O-Dark-Thirty

A Literary Journal

Winter 2016
Volume 4 Number 2

On the cover: *Twoface,*
Photograph by Magdalena Green
United States Marine Corps
2008-2012

"The photograph was created for the
Student Veterans of America (SVA)
2015 "Warpaint" art contest.
The subject of the photo is my twin sister,
Aleksandra Etter, who is also a Marine veteran.
We joined the Marine Corps together upon graduating high school.

The purpose of the photograph is to show the two sides of a [female]
service member: the Marine side, and the human side.
I wanted to show that behind every troop there is
a real person with feelings and emotions.
People often seem to forget that the men and women
serving our country are real people,
with their own beliefs outside of the uniform."

Magdalena and Aleksandra were born in Poland
and emigrated to the United States, in 1996,
when they were six years old.
Magdalena served as an ammunition technician
when she was in the Marine Corps.
She is currently pursuing a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree in
photography at the Illinois Institute of Art, in Schaumburg.
She is married to another Marine veteran and has two sons.

Table of Contents

ISSN: 2325-3002 (Print)
ISSN: 2325-3010 (Online)

Editor's Note

When we posted the call for submissions for this issue on Facebook on September 1, 2015, the first response was from a gentleman who wanted to know why there was "a need to do something special for women veterans."

I wasn't sure how to respond. We hadn't thought of it in those terms. Poet and contributor Anna Weaver quickly replied that the editors of literary journals often create themed issues to create a body of work with some commonality to explore. We could just as easily have chosen work from a particular conflict, or a genre like fiction or poetry, for the themed issue.

Our actual decision-making process was hardly that organized. When the *O-Dark-Thirty* editorial board decided early in 2015 that we needed to put together a "themed" issue of *The Review,* senior editor Jim Mathews asked, "So what should our first theme be?"

"Uh, I dunno," I said. "What do you think the theme should be?" [Silence.] "Dario, any ideas?" [More silence.]

"How about women veterans?" said our production manager, Janis Albuquerque. Her husband Mike Fay, our art editor, had seen Magdalena Green's photograph *Twoface* when he served on a panel of judges for the Student Veterans of America's "Warpaint" art competition in early 2015, and the image stuck in his mind.

We all quickly agreed to Janis' suggestion. Other than the 2008 anthology *Powder: Writing by Women in the Ranks, from Vietnam to Iraq,* an amalgam of nonfiction and poetry, no one had attempted to

publish a collection of women veterans' literary writing. Civilian author Cara Hoffman had claimed in a 2014 *New York Times* op-ed that "stories about female veterans are nearly absent from our culture," and in August 2015 critic Sam Sacks wrote in *Harper's Magazine* that "There are more than 200,000 women on active duty in the military, but the female experience of warfare has barely been broached." Our first themed issue would begin to fill that void.

We weren't sure what kind of submissions we'd get, or how many. Since we began publishing, we'd only received a few submissions from women veterans. I could count them on my digits and have a couple of toes left over. But the response was overwhelming. Not only did we have several times the usual number of submissions to consider, the variety and quality were unusually high. We decided to accept as many pieces as we could possibly print and run on line in the month of February, and we still had to decline a great deal of excellent work. Contributors to this issue come from all five branches of active service, the Reserve, and the Guard. Some were enlisted women and some officers. They served in wartime, from the Vietnam era to Desert Storm and Bosnia; of course in the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; and during "peacetime"—the Cold War. More significantly, the issues and themes in the works are as diverse as the contributors themselves, and go well beyond the stories of victims and "she-roes" so often portrayed in the media.

Kate Hendricks Thomas and Rachel Brune explore diverse aspects of domestic violence. DeAnna Acker muses on how she was *not* like the first women to graduate Ranger School, and Patricia France considers "entitlement." Victoria Rahn imagines a future world in which prosthetics and technology play unexpected roles. In our

interview, former Marine and author/editor Tracy Crow shares insights about her four books and the publishing experience, and tackles the question of writing about risky topics. The issue also includes a poignant meditation on race, identity, and memory in the Vietnam era; a recollection of physical challenges on the Pacific Crest Trail and on the fore topgallant yardarm of USCGC *Eagle;* and stories and poems about leadership, fear and revulsion, love, parental transgression, camaraderie, music, the connection with home during a deployment—aspects of our common experience of military service and of being human. There will be much, much more in our online journal *The Report* this month.

We hope that this themed issue will encourage more writers who happen to be women veterans to submit their work to *O-Dark-Thirty.* We're hard at work on developing a call for submissions for our next themed issue, due out in August 2016. And finally, we'd like to introduce a new member of our editorial board: former *O-Dark-Thirty* contributor Bryon Reiger, our new drama editor. Bryon is an Army veteran who is finishing his MFA in playwriting at University of New Orleans. He's helping us develop submission guidelines for short plays—if you write drama, keep an eye on our "Submissions" page! Welcome to the team, Bryon.

And we hope you enjoy the work in this issue as much as we did.

Jerri Bell

Non-fiction.

Love, on islands in time and place

An excerpt from *Intimate Knowledge: Race, Memory, Genetics and Identity*

By Deborah Fries

"The first marriage is usually to someone you meet on an island—you know, a college campus, or the Peace Corps—someplace where you didn't have a lot of choices, and circumstances pushed you toward each other."

—Some anonymous person from my past

We were wartime trainees when we met at Sheppard Air Force Base in Wichita Falls, Texas in the spring of 1968, when it reached 103˚ in the shade, and the sky was huge. The Air Force was training me to be a medic, one who could eventually be sent to Vietnam, although enlisted women medics were not yet being deployed to Southeast Asia. That danger was the province of nurses—officers whose rank qualified them to be in harm's way.

But in that time of transience and uncertainty, they were not getting us ready to take temps on a convalescent ward in California. In sandy, hot North Texas, we were being taught field techniques:

how to find wounded patients in the bush using compass coordinates; construct a litter from a poncho and two saplings; make triage decisions in the smoky chaos of a simulated air plane crash.

The Air Force was training him to be a jet mechanic, but unlike for me, war would not be simulated; he would go to Vietnam. He was nineteen, and so handsome that I could not believe our eyes had locked and pulled each other into a private universe, outside of time and military training. We were at the airman's club and then we were an item—fast and briefly—in the time we had left in Texas.

He was biracial, with straight hair and blue eyes, a French mother and a light-skinned American black and Cherokee father who had once been a movie actor. He was quick and funny and smart, boyishly cool in shorts and tennies and sweetly sexy in uniform.

We didn't have much time together. The longest blocks of togetherness were spent on a day trip to the moonscape of Lawton, Oklahoma with another couple, and a night in a Wichita Falls motel before I left for my permanent party base in Alabama. We must have promised we would stay connected, although I can't recall that conversation. Race was not a consideration in that magnetic coming together but as I thought about where I was going, I might have doubted how realistic staying connected could be: I was headed in country to a place where the American Independent Party's presidential candidate, hardline segregationist George Wallace, was the native son.

Race was not something I could ignore, even if I wanted to.

That last Texas night in the motel bed, I whispered against his neck *You're such a good lover. It must be the French in you.*

It's the nigger in me he whispered back.

How is it that we can remember dialogue from almost fifty years ago? How do words sear their way into our brains, infiltrate our blood, stay with us long after we've lived full lives?

I've always remembered snips and pieces of life-changing dialogue. I recall that precise moment of that night.

When I met him at twenty, there was a lot I was trying to forget. I'd already had the college equivalent of hard drama and bad luck. I was four years past a failed attempt at prep school; two years past being scooted out of a Southern college; six months out of a pregnancy and illegal abortion. Every attempt at autonomy had failed and like most of the young women I'd met in basic training, I'd thrown myself on the altar of external direction. *Tell me what to do,* our decision to enlist begged the government. *Take care of me. Save me from myself.*

I hadn't been with a man since my traumatic pregnancy. The hometown boy who'd impregnated me had also impregnated another girl during that time in 1967, which would later be known as The Summer of Love. Her, he married, and had a son. My son ended up in a junkie doctor's trash.

In the hot spring of 1968, nothing in the crazy larger world or my baffling interior world made sense. Martin Luther King, Jr. had been assassinated in Memphis the month I'd entered service, and race riots had raged in 125 American cities while I marched around in basic training, separated from news media.

I didn't know what was going on, but even without news, I was afraid of everything: personal failure, violence, pregnancy, rejection, injustice, a final schism with my family over one more unforgivable offense. My parents had refused to pay for college, and I'd sought refuge in wartime occupation.

I was less afraid of Vietnam than I was of another pregnancy. I was not on the pill, and I'd had unprotected sex with a beautiful young man with whom I felt big chemistry. He was my re-entry into love and sex, whose pillow talk would haunt me well into the future. The day after our motel night, I went home to Pennsylvania on leave.

My dad took pictures of me in my summer and winter uniforms. My nine-year-old sister posed with me in most of the photos. In them, I look distant, not really home. I wasn't. My period was late.

My Southern mother does not appear in any of the small, square photos my father took on that leave, but she was omnipresent. She would not have accepted my young man. She would have ignored his European ancestry, gone straight into screaming outrage over his African ancestry. (This is the woman who, less than a year earlier, had responded to the baby I'd conceived with a white boy by saying *I'd like to shoot it out of you.* And meant it.)

When he called during my leave, my dad answered the phone. I took the call in an upstairs office, as I had taken every call from a young man when I lived at home. But even at twenty, thirteen hundred miles from Sheppard, part of me still lived at home as an emotional dependent. Although I was always leaving. Although they'd cut me off.

For some reason, maybe his voice, they quizzed me when I got off the phone. I imagined that in spite of his straight brown hair, light eyes and honey skin, somehow they knew. Knew that this time I'd done it, hooked up with a multi-racial lover who was headed to Vietnam to die, and that it was just a matter of time before my brief military career would end with no husband, a surprisingly tan baby and a dishonorable discharge.

Twenty-five years would pass before I'd bring home a black man to meet my aging parents. But in the psychedelic summer of 1968, out of fear and cowardice, I pushed away the one who'd just called.

I flew to my next assignment as a medic stationed at Maxwell Air Force Base, Montgomery, Alabama.

Bobby Kennedy had been murdered the month I arrived in the kudzu-covered wasteland of George Wallace Land. It was a place

with little love for King or Bobby Kennedy, let alone interracial dating. It was a state like Texas—with anti-miscegenation laws that had been declared unconstitutional a year earlier by *Loving v. Virginia*—but unlike Texas, Alabama's would stay in effect until 2000.

Alabama, the last state in America to overturn a ban on interracial marriage, was not a state I'd explore. I would soon learn that we were stranded on base, a safe island in a city that was not. Town was hostile territory, a place where there were signs on diners and dives that said *No dogs, niggers or Air Force allowed.* Three years after the Selma to Montgomery marches that had assured the right to vote, Southern hospitality in Montgomery had a long way to go.

Hate, assassinations and kudzu threatened to swallow us. Healthy young men were being sent to disappear in muddy fields in Southeast Asia. My own safety was the consequence of bad judgment and impulsivity; I was a young woman who had bounced from school to school, drama to drama, and who had opted for caring for the casualties of war as a solution.

The day before I arrived in Alabama, I got my period.

I need to get a script for the pill, I told the medic who picked me up in his blue MG the day I landed in Montgomery.

I can get that for you, he said.

He got a lot of people what they wanted. He was my sergeant at the Maxwell AFB hospital. In Vietnam, he'd lost whatever thread of respect he'd had for authority, and now was selling weed and routinely losing stripes. He was Greek American, a shade darker than my lover in Texas.

Ten months later, I married him.

Fifteen years later, after we divorced, I'd date only black men for almost a decade. As if I were trying to pass through a developmental phase I'd flunked before. As if I could be better than my racist Southern mother; better than my uptight neighbors in Whitefish Bay, Wisconsin;

better than my ex-husband, who'd use the word *mavre* to describe men I loved instead of him. As if I could be a better person than I'd been in the summer of '68.

Post-divorce, I'd have three longish relationships with men of color: a novelist from my hometown, whose award-winning second book featured a protagonist who loves a white woman named Judith; a *Milwaukee Journal* reporter who'd once been a member of the Nation of Islam, and sold bean pies and *Muhammad Speaks* on the streets of Chicago; and a Yale graduate who was a nationally-recognized research analyst, the man I brought home in 1993 to meet my parents.

But I would never be the fictional Judith. And after four years, I would give up on the reporter, who would then choose someone other than me. I would become alienated by the research analyst's left-brain Otherness, his Republican values and love of Bob Dole, his lack of meet-the-parents reciprocation.

Each of those relationships would eventually feel as if they'd been entered into through some psychological or social schema meant to compensate for a moral failing—mine or my mother's. I would come to believe that there had been something so innocent about that brief affair in Wichita Falls, something that predated race-as-agenda. An attraction that was genuinely chemical, maybe karmic. A connection I'd chase for decades without finding again.

As time passed, my need to find him began as a fly on my fairly large wall of shame. I just wanted to know if he was still out there, extant and whole. For decades, Internet searches for his distinctive name failed to produce a single hit, and I couldn't shake the feeling that he had not survived Vietnam.

But in the summer of 2013, shame gave way to the urgency that accompanies mortality. Autosomal DNA testing results I received that July reported two immutable genetic factors that challenged my identity. My genome revealed that I, like many Americans with

Southern roots who believe themselves to have only European ancestry, have a small percentage of Sub-Saharan admixture, inherited within the last two hundred years.

And health data provided me with the wrenching news that I had also inherited a copy of the ApoE4 gene—the so-called Alzheimer's gene—from both parents.

Apparently I was not the first person in my family to have loved someone of another race, an epiphany I had a good chance of soon forgetting. I needed to put my affairs in order.

I found him in December, 2013 because he had posted customer reviews on Amazon.com.

Alive as I was, he had recently purchased and endorsed a Branford Marsalis CD, a Coltrane CD, and a book that he'd given to friends who'd lost children. A few more clicks and I had an address for him in California, and a picture of him with his wife, jointly smiling from the homepage of her business.

I sent him a Christmas card with a message that seemed appropriate for an old friend who was happily married. At some level, I felt that the man he'd become, one who would buy books for grieving parents, might remember me, maybe even kindly.

As soon as I saw that card, I knew who it was from, he said, when he called the first time. He set the terms of engagement early on: he had shown the card to his wife; had told her he'd be calling me; everything would be in the open, on the up and up. Beneath that bright transparency, I sensed a bond cemented during a darker probationary period.

But he wanted to understand why I had backed away, and his memories of our last conversation were hi-def sharp. *I wasn't ready for you,* I told him, *You were too healthy for me then.*

I want you to know that I respect other people's attachments, I told him during the second call, although it seemed entirely possible that I did not. He said he believed me, and returned the

conversation to how things between us had ended, a subject revisited over the course of several more calls—layered between family reportage about marriage, children, grandchildren, extended family and work—until the uncomfortable process of clarification had been exhausted.

Those calls became an island where we learned each other's stories, narratives that had existed in the same time but very different spaces, stories that would alternately merge, then diverge. He had rejected the East Coast, lived in California all his adult life. I had settled in the East Coast after living for half my adult life in the Midwest. His life was full, relational: a long marriage, three children, grandchildren, church, volunteer work with at-risk youth, politics. Mine has been introverted, unaffiliated and less expansive—divorced since 1985 and with only one child.

There was never a moment in that first year on the island of reconnection when I regretted taking the initiative to find him, to rehash and reprocess the past. It was a gift, a kind of grace that so rarely arrives in our lives. We both enjoyed those long calls: our politics and professions, interests and world view were surprisingly compatible, his stories about his family fascinating. We were enjoying catching up, filling in the blanks, rubbing out an old scar. The more I knew, the more I thought about what might have been—not with deep regret or longing or envy. It was just a fact: if I had been a better person in 1968, we might have had a lovely life together. But I wasn't, and the life he's had seems pretty wonderful.

The calls stopped in early 2015.

Our stories had converged again. We had each spent the first few months of the new year hobbled by eye conditions. I'd had a bad outcome from surgery and lost functional vision in my right eye for two months. He'd been diagnosed with intraocular lymphoma, which is not a good thing to have.

We talked once in late spring and this time he was the one who wanted to explain himself. Our renewed familiarity had become self-indulgent and out of respect for his marriage, had to be jettisoned.

He explained himself carefully and kindly, and I understood and agreed.

I can still see him walking into that motel room in Wichita Falls in a yellow jersey, his beautiful light eyes crinkling with laughter as he reads a letter to me from his little brother. *Stay cool, Steve Canyon,* the boy signs off.

He will. There will be jet engines and planes taking off and landing, Vietnam, then a good woman and accomplished children, life in San Bernardino County, beautiful and talented grandchildren, political wrangling, a time share in Mexico.

I will see none of it.

But because there are moments in this life when we choose to find and open ourselves to each other, I know that these things happened. For now, I know them.

Deborah Fries is the author of two books of poetry published by Kore Press: Various Modes of Departure *and* The Bright Field of Everything, *and a contributor to Kore's anthology:* Powder: Writing by Women in the Ranks, from Vietnam to Iraq. *She writes for www.makingsenseofalzheimers.org and teaches courses in narrative medicine through a variety of venues. Her primary familial relationships came out of war: her parents met during World War II when her father, an Army captain, was stationed in the South, and she met the man she married during the Vietnam era, when both were medics at Maxwell AFB in Montgomery, Alabama. She is currently working on a non-fiction exploration of race, memory, genetics and identity.*

I Am Them

By DeAnna Acker

They are the three women who recently graduated from Army Ranger School. Until this April, Ranger School only accepted men. These Ranger-tabbed women are "firsts." They are also graduates of West Point, a school once open only to men as well, until the women of the Class of 1980 became "firsts." I am not a Ranger, nor am I a "first," but I am a woman and a West Point graduate, class of 2005.

We went to the same school. We completed the same obstacle courses, marched the same ruck marches, passed the same tests. We finished the same runs, repeating the same cadences.

I wanna be an Airborne Ranger
Live the life of guts and danger

We gazed upon the same Ranger tabs, painted in giant relief throughout our training areas, reminders of the holy grail, pictures of the cultural idol. RANGER. Up so high that you had to gaze heavenward in worshipful posture. We rappelled down the same RANGER cliff and climbed the same RANGER wall. They saw that RANGER and knew that, if just given the chance, they could do it. And then they did.

I gazed up at the obstacle called Jacob's Ladder. I didn't know its name, only how it towered over me, so tall it seemed to narrow at the top and sway in the hot wind. I had to climb it to pass Beast Barracks, West Point's version of basic training. The "steps" on this wooden ladder were logs thicker than my body, scarred and worn slick from previous climbers.

"Hurry up, New Cadets! Get on my ladder!" The instructor struck an intimidating, arms-crossed pose as he yelled.

I stepped onto the first log and wrapped my arms around the second one, my boots already beginning to slip, my fingertips barely locking. Another new cadet climbed up next to me. The first two rungs were close enough that we could step up fairly easily. We moved up the ladder, keeping an even pace with each other, the rungs getting farther and farther apart as we climbed. The last two rungs were the problem. They were much farther apart, and we had to climb over the top rung to complete the obstacle. I reached up to grab the next to last rung, but I couldn't lock my arms around it because I wasn't quite tall enough. I looked back down at the ground, at the thick, blue mats meant to save my life if I fell. I doubted they would work. I imagined myself trying to finish the ladder, my grip slipping, my body falling, slamming and breaking on each rung of the ladder all the way down to the useless blue mats.

"New Cadet, don't look down!" shouted the instructor. "Hurry up and get off my obstacle!"

I shook the fear out of my head and wiped my sweaty hands on my uniform. I gripped the log with as much force as I could and swung my right leg up, hugging wood. Sitting, I stared up at the last rung. My muscles shook in nervousness as I used the side of the ladder to steady myself and stand up. No one at West Point knew it yet, but I feared heights.

I looked over at the boy climbing with me, expecting to see him already over the top and on his way down, but, like me, he stared

up at the final rung, quaking. I reached up, but my fingertips barely grazed the bottom of the log. I was going to have to jump.

I took a deep breath and shoved aside my inner voice of caution. There was no room for tentativeness. I let go of the side of the ladder and jumped, slapping my hands down on the top of the log so hard my skin stung. I used the sleeves of my camouflage jacket to create friction and keep my arms from slipping while I pulled a leg up and hooked it. Using the momentum of my hips, I swung my body on top of the log. I gripped it close for a long moment before sitting up. Then I lowered myself down the other side of the log, dropping cautiously onto the rung below before continuing the climb down. When I stood again on the blue mats, my hands and boots wobbled with adrenaline, but my heart beat vigorous and mighty. I looked up at what I had conquered. My climbing partner still stood near the top, needing to make the jump to the top rung, but unwilling.

The three women graduates have met every Ranger standard required of men. They have just completed the most grueling leadership course in the military. Ranger School lasts sixty-two days, if you pass all the phases on the first try. There are three phases: the woodlands at Fort Benning, the mountains at Dahlonega, and the swamps in Florida. Soldiers train with little food, little sleep, and much risk. Snakes, bug bites, twisted ankles, broken bones, rashes, infections, heat stroke, and any manner of illness or injury that you can imagine threaten them. Some of the recent graduates were even struck by lightning. It is never easy to earn a Ranger tab, but for some, for these women, it has taken an extra dose of will. They recycled the woodland phase twice. When the school offers a student a recycle, they have the option to decline, to quit. Five soldiers from their class were offered a Day One recycle, but only the women didn't quit.

I didn't quit. I am them.

We were nearing the end of the twelve-mile ruck march that completes Beast Barracks. The dreaded landmark Bull Hill loomed in front of me. Perhaps it was named that because in order to ruck up it, you had to put your head down and push your way up like a bull. It rose so steep and long you couldn't see the top while standing at the bottom. The path up was rugged, the dirt tramped down by thousands of boots to reveal a bed of mottled tan rocks. Some rocks were jagged, waiting to catch a boot and send a soldier sprawling. Some rocks were polished smooth enough to shake loose the tread of your soles.

I had kept up with my platoon so far, though it hadn't been easy. Ruck marching always challenged me. Why? That's a question I asked myself many times. There were many excuses I might have given. I was short. I was a girl. I wasn't in good enough shape. Those were, are, cop-outs. Smaller women had smoked me on a ruck march. I was in the best shape I had ever been in my life. The only answer I had was that I just wasn't as physically gifted. I wasn't a natural athlete. I wasn't "hoo-ah." I didn't want to accept the idea.

I began to fall behind. The cadet behind me pushed on my ruck, trying to help me along. I tried some positive self-talk. The cadre always said it was more mental than physical, though I doubted their wisdom. Keep moving. One foot in front of the other. I pushed and fell behind, pushed and fell behind, pushed and fell behind, until I fell behind the entire company. I was not the only one; there were other stragglers, both male and female, even farther behind than me. Some had already been picked up by the straggler truck.

My squad leader had fallen back to keep an eye on me. He spoke to me quietly and confidently. "Let's go, Moos, you're not a fall out."

I panted and wheezed and leaned forward with the weight of my ruck, forcing my forward momentum.

"Keep going. You don't wanna redo this." His tone sounded calm, neither full of false praise nor of frustration. He was right. I didn't want to be picked up by the straggler truck and have to redo the march.

I lurched forward so suddenly that I didn't have time to brace with my arms. The weight of my ruck carried me forward hard and fast. Still gripping the hard metal of my weapon, my hands hit the dirt knuckles first. The front of my Kevlar helmet banged into rock right after them, and I landed with a thud, not understanding at first how I got there. I lay still, waiting for my brain to process the information that I had tripped over a rock.

"Medic!" My squad leader yelled out.

I was surprised at how quickly he gave up on me. I supposed he thought I had heat exhaustion. Or maybe he thought I'd just passed out. I couldn't blame him. I looked terrible, my face deep red from exertion, my uniform soaked through with sweat, more sweat dribbling down my chin strap. But I'd only been down for a few seconds. I pushed a knee under me, grinding it into rough rock edges, and hoisted myself, my ruck, my equipment back up.

"That's it, Moos. Keep going."

"She beat me." That's what a Ranger classmate, a male, says about a graduating Ranger woman at a press conference the day before graduation. He speaks about a timed twelve-mile march with a fifty-pound ruck.

"I knew she was a physical stud," says another male Ranger. And he is right. They all must be "studs," because the school requires intense physicality. They run, they ruck march, they carry unbelievable loads. They do all of this while tired of bone and of mind, and while learning and practicing complicated small unit tactics and leadership. They must meet quantifiable physical standards, but they also must pass patrol grading by Ranger instructors and peers. Ranger

students who cannot keep up physically, who slow down patrols, get "peered out" by bad peer grades. These women, these tab-wearers, have earned respect with their physical aptitude. They didn't get peered out.

I do not have their physical aptitude. I would have been peered out. I am not them.

I pulled up the online submission form for the eighth time that day. With graduation nearing, my preferences for my branch were due. There were seventeen options listed, and I had to rank order all of them, but for me three of those options were actually closed. Three combat arms branches—Armor, Infantry, and Field Artillery—were not open to me. But there they were on the form, requiring me to list them before I could submit.

I changed my first choice several times, fluctuating between Military Intelligence and Military Police and Armor. Intel catered to my strengths and personality, but I had dreamed most of my childhood of working in law enforcement. That dream had changed at West Point, when I fell in love with tanks. I listed Armor in the first spot, just to see how it felt.

Proud. Excited. Motivated.

The feeling extinguished quickly. Putting Armor first on my list seemed silly and pointless. My choice would not be accepted. I would be assigned the next branch on my list that had an available slot. I might as well list the combat arms branches at the bottom. What good would it do to even consider them? I changed my first choice to Military Intelligence and wrote Infantry and Field Artillery at the bottom of the list. I started to write Armor at the bottom too, but deleted it. Then I paused over the second spot on the list.

What the hell? It's my damn wish list. I wrote Armor second, pleased with my minor, inconspicuous resistance, my insignificant measure of boldness.

I cannot write about the moment where I changed, because I cannot pinpoint it. Perhaps because internal change usually doesn't happen in one big, memorable event. We change incrementally over time, through small, insipid moments.

I once signed up for my high school's JROTC just because I heard they did rappelling. Despite my fear of heights, I once stupidly accepted a dare to walk across the supports under an overpass with no safety equipment. I once dreamed of going to Airborne school so I could jump from a plane and fall back toward the earth not entirely in control, but also so I could definitively conquer my fear and eliminate my weakness.

At what point did that fire go out? Was it when I gazed upon the deified, painted RANGER tabs in the training areas that I accepted my status as not good enough? Was it when I chanted cadences about being a Ranger even though "girls can't do that?" Was it when my body, which had so often made me feel powerful, failed me repeatedly? Was it when instructors stopped seeing potential in me that I stopped seeing potential in myself?

I can't say when I stopped believing in myself, but at some point in my four years as a West Point cadet, I gave up living by adventure and nerve, and started living by fear and acceptance. Acceptance that I wasn't, that I couldn't. It took much longer than four years to earn a measure of that boldness back.

If they had opened Ranger School to women while I was serving, would I have trained? Would I have gone? I know the answer.

I am not them.

I wonder about them, their backs, their shoulders, their knees and ankles, and all the other parts that tend to ache when rucking. Has Ranger School left marks on them?

The ruck I carried at West Point left its mark on me. The mark remains hidden most of the time, but when I carry anything heavy

on my shoulders, purple-red dots and streaks reappear. The grid of broken blood vessels spans both shoulders, sometimes the top of my back. Over the years, it has become easier to coax this mark from hiding. Several months ago, it reappeared without any weight on my shoulders at all, but simply from the strain of giving birth to my second son. The mark is a totem of my personal history of perseverance and of my belonging with West Point, with the Army, with a life that now feels long lost. I am proud of this reappearing mark because it reminds me that I have done difficult things before, that I once lived life by ambition, by desire, by confidence, by fire. Like my mark, these qualities are often hidden these days, but they too wait just below the surface, ready to reappear.

The Ranger women are that version of me. I was them. The center of me still is.

Much of the history we teach is made by the people we taught. This slogan features prominently on much of West Point's recruiting materials, or at least it did when I applied to the Academy. It is now in my news feed as the headline on West Point's congratulatory post for the first two graduating Ranger women.

Their achievement is historic, just as the first women graduating from West Point in 1980 was historic. Some of those "first" women, and more than seventy-five West Point women spanning the thirty-five different graduating classes, arrived at Fort Benning for the first Ranger class graduation with women. I couldn't go, but I watched the live feed online and checked for pictures on my news feed almost obsessively.

Before the graduation, Rangers performed a Skills Demonstration, a scripted action-comedy show with all the hallmarks of the genre: explosions, fights, pantomimed humor. Rangers narrated the action in a metered, mechanical cadence that made it even funnier.

In the demonstration, I recognized many skills that I learned at West Point and in the Army, and I indulged the nostalgia of a life that shaped me but is now faded. The Rangers spent a lot of time demonstrating close-quarters combat, and it jogged back into focus a memory that I had long forgotten. I, too, once trained at Fort Benning, in a gender-integrated close-quarters combatives class. The culmination of that week-long class was a punch. On the very first day, we were warned by one of the instructors of our impending doom.

"On the last day, you will go toe-to-toe with me. No one leaves here without getting punched in the face."

In that class, women practiced with men, trained with men, took punches equally with men. That class wasn't special or noteworthy. Why, then, was this Ranger School graduation special and newsworthy and historic? It was not because women had never trained, fought, or led beside men before. It was not because what these women accomplished is unimaginable or will never be replicated. It was historic simply because it was allowed.

Grip hands.

This phrase is repeated several times on the West Point Women Facebook page. It is from "The Corps," by Bishop H. S. Shipman, a hymn written in 1902 that every cadet memorizes. I have long since forgotten most of it, but a few short lines have stuck.

Grip hands with us now, though we see not,
Grip hands with us, strengthen our hearts
As the long line stiffens and straightens
With the thrill that your presence imparts.

"The Corps" reminds us that West Point graduates are all linked, that we form a long, gray line that stretches back through a proud history and will stretch on ahead. It represents why, in some

ways, women graduates feel that these West Point sisters are our Rangers. But I did not earn the Ranger tab. That is their achievement. Yet history belongs to all of us, and most especially to those who have lived it and waited for it.

After I watch the live feed of the graduation of the first Ranger women, I gear up for a run. My GPS watch beeps to let me know it has found the satellites and is ready. I take a lumbering start, easing my bones and muscles into reluctant compliance. Like ruck marching, running is a live-action testament to my physical ungiftedness. But I think about the Ranger women, about West Point women. I think about my goal of running a ten-miler next year. The goal feels daunting, though there was a time it wasn't such a giant. No matter. Now I think of slaying giants. I push into the hills, submitting them to my will. I run farther and faster than I have in years.

DeAnna Acker served in the Army as an intelligence officer and deployed to Iraq with the 10th Mountain Division from 2007 to 2008. She writes fiction and essays, and is currently pursuing her MFA in Writing at Lindenwood University. She lives in Cordova, Tennessee with her husband and two boys, where they faithfully root for Army football and Memphis Grizzlies basketball.

Wind and Waves

By Tenley Lozano

My pack weighs in at fifty pounds when I load it into my dark green Subaru Outback the night before my backpacking trip with my husky mix, Elu. I'll be carrying all of our water for the three-day, twenty-two-and-a-half-mile trip, expecting all the streams shown on the map to be completely dry during this record-breaking California drought. On Friday morning, I wake up at 4:00 a.m. to walk Elu and her sister Dola, make my lunch, and then commute to work forty miles away in San Diego.

I normally start the workday in the naval engineering office at 6:00 a.m., but I've been coming in an hour earlier every day this week so I can leave at lunch today and begin the long weekend before traffic gets miserable. I've been drinking an extra cup of coffee just to get through each day and am already feeling worn out and anxious about backpacking with just my forty-five-pound dog. I leave the office at 11:00 a.m. and head to my apartment to pick up Elu and the water bottles I've been keeping refrigerated. Elu sees me grab her pack and wags her tail excitedly, running to the front door, jumping

and pointing her nose at the leash. She knows an adventure is about to begin and wants to make sure I don't leave without her.

When we get to Wrightwood, California, a few hours north of our apartment, a couple of friends let me park my car at their place and they drop off Elu and me at the trail with a leftover grilled chicken breast in a plastic bag for dinner. I met Cara at my wedding; she rented a room to my husband one winter when he was a snowboarding instructor on the mountain. Since I work weekdays and my husband works weekends, I started backpacking on my own a couple months ago. Cara's a parole officer, and concerned for my safety. "Call us if you have any trouble. We'll be available all weekend if anything happens. You're sure you'll be all right hiking alone?"

"I'll be fine. It's off-season, so there won't be many hikers on the trails. And I have my gun," I reply. I know that statistically, a snakebite or twisted ankle presents more of a danger than being attacked by a person on the trail, but after being sexually harassed by coworkers during my last few years in the Coast Guard, I find the weapon comforting, and I can appreciate that she's worried about me.

"What gun is it?" Cara asks.

"A Glock 17. I have a clip with regular cartridges and one with shot for animals."

"Good girl. That's a nice choice," she says approvingly, a small sideways smile on her face.

Her boyfriend adds, laughing: "I'm sure that shot spray would stop anybody trying to get into your tent, human or not!"

They wish us good luck and we head onto the Pacific Crest Trail at thirty-five hundred feet. The trail immediately starts to climb a steep hill and I watch them drive away on the dirt road. I'm glad that I've been spending two afternoons a week lifting weights at the gym. I've been squatting for the past few months, working up to a loaded barbell weighing as much as me. My glutes and quads don't

seem to be protesting carrying the pack up this steep embankment, but my lungs are straining. Every quarter mile I flop down onto the dirt gasping for breath. Elu doesn't even sit down, she's so excited to be out on the trail again, new smells all around us. "What have I gotten us into this time, Elu? Three fucking gallons of water. The things I do for you, dog. I'm exhausted already."

I decide to stop early and set up camp at 6:00 p.m. I check the map and see that we've made it four and a half miles along the trail and are now at six thousand feet above sea level, a drastic change from where we were this morning at our apartment. Since we've only hiked a few miles, Elu isn't even tired. Her pack weighs less than a third of her body weight, and I carry all of her water and her bulky sleeping pad. I share the grilled chicken breast with her inside our tent, adding bits of it to her kibble. After finishing our dinner, I snack on energy gummies as Elu curls up.

I step out of the tent at dusk to admire the view and watch the traffic on I-15 a few miles away. As far as I can see, red brake lights illuminate the highway, moving slowly, barely perceptible from this distance. I'm grateful to be camping under the stars with Elu, having left the life of a commuter and office cubicle worker behind for a few days. Naval engineering is a male-dominated field, and I find my abilities questioned every week by older men, similar to how I had to continually prove myself when I was a Coast Guard dive officer only two years ago. But out on the trail with just my dog, I'm completely reliant on my own skills and strength; no one is nearby to doubt me.

The next day I wake at 5:00 a.m., an hour before first light. Even though Elu and I didn't get the best sleep, I feel wide awake; she wasn't very tired and kept startling at the small noises of other animals in the shrubs around us. I eat a package of pureed sweet potatoes and fruit for breakfast while Elu munches on her kibble

with high-calorie treats sprinkled on top. As the sun begins to show at the edge of the mountains, I take my time packing up our campsite by headlamp and Elu sits on the trail facing away from me, diligently keeping watch.

I strap her pack onto her back, clip the leash to her collar, and loop the handhold of her leash around the waist belt of my pack, tethering us together. We step off into the Saturday morning dawn just as the sun is high enough to light our way along the trail. As we hike further into our route, the landscape passes through the chaparral plants that flourish in dry, nutrient-poor soil. We see Mojave yucca sprouting fifteen-foot tall stalks that bend under the weight of round green fruit, then a section of burnt trees and thriving smaller green plants, still recovering from a wildfire that raced through the area in 2009.

Elu and I continue to climb, following the Pacific Crest Trail through pine forests with breathtaking views of the gray rocky San Gabriel Mountains. We follow switchbacks along the narrow path and I lean into my hiking poles as Elu leads me upward. We come upon a section of trail that seems to cut straight through the mountain, a forty-five-degree incline of loose pieces of Mendenall gneiss to our right and an equally steep drop to our left. Elu doesn't falter, but my head is spinning. I know the vertigo will pass in a minute, and I trust Elu to lead me along the trail. Feeling the tension of her leash against my waist, I focus on her tan-colored, furry haunches as we walk the single-track path.

As soon as we reach the shade of a tree I tell her, "Wait." Elu stops in the shade, lying down to rest, and I pour some water into her bowl. Taking the map out, I check our last reference point and try to find out how far we have to hike until we reach a dirt road. The simple math is difficult for me, and the numbers slip out of my head in seconds. I take another pack of gummies out, assuming

I must have low blood sugar if I'm thinking this slowly. We continue along the trail, and I battle my own mind to focus, stopping every few minutes to catch my breath and drink water. Again, I take out the map to check our progress, but I'm confused about how far we've walked, and how long it should be until we reach the next marker.

Something's wrong, something's wrong, something's wrong, I think to myself as we march under towering pine trees. Elu stumbles, tripping over a rock on the trail, and I call for another break. I sling my pack off and grab some jerky, sharing bites with her. Maybe we just need more protein. That will help us focus. Checking the map again, I still can't seem to figure out how far we've walked today. Maybe I'm just too tired.

"Elu, I'm taking a nap," I announce, and I stretch out on the trail to rest. We haven't seen a single person since we were dropped off nearly twenty-four hours before, so I trust that no one will stumble upon me blocking the route. Elu sits next to my head, looking out over the mountainside, as if standing guard over my prone body. After dozing on the path for a quarter of an hour, I check the map and trail guide again, startled to realize that we're sitting at eight thousand feet. "This is altitude sickness!" I tell Elu with relief, glad to have a name for what is causing my brain to suddenly be so sluggish.

We live at sea level and hiked over five thousand feet in elevation gain in one day. I'll later learn from a guidebook that some hikers consider this climb the most arduous in southern California, and I picked it for a simple weekend outing. I immediately adjust the day's goal to reaching the next public campground a couple miles up the trail, even though we'll get there in the early afternoon.

Elu and I take our time walking to Guffy Campground and reach it well before dusk. Looking around, I'm disappointed to find that all of the campsites are full of cars and families enjoying the start of Labor Day Weekend. I ask a woman in her fifties if there

are any open picnic tables left. “I’m just looking for a place to sit and rest for a while with my dog,” I say.

“I think they’re all taken, but we’ll share our table with you,” she replies.

I learn that she has been traveling with her husband and their pets since they lost their house a couple years ago. They have a cat, dog, and parakeet with them at the campsite, and their son, who looks to be about my age, is camping with them for the weekend. We trade stories, and they invite me for a dinner of chicken, pierogis, and cabbage. I gratefully accept, having been raised on the same food by my mother, who was the granddaughter of Polish immigrants. I’m heartened by the fact that they happily share what little they have with a stranger and I savor the food.

As we sit and eat at the picnic table, the wind starts to pick up and the noise from a campsite across the way seems to increase, as well. We’re huddled around the table in jackets, pants, and hats because of the cutting wind, but the other group—overweight white men—is standing around their grill in t-shirts and shorts, each with a beer in hand. They have four giant pickup trucks parked around the grill and someone yells then jumps into a truck, revving the engine. I feel anxiety building again in a way I haven’t felt since we set off on the trail yesterday. I realize how good I’d felt being away from people: not a lack of physical pain, but a lack of the corrosive anxiety that I feel when in the office, driving in Southern California traffic, or surrounded by people that I don’t know.

I feel a strong urge to put distance between us and these drunk people. I thank the kind family for dinner and get ready to head back to the trail. As I’m repacking Elu’s gear, a fight breaks out at the other campsite. The group has been drinking for hours, and even though they have children in their camp, some of the men begin yelling and pushing each other. I hustle to get Elu’s pack on her as

she stands on legs as shaky as a newborn fawn's and stretches. She looks like she's waking up from hibernation, not just a two-hour nap. I throw my pack on my back, much lighter now that we've drunk two gallons of water. Snapping the belt buckle on my waist around Elu's leash, I tell her in a soft tone that we need to hurry. The raised voices are several yards away from us, but I'm starting to feel panicky. We hear squealing tires, and I assume this group isn't opposed to drunk driving. We need to put some distance between us before Elu and I will be able to sleep tonight.

Elu is hobbling behind me, still sore from today's eleven-mile hike. I urge her to hurry as we pass the large Hispanic family that was quietly setting up their campsite while we were eating dinner nearby. They smile politely at Elu and me and laugh at how sleepy she looks. I'm struck by how different this family seems from the group of drunken white people at the other side of the campground. Even though they have about the same number in their group, the noise level is so much lower.

Then we're back on the trail and heading through a field of wildflowers as I noticed the sun setting. "One more mile? Two before dark? We need to hurry," I say to Elu. I stop to take a picture of the wildflowers and Elu marches around my side and in front of me, the usual lightness back in her step. We hear a car door slam and Elu stares into the woods, looking for the origin of the noise. As we keep walking, we see a red pickup truck, and my urge to hike further into the trees is renewed. We hike into an old grove of tall Jeffrey pines and find the first open area of ground.

"This is it, Elu," I announce, throwing my pack down and setting up our tent on the bed of pine needles. I let Elu off her leash to pee and I throw all of our gear into the tent, unrolling our sleeping pads and my sleeping bag by the light of my headlamp. Elu is alert, her head darting toward every noise, even if it's just a falling pinecone. I call her into the tent and we settle in.

As I drift off to sleep, I hear the wind begin to howl. Beneath the pines we can't feel the wind, but above us, it screams through the tops of the trees in all directions. The sound slips into my dream and Elu and I are adrift in a white wooden lifeboat, the sea roiling around us, waves breaking on all sides. I lean into her, and feel the warmth of her body coiled against my sleeping bag. In my dream I wonder if dogs get seasick, and I nestle tighter towards her. We're being rocked in turbulent seas, the ocean raging around us, but I know that I will keep her safe.

When I wake in the middle of the night to the moon shining brightly through the swaying tree branches, the sound reminds me of the summer I sailed on the Coast Guard barque *Eagle* from Connecticut to Newfoundland and then across the Atlantic Ocean to Germany. A former Nazi training vessel built in 1936 and armed with anti-aircraft weaponry for use in World War II, the 295-foot long ship has three masts covered in sails and is now used by the Coast Guard as a training ship for Academy cadets. Following Coast Guard Academy tradition, I sailed on board *Eagle* during my sophomore summer at the military college. Watching the trees dance to a midnight moon two hundred feet above my head in the Angeles National Forest, I remember my first storm at sea.

The boatswain's mate first class in charge of the foremast asks for volunteers: "It's going to be windy up there. It might start raining. We're going to be working, not stopping to watch the sunset. If you are afraid of heights, don't waste my time. Who wants to climb?"

I raise my hand and he motions me forward with less than ten of my fellow junior cadets. My dad always said to learn everything I can in a new environment, so I don't hesitate to volunteer for the task of pulling in sails. The cadre, cadets learning leadership skills during their senior summers, don't have a choice; if they don't have

a more pressing job to do, they'll be climbing the rigging. A handful of permanent party crew are already fitted out in harnesses, prepared to supervise the less experienced cadets. I'm not afraid of heights; I savor them. That's part of why I want to be a helicopter pilot, part of why I signed up as a cadet at the Coast Guard Academy.

I dig through the box of climbing harnesses looking for an extra small marked with electric yellow-colored cloth over the bungee. I step into it like I'm putting on a pair of pants, right leg through the waist band and the loop that will hug my quads and hamstrings, followed by my left leg, belt snug against my waist over the baggy, dark blue cargo pants of my uniform. The neon-yellow bungee attaches to the belt area and has a clip as long as my hand on the end. I remember the training from the day before: whenever I stop climbing the spider web of ropes and beams, I should "clip in" and attach the oversized hook to any stationary structure. If I get blown off of the rigging or lose my grip in the cold rain, I will fall only as far as the four-foot-long bungee. This harness might save my life. Several cadets have fallen hundreds of feet from the rigging to their deaths.

With this grim thought in mind, I follow the BM1 up the rigging. He skitters up the black web of lines like a rat, faster than I will ever dare. This is his home, and he looks more natural climbing than he did walking on the teak deck below, his too-polished black Doc Martens boots giving the incorrect impression that he's not a working man. BM1 takes up post on the platform near the mast and directs us to clip in and spread out along the tan colored metal yardarm. I follow a junior enlisted man and one of my cadre out to the end of the fore topgallant yardarm and await further instructions. I know the woman next to me from the Academy, but she tells me her name is Christie, not just Miss Galetzke as I've been calling her for the past year in the hallways of the Academy. A cold rain starts to fall and she turns to me and says, "This is kinda scary."

I shrug and reply, "Yeah, but you've done this before."

"My Third Class *Eagle* summer, we sailed around the Caribbean! It was nothing like this. We had to worry more about sunburn than storms, but I'm really excited to see Europe," she says with a nervous smile.

I'm shocked to find out that Christie is less experienced than I thought. I assumed if you volunteered to sail on this ship for a second summer, you must be an expert on all things tall ship. Honestly, I'm pretty sure I'm more comfortable dangling on the yardarm than my upper-class instructor is.

The yardarm is bigger around than I can reach with my arms outstretched. Positioned parallel to the deck of the skip, it holds the topgallant sail out tirelessly, the second highest of the sails on this mast. The royal is the only sail above us, but it is already furled, its cloth rolls stuffed tightly into itself. We're standing on black ropes called foot lines that are intermittently tied onto a round metal beam attached to the bottom of the yardarm. They hang down low enough for an average-sized man to be chest-high with the top of the giant steel beam holding the top of the sail.

I am not an average-sized man, but rather a short woman. The sail is luffing at my eye line, bulging out and snapping in the wind. BM1 barks orders to his crew of willing participants. The rain falls on my hands and is so cold that it stings. The metal handrail I'm grasping tightly chills my fingers and as I reach for a handful of sail, I realize that my fingers are already stiffening up. I flex them again and again, trying to restore blood flow. I can barely reach the sail and I realize that I'll be useless while standing on the foot line. I check the clip on my harness, yanking it against the handrail and hearing the clink of metal against metal, the clip holding.

Taking a deep breath to steady my nerves, I pull with my arms on the handrail and reach for the sail on the forward side of

the beam, launching my body upward to lay my midsection over the cold painted metal as my feet lift off of the line and dangle one hundred feet over the deck of the ship. Christie turns to me with a look of horror, her dark curly hair flattened against her face on one side by the wind and rain. She is much taller, her long cross-country runner's legs placed firmly where they're supposed to be on the black rope.

"I'm still clipped in. It's fine. I can't reach otherwise. I mean, I don't want to stand by and just watch you guys work. Really, I'll be fine," I say, trying to reassure her.

The enlisted crew member next to her shrugs and says, "That's one way to do it." He seems unconcerned.

We're taking handfuls of the stiff sail with one hand and stuffing them into a pocket that we made with the same sail, tightly packing the fabric into itself. Below us on deck are the yells of the crew and rhythmic shouted replies of cadets as they haul around on a thick synthetic line that lifts the bottom of the sail upward towards us on the yardarm. They're giving us slack so we can properly furl the sail for the storm, but they do it slowly enough that the wind won't grab the sail and snap it out of our hands violently.

The wind picks up and throws stinging needles of rain at our faces. I grin into the evening sky, feeling exhilarated, my feet still dangling, the ship swaying gently in the rising seas, beginning to rock more now that the sails are no longer up to stabilize it. The sky is awash in a bubbling riot of colors and fluffy cumulonimbus clouds, signaling the coming storm.

We finish with the sail and climb down the mast along the ratlines, one by one. I have to focus on making my hands grip, hooking my elbow around the edge of the ropes, grasping with my whole arm rather than my mostly numb hand.

That evening, I find it nearly impossible to sleep. I'm one of the shortest cadets on board the ship, but I was assigned a top bunk, the third in the vertical stack, and my head is only a few feet away

from the red light that illuminates the twelve-woman berthing area at night, nearly every bunk full. The red bulb is intended to allow cadets coming and going to and from four-hour watches in navigation and lookout to see their personal items, but it is of a wavelength that will allow eyes to retain their night vision. After a year of sleeping in darkness in the barracks at the Academy, the red light glares at me.

The seas have risen as predicted since we lowered the sails, and the ship rocks steeply from side to side. We all have the toes of our empty boots wedged under our mattresses, an attempt to raise the outer edge of the bed enough to keep us sandwiched in, the boot heels secure against the metal handrails of our bunks. This keeps us safely inside our personal sleeping areas, but I'm small enough that even with the boot trick in place, I roll back and forth between the thin metal grating that separates me from the woman sleeping in the next bunk and the metal handrail, with a five foot drop to the laminate covering the steel deck. I rest fitfully. Every time we take a particularly large swell on our beam, I hear personal items clunk and thunk inside the metal storage lockers that are set two-high between the bunks like the ones from middle school.

The next morning, I climb out of my rack at 0630, hoping to catch sunrise before breakfast. I get dressed in my at-sea uniform of blue cargo pants, boots, and a Coast Guard sweatshirt and head up to the weather deck. I find Christie and her division of my classmates standing watch at the waist of the ship, ready to haul lines in, tending to the one sail that is set. I watch the waves as the ship heels heavily to one side, then rocks back to the other. Holding onto the side of the ship and leaning over, all I see is the pale blue sky of early morning, then the waves leap up at me, and I'm looking down into the ocean. It doesn't seem possible that we should be able to rock this far back and forth, port and starboard, and the ship be untouched by what look like giant waves to me. Somehow, the timing between

the waves is synchronized with the rocking of the ship so that we don't get splashed standing on the deck.

I'm so amazed by this weird perspective of seeing the ocean when looking straight out from the side of the ship that I head back below decks to my bunk to grab my good camera. As I'm reaching into my locker, the ship takes a particularly large wave, stops, shudders, and I hear crashing all around. Over the ship's loudspeakers we hear, "Corpsmen lay to the waist. Corpsmen to the waist. This is not a drill. All cadets stay below decks."

The ship's log from that day reads that there were eleven-foot seas and twenty-nine-knot winds. The synchronicity between ship and waves that I had just been fascinated by ended when a particularly large wave hit the ship off-rhythm. When I read about wave patterns and sizes later, I'll wonder if the wave that injured the cadets on board *Eagle* in 2006 would be classified as a "rogue."

All of the cadets on deck were standing where they were supposed to be, wearing climbing harnesses and clipped into a metal cable "lifeline." The cable was clipped to a bolt attached to the ship's structure at waist height. With the weight of the half-dozen cadets on the cable, the clip snapped. They all slid across the soaking wet deck, and were almost swept overboard. Five cadets were injured with broken bones, and Christie ended up with a fractured pelvis, while another cadet suffered a shattered kneecap, broken ribs, and a punctured lung. If I had been up there without a harness on, I might have gone overboard and surely would have been injured alongside them.

However, if the lifeline had been made of a half-inch thick double-braid nylon rope and attached with a bowline knot to the bolt, the knot would have been able to withstand the stress of those cadets falling and simultaneously pulling on the rope. The point of failure was the metal clip, but the officers in charge of *Eagle* had forgotten their background as sailors and relied on metal clips and cables rather than rope and knots.

I felt sad and disappointed that Christie and my classmates wouldn't get the opportunity to sail across the North Atlantic and the North Sea. They wouldn't have the same ties to our history as sailors and seamen. They wouldn't be standing with me on the deck as we crossed the Prime Meridian and the sky slowly darkened with the setting sun, only to immediately begin rising, an odd chartreuse glow on the horizon, the only time I would see the famed Green Flash.

Safely inside my tent, I sit up in my sleeping bag and pet Elu's curled body. She shifts a little on her mat and I lay back down to sleep. I wake to the beeping alarm of my watch in the predawn stillness of 5:00 a.m. The wind has quieted and the trees stand unwavering above us. The dream waves of last night fade as first light brightens the horizon through the pine branches. "Elu, time to wake up, we've got to get ready to hike again," I tell her in a gentle voice, already climbing out of my sleeping bag and getting dressed. I want to be on the trail to catch sunrise, but this time, I'll have my camera ready.

A couple miles down the trail, Elu and I watch the sun light up the peaks of the ruggedly beautiful San Gabriel Mountains, and I'm filled with the same exhilaration that I'd felt as a cadet watching the sky change colors from the rigging of *Eagle*.

After graduating from the United States Coast Guard Academy in 2008, Tenley Lozano spent five years as an officer in the Coast Guard. During her tenure, she was stationed in the engineering department on a ship that patrolled the Pacific Ocean from Vancouver to the Equator. She then attended Navy Dive School and spent two years as a diver. She is currently pursuing an MFA in Creative Nonfiction Literature from Sierra Nevada College and working as a ship design engineer. She lives in Oceanside, California.

Warrior Culture

By Kate Hendricks Thomas

In truth, it is wildly antithetical to military culture to admit to needing help with anything, particularly a nuanced, misunderstood problem like mental health. Depressed veterans face inexorable stigma when it comes to care-seeking for a possible or confirmed condition. This stigma shapes behaviors and choices, and the pressures come from within as much as from the surrounding environment.

We joke in the Marine Corps about "drinking the Kool-Aid," which simply means thoroughly embracing the culture and lifestyle. Everything is intense, and we are demanding of ourselves and one another. When you're serving, you are a part of an insular tribe. The commitment to a shared set of values becomes comfortable and feels automatic—unquestionable, even. Many of these shared and reinforced values involve strength and dependability, and it becomes comfortable to work to be those things at all times.

I did well within that system for a long time, never realizing that my attachment to a self-image of dependability was so strong that it was tilting me dangerously off balance. It isn't something you realize until that self-image becomes threatened.

My story started the way many do, with sparkly attraction that morphed into friendship, then into love. It was the sort of love that changed the way one saw the world. Unfortunately, my story also ended the way too many do, with holes in the walls, broken doors, and police knocking at the front door.

I met Kyle by accident—I hadn't even planned to go out to dinner with my friends that evening. I walked up to the table with hair casually tossed into a ponytail and zero expectations. He smiled at me, and he had a smile that seemed to light up the room. I remember that being my first impression—a wide smile and lots of very white teeth.

I still grin when thinking about that first dinner and the way our eyes meeting felt like an electric shock to my entire body. There was a knowing in our eye contact, and it seemed like the decision to become inseparable was made for us both in that instant. Kyle made me laugh at every turn. He was charming and outgoing—the life of every party. It seemed to me that his dynamic personality lit up every room he walked into.

We were both Marine officers, which meant he understood my work world. I can't tell you how ridiculous it was to try to date a civilian guy as a Marine; I got so many crazy comments, odd looks, or would-be boyfriends who couldn't understand why I was *still* at the office. My job demanded long hours at least six days per week. I often slept in the field or had overnight duty, and it was a relief to spend time with a man who understood a schedule like that.

We worked hard and played even harder, which was all perfectly normal in the Marine Corps. Free time was a rare commodity, making us feel like every night out should be as epic as possible. We were sensation seekers who were always up for a challenge or adventure. To us, epic nights out often meant heavy drinking and keeping late hours at bars.

Kyle and I got serious quickly. Lots of us on active duty did that.

Someone was always deploying and those outside circumstances often forced big questions and placed premature pressures on military relationships. Soon after we started dating, Kyle was packing bags to head overseas again, and we had to make quick decisions about what we were to one another. Moving in together, getting married, and spending as much time together as the Marine Corps allowed wove the tapestry of our early relationship, and we were at once both wild and wildly happy.

It is hard to explain what my tie to Kyle felt like. He was the first person I shared almost everything with, and he was never judgmental. The guardedness that characterized my professional life of course seeped into my personal life, and I had always shown boyfriends incomplete versions of myself. For someone unaccustomed to sharing, doing so felt cathartic and bred feelings of closeness that allowed me to ignore certain things.

First came the red flags that I ignored because I had all the same problems. Kyle drank in binge fashion, early and often. He was reckless and took risks at any opportunity, always up for some untried, new experience. Most of the time I was right there with him. If you only had one day off or were counting down the days until your next overseas rotation, it didn't seem unreasonable to drink all day long or find something crazy to do in order to maximize your limited play time.

Then there were the flags that I somehow chose to ignore and excuse because I was blindly smitten. Kyle would mix prescription pain medication with alcohol, or go out late and head to work without sleeping at all. One night he was gone until 4:00 a.m. and couldn't explain where he had been. He had dark periods of time where he would disappear into himself, crawling into bed for days and taking NyQuil to stay asleep.

It still seems embarrassing to admit out loud that I didn't see the downhill slide. I was at once too busy and too proud. At the time,

I didn't see Kyle's behaviors as symptomatic of anything larger than boredom or a bad attitude, and I railed against each one with righteous anger. It became a cycle of fights, promises, and forgiveness that was always on repeat.

I also stayed very good at keeping up appearances. When one of his angry outbursts left a foot-sized hole in our wall, I moved furniture and arranged pictures to cover the damage. When family and friends came to visit, I had clever explanations for why the doors in our house were off the hinges. Loud yelling became shoves into walls or furniture. Drinking became hard drugs like cocaine or benzodiazepines.

Our fashionable apartment and put-together life started coming apart, and my self-denial got harder to keep up. One sunny afternoon, he dragged me across the living room floor by my hair and threw me out the front door. I remember being glad that our industrial-style concrete floors were smooth and polished—at least I slid easily.

I can't even recall why he was angry. The neighbors who called the police never asked me any questions, and I never offered them anything but averted eyes. I couldn't tell anyone about it, even as forgiving and forgetting each incident was getting harder and harder to do. I was all alone at this point by choice. I was too invested in seeming smart at all times, and I knew smart women weren't supposed to have problems like these in their relationships.

The influence of culture on my behavior during that period of time and on behavior in general cannot be understated. It never entered my mind that Kyle had a problem with depression or stress injury, and that all of his self-medication had a source. It never entered my mind to go ask someone for help with an abusive relationship that kept escalating.

Never.

I'm a freaking Amazon. These things don't happen in my world.

One's surrounding social norms play a vital role in shaping the attitudes and beliefs commonly used to delineate and define culture, and my culture was one of independence and infallibility. Only the weak had problems, and my husband and I couldn't be weak.

In insular and intense communities, normative values can become highly prescriptive and are enforced in a myriad of intangible ways. It can become tough to describe why a belief is held when cultural norms reinforce it; the belief is likely to feel like inarguable fact. Once deeply internalized, social norms become part of our ego identity and our notion of who we are at our deepest level.

Emotional norms become more than internal disciplinary tools as they are reinforced by colleagues. Such reinforcement is rendered more effective in communities with high levels of adherence to hierarchy. Especially in military communities that promote competitive individualism, this allows the expectations of others to weigh heavily on warriors' shoulders. We become committed both to serving one another and to looking "together" in our own eyes and in the eyes of our fellow service members.

As things got worse in our home, I was truly not equipped to be a real source of help to Kyle. I was as invested in presenting an image of strong silence as he was, trained and driven to disregard symptoms that were staring me right in the face. Warrior subculture tends to promote the belief that acknowledging emotional pain is synonymous with weakness and, specifically, that asking for help for emotional distress or problems is unacceptable.

Mark Malmin's anthropological work with military and law enforcement communities paints a picture that resonates with me. Years after leaving the military and Kyle, I would read his words in a journal article and gasp at their accuracy. He made plain the consequences of my cultural buy-in and explained how warrior culture can distort critical thinking and good judgment in cases where warriors

suppress emotional pain, fail to apply sound cognitive thinking, acknowledge real health or wellness issues, and intentionally choose not to seek help that might remedy a mental health problem. If strength is a virtue, becoming a patient is antithetical to being virtuous.

There is nothing untoward to see here.

I've got this.

The result of such a firmly entrenched value system is feeling a whole lot of shame associated with emotional struggle, patient identity, and mental health conditions. They are simply not options. This doesn't just mean that service members deny needing help; it means that we avoid recognizing symptoms as such in ourselves or in those we are close to. If forced to address displayed symptoms, we will take denial to new heights and even actively dodge treatment when prescribed.

The Department of Defense and the Veterans Administration work tirelessly to provide treatment options for service members with depression and stress injuries. Within the military community, the issue isn't lack of screening for depressive disorders, nor in the medical care available to service members suffering from depression. Rather, the problem is getting veterans to use treatment services. I was a leader who had directed Marines working for me to Family Services or Combat Stress many times.

Use them myself? Not an option.

A major reason service members avoid treatment is that recommendations to seek it often come from civilian mental health providers. Because warrior cultures have their own temperaments, members are typically exclusive and mistrustful of outsiders with different life experiences. The military is an insular world, and well-intentioned providers are simply not a part of it. Research has shown that after deployments, separating service members feel incredibly disconnected from civilians.

At no time in my military career was this feeling stronger than right after coming home from Iraq. I served with the Second Military Police Battalion in Fallujah for much of 2005. I felt most days like I was part of something important, surrounded by people I would do anything for, and that my work mattered.

The Marines I worked with meant more to me than anything in the world, and that feeling was mutual. It was proven to me in very practical ways in Iraq.

As military police, one of the things we spent time doing was traveling around the country to meet with Iraqi corrections officials to discuss how things were being done in their prisons. On a trip down to Al Hillah, we stayed aboard a joint base with soldiers from Mongolia and Poland. As a woman in Iraq, you are stared at frequently no matter where you are, but among the Mongolians I looked like a blonde giant and received a lot of funnier-than-normal looks and even a few requests for photos as though I were a novel alien. Some of the other looks shot my way from the Polish soldiers were less friendly, but I paid them little mind.

The day after arriving, we left the confines of the Forward Operating Base, venturing into the city of Al Hillah to visit the local prison, which happened to be one of the few facilities that held incarcerated women. The women's prison, if one could even call it that, was a single room with a drain in the center of the floor. Women of different ages were being held, some with their toddlers sleeping next to them on the concrete floor. The translator told me that there was nowhere else for the babies to stay, and no one else to care for them. Social services weren't coming to help those little ones.

Some women were there after a rape or accusation of adultery in order to protect them from family reprisal. It was heartbreaking and strange when a little girl ran up to me to be held. She gazed at

me as though I were the most interesting thing she had ever seen and chattered in a language I couldn't understand. She kept running back to her mother to ask questions and point at me. I was twenty-five and not terribly maternal yet, but her sweet smiles tugged at something in me.

My job was to make some recommendations for how conditions might be improved for those women and those sleeping babies. I felt woefully out of my depth, and knew I would depart leaving little changed. One infant in particular was sprawled out, sleeping peacefully with his face pressed against the hard ground. He was sleeping the way one does when truly spent, oblivious to surroundings. His arm reached out, just so, to brush the legs of his mother. As our gazes met, I was struck by her sad eyes. I left there feeling incredibly pensive. Was I making anything better here? Back on the base, I went to sleep holed up in a disintegrating barracks room with a plywood door. My fellow Marines were next door, and we knew we only had a few hours to close our eyes before leaving to head back to Fallujah.

Sometime in the dark of night, I clicked awake. I don't know why, but I felt the overwhelming need to be alert. I reached for my service weapon, which was reassuringly nearby, as always. Suddenly, the plywood door was shaking as someone started to pound on it and try to push it open.

The language outside the door was foreign, and the words were slurred with alcohol. The rape risks facing women on overseas bases were no secret, and I knew what was happening immediately. I assumed being aggressive would lend me a better advantage than sitting quietly while they broke the crappy door down. I moved toward it with my 9mm in hand. As I opened it to see two Polish soldiers drunkenly trying to push their way in, the Marines in the hut next door flooded out. I don't even remember everything they said, but the tone was beyond clear.

What the %^*$ are you doing here at her door?

The soldiers mumbled apologies and left hurriedly in a fit of self-preservation, both disappointed and embarrassed. I cannot remember ever seeing drunk people move that fast! I didn't feel afraid, though I knew their intentions were to try to sexually assault me that night. I was armed and I didn't need to be worried for a second with my people nearby.

I was lucky and blessed to be a part of that team.

I wish all my sisters could say the same.

My experiences in Iraq on convoys and with incoming indirect fire were characterized by excellent timing and good fortune; I came home totally unscathed by either contact or injury. The most I ever saw on the road was a controlled Improvised Explosive Device (IED) detonation. That is a pretty rare thing to be able to say and for many people I loved, this wasn't the case.

My younger brother and I have always been close. He was a Marine Corps infantry officer, and when I was near the end of my stint overseas, his was just beginning. Stars aligned when his unit flew in and I had just convoyed down to the Forward Operating Base where they were to arrive. We overnighted there, and I made sure to check the incoming flight list.

I was able to get to the hangar around the time his unit was landing and be there waiting for him. I probably had some big-sister notion about welcoming him and telling him everything he might need to know to stay safe. I still remember watching him getting off the C-130 with all his gear. He looked ten years old to me, buried in a rucksack with big, blue eyes peering out from under his Kevlar helmet. I wondered for a moment how his unit had let a kid on the flight.

My heart sunk when I saw him, and for the first time since arriving in Iraq I allowed myself to feel reality. I knew where his guys were headed and it terrified me. Ramadi was a bad place in 2005; we all knew that.

A month later, I was landing safely in North Carolina as an IED changed the world of several Marines and a young Navy corpsman forever. My brother was in that vehicle.

Thank God, he lived through the experience, though it crushed him that not everyone did. He was medically evacuated to Ramadi Surgical, then Baghdad, then Germany, then Maryland. I remember being ticked off that I hadn't known he was hurt so that I could have tried to finagle my way to him. I was peacefully packing gear not far away. The thought that he might have woken up scared or alone when I could have been there killed me. Once we were both home, I was so grateful for the chance to spend hours by his recovery bedside in Bethesda Naval Hospital—it was better than the alternative funeral at Arlington Cemetery.

For me personally, it was the beginning of a really confusing time in my life. Since I had just returned from my deployment, I had some time off that I elected to spend near him. I spent some nights in the hospital lounge, a couple with my parents at the Fisher House, and many others with family and friends in the DC metro area. I would leave the hospital some days and spend time in the "real world," but it was a world I no longer recognized. Everyone seemed so casual and happy, oblivious to the pain and sorrow facing the young men I had just left on Ward Five. I didn't know how to speak to civilians, and my resentment of their complacency seethed under the surface. I was simply angry with no articulable words for why.

I got a bit self-destructive that month. I broke up with the supportive, stable boyfriend I'd had for years because he had left the active duty Marine Corps and somehow now fell into the category of "people with different priorities who didn't understand." I spent my time with fellow Marines, partied too much, and tried not to say out loud what I was thinking about most everyone who wasn't in the service.

My struggles connecting with even well-loved friends and family whose lives were untouched by the wars was far from unique. It felt unbelievably awkward, and for me created frequent feelings of disbelief and rage. I stopped wanting to speak to anyone who didn't speak my chosen language of alienation and latent anger.

I can look back and bemoan my lack of awareness about reintegration, but having tons of skills may not have mattered either. Lots of people had the same issue. I was struck reading the story of a professional who was formally trained in combat stress and skillful reintegration. She knew more than anyone how to avoid feelings of disconnect, yet she herself was not immune. A mother and Navy mental health provider, Dr. Heidi Squier Kraft returned from serving with the Marines of Al Anbar around the same time as my brother and me to resume her stateside practice. Of the experience she wrote:

> *And so I returned to life as a clinical psychologist in a peacetime hospital. Despite my clinical knowledge that each individual's suffering is real and important, I often found myself staring in disbelief at my patients. I could not fathom the crises that my patients made out of their life events, nor could I empathize with the petty relationship, work, or financial stressors that brought them to tears in my office. Only months before, I had held the hand of a twenty-two-year-old hero who gave his life to save two of his men. I had witnessed courage in the face of injury and pain, loyalty in the face of grief. Everyday psychological problems not only paled in comparison, they struck me as frankly absurd. Despite the personal toll seven months of war had taken, I found myself wishing I worked on a Marine base. At least then I would know what to say to my patients.*

The feeling that American civilian culture was just as foreign as any far-flung land stuck with me, and it prompted me to stay in the Marines when my contract was up, to select a new duty station, and to move more completely into the mindset that characterized my time with Kyle.

Both card-carrying warrior culture members who adhered rigidly to all its norms and values, Kyle and I became a dysfunctional duo in the last year we were together. We both ignored symptoms and put Band-Aids on wounds that were both figurative and literal.

Kyle's personality was unpredictable. He would go from being really energetic to very withdrawn or even angry and violent without warning. One long weekend, he cancelled our plans to see friends. He went to bed for four days and wouldn't speak or even get up to eat. I stayed nearby, confused and worried, hoping to cajole him into a happier mood.

I didn't call anyone.

The military can be hard on families and relationships in a myriad of ways, especially with a few combat deployments thrown in. Not everyone who struggles in the transition from service member to civilian has a combat history, though, which surprises many. Kyle held fairly rear-echelon jobs in the Marine Corps. I had always thought of depression and stress injuries as combat related. I knew Kyle hadn't had experiences like my brother or others had, so I assumed he was (and should be) fine. Years later, I would read that combat exposure is not a reliable predictor of mental health problems, and what impacts one person may not affect another at all.

I don't think I will ever have a why. I know Kyle felt tremendously guilty for being gone during some tough times for his family. When his father lost a long and painful battle with cancer, he was halfway across the world, unable to lend anyone he loved a hand. He might have always had some issues simmering under the surface. I was simply too close to figure it out.

I'm not a psychiatrist, but to this day I cannot believe that I didn't recognize his dark symptoms. I knew he had the mood swings and sleeplessness that often come along with a depression diagnosis, but I never pushed counseling—that was something those other, weak people needed. I never associated him with mental illness nor considered it a possibility. I never asked myself if my own angry mental state or feelings of alienation were healthy.

Our days were very, very dark toward the end. They are a haze of alcohol and bad choices, walking on eggshells, crying, and making shameful compromises.

This isn't me.

This can't be who I am.

Is this the future I choose?

I did a lot of shameful things to try to hold my marriage together and to keep up a veneer of happy functionality. I wish I could say I was a good influence on Kyle, but I had an unhealthy approach to drinking and used alcohol as an escape from reality in all the same ways he did. I had no idea that Kyle had real problems, and that to him partying was more about self-medication than shaking off a hard week at work.

My best friend was disappearing into a sad place right in front of my eyes, and I didn't know how to see that reality, much less help him. Alcoholic, addict, depressed, unstable—these were all labels I couldn't bring myself to apply to him. I was both ill-equipped and too close to help. No matter how much I read about codependent behavior or how often I hear differently, it still feels like a failure I will always carry.

I was afraid in my own home, but I would never have labeled myself a victim of anything. I had no idea yet that I needed help, and wouldn't have known how to accept it if someone had offered.

It wasn't until one of Kyle's particularly scary benders left me alone in our apartment, searching for places to hide our ammunition,

that I realized something had to change. He was mixing alcohol with Valium at the time, and I could barely understand his speech. He had become paranoid, obsessively checking my whereabouts, phone records, and e-mail inbox.

I had no idea where he had gone that night, but I knew he always came back drunk. I searched for places to secret away rounds so that even if he went for one of our weapons when he came home, he wouldn't have anything to fire them with. I knew he needed help, and a tiny doubt began to creep into my mind about whether I was ever going to be able to get him to seek it before something bad happened to me. It was the first time I considered leaving, knowing I might be leaving him drowning.

Service members are conditioned to avoid recognizing symptoms that could indicate depression or posttraumatic stress. This makes perfect sense when considering the unique and treatment-recalcitrant military culture in which this phenomenon occurs. Mental health conditions are viewed as moral failures, and civilian treatment providers as benevolent but untrusted outsiders. We don't want to see depression or posttraumatic stress symptoms in ourselves, in those we love, and we certainly don't wish to seek professional help.

The results of our belief system show up in our suicide statistics. Before the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the incidence of suicide in active duty US service members was consistently twenty-five percent lower than in the civilian population. Currently, military and veteran suicide rates exceed those found in the general population.

Providers work tirelessly to dream up new ways to treat depression and stress injury, but they can only ever provide a partial solution. The answer can't come solely in treatment form.

Too many of us won't recognize the need for professional help, seek it out, or stick with treatment if forced to go. It becomes easier to wall ourselves off from the world than to share vulnerabilities or shameful imperfections.

Without ever making any of these admissions, I filed divorce papers and packed the car. I called Kyle's sister and left her a message that asked her to look out for him without giving away any in-depth information. I was still being loyal, in my own mind.

I left everything material I owned at our former home with him and drove off, a completely broken version of myself.

Dr. Kate Hendricks Thomas is a health educator and assistant professor of Health Promotion at Charleston Southern University. She is the author of Brave, Strong, & True: The Modern Warrior's Battle for Balance, *from which this essay is excerpted. Kate is a former Marine Corps Military Police Officer, a fitness pro, and mom to both a fearless baby and the Great Dane who dotes on him. She can be reached via her website at www.katehendricksthomas.com.*

An Imperfect Storm

By Karen Ilene Dadey

In the brisk night wind of a desert land, I found myself standing alone, pointing my rifle into the darkness. The air war had begun the hour before—Air Force bombers were presumably lightin -up and destroying Baghdad—but Dhahran was quiet, very quiet. Suddenly, the company's chemical detection alarm siren ripped through the Dhahran silence like a desperate scream. My hands gripped my rifle. My heart pounded against my sternum like an ominous war drum, vibrating my core, resonating in my ears, and echoing in my stomach. At that moment, I realized that this is it. This is war; I am not a kid anymore.

My hands raced to unsnap my mask case and strap my gas mask onto my face, then I heard a loud clamor that sounded like a wrench banging on a metal drum. My fear became a suffocating pressure that drowned all sound and electrified a deaf concentration that only lethal fear can incite. Immediately, I stopped breathing and closed my eyes. The "metal on metal" signal meant that chemicals were present, and so was certain death: choking, blistering, convulsing, or bleeding to death, and none of these options seemed appealing to me whatsoever. My thick, drab green chemical suit already

covered me, and I had been enjoying its comforting blanket of warmth under the chilly onyx sky until the thundering echoes of metal clanging on metal shocked me into the morbid reality of war. I feared the chemical that was present. Was it mustard gas? Sarin? I violently thrust my head through my mask harness and quickly pulled the black, rubber mask to my face. After I hastily tightened my harness, I cupped my mask's mouth and forcefully blew my last breath free. After I pushed the airborne chemicals out of my mask, I promptly pressed the palms of my hands over my mask filters. My heart thumped loudly as I vigorously inhaled. The smallest leak would guarantee that my lifeless body would be zipped in a body bag and flown to Dover, Delaware for its autopsy. My mask collapsed firmly against my face and reassured me that I still had hours left to live. I shoved my hands into my black, rubber gloves. My heart raced, and every direction in my newly confined world smelled as bitter as a new tire. I nervously rechecked my mask to confirm the tight seal then hurried to point my rifle into the night.

As I peered into the darkness, I recalled performing several guard duty shifts where I protected my company's perimeter from an imaginary enemy, but this was my first guard duty during war. Lucky me, I was on the field for kick-off. I tensely scanned the horizon. There was nothing to see and the only sounds were those of the siren's piercing screech nearly muting creaking groans. My lookout platform, a crude construction of plywood and thick, wooden beams, groaned as it swayed with the winter wind.

Guard duty always gave me time to think. As I monitored the seemingly uneventful darkness, with a harsh rubber stench snugly encasing my face, I recalled images from a 1988 *Time Magazine* article I read in my high school library. During my high school years, I did not know of Saddam Hussein or anything about Iraq, until I read the *Time* article about Iraq's tyrant gassing Kurds in Halabja. I especially

remembered the photo of the dead Kurdish woman who clutched her swaddled, dead baby and the sadness I felt for her. She must have felt sheer terror and helplessness as she ran then fell to the ground dying. I imagined the woman witnessed her baby die before she also succumbed to death.

I repeatedly checked the seal on my mask and watched the wind's direction as it danced on branches of nearby trees. I hoped with every fiber of my being that this attack would be survivable, but I feared the possibility that it was a blood agent attack. Blood agents are ammonia-based chemicals that would penetrate my gas mask filters with ease, so I could not prevent my death against blood agents. Nerve agent chemicals are equally as inhumane, yet rarely survivable. Everyone in my company was supposed to take a pyridostigmine bromide pill every day to give our bodies a boost against the complete molecular dismantling that nerve agent chemicals cause. The pills theoretically bind the body's molecules together like "molecular glue" to increase the body's resiliency against exposure to nerve agent chemicals. That is the theory. Practical application was probably a different story. Regardless, I took my pills religiously and chose to believe they would work.

I felt most afraid of a chemical attack, because surviving one was the single aspect of war I was most unprepared to confront. My company had not trained to survive a chemical attack beyond the first few hours. Prior to deploying from Fort Bragg, my commander discussed his vague concept of how we would decontaminate our vehicles, our equipment, and ourselves, but we really did not know how the plan would come together in real time. His idea was that we would immediately wipe ourselves as best we could, convoy to an undetermined, upwind location, and that is where I imagined total chaos would ensue. Theoretically, we would erect a decontamination site of tents with showers and scrub the chemicals off each other.

There would be no time to be prudish or self-conscious about body image issues. There also would be no time to worry about the gender of the soldier scrubbing my naked body. It would be time to trust that men would compartmentalize their sexual behavior, embrace self-control, snap into a protective survival mode, and see me as an able-bodied team member capable of saving their lives. However, I was convinced that this chemical attack would result in everyone suffering painful deaths, just like the poor Kurdish woman who died clutching her infant child.

As I anxiously rechecked the seal on my mask again, my inner voice cut through my panicked redundancy. She calmly asked, "Where is the enemy, Karen? You heard the alarm and the metal-on-metal signal, but where is the enemy?"

My inner voice is a genius whom I respect tremendously, because she consistently has served as my "harm alarm" and alerted me to details that I needed to see in order to protect myself from pain or death. I do not know how she knows all that she does, but she always sees everything before I do.

I continued scanning the uneventful horizon. Dumfounded, I replied, "I don't know." The burning sensation in my stomach felt like I had swallowed the sun. It was my signal that something was not right. My inner voice's relentless questions quickly became an unbearable noise. She had never let me down before, and I only experienced harm when I ignored her; so I trusted her—no matter how interruptive and annoying she might be. Pointing my rifle at the depth of nothingness, I scanned the horizon slowly and more intently than before. The trees waved. Frustrated, I blurted into my mask, "Is this real? Where in the *fuck* is the enemy?"

The siren immediately fell silent; so did my inner voice. I suddenly felt as mortally alone as the Kurdish woman must have.

The guard duty sergeant broke the silence as he bellowed from the ground below, "Private Dadey, all clear!"

My muffled yell struggled through my gas mask, "What do you mean, Sergeant? What happened?"

The sergeant defensively snapped, "It was the wind. All clear. Your relief will replace you in thirty minutes." He scurried into the darkness.

I ripped my mask off my head and barked, "Then what was with the metal on metal?"

The sergeant was already gone. His priority was to deliver his message to the other perimeter guards and he had no time to entertain my annoying curiosity.

So there I sat, alone with the hard truth. There was no chemical attack. There was no enemy contact or looming death. The chemical detection alarm was sensitive to breezy weather. That was a highly unpleasant way to learn an inconvenient lesson—that chemical detection alarms are unreliable—especially in a war against the evil gasman, Saddam Hussein. My inner voice flashed a pompous smirk at my revelation then smiled kindly, reminding me to trust her. As I humbly sat in my numbskull nest, desperately wanting my guard shift to end, I complained aloud to the night, "Really? The wind? All that panic over the wind?" I sighed, "War sucks."

In the first hour of Desert Storm, I discovered the most powerful enemy in war, and his name was not Saddam. His name was Fear.

Karen Dadey is a retired US Army strategic intelligence officer who served in Iraq (Desert Storm), Somalia, and Afghanistan. She performs in film and theatre in Washington, DC, and lives with her cat Duke in Arlington, Virginia. Her website is www.karendadey.com.

Mr. Angry Pants

By Carolyn Schapper

October 27, 2005

Convoy. Convoy. It's all becoming the same, even though it has barely been two weeks here. The route that scared me to death the first day now seems like an easy day. We dropped the team off we replaced yesterday and today is the first day in six days that we aren't going outside the wire. It's crazy to think we're in charge now. It really is exhausting to leave the wire, even if it is a short mission, because your senses are on overdrive paying attention to every little detail. It's even worse for our gunners riding up in the turret. I feel so sorry for them sometimes, I have to control my impulse to reach over and hug their little legs (that's all I can see) all the time. I'm pretty sure I'd freak them out if I did that. They would wonder why they are being attacked from within the vehicle. It is strange being with this team of people I've barely known a month and depending on them, and/or wanting to hug their legs.

My team leader is all right. Because of him, my nickname of "Scrappy" from my home unit has caught on. Everyone calls me

Scrappy now, that's fine, but today someone called me Scrap. That's a little less attractive. In fact the person who called me that is another team member that I affectionately call (to myself) Mr. Angry Pants. He's cracked out on cigarettes and coffee, yet he takes offense to greasy food and soda. Whatever. He's former Army and did the same job as he's doing now, counter-intelligence, but the job has changed, as we are now a tactical HUMINT team and he's not adjusting too well, he stresses way out when we go anywhere. He wants the safe little room on base where people come to him to tell him things. He's not very keen on the current reality of going out on missions. He has his own home business when he's not Army, and I now know why. He does not really play well with others and by necessity needs to work alone. Otherwise he's okay, a good person in general, but does not really seem to look too kindly on my liberal or Catholic ways, oh well, it's not the first time I've been judged in the Army. One of our gunners is very competent, he's former infantry, he really knows his stuff and I trust him completely; he has a way of telling me to do something when I'm doing it wrong that does not offend me in the slightest. I think I must secretly be in love with his legs. Although, being recently divorced and bitter, he does harass me on all things "woman." Our other gunner is young and inexperienced and people worry that he's too ambivalent about his job, but I think that's why his legs need a hug the most. Our interpreter is a bit on the gruff side as well, the other team has a very pleasant one, I wish we could trade. My interpreter (Terp, for short) kept telling me to smile yesterday. Note to all: the surest way to make me NOT smile and gain an enemy for life is to tell me to smile. The third time he said it, I just said, "Why?" I don't even remember his response. But in my opinion only simpletons walk around with a smile on their face all the time. And I am in a war zone, trapped in a smelly house of boys. Why would I be smiling? You all should just be happy that

I am functioning and going about my business. So, the point is: I don't feel like hugging his legs.

Irony

November 7, 2005

I was originally assigned to work on the Operational Management Team (OMT), which is an office job really and, therefore "safe." Turns out an E-6 wanted to be on the OMT basically because he was afraid to go outside the wire, so he asked repeatedly to get on it claiming he needed the experience for his future warrant officer position and after much debate they bumped me while we were in Kuwait, a week before going into Iraq. The Lieutenant on the OMT told me it was because the guy was scared. It did not really matter to me, although I know my parents would prefer me to be in the OMT, it did not seem like I'd really be doing what I was trained for.

The irony is, barely three weeks into being in Iraq, he just got transferred to our house. So he ended up where he was supposed to start. However, he will still be confined to the house. He's our "houseboy," he is supposed to stay here and watch the weapons/radio/computers while we are out on a mission. So, he is still "safe" but he's at a far suckier FOB than he was at before. I call it karma for being a suck ass E-6.

The First Night Raid

November 23, 2005

The last week or so has been a dark one here, our small base lost seven soldiers in three days. The saddest moment being when we found out four died in one vehicle when they went out to recover the other vehicle that had been hit. I saw the vehicle and it sends a chill through you. Anyway, the powers that be here are pretty upset so they set up a forty-eight-hour mission to take over an "island" on

the Tigris just north of us that is pretty much farm land, but word had it that there were weapons caches and bad people responsible for the attacks. I have to admit, I was freaked out. The other female in the house said she could not get images of Blackhawk Down out of her head. I couldn't imagine what to expect, but I didn't think it would be good. Mr. Angry Pants has not slept. He has been up all night drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes and reading his Bible. The extra special irony is that Houseboy, who is afraid to leave the base, has to be a driver! Mr. Angry Pants and Houseboy have become good friends because they both have a very strong belief that they are going to die and do not want to leave the base.

Basically we (pretty much every soldier from the FOB) went in the early morning to "invade" the island. The initial elements went in with air assault and we followed on. However, because we were driving 'blackout' (which is no lights on the vehicle whatsoever) and using only NVG's (night vision goggles) our team members, Houseboy and Mr. Angry Pants, in the vehicle in front of us, turned the wrong way and we followed, but we quickly realized we had gone the wrong way so we turned around like every other element behind us, BUT we could not see Houseboy/Angry Pants' vehicle in front of us and I called them repeatedly on the radio (I was not driving thank God, but was in charge of radio comms), but they weren't answering. This was really bad, we had one vehicle traveling with blackout the wrong way and no way to get ahold of them. The last thing you want is to be alone out there. So, I called the infantry element we were following and told them we'd lost a vehicle, but they weren't listening to me, they just kept telling me to follow the car in front of me. It was infuriating that they would not listen to me. Finally my team leader took the radio, and we guess because it was a male voice on the radio, saying the same thing I'd already said three times, they finally listened and halted the convoy. I am positive they thought

I was some dipshit female who was just scared and I hate that a man had to take over to get the proper response. Luckily another element found our other vehicle after we halted and we continued on the mission, but we kept a close eye on the Houseboy/Angry Pants vehicle for the rest of the day.

Cigarettes Are Deadly!
February 3, 2006

This week was a lot of going to places way out in our AO (area of operations) that we hadn't been to before and others rarely go to. Anyway, we go to an area that is supposed to be a lake, but it's dry. There are no paved roads but we find our way to a distant village. The villagers offered to lead us out so we would not get stuck, but the convoy commander turned them down. Unfortunately, on the way back we seem to be a little lost. See above about no paved roads. Suddenly we halt. I'm driving the third vehicle in the convoy. Lead vehicle is stuck in mud. Second vehicle gets out, but I am not so lucky. Within seconds my truck has sunk to the frame of the vehicle, that's eighteen inches! Fortunately the fourth vehicle did not get stuck either. It tries to pull us out, but to no avail. I suggest that we use two vehicles on either side distributing the pull. Well this is what gets my truck out, but of course a boy claims victory for the idea! Anyway. We try everything to get the lead vehicle out without sinking another vehicle. Eventually some Iraqis wander up and suggest we go ask a neighboring village for a tractor. So one truck stays with the stuck vehicle; my vehicle and another take the Iraqis and go to the other village. My vehicle is the second vehicle and the lead vehicle is Mr. Angry Pants' vehicle and has the Iraqi giving directions with the terp. We're driving through the problem mud again and suddenly Mr. Angry Pants' vehicle takes a right and immediately sinks. Oh crap. Apparently, Mr. Angry Pants, without

considering the mud told the driver to go right directly into it. Everyone in that vehicle is on the verge of killing one another. We only have thirty minutes of daylight left. So we leave the vehicle and go it alone to get the tractor. Keep in mind that it was bad to have the four vehicles separate for security reasons and it is really bad to be driving by yourself or leaving one fairly defenseless vehicle stuck in the mud. We get the tractor and approximately twenty Iraqis come to "help." It's dark outside now and it does not work. Holy crap. Two vehicles stuck in two different locations—we have to finally make the call we've been trying to avoid all day—calling the Infantry and explaining that Military Intelligence got stuck in the mud and needs their help. Gulp. Especially bad that we are in the two locations.

The Iraqis who tried to help us ask if we need anything, now that we realize we will be here overnight. We all say "no," but then I hear Mr. Angry Pants ask them to bring him some cigarettes. You have GOT to be kidding me. I wrongly assume Mr. Angry Pants told our team lead that the Iraqis were going to return, but apparently not, because come nightfall several headlights start approaching us. The two gunners freak out and, rightly, fire a warning shot. The Iraqi vehicle stops. I suddenly realize Mr. Angry Pants had not told anyone the Iraqis would be coming back to deliver his cigarettes. Once this gets figured out, the gunner for Mr. Angry Pants' vehicle wanders out to the middle of the desert and just lies down. I am a little concerned and am about to go out and check on him when my gunner says, "Let him be. He just needs to decompress."

When we made the call to HQ we suggested they wait until morning since we think the rescue vehicles might get stuck too. Within minutes of the call we have air support to check the area. They call us on the radio and tell us that the rescue convoy is on its way. For a second we all have hope that we will not be sleeping in

the middle of Iraqi desert—freezing and hungry. I anxiously watch the rescue vehicles get closer on the blue force tracker. They call us up and say they are going to try to pull us out with their Humvees. "Are you sure? We kinda already tried that already." But whatever, our hope is at full bloom. Finally they get really close to us and then I get the call on the radio. "Umm, we seem to be stuck in the mud and are trying to extract." My reply: "Good luck." They not only remain stuck, but get their rescue vehicle stuck too! Now there are four vehicles stuck in the mud in three locations. But we secretly feel better that the rescuers got stuck too. The rescuers say they are recommending we be plucked out of the mud by Chinooks, because there is no way a vehicle can pull them or us free. Duh. Let the guard shifts begin. We spend the night rotating through hour-long guard shifts. Cold. Hungry. The sun rises finally. Hopefully the Chinooks will be here soon. Radio chatter—negative on the helicopters, they want to send more vehicles out to try and get us out! The lieutenant in the rescue vehicle is explaining that all vehicles will get stuck and only Chinooks are an option as this mud is really clay. The lieutenant was very good humored about everything, especially since this was their first mission. He calls us back and says they are looking into the helicopter thing, but nothing was decided. Oh, and by the way, rain is expected and this is a flash flood area. Two Apache helicopters come give us air support and are checking out the situation. The very cute sounding Australian pilot also recommends air extraction so that gives us some leverage. Now waiting for the Army to make a decision is a process in patience. We know we're not going anywhere soon. Around noon the Chinook option is finally okayed by a general somewhere. They'll be there in a few hours. Ughh! Seriously deranged with lack of sleep and food. Finally the Chinook comes. Everyone is waiting to see how this works. Apparently an up-armored Humvee has never been airlifted and

now they want to airlift six of them—they wanted to take our two unstuck vehicles too so they wouldn't get stuck on the way out. The reason it took so long to rally the helicopter is because they had to have the most experienced pilot do it as it has not been done. Up pops the first one. Oh my gosh! A truly awesome sight. However, they are concerned that the helicopter may not have enough fuel, so we decide to drive our vehicle out rather than get airlifted. But by this time my blue force tracker has died and we have no map. We have to have some Iraqis lead us out. So, there we were, twenty-four hours after the Iraqis offered to show us the way out and we refused, they end up leading my vehicle out anyway. *Inshallah.*

Boom Goes the Dynamite.
April 12, 2006

Well it happened, my Humvee was finally hit with an IED. Thank God that everyone is uninjured. Only the windshield and one mirror had to be replaced, so we are very lucky. My gunner and I were discussing that in fact this was one of the luckiest days of our lives and was truly a good day. If the insurgents had waited one second longer it may not have been so, as it only went off a meter in front of my truck. All I can remember is the color orange. Because the blast was so close, I drove through it pretty quickly with minimal debris/smoke/dirt, although it seemed to take forever. I cannot remember the sound of it at all. It is totally visual when it replays in my head—just a wall of orange as it turned into a wall of dust I could not see through. Anyway, part of me was happy it happened. It was kind of like I had been waiting for it and now that I've been hit, I can move on, as if I received my allotted IED and now I'm done and I don't have to wait any longer.

This IED taught me a very important lesson. I was completely willing to kill someone. I was filled with so much anger and emotion

that someone had just tried to kill my team and me that I wanted revenge. But as angry as I was at the Iraqis in that moment, there was something nagging at me as we stood there waiting for EOD to respond. Why was today the first day we got hit? Nothing about today had been normal. Because of various home leaves I ended up driving the vehicle for Mr. Angry Pants, who was in charge of the radio and ensuring that the anti-IED jammer was on. I would normally never doubt that a team member would not turn on this potentially life-saving device, but the gunner who usually rides in his vehicle said he forgot all the time and kept the sound on the radio so low that he rarely heard it. So, not only am I pissed at the Iraqis, I am in the difficult position of questioning a man two ranks above me. I did ask, and he, obviously, said it had been on. But I'll never be sure . . . it's not easy, not trusting your own team.

Where Did He Go?

I honestly do not remember what happened to Mr. Angry Pants. I know he left the FOB, but I do not know when or where he went. I do know that I became the team sergeant after he left. I cannot say I missed him. Nor can I say our team suffered from his departure. But I can be assured this man walks this earth smelling of coffee, cigarettes, and fear.

Carolyn Schapper served in Bayji, Iraq as a Sergeant in the Army National Guard in 2005/6. She took part in approximately 200 combat patrols, interacted extensively with the local population in and around Bayji, and became an area expert on the Bayji Oil Refinery. She currently works in the national security field in the Washington, DC area and is a National Security Fellow with the Truman National Security Project.

Fiction.

The Pointed End Goes Up

By Elizabeth Stetler

When I was fifteen, Mr. Johnson moved in next door. He was fortyish and tall, with a clean-shaven, angular jawline. He wore plaid shirts and boots and blue jeans every day, even to work. He drove a forest-green pickup that was rusting near the rear tire and his dog, a standard poodle, majestic and stallion-like with glistening black fur, always rode in front with him. I'd watch from our back window as Mr. Johnson threw toys or sticks and the dog grabbed them out of the air and brought them back to his master with care, his stark white teeth not all the way clamped down on the fabric or the plastic, not squeezing the life from within. I was in love with them both.

Sometimes Mom would join me at the window. She'd watch for a few minutes and then say, "Huh," and walk away.

One day, after he'd lived next door for about a month, Mom asked me why I didn't just go talk to him already. I told her that I couldn't; he would think I had a crush on him or something. But when Mom walked away I went outside.

"Well, howdy," he said.

I waved, embarrassed for both of us because he'd just said "howdy." Even though his greeting was a little awkward, I was willing to forgive it because up close he was even handsomer than he was from the window. His eyes sparkled a warm brown, like amber. And though his nose was crooked, as if it had been broken once and was never set right, it seemed rugged, manly. Even his eyebrows were strong and perfect.

"I'm Abe Johnson. This is Banjo," he said, petting the dog's head. "We moved down from Kalispell. And who might you be?"

Banjo's front paws were on the fence and he kept jumping, as if he were trying to come across but couldn't quite make it. Mr. Johnson grabbed Banjo's collar so he couldn't jump, so I reached over the fence and ran my fingers through the dog's shiny black curls.

"I'm Tara." I felt like I needed to say something else. "I always wanted a dog but my dad's allergic to dogs and cats." Mr. Johnson nodded knowingly. Then he looked past me. My mother had come outside and as she walked toward us, the sun caught her hair and spun it gold.

"I'm Claire." She held her hand out to Mr. Johnson.

He let go of Banjo's collar to shake her hand and Banjo jumped again, almost scaling the fence.

Over the next few weeks, I began to go on walks with Mr. Johnson and Banjo when I came home from school. At first Mom didn't seem too happy about it. She asked why I didn't hang out with my friends from school more. I knew that if I told her how much I'd missed out on by not ever being able to have a dog myself, she'd cave. She'd always felt bad that I couldn't have pets. So I played the guilt card and she left me alone.

I started reapplying my mascara and lip gloss right before I left school so that it would be fresh when I knocked on Mr. Johnson's door. I tried not to overdo it. I read in Seventeen once that the point

of makeup is to enhance your natural beauty. I wasn't sure if I had all that much natural beauty. My school friends always said how pretty my mom was, though. I hoped that beauty was one of those things you could grow into. Like, maybe she hadn't started out all that pretty either. Maybe she'd had frizzy, dirty brown hair and temperamental skin and too much hair on her arms. But then, as she got older, her hair became smooth and light and her skin took on the peachy glow that it had. I hadn't seen that many pictures of Mom as a teenager to go off of.

Sometimes my walks with Mr. Johnson were quiet. I tried to make him talk more, I asked him about his job and his favorite movie and things like that but he never really seemed that interested in talking about himself. He'd answer my questions with a word or two, sometimes not at all. When I asked him what his favorite book was, he said he'd have to get back to me on that but he never did. So I started telling him about myself, which is a thing I do when I'm nervous. I blabber. It seemed like by the end of our second week walking Banjo together, he knew my favorite band (U2), my favorite food (ice cream), my favorite book (*The Outsiders*), my favorite animal (dolphin), and my favorite actor (Leonardo DiCaprio). It felt like we were running out of things to say. But that was okay because just walking alongside of him felt electric. I'd intentionally walk a little too close, occasionally bumping into him. I'd offer to hold Banjo's leash just to touch his hands, which were calloused and strong.

Sometimes he was quiet but sometimes he talked. Sometimes he'd ask about Mom. I tried to answer his questions the best I knew how: she used to live in Wyoming and my grandparents still lived down there. We visited them every other year at Christmas. I didn't know what brought her to Montana and I didn't know how she and Dad met. I did know that she liked gardening and that her favorite movie was Casablanca. I knew she preferred tea over coffee. I knew that she wasn't going to let me be like her; I would go to college.

I would not be a stay-at-home mother. He told me that she seemed too smart to have not gone to college. He told me he never went to college.

I was ecstatic when Mr. Johnson knocked on our door one Saturday. Mom answered and I was right behind her, hungry to hear what strange reason would bring him over to us for once. As we stood at the door, Mr. Johnson on the other side of the screen, Mom quickly ran her fingers through her hair.

"Afternoon," Mr. Johnson said.

Mom opened the screen door and invited him in.

They sat down in the living room, across from each other on our tan sofas. I sat down next to Mr. Johnson. He smelled sweet, as if he'd put on cologne. I took a few deep breaths, until I felt dizzy.

Dad came in and looked from Mom to Mr. Johnson to me. "What's this?" he asked.

Mr. Johnson held his hand out to him. "Abe Johnson. I live next door."

Dad sat down next to Mom. "And what can we do for you?"

Mom squinted a little, as if embarrassed about something.

"I've come to ask a favor," Mr. Johnson said. He said that he would be out of town for a week in June, less than a month away. He was wondering if, while he was gone, we would be so generous as to take Banjo on his walks and make sure he was fed and had water.

"I'll do it, no problem," I said.

He turned those amber eyes on me and smiled. "Why, thank you, Tara."

"Maybe we can do it together," Mom said. "It will be fun."

Mr. Johnson smiled at her, too, but only for a second. Then he cleared his throat and looked down at his boots.

"All right. Well, that was easy," Dad said. He got up. "Nice meeting you, Dave." He clumped downstairs and shortly after, I heard the TV turn on.

Mr. Johnson got up. "I really appreciate it, Mrs. Burns."

"Please," Mom corrected him, "call me Claire."

I watched him walk home from the living room window. He had his hands in his pockets and continued to stare at the ground.

When Mom and I came in through the front door at Mr. Johnson's house, Banjo barked a low, rumbling warning at us. But then he realized who it was and gave us both generous kisses and slapped our legs with his tail. On the dining room table, Mr. Johnson had left a schedule for us to follow, written on a piece of notebook paper with shredded ring-holes. His handwriting was mostly in capitals but certain letters, like e and a, were in lowercase. I wondered how he'd chosen which letters to write in lowercase. Or maybe it wasn't a choice. Maybe his hands just found themselves doing things a particular way.

His house, in general, was spare yet dirty. There weren't any pictures on the walls, Banjo's muddy paw prints were all over the linoleum in the kitchen, dishes were stacked in the sink and on the counter, and in his living room he only had a recliner and a TV on a wooden table.

Mom and I walked Banjo together every morning, but in the evenings she had to work on dinner, so I was on my own. It always seemed kind of sad leaving him alone there at night. I began to leave the TV on for him, just so he'd have some background noise.

One day, I had turned on the TV and was about to go home but something made me stay. I walked through the house and looked into the different rooms. Most of the doors were open, anyway. In the first bedroom was nothing but stacked boxes, as if Mr. Johnson were either about to move or still unpacking. Then there was a half bathroom, which was small and dark and smelled a little like urine. The next room was his room, which was larger than my parents'. He didn't have curtains, only dusty, cream-colored blinds. Next to his unmade bed was a small table with a glass half-filled with a caramel

colored liquid. It smelled sweet and doughy. I tilted the glass enough to let the liquid touch my lips. It was warm. Bitter. I swallowed a trace amount. Then I traced the entire rim of the glass with my lips, kissing him through proxy. Banjo sniffed my mouth, his short whiskers tickling my nose.

His closet doors were open and I buried my face in the flannel shirts hanging there. None of his shirts smelled like the cologne he'd worn when he came over. A couple of his shirts smelled a little like sweat, as if his essence was too strong to be washed away that easily. On the floor, he'd amassed a pile of laundry similar in size to the one in my own room. I took a brown, button-down shirt off the top of the pile and pulled it over my shoulders. It was long enough that it could be a dress on me, so I took my jeans off and looked at myself in the mirror. He would probably think I looked cute. Brown was always a good color for me.

Still wearing his top, I climbed into the bed. My head sunk into his pillow, which was much softer than my own and smelled a little musky. I spread my arms and legs out, covering as much area as possible. I pulled the sheets over my head and closed my eyes. From under the sheets, the world was dark and warm and safe. In there, wearing his shirt, my bare legs on his sheets, I felt sexy, adult. I rolled onto my stomach and pushed my pelvis into the mattress, swaying back and forth a little. I felt electric and guilty. Banjo jumped onto the bed and stepped on me. His eyes looked knowing and somewhat suspicious.

I got up, threw his shirt back into his laundry pile, put my jeans on, and went home.

Mr. Johnson returned from his trip with gifts. Though Dad hadn't helped with Banjo, Mr. Johnson gave me a pound of coffee to give to Dad. He handed me a small box. "This one is for

you," he said. Inside, in a coil of silver, was a necklace with a charm in the shape of a sky-scraper. I held it up and looked closer. The tower started wide but narrowed as it got taller. Then, at the very top, was a horizontal disk which wasn't quite as wide as the base but was a great deal wider than the shaft. "It's beautiful," I said. Mr. Johnson smiled at me and I wondered, when our eyes met, if he knew I had spread myself out under his sheets.

"It's the Space Needle," Mr. Johnson said. "It's a tower in Seattle. If you stand in the observation deck, you can see Mount Rainier."

"Cool," I said.

He gave another, larger box to Mom. "For you," he said, without looking at her. When Mom hesitated he said, "It's nothing big. I appreciate what you guys did for me. I don't have anyone around here who can really help out."

Mom nodded and accepted the gift. Hers was a glass vase that looked like the spray of a fountain. Ribbons of iridescent color ran from the bottom to the top, where they looped and came back down.

"I noticed that you like to grow flowers. Thought this might look nice with some of your flowers in it," he said. Then he shrugged. "Or something."

Mom had an expression that I didn't quite understand. It looked like sadness mixed with something else. That's how I knew she loved the vase.

Back in my room, I stood next to my dresser. I had a jewelry box, a cherry wood one with glass panels on the top. I kept my favorite things in it. A ring Mom had given me for my tenth birthday, a wrinkled letter that my Grandma had written me before she passed, and a split rock that was coarse and grey on the outside, but glittering with crystals on the inside. I considered adding the necklace to my treasures. But this trinket didn't seem to fit in with the other things. It was not nearly as beautiful as the gift he'd given Mom. The necklace

seemed cheap and childish, like something from a gift shop. But Mom's gift, the iridescent vase, was unique. It had been made with fire and beauty and love. I stood with the weight of the shrunken building in my palm for a few minutes and then I let it slide into the wastebasket next to my dresser. It hit the bottom with a thunk.

When I think of Mom, I think of hot summer days under the wide, Montana sky. I think of the chirp of crickets at night and cicadas in the day. In my best memories, I love her without jealousy. In my best memories, I love her without betrayal.

I was seven when we planted tulips bulbs next to the sidewalk. It was fall then, and I had finished my small amount of homework and stood watching her from the grass.

"Want to help?" she'd asked.

She showed me where the next hole needed to be and I pushed the spade into the ground. She put a bulb into the empty spot. "Cover it up with dirt," she told me.

After a little bit of practice digging the holes, I knew how deep to make them and how far apart they should be spaced. She said I was a natural. I hit a rock every now and then, and sometimes Mom had to throw a bulb away that had gone bad and would not grow, but other than that it went pretty smoothly until I cut the earthworm in half. I watched in horror as its pink body thrashed, half stuck to my spade, half still in the ground.

Mom picked up the writhing halves of worm and placed them in some of the loose dirt covering a planted bulb. "It will be okay," Mom said. "Did you know that worms can regrow parts of their bodies?"

I was horrified by my violence, accidental as it was. The thought of the earthworm regrowing the rest of its body disgusted me more than it comforted me. I wanted to go inside, to do something gentle and safe, like reading or drawing.

But Mom handed me a bulb. "The pointed end goes up."

I studied the thing in my hands. Underneath its papery cover, it was smooth and shiny brown. On the bottom, the blunt end had the beginnings of roots, small white tubes that would eventually sink into the earth and anchor the plant as it grew towards the sun.

It was September when Banjo was hit by the car. Mr. Johnson buried him under the ocher leaves of the aspen tree in his backyard. Mom and I had brought shovels over and helped dig the hole. We were tired and couldn't dig it as deep as we'd have liked, but the hole seemed huge and dark anyway. The three of us put Banjo, who was wrapped in his favorite blanket, down into the grave and then tenderly covered him in the loose soil.

I had cut roses from the bush in front of our house. They were mostly dead but I placed them next to the twig cross marker anyway. Then I hugged Mr. Johnson, hoping that through the warmth of my body he would feel my care and my love and adoration, but he merely placed his hand on my back and patted, as if he didn't even really register that I was there. I walked back to the house, depositing my muddy shovel next to the back steps. When I looked out from the kitchen window, Mom and Mr. Johnson were still standing at the foot of Banjo's grave. When she hugged him, he held her close to him with both of his strong arms.

The rain started a couple of weeks after Banjo's funeral. I would come home from school, heart still heavy for Mr. Johnson and Banjo and my hair heavy from the rain, and I'd just stare out the windows. Dad said he was tired of me moping around and tried to "cheer me up" by giving me chores to do around the house, so I hid out in my room and moped there instead. Mom tried to convince me to do my homework but it seemed impossible to concentrate. I would stay up late instead, talking to my school friends on the phone. We'd talk about

how I'd let Kenny Lewis touch me under my bra but that I didn't love him or really even like him. They would tell me how they'd kissed/fought with/had their "first time" with Andy Pratt/Josh Fitzgerald/Warren Mark in the McDonald's parking lot/the cinema lobby/his parents' bed. These boys were not for us to keep. The experiences were interchangeable. I wanted something that meant something. When Kenny touched me or when I touched me, I only thought of Mr. Johnson. I thought of lying in his bed, his warm body finally mine to hold.

One day, I had told Mom that I was going to the basketball game. I had planned on it. All my friends were going and though I didn't care that much, it sounded like a fun time. Now that I had the Buick, a rusty gray relic that was older than I was, she didn't have to worry about dropping me off or picking me up. But when school let out and it was still raining, I didn't want to do anything but go home.

But Mom wasn't there when I got home. The house was quiet and dark. Out of the back window, Banjo's grave was no longer a raised mound but a muddy pool. The cross that Mr. Johnson had made of sticks was no longer standing. It was on its side, melting into the ground. I felt a sudden need to see Mr. Johnson, to feel his brown eyes on me, to hear his voice or his silence. He just needed to be near. We could share sadness. We could share anything.

He was home, the lights were on and his truck was parked in front. But as I walked up to the door, I saw that he wasn't alone. As the raindrops ran down my bare legs and skimmed my eyelashes, I saw her through the living room blinds. My mother. She was wrapped in golden lamplight, her eyes closed, her lips parted. Mr. Johnson worshipped her, brushing his mouth along the curve of her neck. He ran his fingers up her arms. Even in betrayal, she was beautiful.

I could have screamed. I could have broken the window with my voice and flown into the room and ripped her hair out. I could

have pulled the tree in his front yard out by its roots and thrown it onto them, crushing them both. But my heart felt faint and tired. And my hands were shaking.

In my room, I made a cocoon of blankets and I stayed there, tangled in anger and hate, even after I heard the front door close. Mom called my name. She had seen my car outside. She tapped on the door. "Sweetie, are you okay?"

At dinner, Mom acted like the same as she always did, chipper and sweet. She passed around the bowls of potatoes and chicken and broccoli. She smiled and talked about seeing an old friend at the grocery store. She pretended not to notice my humphs and eye rolls. When she asked Dad how his day was, I couldn't control myself anymore.

"Why don't you tell us about your day?" I asked.

Mom stared at me. "I did," she said. She seemed to be trying to send a message through her stare, but I was still too upset to try to figure out what the message was or even to care.

"No, I mean your real day. You know. Next door?"

Everyone froze, including me. Without moving her head, Mom looked from me to Dad. Dad looked at the table for a minute before reaching into his pocket and pulling out a twenty dollar bill. He set it in front of him and for a moment it just lay there, wrinkled and scarred. Then he took a deep breath and pushed the money over to me on the table with his fingertips.

"Tara, why don't you go out to the movies or something. Your mother and I need to talk for a while." When he looked at me his eyes were savage and I was terrified to disobey. I felt Mom's eyes on me as well, but I couldn't meet them. I stood up and walked, leaden, to the Buick. The lights were still on at Mr. Johnson's house but I couldn't see him. I turned the ignition and drove away, the money still in my trembling hand, damp from sweat and the still-pouring rain.

Dad wasn't a bad guy. I never thought of him that way. He was just sort of distant. He was busy. He didn't give a lot of himself

to us. I got used to this after a while. I'd push my affection on him knowing that it would inevitably be too much and he'd withdraw. It wasn't really his fault. We were just different.

I remember I was ten when Mom arranged Dad's secret birthday dinner. She hadn't told me much about it because she didn't want me to accidentally say something, as I was known to do. She did tell me, however, that it was a place we hadn't gone before.

When Dad came home from work, I ran to the door to greet him. He looked tired or sad and before he had taken off his shoes or sat down, I shoved the birthday card I'd made into his hands.

"Tara, Tara," he said. "Just . . . give me a minute." He pushed me away and went to his room, closing the door behind him.

Mom followed him to the room. She emerged a few minutes later, shoes on, smile on. But her smile wasn't the one I was used to. She almost seemed nervous.

Even though he didn't know where we were going, Dad drove. He always drove.

"Where are we going, Claire?" he asked Mom.

She'd give him directions and he'd repeat them back, seeming to play along, as if solving a riddle. The closer we got to downtown, the quieter Dad became. None of the restaurants we normally went to were downtown.

"Aaaaand turn right!" Mom said.

He pulled into the parking lot on the right. We had reached the Heart of Sicily, a place I'd heard my friends talk about when they'd gone to fancy dinners with their family. White string lights wound their way up the columns in front and along the wooden trellis over the outdoor eating area. Huge painted cement planters, bursting with red hibiscus, lined the cobbled walk to the main entrance. A yellow glow radiated through the thick glass windows, which were cut through deep stucco.

I imagined that all my friends were inside, passing around plates of fettuccini and chicken parmesan and garlic bread, like people did in Italian restaurants in commercials. I imagined they were waiting for me.

I had unbuckled my seatbelt and was about to get out but Dad told me to buckle back up. "We're not eating here," he said. "We can't afford it."

My hand hovered over the door handle. I waited to move until I had heard what Mom would say.

"I am paying. It's your birthday. It will be an experience," Mom pleaded, but Dad had already put the car into reverse and was pulling out of the parking lot.

"You're paying? With what money?" Dad laughed but it wasn't a happy laugh.

Mom whispered something that I didn't hear. I didn't think Dad heard her either.

"Tara, buckle back up," he said.

We drove back home in silence and when we pulled into our driveway, Dad got out of the car and walked inside without waiting for any of us. Mom sat for a moment, not turning around, wiping her eyes in the front seat. Then she took a deep breath and turned to me in the back seat and smiled.

"So what are we going to make your daddy for dinner? Maybe some pizza?"

I was angry so I tried to think of the most disgusting thing I had ever eaten. "How about liver. And Brussels sprouts."

Mom laughed and as we walked inside, she put her arm around my shoulders and kissed the top of my head.

That was something I carried with me: her laughter. Even after she was gone, when she never came home and a few weeks later I started getting letters from her postmarked from Kalispell,

I remembered her warmth, her laughter. When I remembered this, I forgot to hate her. Sometimes I even forgot to hate myself.

It was still raining when I pulled into the driveway. As soon as I walked in, I knew Mom wasn't there. The vase from Mr. Johnson was shattered on the kitchen floor and the crystalline shards spread like a starburst across the linoleum. Dad's hand was bleeding. He rinsed it in the kitchen sink for a while, then wrapped it in a towel.

"You did the right thing," Dad told me. He went to his room and didn't come back out for the rest of the night. I went to bed not much later. The rain pattered on my window and I listened for Mom to come back.

In the morning, I woke up with a stiff neck from sleeping while sitting up. I thought I heard a noise in the kitchen and imagined that it was Mom, closing the coffee pot lid. She'd be sitting at the kitchen table, the morning sun drenching her hair, her eyes warm and sleepy. But when I stepped out of my room, I was alone. The broken vase was still on the floor. Our dinner dishes were still on the table. The broccoli, wilted and dry, was still in its bowl. Then I realized how quiet it was. The rain had stopped.

I walked over to Mr. Johnson's house and rang the bell. In my head, I practiced what I would tell him and Mom. I would tell them that I didn't forgive them yet. In fact, I was furious with them. I would tell them that they'd betrayed me and Dad. And then, like Mom always did when she was angry with me, I would tell them that I still loved them. But no one answered the door. I walked around to the back and tried to look in the windows but everything was dark inside.

Under Mr. Johnson's aspen tree, the burial mound had been washed away. The ground was open like a wound, and I approached the site with trepidation. Mixed with the earth was Banjo's black fur. Entangled in his fur, like pieces of rice, were larvae, which squirmed and

burrowed in their edible home. Banjo's hind elbow pointed upwards, as if growing towards the sun.

Though the rain had finally cleared, the ground stayed soft and pliable for almost a week after. I threw piles of heavy, wet leaves over Banjo's exposed burial site to hide his bones and fur. I bought tulip and hyacinth and daffodil bulbs and pushed them into the earth around his grave. And though my mother was gone and eventually movers came and took all of Mr. Johnson's things away, that spring when the flowers bloomed, it seemed that I could forgive them. It seemed possible too that perhaps they weren't so very far away.

Elizabeth Stetler is a veteran of the US Army and a graduate of the University of Cincinnati. She is the associate editor for Search & Employ*, a magazine that helps veterans find civilian jobs. She lives in Kentucky with her daughter and husband, who is also an Army veteran.*

Knife to the Heart

By Victoria Rahn

"The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of."
– Blaise Pascal

It is a cool, crisp October day in the year 2107, and I stand in the bathroom holding a shiny and sharp, beautiful knife, the instrument of my deliverance. I stare at my reflection, trying to see beneath my own skin. Who is that cold-eyed stranger staring back at me? I used to know who I was. I used to feel comforted when a friend hugged me, scared at horror movies, nervous when speaking in public, sometimes sad, sometimes happy, comfortable in my own skin. Now I only feel warm or cold, full or empty, tired or rested. I am not who I once was.

I put my left pointer finger on the tip of the knife, hard enough to prick blood. The drop slowly eases down my finger, and I watch numbly. The melodramatic gesture would do nothing to my other hand, the false hand, the hand that set off these fateful events.

Maybe I should rid myself of that hand completely, make myself whole again by tearing out the first corruption. Maybe.

But before I can take any drastic measures, my mind considers

what brought me here, and it's my mind I listen to these days. I can no longer depend on my heart to lead me.

As a kid, I loved all kinds of games, both the mental and physical. Board games and athletics, jungle gyms and trivia contests—I did them all. Every game gave my life excitement and energy. But as I got older, I began to prefer physical challenges, leaving mental ones behind.

It was probably the adrenaline. I loved the feel of my heart climbing into my throat and threatening to jump out. My blood simmered. The little voice in my head was drowned out by a booming heartbeat. It was so awesome! Sky diving, bungee jumping, and jumping off heights into murky waters became mainstream as time went by, and I needed stunts that were more and more bizarre to feel alive. I lived without thinking much, constantly betting on my own luck because continually surviving proved I was undefeatable. No calm, logical facts affected my decisions. No cold reasoning tempered my hot instincts. That was my life until I was twenty-five.

The day I lost my hand the plan had been to ride a hoverboard across a plank suspended between two buildings. At the last minute, friends instead convinced me to balance on top of a car while it rushed headlong down a deserted road. A normal person would have known what would happen, but not me. When the inevitable occurred, I landed against a metal fence with right hand outstretched. The impact severed my hand at the wrist. The doctors tried to reattach it, and at first succeeded. But infection set in within a week. My true hand was declared a foreign invader by brainless bacteria, and I lost a part of myself that I suddenly realized I treasured.

Days of physical therapy, heaps of pointless condolences, and a passing flirtation with pain medication passed in a haze of sullenness and self-pity. But I still had hope, a light gleaming dimly at

the end of a long tunnel. One day, I might have achieved a feeling of imperfect wholeness again. Unfortunately, I met Dr. Stein before I could find that new balance.

In his mid-forties, Dr. Stein seemed experienced and trustworthy, his face a portrait of confidence and wisdom, and I was desperate enough to believe everything he said. But his offer should've been too remarkable to believe. Dr. Stein promised to recreate my hand down to the last scar and mole. Even fingerprints to match my old ones. And a promise of no side effects, drawbacks, or noticeable differences.

Sure that a hand would take away the constant feeling of being a cripple and incomplete, I agreed to the transplant without much thought. "Miss Shelley," Dr. Stein said, "you're one of the best candidates I've seen. Once the operation is over, you won't be able to tell the difference between your hands. Except at airports." His laugh was a rolling one, like Santa Claus if he had a God complex.

The new hand was a mix of synthetic materials and biology. Stein's people grew skin and nerves from my DNA, fused them with titanium bones and silicone muscle, and gave me the power to control the hand with a thought, attaching it to reopened nerves in the arm. I asked Stein how many times he'd done this before. The large man assured me he had scores of successful subjects, which I later learned had all been animals until me.

The new hand operated well. With skin grafted over it and real blood and nerves, it looked very real. The fingers were slightly thicker than my left hand, but the nails were the same feminine shape. The technicians even duplicated my fingerprints.

I never stopped to consider if an artificial hand, no matter how clever, could ever really mesh with the rest of my body, or how something that was part flesh and part machine might go wrong–bizarrely, acutely, and cruelly wrong.

I jump ahead, but my mind insists on tracing the whole journey, keeping track of the decisions based on fear and confusion, made in the emotion of the moment. I wonder at what I had been thinking, if I'd thought at all. How could anything made with cold metal and plastic replace the flesh and blood I was born with? But at first, I was glad to have my hand back—tremendously and thoughtlessly glad. I've noticed the growing coldness and unfaithfulness only recently.

The knife hovers over my wrist with a cool confidence that says, "I can solve your problem with one swift stroke." If the traitorous hand was gone, would it strengthen my resolve? Could I finish the rest with only one hand?

I hesitate, and my arm shakes as the pain and bloody consequences flicker through my head like a badly filmed horror movie. While I'm angry, at least as much as I can be in my condition, my mind focuses on realities, prioritizing what I need to accomplish the ultimate goal. I can't afford to weaken, else I might not . . . do it.

The calculating eyes of a stranger stare out from the mirror, judging my actions. She doubts I can do what I plan. Her eyes say "You're overreacting" in her smug, all-knowing way. She doesn't hate or love me, but finds me illogical and foolish, a person she'd rather not have anything to do with. I can't stop her look! Her pupils grow larger and larger until they are all I see: two ebony disks locked on me like targeting beams from a gun.

My body begins to shiver. Maybe I'm short-circuiting like a light bulb about to blow, but my memory plays on. The knife falls to my side and presses against my thigh as I try to stay on track.

The engineered hand had been attached for three years when I first met my husband. Byron and I locked eyes at a political rally in Washington, DC and fell in love over our shared ideals, the right to alter our bodies any way we wanted. The cybernetics industry

was taking off, and the government was regulating every way and means. Like the old fight for legalized marijuana, we knew people might abuse or object to the opportunity to better themselves and their bodies. But the chance to explore new areas of humanity, maybe even find salvation through cybernetic enhancements, heavily outweighed any potential drawbacks.

So we argued.

Byron had his cybernetic eyes transplanted after going blind from a bioengineered disease introduced by an anti-Californian Republic terrorist group. I thought his eyes were his most riveting feature when we first met, blue and silver with only a few dark recesses. As I got to know him, I saw his eyes as open doorways into an untainted soul, glinting and flickering with warmth and laughter. Byron is a vivid, undeniable light that still attracts me, like a moth to a flame.

We got married in Arizona in a grove of grapefruit trees. The aroma was amazing, sensuous and exciting. I remember how the gentle breeze blew the blossoms around us as we stood before our friends and family, many mentioning on how it was a favorable sign. The two of us were together five years before my heart met its death. Now our time together seems like those grapefruit blossoms—temporal and fleeting, a vanishing beauty.

My Byron. This might break him as much as me. I haven't confided in him much lately. He wouldn't understand why this has to be. I don't want to hurt him, but if I can't love him as I used to, then our life together is only a gaping emptiness that will grow bigger every day until his love for me turns to hate. I can't let that happen. I have to hurry.

When did I first feel my heart giving out, and why did I take so much time to seek help? Maybe if I'd gone to the doctor at the

first sign, they could've saved my heart, and I wouldn't now be this soulless zombie, undead and unfeeling. Thinking myself invincible, I created my own damnation, a non-existence existence.

Two years ago, I was running a marathon down a gold-tinged road in mid-America, feeling as alive as I'd ever felt. After the hand transplant, running replaced my former daredevil ways. The exercise cleared my mind and soul of depression and anxiety. Running with my heavier right hand took getting used to, but I found if I swung it at just the right time, I ran steadier, faster. I usually ran alone. The beautiful sport was best done alone, when I didn't have to share a conversation or someone else's timetable. As blood pumped through my body, my lungs expanded and contracted in rhythm with the slap of my feet against pavement, and I found peace, genuine serenity.

But two years ago, when my heart burst, serenity disappeared forever.

As I lay sprawled on the road, clutching my chest and breathing in stuttering, painful gasps, time slowed to a hypersensitive crawl. I remember an ordinary fly passing close, its tiny wings buzzing a warning in my ears. The sky loomed up and away, and then with ominous swiftness, darkness came down like the lid of a box closing.

I saw things so clearly that day. But not anymore. I can't trust anything I see or feel anymore.

Somehow, a birth defect in my heart had gone unnoticed until too late. Without a new heart, my future was short, to be played out in a sterile, icy hospital. The doctors told me with compassion, but there was a sinister understanding behind their eyes. It felt like . . . a door slammed in the face of a starving beggar, the wave of a tsunami hitting the shore, a knife to the heart.

Byron grasped my right hand tightly as we listened to the diagnosis, but I couldn't feel the connection, the love he was try-

ing to convey. There was only pressure on my so-called cutting-edge, tactile receptors in the skin of the mechanical hand. The first treachery. I tried to place my true hand, my left, over his, but I didn't have the strength. Looking up at him, I saw my doom reflected in his brilliant silver eyes, and I shivered.

Dr. Stein called soon after. Again, he offered hope, salvation, life. And again I took it, without true consideration, a child taking candy from a stranger.

My husband also agreed, as desperate as I was. “Joan, it's our only hope. It's crazy, I know, but what else can we do?” My love's advanced eyes could even cry. Seeing tears seeping out of his beautiful eyes was too much, and I cried, too. For the last time, it turns out.

I signed the consent form, and the transplant was performed without a problem. My recovery was smooth. Three months passed, and I was up and walking, "life" once again in motion.

I shut my eyes, but the memories won't stop.

After decades of experimenting with artificial hearts, the version scientists put in my chest was a large silicone muscle with valves made out of plastic and titanium, a simple computer chip, and a small but powerful battery. Attached to only the nerves and arteries nearby, the synthetic organ wasn't accessible by the brain; instead, the doctors set it up and let it go like a wind-up toy. And the thing tick-tocks away, a metronome instead of a heart. The variations, emotional reactions, and everyday normal responses of a heart to stimuli changed into the same one response: a gentle, even pulse sending blood and oxygen to the body in an orderly, unvarying manner.

But everything was fine at first. My body grew tired less, and I wanted less sleep. When I did need to rest, I was lulled to sleep by the steady throbbing lullaby. My calm demeanor gave me confidence. When I worried or got angry, the emotions were easier to control.

I understood, suddenly, how what I felt was really all in my head, and if it was in my head, it wasn't real. And I thought these were all good signs at first; it meant I was healed, mentally and physically. My opinion soon radically changed.

The first time I really felt the disturbing difference was while watching an old favorite film, a tear-jerker if there ever was one. I sat there wondering what I'd ever seen in it. The scene where the girl and boy kiss after years of separation had never left me dry-eyed before. My husband used to ask how anyone could cry over so much cheese, but the heart feels what the heart feels. This time the heart felt nothing, and the mind inquired about timing, plotline, and the actress's talent. Something was wrong.

Not a big sign by itself, perhaps, but there were other small signs. But none were enough to see how I was being changed by the alien heart. Not until I miscarried.

I place a hand on my chest, imagining how blood flows through my heart, rushing in full of life and love and creativity, then rushing out seared clean of anything except function. The heart scours my blood of the excess emotion and sensations. It keeps only what's necessary to survive. Now it's only my mind that speaks, while my so-called heart is mute, beating a cool, unvarying rhythm at all times, when I run, when I love, when I laugh. The new organ is a Trojan horse, the gift that betrays.

It's not necessary to remember the moment I knew I was pregnant, the moment I told Byron, the moment life first moved inside me. I can't relive the plans we made or the room we decorated. I won't think about that night in the hospital, how the doctors couldn't stop the bleeding, how no amount of drugs could provide relief, or how the baby almost killed me. I wish I had died with it.

My body should've sweated misery, cried tears of blood, shook with outrage and shock, but I did nothing. I know the emotional scene I should've had, a temporary moment of gratifying release from the grief. But it didn't happen; I was a statue, not because my heart was afraid to feel, but because my heart just couldn't feel.

I've heard people say, "You never know what you had 'til its gone." They quote, "The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of." Everyone speaks from the heart, listens to their heart, follows their heart. But not me, not anymore. The indefinable something that filled my heart had trickled away like a slowly leaking tire. Moving on empty, I felt nothing that couldn't be traced to a physical sensation like a pin prick or an icy wind. I was a computer, keeping record of life without a personal stake in it. My feelings were silent, in a coma, maybe dead because my heart was a stone clock, ticking away. No pithy quote would help.

Instead, a silent voice in my head politely inquired if I was serious about falling to my knees and wailing. It explained that no action of mine could raise the child from the dead, no shouts of denial would turn back time. The fuss would only make me a ridiculous figure. It said, "You'll feel better soon. You can have another child, at a better time. This is only a temporary obstacle." That's when I knew my soul was gone.

For days after the miscarriage, I tried to grieve, but the new self wouldn't have it. Byron saw my restless fluttering, but I couldn't say exactly what was wrong. Hospital psychologists diagnosed depression, but how could I be depressed if I didn't feel the pulling, heavy weight of it? How could I be depressed when my heart skipped along like nothing was wrong?

So I went to Dr. Stein in a helpless, hollow rage, demanding action. After thinking about it, he said another device would help. With more new technology, I would be able to control my heartbeat with a thought, slowing or increasing the pace whenever I wanted.

Of course, that didn't work, otherwise I wouldn't be standing here with my sharply honest friend ready to offer the comfort I need. The only friend I have left. My other friends have drifted away, perhaps sensing I'm not the person they used to know. They're right to leave.

Trying to consciously control one's breathing all the time is inefficient, unpleasant, and just plain wrong. Even when I could change the speed of my pulse, it was never smooth or comfortable. As soon as my mind drifted, in even the slightest way, the heart continued beating at whatever speed I had stopped at, tick-tocking a little too fast or a little too slow until a crisis forced my attention back to the problem. I fainted again and again, in exhaustion, in asphyxiation, in frustration. Byron pleaded with me to stop and let the heart function on its own again. He declared that I didn't know what I was doing, and the device was either broken or impossible to use. He shouted that I was trying to commit suicide.

But I continued to experiment and suffer for months until I could take no more.

I went to see the good doctor one more time. It was a Friday afternoon, and Dr. Stein sat behind his desk typing on the computer, jacket and tie off. He looked more nonchalant than I had ever seen him. I tried to force anger into my demeanor, but it disappeared in my throat. The man looked up and smiled with gentle good humor. I sat down and said brusquely, “Dr. Stein, I need another heart."

He leaned on his desk and asked professionally, “A few more details please. How is the heart not working?”

I shook my head. “I told you before. My pulse doesn't ever change. Sleeping, running, yelling, laughing: it’s always the same! I'm a robot. I never get mad, or sad, or glad. That's no way to live. And I physically can't do what I could before, because without getting

the heart to beat faster, I can't get enough oxygen. This thing you put in me doesn't work."

"And the controller doesn't help?" He looked down and took notes as he asked, but I caught a glimpse of an honest expression. His eyes were weary and sorrowful, weighed down with the knowledge of my doom.

"No, it hasn't. My heartbeat lags behind when I try to go fast, and speeds past when I try to slow it. I've fainted every day for two weeks straight! I never have moments of pain or moments of peace. I have nothing. It's like I have no soul. You've got to get me a real heart!"

Dr. Stein sighed. "Joan, I understand you feel changed by the procedure. But is it possible you're overreacting?"

I stared at him.

"The heart saved your life. You would've died within a week if we hadn't done the transplant. You must be aware that creating a long-lasting, working artificial heart is a global achievement. Thousands of lives can be saved worldwide. No matter what kind of side effects there might be, that accomplishment can't be dismissed. It is a tremendous step forward."

I ground my teeth, but he kept going.

"You've lived two years longer already, and I would say you're in good health, though a bit thin."

I shook my head bitterly. "I'm not in good health at all. My health's actually gotten worse. It's like there's an alien where my heart should be. I can't sleep. I barely eat. But mostly, whatever it is that makes me who I am is gone. When you took out my old heart, you took something vital with it. You haven't denied that it's possible."

He sighed again, dourly. "Your experience is totally outside the realm of science. It can't be proven or measured. The only fact I can see is that your heart works. You're breathing. You're alive. The fact that you're unable to control the heartbeat well only means there're a few lingering flaws to work out. Perhaps we missed a nerve

connection. If you want, we can take some scans. As to the metaphysical . . . there's no way I can heal something I can't see. I'm not that kind of doctor. Perhaps you should talk with a priest or shaman."

I ignored his last statement. "Dr. Stein, scans are what you give hypochondriacs to get them out of your office. You're saying there's nothing you can do. I should just buck up and take it. But I deserve more than that. You're supposed to want to heal all people, not just the people lying bloody on the floor." I wasn't asking him to diagnose my spiritual health or hand out medication with a prayer regimen. I just needed sympathy, a glimmer that things weren't as bad as I thought. His answer was no help.

"I can't give what I don't have. The spiritual is what you make of it. That's what I think. Ask yourself how a possible psychological injury compares to being able to live and love your husband for many more years."

He continued, "Keep working with the controller. This heart will be with you for the rest of your life. Give it more time. If you still can't get the device to work in a week, call me and we'll schedule some scans." The man spread his hands as if to say that was it; he had given until he could give no more.

My disappointment was so deep it was almost rage, and before the transplant I might've made a scene or left with a threat. No longer. My mind ignored the frustrated emotions like a parent of a crying, demanding child in a department store. A scene would accomplish nothing.

My hand refused to slam the door behind me. The second treachery.

My mind is exhausted. Is Dr. Stein right? Maybe I am losing it, like a cold-blooded part of my brain tells me I am.

I try to take a deep breath and fail. It's like my heart's in a tiny box. How my chest hurts from trying! This dispassionate heart won't

alleviate pain; it doesn't respond to suffering. No matter what others say, I haven't rejected the heart; it's rejected me.

I shiver again. The morning is chill, and Byron left for work an hour ago. I should be working, too. I run a small business out of my living room, mediating disputes over the Internet, conflicts mostly about libel and illegal uses of information. My new, disinterested attitude should've helped me, but the voice in my head says I don't earn enough to make it worthwhile.

Leaning forward slowly, my nose almost touches the glass. The feeling of having someone else in the room overwhelms me disturbingly, for she is someone I don't like. I am finally nervous. It feels odd, like being outside in a thunderstorm. Electricity is everywhere; something is about to happen. I glare at my reflection, like a rabid dog about to attack. The light brown eyes are wide and forceful. I study the lines around the mouth and eyes, lines of pain and memory, stress and age.

Am I really that old?

The close-cropped haircut wasn't well received when I came home with it last week. Byron said I looked like a dandelion after its seeds blew away. I can't laugh or cry at the memory, though I want to. Hair grows back, I mutter, and then screw up my face to force out tears. But my eyes are dried up, arid and hollow like this heart.

Melodramatic, the stranger-me says. You're being foolish. You're not lost. You're not condemned. The image that stole my eyes smiles mockingly.

My mechanical hand rests next to the sink like a dead fish; in my other hand, the knife feels warm and resolute. The fake hand is always icy, heavy, and withdrawn. I use my left hand whenever possible, because when I touch anyone with my right, they always flinch slightly, as if receiving a shock. Yet another treachery. Nothing I touch with that hand feels real. It's incapable of showing human warmth.

I ease away from the mirror and put my back against the wall, next to the picture of Byron and me at my family's lake cabin. With both fists against the wall, the knife pressing against my thigh, I close my eyes and try again to change my heartbeat without the controller. Nothing. The thing is hard-hearted, heartless, a heart of stone. It's ironic that there're so many words to explain a situation that's never happened before, an irony I can't smile at.

Stein's controller sits on the bathroom counter, quivering a little because it's disconnected from me. My left hand reaches out to touch it with one finger. It's bustling with energy, aching to do what it was made to do. Why won't it work?

I take off the white tank top emblazoned with "Love Machine" in gold letters, the shirt Byron gave me on the anniversary of our first rally together. I pick up the controller and apply it to the back of my neck, focusing on slowing my heartbeat. The device sends a wireless signal to the heart, and my pulse slows maddeningly, bit by bit. Finally, my pulse is slow enough to create lethargy in my limbs. I'm about to slide to the floor when I think rapid thoughts instead. Again, the acceleration is slow, and I barely stay standing. The throbbing in my chest picks up and begins to speed out of control, like a semi barreling downhill with dead brakes. A sheen of sweat breaks out, muscles start twitching, and my vision blurs. I rip the device off and throw it violently on the floor. The ding when the controller hits the floor signals the end. It's a death toll and the cry of a child that will never be heard.

My breathing steadies of its own accord, and I look directly at the ceiling light, hoping the brightness would bring the tears I desperately need. My face reddens, and my eyes blink in reflex, the only way I can summon tears. A hysterical laugh tries to bubble up, but it comes out as a cough instead because of this damned heart. Eyes forward again, my reflection's gaze is unswerving.

Byron won't like this new me, for I no longer have passionate ideals, only logic and the instincts of a caged animal. Our relationship

will change into unconscious avoidance and habit soon. Better to leave while he still remembers how it was, before this curse started.

The mirror girl grimaces in cold disapproval. You aren't melodramatic, she whispers. You're mentally disturbed. You need help.

Of course, but not just mentally disturbed, I think. The part of me that constitutes a soul has been erased, deleted like it never existed. I've been emptied out. I'm not a real person anymore. I lift the knife I still grip, and I place the tip a little below my sternum.

Another would-be sigh, a blinking of the eyes to indicate disagreement. Just because the heart beats differently than it used to doesn't mean that you're no longer human. You're being irrational and paranoid, classic signs of—I plunge in the polished blade.

The other me falls silent. Good.

I pull the bloody knife out with a shudder, amazed. The blade has blunted on the heart within me, thwarted by its metal strength. For the flicker of a moment, descending to the floor, I doubt.

But certainty returns as I feel the warmth of the blood on my hand. My blade goes in again, and again, and somehow, again.

Vibrant, red blood flows out like a cleansing stream. A clear pool gathers by my head. I see my reflection in it, and it is crying.

I am me again.

Victoria Rahn enlisted in the Air National Guard when she was eighteen. She graduated from law school near the end of her six-year enlistment, and now works in the registrar's office at a public university in Wisconsin.

Songs by Donnie Hathaway

By Sarah Estime

I hate the feeling I get when I listen to old songs and remember why I became tired of them. A playlist called *Hearts* or *Walking* or *Running*. It didn't matter. Those were tireless times. Those were negative times. I wasn't going anywhere special.

Nothing in me was changing—I was on an unplugged treadmill running in place and getting shin splints. And then the shin splints hurt and I remembered that time as being painful and purposeless. My heart rate was too high. My feelings were exhausted.

So the music didn't matter to me anymore. So I stowed them away in the history of my brain and didn't hear them again unless it was in passing. And it reminded me of bad times. Times where the music played out. I was tired of those times. Those were tireless times.

Sarah Jean Estime is an aircraft mechanic in the United States Air Force. When not working her day job, she is composing in the young adult, humor, and drama genres. Her work has been published in The African American Review, *the Canadian literary magazine* What If? *and the photography litmag* BurnerMag.

How to Make Bosnian Chicken Salad

By Susanne Aspley

Camp Dobol, Bosnia, 1996

I thought he said "Come in," but when I open the door to his conex, my platoon sergeant is standing on his desk wearing nothing but a purple thong and holding a banana.

I shut the door and slap my hand against it.

"Huh, that's okay, Sar'nt. I gotta go get some breakfast, so, yeah . . ." I say through the door.

"No really, it's okay, come on in!" Sergeant First Class Daniels calls back, a little more high-pitched than usual.

I turn and start walking down the boardwalk, which is just faded packing pallets lined in a row with conexes on either side. When I reach the end, SUCK! One boot almost disappears into the red muck.

SUCK.

The other one too.

Trudging toward the chow hall, I'm almost at peace with the sound: suck, pull, slurp, suck, pull, slurp.

"Hey Combat Camera! Here's my good side!" a young private yells, leaning next to a Humvee. He's all decked out in Bosnia gear,

winter gear, mud gear. His buddy sticking up from the turret smiles a flash of white, and squeals, "Make me famous, PAO!"

"Shoot 'em with film!" I yell back.

Making it to the chow hall takes about ten minutes with the mud and my determination.

Fer the love of gawd. It's already past o-dark-thirty, almost 5:30 AM, as in I *AM* late. This army has already started without me. I need to get a move on.

Except the Serbian contractors in the chow hall hate me. They hate women. They hate Americans. They hate soldiers. They hate just about everything you could imagine.

"Moofffta," the server says.

"Yes. Please, a scoop of those eggs," I answer.

"Piffyou," he answers.

I stand at his mercy. He has the silver scoop. The blessed spoon to serve my scrambled eggs, and maybe some hash browns.

"Thank you. Yes. Please. Thank you." I grimace, trying to look pleasant.

He slams down a smack of oily hash browns, forgetting the eggs; tosses on two turd sausages, shoves the Pyrex tray at me, and then turns his back to go torment the next soldier in line.

At least I can ladle my own fruit cocktail.

I am too late. Soldiers ahead of me have already scooped out the maraschino cherries and pears. Not much is left drowning in the saliva goo except gross peach halves and defeated green grapes.

I grab some burnt pieces of white toast and a handful of Smuckers grape jelly packets which I intend to eat with a spoon, and sit down at the first spot I see.

Lieutenant Tindle gently places his plate down soon after I take off my flak jacket and helmet and stick the M16 between my legs, because Lord knows this is my baby.

I sleep with it. Shower with it on me, like an expensive Baby Bjorn infant carrier, in trendy “NYC urban charcoal gray” color.

"What's your story today, Joplin?" he asks while buttering his black toast.

"My story? I wanna get drunk. And you, sir?"

He laughs and says, "No, your story. What story are you going to write today?"

Lieutenant Tindle and I are on a four-man (or three man and one woman) Public Affairs detachment sent up from our unit that is stationed in Tuzla. We are covering Camp Dobol, about two hours east, and our assignment is to make the Army look good. Peacekeeping. Make the guys here and what they do shine. Not sure why, though. Every story we write is sent out "on the wire" to all national US news outlets, and nothing written by us ever gets published. They only want death, bombs and blood, that kind of war stuff. But nothing like that happens here because, well, we are keeping the *peace*.

Not long ago, Bosnia was all that kind of war stuff, an active shithole, with the Serbs killing the Bosnian Muslims like a flame-thrower on flies. Not anymore, thank God. Used to be a shithole, now just a simmering one, like a lid on something stinky that can't quite boil over anymore.

It's a sad shame. Sarajevo was where they hosted the winter Olympics in '84. Gorgeous countryside, breathtaking, but walking around on patrol, you always wonder if you’re stepping on some undiscovered mass grave. Brutality whispers.

Some infantry guys have told me they have felt ghosts where they have been, evil haunting simple buildings, or farms, or fields. One barn we went to, two soldiers puked, and the whole convoy just left because the creepiness was off the charts.

However, no one seems to wonder why the Arabs in the world didn't do a thing when the Bosnian Serbs massacred all the Bosnian

Muslims. This one is complicated. I'm telling ya, though, those Serbs are a nasty bunch of people. The international community knows what they did. They know what they did, and they know we know what they did, and they are just plain ugly. It strikes me how the entire country of people could just be so physically ugly. Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not all judgy-judgy with the looks but there is something remarkable with just how ugly these people are. Like their hatred inside corrodes their outside. Even the little kids are horrid to look at. Most kids by default are cute just because they are small, but even the little children are nasty looking. Or maybe it's just me looking at them through the eyes of someone, an ugly American, who gives a shit but doesn't want to be here but is. Or maybe just me being politically incorrect, or me being me, don't know.

Daniels sits down with us, but I don't make eye contact. Dear God, he's going to eat that banana that he was doing whatever with in the conex about fifteen minutes ago.

"You need to get your story in by this afternoon, Joplin," he says, all of a sudden trying to sound authoritative and NCO-like.

As a photojournalist, my assignment is write two news stories once a week, among other things. I got one story done Monday for the Operation Joint Guard news magazine, *The Claw*, but it's Saturday and I'm starting to feel some pressure.

I had wanted to go out on patrol with those hunky Norwegian soldiers, but that fell through. So I went up with the Scouts to Ugljevik, otherwise known as Uglyfuck, where the Russians have their base camp, to do a story on them, except the Russkies wouldn't allow me to photograph anything, or write anything, or anything really. This one Russian soldier followed me around like a puppy dog, and he wanted to kiss my hand, so I let him, and he licked it, and that's all the action I got there. After that, the Scouts just drove around the countryside on a presence patrol. The Humvee I was in was at

least a smoking Humvee, and they blasted heavy metal the whole time, discussing the noise Metallica puts out compared to classic Black Sabbath and Blue Oyster Cult. I was immediately accepted as cool because I went to the Black and Blue concert when I was in high school. I told those 11Bs that I was there when Ozzy bit the bat's head off, even though I wasn't.

I don't know what to do now for my story.

Shanker sits down. He's the fourth on our team.

He's grumbling.

"I wish someone would blow something up nearby, so maybe we'd get our combat patches," he says, slapping his uniform's bare right shoulder. "At least we're getting an expeditionary medal for ten months of this crap. I heard that since we're from Minnesota, we can apply to get a cool license plate from the state. You know, the kind that have the medal on them? I don't think you can park in the handicapped spaces but might help get out of a speeding ticket or DWI, ya know what I mean?"

I pour three packets of sugar in my coffee and shake my head.

"No, I don't know, Sar'nt. Last week in a village an old lady threw a beer bottle at me but I don't think that qualifies as combat."

Shanker is scrawny, has an alcoholic body, is about fifty, and has hair that always barely meets regulations and a thick mustache. One time he wrote me up with a counseling statement because he said I was insubordinate. I wasn't. Okay, I was. He had shaved his mustache off and walked into the TOC one morning, and I burst out laughing at him. I blurted, "You look like a turtle!" which he did. I had no idea his upper lip was so damn pointy and tortoise-like. "You look like a turtle named Hitler!" I added. Because he did. His face is tan, but where he shaved his mustache off was blazing white, and yes, he did look like a turtle named Hitler.

Thank God Lieutenant Tindle didn't sign off on the counseling statement. He told Shanker he did, but ripped it up, and told me,

"Joplin, you can think what you want about people, but you gotta learn to keep your mouth shut. Keep it in your head, especially in the army."

I just focus on buttering my toast now, not really sure what to say to the good NCO. We are a reserve unit attached to a regular army battalion at Camp Dobol. The infantry battalion is the 1-26 from Fort Riley, Kansas. Colonel Crane, the commander, looks like a vulture: tall, gangly, always pecking over everything, respected and competent. Except he gets mad at me every week when the latest issue of *The Claw* comes out and he's not on the front cover. He loves Public Affairs, because he loves that we can get him and his "boys" good press. He's proud of his boys, but more than anything he wants his boys of the 1-26 to be on the cover.

Every Monday when a stack of the latest *Claw* is dropped off at the TOC, he storms over to my desk, throws down the magazine and says, "Specialist Joplin! Why am I not on the front cover?" He refers to the entire battalion as "I."

And every Monday I jump to parade rest and scream, "Sir! Yes, sir! I'll try harder next week!"

Then he swoops off, but not in a really mad sort of way. I think he just does that to me to keep me on my toes and to make me try harder.

My coffee is finally cool enough to drink when Master Sergeant Harper comes to the table, and bellows, "Joplin!"

Harper is about the only other female on base, and is charge of, well, just about everything needed to keep the base camp running smoothly. She's beautiful. I'm sure all the men would love to hit on her, but they don't dare, because she'd kick their ass to Sunday unless it was some hot Australian Special Forces dude.

I jump up to parade rest.

She continues, "You have sandbag detail today! Report to the front gate guard shack by *o-six-hundred!*"

"Yes, Sergeant Harper," I snap back.

I plop down, and mutter, "Dang. Now I'll never get a story. Lieutenant Tindle? Can't you just tell them to take me off all these details every other day so I can actually do my job, my mission?"

He shakes his head, and says, "Naw, you'll be fine."

"Then will you call the PAO in Tuzla and tell them I'm gonna be late with my story, or just tell them I can't do it this week?" I whine like only an E4 female can get away with whining.

He smiles and says, "Why don't you do a story on sandbag detail?"

"I'd take your place, Joplin, but I got PowerPoint slides and after action reports and inventories to do," Daniels says, even though he is full of shit, and just wants me to think he is willing to take my place. Besides, he's an E7, I'm just an E4, so I know he does have other things to do besides whatever he does in a purple thong.

Shanker buries his head and says, "I'd take your place too, but I don't want to."

"I'd think you'd be surprised, Joplin, a story about sandbags. In PAO there is a saying, 'We turn chicken shit into chicken salad.'"

We all look at Tindle like he's gone mad.

Tindle puts his coffee cup down and leans forward, as if to tell a secret.

"Let's say you have to do a story on, well, a promotion ceremony, or, say, a bunch of guys pulling guard duty and all they're doing is complaining and moping around and they don't want to be photographed. No problem. Find a story. Everyone has a story. Even the pimply E2 with buck teeth who only joined for the free dental care. You don't have to be a combat vet with PTSD to have a story. They all do. We all do. So get them to talk, and find out what the story is. Guarantee you one guy will say he wants to go to law school when he gets out, another guy will say he had to lose a hundred pounds before he could join so his recruiter ran with him around the block

for a year, and another guy will start complaining about his fat wife that he wants to divorce but can't because they have too many kids and she'll take all his paycheck." Then he adds, "Okay, maybe not the last guy, but you catching what I'm saying?"

"But we're talking about sandbags here, sir. Sandbag detail. What the heck story is there in sandbags?"

"Sucks to be you," Shanker smirks.

"Well, what about sandbags?" Tindle asks. "Think about it. The US Army has used sandbags as a form of force protection since, what, the Revolutionary War? Heck, cavemen used dirt walls to protect themselves from enemy cavemen throwing rocks at them. Why hasn't our modern, high-tech army developed some pre-fab, Kevlar-lined pop-up fortress to protect our troops in the field?" Tindle shakes his head. "Because dirt is everywhere we go. Always available. Bulletproof. Why do you think we dig foxholes and use the dirt from them to build up bunkers? Because it's the best there is. Dirt."

I take a cold bite of hash brown. Daniels and Shanker both nod. Tindle's got a good point.

I smile.

"Thanks, sir. I think I will. I'll take some photos of the guys filling up the bags, and make some chicken salad out of this."

"You better go, then. You have to report in five minutes."

Susanne Aspley retired from the US Army Reserve. She served as a photojournalist in Kuwait, Bosnia, Panama, and Cuba, and as a drill sergeant. She also served in the US Peace Corps, Thailand, as a community development volunteer. Her memoir Ladyboy and the Volunteer *won the 2015 McKnight Artist Fellowship for Creative Prose. Her website is www.aspleywrites.com.*

Terminal Leave

By Rachel A. Brune

In the large room in the small home on the outskirts of Baghdad, our host cracked a bottle of tepid beer and poured us each half a shot glass full. The electricity in this suburb of the capital city was unreliable, and the family we were meeting with didn't own a working fridge. Still, they showed us hospitality, serving us something they thought we would enjoy, so we drank the warm, flat lager and smiled through the conversation. I would have preferred sticking to the water we carried, but our mission was to patrol through the towns surrounding our forward operating base, making nice with the locals and trying to convince them that we would inconvenience their daily lives as little as possible. It was a futile task, because every now and then the bad guys used their houses for shelter and we'd have to go in and stomp around and piss everyone off. Or else the redlegs would need to qualify with their howitzers and we'd be paying some village chief a bunch of money to let us shoot up some poor farmer's field. But it was our job as military police: escort the guys who knew how to talk nice to the locals, and make sure we didn't all get exploded or shot up in the process.

Don't get me wrong, I like beer. I've had a lot of fun, and done a few things I should probably regret, while drinking an adult beverage or four. For a long time I wanted to brew beer, but after telling people of my plans and listening to innumerable bad news stories about exploding bottles and corks launched with enough velocity to puncture walls, floors and ceilings, I had never quite gotten around to it. Especially living on Fort Bragg, with a husband who constantly worried about doing anything to the house that might end up in us paying massive cleaning fees when it came time to move out, I decided that discretion was the better part of valor, at least when it came to marriage and hobbies.

That wasn't a problem now. I had called home one morning after a long, boring night mission, the kind where nothing happened over a couple hundred miles of midnight desert road except a few loads of fuels, toothpaste, mail and vegetables got delivered to some remote base where soldiers couldn't otherwise get that stuff. It was about midnight in the states, and Jim had answered the phone groggy, voice faded and grainy with interrupted sleep. Halfway through the conversation, full of the inanities of long-term separation, I heard an unfamiliar ringtone. Jim swore, and then I heard another voice, feminine, delicate, answer a cell phone.

There had been a long silence, while I thought of all the joint parts of our life that were about to dissolve, and where he tried to think of something to say, and I hung up the receiver in the little plywood shack. My ten-minute time limit was up. I thought about what the woman might look like, if I knew her, if he was at her house when I called his cell phone—if he would get the Jeep and if I would get the dog. I ignored his e-mails for the last four months of the deployment, and when I stepped off the homecoming plane in the deep night humidity of a North Carolina summer, he was waiting there, divorce papers in hand. I signed them.

The call came at two in the morning, the time when any phone call is going to be bad news. I had turned the ringer down, but I was still a super light sleeper, and the vibrations of the phone against the wood of the nightstand jerked me awake, heart racing, hand dropping to the bed to search for my rifle.

I picked up the phone instead. It was my friend's number, a buddy from two deployments ago, but when I answered, the voice was strange.

"Who is this?" I asked.

"My name is Sara." The woman's voice was fragile, flavored with the Deep South. "Jackie had this number in his phone."

I knew immediately what had happened. My soldier had forgotten to change his contacts after moving on to another unit, and something had happened to him, and someone was calling because they thought I was still his squad leader.

"What's happened?" I asked.

"He's dead," she said, with the brutal honesty that comes when you don't know what to say. "He shot himself."

"Have . . ." I trailed off, trying to gather my thoughts. "Have you called the police?"

"Yes, they're here," she said. "I'm trying to call his unit."

So that's how I knew Specialist Jack Trimble was gone.

We had spent an entire deployment, him in the driver's seat of the truck, me in the TC seat as the team leader. He was always going on and on about fixing cars, racing dirt bikes, and when we told him to shut up already about cars and dirt bikes, he had gone on to talk about his other favorite hobby, brewing beer. He had us groaning in pleasure and horror at the amount of beer he said was waiting in his basement, bottles and bottles of different ales and beers and stouts that would be aged to perfection when we got back. We hadn't seen or tasted a beer in months, and we alternately encouraged him and railed at him for riding us like that.

A few months after the 2:00 a.m. wakeup, I got another call. It was Sara again. I didn't want to answer the phone—I had missed the funeral, didn't send flowers, had spent most of the time crawling inside of bottles, trying to forget, while I sidestepped my way out of the Army. I hit "Ignore" but she called back right away, so I answered it. She was cleaning up his stuff and had all of his brewing equipment and didn't want to throw it away or sell it—was it something I would be interested in?

So, here I was with an empty house and nothing but time and a serious urge to develop a drinking problem. I figured it was as good a time as any to get started. I told her I would take them.

I was living off-post now, out of the Army a couple of weeks, renting a house in a quiet part of the city. I had briefly thought about moving away from Fayettenam, but was still trying to find a job and was hoping to pick up something with some Army contractor or other. I couldn't seem to summon up a sense of urgency—I had about four months of terminal leave to live off of, and hadn't even hit the midway point yet.

"Excuse me?"

The voice was quiet, feminine, with a tinge of a familiar accent. I looked up and unconsciously reached for the pistol at my hip. I forced myself to relax and unclench my fingers. This drab creature in her black hijab and swaths of skirt and long-sleeved blouse was no threat.

"Yes?" I asked, wondering where she had come from.

She hesitated at the edge of the garage. I was working with the door open, and she had walked up the short concrete driveway to where I squatted, trying to fix my old mini-fridge in which I intended to eventually store the first batch of beer I brewed.

"Can I have some rice?" she asked.

I stared at her. I couldn't think of anything to say. "Uh . . . how much?"

"Only two cups, I need," she said. "I will bring you, when I am done, dolma. You know? Dolma?"

I had a hard time understanding her. But I knew what dolma was. It was tasty, and I hadn't had any since getting back from Iraq. I had a random bag of rice in the pantry that I thought I remembered. "Hang on one second, I'll be right back."

She nodded and folded her hands in front of her. I dropped my tools next to the fridge and went inside. The house I'm renting is a pretty modern design. The garage opens into a short space with a washing machine and dryer on one side and a closet on the other. I had stashed a load of old military crap in there, along with a bunch of dry foods I had brought from the old house. Most of it was rice and beans, things that required planning and cooking to use up. These days I mostly went with microwave macaroni and cheese.

I gave her the rest of a ten-pound bag of white rice I had laying around. I wasn't going to use it. She took it with a strange relief and gratitude, which made me feel uncomfortable—too much thanks for something I was only going to throw away, after all.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Fixing a fridge," I said. "I'm planning on brewing a batch of koelsch. That's a kind of beer." I added the last to clear up the confusion I saw reflected in the twist of her mouth.

"You know how to do that?" she asked.

"Nah, but it can't be too hard," I said, with all the bravado of the neophyte. "I have a recipe."

"I mean the . . . " She trailed off. "Thank you for the rice."

And then she left and I didn't think any more of it until she came back with the dolma.

This time, she rang the doorbell and I invited her into the kitchen. I was getting ready to start boiling the first batch and I had already washed and sterilized all of the equipment three times. The instructions that I had warned me very specifically, in no uncertain terms, not to allow any dirt or germs or bacteria onto the instruments or else the entire batch would be ruined and poisonous. The first time, I had repeated the sterilization process just to be sure. Then I accidentally touched one of the many plastic tubes that belonged to the apparatus and dropped another one, and so I repeated the whole process all over again.

My fingers were clumsy around the instruments. I couldn't shake the feeling I was robbing the dead, even though I didn't think my buddy would mind I was carrying on his passion. I would think of him every time I cracked a cold one, but it was still creepy on some level.

The front door leads into an open floor plan—family room sunk down one step on the right, open kitchen on the left, to the right a corridor that leads back to a couple of bedrooms and to the extreme left, a small dining room. The decorating was generic. I had taken my credit card to Target and bought a bunch of new cheap stuff stained and bronzed to look like old cheap stuff.

"Come on in," I said. "Have a seat."

"I only have ten minutes," she said.

"Let me make you some tea," I said.

She was wearing the same outfit she had worn previously, but the hijab did not obscure her entire face and I saw surprise in her expression when I got out the tea set I had brought back from Iraq. It was one of the few things I had taken from the old house.

"Thank you," she said.

She placed the dolma on the small kitchenette table and seated herself in one of the low chairs. I moved some paperwork and old bills

off the surface and put them on the counter. Now she could see my cheap linen tablecloth with the daisy pattern I had bought thinking the bright pinks, yellows, and greens would cheer me up.

I put two small plates down as the water boiled. Her gaze took in the house, lingering over the mad scientist assortment of pipes and tubing and containers that littered the counter.

"Is that for your kass?" she asked.

"Koelsch? Yes," I said. I measured out tablespoonsful of granular brown sugar, tipping them into the tiny tea glasses. Once the water boiled, I would steep the tea—leaves I still had from deployment—and then pour it over the sugar.

She didn't say anything else.

"It's my first time trying it out," I said, to fill the silence that quickly grew awkward.

She nodded.

"My family is from central Germany," I told her. "When I was younger, my mom used to tell us we had relatives there, still, who owned a brewery. They make koelsch—Kupper Koelsch."

I told the same story to the guy at the homebrewing store up in Raleigh. He seemed mildly interested when I explained, as I did to my visitor, that all my life I had taken a sort of half-pride in the fact that my family was in the brewing business. It was only when I got older and the Internet was invented that I finally got around to searching the family lore and found out that the pride and joy of the American Kuppers was actually one of the worst-rated koelsches in all of Germany, and indeed the entire world. When I told the guy at the store that I wanted to see if I could do better to redeem the family name to myself, I was only half-joking.

"Very good," she said as I finished my story and the tea, placing a cup in front of her. I smelled the waft of mint and black tea and sat across from her. After two months, she was my first visitor.

"When it's done, you should come over and try some," I said.

"I cannot," she said, embarrassed. "It is . . . haram."

There was another awkward silence. I was batting a thousand today.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Safiya," she said.

"Nice to meet you, Safiya," I said. "My name is Rebecca."

She sipped her tea. "I don't want to keep you."

I shrugged. "I'm not in a hurry."

And I wasn't. I had a bunch of ingredients in my fridge I didn't understand and a pile of equipment on my counter with forbidding names like "siphon hose" and "hydrometer" and "mash paddle." I had a book and a sheet of paper printed out from the Internet.

She set the tea glass back down on the table. "I must go. My husband will be home soon."

And then I suspected that maybe she wasn't really supposed to be hanging out, sipping tea in some stranger's house.

"Well, I don't have that problem anymore," I said.

She frowned.

"No husband," I said and tried to laugh it off. She frowned again.

"I must go."

"Thanks for the dolma," I said. "I'll get your dish back to you."

She nodded without saying anything and left.

I stared at the table. The dolma sat, twelve little pieces of chicken and rice wrapped snugly in their grape leaves. They were still warm. I picked one up in the first three fingers of my right hand and brought it to my mouth, inhaling the scents of spices and meat. I bit down, gently, cupping my other hand under my chin to catch any stray bits.

The taste shuddered through me. I put the rest of the roll in my mouth and chewed slowly. I felt a curious tightening in my chest and my throat dried. It got harder to chew and it was only when I buried my face in my hands, feeling the wetness on my cheeks, that I realized

I was crying. I choked it down and wiped my eyes. Breathing deeply, I stood up, went to the sink, turned on the cold water, and washed my face. I stood there with the water running over my hands for a long time.

A couple days after that, I washed all the equipment again. I still hadn't started the batch, and I was worried that dust or dirt might have gotten on it, sitting on the counter like that. This time, I refused to let myself worry or think. I told myself I wasn't the first one to try home brewing, and clearly many other people before me had attempted and succeeded with this fine kit and recipe, and so it was time to quit crying about it and just do the damn thing.

The recipe kit I bought from the store had all the ingredients pre-measured and sorted, which was convenient. As per the instructions, I boiled the water and crushed grains, using my buddy's thermometer to make sure the heat held steady right between the upper and lower temperature delimitations. I had a moment of panic when I grasped the pot handles with my bare hands and had to quickly rummage through a couple of drawers to find pot holders, and then another moment when I realized the recipe called for me to rinse the mixture with water that was already at a high temperature and I hadn't even started the heat under that pot.

Eventually I got the malt and different kinds of hops into the same pot. I hoped that I was boiling them at the perfect temperature, and that the missteps and hesitations would not permanently damage the process. I felt less as if I were cooking something than that I was playing around with a chemistry set, especially when I went to pour the wort into the fermentation vessel and then realized that I needed another couple of gallons of water—this time cold water—and some apparatus called an airlock. By now I had my laptop on the counter trying to identify which pieces of equipment were which. I was sweating and angry and cursing myself, the recipe, the guy at the homebrewing store, and my buddy for making it sound so easy.

The next part of the recipe was simple—wait for seven days. I left the fermentation vessel or, as I called it, the fucking pail, on the floor of my kitchen. The unfermented beer would remain at the right temperature inside and I knew that if I put it outside in the garage I would forget about it and there would go the twenty bucks I spent on the kit and recipe, and the entire morning of work.

I needed to do something I knew how to do, something that would be easy for me, mindless. I decided to clean my guns.

I have three pistols and a shotgun. I keep them locked up, unloaded, when I'm drinking. Jack wasn't the only one who found it too easy to reach for one when he was mired in low places. But now they were sitting in inanimate pieces across the daisy-patterned tablecloth, and I had a half-empty bottle of Shiner Bock to keep me company as I wiped away the remnants of the morning's range practice. My hands were covered in carbon and cleaning lubricant when the doorbell rang.

I left greasy fingerprints on the shiny doorknob, opening it to find my new friend Safiya. She stepped into the house quickly, moving to hide behind me.

"Is everything all right?" I asked.

"Yes, fine," she said. "I need my dish."

"Okay," I said. "Come on in."

I looked out on the street, casting a glance about to see if there was anyone following her, or any other reason for her strange entrance. Not finding anything, I closed the door and went back into the kitchen. I found her sitting at the dinette, hands in her lap, looking at the gun parts scattered across the tabletop.

"Would you like some tea?" I asked. "I still have to wash your dish."

"That's okay, I can just take it and go," she said, but her hurry was belied by the fact that she sat down.

"No, no, please, it's not a problem," I said. "Let me start some water to boil."

"Thank you," she said.

And then we once again ran out of things to say to each other, so I made the tea, gave her a cup, and pulled the empty dolma dish out of the refrigerator. I had been snacking at odd intervals, pulling one after the other out of the ceramic container with my fingers, not stopping to re-heat them or use a fork and knife. Once done, I had left the empty container in there along with some rapidly-souring milk and an empty cheese wrapper.

"What do these look like?" she asked. "When they are one piece?"

She had a curious way of speaking, like her English vocabulary was limited, so she had to think of new ways to say things.

"They're just pistols," I told her. "Like you see on TV."

"What it feels to hold one in your hands?" she asked.

She reminded me of my own curiosity the first time I had held my first gun. Unlike me, she kept her fingers to herself, wrapping them around the tea glass.

I put down the dish in the warm, soapy water, and dried my hands on a paper towel. Picking up some of the pieces, I put the spring back in the barrel of the Sig Sauer P220, racked the slide and locked it back. I handed it toward her. "You want to take a look?"

She shook her head. "No, thank you. For women, that is haram."

I refrained from stating the obvious, that I was a woman, and that it obviously wasn't that forbidden, and also that I had seen other Middle Eastern women using guns, but I'm used to operating around people with radically different opinions than I about what women should and should not do. And not all of those people are from the Middle East.

"What does it feel like?" she asked. "To hold that?"

I told her that the first time is strange, and that you should never get so comfortable with them that you forget what they're

capable of, but the truth is, I've become more than comfortable with them. I told her they were easy to buy in Texas, although not so much here. She didn't say anything, but I thought I caught a look on her face. She put her hand to her cheek.

"Oh hey," I said. "I finally started the koelsch."

"It smells," she said.

"I guess it does."

She caught my frown. "I'm sorry, I meant I smell it."

"Yeah, it's kind of distinctive," I said, although I couldn't smell anything except CLP from the cleaning kit. We sat, again in silence, which was almost growing comfortable. I finished putting together the rest of the pistols, nestling them in their hard, black cases, closing them up for the next time I ventured to the range.

Someone pounded on the door. Safiya jumped, spilling tea on the tablecloth. She said something in Arabic.

"It's okay," I said. "The tablecloth's machine washable."

She shook her head. "I am sorry."

"Excuse me a minute," I said, and went to answer the bell.

When I opened the door, I didn't recognize the man standing there, but I knew it was Safiya's husband. He was about my height, five-seven, in a suit with shiny shoes.

"Come home, now," he said.

I stared at him, but then Safiya pushed her way past me, holding the dripping dish against her chest, the water staining the dark fabric of her shirt.

I watched, the uncomfortable observer to this domestic drama, as he turned and stalked off my porch, making his angry way down the wide suburban sidewalk. She followed after him, hurrying to stay at his heels. I shook my head. I had seen this sort of situation before, but hadn't expected it to drop onto my front porch or come sit in my kitchen. I wondered if I should say something, or maybe get the number of someone for her to call next time I saw her, but then the

self-centeredness I'd been wallowing in for the past couple of months reasserted itself and I simply shrugged and made a note to try to bring it up in conversation if she ever rang the doorbell again.

The directions I had said to bottle the koelsch after fourteen days, and then to wait an additional two weeks before drinking it. I decided I would keep half the bottles in the mini-fridge for those two weeks, and keep the other half stored at room temperature, to see which ones came out better. My buddy had insulated his basement and kept it at a carefully climate-controlled sixty degrees, but I wasn't about to renovate my garage when I was only renting the house and wasn't sure if I was even going to ever make another batch of beer.

I spent the time puttering around the house, rearranging my resumé, thinking about sending it out to a couple of places. The job market wasn't as bad where I was, but there still weren't a plethora of open hires. I toyed with the idea of investing in a piece of land and starting a business, but I couldn't think of anything I wanted to do badly enough to deal with the heartburn of trying to be a small business owner in this economy.

The day after I bottled my first homebrew, I decided to skip a day of job searching and head to the range. I pulled my pistol cases out from the top of my closet and brought them into the kitchen. Setting them on the table, I opened each one to make sure I had all of my magazines and cleaning equipment.

My Springfield XDS was not in its case.

I had a fun time after that, calling the police, reporting that the .45-caliber, easily concealable firearm had inexplicably vanished from my collection. They sent an officer to take my report, a young kid fresh out of the academy who clearly hadn't been assigned to many challenging cases yet because he tried hard to think of a lot of good, probing questions to ask for his investigation. I told him that

no, I hadn't taken the guns out since the last time I went to the range a month ago. Yes, I was the only one in the house in all that time. And here, I caught the whiff of a pitying look. And no, I had no idea who took the thing. And here, the look turned suspicious.

He took my paperwork, made a copy of my concealed carry permit and the receipt of purchase, noted the serial number, and told me to have a nice day. I decided to take his advice, forego the range, and spend the rest of the afternoon drinking on the back porch.

As it turned out, the bottles I had put on the shelf in the garage tasted better than the ones that had aged in the mini-fridge. I made a solemn, solitary ceremony of the first tasting, chilling the shelf-aged beer in the refrigerator, cracking the bottles with my special bottle opener with the military police crest on it, carefully pouring a small taste of each into two small glasses.

I brought the samples out to the back porch. The first one I sipped was the fridge-aged. I held it in my mouth, rolling the light amber liquid around my tongue and gums. It tasted hoppy, but tart, and stronger than normal beer. I swallowed it, then poured the rest of it on the grass. A strange bitterness lingered in the back of my throat, coating my tongue.

For you, buddy, I said to myself.

I did the same with the other glass. This one tasted . . . better. The aroma was sharper, and the taste lingered longer. When I swallowed, the aftertaste burned like satisfaction down my throat. I poured the rest of that glass out, too, an offering to some obscure household god. I got a kick out of imagining Jack's horrified reaction at the waste of a good beer.

The night was cool, summer fading fast into a reluctant autumn. I still perspired as I sat out on the back porch, a gift of the North Carolina humidity. But it wasn't unpleasant. I finished

the two bottles I had opened, thinking about my buddy, thinking a lot of what-if type thoughts about things that might have happened. It was the sort of night when you don't need anyone around, because the ghosts of those who aren't there are more present than any real person would be.

I fell asleep in my camp chair. Around midnight, I jerked awake, trying to make sense of what I was hearing. Commotion and gunshots from a neighbor's house—not the first time I'd ever been thus awoken in the middle of the night, but that was in post housing. I thought I had left that behind me when I moved off the base. I set my beer bottles upright on the back porch, went back inside and called the police. I was loading rounds back into my Sig when my doorbell echoed through the house.

I opened the door and Safiya stood on my front porch, my gun still in her hand. She was real calm, her face unmoving, betraying no emotion. She wasn't wearing her hijab. I led her into the kitchen without a word. She sat down, placing the gun carefully on the table. I left it there.

Going in the cabinet, I took down a glass. I paused.

"You want a beer?" I asked, although I thought I already knew the answer.

"No, thank you," she said. "It is haram."

I got some ice cubes and water from the tap and gave her the glass. We waited together for the police to show up.

Rachel A. Brune joined the Army Reserve after 9/11 and has been serving ever since, first as an enlisted public affairs specialist and later as a military police officer. Her work appears in a variety of media and genres, from news articles to steampunk to urban fantasy. She has published two novels, Cold Run *(Untold Press) and* Soft Target, *and is currently working on a third.*

Poetry.

Goddess of the Goats

Maggie DeMay

Full moon high in the sky
fog coming in
breaking like waves
against the hills and fences
Rudder was crying
baaing her silly head off
because
she couldn't find her baby
at 3am

and I
Goddess of the goats
get up from my warm bed
not that it mattered
since I was awake anyway
in my flannel pj's and rubber boots
find the baby
sleeping under what's left
of the catalpa tree

a tiny little creature
smaller than the big ginger cat
who guards the farm
against invasions of rodents
when he feels the urge
I take the baby to Rudder
who sniffs it and decides
yes, this is my baby
you may go away now human

Fog rolls in
while in the shrine
erected in the hollow
of the one tree
left standing
candles burn down
smoke and fog uniting

Smoke and fog
moonlight on the fields
white goats shining in moonglow
dancing hooves in the night
whip-poor-will song
with cricket harmony

And I
Goddess of the Goats
with the knowledge
that all my goat girls
and their babies
are safe
can go back to bed

Maggie DeMay is a middle-aged hippie who recently relocated to Arizona. She's an old Cold Warrior who never saw combat. She still misses her goat girls.

Without Regret

Jenny Linn Loveland

For my mother, a survivor of fire-bombing.

Mother washes rice, CalRose, at the kitchen sink—
her ghosts crowd her elbows;
she lifts a grain stuck to her finger:

"One grain feed millions."

One hand in dusty water whorls rice in the pot—

she reminds me, *California is nowhere near Tokyo;*
her words rise and spill with the rice, over edges.
She spins the rice, her fingers raising clouds:

"American bombers, silver beautiful,
that long whistle
slicing
the
air—echoes
sirens, everyone runs
books burn, everything burns."

Mother's days swing loud then, hard;
her naps of brandy silence the house.

Tokyo is nowhere near California:
her armchair, her ticket home.

My pen sits on blank paper—
I make a line, one drawn without breaks or regret.

Jenny Linn Loveland was raised in a military household. Her father was a career Air Force non-commissioned officer who served in the Korean Conflict and Vietnam. Her mother was a Japanese war bride and survivor of the 1945 Tokyo fire bombings. Of their four children, three are veterans. Jenny is a retired Air Force officer who completed tours in South Korea and Operations Desert Shield/Storm.

Belly Jazz

Maggs Vibo

I'm a fetus and I ragtime waltz inside your water band
I hear a muffled ech'O'ing, but only when you're sad
I rat-a-tat upon the keys to show my Byard flow
All of a sudden, I stop because I hear arpeggio

Then from the beats and beyond your womb,
More artists in our band?
Oh, Daddy-O, our fearless one… I call him *Camo Dad*

He raps the mic, then he shouts, 'Tell me, how do Y'all do?'
I ball my fist, as in reply, to show I'm here with you!

Then we scat down the vocals
I sure bebop the best
Calm stalls our night of improv
Heart drums lull us to rest

Sandpiper Man

By Maggs Vibo

Spirits, protect my favorite bird
Halt pains of tendons tensioning
Singing cadence echoing
Endless endurance—
Feathers soar high

On the wings of my love,
Do drums beat?
Feet flicker fast like flames
Sandpiper legs dash
Past ensuing waves

Our Dreamtime Pow Wow

Maggs Vibo

You ripped my jingle dress
Amongst the milky blanket of a starry night
Then tangled talons fell from Medicean moons
And wings looped a hooped heartfire until the last instant
Enveloped in the light and the darkness completely
Barely burnt within an explosion of sensational release
I awoke and poked at pink flesh on my toes
. . . It was a passionate dance

Maggs Vibo served in the Army from 2000-2004 as a brigade supply sergeant. She considers providing toilet paper to buddies, burning waste, and pulling security her most important missions at Tallil Air Base in Iraq. In 2011, she earned a Graduate Certificate in Online Teaching and MA in Liberal Studies. Maggs Vibo has first person images featured at the philosophy website for Douglas Harding@Headlessway.org. Her other pieces on Harding's method of self-inquiry are collaborations with French writer, José Le Roy. As the granddaughter of a Native American, Vibo believes storytelling through art continues the oral traditions of her Sac and Fox Nation ancestors. She currently teaches science and cultural history as a docent at Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum in Hawaii.

The Fly

Kristine Iredale

The heat brings them out
black cobras and green vipers.
When walking in tall grass
always watch your step.
Follow the footsteps
of the person in front of you
if need be.

One bite is a death sentence.
There's no antivenom
and you'll be dead
before the MEDEVAC
can get you to Germany.

We would wish that the snake bite
wasn't so poisonous.
We were willing to lose a finger or two
if it meant leaving this god forsaken place.
One of the master sergeants
killed a black cobra with a machete knife.
It was dark and trying to stay warm
from the heat left over on the rocks.

The camel spiders will follow in your shadow.
A reprieve from the heat
and when you go home from the war
they will follow you in your sleep.
Crawl on your hand, take a bite.
You'll wake up tearing the sheets off.

When you go to visit your Uncle
you'll search for snakes in his yard
where the grass grows tall.
You'll remember normal is an illusion.
What is normal for the spider
is chaos for the fly.

You'll wonder
when will the camel spiders
stop following you?
When will I
stop searching for snakes?

Kristine Iredale is currently a student at Eastern Washington University. In 2008, she deployed with the Washington State Army National Guard's 81st Brigade Heavy Combat Team in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Her poems have appeared in O-Dark-Thirty, RiverLit, The Railtown Almanac, *and* Northwest Boulevard.

Death Warrior

Gorian M.

Events and people and places and histories and dates happened and so we were both in a room, one Memorial Day.

I saw a soul that is bruised and crushed and fragmented and still laughs and loves and is strong and good. I am not broken, he said, confident, before looking away.

They brought him in, after years of war; they gave him drugs, they operated on him, they severed his brain from his heart so that memories would fade, nightmares would stop; so that he could sleep, and not die.

I touched a throat, a jaw, a body of soft skin over warm heart and tattoos covering older tattoos, names of past lovers.

The words Death Warrior in large, splendid print claim the breadth of his back, and, smaller, a Sergeant of Marines design fades on his chest.

A moan, words of love, escaped his lips without permission, without thought of anything but their truth.

Seeing pain from afar, knowing that the water in this glass will enter my body and over the course of days and many chemical processes transform into tears I will cry over him, because this is too hard, I drink the water without hesitating because such is my thirst for his love.

Gorian M. served in the Marine Corps for eight years, with two deployments to combat zones. She writes poetry, memoir, and science fiction; her current battle is trying to get a medical appointment with the VA.

Start a Fire

Melissa Poff

May your blushed cheeks melt your tears before the bitter taste meets his sweet lips

Glove your dry callous hands so as to not tear his sensitive skin

Your mouth should not mark him and your words should not harm him

Leave him as gentle and in love as when you found him

Melissa Poff recently retired as an Army supply sergeant. She served two tours in Iraq, and now resides in Augusta, Georgia.

Entitled You Ask?

Patricia M. France

I have been entitled since the first spear could be thrown . . . . . .
I have been entitled since the first body could be torn . . . . . .
I have been entitled since the first bullet born . . . . . .
I have been entitled since the very first war . . . . . .

I have been entitled since ships could sail . . . . . .
I have been entitled since planes could fly . . . . . .
I have been entitled since tanks could roll . . . . . .
I have been entitled since Humvees could be driven . . . . . .

I have been entitled since MRAPs were born . . . . . .
I have been entitled since arms and legs could be torn . . . . . .
I have been entitled since brains could be damaged . . . . . .
I have been entitled since souls could die . . . . . .
Since souls could die . . . . . .

Patricia France enlisted in the US Navy in 1994 as a hospital corpsman. She spent most of her Navy career in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii as a radiologic technologist and drug and alcohol counselor. She was commissioned into the US Army in 2004 and served as a behavioral health officer (licensed clinical social worker). She deployed twice to Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom (2007-2008) and Operation New Dawn (2011). She resides in Steilacoom, WA, with her husband, mother, and three dogs.

Weekends at the Post Office

Crisann Hanes

Weekends at the post office with insatiable boxes
craving polka dotted pepperoni and memories of grease stains
on your Abercrombie shirt slung, day-dripped across the couch
where empty boxes now implore panty shelves a sampling of home because
you beg for a memory more than these weekly cheese-can Cracker Jack filled boxes.
My pen lifts, writes you all the letters of my heart with postage-affixed and
deposits love to your dusty life where a sand coated package is laced
size small, worn between warm thighs, a gesture far from polka dotted pepperoni.
But you bite over the phone. You need more. Leave lace.
Send anything. Everything, else.
Except raisins, and Kool-Aid.
This ain't Vietnam.

Crisann Hanes is a United States Marine Corps veteran with a Bachelor of Arts in English and a Master of Education in Adult and Higher Education. Her poetry typically addresses experience, history, heritage, and explores the human condition.

jokes with civilians

Anna Weaver

These are the things we laugh about.
It proves we belong.

This is the nomenclature we use
like handles to carry our stories,
keep from losing our grip—

That the Army doesn't have dawn.
The Army has first light and before
that, stand to. That a taste for field coffee
can be acquired. That tying a tourniquet
is a basic skill.

We argue the best way to melt shine
into boot leather. We speak almost fondly
of MREs and CS gas.

Our talk is not talk, but call and response—
one soldier drops a coin, the others follow
as if on command. We never disappoint.

We remember each other by last name first,
by rank, by squad number and stick number.

Our stories have sound effects—engine, rotor, shockwave,
unfolding canopy,
the soft exhale before firing.

Our memories have cadence and caliber, sector and arc,
drill and ceremony.
We cannot sanitize or explain.

Our jargon has no synonyms. Our alphabet
isn't made of letters. There is no signal
to tell you when it's safe to laugh.

Our jokes do not translate
into any of your languages.

hesitation before permitting a man to walk me to my car

Anna Weaver

say yes
and he walks point

say yes
and I will miss
the chance to cinch
the belt on my coat
lace keys through fingers
sharpen the brave
rhythm of heels
each step a warning
shot for stray men
who laugh and watch
from curbs and stairwells

say yes
and my brightest colors
turn dull
say no
and I alone will split
this sidewalk like a blade
danger will part and froth
in doorways
between streetlights
and I might learn
again to trust
in my best lies

that I am whole
and in control
and strong
for a woman my size

topographical survey of a man in a towel

Anna Weaver

The ridge line of his grandfather's
shoulders shadows a quadrangle
of muscle, bone, and dark Irish hair.

Just off-center within the tense plain
of waist, where the terrain draws down
between twin spurs of hipbone,
the terrycloth knot makes a gratuitous V.

My fingers trace the landforms
like water in an arroyo, down
and faster than I mean to.

He does not love me,
so the towel is not a metaphor.

It surrenders in a white valley
at the mountains of his clear, bare feet.

Raised in Oklahoma, Anna Weaver served eight years as a parachute rigger in the U.S. Army Reserve. Her poems have appeared in Literary Bohemian, Connotation Press, One, *and other print and online journals—as well as in a couple of anthologies and public art projects, on coffee bags, and once on a postcard. A self-described open mic tourist, she has performed in eight states and the District of Columbia. She currently lives in North Carolina with her two daughters.*

Interview.

You Owe It to Yourself: A Conversation with Tracy Crow

By Jerri Bell

Tracy Crow has written three books: a memoir, *Eyes Right: Confessions from a Woman Marine*; a writing guide for veterans and family members, *On Point: A Guide to Writing the Military Story;* and a military thriller, *An Unlawful Order,* which she published under the pen name Carver Greene. She also edited the anthology *Red, White, and True: Stories from Veterans and Families, World War II to Present,* which included personal essays from well-known writers like Tracy Kidder and David Abrams; *O-Dark-Thirty* nonfiction editor Dario DiBattista; and *O-Dark-Thirty* contributors Jeff Hess, Amber Jensen, and Brooke King.

Eyes Right was one of the first books I found when I started looking for writing by women veterans in 2013. The candor of the Author's Note got my attention immediately:

> *"This is my story. A combination of one part breaking ground with three parts breaking all the rules, for which there were painful consequences."*

It was exactly what one would expect from a former Marine. Right up front, Tracy acknowledged that she'd broken some rules; she made no excuses; and she accepted responsibility and the consequences of her actions—in print.

She opens the memoir—two chapters of which were published as essays and were nominated for a Pushcart Prize—in the interrogation room of the Military Police headquarters at Marine Corps Air Station New River, where she was being questioned on charges of conduct unbecoming an officer, including adultery. In the memoir she navigates the rocky terrain of miscarriage and motherhood, a doomed youthful marriage, and Marine Corps service at a time when women were beyond unwelcome in the Corps—and does it far more successfully than she navigated the final night compass march during The Basic School at Quantico. She writes with compassion for her younger self, and without bitterness toward her father, her ex-husband, or her former lover.

I read *Eyes Right* in one sitting, and wrote to Tracy as soon as I'd finished the last page to let her know how deeply her book had resonated with me. I didn't know then that our correspondence would become a writing partnership two years later: in the interest of full disclosure, in June of 2015 we signed a contract to co-write a nonfiction book on women veterans, forthcoming in 2017. We collaborate online almost every day, and during our research we've laughed, shed tears, raged, and startled the placid staff of a nearly-empty archive into running to see what was the matter when we started high-fiving and shouting, "Yes! That's awesome! That's how to *tell* 'em!" over one of our discoveries.

We started discussing some of the questions below over lunch at a Gordon Biersch in May of 2015, and we haven't stopped talking since.

Jerri Bell: You open* On Point *by saying that when you left the Marine Corps in 1987 you never intended to tell your story. And in the acknowledgements for* Eyes Right, *you describe a scene in the parking lot of Eckerd College: the instructor of your undergraduate memoir workshop asked you why you weren't writing down your military stories for her class, and you answered that you didn't think anyone would care. That resonated with me: women's military service has been downplayed and discounted throughout American history, and we often go right along with it and downplay our contributions too. And many of our male colleagues are equally modest about their service—they didn't deploy, or they didn't go outside the wire, or they didn't see much action when they did go out on patrol. Even your brother-in-law asked why you thought anyone would be interested in* your *story—that had to hurt. What changed your mind? Why did you decide to tell your story after all? (I know you said that nobody can say no to Dr. Helen Wallace, but you'd have held out anyway if you hadn't decided to write.)

Tracy Crow: In the beginning, what convinced me to write about my Marine Corps experiences, besides my professor's stern encouragement that night, was my desire to write, period. Becoming a writer was a dream I'd already shelved for decades. Here was my chance. I was back in college, a sophomore at forty-one, the same time my nineteen-year-old daughter was a sophomore in college. But until that night in the parking lot, I'd been trying to write about my grandmother who had recently died; the feedback hadn't been favorable, mainly because her death was so recent that I didn't even know what I was trying yet to say about our relationship. So facing a class deadline, I finally gave in and wrote about the funniest, yet safest, of my military experiences.

By the way, I don't think it's necessarily a bad thing that many of us downplay our contributions. The world, frankly, could use a little

more modesty and empathy and self-forgiveness, and maybe that's why my former brother-in-law, who had grown up during the Great Depression, took such a harsh stance against what he likely saw as insufferable navel-gazing. Even now, fiction writers will sometimes take jabs at those who write ME-moir.

But yes, his comment certainly stung and left me speechless; it also sent me running back to the manuscript with the question, *What's in this for my reader?* Since I was just me, Tracy-Crow-Nobody-Famous, I'd have to go to places within my life story that I hadn't planned to go. Writers call this going vertical—going to a place of vulnerability that can only happen after honest self-reflection. Going that vertical in places is hard work, believe me, but I'm glad I did.

"Thank you for writing my story," a woman soldier e-mailed from Iraq after reading *Eyes Right*.

My story? An entire generation separated our military service experiences, yet in my story, she had found her own. That's the power and purpose of meaningful storytelling, I believe: to remind our egos intent on separatism of the immeasurable reward that's gained through the profoundly human connection.

JB: You took a huge risk in telling the story of the end of your marriage and career for public consumption. Who were your first readers, and what reaction did you get from them? Were there any points when you started to think that the reward didn't justify the risk of speaking up? What convinced you otherwise?

TC: The first to read the entire manuscript was my best friend, who was in grad school with me then and who is an extremely talented fiction writer. Frankly, I wasn't even sure what I had written when I finished that first draft and sent it to her. A big pile of poop, I was certain. A few days later, I was driving home from an errand, and on a Florida interstate, when she called my cell phone. I'll never

forget that call—her excitement as she shared all the themes she found within the manuscript. All I could say was, "Really? All that's really in there? Are you sure?"

The second reader was my thesis adviser, J.D. Dolan, followed by thesis readers Pinckney Benedict and Kathryn Rhett. Each validated my friend's feedback.

As for reward versus risk—I don't remember giving any of that much thought after the comment from my former brother-in-law. After that, I took a head-down, detective approach. I was determined to uncover any and all motives behind the choices I'd made that eventually led to a number of unfavorable consequences.

JB: Let's talk a little about telling the truth. You and I have had some long conversations about truth in memoir, and the difficulty of dealing with memory—especially when memories are traumatic or incomplete for some reason. You changed some names in* Eyes Right, *but you're up front with readers about having done that. Everything else in your memoir is true to the best of your ability to remember or research. What would you tell* ODT *readers about truth, memory, and trauma?

TC: Write the truth as honestly and clearly as your memory allows. Be honest and up front with your reader—not at the end of the story!—about when you're imagining how someone might have reacted or what they might have said after, say, a break-up. But don't lie, fudge, make up characters or composite characters or events. Especially with nonfiction, a writer and reader are entering a magical contract with one another. If the reader discovers at the end of the story or book that certain segments of the story were fabricated for "the value of art," the reader will feel cheated; you'll likely lose that reader, and many others, forever.

JB: Your second book was the military thriller* An Unlawful Order *(published under the pen name Carver Greene). Several other women veterans have successfully published commercial or genre fiction. Vietnam veteran Elizabeth Ann Scarborough has a long list of fantasy titles, some written in collaboration with Anne McCaffrey, and her 1989 novel* The Healer's War *won a Nebula Award in 1989. Former Army sergeant Mary Doyle also writes military thrillers and urban fantasy. Active duty Army officer Jessica Scott writes romance novels, set mostly at Fort Hood. What drew you to commercial fiction instead of literary fiction? And when are you going to write the next book in your thriller series? (Ha, ha, I know. But I have to ask!)

TC: Oh my, the Carver Greene novel was a complete accident. A happy one, but here's the short(er) version of a much longer story about how all this happened:

A few months after grad school, with my thesis-manuscript of *Eyes Right* in hand, I won the Powerball. Not really, but it certainly felt that way when I signed with a literary agent at a prestigious New York agency and felt as if I were holding the winning ticket to literary heaven. However, a few months later, he reported he couldn't find a home for the memoir against "the flood of Iraqi and Afghanistan memoirs . . . your story from the 1980s appears too dated . . . write a novel instead." Write a novel? I didn't know how to write a novel. My MFA is in nonfiction.

But he believed I could write a novel. He said to base it on a character similar to who I am in *Eyes Right*. His plan was to sell the novel, and then pull out the memoir with a sly grin for a two-book deal. Sounded good to me, so I went to work on a novel that's based largely on actual events.

Four months later, I sent it off to him. He returned it soon after with recommendations. I went back to work for a couple of months, and sent the revised draft back to him. He was certain he

could sell it. I was so excited I could hardly sleep for weeks. But he couldn't sell it. Seems the marketing folks at each house couldn't figure out how to drive women down the aisle of military fiction, so I shoved the manuscript in a drawer for several years.

The funny thing is, I had the most fun ever writing that novel. I couldn't wait to get back to the writing every day. I still get e-mails every month from Carver Greene fans who want to know if I'm any closer to completing the sequel. (The last fan e-mail included a plea for me to continue the relationship between Chase and Joe.) Fans are always disappointed to learn that I've gotten another project under contract, instead, and have to devote my attention to projects under contract.

But another reason I haven't squeezed in the sequel is because I haven't yet landed on a premise that feels right . . . that is, until a week ago. I think I have it now, but don't tell Carver Greene fans or they'll start sending e-mails and Facebook messages for progress reports. (Hey, Gentleman in Alaska—I know, I know you're still waiting. I'm working on it! I promise!)

JB: We've also discussed that the literary legacy of women veterans isn't widely known. Civilian author Cara Hoffman said in a 2014* New York Times *op-ed that "stories about female veterans are nearly absent from our culture," and this year critic Sam Sacks dismissed women veterans' writing in a two-sentence parenthetical aside in a long article about war fiction in* Harper's Magazine. *The problem may be one of invisibility. Until recently neither you nor I knew that Mary Lee Settle—the author of more than twenty books, winner of the 1978 National Book Award for her novel* Blood Tie, *and a founder of the annual PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction—was a veteran of World War II. Why do you think that the writing of women veterans isn't better known?

TC: One of the chief takeaways from the project we're working on is the startling realization of how little today's women veterans seem to know about their own history. I'm guilty as charged!

I'm not sure how this happens. We seem doomed to repeat the same mistakes and conversations that took place decades, even centuries in some cases, earlier.

Somewhere along the way of education, I suppose we receive the homogenized version of facts, events, and dates, but it's shocking how much is omitted. How do we correct this? I'm not sure, except to suggest that each service extend as much time during basic training history classes on the military contributions of women as they do on those of men—and for both men and women recruits.

If we want to shape a generation of men who will act more appropriately toward the women in their units, I think a good place to start is in recruit training with military history classes on the significant contributions made by women.

JB: You provide a long list of war writing at the end of* On Point. *What are your favorite memoir and your favorite war novel? What writers—especially women writers—do you turn to for inspiration?

TC: No! Don't make me choose. I refuse to choose . . . other than Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*. I hope to someday write an *On Point 2.0* that will include a list of great work from emerging female writers, such as *The Longest Night* by Andria Williams. As for the women writers I turn to for inspiration . . . the usual suspects: Toni Morrison, Isabel Allende, Geraldine Brooks, Elizabeth Strout, Joyce Carol Oates, Janet Burroway, Abigail Thomas, and Alice Munro.

***JB: You and I share the conviction that more military stories need to be told, a conviction that you acted on by publishing* Red, White &**

True. ***And we both also believe that more women veterans need to tell their stories. What stories do you think remain to be told, especially by women who have served?***

TC: I'm not sure, but I'm looking forward to lots of great work from women veterans. I'm encouraged by the workshops I lead from time to time that so many women veterans are willing and eager to write about their experiences. Some are turning their experiences into short stories or novels, and that's fine. Others such as Kayla Williams, Miyoko Hikiji, and Jane Blair have produced what I consider to be important memoirs. Some critics, however, will philosophize that all the stories that could ever be told have already been told. For example, how many war stories do we need?

As many as can be artfully and authentically rendered, I'd say, because every writer's voice is unique and revealed through the writer's choice of conflicts for her characters to her sentence variations to the formatting of her paragraphs. Every writer approaches a story through a personal lens of perception that's unique to that writer and based on that writer's life experiences. Two war stories by two writers might approach the subject of moral injury, for example, but how each writer's characters react or respond will likely be different; through each story we gain a deeper, broader understanding of how moral injury affects humanity.

JB: You've written an entire book of advice for writers who want to tell their military stories. But if you could only say one thing to someone who wants to write his or her military story, what would it be? What was most important to you, or helped you most, in the course of writing your books? And if there was one thing that you could tell other women veterans who are thinking about taking the risk of telling their own stories—if that thing would be different than what you would tell all writers—what would it be?

TC: As you know, *Eyes Right* was the story I never intended to tell. Anyone. Ever. I was honorably discharged, yes, but under conditions that felt less than honorable. For the first fifteen years after I left the Marines, I rarely mentioned my military service because inevitably someone would ask why I had chosen to leave after ten years, and I would offer any number of reasons other than the absolute and final truth for why I left.

But the day of its release, an excerpt appeared on AOL/*Huffington Post*. No one at my publisher's office had remembered to warn me about this, I suppose, so my phone started blowing up at 7:00 a.m., starting with a text from my mother: "Wake up, you're the lead story on AOL."

Under the most salacious headline you can imagine was an excerpt taken out of context and a photograph. Within an hour, the negative comments started popping up. By mid-afternoon, hundreds of negative comments, and an interview request from the *Daily Mail*. My college journalism students that day were upset by the negativity, so any kind comments you might find under that article were likely written by them as a sincere form of retaliation—comments such as, "Read the book, stupid! It's not what you think!"

It was also newspaper layout night at the college, which meant an all-nighter for me and my staff, so this had been going on all day and well into the night. My daughter, at some point, who was about thirty then and living in Los Angeles, had also gotten upset by all the negativity and she'd posted a couple of positive comments as retaliation.

Here's the funny thing: None of the negativity bothered me. I was Teflon. Nothing stuck. In fact, I could even agree with many of the negative comments because the excerpt didn't measure up to the salacious headline.

But that's also the moment I truly discovered the value of writing and the power of storytelling. Because I had already done

the hard work of self-examination and self-forgiveness, nothing anyone could say, or post online, had any effect on me whatsoever. I had long ago defused the emotional charge.

I'd like all women veterans to understand this: you have a story, and your story matters. You owe it to yourself to explore the material of your own life story. What you do with that discovery is entirely up to you.

###

Acknowledgements

O-Dark-Thirty *is supported by the Boeing Company and the National Endowment for the Arts, which have partnered to support arts outreach to military communities since 2004. Previously, Boeing supported the NEA's Operation Homecoming, a creative writing program for U.S. troops and their families.*

National Endowment for the Arts
arts.gov

Submit to *O-Dark-Thirty*

This journal of is writings by veterans, service members, and their adult family members. Have you written a story, poem, or essay that you would like to have published? We seek quality, literary writing on any topic (not just military themes.).

All works submitted to *O-Dark-Thirty* will be considered for publication in *The Review*. Works accepted will undergo a rigorous review process by our editorial board and may require some back and forth between the editors and the author. We seek work of the highest literary quality.

We accept submissions year round, of fiction, poetry, and non-fiction (including memoir and profiles). If you want to write for us, you should be a veteran, a service member (active or reserve), or a service member or veteran's family member. Your submissions should be previously unpublished (see below for our definition of exactly what "published" means) and should conform to these standards:

We accept Fiction—up to 5,000 words (2500+/- words are more likely to be published); Non-fiction—should be true and under 5000 words (again, shorter works are more likely to be published); Poetry—three poems per submission. Please only send one submission at a time: one piece of fiction or non-fiction, or one batch of three poems.

We cannot provide payment for publishing your work. If your work is selected for *The Review,* you'll receive a free copy of that issue and you may purchase additional copies at a reduced rate. It is also our goal to print an anthology of our best works. If your work is selected, you will receive a copy of that as well.

We use *Submittable* as our submissions manager. Please go to our website at **o-dark-thirty.org/submit/** for more information about submitting work to *O-Dark-Thirty* and a link to the *Submittable* site.

Subscribe to *O-Dark-Thirty*

Would you like to receive *O-Dark-Thirty: The Review* at your home or office? You can subscribe to the print edition and receive this great writing at your door each quarter. We print everything from our online edition, plus artwork by artists from the military community.

Individual copies are $12, and an annual subscription (four copies) is $40. Shipping is free to U.S. and APO addresses.

We also encourage individuals to sponsor a subscription for a unit, ship, or organization. Buy one subscription for yourself and another for deployed or hospitalized troops, base libraries, a veterans' service organization (VSO) post or group, or even your own hometown public library. Just tell us the unit or organization's address and, if known, a point of contact (either a position title or an individual's name), and we'll do the rest. The journal will arrive with a note confirming you as the donor (unless you'd prefer it didn't).

Or you could let us decide where this writing will have the biggest impact. We're already providing copies for every patient at the Defense Center of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury, and to the Warrior Writers' Program at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. Our targets include VA hospitals and clinics, units with a high deployment OPTEMPO, and VSOs.

You can subscribe through the secure credit card link on our website (**o-dark-thirty.org/subscribe**) or send a check with the necessary information (name, address, where to send the journal…) to:

Veterans Writing Project
8653 16th Street, #8206
Silver Spring, MD 20910