O-Dark-Thirty

A Literary Journal

Summer 2013
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The mask on the cover of this edition of *O-Dark-Thirty*
was created during an art therapy group at the
National Intrepid Center of Excellence (NICOE),
a Department of Defense research institute at
Walter Reed National Military Medical Center.
The mask was created by a Marine to symbolize
his "split sense of self": his happy, civilian side,
and an injured, military side that has been
affected by war and traumatic experiences.

Service members participate in art therapy,
music therapy, and therapeutic writing
during a four-week intensive out-patient program
designed to advance the treatment, research,
and education of traumatic brain injury
and psychological health concerns.

Veterans Writing Project staff members
created the curriculum and are the instructors
for the creative writing program at NICoE
as part of a program sponsored by the
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Editor's Note

Summer is always the time I think most often of family. I've never been crazy about holidays like Thanksgiving—nope, too much Hallmark-infused sentimentality surrounds turkey day. But summer on the other hand, has always held a kind of special reverence for me.

As a kid, I suppose I enjoyed the long summer break from school as much as anyone. But I most remember taking summer vacations up in the mountains with my family and sitting on the porch of my grandfather's house and listen to him tell stories. Some of those were about his service in France during World War I. Two of his sons told stories about being there during World War II. His third son, my dad, talked about the serving in Korean War and Vietnam. So summer and family and stories are all tangled up in the same knot of memories for me. Sometimes I wish I could sit on that porch again on a warm summer evening and share my stories with them, but it's too late for that now.

This is our summer edition. It's filled with stories about service and family and memory. Give it a read. Share it with friends and family. And don't miss the chance to share your own stories with your family. It's what summer's all about.

Ron Capps

Non-fiction.

Dispatch Calls

By Vance Voyles

The Vidalia onions are in bloom, so you might get the odd call from Dorothy who insists that someone is stealing her vegetables again. They were there yesterday, she'll tell you, flicking her wrist to bring you back on the one acre lot, her mobile home slanted on its rusted support beams, the smell of dirt, wet cat, and ammonia stagnant in your nose. Keep your ear on the radio and try not to get swept up in her imaginary world. She'll point to the water basin where she grows her garden and tell you how her next-door neighbor from fifteen years ago has it out for her. She doesn't remember he's dead, so it's unlikely that she'll remember you, five days from now, when she calls back about the missing celery. Make sure your radio is turned up. Answer dispatch when she unit checks.

Dorothy might start in on the bogeyman. She may peel back the sleeveless, crusty, t-shirt she's wearing to expose her breast, lifting the pancake of her seventy-year-old skin to show you where he was biting her while she slept. Ignore the crinkled black hair on her nipple. Just give her a card and tell her you'll check the area. She'll

thank you and ask if you know so-and-so from back in the day. Just smile or pretend to get another call on the radio; your presence is needed somewhere else. She'll make her way back to the grime of her life. Try not to stare at the bald spot on the top of her hairy calf muscle as she walks away. Ignore the slap-slap of galoshes on skin. Check your volume knob to make sure your radio is turned up.

Next, you might get called to the Circle K for a disorderly conduct, or a trespass after warning. If Jesse James is back out on bond, he'll be raising hell. Of course, he'll be gone when you get there, but his pregnant, homeless girlfriend will tell you that the store manager is a stupid fucking bitch and all they wanted was a lousy fucking beer. Let her rant awhile. You can try to explain how Jessie is trespassed from the store. How he can never come back. Realize that this might make her angry and fall into another tirade about the fucking police and how Jesse ain't never hurt nobody. You'll need to adjust your radio ear when she yells. You need to hear what is coming next. You need to answer dispatch when she unit checks.

Eventually, Jesse's girl will make her way back into the woods where a faded blue, two-man tent awaits her. Try not to shake your head at the life that her unborn child has ahead of it, and don't offer to help her find a home because her family gave up trying a long time ago. Besides, she'll run away. It's what she does. She's using meth. You'll see that. She'll smack her lips when she speaks to you and her face will be pockmarked from the acne of Muriatic Acid and rendered red phosphorus. God helps those who help themselves. She's putting her faith in Jesse. He'll take care of me, she'll say. If he's not back in jail by the end of the week. Check out on your computer for a directed patrol of the area. Write that you're looking for Jesse. Or go inside the Circle K and talk to the nice ladies that work there. Make yourself a barbecue sandwich and call the directed patrol out over the radio so your squad mates can hear

where you are. What you're doing. Answer dispatch when she unit checks.

On 5th Street, you have a frequent flyer. Teenage girl out of control. A runaway who cries kidnap and rape. Understand that this will happen. Listen carefully. Take statements. Believe. If policy demands it, call a detective. If he or she comes out, hand it off to them. If it's days old, handle it yourself. If she is lying, and you will know if she is lying by the gaps in her story, how she gauges her mother's reaction to each telling, and her clear, quick escape to victimhood after just being caught skipping school or shoplifting. With your ear to your radio, call her on the carpet. Or don't. Write it and send it. Whatever makes you feel comfortable. Some of you have a problem talking to kids. Get over this problem. This is ninety percentof your job. Listening. Talking back. Answering dispatch when she unit checks. Understanding which situations are truly criminal and which are just people desperate for someone to take their side in an argument. Problems ten years in the making, children nurtured on neglect, Hatfields and McCoys, resentment thriving wildly out of control will not be fixed in ten minutes by you. They call for support.They call for answers. They call to talk. Listening is mandatory. Believing is optional. Your greatest tools? Common sense and a bladed stance. You have discretion. Some people lie. Some people don't. Some people just want an ear to bend. And make sure you answer dispatch when she unit checks. Make sure you let them know where you are. That you are okay. Make sure you hear them too.

Finally, you might meet John. He'll be calling you about the threats he's been receiving. It will take you a couple of drive-bys to find his address since this is your first time. Call your zone partner if you get lost. The driveway is overgrown, much like the man. You'll need to drive slow. He'll be standing at the gate of a locked chain-link fence guarding a seemingly empty lot. But as you look

closer, you'll see the remnants of asphalt under the tangle of grass and weeds. You'll see the remnants of a man. And that closer look will only happen after you've been talking to John for a while. He is the main attraction on this street. He will tell you this. Nothing is more important than his problems. Nothing, besides answering dispatch when she unit checks.

"They were screaming again this morning. Woke me up at four in the God-damn-morning screaming."

Ask him who was screaming, but it will be hard for you to concentrate at this point. Try to ignore the loincloth towel pinned around his waist. Keep your eyes on his glare, glancing down only when the opportunity presents itself. The towel will be threadbare yet thick with dirt and almost molded to his skin.

"Those kids. Yelling Bum! Bum! Bum! How much of this do I have to take?"

Ask how old the kids are. Try to avoid staring at his receding hairline, which appears to be one large dreadlock of feces; a dirt helmet created from years of sleeping in filth. You will be amazed that the clump of hair doesn't knock up against the back of his neck as he turns to point to the bottles thrown onto his property by these hooligan youths.

"And I know my rights. If they come on my property, I can shoot 'em."

It's okay to wonder why anyone would want to live like this. Just nod your head. Agree with him. Answer dispatch when she unit checks.

"You could do that, sir. It is your right. But wouldn't it just be easier to ignore them? Stay back in your house?" You can say these things. You can try to reason.

And as much as you might want to, don't look for his house behind the brush of overgrown weeds and dense trees. Does it truly

exist? Is there some tent back there too? How long has he lived here? Is there power running to the property? Why haven't you met him before now? Why haven't you heard the stories of the hermit, hunched over, bare-chested, and wearing a dirt loincloth pinned precariously at his hipbone? Some tragic Tarzan. Questions don't help.

"I already got a card from some female deputies last week when the kids threw them bottles, but this has got to stop."

And how long did it take his beard and mustache to grow so that the only way you know he is speaking is the sound and the slight bump of hair moving on his face?

He will ask you what you plan to do about this. He will ask you to fix this problem of his own creation. He will ask you to listen. But your skin will be itching now. Resist the urge to scratch it. Any bugs you feel are probably imaginary. You can go back to the Circle K when you are done to wash your hands. He doesn't really want help. If he did, your skin wouldn't be crawling. Just give him another card while you back away, tilting your head towards your radio, and answering dispatch when she unit checks.

Vance Voyles spent the first part of his adult life in the U.S. Army as an Arabic linguist where he used his language skills translating in the Gulf War. He now works as a Sex Crimes detective in central Florida, and you can read about this life at http://waivingmiranda.com. He received his MFA in creative writing at the University of Central Florida and his work has been featured in Creative Nonfiction's *anthology—"True Crime: Real-life Stories of Grave-robbing, Identity Theft, Abduction, Addiction, Obsession, Murder, and More"—as well as* Burrow Press Review, Pithead Chapel, J Journal *and* Rattle Magazine.

Disconnecting

By Elisabeth Sherman

Robby introduced himself to me while I was refilling my cup at a party on the top floor my university's English literature building. When he approached me, I was standing alone, pumping the keg foolishly, trying to listen to snippets of conversation over the sound of some guy slamming away on his guitar. I narrowed my eyes at him. What could he possibly want? "I think I know you," he said. I rolled my eyes.

"We have class together," I answered. He nodded in the affirmative like he had been trying to remember something that was bothering him.

When I saw Robby for the first time at school, I didn't think too much of him. He was unshaven, wearing a tight t-shirt, his face relaxed in a way that conveyed a quiet arrogance. I was sitting at the other end of the table, in a corner seat, so that when he sat down, all I could see was his profile. He looked too young to be walking with his cane. The way he leaned all the way back in his chair during class discussion, watching everyone, but not I suspected listening to anyone, made him seem immature. That sort of apathetic careless-

ness, that self-importance with which he approached the classroom, made me want to kick the chair legs out from under him, cane or not. At the time, I was not in a charitable mood: The combination of a new university and living in New York City had made me impatient. I was consumed by anxieties over money, my social life, earning my degree—the list of problems that caused stress was constantly evolving.

For our second class, we read *Final Salute* by Jim Sheeler, which chronicled the experiences of an officer who announced the death of a service member to the dead person's family. The piece won the Pulitzer Prize but I hated it. I told the class about how I thought it was melodramatic, full of clichés, and insulting to the military and their families. A few minutes after my speech, we went around the room and introduced ourselves for the first time at the request of our professor, who had spent first class introducing himself. Robby and the man sitting next to me told us that they were both veterans. After our introductions, Robby and the other veteran, Matt, shared that they both agreed the piece in question was an enjoyable read, and if there were clichés, they didn't detract from the power of the story.

When Robby announced his status as a veteran of Afghanistan to the class, all the features of his face, all his arrogant mannerisms, changed meaning. He looked arrogant because he already knew all these stories—he hadn't read them, he had lived them. I looked at him again and noticed for the first time the broadness of his shoulders, the thickness of his arms and thighs, the sharp lines of his jaw, the fullness of his mouth. I wanted to run my hand along the back of his neck, where his black hair was shaved close to his head. His body became a vessel for his job—muscles gained at a great expense, posture born from the discipline of his profession. What I hated in him before was not, as it turned out,

a contrived measure of his ego, but the result of years of labor and dedication. After my teenage years watching soldiers on television news channels, I had formulated a list of fantasy characteristics to define soldiers that I found immensely attractive: They were loyal and disciplined, physically strong, and emotionally stoic. I had been waiting nearly ten years to speak to one as a peer in real life. I couldn't believe after our discussion in class, Robby was still curious enough about me to approach me socially.

"I was sitting over there ranting like an idiot, going on and on about how insulted *I* was, and you guys thought the story was great," I admitted to Robby at the party. "I really felt like such a piece of shit."

"It's alright. People have to remember that these things happen. It's not really all that cliché is it, after all? Because that was really that woman's experience with her husband's death," he answered, and I nodded my head, though I still didn't agree with his point.

"I wondered if you guys were more insulted by me," I said, taking a gulp of my beer. "I wanted to tell the class that my dad has PTSD, but then I felt like maybe I would have overstepped my boundaries. I didn't want either of you to think I wanted to try to talk about something I know very little about, at least in terms of my own experience."

Awkward silence followed this declaration of my family history. To fill the void—and probably to avoid talking about either my dad or PTSD any longer—Robby told me a story about sitting in a plane ready to take off on the tarmac. One of his sergeants told him that another soldier on board had just gotten a call from his girlfriend: She was pregnant. Robby thought to himself, "Well, what the fuck am I supposed to do?" One of his soldiers was 19 years old, and now he had a pregnant girlfriend. But they were on the plane

about to take off for Afghanistan. There wasn't much that Robby could do to comfort the kid.

Robby was 23 at the time, and that made me wonder what his rank would have been—lieutenant, I guessed. But I didn't know for sure, and didn't feel comfortable asking. It occurred to me that when that story took place, in 2003, I was 13-years-old sitting on my dad's couch, watching air strikes in night vision on CNN. I began to feel the weight of our age difference, and my lack of life experience, so I downed yet another beer, suggested that Robby meet us at the bar later, and walked away to join my friends who were dancing in the corner.

A couple hours later, I found Robby at the dark, crowded bar, leaning up against the emergency exit. I grabbed a stool and sat beside him. I couldn't read him. His body was angled away from mine, his hands stuffed in his pockets. As he rambled on about his family history from India to New York, my head began to feel hazy. I had been nursing the same beer for at least a half hour, swishing the watery alcohol around, watching the foam gather around the rim.

I wasn't too interested in what he wanted to discuss; my anxiety began to creep into our interaction—that he would never allow me to get a word in. He kept trying to get me to guess his ethnicity. What I was thinking about instead was the width of his torso: Could I reach my arms all the way around his midsection and touch my fingers together on the other side?

I tried to lie to myself while he talked, tried believe he was attractive. But I had to convince myself of this. I didn't know if he hadn't been in the military if I would still find him attractive.

When he paused in a long monologue about his Indian heritage, I took the opportunity to assert myself into the conversation.

"I want to ask you so many questions about the military," I

said. I wanted to know how much his gear weighed, what type of explosive gave him that limp, if he wore his glasses during combat, if he ever used his gun. There were other things, too, that I wanted to question him about—things that should be simple to explain but never could be: If the worry over the men under his command ever made him freeze up with terror at night; how much he missed kissing and being kissed; if he ever felt so scared that he wanted to die. Most of all, I wanted to know if he still believed everything he learned in his training—all the words that made me him proud but also ended up putting him in the hospital.

"But maybe here isn't the right place, or the right time," I said instead, taking a look around the room full of drunk people.

"I think you're right," Robby answered, making his own assessment of our peers. What did they call that? Re-con mission? Reconnaissance?

He went silent after that and I wondered if perhaps that time I had insulted him in a way I couldn't apologize for. Because what I wanted to know was a little sick—all the gory details of the life he couldn't escape. I couldn't wipe the excitement off my face, the wide smile at the prospect of learning more about the military life. I wondered if he knew that my excitement was not specific to him.

Instead of satisfying my curiosity, he told me that he had graduated from West Point. Not just a soldier, an officer. Robby didn't tell me his rank and I still couldn't bring myself to ask. But it didn't matter. What mattered was the pressure swelling up in my hips, pressing down on my knees, down to my toes. He kept talking but I wanted the noise to stop; I wanted to feel the weight of his palms pressed up against my stomach and shoulders, the twist of his legs around my calves and thighs, the heat of his breath on my neck or in my ear.

"Take my number," I told him, when he announced the time

for his departure. Robby picked up his cane and started doing the rounds, shaking hands with his friends and classmates. I spun around on my bar stool and stared at the inside of my glass.

My cab got all the way to 96th street before he texted me: "You want to come over?" There was already five dollars on the meter, so I told the driver to turn around and take me back to 119th.

The apartment door was unlocked when I got there. He was making his bed when I walked in. Robby helped me pull off my coat—I couldn't seem to get the stiff velvet to cooperate on my own, or maybe I just made it seem that way so that he'd touch me—and then we sat down on the couch.

We tried to talk but there wasn't much of a point in conversation. I turned my body to the side, so that my weight rested on my right hip, my legs tucked underneath me. Robby slid his hand over my jaw, behind my ear, wrapping his fingers around my neck. His kiss was very light; he concentrated on my top lip, his tongue hit my teeth and pulled away, not in a teasing way, but an anxious way.

I had arrived at a crossroads. We kept kissing and not kissing on the couch but while I ignored the slimy texture of his tongue trying to slide between my teeth, I fought with myself over whether or not to stop or to keep going, because more than anything, Robby was just his job to me. He was not Robby the Person, he was Robby the Soldier. That was clearly unfair, but I couldn't really avoid the longing to crawl inside the Soldier, not the Person, and I didn't try to avoid it, either. He could have been just as conflicted as me, wondering if I was using him to fulfill a fetish or just because I was bored and young, but if he felt any hesitation to continue, I couldn't sense it.

Instead, I continued to exploit his pain because I just want to kiss someone who was tortured, someone who needed to be fixed, some tough guy who kept getting called a hero but felt like a complete failure. But I wanted to do a soldier a favor, too—as though having sex with him would help him recover faster, help him take his mind off the ache of war for even just a short time.

Robby pulled away from me and took his shoes off to show me his foot injury. He had no toes on his left foot and the skin was pulled too tightly over the bone, like a piece of latex trying to cover a blunt piece of wood. He told me that he felt as though, just to be fair, he should show me before we went any further.

I half covered my lips with my hand and giggled. Then I looked at him at smiled. My chest heated up and the warmth spread to the tips of my fingers. He thought it might've scared me, but he was wrong.

He rolled up his sleeve and showed me the skin graft on his forearm. He ran a hand over the puckered skin. He grimaced out of embarrassment and I melted into him. My arms turned to wax around his shoulders, my hips slid into his lap. It wasn't just that I wanted to fix the damage; no, it was that I wanted more damage. I wanted to feel his hurt so I couldn't feel mine. No matter how agitated I felt about school, scared that I would be broke and in debt for the rest of my life, or how lonely I had become in the city, my problems were invisible specks on a vast array of pain compared to what Robby had endured. His suffering humbled me, and even in those few hours that we spent together, the trauma I imagined he withstood as a soldier put my meager complaints and fears into clear perspective. I thought I felt sad, but I didn't know true sadness. There's no better place to score the kind of pain to remind me to be thankful than from soldiers, the ultimate burned up creatures.

Robby told me he hadn't been with a girl for a while. Five years. I guessed he meant since he got out of the military, though I didn't push the investigation into his sex life further. But when we got in bed it became clear that he wasn't as out of practice as he claimed to be. When it came to the crucial moment, though, his concentration slipped away and we couldn't have sex. We tried twice but each time he rolled off me, defeated.

I was disappointed. Robby might have been disappointed, or embarrassed, or angry, but I couldn't tell in the darkness, and I flipped onto on my side after our second failed attempt, with my back to him not even trying to comfort or make him feel better.

After some moments, laying there in the dark, I wanted to tell him that I was thinking about those photos that always came up on my Facebook news feed: In one panel there was a photo of a Marine in his dress blues and in another panel was a photo of him after his tour, all burned up or with a leg missing. The caption read, "Like if you respect him," guilting you into feeling bad for the guy. And I did feel bad for him, because he lost a limb, or because he was disfigured, but not because he was a soldier. He had made a choice to join the military. I shouldn't be required to respect someone because he decided to put his life on the line for some abstract political concept, or because he needed money to pay for college, or because if he didn't join he'd end up in prison. I'd rather give ten minutes of my time to smile at him and tell him he's still beautiful despite his injuries; I'd rather kiss him and hold him and make him feel wanted again, make him feel that there is a way out. As I listened to the pattern of Robby's heavy breathing against my shoulder blades, I wanted to explain that I had heard veterans say that they feel as though they never left the jungle, or the desert, or the trenches. That they feel trapped in uniforms and patrols and guns that jam and wet socks. Soldiers get shut inside their agony,

and as we had talked at the bar, I convinced myself that if I opened a door for Robby, he could see a prettier world where soldiers can be men, too, capable of failure, awkward almost-sex, kisses that are maybe a little too wet. He didn't ask for my respect, and I didn't know him well enough to give it. I just wanted to let him rest, just let him catch up on a little lost time.

I wanted to tell him that I was thinking all this, but I just laid there, frozen in place like a statue—no heart, no brain, no blood. Just stone. He didn't need pity, but I did understand him—and that's all he needed, understanding about the skin graft and the cane and the folded up American flag on his bookshelf.

"I'm not going to be able to sleep tonight," he whispered beside me. But I'd already closed my eyes.

Elisabeth Sherman is a graduate student at Columbia University's School of the Arts, studying non-fiction writing. She is the daughter of an infantry veteran of the Vietnam War. Her work can be found on the website Tor and on the blog Not So Popular.

Fiction.

The Feral Ones

By Jason Markle

At dusk, the dogs come out. You watch them as they lurk in the shadows of the buildings and the eucalyptus trees, sniffing out their prey but reluctant to touch the light. At dusk the air is thick and humid and heavy, accentuating the putrid smells of blood and death and rot and spring. The corpses call to them with silent moans and fetid scent. It wakes them from their slumber and draws them from the hollowed nooks where they hide from the killing and the men. You watch the feral dogs as they feast. They intoxicate themselves on flesh, and yelp and howl with unfettered glee. And as the darkness wraps its cold cloak over the hills of Kigali you hope that it swallows you and you pray.

Private Campbell's trigger finger is itchy. He is poised in front of you leaning against the white stucco wall that surrounds the roof of the building that dominates the UN compound. The barrel of his rifle rests on the sandbags that fortify your position; his left hand is nestled under it for support, his right firmly grasps the handgrip. He stares intently down the iron sight of his weapon, scanning for targets, yearning for something to shoot, but there is no one. They are either dead or gone.

Earlier that day they had been there, on the streets, outside the gate. You were guarding the entrance, then, and watched the slaughter unfold. The killers had ceased taking precautions days ago.They knew that you were unable to stop them. They knew that youwere scared. Ten of your comrades were killed on the first day, mutilated for protecting the killers' Prime Minister, a woman who also fell by their hand. Since then you were told to stand down; forced to watch.

Earlier, at the gate, you had watched them drag a man by a rope. They pulled him down the street while his bloodied hands grasped at his neck in search of relief. You watched others kick him as they pulled. A young boy, only about ten, walked up to the man and threw a stone at his face. Only a week ago that boy would've been playing football, right here in this street, but now he is one of them, intoxicated by the blood, caught up in the death.

They brought the man within twenty meters of your position. They tormented him with blows and danced about him kicking and shouting like the native war dances of their tribe. The killers taunted you as well, pointing and smiling, aiming their guns and brandishing their bloodied machetes. You wanted to request permission to fire, but you knew it would not be granted.

The leader of the group wore an orange headband and frayed stonewash jeans. His eyes were wide and white and he bore his teeth to you like a wild dog ready to attack. This man, the leader, walked up to his victim and pulled him up by the rope. The man had no energy now, his arms dangled at his side and his eyes looked up to God. The act was very quick, the shock of the violence so strong that for a moment you questioned if it truly happened, but for years you will lie awake at night and remember. You will remember how the leader held his machete high above his head. You will remember how the movement was lightning quick, but graceful as he brought

it down. You will remember how the blade hacked deep into the victim's skull, the grotesque thud like a butcher knife chopping into a side of meat, or an axe biting into the trunk of a waterlogged tree. And you will remember those eyes that had looked up for protection and prayed for grace, now separated and cold by the blade of his assassin.

You are thankful that you are not sleeping tonight, but you are afraid of the dark. Private Campbell is still next to you searching; he has been that way for almost an hour. He keeps muttering to himself. We've all gone mad. When the radio crackles to life, Campbell goes silent and slightly twists his head. The radio demands a status report, and you slowly pick up the receiver. As you recite the information, Campbell comes to your side. He tugs at your arm and asks if we can fire. At first you wave him away and try to pull out of his grasp, but the young soldier is persistent and you know he makes a good point. Once again you ask permission to engage, hoping that the situation has changed, but the radio crackles a negative and silence reigns again.

For a moment you both just stand there, eyes fixed on the radio. It is Campbell who says something first. He laughs and shouts. The whole bloody world is coming to an end and we have to take it up the bum. He kicks the radio and smashes the butt of his weapon into a sandbag. God damn this place. God damn these rules. God damn. God damn. God damn.

At 0200 the dogs are at it again. In the street they are fighting. Their snarls and barks echo off the buildings and resonate in our ears. The dead man is still in the street and many others line the sidewalks. That afternoon, after the man had been killed, the Rwandan Army came through. They rolled up in five ton trucks and you hoped that they would clear the bodies for good. You are sick of the smell, the rotting stench of death, and weary of the sight,

which is a horror that will last the rest of your life. They didn't take them away, though, they just removed them from the road and laid them in a line, dress-right-dress along the walkway. They were rough with the bodies—they were merely obstacles in the way—and you watched in disgust as they dragged them along without care or consideration or respect for the dead. On the bodies they threw the severed limbs and decapitated heads, remnants of the slaughter, trophies that the butchers cast aside. And then, as quickly as they came, they left, and only the man was there to rot in the street.

Private Campbell can't stop moving. He is standing by the radio, muttering curses to a beat that he has created with his tapping feet. You try to ignore him. You hum to tune out his noise. You watch through the lens of your starlight scope and see the world beyond the gate bathed in shades of green. But Campbell talks about the dogs and you see them moving among the bodies. Those dogs. Those damn dogs. Campbell stomps his feet faster now. We've got to stop those God damn dogs. You turn your head and watch him, but you don't release your weapon. Campbell has the radio receiver to his mouth, but the mic isn't keyed. Still, he speaks into it, singing his little chant. Those dogs. Those God damn fucking dogs.

The worst thing you have seen during this whole God-awful mess was on the day after the killing had begun. Your platoon was sent to a school, a Western one operated by a Catholic priest and his dutiful nuns. The mission was simple, gather the Westerners and get them to the UN compound so that they may be extracted out of the country. The mission was simple and it made sense, but the moment you got there you knew it would be complicated.

The grounds of the school were flooded with people, refugees looking for protection, hoping to find a Savior. When you arrived

they came up to you, thanking you, kissing your hands, bowing before you. It was a shame that your presence was a lie. Your officer made quick work of it all, the whites were loaded without much of a fuss, while the refugees stood silent both shocked and confused. When the wheels of the trucks began to turn, the killers had come into sight. The people fled after you, trampling each other in an attempt to flee, but the trucks kept on moving and you couldn't help but feel like Judas as the executioners began to have their way with them.

As you drove through the chaotic city streets, you watched carnage unfold. Women were raped in the daylight, their bodies mutilated and discarded when the killers were finished. Children were not spared either, their little limbs severed from their bodies, their heads smashed in with rifle butts. The world has gone to hell and you cannot stop it. The world has gone to hell and you along with it.

You are sharing a smoke with Private Campbell when you hear the dogs again. It had been about a half hour since you heard them last and Campbell had finally calmed down. When you hear the barks and howls you chuck the cigarette and grab your weapon. A dog is feeding off the man in the street. You can see it clearly through your scope as it rips the flesh from his abdomen.Your partner is antsy again. He is tapping his trigger finger on the magazine. You think he is crying. Just one shot. That's all he asks for. We've got to kill something, right?

We've got to kill something. The words echo in your head. You imagine your sight moving from man to man as you pick off those who massacred the refugees. You imagine your sight on the rapist and watch as the bullet drops him to the ground. You imagine your sight on the baby killer and hope to murder his soul. And you imagine your sight on the man that taunted you; the man that so callously

murdered because he knew you couldn't stop him. He knew you were too weak. You imagine being the Savior, but you know you are only the Betrayer.

The dog is seated now and chewing on his arm. You level your rifle and take aim. When you pull the trigger you do not hear the crackle of the round as it exits the barrel. You do not hear the yelp of the dog. You do not hear the excited shout of Private Campbell. There is nothing but silence and darkness and death.

Jason Markle is a former US Army paratrooper who served during the 1990's. He is an avid reader of war literature and enjoys writing fiction. Jason currently resides in Michigan's Upper Peninsula and is writing his first novel.

Cooper's Long Flight Home

By Paul Van Dyke

Sergeant Sam Cooper awoke from his catnap to a flight attendant's instructions for final descent. A moment of panic was followed by a slow smile as he realized where he was. His dreams always seemed to take a month or two to catch up to his surrounding, so he expected to continue dreaming of Iraq a while longer.

His hand instinctively reached for his rifle. He felt naked without his trusted M4 with in arm's reach; naked and incomplete, like he had a phantom limb. His thoughts jumped to Williams. Sam wondered how he was coping with his prosthetic.

Rubbing his forearm just to remind himself it was still there, his thoughts drifted to another place and time. *If only I would have spotted that pressure plate, Williams might still have his right arm below the elbow . . . and Perez might still have his life.*

He didn't know how long he spent lost in that moment when his world turned to fire. Time was irrelevant in that dark corner of his mind, that theater where a moment could play for an eternity and years could melt away in the beat of a heart.

His reverie was broken from a flight attendant as she made her rounds to check seatbelts. Her nameplate read Victoria, and she appeared delicate in every way the desert was not. Her unblemished ivory skin was contrasted sharply by the ocean blue eyes, tresses of black hair fell halfway down her back; she smelled of tropical fruit body wash.

He tried to return the warmth of her smile, but was fairly certain what he offered was closer to an entitled smirk normally reserved for a strip club patron.

It wasn't a level playing field. Everyone else on the plane had enjoyed the benefit of countless interactions with the opposite sex over the past year, while he had only the boy's club of the infantry and a wall covered in Maxim pin-ups for company. On the rare occasion that he did see a female on his FOB, body armor, a rifle, and a layer of grime and dust made her look more like a grunt who walked sexy. In the presence of Victoria, Sam feared he was out of his depth.

If he gave off a creepy vibe, she gave no indication of noticing. The uniform seemed to act as a suit of armor when it came to social awkwardness. He thought of the email address he received from the gift store girl in Leipzig; *maybe I'm not such a hopeless case after all.*

He was in an aisle seat, but he peered over the laps of the middle aged couple from Rochester seated next to him to see segmented plots of farmland give way to the suburbs. It was still a shock to see green on the ground; such a sharp contrast to the sand to which he'd grown accustomed.

Everything seemed so much more vivid since he boarded the 767 in Kuwait City and left the Middle East with all its screwed-up problems behind. Nothing struck him more than the taste of real food. He never thought an airport Big Mac could be so delicious.

His stomach tensed as the elevation changed and he threw

in a stick of gum and started chewing. Between the hundreds of bombs and the sharp report of thousands of bullets fired, his ears had taken quite the punishment. He had no interest in adding a pop to the ever-present ringing.

As he flew over the city, Sam wished it were a few hours later. After a year away, an eighteen-hour flight, and nine time zones crossed, the glowing lights of the Twin Ciies skyline would have been a perfect final sight of his journey. He was excited to see the Mall of America as the plane neared the airport, but it was a paltry consolation prize.

When the tires rumbled as the plane bounced on first contact with the tarmac, a part of Sam wanted to raise his fist and shout a victory cry. "I'm home, I'm alive, I made it!" But he didn't. The cabin was filled with people just going from point A to point B who had no reason to be so overjoyed with the flight's landing.

Sam also wouldn't have felt right celebrating when half of his team either came home to Walter Reed or in a box draped in red, white, and blue. All he wanted was a quiet ending to this whole ordeal, and even though he knew that would never truly be possible, he could at least enjoy a peaceful conclusion of this flight.

The wait for the seatbelt light felt eternal. His palms were lathered in sweat; his heart pounded in his temples; he had forgotten to breathe. He wondered how many people were waiting for him in the terminal. He knew his brother, Nick, would be there. He was always there for his little brother, Sammy, in his own way. The Cooper boys would be drowning in booze tonight. *Just like I never left.*

He knew his uncle Donnie would be waiting, too. Donnie fought in Vietnam, and that was about all he ever said about that. Aunt Kate said he had a real hard time after the war, like he never fully came home.

He wished his parents were here to see this day. He knew they would have been proud, and he hoped with all his heart they were watching him from a better place. Their little boy was coming home. It seemed it was only a few months ago he felt certain they were in a better place, but he'd seen enough senseless death to make him doubt.

When the light turned off, Sam disengaged the seatbelt with the speed of an Old West gunslinger. After another compulsory reach for his rifle, he retrieved his assault pack from the overhead compartment. A hard-drive full of pictures, two packs of Camel Wides, and a fresh change of clothes were all inside. He'd been waiting all year to slip on a pair of blue jeans and Chuck Taylors.

Half a dozen people caught him in the aisle with dutiful handshakes and thanks, one man even called him a hero. The word tasted sour in his mouth. Hero, two names came to mind: *Perez and Williams.*

No matter his feelings, he graciously accepted their thanks. He was pretty sure it was one to the terms of his oath of service: *I will faithfully defend the Constitution of the United States of America from all enemies foreign and domestic, and if anybody calls me a hero I will smile, nod, and keep my opinions to myself.*

He was grateful that people were so kind to him. The stories Aunt Kate told him about the way Uncle Donnie was treated during his homecoming were horrifying. With how heavy his heart already was, Sam doubted he had the constitution remaining to endure such a reception.

As he approached the exit, the flight attendant he had been enamored of since he boarded the plane gave him a smile that alleviated any remaining fears of prior creepiness.

He could think of no better capstone to his long dreamed-about return than to score a date with a woman so beautiful, so

elegant, so utterly captivating as Victoria. Coffee drinks, a walk through a park covered in green grass, all sounded like the most enjoyable experience he could imagine—as long as they were with her.

He took a deep breath, trying to gather his courage. The worst that could happen is that she could say no. Rather, the worst that could happen would be not asking.

"Welcome home," she said in a voice as smooth as warm brandy.

His courage deflated before he even exhaled, and a resigned, "Thank you," was all he managed to say.

As he passed her and breathed in her sweet tropical aroma, Sam wished he was possessed of *that* kind of bravery.

I'll be brave tonight, after I get a few whiskey-cokes in me. With his lightweight tolerance and a cavernous void in his heart he was desperate to fill, he knew that it was wishful thinking. He was getting carried out of the bar tonight and there was nothing brave about that.

Sam stepped off the plane and felt a familiar sense of . . . wrong.

The whirring of the C-130 engines was deafening. The lights on the tarmac cut a path into the darkness. The weight of his armored vest burdened his shoulders. The cold touch of gunmetal caressed his hands. Fear burned like an ulcer.

He turned to see two lines of troops dressed in full battle-rattle filing out of the back of the bird. *It wasn't supposed to be this way, I was going home.*

He thought back to the re-integration class, the speaker called this dissociation. *It isn't real, just an all too vivid nightmare.*

He tucked his lower lip between his teeth and bit down. The sweet taste of blood was as real as the pain.

"Sergeant Cooper," a familiar voice behind him bellowed from the diaphragm, "make sure your team is up." Staff Sergeant Finley was Cooper's squad leader, and one guy he couldn't wait to never see again once the war was over.

"Roger that, Sarge. Bravo team, on me." Cooper expected Knight, Thompson, and the two scabs the Army had sent to replace Williams and Perez, but the sight of his entire original team nearly knocked him over.

How could it be? I applied the tourniquet that saved Williams' life but cost him his arm. I helped carry what was left of Perez onto the chopper. There's no way they could be standing here.

He knew he wasn't dreaming, because if this were a dream, Perez would say something like, "What's wrong, Sarge? You look like you've seen a ghost." Clichés like that were only used in dreams and bad movies.

"Hey, Sarge, can we smoke on the runway?" He asked instead. Cooper was so happy to see his rifleman alive that he almost told him to go ahead and light up. That was what happened last time, though. He was lax and Perez died. Not this time. He knew his prayers had been answered, he would have a second chance to go back and do things right. This time things would be different.

This time he would save them.

He never thought to wonder how many times he had been here before, although that would have been like asking where a wheels begins.

"No," he answered, determined to rewrite history, "ask me again, and your arms will be the only thing smoking." Perez rolled his eyes, but Cooper didn't care. *Let him be pissed. Seeing him come home in one piece is all the thanks I need.*

Somewhere in the furthest reaches of his senses, Sam smelled the ghost of a scent of tropical fruit. He couldn't remember why that was supposed to mean something, but he knew he didn't have time for anything so pleasant.

After a tantalized moment, the aroma faded as he returned to the task at hand. He had four men whose lives depended on him, and he would do whatever was necessary to keep them alive.

The eerie feeling that he had been here before came over him, but he dismissed it as nothing more than déjà vu.

Paul Van Dyke served in the Minnesota National Guard from 2002-2008 as an infantryman. He deployed as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2005 to Al Anbar Province, where he received the Purple Heart Medal and the Combat Infantryman's Badge. He came home in 2007 after his tour was extended for four months as part of the troop surge. In 2012 he was diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and turned to writing as part of his therapy.

Stranger in Her Den

By James Seals

Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.
Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.

COLOSSIANS 3:18-19

You rush into his arms. You must have smiled because he smiles. You hold out your hand. He interlaces his fingers with your fingers, ignoring your wedding band. Do you remember accepting that ring as a sign of love and fidelity? You lean into him. He reciprocates, kissing your lips, your cheek, your forehead. Your disregard for prying eyes seems brash.

I watch from the car. You both turn. Your hands are still knitted as you walk along the street. He laughs. You toss your head back, mouthing something. Your tenderness may have been adorable through someone else's eyes. I pound the steering wheel. My hand and temples throb. My face flushes. Remember the group prayer, I say: *God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change.*

You enter the coffee shop. He waits outside. I hadn't seen the dog, the attached pink leash. He chooses a table beneath the shop's logo.He speaks things to the Bichon Frisé, whose tail wags at the words. I expected someone younger, someone twenty years your junior. What was I thinking? I had envisioned someone beautiful, happy, full of life. What am I saying? I anticipated you with your secretary, a woman from a dating website, a woman in general.

Father's gay, I mutter.

The man must be in his sixties. I pictured your lover as chic and as smartly dressed. His cotton button-up shirt and cargo pants clash with your black suit, shiny shoes. His wrinkled outfit and be strewn hair suggest that he just awoke. What the fuck, I think. This can't be real. For some reason, my mind repeats the words that you so often quoted: *Elegance is a question of personality.* What sort of personality does this man have?

In times past, you would have said, See that fella? He's skint. Don't ever dress like that.

You return with two 'for-here' mugs. I imagine your drink: black, bold, scalding hot. The garnished drink, your paramour's drink, has been foo-fooed as you once said of ornamented brews. I wonder what went through your mind when you answered the barista's questions: Yes, please add whipped cream; He likes a dusting of cinnamon, too. Was that difficult for you? You used to quote, *Chocolate, men, coffee—some things are better rich.* Was that a hint? I never understood what you were saying. I was too young, though I giggled at your serious demeanor.

Do you remember the teachings of Leviticus: *Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman?* You wouldn't remember; you skipped services.

I spot your familiar habit; my father's familiar habit: removing your coat, folding it in half, draping it over your left arm before

taking your seat, crossing your legs. Leviticus also said, *They must be put to death.* But who should commit such a sin? Me? I don't wish you dead. You toss your right arm out over your coffee cup, letting your hand land on the center of the table, palm facing up. A moment passes, then a couple of minutes go by. Your lover finally eases back into his chair. He watches his dog who seems distracted by everything. Your lover reaches out. His hand blindly finds your hand as if there were no other place for it to be.

IT'S STRANGE. THE things one remembers.

You introduced him as an ol' chum. You met him during The War. We sailed the South China Sea together, Tony said as he tousled my hair. Great looking kid, he told you. I later asked, Where is the Gulf of Tonkin, but neither of you heard me. I kept walking in front of you, of him. I kicked at the porch's baseboards. What else could a ten year old do? I felt it impossible to distract you, your attentions from one another. You spent hours talking. I thought it odd that you overlooked Tony's hostilities for your newly re-elected president: Ronald Reagan. Instead, you were more interested in his merchant marine duties. You wanted to know where he had gone, what he had seen, what his plans were.

I miss having you around, Tony said. He looked at me then at you, I miss—. He didn't finish.

Mother seemed happy for you. She played her role, entering the room silently, leaving hors d'oeuvres, refilling glasses. You wrapped your arm around her waist, those few times that she paused, displaying interest in your conversation. She watched Tony then you, following each word as though they were birdies being lobbed over a badminton net. Mother played with your hair. You used to like that, didn't you? Mother grinned coyly each time you patted

her behind. She even blushed when you introduced her, This is my Filipino princess. You laughed. She replied, You no need say that, as she hurried to her kitchen. Mother was happy the entire day, singing quietly to herself.

She later told me, Your father have nice friend.

Months later, I recall Tony again loitering on our porch, sitting in Mother's chair. It was a Sunday. Mother and I had just returned from mass. You were inside the house. What were you doing? Were you hiding? Tony waved as we approached. He half stood then sat back down. Mother stopped humming. Tony's bright air turned dark. I looked at Mother. I waited for her to greet our guest, Tony, our friend. Instead, she walked into the house, not even nodding as one does at an acquaintance. Her eyes watched the path, which reminded me of the theme of that morning's Bible study:

I guide you
in the way of wisdom
and lead you along straight paths.
When you walk,
your steps will not be hampered;
when you run,
you will not stumble.

Mother's angry, I said to Tony, parking myself in Father's chair. Tony said that he had just arrived, that he hadn't been there long. His eyes searched each window of the house. His neck craned for a better view. I believed him rude, ignoring my conversation, trying to see—you? Mother? What?

When Mother speaks Tagalog, I said, that means she's really, really angry.

Mother's foreign words captured my interest. I listened as she shouted, Sigurado ka ng bading?

I lied to Tony saying that I didn't understand and that it

made me sad not knowing Mother's words. He didn't seem to care. Hindi ko gusto niya, Mother continued. Tony wanted to know if you could speak Mother's native tongue. I didn't know. You shouted, Just let me explain, making it seem like you might comprehend her lashings, but I told him, I don't think so.

Mother replied, Hindi siya ay pinapayagan sa aking bahay, then a door slammed.

Where's your friend Tony? I asked you a year later. We were tossing a football. Mother was inside the house, cooking. I complained that my mittens caused me to drop the ball, but really I was scared that the ball might hit my face, break a tooth.

You said, I haven't seen him. You guessed that he was at sea, roaming the world.

I EXIT MY car after you answer your phone. Talk animatedly. Hurry away.

I order a cup of coffee. Go outside. Is this seat available? I ask. He's older than I thought he'd be. His yellow skin looked white from afar. His foo-fooed drink is half empty, or should I say it's half full? I don't remember. He ignores me, turning his attentions to his dog.

Tippy, he says, Tippy there's no need for that noise. He glances at me with his blue eyes, distorts his face, perhaps suggesting that he's sorry for the commotion.

I say, Don't worry about it.

He smiles.

Dan, he says. My name is Dan.

I hesitate. I offer him my hand. We shake. Your lover's hand is cold, clammy—soft. Do you like the way his hands feel? I see my reflection in his glasses: I appear thin, tall. He tells me that his dog doesn't normally act this way. I reply, You don't know how anything's going to act these days. Dan goes quiet.

I pull out a cigar. I flip open my Zippo. I inhale as the flame hides amongst the tightly-rolled bundle of fermented tobacco.

Grasshopper, Dan says.

He explains that the Spanish word for cigar is *cigarra,* which translates into grasshopper. He goes on about the Yucatec Mayan word, *sikar,* but I quickly bore of his dialog. I offer him a smoke, hoping he'd stop talking. Do you like his conversations? You must. He declines my offer, turns to watch his dog. The dog sniffs its way to my leg. It pauses. It tilts its head to one side. The dog's cute. Tippy looks at Dan then it jumps onto my lap.

Tippy, Tippy get down, Dan says, with an ease to his tone.

Is this how you two met? Dan scoots his chair closer to me. He reaches out with both arms as though he's a toddler wanting to be held. I start. I lean back, wondering about his intentions.

Tippy, you're being naughty, Dan says, shaking his head. He removes his dog from my lap. After a few seconds, I relax. I settle into my seat. I take note of Dan's delicate bone structure, his slow, deliberate motions.

Do you know me? Dan asks without looking my way.

I don't think so.

Then why are you staring at me?

I tell him that he reminds me of my mother (but he doesn't), that he moves with fluidity (he does). I say the first thoughts that pop into my head: I've seen you here before; I like your dog; It's nice to have met you. My mouth speaks faster than my mind can process. I make up reasons as to why I am here, at the coffee shop, what I'm doing today. I sound childish. Dan doesn't seem to mind. He smiles, nods. He doesn't seem bothered by my intrusion.

Sure, he replies. I wouldn't mind having dinner.

I stop. What? I ask.

I contemplate what I just said. My mind becomes clear. I tell

myself, It's okay. I think, I need to know the person who came between my mother and father. Between Mother's and Father's relationship. I look at Dan.

Father's gay, I mumble.

Excuse me? Dan asks.

I look away. Have you always been homosexual? My father's a queer, I think. I admonish myself—shut the hell up—like you admonished me in my preteen years. That not a nice word, you explained. You went on about sticks and stuff.

I'll see you tonight, Dan says, handing me his address.

I SAW YOU making love to mother once. Or at least I think it was mother. I needed to use the restroom, like a big boy. My eyes were heavy with sleep. I shambled out of my room, into the hall. Pooh Bear holding my left hand. My blankie trailing close behind. Did you know that I was afraid of the dark? The blue light from the television threw odd shadows into the hallway. I don't remember the show. There were few sounds. The television may have been muted. I like to think that the sounds that I did hear were that of pleasure and joy, but I have forgotten.

Remember going on walks with Mother? You held her hand or wrapped an arm around her shoulders. I rode my skateboard nearby. She would say her part like you had trained her: You been drinking; so that you could quote *Miracle on 34th Street: Well, it's cold outside. A man's gotta do something to keep warm.* You never quite sounded like Edmund Gwenn. Then you two would laugh; though, I don't think she really understood your joking.

After Mother's and your skit, you always talked of work and of out-of-town trips. Mother told you of her day. She talked of loving the autumn leaves. She said, The Philippines always green. She would

describe her homeland as one huge jungle. Have you ever been to the Philippines? Mother loved America. I think she loved her life. I know she loved you.

Mother used to watch you from across the room. Did you know that? She would smirk while you acted silly in front of our guests. Your father like the tension, she would say. I would smile, thinking, *attention,* but I never corrected her. She seemed to enjoy your happiness. Were you happy with her? We would sit together, or I would sit on her lap, watching as you told stories or performed acts.

It's not my fault, you yelled years later.

I knew that. I was in college and I had read the pamphlets. I had listened to the doctors. How could you have affected her brain, spinal cord? I wasn't blaming you. The inflammation caused the nerve damage. I just wanted to know where you went, why you were not by her side.

Stay with her tonight, I said.

You declined. Then declined again. We fought. I didn't mean to say it; I don't really hate you. But you started using meetings, work, anything as your excuse. At first I thought the sight of Mother's waning hurt you. Then I followed you.

The brick building once served as a candy factory. The sign stated that some company constructed the building in 1909. Now the building contained lofts. The security doors were unlocked. I stalked you to the fourth floor. Apartment 406. Is this where you went on your 'out-of-town trips'? I listened outside the door. I wanted to hear her voice. Then someone noticed me. Sorry, I said, I'm lost. The elderly lady watched me as I hurried away. She mumbled something.

I lingered outside the building, smoking and drinking, hoping to see the woman who was more important than Mother, than Mother's dying. I waited each night for a glimpse of long blonde or brown hair. A peek into my father's second life. That's all I wanted.

Most nights I ended up drunk, yet I followed you. I took more interest in your life than in my own.

I still visited Mother, though. I brought her flowers. I tried to talk to her. You're so beautiful, I reminded her. She seemed in good spirits, sometimes mumbling a wedding song about taking a taut strand, while desiring a slack one:

Mayag aco sa masiguing
ang malubay na ang aquin

Two months later, Mother died.

IS THIS YOUR family? I shout into Dan's kitchen.

What the hell, I think. I took more interest in the little girl. I didn't notice you at first, but there you are. She's sitting on your lap. My father's lap. I was distracted by her velvet dress, the way Dan was standing. I hold the frame close to my eyes. I cannot see her features. How old is she? She looks Asian. Is this a Christmas photo? I want to ask Dan: Who's the kid, but I can hear that he's busying himself with dinner. I want to tell him that my father—excuse me, that you once had—another family.

I try distracting my thoughts. How long should one mourn a mother's death? A wife's death? A year? Two? I spy other photos: you embracing Dan on some beach (the Keys?), Dan embracing you in the cold of some metropolis (Denver?). I refuse Dan's red wine. Or is that your red wine? I tell him that I'm not allowed, that I'm currently riding William Carlos Williams' red wheelbarrow. I say, I'm on the wagon, when he doesn't seem to understand. He apologizes. He chuckles. He changes the subject. I tell him that I'm not that hungry, that I can wait. Dan says, Make myself at home. He quickly returns to his task.

Who's in the picture, I shout.

Dan must have thought that I asked about his interior design. He speaks about Feng Shui. He's a minimalist. The lines are purposefully situated, Dan says, to balance the positive and negative life forces. What's that mean? Are you the positive or the negative force? Dan goes on about a blue dragon and a red phoenix, but I stop listening after he mentions turtles and darkness.

I begin opening cabinets, scrutinizing documents. Tippy trails me. Her nose samples each of my footsteps. She appears uncomfortable with a stranger in her den. Is Tippy comfortable with you? The little girl? I walk along the apartment's hardwood floors, fingering *The New Yorker* and *Wine Enthusiast* magazines. I stop at the bookshelf. There's another picture. The little girl in this frame is ten years older, but it's obviously the same girl. I am the reason you stayed with mother?

That's Lucy, Dan says.

I flinch.

I'm sorry, I say, moving away from the photograph.

Dan doesn't mind my snooping. The pictures are for viewing, he says. He makes small gestures to the other pictures, on far walls, on end tables, reassuring me that it's okay to have a look. He again tells me that the little girl's name is Lucy. She's thirteen now. I didn't know what to say. I tell him that Lucy was my mother's name. Luisita, to be more specific.

I know, Dan replies. Your father told me.

James Seals is a MFA in Fiction candidate at the Southern New Hampshire University. He writes fiction stories, which have been have been published in Amoskeag Journal, Forge Journal, Rio Grande Review *and* Pithead Chapel. *James served twelve years in the navy: aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln and USS Blue Ridge, and stationed at the NATO Satellite Communications Ground Terminal in Chesapeake, Virginia.*

Poetry.

The Ballad of Ur-Wasp

Richard O'Brien

This afternoon a wasp mocked me
as it flitted about, trapped
between two doors, one French

and the other screened, that
led to my balcony. He was huge,

the Ur-wasp of wasps, and my
first instinct was to retreat to
the kitchen where I kept

insecticide beneath the sink
for just this sort of emergency,

but I couldn't bring myself
to do it. Instead, I opened

the French doors
followed by the screen door
where the wasp clung and gave it

a hesitant push. The wasp
fell to the porch, one wing broken.

In a few a minutes it will be
dark. The wasp is on my balcony,
moving in circles around its

broken wing, unable to
comprehend the honor in
not being given a proper death.

Richard J. O'Brien is a writer of both poetry and fiction. He served in the 101st Airborne Division before the Berlin Wall came down. Afterward, he received his BA in English from Rutgers University. Last year, Richard earned his MFA in Creative Writing at Fairleigh Dickinson University.

Untitled

Samuel Chamberlain

A bit of flesh lies upon the rooftop, its origin
unidentifiable through the lens of a benign
paratrooper, you just place it in the

Neon lemon bags, like a necessitous trick-or-treaters
pillowcase that blows empty, only a
few tiny fragments stick to the
plastic, body-bags become haz-mat Ziplocs
and you wish for once to be on
patrol outside-the-wire, because

Within the wire you can't shoot back, the
Katyushas start to mangle CHUs carelessly
crashing within the perimeter, fists clenched
in unreciprocated rage, later, when

The smoldering fiberglass ceased to smoke,
making it safe for you be begin cleaning up,
the smell of burning flesh lingers, uniting
with other tinged burnt matter, and you think
about the bottle rocket tipping over, the
plastic bottle melted into the Virginia
crabgrass, a burnt patch forever remains

Samuel Chamberlain spent five years in the Army and served as a Combat Engineer in Iraq with the 4-25th Airborne Brigade from 2006-2007. He is currently working on an MFA in fiction writing at Pacific University in Oregon, and lives with his wife in Fairbanks, Alaska.

Shore Leave

Kenyon Wells

1.

Beauty parlors are the best.
An old CPO told me that.
Those almost seedy emporiums
Were his favorites, he said,
You know the ones,
Fading façade and grimy windows
Across a busy 4 lane street
From the enlisted housing area
Just outside the main gate
Near the bus stop.
An unlikely sanctuary of sorts
For the ever hopeful Navy wife,
Where cigarette smoke and ammonia
Create an atmosphere of conjuring
And bleach blond sorceresses
Tangle and tease the hair
Of these on-again, off-again spouses
Left joylessly behind once more
By uninterested lifer husbands
Gone to sail the seven seas.

2.

When the beaded curtain door
Of the land of make believe opens
And a remade femme fatale presents herself
To a world no longer impressed,
Be the eager young seaman,
The wise Old Salt earnestly explained,
Ship shape and squared away,
Grinning mischief in undress whites,
A vision for her nagging memories of
What spit and polish and long afternoons
Once meant to her hopes and dreams.
No need for either party,
By deceit with good intentions,
Or honesty for its own sake,
To confuse in any way,
A tour of intimacy
With a voyage of desire.

Kenyon Wells served in the U.S. Navy from 1970-1974. Duty stations included Pensacola, FL, Adak, AK, and Rota, Spain. He currently works in a college library and writes poetry inspired by what he sees around him every day and from images of the past.

Fear and Shame: We Have Both

Christina Fishburne

Save me from bloodguilt.
Beep.
I hire people to clean my house.
I don't want to drown.
I swear to myself and sometimes out loud.
Beep.
Please don't let me get cancer.
I'll never write anything good.
I'll get fat and have to do my own taxes.
Beep.
Let the bones you have crushed rejoice.
Beep.
He will be killed in the war.
I will lose my parents.
He will be killed in the war and I'll be relieved.
Beep.
Save me from bloodguilt.
Remain in me.
Beep.

They all laugh at me and think I'm obnoxious.
I've squandered 2,000 dollars and am no longer free.
Beep.
I sometimes lie to make stories funnier.
I don't feed my children organic meals.
Beep.
Make me quiet with your love.

Christina Rauh Fishburne has an MFA from The University of Alabama where she also attempted one semester of ROTC, which proved to be very educational. Being an epic coward, she chose to serve her country by marrying a soldier. Being a writer, she writes about how decidedly brave that decision turned out to be.

The Art of War (I)

Antony Owen

In Basra
they close her eyes and wash him.
The son drips silk, spins tepid mist
painting her masterpiece on sackcloth.

From mountains
a canvas of man-made stars,
apache mauve, Kalashnikov pink
the dark matter, drones.

On tarmac
a war stork births unwanted sons
swaddled in stars of folded nylon
from womb to wood, carried.

At the wake
tumblers drink the men
their eyes remove lichen,
epitaphs of watercolours.

Antony Owen is from Coventry, England. His second collection was a pamphlet of contemporary war poetry titled The Dreaded Boy *and was published by Pighog Press in 2011. This collection was partly inspired by a remembrance event Owen organized for a small charity helping injured paratroopers back from Afghanistan.*

Owen's Grandfather was stationed in Algiers in WW2 repairing aircraft and his Auntie was an evacuee following the Coventry blitz.

Interview.

A Conversation with Sioban Fallon

Siobhan Fallon is military spouse and the author of the critically-acclaimed short story collection Y*ou Know When the Men Are Gone* about the families of Fort Hood, Texas, during an Army brigade's deployment to Iraq. The collection was listed as a Best Book of 2011 by *The San Francisco Chronicle, Self Magazine*, Los Angeles Public Library, Janet Maslin of *The New York Times*, and won a 2012 Indies Choice Honor Award, the Texas Institute of Letters Award for First Fiction, and the 2012 Pen Center USA Literary Award in Fiction.

Theatrical productions of her stories include performances by Word for Word in San Francisco and Stories on Stage in Denver. More of Siobhan's work has appeared in, among others, *Women's Day* and *Good Housekeeping*, and she writes a fiction series for *Military Spouse Magazine*. Siobhan has an MFA from The New School in New York City.

O-Dark-Thirty fiction editor Jim Mathews recently spoke with Siobhan about the unique challenges of military life, the inspirations for her stories and the unforgettable characters that inhabit them.

O-Dark-Thirty: How did you get started writing fiction and when did you begin to weave the theme of military life into your work?

Siobhan Fallon: If I go way back, I was always the kid who was making up stories. But I got serious about writing during college. I took a few nonfiction writing courses in school and then I ended up getting a Masters in Fine Arts in creative writing. And then I met my husband, who was in the Army, and we moved to Schofield Barracks in Hawaii. It was at that time that I started writing about the military community for the first time.

ODT: Were you actively pursuing publication of your fiction at that time?

SF: Well, I had been sending stories off to literary magazines for probably a decade before I finished writing my current collection of stories. So for me it was all about starting small, sending things out to small magazines at different schools and getting a feel for how the real writing world worked. Which is what I would recommend to any writer just starting out—in other words, not going directly to try to find a literary agent or publisher, but to feel things out first, read all the literary magazines out there, know what's getting published, and let that affect your own writing.

ODT: So much of* You Know When the Men are Gone *revolves around life on a military base during the seemingly endless cycle of overseas deployment—I take it you've had significant experience in this area to draw from?

SF: Absolutely. We moved to Ft. Hood and about a month after we arrived, my husband—who had been deployed to Afghanistan before

—was deployed to Iraq for the first time. I was a Family Readiness Group leader and when he deployed to Iraq; I really became enmeshed in the Army world in a way that I hadn't been before. And that's when I started writing these particular stories. In a way, I wrote them with a desire to figure out what was going on around us. Not to document it because it is fiction. But I just wanted to get the details down about all that was going on. It seemed that people hadn't been thinking about how military families were being impacted by events in the Middle East and this was my way of letting people know.

ODT: So how has your experience working and living the military life factored into your approach to fiction?

SF: Well most writers have probably heard the adage "Write what you know" and I really took that to heart—especially when writing these stories. I was aware of the dialogue I'd hear everyday. A nineteen-year old soldier would speak differently than, say, a thirtyfive-year old major's wife. So I would constantly be looking out for those details and either make a note in my head or put it down later on in a notebook.Because sometimes you lose these things if you don't capture them right away.

ODT: In the civilian world, the military experience can sometimes be stereotyped as bland, rigid, monotone. Did you find this to be the case and, if so, how did you address it?

SF: Yes, absolutely. I was a civilian before I became a mil spouse. So I came into the military community with the expectations of finding those stereotypes. In fact, I had never wanted to date a soldier. I was raised right next to the West Point military academy

in New York and my sister and I said we'd never date cadets. And then, of course, I met my husband and changed my mind. But yes, I think civilian folks may view military life as everyone being similar because they wear a same uniform and have to have the same haircuts and so forth. But that was part of the fun of writing these stories. To find a different way of illustrating a military character or a military spouse and to try to make them so specific and have different flaws and character traits that would be unexpected to the reader. And that's kind of the fun in writing anyway. When you're creating a character, you always want to surprise your reader, show them something they haven't seen before, instead of relying on what's already known. People who are reading our work are going to be looking for something they haven't read before.

ODT: Were there any particular challenges to the military character?

SF: Well, for me, my main focus isn't on the battlefield so I'm not telling that particular story. My stories focus more on the people on the home front whose lives are affected by war in a different way than the soldiers themselves. Soldiers may be facing physical injuries while the families face the stress of ordinary American life—taking the kids to soccer, celebrating holidays, changing the tires on the car—as well as constantly fearing for the safety of their deployed soldier, airman, Marine. I think that balance presents endless possibilities.

ODT: I noticed that you definitely reach for extreme human emotions and situations when creating conflict in your stories—whether it's jealousy or adultery or violence.

SF: I love tension. When I'm reading fiction, I want something that's going to grab me. I want to wonder what's going to happen next. So

in my own writing, even if I'm writing about a situation that may seem simple—a family at home—I want to ratchet up the way the story is flowing toward a crisis. And because I like this approach in what I read, I try to emulate that in my own writing.

ODT: Looking at the landscape of contemporary military-themed writing, do you feel that we are touching on the same universal themes that we've seen emerge from past wars?

SF: Not necessarily. I feel like there are themes and stories that still need to be told or that can be made new by what's going on now. For someone like me who's always enjoyed fiction, I will get more from reading a short story or novel than I will from a newspaper article or seeing something on the news. So I embrace fictional story telling and will always encourage it even if, say, Homer did it best.

ODT: Do you have a favorite story in your collection?

SF: I have favorite characters more than a favorite story. I have a soft spot for Kit Murphy, the wounded soldier who is a character in two of the stories ["The Last Stand" and "Gold Star"]. It just seemed too tragic how I left him at the end of one story so I had to bring him back and give him a little more hope in the second story. When I do readings, I often read from his two stories. In the collection's lead story "You Know When the Men are Gone," I think I identify most with the protagonist, Meg Brady. She was sort of experiencing deployment in the way that I did—when I was a new spouse and was overwhelmed by the process and what the military world was like.

ODT: Your work has been performed theatrically—did seeing your work play out on stage alter your perceptions of your characters?

SF: I don't know if it altered the way I saw my characters but it was really interesting to see how other people interpreted them. For example, they might put a different spin on things, perhaps by delivering lines I intended to be straight forward in a sarcastic way. There was one scene where some spouses made a comment that I had imagined as sweet but the way [the actors] read it, I thought, of course it could have had that double meaning. So the experience did illuminate certain things in the story that I hadn't paid too much attention to when I was writing.

ODT: Describe your process as a writer in approaching your work? What gets you excited? What gets you to your keyboard and keeps you there?

SF: Well, I wish I could get more done. But I equate it to working out. Nobody wants to get on the treadmill, but if you just force yourself and start doing it, you're going to get the workout done. So I somehow I trick myself and make myself sit down at my desk—whether it's re-reading some material or forcing a word count for that day. Making it a habit is usually helpful. It boils down to getting that butt in the chair and making yourself do it, again and again. And the more I stick to a real schedule, the easier it is the next day to get back in that place where I left off. I try to do five days a week—and I wish I could do the weekends. But with a six month old baby, I'm lucky to get what I can. And again, if I can do this as part of a schedule, then I'm also thinking about the characters even when I'm not writing. I have a lot of little notebooks in my purse to jot down thoughts about a character that helps me the next time I sit down. And just the act of writing down something funny that I've seen, I feel like it sears it into my brain in a way that's different from when, for example, you wake up and try to remember a dream.

ODT: None of the stories in You Know When the Men are Gone are written in first person point-of-view. Is third person your narrative approach of choice?

SF: Actually, first person is my favorite. I usually write in first person which is what's strange about the collection. But there's something about needing to show a wider picture of Ft. Hood, the base, the interactions, and how charaters bump into other characters. I appreciated the distance that third person gave me. I had originally written some of the stories in first person and then changed them to third. There's so much that goes into the revising of stories. It's such an important part of the process. In the end, the third person felt more evocative of a military community and life on base—instead of trying to identify with one particular character and putting everything into one voice.

ODT: So what are you reading these days and do you find it informative to your writing?

SF: Yes, I usually read what will help the work that I'm currently working on. While writing something that focuses on the military life, like my collection, I read a lot of military spouse writing. Alison Buckholtz's memoir, *Standing By,* is particularly good. She's a Navy spouse and she captures a lot of the details and situations that, as an Army spouse, I had no idea the Navy spouses experienced. And then there's Laura Harrington's novel *Alice Bliss*, which is about a Reserve family. It focuses on the teenage daughter growing up while her father is deployed and the dynamics that deployment has on the entire family. Another great book is *Fire and Forget: Short Stories from The Long War*. It's an outstanding anthology of fiction, written by vets of the Iraq War, edited by Matt Gallagher and Roy Scranton.

ODT: What advice would you give to military veterans—and particularly spouses and dependents of service members—who are considering a career in writing?

SF: I think for me the best thing was to become a part of a writer community. Whether taking a class or creating their own writer's group. To have someone else read your work gives you a feeling that, yes I really am writing something worth reading. And it's good to see what other people are working on. I keep in touch with a friend from my MFA who still reads all my work. And I've made friends with other writers. So definitely reach out and connect. It's a small writing world and the military writing world is even smaller. You need to find the writers in them. And I know there are some incredible veteran writing workshops. If you're in a writer's group or workshop, you are forced to finish your work. You have to hand in that piece of writing because people are waiting to read it. And, of course, writers need to read. Read as much as you can. Especially in the area or genre that you're writing. The point is not to write something that's been done ten times but to recognize what's been done and then challenge your readers and surprise them. I have a Nook so I download a lot of samples of work—generally you can download the first chapter of a book for free to get a taste of something, which makes me think that we as writers really need to think about those first twenty pages and how good they have to be, or people aren't going to buy your book.

ODT: So what do you think about future of literature as it relates to these writers who are now emerging from the nation's most recent wars?

SF: I'm seeing so many talented veteran and military spouse writers and hearing from them—or being asked to read galleys of their books

before they go to print. And I hope there are many more out there who are writing, writing, writing and that we'll hear from them soon.

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