New Nonfiction by Bettina Rolyn: “Why Did the Chicken Cross the Road?”

I have come to do a writing residency at the *Museum of Loss and Renewal* in Molise, southern Italy, in a remote mountain village to escape the distractions of Berlin. Just as every writer does when they go off for a residency, in this case, with the added burden of Covid having prevented me from escaping myself for eleven months straight. I had been fighting the need to flee from myself for years, yet Covid closed my usual escape route outwards and made me turn inwards. And towards depression. It wasn’t just the desire for Mediterranean sun but the name of this residency that got my attention: Loss and renewal. I am working on a memoir about my three-and-a-half-year stint in the US Army as an enlisted soldier during the early years of the American wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but it was not proceeding smoothly. For over two years, I reread my journals, wrote up notes and insights in fits and starts, fought back various pains, and despite writing fifty-thousand words, it wasn’t moving forward after the bleak winter of lockdowns and isolation. I decided to focus on one chapter during my trip to southern Italy.

I arrive at the *Museum of Loss and Renewal* on a hot afternoon in July and after getting settled in my room, the curators show me around the little town. In the morning, I awake to the sound of tractors passing in the street below, the neighbor’s chickens clucking, and roosters crowing as the village comes to life.

There have been periods of my life where every day, I consider my own death. *Should I stay, or should I go now?* Suicide is on

my mind a lot. I can't remember the first time I thought about killing myself, but I was surprised to discover in my "self-research" that already as an angst-ridden teenager, I had written about it in my journals.

Watching the cult classic *Harold and Maude* as a teenager, I was less interested in the age gap between the titular characters and more in Maude's status as a Holocaust survivor and Harold's fixation on death by suicide. I spent several years in high school consuming every story and image I could get my hands on about the Nazi era. Photos of dead bodies, emaciated prisoners, piles of teeth, glasses, and shoes—it all fascinated me.

The iconic movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, traditionally aired on TV every Christmas, was also part of my childhood.The pivotal scene, of course, is where James Stewart's character wants to kill himself by jumping off a bridge because of the impending financial ruin of his community bank until his guardian angel intervenes. This is what crisis looks like: suicide as a solution to our problems arises naturally in the human mind. Despite the taboo on discussing it and for its potential contagiousness, I'd like to think that I came up with the idea all on my own sometime around the age of nine or ten when I began contemplating my existence. You cannot contemplate life without death; being without non-being.

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The curators of the residency have a well-stocked library and leave the novel *The Original of Laura (Dying is Fun)* by Vladimir Nabokov out on the table, somehow reading my mind. The book of notes for a work-in-progress was posthumously published by the author's son Dmitri, who wrote the introduction. Nabokov—who likes the em-dash as much as I do—always held a curious fascination. He also spent fifteen years writing in Berlin and lived a life of displacement; the loss of his homeland and the themes of sex and death echo in

his work. In this story, the main character is an obese cuckold scholar who resorts to the pleasurable erasure of himself, a process that occurs in his imagination but fictionally appears real. *"The process of dying by auto dissolution afforded the greatest ecstasy known to man."* By the end of the book, he claims, *"By now I have died up to my naval some fifty times in less than three years and my fifty resurrections have shown that no damage is done to the organs involved when breaking in time out of the trance."*

I have suffered uncountable imaginary deaths. Sometimes by my own hand, other times in perfectly acceptable, nay, even understandable ways. Cancer is a top contender—even as loved ones die for real around me from the disease. There isn't a pain, bump, ache, odor, or other bodily irregularity or phenomenon that I don't suspect of being cancer at some point.

Although my ten-year-old self wasn't familiar with French philosophy, later, when I read that Albert Camus says in *The Myth of Sisyphus,* that the most fundamental question of philosophy is whether to commit suicide, I thought, "Well, duh." Camus concludes that the most urgent of questions is the meaning of life because whatever higher purpose we ascribe to our lives will determine whether we will live (not kill ourselves) or even die willingly (in war) for that meaning.

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In college, I took a seminar called "Theories of the Good Life," where we read, among other texts, Victor Frankl's famous book about finding meaning in life. He wrote it after surviving the Nazi death camps. He was already working on suicide prevention amongst students in Vienna before he was sent to Auschwitz, where his new wife and family were murdered. Later, he developed "logotherapy" and "existential analysis" wherein he identified three main ways of finding meaning in life: making a difference in the world, having particular experiences, or adopting particular attitudes. A

helpful attitude may be, “The universe is fundamentally good.” Or, “Every human being brings something unique to the world.” I was down with that.

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In the military, which I’d joined at the age of twenty-five seeking to “make a difference,” I hoped to deploy and was prepared to die honorably, heroically even. I fantasized about stepping on a landmine in Afghanistan. I would welcome either death or to at least be rid of my right leg, which had been giving me so much pain during my enlistment. But because of the leg and back troubles, I instead was medically discharged.

With each episode of depression and crisis—when my suicidal ideation usually appears—I’m surprised at what challenges tear apart my ability to withstand the strain of existing in this human body, one that comes with so many pains and issues. One common denominator is that I have a tunnel vision of self-absorption and a warped sense of my place in the world. A combination of “I don’t matter” and, “I am the center of this universe of pain.” The first such experience as an adult happened while I was in the pressure-cooker of army basic training. I had been under the special “tutelage” of a female drill sergeant who informed me that I was a piece-of-shit soldier one too many times. I snapped and believed her. I wanted to die. I considered how best to do so, and settled on our rifle marksmanship training, when we were given live ammunition. But I also wanted to take her out with me. There was even a moment when she crouched behind me on the firing line, ostensibly to help me make it through the test with a malfunctioning rifle and I could have turned around and shot her. I did not. Perhaps it was that spark of anger at her and the army for putting us both in this situation that got me through the ordeal with no-one the wiser about what had transpired in my head. By now, I have envisioned my own death in a million ways. Preferably an accident, but that’s a fine line to walk. I used a lot of energy imagining my demise, and

here Nabokov's description of Philip's exercise in *Laura* is apt: *"Learning to use the vigor of the body for the purpose of its own deletion, standing vitality on its head."*

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According to the various spiritual and religious beliefs toward suicide, it is considered either a sin, self-defeating, or ineffective. In the view of the world and afterlife that I was raised with, I knew suicide was frowned upon. It does not solve a problem; instead, it takes away the ability to solve it, ridding our souls of our body—which we need to live out this incarnation on earth. Later I learned the line, "Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem."

In much of the literature I have read about near-death experiences, when people return to earth and report on what they learned in their "preview" of the afterlife, the stories are similar. They say that souls who die by suicide are often tortured while stuck in between heaven and earth in a sort of purgatory. They are unable to comfort those left behind nor move on to higher spiritual realms—for how long differs based on theology. Now, that's a bummer. This belief that our souls are eternal (and reincarnate) and the attitude that there's no quick fix to end it all kept me alive for a long time, but it did not prevent me from turning to such thoughts when in crisis. I have come to view the siren call of release from earthly chains now more as an indicator of how bad my situation has become. It's time to make necessary adjustments—even major ones that make other people unhappy, and also cause me to lose face. I must cancel plans, disenroll from school, seek help from professionals.

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In 2012, I volunteered on a crisis and suicide hotline. I was contemplating a career change from linguist in the defense industry to therapist in the helping professions and wanted to

get a taste for the job. Before being let loose on the lines, we trained in the Carl Rogers method of unconditional positive regard and learned that the fundamental goal of the hotline was to preserve life. One policy was that as hotline listeners—that's what we were called—we would not accompany people while they killed themselves. We were trained to intervene, by—in the most extreme cases—calling 9/11 and sending the authorities to the caller's house while we had them on the phone. This only happened once or twice during my tenure.

Figuring out how to answer people's concerns and know what to say was anxiety-inducing. I sweated through one hundred logged hours of answering the phones in a dank hospital basement in suburban Virginia, though the amount of time I spent on actual calls was probably only one-third of that. Those thirty hours were enlightening. Hunched over in a booth, organs on high alert as I strained to hear my way into the pain of another soul, I learned how a suicidal crisis goes in waves or cycles. The trick is to remove the means to implement the urge and ride out the wave to safety.

During my hotline training, I also learned that in the US, more people kill themselves with guns than die in car accidents or homicides and I changed my views entirely on the second amendment. I learned compassion but also just how frustrating people who are in need can be. I was having a good year in many ways and ended by making a major decision to go to Europe to theological seminary and not study counseling. But a year or two later, amid a toxic relationship-induced crisis, I learned that it's difficult to do the trick of de-escalating on oneself, or rather, only possible to a point.

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In late 2016, after deciding to take a year break from pursuing ordination into the priesthood after three years of seminary, I was searching for something to do for a year and

processing a breakup. I decided to finally visit Spain for a week and check that off my bucket list, and on the descent into Madrid, we hit turbulence. It was the worst I'd experienced in all my years of flying. As the plane shook back and forth, up and down, and people cried out—I was perfectly calm and ready to die. I have done everything I came here to do, I thought as my stomach jumped up to my throat. I have traveled the world and followed my major impulses (to serve in the military and go to seminary). If this plane crashes, I won't have any regrets. And it was true, but it was also because I had ended a life chapter but wasn't yet 'out of the woods' to even see that I had been in a wood, much less a dark one. It took another year of wandering and contemplating the truth that although I had religion, as the expression goes, the more theology I got, the less I wanted to be a priest. A year of suicidal depression followed, and I realized I wouldn't go back to be ordained anytime soon.

In his esoteric lessons held in Berlin in February, 1913, the Austrian philosopher and mystic Rudolf Steiner said that God is real and active where we see the destructive powers of nature; in autumn storms, in all shattering and disintegrating of things. I sat and watched the seasons pass outside my window and existed, being crushed by the manifestation of the divine. Slowly, once I let go of the idea of needing to do something meaningful in a foreordained, meditative, and godly way, moments of happiness returned.

When describing the difference between the "normal" everyday life versus the "esoteric" and supersensible one that can be accessed through meditation, Steiner issues a warning: "Exoteric life takes place in the world of cognition. We know something because we confront an object, look at it and make mental images of it. This changes the moment we meditate." In advising the seeker of spiritual wisdom through meditation, Steiner cautions that "We shouldn't immediately make ideas about what approaches us in this world [of supersensible

reality]. We should just open ourselves, listen and feel what wants to stream into our soul.” In my case, however, I am not a very regular practitioner of meditation except for three years of attempting to know ‘higher worlds’ in seminary training. I already sense my mind’s existence astride the boundary of the exoteric and esoteric, between mental cognition and psychic reality. One in which often-unwilled thoughts of my own death are what stream into my soul, taking up an inordinate amount of “space.” When I opened the door further to this supersensible world, disorientation, depression, and death awaited. One evening last year, my ear began to hurt, and I thought immediately, “Oh, it must be some terrible disease and I will soon die.” I see signs in hypochondria. I read into my symptoms the hope that the journey is almost over. The plane is about to crash.

Steiner continues: “We must preserve absolute equanimity with respect to spiritual experiences, just as we should remain calm in everyday life with respect to all events, ideas, etc. so that we don’t get excited or upset.” Great tip, Rudolf. When not describing the intangible world, Steiner does offer some practical advice for how to practice such equanimity, and it involves disciplining our soul’s capacities for thinking, feeling, and willing. This much I have learned is true—there are ways to mitigate the inner emotional turbulence; but I have also learned to sense when I am in danger of being dragged down by an external situation, one that inevitably involves other humans. Why did the frog cross the road? …

Because it was stapled to the chicken.

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Sitting in my room in the village overlooking the Mainarde Mountains of Molise, I look down at my swollen fingers, the instrument of my intended work and they look foreign to me. No, not quite, they resemble my mother’s leathery hands which are slightly swollen from arthritis and seventy-five years of

work, but mine are now also covered in an angry rash of hives. The left hand has red bumps full of liquid bubbling up from my swollen flesh like poison ivy burns. Slowly bursting from the pressure after a few days, my body's juices ooze out of my finger like maples being tapped for their syrup. The itching on my hands and legs is maddening, coming in waves, triggered by even a slight mountain breeze upon my skin. Even many weeks later, the itching returns like the echoes of a bad dream. The first day I arrived at the residency, I must have encountered the cause of this reaction, but I have no recollection of what it might have been.

I have been in this situation before. In 2013, once I abandoned my career in the US defense industry and decided to attend seminary in southern Germany. First, I stopped by the eastern Mediterranean following an invitation to visit some pastors from my church who were holding an inter-religious peace camp in the hills of Galilee. After one night sleeping underneath the pine trees with the youngsters, I awoke with what I thought were mosquito bites all over my hands, feet, and face. When they quickly turned into these oozing, itching sores, I saw the Kibbutz doctor who told me about the pine processionary moth. I was the only afflicted party in our group. This miraculous creature of the genus "Thaumetopoea," species "pityocampa" has microscopic urticating hairs in its caterpillar stage, which cause harmful reactions in humans and other mammals. The internet tells me that "The species is notable for the behavior of its caterpillars, which overwinter in tent-like nests high in pine trees, and which proceed through the woods in nose-to-tail columns, protected by their severely irritating hairs."

Although the name pityocampa comes from "pine and larva," the word pity seems most appropriate to me now. Pity-evoking is the only word for a skin rash. It's hard to hide and catches the eye. You can't help but be moved by either disgust or pity, in the best case. I am so full of self-pity it is

literally oozing out of me. Did the pity come from feeling unattractive due to these angry hives swelling my limbs, or was it always there and just now coming to expression?

There are certainly many things that I am angry about but do not say. There are truths I want to shout out to the world that are unsightly and unpleasant about what I have done and experienced in my life. I am trying to write them in the form of a memoir, but I'm blocked. In the meantime, my skin will reveal it as literal and metaphoric markers and warnings. These are expressions of my attitude towards the world I've encountered.

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One morning on the mountain, I read the introduction to *The Original of Laura*. In it, Dimitri describes how his father's downward spiral to death started with falling in the Swiss mountains while pursuing his hobby of lepidoptery, the study of butterflies. In the cooling late afternoon of that same day, I found myself walking up the hill to the last house in the village on the left, where I had intended to visit Clara, an elderly woman recently widowed earlier in the year. She said to stop by anytime and meant it, but once I finally got myself up the single road, past the village's old houses, to ring at her door, she wasn't home. Later she told me she was picking out her husband's gravestone. I followed the road upwards on its rough-hewn sun-bleached cobblestones, which ran parallel to one of the many stone walls that crisscrossed the mountainside.

During World War II, the Americans came through here on their way north from Sicily, having beaten back the fascists in bloody battles throughout southern Italy. They fought the Germans here in the Gustave Line, which practically runs right through the village, in the winter of 1943/44. They even built a road still named after "the Americans" to access the remote mountains of Molise in the slimmest part of Italy's boot. The

curators tell me about a Scotsman who fought against the Germans in southern Italy but upon returning home met an Italian from this village, and so returned to Italy for good. He stayed on the hill for the rest of his ninety-two years. That's one way to deal with the aftermath of war.

Along the white stony path, I found myself chasing butterflies to capture them with my iPhone camera, far from civilization, and contemplating the purchase of a house in this village that I had just left. There are many empty houses in the towns of the region. Many of the children of families who'd lived here for generations having long since moved to the big cities of Europe, though some continue to return to build more energy efficient houses or move to lower altitudes, where the winters are milder. The house I looked at came with a plot of land, upon which fig trees already grew. The idea of having an orchard and chickens providing fresh eggs daily and growing my own food in the garden captured my imagination.

If I wandered off the path here, I had been warned there might be shells, unexploded ordinance, and other nasty surprises like scorpions and wild boars awaiting me. I had seen the boars already, hurtling through the underbrush uprooting everything in their path—hard to miss—but also the seemingly invisible moths and caterpillars which caused me grief. As I wrote and searched through my journals—trying to put them in some meaningful order in my memoir—plumbing the depths of my memory, I found undiscovered ordinances of thoughts and feelings, a seemingly endless supply of trauma and suicidal ideations that I had confided to my journals but otherwise hidden from those around me, and even myself for so many years. I had been mentally living a life on the edge for decades, where thoughts of suicide would lie waiting behind every bush, stone, boulder, or obstacle in my path. Whenever I was challenged and felt like I had no more choices out of a bad situation, I had thoughts of ending it all. And now I was stumbling upon them in my journals and wondering how I'd even

made it this far without hurling myself off some cliff.

The rugged beauty of this landscape appeals to me because it is not just pretty, or quaint, or touristy, but real. Molise is beautiful in its wildness. It wasn't always quite so wild. It has been worked, yet it is a work in progress as the re-wilding of this region takes over. My hosts explained how over the past fifty years, nature has been slowly reclaiming these hills and hiding the many stone walls and paths that had been cleared over generations for small plots of land to be cultivated. In the photos of the area at the WinterLine War Museum in the nearby town of Venafro, the landscape looks vastly different. There is history here, but there is still potential amongst the rocky terrain and partly deserted villages. People like me are coming here in search of something quieter and safer, like the curators of the Museum who created such a residency for artistic reflection. Some things look better with the passage of time; others just appear different.

I imagine a life where I live in the house that I saw for sale in the village. I have chickens in the yard and a garden, and I harvest figs. If I had chickens—whose lives I would worry about preserving—and a plot of land to care for would the incessant thoughts of my own mortality fade? Keeping busy certainly is one way of keeping the hounds of existential angst fed and quieted for a while.

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I wrote a children's story about chickens once. I wrote it mostly in my head and like Nabokov, whose characters in *Laura* never get fully fleshed out, my chickens never saw the light of day on a page. They were inspired by real ones my sister kept in Pittsburgh for a few years. Her young children loved to chase them around the small backyard. Every night the hens went into their plastic coop, but one night, as my sister later relayed, several of them managed to flee into the

uppermost branches of a tree in their yard. She had to chase them around in the dark for what seemed like an eternity, so intent they were upon staying in danger.

In my story, these imaginary hens escape their coop and have an adventure in the big city. The story began thus: Miffy, Laurel, and Hilary lived in the small backyard of a big house in a big city. Their coop was opened every day, and they had free range in the yard to search for tasty bugs and juicy caterpillars. They often flew up and roosted on the boughs of the big pine tree next to the house—especially when they got tired of being chased and hugged by their small human friends. From the tree branch, they could see into the big house. From high up, they could see over the fence into the neighbor's yard. They could also hear the shouts, whoops, cries, laughs, and bits of conversations about life out in there in the big city. One day, Miffy—she was always the one starting such debates—said to Laurel and Hilary: "What do you suppose it's like out in the big city?" And so off they went, out into the wilds of urban America, encountering curious raccoons, venomous vipers, pensive pigeons, and friendly foxes who share with them how to stay alive in the big, scary, cityscape. Eventually, they return home, safe and sound.

Is it too obvious to say this story is an allegory? That I long to return to the heavenly coop is a simplification. I am not a mere chicken. I yearn for a sense of meaning in my life. Having pursued it in various external titles, roles, and institutions for years, I am on my own now.

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There are many ways to deal with suicidal thoughts; the stigma attached to seeking help for mental health issues is thankfully disappearing. I also know from other friends and acquaintances, not just myself or suicidal exes, that while so many of us remain depressed, we are not alone in our suffering. We often need other humans to assist us with

getting through the worst of the wave of crisis. Other times, we are being called to connect with our purpose. The Quaker theologian Parker Palmer writes about his depression in *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*—the title itself giving away the key to healing—and connects our ability to hear and thus speak the truth of our selves with maintaining our mental health.

My dad used to tell jokes around the dinner table. Here's one I remember: A man goes to a psychiatrist and explains that he thinks he is chicken feed. They work together for months until finally, the man comes to understand that he is not chicken feed. Just as he's saying goodbye, he says, "Wait, Doc, I have one last question. I know that I'm not chicken feed. You know that I'm not chicken feed, but what about the chickens?"

When do we label ourselves something like "suicidal"? Once you tell someone that you've had thoughts of suicide, they never look at you the same way again. After my formative experience in the military where I was constantly overworked, muscle fatigued, sleep-deprived, harassed, and pushed over the threshold into suicidal ideation (all without deploying!), I learned to be wary of having everything taken from me or "giving my all." It still happens that things become too much, but I remain protective of my internal and external resources, most importantly my soul resources. I try to avoid situations where I might be stuck in a situation that I do not desire; I always have an escape route. My life depends upon it.

Rudolf Steiner also said, in the same lecture given in Berlin almost 100 years ago, quite helpfully that the Gods protect those unprepared for what lies on the other side of the threshold of the visible world by giving us pleasure and enjoyment in creative activity in the physical world. So here I stay, on the haptic side of the line of consciousness and immateriality: writing, eating, and when possible, making merry. Besides writing out the truths of my life and turning hives into literary hay, I've learned to let the imaginary

chickens save my life. Creatively sending the hens out on adventures or calling them home to roost again. Just getting to the other side can be enough. This is an attitude that Victor Frankl would endorse.

New Nonfiction: “Survivor’s Paradox” by Chris Oliver

When I first saw the photo of David Spicer in a 2009 *Army Times*, I was excited to recognize my friend there on the page staring back at me. The picture was closely cropped around his face, but I could tell he was in his dress uniform when the picture was taken. I could see the globe and anchor on his high collar. There was no smile, except in his eyes. Marines don’t smile, but David sure looked happy to be one. David and I were friends while growing up: grade school, middle, and high school. He always talked about being a Marine, and he joined up before he even graduated. The picture was lined up with half a dozen others, all servicemen and women, their faces inside their own individual boxes, names and ages typed out neatly beside. Above all of the pictures in a much larger and darker font than the rest was a headline. It read: “Photos of the Fallen.” My initial excitement evaporated as I looked back at the picture of David. Underneath his name and age was another block of text: “KIA, Helmand Province, Afghanistan.”

As most high school kids do after graduating, we went our separate ways in life. Even though we had both enlisted in the military around the same time, I had heard nothing else

about David until I saw the picture. In that moment, we were jarred back together in recollection and sorrow. I had known others that had been killed in the War on Terror, even served with some. But this was the first time I had grown up with someone who had been killed in combat. I saved that issue of *Army Times*, folded it neatly, and tucked it away in the back of a notebook. On the first page of the notebook, I wrote David's name and the date of his death. Beneath the inscription I added the names of others I had fought beside in Iraq but didn't make it home. In the years that followed, anytime I heard of a friend's passing in Afghanistan or Iraq, I wrote the name down. One by one, the names kept coming. A guy named Cota who I knew from Basic Training in Fort Knox. A Sergeant named Rentschler I knew while stationed in Germany. Sometimes months would pass between names, at times only weeks, but the list kept growing. The wars in faraway lands kept chewing up friends and acquaintances. I had more than one turn in the same meat grinder, and during these deployments I would lose men who were as close, and at times, closer than my own family. Brothers. Slowly and deliberately I inscribed each letter until the page bore their names with honor. The names sat together, unified without regard to color, race, or creed. Melo. Sherman. Tavae. Edens. Morris.

As days turned to weeks and months and years, the list kept growing but much slower. The fog of pain surrounding the list would slowly lift and I began to look at the names with less sadness and more admiration and respect. I began to understand their loss as a by-product of conflict and war. It didn't matter if we believed in the reasons or politics of the wars, we would always honor their memory. In early 2015, it had been close to five years since my last combat deployment and I retired from service. The list had stopped growing altogether. The notebook was put up, tucked away along with the rest of my war memories. Hidden, to be looked upon only through a haze of whiskey and tears. At some point the ink used to write the names began to fade.

Now, with quite a few years since my retirement, most of the men I served with have gotten out of the Army and moved on with their lives, as have I. Though my part in the war is done, or should be, I am still fighting. There is still a war raging. There is still death. New names to add to the list. I find I can't add these names though, as the deaths are much harder to accept. I don't know if they belong next to the others.

I find out in the same ways, while doing the same things. Someone from an old unit will call out of the blue. Maybe a message on social media.

"Did you hear? Chad Golab just died."

"How?" I hope the answer is a vehicle accident, or a robbery gone wrong. Murder. Anything other than what it really is, but deep down I already know what happened to Chad. The caller's reply comes easily in a matter of fact way.

"Shot himself."

Slowly the story is told. There is little emotion given with the caller's words and I give none in return. We are both well versed in giving and receiving horrible news, numb to tragedy. At least, on the outside. Inwardly I feel sick. I flashback to a memory from years earlier in Mosul. I see Chad Golab leaning against a wall out of breath. He had just sprinted across an open area through a hail of bullets and rocket propelled grenades. He wore a smile from ear to ear. He was laughing. So very alive. I can't believe that the man I saw in that moment was the same one who was found outside of a convenience store in the front seat of his car, dead from a self-inflicted gunshot. But it was.

The same types of calls and messages have continued at a steady pace, to the point that I dread seeing the name and number of an old Army buddy pop up on the caller ID. Each time a call comes I learn yet another person who made it back

from “over there” decided they had had enough. The question of “Why?” always lingers in the air, drifting along searching for an answer. The answer never comes, only more of those horrible phone calls. More names. More questions. I’m angry. I feel a deep sorrow and love for these men. I also hate them. I hate them for what they have done to themselves and the unfair enigma they have left behind for us all. We cry for those who have gone before us, yet they are the very ones who have created our pain. What sense can be made of this?

Why did they do it? Why? We will never know what only they knew. We are left to guess in wonder. And mourn.

After these calls of notification are over, my mind floods with more questions than answers. Deep down inside, my old wounds, the ones which don’t leave visible scars, fester once again. The wounds never fully heal and the pain they create is always there, subdued, yet constant. The hard, built-up crust covering these wounds is ripped away and the pain returns in full force, always stronger than before. I sit with hot embers burning away at my gut, wishing for one more chance to talk with these men. The chance for one more conversation. I want to ask them questions and I need them to answer me. What has caused their pain to be so great they decided to leave this world behind? What was the whole point? Why did we work so hard to keep each other safe when there was so much harm surrounding us? Why end it now? You made it home! You made it back to mom and dad and wife and child and friends! Why now? I want to tell them I’m sorry. Sorry for their pain. Sorry for my anger and hate. Of course, I am left to render my own conclusions, more a meditation in pain than an answer.

War is a journey, a journey with many paths and roads moving different directions to different places. In my own experience the trip begins and ends at the same destination. Home. Or at least whatever place each person finds most

dear. It might not even be a place. It might be a person or activity. This “thing,” whatever it may be, is what the warrior turns to when things are at their absolute worst. It’s what they turn to after they have been away from home for months and it’s hot and it’s only going to get hotter and they are carrying 80 pounds of extra weight up the same fucking hill for the one thousandth time and someone they have never met tries to kill them and instead kills their best friend who was standing right next to them and then they have nothing to look forward to except that they get to do it again tomorrow. And the next day. And the day after that. When you go through days like that, there has to be something that keeps you going, makes you say, “I’m going to make it out of here.” And then, finally, one day, you do make it out. Make it back home. Everyone cheers and is happy and claps their hands and you smile and you are truly glad to be home. Home in a physical sense. In body. Your mind however is still in turmoil, still back in the desert or on the side of a mountain, stuck at a crossroads with no idea which direction to take. I think everyone who experiences war travels down the same road passing the same intersections. There are no signs to follow. No light to show the way through the darkness. Each intersection is a question which needs to be answered to make sense out of the senseless experience of war. The questions are impossible to answer. No one ever makes it completely back, but you can make it most of the way. Maybe these people, these guys like Chad, never make it far enough back. They take a wrong turn and lose their way. They get caught at a spot between the Hell of war and the comforts of home. The division becomes blurred by expectation and guilt and shame. Months of constant fear and excitement mixed with boredom and hate has made them question reality. Their loved ones are foreign beings. The precious people who occupied every waking thought and dream and fantasy are happy to see their soldier. Glad they are home. Home safe and in one piece. They give hugs and shake hands and have no idea the soldier is still fighting. Still “over there”.

Of course, the soldier is glad to be home too. But home is different now, not at all like he remembers. His family and friends, like the soldier, have changed. His fantasies were a lie. He wants to talk about the war but can only do so with those who will understand. Only his brothers in arms will do. The one's he laughed and cried with and got blown up with, and shot at people with. Killed people with. They are gone now. They live across the country or are out of the Army, working at a home store or drawing disability from the VA. Some are buried and forever seared into the soldier's mind. The soldier wants to talk to the dead the most. The situation is an ocean of impossibility. They miss home while they're at war but find they miss war when they get home. To them, salvation can only be found at the bottom of a bottle or inside of a gun barrel.

I don't know if it does any good to sit here and ponder these questions or make half-hearted attempts to understand why my brothers have killed themselves. Wondering why they have survived so much only to give in at the last minute. I won't stop though. I can't stop. I can only keep asking the questions. And wait for the phone to ring.

Suicide, the Soldier's Bane

Here’s how it happens: you get a text. Or you see a cryptic post about the
importance of friendship and “reaching out” on Facebook. Or an email. Then, the
phone call comes.

“Hey man. Don’t know if you heard, but Jack Smith died.”

And you already know what that really means. Gun, drug overdose, poison, car
exhaust. One of the many ways to undo or interrupt a fragile system.

Last year I totaled up the number of people I knew, personally, who had
committed suicide—people I’d met and hung out with, something more than a quick
“hello.” The number was seven. I knew of three people, personally, who took

their lives when I was a boy or a young man; two boys killed themselves in my orbit when I was in my teens, and a high school classmate and lacrosse teammate took his life sometime after college, perhaps in my mid-twenties.

Since that time, at least four soldiers with whom I served or whom I knew, personally, took their own lives.

Not surprisingly, the event that precipitated this introspection was the suicide of a captain whom I'd covered while reporting on NATO maneuvers in Romania for *Foreign Policy*. He was the eighth person I knew, personally, to kill himself. When we'd met, he was acting as the S3 of an armor battalion as a senior captain (something I'd only ever seen done by higher-ranking officers), and he was highly respected by peers, subordinates, and superiors. I heard that he had a wife and kids back home, in the United States. He'd sat down on train tracks and waited.

But eight doesn't tell the full story, because those were just the people to whom I had a direct connection, who decided to send themselves West for reasons only they know. One Sunday in March, after climbing into bed, I scanned Facebook a final time (always a mistake) and saw people that I served with discussing the suicide of someone with whom I'd served, a soldier I didn't remember. And *that* experience—the experience of seeing other veterans process

the untimely death of a friend or loved one that I'd met in passing, someone with whom I'd stood in military formation, suicide by one degree of separation—is something I've processed more times than I can remember. Fifteen? Twenty? Thirty? It happens, I'd say, around once every two or three months. Making that calculation conservatively, at once every three months, for the eight years I've been out of the military, produces the number 32.

That doesn't count the soldier who shot himself rather than return to prison, or the soldier who got so blinding drunk out one night that when he decided to drive home, he forgot to buckle his seatbelt, and ended himself in a wreck of metal and glass. They're two of the eight.

It *does* include the brother of a soldier who died in Afghanistan, himself a veteran, who died of "soul sickness," according to the obituary—and many others whose families and communities would prefer not to characterize the death as suicide, though it is. It *does* include a soldier who hung himself when I was on active duty with the Army. They're two of the estimated 32.

The most recent statistics from the Department of Veterans Affairs says that the problem of veteran suicide is bad and getting worse. A story from *The Military Times* from September of 2018 headlined "VA: Suicide rate for younger veterans increased by more than

10 percent” did a
good job of quantifying the problem:

In 2016, the most recent data available, the suicide rate for veterans
was 1.5 times greater than for Americans who never served in the military.
About 20 veterans a day across the country take their own lives, and veterans
accounted for 14 percent of all adult suicide deaths in the U.S. in 2016, even
though only 8 percent of the country’s population has served in the military.

Numerical terms, though, are abstract. You read “twenty a day” and think,
maybe, *that can’t be right* or *it’s horrible*, or *what about the context* or *those*
poor veterans or any of the other socially conscientious things a person
might think when confronted with an impersonal tragedy, and it’s still too far,
too distant.

In the coming months and years, as the remaining soldiers and sergeants and
officers I know transition out into their civilian lives, 32 will increase to
33, and then 34, and so on into the uncertain future. At some point—not too far
off from now—I’ll have lost more comrades to suicide than we lost to the
Taliban. The count will continue its irresistible climb.

Suicide is on my mind not only because of the actions of those around me,
but because it is something I have considered in the past.

It crosses my mind occasionally, the vigor of its allure weaker than before, now more an echo of a masochistic urge that is dismissed as quickly as it arises. But I used to think about it often. I became accustomed to thinking about death. I fantasized about dying in battle (gloriously) or by accident (absurdly), and that fantasy conquered and remains in a compartment of my heart. Each time my heart contracts, pushing blood through my veins, that compartment whispers—"what if this were all to stop?" Over time, the thought became habit.

It took a lot to break me of that habit. I had to learn not to covet some brief control over the terms of my demise. PTSD therapy at the West Haven Veterans Affairs helped, and finding my wife, and friendships, and work.

But then, many of those soldiers who ended their lives had wives or husbands, too; they had friends, and children, and jobs. Their Facebook pages were active. They shared their happy memories of comradeship in times of war—of exhilaration, and love, and respect. They were not so different. Their hearts, too, must have asked, "what if?"

That's what makes it all so maddening. Sometimes a person's suicide seems rational—a response to hardship, or the accumulated result of smaller bad choices and regrets. When one hears about a promising life gone to drugs and

debt, nobody thinks “how could that have happened” (and everyone’s grateful when it doesn’t), and similarly, something about the experience of being in the military lends itself to this type of sensible suicide. Then, sometimes, it makes no sense at all, from a rational perspective, or from the emotional side. There is simply no accounting for it.

And the lack of an explanation for *why* this is happening means we don’t have a good sense of what to do to reduce or resolve suicide. Perhaps we ought to better fund national institutions and publicize hotlines, so those desperate people who find themselves at bottom due to drugs, or alcohol, or gambling, or bad choices can, in spite of it all, find respite—a bed to sleep in, a job to pay the bills. Currently, $8.38 billion goes to VA Mental Health services and programs, while there is $186 million dedicated to Veteran Suicide Prevention and Outreach programs; one can only imagine how grim things would look were this number cut, though it’s difficult to imagine things improving substantially were the number much larger. A scandal that unfolded last year about money unspent implies that greater efficiency could contribute to the mental health of veterans. But on a certain level this isn’t about money, it’s about despair and solitude, the lack of company. The rich and professionally successful, too, commit suicide.

Meanwhile, if one views the government with skepticism, and thinks that a person's tax dollars ought to go to charities instead, we can prioritize the expansion of regional and local charities to accomplish the same task. This runs into the same problem as expanding the VA, which is to say, the problem of throwing money at a problem human empathy is best equipped to handle.

On that note, on a human level, we can be more available to the veterans in our lives—not responsively, not reactively, but assertively, checking in with them, calling, writing occasionally to see how they are doing. But this is the dearest solution of all: anyone who has wrestled with depression themselves or in a friend or family member understands that there simply isn't time enough to think positively for another human who's gripped by despair; our own lives are consumed with the requirements of job, and filial piety, and the duties of the father, and mother, and husband, and wife. Living our own lives well guards us against dark impulses, but as every new parent knows, it can be utterly exhausting to live two lives for even an hour, let alone every waking hour.

A too-obvious fix of not going into war so casually any more, such as was the case with Iraq and Afghanistan and could be the case in Venezuala or North Korea, is rarely discussed with any degree of seriousness,

though it ought to
be.

Adopting all four of these measures will still not solve the problem of
veterans committing suicide. They will help, and because they will help, we
ought to do them, but veterans will continue taking their own lives. We can’t
save everyone.

This leads to a more troubling thought. If there are people who cannot be
rescued by individual action—who cannot be saved by even the most
technologically advanced and intrusive state—who are be saved neither by
religion, nor by secular charities—what then? We are left with a group of
honorable people who wanted to serve their country, often during times of war,
who subsequently commit themselves to self-slaughter. A group of people who
are, in one regard, the type of sons and daughters we’d like, and on the other
hand, shameful cautionary tales.

Ancient Rome and contemporary Japan viewed suicide as, potentially, an
honorable act. There have been other non-Christian societies whose mythology or
narratives contain room for people who no longer wanted to live; paths of last
resort, obviously, but dignified exits to the next world. If we have confidence
that the life we have created here on earth is more attractive to people than
death (and that, surely, ought to be the most primitive, basic

idea animating a
developed society), surely there ought to be an acceptable place for those
folks who can no longer abide here.

Look, we'd all like to help, according to our ability and bandwidth. But the
fact is, when it comes to trauma, the damage to veterans is already done. Many
combat veterans or those victimized by bullies or sexual assault were lost
years ago, and the bill, as they say, is just late coming due. Some of those
veterans could probably be saved by aggressive professional and personal
intervention, but let's be honest: that's not going to happen.

Instead, it's only a matter of time before the next suicide, which will add
itself to the others that came before. And we'll all be left sitting in our
chairs with the terrible news ringing in our ears, wondering: what happened to Jack?
That young soldier, jumping down off the front hood, his dusty armor slapping after
a long patrol, or seated by a campfire, laughing, full with the power and
confidence of their youth? What happened in the intervening years, what caused
them to make that choice, in that moment? Could *I* ever do that? What if…?

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.