confirmed courtesy of a recent Wikipedia dive – takes advantage of the presence of massive objects to shape the path of light coming from objects on the far side relative to the viewer. A sufficiently large star, for instance, could be used by Earth-bound astronomers to “see” far beyond what they otherwise could by bending rays of light coming from distant bodies. The basic physics behind the principle was known to Newton and Cavendish, and a multinational effort just after World War I confirmed many of Einstein’s theories about gravitational lensing. It may be our best bet for obtaining direct visual evidence of habitable exoplanets in other solar systems.

Christopher Lyke’s The Chicago East India Company (Double Dagger Press) is a sufficiently large star. A collection of short stories and vignettes based both on the author’s time in uniform and career as a teacher, the book takes on a refreshing and encouraging role, despite the sometimes-laden and harrowing subject matter of surviving combat and finding purpose in a bureaucratic education system.

I’ll return to the “sufficiently large star” concept in a moment.

The writing throughout TCEIC is, as one would guess, taut and clean, in the sense that there are no wasted words or characters or stories. There’s a physicality that guides the collection, present in spare but efficient vignettes – whether character portraits like “Canton” or meditations on events as in “Another Ginger Ale Afternoon” – but on full display in the longer pieces like “Life in the Colonies,” which amplifies the corporeal experiences of a jungle excursion by examining the personal and political context surrounding it. The sensory descriptions also ground what could be otherwise ephemeral introspection, and this balanced duality continues throughout the book.

In "These Are Just Normal Noises" the monotony of a foot patrol drags on for more than four pages but the writing never falters. Not a word is unnecessary in building to the tension of the impending incident. Every description – of the "kohl-lined eyes and dyed-red beards" on the men and women encountered in the village, or the "riverbed...the tall grass that covered the ground...the ditches and small stonewalls" – seems at once familiar and extraordinary. The connection back to the world entices, but endangers:

We pulled them from thoughts of Chicago and the L and the weekend festivals that they were missing. A soldier remembered the way a girl had spoken to him and how she seemed cool and like the river that glided through the valley below him. We pulled them from this and back to the mountain, to a path or a rocky outcrop at which to point a gun.

We know it's coming, right? The ambush, the firefight, the attack – we've seen this before. The description continues, though, hard and unrelenting, and the agony of a withdrawal delayed by wounded vehicles and drivers, another couple hundred words detailing the by-now familiar yet still deadly blow-by-blow, but "It must have been only a minute since the fight began." We feel that minute stretched over two pages and the exhaustion weighs heavy on us.

A similar burden falls on our shoulders when we read "Solon," perhaps the most memorable story in the book. An unnamed teacher – though likely the same man whose travails we've been following the whole time – ventures from the demanding and unfulfilling classroom to the football field, coaching a team of students unaccustomed to winning and not far removed from the soldiers he once served alongside. Hopes are raised, then tempered; this is no Hollywood story of a team defying all the odds, though the growth and depth of the kids is much more realistic. Dreams are dashed, not by death but by an injury sufficient to upend what would be, in a scene meant to

inspire, the rags-to-riches career of the honest and likable young Darnell. The teacher unspools, seeing the players set beside soldiers set against football players from his own suburban youth in Ohio, and spins out of control:

...he knew that the team he was coaching was bad, and that it wasn't their fault. They were in a system that prevented them from being slightly more than terrible. And if it were a movie maybe an emotional director would have the poor kids win. But in reality, if they played one another his boys would probably get hurt...He didn't blame the suburban boys, they didn't hate the city boys, they just knew they'd beat them to death and wanted to, because they wanted to beat everyone down. That's what they were trained to do, and bred to do, and would do. It wasn't malice so much as inertia. They'd smile uncynically and help our boys up after cracking their ribs.

I found no morals here, because every time I tried to connect the Ohio players to Afghanistan or the Chicago players to the insurgents or reversed the roles or asked *Who would be who in the war zone* the futility of that line of questioning stopped me. War is not football, football is not war, but both deserve our attention for their consequences.

The other stories – “No Travel Returns”; “The Gadfly”; and the title piece – contain just as much depth of characterization and breadth of plot, maybe even more so. As readers we recognize the central character – sometimes first-person narrator, sometimes third-person participant, even as a literal bystander in “Western and Armitage,” when he spends less than a page delivering a gut-punch and denouement at the scene of a traffic accident – that Lyke inhabits and uses to bring us along on a journey that doesn't end. “None of it ended,” he says in protest to the idea that stories need resolution. But compared to many combat or redeployment stories about the hopelessness of such an idea, I feel like there's something to look forward to here.

TCEIC arrived at an opportune time for me as a writer. Full disclosure: Christopher Lyke founded and runs Line of Advance, a military- and veteran-focused literary website that has hosted much of my work, and even more work from many other writers. LOA sponsors the Col. Darron L. Wright Award for military and military-adjacent writers. They've amassed enough groundbreaking and stunning writing to publish Our Best War Stories (Middle West Press), with hopes for a second volume. LOA has been a great and generous home for my own writing, and I was excited to read more of Lyke's own work, if only to see into the mind behind a mainstay in the vet writing constellation.

Getting civilians to care about "The Troops" has been far easier than getting them to care about veterans. Wave a few flags, drop a few parachutists into a football game or two and they will stand for the anthem and mouth the affirmations they're expected to. It's American tradition – dating back to the Newburgh Conspiracy, the Bonus Army, and burn pit legislation – to celebrate war and forget the vet.

The writing in TCEIC embodies an antidote to that malaise, not in building overly optimistic bridges across the civil-military gap, but in reminding those of us in the vet writing communities that this kind of storytelling still matters, and will continue to matter. As major combat deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq fade in the general consciousness – if it were ever really there, short of jarring news announcements – and attention shifts elsewhere, spaces like LOA and books like The Chicago East India Company serve to focus our efforts. The longevity of a website that allows for creative expression gives hope. The straddling of worlds in TCEIC – connecting the experiences and people in a combat zone miles and years away to the experiences and people in contemporary and ongoing America – gives us that sufficiently large star. We can use its presence to bend the light and see habitable planets beyond the terrestrial profusion of "typical" war stories, the

kind you see in Hollywood if at all, and imagine literary planets where authors with military memories can explore stories beyond combat, can continue “writing things that aren’t just bang bang stories,” as Lyke puts it in an interview with Phil Halton, and maybe one day bring along a few of those civilians to populate these new worlds.

The Chicago East India Company by Christopher Lyke is available for purchase [here](#).

New Poetry from Tanya Tuzeo: “My Brother, the Marine;” “My Brother’s Shoebox;” and “My Brother’s Grenade”



WAR HAS DONE / *image by Amalie Flynn*

my brother, the Marine

the recruiters come weeks earlier than agreed—
arrive in alloy, aluminum with authority,
military vehicle blocks our driveway
announcing to the neighborhood
they’ve come for a boy here
who will have to go—
though he sits at the top step
and cries

i follow them,
strange convoy to Staten Island's hotel
where all the boys are corralled—
farmed for war, becoming weapons
of mass destruction
when before they picked apples
at family trips upstate

a hotel lobby—last stop before using lasers
to blow off golden domes,
silence muezzins in the crush
of ancient wage and plaster—
Hussein's old siberian tiger left thirsty,
watches other zoo animals
being eaten by the faithful—
just like a video game

i clamp onto my brother
beg him not to go, we could run away
he didn't have to do this—
recruiters quickly camouflage me,
am dragged outside—my brother lost
did not say goodbye
or even look at me.

my brother's shoebox

the room across the hall is inhabited again,
home now from another tour
like sightseeing from a grand canal
where buildings are art
and storied sculptures animate street corners—
my brother returns a veteran.

i want to remember who this person is,
or at least, find out what war has done.

he leaves with friends to drink—
that is still the same,
later tonight
he might howl at our parent's window
or jump on my bed until the sheets froth,
uncaring and rabid.

but i don't wait for him to come home
and begin searching the room
that is his again.

it is simple to find
where people hide things—
a shoebox under his bed
that wasn't there all these years
furrowed by sand
and almost glowing.

i open to find drugstore prints,
rolls of film casually dropped
for a high school student to develop—
silver halide crystals take the shape
of shattered skulls
goats strung and slit
a school made of clay
blasted in the kiln of munitions
"KILL ZONE" painted across its foundation—
each 4x6 emulsion a souvenir
of these mad travels,
kept to reminisce and admire.

my brother's grenade

my brother's room in our family vacation home
has embossed wallpaper, indigo or violet
depending on the light that filters through the mountains—
and his grenade in the closet.

i saw it looking for extra blankets,
thought it was an animal resting in eiderdown
kept by my mother in one of her tempers
but it didn't move
and so
i picked it up.

inhumanity held beneath iron's screaming core—
a pleasant weight,
like the egg i threw across the street
detonating onto the head of boy
who said i kissed him but i didn't,
is it like that for my brother?—
fisted mementos of thrill?

seasoned by cedar sachets,
neatly quilted metal shimmered as i turned it
forbidden gem, his holy relic—
i placed it back in the closet and began making dinner,
said nothing.

the slender pin preserves this household
where our family gathers
unknowing a bomb is kept here—
my brother roasts a marshmallow
until it catches fire, turns black,
plunges into mouth.

New Poetry from Amalie Flynn: “Celebrate”



TREE / SKIN / BONE *image by Amalie Flynn*

1.

Celebrate them.

2.

Celebrate the soldier who went to war

Just to kill.

This soldier accused of shooting and

Killing civilians. How the men from

His own platoon. They say *he did it.*

He shot civilians. He shot at civilians.

Shot a girl in Iraq in a flowered hijab

In her stomach.

Blooming wound. Like a daisy eye or

Hole in her gut. How he shot an old

Unarmed man dead. His white robe

Drenched red. The stain a spreading

Blood sun.

And they say they saw him. Saw him

Kill a teenager.

An ISIS fighter. Wounded and waiting
For a medic on the dirt floor in Mosul.
How they say the soldier said
Lips into a radio

Don't touch him.

Because *he's mine.*

Before driving his knife deep and deep.
Hunting knife
Into the boy's neck. Through skin and
Muscle. Tissue and ligaments an artery.

3.

Or how

There is a photograph.

The soldier squatting in the sand.

Full battle rattle next to the ISIS boy.

His dead body. Face up. Arms bare.

Calves exposed. His legs sprawled.

And the soldier. How he has the boy.
His hair. Gripped in the fist. And he is
Yanking. Yanking him. The boy's head.
His face up. For the camera.

How in the photograph.
The boy is dead.
And the soldier is smiling.
Because the boy is not a boy.

He is *deer kill*.

3.
Celebrate him.
Celebrate that soldier and the way it felt
When he held that soft sweat tuft of
Human hair.
Between his thumb and fingers like.
Like feathers.

4.

And why. *Why stop there?*

How there are more. More soldiers

5.

Soldiers who stood over dead bodies

On a video. Standing over the dead

Bodies of Taliban fighters they killed.

Killed in war in Afghanistan.

How the soldiers exposed their penises

And urinated on the bodies. Urinating

On the dead bodies or how

They are laughing.

Celebrate them. Celebrate those soldiers.

Celebrate how they felt when that stream

Of urine. Their urine.

Hit the men. Hit the dead bodies. Hit dead

Legs and dead torsos. Dead faces. Splashing

Open dead eyes. Into dead mouths.

Celebrate how.

How it felt. When their urine
Filled the dead men's nostrils.

6.

Celebrate Abu Ghraib.

Celebrate that it happened. Celebrate

Soldiers who stripped prisoners naked.

Raped them with truncheons. Strapped

Dog collars around their necks. Soldiers

Who dragged men on leashes like they

Were dogs. Who placed bags over heads.

Made men stand on boxes with wires

And electrodes attached to fingers and

Skin. Soldiers. Soldiers. Soldiers who

Tortured men.

Soldiers who piled men. Piled men up

And into contorted piles. These piles

Of tortured human flesh.

7.

Celebrate them.

8.

Celebrate all the soldiers who do it. Who

Do things like this.

Celebrate them even though. Even though

The military is filled and filled and filled

With soldiers who

Would never. Who never do these things.

9.

Just don't say. It is because

They did nothing wrong.

Don't say. Don't say *they didn't do it.*

10.

Celebrate them because you know.

You know they did.

11.

Celebrate them because you like it.

It Just Keeps Going

The first time I heard the phrase “Hate Train,” I was stationed in Japan with the Navy, attempting to enjoy a bowl of oatmeal. Our previous officer-in-charge (OIC) had finished turning over with his replacement and the new guy was proving to be a micromanaging, all-knowing, pain-in-the-ass. Mind you, I didn’t dislike him as a person, he was a nice enough guy. Still, he was awful to work for and his poor leadership, frivolous requests (usually demands), and attempts to force us to endure awkward esprit-de-corp events were a frequent topic of conversation. It was during one of these conversations, early one morning, that the phrase “Hate Train” came up. We all know what the Hate Train is because we’ve all been passengers on the Train at one time or another, hidden away behind closed doors or out to lunch, hating on someone who angers or frustrates us by way of their words or actions.

We all board the Train for different reasons. I can tell you why I ride: a fissure between reality and expectations. I remember hearing a lecture once about relational conflict. The point was that frustrations stem from failed expectations. If all week I’m planning to lay around and do nothing on the weekend and my wife suddenly decides to spend the entire weekend with her long-lost college roommate, whom I barely remember from our wedding and haven’t seen since (about 8 years now), then the odds are there’s going to be a problem.



“Long exposure of a Piccadilly line train leaving Leicester Square station, looking south-southwest.” Copyright Robert Lamb, licensed for reuse under Creative Commons Licence.

Regardless of why we're frustrated, or where it comes from, there are good and bad ways of handling that frustration. In past versions of this essay, I would have logged the Hate Train under “bad ways” to handle frustration. But, if I've learned anything since I first wrote about the Hate Train, I don't think it's as simple as “good” or “bad.” Like hearing the same story from two rival sources, the truth lies somewhere in the middle.

I made a friend riding the Hate Train. For the sake of dispelling ambiguity, we'll call him Tom. Tom and I were stuck in an untenable situation involving a lazy and inept supervisor and, in our desperation, we became close. Granted, we had other things in common, certain personality quirks and interests but, even when we met away from work, usually for coffee, most of our discussions took place on the Hate Train. By the time we were ordering refills, we had moved on to other topics, but I'd be lying if I said I can remember a conversation that didn't start on the Train. We'd criticize our supervisor for his lack of presence during training exercises or, when he was present, the way he lapped up all the credit for the work we were doing. You know, real “leadership” stuff. I realize complaining isn't a great foundation for a friendship—and this is probably why we aren't friends anymore—but riding the Train, Tom and I latched onto each other. At the time, we genuinely believed that we were the only ones who knew what the other was dealing with.

There were other people I talked to and there were things that I had to overlook about Tom, nuances of character that I chose to tolerate because this was a “friend.” We can all relate to that, wanting to see only the best in the people we choose to associate with, because if we realized that the people we

associated with were less than perfect, what would that say about us? While in time, the source of our frustration disappeared, that didn't mean we stopped riding the Train.

Unfortunately, after awhile, the Hate Train got old. That's not to say I didn't enjoy my time on the Train with Tom, but I learned there's a limit to the amount of "talk" I can handle before my eyes start to glaze over, even if it's coming from a "friend." There should be more to a friendship than ripping on others for their inadequacies and blunders. And so, in an effort to expand our friendship, when we met for coffee, I tried to get Tom to talk about his family (I have one too), books (I enjoy reading), movies (who doesn't like movies?), or just life in general. My hope was that in time we would move beyond just being work friends to being "real" friends. It didn't quite work out.

Maybe that sounds needy. Honestly though, at this point in my life, though acquaintances are nice, I have plenty of obligations (that family thing), and if I'm going to take the time to sit down with someone in the morning for a cup of coffee, I'm more interested in investing in an authentic friendship, not just one built on shared inconveniences.

About six months ago, Tom moved to a different division, work grew busy, we met less often for coffee, and we just kind of fell apart. When I did see him it felt hollow, like going through the motions of a friendship, and so I started finding other things (and other people) to occupy my time. Maybe I should have tried a little harder, put myself out there more, but when there are only so many hours left in a day after work and family have taken their "pound of flesh," you have to be a little selfish with your time.

When I stopped riding the Train, those flaws I had overlooked started to become more apparent. Tom was good at a lot of things but he was lazy and, honestly, it annoyed me. When it came to the less-than-sexy parts of the job training units

preparing to deploy, other people consistently had to pick up his slack because he simply refused to do the work. He was opinionated (who isn't?), but not in the sense that encourages conversation. He refused to listen because no one else knew better than him. And, he was shysty, playing little power games and utilizing his personal relationships to push agendas that only benefited him. Plus, when things didn't go his way, he concocted elaborate conspiracies to avoid the reality of his failures. When one of his training events fell apart, instead of reflecting on his utter lack of presence before, during, and after the "shit hit the fan," he blamed the guys in other divisions who were forced to run it in his absence.

The irony of our briefly-lived bromance was that as we moved apart, I became a topic of discussion on the Hate Train. Of course I never heard it myself, but people talk and I found out that my "friend" had gathered around himself his own little cohort of travelers. From what I'm told, they practically lived on the Hate Train. Easy to believe given the palpable toxicity that they exuded when they were together and the general air of superiority they put on when interacting with anyone not on the Train. It's sad, but I have to wonder if that was me at some point. And that possibility, that I was one of those people, more than anything else is what keeps me from setting up shop on the Train—a brief visit maybe, but no permanent residence.

I don't know if the Hate Train is "good" or "bad." Does the Train get old? Yes. Should we try not to ride? Sure. Still, I know the Train is good for something. I learned a lot while riding the Train: how I react to frustrations and how those frustrations can be a catalyst for change. I learned what kind of leader I wanted to be listening to other people's frustrations. I made it a priority to foster an environment of inclusiveness, where everyone had a say, so long as we kept it civil, about how we wanted to execute training, run the division, or where to get breakfast on short days. Not least

of all, I learned that I wanted to surround myself with people who didn't need to resort to riding the Train when frustrated, but who would challenge me about the decisions I'd made and work with me to solve our problems rather than walking away to bitch and moan in secret.

Above all, I learned how long term exposure to the Train is toxic and how when I leave military I don't want my legacy to be that of just another shit talker. It's not in me to not act when I can see the solution. Is it easier to just ride the Train and spew hate at everyone as they struggle? Sure, but does that mean it's "right?"

I don't know if it makes sense to label the Train as "good" or "bad," but the Hate Train is a reality we have to confront because the Train won't stop going, not as long as there are people willing to ride.

Wrongful Appropriation of the Soul

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

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

One: Complicity

Every time I read another account of sexual assault in the armed forces—most recently, when I read Senator Martha McSally's recent statement that she'd been raped by a senior officer, hadn't

reported the
assault, and continues to support leaving the prosecution of
sexual assault
cases in the hands of military commanders—I think of the last
thing that poet
Audre Lorde ever said to me.

I said goodbye to Audre one night shortly before her
son Jonathan and I reported to Naval Officer Candidate School
in 1988. I didn't
know then that it would be our final conversation: the breast
cancer she'd
survived a decade earlier had metastasized in her liver, but
homeopathic
injections prescribed by a doctor in Switzerland had been
keeping the tumors
under control for four years. Audre was a warrior, and at that
time she seemed
invincible.

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

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

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

Two: Assault

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

The midshipman was a foot taller and at least fifty pounds heavier than me. He drank enough at a shipboard dining-in to imagine that I was interested and he was desirable. He followed me to my stateroom, pulled me inside, slid the pocket door shut, and grabbed me in a nonconsensual liplock. I waltzed him around until I could push the door open, and tossed him out so hard that he bounced off the steel bulkhead on the other side of the passageway.

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

military personnel, I prioritized mission accomplishment over personal inconvenience.

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

Three: Grooming

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

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

Grooming often begins in accession training.

I met my first military sexual predator at Naval Officer Candidate School in Newport, Rhode Island. Our first eight weeks of training included a class in

maneuvering

board, a system of solving relative motion problems graphically and mathematically. The instructor, a chief boatswain's mate, made no secret of his contempt for women. We were of no use in his man's Navy; women's sole purpose was gratification of male sexual desire.

Another officer

candidate, a prior enlisted woman who'd served as an operations specialist on an oiler, whispered to me in the passageway outside of the classroom that the best way to handle him was not to draw his attention. *Don't ever get caught alone in a classroom or deserted passageway with*

him, she said. She didn't need to say *Don't bother reporting him*. He was still

an instructor: one needed to know only that to read between the lines. I'd survived a violent sexual assault two years before I joined the Navy; I was so uncomfortable around that chief that I choked on the final maneuvering board exam and failed it.

The cadre brought

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

instructor proctored it;
I passed easily.

I assumed that
the horny chief was an outlier. Some of the men in my class
didn't exactly
approve of my presence, but none of them behaved
unprofessionally. Listening to
women in the know and avoiding the occasional bad apple seemed
to be reasonable
strategies for sexual assault prevention—which I understood to
be my individual,
personal responsibility. I didn't realize how many bad apples
were in the
barrel; that a network of street-savvy, collegial women didn't
exist everywhere
in the Fleet; or that some men worked hard to prevent women
from trusting each
other and sharing information.

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

Our male
classmates told me, *She's always talking
about the pilots who take her out to dinner: where they go,
what they eat, and
how much they spend on her. She's just
in the Navy to find a husband. And if
you pal around with her, people will think you're fucking*

*every pilot at Oceana
too. You're a professional, though,
aren't you? You're one of the good ones.*

It didn't take
long to figure out that sailors laud promiscuity among men and
loathe it among
women. I learned never to use the phrase "double standard" to
describe this
phenomenon; every man who heard it changed the subject to
complain about gender
differences in scoring on the physical fitness test.

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

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

In addition to
serving as the station intelligence officer for two years, I
was to earn
qualifications to be responsible for the safety of the

aircraft in flight, and to debrief the missions and report submarine contacts back to intelligence and antisubmarine warfare headquarters commands in Norfolk, Virginia, and Washington, DC. Although 10 USC § 6015 still prohibited women from flying combat aircraft in 1989, the P-3C community had accepted women in support roles for several years and was considered to be less aggressive and hostile toward women than the carrier aviation community.

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

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

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

I shook my head and stomped my foot a couple of times like a Navy

instructor who wants students to remember something important for an upcoming test.

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

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



One of the P-3C crews deployed to Bell’s first duty station let her fly the plane for 15 minutes—with the mission commander in the copilot seat, and the vertical autopilot on. Said Bell, “I’d have stayed in that seat the whole mission, if they’d let me.” Women could fly on P-3C missions as long as the crew wasn’t expected to drop torpedoes on an enemy submarine. My supervisor in Lajes, the operations officer, wanted me to fly as often as I could. For my first flight, the detachment

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

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

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

On another day, a pilot invited me to the hangar to learn about the squadron duty officers' responsibilities. When I arrived, he and another lieutenant called me into the squadron duty office and told me to shut the door. On the back of the door, they'd hung a *Penthouse* centerfold of a naked blonde (I

am also blonde) sitting in a spread-eagle split. My face was exactly level with her crotch. I could count her short-and-curlies. Suppressed snickers confirmed that the placement had been deliberate.

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

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

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



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

Over the course of the two-year assignment to Lajes, three of my married colleagues propositioned me. Each time I declined: *Flattered, but not interested*. They accepted the

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

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

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

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

For weeks before the summer antisubmarine warfare conference, held that year in Lajes, the only other single woman officer in the command (the administrative officer) and I endured

repeated badgering from the executive officer and my supervisor, the operations officer, about who our “significant others” would be for the Saturday night dining-out event at a local seafood restaurant. The executive officer wasn’t satisfied when we told him we were going stag. Practically licking his lips at the picture of two young women paired with two hot-to-trot pilots, he ordered us both to bring significant others to the dinner.

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

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

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

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



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

In the summer

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

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

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

told him several times that he wasn't welcome.

I didn't complain,

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

he was scaring me.

I thanked them,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Four: Silence

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

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

The Navy had one more lesson to teach.

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

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

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

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

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

I disagreed.

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

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

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

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

Five: Barriers

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

New Nonfiction from Kiley

Bense: Tell Me About My Boy

Here's an empty grave, where a body that had been a boy became bones beneath a wooden cross. They buried him with one set of dog tags hanging against his bloodied chest.

He bled in a field hospital bed not far from here, shrapnel buried in his skin. Is that what killed him—hot metal melting flesh, an unseen severing? Or was his body tossed limply from a jeep seat as it crossed the desert, the crush of cargo snapping ribs, a crackle of tinder at dusk? "Morale is very high," the morning reports said, on the day the boy disappeared into the horizon. The next day he'd be dreaming under several feet of sand. They couldn't have known. They couldn't have. They couldn't.

When he died, the boy was twenty-three and dark-haired, all shoulder and grin: my grandmother's little brother. It's one thing to consider his photograph on a mantelpiece, a charming kid wearing a tilted cap; another to imagine him becoming broken, hollows purpling beneath his eyes and a bloody bandage wrapped around one thumb where a cactus thorn was entombed in the soft pad of his finger. One thing to read "artillery fire" on a typewritten government medical form (death requires paperwork); another to watch a German gun spitting shells, coughing up sounds that rattle across time and sky. How fragile is a human body in the path of such certainty.

Here is that body: one-hundred-sixty-two-pounds, down from one-hundred-and-seventy since he'd filled out his draft card in an office in Philadelphia one year before. Seventy-five inches tall. Gray-blue eyes, like his father's. Freckles across the top of his nose blotted out by five months of sunburn and grime. One thumb now scarred. One uniform crusted with sweat, salt, blood and smoke, one rosary and an American flag stuffed in the pockets. Feet stiff, callused and blistered. Lean jaw and face, angles cut sharper by

sleeplessness and fear. Shrapnel lacerations unfurled like tattered red-black lace over his left arm and chest. This is the body they buried in Tebessa with a gunshot salute and a chaplain's murmured blessing.

Bury him at Gettysburg, his father said, when the government wanted to know where to leave his son's bones for good. There's no room in Gettysburg, came the reply, that meadow's already crammed with dead American boys. Choose another tomb.



Here is a letter about nothing: "Dear Sir," it begins. "Will you kindly change my address on your records? My son, Private Richard H. Halvey, 331356641, Headquarters Co. 18th Infantry, 1st Division, was killed in action in North Africa, March 21st, 1943, and I am anxious to have your records correct so that I may receive future correspondence regarding the returning of his body. Thanking you for your attention, I am, Very truly yours." Signed, Brendan H. Halvey, my great-grandfather. Here is pain, laid out on one creased sheet of paper.

He bled for us. But he will not rise. Here in Algeria the air is still, the night is silent. There is no weeping. The only cross at his grave was the slatted thing they stuck in the dirt above his head, one set of dog tags looped around its arms. He hated those dog tags. The cord bit at his neck, a reminder that the Army was trying, every day, to convert him from a person into a number. It took all of one day for him to die. Then he was inked into a serial code in some forgotten notebook. 331356641. 331356641. 331356641. Repeated till it stays.

Across the ocean from the skeleton his son had become, his father wondered where to bury what was left. Here is what the government said: We can't tell you much about your boy, other than that he isn't coming back. They took his blood and his

body, and all that's left is bone.

Maybe Brendan asked for Gettysburg because the government was bold enough to parrot Lincoln in the pamphlet it mailed to stricken fathers. "Tell Me About My Boy," the pamphlet was titled, though really it told nothing. The dead were valiant and heroic, said the pamphlet, they "gave the last full measure of devotion." There was no mention of Lincoln's next line: "We here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain."

Arlington, Brendan decided, finally, in 1947. So they shipped Dick Halvey's body (which was jumbled bones and dog tags) to Virginia, where the Army shrouded him in stripes and etched a cross on marble above his name. Not blood-soaked Gettysburg but Arlington, everything green and white except the roses laid on headstones. Here, across the river from the capital, we buried our boys in neat rows. "Our boys," they said back then, pleading with o-mouhths at news reels for a glimmer of truth. Our boys aren't coming back the same.

Note: Tebessa, Algeria was the site of a temporary American cemetery during World War II. Starting in 1947, soldiers' remains were moved from Tebessa either to the American cemetery in [Tunisia](#) or brought back to the United States, according to the family's wishes.

FOB by Daniel Ford

An excerpt of the debut novel *Sid*

Sanford Lives!

by Daniel Ford

Sid stepped into the desert surrounding the cramped forward operating base just as the sun surged over the distant mountaintop. He scratched his patchy, three-day-old beard. He inhaled deeply, the already warming air singeing his raw nostrils. The sand didn't crunch so much as slither away from the hot breath of desert wind.



Daniel Ford's debut novel *Sid Sanford Lives!* is now available from 50/50 press.

He eyed the line of beige Humvees parked by sandbags piled waist-high. He strode over and climbed into the makeshift garage. Sid propped himself against the tall front tire of the closest vehicle. He stretched out his legs and crossed them, feeling the full weight of his still stiff boots on his ankle. He shifted his position just enough so he could awkwardly pull his notebook out of his back pocket. He stuck his pen behind his ear, sure the words that had been eluding him since the troubled descent through the mountain range would come before the afternoon sun boiled his internal organs. For now, Sid propped his head up against the hard, black rubber and tried to remember how he'd landed in this dusty valley.

Roger Ray's slamming door muffled the newsroom's buzz. So many conversations from which Sid had long ago felt disengaged continued in shouted whispers once Ray started howling in earnest.

"I'd be weakening my damn city desk in the middle of a mayoral

election," the aging editor said. "On top of everything else, I'd be giving you, a little pissant, a promotion ahead of, frankly, a long line of more goddamn qualified reporters."

"Someone else can cover the Bronx borough president's philandering and embezzling," Sid said over Ray's incoherent grunting and molar grinding.

"Plus, I'd catch all kinds of holy fucking hell from the board..." Ray said. "Wait, what did you say?"

Sid patiently reached into his messenger bag and retrieved a blue folder that looked like an overstuffed jelly donut. He tossed it on Ray's desk and watched as he casually flipped it open. Ray rolled his eyes as he read the top sheet, but that hadn't stopped him from skimming the tax forms, illicit photos, and tawdry phone records bulging underneath.

"Sources?" Ray grunted.

"Waiting for a phone call from whomever you decide to assign the story."

Ray held Sid's gaze, hoping his young reporter would wear his self-satisfied grin just long enough for him to slap it off his face with a hefty Sunday newspaper.

"This doesn't change anything," Ray said, slamming his hand on the pile of front-page fodder. "I could just as easily order you to write this."

"I have a draft someone can polish if that helps," Sid said. "You don't even have to use my name. Actually, I'd prefer you didn't, I don't want to get banned from Harlem and its chicken and waffles."

"Listen, son..."

"I believe you owe me one," Sid said, his jaw stiffening.

Ray waited a beat before nodding weakly. He got up, sat down on the edge of his desk, and put a hand on Sid's shoulder.

"A desert warzone isn't an appropriate place to overcome personal demons," Ray said.

"That's not what this is about," Sid said. "I've just moved beyond writing about tainted politicians and transit complaints."

"You better hope so. You survive our security training and I'll think about it. That's the best I can do."

Sid took the deal and flew out to the Middle East three weeks later.

A sharp pain in his shin brought Sid back into the present. He cursed his luck, certain he'd been stung by a scorpion. However, the pain dulled quickly, but not before another kick to his boots forced him into a crouch. His eyes burned red as he opened them fully. He put his hand against the sun and made out a camouflaged hulk wielding a wrench standing in front of him.

"Scared the fucking piss out of me," the soldier spat.

A tobacco-infused glob of spit now sparkled in the sand between the two men like a brushstroke of oil puddled in a Queens parking garage.

"Sorry," Sid muttered.

"You're not supposed to be here. I could have put a bullet in your fucking head. Probably give me a damn medal considering you're a reporter."

"I get it," Sid said. He brushed the sand off his pants as he stood. "I'm leaving."

"Don't be a pussy," the soldier said, extending his hand. "I'm

Mason.”

“Sid.”

“Oh, I know your name. We get daily briefings on how to talk to you.”

“Is that why no one has done it yet?”

“Fuck, easy killer,” Mason said. “PR is not our strong suit.”

“Funny considering that’s part of your mission.”

“Enjoying the heat while you’re preaching at me?” Mason asked, slapping a wrench into his palm.

“Had to get out of the AC,” Sid said. “Too small a space and too many closed windows.”

“You want to open those bulletproof windows for the enemy, be my guest, but make damn sure me and my friends are all in the latrine when you do. And try not to make too much of a mess for us to sop up later.”

“Yeah, well, never been a fan of central air. Messes with my sinuses.”

“You been in a sandstorm yet?”

“No.”

“Might change a few of your preconceived notions about our little air conditioned shit box.”

“I didn’t mean to offend anyone.”

“Well, could you not offend anyone a few paces to your right. I’ve got to park my ass under the vehicle you’ve been using as a hammock.”

“Right,” Sid said. “Yeah.”

He moved out of the way and heard Mason slide under the front bumper. Sid rubbed the back of his head.

"Something wrong?" Mason asked from beneath the vehicle.

"Can I help you with anything?" Sid asked.

"You know much about auto repair?"

"Not really, no."

"Then I'm good."

"Well, how about I just keep you company then?"

"Like to work alone."

"This is the longest conversation I've had in days," Sid said.
"Give me something."

"I didn't shoot you, what more do you want?"

"Son of a bitch," Sid mumbled.

The clangs and grunts stopped. Mason wagged his boots back and forth.

"Coffee," he said.

"Do you want anything-?"

"Black."

"You got it."

Sid headed back to the FOB. He found another hulking figure in fatigues leaning up against the counter, waiting for the coffee pot to finish gurgling.

"Lieutenant Núñez," Sid said, keeping a respectful distance.

The officer growled something through his dark mustache that sounded like, "motherfucker." Sid contemplated reaching for

his notebook and peppering Núñez with questions before the man had even poured his morning coffee, but thought better of it.

“Given any thought to my, um, repeated requests?” Sid asked instead.

The officer’s severe, but sleepy, brown eyes motioned toward the coffee pot.

“Got it,” Sid said, grabbing two Styrofoam cups from the stack.

“Thirsty?” Núñez asked.

“Getting one for your mechanic.”

“Are you referring to Sergeant Ward?”

“This would be a lot easier if you didn’t break my balls every time we had a conversation.”

“But it wouldn’t be as fun,” Núñez said. He filled his mug and turned to walk out the door. “Don’t bother my men without my permission or I won’t talk to you at all.”

The officer knocked into Sid’s shoulder as he left.

“Sir?” Sid called out.

“You’re not ready to leave the wire,” Núñez said, pausing in the hallway. “Some of my men aren’t ready. Request denied.”

“Thanks for your time, Lieutenant...” Sid muttered.

He knew picking fights with commanding officers wouldn’t get him anywhere, but he hadn’t been raised to keep his mouth shut (or respect authority for that matter). However, Núñez had just confirmed Sid’s suspicions about the base’s preparedness. What Sid couldn’t piece together is whether that mattered in this country or not.

Sid returned to the Humvee and found Mason's boots pointing out the opposite end. Sid pounded his fist up against the bumper.

"Jesus H. Fuck!" Mason yelled out.

Sid heard tools thump against the sand.

"Delivery," he said. "I'm allowed to give you coffee, right?"

"Hell yes," Mason said.

After climbing out from the car's underbelly, Mason grabbed the cup and downed the coffee in one swallow. He tossed the cup back at Sid who caught it while preventing his own coffee from sloshing out.

"That must have felt good," Sid said.

"Nothing feels good here. Needed a jolt."

"Happy to help. Does this mean I can ask you a few questions?"

"Hope you're not looking to fill column inches with me," Mason said. "I'm a pretty boring story."

"Yeah, I figured that out pretty quick," Sid said. "But I'll take what I can get right now."

"What are you writing about?"

"Don't know yet."

"See, you want us to engage, yet you have no fucking clue what your plan is."

"I'm here, that is the plan. A lot of people have questions about what's going on over here."

"Tell you what, a lot of guys over here have a question or two on what's happening."

"Maybe we can learn from each other."

"When can I say I'm off the record?"

"Whenever you want."

"And you can't use what I say?"

"That's how it works."

"Then I'm off the record."

"Fine by me."

Sid leaned up against the door, burning his elbow on the hot metal handle. He pulled it away, more pissed about the squad's antipathy than by the glowing red blotch on his arm. Mason wiped his forehead with an oily rag and then got back to work.

Mason clamped his thick hand down on Sid's shaking leg.

"Really? Still with the fucking nerves?" Mason asked. "The mission is over, fucking relax."

Sid adjusted his helmet and nodded.

"Lieutenant, Bob Woodward here is still pissing himself," Mason yelled above the roar of the Humvee. "Any suggestions on how he can calm his delicate senses?"

In the passenger seat, Núñez turned his head slightly and growled something that sounded like "fucker."

"Well, I wouldn't do that to your mother," Mason said. "Just sit tight, we're almost home."

Sid had hounded Núñez for nearly a month to authorize his first patrol. The squad now fancied itself a crack staff, impervious to the anxiety and turmoil endemic to other platoons across the desert. Outside of the occasional pop-pop-pop in the distance, however, none of the men crowded in the

FOB had been in a firefight or had to halt a long caravan in order to investigate and detonate an IED. How would they react in the face of something more treacherous than cleaning out latrines or standing at attention for Reveille?

It turned out that Sid's hands refused to stop shaking the moment he parked his ass in the Humvee. They shook all through the meeting with the hard-eyed, sun-scorched elders of the nearby village. Núñez listened patiently to the staccato Arabic flying off the leader's rotten teeth like acid. He absorbed the overwhelmed translator's stuttering and backtracking while nodding and trying to maintain eye contact with his counterpart. Sid watched as younger, more anxious men prowled along the back of the tent, shouting and pointing every so often. They had been stripped of their arms before entering, but their danger still permeated the cramped space.

"What are they pissed about?" Sid had asked Mason.

"No water. Limited food. Enemy offering it all at discount prices," Mason had said. "It means we're fucked. Now shut up and keep close to me or anyone else with a gun."

Sid's concentration was broken by Mason leaping out of his seat and climbing on top of a snoozing soldier in the rear of the Humvee.

"I said move your hand, Bee," Mason shouted, slapping his subordinate on the cheeks.

"Wake the fuck up, this ain't fucking nap time."

"Sorry, Sergeant," Bee said.

"Up all night playing 'Call of Duty' again?" Mason asked.

"Nuh-uh, Sergeant," Bee said.

"Christ, just what Uncle Fucking Sam had in mind when he signed your sorry ass up," Mason said, retaking his seat. "Has

more goddamn kills online than he does in real life. Put that in your article, Sanford.”

“Why do they call you Bee?” Sid said, ignoring Mason’s jabs to his bicep. “Hard to figure considering your nameplate reads Zdunczyk.”

Bee glanced at Mason, who nodded his approval.

“Real name’s Frank,” Bee said.

“I’m aware,” Sid said. “Why Bee?”

“Aw, tell him,” Mason said, throwing in another scoop of tobacco below his bottom lip.

“My first day in the mess I wanted to make conversation,” Bee said. “So I started talking about this article I read about bee hives being like a communist society. Then I started in on the similarities and differences between hives and military bases. Kind of explains it all.”

“You’re so fucking lucky ‘Queen Bee’ didn’t stick,” Mason said. “Whole squad was fucking howling so bad Núñez smoked the shit out of us. So worth it.”

Sid reached the pocket of his flak jacket and pulled out his recorder. He waited for Mason’s affirmative before turning it on.

“Why’d you sign up?” Sid asked.

“No one needs to hear that fucking story,” Bee said, wearily looking at the slim device. “No offense, sir.”

“This is your penance for conking out,” Mason said. “Be thankful it’s not fucking licking my boot whenever the fuck I tell you to.”

“Yes, Sergeant,” Bee said. “It all started when my father was murdered...”

"Murdered?" Sid asked, the quake in his hands now having less to do with nerves or the Humvee's shimmy.

"Yeah, couple of townies broke into our house looking for shit to pawn to buy meth or some shit," Bee said. "My dad went to investigate and they dropped him with one to the head before he could raise his pistol."

"Holy shit," Mason muttered, spitting tobacco juice into a cup. "Where were you?"

"Getting high in the woods with a bunch of fucks from school," Bee said. "We all passed out there. Cops ended up coming out to find me. We all scattered thinking they were going to bust us for weed. Ran home and right into the yellow caution tape like a goddamn marathon runner."

"They catch the bastards?" Sid asked. "I mean...did they apprehend the suspects?"

"Nah, this is the best part," Bee said. "They stepped over my dad and started ransacking the rest of the house. Probably looking for money or trying to cover their tracks. Make it look like there were more than two shit kickers. My mother had holed up in her closet and waited for them with a Remington 870 shotgun she bought on layaway from Walmart. Blew both motherfuckers away when they opened the door."

"My kind of woman," Mason said. "Shit, sorry about your Pops, but this is making my shit hard."

"So how'd that lead to you enlisting?" Sid asked, once again ignoring Mason.

"Despite being relieved, my mother was pissed as hell I wasn't home when it all went down," Bee said. "She told me that since she took care of my father's killers, the least I could do was go shoot some towelheads in the desert. Sorry, is that too crass for a newspaper?"

"I'll clean it up, don't worry," Sid said. "You regret it?"

"Only regret I have is not killing those pricks myself. And not having a chance to kill anyone here. Fucking glad-handing political bullshit isn't my thing."

Sid nodded and pressed the pause button.

"Thank you for trusting me with your story," he said, extending his hand. "I'm sorry to hear about your father."

"Oh, I don't trust you for shit," Bee said, shaking Sid's hand. "But Mason does and I report to him. I'm just as liable to shoot you next time you come near me."

"Understood," Sid said. "Just make sure Mason's behind me when you do it. Takes care of both our problems."

"You fucks know I'm still fucking here, right?" Mason asked.

The Humvee's breaks squealed like a downtown bus as the hulking transport swerved abruptly. Sid tumbled into Mason's lap just as the cup of dip flew out of the Sergeant's hands and onto Sid's chest.

Núñez shouted something unintelligible from the front of the vehicle.

"Shit," Mason said. "Look alive, fellas."

Sid's nerves actually calmed as the camouflaged men around him checked their weapons and reached for additional ammo. He heard a distant whistling that aggressively faded into dense thuds nearby.

"Fuck, we're in the shit now, boys," Mason said.

The Humvee shook after a mortar landed a few yards away, spraying sand and debris across the small windows. The whistle intensified as the enemy's aim improved. Núñez's orders came out in a stream of profanity and pseudo-Spanish as he exited

the front seat. Sid could feel the ripple of steel and sand as the Humvee continued to race across the desert. Mason shoved a finger into Sid's chest.

"What did I fucking tell you before?" He asked.

"Stay close," Sid said. "Preferably next to someone with a weapon."

"Good," Mason said. "Don't fucking forget it."

And then the world went white.

<https://www.amazon.com/Sid-Sanford-Lives-Daniel-Ford/dp/1947048104>

<http://www.writersbone.com/>



Daniel Ford

Daniel Ford is the author of Sid Sanford Lives! He's the co-founder of Writer's Bone, a literary podcast and website that champions aspiring and established authors. A Bristol, Conn., native (and longtime Queens, N.Y., transplant), Ford now lives in Boston with his fiancée Stephanie. He's currently working on a short story collection.

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.*

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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.

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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 enlisteds like 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.

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“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.

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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 egg 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."

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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.”

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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 noodles 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.

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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 Yael Hacoheh



Fortitude

Seven times I've been to the Wall
to scribble my prayers
and fold them into
the seams in the yellow stones.
The walls of Jericho fell on the seventh
so I elbow my way through the crowd
to put my ear to the stones
and hear the horses surround them,
but the wail of sirens drown out the hooves
the herds disperse from the plaza
and I forsake the Wall
to let it stand on its own

an ancient olive tree
straining against its plot in the dirt.

Pre Traumatic

The first time I shot an M-16
it was the heat of summer in the Negev.
Gas-operated with a rotating bolt,
five-point-fifty six caliber,
with nineteen bullets a box.
I could shoot like an angel,
I could hit a running target
at six-hundred-fifty meters.
I cried the first time.
I was eighteen.
Already, my hair in a bun.
You didn't stand
a chance.

Photo Credit: [Friends of the IDF](#)

New Fiction: “Old Wounds” by Therese Cox



The YouTube walkthroughs have names, like action movies or episodes of a serial TV show. *Judgment Day. Suffer With Me.*

Fallen Angel. Old Wounds. If you were playing, you'd fire up your console, scroll through the list, pick your game, and go. But Tracey Knox doesn't play. She's only here to watch. One quick click and SchoolofHardKnox is leading the way through the war.

She's watched them all, headphones on, grinding through anti-tank fire, lobbing grenades at ditches, clamoring for weapons, hoping there'd be one, just one, with a voice-over and a *howzit goin'*. How else is she going to hear Geoff's voice? Flat Michigan vowels with those U.P. dips and stalls: a sound she doesn't get a lot of in New York. She's spent hours patrolling these deserts. It's only grown worse since she lost her job at the architecture firm. There's nowhere she has to be at 9 a.m. No project manager to look over her shoulder. No more designing cat fences for rich ladies in Connecticut. She is thirty-nine and can do as she likes.

There are thousands of views. Who was Geoff making these walkthroughs for? He didn't do voice-overs, didn't narrate, never popped up mid-scene in a Fugazi t-shirt, flashing his tats, to explain strategy. Each episode is like a movie he lived once and forgot about, one long jittery dream that Trace lives over and over.

"Old Wounds." She likes the sound of that one. He dies too soon in it but it's badass and medieval to gallop on horseback, brandishing a sword pried from a skeleton's ribcage. She clicks on the name and lets it roll.

*

It's Friday night at the Hampton Inn in DC. Tracey Knox is incumbent on a queen-sized bed, surrounded by plugs and remote controls. A screen flickers from her lap, lighting her face in flashes. Her eyes glazed, ears snug under industrial-sized headphones. She's been dressed in the same clothes for a week straight—baggy cammie trousers bought discount from the Gap,

\$4.98, an end-of-summer deal, and a faded Jackass t-shirt. She's skinnier than usual. All week it's been nothing but sunflower seeds and Arizona iced tea, but then, the anniversary usually has that effect. At the moment she's knee-deep in a YouTube k-hole and doesn't care who knows it. Each fresh burst of gunfire grinds her guts with a bad longing. It calls back the barrage of explosions drifting down the hall from under Geoff's bedroom door. The on-screen desert had been Geoff's playground. Virtual Sergeant Foley, a stand-in for Dad.

Tracey's best girlfriend, Constance Lawson, is knocked up and across the room, embedded in a nest of Hampton Inn pillows. They've decided to do a girls' weekend in DC. Just the two of them, like the old days, one last hurrah before Constance, now Connie, becomes an FTM, or full-time mommy.

Connie had planned everything. Two queen beds and an all-you-can-eat menu of reality TV shows and room service mocktails. Right now Connie's reading to Tracey from an upbeat email. Connie's writing a book about her experience of IVF, half memoir and half how-to. The future for mommy lit is apparently bright. She's landed a slick agent on the basis of a sample paragraph and outline and is already in negotiations for a book deal for her WIP.

"What's a W-I-P?" Tracey asks, slipping off one headphone.

"Work in Progress," says Connie, who's superstitious about names for unborn projects.

Tracey, for her part, has no reason to fire up her email on a weekend. She recoils at the memory of the last exchange before HR sent her the marching papers, a "reply all" that should very definitely not have been a "reply all." Tracey nods, says it sounds promising. She switches to half-listen mode and goes back to the screen.

On her laptop, a menu of a dozen other options pop up, all

listed under her brother's screen name. She's stopped talking to people online after a Skype with their LA office went balls-up and cost Tracey her job. She's been living off her severance package above a tire shop in Greenpoint, buoyed by the salary of her Dutch bicycle-parts designing husband, Niels. Her job search is equal parts day-drinking, flirting with bartenders, and experimenting with the font size on her CV. If there's a café with free wi-fi, she's freeloading. Whenever either of her parents, divorced of course, gets her on the phone, Tracey says the same thing: she is pursuing other options.

"Do you think I should come up with a new name for TBD?" Connie asks.

"To be determined?"

"No, no, Trace, T-B-D. The Baby Dance. It's what the *What to Expect When You're Expecting to Be Expecting* book calls sex."

"Why don't you just call it sex?"

"Because," Connie says, "That's so louche."

Connie reclines in yoga pants and places her hand on her swollen belly. She balances the phone on top and shows Tracey a new app, plugging in a set of hot pink earbuds. The app's main feature is the frantic liquid throb of a fetal heartbeat so Connie can eavesdrop on her unborn infant. The baby, in all its amniotic fury, pounding away. It is just a cluster of nerve endings and cells and life pushing blood through its fetal chambers, *but listen to it go*. The heartbeat hypnotizes her with its systole and diastole, evidence of its miraculous, furious progress. Connie is transfixed in the dull spell, fingers slack on the edges of her iPhone, earbuds shoved in, the better to hear the back and forth of the protean sludge. Tracey tries to ignore it but Connie insists. Through the wire comes a birdlike thrum, frantic and pulsing, the life that is both part of her yet apart from her—primordial—she is life-

giving—this baby-to-be, sloshing over and over just for her, the sound (she makes Tracey listen. *Listen, Tracey!*) going *mama mama mama* oh god.

“But Tracey, don’t you think about it sometimes?”

Sure, Tracey thinks about it sometimes. The possibility of new life. The thing her friends are all doing, the thing she knows Niels wants. It’d be a beautiful baby: half-Dutch, half-red-blooded-American. Niels would have the kid on training wheels in no time. She could forget about the architecture. Embrace the FTM. Make their offspring her avatar.

But Tracey Knox pursues none of those things. She unhooks herself from Connie’s app and slinks back to pole position, head hunched, knees curled, itching to get back to her trance. She’s not even playing the game, a level way worse, just watching virtual violence, eyes glued to the stuttering screen, explosions collapsing around her in bursts of orange and red, choppers snip-snip-snipping the sky above.

Outside the hotel room, DC lurks. Connie had come to grad school here. Tracey, dragging an art history degree behind her, had followed her out and spent a year mopping gallery floors, playing the mistress to a fastidious art buyer who lived in Dupont Circle. DC never spoke to Tracey in quite the same way it did for Connie. When Connie had first suggested it, that if they came to DC, Tracey could visit *the grave*, Tracey blanked.

“The grave,” Tracey said, nodding. “Right.”

As she fires up the next episode, she thinks maybe she’ll look Danny up again after she gets back from DC, hit him up for a couple of cold ones and ask him more questions about what else he knows about Geoff. Now that she knows the story, or enough of the story. Maybe it’s that she knows too much?

Blood and Gore Intense Violence Strong Language Suggestive

Themes Mature 17+ Online Interactions Not Rated by the ESRB

Let's roll—

She adjusts the headphones so they're snug and then *wham!* she's back at the helm of the war machine, flexing assault muscles and tactical ops, leaping out of choppers as shrapnel rains from tall sheared-off buildings. Jump cuts, jittery exterior shots, implausible musculature and digitized MRAPs. Quick flash of landscape porn, desert mountains and desolate horizons, fade in then fade out, the Ken Burns effect plus amphetamines, amplified and sped up and pumped out, life through the barrel of an assault rifle. She hijacks a chopper and mainlines that view from above—*I don't see, I fly*—then *whoosh*, she's back at ground level, hand to hand combat, slow sexy focus on metal and skin and tattoo and blood. She swims and she flies with her entourage, industrial war machine overhead in twenty parts glittering. Down below in the rubble it's all dirt and desert and fumes, the phosphorescence of foreign war, choppers rising up in clusters and scattering.

She's shooting lasers from what looks like a souped-up staple gun, exuding godlike luster in a landscape of smoke and red sand. She's busting into hideouts and blowing up bodies, dodging the splurge of vermilion enemy blood, no time even to blow on the smoking gun. Here she is no one, she is cranked up to full speed and smoothed down to her essentials—blood and muscle and armor—kicking down doors, spitting steel. She has no womb, no wounds. Tracey Knox is a killing machine, trained to close and destroy, breach and clear, dismantling all the architecture, trafficking in the invincible.

*

When Geoff Knox came back from his first deployment in Afghanistan, he was full of stories. They weren't usually what you would think of as war stories but more about things going wrong—stupid stuff, just everyday things: bad latrines and

gravity-fed showers and pranks with packages. Over time the Afghan villagers had picked up certain American phrases. Sex was “up-and-down.” Bombs were “bang-bang.” The one word pretty much all of them knew was “killed.”

One day, Geoff said, there’d been a bomb in a neighboring village. The usual shit–IED–and their interpreter–their “terp,” Geoff called him–was off meeting with some village elders. So there’s Geoff, asking around, trying to get a tally of the civilian dead. There was this one kid, maybe eleven or twelve, name of Omar, who spoke some English and was trying to translate. And the kid had told Geoff, “One killed, dead. Two killed, not dead.”

Geoff scratched his head. “Two killed, not dead? The hell does that mean?”

Omar kept saying it. “One killed, dead. Two killed, not dead.” It took Geoff some time to realize that by “killed, not dead,” Omar was trying to say “hurt.” The kid didn’t know the word for “hurt.”

There’s a lesson in that now, Tracey thinks. Every wound, especially in the war, *killed* you. It’s just that some wounds left you dead, and others left you alive.

I have two siblings, Tracey Knox says. She’ll say it to this day, will say it to the end, whenever anyone asks. *I have two siblings, a sister and a brother*. One older sister: killed, not dead. One younger brother: killed, dead.

Tracey lost her brother, and her brother was in the war. At thirty-nine years old it was her saddest story. Some days it was her only story. Maybe she should just fix people in the eye and say, *My brother died in the war*. Or: *My brother was killed?* She’s always hated the passive voice, hated the linguistic gymnastics she had to do around the topic of her brother, who was dead, and it had nothing to do with just causes. He didn’t die in the war, he died during the war. And

that's as close as Tracey will ever get to telling Connie the truth.

*

After 9/11, Geoff Knox marched up to Lake Superior State University to the fold-out desk. The Army recruiter had been a bemused bruiser who, learning he had an eager fourteen-year-old kid on his hands, didn't change much about his pitch. Geoff didn't tell the recruiter about his big sister Tracey, who was living in New York when it happened. The desk was busy that September.

The Soho firm had been Tracey's first job after architecture school. She'd landed a position with an architecture firm in the city and had been downtown when the planes struck the towers. She got to the eighth-floor window just in time to see the fireball roar through the second tower. Through glass she watched the haggard red stripes of flame rip the steel beams and the confetti of paper and debris that had fluttered out of the twin towers from gaping black maws. She called home, unable to get through till almost midnight, called that night and every night after to talk to their mom and Geoff, trying to describe the scene. What does she remember? The smoke, mostly. There was the smoke, first the black plumes and then the blanket of white ash and then the nauseating waves of air for days after, the rank stink of rent steel and rotting flesh.

As for New York? Vigilance—that was the word on the street. That was the order. Be vigilant. But what did it mean to be vigilant? *Semper Vigilans*. You'd better know, because you were supposed to be it at all times. If you see something, say something. The city's nervous system ran on a code. Orange alert. Red alert. Tracey played into the system like the compliant citizen she was trained to be, reduced to stimulus/response. Tracey tried with the subway but she couldn't be underground. She started taking buses. Goddamn

buses. They were inefficient and made her late. But she had to see the world through windows, had to be near the yellow tape so she could press it at the first sign of mayhem and get the fuck out.

The American flag hung in every window. Stars and stripes stabbed into every lapel. Passing strangers on street corners, or sharing an stuffy elevator ride, Tracey looked into their eyes and asked them with her eyes, *If I look at you, if I show you my humanity right now, can I stop you from blowing yourself up? Or: If this top floor gets blown to kingdom come, will you hold hands with me?* She looked down at a stranger's hand and pictured its entangled with her own. She pictured their two hands, severed, fingers entwined, lying on a pile of smoking wreckage. She saw the first responders finding their mutilated remains, heard the heavy goods vehicle carting off the load to Fresh Kills, all in the time it took an elevator to climb four floors and the stranger to scratch his nose.

There'd been the thing with the shoe bombs and the nitroglycerin. There'd been the anthrax letters. Investigating, Tracey learned the word *cutaneous*. Cutaneous, subcutaneous, airborne: it could get you any of those ways. Weeks of tension and indigestion. Ash and aftermath. Couldn't look at headlines. While Tracey Knox was commuting to work in Soho and coming home to hide in her Tribeca basement bunker, workers ten blocks south were down there shoveling through the rubble. Firemen, policemen, EMTs, contractors and volunteers, picking through smoking wreckage. Deadly particles seeping into skin, latching onto lungs. Outside the Century 21, finding actual human remains. But then somehow, over time, the terror here was wrapped up, boxed, and shunted back to its place over there. Till Ground Zero became just another construction site. Till the whole thing just deteriorated into a cycle of hearsay and fear-whispers and rumors—a ticker tape terror feeding the twenty-four-hour newsroom beast. Till the rumor of war had hardened into the certainty of war. A war

that, fifteen years on, would know no end.

There's a longer history than the story she tells herself. But she still thinks back to that blue-sky morning. The day when, fresh out of Harvard, from the eighth floor of the architectural firm, she watched the towers burn.

Maybe Tracey feels at fault for the stories she has told. But the truth is, it didn't matter at all what she had or hadn't said all those years ago. All he had to be was an American citizen, clap eyes on those collapsing towers, and his mind would be made up. He would want to do something for his country. For his sister. For all the usual words. Freedom. Terror. These are laden words. Tracey doesn't get them, didn't then and doesn't now. She understands form and function, angles and AutoCAD, blueprints and markups. Geoff hadn't seen the things she saw. He lived in a different aftermath. For a while, he put off enlisting. There was that degree he'd decided he wanted after all. He was so close to not being a part of it. That scholarship, Tracey thought, had saved him. But through four years of university, through a trail of tailgates and chemistry lectures and test prep on Red Bull and Adderall, he never forgot the towers. After all, Geoff Knox went off to war.

*

The third tour was to be the last. It is three years since Tracey stood in that moon-drenched kitchen and heard the story of Geoff's death, and she can't shake that phone call. Elyssa—it's always Elyssa who's the first to know everything—calls to tell her sister the news.

So it's happened at last. Their brother has died in Afghanistan. The first thing Tracey thinks when she get the news is that it's not Geoff who's died. She doesn't think of her brother dying in Afghanistan. She can't. She thinks of her brother, alive, in Michigan. She thinks of him back from basic

training, planting green plastic army men on the Christmas tree for hide-and-seek the way they used to do as kids. The sniper was always the hardest to find, laying low in the bristles and garland, aiming his plastic gun at this ornament or that: the macaroni candy cane, the cradle in the manger. Or she thinks of her brother with skinned knees and gap teeth, climbing the crabapple tree in their old backyard. Or maybe she's remembering how he was the last time she saw him, at home on the couch at Thanksgiving, lean and muscled and laconic, eyes glazed after his second tour, dream-weaving his way through Call of Duty while she was trying to talk to him, you know, actually *talk* to him about his deployment. But she's hard-wired against accepting such bullshit, that her brother would actually go to Afghanistan and get himself killed, of all things.

All evidence to the contrary—in four days she'll be carrying that urn—and she refuses to believe Geoff's mortal. Won't buy that it's her little brother who died in the war. She's going to watch him get hitched to some cute, fake-tanned Michigan chick and raise a crop of cornfed kids. He'll settle down in some government job, spend his weekends with his buddies at the Joe watching the Red Wings lose, eat red meat and wipe his ass with *Foreign Affairs*. Such news—her brother dying in Afghanistan—doesn't register. And as Elyssa keeps talking, the details really don't line up. In this story, there are no notifying officers, no Army chaplain. There are ER doctors and paramedics. She distinctly hears the word *Detroit*.

And so when it turns out that her brother dies but it's not in Afghanistan, that Geoff never went back on that last tour like he said he was going to, when it turns out her brother dies less than a mile down the road from DMC Detroit Receiving Hospital, that he's died all right, but it's in a squat with festering walls and peeling linoleum floors, when it happens that Geoff's been kicked out of the Army and OD'ed on oxycodone, Tracey tries to to piece together the unbelievable

story she's hearing with the scenario she didn't even know to imagine. And none of it makes sense.

Tracey books the flights from JFK to Toronto, Toronto to Sault Ste. Marie, pronto. She pays way too much for the tickets but what is she going to do, it's her brother's funeral. She flies back to Sault Ste. Marie with Niels, who is Dutch and has never been to an American funeral before.

One day after the phone call, just before she flies home for the funeral, Tracey meets up with Danny, Geoff's war buddy, and gets a debriefing in a Queens sports bar en route to the airport. Tracey rings Danny on their way to JFK because he's local and he'd once given her his number and said, *If you ever need anything, give me a ring*. The place reeks of Windex and buffalo wings. Tracey and Niels sit next to Danny at the sticky bar under flickering screens. They bear hug and order a round.

"You didn't know about Geoff's TBI?"

Danny blinks at Tracey, then at Niels, dipping a wing in sauce and gnawing chicken from the bone. Know about it? Tracey doesn't even know what the letters mean. Danny has to spell it out for her. Traumatic Brain Injury.

"Is that like PTSD?" she asks, timid. It's hard to make herself heard over the din of the bar and the Eagles-Patriots game.

Danny talks, gesturing to his temple with the chicken bone. "After the blast. He was bleeding from the ears, man. It scrambled his brains. He was all messed up. They had to send him off to the unit."

Tracey doesn't get it. Danny washes down the gnawed meat with a Rolling Rock and tells all. Things that didn't make sense before start to make sense. Geoff's fuzzy details about the last deployment. Her letter, stamped *Return to Sender*. And the

discharge, unearned in Danny's humble opinion, of Other Than Honorable. Tracey feels her face flush. She hasn't touched her Jack and Coke. Danny, wide eyed, looks from Tracey to Niels, Niels back to Tracey.

"You don't know he spent that time on a wounded warrior unit?"

"Geoff's Humvee *got hit with an IED* and he didn't tell you?"

Well, and what if he didn't? That was always Geoff's way. If he was sick, he wouldn't admit it. Wanted to take care of himself, always did, didn't cry even when he was six and Tracey, who'd more or less brought him up, went off to college. And here's the big sister, not one but two higher degrees. Graduates from Michigan with honors, goes off to Harvard and can't tell when her own brother is lying about his last deployment. But why would Geoff do that that to her, to all of them? Who had he been trying to save?

Trace feels sick so they leave the bar early. They hail a cab on the parkway to take them to the airport. Niels loads her luggage in the trunk. Tracey's eyes are hot with rage. The driver rollercoasters them to the terminal, and all Tracey can think about is their mom. Geoff's not going to have the military burial, that's one thing. Their mom had been hysterical about him going off to war in the first place, said she had a premonition. Now the premonition's come true, so good luck with that anxiety disorder. At JFK Tracey pushes her purse down the conveyer belt, is patted down by TSA, goes with Niels to the gate. There's that sense of being cheated. There's that Other Than Honorable. The discharge hung Geoff out to dry, now it's going to leave their mom without any benefits. Mom's on disability, their stepdad's a barely functioning alcoholic, and their dad, their real dad, oblivious in Grand Rapids with his new wife, will be no help at all. Remember when their mom was a successful marine biologist? Remember when Geoff was still alive? Tracey does. That life. What is it now but history?

At the gate, Tracey goes online to find out what's she's missing. She learns a lot of really awful vocabulary in the process, like the word *repatriate*, but she does gain some intel. It turns out when you take the whole foreign war component out of it the whole thing can be over and done in a lot faster than you imagine. The body didn't die in Afghanistan, so it doesn't have to be repatriated, it doesn't have to be flown into Dover on a military plane. A quick trip in a fast ambulance to the ER of DMC Detroit Receiving Hospital doesn't cost as much, and it's much quicker. You can place a notice in the paper days later of the general death and keep details quiet. All you have to say is "in a private ceremony" and everyone has to respect that. They won't ask, you don't tell. Except when it's your best friend involved, and you happen to lob her a fib. Then it gets complicated.

He wished to be cremated, so they honored his wishes.

She'd been distraught at the sight of the urn. Who wouldn't be? She'd always imagined it as an elegant container, a silver goblet with a name engraved, displayed on a mantelpiece. This, though, was decidedly not that. This had been an industrial plastic tub stamped on one side *Detroit Crematorium* in an inelegant sans serif. The plastic lid screwed on and off. It looked like it held weed killer.

There'd been debate after the ceremony about what to do with the ashes. This was the Knoxes. Of course there was debate. The whole thing was ghoulish, Geoff's body stashed into a Ziploc in the *Detroit Crematorium* tub, but Tracey had wanted to give him the honors he deserved. And so the day before she'd flown back to New York, Tracey had unscrewed the lid and made off with a scoop of her brother's ashes. Is this the story she is supposed to be telling Connie over room service mocktails?

Because there's the story Tracey told Constance, the story she'd told all her friends. The one about the military burial,

about Geoff dying in the goddamn war. And here is Tracey Knox, anniversary number three, stationed for two days in hallowed DC. From the Hampton Inn, Tracey Google Maps the directions: 2.3 miles from that cemetery. That great green ground of tended graves. She ought to do something. She ought to lay it to rest.

*

It's bone-chill weather, mid-November. Week before Thanksgiving. Tracey is stalking the grounds near Washington Mall alone. She gets to thinking about monuments. You can't avoid it. Here, Lincoln parked in an armchair on that grand staircase. There, that obscene obelisk, rising up out of the ground like Mother Earth with a concrete hard-on. Tracey takes it in, drinking coffee from a to-go cup, her hands in mittens. A couple of people with clipboards and smiles, college kids, come at Tracey on the curvilinear walkway wrapped in bright red smocks that say *Save the Children*. Tracey dodges them, staring at her feet as she hurries past. Does she have a few minutes today for saving children? It would seem not. She cannot save children. She couldn't even take care of her little brother, the one child that had ever been entrusted to her. She let him go into that war. Is the people in the red smocks' plan to not let the children go fight wars in foreign countries? Because maybe she'd have a few minutes for that.

Tracey pitches her coffee in the trash and keeps walking, hands in her pockets. There's the packet of ash in her right pocket. She feels its uneven lumps through her mittens. She thinks maybe she'll find another Knox, a namesake, and scatter the dust there. But so far, no Knoxes, and the mission's making her sweat.

Tracey dreams, as she walks, about designing a monument for Geoff. Or no, monument isn't the right word. A memorial. She thinks back to her architecture school days and calls up a quote from Lewis Mumford. "The more shaky the institution, the

more solid the monument." So, a memorial then. She can imagine it. There's a field lit in a haze. Lemon-colored light. Reeds and grass and stems. There's a crop of pink and red poppies, swaying and bending. She'd call it "The Poppy Field." It would be a vast stretch of land designed so you could walk through it. No sign would tell you not to touch the flowers or not to step certain places. You could press the velvet-soft petals of the poppies to your cheek. Or you could stand in the middle of the field and let the wind blow through your hair. You could breathe in the scent of earth, of sweet prairie grass and Queen Anne's lace. There would be no bodies buried underground. There would be no bodies at all, no ash, and no plaque to tell you what to think about. No why, no when, no who.

What can she say about the evenly spaced rows, the dignified engravings, the markers of moral purpose and patriotism? She can only wonder: Where is my brother? Where was I for him? She is insurgent milling through the manicured lawns. As she walks, she thinks about the memorial she wants to design, the one with the poppy field, and thinks it shouldn't be called "The Poppy Field." It should be called "Old Wounds."

Tracey hadn't meant to tell Constance, those years ago, an untrue story about her brother's death. It had started as a story Tracey was telling to herself, a story she could use to comfort herself with, a story that he had died for a just cause. She wasn't thinking when she typed it into a screen and hit send, and then the whole story had gotten out of hand. Tracey doesn't know how to say it. That she never flew to DC for the funeral. That there had been no honors, no gun salute. That they'd scattered most of her brother's ashes in Chippewa County into the St. Marys River between Michigan and Canada. All Tracey knows is, she didn't tell the real story right away, and at some point—who knows when?—it had become too late. Connie, who has planned the whole weekend, has carved out a grave-shaped space into Sunday, assuming Tracey will

want to use the time to visit her brother's grave in Arlington National Cemetery. And who is Tracey to say that Geoff is not buried there?

That morning, Connie had asked if Tracey wanted company when she went to visit "the grave." Now, coming back into the hotel room, cheeks flushed from the cold, it's all Tracey can do is turn to her best friend and say, "Geoff's not here, Connie." It's her attempt to come clean, and Connie misses it entirely. She thinks Tracey is being figurative, that it's something spiritual. So close to telling the truth, Tracey lets the confession drop. She hangs her coat from the plywood hanger where it swings, the packet of ash still sitting in her right coat pocket.

That night, Tracey crawls into the hard bed and snaps on the bedside light. She takes it out of its drawer, the little green Gideon's Bible. But all she's thinking about as she rifles through the tissue-thin pages is Geoff's copy of *The Art of War* and how she'd claimed it as her own. Geoff's secondhand paperback copy, underlined and dog-eared, is the closest she's come to his idea of a theology. The book's not with her. She hears Connie's breathing deepen. Tracey puts down Gideon and opens her laptop. She opens a browser tab and searches Geoff's username until she finds what she's looking for. No graphics, no explosions, just a careful set of instructions. She reads through the list for "Suffer with Me."

Throw a knife at the guard at the post.

Spam the FIRE button when Woods climbs to the first guard post.

Survive enemy RPG blast which causes collateral damage (to buildings).

Her tasks, here, are clear. Destroy enemy chopper with mortar round. Destroy tank with anti-tank mine. Her eye scrolls down to the last lines.

Kill 8 enemies in the clinic.

Collect all Intel.

Do not die.

From *The Art of War* to Call of Duty, military theory boiled down to one order: Do not die.

And if you do?

Tracey dips her head, plugs in the headphones, goes back down into the Black Ops forest.

*

“All Hunter victors, this is Sergeant Foley. Prepare to engage. We’re taking sniper fire from multiple directions.”

“Prepare to engage, we’re going in! Spin it up!”

The screen is flecked with blurs and drops of crimson. It’s an ambush. She moves forward but with difficulty. The explosions now have ceased to be controlled, now she surges forward with a deep nausea through the exploding mortar and shrapnel. Tracey hears the breath of the soldier come in hard, heavy bursts, so intense she can’t tell if it’s the soldier breathing or if it’s her. A message flashes on the screen: “You are Hurt. Get to cover.” The hands in front of her, her hands, Geoff’s hands, stay set on the gun as they stumble deliriously through the wreckage.

They are under sniper fire. She sees clothes and rags draped on a clothes line, a banner on which something is written in Arabic. Her head jars with every lurch. It feels like she is under fire from the very infrastructure. Her hands don’t leave the rifle. She falls into an alley between a chain-link fence and a corrugated steel shed. The sky is a smudge of smoke and rifle fire, the tracers of bullets garlanding the background. It feels like being drunk, stumbling to find a doorway she

cannot find. Gunfire goes off but it's a muted spray. She can hear Sergeant Foley screaming directions through a walkie-talkie but she can't move her mouth to answer. Breathe. Breathe. The message flashes again, small, insistent: "You are Hurt. Get to cover." Geoff does not get to cover. Tracey is spinning with him, stumbling each inch forward. She cannot rescue him, cannot get him to cover. The screen is streaked with fog, her eyes stung with shattered glass, drops of crimson, this is the way the world ends, not with a bang but—

"Tracey."

Tracers, rocket launchers. Connie is saying her name. How long has she been saying it? How long has Tracey been holed up in this hotel room in DC with her pregnant friend? There is nowhere to go. Her neck is clammy with sweat, her heartbeat going like mad, its pulse wild and lone and unmeasured. The screen is flashing but the sound no longer fills her ears. A desert stretches up to her feet, all the way up to the dull upholstery of the olive-colored couch, the beige wallpaper, the styrofoam coffee cups. Her hands, shaking. It would be so easy to snap the laptop shut, but she can't bring her hands to do it. She's still waiting for orders.

Photo Credit: [the yes man](#)

New Poetry by Randy Brown



PHOTO:

Marie-Lan

Nguyen. Bust

of Homer

Toward an understanding of war and poetry, told (mostly) in aphorisms

Poetry is the long war of narrative.

Poetry, like history, is subjective.

If journalism is the first draft of history, poetry is the last scrap.

Poets set the stage of victory. Just ask Homer: Who won the ball game?

Do not make fun of war poets. A war poet will cut you.

War is hell. Poetry is easier to read. But each takes time.

Any war poem is a final message home.

Poetry can survive fragmentation. Irradiation. Ignorance.

Poetry can cheat death. Poetry has all the time in the world. Poetry will outlast us all.

Poetry is a cockroach.

“History does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme.”—Mark Twain

“Twain didn’t actually say that.”—John Robert Colombo

John Robert Colombo is a poet.

Notes: While John Robert Colombo incorporated the popular “history rhymes” quotation—which he then attributed to Mark Twain— into his 1970 work, “A Said Poem,” he later privately reported he was uncertain of its origins. And, despite the poetic construction here, Colombo himself never said, “Twain didn’t actually say that.”

In an 1874 introduction to “The Gilded Age: A Tale of To-Day,” co-written with Charles Dudley Warner, Twain apparently did say, “History never repeats itself, but the Kaleidoscopic combinations of the pictured present often seem to be constructed out of the broken fragments of antique legends.”

History prefers Colombo’s version. So do I.



PHOTO: Spc. Leslie Goble,
U.S. Army. A soldier peeks
out of the “Death Star.”
The outpost overlooks
Combat Outpost Najil and is
manned by soldiers 24 hours
a day.

the bottlefall at COP Najil

in summer sun, a plastic waterfall cascades,
the emptied residue of our Afghan brothers
encamped along the ridge just across from the fortress
we call the Death Star.

above and below, a Scout Weapons Team buzzes up
and down the valley, TIE fighters searching for a truck
full of fertilizer, a bomb waiting for us
to happen.

we have taught the Afghans well: That water
comes only in bottles. That cowboys don't
care for the desert. That our brand of war
is sustainable.

Notes: The acronym "COP," pronounced "kahp," stands for "Combat Outpost." A "TIE fighter" is a fictional spacecraft—one that is powered by "Twin Ion Engines"—that first appeared in the 1977 movie "Star Wars."

the homecoming game, a war sonnet



PHOTO: Jessica Blanton. Navy Petty Officer Jeff Howard surprises his mother and grandmother at a Falcons Preseason Game at the Georgia Dome. Petty Officer Howard's mother,

Tina, thought he was still
in Afghanistan. DVIDS
worked with the Falcons to
coordinate the emotional
homecoming.

Friends and countrymen, lend us your eyes
–the half-time tribute our G.I.s deserve!
For patriots' love, a gladiatorial surprise:
one family's tears on your behalf observe!
Our man behind curtains will soon appear
to his kids and young hot wife transported
from Afghanistan to home so dear,
their kiss upon a Jumbotron distorted!
Then, attend these soapful sponsored messages:
Your focus on this spectacle so pure
will wash your laundries and your sins in stages
gentle, scent-free, and all-temperature!

For we, about to cry, salute our troops–
their sacrifice played in commercial loops.

three tanka from Des Moines,

Iowa

Spring 2016

1.



PHOTO: Spc. Emily Walter, U.S. Army. Cadets file into a Chinook helicopter to begin the Ranger Challenge, Nov. 3 at Camp Dodge, Iowa. The challenge consists of several tactical training events that test the soldiers' physical and mental capabilities.

A flock of Black Hawks

thudding through our barren trees

announces March drill.

In springtime, comes the fighting,

but we wait for the Chinook.

2.

With ceremony,

Old Man assembles his troops.

It is Mother's Day;

sons and daughters are leaving
in order to sustain war.

3.

Conex boxes stacked
in the Starbucks parking lot
bring back memories
of making war and coffee.
I miss the old neighborhood.

Randy “Sherpa” Brown embedded with his former Iowa Army National Guard unit as a civilian journalist in Afghanistan, May-June 2011. He authored the poetry collection *Welcome to FOB Haiku: War Poems from Inside the Wire* (Middle West Press, 2015). His work has appeared widely in literary print and online publications. As “Charlie Sherpa,” he blogs about military culture at: www.redbullrising.com.

Hierarchy and Americans, A Long Love Affair

We have leaders, in the USA, it's always been that way. I don't believe in some magical, fairyland communal or egalitarian America that was free from hierarchy. The settlers who occupied the land through Siberia and Asia did so in tribal societies some of which were patriarchies, and some of

which were matriarchies. The invading Europeans all arrived from their own feudal or quasi-democratic traditions—they were not free from the assumptions or rules of their parents or grandparents, though they may have loathed them.

The original American settlers – whether the Native Americans or the Europeans – were all people who called someone master, and elevated that person above the rest, for a variety of reasons. They had to, in order to survive.

Even so, after several generations of European immigrants arrived in the late 18th century, and following certain intellectual innovations in political and moral thought in Europe, a choice was made. Many of the colonists decided to create a new system of government, based on the idea that white, male humans all had some inherent dignity apart from their financial responsibilities. While that dignity has often been couched in financial terms, the original statement of human rights—*life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness*—is idealistic and totally (by luck or design) abstract.

Those white men revolted against their political masters, the kingdom of Great Britain. They fought British soldiers, German mercenaries, and neighbors who disagreed with them. With the help of France, the pro-humanism white supremacist European colonists won, and the United States of America was born.

Since then, people have extrapolated a great many things from that original idea about human dignity—that it should apply to non-white people, and also that it should apply to women. These notions seem self-evident to most today, but were

not at the time. Every one of those social revelations (black humans are entitled to these rights, female humans are entitled to these rights, etc.) depends on a single, overwhelming and revolutionary idea: that government owes something to the people it serves, because it *is* the people it serves.

In the US, we have yet to reach even an approximation of that ideal. One reason behind this inability to think or view government as belonging to the people is that in word and thought, we consistently place ourselves below elected political representatives.

This problem comes down to an infatuation with hierarchy. No single factor—not the electoral college, not gerrymandering, not money in politics—is more dangerous or damaging to democracy than the tolerance for giving titles and honorifics to people who serve as elected or appointed officials in whatever it is we call the American democratic experiment. “Secretary Clinton,” “President Trump,” “Senator Cotton,” “The Honorable Clarence Thomas.” Our use of titles—our enthusiastic desire to label and categorize damns us as authoritarian collaborators, as servile scum to be used and abused at any and every opportunity.

And abuse by the authorities is precisely what happens in America, routinely. Our elected leadership and their political appointees use and harm us. Who can blame them? We tell them that they’re powerful, and that exploitation is okay. Not just okay: good.

If we want to reform our system, the first thing to do is to strip every politician of their title. Him, her, they – the titles must go. In their place, we should mandate that they be addressed using insulting and offensive nicknames, the more humiliating the better, to be used whenever and wherever possible. The potential criticism that this is what Trump did to be elected might be countered by pointing out that now that he has become elected, he would be subjected to precisely the same obligatory disrespect he has encouraged, which seems like something he doesn't like.

More precisely, elected and appointed citizens with political power, for their part – members of Congress, judges, the President, members of the Presidential cabinet—should address every U.S. citizen as “sir” or “ma’am.” They must also say, upon greeting an American citizen: “you’re stronger, smarter, and more beautiful/handsome than I am. Because I am weak and stupid and look like shit, like actual dogshit.” If they fail to say this, it should be legal and necessary to kick them—not too hard, but not soft, either. In the ass—like they are a dog, that has annoyed you. When doing so, you (the citizen) must say something like “I’m kicking you with my foot instead of slapping you because one uses one's foot to kick a dog or some other unclean thing. I don’t want to get my hand filthy by touching you.” Elected representatives should address felons convicted of brutal and appalling crimes as “brother” or “sister.” Nonviolent felons should be addressed as “sir” or “ma’am.”

Elected representatives should be on a similar social plane as felons. If you don’t agree with me, you’re a coward, a fool, a slave, and you’re destroying our democracy.

Why do our elected representatives need titles? What does it do for them? Is it necessary to remind them that they have power, or responsibility? No, that's a silly argument, obviously they have power and responsibility. They know that. What they don't know is that the power and responsibility is totally, completely contingent on their service to citizens. They forget this in the way that they speak to us, in the way that they live, in the influence they wield. They forget this, living in a democratic society, by insisting (institutionally, officially, or personally) that they be addressed by some form of title. That they believe honor or respect is their *due* as a Senator or Cabinet Member.

Absurd, untrue, obscene.

People in the military understand that they serve the country—they swear oaths to the same. They address civilians as “sir” and “ma’am” in part because doing so preserves the essential hierarchy of violence in America—citizens are above soldiers, politically and socially, and should be. In turn, soldiers are given some tangible benefits, while (in most practical terms) being treated like dogs, made to wear silly uniforms, and subjected to the real prospect of a quick death. We can do the same for elected and appointed representatives, but as the consequences are so much greater for the politicians who can do things like declare war or authorize military intervention, those politicians should be treated with accordingly less respect than soldiers.

I say “soldiers” because the proliferation of titles for different types of soldiers—“marines,” “sailors,” airmen” “SEALs” and so forth is more of this servile and appalling, totally inappropriate impulse to set apart and above. If

you're in the military, you're a soldier. People who believe otherwise are willing idiots at best, and dangerous radicals at best, attempting to subvert and destroy democracy. Stop using any word other than "soldier," immediately.

Furthermore, as much as Americans secretly despise soldiers—they do, unarguably, despise them, passionately and secretly, as all great passions are secret passions—soldiers are still offered a measure of public respect. Soldiers offer to die, which is pretty generous of them, considering, so they get monuments and speeches. Politicians never offer to die for their country, although we'd all be better off if most of them did—not offer, die, I mean—so we should give none of the tongue-in-cheek, superficial and almost entirely bogus support we say we give to "the troops" to politicians.

"Shitheel" or "Shit-for-brains" would be a good title for people serving in Congress. "Hey Shit-for-brains Cotton. You really have Shit-for-brains." Whether you agree with Tom Cotton's politics or not (I don't, but that's beside the point), you see the benefit. He remembers that in spite of his representing a constituency, it's everyone's duty to tell him what a total, complete, utter disgrace he is for being in politics. If you don't like my example of Tom Cotton, don't worry, it applies equally to Tammy Duckworth, someone for whom I have a great deal of respect, whose politics are 100% diametrically opposed to Cotton's. Basically, pick someone in Congress today—anyone. It works.

Now, I don't want to peg the title to a specific phrase—"Shit-for-brains" is insulting now, but give it a couple years and people would be trying to make it into a mark of honor or distinction. Really, people in Congress should just be called

whatever you call a drunken, stupid, lying, criminal sack of decrepitude. Today it's "shit-for-brains," but tomorrow it could be something totally different.

The president would have a worse title, because the president has more power than any single congressperson. When addressing Congress, however, the president would obviously say "brothers" or "comrades" or "collectively, my equal."

People who work for Congressmen and Congresswomen, as well as those working for a president's cabinet or the President should not be addressed under any circumstances. They should be ignored, and if anyone hears them speaking, they should be kicked and called a dog, and otherwise belittled. If any of these people acquire prominence simply by working with or for a powerful person—Clinton's aide Huma Abedin comes to mind as an excellent example of this, as do all of Trump's children and Obama's former Chief of Staff, Rahm Emmanuel—they can be kicked on sight. What happens later in their career does not matter, so that Rahm Emmanuel's becoming Mayor of Chicago does not mean he's suddenly immune to being kicked, or having voting-age citizens scream "you shit, you fucking worthless piece of shit, I own you" while kicking him, so close to Emmanuel that spit flies off their mouth and onto his face—no, that just means now he's Mayor of Chicago, but also these earlier bad things are still happening to him.

Caveat: as a politician you can't hit back or say anything while being kicked or screamed at except "I'm sorry, you're right citizen, I'm sorry." And it better fucking sound sincere.

Some Bullshit Counterarguments, Easily Dismissed

Here are some counterarguments against my wise scheme. Firstly, there could be concern that people elected or appointed to leadership positions would get depressed by getting called bad names or kicked, and do a worse job—especially without any positive reinforcement. I would point out that in the military, especially during training, I and every other soldier in training were subjected to every horrible name one can imagine and worse, and made to know both that we had no right to expect anything, but also that what we were doing was very important. What I saw in training and at the unit level, on a tactical level, was that the very best people did not care about what they were called, and worked very hard to earn the respect of their peers. Only when you got away from that small, personal level, only when you left “the tribe” did things begin to break down, did rank and tabs or awards become more important than actions. In any case, I did not see verbal abuse as dissuading good people from working hard—in fact, it seemed like a stimulant.

Another counterargument could be that using vile language to describe American leadership would encourage citizens to do actual violence to them, or to murder them. This is an excellent point, but not, I think, a counterargument. On the contrary, I believe that if a clever human like Hillary Clinton had been called “Shit-for-brains” or “garbage-taint-scumheart” or whatever else people wanted instead of “Madam Secretary,” it could have helped guide her political evolution in a more productive direction than the trashcan of history, where she and her philosophy have ended up. Ditto Donald Trump, obviously.

In other words, the violence of words would signal in plain language to officials that, in fact, they were, at all times, very close to their end, and that, [like the character of Nick the Greek in Lock Stock and Two Smoking Barrels](#), they'd have to work very, very hard to avoid that actual (rather than threatened) end.

Another criticism could be that this practice or habit would lead to an increase in violence in society overall, and a desire to use harmful language in general. I don't think this is a valid criticism, because people tend not to enjoy using violence under any circumstances—violence is profoundly unsettling. People who love hierarchy want us to believe that the alternative to hierarchy is violence, but of course that assertion is as hypothetical as the assertion that communism is practical. The requirement to describe elected leadership and their political representatives as “Shit-for-brains” or “Shit-soul” or “Stupid-Fascist-Fuckup-Fucker” would not suddenly result in many people cursing in public all the time. Rather, it would serve as a kind of caution to everyone living in the society: but for the grace of god and hubris, there go I. Furthermore, human decency would protect those elected leaders who truly worked for the people from the worst outrages. Politicians would see that working for the *good* rather than for each other or themselves would result in ameliorated negative interactions. Rather than curse at them in public or in private, citizens would just try to ignore interacting with them in general, so as not to hurt their feelings or stop the good work they were doing. This would only happen with the best of them, though. The sign of a great leader would be that people only grudgingly (rather than enthusiastically) made remarks that in other circumstances would be slanderous about their person and personal lives. Good leaders would be allowed to do their good work.

A final counterargument would be that this situation would dissuade people from getting into politics. I disagree—I think it would dissuade all but the most sturdy people from getting into politics, people who do not depend on titles and honorifics to describe their authority as do our cousins in Europe or Asia or Africa. If you don't mind getting called every horrible, insulting phrase under the sun—if you don't mind hearing your mother and father and sister and brother and wife and children abused in the most horrifying, borderline criminal, graphic detail imaginable, politics shouldn't be for you. If you want someone to address you as “Ambassador such-and-such” or “Secretary so-and-so” or “Mr./Mrs. President,” there are many other countries in the world that will accommodate this type of (to my American thinking) nauseating pander: this should not be how we do things in America. Bowing and scraping and elevating the most servile and precious, the most proud among us to positions of leadership—it is below us, individually and collectively.

Let's choose instead to call our elected leadership and their political appointees what they are: shit-for-brains, asshole-grease. Down with hierarchy, up with democracy!

Wrath of UCMJ: Against Crushing Bowe Bergdahl

Americans have become jaded by injustice. Wealthy and elitist citizens like Robert Durst and John du Pont bully, rape, and kill their way through life like Godzillas, law enforcement

seemingly powerless to stop or even slow them. Meanwhile, poverty-stricken communities are treated like hostile territory, and then get to watch as their citizens are routinely treated worse than we treated Afghan Taliban sympathizers on combat patrols. It goes beyond simple racism, too—the recent hit series [Making a Murderer](#) features an impoverished white man systematically framed and—frankly—fucked over by both the local law enforcement community and its criminal justice system. And the success of podcast *Serial*'s first season owed as much to its producers' skill as to a boundless cultural appetite for true crime stories where the criminal is the justice system. Enter the case of Bowe Bergdahl.

In late December, 2015, the Army announced that Bowe Bergdahl would face charges of desertion and “misbehavior in the face of the enemy” during a Court-Martial. The stakes are high—Bergdahl faces Dishonorable Discharge (loss of money and benefits) and a lot of prison time. Is hanging Bergdahl up by his toes the right move? While I believe he's guilty, and think he's a snake who deserved the misery he endured when he chose to walk off-post in 2009, I don't believe the Uniformed Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) should destroy Bergdahl. Actually, although every time he speaks on *Serial* I hope the Court-Martial panel finds him guilty and maxes his punishment, upon reflection, and considering the broader situation with how justice works in the military and society, I conclude that the court should go easy on Bergdahl. Justice and mercy are rarely the same. There's precedent for military mercy, though, and in an unusual place for an institution dedicated to enforcing strict standards for its leaders: General Officers.



I was a fan of General David Petraeus, and have positive personal feelings toward him as a

leader. His punishment for divulging sensitive information was either a great precedent for mercy or a travesty of justice

What happened in March of 2015 is the most prominent example of this phenomenon that I can remember. General (retired) David Petraeus was offered a plea-deal to avoid prison time for [allowing his biographer unfettered and unauthorized access to classified material](#) (in espionage terms, a potential “honey pot” scheme). Whether one respects Petraeus, the work he did in the military and afterward as Director of the CIA, it’s difficult to see how his crime could warrant such light punishment, especially given the sentence delivered to Chelsea Manning. Petraeus received what was, by all accounts, a slap on the wrist. This type of approach is normal when it comes to higher ranking officers found guilty of misconduct.

Views on Bergdahl and his legal predicament metastasized in 2014, mostly for political reasons. For conservatives, the trading of five Taliban was tantamount to Chamberlain ceding the Sudetenland to Hitler. To Progressives, getting Bergdahl back was an act of mercy. Then, [members of Bergdahl’s unit](#) (veterans and active duty) broke their silence, condemning him as a traitor and deserter, and the discussion focused on the deaths and injuries Bergdahl’s act caused. Obama walked away from what he thought had been a political triumph with egg on his face, while an angry lynch mob clamored for the firing squad or the hangman.

A couple years ago my old Brigade Commander in the 173rd, then-Colonel James H. Johnson, III, [lost a rank and was forced to retire \(keeping all of his benefits\)](#) after furnishing his Iraqi lover’s father with tens of thousands of dollars of contracts, engaging in bigamy, and some [other hanky-panky](#) that

would actually be hilarious if it hadn't happened in real life.

Because the argument over what should or shouldn't happen to Bergdahl has become intensely politicized if you're a non-vet, and personal if you're a veteran of Afghanistan (and the closer you get in time and in space to the corner of Paktika Province, where Bergdahl deserted, the more personal and emotional it becomes), it might seem like this is one of those scenarios where there is no answer – perfectly suited for adjudication by justice. But there is an answer, and a solution. Here's how this needs to go down.

To begin with – it was good to get Bergdahl back. Regardless of his actions, he's an American soldier, and the military doesn't (and shouldn't) let its members languish in prison – Afghan, Iranian, Mexican, wherever. Trading five or five hundred Taliban to get Bergdahl back was worth it. By the numbers, [we've been absolutely destroying the Taliban since 2001](#) – I can confirm that this is what I saw on both of my deployments to Afghanistan, 2007-08 to Paktika Province, and 2010-11 to Kunduz Province, Taliban getting bombed, shelled, mortared, and machinegunned when they stupidly came close enough to one of our forts, blundered into one of our ambushes, or blunderingly ambushed us when we had jets, artillery, or helicopters close by (as good commanders almost always did).

I sympathize with people who expressed fear that the 5 released Taliban would join up with ISIS or the Taliban or some other rag-tag group of fighters that could not withstand a single day against the concentrated power of America's military. The Taliban and ISIS seem scary, and do horrible things in places that are far away. To those [conservatives](#) who live in constant terror that one of these anally fed five early-2001 former Taliban commanders, hungry for vengeance, will track them down and wage jihad on their patio: don't worry! Those Taliban are way more scared of you than you are

of them. They're horrible shots. And if we ever want to kill them, we can. The trade to get Bergdahl back is not more reason to hate the soldier, even if it seems [we could have got him back for less](#).

It was good for us to retrieve Bergdahl. But the military has placed itself in a bind. If Bergdahl doesn't receive serious punishment, some say, his trial risks turning UCMJ into farce.



Bowe Bergdahl Heroically
Eats Food in the Captivity
He Heroically Heroed
Himself Into

As painful as it will be for veterans to hear, especially those personally invested in his adjudication, he should be allowed to separate with benefits, owing to the unusual and special nature of his case, and the fact that he's quite clearly out of his mind and always has been. The most important jury—the jury that really matters (members of the military community) already *knows* that Bergdahl's a deserter, a coward, and a man with no honor. That is already a fact, based on the facts as reported in venues like *The New York Times* as well as Bergdahl's own testimony on *Serial's* second season (although subsequent episodes reveal that Sarah Koenig believes that Bergdahl's attempts to escape from the Taliban are exculpatory and mean that he was heroic rather than cowardly, this well-intentioned but ultimately hypothetical argument is not compelling). Bergdahl admits (to an opportunistic Hollywood producer) during *Serial's* first episode that part of his motivation in leaving OP Mest was to indulge a narcissistic fantasy with himself as a cinematic protagonist on par with Jason Bourne. Bergdahl wasn't a posturing intellectual who (as it turned out) created far more problems than he resolved—he was crazy. And the military never should have let him wear a uniform.

Bergdahl should keep his benefits, lose his rank (he is not a sergeant, and his appearing as such dishonors all non-commissioned officers), and face a fine and reprimand, as did [Brigadier General Jeff Sinclair](#) (who admitted to having mistreated a subordinate with whom he claimed he was having a consensual sexual relationship). This will be bad for Bergdahl, but good for the military. After all, he's immediately recognizable to almost everyone in the military-veteran community—every time he were to enter a VA clinic or hospital, he'd face a stony silence and turned backs. He is a pariah. The best thing that the military can do is make that most powerful of gestures—conditional mercy. *Something* must be done, nobody who's served would argue that he should be released from his choice scot-free, this is an absurd and childish claim. But what? Given the way the military handles high-ranking officer misbehavior, what should be done with Bergdahl isn't much.

The military of today uses rules that were designed for a draft military, where desertion was (and remains – see Afghanistan's military's problems with desertion) a major issue. For America's volunteer military, composed of ([mostly](#)) healthy young men and women, the problem with many young soldiers is keeping them engaged while they're *not* in dangerous areas. Restraining action is very different from *compelling* it – and the stories that infantrymen tell themselves and each other are how to get the Medal of Honor, not how to shirk or avoid the mad minute. I don't know about Iraq, I was never there, but in Afghanistan, it was all about getting out and after the enemy as much as possible. Our military should not feel threatened by desertion – the idea of honorable service among soldiers is sufficient to compel good behavior. In other words, people serve because they want to, not because they're afraid of punishment, as they were in the past. Unless, of course, those soldiers are unhinged, as Bergdahl clearly was (and is).

Apart from the military not needing to enforce this archaic rule about desertion and misbehavior (although it seems prudent to keep the rules on the books) because soldiers and veterans will enforce it anyway as a matter of course, the best reason not to punish Bergdahl severely is the one I've been making throughout, which is that the military rarely does so in a meaningful way when it comes to its officer leadership. A great deal has been made of how Bergdahl may have been responsible for the deaths of those searching for him, and for endangering the mission in Afghanistan. So let's take the case of the Air Force Major General Carey, in charge of 450 ground nuclear missiles, or about 100 times what it would take to kick World War III off in style. What happened when (I could not make this up if I wanted to) he started drinking heavily, fraternized with two "suspicious women," and ended up on a [three-day bender](#) while on an official trip to Moscow in 2012? What happened to the guy who was casual around the apocalypse?

He was removed from his position, reprimanded, and moved to other positions of responsibility. No loss of rank, no fine. Just—a little hangover.

If we want to be real about justice in the military, in America, it's time to stop jumping at every opportunity to squash people whose lives are already miserable, and can only be made marginally worse. It's time to treat ourselves more seriously, and use the rules equally—not to pretend that money or power or influence can keep us from that ultimate justice, which is death in a casual and uncaring universe. Bergdahl has already suffered enough, and will suffer more without the military lifting a finger. He's a marked man, now—he will never be able to live a life free of fear that one of his comrades won't track him down and beat him, or worse. Moreover, a brotherhood of which he desperately wanted to be a part has forever turned its back on him. Why rub salt in the wound? Give him an OTH discharge, treat him for the wounds he

incurred in Taliban captivity, tighten up recruiting standards, and be done with it. That's essentially what's already been done with so many General Officers. Time to show a little mercy to the common man, even if the common man happens to be a one-of-a-kind nut-job like Bowe Bergdahl.

The Racist Arguments For, Against Gun Control

Gun violence is deeply entrenched in America. Chances are, if you've spent any time outside the Upper East Side of Manhattan in the last 30 years, you've been touched by gun violence personally—someone you've met or know personally has been hurt or killed by guns. It's a problem that affects us all.

It's also a complicated problem, in the sense that the two groups of people who are most enthusiastic about the issue are the ones making certain that nothing happens to change the status quo. On the one hand, you have on the right the numerous NRA-member, 2nd Amendment-quoting survivalists, who think that far from the US needing gun control, what the US needs is more guns, everywhere. These people are dangerous. On the other hand, you have a smaller but equally vocal group of people on the left—the precious, very-well educated shop-at-Whole-Foods-for-their-vanity-illness types—who think that the only people who should have guns are the police and the military. These people are dangerous.

And both groups may be racist.

The 2nd Amendment, which provides for a “well regulated militia” was written with several things in mind. One was an organic, community-level response to attacks by hostile states

and nations. Another was attacks on colonists at the peripheries of U.S. territories by Native Americans (then called "Indians" or "Natives") who often disputed settlements (for understandable reasons). Another was the prospect of a tyrannical government arising in America itself—a guarantee provided to each State against the possibility of a large entity destroying the small, at a time when that seemed more plausible and immediate than it does today.

One of the most important considerations at the time, well documented in other publications, was the fear that slaves would gain access to guns, enabling them to organize a rebellion. As time went on, this concern diminished in the North (where they did away with slavery and indentured servitude in favor of more benign methods of employment, such as wage slavery and the systematic exploitation of immigrants in factories). Meanwhile, demographics made the problem (from the politically-dominant White population's perspective) much more immediate in the South. There's a fairly convincing argument to be made that the tradition and legacy of gun ownership in the South is tied directly to fear of a massive racial uprising.

So when the NRA people say they want guns to protect themselves, they're saying they want guns so they can *feel safe*. The legacy of that feeling of safety in the South is tied directly to slavery, and the worry that a large group of angry black people—dslaves, or, in today's parlance, former slaves / criminals / thugs—would come after white people. The only way to protect oneself from that fear—the only way to be *safe*, according to this way of thinking—is to own guns.

On the extreme of the progressive position, the urban, largely northern "nobody should have guns except the military and the police" advocates of gun control, racism is more benign, but based on the realities of life-as-it-is, undeniably present. This group, typified by intellectuals like *The New Yorker's* Adam Gopnik are operating on the same basic assumptions as

their southern and Midwestern countrymen—they want to be *safe*—and the best way to be safe from gun violence, according to this small but vocal group, is to take all the guns off the street, absolutely prohibit them from personal use, and only permit them to the military and police.

While the military is about as white as the population – the combat branches, officers (the leaders and the ones with the guns, so to speak), and senior officers are disproportionately white. Most of the police are white, also disproportionately so given the populations they patrol. So when the extreme left says “the guns should be in the hands of the police and military,” actually what they’re saying—whether they’re conscious of this or not—is that they feel *safe* with the military and police they have, and that those people should have guns. That is, they feel *safe* when the people in authority have guns, as long as the people in authority are just like them.



On the other hand, while there are black advocates of better gun control, their idea of gun control rarely includes a more perfectly-armed police force and military. Their idea is—like that of most of the left, many moderates, and centrists on the right—simply that guns should be more difficult to procure, to keep them out of the hands of mentally unstable or those with criminal tendencies. It’s difficult to imagine a less objectionable idea: guns are available and restricted like cars, with various permutations to handle different types of weapons.

In summary, citizens who believe that nobody should have guns are probably racists. Citizens who believe that everyone should have guns are probably racists. Citizens who maintain that while it should be more difficult to have guns, law-abiding, mentally sound tax-payers in the United States of America should have access to them do not exhibit any explicit

or implicit racial biases, at least when it comes to this issue.

Suicide and the Military

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

This topic has been examined under a microscope. 22 soldiers and veterans die per day in America by their own hand, victims of some unknowable, tragically preventable plague. Especially tragic given the notion that a person who has cheated death should have some sort of inherent attachment to life. We believe that a man, having avoided bombs, bullets, and grenades from determined foes as variable as the enemies we've faced over the last seventy years, should have a higher reason to live. We believe that a soldier-veteran, ennobled by the experience of having come close to an end to their existence, should far more than others be eager to embrace the world, to love life. We imagine that we, in our dull day to day lives, which include regret, and trifle, and petty annoyances, have got it bad, and that veterans have seen clear through to some transcendent truth. Like a sunset over the water after a thunderstorm, with rays of light reaching up into the heaven, and beyond ourselves. Like encountering a known limitation,

and moving beyond it.



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

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

During my time in the military, I came to believe that one reason there were so many suicides – apart from the proportional wealth of toxic leaders I encountered who likely did much to encourage their soldiers to take their own lives – was that it's the single area over which the military has absolutely no jurisdiction. Each individual is instructed from the earliest moments in training that authority is violence, and violence is authority, and who can do the greatest harm to

whom determines rank. A salute isn't just a gesture of respect, it's an acknowledgement of hierarchy. One person must awake at four in the morning to clean an area so that another person can walk over it with dirty boots. Infractions are punished. Individuality is punished. Thoughts are punished. Feelings are punished.

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

Some people are afflicted with medical conditions that prevent them from taking any joy in life, or the world. Depression – suicidal depression – is a real condition. For these people, sights and smells and sentiments from which reasonable people would take pleasure offer nothing instead. These people require help – medical assistance, psychiatric guidance – and should be in places, surrounded by professionals who are capable of giving them said help. I've had brushes with depression in my own life, had my share of beautiful summer evenings that unaccountably tasted like ash – enough to know that people who must live with depression, with existential crisis, on a daily, hourly basis are truly cursed.

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

painlessness.

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

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