

# **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.

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## **New Fiction from Colin Raunig: "What Happened in Vegas"**

Since getting back from deployment, Frank had gone soft. He was still a massive block of muscle, but the edges had rounded. Too much time off. Too much food and booze. He saw it in his reflection of the Vegas penthouse suite window that overlaid the view of the pre-dawn casino lights that blighted out the stars and blazed like a midnight sunrise. Frank had woken up too early and couldn't go back to sleep—he couldn't sleep well after he drank.

On deployment in Iraq, Frank's body had been perfect. The life was perfect for it. Go on patrol, work out, eat, sleep, do it again. Just what the body needed. Out on patrol, while Frank sat in the Humvee or ran through a door or while he stood there and the guys loaded him up with extra ammo belts and gear, a tucked away part of both Frank's body and mind would be waiting for the point when they, together as a pair, would return to the FOB and he would go to the gym. When he would swap cammies for his issued olive green Marine Corps PT gear and a gallon jug of water and leave the plywood box of his bunk for the one with the stacks of weights.

Frank would slide the weights onto the bar and into each other with a clang, position himself horizontally on the bench and beneath the bar as he readied himself for the energy transfer of metal to muscles. The results spoke for themselves: in the mirror and in the eyes of his fellow Marines, who *oorah'd* his massive frame starting day one of boot camp. The bodies who had observed him, and he them.

So many of those bodies, on deployment, had been hurt, disfigured, lost. So many minds of those bodies, from deployment, had been hurt, disfigured, lost.

Not Frank, though. No. He was all right, just hung over and tired and not out of shape, but slipping.

If Frank hit the hotel gym now, he could get in a full workout before Cameron woke up. Cameron, whose streak at the craps table the night before had gotten them two nights comped, was sprawled out on the couch—pants on, but no shirt—his half-belly half-hanging over his belt line, the tattoos on his torso like scars across his body.

Frank put on his PT gear, grabbed his room key, and slipped out the door.

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Frank and Cameron walked side-by-side, just narrow enough to manage the busy Vegas sidewalks. The sun baked them. Frank's muscles were alive with a buzzing soreness, but he hadn't done quite enough in the gym to burn off the effects of the night before. As he walked, he stared at his flip-flopped feet through his wraparound sunglasses. He thought of how his toes had their own little toe lives, every one of them.

Frank had met Cameron and his raspy, high-pitched Texas drawl at boot camp. They had been together ever since—after boot camp, infantry training, all the liberties out town, deployment, and, now, leave, in Vegas. From cradle to grave,

literal or figurative—one way or another, everyone, eventually, left the Marines.

It was Saturday and was their second to last day of a long weekend in Vegas. Tomorrow, he and Cameron would drive back to Camp Pendleton, just north of San Diego. After getting back from Iraq, Frank made a quick stop to see his parents and some high school friends in Oklahoma, then went right back to the unit. Back to his routine. But then Cameron cashed in on the promise Frank had made on deployment. Frank wasn't much of a Vegas guy, but he was Cameron's friend, and he kept his promises.

Frank made his Vegas promise the night after a squad from a nearby platoon had been out in a Humvee and hit an IED. In an instant, four died. They were alive and then they weren't. This was halfway into Frank and Cameron's 12-month deployment. The next evening on base, as the sun went down and they waited for their mission, Frank and Cameron smoked cigarettes and drank Rip It, which would get them through the night and were the sole vices that Frank allowed his body—they helped keep him alive.

That night, Cameron, his face and helmet a shadowy blur in the dwindling light, grabbed Frank by his flak jacket.

"I swear to fucking God, when we get back, we're going to Vegas," Cameron, desperation in his voice, had told Frank. "You're coming with me. And don't you die before we make it back. Or I'll kill ya."

"Okay," Frank said.

Doing so, Frank knew, meant that he couldn't die, so, the next morning, when they got back from patrol, Frank hit the gym with a vengeance, pushing weights he had never pushed before, trying to take not just the energy from the metal, but their very essence, and make it his. An IED could tear through flesh and bone, but not iron.

After a while of making their way down the Vegas strip, Cameron stopped walking and looked out over a small blue man-made lake. On other side of the lake was the Bellagio hotel, a tower of smooth concrete and tinted windows. It was built as if specifically to view from the spot where Frank was standing.

It stood in stark contrast to the charred remains of the buildings in Iraq, the ones militants had burned or bombed or the ones the United States had burned or bombed. When Frank had driven by them in the back of the Humvee, they all looked the same: charred and black. Just as the bodies had been equally burned, so much that it was hard to believe they had once been alive and human. They might have been mothers, fathers, daughter, sons; they might have been Suni or Shiite or American. But to Frank they just were as they looked: charred black over bone.

“What the fuck?” Cameron said.

“What?” Frank replied.

“Where are the fountains?” Cameron asked. “There are supposed to be fountains.”

“Where?” Frank asked.

“Where? Right fucking there. In the lake.”

“All the time?” Frank asked.

“I don’t know,” Cameron said, upset. “I just know they are supposed to be here. And I don’t fucking see any.”

Frank grunted in response to Cameron.

“Hey,” Cameron said.

Frank looked down at Cameron. Most everyone was shorter than Frank, Cameron especially. “What?” Frank replied.

"The *fountains*," Cameron said, incredulous.

"Must have just missed them," Frank said.

Cameron reached over the side of the wall and tried to touch the water of the lake. "The fountains restores youth to those who bathe or drink from it," Cameron said.

"We're only twenty-two," Frank said.

Cameron, not able to reach the water, stood back up. "Whatever," Cameron said. "People pee in there, you know."

Frank wondered if Cameron was talking about himself. Cameron had built up Vegas over deployment for so long that there was no telling how far he would go to achieve his vision of what it was to be here. There was Cameron's luck at craps the night before. And the woman whose hotel room he stayed at the night before that. Who knew what tonight would bring.

"Oh, look at the beautiful toes!"

Frank was surprised by a man who was bent over and looking at his feet. All Frank could see of the man was his headful of frizzy hair, like a brown brillo pad.

"They're wonderful! They are such little treats!"

Frank was confused. Cameron jumped back.

As the man stood up, two people in black came walking towards Frank, one short, one tall. The short one Frank could take. The tall one, too.

As Frank sized up the situation, and looked at the man again, who was standing now, he registered the hair, the bronze skin, the light in his eyes, a gold silk shirt over white pants, the joyfully high register of his voice, when Frank realized who it was: it was Richard Simmons.

"Is everything ok?" the shorter man whispered into Richard

Simmons' ear, eyeing Frank at the same time.

Richard Simmons looked at Frank while he responded to his body guards. "Oh, I was just saying hi to these boys," Richard said.

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The Bellagio Baccarat Bar and Lounge was a cool reprieve from the hot strip, though just as bright. The pillars were made of white and gold marble, the chairs red velvet, and there was a glass statue that looked like a blue mix of a bouquet of flowers and jellyfish and gold flames made of glass that shot towards the sky. Richard greeted the hostess by name and kissed her once on each cheek. He was directed towards a set of closed oak sliding doors, which, when opened, revealed a large, circular marble table in the middle of a room. A large blue and purple chandelier hung over it.

Frank, who felt severely underdressed, was the first to sit at the table, which had about twenty chairs surrounding it. He sat in one. Cameron sat on his left, Richard on his right. A woman in a dark blue suit and wearing rectangular glasses sat to Richard's left. The bodyguards were nowhere to be seen.

Frank couldn't really believe he and Cameron were here. With Richard Simmons.

A waitress appeared at the table, dressed in black and her thin, blonde ponytail pulled back.

"So, what'll it be?" Richard asked the table. "It's on me! It's the least I can do, for what you did."

Neither Frank nor Cameron had told Richard they were in the military, but they looked like they were, and they were.

It had been four years since Frank enlisted, right after high school in central Oklahoma. In high school, Frank had developed a smaller version of his current ox-like breadth as

a freshman in high school, and had quickly been recruited by nearly every coach. He had accepted his fate with casual grace, excelling at varsity football, wrestling, and baseball, pleasing his coaches and classmates and teachers, if not himself. The glory of the field was nice, but he wanted something more. When colleges tried to recruit him, he balked at their offers. He wasn't ungrateful, just uninterested.

Frank didn't know what he was interested in—until one fateful school lunch in fall of his senior year. After Frank got his food and as he walked to find his table with his lunch tray, his eyes locked with the Marine Corps recruiter that stood by a table with an olive green drop cloth over it. The recruiter wore his dress uniform was built like a bulldog. His eyes widened at the spectacle of Frank. Frank walked over. As Frank stood there and pawed his two meatball subs off of his lunch tray, the recruiter spoke to Frank, using words like:

*Honor*

*Loyalty*

And the phrase the Marine Corps was known for:

*Semper Fidelis*—always faithful.

These words stuck with Frank. They were the words Frank would use to tell his parents when he told them his plans. Once Frank joined, they were all the words he needed to not quit and stay the course and get ready for war and, by doing so, staying faithful with his fitness. As a Marine, Frank got bigger, faster, fitter. The Marines always use a guy like Frank. And smaller guys like Cameron could use a friend like him, too.

And it had been nearly four years since Frank had enlisted for a four-year contract. In a few months now he would have to decide whether to stay or go. Same with Cameron. Frank didn't know what he would do. He wasn't sure what Cameron would do, either. Cameron was the type to stay in the Marines forever.

Or maybe not. Frank had a hard enough time weighing the intentions of himself, let alone others. If he and Cameron went their separate ways, then so be it. Everything eventually ended, one way or another.

But Frank did know what he wanted to drink. "Jack and Coke for me," Frank said to the waitress.

"Make it two," said Cameron.

"Make it four," said Richard.

The waitress disappeared and left the four of them at the table. They all sat there in silence.

"Well, thank you, Mr. Simmons, for having us," Cameron said. Frank was surprised with Cameron's politeness.

"Mr. Simmons!" Richard said, delighted, "Mr. Simmons is my dad's name, and *he* didn't like being called *Mr.* either. I had to call him Sir."

"Really?" asked Cameron.

"Not Dad. *Sir*. The one thing I have in common with the military. Well, one of the things."

"Oh yeah?" said Cameron.

"You both know, like I do, the importance of being fit. I'm fit," he repeated, bringing both his arms so that his biceps were parallel to the floor.

Richard did look fit. His arms were tanned and toned, with a small amount of loose flesh that could be excused given his age, and the fact that he also seemed to be on vacation. The Jack and Cokes couldn't have helped, but then Frank was having them, too. This was Vegas, after all.

Richard gestured with his hands and scanned the room while he talked. "60 years old and I don't feel a day over 30. I have

my gym still. In LA. I can't move like I used to, but I can keep up with most people. And it's fun! I put on some music and we all have a ball. But that's the first thing I noticed about you, how fit you are. But made in the real world, not just the gym."

Frank was suddenly made aware of how much time he had spent in the gym.

Cameron motioned to Frank with his thumb. "Frank's the real fitness freak."

Richard looked at Frank. "The strong, silent type, I can tell," said Richard. "Frank, what's your routine?"

Richard turned towards Frank and looked up to meet his gaze. Frank and Richard were sitting so close to each other that Frank thought he could see himself in the pupils of Richard's eyes, in the black mirrors of his pupils. Frank grew shy under the intensity of Richard's gaze and looked away.

The waitress returned.

"Oh, thank you!" Richard said to the waitress, who put the tray of drinks on top of marble table closest to Richard's assistant, who began passing them around. The drink Frank had thought was for Richard's assistant was also for Richard.

After they all got their drinks, Richard lifted his two glasses in the air. "To the troops!" Richard said. Frank and Cameron lifted their glasses in the air and after they all clanked them together, they drank.

"Bench," said Frank, in response to Richard's previous question. "Deadlifts, clean, pullups, dips, all that."

Richard was drinking when Frank responded and was initially confused by, then registered, the response, both with deliberate movement of his eyebrows.

Now that he had answered Richard's question, Frank took a sip of his Jack and Coke. It went down smooth. He had drank way too many of these over the past couple of weeks.

"Wow, and all the military training you do, too," Richard said.

Frank nodded. "70 pound rucks, not to mention the gear. Jumping out of trucks, hiking, running, sprinting up stairs, night missions. Really takes its toll on the body. All the stuff in the gym helps with that. But I'm kind of taking a break now. We just got back from deployment two weeks ago."

"Two weeks," Richard said. "So you really just got home, didn't you?"

Richard made eye contact with Frank again, and, as Frank met it, he was suddenly struck with a familiar feeling.

Frank had never particularly followed the career of Richard Simmons, but Richard had been popular enough at the prime TV watching age of Frank's youth that it would have been almost impossible to avoid his presence. Frank remembered the clips of people who were desperate in their situation, those who felt hopeless to make any meaningful change in their lives. Those were exactly the kind of people who Richard had wanted to help, who Richard sought out and went into their homes and sat right next to them and looked right into their eyes with genuine concern—the same genuine concern that he looked into Frank's—and took their hands into his as he told them everything was going to be *all right*. And afterwards, for many people, it was. Their lives became better. Simply because they had met Richard Simmons.

Frank broke Richard's gaze, grabbed his drink with his right hand, and took a long sip.

The waitress soon walked into the room again, holding another tray full of Jack and Cokes. Frank didn't remember anyone

ordering another round. Richard flagged her down even though she was already heading to the table. Once the drinks were again passed around, Richard gave the waitress his phone and asked her to take a picture of them.

After she took the picture, and after they finished their second round of drinks, but before they all departed, Richard asked for Frank's and Cameron's number, and he texted the picture to them.

When Frank received the text and looked at the picture, he looked at Richard, whose mouth and eyes were open and joyous as he stared into the camera and now met Frank's gaze. Richard looked happy.

Cameron, who looked as he always did for the pictures they took on deployment, had a blank face, one devoid of emotions, except for the emotion he used to look hard. It was the face that Frank would put on when they were geared up and ready to go out on patrol or when he was at the gym and about to put up serious weights.

But that's not the face that Frank had in the picture. He had the tinge of a smile and his face was relaxed. Frank didn't look as in shape as he would have liked, but, like Richard Simmons, he looked happy, too.

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"Do you think he's gay?" Cameron asked.

Frank and Cameron sat on black leather seats in the back of stretch yellow Humvee that had been promised to Cameron over the phone.

After drinks with Richard Simmons, Frank and Cameron went back to their hotel, but not before Richard asked them to meet up later that night. While Cameron began to shake his head, Frank said they would think about it, and they departed. When they

got back to their hotel, Frank watched Cameron lose money at blackjack, then slots, then they went together to the hotel buffet and ate plates of meat and potatoes. When they were done, they went back to the room to freshen up, then Cameron called the number for Larry Flynt's Hustler Strip Club, which sent the stretch yellow Humvee they were now sitting in.

"Who cares?" Frank replied to Cameron's question. "Why does it matter?"

Cameron fiddled with the power windows of the limo.

"It doesn't," Cameron said. "I'm just asking, damn."

"Well, if it doesn't matter, then it doesn't matter."

"He did ask us to go dancing with him tonight."

"He was just being nice," Frank said.

"Whatever," Cameron grunted.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Frank asked.

"Nothing," Cameron said. He stared out the window.

Frank hadn't been to very many strip clubs. He didn't like to party like Cameron and the guys. They let Frank off easy because he looked like he could beat them up, which he probably could, even though he had never tried.

Most male Marines looked like Cameron, only a little taller, and lived a similar lifestyle. Pudge on top of muscle. They balanced a steady supply of cigarettes, alcohol, dip, energy drinks, burgers and fries, with pull-ups, running, cross fit, the weight room, and protein shakes. They looked like it, with thick necks and torsos that were tough, meaty, and tattooed.

Not Frank. There was no balance, only exercise. Not a drop of ink to found on him or alcohol in him. The other Marines would make fun of him for it if they weren't so impressed or scared

or jealous. The saying was “every Marine a rifleman,” the rifle their weapon of choice. Frank was a rifleman, too, but his body was the weapon. And the fortress. An impenetrable shell. But that wasn’t why Frank worked out. He did it to feel whole. It didn’t quite work, though, so maybe there was something to way Cameron did things. He’d give it a try, at least.

The stretch limo dropped Cameron and Frank off under a giant open rooftop that was held up by green fluorescent pillars. They were ushered through the front door and entered a long, black hallway that lead to a black door. On Cameron’s suggestion, they got the VIP pass, which gave them two free drinks and a lap dance, and they went through the door and into the club.

Frank entered the club behind Cameron. As soon as he did, he was overwhelmed by it all: the ivory white bar the sea of white leather chairs to his left, the poles everywhere, the pulsing hip hop.

A hand touched Frank’s elbow. He turned and was met with the steady gaze of a blonde woman. Her skin and hair glistened under the light. She gestured to his right ear, which he bent down towards her.

“Vanessa,” she said.

“Frank,” Frank replied.

“Do you want a dance?”

“Okay.”

She took him by the hand and began leading them up the stairs to the second floor. Frank looked for Cameron, who stood by the bar sipping his drink and watched as three of Vanessa’s coworkers gathered around him and contended for his attention.

When Frank got upstairs he was led to a booth, where Vanessa

began to give him his dance. She stood in front of him and danced and then began to straddle him. He was allowed to touch her torso as she danced for him, which he did, with both hands. While she danced, he couldn't help but notice her perfect hair and makeup, her slim and toned muscles and abs. And that look. The perfect combination of seduction and admiration, as if he was perfect.

Frank wondered what she had done to get everything so perfect as she did. And he wondered what she would do when it was no longer perfect anymore, when her body or mind wasn't able to do this anymore, from age or exhaustion. When Vanessa got to that point, would she think that she best used her time now, or that it used her? Will she consider her life over, or that it had just begun?

Toward the end of the latest song, Vanessa leaned over so that her hair draped over him. She again spoke into his right ear.

"You're body's so hot," she said.

Frank was excited despite himself—he liked women, but this was nothing but a transaction, and he knew it.

Out of the corner of Frank's eye, he saw Cameron leading a petite brunette by the hand past Frank and Vanessa and into a back room.

Vanessa stopped dancing. She stood up, flipped her hair, and asked if Frank wanted to continue. Frank said yes. Vanessa said they should go into the back room. When she answered how much it was, Frank said that they should just stay where they were. She walked away and came back with a credit card reader. It was still too much money, but Frank swiped his card, and she started her routine all over again.

At the end of her next dance, Vanessa again asked Frank if he wanted to go into the back room. Frank said no. She asked if he wanted another dance. Frank said no. She said thanks,

smiled, and walked downstairs.

Cameron was still in the back room, so Frank went downstairs and to the bar. Frank didn't want to leave Cameron, but didn't want to spend any more money on dances. He went to the bathroom and checked his phone. He had two missed phone calls from Richard Simmons. Frank looked at the time. It was nearly midnight. Frank shot a text to Cameron to ask him where he was. Cameron didn't respond. Frank then thought of calling Richard back, but it was late, and his phone was almost dead.

When Frank got out of the bathroom, he saw a phone charging station next to the bathroom and attached to the wall. He swiped his card in the charging station and hooked up his phone. As he stood there, Vanessa and a co-worker walked by him and down a hallway. Neither of them seemed to notice Frank. In fact, no one did. Frank was in a bubble he could stand in, safe from the obligation of interaction. He would stay here.

From the hallway that Vanessa and her co-worker had walked down, a red head walked towards him. She glanced nervously from one side of the hallway to another. Her hair and makeup was overdone and she walked in heels and a black coat that came down to her knees. She held a sparkling black bag in the crook of her right arm and continued to shift her focus from one point to another as if she was scanning for something she had lost. Then her focus settled on Frank.

Frank looked away, but it was too late. She was headed right for him.

"Hey," she said. She stood right next to Frank.

"Hey," he replied.

"Sandra," she said.

"Frank," Frank replied.

She held out her phone, whose screen was black. "My phone is dead," she said. "Would you be able to call me an Uber? I can pay you." Before Frank had a chance to respond, she opened her bag, stuck her hand inside and pulled out a stack of one-dollar bills that were carefully folded in half. She held them out to Frank. "That should cover it," she said.

Frank took the money, put it into his pocket, and touched the screen of his phone to bring up the Uber app.

"Where are you going?" he asked, and when she told him, he told her how long until the driver would arrive. She thanked him and then they both stood there, both of their bodies facing each other, but neither making eye contact.

Sandra began to shake her head as she looked at the ground. "I just failed my audition," she said. She glanced at Frank then back at the ground as she used her right hand to put her hair behind her ears. "They want me to lose twenty pounds and to get work done. I mean, I could lose some of the weight, but I won't get surgery. I didn't have to do any of this shit in Portland."

"I'm sorry," Frank said.

They both looked at each other now.

"It's different here, in Vegas," she said. "The competition. The standards. Everyone wants you to be something you're not."

"I think you're beautiful," Frank said to her. He meant it.

"Thanks," Sandra said. She said it like she had heard it a thousand times before.

Frank didn't know what to say anymore. "Don't let them change you," he said. He had heard someone say that once.

Sandra touched his arm. "Thank you," she said. She smiled and looked at him sincerely. "What are you in Vegas for?"

“Just got back from Iraq,” Frank said. “Here for some R & R with my buddy.”

Sandra instantly threw her arms around him. Frank, surprised, kept his arms by his side. Sandra let go and stepped back and looked sheepish, as if she had violated his personal boundaries. “Welcome back,” she said.

“Thanks,” Frank said.

Frank's phone buzzed in his hand and when he looked at it, he saw that Sandra's ride was here. She hugged him again and thanked him, and this time he hugged her back.

“Thank you for helping me,” she said into his ear, as she still embraced him. He inhaled the smell of her hair and perfume. “You're so sweet.”

Frank was moved by her comment, and found Sandra attractive. This, whatever it was—he didn't want it to end.

“Can I come with you?” Frank whispered.

Sandra looked neither surprised or offended. She shook her head. “Not tonight,” she said.

“Okay,” Frank said.

Sandra hugged Frank quickly again and left. Cameron still hadn't come downstairs yet. It was just past midnight. Frank remembered the two missed phone calls from Richard Simmons. He figured it was too late now to call back.

Frank stood at the bottom of the stairs for another twenty minutes or so as he waited for Cameron to come down, and when he didn't, he ordered an Uber for himself back to the hotel.

After the Uber, arrived, a black Honda Accord, Frank sat in the back. He pulled up the picture that Richard had texted him. Frank looked at Richard's face again, the one where he

had thought Richard looked so happy.

But when Frank looked at the picture now, he looked into Richard's eyes as they looked back at him and saw the sadness that no amount of acting happy could hide.

As the Uber driver drove and talked to Frank about NBA basketball, Frank tried calling Richard Simmons. The phone rang and rang and then went to voicemail.

\*

Frank woke up early the next morning, hung over. He walked to the windows and looked out as the rays of the sun took over duties from the lights of the strip. Cameron was passed out on the sofa, shirt on, but no pants. Frank hadn't heard him come back last night.

Frank put on some clothes, grabbed his room key and phone, and slipped out the door. He was on the Vegas strip in minutes.

At this hour, the streets were deserted, except for the occasional pairs of older couples or friends who walked with purpose. Frank took his time— check out time wasn't for hours. His muscles were calling for the workout he was sure to miss that day, but he tried to ignore their signals and the ones that called for food and water. He kept walking. He had spent too much time in his life sealed off, untouched by the secrets the wide world had to offer.

Frank took in the sights. The tall hotels. The fake pyramid and fake Eiffel tower. The people. He tried to think of the contrast between this and the streets of Iraq, but nothing came to him. When he thought of Iraq, he thought of working out, or of waiting to work out. Sometimes of bodies and the minds of bodies. Of the charred and black. But when his mind went to that, he thought of working out again.

Frank's phone buzzed. He took it out of his pocket and saw that it was Richard Simmons. He answered.

"Hello, Frank," Richard said to him. He sounded disappointed. Frank and Cameron had blown off Richard's invitation last night. Frank didn't want Richard to be upset.

"Hi," Frank said.

"I know it's early, but I woke up early. I had trouble sleeping."

"I'm up early, too," Frank said. "I'm sorry about last night. We did appreciate your invitation."

"What are you up to?" Richard asked.

"I'm out walking the strip."

"Oh, you are?" Richard asked. He sounded less disappointed now. "Where?"

Frank looked around him as he held the phone to his ear. "I don't know. By some hotels."

"Are you hungry?"

"I could eat."

"Come to the Bellagio. They'll send you to my room. How does that sound?"

"Okay," Frank said.

When Frank got to the lobby of the Bellagio, an open expanse of marble ceilings and floors, and rainbow colored decoration, he looked for a hotel clerk to speak to. Frank realized he didn't know where Richard's room was. Someone tapped him on the shoulder, and he turned to see a man in a burgundy coat and white gloves.

"Are you here for Richard Simmons?" the man asked.

"Yes," Frank said.

“Right this way,” the man said. He stepped backwards and to the side and extended his right arm in the direction of where he wanted Frank to walk.

When Frank got to Richard’s room, the door was slightly ajar. Frank walked in. Richard sat alone with his back to the window, facing the door, and at the head of a glass dining room table in a yellow chair. When Richard saw Frank, he gave a tired smile. He wore a red sequin tank top and white pants.



“Frank. Come in.”

The place setting for Frank was at the head of the table opposite Richard. In the middle of the table, there was enough food for a platoon: French Toast, muffins, eggs, bacon, potatoes, prime New York steak, smoked salmon on bagels, carafes of coffee and orange juice. Richard hadn’t touched the food yet. Frank took his seat.

“I got a little of everything,” Richard said.

“I can see that,” Frank replied.

“Shall we?” Richard asked, and gestured towards the food. A genuine glow lifted his face and body.

Frank dug in. He put enough on his plate for at least two. Richard then got some food for himself, a small portion of

eggs and potatoes and bacon. While Frank ate, he poured rounds of coffee and juice and water for himself.

Frank was done almost as soon as he began. Frank then looked at Richard, who ate his food gently and took his time. This was in sharp contrast to Frank, who, now aware of that fact, was embarrassed, but tried not to show it. Richard didn't seem to notice, and was focused on the simple act of eating. Frank got some more food and ate it slowly enough that he wouldn't finish before Richard did.

"How was it?" Richard asked. Frank was in the last chews of his second round of food.

Frank wiped his face with his napkin. "Really good," Frank said. "Thank you."

"Of course," Richard said. He cupped his coffee cup with two hands, brought it to his face for a sip, then put it down. "Did you have a nice night?"

"We went to a strip club, actually," Frank said, who wanted the words back as soon as he said them.

Richard must have sensed Frank's embarrassment and waved away his concern. "It's Vegas. I'd be worried if you *didn't* go to a strip club."

"I was worried to tell you, actually," Frank said.

"There's nothing you've seen that I haven't. And I've seen *everything*. Did you have a good time?"

Frank thought about it.

"I don't know," Frank said. "Maybe not."

Richard gave a slight nod and a little shrug of his shoulders. He understood.

"What about you?" Frank asked.

Richard rolled his eyes and smiled as if he had already explained it to Frank. "Oh, I found the party, but the party didn't find me, if that makes sense."

It didn't, really, to Frank, but he nodded anyways. Frank was deeply aware of the bounty of food he currently held in his stomach. He wasn't going to throw up, but he was worried he might burst.

"Do you ever get tired of it all?" Frank asked Richard.

Richard put down his coffee cup. He was curious about Frank's question. He put both of his elbows on the table in front of him and gestured with his hands to the majesty of the room around him. "Of this?" Richard asked. He meant it sincerely.

Frank felt bad, that he had overstepped. "No, sorry," Frank said.

"Oh, I can get tired of this," Richard said. "It's marvelous at first—and it is marvelous—but after a while it just becomes normal. So then you look for something new to give you the feeling that the first marvelous thing did. After a while, when you get tired of all that, you just want what was normal to begin with."

"And are you tired of it now?" Frank asked.

Slowly, Richard swiveled around in his chair and looked out the penthouse window. Down below was the small, blue man-made lake. "Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Sometimes yes, but then I take a break, and then I'm good again. But the breaks have gotten longer over the years."

"I think I'm getting to that point," Frank said. "Of being done."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-two."

“Ha!” Richard’s laugh rang out like a shot. He continued to laugh as he swung around in his chair. When he faced Frank, he covered his mouth with one hand and waved towards Frank with the other, as if trying to apologize for his behavior. Frank couldn’t help but feel a little embarrassed. Richard’s laugh trickled down into a sniffle.

“I’m sorry,” Richard said. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Frank said.

“I wasn’t laughing at you,” Richard said. “I just –”

“It’s okay.”

Richard stood up, walked over to Frank, and sat in the chair that was to Frank’s immediate left. He looked in Frank’s eyes, with the same gaze that had cast Frank into a spell the day before.

“You’ve been through a lot, haven’t you?” Richard asked.

Frank looked at Richard and nodded. “And so have you,” Frank said.

Richard was surprised by Frank’s comment. He looked away from Frank and furrowed his eyebrows, not in disapproval of Frank, but in reaction something that only he could see. Richard stood up, walked over to the window, and looked out it. He stood there for a while.

Frank thought of when he had typed “Richard Simmons” into YouTube last night, when Cameron was in the shower, getting ready for the strip club. The first YouTube result was an hour long video of Richard dancing with a roomful of people, titled, “Sweatin’ to the Oldies.” Frank clicked on it and it was what he had expected: Richard and a roomful of his followers, all in leotards, dancing to the oldies. Frank exited the video and clicked on the second result, which was one of Richard’s David Letterman’s appearances.

In the video, Richard wore a turkey costume made of red and yellow feathers. The audience howled their approval of his costume, and Richard basked in their approval. Letterman smirked. Richard seemed to purposely annoy Letterman and Letterman responded by making fun of Richard—this was their routine. Richard then wanted Letterman to give him a kiss on the cheek, then he stood up in his red and yellow feather outfit and walked over to Letterman to try, and Letterman stood up carrying a fire extinguisher and sprayed Richard with it. Richard yelled at Letterman to stop but Letterman continued spraying him. The audience went wild. The video ended.

Frank felt conflicted by the video. Fitness wasn't about celebrity. It was about fitness. Frank worked out to get strong and to look strong.

But then that wasn't fully true. He worked out to kill. He worked out to distract himself from killing and dying and death and the charred and the black. Frank worked out to save himself. And while it was true he would eventually leave the Marines, one way or another, it wasn't true that the Marines would leave him. Once a Marine, always one.

Maybe it was similar for Richard. His body would only allow him to work out for so long. But whatever happened, he would always be Richard Simmons.

Richard continued to stare out the window. Down below, Frank knew, were the fountains that he hadn't seen.

Frank's phone buzzed in his pocket. He pulled it out. Cameron was calling him. Frank let it go to voicemail.

Frank looked at Richard. "Hey, what's up with those fountains?" Frank asked.

"What do you mean?" Richard asked.

"Do they work?"

"Yes," Richard said.

"Yesterday when Cameron and I went by they weren't on. And they're not on now, too."

"Well, they start only after a certain time. Four o'clock, something like that. What time is it now?"

Frank looked at his watch. "Nine A.M.," he said.

"We'd have to wait for a while then."

"I'll be gone by then," Frank said.

Richard, still looking out the window, nodded.

"I've never seen them," Frank said. "In person, I mean. I've seen them on YouTube or whatever."

Richard whirled around on his heels. "You've never seen them?!"

"No."

Richard walked quickly past Frank and in the direction of his bedroom. "Frank, what are we going to do with you? Hold, please."

Richard slammed the bedroom doors shut behind him. Frank heard Richard's muffled talking. After a few minutes, Richard opened both doors at the same time. He was glowing. "I've got good news!" Richard said. He started walking.

"They're going to turn on the fountains?" Frank asked.

Richard pointed at Frank. "Bingo," Richard said. Richard walked past Frank towards the window. Frank followed.

"How'd you do that?" Frank asked.

Richard put out both his arms and shrugged his shoulders like *aw shucks*. "One of the perks."

Frank walked to the window and stood next to Richard so that they were shoulder to shoulder. They both stared out the window and onto the lake below.

"Any second now," Richard said.

"Okay," Frank said.

"What about your friend?" Richard asked. "Should we stop the parade and invite him?"

Frank stayed silent for a few moments as he thought of his response.

"Cameron doesn't like fountains," Frank replied finally.

"Oh," Richard replied. "Oh, okay."

As Frank and Richard waited for the fountains to come, Frank could see both of their reflections in the mirror.

Richard, who looked through the window with anticipation, seemed tired, but content. Compared to the one Frank had seen in the YouTube video on Letterman, his face was older, obviously, not quite as full of youth and vigor. But it was Richard's.

Frank then looked at himself and his rounded edges. He didn't look like he used to. But he looked like who he was. He looked like Frank.

Suddenly, from the blue lake below, two circles of fountains of water shot up from the lake, then, in the middle of both those circles, two towers of water shot up into the sky, so high up, that they seemed like they would never come down again.

Richard gasped.

Frank looked at his own reflection. "Don't be scared," he said.

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## **New Fiction from Ken Galbreath: "Checkpoint"**

In high school, I was invisible—acne and braces, last year's wardrobe. I didn't have close friends. My grades weren't going to win me any scholarships. The football coach offered me the equipment manager's position after tryouts.

In the ninth grade, 9/11 happened. In tenth grade, I watched the Air Force drop daisy cutters on Tora Bora. In my junior year, I watched the Marines level Fallujah. There were yellow ribbon magnets on every car and American flags on every porch. The military was a way to be somebody.

So after I graduated, I ran to the recruiter's office; shaved my head before I even shipped out. Some guys hated basic training. Not me. I couldn't wait to get home in my dress uniform and strut through town, to show all those people who had looked over me or looked through me instead of looking at me. I'd be impossible to miss with a chest full of ribbons and medals.

I finished basic and shipped to Fort Bragg. My unit deployed to Iraq three weeks later, just in time for me to get some. But our area of operations was only peace and the endless desert. Nobody had died in almost a year. No Americans.

My platoon drove around Iraq in humvees, pointing our guns at the horizon, hoping to draw fire. We escorted supply convoys. We transported detainees. We set up checkpoints.

The recruiter never said shit about supply convoys. And he definitely didn't mention sitting at a checkpoint, in a hundred and fifty degrees, in body armor, in a truck in the desert, just sitting. That lying prick told me about kicking in doors, calling in airstrikes, airborne infiltrations. Never checkpoints.

But, no shit, there we were.

When we arrived, the lieutenant radioed in our coordinates. Sergeant Schwartz and the other team leaders arranged orange cones and stretched out large, spiral coils of barbed wire creating a temporary barrier. Two soldiers positioned signs at either end of the checkpoint. In Arabic and English, they read, "Caution. Stop Here. U.S. Forces Checkpoint Ahead. Wait for Instructions. Deadly Force Authorized. Caution." My job was to stand in the turret and man the .50 caliber machine gun, to provide security while the other guys set up.

Sergeant Schwartz pulled the heavy door shut as he got back into the truck.

"And now we wait," he said.

Scwhartz took a pinch of snuff and tucked it in his bottom lip. He passed the can to Carpenter, the driver. I heard them spitting into empty bottles. Out past the barrel of the .50, the dirt road shimmered like water. Two hours went by, then three. Farmers' trucks kicked up dust as they drove from one rural village to the next.



Ramadi, Iraq (Feb. 20, 2005). U.S. Navy photo by Photographer's Mate 1st Class Shane T. McCoy.

So far, we had searched two vehicles and had found nothing.

"Hey Sergeant Schwartz," I called down from the turret. "Is it always like this?"

"Like what?"

"This..." I said, "boring."

"The last deployment wasn't," he said. "We were up near Baghdad. Urban environment."

"What's the craziest thing you ever found?"

"No shit," he said. "This one time, we stopped a car full of midget hajjis."

Schwartz told us that Bobby Barrow, one of the other team's sergeants, had halted four lanes of traffic so he could take

pictures. This was back when he and Schwartz were still privates. While Bobby was getting his picture taken, the search team found a wooden box full of Iraqi money hidden under a spare tire. So Bobby and Schwartz had to zip tie all these tiny little hands together while the lieutenant radioed headquarters. Turns out, all the money had Saddam's face on it, so they let the driver keep it. Before they left, one of the Iraqis tried to get Barrow to marry his daughter and take her home to America.

"Bobby told him, I can't take no hajji girl home to my mama!" Schwartz finished, laughing.

A truck approached.

"Punisher 7," I called it in. "This is Punisher 4. Vehicle approaching from the south. Over."

"Roger. Over." The bored reply.

A door clunked open and the truck rocked as Sergeant Schwartz stepped out. I heard the team leaders from the other trucks doing the same. Out at the furthest clump of orange cones, the white pickup truck slowed, as if the driver was reading the sign. I stood in the gun turret and held my hands and arms straight out in front of me like a traffic cop, but he kept driving, rolling past the sign.

The team leaders, standing in the road beside my truck, raised their long guns and pulled the butt stocks tight into their shoulders.

I fired a signal flare, a warning. The flaming red ball arced past his windshield.

Still, the pickup didn't stop; it accelerated toward the barbed wire, our position.

"Light him up!" Sergeant Schwartz nodded at me.

I aimed. I fired three rounds.

The pickup lurched and jerked and skidded to a halt. The passenger's side sagged off the dirt road into an irrigation ditch. A door screeched open, and three female figures scrambled out, screaming and crying. The search team corralled them. Someone shouted, "Clear!"

There was nothing in the truck.

And then Doc sprinted up and pulled the driver out. She laid him on his back in the road, cut his pants apart, and stuffed handfuls of gauze into the gaping wound in his groin. And then she gave up. I heard the call for a body bag on the radio.

I clambered up out of the turret, pulled my headset off, and ignored Carpenter's questions about what I was doing, his warnings that I would be in trouble for leaving. I marched down the road, around the serpentine of barbed wire to where the truck had stopped.

One round had passed through the windshield of the truck high on the passenger's side, a cloudy spider web centered around a clean hole. Another hole in the grill, driver's side. Fluids leaked from under the truck, oil and antifreeze. Blood soaked the driver's seat, dripped out the door and puddled in the sand to form tiny lakes.

I caught glimpses of the driver, with all of the people crowded around: the platoon sergeant, the medic, the team leaders, too busy talking about the details of "the report" to notice his wispy moustache. They didn't see the zits that dotted his face, because they were talking about proper escalation of force. They didn't notice me either, standing outside of their huddle.

Two young girls wailed on the side of the road. Their mother, or grandmother, was ancient and dry. The lieutenant asked the interpreter why they didn't stop at the sign, and the

interpreter turned to the woman and said something in Arabic.

Her voice was papyrus. She held her hands out in front of her and patted her breast with her hand.

"She says they didn't know what to do," the interpreter said.

"Did they not read the sign?" the lieutenant asked.

"She says there is no school here," said Nasir.

The old woman patted her chest again and again.

"There's no school here," the lieutenant said, almost to himself. And then, not so quietly, "JESUS! FUCK!"

Heads turned to look at him, including the platoon sergeant's. I stood in the middle of the road. His eyes flicked to the empty turret 40 meters away.

"What are you worried about that for?" He jerked his head back over his shoulder. "You're supposed to be worried about your fucking sector of fire, dumbass." He shoved and pulled me to the truck and ordered me back up into the turret.

I watched my sector while the platoon packed up road cones and signs. They loaded everything into the trucks.

The platoon sergeant and interpreter spoke to the old woman, telling her how to file a claim. They gave her a piece of paper with the information printed on it. Before they left, Schwartz knelt and offered the girls a package of M&Ms. The smaller girl burst into tears and clung to the woman's *burqa*.

As they walked away, the old woman stopped and rasped at me, "*Asif.*"

"I don't speak your language," I told her. "I don't understand."

"She says she is sorry," Nasir said.

\*

On the ride back to base, Schwartz kept telling me not to worry. We did everything by the book.

“You’ll have to write a statement when we get back. Probably answer some questions, but just tell the truth,” he said. “We did it all by the book.”

It was annoying, the way he kept repeating himself.

I finished my tour of duty. The army gave me a medal. Later, they gave me my discharge papers. I grew out my hair and enrolled at a state university.

I didn’t strut around town in my dress uniform.

\*

Two years later, Carpenter’s email arrived. It was short.

“Hey G,” he wrote. “I don’t know if you heard, but Schwartz died. Wanted you to know. Hope you’re doing good.”

The first email came a week after I left the army. Donahue died. Suicide attack in Baghdad. Last year it was Bethea. IED on some road in Afghanistan. He had gotten married the month before. Now Schwartz.

At the bottom of Carpenter’s email, there was a link to an obituary. “Staff Sergeant Michael A. Schwartzberger, age 32, died on...”

I hadn’t talked to Schwartz, or practically anyone from the unit, since I left the army, but I felt like there ought to be more than just some dates and a list of people he left behind.

I read his name over and over. Schwartzberger. The name tape on his uniform had the tiniest little letters so that they would all fit. We had just called him Schwartz.

I emailed my professors and left that morning.

\*

The honor guard stood off to the side with their rifles. Some hairless kid in a baggy dress jacket held a bugle.

Standing behind the crowd, I searched the backs of heads for familiar faces. Bobby Barrow was conspicuous, his shoulders as broad as ever. He was the only person in a dress uniform who wasn't part of the honor guard. Carpenter would be here somewhere.

The chaplain stood next to the coffin rambling through generic scripture— *The righteous perish and no one takes it to heart. The devout are taken away, and no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil*— I wanted to shout him down. I wanted to tell Schwartz's *real* story.

Schwartz was 20 when he joined the Army.

His grandfather and his father worked in Youngstown, but Schwartz was born the year after the steel industry moved to China. There was no future at the plant.

The Volunteer Fire Department didn't offer a pension. No benefits package either. Fourteen dollars an hour might have been enough for him and Melissa, just the two of them, but then the baby came.

Schwartz was an all-American kid: athlete, honors student, Eagle Scout. The recruiters had hounded him right after high school. Then, he had tucked their cards into his wallet and nodded and smiled. When things got tight, he dug through the drawer in the kitchen where old wallet clutter was archived with dead batteries and receipts of questionable importance.

Melissa's belly was seven-months-fat when the recruiter came to pick up Schwartz for basic training. She sobbed on the porch while Schwartz rode away.

“Don’t worry,” the recruiter told him in the car. “You’ll be gone for a couple of months, and then you’ll move her and the kid down to Fort Bragg, and you’ll see her every night. Except for a training exercise every now and then.”

After basic training, he moved Melissa and Emily to Fort Bragg. He spent every night with them, except for the occasional training exercise.

After 9/11, the exercises came more often. The nights he spent at home, he lay awake, straining to sleep. He never explained it explicitly, but I understood. Some part of him needed to record the sound of his wife’s soft snores or the smell of her hair. He needed to absorb the blank hiss of the baby monitor.

On a tiny base in Khost Province, he earned an Army Commendation Medal and corporal’s stripes. He kept a picture of his daughter in his helmet. He wrote letters home every week. The letters never mentioned rockets or mortars or any kind of trouble. He told Melissa about his promotion. He wrote how much he missed her.

They had been in Afghanistan for six months and already there were murmurs about Iraq.

He received another medal and another promotion in Baghdad. He wrote letters. He kept a copy of his wife’s sonogram along with the pictures tucked in his helmet. The unit arranged it so that he could make a phone call home on the day that Ashley was born.

These are the stories he told us while we were overseas together—his third deployment, my first and only.

\*

Schwartz’s unit was still in Afghanistan. The honor guard had been scraped together from the fuckups left at Fort Bragg. The rifle detail and the bugler were privates, fresh out of basic

training or discipline cases. The detail's leader was a fat, dumpy sergeant first class. All of the able bodies, and minds, were in Afghanistan.

The chaplain finished the service. The fat sergeant stepped up to the casket and raised his right arm in a slow salute. I watched to see who would jump at the first volley of shots. As the last volley's echo rolled through the cemetery, the bugler started to play "Taps."

It wasn't even a real bugle. There were so many funerals, and so few trained buglers, that the army had to use fakes. The digital bugles played a perfect rendition every time, but anyone who ever played a brass instrument would be able to look at the kid in the baggy jacket and tell he wasn't playing. He didn't even know how to hold the fucking thing.

The fat sergeant handed the folded flag to Schwartz's mom.

Some of the attendees walked back to their cars. Others waited to pay their respects to Schwartz's parents, still seated, looking as if they'd be guarding his grave forever.

\*

Bobby, Carpenter, and I met at a bar near my hotel.

Neither of them knew how Schwartz had died. Bobby said Schwartz's unit had deployed eight or nine months ago, but like the rest of us, he'd lost track of Schwartz after leaving Fort Bragg. Carpenter hadn't really talked to anyone since he'd been kicked out—cocaine.

Schwartz's honor guard walked into the bar a little after sundown. They were in civilian clothes, but I recognized the fat sergeant who had handed the flag to Schwartz's parents. Bobby asked about my hair: "So, when your girlfriend is pegging you, does she pull your hair? You know? And, do you have to put it back in a bun when you're licking her balls..."

I nodded toward the door, distracting him.

"Hey bartender," he yelled. "Get these boys some drinks!"

We sat at a table and told stories about Schwartz. Bobby had known him far longer than me; Carpenter too, so I let them do the talking. I was drunk. I smiled and nodded in the right places, chimed in with exclamations when I was expected to.

We kept waiting for the fat sergeant and the honor guard to open up. They were happy to drink on Bobby's tab, but they stayed quiet, like we were still at the funeral. They seemed surprised by the way we described him. It was like they had never even met Schwartz.

We wanted to hear their stories about him, but what we really wanted was to know how he died. The obituary had said nothing, not even *where* he died. And it wasn't like he was a spy, out doing something classified. He was in the fucking field artillery.

The jukebox died. Bobby was content to give it a rest. There was a lull in storytime.

"Tell 'em about that kid you smoked at that checkpoint," Carpenter said.

My stomach dropped. I focused on the beads of condensation running down a bottle of beer, but all I could see was that dusty, old woman. I could hear her voice, her rusty tongue dragging across the roof of her mouth. *Asif*.

*She says she is sorry.*

I struggled away from the memory and looked up, hoping for an interruption, an earthquake, a meteor strike, anything not to have to relive it.

The men from Schwartz's honor guard stared at me hungrily, waiting for blood. Bobby wouldn't meet my gaze. He understood

that this was necessary. If I shared my story of bloodshed, then they would tell us what happened to Schwartz.

Blood calls for blood.

"So," I said, "this kid, who it turned out couldn't read, blew through a sign at our checkpoint, and I thought I was doing the right thing, but it turned out-."

"Dude!" Carpenter interrupted me. "Tell it *right*, man!" He turned to the fat sergeant and the rifle detail. "So no shit, there we were, in the middle of this fucking dirt road ..."

He told it all.

When Carpenter finished, the fat sergeant raised his bottle towards me, and then everyone at the table did the same. I waggled my bottle side to side. The label lay in shreds on the table.

"Sorry boys," I said. "I'm empty."

"Get me one too!" Carpenter called as I walked away from the table.

The parking lot was dark and cool. I pondered getting in my car and driving back to Asheville. The keys were in my hand.

Raised voices and breaking glass forced me to do an about face.

Inside, Bobby stood in front of his overturned chair, red-faced, cursing down at the fat sergeant. "You don't fucking know. You weren't there, you tubby shit!"

And now the fat man jerked to his feet knocking his chair to the ground too. "Listen, sergeant." He pointed his sausage fingers in Bobby's face. "You need to tone it down. I don't know who it is that you guys knew, but it wasn't the guy that I knew. Schwartz was a fucking shit bag and a drunk. That's

why they left him in the rear.”

“What?” Bobby’s arms sagged.

When a unit deployed, they left people back in the States to take care of admin stuff– bitch work. They called it rear detachment. It was for broke-dicks, whiners, fuckups. Schwartz wasn’t any of those things. This was a mistake.

“They. Left. Him. In The. Rear,” the fat sergeant repeated, accentuating every word. “Schwartz got a DUI, and then he got busted for being drunk on duty. His ex took his daughters and got a *restraining order*. He was about to get busted down to sergeant.”

“Liar!” Bobby said. Angry tears brimmed from his blue eyes.

“That morning, when he didn’t show up to P.T. formation, no one blinked, because, like I said, Schwartz was a fuckup. When he missed 0900 formation too, we sent a couple guys to his quarters.”

Bobby made harsh cawing sounds and the tears spilled over.

The fat sergeant continued. “When they knocked, no one answered, but they knew something was wrong. So, they broke in. They found him in the garage, in his truck with the engine running.”

Bobby crumpled into a chair. Until now, I’d never seen him look deflated.

“Did he leave a note?” I asked.

“Sort of,” the fat sergeant said. “That’s how the guys knew something was wrong when they went to Schwartz’ place. He wrote *Sorry* in giant, spray paint letters across the garage door.”

*Asif.*

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# New fiction from Taylor Brown: Excerpt, 'Pride of Eden'

*The following is an excerpt from Chapter 2 of Taylor Brown's newest novel, [Pride of Eden](#), out March 17th, 2020. Reprinted with permission from St. Martin's Press.*

Lope knelt before the fire engine, rag in hand, polishing the silver platters of the wheels. An old song rose in his throat. Muddy Waters or Howlin' Wolf, begging his baby not to go, not to be her dog. Lope let the words hum against his lips, unvoiced. There was heat in the blues, he knew, as if the singer's heart were held over the blue hiss of a gas flame.

Lope started to part his lips, to sing to the sleeping engine, when a whistle rose in accompaniment, like the train songs of old. A turbocharged diesel came whining up the drive, a black Ford dually with smokestacks risen over the cab like a pair of chrome horns. The truck skidded to a halt before the firehouse bays, rocking on its wheels, as if summoned here.

Little Anse Caulfield jumped down from the cab, his backcut cowboy heels clacking in the gravel. He was a square-jawed bantam, built like a postage stamp, bowlegged like the old jockey he was. He wore a bush hat, the brim pinned on one side, and the small round eyeglasses of a small-town clerk, his nose smashed broad and flat against his cheeks, as if by God's thumbs. His eyes were iron-gray. In one hand he held a double rifle, like for shooting elephant. He stood before the open bay, squinting at Lope.

"You ain't seen a lion, have you?"

Lope stood from the wheel. He snapped the rag at the end of one long, dark arm. "Lord," he said. "Not again."

\*

Her name was Henrietta. She was a golden lioness, born on the grasslands of Africa, sired by a black-maned king of the savannah. She was still a cub when poachers decimated her pride, killing the lions for their teeth and claws and bones. The cubs were rounded up and sold on the black market. She became the pet of an Emirati sheikh, who later sold her to a Miami cocaine lord who enjoyed walking her on a leash amid the topiary beasts of his estate, ribbons of smoke curling from his Cuban cigar.



"Heracles Slaying the Lion." Roman mosaic, Liria, Spain.

After a team of DEA agents raided the place, she found herself

under the care of Anse Caulfield. His high-fence compound on the Georgia coast was a sanctuary for big cats and exotics of various breeds. It was located an hour south of Savannah, where the dark scrawl of the Satilla River passed beneath the old coastal highway—known as the Ocean Highway in the days before the interstate was built. On this two-lane blacktop, laden with tar-snakes, tourists had hurtled south for the beaches of Florida while semis loaded with citrus and pulpwood howled north. Sometimes they'd collided. There had been incredible wrecks, fiery and debris-strewn, like the work of airstrikes.

Now traffic was scarce. Log trucks and dusty sedans rattled past the compound, which was set back under the mossy oaks and pines. Behind the corrugated steel fence, there lived a whole ambush of tigers, many inbred or arthritic, saved from roadside zoos or private menageries or backyard pens. Some surrendered, some seized, some found wandering highways or neighborhood streets. There lived a duo of former circus tigers, a rescued ocelot, and a three-toed sloth once fenced in a family's backyard jungle gym. A range of smaller big cats—servals and caracals popular in the exotic pet trade. An elephant that once performed circus handstands, a troop of monkeys, and a lioness.

Anse called the place Little Eden.

No one knew why he kept the property, exactly. His history was vague, rife with rumor and myth. Some people said he'd been with an elite unit in Vietnam—a snake-eater, operating far behind enemy lines. Others said a soldier of fortune in Africa. Some claimed he was a famous jockey who'd fallen one too many times on his head. But Henrietta was his favorite—everyone knew that. He'd built a chain-link enclosure for her, sized like a batting cage for Paul Bunyan, and people said his big dually truck cruised the night roads, rounding up strays to feed her. Others said it was Henrietta herself who stalked the country dark, loosed nightly to feed. Why she

would return in the morning, no one knew.

"You reported it yet?" asked Lope.

"What you think I'm doing now?"

Lope got on the radio. The schools would be locked down, the word put out. The county cruisers would begin prowling the backroads along the river, looking for tracks. The firefighters would take their own personal trucks. When he emerged from the radio room, the firemen had paired off into two-man search teams. Anse stood bouncing on his boot heels, grinding his teeth. The odd man out.

"I'll ride with you," said Lope.

They aimed up the old coastal highway at speed. Lope had one long arm extended, his hand braced against the dashboard.

"This fast, ain't you afraid you could hit her crossing the road?"

Anse was hunched over the wheel, his chin pushed out like a hood ornament.

"Serve her right, running out on me again."

Lope eyed the elephant gun rattling on the rack behind their heads.

"Where's your tranquilizer gun?"

Anse sucked his lips into his mouth, then popped them out.

"Forgot it."

They passed the old zombie neighborhoods built just before the market crashed. Satilla Shores, Camden Bluffs, King's Retreat. Whole housing developments killed mid-construction, abandoned when the housing bubble burst. Their wrought iron gates stood twisted with vines, their guard shacks dusty and overgrown, vacant but for snakes and possums and the odd hitchhiker

needing shelter for the night. Their empty streets snaked through the pines, curling into cul-de-sacs, skating along bare river frontage. They turned in to one called Plantation Pointe, the sign weedy and discolored. The community was neatly paved, with greening curbs and sidewalks, periodic fire hydrants standing before overgrown lots. There were four or five houses built, pre-recession dreams that petered out. They were empty, their windows shining dumbly in the morning sun, their pipes dry, their circuits dead. Squatters had been found in some of them, vagrant families with their old vans or station wagons parked in the garages, the flotsam of Dumpsters and thrift stores strapped to the vehicles' roofs. The vagrants cooked only at night, in fireplaces of brick or stone, like people of another age. They kept the curtains drawn.

The dually rolled through the neighborhood, the tires crackling around empty cul-de-sacs. The windows were up. Lope had his ballcap turned backward to press his face closer to the glass, scanning for a flash of golden fur in the trees. "How'd she get loose?"

Anse frowned. "Same's last time."

"And how was that, exactly? I never got it straight."

Anse chewed on his bottom lip. "Look," he said, pointing over the wheel. "A kill."

\*

They stood in the overgrown yard. It was a whitetail doe, or used to be. It had been torn inside out, the guts strung through the grass. The rib cage was visible, clutching an eaten heart.

"Lord," said Lope. "You been starving that thing or something?"

Anse spat beneath his bush hat and looked up. A white clot bubbled in the grass. "She's born for this. What do you expect?"

Lope looked out at the tree line. Fragments of the Satilla River shone through the trunks and vines and moss. The lioness must have stalked the doe from the woods, bursting forth to catch her across this man-made veld. Anse had the elephant gun cradled against his chest, still staring at the mess in the yard. "Used to be lions all across this country, hunting three-toed horses and ground sloths, woolly mammoths."

"You mean saber-toothed tigers?"

"They ain't tigers. They're saber cats. Smilodons. Then you had the American lion, too—*Panthera leo atrox*—four foot tall at the shoulder. Them cats owned the night. 'Course they disappeared at the same time as the rest of the megafauna, ten thousand years ago."

Lope shivered. "Thank the Lord," he said.

Anse's upper lip curled in sneer. "They would of ate your Lord off his cross and shat him out in the woods."

Lope stiffened. He thought of the hymns sung in the small whitewashed church of his youth, where his father, a deacon, had often preached on Sundays, his face bright with sweat. Songs of chariots and lion dens and flying away home. He looked at Anse. "Not Daniel they didn't. 'God hath sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths.'"

Anse smiled at the killed deer. "Hath he now?"

Lope could remember his first structure fire more clearly than his first kiss, than his first fumbings for buttons and zippers in the dark of movie theaters and backseats. The stable fire peeled back the darkness of the world, so bright it seared him.

He was ten at the time. He'd already developed a fascination with fire. Under his bed, he kept a cardboard box filled with cigarette lighters he'd collected. He had a vintage Zippo, a butane jet lighter that hissed like a miniature blowtorch, even a stormproof trench lighter made from an antique bullet casing. He would sit cross-legged on his bed and thumb the wheel of a Zippo or Bic, relishing the secret fire in the house. Sometimes, after school, he would erect small temples of kindling and tinder in the backyard, then set them alight, watching rapt at the transformation—the twist and glow of their dying architecture, the chemical brightness.

The day of the fire, he followed a black pillar of smoke home from school, weaving down the shoulder of the road on his BMX bike as the fire engines roared past. His heart raced faster and faster as he realized what was burning.

The stables where his father worked.

The man had grown up on one of the sea islands, riding bareback on marsh ponies while other children were still hopping around on hobbyhorses. A hard man among his family, but strangely tender with animals. He spoke to horses in Gullah—a tongue Lope never heard him use among men. His loose-jointed body seemed built for horseback, his seat and shoulders bobbing in time to their trots. With his long limbs, he could trick-ride with gusto, swinging low from the saddle like an Apache or standing high atop their spines, his arms spread like wings. He worked as the barn manager and groom for a local equine community.

Lope straddled his bicycle before the blaze, his face licked with firelight. Antlers of flame roared from every window, like the blazing crown of a demon, and the smoke looked thick enough to climb. An evil hiss pervaded the scene, pierced now and again by the scream of a frightened animal. Only later did Lope learn that his father had been inside trying to save the last of the horses when the roof beams collapsed.

Ten years old, Lope could not help but feel there was some connection, that his secret fascination had sparked this awful happening. His secret desires or jealousies. So many times, he'd wrapped his arms around himself and wished for the gentle touch and cooing voice his father gave only to his horses—never his son. So many times, Lope had huddled over his yard-built temples and pyres, watching them burn.

Back at Anse's truck, Lope called his wife. He told her to stay inside with the baby until she heard from him.

"Larell Pope," she said, using his full name. "I got a cut-and-color at ten. One of my best clients. I'm not canceling on her because some zoo animal is on the loose. I already have a girl coming to watch Lavonne."

Lope turned toward the truck, gripping the side mirror. "Please," he said.

"That new dryer ain't going to pay itself off, Larell."

"It'll get paid."

Lope could sense Anse waiting behind him, his boot heel grinding into the pavement. "Just cancel it," he said, hanging up.

When he turned around, the old man was sliding a giant, double-barreled pistol into a holster slung under one arm. The gun looked like something the captain of a pirate ship would carry, with twin rabbit-ear hammers and double triggers.

"The hell is that thing?"

"Howdah pistol," said Anse.

"Howdah?"

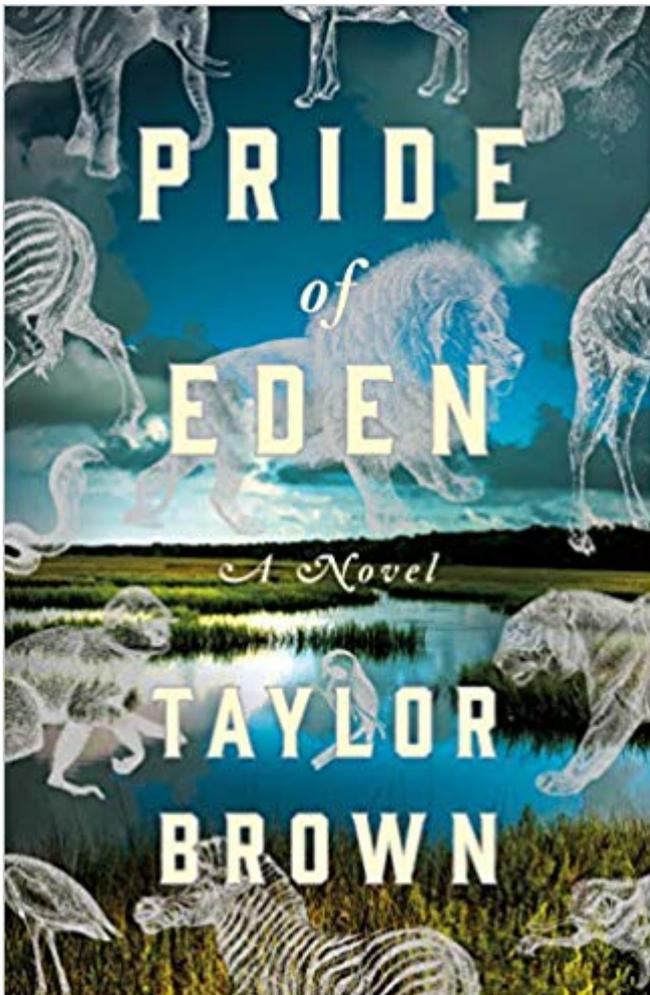
"An elephant carriage. Back in the colonial days, hunters carried these pistols on shikars—tiger hunts—in case a pissed-

off tiger tried to climb the elephant they were riding.”

Lope swallowed. “Hell,” he said.

The old man took the double rifle from the backseat and held it out. “Can you shoot?”

Lope looked at the old safari gun. The twin barrels were huge, the stock scarred from years in hard country. He sniffed. “I can shoot,” he said.



Brown, Taylor. [Pride of Eden](#) (St. Martin's, 2020).

*Look for the novel on March 17th wherever books are sold. It is also Wrath-Bearing Tree's giveaway book for the month—a comment anywhere on the site enters you to win.*

An excerpt from Brown's novel [Gods of Howl Mountain](#) as well as [an interview with Taylor](#) appeared in the February 2018 issue of *Wrath-Bearing Tree*.

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## Disrespecting the Troops

Sitting in front of my computer one evening, scrolling idly through Facebook items, a long post catches my eye. As a novelist, I'm sympathetic to fellow writers who can't fit their thoughts into tidy soundbites, who need space to express their concerns. So I click "read more," hoping someone will give me valuable food for thought in a simplified world.

Alas, I have made a mistake:

*Hey, real quick. For all y'all big ole football players who want to take a knee during the national anthem I just want to say "go ahead." That's right biggun', take that knee. The 1% got it. They will continue to embrace the suck for minimum wage in a country where you can't even begin to understand the various civil liberties that are violated. ...When the day is done and you take off your pads, have your interviews, sign your lucrative cereal box deal, and fly home to your castle, the 1% will clear their weapon, take a cold shower in the hopes of cleaning off their best friends blood and brains that covered their face and flag. They will eat yet another MRE before laying on a ragged cot only to wake up, put a round in the chamber and walk the streets in the hope of providing just 1/10 of the lifestyle you kneel in protest against.*

I feel myself thinking, for the billionth time since last year's election: What the hell is this?



Why is protest seen by some sectors of US society as disrespectful to the troops? Photo by Britta Hansen

Right off, there are some things I can recognize: the Fox News sneer, oddly colloquial hostility, and chummy racism. Why do these conservative op-eds always feel like being advanced upon by an irate stranger in a grocery-store parking lot?

Instead of slamming my computer shut, for some reason, I want to understand this. I want to get to the bottom of why this person is so very, very angry, and what it is about men kneeling at football games that makes him so, and what on earth that has to do with the poor guy sleeping on the cot in some unnamed country.

So I read the post again. And I can start to see it: that familiar bitterness, rage even, toward any non-white person who's ruffling the status quo. Somehow, this anger is "justified" through the righteous defense of veterans.

Wait, hold up, what? What have veterans got to do with it?

The answer, I believe, is very little. But an *idea* of veterans, and of the American military as a whole, is being cultivated by American conservatives, with striking confidence and vehemence, to justify the right-wing platform—one that now more than ever imagines the US as white, masculine, and authoritarian.

My Facebook rhetorician's name is "Todd", but I don't know Todd personally. The post was shared by a female acquaintance of mine, whom I happen to know is neither a military spouse nor a veteran. What could appeal to her in this message?

*The 1% got it. They will continue to embrace the suck for minimum wage in a country where you can't even begin to understand the various civil liberties that are violated.*

"Embrace the suck" – interesting. Is "Todd" a veteran? Vietnam, maybe? An impersonator? Or, more generously, someone who's simply channeling a pro-military self-righteousness that utilizes whatever slang he's picked up?

Now I want to know: What are the various civil liberties I can't even begin to imagine are being violated? Aren't "I," in the alternate universe of this folksy polemic, somehow partly the big guy kneeling to protest violated civil liberties which I have not only imagined but to which I have likely borne witness?

*Now, when the day is done and you take off your pads, have your interviews, sign your lucrative cereal box deal, and fly home to your castle, the 1% will clear their weapon, take a cold shower in the hopes of cleaning off their best friends blood and brains that covered their face and flag. They will eat yet another MRE before laying on a ragged cot only to wake up, put a round in the chamber and walk the streets in the hope of providing just 1/10 of the lifestyle you kneel in protest against.*

This is ramping things up significantly. There's not only a

cultural-disgust element to this wee jeremiad, but a high emotional pitch, too. And emotion is why the post is being shared among the conservative underbelly of my friends-set, and agreed upon with such relief and gratitude (“THANK YOU!” “I’m so glad someone said it!” “I knew this would speak to YOUR family, X.”).

Because here we are: this is about loving the veterans. This homegrown Pericles is offering his support to the veteran, defending what he imagines is his life of harsh privation – interestingly, not something to be protested against but something in which to encourage pride, around which to rally.

Other than the offensive casual racism of the author’s viewpoint to begin with, that pride is what worries me most. The conception of modern soldiers as thralls on an endless treadmill of violence and sacrifice. The author’s hypothetical soldier seems to have had the worst day of his entire military career, and yet it’s described as almost run-of-the-mill. Certainly, days like that, or worse, have taken place for countless soldiers since the wars on terror began: days when they lost limbs, or friends; were lonely or depressed or at the least very physically uncomfortable. But, thirteen years after the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battle of Fallujah, is this really what civilians think a full “one percent” of the American population continues to do daily—to literally wipe their best friend’s blood and brains off their faces every night before sleeping in a “ragged cot?” To live the same sort of horrific, numbing day over and over again into infinity, for “minimum wage,” in a country that apparently can’t respect them?

And if so, why the hell would they be okay with that?

\*

Much of what happens on social media today is the equivalent of watching someone throw a flaming dog turd into a swimming pool, then sitting back to see who paddles delightedly toward

it and who thrashes away. But it can be a useful vehicle for recognizing patterns in human thought and behavior, and like many members of military families I can't help notice the constant contrast that's being drawn between veterans and, most immediately, the NFL protestors, who've undertaken the very American act of regular, meaningful, and visible protest. From the conservative corners of the newsmedia, in conversation, and across the lightning-fast interwebs, I've seen veterans contrasted with virtually anyone conservatives don't like: all those spoiled, whiny millennials, for example, or immigrants, who apparently should be grateful to get through the day without seeing the inside of a holding cell. It's like constantly being lectured at the dinner table by a crabby, work-exhausted dad in khakis who (although he didn't serve, but his father did) answers your every complaint by telling you to shut up, because men died for this country and you've had everything handed to you on a silver platter.

Less than 0.5 percent of Americans currently serve in the military. This is the "military-civilian" divide we've all heard about, though exactly what can be done is still up in the air. Overwhelmingly, the divide is referenced by veterans and their family members, because (and this is part of the problem) they are the ones most concerned with it. The veteran-artists who bravely write, talk, act, or make art and music about their experiences do so for a wide range of reasons, but for many, stripping away a romanticized notion of war and military service is part of what they hope to accomplish through their work.

Meanwhile, the American public bears witness to a bizarre lovefest for the American military, predominantly (but not exclusively) from conservatives. This is more than just supporting the troops. This is the first time your ex-boyfriend got suddenly, really weird. It's as if conservatives are channeling some kind of political and cultural fantasy into the notion of military service, using it to justify their

beliefs, their prejudices, their vision for an America that not only does not now exist but maybe never has.

This is what I think of as “the American military in the modern conservative imagination.” Or, the way my friend [Peter Molin](#) put it in an e-mail, conservatives have mentally constructed a military that is white, masculine, and “safe” in the sense that it defends all that the right holds dear. Conservatives seem to hope this vision will reflect back onto the nation as a whole, giving them the whiter, manlier, safer America they desire. But you make the military out of the people who live in America; you don’t somehow make America out of your idea of the military.

And the only way to craft a fantasy out of a differing or even opposite reality is through force.

\*

I’m watching a series of old GOP attack ads made during the Obama-McCain election in 2008.

Here’s one narrated by a disapproving-sounding woman; she’s the worst secretary you ever had to wait with in the principal’s office. As she addresses her conservative demographic, I can tell this woman would like to spit in my little liberal whore face. The ad scans over a filmstrip of images (alarming explosions, fighter jets, a waving flag, a smiling and very young male soldier with all of innocent Caucasiamerica in his blue eyes) and she warns of alleged liberal attempts to “cut off funding for our active troops, endangering their lives,” as if liberals would like to rip the weapons from their hands, leaving them encircled by slathering Taliban. The camera zeroes in on a triumphant-looking picture of Obama flanked by that estrogen devil herself, Nancy Pelosi on one side, and on the other an almost absurdly-thrilled-looking black politician I don’t recognize who has his hands flung upward, fingers pointed in a double V-for-Victory, as

if, at last, the domination of white America by minorities is finally complete.

The camera goes back to that young white soldier, his life, paradoxically, in our very hands. "Obama and Congressional liberals," says the angry-sounding woman. "Too risky for America."

Alright, so this is par for the course when it comes to political ads. They're the equivalent of those Facebook posts I mentioned earlier, except the flaming dog turd has been traded for an actual human shit with sparklers sticking out the top. Anyway. While I find them irritating, it's neither the existence, nor the tenor, of these ads that particularly troubles me.

It's the fact that Obama's skin has been deliberately darkened in almost every single one of them.

A [Stanford University study](#) analyzed more than 100 of the videos and found the difference in his skin tone between the ad images, and the same images in their original forms or publications. Furthermore, "[Obama] appeared especially dark-skinned in Republican attack ads that aired closer to election day. Meanwhile, McCain's skin appeared gradually lighter over time in the same ads."

While you're wondering how America possibly possesses the technology to make McCain's skin even whiter than it already was (was he translucent?), consider this: the article's conclusion, put forth in an understated way: "The study... suggests that the images could have been intended to tap into possible racial biases of some viewers."

I've just watched a visual implication that the very fact of a black President might be harmful to American troops.

\*

No matter what the political far-right would like to believe, the American military has never upheld its regressive dreams. Forty percent of active-duty service members are people of color, with African-Americans and Native Americans represented in higher proportion than their actual population percentage in the United States. According to a Pew study, racial intermarriage is also “typically more common among people in the military than among civilians.”

The desegregation of the U.S. military took place in 1948, sixteen years before *Brown v. Board of Education* made segregation illegal here at home in 1964. Even so, desegregation was seen as particularly dangerous for the troops. The Army was not an “experiment,” claimed Army Secretary Kenneth Royall to Harry Truman, adding, “It is a well-known fact that close personal association with Negroes is distasteful to a large percentage of Southern whites.” Secretary Royall’s warning has been echoed with strange fidelity by conservatives in the many years since, over everything from women in combat to the presence of LGBTQ+ troops. “The U.S. Armed forces aren’t some social experiment,” said Sen. Chuck Hagel in 1999 when asked about the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”; and over a decade later, former Marine Corps Lt. Col. Oliver North said the same thing, with a little of the righteous indignation we now expect to accompany political statements: soldiers “deserve better than to be treated like lab rats in Mr. Obama’s radical social experiment.”

In all seriousness, as a military wife, I have to ask these affronted and obstinate politicians: When do we *not* treat our military like some kind of giant experiment? Any time we send men and women overseas, every time we commit them to action in Vietnam or Korea or Somalia or Iraq or Afghanistan, every time they’re sent to meet with tribal leaders or walk through the streets, or to (in the case of female service members) form FET teams and enter Afghan womens’ homes, it is all part of

[some big experiment or another](#), all of which are far less predictable, with more immediate and potentially dangerous outcomes, than the possibility (or, “threat” as North & Co. call it) of compassionate social progress.

Maybe we should take greater care with the lives of our fellow citizens than to hazard them trying to prove that people in the Middle East prefer our form of representative democracy, or the notion that given enough money thrown at them, feudalists or tribalists will suddenly become responsible middle class citizens.

And if we really want to stop “experimenting” on our troops, maybe we should stop doing things like sending them out on caravans in under-armored Humvees, or deliberately exposing them to chemical weapons and psychoactive agents the way the U.S. Army Chemical Corps did at Edgewood Arsenal in Maryland for twenty years, or making them tend burn pits in the toxic fumes of everything from scorching rubber and plastic to unexploded ordnance to human and medical waste.

Or would the political right like to think of this, too, as a strange mark of pride? Does military service mean that anything can be done to you, to your body? Is that what you signed up for? As a female service member, if you are raped or assaulted during your service, should we all, like Trump, simply wonder, “Well, what did they expect to happen?” If you spend, as in that original Facebook post, every single day in discomfort and loneliness, away from your family, wiping brains off your cheeks, is that just what you signed up for?

I can't help but feel that part this fantasy about the American military that it's both the seat of rule and order, but also a lawless place where anything can happen. It's HBO in a sitcom world, where men are sheriffs or cocksuckers and women are angels or hookers. In this masculine dream, let men do what they are gonna do; just don't try to improve them, or make them think. Save that for the lab rats.

\*

I'm attending the memorial service of a veteran here in town. He was a Vietnam vet, twenty-year career. He and his wife had no children, and she feared she'd be alone at the memorial, so the local VFW has put out a call for people to attend the service and show their support.

I've dressed the kids in their best; they've made cards with rainbows and hearts for the red-eyed, exhausted widow, who seems genuinely touched by them. My husband, like the other active-duty service members present, is in uniform. We marvel at the hundreds of people who've shown up: whole legions of bikers in bandannas and black leather, smoking and chatting and already sipping beer at the bar; a serious and highly-decorated African-American Marine who waits in line behind us; cars full of Air Force cadets, so bright and shiny in their blue uniforms that the mom in me wants to remind them to wear their seatbelts.

Standing in front of us in the long line, which winds through the VFW with its many coffee pots and posters and plaques and ancient dark-green carpeting, is a young man in a burgundy leather jacket, holding his toddler son. "I brought him 'cause I want him to grow up to have respect," the young man says. "Kids don't have respect these days." I tell him I think it's nice that he's there. He keeps talking about respect. He's so earnest about this, he's almost excited. His face shines with nervous sweat. His son, far too young to understand what's going on or certainly remember it, plays with the lapel of his dad's jacket.





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As we walk back to the car, my high heels clicking, my kids trailing behind me, my husband in uniform, we spot the young man again, buckling his toddler into his car seat. The child babbles something and the dad says, "That's 'yes, *sir!*' You gotta have respect. You say, 'yes, *sir.*'"

We pass bumper sticker after bumper sticker: "Hillary for Prison 2016." "Hillary Lied, People Died." "Proud to Be Everything a Liberal HATES." "The Lefties Are Coming! LOCK AND LOAD." I peer at who's climbing into these trucks. Overwhelmingly, they are not the service members in uniform, but civilians who've been drawn to the service out of a sense of patriotism and a desire to support the troops. Minutes before, they were, quite warmly, shaking my husband's hand.

\*

It's a very gray November morning, and I'm drifting through a Facebook page called "FuckColinKaepernick," maintained by a man who makes the not-so-comforting claim of being in law enforcement. I don't really want to be here, and I feel anxious that my surfing, however research-motivated, is being catalogued by some demon algorithm and will come back to publicly haunt me. But I suck it up in the interest of trying to understand why Kaepernick's protest in particular has instigated so much conservative ire, and whoever devotes himself to the cultural abscess known as "FuckColinKaepernick" is giving me some clues.

The page features the sort of intellectual gems you'd expect: photo after photo of—who else—soldiers and Marines and policemen honoring their flag; images of Kaepernick paired with captions like, "I Only Take a Knee When I'm Blowing Someone for a Job"; "ISIS Signs Free-Agent Kaepernick to 1-Year Deal." One commenter, "ColinKaeperdick," mentions enthusiastically that he'd like to see the football player dead.

Through this disgust for the First Amendment-as-expressed-by-nonwhite-people runs a familiar vein of support for authority, for force, for the smackdown. Don't put up with that SHIT, is what every post seems to yell. You are the authority. You are strong. The defiance of other races, the simpering of women—you are above that shit. The conservative loathing of crybabies seems to extend even to actual babies, I learn a few minutes later, as I come across an unexpected image on the "FuckColin Kaepernick" Facebook page: a stock photo of a mother cradling a crying child. The mother appears sympathetic and tender, but a bigger issue is resonating with FuckColinKaepernick as he posts the meme:

"When you touched a hot stove, what was your parents' reaction, A or B?"

1. A) [illustrated by the picture of the mom comforting the child.]
2. B) "Bet you won't do that shit again huh?"

This meme gives me pause. It's been given some "likes" and a few laughing-face emoji in response. And, sure, while the thought of this mom snapping something so harsh at her cute child is a little off-putting, it's hardly shocking after the garbage I've been scanning for the last fifteen minutes. I've seen similar on the Facebook pages of conservative friends.

Still, it seems part and parcel of what's troubling me. I remember, from our time stationed in Virginia, an approach touted by many of my friends: the "Biblical Approach to Spanking." A little while later I'm looking for the official word from Focus on the Family, a conservative, evangelical organization that puts out 4 million pieces of mail a week and is so prominent it has its own zip code. On its web site, a man named Chip gives step-by-step pointers on [how exactly to spank your child](#):

*Have the child lean over his bed and make sure you apply the*

*discipline with a quick flick of the wrist to the fatty tissue of the buttocks, where a sting can occur without doing any damage to the body. You want to be calm, in control, and focused as you firmly spank your child, being very careful to respect his body.*

I won't get into the merits or demerits of corporal punishment here, and I am very familiar with the myriad frustrations of parenting, but I do find it telling a few paragraphs later when Chip writes, "For my part, some of the most intimate, touching moments I ever had with my kids were right after exercising discipline."

\*

Perhaps one of the most startling revelations of the 2016 Presidential Election was the almost-surreal enthusiasm of conservatives for the modern Russian state and especially its bullish head honcho, Vladimir Putin. It shouldn't have been so surprising. The conservative love affair with Putin, cultivated steadily through Obama's presidency, has spawned fawning articles by the likes of Pat Buchanan and Matt Drudge of The Drudge Report. In ["What Trump's Putin Love Reveals About Conservatives,"](#) Neal Gabler points out that, quite simply, "authoritarians love authoritarianism," and that "the Russian state does appear to be the conservative paradigm: white, highly nationalistic, militaristic...nostalgic for a lost past."

American conservatives share something even more specific with Putin, and that's his almost monomaniacal hatred of homosexuals. "They should be banned from donating blood, sperm," he has said, "And their hearts, in case of the automobile accident, should be buried in the ground or burned as unsuitable for the continuation of life."

No wonder that the military is where conservatives try to police homosexuality first, where they hope they'll have the

most success. Again, I can only comfort myself with the certainty that they can't make the America of their dreams simply by tweaking the military to their specifications; it simply won't happen.

But still, these are the people in power, in America, in 2017. And they love the troops so much that they aim for its conservative perfection, for it to give them—when America itself sometimes can't—that perfect dream of a white, white, masculine world – a world where, if people do dare to step outside the lines, we simply will not put up with that shit.

\*

Despite my aversion to being lumped in with the authoritarians of the world simply because of my husband's military service, I can't ignore the fact that many conservatives do genuinely wish our veterans well. When people thank my husband for his service, which always embarrasses him somewhat, I don't think they are being insincere. And if the greatest gift you can give someone is paying attention to them, well, conservatives are. They may be paying a myopic attention, but it's there.



The troops sacrifice physically and emotionally during training and operations, so that citizens can express different opinions without fighting. Kneel away!

The military is a complicated beast, and I feel it every time I'm at a social gathering: at a little girl's birthday party, for instance, where, amidst a cheerful Pinterest explosion of tissue-paper flowers and tea-party hats, the parents' discussion somehow veers into a brief Colin Kaepernick Disgust, making both my husband and I squirm (and I'm sure I see in his eyes the pleading, *Woman, please do not announce you are writing an essay on this!*). Everyone there is white. At that moment, can I say that the conservative idea of the military is false?

Or: While watching a friend's children this weekend so she can run some errands, she returns with the report that she's gotten a phone call: her husband's battalion has had their first K.I.A., just weeks into a 7-month deployment. "Oh, shit," I say. "No, no." The deaths of these men are our nightmares. Her husband is Special Forces, and his experience may be as close to that Facebook poster's imagined lifestyle as any active-duty service member's can get. Just because it is, at this moment, rare doesn't make it less real; conservatives do understand this.

Downstairs, my own husband's heavy uniform is tumbling around in the dryer. My friend and I are squinting to talk in the fall sun. Funeral arrangements, childcare, meal trains: the brisk, terrible, simultaneous familiarity and strangeness of these things. The sun is bright and beautiful over the mountains. There's a new widow somewhere here in our temporary town, and our nation is still, still, still at war.

\*

As a woman, I'm used to watching the way men imagine us. The

male imagination, with its prominence in film, art, sports, politics—everything— has obvious and obsessive ideas of what women are, so intense at times that you can't tell what part of you even came first, what part of you was naturally feminine, or what part developed that way as a coping mechanism or simply so you wouldn't rock the boat.

Now, I see veterans put in a similar situation, a similar discomfort. They didn't, perhaps, enjoy the violence of war, but they're coming home to an increasingly violent and divided country. They are a diverse group, quite often thoughtful, often (if this is still the minority) liberal, but they're supposed to pretend that they're not.

They are black service members who see, time and again, as people of color are beaten or shot by police who get off nearly scot-free. They are women who've served their country and come home to a president who jokes about grabbing 'em by the pussy. They are the many, deeply caring parents of children with disabilities, using the Exceptional Family Member Program to get the best care for their kids while they watch their president boggle his eyes and jerk spastically on the TV screen, mocking a disabled reporter. They are soldiers from Puerto Rico watching their president leave their American islands nearly for dead and complain about providing even basic aid. They are combat veterans who watch as a civilian with more weaponry than they maybe ever handled in-country guns down 500 people at a country music concert, of all things, and how do they not feel like, what the fuck is this, what the fuck were they fighting for?

It may take force to make a fantasy out of a reality, but somehow, in America in 2017, the far-right pulled this off. It still feels like a sleight of hand, a magic trick. A joke. Sometimes I wonder if, for Donald Trump, those moments of conquest were when he felt closest to America, to his people. If the authoritarian pleasure is in domination, then we've all been royally had.

*This essay is solely the work of the author and is not intended to represent the Department of Defense. All opinions are the author's own.*

Andria Williams is the author of the novel [The Longest Night](#) (Random House, 2016) and editor of the [Military Spouse Book Review](#).

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## **New Fiction: “Plink, Rack” by Steven Kiernan**



The re are many moving parts in a gun. There's the trigger, which

most people mistakenly believe is what fires the whole thing. This is understandable. The trigger is elegant and shapely and romantic. Simple. Easy to comprehend. But, the trigger is just the instigator. It compresses a spring, slowly (or quickly) building up enough energy to pull back the hammer, a blunt object, which in turn hammers the firing pin, striking the primer and setting off the small explosion that jettisons the bullet out of the barrel and toward an intended target. The target is missed more often than not. The bullet is a part of the gun, but not *part* of the gun. They're the only expendable bit. A gun will not fire unless all of these parts work together in that order. Otherwise, it is useless. If you have ever held a gun before you will recognize what a sad thought that is. Guns are too tempting not to fire. They are surprisingly heavy things, cold things, and when you hold one in your hand and feel its heft, its power, it makes you powerful, and for a moment in time you feel the urge to blow something away, anything. Sometimes this disgusts you. Sometimes not.

\*\*\*

Hal kept the rifle under his bed in a hard-plastic pelican case he surrounded with balled up clothes and used towels. It wasn't hard to sneak on to the hospital campus. They stopped searching vehicles after the Army MPs were switched out with civilian security. The rifle was a Bushmaster carbine, not unlike the M16 he used to carry in Iraq. It was short and black and he liked to feel the weight of it in his hands. Liked to lift it up into his shoulder and rack the bolt, which he kept properly lubricated so that it slid back in a smooth metallic fashion. Liked the *plink* sound the firing pin made when he pulled the trigger with an empty chamber. *Plink, rack. Plink, rack.* Hal never aimed in on children, but everyone else was fair game.

Odd numbered days.

Those were the days he would get the rifle from under the bed, remove it from the case, and rack the bolt a few times. Then he would hop over to the window on his one foot and sit down in the wheelchair he kept by a small round table, no more than two feet in diameter. It was the one surface in his room that was clear of debris. No dirty clothes or half-filled spit bottles. He'd settle in, leaning on his elbows, and aim the rifle out of the window and down into the courtyard below, which sat inside the "U" shape of the building. There was a large brick patio that stretched about fifty meters in length. It had barbeque grills and a couple dozen chairs and tables and during the summer was always busy with some cook-out or special event. A long walkway led out towards the main hospital and administrative buildings on the other side of the campus. Last summer, part of the walkway had been replaced with red bricks. You could purchase one for a hundred dollars and have it engraved with a name or message. The bricks sold out in less than a week as guys rushed to immortalize fallen comrades. For a few days after the bricks were laid, there was always at least one person out there in a wheelchair admiring the names of the less fortunate. But that was last summer. Now people tread upon the dead without ever looking down.

The smoke-pit was too close to the building and he couldn't get a decent line of sight without having to stand, but Hal had an easy vantage over the walkway and patio. He felt the cold plastic of the buttstock against his cheek as it warmed to match his temperature. The solvent smell of the gun oil sat inside his nose rather than slip into the back of his sinuses and throat the way gunpowder did. He looked over his sights, searching for a target. Two soldiers in grey camouflage sat at a table in the patio area. They were both laughing and one was gesticulating wildly, accidentally knocking his beret off. Hal chose him. He settled his cheek back against the buttstock and peered through the iron sights. He aimed like he was taught. Center mass. Focus on the front sight post, not the target. Exhale. *Plink, rack.* He swiveled towards the other soldier.

*Plink, rack.*

“Doing alright up there, Hal?” J asked from the driver’s seat.

“Just great,” Hal said from the turret.

It was eleven in the morning and already the temperature was over one hundred degrees. Standing inside a metal Humvee turret and wrapped in body armor Hal felt like he was in a microwave. He pulled off his sunglasses and wiped the sweat from his brow.

“I fucking hate pulling security for 1<sup>st</sup> platoon, man. Assholes just do not know how to search a compound,” J said.

Hal checked his watch. Almost forty-five minutes.

“Hajjis will start getting ideas if they take any longer.”

“I got ya, bro,” Hal said. He scanned the street with the ACOG on his rifle, the four-power scope giving him clear vision out past five hundred meters. Normally he would have had the machine gun, but it had been cannibalized to fix another and they hadn’t yet received a replacement. It was awkward being in the turret with just a rifle, like he was incomplete, less safe.

“This is just getting ridiculous.” J said.

Fifty-five minutes.

“You know, I was planning on going to film school before I enlisted.” J said.

“No shit?”

“Had been accepted and everything. A real fucking Spielberg I

wanted to be.” He took off his helmet and tossed it on top of the radio. “Then I got this great fucking idea, *I’ll join the Marines and then come back and make an epic war film,*” he said in a nasally voice. “Even told my recruiter about it.”

“I bet he fucking loved that,” Hal said. “Why didn’t you go combat camera? He get you with the old ‘Infantry is the only slot open right now’ line?”

“Guilty as charged.”

“So, how’s your ‘epic war film’ working out? I bet it’ll be realistic as fuck.”

“Don’t you worry, I got it all planned out. It’s gonna be six hours long with only ten minutes of action. Ree-ah-lis-tic.”

“Yeah. But those ten minutes though...”

J began to drum his fingers on the steering wheel and for a while that was the only noise in the Humvee.

“My grandfather fought in World War II,” J said. He had quit the drumming and now gripped the steering wheel loosely. “Was on Tarawa and Saipan. Got shot on both. Saw some real shit. I used to bug him all the time as a kid, asking him to tell me war stories or to show me his medals. He never did though. Wasn’t until just before I shipped out on my first pump that he told me anything. My mom threw this big going away party for me, invited the whole family. My little cousins were going wild running through the house and my uncles kept pulling me aside to shake my hand over and over and tell me how fucking proud they all were. Anyway, I managed to sneak away into the den and found my grandfather sitting there alone. Fuck it, I thought, and asked him, Marine to Marine, what’s it like? He shook his head a little bit and chuckled, then told me this joke:

*A man kicked his brother down the street.*

*A policeman shows up and says, "Hey, why are you doing that? You can't do that."*

*The man turns and says, "It's alright, he's dead anyway."*

*"I didn't get it at the time, but after two tours to this shithole I think it's pretty fucking funny."*

It was after noon now and the sun was directly overhead and seemed to have a kind of weight to it. Arms got heavier and shoulders slouched more, the color drained from the sky as it was slowly pushed back down towards earth until the horizon disappeared and looked like one big barrier. The weight of it all was unrelenting, purging all thought and leaving you apathetic and complacent. Time continued to pass but Hal no longer kept track of it. This part of the day was always the most dangerous.

Hal had turned the turret so that he could cover the left side of the Humvee, leaving J to watch the front from the driver's seat. Hal faced an alley that ran about two-hundred meters in length before it ended and split into a T-intersection. The squat cement-brick buildings along the sides held a dozen different shops and even a poolhall and they reminded Hal of public storage units back home with their metal roll-up doors. Nobody was out, which didn't surprise Hal, with the heat and all. He wiped some sweat from his eye and when he looked back up he saw a head peeking around a corner fifty meters away. After a few seconds it disappeared back behind the wall, then popped out again a few seconds after that.

"I got someone turkey-peeking over here," Hal said.

"Mmm hmm," was all J said.

"He looks kinda shady,"

"Well, then pop off a couple rounds and let him know you see

him.”

Hal brought the rifle up into his shoulder and right as he did so, the man stepped from behind the corner into the open, a long tubular object resting on his shoulder.

“Oh, shit. He’s got an RPG!”

“What?!” J said. Hal could sense him jerk towards the door window. “Shoot him, man. Shoot him!”

Hal could hardly believe what was happening. He had been in-country for five months, participated in at least a dozen firefights, but not once had he seen a live, no-shit enemy fighter. Even muzzle flashes were rare to spot. But here he was, fifty meters away, appearing large in his four-power scope. Hal could easily make out his details. Track pants, sandals, and a snot covered knock-off Affliction t-shirt. He could have stopped there, shot him in the chest and been done with it. But, he had to see his face.

“Shoot him!”

The patchy beard got his attention. How it grew in splotches, wide avenues of bare skin between them. It reminded Hal of his own attempts at facial hair while home on leave and how his girlfriend Dani would always give him shit for it. But it was the eyes, wide and white that gave him pause. It wasn’t really fear that Hal saw, more disbelief. Like his body was moving and he was just along for the ride. The eyes of a first-time skydiver sitting on the edge of the plane looking down and getting ready for the plunge. And it was there, between the white and spackles of flakey brown that Hal recognized him as more than a target. Hal had never shot at people before, only in directions or tree-lines or windows, and in that moment of realization he knew that he never could.

“Shoot him!”

He never heard the explosion, but he felt it. For half a second the air turned into a searing heat and an immense pressure squeezed his chest and he couldn't breathe. When he opened his eyes, he was on the floor of the Humvee, his rifle swung just above him, its sling still caught on the turret. He panicked a moment when he thought the vehicle was on fire, but calmed down when he realized the smoke was just a thick haze of kicked-up dust. He saw that his right foot was gone and he saw that J was dead.

There was no one else down on the patio and so Hal turned his attention to the walkway. It was empty now, but he knew if he just waited a few minutes someone would come. He flicked the safety on and off with his thumb. Five minutes later a patient in a wheelchair turned the corner down at the far end of the walkway and began rolling towards Hal and the patio below. Hal settled in like before, cheek snug against the buttstock. He exhaled. *Plink, rack.* There was a knock on his door. "Hey, Hal, ya in there?" Hal ignored it, he kept his aim on the patient in the wheelchair. *Plink, rack.* "What are you doing, man?" *Plink, rack.* It's alright, Hal thought. It's alright.

**Photo Credit: United States Marine Corps**

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**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 freeloader. 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, Trace!*) 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 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—

"Trace."

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](#)

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# Resistance                      Dispatches: Foreign and Domestic



Every American soldier takes an oath to support and defend the Constitution against all enemies. Since I left the service, I wondered who those enemies truly were. Once, I thought they were those disciples of God in the mountains of Afghanistan.

When we went to war, the newsreaders told us that the Taliban buried women up to their necks and crushed their skulls with stone. It was a war on American ideals, because it was a war on women. They locked them away like prisoners, forced them into marriage, scarred their faces with acid. Though I cannot say what this had to do with airplanes pitched into our monuments of commerce and battle, I went to war to fight in the name of women whom I never saw. The closest I ever came was when we killed the men and heard the mothers, sisters, and wives wailing behind the *qalat* walls. The saccharine thrill of combat turned to lye in my mouth. Only after years of contemplation can I ask myself if I was just another man waging war on women, simply on another front.

When we elected the 45<sup>th</sup> President, I felt as if the war had followed me home. It seemed like everyone was looking for an enemy. For those who won the election, the enemy occupied the space of the foreign—the sexually aberrant, culturally diverse, economically anathematic to the so-called American Dream. My enemy, on the other hand, was domestic—that man elected President and the bigots he enabled with hate speech.

I welcomed a fight. It was a respite from my self-imposed exile from the people around me. Sharing the beauty, pain, and trials of my time in Afghanistan was like speaking an alien tongue. Gone was the collective purpose that I took for granted in the Army, but now the threat of that man in the high castle galvanized people into action. I also must admit that there was comfort in the tumult and panic—the pain of others seemed to lessen my own—helplessness and isolation were now part of the emotional vernacular. So when the call went out to march on the Capitol, I volunteered. Many of the protesters drew from a well of deep moral wounds, structural oppression, or strength to march. If I am honest, in that moment I approached the Women's March as a soldier, and this was simply another battle to fight.



Ksenia V. CPT, USAF (sep.)

I traveled with my friend Ksenia, a former Air Force Captain. We planned to march with Common Defense, an organization of progressive veterans opposed to the new president. On the drive south, she told me that many of the people with whom she

served opposed her politics. Many of them cut ties with her when she made public her intention to march. I watched the nude trees outside my window, passing too fast to distinguish branches. So many of my former comrades and fellow veterans also spoke against the protestors. I found people I love on the other side of this new conflict. Would I have to count them among my enemies as well?

*Give war a chance*, one of them wrote on Facebook.

*OPEN YOUR small minds, you whining losers, wipe away your tears, and open your malicious hearts, AND JOIN IN GIVING GOVERNMENT BACK TO THE PEOPLE!* wrote another.

At the time, I did not realize that I would have to carry their reputation with me—that others would see me as the same as these angry veterans. I buried my phone in my pocket for the rest of the ride. At rest stops, I watched the nursing mothers in pink hats and elder matriarchs with their signs in windows. These were the people my one-time comrades railed against? I cried in front of my soldiers, fought beside them, triumphed because of them. Would they see my decision to march as a betrayal?



Abuse of power comes as no surprise

I muffled my doubts. When we arrived, I reunited with old friends. We smoked and drank too much, dancing the way the young do because they do not yet understand they will die. To celebrate with people I loved felt novel, like learning how to whistle, and for the first time in years I thought I might name something happiness. Voices too loud from liquor, hands fluttering, and wide eyed, we looked forward to a march, organized by women of color, Muslims, and queer women. It appeared that the organizers had made good on their claims to place intersectionality at the fore.

In the morning, I pinned my medals to my jacket, took up my sign. *VETS VS HATE*, it read. Demonstrators inundated the subway platforms. Trains passed, one after another, bringing more people. The station choked with bodies, it was almost impossible to move. Cheers coursed through the crowd, amplified by the arched concrete enclosure and I worried if the huddled voices might rattle the station walls apart and

bury us alive. There were so many people underground, it was difficult to breathe. Above-ground carried the same sense of unease, the overflowing streets patrolled by national guardsman and police, yet as people gathered, even they were hemmed in and immobilized. I grew up in Alexandria just across the river, and I never saw the streets so full. The place I planned to meet Ksenia and the other veteran protesters was too crowded when I arrived. I looked for her, but I couldn't move more than a few feet, wriggling through the assemblage. I thought, if we all wanted to, we could take control of the city.

Demonstrators wore the near-ubiquitous cat-eared pink hats, held their signs—their political convictions aloft for the world to see. I too performed my identity, but as a veteran of the War in Afghanistan. Some of the demonstrators looked at me the way I once had looked at Afghans—*friend or foe?* There were many men there—fleece-clad fathers pushing strollers, boyfriends and husbands clinging to lovers or spouses, waving rainbow flags, but I was the only one who trespassed into the territory of threatening. Being a veteran may have evoked images of violent American Legionnaires at rallies during the election. *Man, soldier, medals*—symbols of masculinity, patriarchy.

*Yes, I'm a veteran, I told them, yes I'm here in solidarity.* I could not choose between removing my hat and my medals, or shouting at the top of my lungs *I'm one of you.* I told myself that it was important to show that those that served were not props for hate. I told myself that this day was never about me. Yet there was something else. Most of the faces around me were white. There was a group of Muslim students, a smattering of people of color, but each of us—all of us, were surrounded. I made calculations—was I using the right speech pattern? Was my posture sufficiently unthreatening? Did my expression say *I don't want any trouble?* I've been told that I'm too self-conscious, that I should *just relax*, but anyone who said that

never had to live a life of color. I remember one childhood summer in Philadelphia, fleeing from a white teenager brandishing a baseball bat. In Louisiana, I lived on a block where I let all my white neighbors know that I owned guns because they spoke as if blacks still belonged under the lash. They only spoke to my white wife, as if I wasn't there to hear them—that I served on active duty seemed to make no difference to them.

Yet I was still a man among hundreds of thousands of women. They came to the Capitol because of a misogynist and bigot. Where the sense of urgency brought my friends and me together, at the march, my anxieties might have played off those of the other protesters, creating distance. White or not, that we all feared for our bodies should have been enough. We were all there together, after all.

The rally started—a mixture of cheers, punctuated by bouts of silence from a crowd that appeared uncertain of what to do next. Demonstrators shouted their adoration for celebrity speakers like Gloria Steinem, Michael Moore, and Ashley Judd. Though situated among vital voices from marginalized groups, the biggest voices were white ones. An hour passed, then another. More speakers, musical interludes. Those in attendance looked at their watches, waiting. I looked up at the signs, held aloft like pikes. *It's not Feminism if it's not Intersectional*, one read. I did not know whether this was lip service or a rallying call.

By the third hour, many of those assembled chanted, *Let us march, let us march*. I too was tired, my back ached from tensing against the shifting crowd. National Guard and paramedics ferried the ill through the throng, parting it for ambulances that crept forward like giant flashing snails. In the shuffle, I found Ksenia. We had been so close the whole time, but could not see one another because of the mob around us. *Let us march*. The words nearly drowned out the speakers.

Tamika Mallory, one of the national co-chairs took the podium.

“To those of you who have for the first time felt the pain that my people have felt since they were born here with chains shackled on our legs—today I say to you, welcome to my world,” she said.

Moved though I was, those words did not seem to sit well with many around me.

They began again, *let us march*. I too wanted to move, but the urgency of the narratives told on the stage held me there. Yet another hour passed. Though I am young, years of carrying half my body-weight in body armor and ammunition had ravaged my joints, which started to ache. I cannot imagine the pain of the elderly among us. Impatient voices became angry. Louder they said, *let us march*. Many did not carry the chant, yet it only took everyone else’s silence for a few to reenact the silencing of people of color, Muslims, and the LGBTQ community. What had they done to earn such ill treatment? It was imperative to stay and listen, yet I am ashamed that I wanted to leave and take to the streets. The anxious current infecting the thousands around me took a hold of me too. The women telling their stories asked of us a mere four hours of our time. The marginalized wait all their lives to be heard, and so many never live to have the chance.



ution will not be televised

Some booed as the organizers announced each subsequent performer and speaker. They booed before Alicia Keyes arrived on stage, but they cheered when they heard her name. When Janelle Monáe performed with the mothers of Eric Garner, Mohamed Bah, and Dontre Hamilton, everyone knew better than to chant or jeer, but it did not stop them from complaining, as if they were waiting too long for a cup of coffee rather than paying tribute to the women on stage. No one booed or chanted when Amy Schumer and Madonna took the stage. Some even yelled for people to lower their signs so they could see the performance. Madonna said she thought about blowing up the White House, but only a white person had the luxury of saying that without repercussion. I thought of what Tamika Mallory said.

“This is not a concert.”

Ksenia and I broke away to find our group. As everyone set off on the slow walk around the Mall, we left the rally like the recently concussed. I could not reconcile the words I heard on stage with the behavior of the throng. As we made our way to the rendezvous we passed through the crowds. I tried to chant, to rouse the crowd, but few followed my lead. A few demonstrators plugged their ears. Ksenia mused that she was not yet ready to be out as a veteran. Despite everything she suffered, everything she achieved, she felt she could not show the rest of the world who she was. I thought of the entitlement I had to wear my medals. To be a male veteran is acceptable. To be a woman veteran is transgressive. I wondered if blending in was a matter of survival for her, like my own habit of dialect hopping.

Ascending the low hill at the Washington Monument, I saw the immensity of the movement below us. The great swathes of humanity streaming through the Capitol's marble canyons resembled the masses fleeing strife across Africa and Asia for the unwelcoming shores of the West. Who would dare oppose such a force? Then, if the right wing vilified the biggest humanitarian crisis since World War Two, of course they would also vilify us. The light retreated from the day. Ksenia and I stood there, watched. An immigrant from the Soviet Union. A son of Vietnamese refugees. Vestiges of the last long struggle watching the embers of the next.

We found our group, after everything ended. We spent the night celebrating, commiserating, mourning. The fatigue of the day softened with the comfort of old friends and new comrades. The veterans of Common Defense spoke in practical terms—lessons learned, future collaborations, the long road ahead. Among that small group, I saw the vision for the march that felt so elusive during the rally. Women leading a movement, men in solidarity. People of the First Nations, people of color, Muslims, queer folks, alongside whites—united.

“Veterans issues are women’s issues,” one of the organizers

said to me. "When we talk about [Military Sexual Trauma], when we talk about the repeal of [Don't Ask Don't Tell], when we talk about women in combat, these are women's issues. These are veterans issues."

When I heard this, I felt so short sighted. I understood then, that whatever this movement becomes, we are no longer siloed into labels like *Anti-War*, *Racial Justice*, or even *White Feminism*. The old guard of activism must give way to this generation, a large interconnected spectrum all concerned with justice. We parted ways, and for the first time all day I felt hopeful that we would overcome.

I crossed the city to meet my college friends again. The drive took us across the city. Demonstrators continued marching in ragged informal lines. Trashcans brimmed with discarded signs. I met my friends at Comet, an establishment made famous by a fantastic scandal that began with wild speculation and ended with a deluded man armed with a weapon bent on violence. When I first heard of the so-called Pizza Gate scandal, I could not fathom why so many subscribed to such a spurious narrative. That folly felt little more than a fever dream that night. Protest signs leaned against every wall. Among the patrons, staff, my friends, I felt the relief of taking the first small steps down a long difficult path. Eyes ringed by fatigue from the march, everyone in our party welcomed sleep.

As we departed, the flashing lights of police cars and the garish banners of the Westboro Baptist church greeted us—*HOMO SEX IS SIN, Got AIDS Yet?* The police scrambled to get between the zealots and the Women's Marchers. Men yelled, by bullhorn, over the bullhorns. I thought to defy my old habits of resorting to anger. In Afghanistan, anger sustained me, protected me even. A policeman between us, I spoke to one of the men on the picket line. I asked to talk, to tell me why he was doing it on his terms. I told him that we were not so different, both Americans. I served for him to have freedom of speech, I said.

He called me crazy. Someone filmed the exchange, draping us in harsh white light. Another man screamed over my shoulder.

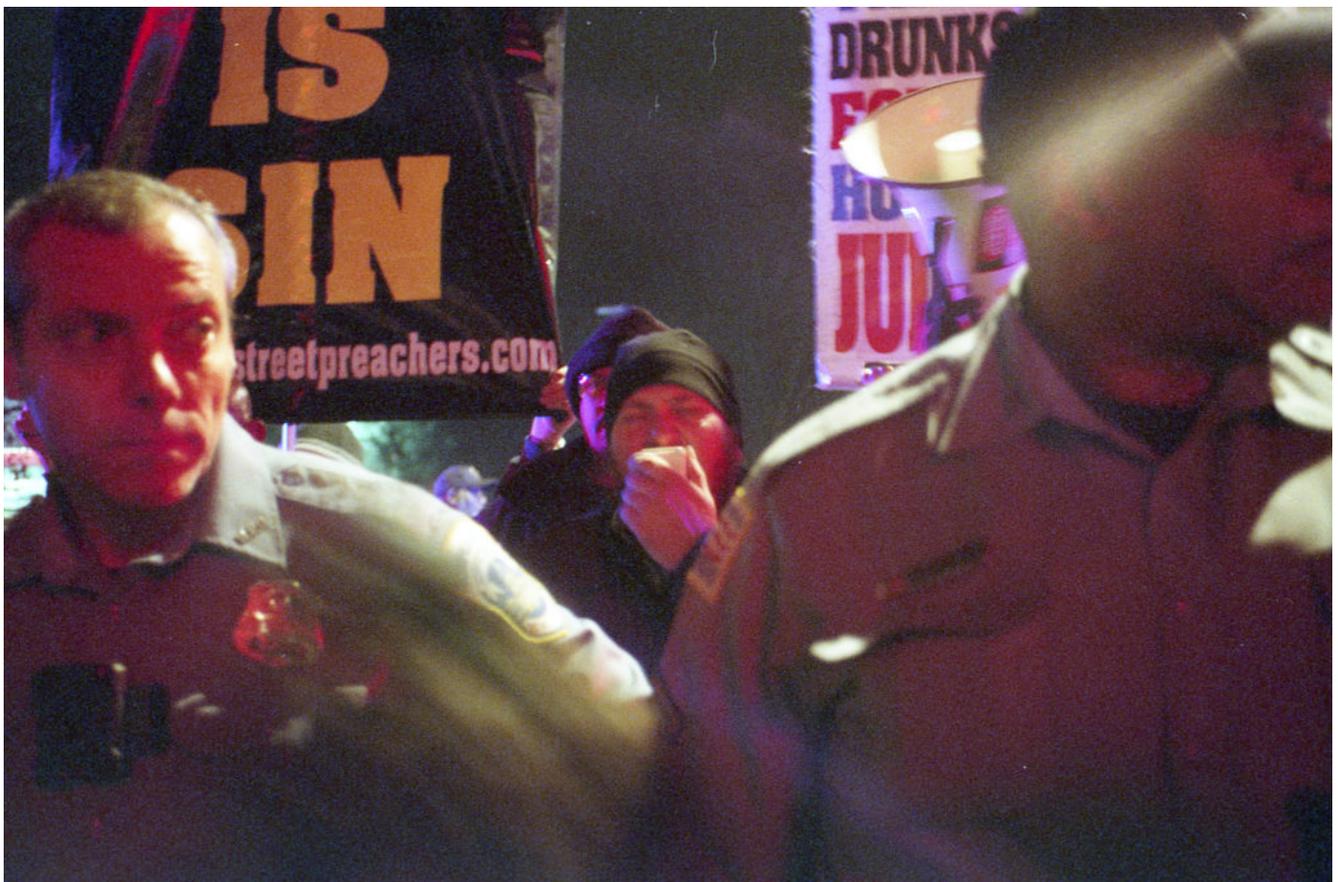
“That guy didn’t ever do shit for his country. He never had to give anything up.” He pointed at the evangelist, “Fuck you buddy.”

“Why am I crazy?” I said.

The man behind me pointed to a black church member.

“There’s some real self-hate going on there.”

The man behind me was white.



Westboro protesters at Comet Pizza

The evangelist ignored the commotion, gaze fixed on me. I remembered—these people protested soldiers’ funerals. Dead soldiers. These wild-eyed men with their long beards activated an old familiar heat in my chest. I moved through the crowd. Music played, and my friends dancing. Beat and rhythm carried

through the revelers like the sway of wind through water. Protest signs held aloft like boughs overhead. Rainbow flags like falling leaves. The man with the bullhorn singled people out, women he deemed un-weddable, men he called sexual deviants. They flipped him off, or cursed at him, but they kept their smiles, bodies still moving.

When it came my turn, the bullhorn man jabbed a finger at me.

“You, I know your kind. You’re doomed to hell. Hell waits for you.”

“I’ve been to hell,” I told him. “We had a name for people like you in Afghanistan—*munafiqeen*.” The false pious.

“Hell,” he went on, “hell for your kind.” I wanted to reach past the policemen, tear the beard from his face. After everything I gave, this is what I defended?

“You motherfucking Taliban.” I screamed back.

A woman chided me.

My anger broke. Present, but not blinding. Cooler now. Around me, that moment of rage did nothing to dampen the mood. Two women kissed. Children cavorted atop patio tables. This was what I hoped to return to after my war ended, yet in that moment I watched as if I never came home.

I drew back into the crowd, tried to unfold the seams of that brief glimpse back into my past. Against what did I swear to defend? Once, it was enemies from without, students of God hiding in the mountains. Yet, the Taliban never sought to destroy America. I learned over there that even the worst of them believed that they were simply defending against invaders. No, America’s real foes were always at home. The bigots, kleptocrats, and the new President among them. We must disabuse ourselves of biases, entitlement, alienation. The road ahead needs cooperation, joy, and compassion. If I am to

be ready for the future, I must defend against enemies domestic—at home in my cities and fields. Home in my heart of hearts.

**Photo Credit: Drew Pham**

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## **Sebastian Junger with WBT's Drew Pham on "Tribe"**

How can a society so disconnected from its wars welcome back its fighting women and men? What do we lose when we privilege individuality over collectivity? WBT Writer Drew Pham joined in a panel discussion with Sebastian Junger on his book *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*, alongside Columbia University Professors Beth Fisher-Yoshida, Peter Coleman. Venera Kusari of the Negotiation and Conflict Resolution Program at Columbia moderated.

**Watch the recorded discussion below:**

**Sebastian Junger** is the New York Times Bestselling author of [The Perfect Storm](#), [Fire](#), [A Death in Belmont](#), [War](#) and [Tribe](#).

As an award-winning journalist, a contributing editor to *Vanity Fair* and a special correspondent at ABC News, he has covered major international news stories around the world, and has received both a National Magazine Award and a Peabody Award. Junger is also a documentary filmmaker whose debut film [Restrepo](#), a feature-length documentary (co-directed with Tim Hetherington), was nominated for an Academy Award and won the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance.

**Dr. Peter T. Coleman** specializes in the field of conflict resolution and sustainable peace. Dr. Coleman holds a Ph.D. in Social-Organizational Psychology from Columbia University, where he today serves as Professor of Psychology and Education. He directs the Morton Deutsch International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution at Teachers College, and is the Executive Director of the Advanced Consortium on Cooperation, Conflict and Complexity at the Earth Institute.

**Dr. Beth Fisher-Yoshida** is a faculty member and the academic director of the Negotiation and Conflict Resolution program, Director of the Youth, Peace and Security program and Co-Executive Director of AC4, all at Columbia University. Dr. Fisher-Yoshida teaches classes in conflict resolution and related fields and conducts participatory action research, and research in the areas of conflict and conflict resolution with a focus on intercultural communication, transformative learning and Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM). She received her Ph.D. in Human and Organizational Systems from Fielding Graduate University in Santa Barbara, California.

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## **The Importance of Identity**

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# Preparation For The Next Life – What We Want Is Not What We Will Get

✘ After war, most societies look for love. Instead of dealing with the various manifest issues that remain after years of chaos and wanton murder, they seek the understanding and hope that can only be provided by stories based on faith, something greater than the brutal logic of expedience. A certain type of story presents love as a gift to the audience, a sanctuary from the tension brought about by strife, a coherent conclusion. A happy ending. It seems, from reviews of *Preparation for the Next Life*, as well as the recent reception of *American Sniper* and the relationship between Chris Kyle and his wife that forms its logical heart, that many Americans feel that they deserve such a story as well.

*Preparation for the Next Life* is not about love – it's a terrifically clever and realistic accounting of the ways in which people seek escape from life at the bottom of a capitalist society. The plot's logic depends in part on offering readers the catharsis of a conventional love story, then switching the terms of the bargain without losing any momentum. By the time readers realize that *Preparation for the Next Life* uses love like toreadors use their capes, it's too late. And instead of salvation, readers encounter a tragic tale of poverty and paucity that leads into a scathing indictment of the choices Western culture has made over at least the last fourteen years. More, if one counts Chinese communism, itself a product of Western culture.

There are two main characters in *Preparation for the Next Life*. The first to whom readers are introduced is Zhou Lei, an ethnic Uighur from the northwest of China. The Uighurs are Muslims, and the ethnic (Han) Chinese tend to dislike or hate

them, which leads to her being alienated in her own country. Zhou travels from the type of crippling poverty one encounters in the third world to America (land of opportunity), where she is still viewed as an outsider by the predominantly Han Chinese immigrants. Despite the many hardships in her background, Zhou is defined by an inexhaustibly optimistic nature. This optimism draws its power from the myths her mother tells her when she's a child, and is framed logically by her father, who believes in 60's-style nationalistic, pro-Chinese propaganda. It's interesting to see how easily this propaganda fits into Zhou's idea of herself succeeding in the context of Western capitalism, as well.

The book abounds with stories and myths that the characters hear, and which they tell each other – they form the novel's life-blood, and are simultaneously vital to the plot and empty of all meaning. The myths that Zhou Lei's mother tells her, for example, serve as touchstones that readers can follow like signposts throughout the narrative. In one, offered in the beginning of the book, Zhou's mother explains that distant mountains conceal a land of plenty. Much later in the book, a tired, hungry, and distressed Zhou finds herself talking with an Uzbek Afghan grocer, who has seen the same mountains from his native country of Afghanistan. The Uzbek offers her food and water, and Zhou experiences momentary relief, which leads nowhere. In another of Zhou's mother's myths, a girl travels to the faraway land of plenty with nothing but seven seeds to sustain her. The girl burns her feet while traveling over an iron desert, but makes it through to a blue river, where she's healed. The occurrence of blue and injured feet later on in the book at various points offer useful guideposts on Zhou's actual journey – or, at least, gives readers a sense of how she views a given situation; in keeping with the book's relentless realism, these signifiers are logical to the narrative and unto themselves, but don't actually deliver any more profound truth.

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The next character readers meet is Brad Skinner, a former bodybuilder who joined the military after 9/11, and served three tours of duty in Iraq with the U.S. Army Infantry, including during the invasion. His background, delivered in the third person, states that the impulse behind joining was the terrorist attack on the twin towers – but it's more complex than that: *"9/11 was the big reason, but he would have gone anyway, just to do something."*

Skinner is surely one of the more complex veteran characters to emerge in contemporary literature. It would be a mistake to say simply that he is a broken veteran of the Iraq War, or suffers from PTSD – while both are undeniably true in the context of the text, they simplify and reduce his essential characteristics in a way that diminishes his experiences. The character readers encounter isn't a fundamentally decent man, twisted and misshapen by war – he's a savvy, emotionally manipulative adolescent who has been allowed to hide his defects behind his service, and attempts to do so immediately, as well as throughout the text. Skinner understands the archetype he's playing – the "war hero" – and he cynically exploits expected civilian reactions to this type, again and again, describing himself as a veteran whenever he senses that the listener could be sympathetic to such an introduction. We meet him on the road into New York City, having hitched a ride from a very tolerant trucker after leaving the military – after acting like an entitled jerk and getting kicked out at the first gas station possible, Skinner walks into the city and attempts to pick up one of the first women he meets:

*"I just got here, literally like an hour ago. Two hours ago. We could have a drink or something and you could tell me about yourself."*

*"Thank you, no."*

*"You sure? I just got out of the army yesterday. I literally just got here. All I want to do is buy you a drink to say*

*thank you. Howbout it? I mean, you're not talkin' to a bad person."*

*"I realize that."*

He moves on from this rejection, which he handles with characteristic irritation, Skinner heads to a patriotic bar. There, patrons buy him drinks for his service. Despite a desire on the part of readers to, maybe, see Skinner as a good person exposed to the horrors of war (and he was exposed to the horrors of war), few soldiers or veterans act, consistently, the way Skinner does – he's been written this way to a purpose, and that purpose, when one reads the entire novel, is a subtle repudiation of the debatable notion that moral injuries sustained in combat lead inexorably to bad ends. Sometimes injury and moral injury does lead to tragic decisions, but more often, as pointed out by thinkers like Nietzsche and Jung, moral injury from war leads to good and decent men growing and expanding – undertaking political service, as in the Greatest Generation, or literary works, as in *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Catch-22*. Skinner is a different breed.

The physical descriptions of war arrive through Skinner's dreams, or shaded recollections, and tend toward the surreal. They feel authentic – the way one sees vivid experiences from the past, unmediated by the conscious mind – especially in the beginning of the deployment: *"They crossed paths with other units, soldiers who had been in heavy house-to-house fighting and there was a bad feeling, like they wanted to hurt somebody and you were it."* As time goes on in the war, readers experience combat like an especially urgent impressionistic painting in which Skinner has become trapped: *"In the arc-weld light, solid forms appeared to shift – the hanging dust. Shadows were running. The drilling deafening thundering never stopped. The razor lights leapt straight across the black, flashed past – he whipped his head around – and they went away and went arcing slowly down like baseballs. The ground and the*

*air were being shocked.*" He loses friends, and (at least at first) dreads his memories of those experiences – until later in the book, when, thoroughly in the grip of the delusion that war can provide some sort of balm for his aching soul, he dreams of the war as a happier place, a time of fellowship and shared purpose.

There's no question that Skinner has encountered severe moral injury based on what he sees and does in combat. He murders civilians, for one thing, and photographs them in awful positions for another – he is a war criminal, in other words, the lowest, most thuggish level of war criminal, but a criminal nevertheless, and carries PTSD. But the ravages of that awful psychological disorder – from which so many veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan suffer – do not explain or excuse his actions in the middle and end of the book. No – in *Preparation for the Next Life*, Skinner's choices, in and out of war, belong to him.

The relationship between Zhou Lei and Skinner is complicated, and depends in equal parts what each character represents to the other, which comes down to "escape." Zhou seeks in Skinner a replacement for her father, a sergeant in the Chinese Army who died during one of the collectivization phases of Chinese development in the 70s. To support this dependence on the pro-military narrative in Zhou's life, references to her belief in and admiration for soldiers and the military abound. She claims to have "military training" and admires the trappings of Skinner's service – his military gear, his camouflage, his boots. She does not, however, understand Skinner, and by the time his PTSD manifests and he begins acting as selfishly as he feels, she's trapped with an emotionally abusive, self-destructive adolescent. To Skinner's credit, he often describes precisely what is important to him – his war, his pistol, his dream of one day returning to Iraq – rather than concealing his ambitions. Although he usually talks about the return to combat as a way to make money, it is

quite clearly a dream to destroy himself, for a variety of reasons. Whether Zhou Lei willfully misunderstands Skinner, or it is simply a misunderstanding based on her desire for what he represents is left to the reader. For Skinner's part, he sees Zhou Lei as a sexual object most of the time, and, as time goes on and his condition worsens, alternately as a source of stability and a burden of which to be rid at any cost, until the book's unforgettable and dramatic conclusion.

This fixation on superficial aspects of love helps explain an otherwise curious phenomenon wherein physical fitness correlates with moral health. This, alongside Zhou Lei's idea of soldiers as a sort of ideal, is the most prevalent strand running through the book: immoral or insane characters project internal dissatisfaction through broken bodies, while moral or decent characters do the same through near-religious attendance to working out. Here's one of the primary characters exercising at a public park, in a scene of retreat that evokes Faulkner, Hemingway, and Hawthorne: *"Skinner was doing pushups with his boots up on a ledge. When he was done, he had trouble standing up. He sat down and did nothing for quite a while, just sat at the bottom of a slide, his chin dripping, looking down at the sweat drips falling between his fingers. When he looked up, he saw a pit bull, a beautiful powerful animal with tight glossy skin over striated muscles..."* The primary antagonist, on the other hand, *"looked like a white meaty insect whose exoskeleton has been peeled away exposing the mechanical workings of muscles and white sacks of flesh, which had never been in the open air before."* The antagonist's family members, too, suffer from physical ailments or deformities that feel linked to the choices they've made in life – the landlady is fat, so much so that she ends up suffering a heart attack. Her daughter, Erin, is described as "giant" when introduced to readers, then again on several occasions. While few would object to the medical assertion that a correlation exists between good health and good spirits (Mr. Carson of this blog argued the contrary

[here](#)), *Preparation* actually bases part of its moral hierarchy on disciplined workout regimens, or “military training,” as Zhou Lei puts it, so much so that the final image in the book is that of a good character preparing to squat more weight than they have ever before attempted. A character’s fitness or health does not mean, necessarily, that they are good, or healthy, but the absence of fitness is a sure sign of spiritual poverty. In the context of the book’s ostensible theme, then, characters use working out as a replacement for the affection they don’t derive from external sources, or as a means of escape from a world over which they otherwise have no control. Working out, according to the logic of the text, is an activity that leads nowhere, and gives its participants nothing beyond temporary respite from a sense of existential terror that runs like rapids throughout the text.

Many people believe that love offers some sort of redemption – a way to balance out the sins of violence, the choices its nation made in war. When Skinner disagrees with Zhou’s proposition that love makes the world go round, she challenges him. “*What makes the world go round,*” she says, and Skinner answers: “*War... Actually, I’d say money first. Money and then war.*” America, a capitalist society that seems addicted to both money and war, has made serious mistakes in its pursuit of both – like torture, like bullying, like unnecessary violence, like sexual assault, like disastrously unregulated financial markets, all to no apparent end. And as much as readers would like a classic love story to make it all seem okay, that redemptive narrative isn’t here for American society in the way that it seemed accessible or deserved after World War II. In the end, after all the struggles, perhaps the best analogy for this book in the western canon would be one a disillusioned Hemingway wrote after The Great War – *A Farewell to Arms*. The sad truth is, there is no transcendent understanding bought when one covets trauma and violence – only more trauma and more violence – a pessimistic, never ending cycle. *Preparation for the Next Life* delivers both, and

in such a way that one cannot help but grow from reading it.

*Preparation From the Next Life* is by Atticus Lish, published by and available through Tyrant Books.