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POETRY

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FICTION

VISUAL ARTS

*denotes Pushcart Prize nominee

POETRY

Earthrise

Kris Becker

It was 1968. Why not fuck
away the world? One bullet,
one can of gas, father
who maybe didn't like you all
that much. Then, as now, hard to be smart
and beautiful. Cigarettes, alcohol,
another bullet, brothers
headed for the draft. Everything green,
convulsing, in a rage. What a girl
wanted didn't matter, pulsar,
radio, SOS, math. There were too many
people in that tiny house, always
someone crying, or wanting to.
Everything swollen: did she want it? Cock,
then gut, then face. Prom came
and went. The tadpole lodged
and owes its life to this:
poverty, religion, and the law.

"I was born in December 1968. 'Earthrise' imagines my mother's experience as a teenager who became pregnant that year, while the war in Vietnam and corresponding civil unrest disrupted her family, community, and worldview." —Kris Becker

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Kris Becker was a first-gen student at Willamette University, then a Peace Corps volunteer, and then completed an MFA in poetry at Syracuse and a career in nonprofit leadership in northwestern Washington state. Her poems and translations have appeared in *Terrain.org*, *CALYX*, *Willow Springs*, *Two Lines*, and elsewhere. She lives in Port Townsend.

After Hope
Roy Bentley

If the loss of hope were a country, it'd be this one. And
for a while, you would have Wi-Fi. A menu of rock 'n roll.
The myriad behaviors of cottonwood leaves in noon light.
Love-approximately might still be trial-and-error answered
with that knowing smile won in the College of Heartbreak.
No one said it would be easy to live with your fellows,
but at least there's some time to consider a few things.
And I think there's sliced salami you like in the fridge

and enough wheat bread to make a sandwich. You'll
soon understand how fucked you are and dismiss it—
Sandy Langford sent me letters in basic training.
Once she scented the envelope with her perfume.
Our TI was some short Airman First Class with
a Napoleon Complex, and I'm a tallish hillbilly,
so he commenced waving the aromatic love letter
around. Sniffing it. Sticking his pinkish tongue out

and having a bit of fun at my expense. The laughter
in the barracks was friendly, and the TI did ultimately
hand over Sandy's letter. But with a big, mock smooch.
That was the letter in which she said she wanted to see
other people. And in the Air Force in Texas back then,
they called letters like that Dear Johns. Nevertheless,
for a while after, I heard the wolf whistles in my sleep.
I saw Sandy's blue-eyed Look of Worship turn away.

The TI had wagged the letter like a flag of battle—
like a standard-issue Middle Finger to the Mystery.
After hope, it turns out, at least in the Air Force,
you have everything that came before. If lucky,
something scented with an echoing loss of love,
the sting of which may linger for fifty years or so.
A daft little piece of American Theater in which
you starred for a moment, or at least costarred.

"I've felt the disappointment that attends someone choosing not to love you. Whether an intimate relationship or our relationship to the group, I see that painful set of moments as a metaphor for what many Americans feel they've been forced to endure of late. The word *disappointment* strains to include the humiliation and scarring." —Roy Bentley

Roy Bentley is the author of *Walking with Eve in the Loved City*, chosen by Billy Collins as finalist for the Miller Williams Poetry Prize; *Starlight Taxi*, winner of the Blue Lynx Poetry Prize; *The Trouble with a Short Horse in Montana*, chosen by John Gallaher as winner of the White Pine Poetry Prize and *Boy in a Boat* (University of Alabama), which was selected for the University of Alabama Press Poetry Series. He has received a Creative Writing Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, six Ohio Arts Council fellowships, and a Florida Division of Cultural Affairs fellowship.

Evening
D. Dina Friedman

After "Messenger" by Mary Oliver

Now that the sun has finally set,
let me lie here and love the world
despite pictures of limbs

in the rubble. Let me be
like the cat, waiting with one shut eye
for the miracle of the open can

or like the baby, no longer hungry,
but requesting crackers for the pure pleasure
of watching them sail out of his hand.

Let me pretend when I showed him the sky
and he learned the word, sky, I saw only birds.
I didn't see fighter jets, or hear their clamor.

Let me pretend there's no greater pleasure
than the rapture of buds, the ting of a wind chime,
the firm promise of a garden pebble in your hand.

Let me pretend all that matters in life
are the words you learn: Sky. Cracker. Bird.
Cat. Bell. Light.

Yes, light.
Especially, light.

"I wrote this last year as part of a community-wide fundraising project for the Center for New Americans in western Massachusetts, where writers attempt to write 30 Poems in November. Each day the coordinator sends out a prompt, and that day the prompt was the gorgeous poem 'Messenger' by Mary Oliver. My days were full with grieving about the Gaza War, which had just started, and taking care of my 14-month old grandchild, who was just beginning to vocalize the sights, sounds, and textures of the world outside—discoveries that both he, and Oliver in her poem, found miraculous. I wanted to write about this juxtaposition between grief and joy, and explore how we can come to a place of gratitude amidst deep sorrow." —D. Dina Friedman

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D. Dina Friedman's newest books are the poetry collection *Here in Sanctuary—Whirling* (Querencia Press) and the short-story collection *Immigrants* (Creators Press), which was first runner up in the short-story category for the Eric Hoffer Award. Her previous books include two YA novels, *Escaping Into the Night* (Simon and Schuster) and *Playing Dad's Song* (Farrar Straus Giroux) and one book of poetry, *Wolf in the Suitcase* (Finishing Line Press). Dina has published in over a hundred literary journals including *Rattle*, *Salamander*, *The Sun*, *Mass Poetry*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Cider Press Review*, *Lilith*, and *Rhino*. She has received one Best of the Net and four Pushcart Prize nominations.

Veils

Sadia Ali Heil

When Afghanistan falls,
an image circulates in social circles, spheres
of Western feminism.

A woman wears a veil.
Her daughter wears a veil.
Her daughter's doll wears a veil.

How horrible! they claim.
So sad!
How oppressive! Save them

the little girls,
the women.
We fear for their future.

What about the veil they wear,
the veil that hails over their tongue?
Veils of comfort
concealing

true feelings? I am better than
deserve more than
the women behind the veil
babies cut from their bellies
bare, c-sections without anesthetics
their daughters behind our screens
scouring for weeds, grateful for dinner—
for animal feed
their dolls there are no dolls there is nothing left

not even a veil.

Where are you? Where are you? Where are you? Spheres
of freedom women's march
my body, my choice—sea of pink pussy hats

Astakfirullah! Drowning
in audacity—
their bodies, MY choice

How horrible!
So sad!

How oppressive! Save them

from the veils they wear
concealing

We care! (when it serves our interests)
We care! (when it serves us)
We care! (because)

veils
serve
us

"Ask any veteran where they were three years ago when Afghanistan fell. They'll remember. Many sprang into action: helpers. Others succumbed to confusion, fear. That's how I came across the image of the veils.

Though microaggressions rooted in anti-Muslim bias are commonplace, the hypocrisy is still mind-bogglingly audacious. When Western supermodels rock veils on red carpets, in fashion shows, they are lauded. Meanwhile, 'full gender parity' proud nations continue banning veils (which is why seeing Olympic icons like Sifan Hassan rock a veil while accepting her record-breaking gold medal was so deeply, incredibly fortifying).

'My body, my choice' applies to all women. Someday. Insh'allah." —Sadia Heil

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Sadia Ali Heil is a writer, advocate, and Air Force veteran who grew up listening to South Asian stories of family and faith. Her debut picture book, *Baba's Car* (Candlewick Press), is set for publication in Spring 2026. In her free time, Sadia hoards plants and family photos, arranges flowers, paddleboards, runs, and hikes. You can find her on Instagram @sadiaheilbooks.

Even This

Thaer Husien

Sun's stuck at dusk.
What are words when we screamed
for greater resistance eleven months ago?
Why become anything that's not that?
Even this?

> "What are words without action, what is theory sans praxis? Kill your bourgeois dreams." —Thaer Husien

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Thaer Husien is a Palestinian educator living on Turtle Island. He is a co-founder of The Posterity Alliance, a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer, a Fulbright scholar, and holds an MFA in Creative Writing from American University. Short stories can be read in *The Written Resistance*, *Rusted Radishes*, *Litro Magazine*, *Sonora Review*, *Montreal Serai*, and *Emrys Journal* with selected work in *Poetry Wales*. His debut novel, *Beside the Sickle Moon*, is near future literary activism based on Israel's occupation of Palestine (Daraja Press, September 2024).

Pillar of Salt

Kathryn Jordan

Because the girl in the photo looks like me,
and because we've all but forgotten Vietnam,
I have a clipping with photo of a family reuniting
after the war. Children charging at the soldier,
daughter leaping for him, clunky 1970 shoes,
lanky legs, short skirt, arms outstretched,
wife trotting along, holding her boy's hand.

War is a flower that draws blood from the soil
and lives on in the seed. I was nearly grown
before I realized my own real father flew in Vietnam.
My mother only told me he was *on cruise.*
I never worried, never sent him cassettes of songs
and poems —as I was asked to do for her new husband.

When our stepfather came home from Vietnam,
my brother and I ran over the tarmac.
Glancing back, I saw my mother in blue suit,
blonde bouffant, no smile, walking slowly.
We moved to the hills and everything went south.
Through the walls over and over, I heard: *Fran,*
Fran, I never went out on you, Fran, I swear.
They traded the Pontiac stationwagon for two VW bugs.
She took off for five more husbands;
he went back to see about Laos.

A lifetime later, when I call my ex-stepfather to say
my unhoused brother is dead, he says, how sad,
then confesses *how attractive the bar girls were in Chu Lai*
and he just couldn't help it. So I decide to tell him
about my mother's nights out when he was in 'Nam.
After I hang up, I dig up the clipping, learn the pilot-soldier
was a P.O.W., who'd just been served divorce papers.

I never once imagined my own father's flight home, his hope
someone would be waiting. Is it too late to welcome
my father home from war? He's coming now, stepping
out of the plane, taking in the sky, taking a full breath.
He's descending the stairs, one step at a time, his shiny
military-polished shoes touching down on nothing but air.

Re-fletching
Kathryn Jordan

My father still means to mold me with his
articles of faith, Wall Street Journal words
proving the right to rape and rule the earth
and wound the living land. Stars and stripes
on his uniform, he didn't know I'd yanked
stakes from the fields as my breasts began
to show. Nor did he realize I'd never forget
his use of belt and switch to enforce his rules.
Now, as blue spruce arrows burn in my hot
quiver, one breast flattened by desire to win,
I've come to see each battle as a thin disguise.
To do right by this beautiful world, I would
re-fletch my arrows, align the feathers, using
love's glue to mend the vane, end all hate.

"In 'Pillar of Salt', the parallel stories of two military families reuniting after war reveal the damage covert coping behaviors can have not only on the soldier but also on the spouse and child. 'Re-fletching' reflects a deep desire to reject my own aggression against myself, others, and the earth, which I learned from those who claimed to love and own me, others, and the earth." —Kathryn Jordan

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Kathryn Jordan holds an English M.A. from UC Berkeley. Her poems twice won Honorable Mention in the Steve Kowit Poetry Prize and the Patricia Dobler Poetry Award, and twice garnered Special Merit for the Muriel Craft Bailey Poetry Prize. Her work appears in The Sun, Atlanta Review, and New Ohio Review, among others. She loves to hike the East Bay Hills in search of the varied thrush that can sing two notes at the same time.

Odio

Mateo Perez Lara

My shame is excess // infiltrates my dreams
shame pictures a body, which morphs constantly.
What had shame witnessed: a misfit queer
spicing up rooms, a doomed
repeat offender of pronouncing words incorrectly in
their vacuum of assimilated-Mexican
Spanish, their fumes lilting
over a river scourging brown but
beautiful dirt & pebbles covering their feet
calloused // bloody inking their journey
must have been all this smoke from
nearby wildfires choking, like all my ex-lovers
who undo my electric whirring spark, they set
traps of love, here I come, trying
my best to be better than what they
expect, them wanting so much out of me, I swear
if I say this word wrong, they will
tear me apart.

"The word [odio] means 'hate' in English. Many of my family members were in the service, are currently in military service. They find, as religious and masculine entities, LGBTQ+ concerns very demoralizing and shameful to the family. Yet, shame becomes a way to process and fight against those perspectives. Shame becomes bravery, even after lovers, (who have also been in military service and are in the closet), disappear, one fights against the violence anyway."

Queer Colic

Mateo Perez Lara

for cory

Pull back, let me see, envelop me, Pull
me back, pull me in, let me sleep. Let
me. Pull me back, pull me in, let me see,
let me, pull me into you, pull me clearly
through this disturbing entry, smile a
little if you can, pull me in, pull it back,
reveal secrets about where you lived,
how long, point to when it changed, how
often, pull me in, let me see, pull me in
with you, please, I'm near, yet I couldn't
sleep without you retelling me there is
hope, pull me in, remind me, there is a
small chance, pull back, let me in, let
me.

"A beautiful friend of mine is a military brat. I met him briefly and wanted to know him more. I can tell there is a lot that he keeps inside, this was a spell, a way to, if I could see him again, enact a way to open him up after memories or be one to listen to someone you love and admire."

Blasphema

Mateo Perez Lara

can you remember that steel toothpick
how it crushed the bone of your beloved.

---

his brown hand touched you one last time
his voice crinkled, a humming AC.

---

you wish violence was wind
you wish violence was rain

---

it comes with fists
as gun, as hand-cuffs, as knife
as cages, rage, deceit
you let the violence come, its monster is coming.

I was 23 when I went to jail. I was drinking too much
then I was called faggot, hurt by white-hands
they called me embarrassing for crying // throwing up
when they hand-cuffed me, they let the white man go
who punched me, who lunged.

---

these memories remain in these ghost-lands
our names known, then forgotten
all together with bricks // stones,

we build their harm in a temple of throes
of our patience, how horrible, does God know
that blasphemous tongue that licks the blood
after it touches us, then everything?

"This is an examination on violence I have witness and been told about. The way violence after someone comes back from their occupations or service, how it reverberates toward others. How I have met people who have served that drink to take away some memory but in that action have become violence and angry. It is a way to unpack that from what I've seen, what I've been through because of someone's past." —Mateo Perez Lara

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Mateo Perez Lara (they/them/theirs) is a queer, non-binary, Latinx poet from California. They have a pamphlet of poems, *Glitter Gods*, showcased with Thirty West Publishing House. They have an MFA in Poetry from Randolph College. Their poems have been published in *EOAGH*, *The Maine Review*, *The Acentos Review*, and elsewhere.

Apricot tree*

Peter Lilly

W e a r e g o i n g t o p l a n t a n a p r i c o t t r e e
W e a r e g o i n g t o p l a n a r i o t
W e g o t o a r i o t
W e g o r i o t
W e i
W e l l, i ' m m e
W e l c o m e, l o! i ' m m e
W e l c o m e l o v e, i ' m m e
W e l c o m e l o v e c l i m b i n g m e
W e l c o m e l o v e ' s c l i m b i n g m e m o r y
L i k e a c h i l d a s c e n d i n g a n a p r i c o t t r e e
T o w a t c h t h e f i g h t a g a i n s t t y r a n n y

"This poem plays with the erasure and addition of letters in a short sentence to draw lines between organic growth, childhood play, love and memory, to resistance against tyranny and the enduring of suffering." —Peter Lilly

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Peter Lilly is a British poet who grew up in Gloucestershire. After studying theology and working with the homeless in London, he moved to the South of France in 2014. He lives in a rural village with his wife Silje, and son Gabriel, where he concentrates on writing, community development and English teaching. His debut Collection, *An Array of Vapour*, is available with TSL publications, and his second collection, *A Handful of Prayers*, is available with Wipf & Stock.

*Pushcart Prize Nominee

How to Love in a Toxic Masculine World

Jennifer McKeen Rodrigues

An ancestry of sleeping in
A lineage of leaving be
To experience emotion is too extreme
Rooted in fear-of-failure syndrome

You wear 'like father like son'
But your mother is your poncho
Your grandparent's names all forgotten

A dialect of non-communication
Bloodline of loveless days drip on
Who were you to think you could buck it

It's in your genes to sacrifice hope
Err on the side of not giving a good got damn
And to feel no remorse feels right

You didn't want children to pass your dynasty to
But refuse to see the resemblance
Keep the family tradition alive
Feel nothing love no one

The Military Wife
Jennifer McKeen Rodrigues

She grew up fearing officers
Because her DNA carried the
Groveling screams of her
French speaking WWII grandfather

Oh the feel of needing to be
A tall line for the salute to the flag
Camouflage within canned green beans
Lost within isles of another commissary

Cursing her life while drowning in marshes
Of moving boxes and packing paper
Where's the baby
Oh God, where's the baby?

Sleeping in a pack 'n play in the bathroom
I heard her husband doesn't love her
That he has deep contempt for himself

She goes to the back room to mix
Her sorrow and regret
Lies in an empty bathtub and drinks her
Poison

"These poems explore my family's experiences with military life and the lasting effects of trauma being handed down through generations. I had to face my own assumptions when I became a military spouse after having heard many stories of my grandmother's and parents' experiences, and the fear of potentially being exposed to the same lived stories." —Jennifer McKeen Rodrigues

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Jennifer McKeen Rodrigues currently lives on the sacred Powhatan land of Fairfax, VA. She is trained as a certified yoga therapist & trauma informed yoga teacher, is a queer & neurodivergent military spouse, & mom. She has been featured in many lovely literary journals & anthologies, & has been nominated for Best of the Net with her photography. Find her on Insta @gmoneyfunklove.

SYNAPSIS

Kashiana Singh

weeping willow	painting the strokes	of your absence
windmill	after windmill	synapsis
cactus spears	scribbling wildflowers	on brick walls
sounds and sights	of obstructive apnea	ruckus of birds
renewal season	flavors of the pie	bloom overnight
ant colonies	the untold stories	of others
knotted roots	scraping deep down	into my center

"SYNAPSIS is a poem inspired by the world of haiku, addressing the fundamental questions of existence. Its title and structure mirror the intersections of significant life events and moments of truth. Each section represents a fragile thread, with spaces between them echoing the wounds we bear. Yet within this, hope emerges—a staccato rhythm that resonates like scarred heartbeats, yearning for light to break through the barriers crafted by man." —Kashiana Singh

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When **Kashiana** is not writing, she lives to embody her TEDx talk theme of Work as Worship into her every day. She serves as Managing Editor for *Poets Reading the News* and is President of the North Carolina Poetry Society. Her fourth poetry collection is called *Witching Hour* and will be released in 2024 by Glass Lyre Press.

An American in Gaza

Lianet Vazquez, MD

When I think of Gaza,
I think of blue gloves,
Woven welcomes,
Friendship and trust.

She sheltered me, clothed me, fed me.
She whispered: I'll keep you safe,
Admire the sunset from a balcony adorned
With the softness of twilight
And the serenades of dawn.

In exchange,
I paid for the shelling that destroyed her home.
I silenced the gavel that accountability sought.
I parroted scripts that defaced her in scorn.
I made her an exception in international law.

Tragic that my knowledge of you was not enough
For my government to see you for your blue gloves,
Or the kites that your poets imagined with hope,
Or the men who carved life from the rubble with love,
Or the doctors on duty who spelled HELP in their own blood,
Or the child who danced *dabke* to the beat of dropped bombs.

Oh Gaza, Oh Gaza
What have I done?

"I wrote this poem thinking about the people who welcomed me with generosity and kindness when I worked in Gaza in 2021. The poem captures my interactions with a dear friend—the hospitality, assurances, and love she offered me—juxtaposed with the actions of the US government in providing the weapons, impunity, and diplomatic cover of Israel's indiscriminate assault on my friend's home and the entirety of Gaza in what the International Court of Justice calls "a plausible case of genocide." The poem is an acknowledgment of our moral failings as a society and a cry for the international community, including the US, to recognize the humanity of Palestinians." —Lianet Vazquez, MD

Lianet Vazquez, MD is a resident physician at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. Prior to practicing medicine, she served as a Herbert Scoville Jr. Peace Fellow and worked on issues of conflict resolution and non-proliferation in the Middle East. She has worked with refugee

populations in Jordan and Lebanon and conducted a medical rotation at Al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza, in the aftermath of the May 2021 war. Her poetry has previously been published in the medical journal *Annals of Internal Medicine*.

Elegy for the Flora and Fauna of Gaza

Pramila Venkateswaran

I don't remember the day I became aware
of myself as separate from you
but always looked toward you even
if I was far away.
The snow remembers the earth
remembers the tree remembers the clouds,
the rain the sky the lake by the house and I.
When hearts are unrelenting,
I recall people struggling through the annals
of history to love their land and protect it.

When my sadness digs deep into my dreams,
I send out wishes like feathers to the dying,
the starving, and the fleeing, their shoes,
shirts, and cups left behind.
Who will write their elegies? Sing their eulogies?

The sky is a deep blue. The Mediterranean
is quiet. The world's protest is a hum.
My people who sing hymns of exile
don't want to drive out our neighbors,
for we remember the pain of the soul
stretched out of the body
and its longing to return to its salt.

"I am concerned about the severe loss of animal, plant, and insect life, in addition to human life, in wars between countries. In the current genocide in Gaza, there is not much attention paid to the devastation of flora and fauna which agonizes witnesses wherever they are. One of the witnesses in the poem is in Israel and has arrived there from a different country and is deeply affected by the wounding of the land. Borders do not diminish the agony one feels at seeing the utter destruction of all life. Violence manufactured by governments devastates our planet." —Pramila Venkateswaran

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Pramila Venkateswaran, President of NOW Suffolk, poet laureate of Suffolk County, Long Island (2013-15), and co-director of Matwaala: South Asian Diaspora Poetry Festival, is the author of many poetry volumes, the most recent being *We Are Not a Museum* (Finishing Line Press, 2022), winner of New York Book Festival award. Her forthcoming books are *Exile is Not a Foreign Word* (Copper Coin, 2024) and *Tamil Dalit Feminist Poetics* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2024).

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Learning to Crawl*

Rebecca Evans

A typical crawl travels left-hand, right-knee, right-hand, left-knee, or, limbs diagonal-shifting in balance with the body. Crawling, our first human gait, motivated by desire, usually a toy. Once mastered, other life-skills flow like little soldiers lined for war—reading, writing, and feeding oneself.

*

In 2002, I knelt beside my ten-month-old, Zach, urging him, *Crawl.* My head tucked, my hand covering his tiny fist. I'd wrapped a hand towel 'round his waist and clutched the ends harness-like to help him hold his position. With my thigh, I nudged his left leg forward. In the same movement, I slid his right hand. Zach resisted, his body moved less than an inch. I moaned.

You're supposed to do this on your own already. I might've said this out loud. I know I thought it. I'd been teaching Zach to crawl for four months.

*

In 2013, when they—the VA medical team—evaluated me for abnormal vaginal bleeding, they discovered ovarian and uterine cysts and growths. They noticed lung nodules, kidney stones, and, by the end of the report, they side-noted my dissolving hip. To restore blood supply and slow the decay of my left hip, they drilled six holes through my femur to my acetabulum.

*

Pat, Zach's Physical Therapist, cheered during crawling training. *Come on, Zach, move a little.* She spread a dishtowel beneath his knees, offering some glide. Zach, more rigid than before we began, refused to budge. Sweat dripped from the tip of my nose into the terry folds of his shirt. Moving Zach, only eight pounds at ten months, felt an Olympic feat.

*

Along with my hip, lungs, and lady parts, I'd a cervical spine injury, sizzling nerve pain from nape to pinky. My hands numbed. My grip gave way. And, as if my body quit holding onto itself, my left shoulder tore in three: rotator cuff, bicep tendon, and labrum. I felt a tattered rag doll.

*

The crawl's repetition stimulates and organizes neurons, developing mental control in processes, like comprehension, concentration, and memory. When we crawl as babies, we visually find direction. We are led. We lead ourselves. Our hands guide our way.

*

Poliomyelitis, derived from the Greek *grey* and *marrow*, refers to the spinal cord. Before we knew better, they—the world—believed polio an infantile paralysis because those who survived the virus were young. And those who survived suffered temporary or permanent loss of movement.

*

Pat splayed Zach's fingers repeatedly, his clench returning over and over, returning to what it remembered. I leaned back, and sat on my feet, the glass door on the oven bouncing my reflection. *When did I use this last?* I thought, realizing my appliances sat vacant since Zach's birth. I lowered Zach to his belly and slackened the towel supporting him.

*

Eight months before Zach's birth, my body pressed one-arm/one-leg push-ups with weights on my back. In training, I'd strap a forty-five-pound plate 'round my waist and count twenty tricep dips. Those at the gym thought me a superhero. I believed myself invincible.

And I was.

Until I wasn't.

*

HELP Charts state that between six and nine months, the average baby should sit unsupported, and, no later than ten months, should crawl. According to them—the experts—missing these milestones might indicate later developmental difficulties.

*

Pat and I spent twenty minutes three times a week working Zach's singular skill: crawling.

*

We—my surgical team and me—decided a full hysterectomy took priority. We—same said team—decided we'd monitor my lung growths because a biopsy risked lung-puncturing. We decided on hip surgery before shoulder surgery because I'd need to support my groin on crutches. We decided to slice my neck last because this rehab proved extensive, at least six months of re-learning skills, like ushering a fork to my mouth.

*

Why can't he get this? I want to say this out loud. On his belly, Zach kicked, flailing his arms. I rolled him to his back. Pat tapped my forearm. *Let him do it,* she said, and, *He can.* She pushed her hair, wispy and gray. Her clothes, scented of ginger and lemon balm, different than mine, lavender and vanilla. She, different than me. She doesn't know more than me. She is not his mom. I stood, steadied myself, watched the two of them work.

*

My surgeon offered hip options.

1) Joint replacement.

2) Holes in my femur.

3) Do nothing and it might crumble.

I opted for drilling through my thigh-bone to my femoral head and the body—my body—would hopefully gather blood cells, oxygenate the decay, prevent further damage. *Avascular Necrosis:* Death of bone tissue due to lack of blood supply. I felt as if my body died, piece by piece, though, clearly, I was still alive.

*

Pat placed Zach on his stomach and rotated him to his side. *Put your hand here, Zach*, she said. She laid his hand next to his thigh. *Spread your fingers.* She slid her index under his palm, straightening his crunched fingers. *Now push your body up. Up.*

She talked to him like a real person.

*

At one point, I maintained eleven-percent body fat and could execute a toe-touch over top a six-foot man, landing in a push-up on the other side.

*

My body broke shortly after leaving a bad marriage—okay, a violent marriage—in 2010. By now, Zach turned nine. By now, he'd have two more brothers. By now, I believed my body—no longer fighting or flighting—relaxed, quit over-producing Adrenaline, Cortisol, and Norepinephrine, hormones protecting my psyche against pain perception. It wasn't that I broke. More likely, I failed to notice my suffering while living with abuse. Failed to notice my body-pain while fleeing for safety. Doctors named this post-stress event: *The Let-Down Effect.*

*

Pat raised Zach the rest of the way, into a sit. He grinned as though he accomplished some great feat. I squeezed my eyes. *All this work to sit up*, I accidentally said aloud. I sounded hard. I sounded impatient. I was. Hard and impatient. I felt unqualified for this, this Optimistic Therapy.

As a trained coach, I coerced adults into performance. And results. Pat once told me that I—with my athletic background—qualified as the perfect mom for Zach. I lacked her vision. I also lacked her enthusiasm. It's easy for her, paid to encourage. When her workday finished, she probably soaked in luxurious baths and ate quiet meals without any urgency to keep another human alive.

*

I felt I let my body down, ignoring symptoms during survival, and now, my body was getting me back. Or getting even. Or perhaps getting my attention.

*

Some say crutches were invented in Ancient Egypt, though Emilie Schlick patented the design in 1917. There's a method to manage a crutch. A right way. A wrong way. I found climbing stairs the most challenging as you put your bad leg forward first, like a terrifying Hokey Pokey.

*

I hated this feeling, feeling as if racing, trying to help Zach measure up against all those charts. I hated even more this other feeling, feeling I'd lagged behind the other runners, the other mommies. No. That's not accurate. I didn't feel I'd fallen behind.

I felt I was failing.

*

If you've never experienced hole-piercing-bone, think of your worse toothache, one that zings from jaw to brain, coupled with constant dull ache. That was my leg—knee to hip—for weeks. My sons—at the time, 2012, were thirteen, eleven, and five—spiraled, watching me, mommy, shuffle on crutches. *Are you worried I'm limited because of crutches?* They nodded. *Do you know I'm a mamma bear?* They nodded. *Do you know what that means?* Eyes wide, my middle son shrugged. Zach giggled. My youngest climbed onto the good half of my lap. *It means I'll destroy anyone who tries to hurt you.* Silence. *Do you know what these crutches can do?* They shook their little heads, I swear, in unison. *Think of me as a Transformer and these are extensions.* I swung my crutches 'round, sweeping the room. *Look at my reach! Can you imagine the damage I could cause with these weapons of mass destruction?*

It took three more years before everyone slept in their own beds.

*

Pat clapped for Zach. *You're doing a great job with him. It might take another year, maybe more, before he crawls.* I think I sighed. She said, *We'll have to see what he decides. Let's help him push into a sit.*

Can't he take a break? I asked. I couldn't admit my tiredness—I was tired of this work, tired of this worry.

His muscles are warm, pliable, she said, and, *Now's the best time.*

*

After my hip-drill, I re-learned to walk. First with crutches. Then with a cane. Then with the instability of my own disabling body, my gait insecure. Me, uncertain. I felt like I was learning to crawl. I felt like I was starting over.

I was.

*

The commando crawl, the well-known tummy crawl often depicted in military movies, often with some Commanding Officer shouting, *Keep your ass down*, because it's rough to scoot tits-down in wet mud pulling your weight with only your elbows all the while hoisting a gun in the crook of your arms. We practiced this crawl in training, all in fun. I remember the obstacle course at Lackland AFB during Basic. I heaved myself with my forearms and pressed my hipbones into dirt, legs straight, dragging behind me. *Tug, tug, wiggle, wiggle.* More difficult when swallowing sand. The TI yelled, *Ladies, your butts are high*. And, *This is no place to show your derrieres*. And, *No one cares about that tush, especially if it's shot to hell.* It was just as tough not to laugh as it was to crawl. I never used that crawl-skill. Not once. Not in field. Not in desert.

Not in the center of war.

*

I turned old at 47, walking with my cane a year following hip surgery, and sometimes, still, today. I quit teaching fitness and spent the next two years rehabbing my body. I still am. Old and rehabbing. I no longer hold most yoga poses, my spine and shoulder and hip unable to withstand the weight of my scarred flesh.

*

I sat Zach on the carpet and reluctantly mimicked Pat's gestures. It took three attempts before I got it right, before Zach helped me position him into a sit.

*

My grandmother once told me she believed I contracted Polio. At eighteen months, I'd yet to crawl or walk. Later, she confessed that my mother refused to hold me. Grandma told me I looked like my father, the man who cheated on my mother with her best friend when I was six months old. My mother, heart-broken, or perhaps simply broken, left me in my crib. All day. With little motivation to move—no toys in the confines of my bed, no instinct to push my little body, to reach with my right or left hand for something, anything—I stayed in a sit.

I stayed still.

*

The oldest evidence for walking on two legs appeared around six million years ago when the earliest humans, *Sahelanthropus*, turned bipedal as an act of survival. Maybe walking matures naturally when we need to survive. Maybe we restrict our gait, especially if we've not learned to properly crawl. Where does running or fleeing fit into human evolution?

*

My lower right leg, paralyzed from knee to big toe, swings out to avoid banging my dangling foot. You'd probably not notice this unless I told you or you observed me clear a stair. I wear a brace. It's bulky and doesn't fit into most of my shoes. Without the brace, I lose my balance. My paralysis, not from childhood Polio—which I never had—originated from my cervical spine injury. Interesting, the way nerves route from neck to toe and back again. The way so many things go right in the human body. The way we harbor frustration when one small thing goes wrong.

*

What if, like the doctors predict, Zach never crawls? What if I'm required to manipulate his limbs when he's thirty? 170 pounds? A grown man?

*

I park in handicapped spaces, a placard draped on my rearview. A reminder I'm not to walk on concrete much. Or ride a bike. Or hike. I hide my leg brace beneath wide-legged trousers. I enter my car with a side-sit, swiveling my legs beneath the dash. I've adapted movement to appear normal. One-time, downtown Boise, I swung myself into my car and a policeman approached, tapped my window, *You all right to drive?* I explained I'd nothing to drink.

Well, you entered your car sort of funny.

I pointed to my handicap sign. *I'm a Disabled Veteran,* I said.

He saluted. *Thank you for your service.*

Right.

*

Zach smiled, his two bottom teeth showing through his wet grin. He waved his hands in the air, as if proud. *Good job,* I said. I tried to sound hopeful. I tried harder to feel hopeful. I lifted him, held him, his face squished into my chest, his hair damp, his lashes, dark and heavy, cascading mid-cheek, contrasting his pale skin. Despite his disabilities, he looked like a regular baby.

*

I learned to walk. I never learned to crawl. At least not as a toddler. I learned to walk before I turned two. And over and over, as an adult. I'm still learning. I limp. I modify to bring less harm to my damaged-self. I'm learning to believe I'm that brave Transformer I once portrayed to my sons. To believe that my repairs and rebuilding built me strong.

I'm not sure I'm buying it.

*

Zach did learn to crawl. And walk. Today, he's endured thirty-six procedures, including his heart, his eyes, his feet. Today, he holds a green belt in Kajukenbo. Today, he runs (his own way). He climbs

(his own style). He jumps (his air-jog). He bowls (his extravagant bow-curtsy-throw at the end of each roll). He's mastered these skills, all on his terms.

*

After my ovaries-uterus-hip-shoulder-neck surgeries, I spent the next eight years unsuffering my physical ailments, unwhining my internal complaints, my new limits.

Can I get your foot brace for you? Zach asks me today. I have two braces. Both styles cut into my ankle. I trip when I don't wear them. If I catch myself with my hands when falling—the natural human response—I risk jacking my cervical spine, creating more injury. *Sure,* I say. And, *Thanks.* He needs breaks from short walks. He needs pauses and stretches throughout his day. He set reminders on his phone to care for himself. He never complains.

Pat got it wrong.

I wasn't the perfect mom for Zach. He was—and is—the perfect son for me.

*

A few weeks ago, I parked in handicap as usual. As I stepped from my car, a female security guard walked towards me, and said, *You're going to take a space that someone with a wheelchair might need?* I lowered my eyes, my face flushed. I wanted to explain to her how I've modified my movement. Wanted to tell her that, like my son, I look much better than I feel. Wanted to point out that not all disabilities are visible. Then I wanted to shake her, shake her hard, even slap her as if to wake her. *Who was she to decide that I'm not disabled enough?* Did she even care that I never learned to crawl or that someone like Zach had learned crawling and then walking over the course of three years and a series of four casts and numerous surgeries?

I avoided eye contact.

Instead, I shrugged and limped the short block to my meeting and that night, I pulled Zach close, knowing he'd endured more than me. He'd carry this expectation that he should be *fine* because he looks *almost-fine*. And I'll wonder if any of us are ever really *fine*. Wonder what defines normal or healthy or special. I'll hope—more than hope—that my body holds together, despite its dismantling. Hope that it adheres somehow, some way, to provide a body-shield, mamma-bear protection for my boy, this boy, my greatest teacher.

> "'Learning to Crawl' was born as a montage, a collection of interlacing scenes between my disabled (now adult) son, Zach, and me, as we both learn, in our own ways, how to navigate this world. My fascination with the human body and the way it heals and weaves through and around disabilities became a driving force, along with the idea that we are all simply 'crawling' through this thing called life. Hidden beneath these vignettes lives the idea that our limitations, our hidden disabilities, are often ancestral, familial, and gifted to us from our time in service, or, sometimes, from the world at large." —Rebecca Evans

Rebecca Evans is a Pushcart Prize-nominated poet who writes the difficult, the heart-full, the guidebooks for survivors. Her debut memoir in verse, *Tangled by Blood*, bridges motherhood and betrayal, untangling wounds and restorying what it means to be a mother. She's a memoirist, essayist, and poet, infusing her love of empowerment with craft. She teaches high school teens in the Juvie system through journaling and visual art. Rebecca is also a disabled veteran and shares space with four Newfoundlands and her sons. She has hosted two television series, *Idaho Living* and *Our Voice*, and currently co-hosts Radio Boise's *Writer to Writer* show on Stray Theater. She does her best writing in a hidden cove beneath her stairway.

Her poems and essays have appeared in *Brevity, Narratively, The Rumpus, Hypertext Magazine, War, Literature & the Arts, The Limberlost Review*, and more, along with a handful of anthologies. She's earned two MFAs, one in creative nonfiction, the other in poetry, University of Nevada, Reno at Lake Tahoe. She's co-edited an anthology of poems, *When There Are Nine*, a tribute to the life and achievements of Ruth Bader Ginsburg (Moon Tide Press, 2022). Along with her full-length poetry collection, *Tangled by Blood* (Moon Tide Press. 2023), she has a collection-length poem, *Safe Handling,* (Moon Tide Press, 2024) available.

*Pushcart Prize Nominee

Children of the American Military Machine

Ann Marie Potter

A few years back, in the middle of a phone conversation, a very nice man in Arizona hung up on me. The conversation had begun on a great note; I'd won a prize from a writer's organization and he wanted to publish the essay in his newspaper. The five-hundred-word nonfiction essay was about the year I'd spent in Japan as a ten-year-old Air Force dependent. In particular, it talked about a 4th-of-July memory—watching the largest fireworks show in military history being shot off Tachikawa Air Base's runway #3. Roses bloomed in the sky, then faded in the twilight shadow of Mt. Fuji.

"It was a nice piece," my newspaperman said. I never caught his name and can't remember the name of the newspaper, but he sounded… nicely matured. I pictured him in an oak-saturated home office, drinking coffee from an earthenware cup. His neatly trimmed steel colored hair would match his wire-rimmed glasses. It would barely graze the collar of his oyster-colored button-down sweater. He'd be a retired anesthesiologist or small-town optometrist who took over the small town newspaper to stave off boredom. His wife would peek into the office to remind him of his late morning dentist appointment, and he would smile indulgently. We chatted amiably for a minute, but when I mentioned growing up in the military, things changed. I could hear the pieces falling into place in his mind, with tiny doors clanging shut behind them. "Well," he said, "thank you for your time." Click. Dead air. I never heard from him again and I haven't found any evidence that the essay was published.

It took me a bit to put it together, to realize that the conversation had gone south when I'd reminded him that all of America isn't Arizona dreamscape. There may have been roses in the sky over Tachikawa, but I'd been honest about life on the ground, life in a family steeped in mental illness, addiction, and a slow-simmering rage. I'd let it slip that the family I'd described as "treacherous" was an American military family. And that it was an American airman—my father—who had drunk himself "into an alcoholic stupor that he never escaped." I'd crashed headlong into an invisible wall of denial—the seemingly impenetrable fog of toxic nostalgia about the American military.

The American military machine has devoted a lot of spit and money to polishing its image. Vintage recruitment ads espouse a fight for liberty and democracy. Ads from all eras promise travel and adventure. None of the pictured uniforms, sharply creased and crisp, sported blood or mud or bullet holes. The promise of glory brought many a farmer's son to an early grave, but historians agree that the concept began losing its shape and shine in the yellow haze of mustard gas. Many of today's recruits respond to the promise of an education or a steady income, although families of enlisted personnel often earn so little, they qualify for food stamps.

The military's façade has been reinforced so often that it would take something monumentally image-shattering to lay it to ruin. But things that should cause the walls to shudder and turn to dust fail to penetrate—they land like plastic arrows from a child's game: the dreadful pictures that came out of Abu Ghraib, the frequent homicides, many of them sexualized, occurring on military bases around the country, and the massacre at Ft. Hood. There is the fact that members of every major street gang, as well as some prison and outlaw motorcycle gangs, have infiltrated the United States military in order to train their members and traffic weapons and drugs. Finally, we have the sad truth

that dozens of active duty and reserve military participated in the attempt to overthrow the United States government on January 6th. It takes a special kind of oblivion to salute the uniform in the face of all that. We shouldn't be surprised, I suppose. Some of us who grew up behind the khaki curtain aren't surprised in the least. The mythological American military, with its attendant air of respect and honor, was a hologram that shifted and shimmered, but never quite fully materialized. It was a rose that bloomed with great promise, then faded instantly in our skies.

In 2017, the folks at *Chicken Soup for the Soul* headquarters published *Military Families: 101 Stories about the Force Behind the Forces*. Predictably, the book was a litany of interviews that showcased the strength of military families, the glue provided by the nearly deified military wife. The book acknowledges the hardships of military life—the transient lifestyle, the need for yellow ribbons and military funerals, and the reality of PTSD. But, according to *Chicken Soup* wisdom, the well-glued military family handles this all with grace, strength, and good old-fashioned American pluck. I have no doubt that many military families flourish in this chosen lifestyle. My objection is with the unwritten rule that silences troubled military families, those who are not dealing gracefully with the stress and strain of military life. I call this the "no whiners allowed" rule, and it keeps struggling families from getting the help they need. The military awards this secrecy with promises of promotions and the attendant pay-raises. It punishes "whiners" by withholding the same. The military has programs in place for troubled families, but the silent messaging that seemingly saturates the aging buildings on any military base is still strongly patriarchal. It's as old as the Bible—the belief that a man who can't maintain order in his own family can't be trusted to oversee an army. This dogma translates easily in modern military life—a man with a hooligan child or an unstable wife doesn't deserve that coveted duty station in Hawaii or the extra four hundred bucks that comes with another stripe. This can easily lead to the unspecified "necessary" parental discipline crowed about in *Chicken Soup*, or the need for a military wife to isolate in order to not appear fragile or troubled to prying eyes.

The scars of a chaotic childhood can last throughout adulthood, but so can the denial that prevents that chaos from entering our conscious mental process. A brief visit to one of the Brat websites (sites dedicated to those who grew up in the military) will showcase the collision of these two vying attitudes. Even a hint of emotional honesty—truth-telling that doesn't paint military life in the rosiest of glows—will be quickly and harshly rebuffed. "Now," the fatherly voice admonishes, "we'll have none of that." Unfortunately, no whining means no healing. This is sad in that even military kids with happy home lives will face the grief and loneliness of nomadic lives. The U.S. Department of Defense estimates that military children change schools between six and nine times before graduating from high school. That's a lot of goodbyes and, if they are honest with themselves, Brats will tell you that they learned early on to sink shallow roots to avoid the bloody tearing and painful wrenching that comes with each new duty station. They will tell you that growing up in the military has made them incapable of forming or holding on to relationships as adults. Some of us will tell you that we simply can't settle down. I've had driver's licenses in seven states and even contemplating a permanent home fills me with anxiety. I must admit that my itinerant childhood had some lovely byproducts: a childish wonder at the creatures of the red-stone desert, a second-grader's fascination in the tide pools of Monterey, and a passion for all things Japanese. I can recognize the trees of Northwestern Pennsylvania. I have a well-seasoned sense of adventure. But I also have inner-children so lonely that they panic, then grieve, if I separate bottles from their lids in the trash. In many ways, I had a bountiful childhood, but in many ways those early years broke me. I am healing, but only because I chose to do an appropriate amount of "whining" and when the myth of the perfect military childhood started to shatter, I chose not to cut my hands to ribbons holding on to the shards.

I've had to remove myself from the Brat websites because they were diligently recreating a childhood built on deception and denial. Nobody is going to put me in that box again. If I could talk to my Arizona newspaperman, I'd tell him to print the truth rather than the myth that keeps crippling military families year after year. I'd tell him to do the research and reveal the dismal statistics about bullying and suicide in Department of Defense schools. I'd tell him that roses in the sky aren't real, and neither is the perfect military family.

> "Writing 'Children of the American Military Machine' was a small part of a long and arduous healing journey. The essay forced me to ponder the many messages I received as a child member of the American military community and allowed me to sort fact from fiction." —Ann Marie Potter

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After earning a PhD in creative writing from Oklahoma State University, **Ann Marie Potter** officially retired from academic life. She currently lives in the beautiful state of Wyoming where she watches the wind blow, the sky snow, and the deer play—and poop—in her front yard. Her work has appeared in *The Muleskinner Journal*, *The Meadow*, *Peauxdunque Review*, and *Literally Stories*.

The Cover Up
Kathleen Tighe

"We start out as little bits of disconnected dust." (Naomi Shihab Nye)

A 16-year-old girl in Tehran is in a coma after boarding a subway train with her head uncovered. Stories conflict. Armita Geravand's friends say they were confronted by officers for not wearing hijabs, the head coverings worn by Muslim women in Iran. Argument ensued and an officer pushed the 16-year-old; she fell and hit her head. The official explanation is that the girl fainted because she had skipped breakfast. In either case, Armita was dragged from the train, unconscious.

I flashback to my abaya, the black polyester baglike garment now collecting dust in the back of a closet. I had once cloaked myself in it to avoid harassment. That was all so long ago: I left the Middle East 22 years ago, more years than that Iranian teenager has been alive. In all those years, has so little in the lives of women changed?

*

I had been in the Kingdom less than 48 hours, still jetlagged, when Dan, my husband of two weeks, announced we should go shopping.

"You'll need an abaya," he said.

Before agreeing to move to Saudi Arabia, I'd done my research. Muslim women were required to wear abayas and head scarves in keeping with the teachings of Muhammad, the ones that advised women to "guard their modesty," to display "their beauty" *only* to their husbands and family members. But I was not Muslim, and according to the US State Department, American women in Saudi Arabia did not have to wear abayas and veils as long as they dressed with respect for the local culture.

"I packed lots of conservative clothing," I responded. "Long skirts, loose-fitting blouses. I'll be fine."

Dan said sometimes it might just be easier to throw on an abaya. "If you attract attention, you're asking for trouble."

I sighed. Maybe it was exhaustion from jetlag and the heat, but it all felt like so much to deal with. Already I'd yielded my passport, to be held in our employer's government relations office for as long as we remained there. With that move, I'd surrendered identification. Dan's passport was replaced by an iqama, the Kingdom's residency card for foreigners, but they were issued only to men. As his spouse, I was added as a dependent to his document. The message was clear: he was responsible for me, for my actions, for my travel. If I wanted to move about outside our home, I could do so *with* my husband.

And now it seemed I must buy an abaya.

I'd read *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Hold on. This is not Gilead, I told myself. *Take a breath*. I knew these things going in, I knew living overseas, living in the Middle East, would require flexibility, and I was prepared to flex. The adventure would be worth it.

Apparently flexibility and adventure included shrouding myself in black.

We went shopping.

That first year we lived "on the economy," as it was called, meaning we were in an apartment in downtown Khobar instead of living on one of the many housing compounds reserved for Westerners. Our building was typical of the concrete structures that sprang up around the desert country as its population grew. It was unremarkable—an open-air lobby populated by feral cats, a single elevator that rattled unnervingly as it ascended, an overwhelming impression of utilitarian grey.

Our apartment on the sixth floor was pleasant, though, with spacious carpeted rooms, their large east-facing windows overlooking the Corniche that lined the coast. I loved watching the sun rise over the Persian Gulf, its light casting a pink glow over calm turquoise water and a cloudless sky, and I sometimes opened a window, despite the oppressive heat, to listen to the morning prayer call ringing out over the city.

The neighborhood was urban, shops and businesses lining the street on which we lived. Just one city block away was Al-Shula, a two-story mall that formed the center of the downtown shopping experience for both locals and expatriates.

Al-Shula was a single rectangle occupying a city block, its stores lining a hall that wound around the building. Scant lighting revealed a dark, smokey place, filled with men ambling the halls, staffing the shops, loitering near the tea shop that served only men, a place that seemed to me to say, you may shop here if you wish, but perhaps you'd rather leave it to the men. In its western-facing corner, a small grocery store offered fruits, vegetables, boxes of UHT-treated milk, cases of pop. Other shops sold sandals and athletic shoes, camera equipment, incense and perfumes, plastic laundry tubs and various household goods. On the second floor, we passed shops hawking bootlegged music cassettes of popular hits—Dire Straits, Guns 'n Roses, U2, Michael Jackson—but you could also score classical and jazz recordings there. The cassettes, encased in clunky plastic meant to withstand searing heat, were stacked in boxes for customers to peruse. Plastic permeated the air, and tinny-sounding Arabic music wafted from a small radio. Playing pop music in public was *haram*, forbidden.

We came to a row of clothing shops, mostly T-shirts and jogging outfits for men, but there were a few dedicated to women's clothing. To my surprise, a number of store windows featured racy lingerie, colorful bras and lacy panties and sheer baby doll pajamas displayed not on mannequins but on wire hangers. It might seem that sex was absent in this world where all of the men were garbed identically in thobes, white shirtdresses falling to their sandaled feet, their heads wrapped in red-and-white checked gutras draped over a skull cap and held in place with an iqal, a black cord coiled twice around. The women floated about resembling, for lack of a better description, black tents, and it was impossible to guess at how men and women related to each other. They did not hold hands, walk together, converse. Not in public anyway. The lingerie shop reminded me that public appearance is

hardly a glimpse of this secretive society, that its strict dress requirements, ruled by strong admonitions in the Koran, served to shield private lives from curious onlookers.

Dan and I stepped into an abaya shop and I looked around uncertainly. A salesman glanced at us with disinterest. A wide array of styles was displayed: capelike abayas with bell-shaped sleeves and coats with zippers or buttons fastening the front; simple polyester abayas; abayas trimmed with lace and tassels. All black. In one of the hottest countries on the planet, women swathed themselves in black. In Afghanistan and Iran, women wear dusty blue burkas; Egyptian women wear more colorful shifts called galabayas. How did Saudi Arabia's uniformity of black originate? I don't know, but one source claims it is because black blocks any possibility for the shape of the body to be seen.

I selected a polyester abaya shaped like a long shawl, easy to pull over my clothes, to thrust arms through its triangular sleeves, tying the long front ends to keep it closed. It felt awkward, cumbersome, and suffocating despite its loose fit. I hoped I would not have much use for it.

A few weeks later, Dan was working one Thursday morning, and I found myself on my own. Thursdays were essentially Saturdays to us—the first day of the weekend in the Muslim world before their holy day on Friday. We'd been filling our Thursdays with sightseeing—a visit to a camel market in Qatif, flamingo-spotting on the shoreline, drives along the coast to see the progress on the Causeway that was being built to span the Gulf to the island of Bahrain. We enjoyed afternoon walks along the Corniche to the swanky Meridien Hotel where we would stop for tall glasses of refreshing iced tea with mint leaves.

On this Thursday, I decided to go shopping. My choices were limited. I could not drive—women were not permitted—and I was not yet comfortable with hiring a driver for the day. Anyway, I did not need to. The mall was just up the street. I thought I could buy stationery; I'd been writing letters home on the same yellow legal pads I used to create my classroom lesson plans, but real stationery gave my trip a purpose. To the mall I would go.

So many memories of those days have become hazy with time, but this one remains visceral:

I adjust the abaya so that it completely covers my jeans and T-shirt, pull a baseball cap low over my face, and brace myself to step into the murky shopping mall. I keep in mind my goal, pretty paper at the stationery store I'd spied on the second floor. But honestly, I am here simply to do it, to enter a mall in the middle of the day and walk with intention through its cigarette smoke-filled halls, past the throngs of men, mostly men, too many men, to ignore their curious gazes, their leers, their predatory stares, their righteous indignation that I would dare to be here, to do what women everywhere else in the world do freely, go shopping by themselves. Just three months earlier I was riding the F Train from Park Slope to Manhattan every day as I had done for years and nothing ever happened—except that one time we were packed in so much like sardines we held each other up without needing the overhanging straps, and the man behind me pushed up against me again and again, panting into my ponytail, making the two girls sitting on the bench seat in front of me snicker—but it was only that one time, and that was, oh, maybe six years ago, and now I am scared to walk through this rundown little shopping mall? I take a deep breath and reach for the door.

Immediately, I am enveloped in smoke. This is the hangout for the foreign men, mostly from Asian countries, who work in this Kingdom, leaving behind their wives, their families, their homes, who are now without any other entertainment possibilities on their day off besides the occasional soccer

game; for the young Saudi men, too, teens, early twenties, not yet family men but not children either, who cannot date, at least not publicly, or go to bars as there are none, so they gather in swarms to wander the mall, check out the latest music in the cassette stores, ogle the black-garbed women who occasionally glide by or the Western expatriate women with their faces boldly bared, their hair, too. I feel rather than see their stares, my eyes cast down, my steps quick as I head to the central escalator. I will myself to breathe calmly, I am safe, I am in control, I am a strong, independent woman and I will not be intimidated, but my shaky knees tell a different story. In the stationery store, I rapidly peruse the disappointing selection of paper, a few boxes of overly-sentimental floral sheets, some blank notecard-and-envelope sets. I settle for one of those, hand over a few riyals to the bored Arab man at the cash register, and make a beeline for the exit. I had thought I might look for some new music, maybe stop at the grocery store for oranges, perhaps even order a pizza to go from the corner Pizza Sheikh stand, but my feet have whisked me out of the mall and before I even think about it, I am heading back up the city block to the refuge of our apartment.

I wonder now at my timidity. I am embarrassed by it. But I was newly arrived in a strange place, so foreign to everything I knew, and the stories I'd heard were frightening. Not far from our apartment was a building most expats knew from the rumor mill—it was there a Filipina maid had been thrown out of a top floor window after being raped. Those who'd been in the Kingdom much longer than I were quick to share advice: "All American women are viewed as whores here. Remember that when you're out in public." "Don't get into an elevator if a man is already in it." "Rape is always the woman's fault here. Men cannot be expected to control themselves, so women must not put themselves in a position where a man will lose control." "In a police report, it takes two women's testimony to equal one man's."

Was this true? Was it fair? Undoubtedly some of it was, but surely not all of it. Just as I knew New York City was generally safe, it also could be very dangerous. But in New York, I had learned to negotiate that risk. Avoid certain neighborhoods. Don't turn down dark streets. Don't get into a crowded subway car…ever again. Here, I was uncertain. I did not know all the risks, but I sensed them all around.

It took time to feel comfortable, but as I met other expatriate women and joined them on shopping trips, my confidence grew. They, too, were wary but determined to seek some semblance of normalcy in their lives there, a feeling of independence, and going shopping without husband chaperones came to symbolize that. They all had stories. There was Kim, a fellow teacher, who shared a supermarket experience.

"So I'm in the canned vegetables aisle, looking for…oh, I don't remember now, maybe peas or carrots? I *am* wearing my abaya, mind you, like I always do, and I feel something near my foot. I look down, hoping it's not a rat, and there's a guy, lying on the floor, trying to look *up* my abaya!" She shrieked with outraged laughter in her retelling. I tried to picture the scene and couldn't. It was too ridiculous.

Another story from Sara, the mother of an eight-year-old girl with long blonde hair. "We were on King Khalid Street, waiting for the light to turn green. I had Audrey by the hand, ready to cross. A fully-veiled woman stopped me, grabbed my arm, and said, 'Your daughter should wear an abaya.' This made me angry. I shook my head no, and told her, 'She's a little girl. She doesn't have to.' The woman said, 'It's not for me, I say this. It is for her own safety.'"

What was it like, to wear an abaya? I try to recall and am confronted with conflicting emotions. On the one hand, it was just a piece of cloth, hastily flung over other pieces of cloth, unnecessary layering in a hot climate, but loose-fitting and not a big deal. On the other hand, my husband never had to wear one. He, and other men, could walk freely in short-sleeved tees, without fear of confrontation. There was a subconscious niggling, a little voice that whispered *this is not fair, this is not right*, but I could not pay that voice too much mind if I intended to stay there. Perhaps if I could have viewed it as a costume, like the ones I once wore for Halloween—fun, the donning of another persona, imagining life as someone else, if only briefly—but that was not really possible. There was no creativity, no imagination, no *choice*. Cover up, or face the consequence.

We heard stories of women having their legs struck by the switches carried by the Mutawah, religious police charged with protecting the community's morality. They prowled the streets looking for transgressions. Too much leg, bare arms, bright red lipstick could be viewed as violations. I never knew anyone, though, actually struck by a Mutawah.

The power of the Mutawah to instill compliance through fear would last until 2002, after I'd already left the Kingdom, when 15 girls in Makkah died in a school fire. The Mutawah were blamed for hindering the girls' escape because the girls were not wearing abayas or headscarves. Some say the influence of the Mutawa has dwindled since then.

But throughout my time there in the 1990s, plenty of American women heeded the stories and chose avoidance. They never left the security of their housing compounds, except to make their way to the airport. They refused to explore the country, its cities, its desert, its beaches. Fear was too great. I did not come here to cower in fear, so I continued to venture out, to the mall, the supermarket, hotels for coffee, restaurants for dinner. On weekends Dan and I drove into the desert to camp. We took long weekends to visit other cities, to tour the mountains of the Asir Region and to marvel at the remains of the early Nabateans at Mada'in Saleh. And I didn't always wear my abaya. I grew secure enough, in knowing the places to go and the places to avoid, that I often headed downtown dressed in long skirts, loose blouses buttoned high on my neck. I even occasionally donned pants, though always with a long shirt, often one of my husband's, worn like a tunic. I moved with caution, but without fear.

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It has been over 20 years since I left that part of the world. I'm told it's changed but it is unclear how substantive that change is. There are the stories, the proclamations, the polished public relations images released for Western consumption, and then, there are the realities on the ground. We departed just as the Internet was exploding, and doubtless that has had a huge impact on the society.

By the time my family and I left, Al-Shula Mall had burned to the ground, but newer shopping malls had already proliferated, two- and three-story structures with multiple wings, glass-fronted entrances, glittering escalators, food courts with American fast-food restaurants, Western brand-name clothing stores. Ample lighting. Coffee shops and cafes with family dining areas, where single women can enjoy lunch without fear of reprimand. There are actually movie theaters now, where once films on videocassettes were smuggled in to bypass the censors who would delete objectionable scenes. It is hard to imagine now that these everyday aspects of life were once unthinkable there, yet that was the Arabia I knew.

Still, I am skeptical. Are the changes indicators of genuine social shifts, a recognition of the equal rights of women, a sign that a younger generation is rejecting the mores of their grandparents? Or are they superficial window-dressing, small appeasements to modernity, to the siren call of consumerism as promoted on social media? Occasionally I see headlines out of Saudi Arabia like the recent story from Iran—perhaps not of young girls harassed and beaten on subways for failing to wear hijabs, but of public beheadings for political dissent or drug charges.

Women can now drive, a right finally granted in 2018, a move the government claimed they instituted to increase women's employment, but women's rights groups say it was their work that brought about the change. A leader of the movement, Loujain al-Hathloul, was imprisoned for three years, charged as a terrorist. She was finally released in 2021 but she is still banned from traveling.

My feelings about the place are complicated. My family and I had such good experiences there, and my children, now adults, recall their early years as ideal. My own warm memories are chilled by the knowledge that the jets of 9-11 were commandeered by Saudis, following the lead of Saudi-born terrorist Osama bin-Ladin. I am repulsed by the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, the *Washington Post* journalist, and the considerable evidence that his killing was coordinated by the nation's top leaders.

And yet, while I deplore its autocratic government, its absolute monarchy, the archaic laws that keep women second-class citizens and refuse to accord rights at all to LGBTQ people, a whisper of "hypocrite" rises in the back of my mind. My own nation, the one I prize for its progressive movement toward greater equality and opportunities for all people, is itself experiencing a conservative backlash repealing the progressive efforts of the past half-century, a religious right movement spreading intolerance. A political dissident in Riyadh is imprisoned and in Florida teachers are afraid to say the word "gay" lest they lose their teaching licenses. A teenager is grievously injured on an Iranian train for failing to cover her head, while a little girl in Mississippi is forced to bear the child of her rapist.

In Iran, Narges Mohammadi is imprisoned for "spreading lies about the state." She has been awarded this year's Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts to fight oppression against women.

And also in Iran, two weeks after boarding a subway train without a headscarf, Armita Geravand has died.

> "I was so dismayed by a recent news story about the death of a young girl in the Middle East from an altercation involving the issue of a headscarf. The story brought me back to my long ago experiences living in Saudi Arabia, to my mixed feelings then, and now, about conforming to a cultural expectation to 'cover up.' Thus, my creative nonfiction piece, 'The Cover Up,' was born." —Kathleen Tighe

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Kathleen Tighe is a Michigan-based writer of creative nonfiction, fiction, and poetry. Her work has appeared in *The Write Launch*, *Collateral*, *Wild Roof Journal*, *Dunes Review*, *Still Life*, and *Qua Literary and Fine Arts Magazine*. Kathleen is currently working on a memoir linking her experiences in Saudi Arabia with contemporary issues in the United States. Her website is kathleentighe.com.

FICTION

Sonny's Errands

David Blome

"Dad, what's a bitch?"

"A what?"

"A bitch."

"Where did you hear that?"

"You say it when you fight with Mom."

"It's just how we talk, Sonny."

"What's it mean?"

"It's not a nice word."

"Like what Mom calls you?"

"What does she call me?"

"An asshole."

"Listen, can we go outside? Your bike's ready."

My ninth birthday present. We were going to the park so I could learn how to ride it. Dad gave me some pointers at the top of a downhill. I put my butt on the seat and looked up at him. "Can we try tomorrow?" I said.

He smiled and said, "Nope."

"But I'm not ready."

"You don't know that. Now put your feet on the pedals, I'll give you a push."

"Okay."

"Go."

I started pedaling. And fell. "See?" I said, standing up.

"See what?" He picked up the bike.

"I told you I'd fall."

"No, you told me you weren't ready."

I looked away, my chin quivering.

"Hey," he said, "take the bike, we'll try again. I'll hold on longer this time."

"Promise?"

He said, "Yeah," then ran beside me all afternoon until I got the hang of riding.

That evening Mom came home late. When the garage opened, Dad and I were eating at the kitchen table. I ran to the door and stood in front of her as she kicked off her shoes.

"I rode my bike today."

"Let me get in the house, hon."

"Dad taught me."

She took off her coat, looking me up and down. "Why are you so dirty? And did you rip your pants?"

"I fell."

"Hon, please be careful." She hung up her coat. "Did you eat?"

I followed her into the kitchen. "We started to."

"You did? Mike, you couldn't wait?"

"You couldn't call?" Dad said, leaning back in his chair. "Sonny was hungry. We had a big day."

"I heard. Is this still warm?" Mom pointed at her plate of chicken and broccoli.

Dad crossed his forearms. "If not I can heat it up for you."

"Don't worry about it." She picked up a fork and started eating. I sat next to her. Dad watched her eat, his posture and expression unchanged. After a minute he leaned forward and said, "Sonny, eat." I looked at him. He winked. When I finished eating I stacked my plate on top of Mom's, picked up her silverware, and carried everything to the sink.

"Thanks, hon," she said. I came back to the table for Dad's but he held up a hand, saying, "I got it."

"Let him help," Mom said.

"He helps enough."

Mom shook her head and left the table. Dad carried his plate to the sink and started washing the dishes. I grabbed a towel and stood next to him. He handed me the clean dishes to dry and put away. While I waited for the silverware I stared at the circular scars on his leg. He called them his war souvenirs.

Later that evening I sat between Mom and Dad while they watched TV. When the show ended Dad shut off the TV and said, "Sonny, let's get ready for bed."

"But I want to sit here with you."

"When are you gonna start working on the beach house?" Mom said to Dad.

Dad let about five seconds pass before he said, "Tomorrow." My eyes widened.

"When were you gonna tell me that?" Mom said.

"I just did. Why does it matter?"

"What if I need to call you?"

Dad looked at Mom. "When was the last time that happened?"

Mom sat up and crossed her arms. "Okay, what if you need to call me? Your phone doesn't always get service out there."

"Well, I guess you'd never know then."

"Mike, you'll have Sonny with you."

"Jesus, I thought you'd be happy. Guess not."

"What are we doing first?" I said, placing a hand on Dad's forearm.

Dad looked at my hand. In a low voice he said, "Sonny, if you wanna help tomorrow, you better go get ready for bed right now."

I jumped to my feet and ran out of the room.

The next morning I walked my bike out of the garage and leaned it against Dad's pickup. Dad strapped a ladder to the roof then slung his toolbox into the truck bed. I climbed into the back and tried to push the toolbox against the cab. It didn't move.

"Heavy, isn't it?" Dad said.

"How do you lift it?" I said, looking at my hands.

Dad handed me my bike. "How do *you* lift it, you mean? That's gonna take some time."

As we backed out of the driveway I said, "Should we close the garage?"

"Mom can get it. She'll be leaving soon."

I looked at the house, hoping to see Mom before we left. "Why doesn't Mom want to help?"

"She helps, bud. Just in her own way."

I had never seen her help with anything. "By working?"

"Pretty much."

"Why don't you work?"

Dad laughed. "I'm retired. And I have to take care of you."

"What's retired?"

"It means I don't have to work unless I want to. You excited about today?"

I nodded. "What're we doing?"

"Well, first we'll go through the house, make sure everything's okay."

"Can I go on the roof?"

Dad looked over at me. "You wore your sneakers, right?"

I held up my feet. "Yup."

"Good." He looked back at the road. "We'll get you up there."

"But Mom says I'm not allowed."

Dad turned on the radio. "That's not her call, bud." He started singing. I turned to get a better look at the empty fields and abandoned buildings we were passing.

"Are we almost there?" I said.

"Almost."

We arrived maybe an hour later. Dad stared at the house, a two-story bungalow on the corner of a dead end street.

"Might have to cut that grass," he said, shutting off the engine. I climbed out of the cab. Dad unloaded the truck and leaned the ladder against the house. As he unlocked the front door, he turned to look at me and said, "Sonny, why don't you ride your bike while I walk through the house?"

"You're not gonna help me ride it?"

"You don't need help. Just don't go too far and listen for cars." Dad stepped into the house, leaving the door open.

I walked my bike to the end of the driveway. It was different with no downhill but after a few minutes I managed to pedal on my own. Soon I was riding figure eights, feeling good. Dad stepped out of the house.

"Guess you got it," he said.

I rode to the edge of the driveway and smiled. He pulled a wrench out of his back pocket and said, "Want me to raise the seat?"

I looked down. "No. It's good."

"You sure?" He leaned back. "Looks a little low. Let me see you ride it again. I couldn't see too well from inside."

I pushed off with my feet, rode a few more figure eights, then stopped in front of him.

"Knees feel okay?" he said.

"Yup."

Dad put the wrench back in his pocket. "All right, let's get on the roof." I leaned my bike against the pickup and we walked to the house. Dad extended the ladder while I stood and watched.

"Sonny," he said, "go in the toolbox and get my tape measure. Should be right on top."

"Okay." I ran to the pickup and climbed into the back.

"Got it?"

"Yup," I said, climbing over the tailgate.

Dad had already started up the ladder. "Bring it here," he said, extending his hand.

I handed him the tape measure and took a step back.

"You coming?" he said.

"I don't know."

"You don't have to."

"Can I think about it?"

"Sure." He waited a moment then climbed the ladder and stepped onto the roof. I walked to the end of the driveway and sat down with my back to the house. I was throwing pebbles into the road when I heard a loud thump followed by a crash. Startled, I jumped to my feet, ran to the front of the house, and froze. The ladder had fallen and Dad was lying on the ground. I stared at him, afraid to move, until he groaned. I took a few steps closer.

Dad swallowed hard and strained to say, "Hey, gonna need your help." Blood had started to pool beneath his head. His eyes were closed.

"Dad, you're bleeding."

He raised his head a little and opened his eyes. "I know." He took a few breaths. "Listen, you wanna run an errand for me?"

I said, "Sure." Dad cleared his throat. "Okay, go down the street here, ask for help. If no one's home, come right back. Can you do that?"

"I can do that."

"All right, be quick." He closed his eyes and let his head drop to the concrete. I sprinted across the yard.

There were three other houses on the dead-end street, each about a football field from the other. None of them had garages. The closest house had a boat in the driveway. I rang the doorbell and looked through the front windows. Nothing. I ran to the next house but didn't see anything in the driveway. I knocked on the door anyway, trying to catch my breath. The last house had a car in the driveway but no one answered when I rang the doorbell. I checked the front windows before running back to Dad.

He had not moved. I stood next to him, panting, and said, "Nobody's home." Dad lifted his head and winced. Through gritted teeth he said, "Get the phone out of my jeans." He rolled toward the house and I pulled the phone out of his back pocket.

"Look in the top left corner. What's it say?"

I pressed the home button and squatted next to his head. "No service."

Dad said, "Sonny, take the phone and get on your bike. Ride down the road the way we came." He took a few breaths. "Call Mom when you get service. Remember how to do that?"

"Yeah, go to contacts and call Caroline."

"Right. Tell her what happened. She'll take it from there."

"Okay."

Dad closed his eyes. "You'll get service, bud, just don't give up."

I walked my bike to the edge of the driveway, stepped over the top tube, and paused. With the phone in my hand I couldn't grip the handlebar. My pants didn't have pockets so I tucked the phone under my chin and started pedaling. After a few minutes I settled into a rhythm but now my neck was hurting. Still pedaling, I took the phone from under my chin and pressed the home button. When I looked down, my front wheel slipped and I fell. Hard. The phone skidded into the road. I kicked the bike away, crawled to the phone, and snatched it from the asphalt. It wasn't broken, just no service. I sat there a moment, my elbow bleeding. Then I limped back to my bike wondering how much farther I needed to go.

In the distance I saw a speed-limit sign. That gave me an idea. I tucked the phone under my chin, put my feet on the pedals, and started counting in my head. At a hundred I coasted to a stop and pressed the home button. No service. At two hundred I took a break. My elbow was burning and my legs were sore. At five hundred two bars appeared on the screen. I dialed Caroline. The phone rang twice then went to voicemail. I called again. This time she answered.

"What do you want?" she said.

"Mom?"

"Sonny?" A pause. "Are you okay?"

I started to cry.

"Sonny, are you okay!"

"I'm okay."

"Are you with your father?"

"No."

"Where are you?"

"I don't know."

"What d'you mean you don't know?" She was yelling.

"Sonny, you better tell me what happened right now."

Between sobs I said, "Dad fell."

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Three days later I was sitting with Mom in the hospital waiting area. I had not seen Dad since the accident and I was excited to talk to him. While we waited Mom flipped through a few magazines, looking angry, then sat back and crossed her arms.

"Remember to stay off the bed," she said. "He's still recovering."

"You already told me that."

"Well, I know how you two are."

"Is Dad better?"

Mom huffed. "It's gonna be a while before Dad's better."

"How long is a while?"

"I don't know. No one does."

Just then a nurse stepped into the waiting room and told us we could see Dad. Mom motioned for me to go. I walked with the nurse down the corridor to an open door. We stepped inside the room and I froze. Dad looked like he was sleeping. His head was bandaged, his leg was in a cast.

"Over here, sweetie," the nurse said, guiding me to the bed.

"Thanks, Darlene," Dad said, his voice a bit raspy.

Darlene smiled and left. Dad turned his head toward me, half opened his eyes, and grinned. "How are you, bud?"

I had to smile. "I'm good."

"You sure?"

"Mm-hmm."

He closed his eyes then opened them again. I waited. "Listen, bud," he said, "I don't know how long I'm gonna be here. Might be a week or two. They have to do more tests, make sure I'm getting better. Everything okay with Mom?"

I nodded. Then Mom walked in. I turned to look at her. She was holding a thick envelope, shaking her head.

"You goddamn idiot," she said.

"Hey," Dad said, "no new cuss words, eh?"

Mom leaned forward, waving the envelope. "New cuss words? I have a few new words for you."

Dad sighed. "Sonny, bud, can you give us a minute?"

"Okay," I said and backed away. Darlene met me in the hallway. They took longer than a minute. Mom found us at the nurses' station and said we had to go.

"Can I say goodbye to Dad?"

She shook her head. "You'll see him soon."

On the drive home Mom said nothing until we parked in front of a building that looked like the dentist's office. The sign read, "Family Law Attorney." Mom turned to me, lifted the envelope from the center console, and said, "Sonny, you wanna run an errand for me?"

I sat there motionless until she touched my arm. I jumped.

"Sonny, what's wrong?"

"What kind of errand?"

"What's the matter with you? Just run this into the office and hand it to the lady there."

I looked inside the building. Then at the envelope. Then at Mom. Then, somehow, I knew. Mom took her hand from my arm, saying, "Will you run it in for me or not?"

I turned toward her, rubbing the scab on my elbow, and said, "No, I won't."

"Excuse me?" she said, sitting back.

I sat up and looked her in the eye. "I said no. Do it yourself, asshole."

> "I wrote this story to explore the enduring struggles that afflict combat veterans and their families, especially their children." —David Blome

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David Blome is a combat veteran of the US Marine Corps who holds a PhD in ancient history from Cornell University. He began writing fiction in 2019 after publishing a book on the ancient Greeks. To date, his work has appeared in *As You Were*, *The Penman Review*, *Proud to Be*, *The Wrath-Bearing Tree*, and elsewhere. He lives in Philadelphia.

Whale Watching with an M16

Matt Eidson

Three hours. That's how long Fox Company bounced and sliced through the water off Coronado Island in 20 Combat Rubber Raiding Crafts. "Cricks" in Marine Corps shorthand. We had an objective to simulate a beach raid. Trust me, it sounds cooler than it is. Six semi-seasick Marines crammed into a boat, clutching weapons and gunnels, trying not to piss or vomit with each crash over a swell in the pitch black night. It gets real old, real quick.

And when I say pitch black, I don't mean "dark but with the moon-and-starlight to guide us." I mean it's a cloudy, moonless night, and we're not allowed to use lights of any kind because it wouldn't be tactical or whatever. The crick becomes a goddamn deprivation tank. Except the water's cold as hell and there's a pod of orca somewhere nearby, which technically means we're not supposed to be conducting training exercises. But supposedly the pod was last seen moving north a few hours ago, so our command gave us the all clear. But I'm not salty about it. Not at all.

All I'm saying is that after surviving multiple deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, getting chomped in half by that goofy-ass whale from *Free Willy* during a fucking training exercise would be an embarrassing way to go.

An hour or so ago, we reached our objective, a patch of ocean a couple hundred yards off the coast of the beachhead we'd be landing on, and dropped the scout swimmers into the water so they could begin their tactical maneuver towards the beach. Which is just a fancy way of saying that the rest of us waited on four or five dudes to swim slow-as-shit to the shoreline and secure the beachhead. In other words, Fox Company was currently in the "wait" portion of the "hurry up and wait" ethos the Marine Corps is so famous for.

I wrap a tarp around me tighter to keep the ocean spray off my back and hug my knees closer to my chest, shoving my body between the forward gunnel tube and the deck of the crick. A crick isn't nearly as cool as the movies make it out to be. It's pretty lame in reality. It's heavy, leaks all the time, and has a nasty habit of deflating at the worst possible time.

My boat's lashed together with the other cricks, and all I see are lumpy masses of Marines snuggling up to each other for warmth. Screw bravado, desperate times call for desperate measures. And if, as a straight man, you're compelled to big-spoon a hairy dude who smells like Axe body spray and ball sack, well, that's about as desperate as it gets.

There's hushed conversation among the Marines along the line of cricks. Most of us understood what tactical meant, and kept quiet, but Gonzo seemed to have forgotten. Even subdued, his voice is clear as day. It's true that noise carries easier over water. But even without the water, you'd probably hear him chatting casually over a fucking chainsaw. Nice guy and all, just a total goober with a loud voice and the kind of friendly-but-annoying disposition you find in church on Sundays, or used car lots.

His voice carries easily to my boat, all the way on the other side of the group. And if I can hear it, then sure as hell Lieutenant Scott also hears it.

"Tell Gonzalez to shut the fuck up," he whispers to the Marine next to him.

"Roger sir," the nameless, faceless Marine says. He turns to the man next to him and relays the message, who leans over the side of the crick and taps a Marine in the other boat and relays the message to him. The words make it about halfway to their destination before, suddenly, all hell breaks loose.

First, there's a monstrous splash, like a St. Bernard barreling into a swimming pool. Then we hear something scraping against the rubber gunnel tubes of one of the cricks. Then a kind of exasperated sigh, as if someone just got punched in the gut unexpectedly. Then Gonzo starts shouting.

"Oh dude, what the fuck! Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit!"

As he's screaming, there's another loud splash. Pandemonium breaks out.

"Bro what the fuck was that."

"Something just jumped out of the water!"

"Shut the fuck up, no way!"

"Dude I swear to God!"

"Was that a fucking animal or something?"

"Shut the fuck up, why is everyone freaking out?"

"Gonzo just got attacked by something dude!"

"Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit!"

"Gonzo chill the fuck out bro it's gone!"

"Twenty bucks Gonzo's just trying to get a light duty chit."

"Fuck you, bro! Something just fucking jumped out of the water and hit me!"

"Bullshit."

"Are the fucking scout swimmers on the beach yet?"

"They're probably dead because Gonzo just woke up the enemy."

"Fuck you guys!"

"Keep it down!" Lieutenant Scott shouts. Silence is instant across the water. "What the fuck is going on over there?"

Lieutenant Scott is a nice guy, and generally respected by the enlisted Marines, but he's still an officer. "Sir," an unidentifiable Marine speaks up, softly and respectfully.

"I think a seal just jumped into the crick and hit Corporal Gonzalez."

"Wait," Lieutenant Scott says, holding back his laughter. "A seal? A no-shit seal? Is it still there?"

The crack in his bearing reverberates across the cricks and relaxes the Marines, who begin to chuckle quietly and whisper amongst themselves.

"No sir," the Marine says, laughing. "Gonzo's bitch-ass screaming scared it off."

"Fuck you!" Gonzo yells.

Up and down the line of boats, Marines—featureless and freezing in the icy-black night—begin to laugh hysterically. After a few seconds, Lieutenant Scott says a forceful, "at ease," and the cricks go quiet.

I look to the coast and see red chem lights glowing in the dark. I lean back to Lieutenant Scott. "Sir, signal's up."

"Roger," he says. "Marines, get your shit together and start 'em up. Let's go."

We go silent and stare at the glowing chem lights in the distance as the boats patrol slowly, tactically, toward the shore. It's been a long night, and we've still got a long way to go.

> "'Whale watching with an M16' is a story inspired by my time as a Marine with the Fox Company Blackhearts, a line company that specializes in small boat operations. With this piece, I wanted to give the reader a better view of the folks that sign up for the military. Because far too often the guys and gals that serve are treated as a monolith. Many of us enlist to protect our country, sure. But many, many more are just looking for some structure, a ticket to college, and a place to belong. 'Whale watching' is my attempt to humanize military veterans, who are, at least in my experience, a group of loud-mouthed, funny, and totally awesome people that I miss more and more every day." —Matt Eidson

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Matt Eidson is an MFA in creative writing candidate at West Virginia University. He's also a Marine Corps veteran with deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. When not writing, Matt can be found competing in ultramarathons, watching stand-up comedy specials, or scouring Pittsburgh in search of the best chocolate chip cookies the city has to offer.

The Waders

Jacqueline Keren

Even 25 years on, Wade didn't mind that the Gulf War had landed him at the cabin on the lake in the worn out Adirondack mountains. No more village life, or neighbors "accidentally" digging up Gloria's lilies in broad daylight while their cats turned her flower beds into a litter box. No more communal life headaches. Gloria had adapted quickly, learning to ride a dented fishing boat to work in town. But without a fuel truck to drive, he'd needed another means to make a living. He'd always had a green thumb, and the soil around the lake was rich, so he planted the obvious. His marijuana plants were always flush and skunky by harvest. After the first frost, when the hairs turned brown, he hung them in the shop to dry. Then they were ready to clip: tweezing away the dried leaves curled around the densely packed flowers. Clipping was hard for him, for after a time, his hands would cramp as if they were locked around a wheel and he was grinding over a battered highway. He did not love the Gulf War for that.

Now, the weed was ready. The day was warm for October, the wind gentle enough to work outside. He stood at the dock as a lone pontoon boat hummed around an island. A heron standing in a bay, shoulders hunched, squawked as the boat puttered near, then rose, its wings whooping as it passed overhead before settling in the thin branches high in a dead tree.

He emptied a paper bag of buds into a salad bowl, an indica-sativa cross suited to the north, dusty blue and dense and sticky. Blue Dream, his signature variety, a high that inspired while you melted into the couch. His was a small operation. He grew enough to carry them through winter, and sold through middlemen, hard-up friends to whom he gave a steep, wholesale discount. With no one coming to the cabin for their ounce or dime bag or forty dollar hit, he needn't fear pontoon boats in his waters, and they survived on what he made, for Gloria was a whiz at making do, and he was Mr. Fixit, a must for living off the grid, even when his hands gave him hell, which lately they did more often. He hadn't told Gloria, but he'd been to a doctor. A tunnel was closing around the nerves in his wrist and arm, the result of gripping a steering wheel the way the herons gripped the finger-bone branches. That he'd given up driving twenty years ago mattered little; his hands remembered.

Even as he kneeled on the grass to tuck a paper plate under the leg of a picnic table, steadying it on the uneven ground, his nerves whined before settling into a familiar undercurrent. He soldiered on, and when he looked up the pontoon boat had turned and was driving toward their dock. The law? Even in the off season, they were plentiful. He waited for the voice from the bullhorn—*busted!*—when he recognized Bump at the wheel beneath the green Bimini, his hand held high. Beside him, Wade's sister, Patty, waved a signal flag, her message, predictably, scrambled. They lived in town, not far as the crow flies, but the effort of the boat ride kept visitors away. He lifted a hand in greeting. "What brings you here?" he called as the boat thumped against the dock.

Patty jumped out, took the line Bump threw and pulled the boat in. "We wanted to take one last ride before putting the boat up for the winter."

Bump, compact as a bullet, leapt lightly to the dock. Wade and Bump had served together through Desert Shield and Desert Storm with the seventh transportation group, delivering supplies to the forward operating bases: petroleum, equipment, MREs. Early on, Bump had introduced Wade to his

sister, Gloria, and he to Patty, and now they were brothers-in-law and Patty his sister-in-law, a situation that even now struck him as vaguely taboo. Two sets of siblings, married into the same family.

He gave them a hand tying up, then the two men gripped opposite ends of a cooler and carried it to the picnic table. Gloria, the wind blowing through her red curls, emerged from the cabin, carrying a box of alcohol wipes and a first aid kit. "Look at you," she said.

Patty opened her arms. "Look at us." Rather than hugging, the women touched elbows and made the sound of an electric bug zapper—*zztt*—a greeting begun at the Doublemint wedding in Puerto Rico, at the home of Bump and Gloria's grandmother, the four of them arm in arm. In the tying of knots, the women had bonded as tightly to each other as to their spouses, and from the spark of their elbows, for he was sure he saw it, ran a current of experience and understanding. He trusted Gloria to share only what was essential, but Patty spilled volumes about young Wade, his history flowing like electricity from the breaker box to the outlets. His head ached with the nakedness of it, but his heart thrilled at the current between the women.

"I could use some help while you're here," Wade said.

Bump plucked a branch from the pile, eyed the fat finger of Blue Dream and twirled it. The resin-covered flowers caught the sun. "Christ-on-a-stick," he said. "All this?"

Wade, inhaling the smell of raw reefer, touched a bloom, the resin sticky. He rubbed his fingers together. This was going to be messy, but customers were clamoring, last year's supply toked out. "There's more in the shop."

Bump thumped Wade's back. "It could be worse," Bump said, words that had carried them through the worst of it as they'd driven toward Kuwait City after the air campaign and the ground assault. Along the route, blasted tanks, resting at odd angles as if drifting off, spilled blistered bodies. The mother of all poundings. Even before they reached the oil fields, he saw the fires screaming fury, torrents of smoke smothering the sun.

Living in the north, he was used to long winters of gray sky turning him inward, but the clouds always broke, and the snow melted. In Kuwait, the oil wells had burned for weeks, black clouds stifling the sun. On the ground, spewing oil collected in a thick, sheeny lake. As the days wore on, the oil lakes took on an alluring rigidity. He could walk on one, a voice whispered through the smoke clouding his brain. He kept a watchful distance while reading letters from Gloria of fishing trips to escape the wily neighbors, the water a serene film, the baby asleep in a basket, like Moses in the reeds. After a few days, a thin layer of dust camouflaged the oozy lakes of oil. The cormorants and grebes, even the insects, fooled by the tantalizing surface, plunged in. On the shore, the waders preened their greasy feathers until they bled. He was afraid to sleep. If he let his guard down, he, too, would dive into the fool's gold of solid ground hiding a gummy trap. A modern day La Brea Pits. Yet sleep was powerful. One night an explosion woke him from a dream. The boom roused him from the deep where he dreamt of lying with Gloria, his body curled up in hers, his face in her hair. He could almost feel her. The scent of *vivaporu*. What did she dream about when he was away? He darted outside into a light rain that burned his skin as an A-10 flew overhead. Smoke smothered the stars, and without them as a reference point, he didn't know where he was. A shadow cut across

the sky, followed by the noise of a screaming engine. A shower of tracers cut across the sky, searching out the enemy.
Gloria rummaged through the first aid kit. "I've got just the thing," she said, unearthing three pairs of medical scissors.

Wade rested his chin in his hand. "Where did they come from?"

"You're always saying we need backups to live off the grid."

"One or two is backup." Three was a gnawing worry.

Patty clapped her hands together. "Three is good. Let's get to it."

They sat. The big buds, more flower than leaves, went quickly while the runts were a surgical process, the dried leaves packed tightly into the flowers. He clipped, a slight twinge in his wrist, nothing to get twisted over. At times he welcomed it, for his hands stored all his memories, dark and light: driving through the desert and the mountains, the deck he had built and the picnic table, stroking Gloria's hair, cradling their son.

As he finished a bud, he tossed it into the salad bowl.

Bump set a beer before him. "What are you doing this winter? I could use some help with the house."

"What's on the agenda?"

"Kitchen cabinets," Patty said.

"Wade has time," Gloria said, the sun setting her hair on fire. Even with encroaching grays, her hair was vibrant and distracting. At the wedding he'd discovered where the red came from when he met the Irish side of the family with their painful Boston accents. She was right. Besides nursing the clones until spring, winters were quiet. The cabin, once a hunting camp, needed maintenance but nothing so urgently now. On winter days, he spent hours sitting before the woodstove, his hands idle.

"You could use more solar panels," Bump said. "We can take a look in the spring."

"At last," Gloria said. "We can make coffee and toast at the same time."

"Deal," Wade said as he freed his hand and shook it out under the table. Resin, sticky as sap, gummed up the scissor blades and spotted his fingers. If he'd let the plants dry longer, he wouldn't have this problem. He had a way of getting ahead of himself, but his sellers needed him and help was here. He grasped the handles once more, and as he brought the blades together, a pain shot through his arm and into his neck, leaving a throb behind at his elbow. He drove on. Gloria, a scattering of freckles across her nose, lay her hand upon his, her palm not buzzy with electricity but warm as bathwater. Then her hand was gone, and there was only the memory of her touch. He ran his fingers through his beard before snipping once more.

Gloria brushed his cheek. "Now you've got sap on your face." She retrieved the *vivaporu*, from the first aid kit, the menthol rub a cure all, and smeared it on his hand.

Bump lit a big fatty. "What you need is a blue dream."

The sun sat low, the moon a pale crescent in the denim sky. Wade closed his eyes as he toked and his body dissolved and his brain hummed like a well-tuned motor spewing blue exhaust. An apple thudded to the ground and rolled down the sloping lawn. On delivery runs in the desert, they'd smoke so much reefer, they'd sing over the grinding motor to the rhythm of the wheels on the rutted road, a beat that kept them cool and sharp, and because he was slipping into a blue dream, he sang again, "*To market, to market, to buy a fat pig.*"

Bump finished the jingle. "*Home again, home again, jiggety-jig.*"

They clinked beers. Patty tossed a clean bud into the salad bowl. "Brothers-in-arms," she said as she turned to Wade. "At least you came home with a friend."

"Not much else," Wade said.

"Don't you wonder what your life would be like if you hadn't enlisted?"

Wade toked, pulling the smoke deep into his lungs, before cleaning the blades and threading his fingers through the handles. "Nope."

"You'd be living in an old Victorian house with electricity to spare."

"We're off the grid, not in the stone age."

"Someone should have stopped you."

"Dad didn't warn me off." Wade's father, a Korean War vet, only said he'd spent more time waiting than fighting.

"He wasn't much for talk," Patty said. "Of course you didn't listen to me."

He remembered Patty sitting with his parents at his high school graduation, while an army recruiter, meandering among the graduates, delivered an airtight case: The country had closed the book on Vietnam, the wall had come down, and who the hell wanted to go to war? "It sounded like a good deal," Wade said. "Two years, then the reserves, a life of benefits, even college."

"College?" Patty asked.

"All right, maybe not." But listening to the man's smooth song and dance, the studs and joists of his future had snapped into place. The Gulf War came out of the blue. Even as he'd crossed the globe, he'd expected a reprieve. The pervasive heat of Saudi Arabia crushed any hope of the war not happening.

Patty pointed the scissors at him. "You were always gullible."

"Receptive," Gloria said.

"I should have stopped you," Patty said.

Gloria leaned against him. "I liked that you weren't army material."

Patty scratched her forehead with a blade. "I bet they saw the war coming."

As he closed his eyes, his blue dream darkened to navy then black. "That's all they see," he said. The brass couldn't see the young man who'd wanted, like his father, to deliver propane all day before coming home to his giddy children. Once, long ago, he'd pictured a herd of them galloping through a rambling house. He rubbed his wrist.

Bump rested his hand on his back. "You should see a doctor before it gets worse."

The mountains were lit up in red and gold, colors so warm he would fly into them if he could. Bump had power to spare, but Wade, an old battery, couldn't store it for long. "I saw a doctor."

"A real doctor," Gloria said. "Not our retired pediatrician."

He scratched his neck. The jackass had ratted him out.

"You're a vet," she said. "Vets go to the VA for help."

"That's a three hour drive." He could maneuver through the shoals of the river, but the traffic around Albany was a minefield. "Besides, I belong to the club."

Gloria closed her eyes. "Not drinking help. Medical help."

Wade smoothed the greasy rub over his hands before dusting his hands in the dirt beneath the table.

Bump, beside him, had grown uncomfortably compact. "You could ease up a little."

"This is my livelihood."

"There's disability."

"That's not for me." He could take care of his family. He wouldn't milk the system.

"Think of it as a backup," Bump said. "Save the money for emergencies. Or buy another battery for the solar, enough for a toaster. Invest in a sawmill. Build a new grow room."

Gloria said, "You deserve it."

He spread his hands, stretched his fingers, clenched his fists. He didn't deserve a dime extra for doing the job he'd been paid to do. Or for being foolish enough to enlist. He'd been a driver, and that's all he was. Not some grunt who saw some real shit.

"What are you going to do when grass is legal?" Patty asked.

"Seeds," he said. People would fork out a lot for quality.

Gloria said, "Just go. Talk to someone. You say we need backups. Apply for backup."

He frowned. "Like backup scissors?"

"It's not easy getting disability," Patty said. "You'll have to make a case for it."

"What case?" Wade said.

"A sad case," Bump said. "Tell them how you live."

Gloria frowned. "What's wrong with the way we live? It's a beautiful life."

Wade reached for her hand. They'd made it beautiful.

Bump pressed his palms to his eyes. "They won't understand," he said. "Look, you have no central heat and hardly any electricity, crappy Internet, and your job, your real job," he said, glancing at his sister, "barely pays enough to buy the basics. You run out in your skivvies on cold winter nights to shit in your outhouse and your ass sticks to the frozen toilet seat."

"That's not true," Gloria said. "We keep the seat inside by the woodstove."

"Hear, hear," Wade said. Some nights, the woodstove burned so warm they had to crack the windows. He pressed the toasty toilet seat to his chest as he carried it outside. Silence poured off the trees as he took a dump. Through the quarter moon cut in the door, he watched a twist of smoke from the chimney, the silence so profound that not even the greasy clouds rising from burning fuel silos could interrupt the reverie of a good shit. It wasn't just a good life; it was, after the war and after his job and after he hollered at the neighbors for digging up Gloria's flowers and bellowed at the baby, the only life he could live.

"You don't want to move back to town, do you?" Bump asked.

He balled his fist, his nails biting his palm, scattering his blue dream into the night.

Gloria said, "We're not moving back to town." She wiped the stray hair from her face, and as she locked her hair in a barrette, her elbow brushed Patty's. The sudden *zztt* stripped him bare. He stabbed the scissors into the table. Smoke blew through his head. His wrist was on fire. "Shit!"

They gazed at him as he did the birds in the dead trees. They clung to the thin branches through rain and wind until they returned one spring to find the trees downed. The pontoon's rub rail thumped the dock, a hollow drumbeat. They clipped. Gloria nodded at the rake, the handle, thick and cool, needing only a little pressure to do its job. He swept, his hands numb around the aluminum tubing as he gathered the sticks and leaves into a pile. The clouds blew away and his head cooled. Bump hummed a jingle from a long ago commercial about exercise and being wise as they clipped the

plants clean. Soon Bump was on his feet, wiggling his hips. "Move it and you'll feel better!" He took the rake from Wade and danced with it. A guffaw bubbled up from deep in Wade's gut, demanding so much air, he had to chase after it, a wonderful kind of choking.

*

A few days later, they rode into town. Gloria hunched deep into her coat as the winter cold cut across their bow. He pulled up to the boat launch without the chaos of summer people maneuvering their boats in and out of the water. He hadn't visited civilization since August. He was pleased to see their former neighbor's flowerbeds, lush with the lilies they had stolen, dying back in autumn. They collected the car from the gas station across the street. He dropped by the laundromat while Gloria visited a hair salon. While the clothes dried, he nursed a beer at the VFW. A young man swinging a stiff leg swept the floor and pocketed the spare change he brushed from beneath the stools.

The bartender unloaded the dishwasher. "Where's Gloria?" he asked.

"Getting her hair done."

"Not the whole torch?"

"Just a trim."

The man sweeping, a boy really, a thin trail of whiskers for sideburns, moved stiffly, using his upper body to raise his leg, before pausing to rest his chin on the broom's handle, then leaned against the bar, rubbing a spot on his hip, the warp visible through the worn out fabric.

Wade straightened his spine. "What's up with your leg?" he asked.

"Runs in the family, something with the hips, like German shepherds. I thought it had skipped a generation, but a year into my tour, I could barely walk. I might need a replacement, or I could get the leg amputated and never work again."

"Don't you want to be able to take care of your family?"

"The military industrial complex will take care of us."

He was still prattling when Wade covered his face with his hands. The boy's limb swam in the oily darkness. He wanted to take the broom, force the young man to stand up straight. Pain could eat away at you unless you struck a deal with it. He saw his father, clutching a can of Old Milwaukee, flicking a dead lighter, a tic, his mother said, he'd come home with, yet he'd worked all his life. He rubbed his temples. "Maybe so," Wade said.

"Just a thought I had."

"Keep thinking," he said as the boy returned to his slow sweeping. What sandbox had he fought in? He wasn't much older than Wade's son, who worked for a company making solar panels, yet somehow an old man. Had a recruiter cornered the boy at graduation? The arguments were different, he expected, for now the recruits were eager to be heroes.

He hoped the boy had found a friend or carried a talisman, as Wade had with Gloria's red hair, fluttering ahead of him, a red shadow on the dusty windshield, and the memory of her smell when he pressed up against her.

Wade, peering into his glass, took one last swig, swallowing his reflection. His beer empty, he headed to the restroom before leaving. At the restroom door, he paused to read a posted message, shaky letters scrawled on a napkin. "It broke." His eyes glazed over. An exclamation? *It broke!* Or a warning? *Beware the thing that broke.* And who was the note from?

His palm rested on the metal push plate. The boy was gone, and the bartender had disappeared. The oily, burning smoke blew in and the day darkened as on days when he couldn't find the right bit for the drill, or the Phillips-head screwdriver, only a flathead. He closed his eyes until it faded.

His hand sweated. Push, he urged and at last his hand obeyed. The door flapped behind him. The toilet was most likely broken, so he opted for the urinal. Relief washed over him as the warm stream poured out, and he gazed out a dusty window into the backyard. The wind blew through an apple tree stripped of its leaves, the yellow fruit hanging on against a steely sky. He washed his hands, rinsed and washed again, picking at the dirt embedded beneath his nails, before reaching for a paper towel from the dispenser. When the mindless piece of machinery resisted, he yanked. The paper flew out, swinging his body out of balance. When he grabbed the sink to break the fall, his wrist screamed. His head collided with the sink. Down, down, down. He sank into an oily silence.

When he woke up, he was lying on the bathroom floor, the lame boy and the bartender and Gloria gazing down as if he were a naked body on a slab.

"What happened?" Gloria asked.

"I had a fight with the sink."

"You shouldn't let the sink beat you like that," the bartender said.

Wade frowned. "How long have I been out?"

"A few minutes give or take."

A hole in the timeline. Dead air. His head throbbed.

They supported him as he struggled to sit, his head spinning. He felt nothing when Gloria and the bartender made contact with his body. He was a dead battery; no power upon contact. He shook them off as he climbed to his feet and touched the throbbing knot on his forehead, saw blood on his fingers. He pressed a wad of paper towels to his head. In the mirror, he faced a soldier on the long march home, his wound patched with the materials at hand. Gloria stepped out from behind him, her face the explosive red of her hair, but her voice was tired. "Now will you go?"

The boy said, "Amputate. No more worries."

Gloria scowled. She took Wade's hand, her touch as substantial as smoke and vapors. If only they created static, the electric current of his memories passing through without dimming her, the light he followed.

"You should see a doctor," the bartender said.

Wade touched his forehead. "So my wife tells me."

*

Wade was on the Northway, headed south to Albany. He'd swapped the summer tires for winter, bartering with the mechanic, who'd rushed to balance them. The car shook as he approached sixty-five as if it might explode. The car he trusted, but his head? A sharp pain ran from his temple to his crown as if a fissure were opening. He squinted at the mirror then away. Better not to know.

The traffic was light, and he arrived a few minutes early to the appointment. He stood in the parking lot to gather himself. He checked himself in the side view mirror. His black eye had faded to green. He looked ill but not beaten. A plastic bag ruffled in a bare tree. Did it fight to free itself or to cling to the branch? He scratched his beard where he was wearing away a bald spot. It was only a bag. Was that how Gloria saw him?

The receptionist gave him a sheaf of papers on a clipboard and pointed to a chair in an alcove where several men scribbled. One, ashen faced, steely haired, gazed into the filtered air as if waiting for the particles of dust to resolve into a coded message. The TV hanging in the corner was dark. The men had a familiar tightened spring air about them; they toggled between two modes of being, anticipation and action.

Wade sat next to the gazer, his face haggard. Vietnam. The man glanced at him then down at a wicker basket on the coffee table, a ladybug circling its rim. As the bug completed a revolution, the man settled a straw against the basket, and the bug scrabbled to the table then up the man's creased finger. Wade quelled an impulse to grab his wrist as the man set it on the rim again. Too late. The bug set off, itty-bitty anxious steps along the rugged wicker. Wade flicked it into the room as he sang, "*Ladybug, ladybug, fly away home.*"

The man snapped to attention as if he'd been switched on. He picked up the rhyme, his voice a gentle sing-song. "*Your house is on fire, your children alone.*"

"What are you here for?" Wade asked.

"I can't sleep no more."

"Sounds bad." Or was it? No oily visions seeping out of his head.

"I should never have retired."

A bubble swelled in Wade's chest before sinking to an elusive bottom.

"They gave me something and told me to walk, tire myself out, but the pills," he drifted off. "I'm slipping away." He swiped his hand down his body as if to remind himself of his corporeal presence then fingered the placket of his coat. Wade concentrated on his forms.

After a few minutes, Wade was led away to a woman, young, a veteran of a war without end, another thing for which he was grateful to the Gulf War, a conclusion that had held for a time. She wore a sergeant's stripes pin, and her hair, pulled back in a bun, drew out the gray eyes boring into him. He shuddered as he stepped into her office. How could he fool this woman who had stripped him bare before they started?

"What's going on?" she asked.

He glared at the offending hand. "I have pain," he said, cradling his wrist. "I can live with that up to a point."

Her eyes weighed on him, the bandage on his forehead. "Is it beyond that point?"

He tapped his foot. "So I'm told."

"Any numbness?"

"My hand would make a good pin cushion."

She put her hand in his. "Squeeze."

Her skin was cool, dry. The ground, not the live wire. His wrist tingled but his hand obeyed.

"You still have a lot of strength," she said.

"I keep busy."

"How are you feeling otherwise?"

When he said nothing, she waited.

Finally, he said, "Sometimes a curtain comes down."

"How do you mean?"

He'd missed the mark. The problem was the curtain lifted and the oil in his head gushed out. He scratched his whiskered neck. Gloria had told him to shave before his appointment—he should be tidy even to make a sad case—but it was impossible to keep up with the stubble. A three hour ride was just long enough for it to fight its way out again. Yet the words refused to surface. He settled for sad. He tapped his temple. "Headaches."

"Gulf War syndrome," she said. "There's some real evidence for it now. We have doctors who specialize in it. We can set you up with one. How are you faring financially? Are you able to work?"

"I do odd jobs."

She glanced at his file again. "You live in Port Geoffrey?"

"We live outside of town, in the sticks, an old hunting cabin on Arnold Pond," he said, laying it on as Bump and Gloria and Patty had coached him, their quarters rudimentary, shabby.

"Do you have electricity?"

Her questions came quickly. She'd met others like him, the wraiths in the waiting room. Men and women who chased butterfly words, but the spigot always tightened. They'd had no red beacon to guide them through the darkness. No thumping road to keep them sharp. This would be easy if he played his part. "Some."

"And running water?"

He wasn't some yahoo who couldn't take care of himself. "An artesian well," he blurted. He tapped his foot. He was treading into back-to-the-land territory when he wanted to sound like a redneck. She glanced at his foot before denting her cheek with her pen. "Explain."

He pressed on his knee to tame his foot. Keep it simple. Keep it sad. "The water bubbles up from the ground. Gravity brings it down to the house."

"In a pipe?"

"In a pipe."

The woman eyed him, a thin furrow between her eyebrows. "And your wife is happy with your living situation?"

Situation? The cabin on the lake was their beautiful creation. A spider might surprise Gloria in the outhouse, but her upset was short lived. Town was a situation. He'd blamed his weary hands for moving to the lake, but it was the idle moments, delivering propane, that wore him down: an endless stoplight on an empty road, or a muddy driveway that swallowed the truck, in the absence of the drumbeat of the tires, coyotes filling the forest with their anxious cries while he waited for a tow. Lullabies and quiet dinners. In the smoky silence, he was alone with his naked self. No one could find him through that fog. That was a situation. One weekend they rode out to the cabin and never left. He scribbled his boss a cryptic note when he quit. *This sucks*. Chopping wood, caulking windows, odd jobs around the cabin became Wade's livelihood. In the doing of things, the man he'd been before the conflict returned, a kind of muscle memory of his better self that he could draw from when the noose around his nerves tightened.

"She doesn't complain."

"Women never do."

The young woman set her fingers on the keyboard, waited, then typed furiously, archiving his complaints, packing them away like long underwear in summer.

"Where did you serve?" he asked.

"Iraq."

"What a cluster fuck." He rubbed his stubble. "Pardon my language."

"I've heard worse." She smoothed a hand over her hair. "I enlisted out of college," she continued. "I wanted to serve my country. It's never that simple though, is it? Your hands get dirty no matter what you do."

"You were just a soldier."

"Agreed. But now I know better." She pushed back from her desk and grabbed a sheaf of paper from the printer. "Still, I made friends. We talk, check in." She turned her gray eyes on him. "You?"

"One." Two if he counted Gloria, three with Patty.

"One is all you need." She handed him a stack of forms. "Fill these out. When you're done, tell the receptionist and she'll bring you back here."

More paper. He gathered it in his arms. It was a fight he could win.

*

In the parking lot, two women laughed. He leaned against the car, the metal warm, in his hands paperwork and helpful pamphlets. The checks would come quickly, the woman said. A good chunk of money to start. He'd buy a new outboard for the boat so Gloria wouldn't have to wrestle with the old one. In his new grow room, he'd pollinate the flowers, harvest the seeds.

As the women waved farewell, their hands touched. A spark flashed, brief and brilliant. He rubbed his stubble. Someone had to ground the current or hell would break loose. The wind ruffled the pamphlets he clutched to his chest, paper wings.

> "I'm interested in stories of people who survive difficult situations without falling into despair, who find inner reserves where they thought there were none." — Jacqueline Keren

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Jacqueline Keren's short fiction has appeared in the *Santa Monica Review*, *Calyx Journal*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, and other journals. She works for a hospital coordinating a health screening program for uninsured women. She is working on a collection of linked stories, *The Coast of the Adirondacks*.

Zzyzx

Dan Murphy

A sign next to the door says *Warriors Club,* and inside it sounds like Friday even though it's Wednesday. The air is warm like a damp towel, more like the Carolina nights Piot hated in boot camp the year prior. The California desert is colder, its nights whipping and more like home than he expected. The room is big and swollen with the racket of scraping chairs and shouting. Another battalion is celebrating the end of their training package. They rattle the long, heavy tables with their bloated talk and readiness. Staff pour beer at one counter, while a long line of bodies queues for food at another. Piot obediently takes his spot at the end of the food line, squints towards the menu at the other end. Sergeant Clausse shoves him from behind.

"Gangway, boot. I'm thirsty." Clausse carries his fists like suitcases. Piot thought they came to eat.

Bravo Company had been way up north in the sticks of Twentynine Palms for two weeks. Half-a-million acres of rock, sand and prehistoric lakebed blasted to hell, the fossilizing dust and gunpowder of America coating the folds of Piot's ears, between his toes and his ass crack. He hears the words JDAM and Abrams and 120mm get thrown around but doesn't need or worry much about details like that. He's having too much fun. The days are like guided tours through supercharged war flicks. Just chow and fighting and then sitting around to catch their breath. His little brother Sam eats it up whenever he calls home. Sam listens quietly to Piot's stories, how on clear, exhausted nights, from high ground you can see the frizzy blonde glow of semi-real California towns like Barstow and Harvard and Bagdad. A place called Zzyzx. One night, he'd been gently shivering while on firewatch when the LT crept up and pointed vaguely. "Careful, stud," the LT said. "Out there's where the Manson Family lived." He flashed his eyes under his headlamp and squeezed Piot's bicep. "Crazy Town."

The company slept out in the open. It was February, and the desert slid like ice over his forehead as he smoked his first cigarette through the small opening in his sleeping bag. Then he'd hop out, stuff his gear and be ready to step in ninety seconds.

They ran complex ranges, multi-phase assaults. Clausse calls everything "Lotta moving parts" and that time it made sense to Piot. The ranges started with a squad and leveled up to platoon, company, battalion. Each had more officers and NCOs shouting than the last one. Them pointing, Piot going. Just this mad dash every which way. Piot's lungs burned and he lapped it up. Kept his mouth shut. Listened to the commands and tasted the smoke and the dirt, watched it spasm and mushroom in the distance as it shook against his belly. They fired and maneuvered through the dead spaces, dropped into defilade. They shouted, *Moving.* They answered, *Reloading.*

On the very last range, he'd watched the engineers set a Bangalore torpedo—it became *Bangarang* in his head—and he's woken up every day since thinking about how he'll describe it to Sam. How the live fire exercises remind him of the carnival at St. Mary's every summer, the smoke and cracks like a victory cry for having escaped Elmira.

The chow hall is closed, so they've come to the Warriors Club for dinner. Bravo was only at Camp Wilson for a shower and a reveille. They'd be up and back in the field before morning chow. The LT

specifically said no booze, so Clausse looked pretty clever about bringing a round of beers to the table.

"Just to tide us over till the chow line dies down," he says.

Jigsaw says, "Thanks."

Piot looks at his beer. "I thought we're not supposed to?"

"Try not to think so much, devil dog," Clausse said.

Piot looks at Jigsaw, who never calls him *devil dog* and is looking at Clausse. Piot sips his beer. It's cold and skunky. He's heard that *You're not really a Marine till you've been NJP'ed* but that saying always confuses him. Why would anyone *want* to get in trouble? *Non-judicial punishment*. Makes him think of the state prison walls that loomed over the drive to school every morning and home every afternoon. He nudges the cup away from him. Wipes his hands on his trousers.

He scans the room. There are tilted pool tables, pinball machines, Asteroids, faint knocking and pinging amid the din of voices. Everything seems sticky. He follows Clausse's gaze and notes the odd WM. As a reservist in an infantry unit, he's been in uniform for eleven months. He's spoken to a female in uniform twice and twice called them *Sir,* apologized and blushed.

One walks by their table, a lance corporal, eyes front. Clausse smiles, says, "Hey, how's it going?" and Piot worries what Clausse'll do when she ignores him, a sergeant. Jigsaw seems wound tight, his gaze perched and unspeaking, and it occurs to Piot that his team leader despises their squad leader. And he can understand why but at the same time the how troubles him. The only thing Piot's really scared of is being promoted.

He doesn't mind being new. Doesn't really even think about it. He's too busy looking at everything directly ahead of him. He likes watching the guys from the other unit. Their rubbery smiles and easy ways. It's obvious they're done at Twentynine Palms—*Two-Nine*, he reminds himself—and probably headed to the Sandbox soon, with Bravo close behind them. He needs a haircut, a shower. He feels the stiffness of sand and dried sweat in his cammies, same as theirs, he thinks, and the smell and the grit of it whenever the body shifts.

"Any word on where we're gonna be yet, S'r'nt?"

Clausse says, "You'll know when you need to know, okay, Piot?"

"I hope we're right in the middle of shit."

"You don't know what the fuck you're talking about."

"Aye, S'r'nt."

Jigsaw leans toward him. "Just drop it, alright, man?" Jigsaw wears the straightest face Piot's ever seen, but he's always friendly with Piot, treating him like a little brother.

"Aye, Corporal."

"Listen, it doesn't matter," Clausse says. "Wherever they send us, you'll be right here in third squad, okay?" Clausse has less hair than Piot's father, and the fluorescent lights smack his pate.

Clausse just got his third stripe and talks about six inches taller ever since. On the long drive back to Wilson, he preached over the diesel motor about the graces of rank. Encouraged Jigsaw and Piot to just weather the bullshit because that third chevron is worth it.

"Everybody treats you different. Like, overnight, okay? Telling you. It's like, just a whole different job all of the sudden." He pinched his collar chevrons as if it wasn't clear what he was talking about. "Green Weenie's not so bad from this side."

Clausse puckers long drags of his beer, and makes a sound that reminds Piot of his father chewing. Piot winces. Clausse sighs. Jigsaw looks away, neither alertness nor boredom in his face.

Clausse and Jigsaw have already been to the Sandbox. Piot's heard a hundred stories a thousand times and never gets tired of it. How they rode in on the tail of the invasion and held Nasiriyah tight after the smoke cleared. When no one else is around, Jigsaw calls it "The ass end of the spear," and Piot laughs because he hopes he's kidding. The war is different now, they say. Bravo didn't know yet if they'll be on one of the big bases—phone centers and Burger King, R&R in Kuwait or Qatar—like Al Taqqadum or Al Asad. Piot hopes the company will get a real mission, that it will be like '03, living out of their packs, MREs and iodine tablets and burning their own shit. Thinks of almost nothing else.

Clausse says, "Looks like we're not the only ones having a cold one," and points at a Marine tottering through the crowd in their direction like a bowling pin. "Maybe more than one."

Piot recognizes Corporal Brescia immediately. He's never spoken to him, but guys that know him call him Brassy. Either a joke or a god depending on who's talking. Piot heard a clipped version of the ambush story: Brassy in the turret of an AAV when a roadside bomb tipped them off the Canal Road. The track slid down the bank and lay burning, belly up in four feet of water and taking small arms fire. Brassy was tossed away in the blast, ran back, and pulled every Marine to safety. No KIAs. A genuine miracle. They've never met, but Piot's been in love ever since he heard it.

Clausse reads Piot's face. Before Brassy's close enough to hear, Clausse says, "Jesus. This fucking guy."

Brassy's top-heavy. Face red and open, waving a beer, wet smile splitting his face.

Jigsaw stands to shake hands, introduces Piot. Clausse sips his beer and looks elsewhere.

Brassy calls Piot "dude" and says, "Howya doin?"

Piot says, "I'm good to go, Corporal."

"Well, how 'bout that?" Brassy says, and laughs a bald laugh, a crowing that makes Piot jump back. Jigsaw grins. Piot beams.

Brassy puts a hand on Clausse's shoulder.

"And how 'bout this guy? Fucking *Ser-geant* Santa Clausse. Haven't had a chance to say congrats yet, brother."

Clausse stays square to the table when he reaches up to meet Brassy's hand, says, "Thanks, man. They pinned me about a month ago."

"Right on, right on."

"You were there."

"No doubt."

"Trust you're enjoying yourself?"

"Not as much as yourself, Claussy boy."

Piot watches Clausse. Reaches for his beer but doesn't pick it up. It's getting late. He's hungry and worried.

Brassy says, "Some fucking speech out there, huh?"

They look at him.

"The BC."

"We must've missed it," says Clausse.

Brassy puts his beer down and straddles it heavily with his hands as if the table might rise off the floor. He's making a shocked face. "You didn't fucking *hear* that shit?" His eyes are wild, scanning the three of them for the truth.

"Nope."

"Seriously?"

"Jesus."

"Holy fuck. It's good I found you. Not gonna believe this shit."

Piot asks if the BC said anything about where they're going and Jigsaw says, "Hey, man, what the hell?" Piot feels bad but really wants to know.

Brassy exhales with a whoosh and a smile. Shakes his head like a wet dog. He tells them how the Battalion Commander called a big school-circle a couple of hours ago. The whole battalion gathered round in the dark so he could pass the word directly.

"So the Colonel says he's got our mission order from the general and this and that. And then he says, 'I'll get to that in a second though.' I'm way in the back yelling '*Demobe*' like a fucking jackass," he pauses to crow again. "That's why I'm here, hiding out from First Sergeant."

"Come on, Brassy," Jigsaw says.

"I'm getting there, I'm getting there. This fucking guy. The Colonel gets in with the pep talking, right? Like he does. Says something like—he starts, says," and Brassy sort of shakes himself loose for the impression, chops the air slowly with a flat hand like that's where he keeps the battalion commander's voice. "He says, 'Now, I hear a lotta talk about reservists being *part*-time Marines, like it makes us not so good as *full*-time Marines. But I'll betcha my next paycheck, that a part-time burger flipper at McDonald's flips a burger just as good as a full-time burger flipper at McDonalds.'" Brassy's knees buckle and he doubles over, laughing with his cheek on the table, mouth red and drooping.

Clausse says, "He said that?"

His cheek still down, Brassy raises his arm, says, "Hand to God. Motherfucker said 'burger flippers.'"

Brassy's hair holds sweat in slender thorns on his temples. Piot watches and thinks the room is not that warm. His father would sweat the same way, cheeks beading, casting a damp shadow on their kitchen table.

"What about the mission, Brassy," Jigsaw says.

"Burger flippers?" says Clausse.

"Burger flippers, Santa. Fucking wish I coulda made that up."

"He called us part-time burger flippers?"

"Motherfucking burger flipping motherfuckers." Brassy's screaming now, attracting attention.

"Brassy." Jigsaw slaps the table. "Brassy. What did he say about our mission?"

"TQ, dude. Base security. Flipping burgers safe and sound. Snug as a bug in a Jacksonville rub n' tug." He did a little dance.

Piot's concerned and Jigsaw looks at him.

"Hey. Semper Gumby, right?"

Brassy laughs at that, and they all watch him. Piot braces again for Clausse to react, but Brassy sees something he likes and says, "Be right back."

They watch him saunter up to a trio of WMs at a pinball machine.

Clausse says, "Fucking clown."

"Is it true? The story about him?"

Clausse says, "He's no big deal. We were all there. Fucking clown. "

"You saw contact in Nasiriyah?" Jigsaw says. To Piot it sounds like an honest question until he sees Jigsaw's face. Clausse looks away.

They drink their beers.

"Just stay away from that guy, okay?" Clausse says to Piot. "He saved a couple guys, sure. He was just in the right place at the wrong time. Or vice versa. Doesn't matter. Doesn't make it okay to act like a jackass. Makes it worse, if anything. Gives boots like you the wrong idea. The CO ought to bust him down. Kick his ass out. Whatever."

Jigsaw eyes Clausse. "Why don't you tell us some more about getting yourself promoted?"

Clausse pounds the last of his beer and goes for another.

When he's gone, Jigsaw leans over to Piot and says, "It was more like a dozen guys." Jigsaw nods toward Clausse. "He's full of shit."

Piot has no answer so he nods. His face feels warm. He thinks about Sam. Whenever Piot calls home, he waits until it's late. Cell phones aren't allowed in the field, but Piot snuck a call or two, just to make sure Sam was OK. He'd let the phone ring once and hung up and waited for Sam to call back. When they talk, Piot tries to ask about Sam's honors classes and his plant terrarium, but Sam always cuts straight to demanding what Piot's been training on. He knows all the weapons' names and specs, wants to know what they feel like. Asks about the other guys. During his last call, Piot told Sam about how every Marine had only been allowed nine rounds each to fire from an automatic grenade-launcher—"the Mark 19," Sam says—and how it was hard to get anything on target or even hear the impacts 1500 meters away, but Sam was ecstatic, whispered into the phone with an urgency that stung. "Was it cool?"

Piot needed sleep. Sam could go all night, he knew. "Crazy town," Piot tells him, because what else could he do. Sam deserved the half-hour of sleep Piot couldn't spare. Sitting with Jigsaw now, he hopes for the first time that Sam has a better plan than enlisting.

Clausse returns with a beer and nobody says anything.

Eventually, Clausse says, "Guess the BC missed chow, too," and points.

The Colonel and the battalion Sergeant Major stand in line, looking stern and almost anonymous in the line of tan cammies. The BC's hair is cropped, like a graying skull cap, and he has his arms crossed and stares straight ahead. Next to him, the Sergeant Major's eyes scan the room, hands on his hips, until the Colonel leans over and says something to which the Sergeant Major nods quickly, replies, and they both allow a staid laugh.

Piot wants to get in line, too, but can't bring himself to speak up again.

Brassy returns, says the WMs he's been talking to are going to join them.

Clausse leans back in his chair with his shoulders flung wide and watches the girls. "Well done, Brassy, well done." He claps him on the shoulder. "They all set on drinks or are you grabbing a round?"

"Hold your reindeer, Santa." Brassy's looking at the Colonel. "The Grill Master himself."

"Brassy." Jigsaw puts a hand on his arm.

"What, me?" Brassy smiles, like he's being dared.

Jigsaw just looks at him. Piot's terrified. Clausse doesn't hear, still making his chest big and watching the WMs.

The Sergeant Major steps abruptly from the line and heads for a far, loud corner of the room. Brassy sees the opening. Piot's impressed with how steady he moves—in a straight line, beer balanced at his chest.

It's too loud to hear what Brassy says. The Colonel tips his head, listens.

"Jesus Christ," Jigsaw says. "We oughta to get out of here."

"What?" Clausse follows their gaze. "Oh. Fuck."

Piot understands vaguely that minor infractions, like unauthorized drinking, are amplified by proximity to larger ones, like gaffing off colonels, but he can't look away either. Brassy is swaying again. He mimes flipping burgers as the Colonel watches. Then Brassy thumbs at the food counter with the wet smile that makes Piot want to get up and run.

"See what I mean? A fucking clown."

"Maybe his beer is at least blocking his nametape."

The Colonel turns square to him now, unfolds his arms, points at Brassy's chest, and Brassy snaps to parade rest, spilling beer down the back of his trousers. The Colonel's voice rises over the din of the club, "…after you get my deck swabbed."

Brassy snaps to the position of attention and nods, smartly, then starts moving towards the front of the club where there's a mop caddy. As he passes the front door, he looks back at the Colonel once—Jigsaw and Clausse and Piot all curse—and runs out into the night.

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Back in the hooch, the rest of the platoon is racked out. Still three hours until reveille. He digs through his gear for a packet of cheese spread.

Outside he kneads it open and calls Sam. His father answers before he can hang up.

"Who the fuck is this?"

Piot's too scared to say anything. Pictures his father waiting in ambush over the phone.

"I said who in the hell's calling my house at three in the fucking morning?"

With the cheese packet in his teeth, Piot closes his phone as quietly as possible.

He lights a cigarette as a dark figure stumbles toward him and asks for one.

Piot stares up at him, holds the pack up.

Brassy says thanks and drops down beside him, pulling a lighter from his pocket. In the dim glow cupped in his hand, he almost looks sober.

"What time is it?"

"0024, Corporal."

"Bangarang."

Piot can't help smiling.

"Did the Colonel catch up with you?"

"Hmm?" In the dark, Brassy is still for a moment. "Oh, nah. Probably hear more 'bout that in the morning, though." He shrugs. "I dunno."

"So we're gonna be on TQ the whole time?"

"That's what they tell me."

"You're sure?"

Something occurs to Brassy, and he pauses to look at Piot, sizing him up. Piot pretends not to notice, just sits looking straight ahead.

"You're Jigsaw's kid, huh?"

"Yes, Corporal."

"Cut that shit out."

"Aye, Corporal."

Brassy takes a drag and exhales. "Jigsaw's good shit. You're lucky. Listen to him. Clausse, too."

Piot looks at him.

Brassy grins. His teeth are black-light blue in the moonlight.

"I know Clausse thinks his shit don't stink, but—fuck, man. I'm just saying don't listen to me."

Piot doesn't know what to say.

Brassy grins again. "Clausse don't like me much, huh?"

Piot says, "But aren't you like, proud? Of what you did over there?"

Brassy laughs. He looks around. His eyes settle on Piot's collar.

"You saved those guys, though, right? You got a medal?"

"Got lucky."

"Lucky?"

"It was easier than you think."

"You coulda got killed."

Brassy smokes and nods.

A minute passes. Brassy says thanks and leaves Piot sitting alone in the dark, twisting the cigarette filter between his fingers.

His phone rings.

"Is Dad still awake?"

"I'm not sure." Sam lowers his voice to a whisper. "I think so."

Piot could picture Sam's eyes on his closed bedroom door.

"Sorry it's so late."

"Think you'll get time to come home before you leave?" Sam offers to fly out there but they both know that won't happen.

"He'll never let you."

A beat passes. Piot feels his brother tearing up, feels the long winter's heavy air outside the house. Another beat passes.

"I don't care." Sam's voice is thick and quiet.

"Yeah," Piot says. "I know you don't."

> "This story started while I was reading 'Night Before Battle' by Hemingway. The scene anyway. I took that one—soldiers, strangers to each other, at a bar in a town adjacent to an ongoing battle—and tried to modernize it, put it in the context of today, borrowed here and there from stories I'd heard. Then it just sort of ran. Camaraderie's real, but it's messy. The mess doesn't always get enough play." —Dan Murphy

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Dan Murphy is a former Marine who lives and works in New York City with his wife and son. He's writing his first novel.

The Willows

Karl Nastrom

Before everything happened, when she was still almost faster and stronger than the boys, Alison Stenner came down the rise from the willows where the girls always played and beat Marty Haugen at football.

It was 1974 along the Minnesota River, out on the prairie. They were both eight.

Alison didn't want to make trouble, but she needed to teach Marty a lesson. Just last summer, she and Marty were such good friends. Riding their bikes around town, picking up other friends, grabbing candy from the corner shop. Then Marty started teasing. About her dad and his gimpy left leg, how it sagged off his body and hitched when he walked. Marty showed what he meant, mimicking Alison's dad, limping and dragging. Boys laughed along, which just made Marty's taunts feel meaner. Alison didn't understand how Marty could be so mean. She told him to stop. She begged, almost in tears. He laughed. "It's just a dumb joke. You gonna cry?"

Alison told her mom about Marty's teasing, but not what Marty said. She didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings, or get Marty in trouble. From the other room, from his chair in the corner, Alison's dad said, "Don't take that shit. Kick his ass."

"Stop that," her mom said. "She's not a boy."

"I know," her dad said. "She's my daughter."

Alison tried Marty again, but he kept on until she had no choice but to walk down the rise and onto the field where the boys clumped together, hunching over to draw plays in the dirt.

"One play, Marty," Alison said, kneeing his shoulder to get his attention.

"One play what?" Marty said, standing and stepping toward Alison.

The other boys got to their feet and gathered around.

"Football," Alison said. "Me and you. One play. So you'll stop teasing." She stooped and picked up a ball. She squeezed tight to stop her hands trembling.

Marty laughed like he was amused, but he dodged her eyes and looked side to side at the boys who stood staring. "Stop playing, Al," he said, using the name that he used when they played as friends. That made her so angry that her hands stopped shaking.

By then the rest of the girls had come down as well. The whole class was watching.

"I get the ball," Alison said.

"So?" Marty said.

"If I win, you stop teasing," Alison said.

"Yeah right," Marty said. "If I win, then you're a big baby who can't take a joke."

They looked at each other.

"You're gonna get hurt," Marty said.

Alison looked down at her hands that were holding the ball, holding tight, holding as hard as she could with her hands that were strong because she'd been practicing in the backyard for so long, not for football, but to hold the bat off her shoulder so her dad would go to the park and pitch underhand for her. He wouldn't take her unless she could handle the bat. He offered to buy a small model for her, but she wanted his, the bat he'd used before he went to Vietnam and his leg got exploded, when he was still almost good enough to go straight to the Yankees, straight out of high school. He'd been that great, people said. Like Mickey Mantle. Like God. Her dad never said what that was like, to be like Mickey Mantle and God. He didn't say much, mostly sat in his chair in the corner. She could tell he was sad, but he never cried. Once Alison asked why not. He said that she shouldn't cry either, that tears never did a damn bit of good.

On the dirt field where the boys always played while the girls were off in the willows, the boys made up the rules. They called it a game, but it wasn't. Alison got the ball. Six steps apart, she and Marty would run at each other. She'd get past Marty, or he'd drop her like a sack of potatoes. And she couldn't fumble. That was it, the boys said. The girls didn't argue.

She and Marty stepped off their paces. Someone said, "Go." They charged at one another. Marty was right, she'd get hurt. It didn't matter. She lowered her shoulder. When her head hit Marty's, Alison heard a loud crack inside her skull, like a bat hitting a ball. She saw stars. Not cartoon tweety-bird-on-a-blue-sky stars, but flat-black-filled-with-angry-stabbing-sharp-white stars. Her jumbled brains were about to explode. It was like dying, but worse. Alison bit her lip and stumbled forward seeing those stars, tasting blood in her mouth.

Her eyes cleared. She saw Marty sprawled in the dirt, face down, unmoving. She swallowed the blood and wanted to ask who'd won, but she began throwing up. She collapsed to her knees. Reaching to break her fall, she saw the ball slip from her grasp. So she'd won.

Things went fuzzy and dark. She awoke on a cot and saw a hand reaching down. It was her dad.

"It's okay, Peanut; I got you. I'll bring you in."

*

Five years later, Alison turned thirteen and barely thought about beating Marty Haugen at football to get him to shut his big mouth. Too much had happened, since that day at the willows. So many little leaves of sadness and hurt, browned and brittle and collecting, that Alison could crawl into the warm heart of the pile and sleep forever, if she had that chance and was willing to take it. Like her dad took it. Even her mom, tall and calm in the face of her own sadness, said Alison could stay home

from school on her birthday, if she wanted, in case she got sad. "It's okay to cry," her mom said, yet again. "You won't die, I promise."

Alison went to school, simply because mom had given her the option to stay home. Before her mom could give her a lecture, Alison stomped off, leaving the front door to swing in the wind. Her mom had no business saying what Alison should or shouldn't do now that she was practically grown. She'd be driving in three years, legally drinking in six. She'd chugged stolen beers with her friends a few times already, and as far as she knew, she was the first in her grade to learn how to roll her own joints.

She was fine through the morning at school, minding her lessons, not thinking at all. Then at lunch her mashed potatoes were lumpy. She picked up her fork to press out the lumps and was taken by a memory of her dad long ago, when she was small and not strong enough to fix her potatoes herself. So he did it for her. His big hand swallowed her hand wrapped around the fork handle. She got to watch from his lap while he smoothed out her spuds.

Alison felt tears coming on. She jabbed her arm with the fork. She shook her head side to side. The tears pushed. She didn't want to cry in the school cafeteria with everyone watching.

She saw Marty, two tables away, clowning with friends. He shoved an entire cheeseburger into his mouth and tried to drink milk through a straw. His mouth was too full to swallow or get any suction. Milk dribbled down his chin. Chunks of unchewed cheeseburger fell out. Alison almost laughed. At that moment, Marty was the only person in the world who could make her almost laugh, even when he didn't know she was looking. He didn't have to try. That's just how he was. Such a good friend.

But the effort it took to hold back the laughter brought her tears even closer to flowing over the edges that had been keeping them in. Alison bit the inside of her lip hard enough to taste blood. That didn't help either. She squeezed her eyes shut, tasting blood in her mouth. The tears were about to pour out.

She heard Timmy Jernigan. "Hey, everybody. Look at Alison." Alison hadn't talked to Timmy since fourth or fifth grade. There'd been no reason. Yet there he stood.

She opened her eyes.

"You cryin', Alison?" Timmy said. "Cry, baby, cry?" He squinched his face. He whimpered. He sniffled. He mimed baby hands at his face.

Alison could only watch Timmy. More tears gathered. But then she heard Marty, two tables away.

"What did you say, Timmy?" Marty's voice carried easily, the confidence of scrimmage calls and midfield directions gave his voice a commanding note, the cafeteria silenced.

She turned and saw Marty stand, then rush toward Timmy. Marty had grown up so fast. He was so big and strong now. At twelve, he played varsity football. He closed on Timmy so hard it was scary. "You teasing her, you little fuck? You gonna tease on her birthday?"

Timmy's eyes went wide. So did his mouth. But no words came out. Marty's fist hit Timmy's jaw so hard that it cracked, like a ball off a bat.

Alison swallowed the blood in her mouth.

Timmy spun around and went down like a sack of potatoes.

Marty stood, chest heaving, nostrils flaring, his hand stuck sideways, his wrist broken or worse. Alison wanted to go to Marty, to say something. To thank him. But she couldn't. Once she saw his wrist, she had to look away.

Before they found her dad in the garage, when Alison still almost believed he'd pull himself up and be okay, he told her about this kid Jerry Connor from Chicago who'd reached down from a helicopter and saved his life. "He brought me in, Peanut, hanging off that skid, or I never would have met you." Her dad said Jerry Connor had done that with a busted wrist. "That had to hurt like a mother, Peanut. Like a mother." Her dad said, "Maybe he shoulda just left me there." He tousled her hair. "Woulda been better for his wrist, at least."

"Dad, please don't say that," Alison said with a lump in her throat.

"I'm just teasing," her dad said. "It's a joke." He laughed like he was amused, but Alison saw that his eyes were all gone.

In the lunchroom, Alison looked back at Marty to check out his wrist, but she couldn't see. She was crying. With her class all around, she was crying, her tears filling and flowing, falling all over, all down her face and neck and soaking with snot into the front of her shirt. She was a mess. But it wasn't so bad after all. Maybe her dad hadn't wanted to cry, but that wasn't her. She wasn't her dad. She was his daughter.

Marty was another thing. The vice principal escorted him out like a criminal while the nurse triaged Timmy Jernigan, trying to revive him. Alison worried that Marty would get in big trouble—suspended or locked up or kicked out of football—and it would all be her fault.

Walking to class, she decided that her mom had been right. She should have stayed home. Yes, her mom was annoying, but Alison didn't really mind her.

At the same time, Alison wasn't about to have any heart-to-heart conversations with her mom. She might slide in for a hug, all soft and maternal, or fold her arms and say something parental. Worse, her mom might laugh. Her mom was sad, too, since her dad, but her mom always tried to keep laughing, more than Alison liked, as though her mom knew some private joke that she didn't bother explaining because Alison was too slow to get it, and, even if Alison got it, she wouldn't be able to laugh.

Her mom kept threatening that if Alison didn't lighten up a little, someday she'd die with a frown on her face.

That was no problem. Alison was ready. In the willows, when they were younger, the girls played a game they called dying. They lay on the ground without moving or smiling or crying. Frowning was

fine, as long as they kept the frown forever, like a painting or drawing. Kids took turns staying alive to say who was out. Last person dead was the winner.

After a while they quit playing because Alison won every time. Kids said she cheated, but that wasn't true. Alison won because dying never felt like a game. It was easy and natural, like a joke so good that she couldn't help but laugh on the inside until she'd been dead longer than the last girl alive.

> "I knew from the start that the story opens with a violent showdown that Alison wins. That took a few minutes to outline. Within days, I wrote most of the rest. I felt the semi-elation of almost-completion. Then I remained stuck for over two years, unable to locate the conclusion, until I allowed myself to question why I'd been so certain that Alison would always beat Marty in a heads up fight at the age of eight. Seeking that answer led me to a time before the story's beginning, at which point I could finally write an ending." —Karl Nastrom

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Karl Nastrom grew up in Minnesota and began writing in 1996, while stationed in Germany as a USAF intelligence officer. When not writing, Karl has represented clients as an attorney in federal, state, and tribal courts in Alabama, California, and Minnesota. He has also taught math at public high schools in Maryland and Mississippi. He currently lives in Minneapolis, where he works at the Indian Child Welfare Law Center, serving Native families involved in child protection. "The Willows" is his first published work of fiction. His website is: www.karlnastrom.com.

One More Day, Baby

Rachel Schmidt

A cramping pain in my lower back wakes me to the sound of thunder. The house is quiet except for the effects of the storm. Even my daughter, Greta, two years old and still waking every few hours each night, appears to be asleep. Another contraction squeezes the rounded mass of my belly and I groan, throwing off the blankets and shifting as if this is only a matter of positioning.

It feels like I only just fell asleep.

Already my mind is back to where I was before bed. An anxious spiral about Patrick's latest flight delay that fanned the panic from the previous four canceled homecomings. The scab-pulling thought cycle of where-the-fuck-is-my-husband and why-isn't-he-here? I don't even want to check my phone, an act so habitual that I'm forced to purposefully avoid it now. Because I don't want to hear that his flight to Dublin isn't just late but worse, not happening. That once again, he's not on a plane like he's meant to be.

I've been so annoyed with each new date, each pushed out reunion, that we've stopped Facetiming. The only communication I want is news that he's actually begun the journey home. I don't want to hear about how much his tent sucks. I don't want his impersonations of the other Airmen in his unit, especially not his version of the old civilian contractor whose voice is hoarse from years of cigarettes and sandstorms. Even Patrick's promises to take over all the childcare as soon as he's home, to change every diaper single-handedly, don't mean anything when I'm thirty-eight weeks pregnant and he's still not back.

The window rattles, rain smattering the glass under a gust of wind, and I worry that I'm about to get an alarm for another tornado warning. I rub my eyes with the heels of my hands and pretend that I'm home in Bangor. That my best friend isn't overseas and that all of my family is only a few blocks away. That I'm not stuck in the sticky south with its claustrophobic humidity and calligraphy Jesus-merch tee shirts.

I breathe into the next contraction. It's false labor, been happening for days. No reason to panic. With Greta, I had to be induced after forty-one weeks. And the OB checked me not even four days ago. One centimeter dilated, putting me on the same course as my last pregnancy. A late delivery.

And Patrick will be here. He will. He should already be en route to Dublin, where he'll hang out for a few hours before the next long leg. He'll make it in time to help me deliver our second born. And Mom's flight comes in three days. She'll be able to stay with Greta.

I rally myself by tracing each eyebrow with the edge of my thumb and then check my phone, hopeful that this time will be different. That this time there won't be an apology message, or some ill-advised plea for flexibility and patience. Instead, there's only a black screen. The unlock button is unresponsive. It makes no sense that the phone is dead, it's plugged in. I bend further away from the bed, checking the wall. The USB male connection lies on the floor. The female connection attached to the wall an empty, bottomless canal that mirrors the hollowing between my legs. My center of gravity is shifting all over again.

Another wave of tightening and I grit my teeth. I need to walk this off. To move.

Once the pain becomes a manageable soreness, I swing my legs to the edge of the bed and push off. Maneuvering my belly around the table, I plug the cord into the wall charger, reuniting male and female and thus, the closest thing I've had to sex in months. It takes a moment for the green power indicator to flicker on.

After it does, I stretch, leaning from one side to the other.

The rain abates as I make my way to the main portion of the house. Away from the windows, the house is silent except for the background hum of the air conditioning. My toes spread against the cool, hard tile. A welcome and yet unwelcome reminder of my swelling feet.

I walk until I reach Greta's room. She sleeps starfished across the small mattress, her Daddy Doll, a bullet-shaped pillow with Patrick's photo printed onto the soft canvas, peeking through the rails of her crib. I consider leaving him stranded there but then tuck him closer to her. I wish I could lay down next to her. To somehow push the curls off her forehead without waking her, breathing her in and fusing our bodies together once more. Both my babies a part of me, all three of our heartbeats thrumming in time together. Before I disturb her, I back away, closing the door behind me as gently as I can manage.

I don't make it far before another contraction hits. Steadying myself on the wall, I count as if trying to determine how far away the storm outside truly is. One Mississippi, inhaling and exhaling long and slow on each -iss. Two Mississippi. Thunder rattles the house, mocking my attempt at control.

If this is labor, then the biggest issue will be deciding what to do about Greta. At the last prenatal appointment, after the OB had checked for dilation and measured my belly, she had gestured toward her.

"What are you going to do with this one?" the doctor asked. "She can't be with you during the birth. Not without supervision. And even then, I don't recommend it."

"My mom's coming into town," I said. "And my husband is coming home soon. He'll watch her if the baby comes early."

"You'd give birth alone?"

I shrugged. As long as Greta was taken care of, I'd do what I had to.

"And what if you go into labor before your mom arrives, and before your husband returns?"

"That won't happen."

"Say it does."

"Then I'll call a friend."

I'd said it simply, like that was the most obvious answer. As easy as picking up the phone and dialing. If the doctor noticed that my cheeks were flushed, my voice too wavering to be sincere, she didn't say. She probably thought I was just growing flustered at the thought of going to the hospital alone. Worried that my husband might not get back in time. How was she to know that her question was salt on the wound of my isolation? How was she to know that the military community pictured in films, wives gathering daily, people introducing themselves with baskets of baked goods, all of it, is actually a product of luck and not routine?

And I haven't been lucky here. I've had to smile and pretend to relate to women who bless my heart after I tell them I wish I was working. Who try to convince me that time flies too fast to spend it worried about the three-year gap in my resume. That this is time with Greta I'll never get back.

When we bought our house, the realtor called the neighborhood military friendly, and I hoped we'd meet other young families. But after living here a year, the only other uniform we've seen is the cop's across the street. And friendly extends to our next-door neighbor whose eye darting, lip-licking hello initially prompted me to scan the local sex-offenders listing site for his photo.

Sometimes I drive Greta to base around dinnertime for another walk around the track. My husband assures me that with the cop across the way it'd be safe here as well. But I don't feel comfortable walking Greta alone when, as soon as the sun begins to set, our neighborhood is perfumed by pot. The house responsible for the smell is frequented by a steady exchange of cars whose subwoofer beats pound behind my eyes, setting my teeth on edge.

Another contraction takes hold and I brace myself against the archway leading into the kitchen. It has to have been at least five minutes since the last. That's good, in bed they had seemed much closer together. And by now, my phone should be charged.

Wind makes the maple tree out back groan, loud enough that I can hear it beyond the walls of the dining room. I pause, breathing out, trying not to let my imagination run wild. Lightning turns the kitchen windows into squares of light before a boom rattles them back into darkness. A click and the green digital clock above the stove goes out. The faint hum of the AC stops. Silence.

And then another contraction. Surely, my phone has some charge to it by now. I need to call someone to help with Greta. Gripping either side of my lower back, kneading as if I could simply massage the pain into submission, I walk back to the room.

Worst case scenario, I'll have enough battery life to call for help. I can drive myself to the hospital after I call the commander's wife. Leadership is always obligated to help. And although I don't know her super well, Patrick likes her husband, quick to tell me how much he respects the man's leadership. If he trusts him, I can trust her. At least for the day that I'd need her. Because Patrick will be home to take over tomorrow. He will. He must.

Twice, I stop to breathe through the pain, holding my belly and moaning. By the time I reach the nightstand, it's like I'm straddling a beach ball. I'm sure the contractions are less than three minutes apart. I reach for the phone. My battery is at five percent.

Before I can do anything with it though, I need the bathroom. It can't wait. I furniture surf through the darkness, hugging the wall and blinking away the image of giving birth over the toilet. The rain returns with a vengeance, pounding the roof.

Back in the room, the phone is down to four percent. But at least Patrick has texted, reporting that they boarded the military flight that would take them into Dublin. Celebratory GIFs featuring champagne bottles pop and froth across the screen. In another, sports fans sink to their knees in the bleachers, fists raised in tear-streaked gratitude for the win. I try to take heart in his optimism.

Tightness redoubles around my middle. Animated texts continue to flash across the screen. I close my eyes and consider my options. I've handled everything all by myself for so long. Too long. I don't want to have to do this alone too. I don't want to get into the car and risk giving birth in the dirt on the side of the road, Greta screaming from her car seat because I woke her up the one night she finally decided to sleep. I don't want to call a near-stranger to come to my house and care for my baby. I don't want to do all of that just to find out that labor is going to last thirty hours like last time. Contractions punctuate every single one of these thoughts.

I breathe out, long and slow, giving myself one more minute to dwell in the misery of my decision fatigue. When I open my eyes, I message Patrick back without pictures or fanfare, without the accusatory language I'd like to use. Only the truth. I'm having a lot of contractions.

The text stays marked as delivered. Not yet read.

My eyes burn and I gulp my next breaths. Typing it is easier than saying it aloud. I think I'm having this baby. I don't say what I want to say. That he's supposed to be here. That as the father, as my partner, he's obligated to be here.

The screen goes black again.

I've wasted what little battery life there was. Now, I'll have to wait until the power returns to call for someone to watch Greta.

I don't know what will happen if I just skirt the rules and bring her with me. I'm confident it'd be illegal for the hospital to turn us away. But what if they did?

Pelvic pressure forces me to arch my back. My cheeks are hot. I'm not prepared when the sob rips out of me. A loud wail that I put my hand to mouth to stifle. Greta is still asleep in the next room over. I bite into the skin of my knuckles. When Patrick and I had given ourselves a narrow window to try for this pregnancy, it was specifically to avoid this.

I want Patrick here, like we planned. I want my mother. Any of the people that are supposed to help me, care for me, love me.

Several clicks sound and the HVAC turns back on, the house groaning as air begins to pump through the ductwork in the walls. I sit beside the bed, propped over my phone, watching, waiting, for the lock screen photo of Patrick and Greta reading together to reappear.

"Please," I say. "Please."

It takes three minutes and two contractions.

As soon as the phone lights up, I call the commander's wife. No answer. I hadn't told her that I might be calling in the middle of the night. No one agreed to be available, to be on standby for a desperate, late night call. I've been cavalier with my snobbery and independence.

I call her again. Nothing.

I call another of the officer's spouses, this one a working spouse. We bonded over both being in the medical field. Then she found out that I'm now a stay-at-home. A *dependa* with only baby stories to talk about, just like all the other Bless-Your-Hearts. I'm sure she would never be caught in a situation like this, with limited options for people to call, and no one on hand two weeks before a due date. She's self-sufficient, confident. Probably flush with friends from work. I hang up before the voicemail message ends.

There isn't anyone else I can think of.

A pop at the very base of my belly, an overcurrent that sizzles, sweeping my body, silences my worry. It takes an extra second to recognize that my underwear and shorts are soaked, water snaking down my leg and puddling on the floor between my feet.

The next contraction is torture. I lean into the bed, waiting for it to relent before I position myself so that my elbows rest on the mattress, my pregnant belly hanging above the ground. My knees wobble. I fight through it to remain upright because I have to find someone to take care of Greta. But how can I do what's best for both my babies?

If I dial 9-1-1, will the EMTs deliver me at home? Allowing Greta to sleep until her usual six-thirty wakeup time? They'd want to take me to the hospital after though, and I'd still be forced to find a place for Greta to stay. Someone to come pick her up.

Desperate now, I call the squadron commander's wife again.

Before I hear a ring, everything mutes and all I can think is that I need to push. My body is beyond my control. I lower to my knees and drop onto my butt, scooting until I am against the wall and facing the bed, rocking back onto my hips and inching my feet so my knees point upward.

The need to push ebbs. I drag myself back to the bed on my side, pulling the comforter down until it hits the floor, the section that wraps around my phone falling with a loud *thunk*. I call emergency services and, gritting my teeth and crying out, pull the comforter between my legs. I tug the bottom half of my clothes off.

"I'm having a baby," I say to the cool-voiced operator. "My water's broken and I've got to push. I'm pushing."

The operator keeps talking but I drop the phone. Their voice is tinny from the ground. I grab behind each of my knees, pulling my thighs into myself and bellow, an animal on some nature documentary.

"Patrick!" I cry his name between breaths. As if he could somehow hear me, up in the air and flying over Belgium, the Channel, across the belly of England to Dublin, where he'll land and have only the one Guinness, wanting to break the half-year enforced sobriety, but assuring me that despite the long layover, he'll be level-headed and available the second he lands. He should be here now. Available now. He'd said he was coming home days ago. Weeks ago. Eyes blurry from crying, my nose running and mirroring the sticky release from between my legs, I call out for him again.

"Mama?" Greta's voice carries through the house. "Mama?"

"I'm okay," I sob. "I'm okay." I grunt into the next push, demanding myself to stay quiet, desperately hoping that my toddler will go back to sleep.

The phone buzzes against the floor.

I fumble, pawing along until I find it. It's the commander's wife, calling me back. I manage to answer, repeating my address and some nonsense that sinks into puddled pleases.

A pounding on the door. Muffled voices shouting to ask if anyone is home. Greta's cries transfer to the background when the world kaleidoscopes behind the back of my eyelids. I focus on the tunneling need to bear down. I scrunch my face and hold my breath, squeezing my abdominal muscles with all the force I can muster. Mashing my stomach as if I can accordion myself in, and the baby out.

A ripping crack from across the house and now the voices from before are loud. Calling out. Asking where I am.

On the next release, I'm aware that the bedroom lights are on. A man is kneeling in front of me, his head blocked by my contorted belly.

A searing sensation stretches me. I throw my head back. Gloves snap.

"Nearly there," the man says.

"My daughter," I moan. "My husband's deployed. He'll be home tomorrow."

"The baby's coming," he says.

I push and shout as my face bunches. My teeth chattering.

"Greta is in her crib," I say. "She's awake."

"My colleague is with your daughter."

A cramping force detaches my mind from me. I float above the whole scene. My body is below, blood and shit staining the comforter that we'd bought last Christmas, the EMT's hands cupped before my stretched vagina. Made full and solid by my baby's crowning head. Another EMT takes

readings from a blood pressure cuff wrapped round my right upper arm and taps onto a handheld iPad. I want to leave this behind. To get to Greta and make sure that someone really is with her.

Pain wrenches me back to myself. I'm dizzy and increasingly aware that I can't do this. Not alone. Not without Patrick. "I can't."

"You can," says the EMT.

I set my jaw, grinding my teeth. Fixated on his mouth. A small circle forming the word, push.

"Now," he says. "You're almost there."

I do. Without any more thought of Greta, whether she is okay, or whether I can carry this alone, I lean into what is required of me. I push, cleaving myself from my doubts, one body into two, leaving all else behind but the matter at hand.

> "This story started as a simple what-if from when my husband was deployed and I was heavily pregnant with our second child. However, while writing, I found myself needing to use the worst-case situation to reflect my frustration with the disparity between the label, dependent, or worse, *dependa,* and the independence, sacrifice, and resilience of so many of the military spouses I've had the honor of meeting and befriending." —Rachel Schmidt

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Rachel Schmidt is a registered nurse and military spouse. She holds an MA in Writing from Johns Hopkins University and has been published by *Bath Flash Fiction* with work forthcoming in *Winged Penny Review* and *Flash Fiction Magazine*.

VISUAL ARTS FEATURE

INTERVIEW WITH CARL GOPALKRISHNAN
VISUAL ARTIST

When we first sat down with Carl Gopalkrishnan to discuss his visual arts submission to *Collateral*, we had more questions than time allowed us to ask. Carl's work as an artist strives to confront multiple identities—his own, and the interdependent, always-shifting identities of human culture—in ways that are open, vulnerable, and unafraid of the ugliness or uncertainty of what it means to survive on this war-stricken planet in the twenty-first century. His perspective as a queer Chinese-Indian-Australian born in England (with an acknowledged reputation as a 'war artist') informs his interest in the spiritual, mythological, and psychological ways the human family has less to divide it than it has in common. He speaks to the artistic struggle against censorship, particularly as it affects marginalized artists, and the control nations have and would like to have over publicly acceptable art.

We began at the beginning, and we got as far as we could, for now. Here are the highlights.

Collateral: How and when were you initially drawn to the visual arts?

Carl Gopalkrishnan: I've been drawing and painting since before I learned to write, like most kids, but for me it continued as my primary expression, I suppose. I thought visually before I thought in words. I was a very interior child. [My family] travelled a lot, and I think constantly changing cultures, languages, and places confuse some kids. It's exciting of course, but also confusing, so my inner life was where I went to process the world from a very young age.

[My high school] was a catholic boys' school, not a great place for me, and not supportive of creatives. Again, retreat into my interior visual life and making art. I dropped out of high school and fell in with some musicians and other artists during the early 1980s. The 1980s were fun but dangerous; it was the AIDS crisis, and being gay was illegal. The city I lived in (Perth in Western Australia) was also experiencing a right-wing anti-Asian terrorism spree of Chinese restaurant bombings that made international headlines. This was less than a decade after the dismantling of the White Australia Policy, so we were early migrants during that time, and I had to go to school in that atmosphere, with swastika stickers at the bus stop. After dropping out of school at 15, I did a work experience at a publishing wing of the Education Department as an illustrator at age 16. Traditional pen and ink, painting, drawing, and that inspired me to enroll the next year in the local graphic design course at the technical college.

In 1984, fine art and commercial art sat in the same course; this is before computers, so it was design-oriented with bits of live drawing thrown in, and art history, and making tv ads, and writing copy, and designing packaging. I was drawn to typography, but I was known as "that fine arty" kid,

because my designs were so painterly. At home, I started painting in earnest from about age 18 and never stopped. But I never thought of myself as an "Artist" because of that course. I was terrible in advertising, hated the environment, so I worked in fashion textiles in Melbourne in 1989, painting at home still. Returning to Perth, I went to get one of [my works] framed, and the gallery loved it; they offered to throw me a solo exhibition for free and that's how I started out.

My inspirations at the time were numerous. As a designer we were all obsessed with the UK magazine *The Face*. Typography and fonts were very hip back then. My teachers were older, traditional, Bauhaus-influenced designers. My typographer lecturer was a control freak trained in Basil, Switzerland. I didn't meet many painters till I left design school, but I was a fan of Friedensreich Regentag Dunkelbunt Hundertwasser, the Austrian artist and architect. I loved the surrealists, and Miro, and developed a real passion for Outsider Art, which was also called Art Brut. So, I was limited in my early exposure. Then I started working as a gallery assistant at a small avant garde gallery in Perth called Bridge Gallery, where I first exhibited, and that is where I learned more about painting from generous older painters who were happy to talk to me and share their techniques.

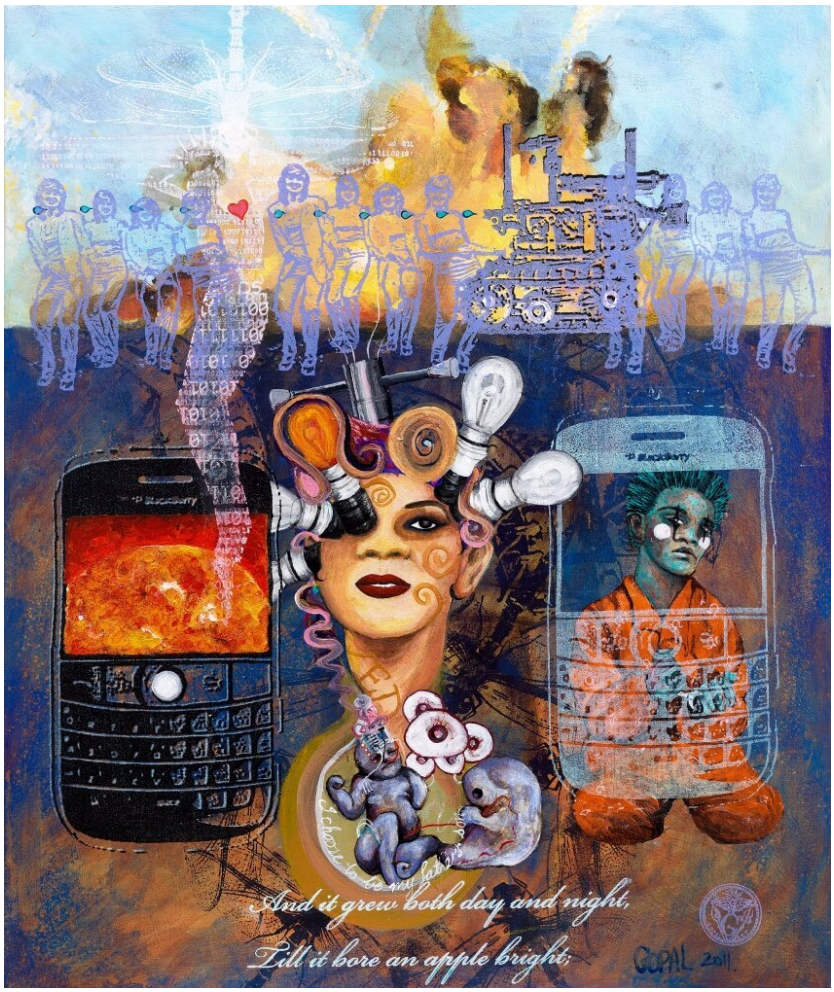
Life was slower in the 1980s; people took more time to research and reflect, and they took ages before making marks on the canvas, or scratching marks into their etching plates. It all felt slow and deliberate. That is the best education really. I never use the design stuff, but I use a lot of those older processes and materials today in my own art. I prime my canvases with gesso at least eight times and sand it down. I always allow layers to cure/dry, because I use acrylic and it's not about making acrylic paint look like oils. Acrylic paint is a lot more multifaceted and layered. I've worked with it for over 35 years now, and I keep stretching it. I keep teaching myself. I also created my own process in terms of the research. I was more drawn to history, philosophy, psychology, and literature, and I now integrate performance into the painting process.

Over time, art has merged into who I am; I use artistic processes in all areas of my life, so the division between my art and my various day jobs isn't always clear. I have this intuitive capability that art gives me what I need in all areas of my life. All areas of my life and the world then bleed back onto my canvas, so I don't keep my art in a little box. It's the entire way I see the world and live my life.

Collateral: You've said that you began to confront war and conflict in your art post-9/11. What were you hoping your art could do then? Has that hope changed or crystallized over the past 23 years?

Carl Gopalkrishnan: I think we were all in shock at the changes to the world after 9/11; a lot went downhill, and a lot remained "normal". Around 2003, I started some small drawings after taking a break from art, and it was just there, for me, this post-9/11 reality. It made me ask questions, and then I started reading books, poems about war (at first, those of Wilfred Owen, T.S. Eliot, Herbert Read, as well as ancient Chinese and Greek poems, and Nikolay Mayorov's "We Are Not Blessed") and then reading a lot of research papers from the Pentagon because technology was changing so fast. Drones were just becoming a thing, and we had all failed to stop the war in Iraq with demonstrations across the world. So we were at war again (after the Gulf War) in Iraq, and we now know that our involvement was based on false information. So that was the era. And artists soak up the era.

In Australia, there was a huge wave of censorship in the arts, and artists being questioned, exhibitions closing down, art being vandalised. Artists express what they see and feel, and when that isn't politically convenient, we are easy scapegoats. Since 9/11, Australia has legislated the most counter terrorism legislation in the world, to the point that it has changed the national cultural identity. Australia and America, as allies, have a long cultural history, and as a person of colour, a lot of us were impacted by Islamophobia even if we weren't Muslim, because so much of the post-9/11 wars have this racial element that continues today. So, in a climate of censorship, and as an artist just wanting to make art, I was challenged to find new ways to speak about this. I learned a lot from this censorship, and I studied war doctrines, policies, and technology in order to be as relevant to the times as I could.



"War Porn" from *Hitting the Target (acrylic and screenprint on canvas)*

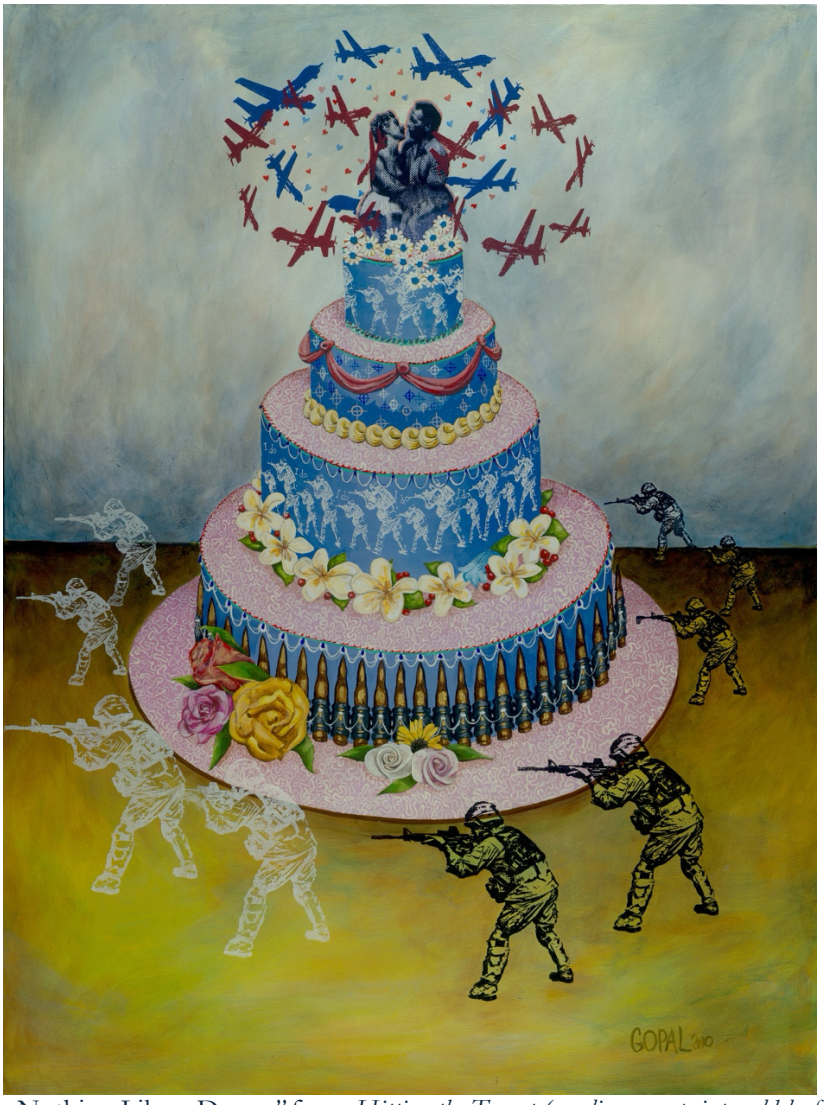
I also studied my family history more and I could not get away from the experiences of my mum and dad, as children of the Pacific War and Japanese occupation. Lots of horror there, and intergenerational trauma in my family and among their friends. So I began to see patterns of stories, and I began to hear the cultural, religious, even cinematic Hollywood stories about those wars. That led me to read more, and to interview more veterans. That process itself was difficult; not all of them were healthy people. I learned about the failure of our militaries to properly re-integrate soldiers to civilian life and how that spirals into a range of other social problems. I think art, at the end of the day, allows for creative and unconventional ways of asking questions that policy, psychiatry, and psychology just don't have the tools to deal with.

It has occurred to me that the original aims of war artists from the two world wars have frequently been distorted in favour of military involvement in many ways. In Australia it became a 'thing' for artists to become embedded (like journalists) into the military in very controlled ways, given basic training, and not encouraged to paint the full picture, but paint formal portraits that celebrate doctrine instead of excavating the full, uncomfortable truth of war: those truths I was getting from

my parents, from my ethnic community families in my job, from former soldiers who had no qualms about telling a curious artist about the realities of war.

Civilian stories were being cut out, or became background collateral, necessary to telling a particular military story. Creativity was coopted to wash over mistakes, fears, fuckups, bad doctrines, bad calls, bad people. They were rewarded as celebrity artists in their camo cargo pants in magazine spreads, holding their guns and brushes in the same hand. That's when I started seeing my paintings as a form of 'war art' from a civilian perspective, from a cultural viewpoint, and my work has been exploring the depths of that idea for about the last 24 years.

My hope was to redefine 'war art' away from this misuse of 'war artists' being recruited for the military PR payroll. Has it been affective? Who can say.

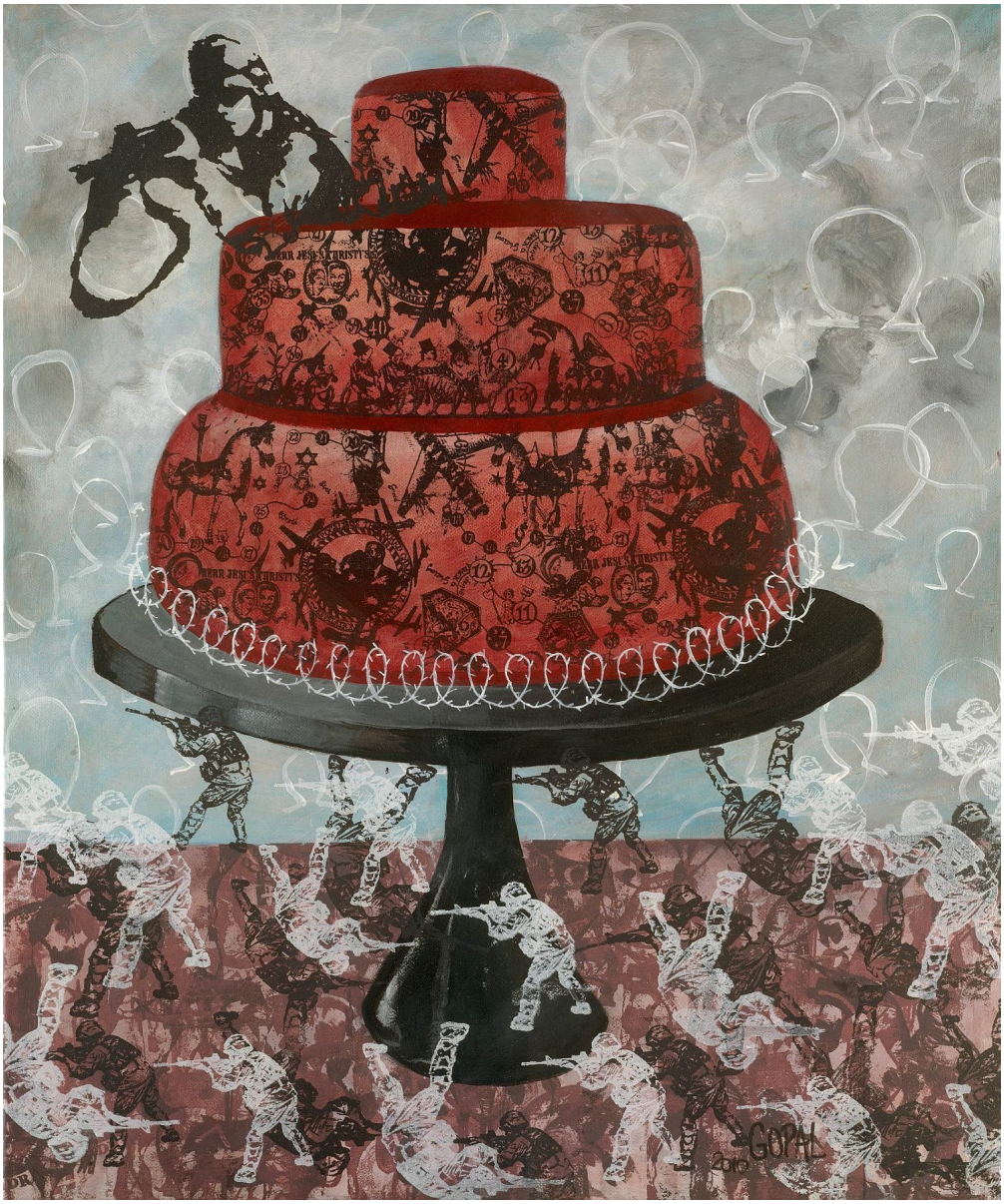


"There Is Nothing Like a Drone" from *Hitting the Target (acrylic, screenprint, gold leaf on canvas)*

In 2012, I was invited to contribute to a high-level workshop in the UK centered on drones and international intervention and I think it did open the minds of some people to the cultural politics of international conflict. They were unusually open-minded, but some of them were pretty high-level

players. But I don't think even they were listened to with their concern about the normalisation of targeted killing and assassinations, and the way international law and the rules of war have become so abused to the point of breaking down the entire post-World War 2 international framework.

I think where Gaza is today and the damage being done to our expectations of both what is a *just war* and a *just prosecution of war*, it didn't just happen over the past year. It began two decades before and can be traced to the world's reaction to the CIA "enhanced interrogation" programs at Guantánamo Bay; and when President Obama's Attorney General Eric Holder advocated for targeted assassinations without judicial review to kill terrorist operatives overseas even if they were American. That made everyone's jaw drop. That is when I saw the love affair between America and the rest of The World pause. And it was a love affair but it's over.



"Gaza Wedding" from The Assassination of Judy Garland *(acrylic, screenprint on canvas)*

I did a painting where I saw the statecraft between the nation-state of America and the nation-state of Israel as the marriage from the 1952 Hollywood musical *A Star is Born* with Judy Garland and James Mason. Mason's character, Norman Maine, is a top Hollywood star and alcoholic on his way down, while Judy Garland's Esther Blodgett is rising. The American Jewish interfaith magazine *Tikkun* featured me as their Artist in 2011 and interviewed me about that and other paintings through their values of *Tikkun Olam,* which is Hebrew for 'repairing the world'. I have always thought of the politics in my art not as politics, but as a landscape for the subconscious myths and stories that drive them. If I could help people to see those stories, and to own them, then it might give them the courage to try to change those stories. It might also inform de-escalation strategies between "enemies" and expand creative thinking of military minds so they could invent better options to fight asymmetrical urban wars than by obliterating all civilian infrastructure.

In that sense, and not being Jewish myself, I felt then and still do that my art is as much a part of the Jewish *Tikkun Olam* as it is of the social justice values innate within Christianity or Islam and indeed most of the Eastern religions from my own cultural heritage here in the Asia-Pacific.

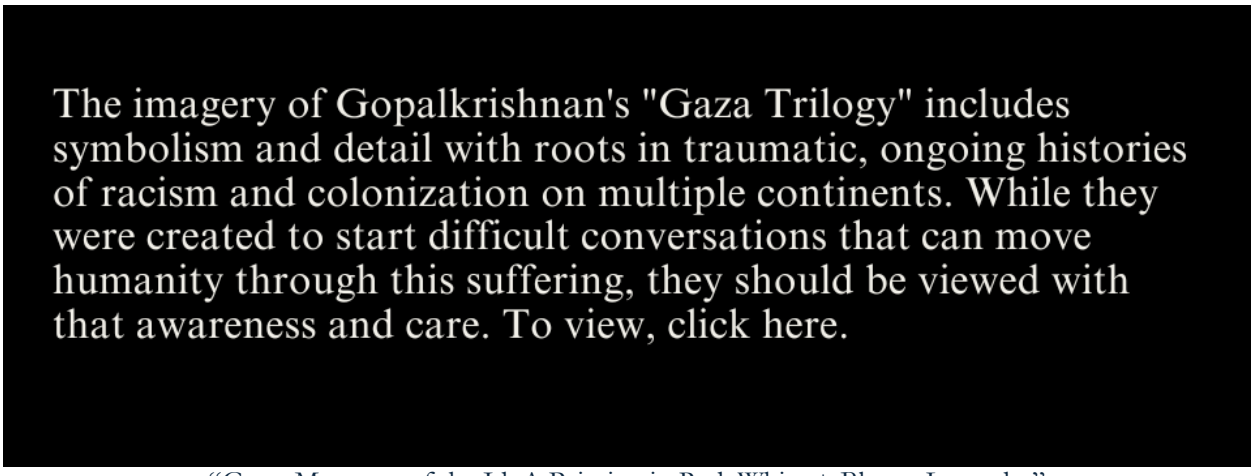
Collateral: How did the Gaza Trilogy begin? What sustained it?

Carl Gopalkrishnan: Like the whole world, I have been a witness to the wars in Gaza for some time. It was the war in 2008 when I felt it cut into my consciousness as an artist, while I was dealing with the post-9/11 years. I was exploring American exceptionalism, and how the wars of 9/11 were affecting that creative legacy of literature, film, art, and self-identity. When I say affecting, I mean damaging the soul of the American psyche, which has nurtured all this amazing soft power creativity and reshaped the world in its own image. So, it was about how I saw America losing its creative spirit, and I think my motive was to warn against this.

The three paintings I did for the Gaza Trilogy were, for me, a continuation of that storytelling and warning. I suppose I think less about my "imaginal" process and more about the ideas people ask of me. I have always, from a very young age, experienced strong images and sensations in my imaginings that have stayed with me into adulthood. The less safe word for it would be "visions." I think in a secular, science-oriented society, we like to downplay, or suggest that what is non-explicable to science is not 'reasonable' and therefore not legitimate, even in art. That is quite different, I think, as you move between different parts of the world and outside the western framework where I live in the Asia-Pacific. So faith-based can be ideas of the intellect, or actual experience, and Art made from that also is shaped by those different ways of seeing the world.

For me, having strong feelings that become clear vivid images and statements from my mind, or completed essays that literally "download" without much intervention from me, is normal. In psychology, the closest I have found to explain my process is the work of American imaginal-psychologist Mary Watkins, and two of her books which not entirely, but somewhat, explain my process in our rational language: *Waking Dreams* (1976) and *Invisible Guests* (2015).

I've written previously about each of the Gaza Trilogy paintings. Here are some excerpts from those essays [edited for *Collateral*]:



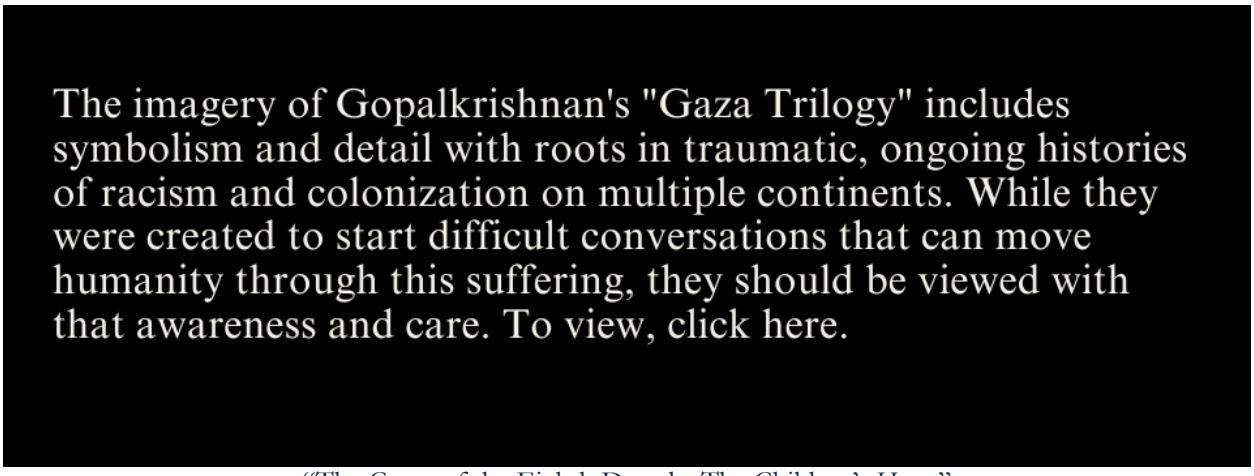
"Gaza, Monsters of the Id: A Painting in Red, White + Blue = Lavender"

"In each painting Gaza's children are dead, but dead in different ways. In my first canvas, 'Gaza, Monsters of the Id: A Painting in Red, White + Blue = Lavender,' the children are in blue plastic body bags, which surely isn't where most have ended up, since many will never be recovered from under the rubble. Many will die from disease and damaged organs, from poor amputations without anesthetic, perhaps years after a ceasefire, without their deaths ever being counted. In this painting the bombing is happening, but we don't see this reality. Instead we see metaphors. Those witnessing this genocide are becoming either desensitised from too many videos from Gaza, or they are refusing to see, speak or think that a genocide is occurring. We are splitting into tribes, for and against. Our societies are fragmenting. Friend against friend. Colleagues against colleagues. Family against family.

There is a reference to ancient religious prophecy in my use of symbols from ancient amulets and cultural artifacts of colonisation such as the golliwog doll. A difficult focus of my painting is the line of blue plastic improvised 'body bags' tied up at the head & feet of unidentified/unclaimed Palestinian corpses. They form a horizon separating & connecting both the physical war from the spiritual & mythological war (or the Underworld).

The dogs of war here become one big dog of war backgrounded by a mythical beast—our subconscious Ids—covered with ancient symbols and letters. The beast has become an amulet in itself, mirroring the fears of ancient Christianity, Judaism and Islam. These religions with angels and demons, Satans and Gods, prophecies and doctrines have difficult relationships with their magical, mystical and supernatural elements. Superstition is the bleeding of this relationship from the Underworld into our social media.

We have inherited these split personalities, but we do not own them, and as a result they still control our narratives of war and peace. Similarly, when we program Artificial Intelligence (AI) with our own limited beliefs and doctrines of faith, they will act as we do. Like Israel's US funded and developed AI targeting system named Lavender, it will repeat our human histories of war. The painting is themed in the colours of red, white and blue which, when combined, also create the colour lavender."



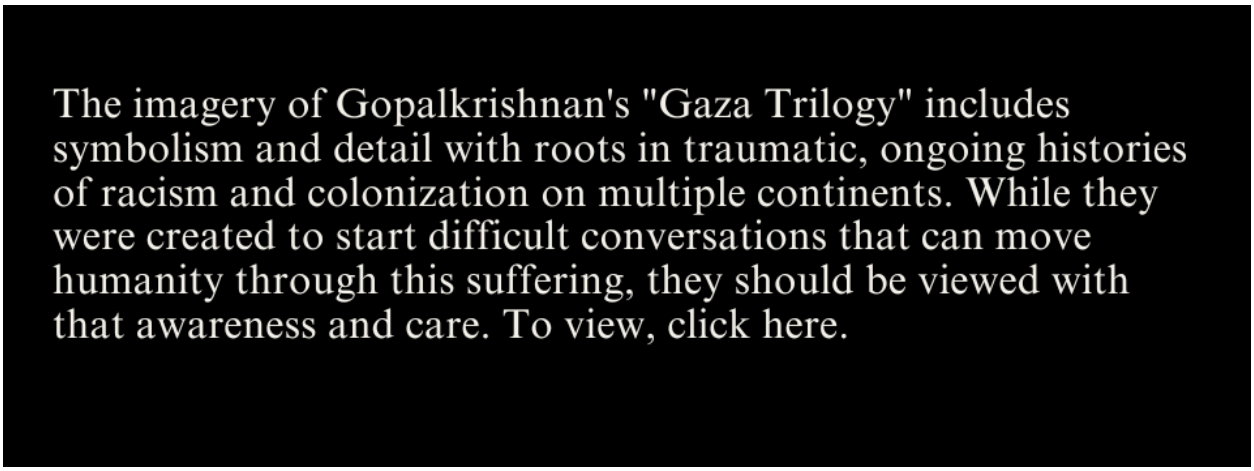
"The Curse of the Eighth Decade: The Children's Hour"

"In 'The Curse of the Eighth Decade: The Children's Hour,' the children trapped under the rubble and buried in plastic are decomposed, their eyes the only representation of their past identities. The drama is always occurring twofold, as represented by figures above and below the horizon. It is the political drama above The Underworld of subconscious thoughts and ideas embedded in religious doctrine such as The Mishnah and its reference to a Red Heifer, the essential character in the Curse of the title.

The curse refers to the destruction of the third Temple of Israel and groups of Jews, evangelical Christians and Muslims who carry deep fears around this narrative. The central thesis of the curse is a contested hilltop in Jerusalem and desire to rebuild an ancient temple on which the Islamic shrine The Dome of the Rock now stands.

When I looked further into this curse, I found varieties of interpretations but a powerful belief across all faiths which I didn't expect to see in 2024. Muslims, Jews and Evangelical Christians remain tied to each other through this mythic story, so it seemed an important story to paint specifically in the town of Rafah. As neither Jew nor Muslim but from a multifaith life experience, the Third Temple seems not only a physical building and place of worship, but a renewal of identities exhausted by false promises of atonement for past trauma. Our concepts of God need to be equally renewed because they are killing us.

I am deeply disturbed by how the language of purification repetitively precedes genocides throughout human history. In my painting, the dogs of war return, carrying the weight of our imagined Jesus. Like him we watch and recognise the precursors to previous cycles of trauma, pain and revenge. We watch medical aid get blocked, allied countries watch powerlessly and we ask, as Jesus foresaw himself in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Lord, why hast thou forsaken us?" In the smoke-filled skies plague doctors from the Middle Ages reach out to pierce medical workers in Rafah. The scenes of destruction evoke equal horror from Jewish people of conscience and devout scholars who ask, *where is the Judaism we know?*"



"American Mnemosyne: A Valkyrie of Atonement"

"'American Mnemosyne: A Valkyrie of Atonement' evokes other religions in other times in the form of the ancient Greek goddess of memory, Mnemosyne, and her nine muses. It is set in the future, after a Gaza ceasefire has passed many years. The horizon again reminds us that the past is ever with us, with clear fields of soft green leaves washing away the memories of the Gaza genocide.

But a Valkyrie descends from the sky, and we are mesmerised and caught initially in her role as a guide of dead soldiers to Valhalla to fight another day. She is also the goddess of memory Mnemosyne in disguise with her nine muses. Though decomposed and lost, Gaza children recognise the Muses and see them as teddy bears: pastel, warm, friendly and kind. Unbeknownst to the children, she is also the American holder of Military Memory.

The Valkyrie/Mnemosyne is inspired by a likeness to the author Elizabeth D. Samet to intentionally evoke her thesis, *Looking for The Good War*, which unpacks the power of creativity and storytelling in the arts to affect how we feel about the past to change the present.

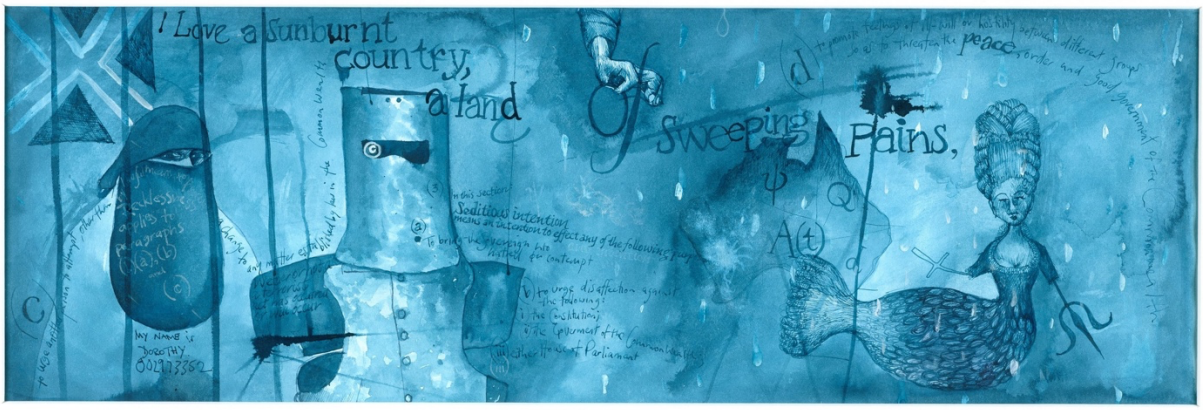
In this imaginary future, America now has memory, and knows it is complicit in these children's deaths. The Goddess of Memory brings not politics, ideology or doctrine to the killing fields of Gaza, but the liberal arts and the poets to heal their souls. She brings the muses of music, theatre, writing, epic poetry, dance and tragedy and comedy. She brings the knowledge of science and the stars. She knows that memory and pain can only be forgotten through repetitions of joy, creativity and love."

Collateral: What do you hope this work can do?

Carl Gopalkrishnan: I hope the viewer of these paintings can reflect on a few different realities when they think about the genocide in Gaza. I hope they might consider the possibility that all children's lives matter, and try to imagine what conflict and wars might look like if avoiding the killing of children became the central rule within every nation's defence doctrine. I hope they will learn to think more creatively about the causes of war, and to better identify when religious mythology and past national trauma is embedded in their nations' military doctrines. Finally, and in my last canvas, I hope that the US and its allies realise that to heal and disarm the long-term seeds of

hate planted by the suffering and death of so many Palestinian children, they will need to do more than throw money at them through foreign aid.

By allowing an honest memory of its role, American guilt can lead to atonement not just by giving money and aid, but by a deep and inspired use of its artistic, literary, philosophical and spiritual legacy which it has neglected. In so doing, the trilogy prophesies not a lesson of charity, but of a much deeper transformation of the American soul than the tools of politics could ever achieve.



"Dorothea Mackellar Has Been Detained" from *Sedition + Other Bedtime Stories (pen, brush, ink on paper).* Gopalkrishnan writes, "Dorothea McKellar was a poet who wrote an iconic poem called 'My Country', which we had to learn as kids at school (though not anymore, I hear). The poem defined Australia by our relationship to the land, from the voice of a white woman. So, in this piece, I contrast the land we love with how it is experienced by refugees and migrants in detention camps offshore while classed as 'illegal immigrants' and their visas are processed, often for years. They were collateral damage from the War on Terror years, which speaks to how we are now trying to ban Palestinian refugees, at least in Australia."

Collateral: Do you have a message we can help deliver to other artists around the world creating work that intentionally starts difficult conversations in the face of censorship and suppression?

Carl Gopalkrishnan: I realise now, nearly four decades later, how different my art would have been if I had relied or become dependent on the arts grants system of governments early on. For so many artists, that's what they begin with, and then institutionally again, the parameters for creativity are already set. [Moving away from that] gave me freedom from the beginning as an artist, not even calling myself an artist, just making art as a natural expression of who I am.

We can't start difficult conversations if we haven't learned to think for ourselves. If we have, then we can see the agenda in those briefs, those grants, and decide if they will allow us to see, think and express the world unimpeded in our work.

So, when the commercial gallery doors closed here in Australia, especially after my shows about Australia's anti-terrorism legislation in 2006 and then my Gaza paintings published in 2011 in Tikkun Magazine in the US, I had to re-think what an art career looks like, indeed what 'success' looks like. Here are some of the lessons I've learned:

Build a support network

It's always been important (if your art questions power) to nurture relationships with smaller, independent galleries that have specific, written policies of welcoming minority opinions. Don't assume a progressive tone will lead to actual support for the content of your work. If they don't spell it out, build their business around those values, then they don't mean it. So trust the right people and build a support network before you try to change the conversation.

Decide if art is your vocation or a career

I think it helps to know yourself. Is your art practice also a vocation, or just a career? That's an important distinction to know when you're paying the price of exclusion for intentionally trying to start a conversation during times of censorship and suppression. It also helps if you *don't* ask difficult questions and are criticised by progressive voices for your 'silence' or 'complicity'. I'm less harsh on people who are trying to make a living by intentionally making art which is decorative. Artists, however, who use their creativity to sell government, military, and corporate agendas which kill kids, well, I avoid them, which is hard because they are often in the top tier of our creative industries. If you have a vocation, it will be harder to turn off emotionally, but that need not diminish your professionalism when people accuse you of being naïve, misguided or amateurish for having a different opinion.

Go beyond Google in your self-learning

It is more important today to do your research beyond Googling things, because so much more is not archived or made available on the internet than you'd think. I only know this because I am from another century (literally). Knowledge and insights are being lost, and algorithms present a skewed number of options that bring you back, like Alice in Wonderland, to these potholes where you think you're free and making a difference, only to discover that you're exactly where they wanted you to be—nutted. Suppression and censorship happen on multiple levels, including self-censorship and covert invitations to shut up and take the money. By all means, take the money when necessary, but try not to sign any contracts.

Accept not being liked

Become really comfortable with not being liked or respected or invited to the next big thing. I've had periods where I tried to sell out, and you know, you definitely eat, sleep, dress and spend better for a little while, but if you are in it as a vocation, you can't maintain it, and you won't be able to keep your mouth shut for long. So, during those times of weakness, take all the booze from the fridge, towels from the hotel bathroom, selfies with important people, and save a LOT OF MONEY for the lean years when you're blacklisted.

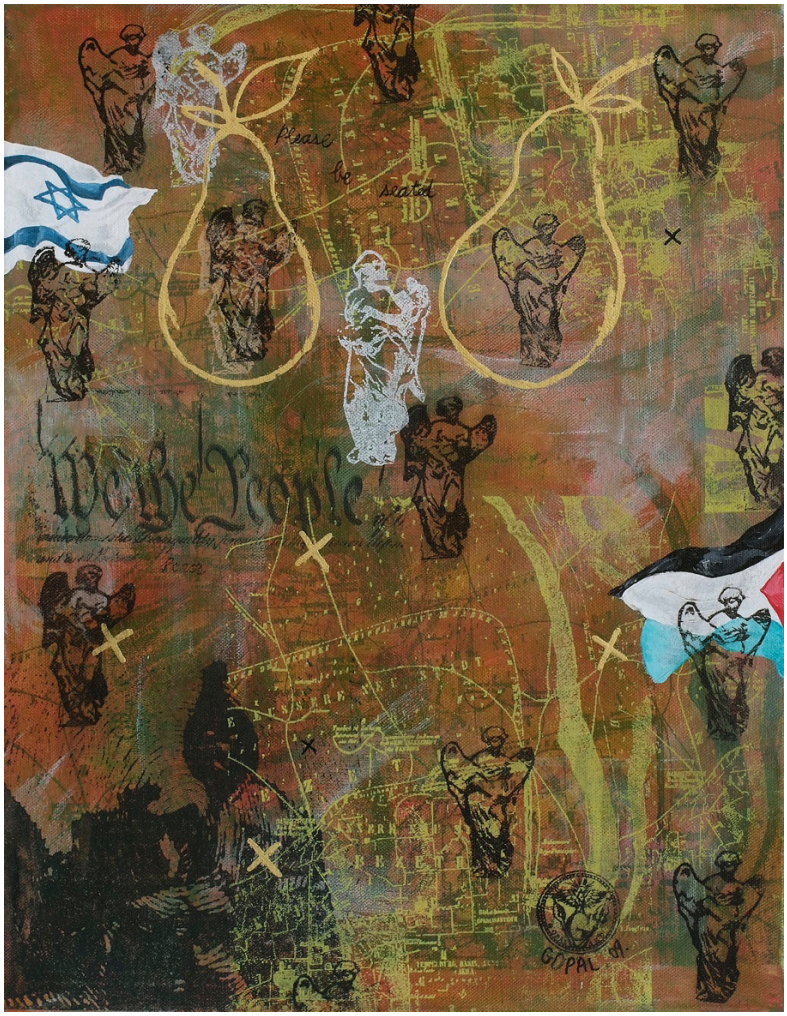
Know the difference between Artist and Activist

I have learned over time to make a commitment to my values, not my feelings. Feelings matter of course, but they come and go, and they more often deceive you. They are great to kick-start you, but they don't travel with your actions all the way to the end, which can confuse artists that over-rely on inspiration and not perspiration.

Of course if our feelings turn out to be right, great; keep your opinions and start those conversations, but if we start to doubt ourselves and others we believe in, it's not a failure. We develop our own opinions, and then paint, sing, act, and write from that space.

So, as artists, ask yourself: are you an Activist or an Artist? Are you both? Do you have a method of your own making to test yourself against those terms? You do? Great. Make art from that space. That is Art, not necessarily Activism. The manner in which our art enters and interacts with the world can't be controlled.

I don't confuse my roles. I have a day job in policy and advocacy. When I am learning, reacting or expressing the world through my art, holding the mirror up to the world, as Nina Simone famously explained, then you are an artist, and a *citizen* I might add, being active in the world. Being active in the world, as an Artist, is as valuable as being an Activist, but they are not the same things. Was Picasso's painting *Guernica* Art or Activism? You tell me. Every generation and every individual should answer that question differently. An artist that is comfortable with being uncomfortable is better prepared and trained to lead others through difficult conversations.



"Angels and Pears 2009" from *The Assassination of Judy Garland (acrylic, screenprint, and gold leaf on canvas)*

Collateral: What upcoming publications or exhibits do you have planned or in progress?

Carl Gopalkrishnan: In November 2024, I'll appear in *Vala* Issue 5, the journal of the Blake Society in London, with a collaborative photographic performance art essay I did with a portrait photographer in Perth named Juliette Scott. We started out initially with two separate projects-my *Vala* submission and her desire to explore drag, and that issue of drag really got me thinking about William Blake and his challenging women's roles in society in 18th century London. A lot has been written about his attitudes toward free love, and his poetry really challenges the dualistic thinking in government, religion and imperialism, including slavery.

To me, a lot of Blake's art and poetry is actually gender ambiguous (some of his visual/literary characters change form, reproduce in a god-like manner, or merge with his mythical characters), so we created five characters and our stylist, Marica Furlan, helped me to create these characters, which I performed. They challenged how we see Blake's God, not only as female but as gender diverse and LGBTQ. So that comes out in late November both online and in print.

I have an un-exhibited body of work that was shelved during the pandemic, and the few independent galleries I loved closed down, so it's still sitting there. It's called "Boy on Electric Scooter in Collapsing Universe" and includes paintings and prints from 2015 to 2024. It is definitely mirroring the many changes within that decade. Personally, for me, my dad died in 2018, and we went into the pandemic, plus social media extremism and now global conflict and climate disasters. The title reflects how I feel within all this fast-paced change. During the pandemic I started an online shop, as many artists have learned to depend less on physical space.

I hope I can get that exhibition together in 2025 somewhere, but I'm moving into a new narrative arc called *Revelation* now, which is, I guess, my own version of religious art, whatever that means. I started creating amulets in 2023 after researching the role of superstition in military life, and that is going to be part of the new phase—learning to work with ceramics. I'm enjoying working with the clay.

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For more information about Carl and his work, please visit www.carlgopal.com

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