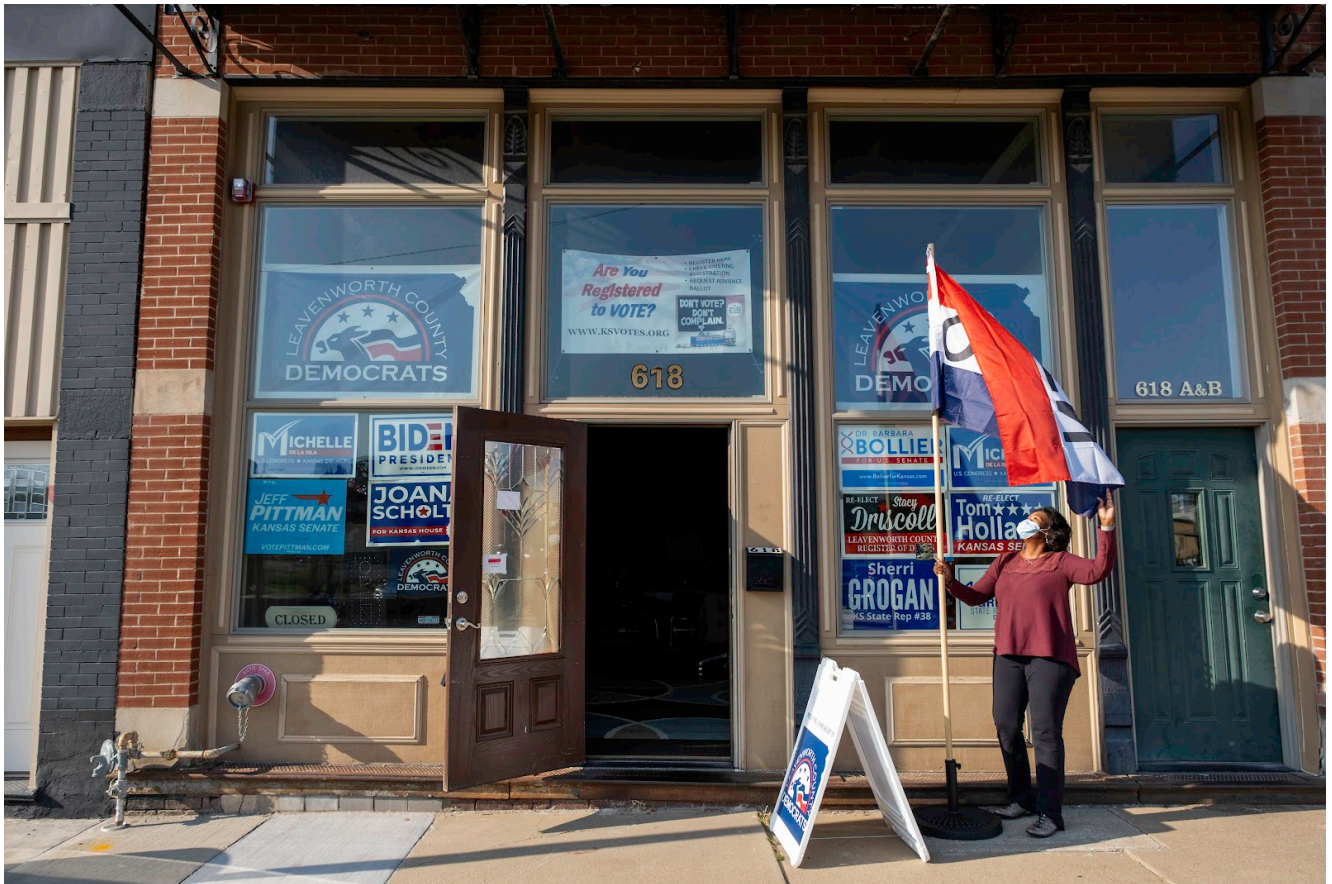


# New Photo Essay by Arin Yoon: “Standing Up for Change”



*Joana Scholtz wears her VOTE necklace on September 25, 2020 in Leavenworth, Kansas.*



Joana Scholtz sets up the “open” flag at the Democratic party’s headquarters on September 24, 2020 in Leavenworth, Kansas, in preparation for an evening of phone banking by an all volunteer staff.



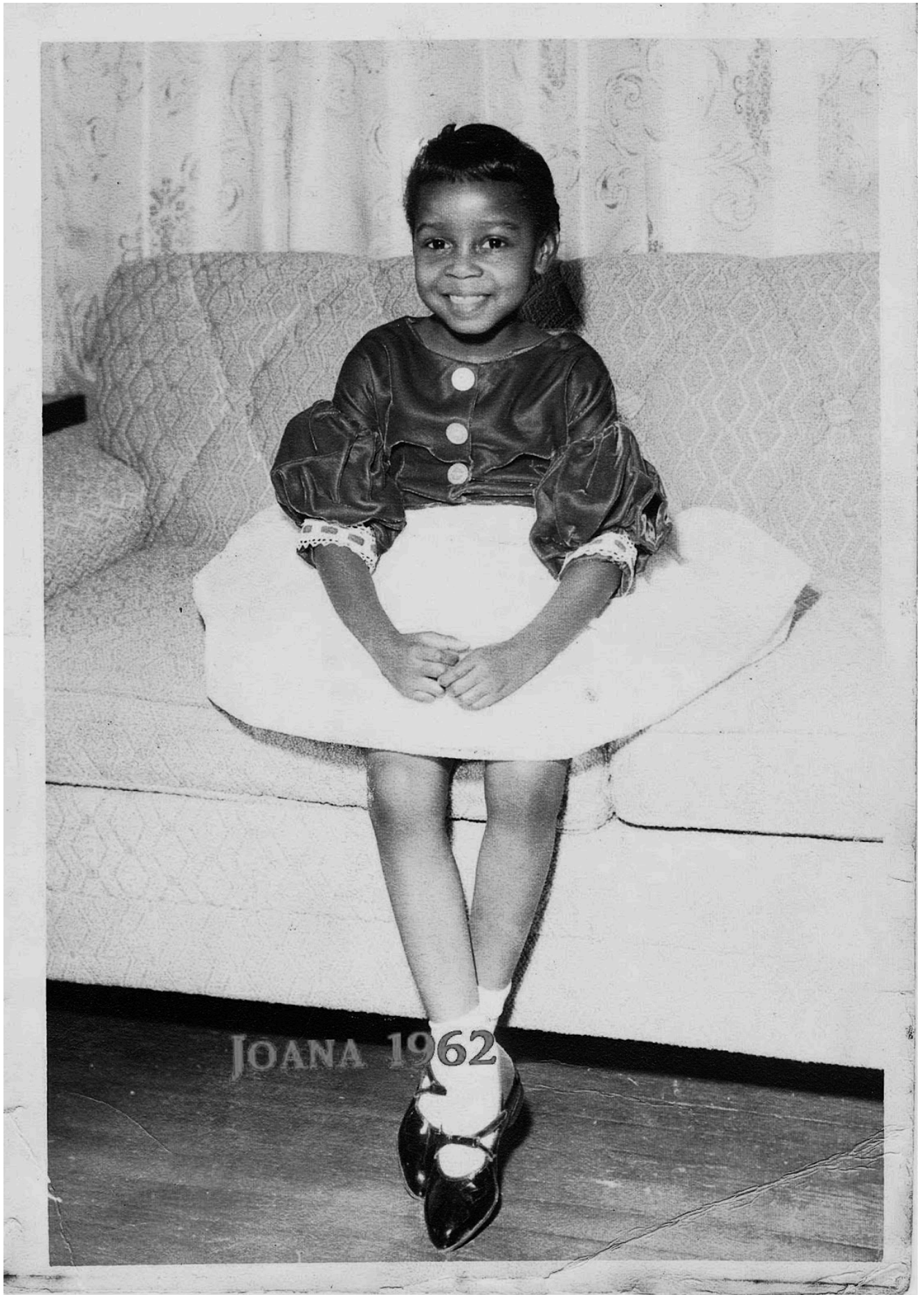
L: Joana Scholtz points out the political leanings in different neighborhoods of District 40, outlined in red, on a map that shows how the borders have been gerrymandered, on September 22, 2020 at campaign headquarters in Leavenworth, Kansas.

R: Joana Scholtz discusses her next steps in a Zoom meeting with her staff which she refers to as her “Kitchen Cabinet” on September 22, 2020 at campaign headquarters in Leavenworth,

*Kansas.*

My first encounter with Joana Scholtz was as I ran after her (and her husband, Rik Jackson) as they were exiting campaign headquarters and about to enter their car. I was on assignment photographing football fans on the first day of the NFL season and I was on the lookout for people decked out in the red and yellow Kansas City Chiefs gear. Rik graciously obliged to be photographed and as we got to talking, Joana said she was running for the Kansas House of Representatives in District 40. I was excited to meet a political candidate and was surprised at how down to earth she was. I had always felt like politicians were out of reach, but with Joana, I felt like we could talk for hours.

I called her up not long after that chance meeting and asked her if I could document her campaign for a photojournalism workshop and to my surprise, she agreed and opened up her life to me. In that week, I learned a lot about local politics, what it means when a district is so clearly gerrymandered, and what a grassroots campaign looks and feels like. We recently caught up via Zoom and talked about her career in the military and foray into politics and her personal experiences as a Black officer in the Army in the 1980s.



*Joana at the age of five in 1962 in Chicago, Illinois.  
Courtesy of Joana Scholtz.*

Born in Mississippi, granddaughter of sharecroppers, at the age of four, Joana moved with her siblings and mom to Chicago with the Second Great Migration. Joana recalls, "When I was in college, I was going to be an Education major then I found out at the end of first semester that when you graduated and actually got a job that the salary was so low that you qualified for food stamps. And, you know, after my mother and my stepfather got divorced, we were living on welfare in the projects, getting food stamps and I was always embarrassed by that. So there is no way I was going to get a college education and wind up back on food stamps."

So, in 1979, as a sophomore at Knox College, she joined the ROTC and was commissioned as an intelligence officer because she knew that the military was one of the few professions where men and women were paid the same amount. That sealed the deal.



*Joana Scholtz on ROTC maneuvers exercise at Knox College in 1979 in Galesburg, Illinois. Courtesy of Joana Scholtz.*



*Joana Scholtz and her best friend Lenore Ivy at their Captain promotion ceremony while attending the Officer Advanced Course at the Military Intelligence Center and School in July 1983 at Fort Huachuca, Arizona. Courtesy of Joana Scholtz.*

Joana found community and mentorship with other Black officers. "I think as a general rule, people do seek their own just for the comfort and the support of somebody who understands your journey." She soon realized that many of her Black peers were being "recycled" through the Officer Basic Course and saw it as a systemic problem. "Military intelligence was a really segregated branch. They were not necessarily welcoming to Black officers. There was a lot of fear of failure from the Black officers. And there was a lot of frustration because there wasn't a lot of feedback. Although Jim Crow was over and the military was integrated, people's minds weren't necessarily integrated." Being a woman in the military also brought about its own challenges. "You dealt with a lot of sexual harassment. In 1979, there were no sexual harassment laws. And when a woman complained, it was often blamed on the woman. And she was either blackballed or sent to another unit. The consequences were for women because you were in a male environment."



*Joana Scholtz with her Combined Arms Services and Staff School group in 1996 at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Courtesy of Joana Scholtz.*

When asked about her greatest accomplishment while in the military, she says, "You know a lot of people would look at awards as a greatest achievement. But for me, my greatest achievement was getting beyond the self, getting beyond my own struggle, getting beyond looking at what I needed to achieve to realize that leadership is about taking care of people. For me, that was my biggest growth and my biggest achievement- to realize that my soldiers really did come first. As an officer, you gotta be successful. You gotta meet all of these criteria and goals and standards and whatnot. That's just part of being an officer, but really understanding that it's the people you lead, whether it's wartime or in peacetime, it's how you accomplish the mission as a group. And how people feel when they finish accomplishing the mission. If I have a soldier who

works for me and he or she is no better off after working for me, then I haven't done my job."



*Joana and Steven Scholtz on their wedding day on December 19, 1985 in Lyngby, Germany. Courtesy of Joana Scholtz.*

In 1983, Joana met Steven Scholtz, who was her sponsor when she arrived in Germany. "From the moment we met, we knew each other. We started hanging out on the weekends and we would always talk about who we were going to date and then we kind of realized we weren't dating anybody but each other. We got married in 1985. Back then there were very few couples where the woman was Black and the man was White. And I remember the first time we walked into a Hail and Farewell, the whole room hushed. Other times, people who would be talking to us and they would be like, 'Where's your wife? Where's your husband?' They were more uneasy than we were."



*L: Joana Scholtz speaks with women at a luncheon with the Leavenworth-Lansing Chamber of Commerce Women's Division on September 22, 2020 at the Community Center in Leavenworth, Kansas.*

*R: Joana Scholtz reaches out and briefly squeezes the hand of one of her constituents during the luncheon with the Leavenworth-Lansing Chamber of Commerce Women's Division on September 22, 2020 at the Community Center in Leavenworth, Kansas.*

Joana became pregnant with her son Alex in 1987. "Steven and I had made a pact before we got married, that if we had a child while we were on active duty, one of us would get out. I assumed it would be him. I had no idea he assumed it would be me. And so when we actually had the conversation when I was

about five or six months pregnant and he said, 'Well, when are you going to let them know you're resigning your Commission?' and I thought, 'What do you mean? I was waiting for you.' And so we flipped the coin. I mean, I totally trusted him and he totally trusted me. So we had to have a tiebreaker. We often had to go to the flip of the coin. I couldn't believe I lost the toss. But, if you lose the toss, you've got to honor it. Maternity leave was six weeks. And the military really wasn't equipped. I don't think the military had thought through the consequences of having women, in their prime childbearing ages, and the effect on mission readiness." Joana got out on December 31, 1987 and eventually went on to work in education in 1998, as a teacher and then as an instructional facilitator. Steven passed away in 2016 only 17 months after being diagnosed with terminal brain cancer.



*Joana Scholtz waves at a neighbor while crossing the street with her yard sign, on September 25, 2020 in Leavenworth, Kansas.*

A year later, Joana retired. She realized that her community desperately needed change. She reopened the Leavenworth NAACP

chapter. Not long after, she decided to run for the Kansas House of Representatives seat in District 40 because no one in the Democratic party was challenging the incumbent. "I had no idea that campaign would be so vicious." At a voter registration event with Buffalo Soldiers on Fort Leavenworth, a military installation which forbids all political and partisan campaigning under the Hatch Act, a candidate from the Republican party arrived with his campaign team dressed in campaign gear. Someone told him that he would have to leave and come back after he changed. Joana was shocked when the next day, a story circulated on Facebook that the angry Ms. Scholtz had something to do with it. She couldn't believe that he was trying to exploit the angry Black woman narrative to justify his overstepping the rules.



*Joana Scholtz wears her "Stand with Joana Scholtz" mask while canvassing on September 23, 2020 in Lansing, Kansas. She speaks for a long time with a swing voter and her husband, a Republican. "How do you feel about second amendment rights?" is the first question asked. The couple agrees to hold on to a yard sign while they research her platform. They will return*

*the sign if they decide not to put it in their yard.*

She realized then that “there was no requirement for truth in campaigning. And when you’re in a district like mine, which is basically white middle class Republican, they’re drinking the Kool-Aid. And it’s really hard to overcome that group think.” As I followed her on the campaign trail, I met her campaign manager, Rebecca Hollister, a college student at Georgetown University who was voted Young Dem of the Year in Leavenworth. Despite the generational difference, they were a perfect match, united in their desire to make positive changes in their community. Joana lost the election by a small margin, but it didn’t stop her from continuing her work to stand up for change on a community level. Speaking about Rebecca, Joana says, “She’s just a hard worker and I felt so bad when we lost. I felt worse for her than for myself because she fought so hard for me.”



*L: Joana Scholtz embraces her campaign manager, Rebecca Hollister, after hearing the election night results on November 3, 2020 in Lansing, Kansas.*

*R: Table centerpiece at Joana Scholtz’s election watch party on November 3, 2020 in Lansing, Kansas.*

Joana is now the Chairperson of the Leavenworth Democratic Committee and is working to increase voter registration. “We didn’t register as many people in disenfranchised areas as we would have liked to because a lot of them don’t want to use technology to register, but they don’t want to use paper because you have to write down your license. There’s a greater

amount of suspicion about the government in lower economic areas. And that's just something that you have to just keep going and overcoming and get people to realize that their voices count."



*Joana Scholtz calls registered Democrats who have not yet voted up until the polls close at the Leavenworth Democratic Party Headquarters on November 3, 2020 in Leavenworth, Kansas.* "My biggest focus with the NAACP right now is getting our youth up and going, but as a chapter, we really want to focus on economic development and economic wellness in our community because people talk about jobs, but if you work all your life and you have no savings at the end of it or you're always in debt and struggling, then you never experience that sense of wellness. And so we want people to understand that, regardless of your income, the goal is to reach a sense of wellness where you're paying your bills and you're putting a little bit aside. And also really starting to look at what jobs are in the community and where there is systemic racism in employment in our community. And being able to have those difficult conversations with people that make them aware of the need to

make changes and then persistently helping them make those changes.”



*Joana Scholtz checks her messages on her watch as she gets her hair done before a Zoom fundraiser on September 23, 2020 in Leavenworth, Kansas.*

“The other thing is introducing a culturally sensitive curriculum to our school systems. Right now, it’s what’s easy. Like if a teacher has a curriculum for *To Kill a Mockingbird*, they’re perfectly comfortable using that during Black History Month to demonstrate the struggles of Black people not realizing that that particular movie or book is extremely traumatic for Black students who are sitting in the class hearing the word n\*\*\*er over, over, over, over throughout the book. And the theme of the violence against Black people and the expectation that it has no meaning. You know, it’s more comfortable for that teacher to dust off that curriculum every year and use it, than find something more relevant.” Reflecting back on this past year with the Black Lives Matter movement, the murders of George Floyd and Vanessa Guillen, and the recent storming of the Capitol, she says, “I think the

world is starting to figure it out. They're having to see what's always been there but it's always been kind of behind a thin veil. But that veil of civility has been ripped apart. It's really evident."



L: Joana Scholtz checks herself in her rear view mirror before heading out to go door to door and on September 23, 2020 in Leavenworth, Kansas.

R: Joana Scholtz celebrates the 22nd birthday of her granddaughter Jasmine Moody, with husband Rik Jackson, daughter Jacquanette Moody, and granddaughter's boyfriend Harrison Horton at her home in Leavenworth, Kansas on September 24, 2020. Her son Alex Scholtz and son-in-law Justin Moody join in via Facetime. She says, "you know what kind of life you lead by who's at your table."

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## Artist Profile: Musician Emily Yates

### INTRODUCTION

Emily Yates joined the Army at 19, spent six years in, from 2002 until her "release," as she puts it, in 2008, finishing as an E-4, and served two deployments to Iraq in 2005-06 and

2007-08. She calls herself a former “public affairs minion, writing heartwarming news stories about the Iraq War to help build fellow soldiers’ morale.” **1** She worked under David Abrams (author of the novels *Fobbit* and *Brave Deeds*), and as “the only snarky female specialist in his unit,” she sees some of herself in the character of Carnicle. She says that she wishes to “use my experience in the military to make my civilian life richer . . . [and] help those who are struggling.” **2** As a self-proclaimed “eventual ukulele superstar” she often uses humor to express her concerns, and utilizes juxtapositions of joy and disillusionment, humor and aggression, and gentleness and vulgarity to communicate those concerns, whether they be about the VA, the precariousness of freedom, sexuality, the military, certain personality types, or how “not to be a dick.”



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

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

Two essays for *Truthout* also express her concerns. "American Propagander: Six Ways Paul Rieckhoff's 'American Sniper' Column Deeply Bothers This US Veteran" (2015) Yates presents a scathing critique of Rieckhoff's praise of Eastwood's film. She feels that in his discussion of the film Rieckhoff exploits veterans and ignores the complexity of the war. In her view, he ignores the real story of the war, such as PTSD and veteran suicides (although to be fair, Kyle's PTSD is depicted), and the complexity of American involvement. She ends her essay "All of these points illustrate the larger issue that when veterans' traumatic experiences are exploited as freely by veterans themselves as they are by the powerful few who send us to war, it's a sign that we ourselves have internalized the destructive system that our bodies were used to support."

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

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

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

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

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

*Just bomb their country  
Just bomb their fucking country  
Kill all of their children and destroy their infrastructure*

*Just bomb their country, put holes in all their history  
Then take all of their resources and bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb  
their country.*

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

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

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

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

strip of tape over her mouth. On the strip is written “patriot,” suggesting that in the current political climate the real patriots, the truth-tellers, have to be silenced and held in check.

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

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

## INTERVIEW WITH EMILY YATES

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

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

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

best of it.

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

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

The yellow ribbon, to me, was sort of emblematic of that attitude, even though I know there are plenty of people who really mean it sincerely. I think many of those people are just as misled by our government as I was.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**EY:** Yeah. I try to think of myself as a multi-polar person. Maybe not bipolar. It's got such a negative connotation. I

feel like too often, we humans are pressured to define ourselves as being one thing or another thing. I love butterflies, and I care about militarism.

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

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

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

**LA:** How did you get into songwriting?

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

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

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

She had the line, "Fuck Bush. And I'll say fuck Bush and fuck this war." She said it so cutely, and I was like, yeah. Let's just say things cute. I listened to that and I was like, yeah.

How do you be angry at that voice? How do you be angry at that song?

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

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

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

**LA:** This is true.

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

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

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

little bit. Maybe people are more open to hearing what you have to say if you can make them laugh while you say it.

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

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

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

Then, I started dating my now ex-husband, who was a musician, a multi-instrumentalist, and he happened to have a ukulele that he never played because he was always playing other things. But he had this ukulele and I was like, "This is so cute. I want to play it!" He was like, "Okay. Here's how you play a couple of chords." I was like, "Great."

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

So we went to Ghana. His bandmate had set up these drumming and dancing workshops that we had to get up ridiculously early for every morning. He had set up different levels of drumming

workshops. The real musicians were in the advanced drumming. Then, the wives were in the beginning drumming class to keep us busy.

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

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

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

**EY:** I've since learned that there's a term called anti-folk that a couple of other artists, like Ed Hamell or I think Ani DiFranco, probably relate to that is a better descriptor. I related to punk because I felt like punk rockers were also putting messages in with their songs that a lot of people didn't want to hear.

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

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

Even though I love Bob Dylan, misogynist though he is. That's a whole other conversation. Although that did inspire me to

write some parodies of Bob Dylan's songs, called Boob Dylan.

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

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

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

**LA:** You were in the military for six years. What led you to that decision?

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

People usually ask this blanket question, what was that like? And I'm just like, well, buy me a drink and sit down. How much time do you have? Now, I was like, fuck it. I'm just going to put all of the answers in stories and show rather than tell. I

don't want to beat people over the head with my opinions about my experience. I just want to explain what I went through and show what I went through. You can see for yourself how I came to the conclusions I did.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the military, they pretty much train you to not take your own health seriously because any time you seek help, they act like you're trying to get over and game the system, and to get out of something. So, soldiers specifically, because I don't really have as much experience with the other branches, are put in these positions where even if there's something legitimately, terribly wrong with us, we're forced to downplay it.

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

If you go into the VA and you're like, "Hey, I'm having some trouble sleeping," they're like, "Well, what's your pain level on the scale of 1 to 10?" You're like, "Uh, I don't know. It's

1 or 2." "Okay." You immediately aren't taken seriously. If you're not in excruciating pain and you don't look like you're actually falling apart, they just stop caring or stop asking questions.

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

I think that the past administration, Obama didn't address the fact that literally every person who goes to a combat zone comes back with some kind of post-traumatic stress. It's not a disorder, it's a natural outcome. People are treated like they're broken because they have post-traumatic stress because they've been in traumatic and stressful situations. That is an absolute dehumanization. It's an absolute denial of the fact that these situations are inherently traumatizing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I think if you can say it, say it. Truth shouldn't be restricted to adults. Kids are more honest than everyone. I just thought it would be a funny thing to put it on there. Especially because "The Bad Word Song" is also on there, which was inspired by George Carlin's bit about the seven words you can't say on television. I think I put every little word in

this album that nobody wants me to be saying in front of their kids, so why not just do that?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**EY:** Jason [Moon] asked me to write a song about military sexual trauma and I tentatively agreed. At first, I was

annoyed with him. I was like, how do you just ask someone to write a song about that? That's fucked up, it's terrible, it's traumatizing. Fuck!

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

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

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

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

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

It was like a tiny window of normalcy or mundanity in this absolutely surreal experience. The smoking area was right by the headquarters. We would just be sitting there and hear

mortars land, and talk about who had been killed, and about our shitty bosses, and how this fucking war was like Groundhog Day, where today is just one shitty day after another, the same shitty day every day.

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

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

So I started taking smoke breaks. They were the one opportunity to regain a tiny sliver of sanity in the day. I don't smoke cigarettes anymore; I quit a couple of years after I got out. I smoke weed now.

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

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

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

ends of the spectrum, and all over the place.

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

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## An Interview with Filmmaker Jordan Martinez

First Sergeant Russell Tuason faces a dilemma: does he deploy once again to Iraq to lead the troops he has been training, or does he take a meritorious retirement from the Army and begin a family with his wife Krissy?

His best friend, Sgt. Emmanuel Sanchez (Ramon Rodriguez), tells him that he has already proven himself and has no need to return to battle, that he can “ride off into the sunset.” However, In Jordan Martinez’s 2019 film *The Gatekeeper*, Tuason feels that if he retires he will be abandoning his duty and his men, sacrificing his honor, but if he deploys he will be jeopardizing the hopes and dreams of his wife Krissy (Jennifer Marshall), and the promises he made to her. In an argument with his wife, he says, “If I don’t finish what I’ve started, then what kind of leader does that make me?,” a conflict that is at least as old *The Odyssey*. Tuason is torn between what he “wants to do” and what he “should do,” between family and duty. He chooses duty.

*The Gatekeeper*, Jordan Martinez’s first short film, begins with this conflict. Martinez explains that he “wanted to convey that going back is a choice. Russell doesn’t have to go, but he feels his sense of purpose or duty is to ensure the

safety of his men.” Later on, we discover that Russell’s sense of duty isn’t the only thing compelling him. “Perhaps in his mind he believes he is choosing duty for the right reasons. Or is he lying to himself?”



The character of Tuason is portrayed by Christopher Loverro, an Army veteran of a 2005 deployment to Iraq, former SWAT Team member, and founder of Warriors for Peace Theatre. He remarks that he “struggled with suicide when I returned from Iraq, so much of what the character was going through were things I could relate to in my personal life. Everything my character in the film experienced were things that I could relate to or experienced personally or someone I served with experienced. I pulled from my own personal military bio or used soldiers and leaders I served with to pull from.”



The action shifts to Iraq, circa 2004, with Tuason's company in a firefight with insurgents (shot at Blue Cloud Movie Ranch in one day of production). As Tuason enters a courtyard scanning for the enemy, camera work and special effects lead to a sense of spatial and temporal dislocation, creating disorientation and uncertainty. He hears the faint cries of a woman and enters a door which leads into a church. In a flash forward, he sees a flag-draped coffin (his?) and a woman, who in a later scene is shown to be his grieving widow.

Martinez, born in 1990, served for 10 years in the Army, which he joined at 17, training as a paratrooper and eventually becoming a Civil Affairs Specialist, with a deployment to Afghanistan. He says, "I was attracted to the military as a child. My sister was in the military at the time and I wanted nothing more than to go on an adventure and see the world. When I was about sixteen years old I knew my goal would be to

join after high school and I wasn't afraid of going overseas even though the wars were going full speed."

After he left the service, Martinez had some jobs in various film productions. He learned about the graduate program in Cinematic Arts at USC and "made the second best decision of his life" to apply. He was accepted, and thus Martinez fulfilled a life-long dream to make movies, which began when he was eight years old growing up in Southern California. Brian DePalma's *Scarface* (1983) made a significant impact, as did *What Dreams May Come* (1998), starring Robin Williams. The Wachowski brothers' *The Matrix* (1999) and Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010) were influential, he says, for their conceptual frameworks. While at USC, Martinez studied with such top industry professionals as Robert Nederhorst, Visual Effects Supervisor on *John Wick 3*, Academy Award Winner Michael Fink, and John Brennan, Virtual Production Lead on *The Lion King* (2019). *The Gatekeeper* is ground-breaking in utilizing on such a small project "motion-capture previsualization," a type of digital storyboarding which allows complex scenes to be created before shooting, thus saving time on the set. All told, the film came to fruition over a year and a half, from the script to post-production to screenings at film festivals. *The Gatekeeper* is Martinez' final project for his Master of Fine Arts in Cinematic Arts from USC. He graduated in December, 2019.

As the firefight continues the company is pinned down, and Tuason, now in command, faces another choice: return to the base or maintain its position and take the fight to the enemy. He decides that they will "stand our ground," a fatal mistake that leads to the deaths of everyone in the company except Tuason. When he returns stateside he suffers from intense survivor's guilt and believes that he "should have died there with them . . . They all died because of me." At his best friend's, Sanchez's, funeral, shot at the Los Angeles National Cemetery, he hopes to obtain absolution from Sanchez's widow,

but she tells him that her husband is dead “all because you wanted to be a hero,” and referring to their daughter: “and now she has to grow up without hers.” This sends Tuason further into depression.

As he contemplates suicide, he is visited by Sanchez’ ghost. Sanchez is an emissary, but from where? Heaven? Hell? Is he the gatekeeper? As Tuason makes a final pact with Sanchez, he has visions of his childhood, his men, his wife and their newborn daughter being given up for adoption. The final shot of the film is a close up of Tuason’s face, eyes questioning, searching. Martinez provides no answers, preferring ambiguity and individual interpretations.



The film has been called a “military thriller” and a “psychological thriller,” but Martinez says “it could be a military thriller, a psychological thriller, a supernatural

thriller, a drama, a war film, and in all honesty it can be all of these. It just depends on your perspective. This was my initial goal in making the film because no one wants to be told what to believe. I really wanted it to start a conversation, perhaps even pose the question, 'What did I just see?'"



Martinez, left, during his Army service.

Martinez wanted the film to be accurate in military aspects. Even though he was in the service for 10 years, he relied on Retired Army Sergeant Daniel Stroud to insure authenticity.

In a twist, Stroud was Loverro's First Sergeant in Iraq in 2005 and Martinez's Command Sergeant Major in Afghanistan in 2012. The casting of veterans in major roles and the use of veterans behind the camera was crucial to him, not only for realism but also to allow vets to tell their stories in the non-stereotypical ways he sees in many big-budget films. "Veterans were in front of and behind the camera," he

explains. "Veterans are the first to destroy a film for its lack of authenticity since they are trained to find flaws. Therefore, they are the hardest to please. I wanted to ensure I had extra attention to detail to make sure they were immersed in the experience since bringing them back to those memories of service was extremely important to me." He notes that he's received many emotional responses from military wives and veterans. He adds, "it's an honor to be able to connect with those closest to the material." His sentiment is shared by the film's co-star, [Jennifer Marshall](#), a Navy veteran from Denver, CO, who notes that she has occupied many roles related to the military: she has served, she has been a wife at home while her husband deployed, and she has lost friends both while serving and then to PTSD after coming home.

"I was honored to play the role and bring my real-life experiences to making her a real person." Marshall adds, "It's essential that veterans in Hollywood work with other veterans and bring our stories to the forefront. The alternative is Hollywood telling our stories for us . . . often times riddled with errors and half-truths."

Loverro says, "War veterans offer an understanding and breadth of knowledge that give them an advantage a civilian actor or director might not have. That's not to say civilians can't make great films about war, obviously many have. However, during the making of the film we felt what we were telling 'our' story and that process in and of itself was cathartic."

Beyond authenticity, Martinez's overarching reason for making the film was to address PTSD and the human toll as a result of war, and by extension other types of trauma. Having lost friends to suicide, he wanted to show that an extreme decision has ramifications beyond the individual. He points out that civilian rates of suicide are also high and that many of those who have committed suicide had experienced trauma. "I think this film can touch on trauma of all types and that those experiences can negatively influence our judgment, leading us

into a treacherous depression or a dangerous thought process.”



He hopes the film can start an honest conversation about what the military does to people, and that the purpose of the military can be both fighting wars and also healing those who fight in wars, and better preparing them for how war changes them as well as helping veterans readjust to civilian society. Aspects of the military mentality can take a toll not only on vets but also family members and he believes that more discussion in the country as a whole could help prevent veteran suicide.

Martinez's long-term plan is to obtain funding to make a full-length feature of *The Gatekeeper* and receive theatrical distribution. He has a treatment for the entire film that he is ready to pitch to major studios. His goal is that the film will bring this conversation to national and international audiences.

*The following is an interview between professor Larry Abbott and filmmaker, Jordan Martinez.*

**LARRY ABBOTT:** Can we start with a bit about your background and how you came to be a filmmaker?

**JORDAN MARTINEZ:** I was born in 1990. I'm from Southern California. I grew up all around the area when I was a kid. My mom was a single mom. She moved around, county to county pretty much. I enlisted in the Army in 2008. Once I joined, I became a paratrooper, joined Civil Affairs, and eventually became a Civil Affairs Sergeant. I was deployed to Afghanistan in 2012 to 2013, in Kandahar Province.

After that, I was still in the Reserves, all the way up until last year. The last couple years, I started working in Japan for USFJ. I officially got out last year, a total of 11 years, most of it Reserves.

I started getting into film in 2013, when I got back from Afghanistan. I met a couple veterans who brought me to some organizations in Hollywood, got me some jobs here and there, and I started doing a lot of background production assistant work.

I realized that that was not the path toward becoming a director, which is what I always wanted to be from childhood. It's a very difficult journey to become a director. There was a lot of opposition, but if I wanted to have a chance, I needed to get educated. I had my Bachelor's Degree in Communications & Film, but I didn't feel like it was really a substantial degree. I didn't feel like it really taught me the technical skills I needed to work in an evolving film industry.

I entered the film program at USC and I've been there for the last four years. I learned a lot about the technical side, and I met a lot of great people, and got more experience. That's exactly what I wanted, to have more stuff on my reel, build my

network, learn more about the technical skills that are involved in filmmaking.

I had the opportunity to be mentored by an Academy Award winner, one of the visual effects supervisors for *John Wick: Chapter 3*. He was a great mentor of mine and still is. He helped me out with making *The Gatekeeper*, as far as telling me where I was going wrong, what I was doing right. *The Gatekeeper* was definitely the pinnacle of my work at USC.

**ABBOTT:** Why did you decide on a military theme?

**MARTINEZ:** I realized early on that military films are not really being told. It's funny, because I didn't really think, when I started in the film industry, that I was going to be a director of military-related films. I didn't think that was my path. I didn't think much about that genre-wise.

When I started going to USC I really started to think: Okay, I need to double-down on this because there's no one else doing the job. There are no movies, in my opinion, that are really, at the moment, doing a lot of justice to the experiences of serving in post-9/11 wars. I started getting my feet wet with that.

2016 was very divisive. I really feel like it was similar to—maybe not quite the same, because I wasn't born in that era—but similar division-wise to the Vietnam era. You had a lot of protests. You had people who just didn't like the military. It's unfortunate, but you get a lot of this in strongholds like Los Angeles and New York.

Regardless of all that, I made military-related films when there were people who didn't really like the underlying messages, who thought they were controversial. But I told them that they were accurate and often based on actual events that happened to people.

I work very hard to get my films as authentic as possible

because I know, as a veteran, how much we are willing to totally tear apart a movie. We look at something like *American Sniper* or all these high-budget movies and we say, "Hey, you had \$100 million. Why couldn't you get this shit right? Why couldn't you hire someone, a veteran, to help you out or even tell the story?"

I think that's part of the disconnect that I hope we'll see change. We already are seeing "veteran" being its own diversity category. We're not really being represented in the film industry at all. If you look at the demographics, veterans are the least represented in the film industry.

I think that this is changing, and I've already seen the beginnings of it. I hope it continues to change because veterans want to be able to tell their own stories. They want to be able to enjoy films that are accurate and that honor the sacrifice that veterans have made in service to this country to further the ideals of freedom and democracy that have really been under attack for quite some time.

I'm not political in any way. I'm very independent-minded, but I do believe in America. I do believe that the sacrifices of our veterans are being misunderstood and not really being taken in total account.

We look at Veterans Affairs, we see tons of suicides. For me, I've known people who have either attempted or actually committed suicide in the military. It totally turns the world upside down for everyone around them. Friends and family are destroyed. I think, for far too long, it's been brushed under the rug.

The idea of *The Gatekeeper* began in 2015, believe it or not. It was my first film at USC. The original idea started when I saw *What Dreams May Come*, which is a Robin Williams film. It's something that many of us think about in the military. It's a military ideology: Valhalla, Warrior Heaven, and all that.

In the film Robin Williams' character goes into hell to save his wife. I felt this was a keen idea of film in general, an interesting concept, and I combined that with the ideals of the military and the genre of the military itself. I think it is its own genre at this point. My film is not really a thriller. It's not really military. It's not really a drama. It's all of those combined.

When I made the short film, sort of a prequel, I didn't have enough money. Back in 2015, I didn't have the assets. I did it for my first project at USC. It's a very, very restrictive time constraint. You have five minutes! But it was really well-liked. A lot of people liked the concept, but it just wasn't a big enough production. It didn't have enough screen time. It didn't have all those things that are necessary for a film.

USC is a very, I would say, liberal-minded campus, nothing wrong with that, but they are not into seeing the military in a positive light. I'm not making the military positive or negative. I'm making it authentic.

That's something that I think is not being recognized in Hollywood. The military is either portrayed as super evil or super good. That's just not what it is at all. It's not super good. It's not super bad. It's just an ideology that people fall into who are supposed to support the Constitution and the country of the United States.

That's the perspective that I didn't see represented, so I decided to keep making films that show what it's like being overseas as a soldier. I made a second film about Afghanistan. It was about a child suicide bomber. It got a lot of heat. A lot of people didn't like the fact that I was getting into controversial things about the war.

I said, "Okay, cool. I'm hitting a button here. I'm hitting something. I'm getting a reaction out of people, which is, for

better or worse, good." As long as it comes from truth, I think that that's a good place. Eventually, through my time at USC, I learned more and more, and I became known as "the military director."

**ABBOTT:** How important is authenticity?

**MARTINEZ:** Eventually, I was getting close to the end of my time at USC. I was there for four years, from 2016 until December of 2019. The process for making a thesis film is really about three semesters, a little over a year, and the script for the thesis film was really pretty much the same thing as my original short, which was essentially the same concept as *The Gatekeeper*. I have the same main actor, who's a good friend of mine, Chris Loverro. He himself is a war veteran. He's an amazing patriot, amazing veteran, amazing theatrical actor. My relationship with Chris is so strong I knew that I was going to be able to pull this film off with him.

For *The Gatekeeper*, he was instrumental with helping me build the firing range shown in the film, with helping me get right certain things that a high-ranking soldier would do. Even though I was in the military for ten years, I couldn't know everything. I think that's where Hollywood gets it wrong. They have directors who have spent zero time in the military, and then they don't even listen to the military advisor that the studio has provided for them.

I really tried to make the film as authentic as possible, as military people will totally rip apart any little thing that's incorrect in a movie. It's like, hey, if I'm going to be known as a military director, I better make sure I have this complete on lock the weapons, the uniforms, the jargon, the tactics, everything single thing has to be completely on point.

**ABBOTT:** How did the actual shoot progress?

**MARTINEZ:** We filmed *The Gatekeeper* in six and a half days. That was all we could afford within our budget. I was lucky enough to be able to get some financial help. I did spend a lot of my own money to get the project going, which I saved during my time in service, and then also I got scholarships and grants. I was very fortunate to get help from the Robert Rodriguez Scholarship, as well as a few other people that were kind enough to donate as well.

I built a lot of connections within my time at USC as well, so the weapons and the locations and everything like that, a lot of it I got for free or next to nothing, which was a huge help in being able to pull this thing off.

I had great help from people who chipped in their time, chipped in their energy, a lot of veterans that I knew within Hollywood that I had built a relationship with who knew me came out of the woodwork to make this film come alive. Jennifer Marshall, she's probably the most well-known actress in the film. She's been in *Stranger Things*. She's been in *Hawaii Five-0*. She has her own television show on CW called *Mysteries Decoded*.

It was a long and grueling process, but also a great process to collaborate with cast members who are veterans. I wanted to make this movie after I learned that a friend of mind had committed suicide around May 2018. I found out that he had hanged himself. It finally struck me that veteran suicide is a big problem. Essentially, I wanted to be able to convey to veterans, in their own language, how suicide is not the answer, no matter how depressed one is. Anybody can be susceptible to suicide.

**ABBOTT:** How does this concern come out in the film?

**MARTINEZ:** The lead character, Tuason, is the highest-ranking member in the platoon, the first sergeant. Even he can be susceptible to depression. That's what I wanted to show.

You're not weak for showing guilt.

A lot of this movie has to do with my own experiences. Some of the characters reflect my own perception about how the military really functions. Too many times we hear things that are not helpful to soldiers. I think there can be some change within the military to help people.

In my opinion, it's definitely against human nature to kill one another and see one another killed, and it can cause quite a lot of damage psychologically and spiritually to people.

That's the thing a lot of people don't see, too, especially from the outside, is that the experience is not all sobs and horrors. It's also very exhilarating and addicting. I virtually don't know any veteran who wouldn't go back overseas. I honestly don't think I know one. Every veteran I talk to, if you asked them today, "If you could put your gear on and you could go back to a war zone, would you do it?" I would guarantee you 75%, if not more, would say that they want to.

Once that feeling is in your blood, once that level of excitement is in your blood, it's impossible to top. Risky behavior, driving a fast car—that's why you see a lot of veterans on motorcycles, because that's the closest they can get to the type of thrill that makes them feel alive.

There's absolutely a psychological effect that combat has on people. Whether it's addicting or thrill-seeking, or whether it's a combination cocktail of all of those things, there is that element that you see in *The Gatekeeper*.

For me, I think there are a lot of similarities in the cultures of religious ideology and military ideology. There's loyalty. There's the idea of seeing each other in the afterlife. There's the idea of a higher purpose, of renouncing the individual self for the group.

That's what I wanted to show in *The Gatekeeper* as well. The whole scene, to Tuason, is about him believing that he's going to see his friend in the afterlife. This is something that is absolutely real in the military.

**LA:** Sanchez, Tuason's best friend, does appear as a ghost. What exactly does the title refer to?

**JM:** The title refers to multiple things, but the main thing is the gate between heaven and hell. That's what Sanchez' character in the afterlife is supposed to portray. It also has a dual meaning because the main character is somebody that essentially keeps the enemy at the gates as well. That's the big question: Who is really the gatekeeper? It is Tuason or is it Sanchez?

I also wanted to make this film connecting to people that believed in theism or people that were non-theist. That was very important to me. I wanted it to be connected on both sides. There's a huge religious element to the film, even in the beginning, when he says, "You're gonna send these guys to the afterlife." It's very strong in the narrative.

What I wanted to convey with this is that Tuason's belief system is, in my opinion, religious. The United States is still a Christian religious country.

**LA:** What were you after at the end of the film?

**JM:** At the very end, did he go to hell, or was it a hell he felt psychologically? You can perceive it in both ways. We all share this one thing that's on our minds more than others: the thought of death and the thought of going back into the earth, if there is life after death, and all of these other types of constructs. The life-after-death construct is definitely heavy—and has always been heavy—within the warrior mentality, because there's just so much of it within that culture.

I definitely had a very deep philosophical angle that I wanted to show. The main thing is that a lot of veterans are suffering and they are not only feeling guilt, but there is also the ideology of honor that is in the military ideology.

I think honor's great. It's great that people have the Medal of Honor. And the ideas and concepts of honor are good in a lot of ways. But I also think, in other ways, when we start to really look at it, it can have negative effects. How do you define honor? Can honor be fully achieved? What is the effect of lost honor?

I don't think people in the very strongholds of Hollywood care, to be honest with you. I don't think they really care about the veterans' suffering. I think they believe that the wars are evil. I think that this is a huge, how do I say, misfortune. It's a huge misfortune for all of us, because we're not getting movies like *The Gatekeeper* that can ask more questions. I want the audience to ask questions. I don't want to tell you what exactly it means. I want you to find a deeper meaning to it.

For me, my deeper meaning is: When we tell somebody they need to aspire to a sense of honor, and then you take it all away from them overnight, all these ideas of being a soldier, with the Tuason character, he didn't feel like he had achieved that honor, and that's where the guilt comes in, where he felt like he wanted to go back to combat, because he wanted more of this experience. This can absolutely crush and destroy people.

**LA:** The ending of the film is ambiguous. Tuason goes to the hospital and talks to Sanchez. You use some special visual effects.

**JM:** Not to give away any of this, but what I was trying to say with that—the veins, the choking—is it really does feel like we cannot communicate with the rest of the world. The pain he was feeling throughout the film suffocated him. That is much

more common and much more real: the war within the self.

Tuason joins the firefight to save his troops, which is definitely an honorable thing to do, but he makes the decision to not retreat and essentially go for revenge, for the satisfaction of killing the enemy and completing the mission. It doesn't work out. More of his men are lost because of his decision. He loses everything, including his own mental health.

You can't talk to the military about PTSD or you will be yanked from your command. All sort of repercussions would happen if you had any psychological disruption, especially during that period in Iraq of the '03-'05 era.

The military has definitely gotten better at this, but Tuason felt that he couldn't to talk to anyone within the military or within his family. He's being psychologically choked. He can't breathe at that moment because he's being pulled back into hell as well. So, there's a supernatural element combined with the element of his being suffocated, in so much pain, with this depression, this guilt, not being able to connect with anyone. It's a dual feeling that I was portraying there.

And then, with him at the very end, I wanted to add some suspense if he was going to kill himself or not. I wanted people to see what it is like to be in that suicidal state so they don't get to that state. I want veterans to feel what it would actually be like to be in that state—you're probably not immediately going to die in any certain circumstance. I don't care if you jump off a roof. You're probably still going to be conscious for some period of time, according to scientific data.

Even if you shoot yourself in the head, you're probably going to feel that pain of not being able to go back, the real regret. Who knows what goes on at that point? We don't know what kind of ideas and dreams you have before you leave this

world. I wanted to show that Tuason felt the pain, he saw the pain, of leaving his wife and have her shatter to pieces. She'll never be the same person again after her husband's death.

**LA:** When she's in the hospital bed, giving birth to the child she always wanted, the image of her is in black and white and her face is distorted.

**JM:** She's distorted. That's what the underlying message is that she's a shell of what she could've been and he gets to see the baby girl. He gets to feel the real pain of his ultimate decision, which is irreversible, of killing himself. That's what I want veterans to see.

And not just veterans. I wanted to connect with everyone. Even though this film is centered toward the veteran, I think a lot of people can understand the suicidal impulse. It doesn't matter if you were a first sergeant in the Army. That doesn't matter. What matters is that we all feel trauma. We all feel pain. We all sometimes feel like quitting, especially right now, with this coronavirus situation. There's a lot of depression, I'm sure, going on. The real tragedy is to give up and to give in. Taking your life is something that will affect all of those people around you in many different dimensions.

I wanted to be able to send that message to the big screen, because we're just seeing too much of this happening in our society. It's really an epidemic, maybe a pandemic, but there are is a shocking number of veterans who are committing suicide. I've seen it happen too many times. We've see the data.

**LA:** What were your influences growing up, filmmakers or otherwise?

**JM:** I'm a huge fan of *Scarface*. When I was eight years old, in 1998, I saw *Scarface* for the first time, and that's when I knew I wanted to become a filmmaker. There was something about

that film that made so much sense to me. It was just such a beautifully directed film.

Obviously, it was a little beyond my time. I was very young and the movie was probably ten years old at that point, or whatever, at least. But I just connected with it in such a way, and I kept watching it and watching it and watching it. It's a three-hour movie. I just fell in love with the artistic side of that film.

*The Matrix* was also a favorite film of mine from my era. There's a sleekness to *The Matrix* that I tried to emulate—being in another world, different dimensions. That's kind of what you see in *The Gatekeeper*. I tried to combine that sleek and slickness as much as I could.

**LA:** *The Gatekeeper's* structure is certainly non-linear.

**JM:** Exactly. The whole movie is really jumping between timelines. That's something I picked up from *Inception*. It's not my favorite movie by any means, but I do appreciate the non-linear “what's real, what's not real” element. I liked the concepts it was trying to master, and I borrowed a lot of those things, as much as I could, to put into *The Gatekeeper*.

Every film borrows ideas from others. We all know this. It's just what happens. There's a lot I borrowed from *What Dreams May Come*. You could arguably say *The Gatekeeper* is *What Dreams May Come* meets *American Sniper*. That's really what it is.

There's this whole ideal in the military “sweat more, bleed less.” But death can come to anyone in the military. Under bad leadership, everyone can be vulnerable to death.

But you are also vulnerable under good leadership. It could be an unfortunate event. It's really your perspective. Death is random. It's the luck of the draw. It doesn't matter sometimes how skilled you are. It can matter, but it's multitudes of things. We all like to think—and we are all trained in the

military to believe—that it's not luck, that it's really how well-trained you are.

I think we have to talk about these tough things in order to really bring change. We can't have them taboo forever. We've been so under the spell of "Oh, yeah, you can never talk about politics. You can never talk about religion. You can never talk about veteran experience, because they're all sacred."

I don't buy into that. I think when we don't talk about those issues, it leads to this toxic cocktail of isolation. Veterans in the Vietnam War and the current wars, too, have been forced to kill children. We see a little bit of this in *American Sniper*. People are using children as soldiers, and that really can screw up the psyche of a soldier, being forced, essentially, to kill children. That's just one example—women, children, innocents.

So, if we don't talk about it, if we're barred from talking about it and we're being forced to live within this illusion, that has repercussions and can damage veterans.

**LA:** Have you shown the film to other veterans? Any feedback from them?

**JM:** I have. I did a screening, an educational screening, in downtown Los Angeles, where USC is. I showed it to a bunch of veterans. We had a huge amount of people come. It was the first actual screening of the film. I had people cry. I had a woman whose husband was a Vietnam veteran, and she said there was so much of that film that she, as a wife, could connect to. So, that was really powerful for me to see her so emotional from this film.

I've shown it to other veterans as well. They have been very emotional after seeing the film, knowing that I tried to show the truth in the way that veterans think, and that veterans within our communities are essentially silent when they kill themselves.

Honestly, I don't think I've had a veteran who hasn't understood the film at some level. Combat veterans love the film. They totally get it—Army, Marine Corps. It doesn't matter what era, because the movie is showing what the ideals of military service are.

But the film is not just for vets. I wanted to be able to connect with civilians. I think they are emotional through it, in a sense, and they can see how war can have negative impacts overall on people's mental health. Suicide is not just a veterans' issue.

I would love to be able to get this in front of people in Washington. I've been working toward that as well. But if I can get tapped in to Washington, I think there could be some great ideas in being able to work together and promote content that is more accurate to mental health issues.

**LA:** You've said, "I want to make a difference and start a conversation. I think *The Gatekeeper* can save veteran and civilian lives."

**JM:** That's the overall goal of the film. You could call it a deterrent. Sure. But we use deterrents in society all the time. We have police deterrents. You can't go to the beach right now in LA. You get a \$100 ticket.

So, deterrents aren't necessarily a bad thing. They can be used for good, especially when society needs to be pushed back in the right direction.

You take somebody who's had an enormous amount of power, enormous amount of respect and responsibility, and then they get out of that world. Maybe they hated aspects of it and maybe they loved aspects of it, but now there's nothing. We couldn't really get into it within the film. There just wasn't enough time. But that element of nihilism, that's what I firmly believe is the number one killer. I think what a lot of veterans go through is a sense of needing direction and

purpose.

I want to stop them from killing themselves and make other narratives that are better. It's a huge thing for me to be able to hire veterans. I hire a lot of veterans with my own money. I don't live in a mansion over here in LA. I live in a very small apartment. But I paid a lot of veterans to be able to come out, help me out, and make a film that, overall, is essentially a deterrent—specifically for veterans, but it could also be for everyone in these dark times.

**LA:** You see that theme of the difficulty of returning to the civilian world in a lot of the films and the novels and the stories. In *War*, Sebastian Junger mentions Brendan O'Byrne, who comes back to society and nothing is life and death anymore, whereas, in war, an untied bootlace could mean your death. You come back to the civilian world and nothing has that import anymore.

Tim O'Brien writes about a buddy of his, Bowker, who comes back from Vietnam but can't fit in anywhere. He drives around and around in circles all day, before finally killing himself.

You see this in Hemingway's story "Soldiers Home." Krebs comes back and he can't fit into the family anymore. He can't fit into society. Religion fails him. At the end of the story, he just leaves; he can't bear being back home again.

Anyway, your film is notable for using 3D motion capture and digital storyboarding. How important was that to you?

**JM:** I'll put it this way: there were not enough hours in the day to finish the film without that previsualization, because it's so important from a production angle.

It is a storyboard on steroids. Using that technology would've probably cost me \$30,000 in Hollywood, at least. But, because I used USC's technology and the information that I learned from being a student there, I was able to plan every single

shot of my movie. We shot all the Iraq war scenes in one day. That was an incredible amount of footage to be able to capture in one day. Everything was planned because I had that previsualization.

A lot of the process of movie-making—even George Lucas talks about it—is to keep it in the parameters that you have, the resources, the time, the ability. I was able to mobilize all the various components—and you know what the beauty of it is?

My experience in the military is all about planning. It's all about preparation and then execution.

So, because of my background, I was able to have that discipline and plan the film out as much as I possible could. I think *The Gatekeeper* looks a lot closer to a Hollywood film than a lot of student projects because of that reason, because of my background. My military training helped out a lot.

**LA:** You have multiple settings. There is a cemetery, the interiors, a hospital, battle scenes, a rifle range.

**JM:** The VA actually allowed me to film at the West LA National Cemetery. I filmed the range out in the middle of the desert. I actually built that range with my bare hands and help from my command sergeant major and a couple other Marines.

The film was impossible to do without the veteran community. When we all come together, when we all have a common goal, and when we all know that this problem is eating away at our society, we can accomplish great things. That's what I want to do.

**LA:** You co-wrote the movie. Could you talk a little bit about your co-writer?

**JM:** Connie Siu was the co-writer. I wanted to have a civilian help me make it more understandable, and she was great in helping out with the female character. In the early stages of the scriptwriting process, there wasn't enough substance for

the Krissy character. I wanted to have a strong woman, because you need a strong woman for a strong man like Russell.

I didn't want to screw that up, because women, especially in the military films, are not really represented that well. I didn't want to be branded that way. But, at the same time, women are not in the infantry, so you've got to have a realistic story. I just had to toe a line in being able to convey that wives have a huge role to play, during and after deployment. After he's done with the military, he's got to have, hopefully, a family to develop and look forward to. The same could hold true for a woman in the military with a civilian husband.

I wanted to have a woman on the team in the writing stage that could really help out with not only me asking her, "Does this make sense to you as a civilian?" so I don't go too far into the military jargon. She also helped with getting things done as well as a producer.

**LA:** How much did you create or work on the musical score?

**JM:** I wish you could see it in theaters because that's really where you can hear the score to its fullest. It kills me to have to show it to people online, but you've gotta do what you've gotta do. The score was a huge part. I was very connected to the score. I probably had about five sessions with the composer, and those sessions probably lasted about three to four hours, on average.

It was a live score. We recorded it live with many musicians and opera singers. It was an amazing experience. It was probably one of the greatest experiences I've ever had to have an actual score on the film.

Mateus de Castro Machado Freire graduated from USC last year. I knew of his work. His music is like—you listen to it and you automatically think of Steven Spielberg's films.

I reached out to him. He's from Brazil and was living there at the time. After he saw the rough cut of the film, he said he would fly up to California and make the score, and that's exactly what he did. He flew from Brazil, came to California, and just slaved away at the score. You've got to understand that there are a lot of deadlines. There are a lot of time constraints. I loved what he did. We worked very hard on the score. I will probably work with him in the future for the right project.

I think my favorite part of the score is the war scene. That's the longest song. It's about four or five minutes long. He's just a master at transitioning the tone of a film. That's really important. It switches tone from thriller to war to almost like horror in one moment. He did a spectacular job. He was a composer in Brazil before he went to USC. He was a violinist for many years. He's just a true artist, a great friend.

**LA:** To wrap up, the film touches on many issues, such as the returning veteran and the transition to civilian life, the military mindset, the aftereffects of war. What are your concerns beyond the film?

**JM:** I think many returning vets feel a loss of purpose. I think art can restore purpose. Chris Loverro, who plays the main character, Tuason, is a huge advocate for acting as a therapeutic method for veterans. If he can get veterans into showing their emotions again, I think it is freakin' phenomenal. For so many years, you're being told no emotions, kill without emotion, operate like a machine, be a machine, lean like a Marine machine—all of this propaganda that you are just a cog in a machine.

That works well for the military environment, but when you get out, your emotions being gone can lead to extreme mental damage. When you're fearful of using your emotions, never use them, and to be like a savage—which is kind of the culture of

the military, I would say—I think there should not be a ceremony but maybe an exit—maybe more focus on that, focus on, “Hey, these things that we taught you in the military may not help you in the civilian world.”

We can't talk about women in society in the same way that you do in the military. The military is a fraternity. You can't treat people in civilian society the way you do in the military. It just doesn't work. You would be chained up. You can't treat other people like machines. That's what you did as a sergeant in the Army or Marine Corps. You're copying like Mr. Smith in *The Matrix*. You're making more mini-clones of yourself.

That mentality is hard to come out of when you've been so impressionable to it. I joined when I was 17 years old. I was a paratrooper by my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday. What I'm saying is that it can help you in many ways and it can really damage you in a lot of ways. It's taken a while in order to overcome the negative things that I learned within the military.

I didn't really have a father. I grew up pretty much with a very distant father, you could say. The military was more of an impressionable father figure than my own father. The things that they taught me were not good in a lot of ways. They were good for being in the military, but they weren't good for being a civilian in other ways.

Leadership? Yeah, okay, that's good. So, anyway, what my point is at the end of this is that maybe the military can adjust. Maybe they can—whether it's at the exit of your time in service or maybe they just adjust the culture, just in general, to be in a way that is less—I guess you could say trusted, especially to the youth, the people that are the youngest.

If you're an officer and you join the military, you're probably 22 or 23, because you have to go to college first.

So, in that time, you're able to develop your own philosophy. You're able to have more life experiences. And you may not be totally susceptible to an onslaught of demeaning, horrible treatment and ideology, because you're a lieutenant. You're kind of above all of that.

I'm a big supporter of the military, but I also believe in change. I think that there's change that has come, and I think there could be more change that will be able to come.

Military rape is a huge problem—huge, a huge. How are you going to be comfortable sending your daughter into the military when you hear that rape is so prevalent, especially in certain branches? We've got to change the military culture.

That's a whole other conversation, but the actress, Jennifer, is very open about being raped in the military. That's horrible. People shouldn't have to go through that. How can you be raped by another Marine, soldier, sailor?

You can't do the things that you did in the service that were celebrated. Society, especially in liberal society, will make you a total outsider, a total outcast, and you'll suffer.

With that, the wars have drawn down. We're not getting a huge influx all at once of people that have just come straight out of the battlefield. I think if we improve these things we can have less suicide. We can have a better military force. We're always going to need a military force. There's no way around that.

The other ideology of the liberal doctrine, in my philosophy, thinks that we don't need a military. The military is belittled and people think that vets are a bunch of wackos and killers. That's not the way to think about that, either.

Hopefully there can be a middle ground, a neutral position, that can understand that we need the military but at the same time see veterans in a more positive, welcoming light.

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# **An Interview with Brooke King, author of WAR FLOWER: MY LIFE AFTER IRAQ**

The background of the cover is a painting. It features a central flower with petals in shades of yellow, green, and blue. Inside the flower, there is a dark, stylized skull. The flower is set against a vibrant red background. In the upper left corner, there are dark, brush-like strokes. The entire painting is enclosed within a thin red border.

# WARFLOWER

MY LIFE AFTER IRAQ

BROOKE KING

**Andria Williams:** Brooke, thanks so much for taking the time to chat with Wrath-Bearing Tree. We are all excited to feature an excerpt from your debut memoir, [War Flower: My Life After Iraq](#). In a starred review, Kirkus called it “an absolutely compelling war memoir marked by the author’s incredible strength of character and vulnerability.”

**How long was this book in the making? How does it feel to finally have it out in the world?**

**Brooke King:** It is a bit nerve-wracking to have it out in the world, but then I remember that it took me four years to get it there, and even longer to try and write the book. I struggled with what people would think of me and what I have been through in my life, and then it dawned on me. The 19-year-old girl I was then doing all those things is not the same person that I am today, and so I gave myself permission, in a sense, to just let the criticism slide away. Yes, there are going to be people that judge what I did or shame me for falling in love with an officer when I was a married woman, but to me, that girl no longer exists. A mother of three no, I don’t even know who that girl is anymore because I am so far removed from who she was and to me, that is what makes it okay to have this book out in the world for all to read.

**AW:** I have to ask, because my kids (especially my 11-year-old son) are magnetically drawn to the book’s cover: what’s the significance of Boba Fett? Is that your tattoo?

**BK:** So, it’s funny you should ask. The Fett tattoo is mine. It’s located on the inside of my left forearm. I originally got it because I wanted to get a tattoo that symbolized my nickname, “War Flower.” And because I am a writer and symbolism is everything, the meaning behind it is kind of cool, but also very nerdy. Boba Fett is a bounty hunter from the Star Wars lore. And here is where my nerd shows through.... He ultimately was a war byproduct of his father Jango Fett who was a general for the Clone Army during the Clone Wars. The

symbolism behind it is that during his hardships of growing up, he turned away from the traditions of the Mandalorians and chose to follow his own path, and so having him blooming out of a flower seemed to be a perfect metaphor for *War Flower*. The design staff over at University Nebraska Press asked for what my interpretation of *War Flower* was and I mentioned that I had it tattooed on me. I sent them over the image of my tattoo along with the meaning behind it and they loved it so much, they decided to use it.

**AW:** I'm a fan of the Fetts, so I think that's pretty cool. (I have even dressed as a Mandalorian, but that's another story.) Anyway, I love your tattoo, and it makes a perfect cover.

So, the book's synopsis begins, "Brooke King has been asked over and over what it's like to be a woman in combat." I found an intriguing hint of an answer to that in the line, "Here is where a girl is made into a woman and then slowly into a man." What does that mean, exactly?

**BK:** It means that there is a time in every female soldier's service where she is forced to grow up. But for me, as a female soldier who saw a lot of things that normally I wouldn't have, I was forced to grow up, but then thrown into a situation that normally is reserved for a male soldier sort of forced me to become emotionally and mentally like a male soldier. In a sense, I was forced into survival mode by adapting to what male soldiers would normally go through in the harsh condition of combat.

**AW:** And yet, even though many women have served in combat over the last decade and more, you share an anecdote about being driven by your grandfather to the local VA upon your return home and encountering not one, but two VA employees who meet your explanation of combat trauma with disbelief and even

hostility: "A man comes in, asks me to follow him to the TBI and spinal injury ward. He points to the men inside the room, tells me to think long and hard about lying about combat before I tell him anything more."

First of all, what an asshole. But also: How is it possible that such a disconnect can exist, not only between female veterans and the civilian public, but even between women vets and the civilian professionals meant to serve them?

BK: I think it stems from the concern that women are supposed to be the bearers of life, so to think that a woman can be hurt in the same way as a man at war, it makes people uneasy. However, I think the disconnect about female veterans comes from lack of knowledge. Civilians just didn't know to what extent women were involved in OIF and OEF, and because of that, they have a hard time believing when a woman comes in for help with combat PTSD or combat related injuries. In order for this stigma or misconception to diminish, the government and female veterans really do need to speak up and account for that missing link of information. I know that personally speaking up has helped thousands of other women because I was one of the first women to go through combat PTSD treatment from OIF. I went through a lot of trial and error for years until I was able to find a regimen that worked for me.

AW: *War Flower* alternates between sections of traditional first-person memoir, and brief chapters of creative nonfiction in which you imagine your way into the minds of other people—a teenage Iraqi girl, a tormented young boy—and even (as in "Dog Tags") inanimate objects. How and when did the structure of the book become clear to you? Did it begin as a more traditional memoir, or did you always know that you wanted it to be more of a kaleidoscopic view of war and homecoming?

BK: I began writing the book several years ago and it wasn't until I ran into a part of the memoir where I couldn't remember all the details correctly enough that I began to

imagine what it would be like to be that person. I am referring to the section "Ghosts" where I imagine what it would be like to be an Iraqi girl on the other side of the war. After I wrote this section, I realized that memories are a jumbled mess of information recollected over time, and someone with combat PTSD has memories that are distorted by their trauma, so when I went back to rethink the structure, I decided that the structure should mimic my memories; fragmented, disjointed, and at times kaleidoscopic.

**AW:** Your wartime experience appears to have given you an empathy with veterans of former wars, and particularly for Vietnam veterans. In the chapter "Legacy," you very sensitively craft a sort of plural voice of Vietnam vets: "I am nothing, they would say. I am the fault of my government, my father. I am plagued with nothing but lies. I did what I was told."

This tone seems matched by one of your early observations about your time in Iraq: "We didn't know the names of the streets or which roads led to nowhere. When shit hit the fan, sometimes we didn't know which direction to fire the bullets...In the end the only thing we knew for certain was that we were all soldiers stuck in the same godforsaken country until the military let us leave or we died, whichever came first."

**Do you think there is a particular understanding between veterans of Vietnam and the GWoT?**

**BK:** I think there is a sort of "oneism" that comes from being a combat veteran. There is a silent understanding that even though your war was somewhere different, you can still share that bond of knowing they went through hell as well. So you adopt with it this perspective of empathy towards other combat

veterans of foreign wars. You know their struggle because you are silently struggle with the same issue. Though by no means was the homecoming I received the same as the Vietnam veterans, but it is that quiet understanding amongst us that to suffer and see war changes you into someone else, that there is a slow coming back process that each veteran must take. Some get there sooner than others and some never find their way back to the person they were before war.

**AW:** You mention reading Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* while in Iraq. I'd love to hear more about your reading (and listening!) life during your military service—boot camp, wartime—because it seems that this kind of inner world is so linked to a person's state of mind at difficult or transformational moments. (Did you listen to the Grateful Dead in Iraq, for example, or did that just bring back too many memories of your dad?)

**BK:** When I was deployed I listen all sorts of music. On days when I needed to unburden my soul a bit, I would turn on the Grateful Dead and listen to Jerry's guitar in "Stella Blue" crying out to me, allowing me to feel the emotions that I needed in order to get through another day. Other days, I would stare at a blank page in my notebook unable to write a single line. Halfway through my deployment, I stopped reading and writing all together. I stopped listening to the Grateful Dead and listened more to heavy metal like Cradle of Filth and Dark Funeral. Some of soldiers around me listened to Slipknot. Sometimes I went days without anything but the sound of mortar rounds exploding and helicopters flying overhead, soldiers laughing and arguing in the smoke area, and sometimes, I just listened to the wrench I was holding while I laid underneath a truck ratcheting a bolt down. The sounds of war and of home coagulate if you let them, so I made it a point to never let the two intermingle for too long because I become either homesick or pissed off that I was still stuck in Iraq.

**AW:** Metal! Were you a fan before you went to Iraq, or did you

**start listening to it there?**

**BK:** I listened to Pantera and Slayer, and I think I even listened Iron Maiden, but I really didn't listen to it too much before. I was a punk rock kid growing up so I listened more to the Ramones, Rancid, Anti-flag, and Bouncing Souls, that sort of stuff. It wasn't until the guys in the PSD team put on Slipknot and Cradle of Filth that I began to listen to more mainstream metal. And even then, it was only because one day I was smoking a cigarette and I began to really pay attention to the lyrics and was honestly blown away by how poetic Corey Taylor's lyrics were, and it sort of resonated within my soul how I was feeling at the time and gave me some sort of tragically fucked-up sense of peace to know someone else had a dissonance within themselves they were wrestling with, in a way listening to it made it feel as though there weren't two different women inside of me trying to tear my body in half so that they could both be free. I felt that the war for me was a constant struggle between who I wanted to be as a human being and the person I had to be in order to survive, and for me, music sort of helped calm the tearing apart of my soul.

**AW:** Well, I think that's a really powerful explanation of what music does best.

**Is there anything you left out of the book that you wish, in retrospect, that you'd included?**

**BK:** I think every writer wishes they had put something in the book that they forgot, but for me, I struggled with whether or not to include more about my late ex-husband. He passed away right after I signed my contract and though he was happy that the book was getting published, I wish I had incorporated more about our marriage, more about how he was the one to save me in Iraq from not only the war, but from myself. He truly was a wonderful man and I wish I had incorporated more of that in there. The next book, however, does pick up where this one

left off, so maybe there is time to redeem myself.

**AW: I was very sorry to hear of your loss. For what it's worth, I think the book paints him in a positive light—as a mostly helpful, concerned person for whom life was not particularly easy.**

**What were the hardest and most effortless parts of the book to write?**

You always want to say that the easiest parts of the book are the ones where you talk about your family, but for me, the easiest part to write in the book were the wartime sections. Because I had gone through so much therapy and introspective at myself and war, it became very easy to write it down. To me, the hardest part was writing about my family. I really didn't want to write about my upbringing. It wasn't something I wanted to put in the book simply because I couldn't dedicate enough space to the matter that it needed, and so I ended up summarizing those parts and it really pained me to do that in particular because I knew I would be leaving huge sections of my life out that needed to be discussed fully. I also feel bad about it because I shed some of my family members in a very negative light, much to their dismay, and I have gotten flack for it by them, but in my defense, I did tell them that the next book was going to discuss more of family and less of war. It also was extremely hard to dissect my marriage that at the time I was writing the book was in steady decline. How was I supposed to write about falling in love with my husband when I knew he was somewhere else with another woman? But I found another reason as to why to tell that love story; my twin boys, who the book is dedicated to. I wanted them to know who their father was when I met him and even more so now that he has passed, so I wrote everything down as though we were still in love and tried to remember those memories instead.

**AW: In the Sierra Nevada MFA program, you were able to work with writers who were not just talented at their craft but are**

**also combat veterans. What did this mean for you in developing confidence as a writer? Do you think your MFA experience would have been different if it had not included other veteran-writers?**

**BK:** Being in the SNC MFA wasn't just about being surrounded by combat veteran writers, it was about being surrounded by talented writers. I found that I was more so inspired to tell my story from the non-veteran writers than I was the faculty that were veterans. Of course, it helped that I had other vets cheering me on in my journey as a writer, but writers like Patricia Smith reading "Siblings." Gah! It gives me goosebumps just thinking about it now. Colum McCann. Rick Moody. Writers, truly amazing writers inspire and light a fire underneath your ass, and I think the director bringing those writers is what really helped me become the writer I am.

**AW:** I love hearing that. I had a similar feeling when I went into my MFA program, too—that I was finally joining a creative culture that I felt I'd been seeing from the outside for a long time. And we can all use a creative fire lit under our asses, I suspect. What projects are you working on next?

I have started writing my new book, nonfiction of course. It really does pick up where "War Flower" left off, and traces the roots of my childhood while raising my children, the ups and downs of my marriage to James, my struggle with PTSD, and the death of James which damn near almost broke me. To say that this second book is going to be a hard one to write is an understatement, but I think will be almost like an emotional enema, and will really be interesting for readers who are struggling with PTSD, or the loss of a veteran to suicide, or even being a parent struggling to raise your kids. What made "War Flower" so unique was that I was a woman with combat PTSD, but having PTSD while trying to raise kids is a whole other beast that I really didn't tackle full on in "War Flower" so the next book is really going to explore transgenerational trauma and female veteran related issues

that surround combat PTSD.

AW: Can't wait to read it. Thanks so much for talking with me, and sharing your work with Wrath-Bearing Tree.

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## **New Nonfiction from Brooke King: "Ghosts" and "The Only Stars I've Seen"**

### **Ghosts**

The young Iraqi girl stared back at me, her face covered over in black; only her eyes shown out from under the cloth. For years the girl I saw in the marketplace haunted me. I used to wonder what she saw. We were almost the same height, and though I had armor and a weapon, she stood there across the street from me staring at me as though she couldn't decide if I was a friend she'd once known long ago when she was child. We did not speak to one another, but I often wondered what I would have said to her, what she would have said to me. She stood beside her mother, who was waiting for water and aid from one of the soldiers who was handing out supplies from an LMTV truck bed. The girl's hands were clasped onto one another, her gaze direct. Her abaya and hijab covered her figure and her hair, only leaving the eyes for me to see. They were restraints from her religion, but they did not seem to bother her. She had lived that way as long as she could remember. She watched her mother carry out the same routine in the morning before she ever left the house: this is how you wrap the hijab around the head to cover the hair, she would say, pin it here underneath the throat and wrap the rest up and over the head. As a girl, she practiced it every day. Now

a young adult, the girl had a hijab that was perfect, wrapped tightly and neatly around her head, the black shielding her from me. Her eyes peered at mine, locked in an understanding that this was her home, her street, the marketplace where her father sold spices, and though I was only there to make sure she received water and medical aid, I felt as though I were an intruder. I smiled at her, and it was then that she looked at my rifle. Two days from now the marketplace will be a pile of trash, rubble, and bodies. She will be dead. Her mother will cry out for her, not knowing in the chaos where she is, and the next time I look at her in the eyes, there will be no life in them. But I did not know that now. Right now, she stared back at me, as if to acknowledge that we were both trapped, that at some point one or both of us will die, and that for a short while we must continue living, if only to come to the understanding that the world consists of people waiting to die.



## The Only Stars I've Seen

The Paladin tanks of First Cavalry, Eight-Second Field Artillery, had been firing shell rounds for an hour, creating a low-lying fog around the base from the barrel smoke of their guns. Their constant firing echoed like thunder and the flash bangs from their turret barrels reflected off the smoke like lightning. The war-generated storm that had engulfed our base reflecting the mirage of a foreign battleground from history's past. Atop the back wall of our base, our brigade colors flew true in the slight wind that had picked up. It had made the battle sounds of firing guns less persistent, as the artillery unit battled not only the wind but the incoming barrage of mortar rounds that were starting to land inside our concrete barrier-lined base.

It had been a few months since my near-death experience with the mortar round, but I still couldn't sleep; the residual pain in my healing shin and the noise outside kept me awake. I'd climbed to the top of my tin-roofed hooch, and as darkness fell I sat there thinking about what every soldier far from any familiarity would think about—home. I thought back to Kyle and the last night I spent in his pickup, his hand trying to find a space on my leg—how he finally settled on my knee, firmly holding it with his sweaty palm. I remembered wishing that he had found a place for his hand closer than my knee. I thought back about what I could've said in the silence of that cab or what I could've done, but I knew only a good fuck and an "I love you" would have made him wait for me. I looked out beyond the concrete walls lined with razor-edged concertina wire and realized how stupid I'd been to leave home and come to this hellhole. All I wanted now was Kyle's loaded "I love you's" and the warmth of his suggestive hand on my knee.

The outgoing fire had ceased. The smoke from the barrels was too thick, making vision nearly impossible. From my perch, sitting in the rusted lawn chair I had acquired earlier from the smart-mouthed medic who lived behind me, I watched as the

smoke slowly rose into the air. I'd been trying to fall asleep when the outgoing fire started, but I now found myself looking up at the night sky, waiting for the outgoing guns to start up again. It was the only sound of war I looked forward to.

Whenever the cannon cockers of Eighty-Second Field Artillery began outgoing fire, it was tradition for Tina and me to watch the outgoing shells. The artillery unit had missions only when the sky was completely clear. Normally it was covered with smog, sandstorms, or clouds. Tina and I missed the clear skies of our homes in California—dark nights full of twinkling stars and crisp, cool night air that could suck the breath out of you if you didn't wear enough layers. Of course it was dangerous to be outside because of the return fire, but we braved it. It was the closest we could get to seeing the night sky, a taste of home. I had gotten the bright idea one night to sit on top of the roof of our hooch while incoming mortar rounds were whistling into the perimeter of the base, but it only took one time for Tina and me to be sent scrambling from incoming mortar fire for her to say that she was never going up there again. But those nights were few in number. Most times I sat for hours by myself on the roof looking up at the stars. When Tina joined me, I'd sit down on the stoop with her, swapping funny stories or talking about our families, and sometimes we just sat without saying anything, just looking up at the clear night sky, listening to the incoming and outgoing fire.

Tonight Tina had been called into company headquarters for the first shift of radio duty, and so I was left alone to watch the night sky by myself. The military field chair I had acquired from outside of First Sergeant Hawk's hooch stood beside me empty, as I sat in the white plastic chair I stole from a Charlie Company medic for mouthing off to me in the showers the night before. The smoke was beginning to lift, but I guess not fast enough for the Eight-Second's gun bunnies because they began to shoot flares up into the night sky,

staining it with red streaks of bright light. The flares' light gave away my position, and Sergeant Lippert, who happened to be passing by, looked up and found me sitting on the roof.

"King," he shouted up, "just what the fuck do you think you're doing?"

The sound of his hard voice shouting up to me made me jump. Soldiers were not allowed on their roofs because of safety issues, something Tina and I ignored at least once a week. We had managed thus far not to get caught.

"Hey," I said, clearing my throat, trying to come up with a bullshit explanation that he knew was going to be a lie. "I just wanted to get a look at the action that's going on by the back gate."

He glared at me in disbelief. Normally soldiers didn't intentionally put themselves in harm's way, but that didn't matter much to me anymore. He kept staring up at me. I knew he was contemplating whether or not my excuse for being on the roof warranted his attention. A couple of seconds had gone by before he looked like he'd come to the conclusion that I was up to no good.

He yelled at me and pointed to the ground, "Get the fuck down from there. It's one in the morning. You don't need to see anything but the back of your eyelids."

I leaned forward in my seat and peered down at him. "Not to be a smart-ass or anything," I said, as I gestured down at him, "but you're not exactly slamming back zzz either."

I was still sitting in my seat atop the roof when Sergeant Lippert stomped closer, with a heaviness to his stride like he was putting out a fire with each step. He didn't look pissed off, but his stiff and quick gait suggested he was none too thrilled at my remark. In a few seconds he was next to my

front door and I was stuck on the roof, cornered. For a couple of seconds he disappeared and then reappeared again.

"Hey, King, how the hell did you get up there?"

I leaned out of my chair, cringing as if he was already within arm's length of me with his hand stretched out trying to snatch me up. "You're not going kick my ass or anything, are you?"

"No, now tell me how you got up there or I am going to kick your ass."

For a split second I contemplated whether or not he was bluffing about kicking my ass, but looking down ten feet at him next to my front door, I realized that either way I was fucked. I sighed and said, "All you do is scale the side of the concrete bunker by sticking your feet in the metal rings on the sides. Then when you're on top of the bunker, swing a leg up onto the roof."

He started up, his combat boots slipping on the bunker wall. "It's easy, once you get the hang of it," I said, as I watched him struggle up the side. He looked like a dog trying to scale a chain-link fence to get to a cat. It took him three tries before he finally got to the bunker roof, and next thing I knew he was sitting next to me in First Sergeant Hawk's chair.

"This chair looks familiar."

"Really?" I said, looking away from Sergeant Lippert, who was inspecting the chair. "It's Specialist Kennedy's."

Trying to shift Sergeant Lippert's attention from the familiarity of the first sergeant's lounge chair, I quickly changed the subject.

"So," I said with a nonchalant smile, "what brings you up here?"

"I wanted to see if your bullshit excuse about being able to see the action was true. But from what I can see, you have a pretty good view of the back gate."

"Yeah, well," I paused. "That bit about the artillery wasn't exactly true."

We both looked at the back wall; the gun bunnies had reloaded the guns and were getting into position inside the turret. The fog from the guns had started to lift and the night sky was visible again—the stars breaking through the haze in patches.

"I thought so," Sergeant Lippert said, as he shifted his weight in the chair to look at me. "So what the fuck are you really doing up here?"

"Don't laugh, okay?"

Private, tell me what the fuck's going on or I'm going drag you down from here," he said, pointing to the ground, "and smoke the shit out of you."

"Okay, okay." I took a deep breath. I knew he wasn't going to believe me, but telling him the truth was better than doing pushups until I couldn't feel my arms. "Specialist Kennedy and I come up here when the artillery is going off because it's the only time you can see the stars at night." I pointed up to the sky. "That's what we do up here."

As I spoke, he looked up, then back at me, and then back at the sky as if to study if I was fucking with him or not. For a minute I watched him, his head tilted back, quietly looking up.

"You know," he said, his voice dropping a little, "if you sit on the deck of my parents' house back in Austin, Texas, you can see a whole sea of stars. So many stars, you can't even begin to count them." He leaned back in the chair, arching his neck so he could get a better view. "I used to love sitting

out there on summer nights with my kids. I used to point out the constellations. The kids would point at other stars, trying to make them into different things.” He was smiling with his hands on his chest. “Jeanie, my youngest one, she loves horses. She’d swear up and down that Orion’s Belt was really a horse.” He laughed and glanced at me. “You couldn’t tell her anything,” he said, shaking his head, “stubborn, just like you.”

I looked over at him. He didn’t say anything for a minute but sat there quietly squinting up. I could tell he was thinking about the same thing Tina and I thought about when we came up on the roof to look at the stars—home. Though he was probably thinking about more memories of his wife and kids, I was thinking about my dad and where he lived now in Colorado. He always used to tell me about this lake, Turquoise Lake, where he would go camp out underneath the big Colorado sky. I wanted to be there now.

I turned and looked back up at the sky and said, “You know what’s great about the stars?”

“No, but I’m sure you’re going tell me,” he said, as a smirk cracked across his face.

“Constellations never move, only the earth does, so no matter where you are in the world, your loved ones are staring at the same sky as you are right now. It’s like looking up at a little piece of home.”

For a while, Sergeant Lippert sat there staring up at the sky. Then he looked at me and nodded before he got up from the rickety chair and started scaling back down to the ground. “You okay?” I asked, as I watched him move down the side of the bunker and then disappear out of sight.

Below me, the gravel shifted and rustled. I stuck my head out over the edge of the roof to make sure he’d made it down all right. After a moment he reappeared below, brushing off some

dirt from his ACU top. He shouted up to me, "King, don't fucking stay up there all night, you hear me?"

I smirked. "You got it, Sarge."

I watched him walk down the aisle of hooches. He'd just disappeared around the last hooch on the corner when I heard Tina call to me. I chuckled at Tina's skinny, gangly legs striding out of sync as she walked toward our hooch, flinging gravel behind her.

I called her name as she got closer to the door. She looked up. I smiled.

"No way in hell."

"C'mon, I got you a chair."

Slinging her M16 over her shoulder and scaling up the side of the bunker, she shouted, "We better not get in trouble for this!" I decided not to tell her about Sergeant Lippert or the fact that I had thrown her under the bus a little bit. As she made her way onto the roof of the bunker and then onto the roof of our hooch, I said, "You'll be fine."

"Where'd the chairs come from?"

Smiling coyly at her, I said, "You really want to know?"

With one eyebrow raised, Tina said, "Ah, something tells me no. I heard over the radio that the outgoing fire is going to start any minute now."

"Did you happen to grab any munchies?"

She plopped down in First Sergeant Hawk's chair, set her m16 next to her, opened both cargo pockets of her ACU pants, and pulled out two bags of Hot Cheetos. She handed me one of the bags.

"Thanks, battle."

"Anytime," Tina said, smiling.

Opening our bags of Cheetos, we leaned back in our chairs. We peered up at the clear night sky as we waited for the outgoing fire to start up again, both content to sit and gaze at the stars all night. Again my mind wandered home. I missed the routine sounds of familiarity, the slamming of the front door, Grandpa yelling, "Don't slam the door!" The low chuckle Nana used to make every time I purposely slammed it so I could hear Grandpa holler at me from wherever he was in the house. I missed Dad's loud music, the crackled sound of the stereo blaring Grateful Dead that echoed in the driveway like an amphitheater. I missed how Dad burst in the door every night, yelling with a crescendo in his greeting, "Hello!" I thought about the last time I'd called home just to hear their voices. I'd only gotten the answering machine, the sound of Nana's voice, "Hello, you've reached the Kings. We're not home right now, but if you leave a name, number, and a brief message, we'll get back to you as soon as possible. Thank you and have a beautiful day."

I closed my eyes, trying to see the faces I knew so well. But the memory was blurred. I clenched my teeth in anger. I needed home right now.

"Do you think it's too late to call the West Coast?"

Underneath her patrol cap, Tina was trying to figure out the time difference as though it were a calculus equation. Using a Cheeto and an invisible chalkboard, Tina leaned out of her chair, counting the hours with her Cheeto, trying to deduce the correct answer. Nodding her head in agreement at her calculations, she turned in her chair and said, "I think it's only five in the afternoon in California."

I lifted up my ACU sleeve and looked at my watch. It was one in the morning. Nana was always my first choice. Counting nine hours back from my time, I realized that it was only four in

the afternoon California time.

"Tina, you suck at counting."

"What?" she said, raising one hand in the air, a Cheeto caught in between her index finger and thumb.

"It's four in the afternoon, not five."

Throwing me a cocky look, Tina's green eyes stared at me, daring me to challenge her again. "No, Brooke, it's five."

"No, it's not," I said, shaking my head. "You count back nine hours from our time. It's one in the morning here, which means it's four in the afternoon in Cali."

With a furrowed brow, Tina threw a Cheeto at me. "Whatever."

It bounced off my forearm and onto the tin roof. "Waster," I said, leaning over and tossing it into my mouth.

I decided to give a phone call a shot, hoping to reach Nana. It was Thursday, which meant that she'd be home from her stint at Saint Therese's, where she sat in the chapel every Thursday for an hour to pray. As I pulled out my phone—a red Motorola Razor, the only perk of being stationed so close to the Green Zone in Baghdad—I contemplated what to tell Nana. I couldn't tell her that I was having a hard time being in Iraq and that I was seeing way more combat than I anticipated. You just didn't say those things to Nana. She was a gentle and sensitive Old Italian grandma who got what she called "worrying stomachaches." Ever since she'd had her bleeding ulcer two years back, I had tried not to worry her about my army stuff. She was having a hard enough time with the fact that I'd been deployed.

I dialed my home phone number, hoping that Nana would pick up. I let it ring twice but then closed the top of the cell phone and hung up. It felt wrong to call home, but I needed to hear her voice. Her gentle but frail voice always reassured me that

everything, no matter how bad, was going to be okay. I opened the phone back up and dialed again. I sat waiting, looking up at the stars, thinking of my bedroom back home. For my seventh birthday I had begged my dad to buy me a packet of plastic stars that I could stick on my ceiling. Grandpa had said no, but Dad ignored him and bought them anyway. The night of my birthday my dad woke me up at midnight to give me my gift: the ceiling above my head covered with stars and even a glow-in-the-dark full moon. He had snuck up to my room and put them up while I was sleeping. Of course Grandpa was mad, but by the time I was in high school I had bought enough stars to cover the whole ceiling, so I had the constellations inside my bedroom. I looked up at the night sky and thought of my room with all the twinkling stars plastered to my blue ceiling as I sat there waiting for someone to pick up the phone at home, but it rang four times before going straight to the answering machine. Nana's voice—a resonating crackled sound that echoed through the receiver I held to my ear. Tears welled in the corner of my eyes. From the other end I listened to the background noise of the greeting—the living room TV turned on, the sound of someone shuffling past in the kitchen, the distant sound of Molly, my Alaskan malamute, barking at the back door. As the greeting came to an end, Nana's voice grew louder as she said to have a beautiful day. The usual cadence of silence passed before I was prompted by the answering machine beep to leave my message. In a shaky crackled voice I said, "Hi, Nana. I couldn't sleep and just wanted to hear the sound of a familiar voice. I guess you're still at the church, probably praying for me not to die here. I guess I'll call tomorrow or something. I, ah . . ." I tried to rush the rest of my message before I totally lost it. "I miss you and love you. Talk to you later, bye."



I slapped the phone shut and shoved it back into my pocket. I was a total wreck. I threw my hands over my face and bent forward, resting my head on my knees.

Looking up from her bag of chips, Tina asked, "You okay?" I turned my head toward Tina, wiped my tears onto my uniform, and said, "Ah, no. I think I successfully just left the worst message a granddaughter, who is at war, could've left on the family answering machine."

Leaned back in the chair with her legs crossed, Tina canted her head toward me, raised her eyebrows, and nodded her head in agreement as she said, "Yeah, that was pretty bad."

Chuckling, I wiped snot from the back of my hand onto my black pt shorts and said, "Oh gee, thanks, Tina."

"Eat a Cheeto." Tina handed me the one in her hand. "It'll make you feel better."

Shoving the Cheeto into my mouth, I let the hot flavor of the chip dissolve in my mouth, hoping that it would take away the longing for home that I felt, but it wasn't making my homesickness go away fast enough. I started shoving them in one after another until my mouth felt like I had just shoved ten habaneros inside of it, but I still didn't feel any better. I didn't feel anything but the need for the normality of home.

"Ease up on the Cheetos, Brooke." Tina put a hand on my arm, preventing me from putting another Cheeto in my mouth. "You're throwing those things back like some anorexic chick who hasn't eaten in days."

"Fuck you," I said, spattering half-chewed debris from my full mouth.

Tina just shook her head at me, eased her hand off my arm, pulled another chip from her bag, turned to me, raised one of her Cheetos in the air, and said, "To home."

I leaned over out of my chair, put my arm on her shoulder, raised a Cheeto, and with my mouth still stuffed full, I echoed her toast, "To home."

A loud booming sound rippled through the air like a shock wave. The outgoing fire had begun again, but it didn't bother me. I was thinking of my bedroom, of home.

*"Ghosts" and "The Only Stars I've Seen" have been excerpted from [War Flower: My Life After Iraq](#) by Brooke King ([Potomac Books](#) 2019).*

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# Fighting Like a Girl Means Not Being a Pussy: Mary Doyle Interviews Kelly Kennedy

It's never easy to voice suspicions that your boss is out to get you. No matter how you describe it, the accusation sounds crazy. By the time you're ready to put your instincts into words, you've already spent hours, days, weeks making the argument to yourself and telling yourself it's all in your head. It's not until you've fully convinced yourself it's true that you'll talk about it.

Lt. Col (Ret.) Kate Germano wrote a book about it.

Germano had come into her new job as commander of Fourth Battalion with a specific set of goals. She took seriously her role in leading the unit responsible for guiding every female recruit from civilian to Marine as they met the challenges of Marine Corps basic training. The goals she'd set for her command, like boxes on a check sheet, had tick marks from top to bottom, and yet, it took her a long time to realize that, despite her successes, her efforts were being undermined. Eventually, Germano knew without doubt that her aim to prove women Marines could train alongside male Marines was being challenged by Marine Corps leadership. The men working against her started from the very top. But unlike most of us Germano had proof that her bosses wanted to see her fail.

She maps out that proof in her new book, *Fight Like A Girl*, (Prometheus Books, 2018) in a calm, methodical, and well documented way.

Helping her make that argument is her co-author, Kelly Kennedy. Kennedy, an Army veteran and journalist, uses her research skills and a logical progression to map out an argument so convincing the two authors bravely name names. The

names include those of Germano's former boss, Colonel Daniel Haas and even the then, Marine Corps Commandant and now Joint Chiefs Chairman, GEN Joseph Dunford.

In 2010, when the book I co-authored with Shoshana Johnson (*I'm Still Standing*, Touchstone, 2010) was released, I remember feeling such relief that the book was well received and that my work on Shoshana's story had helped make people aware of what she'd gone through. I was anxious to speak to Kelly Kennedy about her work as a co-author on Germano's project and what it meant to be a part of telling this story that was so important, and yet, not her own.

**Mary Doyle:** I understand your agents introduced you and Kate Germano in hopes that you would work together on this project. Why do you think they thought the two of you might be a good fit? Had you ever worked on a co-authored project like this before? And how long did the project take?

**Kelly Kennedy:** Well, at first, I didn't. I had heard bits of Kate's story, and I was a bit worried that the military had it right—that she was abusive. But the more I dug in, and the more I talked with her, the more I felt not only that I trusted her (she backed up her story with plenty of documentation), but that I needed to help her tell it. Because we're both veterans, I was able to ask her some questions based on my own experiences, which sparked at least one chapter. But I was also able to tell her about my experiences as a civilian, which informed part of the story. This was my first time as a co-author. We worked on the project about 1.5 years.



Kate Germano (left) is interviewed by her co-author, Kelly Kennedy, during an event at Politics and Prose at The Wharf, April 10, 2018. Photo by Mary Doyle.

**MD:** Part of the reason I agreed to work with Shoshana Johnson on her book was because I thought her story was, not only compelling, but an important story to tell. Germano's story couldn't be more important in terms of women in the military and proof positive that the decks are stacked against them. Did the importance of this story weigh on you at all? Did the weight impede or inspire?

**KK:** It was tough to hear her tell it, and it was tough for her to tell it. She often calls me her "therapist," which is something we hear a lot as writers. Part of recovering from a traumatic event is the telling of it until the words don't hurt as much, and it develops an overall meaning, rather than just a feeling of pain. But as the #metoo movement hit, and as

we see more and more women prove themselves in infantry training, and even as we talked about women in endurance racing or crossfit or the tech world, we understood how important it was to say this is an issue that effects all of us, and that, as women, we really need to feel like we have each other's backs—that it should no longer feel heroic to say, “You okay? I got you. Here's how to...”

**MD: How did you develop your work method and what did that look like? Was there ever a time when you had to stop and iron out issues? Or were you in sync the whole time? Did you have any influence in how the story was told?**

**KK:** We started by meeting up for interviews. I would type in all of my notes, and come up with more questions, and then we would meet again. Kate speaks in story—she's clear and to-the-point, so that part wasn't terribly difficult. The harder part, I think, was getting the more emotional details out of her. Okay, that hurt, but what did you do? What about it hurt you? Where were you?

Generally, we were oddly in sync. When I sent over the proposal with the first three chapters, I think she was relieved. She has said, in reading the book, that she was terrified, but that she laughed and cried and got angry and loved it. But part of that is because she's so good. The third chapter—the one about her background—didn't quite feel right to me. I liked parts of it, but I didn't like all of it. I sent it to her and said, “I'm not feeling this.” And she added and reorganized and sent back something we both liked a lot. So it was collaborative and fun and so much work.

We had written the story about the investigation as basically a long slog of the things that had been said about Kate. Our editor said, “You know. I think you lose Kate's voice here. This is her story.” So we regrouped on that and focused more on her reaction—that a lot of it was just nonsense, like hugging one person but not hugging someone else, or the

captain who was angry when Kate yelled at her for not doing her job so she walked out of her office. These are not things that are normal in any other version of the military, so we concentrated on that.

And yeah, I set up the outline, and Kate liked it. I would write up a section based on something we had specifically talked about or something generally important, like the background of women in the Marine Corps, and then send it as a word document. She would add or not and send it back. But she saw everything at least twice before we sent it to the publisher.

**MD: One of the most impressive things about the telling of this story is the bravery Kate demonstrates in being open about how personally devastating the entire experience was for her. She often says she could have taken her own life. Did you ever fear that the retelling would have a dangerous impact on her? Shoshana suffered from terrible depression and getting her to read pages always made me feel as if I was forcing her to relive things she didn't want to recall. It made me feel guilty, as if I were forcing her to bleed for others' entertainment.**

**KK:** My whole career has been about traumatic stories—from being an education reporter covering the first kids-with-guns stories to a cops reporter to a war reporter. Fortunately, I was chosen as an Ochberg Fellow after the series came out that led to “They Fought for Each Other,” because not only was I traumatized by the events that inspired it, but I was doing some incredibly intense interviews for the book. One guy talked for eight hours and said he hadn’t told any of those stories before. The Dart Center, which sponsors the fellowships, teaches journalists not only how to handle their own trauma, but how not to retraumatize someone. I have to say, I’ve never had anyone refuse to tell me a story, and I think they trust that I’ll listen, and that’s huge. We’re so often shut down: You’ve already said that. I can’t hear this.

But you're okay now, right? And I trust that the people I interview will be helped in the telling, and that the written story will lead to them being better able to tell it again—to invite people in. I hated seeing Kate cry, but I knew she needed to.



Kate Germano (left) is interviewed by her co-author, Kelly Kennedy, during an event at Politics and Prose at The Wharf, April 10, 2018. Photo by Mary Doyle.

**MD:** When I co-authored Shoshana's book, the "with" co-authored inclusion was negotiated from the beginning. Would you have accepted the job if you hadn't had co-author credit? Kate can obviously write since she has published in the NYT and other places. Did you worry that her ability to write would make life more difficult or less?

**KK:** I had no idea. Kate fought from the beginning to make sure

I got credit—she's huge on that, in general, and she's been amazing about including me in the publicity afterward, which is fun. I think I just had no idea how it would work, but I did wonder what she'd think of those first chapters. I felt good about them, and they felt like her to me, if that makes sense, and it ended up being okay. After working with her for this much time, and seeing her so devastated as she told parts, some of the accusations against her blow me away. The idea that she could be cruel or unstable? Didn't see it, and I was watching.

**MD: Kate makes some very bold statements and charges throughout the book, every one of which she backs up with detailed facts and a logical argument to support them. Did you have influence in how the arguments were presented? Did you know all along that you would need to include the citations and notes at the end? I was surprised at first to see the citations in the text but understand why you used them. It's further proof that her arguments are absolutely sound. Here's just one excerpt among many that is an example of her supporting arguments:**

*We also had women break their hips. Male leadership assumed it was because of a physiological limitation, rather than a combination of a lack of fitness, their poorly fitted packs, and recruits running during the hikes rather than taking short, choppy steps.*

*Just like everything else at boot camp, hikes were part head game, part physical fitness. A lack of mental preparedness could make five miles seem like a marathon. But some of it was due to a lack of attention by the drill instructor staff. The hip-injury rate at Fourth Battalion had me wondering if I was training teenagers or octogenarians.*

*A lot of the problem had to do with how the women wore their packs. They wore their packs too far down, so the hip belts hit the wrong place. So, as they added weight, they hurt*

*themselves. As it turns out, at one time, our athletic trainer had conducted a class with the drill instructors to train them on how to fit the packs for the recruits. But she had given the class to the battalion the year prior, so the new Marines and recruits hadn't gotten the training. Broken hips were the result of a problem that could have been remedied with a simple solution. No one had shown the recruits how to adjust their packs properly.*

*Literally, adding insult to injury, the Marine Corps used that data –the hip injury rate–as justification for why women should be excluded from ground combat jobs.*

**KK:** Sure. She's very well-spoken and thoughtful, so I had much of the argument from the beginning. I did a lot of the research, but she constantly reads and thinks and writes, so she was sending me stuff, too. The fun one was Mona. She told me about Mona, [a section in the book about an alligator] and I kept thinking it over and thinking it over, and then it became this metaphor. So I wrote it up, and held my breath and hit send. And she was right there with me. Because she can be so black-and-white, I think part of my role was to help people understand how empathetic and funny she is, too.

**MD:** Since she was relieved of command, Kate started speaking out in the press about her position that female Marines need to train alongside their male counterparts for a long list of reasons. The way she has been treated since she began speaking out is further support for her arguments. Not only are her charges eye opening, she has never been afraid to name names and to boldly confront the issues. Did you ever caution her about the potential consequences? What is her attitude in terms of what consequences she expects?

**KK:** She understood from the beginning. Much of the time, I was trying to explain that she was going to end up helping people, and that it would all be okay in the end—that someday she

would be glad she was fired. I think she's just now starting to believe me. It's part of her make-up to be brave, so I can't imagine her backing away from anything.

**MD:** I found it interesting that you began most chapters with a letter of support Kate received shortly after she had been relieved. You also included one nastygram but she must have received many more. Some of the comments on *Marine Corps Times* are about what you'd expect. How did you and Kate prepare yourselves for the potential of negative comments once the book came out? You must have been deep into the writing when the *Marine Corps United* story broke. Did that impact the project at all?

**KK:** We talked about Marine Corps United a lot, but not as something to worry about—it was as something to fight. We've surrounded ourselves with tribe. We've worked hard and done our best. We've focused on the importance of what she had to say.

**MD:** There are a couple of places where Kate's husband, Joe Plenzler, adds his take on Kate's situation. Hearing his perspective is a major shift in the story telling but it adds an angle you wouldn't otherwise get since he worked at the pentagon and had direct connection to Marine Corps leadership. In fact, it is in one of Joe's portions that the main nugget of this book is revealed. Was this Kate's idea? Yours? Did you have to negotiate its inclusion at all? What did you hope his point of view would add? Here's an example of Joe's input:

*I served with the Commandant, General Dunford, when he was the Regimental Combat Team Five commander back in 2003, then as his speechwriter in Afghanistan in 2013 for three months, then again for the first five months of his commandancy. He too was no help.*

*It was pretty clear to me that General Dunford wanted to keep women out of the infantry at all costs. He was the only member*

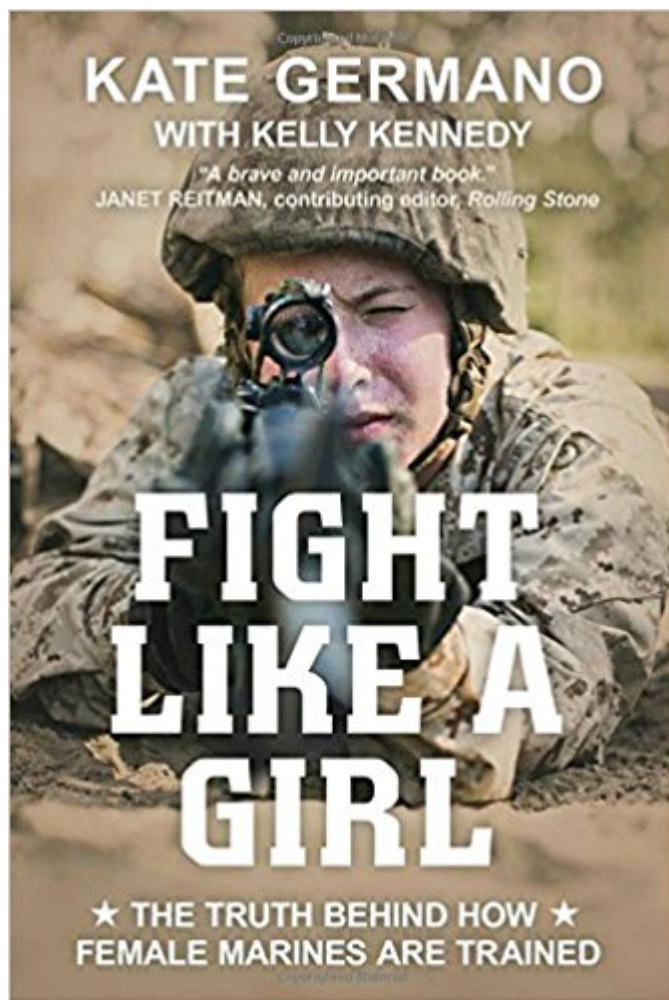
of the joint chiefs (senior leaders of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force and National Guard) to ask the secretary of defense for an exception to policy in September 2015 to keep women out of ground-combat arms jobs and units. That's one way of saying it. The other way is to say that he wanted to perpetuate the Marine Corps' policy of discriminating against women for some jobs based on their sex alone—regardless of whether or not they could meet the standards. His request made a lot of headlines because it placed him in direct opposition to his bosses, the Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus and Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, who were pushing for all jobs to be open to any person, male or female, who could meet the standards. Even more disappointing, when Dunford didn't get his way, he skipped the secretary of defense's press conference on December 3, 2015, announcing the policy change. It's practically a Pentagon tradition for both the secretary and his top general, the chairman of the joint chiefs, to attend together any press conferences announcing major policy changes.

In retrospect, it makes sense that the commandant would do nothing to ensure Kate's complaint about systemic gender bias was properly addressed. It's pretty evident that every advancement Kate made with her Marines at Fourth Battalion stripped away justifications for keeping women out of ground-combat arms jobs and eroded claims that women don't shoot as well, don't run as fast, and can't carry the same weight as their male counterparts.

*With every improvement to female performance, Kate was quashing critical elements of those arguments.*

**KK:** We didn't have to negotiate. I talked with Joe a couple of times to get some back story, and it started making sense to have him there. There would be no book without Joe because he

was at the Pentagon to hear all the background, so it was nice to get him in there as a primary source having heard those conversations. But they're also so different—Kate's type A, obviously, and Joe, while incredibly talented and aggressive, is much, much more laid-back. I think he helps people like Kate, which was important to me—that people see more of her personality. I mean, you kind of go into the book judging her. But I think Joe also helps us better understand how we should (or could) feel about her story, almost like he gives us permission to just be pissed.



**MD:** Kate's story is obviously an important one to tell. How do you feel about the role you played in ensuring that it has been told? Would you do this kind of project again? What advice would you give to others who are trying to tell their story in print?

**KK:** I'd definitely do it again. For whatever reason, I feel

like we were the perfect team for this project—just our joint experiences fell in well together. I loved that we were able to include civilian and enlisted women, and I think some of that was me. My role, I think, was making sure that the Kate piece—the who she is a person piece—didn't get lost in the facts piece.

**MD:** Just after Shoshana's book came out, I received emails and phone calls from people who wanted me to help them write their stories. I imagine you are already receiving queries like that. I did end up doing one other co-authored memoir and seriously considered another but that project never came through. What would be your criteria for doing this again? What considerations would go into the decision?

**KK:** Some of that will be up to my agent, who believes I need to be careful at this point about choosing something that will allow me not to have to work a full-time job while writing a book full-time. I'm so glad I worked with Kate, but it was a labor of love for both of us. But also, I would need to believe in the truth of the story. At one point, Donald Trump's biographer came out and basically said, "I wrote this book for the money, and it's not truthful," and Kate said, "Oh my god. I don't know what I'd do if you felt that way." My response: "I wouldn't. I would never knowingly falsely represent someone." That still stands. That happened a lot as a journalist, too: "I saw the story you wrote today. I want you to write a story about me." You have to have some news judgment. I'm also finishing up a novel, so I don't feel like I'm in a huge hurry to start something new.

**MD:** Has Kate had any interaction with Haas or BG Williams or even Dunford, since all of this kicked off? Have they expressed any regret? (I thought Dunford's position was indefensible when he testified on the hill. It's even more ridiculous after reading Kate's book!) Does she ever worry that one of them will show up at a book signing?

**KK:** She has not. There is no response. It wasn't their story, and honestly, they've already had their say. They released Kate's investigation within 24 hours of her firing in an attempt to spin the media coverage. The investigation is still available online. I don't think she worries about them showing up—and no. No one has offered any regrets.

**MD:** While they may not have come out and said it, it appears the Marines have taken many if not most of Kate's suggestions and put them into practice. One small example is removal of the chairs that formerly were placed behind the women's platoons in case one of them needed to sit down for fear of fainting. Has the Marine Corps leadership acknowledged the role Germano played in making those changes?

**KK:** Nope. But last month, they started pushing stories about how boot camp doesn't need to be integrated because they're doing such a mighty-fine job of integrating it now—and it looks as if they've made some changes. But it's still not integrated at the battalion level.

**MD:** Is there anything you wanted to add that you wished I'd asked?

**KK:** This has been an odd project for me because I've usually stayed so far from a story I'm covering—I'm a journalist. This story was much more intimate, and I'm sure I could have stood back, but so many of the things she writes about have also happened to me or around me, or I've reported on them over the years, and so the story was important to me. In addition, I like her. She's become a dear friend, and I'm proud of her.

**MD:** You have every reason to be proud, of her, and of this project. Thanks for taking the time to talk to me, Kelly! I think this co-author/big story relationship is so important and not one that is fully understood. I'm hoping your book, along with discussions about how these types of co-authored relationships come together, will help others understand that

there are ways their stories can be preserved even if they can't write them themselves.

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*Fight Like a Girl* (Prometheus Books, April 2018) can be purchased at your local independent bookstore, [online](#), or anywhere books are sold.