

O-Dark-Thirty



Fall 2016

O-Dark-Thirty
A Literary Journal

Fall 2016
Volume 5 Number 1

On the cover: *A Carol for the Fallen*,
oil on canvasboard
by Peter Damon

Peter Damon enlisted in the
Massachusetts Army National Guard
in 2000, as a helicopter mechanic, and deployed
to Camp Anaconda in Balad, Iraq, in 2003.
There, a helicopter tire that he and Specialist Paul Bueche
were inflating, exploded, killing Bueche
and amputating both Damon's arms.
Formerly right-handed, Damon learned to use a hook
attached to his left elbow during a year of rehabilitation
at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.
He taught himself to sketch with a pencil,
and mastered pastel, watercolor, and oils.

Damon cites Edward Hopper, George Luks, John Sloan,
Robert Henri, George Bellows, John Marin, John Fulton Folinsbee,
and contemporary painters Stephen Magsig, John Traynor,
and Ray Ellis as his artistic influences.

His artwork has been featured by NBC Nightly News, t
he *Boston Globe*, and the *Boston Herald*,
and has been exhibited in the Rotunda of the US Capitol.

Damon, his wife Jenn, and their children live in Massachusetts,
where he and Jenn run the True Grit Art Gallery in Middleborough.
sgtdamonsart.blogspot.com

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Publisher's Note

Welcome to the fifth year of *O-Dark-Thirty*. You're reading the first of the four issues that will make up Volume Five. Let me tell you what you have to look forward to by talking a bit about what we've already done. For the past four years, we've brought our readers fiction, non-fiction, poetry, plays, and profiles written by veterans, service members, and their adult family members. That won't change. But as we move forward we'll seek writing on subjects beyond the military experience. We'll be looking to publish works on a wider variety of subjects. Several times in the past we've published themed issues: the ghost issue, an all fiction issue, and a women's writing issue. That will continue. This year's theme will be "identity." Watch our website and social media pages for details about that from the editorial staff. One thing we've not done yet is to anthologize works. That's going to change. We're planning an anthology of some of the works we liked best through the first five years. You should look for that in the fall of 2017.

As the publisher of this journal, I'm exceptionally proud of the work we've been able to present both in print and on the web. Some of our authors have gone on to publish memoirs, novels, books of poetry, and plays. Some have won awards. I'm also extremely proud of the staff at *O-Dark-Thirty*. All of the staff here are veterans or family members. And all of the staff, whether artists or writers or editors, make time to pull together our online journal and this print quarterly, even while they are active with their own personal creative work. It's often a scramble,

but somehow it always comes out. But mostly, I'm thankful for you, our readers. Thanks for taking part in this endeavor. I hope you'll subscribe and maybe give a gift subscription to someone else or sponsor a subscription for a military unit, veterans' service organization, or hospital as a way of supporting our work and of getting this terrific writing out in front of a larger audience.

So here's to the first five years. Join us for a yearlong celebration. And bring your friends.

Ron Capps

Non-fiction.

The Veteran

By Naomi F. Collins

Just because it's a short story doesn't mean it's untrue—or short.

A n unknown soldier walked into my life when I was three years old. He seemed tall and remote. Enclosed in khaki from hat to feet, he didn't look like my uncles. His hefty boots shook the parquet floors with each step.

Then he started peeling. First, his hat. Then, with my professional help, his boots: I was inordinately proud of my skills with laces and bows. He dropped these cavernous objects next to his zippered duffle bag. Also khaki. He smelled unfamiliar, of wool and leather.

He was my father. How many times had my mother tried to convince me that an image on paper, a photo of a face, was Pop? No memory. But I knew my mother had gone into overdrive cleaning and polishing me and the small apartment. I knew when “important” entered my toddler field.

Earlier that day, my mother had planted herself at the kitchen window for hours and hours in kiddie time. She had never done this before. Eventually, a yellow taxi pulled up and released this

stranger in front of our apartment building in remote Brooklyn. There stood—as it turned out—the husband she remembered, the father I couldn't recall. I knew this was not an ordinary day, but was too young to imagine what might lie ahead, or even to know what “ahead” meant.

When he lifted me into the air he seemed as surprised to see me as I was to see him.

Suddenly there were man-droppings throughout the small apartment: cured socks, smoked butts, shaving soap, new scents; the unexpected bass voice from another room, the piano keys alive with Beethoven's *Pathétique*.

And toys. A mess kit to dismantle, canteen, complex buckles, and a miniature pottery tea set crafted of baked mud on a remote Pacific island. Could there be children like me in such places? When he later developed and printed his own black and white film in porcelain pans set in our darkened bathroom, I saw images emerge on dripping paper of small boys and girls—tanned, naked, and bare-foot. Why was such a young one carrying a still younger one?

It was only years later when the media turned their focus to the children sired by soldiers overseas, left behind in their villages, that I developed a new silent worry: what if I had a half-brother or half-sister in one of those remote islands? Wasn't my very visible brother next to my bed bad enough? Although such another sibling never materialized, I kept the sense of a possible doppelganger standing shoeless in her loose cotton dress and straw hat, smiling shyly outside her grass hut in a small dusty village.

Some men returned telling stories. Pop returned silent, numbed by front line battle, constant fear of death, trying to absorb that the apocalypse was over. The incessant noise of artillery, the unnerving silence between rounds, was over. The blood, bodies and body parts as the Allied troops advanced under General MacArthur on the

Pacific front, from island to island, in the first units trying to recapture New Guinea, Guam, the Philippines, was over. More gore than glory.

But I couldn't imagine this then. What did "the Pacific" even mean? I was over 8,000 miles away, playing with dolls and building blocks, going to nursery school. I was told I had a father, but I didn't see him. It seemed normal in the way that things often do to children. He was "far away," my mother said. But so was the grocery on the next street. And somehow I knew that this person so important to her was clearly not here, and a great worry.

At intervals, Mom would levitate at the sight of a tissue paper envelope, bordered in red and blue stripes, arriving in the mail. Our postman, spotting one, would ring the downstairs bell to our upstairs apartment to signal its arrival. She'd drop everything to sprint downstairs to one of the metal cubby boxes in our lobby. Her day would brighten immediately. Other days she'd watch the mailman's departure with sadness. I didn't yet grasp what words on paper could mean.

Then for a long period no letters arrived. "Missing in action," "behind enemy lines," I overheard. That, too meant little. He was already missing, wasn't he? He wasn't here. But I knew that Mom was sad and worried—and that it had to do with no letters coming.

Suddenly one day, life turned weird. Adults were acting like children. They were screaming, crying, and dancing in the streets. My mother told me it was V-E Day. I was baffled at how adults suddenly turned so strange (alcohol, I've since realized, may have been a factor). My mother seemed cheered but wary. I'm not sure whether my father had been located by then. Then came August 1945 and it happened again. "V-J Day," she said. I knew what a "V" was, and a "J." They were on my alphabet blocks. But what this could mean was incomprehensible—until she said, "This means that Pop will come home." Her happiness felt glorious.

And he did return—several weeks later, by ship to San Francisco, by train across the US. Trains too packed to board cost days in waiting, then more to cross the country. But my mother was ready from the moment he rang up from a pay phone booth in San Francisco, queued up for his turn. No cell phones, no Internet, no texts. Just waiting.

Atomic bombs had wiped out two Japanese cities in a horror to end other horrors. The war was over: guns were silent; treaties had been signed, territories and boundaries adjusted. People displaced, misplaced, replaced. Only later did I wonder where he put the visions of that raw brutality and stench of death, the gut-twisting fear of being blasted out of existence. Were these dark images packed up and stored inside some vault within him? For the next fifty years he did not speak of the war.

While many dads in those days were buttoned up, Pop seemed more remote than others. The warmth and laughter my friends' dads brought to our play was absent in him. In its place were tight control and emotional detachment contained in an undemonstrative man of silences and moods that Mom declared was not the man she had married.

“Shell-shocked,” I overheard them say about Pop’s cousin S., a bombardier who flew missions over Germany, now resident at Bellevue Hospital. I pictured seashells, but not shocks; later I knew it must mean turtle shells, and how cousin S. had retreated into his shell like a turtle. Killer shells and bullets, those that bore holes in the blankets Pop brought home, I didn’t yet know. Although Pop cared deeply for his cousin, more than he did for most people, I knew even then that Pop was not the same as cousin S. Pop was at home and not in a hospital.

Talk of posttraumatic stress disorder was not yet common, so I don’t know whether any degree of PTSD would have been ascribed to him. He seemed on reentry to be driven by some secret store of

determination to build a life as if nothing had happened, to double-lock the memories in a hidden compartment somewhere, and to avoid the emotional side of life that might trigger nightmare visions.

He must also have felt a bit like a patient awakening after anesthesia, trying to account for the missing chunk of time, while reconnecting with large, in-his-face Brooklyn realities: a wife, two small children, an apartment, and the need for a paycheck.

He quickly learned that while time for him had been suspended, no one had stopped the clock in the working world during his absence fighting a war. No time to dwell on the fairness of things: it was time for the next battle.

Turns out few employers were sympathetic to the break he had from traditional employment. So he took the New York City Civil Service exam and got hired as a clerk, Level One, the bottom rung. He had earned a BA in chemistry before the war; now he returned to university for his masters in engineering. It took years before he worked his way up to the “junior engineer” job for which he would normally have qualified with his degrees. But he never complained.

He worked. He studied. He played with my brother and me on weekends, took us to parks, zoos, museums, concerts, beaches, mountains, and lakes; to monuments, rock formations, the ocean and boardwalk, and more museums. Read us books. Taught us to swim, bike, skate, row, sew a button, mend a sock, skip a stone across a lake, and whistle through two blades of grass. Coached us in math and science. And he played the piano nightly, played bass in a community orchestra. He built a career in civil engineering, in water resources, sanitation, landfills, public works, environment, capped by becoming New York City’s Commissioner of the Sanitation Department; then elected member of the New York Academy of Sciences. Built a home and family over scars and dengue fever—as those islands in the Pacific rebuilt normal life fertilizing rich tropical growth from

the bodies of fallen men. He resumed his roles as a husband, father, uncle, son, brother, and breadwinner. His letters and photos remained in boxes on the closets' top shelves.

We slid through the fifties like other middle-class aspirants saving toward the dream of housedom rather than apartment dwelling, with our own patch of lawn and bushed-in borders, in Flushing, Queens. My mother sought the secrets of proper living in *Ladies Home Journal*, *McCall's*, and *Good Housekeeping*. My friends and I sought other secrets in dirty books, listened to Elvis, primped in poodle skirts and saddle shoes. My mother got an office job to provide more income.

And fifty years went by until 1995. My brother and I grew—he more than I. We studied, found careers and spouses. Pop and Mom traveled to exotic places, to fjords, African game preserves, Pyramids along the Nile. They sold the house in Flushing to an Asian family emigrating from one of the Pacific Islands Pop had invaded and occupied decades earlier.

Then the fifty-year commemorations of World War II began. Movies, TV, books on the war proliferated. Mom didn't live to see this (felled by cancer in 1983), but one day in 1995 Pop finally spoke. "I never thought I'd live through the war—so the rest has been gravy." He added, "I've had fifty years I never thought I would have."

Once he spoke of his fifty-year bounty he seemed quite pleased at eighty with that thought. And I, his then middle-aged daughter, selfishly thought, "I could have been an orphan."

It was not long afterward that I got a call from St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital in New York City to my office in Washington, D.C. Your father, a doctor told me, is "unresponsive." The doctor explained that Pop's intestine had burst, bleeding into his body, with sepsis stealing his consciousness, then his life. It's hard to say where

the remnants of war memories might have been lodged like shrapnel, but the mystery of where they were hidden was always part of the mystery of the man, the private part that none of us could know or touch.

Shocked by the call, I glanced at my miniature tea set, wondering where it would end up.

And how does a true story about survivors ever end?

Naomi F. Collins, Ph.D., is author of Through Dark Days and White Nights: Four Decades Observing A Changing Russia (New Academia Press, 2008) and other works of nonfiction.

The Scars Beneath Bermuda

By Ilona Elliott

My dad was a veteran of the Second World War. He didn't fight in any major battles. He wasn't awarded any medals. He spent his military service on the island of Bermuda. Rough duty.

When I was a kid my dad sometimes joked about how, while his buddies and brothers were in the Pacific and Europe, he was perfecting his golf game in Bermuda. Then he would get serious and share his real feelings—how he felt guilty because his peers were in harm's way and he was not. He had enlisted like so many of them and by a random stroke of luck, he ended up with a pretty cushy deployment. But I learned later on in life that my dad's service was not all putting greens and sunshine. Behind the laughter that was my dad's way, there were disturbing images and deep scars.

Dad's military training began at Fort Rodman in New Bedford, Massachusetts. He was assigned to the 23rd Coast Artillery Harbor Defense. After training, he was sent overseas to take part in the invasion of North Africa. During his deployment there, but before the invasion, he contracted pneumonia, and was shipped to the

military hospital in St. George, Bermuda. A base commander befriended Dad and soon learned that Dad was already an accomplished golfer. He asked Dad, "Can you teach me to golf when you are well?" to which Dad replied, "SURE!" Dad spent the remainder of his military career in Bermuda, working as an orderly in the hospital, occasionally manning the coast artillery, and teaching and playing golf.

Dad was a funny guy. He loved to laugh and to make people laugh. He didn't talk much about the hurtful things, but when he did, his voice would grow quiet and thoughtful and he would become pretty reflective. He had shared a little bit about his duties at the military hospital in Bermuda. I remember him saying one of his duties was to fold the flags that draped the coffins of fallen soldiers. They had to be folded just so. And he worked in the military hospital. That's where it got real.

I recall him talking about how the men who had lost limbs would have phantom pains and sensations. They would ask him to scratch their missing limbs. Whenever he talked about it, his eyes were dark and haunted and his voice was hushed.

Being a people person, Dad befriended the soldiers in the hospital in Bermuda. He spent time with them and talked with them, looking at photos of their sweethearts and families and listening to their stories. He scratched their phantom limbs. He folded the flags that covered their coffins.

My dad loved to golf. It was his muse. And he was good. He worked as a golf pro for a time, teaching folks at the country club how to swing with proper form and stance, how to steer the ball, and how to track that putt into the hole. He learned these things as a thirteen-year-old boy who had to leave school due to the Depression to go to work as a caddy on the golf course. As an adult, the course became his happy place. There he escaped from the responsibilities

of raising six kids, which often required a part-time job in addition to his position as an instrument maker in the budding aerospace industry, and he consistently beat the pants off his golfing companions. At sixty-three he retired and moved to Florida so he could golf year round, which he did until his seventies.

At the age of seventy-four things began to fall apart for Dad. He had been diabetic for several decades and his blood sugar levels were rarely well controlled. He began to have a lot of pain when he walked that would escalate the more he walked. He was diagnosed with peripheral artery disease and diabetic neuropathy, which meant painful nerve damage in his feet and collapsing arteries in his legs. During this time he stepped on a pin and the injury turned into an ugly black hole that wouldn't heal. Then several toes started to turn black. It was frightening.

Eventually Dad would have ground-breaking surgeries to restore proper blood flow to his legs and feet. Portions of blood vessels were stripped from his arms and pieced onto healthy portions of veins in his legs. He would come home from the hospital with incisions that ran up and down his arms and legs, stapled back together, like the neck of Frankenstein. But it worked. It restored some blood flow to his feet. It bought him some time. Unfortunately he lost a toe on his right foot. Then the foot. Then his calf. And then things leveled out for a while. He had wonderful home care and dedicated therapists who came three times a week to teach him to walk with his artificial limb. He was doing really well. He was getting his game back on. His sense of humor was intact. He talked hopefully about getting back on the golf course again someday. We all felt relief and hoped for the best.

But one day while I was visiting, I watched him sitting in his recliner staring vacantly down at his missing limb. He looked up at me with tearful eyes and I saw the fear gnawing away behind them.

He started to tell me again about the men in the army hospital who wanted their amputated legs scratched. And this time he cried. And I cried. It was so hard to watch him experiencing the very things that haunted him from his war days. I knew he was reliving the pain as he sat there contemplating his own fate. Those tears were a long time coming. I went over to him and held his hand. And wept with him.

Then the unthinkable happened. He developed gangrene in his left foot and leg. He would have to have another amputation. There were no good veins left in his body to harvest to try to salvage his remaining healthy limb. It was removed just below the knee. He developed a dangerous staph infection in the hospital that almost killed him. They removed more of the leg, to the top of his thigh. At one point he went into cardiac arrest and had to be revived. I remember getting a call from my brother that I better get on a plane to Florida because his prognosis was not good. I was there the next day. Somehow, Dad survived and eventually came home and those same angel therapists came back and taught him how to live from a wheelchair. How to transfer himself in and out of bed with the help of a pulley installed in the ceiling. How to work his arms and shoulders with weights to strengthen them. He was brave. He made jokes. He seemed to be okay.

My Dad spent the rest of his life, roughly a year and a half, in a wheelchair. He would sit and rock back and forth in his chair as he watched TV. He would play hide and seek with his grandsons from his wheelchair. He would call me up and say funny things and joke around. But he would never see a golf course again. I know he thought about his many years on the course. And I know he thought about Bermuda, and the army hospital, and the shell-shocked soldiers with phantom pains and itches in their amputated limbs.

In the last couple years of Dad's life he showed incredible courage and resolve. Before that, I never realized what a brave man

he was. I never knew how deeply his war experience affected him. He joked about Bermuda. He hid the scars. I guess every soldier does.

I hope he didn't carry around any guilt that he never fought in a combat battle during that war. I hope he never doubted his own aptitude for bravery. Because he was so very brave. He was brave enough to make wisecracks and jokes in the face of his pain in order to make all of us who loved him feel at ease. He masked his struggles behind laughter to make us think he was all right. He lifted our burden. He carried his own. That's what soldiers do too.

Damn. He was one hell of a soldier.

Ilona Elliott is the proud daughter of a United States veteran of World War II, whose military experience provided him with lifelong friendships and inspired the stories and colorful language his children still remember him for. Her blog Rainy Day Writing includes memoirs of growing up in a large New England family, personal narratives, and humorous anecdotes.

Fiction.

After Phu Bai

By Erin Carpenter

I knew we had an issue when my mother dropped the salad tongs. She was a devotee of the 12-step program of Overeaters Anonymous and she treated food like she was detonating a bomb. Her clumsiness was strange, but her subsequent retreat to the kitchen was not. Some nights she couldn't take the pressure.

My father, a psychiatrist with Veterans Affairs, was used to covering for her abrupt departures at mealtime. He carried on assessing my boyfriend Kyler, who had just revealed to my parents that he had enlisted in the US Army.

About a year later, Kyler was at basic training and I was planning a simple wedding. My mother met me at Macy's where a yellow-haired woman handed me a scanner gun before throwing the sign of the benediction across cosmetics in the direction of housewares. I bounded off to pick out some cooking equipment, my mother trailing me like a hunter.

"You'll want your mixer to match your kitchen countertop," she said.

“You’re so uptight, Mom,” I replied, and turned my gaze upon an island of shiny pots and pans.

“You’ll need a bigger pot than a five-quart,” she advised, reading the back of the box of All-Clad stainless steel cookware I had just zapped. “If you want to poach a chicken, that is.”

“Mom, don’t take this the wrong way,” I said, heading into linens, “but you are the last person I need advice from in the kitchen. You don’t even eat. You just absorb nutrients.”

Next she began a discussion of the lost art of ironing sheets. I told her how we needed to stop by the tailor to pick up Kyler’s altered suit. She asked why he wasn’t getting married in uniform.

“It doesn’t do anything for me,” I said.

“What is it about him that does do something for you, then?” she asked.

“Is this a test?” I replied.

“A practice test, maybe,” she said.

All around the room, short display beds in full regalia were trying to induce me into a mother-daughter conversation about sex. I sat down on a faux quilt and weighed my options.

“I like how he wants to help people. Like Dad, but without having to be so brainy about it. Without medical school and all that.” Kyler was set on becoming a medic.

“But why does he have to join the Army and get sent all the way across the world to do that?” she asked.

“They fight over there so we don’t have to fight over here, Mom.” The words had a tenuous sincerity at best; I was just repeating a line. We hadn’t been to war since Desert Storm, and we had kicked so much ass that I really didn’t worry about Kyler deploying.

Mom voiced her opinion with a set of risen eyebrows. “You know honey, there’s a term I teach my undergraduates in their composition class. *Kairos*. It’s timing. The ancient Greeks used to

equate it to the exact moment when you'd let fly an arrow to bring down the deer in the hunt."

Then she set to hammering away at her collarbone with her middle finger, which was some emotional regulation technique she learned from her therapist. When she was "tapping," as she called it, I couldn't help but wonder what exactly was trying to escape from her molten core.

He was stationed with the 10th Mountain Division at Fort Drum, New York. I found a job selling bait and tackle, which I knew nothing about, but the men I worked with, who were retired from their military careers, enjoyed having a young girl to tease about worms and bugs. It was an easy job that kept us all busy. The guys in Kyler's platoon were always going home to their wives and kids, but neither one of us had a vision for launching into parenthood, so I had no subject around which to orbit in a search for friends. Mom and dad kept mentioning graduate school, but I was uninspired.

When Kyler went down to Georgia for some kind of training – it had something to do with parachutes – mom came up to visit. I hadn't seen her since the wedding. She said she was trying to give me some space to start my married life, and she made it sound as if I were mixing ammonia and bleach in the bathroom. As soon as she walked through the door of my apartment, she sauntered into the kitchen and inspected the refrigerator, which contained nothing beyond basic condiments, a box of half-eaten Domino's pizza, and a two-liter of Coke. Then she peered inside a disheveled cabinet above the stove.

"No cookbooks? I'll have to get you some for Christmas."

I could tell she was avoiding the couch, the coffee table, the window coverings and everything else she would have liked to furnish for me in the name of a holiday. Our living room contained a futon and a couple of old, leaky beanbag chairs.

In the apartment next door an object hit the wall, and a child began screaming. I turned the stereo on to drown out the noise, and the growling thrash of Phil Anselmo entered the room. Kyler's music conjured the boys weight room back in high school, a place that I did not belong, but with Mom staring at me as if she were watching open-heart surgery on TV, I listened intently. I missed him. In spite of the anger, I heard a groove, and I imagined us peaceful in bed, my ear nested into his sternum like a stethoscope, my hands pointed at his chin in prayer.

She began tapping her clavicle again, and so we went for lunch at a pub with a view of the Black River. We sat down in our heavy wooden seats and mom took out her eyeglasses for the solemn ceremony of ordering. I knew better than to try to make casual conversation while she was deciding on a meal. The days had long passed since she would whip a little plastic Weight Watchers points calculator out of her purse, which always made it look like she was about to take a birth control pill, but she was still performing a cost benefit analysis of the menu. She looked up after about four minutes, and I expected her to announce her decision, but instead she glanced about the room and said, "I had another husband once."

She seemed to have timed this statement precisely for interruption because the waiter then arrived with pen and pad looking like a news reporter. I pushed the lemon down into my glass and stabbed at it with my straw, while my mother interrogated the kid about lettuce.

"Where did you meet him?" I asked, trying to sound nonchalant until he had scampered off to the kitchen.

"He showed up on the front lawn outside the church one Sunday. I was in line for a piece of coffee cake when he sidled up and asked if he could take me out for a ride on his motorcycle. My parents were talking to Father O'Neal. I remember I had been arguing with them about curfew. Mine was still 10:00 p.m. I felt entitled to some

excitement, so I feigned illness and arranged to meet him that afternoon while they were at the parish picnic. We rode all the way out to Rockaway Beach, he bought me a funnel cake, and we walked along the boardwalk. It was bumper to bumper the whole way back, but we split lanes like we were parting the Red Sea.”

Kyler had been talking about getting a motorcycle. Mom took her glasses off and put them back into her purse. Then she placed her thumb and middle finger on the edge of the divots of her eye sockets as if to focus all that lay behind them into a coherent stream of events.

“It was two months before my eighteenth birthday and I didn’t want to go to nursing school. My three older sisters made it sound like being a housekeeper in a hotel for sick people. Marriage looked like a pretty good option, except that he wasn’t Catholic and his last name was Cromwell. My parents told me that his ancestors raped my ancestors, and that if I married him they’d never speak to me again. But we went to the courthouse on the day after I turned eighteen. Six weeks after that, he was drafted. I never saw him again.”

She sighed and rested her chin in her cupped hand.

“Killed in action?” I asked.

“No, he deserted. He deserted me at least. In the couple of letters I got from him during boot camp, he told me they were shipping him off to some place called Da Nang, but within a month everything fell silent. I called the Army several times and got passed around from one person to another. They couldn’t locate his file at all. He wasn’t showing up on any of their reports. Not dead, not missing, not absent without leave, just sort of not anywhere. Was I sure I had the right name? They were paying him, I said. How could they be paying him if he wasn’t there? But they couldn’t tell me where he was, and more and more of his paycheck disappeared from our account every month. They eventually told me to put in a request with their locator service, but when I wrote to them in

Indiana or wherever, they replied that they could not locate anyone overseas. They would, however, forward any letters to him for ninety days, as long as they had the correct postage. They didn't know crap. He was fine, they said. Men responded to the stresses of war in different ways, they said. But they were just putting me off. I went a whole year with no word. I even joined a group of POW wives and started protesting the war. That's where I met your father—at a protest at Union Square. I filed for divorce on grounds of abandonment and remarried a year later.”

“Have you told Dad?” I asked.

“No. He doesn't need to know.”

Our food arrived. I couldn't care less about my cheeseburger. There are things people tell you that you forget the next day, or the next week, or even the next year, but I didn't think this revelation would ever fade.

I needed something more than another Diet Coke. I took her to the VFW in Watertown. It was Saint Patrick's Day. About fifty men in their sixties and seventies were spread about the place, sitting at rectangular tables set up on a white linoleum floor speckled with gold and grey. A handful of women were carrying trays of corned beef and cabbage out from the kitchen. The bartender, in rainbow suspenders and plastic green top hat, was tainting beers with food coloring when we arrived. He didn't even ask if we wanted one; he just poured two and pushed them toward us.

Mom looked around as if she were an animal deciding where to die, and then sat down on one of the bar stools and emptied the glass.

“Did you love him?” I asked.

A ruddy lady in a *Kiss Me I'm Irish* t-shirt was clawing her way towards the upper register of Danny Boy while the words appeared on a huge screen, mocking her breathtaking effort.

“Marrying him was a means to an end. I got out of the house. There was no picket fence at 22 Tyrone Drive.”

"You could find him on the Internet, assuming you can remember his birthday," I said.

"I don't need to find him, Maura," she said.

"But aren't you curious what happened to him?"

"I know what happened. He stopped loving me. Perhaps he never loved me to begin with."

"He disappeared," I said. "Maybe he got stuck down in one of those tunnels."

"I did three tours in Vietnam," we overheard somebody say. A man in a flannel shirt was coming up to the bar. A faded bandana rested atop his silver tousled hair, and the skin on his cheeks looked as if they had once been scarred and then airbrushed by decades on the open road.

"I got stuck at the Hanoi Hilton for a spell," he continued, motioning to the bartender for a pitcher. "After I got back from that little vacation, they let me go home with an honorable discharge, and the next fifteen years are like one big bong hit." He laughed a little and lit a cigarette. Mom looked up and watched as he pulled out his wallet to pay. Then without even looking at her, he pulled her empty glass over and filled it with green beer. She smiled and blushed, and then he filled his own glass, and raised it up to toast anyone within arm's reach.

"Sláinte," he said.

"To your health," she replied. They clinked, and she took a sip and put the glass down. She pulled a Polaroid picture out of her wallet and handed it to me. You could see the forearm of a young man reaching out towards the camera that framed her freckled face, which was darkened with a summer tan. His sharp profile was accentuated by a crew cut and he was kissing her ear and she was laughing. The colors were faded like the photo hadn't fully developed yet.

"Hank and Terry Cromwell, 1967," she said.

A few hard-boiled men had taken the karaoke stage, and were snarling a shanty about somebody's boots. The top of the melody startled me as I dug around for something to say. I dropped the photo into the pond of shiny green shamrock confetti we were standing in. Mom jumped to pick it up but knocked her beer over in the process, dousing the biker. She dove down to recover it, and stood up again, her eyes still locked on the photo, shaking it as if it had just been taken, picking off the glittery debris and watching the blot grow over her youth. She yelled, "Get me a bar rag!" as if someone had just lost a limb, and the bartender brought her a white towel which she used to pat the Polaroid. Then she turned and started wiping beer off the bewildered man. The guy crushed his cigarette into an ashtray and stood up. His color had gone red but he remained composed, as if he had expected all along that this would happen.

"I'm sorry," she stammered. He was tall and as he took the rag from her, he wrapped his long fingers around the base of her hand, just above her dainty wrist, and squeezed. It was difficult to tell what kind of squeeze it was. Her knuckles jutted out of her pale skin, and yet part of me believed that they were getting ready to ballroom dance, or that he would kiss her.

Mom looked behind her shoulder. "Is he still there?" she gasped, as if a spell had been uttered and she was waiting for the biker to disappear. In fact, her eyes were locked on the relic I now clutched. The drunken singers shouted about throwing mud at the cook.

The man released his grip and with a doddering swagger, went out the door to his motorcycle. His pipes fired up from the sidewalk with a fury. Mom snatched the photo to study it for damage and slipped it back into her wallet, then dropped it into her bag.

"Mom?" I said, putting my hand on her shoulder. She shook her head as if she were disagreeing with something I'd said. "Are you okay?"

She looked up from the black hole of her purse with eyes begging me for redemption. I wish I could have complied.

One year later, the Towers fell. Forty miles outside of Scranton, the radio in my Pathfinder couldn't get a single station and all I could hear was the baby fussing in the back seat. We had slipped out from under the pall of suburban New Jersey and were driving back to post. I had been down visiting my parents when the planes hit, and Mom had asked me to stay with her for a few more days, since my father's psychiatry practice had him volunteering extra hours at crisis centers in the boroughs and her classes at Rutgers were cancelled for the week. Being needed in this way was a minor tremor, an aftershock.

Heading back into the front gate, I saw lines of uniformed patrolmen carving up what had once been open space. The security officer looked at me with extreme concern as I rifled through my diaper bag tossing wipes, bibs, bottles and teething rings out onto the passenger seat, only to discover I had left my wallet on my mother's dining room table.

I looked back at the baby, as if to shift the blame where it belonged, but she had finally fallen asleep during the last thirty minutes of the drive. The guard called Kyler and he came and vouched for me. I carried Cassie into the kitchen and set her car seat on top of the table, hoping she would stay asleep so I could talk for a few minutes without having to bounce her around on my hip. Her desire for momentum was insatiable.

"When will we find out when you go?" I asked as soon as my lips were off of his mouth.

"Bush told the military to get ready," he said. "I saw it on the news."

"I thought the military was always ready. Isn't that the whole point of having one?" I asked, flopping down on our faded floral print couch and beckoning him to follow.

"I've got a job to do over there," he said. "I get paid for this. Remember, we knew this was a possibility."

Kyler had always been both patient and impenetrable, treating my emotions as if they were a case of the hiccups, which infuriated me. “Mmm-hmm,” I said. Tears came like breaths, sometimes faster or slower, but unremarkable.

“We just have to sit tight and wait. I’ll be working regular hours until we get the word from Washington.”

Outside I heard the sound of helicopters, which was common enough around here, but this time there must have been several of them in formation. Through the window they appeared, covering the sun, transforming my world into some kind of video game. Cassie startled awake and began to cry again.

The next day I drove back down to Jersey to get my wallet. It was lying on the kitchen table where I left it. Mom must have gone out for a walk because her Volvo was in the driveway and Keats, the Irish setter, was gone. The phone rang in the kitchen.

“Hello, Welch residence.”

A man’s voice hummed at me before making any decipherable words, warming up like a cold car.

“Is this Terry Cadigan?” he said.

Cadigan was mother’s maiden name. Somehow I just knew it was Hank. I could have hung up, but the minute he started talking, it was like finding her diary open on the coffee table.

“May I ask what this is regarding?” I said. My mother’s friends had been mistaking my voice for hers for years.

“Terry! How ya doing? How are ya? Terry, listen to me. I know it’s gonna sound corny, crazy even, but my life flashed before my eyes this week. You were in it. I should have called sooner. I know. Listen, I want to make this up to you. Can we get a drink sometime?”

The whirring sound stopped and there were a series of beeps that sounded like the dishwasher was done.

“How did you get this number?” I asked.

“Listen Terry, I just want to know—are you alright?”

I heard the garage door opening and Keats shaking his ears while the metal ring of his collar chimed against the buckle.

“I have to get off the phone now.”

“Did you lose anyone, Terry?”

“It’s not that, it’s just . . . I gotta go.”

“Write down this phone number,” he said. I scribbled the digits down and hung up, sneaking off just like when I was a teenager afraid of being caught talking after ten o’clock.

Mom slumped down into a dining room chair without even saying hello.

“I need you to go help Aunt Mary with her kids,” she said. Terry was the youngest of four children, and she was closest to Mary Knudsen. Aunt Mary’s husband had been away on business since before the attack.

“I’ve been over there since you left yesterday morning. Those kids are running wild and Nikki left to go cook pozole and pray the rosary at her son’s house—he’s a paramedic on Staten Island and he hasn’t slept since Monday night. I don’t know when she’s coming back.”

I wanted to talk about Kyler’s deployment, and I considered telling her that Hank had called, but instead I agreed to go into the city to fill in for the nanny. I told mom to go take a hot bath. Then just as soon as she was in the tub, I picked up the phone and called Hank back. His phone number had a 212 area code so I knew he was around here somewhere. I told myself that I was protecting mom from the agitation this intrusion would create in her life, but really I wanted to see the face of the man she had left home with on the back of a Honda 400 Scrambler.

He picked up on the second ring.

“Terry?” he asked.

“Listen, I’m heading into Manhattan in about an hour. Do you want to meet?” I asked.

“Where?”

“Union Square.” The park was about four long blocks and fifteen short blocks from my aunt’s house in Chelsea.

“Okay, sure. Look for a blackthorn shillelagh. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

I loaded Cassie up in the Pathfinder and took Route 22 to Harrison. Even the traffic was still in mourning. When the PATH train left us at 14th Street, and I walked uptown, my every sense could feel the presence of that gash in the skyline. At Union Square, people weren’t talking so much as writing on a communal canvas made of butcher paper. A woman in angel wings was lighting those Guadalupe candles from the drug store.

He arrived with an air of urgency, his meaty beard trimmed in white like freezer burn. Had he been wearing plaid pants and a cable knit sweater, he might have made an oddly attractive seaman.

“I’m Maura Creasman, Terry’s daughter,” I said, extending my hand.

“Hank Cromwell,” he said, scanning over my head for anyone that looked like my mother, and failing to find her, flinging his arms out like he was about to jump off a bridge. The limbs landed on me in a violent hug, and I felt the nub of the cane press into my upper back.

“Where is your mom?” he asked. “She called me and said she was coming in.”

“Sorry Hank, but this is a tough time for everyone, and Mom gets stressed out pretty easily. I don’t think she wants to go digging up her past—at least not until things settle down. I’m heading over to my aunt’s house in Chelsea. Would you mind walking with me?”

He said nothing, but he followed. I suggested we walk up Sixth Avenue. For ten blocks neither one of us said a word. Then we saw a flatbed truck covered with construction workers holding flags,

and Hank stopped over at the curb and put his hand over his heart and mumbled what must have been the Pledge.

“You can’t buy a flag in any of the five boroughs,” he said, leaning one foot back against the concrete base of a street lamp. “Sold out.”

“Is that right?” I replied, setting the foot brake on the stroller and walking around to find Cassie her pacifier.

“I wish I was young enough to enlist again,” he said.

“My husband is probably going . . . over,” I said. The words dribbled out of my mouth. “He’s an Army medic.”

Hank had been breathing heavily and now he inhaled the charred city air, holding it in as if waiting for the nicotine to reach his brain, and letting it out in a deeply dissatisfied sigh. “I’d go in his place if I could. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

With his stamina, I wasn’t sure he would make it to Hell’s Kitchen. He was thin and pulsed with nervous energy as he fiddled around in his pockets, pulling out a package that looked to me like new oversized pencils on the first day of school, except there was a woman in a Hawaiian skirt on the cardboard box. Hav-A-Tampa Jewels.

“Nobody wants their husband to deploy,” I said.

He puffed on his cigar. His face, the part that wasn’t grown over, had a sallow, waxy softness.

“Were you surprised when your card came up?” I asked.

“Everybody went back then. My notice came right after I married your mom. A shitty wedding present from the Uncle.” He paused here and looked at me, not sure whether he was saying too much, and then he smoothed and patted the hair on top of his head, which looked like a used Brillo pad.

We were standing in front of the Fashion Institute of Technology. Students were outside draping blue and green cloth over the sidewalk, creating a space for another vigil.

“Look Hank, my mom hasn’t said a word to my dad about you. I don’t think she wants this kind of thing right now,” I said.

“I’m in line for a liver transplant,” he said. “I just want to know if she’s okay. I want to know I did the right thing. I have to know something turned out right.”

We had this much in common. I didn’t want to be her Plan B.

“Tell me what happened,” I said.

He drove a supply truck in Vietnam. Moved around a lot. Ended up in a place called Phu Bai. When my mother’s letters finally caught up with him, he read them as if they had been sent by some pen pal he had never met. She was not the comfort he craved.

They sent him to a temporary headquarters outside Hue after the Tet Offensive. He was being carried on the morning report of a Marine command. He came home in 1971, having finished out his contract, but it took over a year for them to even find the paper trail that proved he was eligible for benefits. By then he was squatting in an old Soho warehouse worth ten million in today’s market, having fallen in love with amphetamines.

I made it back to Fort Drum at 3:00 a.m., smudges of macaroni and cheese and patches of dog hair on my clothes. I half-expected Kyler to have aged by the time I got home, or to be wearing his uniform, or packing his duffel bags.

He was asleep on the couch in front of the television. I laid Cassie down in her crib, and then gently shook his shoulder. He sighed a sound from far away and opened his eyes. “Let’s go to bed,” I said. We staggered into our room, and I started talking. The phone call, the meeting, the liver transplant.

“Stay out of that mess. You can’t absolve her from her sins, Maura. You’ve got enough to worry about.”

We were settling into bed. “Back up a minute. Her sins?”

“Besides, for all you know he called her back and they are having a standing lunch date at some bagel shop in New Brunswick. Do you think your mother would tell you about it if they did?”

“Yeah, like my mom would eat a bagel.”

I didn’t want to argue because any day now a leviathan would swallow him whole and spit him up into God knows what.

“Will you tell me what it’s like over there? Will you tell me what happens?” I asked. I was staring up at the ceiling. The sound of Cassie’s white noise machine crackled through the baby monitor.

“Shhh, go to sleep. Big day tomorrow.”

I thought about the young city women I had seen coming home from work toting expensive bags, their hair blown out so it fell just right, their makeup a lacquer over their smooth wood faces. Those women would have a big day tomorrow. I, on the other hand, would be waiting to hear when the real waiting would begin. I resigned myself to the satisfaction of aligning our bodies and tucking in our limbs to the spaces where we knew they fit best. I listened to the cicadas still chattering in September and collapsed into a dream I would not remember when I woke up.

Erin Carpenter realized early in her marriage to a former infantryman with the Army’s 10th Mountain Division that conversations about his combat experiences and military life worked better with the aim of character research than just for the sake of talking. She began her novel-in-progress while pursuing her M.A. in English from Western Carolina University. Erin currently teaches language arts to middle schoolers on the Qualla Boundary of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians.

Homesteaders

By Lawrence F. Farrar

I bet I've gone up there maybe a dozen times over the last ten years. But I never found a thing—not one goddamn thing. I've been bitten by every mosquito on Okinawa, sweated like a horse, practically wore out my arm chopping through the jungle, and got the shit scared outta me when one of them six foot habu snakes went slitherin' across the trail. (Jeez, if there's anything I hate, it's snakes.) But I'm gonna go again. Now, with what's happened, I've just got to.

Maybe you saw the story in the paper the other day. Just a few lines on an inside page—right next to an ad for Vinny's Okinawa Steak House. I almost missed it, but once I caught the headline, that article sure as hell grabbed my attention.

I'd just sat down in my office—well, it's actually a kinda beat up eight by ten, cinderblock hut in the middle of the lot—watchin' the steam come off my morning cup 'a joe. Lookin' out the window, I could see this dumb-ass Okinawan kid tryin' to string up some new plastic flags we got. The kid does odd jobs—washes the cars, cleans up when we close, and picks up my copy of the *Morning Star*.

A lot of them Okinawan boys sure as hell aren't good for much—and he's one of 'em. I give 'em cigarettes and once in awhile a jar of mayo or a can of Folgers—courtesy of one of my buddies on the base.

He'd just dropped off the paper, so, like I always do, I spread it out to check my own ad. It's one of those little boxes in the classifieds: *BILLICK'S ISLAND SALES—All Cars Guaranteed to Run. Best Deals on the Island. Highway One. Across from Kadena Base Main Gate.*

That headline shoulda jumped right out at me: "Remains in Cave Believed Those of Missing GIs." Christ, I almost didn't see it. Once I did, I read the story real quick. It said that after holding back for almost twenty years, some local up near Nago had tipped off the police to the murder of a pair of American GIs.

He told the cops that about twenty years ago two American soldiers had stumbled onto his village in a remote part of the Motobu Peninsula. At first they acted real friendly. Handed out tailor-mades; gave the villagers C rations. But, then they went after the girls. Raped three or four of 'em. And those soldiers kept coming back. Big and mean, and they had guns. Wasn't no surprise the locals got scared.

The villagers finally decided they had to do something. One day some of the men hid beside the trail, and when the GIs showed up, they jumped 'em. Beat 'em with clubs and rocks until they weren't moving. Later they threw the bodies into a hole inside a cave.

After a while, the jungle covered up the entrance, and people sort of forgot where it was. But the latest typhoon—I guess that would have been Dorothy, or whatever they called it—opened up the entrance. Sure enough, when the cops climbed down in there, they found bones, some skulls, dog tags, and what was left of some boots. Also parts of some Japanese uniforms. Nobody is sayin' who did what. The police and the Army CID are investigating.

Now I'll know where to look. I'll have to sit tight 'til some o' this blows over, you understand. But, now I'll know where to look. It's

what I've been waiting for ever since I came back to the Rock more than ten years ago.

I sure as hell didn't come back here to do nothin' but sell cars to dumb-ass corporals who get shit-faced and wreck 'em before they're paid for. No, sir. And it's sure as hell not the women. I suppose there's been eight or ten Okinawa *joo-sans* in and outta my place. Between you and me, I'll take a Korean girl anytime. And that's a fact.

What did I come back for? Well, let me tell you.

It all happened in 1948, three or four years after the big fight ended, about the middle of September. I still remember being questioned afterward by this butter bar lieutenant. I think his name was Brockton. Funny how names stick with you. Skinny kid, about my age then, twenty or so. His ears stuck out. I keep thinking of the flying elephant in the movie. He'd never been in combat. Well, to tell the truth, neither had I.

Anyway, he was trying to find out what happened to Sergeants Ramsford and Purcell. They'd missed company muster three days running. Seemed nobody knew what happened to 'em. He said he'd already talked to four or five others before me. Asked if I knew where those two might be.

"Sorry, lieutenant," I said, "I got no idea. If I knew anything, I'd let you know. And that's a fact."

"Just think back, Billick. You sure those two weren't in some kind of trouble?"

"None that I know about, Lieutenant."

"How about medical problems? Either of them been coming to the dispensary?"

"Just crabs. But, hell, sir, half the men in the company got crabs."

"No, I mean something serious. Something that could incapacitate them."

"Nope."

"Girlfriends?" He didn't even crack a smile. Real serious.

“Well, they’re both whorehouse commandos. But, so are . . .”

“I know. Half the men in the company.”

“Yes, sir. Besides, I hear the MPs checked all the places out in the ville. Nobody knew nothin.”

“Okay. But, if you hear anything, let me know.”

I gotta admit, I’d been sweatin’ bullets the whole time. But, I guess it didn’t show. That ninety-day wonder never tumbled to anything. Believed every word I told him.

In fact, I knew plenty. More than I ever wanted to.

Ramsford and Purcell had reputations—which they deserved—for being real operators. And that’s a fact. Specialized in midnight requisitions—if you catch my drift. If it wasn’t nailed down, it shoulda been. Luckies, Johnny Walker—you name it. They could get it. But, it wasn’t anything like that made ’em end up missing. No way.

I was, you might say, their associate. I made a nifty little profit peddling goods for ’em.

Also picked up a few things they wanted here and there in the dispensary. No problem. Drunk most of the time, the medical officer was a moron.

That surprise you? Then you gotta understand our situation out here in those days.

The higher-ups in America didn’t even know we were alive. Our own brass on the island wasn’t any better than the medical officer. They didn’t seem to care much about us. There was fifteen thousand of us livin’ in broken down Quonset huts and tents. Hell, our camp looked like one of those hobo jungles back in the States. Lieutenant Brockton called our places “hovels.” And we didn’t have much to do—a few crummy movie shacks and some sorry lookin’ ball fields. (We treated a lot of coral cuts at the dispensary.)

People say Okinawa had been turned into a dumping ground in those days, a place where other units sent their screw-ups and

misfits. I think it's kind of a bum rap. Although, in my own case, I gotta admit I didn't exactly volunteer for my transfer outta Korea. I guess it's true there was a lot of crime—murders, rapes, robberies—you know, mainly against the locals. Hell, what could you expect? We didn't ask to be sent to the Rock. Besides, if you got convicted, you got sent home early and could get out of the stockade in no time.

I have to say, the locals came across as a pretty sorry lookin' bunch. That's for sure. They lived in worse shacks than we did; always blew down whenever a typhoon hit the island. Lot of 'em had nothing to wear but cast-off army fatigues or old shirts. They lived mainly on sweet potatoes. I expect it made 'em fart pretty regular. A lot of 'em worked on the bases or did odd jobs around the camps. You wanted your boots cleaned or shirts washed, they were Johnny-on-the-spot and real cheap.

Most of the Okinawans didn't have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of. But,

I guess they liked us, even if some of the boys got out of line once in awhile. I know they sure hated the Japanese, maybe even more than we did. Kids were always hangin' around. You ought to have seen 'em scramble when we tossed gum or cigarettes over the fence. And the *joo-sans* liked us a lot. And that's a fact. The ville was loaded with bars and whorehouses.

One afternoon, I was sitting in one of those bars with Ramsford and Purcell. People out there treated Ramsford sort of like the unofficial mayor. At least him and Purcell had their own table in the back of the Bar Naminoue. They also had this big electric fan in there, which I think one of those two got out of the back room of a PX. Anyway, the bar owner seemed thankful to have it. Besides, he was afraid of them. They'd beat him up, along with two of his girls, when they thought they got overcharged for a short time. I have to admit to being kind of afraid of them myself.

Ramsford grinned at me. “Billick, how’d you like to go for a little ride with us out in the jungle?”

He was a big, red-faced blonde with rough skin. He musta had bad acne when he was a kid. That grin looked almost as snaggle-toothed as my own.

“What for?”

“What for? I’ll tell you what for, you little shit.”

Ramsford called me stuff like that a lot—but it’s just the way he talked.

“We’ve got a sweet deal out there in the jungle. Since you’re our pal, we thought we’d let you in on it.”

“What kinda . . .?”

“All the snatch you can handle.”

“Yeah, and it’s all free,” Purcell added.

He had a face like maybe a rat or a weasel—you know, like in the cartoons. But I liked his mustache—neat, like Brian Donlevy’s—or maybe Ronald Coleman’s. They were big movie stars in those days.

“I don’t get it.”

“You will. You’ll get all you want.” They both laughed.

I don’t know where they got hold of the jeep. Anyway, we bounced along a main road for half an hour or so, then turned off on a track that ran through some cane fields. We drove another twenty minutes, and then headed up into the hills and thick jungle.

“I hope you know where—” I started to say.

Just then, Purcell stopped the jeep.

“We walk from here,” he said.

Ramsford swung out of the jeep, reached back in, and picked up his rifle. Purcell did the same.

“How come the artillery?” I asked.

Purcell patted his weapon. “Never know when you might run into one of them Japanese stragglers.”

I'd heard some of 'em supposedly never surrendered. But I didn't know anybody actually ever saw one.

We walked single file, me bringin' up the rear. I kept tripping on vines and roots, which I guess they thought was funny. Soaked from the heat and wet air, I sure wished I had a towel, especially to dry my crotch, which was real uncomfortable from all the sweat runnin' down.

"Here we are." Ramsford gestured with his hand like he was a sightseeing guide, or maybe a master of ceremonies.

We had come to a small clearing, with eight or ten dumpy lookin' thatched huts next to a stream trickling down the side of the mountain. Whoever lived there had hacked some pathetic little gardens out of the jungle.

"Looks deserted," I said.

"Oh, they're around."

"Hey. *Konnichiwa*. Come on out. You got visitors," Purcell called out.

One by one a few ragged men came out of the huts, followed by some old women. They looked nervous. Maybe scared is more like it.

"*Ano ne*. Where's the *joo-sans*?" Ramsford said.

The villagers just stood there.

"Maybe they don't understand," I said.

"Oh, they understand okay," Ramsford said. "Just not cooperating."

Next thing I knew, without so much as a by-your-leave, Purcell pushed into one of those huts. Some girl or woman—I don't know which—inside started screaming and crying.

I heard Purcell. "Come on, baby." Then more screaming and crying.

Ramsford just stood there, kinda cradling his weapon. A couple of the women put their hands to their faces. But, nobody said a word. Nobody made a move.

“How about it? You want to be next?” Ramsford said to me. He had a big shit-eating grin on his face.

“No. I’ll just pass. I’m sort of tired from the hike.”

“Something wrong with you?” He looked at me kinda surprised. “Well, ain’t nothing wrong with me.”

He handed his weapon to Purcell when he came out, then Ramsford went into the same hut. This kinda tradin’ places went on for about an hour, includin’ with a woman they caught hidin’ just outside the clearing.

I sat under a tree smoking a Lucky and wishing I hadn’t come. I wasn’t no Boy Scout. But, if they—we—got caught, we coulda been in big trouble. Everybody said the new Provost Marshal had been cracking down.

Later, Ramsford and Purcell came and sat with me under the tree. They had whiskey, canned goods, and I don’t know what all stashed there. So we ate some of them little canned wieners and drank some Jim Beam, and they kept sayin’ what a sweet situation it was. The people just stood around like a bunch of dumb oxes, watching us.

“Hey. Here’s a tip,” Ramsford said. He said it in a kinda mean way. He tossed a couple a packs of Chesterfields on the ground. Nobody moved. You’d have thought they’d pick ’em up. I mean, it wouldn’t change what already happened if they did.

“They’ll get ’em after we’re gone,” Purcell said.

When we left, the people were still all standing there, staring after us. I can’t say I felt real good.

Ramsford stopped and looked back.

“Be seeing you,” he called out.

Then he waved, like he was sayin’ goodbye to a bunch of his friends somewhere.

On the way back, they kept joking about me being “too tired.” They also told me I’d better keep my trap shut. I knew they meant it.

The next time they asked me to go up there, I said I had duty and couldn't make it. I figured sooner or later word would get out, and that would be the end of their little arrangement. Besides, I didn't like the way them people looked at us.

I know Ramsford and Purcell went back more than once. But they never asked me but that one time. I kinda wondered why. Not that I really wanted to go, you understand.

One night lying in my bunk half asleep, I heard 'em talking. They must have thought the Quonset was empty. Most of the guys had gone over to the chow hall to watch Robert Mitchum in *The Story of GI Joe*. The higher-ups always seemed to be showing us war movies. I could just make out the two of 'em talking in low voices, almost murmuring you might say. I couldn't even tell which was which.

" . . . should have killed 'em both."

"That would have been stupid. What I think is . . ."

" . . . still alive. Maybe we can make him tell . . ."

" . . . strong boxes . . . kind of loot . . ."

" . . . Philippines . . . Formosa . . . closer."

" . . . sketch shows cave . . . has to be buried near . . ."

They'd latched on to something—I just couldn't figure out what.

Well, you better believe I kept an eye on those two. Ramsford and Purcell left the camp early on Fridays. You could set your watch by it. On Friday morning, I got the medical officer to sign a requisition for a jeep. Told him I had to go to Zukeran to pick up supplies. Far as I could tell he was drunk as a skunk.

I drove up island to the place we'd turned into the cane fields. Parked behind some trees and waited. I've got to admit I sort of shivered, even though it was hot out. I guess I kinda had a case of the nerves.

Sure enough, they showed up about an hour later and headed into the cane. I waited a few minutes, and then followed 'em. It had rained the night before, and their tire marks showed up real plain.

When I spotted their vehicle parked at the end of the track, I stopped, turned around, and killed the engine. I planned to be long gone when they came back. I had a forty-five just in case things got rough.

I set out on foot. It was hard going, and I was trying to be careful not to make any noise. I'd only been at it for ten minutes or so, when I heard a real hullabaloo up ahead. Lots of yelling and screaming. Sounded like a pack of banshees howling, kind of a mix of English and Japanese or whatever it is the locals speak. I thought I heard a shot. The commotion only lasted a minute or two. Then nothing. Just silence. It felt real weird, eerie you might say. I wanted to hightail it, but I guess my curiosity got the best of me. Besides, I had some insurance in the holster on my hip.

I ran into Ramsford first. He sat slumped up against a tree, blood all over him. A few feet away I saw Purcell laying face down in the mud. The whole back of his head was stove in, like somebody pounded on it with a hammer, or maybe a big rock. Made me wanna barf.

"Hey, you little shit. What are you doing here?"

Ramsford didn't have a whole lot of life in him, but he sure recognized me.

I looked around. But, except for some stupid bird yammering away, everything seemed quiet.

"What happened?" I didn't know what else to say.

"Bastards from the village . . . jumped us . . . hiding by the trail."

I knelt down next to him so I could hear what he said.

"I'm in a bad way." He could barely whisper.

I started to give him some water from my canteen. But blood came gurgling out of his mouth. So I pulled the canteen back.

"I got loose enough . . . got a shot off. The little bastards took off." He looked at me like one of them sad dogs with long ears.

I said to hell with it, gave him some water.

"Listen Billick. Listen real . . . good."

He kept wheezing, like somebody with pneumonia or something.

"We spotted a Jap straggler a few weeks ago near the village. Trailed 'im back to a cave."

He wheezed some more.

"Cave's behind us . . . up the hill . . . hard to find."

"Where is he? Where's the Jap?" I didn't figure Ramsford could last much longer.

"Was two of 'em. Living like animals. Killed one the first day . . . Other one talked gibberish for a couple days . . . killed him too."

"Anything else?"

"Yeah. They were guarding . . . something. Empty strong boxes in the cave."

"What was it? Gold? What?"

"Don't know. But, it's hid nearby. We came up to look today, but . . ." He had a hard time breathing and I had to wait for him to start talking again. "Get me out of here . . . cut you in." His voice was real faint.

I guess I looked like I didn't understand.

"Got a sketch map, you little shit. Took it off the dead Jap."

He sorta patted his pocket. I pushed his hand away and reached into his pocket. I pulled out a scrap of paper, smeared with blood. Sure enough, it looked like a map. I'd just have to get all that hen scratching translated and find the cave, and I'd be in business.

"Help me up . . . get back to jeep."

That's when we heard the voices.

"Jesus! They're coming back. Give me my weapon!"

Ramsford didn't say nothing more. But, when he reached out with his hand, his eyes looked scared, kinda begging, you might say.

I picked up his piece by the sling. I stood there, not knowing what to do. The voices sounded closer and closer and I had to make up my mind real quick.

I ran. Ran with Ramsford's weapon still in my hand. Ran as fast as I could, slipping and sliding back down the trail. Piled into my jeep. Got the hell out of there.

Whatever happened to Ramsford after that, I figured he deserved it.

Anyhow, you can see why that lieutenant asking me those questions put me on edge. But after a while the officers quit asking, and I calmed down, especially when I got shipped stateside. I heard that for a year or two they listed the two sergeants as deserters. Later on, people just said they'd disappeared. And that was it.

Once I got discharged, I came back here from the States. Sold a little insurance. Went partners in a restaurant. Finally got into the used car business. Hell, I even joined the American Chamber of Commerce. I have to admit to drinking a fair amount too.

But, like I said, I had something else on my menu. Mainly I wanted to find that damn cave. Whatever it was they were guarding up there is hid close by. You can see that on the map. Now I've got a good idea where to start looking.

It was right there in the *Morning Star*: "GIs Killed by Villagers." That part's true enough. Isn't anybody needs to know any more.

Lawrence F. Farrar is a former US diplomat with multiple assignments in Japan as well as with postings in Germany, Norway, and Washington, DC. During his time in the Foreign Service, he graduated from the National War College, was Consul General in Okinawa, and served as the Political Advisor to the Commandant of the USMC. Before his diplomatic career, Farrar served as a deck officer on the USS Kearsarge (CVS-33) and as a ComNavForJapan staff officer. His son is a Marine reserve officer with service in Somalia and Iraq. Including those in O-Dark-Thirty, Farrar's stories have appeared in more than fifty literary magazines.

Poetry.

The Cull of Saqlawiah

Jason Arment

I Googled one of the towns
my company occupied in Iraq
with the words
“purged by ISIS”

Bodies lay piled up
chest high & ten feet across
stretching down the center
of the town's main road

I couldn't make out any faces
Men, women, & children wore
hijabs, burkas, track suits & western clothes
No one looked dressed for death

More than Sorrow

Jason Arment

An unwanted miscarriage
after years of trying
& months of hope & happiness
an unfathomable loss

I can't imagine how that feels
& I can't explain what it means
to watch my former life's work
turned to ash

Even though the metric of loss
has a hard time going two ways at once
maybe those things are close
maybe I could sit with the parents & talk

About what it means to really believe
only to have everything come crashing
down, the smoke stinging
tearful eyes

The Smell of Pine

Jason Arment

All my meds are in a stout pine box
my mother gave me as a gift
my Beretta laid beside the bottles
quit or cure—no more half-measures

Jason Arment served in Operation Iraqi Freedom as a machine gunner in the USMC. He holds an MFA in Creative Nonfiction from the Vermont College of Fine Arts. His work has appeared in Narrative Magazine, Gulf Coast, Lunch Ticket, Chautauqua, Hippocampus, The Burrow Press Review, Dirty Chai, Phoebe, Pithead Chapel, The Indianola Review, Brevity, The Florida Review, and War, Literature & the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities. It has also been anthologized in Proud to Be: Writing by American Warriors, Volumes 2 & 4; and is forthcoming in Zone 3, Duende, Midwestern Gothic, and The Iowa Review. University of Hell Press will publish his memoir Musalaheen in 2017. Jason lives in Denver, where he coordinates the Denver Veterans Writing Workshop with Colorado Humanities.

Jungle breakfast

Bruce Colbert

We sat on the veranda of that Tikal motel and it rained in monsoon sheets for hours on end, this grey sky and the heat of the Guatemala jungle, and we drank, mostly one scotch after another and talked in a pidgin Spanish, the ranting of too much liquor, twisting the words like children almost, the language, two men sweating, the stone rectangles of the vanished Mayans looking back at us above the tree line, people who had a civilization that lasted a thousand years and one day disappeared into the rain forest, forever, and we

Turned this language into something nonsensical, asking for the name of a llama that sounded like asking a man's name, and it went on, mostly me,

For hours, right after we'd eaten what amounted to a road kill dinner of some unfortunate creature, tasty though he might be, and the chef was delighted, or maybe he didn't care because we were the only guests at this two story erector set-looking building, save one other with the UN, serious-looking with wire rim glasses,

And we all looked out into the bush over our drink glasses, and at night heard animals calling to one another, unfamiliar sounds, jaguar growls and monkey calls, and at breakfast, without much real

Appetite I asked this single other guest, a doctor, at our table,

What was the biggest problem here? and between bites of his fried eggs, he said, “The war, the one that they say we don’t have which will finish us, and after that there’s dysentery. Kills a fifth of the Indian children. But who cares?”

“You can get murdered by both sides, it’s kind of funny in a way, being completely innocent of it all, almost democratic.”

Bruce Colbert, a Navy veteran, is an actor and playwright in New York City. His plays have been performed off Broadway, and in Toronto. He is the author of five books: a short fiction collection, two novels and two poetry volumes.

The Vietnam Memorial Is Visited Late at Night

Susan Meehan

The theory of war is mastered
methodically
at night when tomes
are underlined in red
in war college carrels.

The theory of pain is demonstrated
Repeatedly
Late at night when soldiers' shadows
Return to stretch out across unyielding granite
Mirroring, echoing stories own
Death's flanked paths,
Leaving behind only a trace of
Lives so quickly ended
but remembered forever
In formally etched stone.

*Susan Meehan is the daughter of a WWI Marine, the wife of
a Vietnam army veteran, and the mother-in-law of a SeaBee
currently on active duty.*

Interview.

A Conversation with M.L. Doyle

By Peter Molin

I first heard United States Army veteran M.L. Doyle speak at the Association of Writers and Writing Program (AWP) 2016 conference in Los Angeles, where I was struck by both the sharpness of her insights and wryness of her perspective. Intrigued, I sought out a chance to converse further with Doyle at AWP and find out more about her work. When the organizer of Doyle's AWP panel, *O-Dark-Thirty* editor Jerri Bell, offered a chance to interview Doyle for the journal, I jumped at the opportunity. Now, after reading *I'm Still Standing: From Captive U.S. Soldier to Free Citizen—My Journey Home* (2010), which Doyle co-wrote with U.S. Army Specialist Shoshana Johnson; *The Peacekeeper's Photograph* (2013), a military procedural set in Bosnia, and *The Bonding Spell* (2015), an urban fantasy about an Iraq veteran endowed with the superhuman powers of an ancient Sumerian goddess, I'm not just intrigued but thoroughly impressed by the range of Doyle's talent and the uniqueness of her vision. After an exchange of e-mails and phone calls, I'm happy to share the fruits of our conversation with a larger audience.

In the military, Doyle rose to the rank of Sergeant First Class (E-7) as a Public Affairs journalist in the Army Reserves with deployments to Puerto Rico, Guatemala, Honduras, Thailand, and Panama to cover exercises, and to Bosnia for a nine-month stint as a U.S. Army peacekeeper under her belt. Writing was part of Doyle's professional life as a military journalist and led to the offer to co-write Shoshana Johnson's memoir, Doyle's first published book. As she relates below, Doyle's true interest was fiction, and while writing *I'm Still Standing* she had already begun working on the "Master Sergeant Harper Mysteries," a series including *The Peacekeeper's Photograph*, *The Sapper's Plot* (2013), and *The General's Ambition* (2014) that feature an African American female senior non-commissioned officer whose duties bring her in contact with the Army's criminal underbelly in Bosnia, Honduras, and Germany, respectively. Eschewing the hustle of mainstream publishing, Doyle began publishing the Master Sergeant Harper mysteries independently, where they have received critical acclaim and a wide audience. Later, Doyle co-wrote the biography of Brigadier General (Retired) Julia Cleckley, *A Promise Fulfilled: My Life as a Wife and Mother, Soldier and General Officer* (2014) and, as if memoir and crime fiction were not enough, she also began self-publishing urban fantasy and adult romance titles.

In the interview that follows, Doyle offers thoughts on a wide range of subjects: her love of writing and reading, getting started as a published author, the complex experience of African American women in the military and the war-writing scene, the attraction of genre writing, the virtues of independent publishing, and much else. A native Minnesotan, Mary Doyle currently lives in Baltimore, Maryland, with her two cats. Along with writing or thinking about writing every day, she works in the Public Affairs Office at Fort Meade, Maryland, as a media relations specialist. Her website is <http://www.mldoyleauthor.com/>

ODT: *Describe your military career—why did you join, how long did you serve, what was your MOS, and what were some of the highlights of your time in uniform? What do/did you like most about being a soldier?*

M.L. Doyle: I joined the Army Reserve at nineteen and kept a variety of full-time civilian jobs while serving my weekend and summer duties in uniform. The Reserves started out as being kind of a part-time job, but quickly grew to mean much more to me as I gained more experience and changed specialties. The units I served with were all out of Fort Snelling, Minnesota. The first unit had very few women and at the time, no minorities to speak of. My first job was as the clerk in the motor pool (71B), the only woman who had ever served in the motor pool for that unit. I then became a supply sergeant (76Y) before becoming language qualified and switching to Intelligence Analyst (96B). I loved being an analyst and actually wrote several official papers while in that role, but I finally found the job that was right for me when I became a public affairs broadcast specialist (46R) in a mobile public affairs detachment.

In the Mobile Public Affairs Detachment (MPAD) we went all over the world covering exercises. Puerto Rico, Honduras, Guatemala, Thailand. We went to Panama right after Operation Just Cause and covered a lot of the aftereffects of that operation. I was activated to run a media operations center at a mobilization station in Illinois during Desert Storm and was deployed to Bosnia for nine months for the peacekeeping mission there. My first novel was based largely on that deployment.

ODT: *Are you writing full-time now, or are you still working?*

MLD: I work full-time as a civilian for the Army and work just about every weekend and holiday at the keyboard. During the week, after

work, I just don't have the energy to devote to writing so I spend some time on weeknights researching, reading about what other writers are doing etcetera. On weekends and holidays I try to cram as many hours at the keyboard as possible.

ODT: In the Acknowledgements to The Bonding Spell, you thank your mother for always having your nose buried in a book. What kind of reader were you as a youth, and what role did your mother play in your development as a writer?

MLD: I followed my mother's example and was always reading a book. I simply couldn't stand the thought of not having something to read. If I neared the end of one, I was already looking for the next one. We would go to the library together and come home with bags of books. We never returned them late and usually finished reading all of them by their due date.

I have never understood people who don't read. I want to shake them and scream in their faces. "Have you no idea what you're missing? How can you turn away from this when it's right in front of you?" It's sad to me and unfortunately, seems to be getting worse.

I used to give my mom some of my writing to read but she, unfortunately, never liked my writing. She once handed a story back to me and told me I should stick to non-fiction. It hurt and eventually I stopped asking her to read my work, but I never stopped having her critical eye in mind with every word I wrote. Maybe it was good that she never gave me much encouragement. It just made me try harder.

ODT: When did you begin to write, and how did you become a published author?

MLD: I didn't work on getting my first degree until in my late twenties. I'd played around with writing before then, but I think the collegiate

atmosphere, the workshopping and pointed criticism, brought out the writer in me. I never stopped after that. I wrote mostly short stories and after getting my bachelors, started an MFA program but decided I couldn't afford it.

For many years, all of my writing energy went to writing things for work . . . broadcast scripts, training videos, press releases, that sort of thing. When I changed jobs, that energy then went into writing my first novels, which were in the mystery genre. I managed to get an agent who shopped the mystery series around with little luck. Eventually, she came to me and asked if I wanted to try my hand on a ghostwriting project. I jumped at the chance to write Shoshana Johnson's memoir of her time as a POW in Iraq. The book was published in 2010 by Touchstone. Those were exciting days . . . to see it in bookstores, to see Shoshana doing the talk show circuit, and when the book was nominated for an NAACP award.

As much as I enjoyed writing her book, my heart was still rooted in writing fiction.

ODT: You have helped write two memoirs, one with Specialist Shoshana Johnson and one with Brigadier General Julia Jeter Cleckley. What was challenging about the two experiences and how did they differ?

MLD: Where to begin? Johnson's memoir was focused on her captivity with a little about her background, her life and all of the fallout of her time as a POW. I can't tell you how brave she was, not just as a POW, but as a woman telling her story, faults and all. She wanted to tell the whole truth, as raw and as ugly as it could be. She didn't take much prodding and the story was so compelling it seemed to tell itself.

Cleckley's story was much more complicated because it encompassed her entire life—a full and tragic civilian life combined

with a long and prosperous military professional career. A lifetime of stories is difficult to cull down into something that can be told in a book. And when you're trying to help someone else tell their story, you have to work through a great deal of their history to find the nuggets that you can turn into something with plot and structure. Not to mention that something I might think is important upon hearing it, may not be something the subject wants to delve into. Ghostwriting is a long and exhausting process. It took us more than four years to get Julia's story done. It could have taken us a lot longer but we were both determined to get it done no matter the obstacles.

ODT: I'm Still Standing portrays a low-density, junior-enlisted, female soldier who is also African American. In other words, demographically, Shoshana Johnson is about as far from the typical hero of military memoir—white, male, combat arms or Special Forces. What is interesting and important about her life story and her perspectives on military and the war?

MLD: Shana would be the first one to tell you that she is not a super soldier. She and the person she was riding with, Specialist Edgar Hernandez, had no idea where they were when the ambush happened. They were just another vehicle in a very long convoy that got lost and attacked, and as with any small unit, every one of the eleven people who were killed in that ambush were close friends to each other. The story she tells isn't just about what she went through. She can't tell her story without talking about Jessica Lynch, Lori Piestewa, Dave Williams, Ron Young, and others who were killed or captured along with her.

For every Special Forces troop, there are scores of soldiers like Johnson who play their support role and concentrate more on that role, that job, than they do on soldiering skills. They go to the weapons range once or twice a year, take the required land navigation

classes, combatives training and the like, but in truth, they aren't thinking they will ever have to use those skills. The strength in her story is not about taking on the Iraqi Army. It's about facing her fears, surviving through the trauma and then coming back to the states to face the media and public opinion backlash. Her story is equally about what she and her unit members went through and about the kinds of media and public opinion gauntlet people are forced to endure these days whenever they go through something that then thrusts them into the public eye.

ODT: *How did your interest in military crime fiction develop?*

MLD: One of my mother's favorite authors was Dick Francis, a British author who wrote mysteries centered on the British horse racing industry. Through his books, you learn all about the racing industry, what it's like to be a jockey, various jobs within the industry and the power brokers who make the rules and break them. I've always loved his books and I learned much of what I know about mystery writing by studying his story and plot style.

My goal was to do with the military what he did with horse racing by using the military setting, the variety of jobs and roles people play in uniform, to not only tell a compelling mystery, but to unravel some of the misconceptions people might have about military life. My first book, *The Peacekeeper's Photograph*, was all about the Bosnia peacekeeping mission, life on a remote outpost, and the role of a public affairs soldier. The second, *The Sapper's Plot*, is about the National Guard, humanitarian missions and the role military engineers might play in one of those missions. The final book, *The General's Ambition*, is about a field training exercise in Hohenfels, Germany. My hope is, that through the story, the reader learns a bit more about what normal soldiering is like and comes away with a deeper understanding of the military world.

ODT: *The Peacekeeper's Photograph, the first Master Sergeant Lauren Harper Mystery, portrays many elements not often seen in contemporary war writing, such as a senior NCO's perspective (an African American woman's, to boot), command group and higher headquarters staff culture, and a deployment to Bosnia. It also depicts general officer corruption and erotic and romantic attraction within the ranks, as well as the threat or actuality of rape of female American soldiers captured by an enemy. Wherein lies your interest in these subjects? Were you deliberately trying to address subjects that were not often portrayed in war writing?*

MLD: Most people who know me and who read the Harper Mysteries think MSG Harper is a lot like me. I was a soldier, a senior NCO, I worked in public affairs, I went to the locations Harper goes to; but aside from those aspects, Harper is just a character. As to my deliberateness in telling stories not often found in war writing, I have never read a mystery in which the central character is a black female senior NCO. I have never read or heard of a character in literature that is so much like me and yes, I wanted to fix that.

Doesn't it make sense that any character I write would be of my race and gender? And if that's true, does my story have to be about my race and gender? If a white male is writing a book about his experiences in uniform does he purposefully address what it is to be white and male in his storytelling?

When we talk about race or gender roles in literature, the expectation is that any minority voice has to either reinforce what we expect from established norms we assign to that race or lend some new perspective to those roles within the story. Bottom line, the minority character must, in one way or another, speak to that minority space in some way. Harper can't just be a black, female NCO. There must be some justification for her to be so, some reason within the story for her to be something other than white and male.

There are aspects of Harper's character that naturally reflect her race, her upbringing, her experiences as a soldier and the way she approaches some relationships. Within *Peacekeeper's* and the other Harper stories, she is as color blind to her race as most service members are when they walk into a TOC or a barracks or any other military setting. Race only becomes a thing when someone makes it so, but in uniform, I found those types of situations were thankfully rare and Harper's experiences, so far, reflect that view.

ODT: Master Sergeant Harper's sense of what's important about her identity is intriguing—it blends and balances her awareness of her status as a woman, a senior Army NCO, an African American, and the unique circumstances of her family history and her personal outlook on life. Is that how you see her too, and what more would you like us to understand about her?

MLD: Harper is like so many black women soldiers I know. She joined the military with the hope of improving her lot in life. She comes from a loving family but one that had its challenges. Her upbringing is in a single parent household with a matriarchal example that she strives to emulate. She is an older sister to a sibling that she ends up having primary responsibility for. And as her career develops, she is surprised to discover that the job she took as a means to an end, ends up being a life she loves.

What she struggles with, and what so many dedicated female service members struggle with, is her love life. How does a woman soldier balance her dedication to a job that has 24/7 demands, with a courtship? When you are in a career that can call on you to drop everything, pack a bag and be gone for long lengths of time, how to you maintain a love life through demands like that? And what about children?

Harper doesn't have all the answers, but what I want people to know about her is that she's strong and dedicated and wants more than anything to be a good soldier. Her weak point, of course, is her feelings for her commanding officer. The fraternization is bad enough, but that he's married is far worse in her book.

ODT: *You have also written stories in the genres of urban fantasy (featuring an Iraq War veteran possessed by the spirit of a Sumerian goddess) and romance. What is interesting about these genres for you? Of all the genres in which you work, which one comes most easily to you and why?*

MLD: I am almost grateful that I couldn't find a publisher for the Harper mysteries. If I had, I'm sure I'd be stuck writing book after book in the Harper world. Now, I love Harper, and there are more books about her world I'd love to write, but I can't see myself as being happy as someone like Sue Grafton who, once started, had to write a book for every letter in the alphabet in her alphabet murder mystery series. Not to mention other authors who are stuck, because their publisher demands it, with writing only one thing or another.

As an indie author I can write what I want and I've found that if a reader enjoys your writing and the way you tell a story, they usually have the patience to try a whole new genre and setting if you can take them there. Aside from preferring fiction over non-fiction, I don't have a preference. I love mystery, romance and urban fantasy. I've even been toying with a post-apocalyptic storyline that I hope to dive into soon. I love reading it all, so why not write it all?

ODT: *What aspects of race and gender relations in the military are you seeking to explore and explain in your writing?*

MLD: See question eight. I think part of this is about the difficulties anyone has with writing about the group they fit into. For example,

how do you write about being white? How do you write about being a man? These are the roles of our lives so why are these aspects of ourselves the things that have to be most involved in our story? If I walked into my trailer, as Master Sergeant Harper does in *The Peacekeeper's Photograph*, and I find my soldier dead, the last thing I'm thinking about is how a black woman would or should react to that. I'm reacting as a human. Once my heart stops pounding, I would consider what it means that the dead soldier is white, but that's only part of all the other extenuating circumstances of the story and how one goes about discovering who killed her.

ODT: What is your writing regimen? Where, when, and how does writing work best for you? Do you have a support system of fellow writers or do you tend to go it alone?

MLD: I've been part of a writing critique group for years. I can't write in a vacuum and always like to run my work past readers. Part of it is the desire to just be around people who are struggling with the same things you are, the ability to discuss issues with other writers and to feel part of a community. The group I currently work with is five other authors working on everything from mystery, fantasy, time travel stories, etc. Some have been traditionally published, others are either self-published or on the road to doing that. I've learned so much from them and over the years, my writing has definitely improved by working with them.

In terms of my regime, I simply write when I can. For the last couple of months, I've been unable, or unwilling to work on my latest novel (the second book in the desert goddess series). It felt as if I was writing constipated. No matter how hard I tried, the words would not come to me. I just didn't have the willingness or desire to work on it for whatever reason. I took a vacation to New Hampshire and spent a week at a remote cabin on a lake and finally, the words

started coming again, as if someone opened the tap and finally let them flow. It feels amazing to be back at it and to see that I'm finally, after so many weeks, making some progress again.

ODT: *Much of your work has been published independently. How did that happen?*

MLD: My first published book, *I'm Still Standing*, came about when my agent, who was shopping my fiction around, was asked if I'd be interested in writing Shoshana Johnson's book. I jumped at the opportunity. I wrote some sample chapters, they liked them and I was hired. Working with Shana to create the book and finally seeing the resulting memoir was an amazing experience, but my first love in writing was fiction. My agent continued to shop *The Peacekeeper's Photograph* around and I collected a nice little stack of rejections.

By the time *I'm Still Standing* hit the stores, *The Sapper's Plot*, the second book in the Harper series was done and I still didn't have a publisher. I finally started exploring the idea of indie publishing. I'd been doing my research, had corresponded with several self-published authors, and it took me a long time to finally decide to go for it but I did.

I published *The Peacekeeper's Photograph* and *The Sapper's Plot* on the same day in 2013. Since then I've indie-published several other books and novellas. At this point, I would never pitch a project or write a query letter again. I love indie publishing. I love choosing my own editors, having total control of the cover, title, rollout, marketing and I like that I have a much larger royalty share. Also, if I had found a publisher for the Harper stories, I think Harper would have been all I could ever write. Now, I'm writing urban fantasy, adult romance, and I'm sketching out some ideas for a dystopian series I might release in serial format. I even have a mystery series of novellas that center around a gay Major in the Army who, because

of the ending of Don't Ask Don't Tell, can finally have the open relationship he wanted with an FBI Special Agent.

Indie publishing gives me the freedom to write what I want and I don't have to suffer through the endless waiting, the multiple rejections and the loss of control. It ends up being a lot more work and there are times when all I want to do is write instead of deal with so much of the business of writing, but at least it's my business with deadlines I set and projects I want to work on.

ODT: How do you handle the business side of writing—working with agents, dealing with publishers, pitching projects, trying to make a dollar or even a living from your writing?

MLD: How do I handle the business side? I don't, really. I don't promote my work the way I should, I don't blog as often as I should, I don't pitch projects—and surprise, surprise, I don't make much of a living at it. I keep telling myself, one day I'll get organized, have a real launch of the next book, or work on some all-encompassing promotion that will gain new readers, but when it comes to choosing between planning a marketing strategy and actually writing, I'd rather be writing. Someday, when I retire from my day job, I will dedicate more time to writing and the business of writing. Right now, I guess I'm building my library and working on my craft. If I make a little money along the way, that's fine.

ODT: What advice do you have for veterans who would like to build on their military experience to become published authors?

MLD: In my day, we had battle buddies. I think they call them something new these days, but the key thing is, while writing is a solitary thing, actually learning to write and learning the business of writing

isn't. Hunker down and put pencil to paper, or fingers on the keyboard and work, but lift your head up every now and then to see what is around you. There are other writers or poets, screenwriters and playwrights who are going through the same things you are. No one gives you medals for carrying the burden on your own, so take advantage of the programs and support out there that can help.

ODT: Thank you, Mary Doyle, and keep on writing!

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Peter Molin manages the Veterans Writing Project mentoring program. He is a retired Army lieutenant colonel who served in infantry units at Fort Drum, NY; Fort Bragg, NC; and in Korea. In 2008-2009, he advised Afghan National Army forces in Khost and Paktya Provinces in Afghanistan. He holds a Ph.D. in English literature; taught English at West Point; now teaches at Rutgers University; and created the Time Now blog, which features art, music, film, and literature about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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a creative writing program for
U.S. troops and their families.*



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