

# COLLATERAL

Issue 4.2  
Spring 2020

With thanks to our home city  
Tacoma, Washington

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# Poetry

**Carlo André**

**“Proceedings”**

Carlo André is a Peruvian-American writer and performance poet. He served as a Navy Hospital Corpsman for Marines during Operation Iraqi Freedom. His writing has appeared in SAND Journal, Pidgeonholes, Cream City Review, Palaver, Funicular and others. “Proceedings” was written while reflecting on the second Bush years, their zeitgeist, power struggles, and ways of wielding public opinion.

## Proceedings

Carlo André

From the cumulative history of this conflict, it has been determined that:

- a) the Inquisitor was at fault for the majority of perpetrations against the state, namely, the people and its general welfare.
- b) the Inquisitor has demanded, if not imposed, steep resource allocations for its ongoing gain.
- c) the Inquisitor has led nominal initiatives for improvement that were quickly abandoned and reported as accomplished.
- d) the Inquisitor has sabotaged efforts for an inclusive form of governance and tolerance of divergent views other than those of the Inquisitor & Co.
- e) further, the Inquisitor has relegated far-reaching, damaging impositions to private entities outside any governmental jurisdiction. Entities, one must confess, of aberrant ethical practices, if not outright criminal.
- f) the Inquisitor has decried, time and again, a false need for its own security and protection before multinational forums, which have conceded to many of the Inquisitor's demands at the cost of their own privacy and liberty.
- g) the Inquisitor maintains a selective memory of events, rendering all varying outsider input of equivalent times unacknowledged, thereby, omitted from the record.
- h) in its pursuit of omissions, the Inquisitor has spearheaded a soft legal, if not clandestine, push for informer's bypass and prosecution.
- i) is for Inquisitor, it has it all, it moves it all. It's all Aces blind.
- j) the Inquisitor has devolved into further fragments that have become all the more radical because of their size and disownership; these further antagonize each other in a swarm-like guerrilla sensation.
- k) the Inquisitor is peeling itself from a rotten trunk; it will slowly slough off and drop to the ground, where it will acquire new fungal life and environs.
- l) the Inquisitor is roaming desert villages like a gliding sea bird that suddenly plummets to prey from the pool of the living.
- m) in an instant, the Inquisitor eyes you through the screen, pinpoints you moving through traffic, and assesses your rationale based on your user search history.

- n) the Inquisitor wears smoky eyeshadow and laced fishnets before a faraway mirror that will not try to advance impeachment, as is the Inquisitor's practice.
- o) the Inquisitor, the Inquisitor *oob-la-las* its tremendous reflection, blowing kisses and mounting the bed on all fours, staring at its own backside, wishing to eat it, like an ouroboros snake.
- p) the Inquisitor's immense assets are parsed out globally, through multiple representatives of its true capital Kronos, which should never be reconstituted, lest it become targeted for tax purposes.
- q) the Inquisitor contains all questions, period.
- r) to be an Inquisitor, one must convene to reconstitute oneself into an unregulated multiplicity and gain the most from the least. Not to mention, make a point of diversifying with insiders of conflict markets.
- s) most importantly, an Inquisitor cancels out the inquirers, since to be an Inquisitor is the embodiment of the inquiry politik.
- t) the Inquisitor will flyby decompose.
- u) the Inquisitor will burn on contact as if nothing had ever happened.
- v) the Inquisitor will acquire its face, your face, my face, their face.
- w) the Inquisitor is the sole executor of all that it is, and shall remain nameless.

**Randy Brown**

**“Clausewitzian nature poem”**

**“a poem”**

**“just-another-day haiku”**

Randy Brown embedded with his former Iowa Army National Guard unit as a civilian journalist in Afghanistan, May-June 2011. A 20-year veteran with one overseas deployment, he subsequently authored the 2015 poetry collection *Welcome to FOB Haiku: War Poems from Inside the Wire*. He also co-edited the 2019 Military Writers Guild-sponsored anthology *Why We Write: Craft Essays on Writing War*. A former editor of community and metro newspapers, as well as national consumer and trade magazines, he is now a freelancer based in Central Iowa. As “Charlie Sherpa,” he blogs about 21st century war poetry at [www.fobhaiku.com](http://www.fobhaiku.com); about civil-military dialogue at [www.redbullrising.com](http://www.redbullrising.com); and about military-themed publishing at [www.aimingcircle.com](http://www.aimingcircle.com).

### **Clausewitzian nature poem**

the only thing  
war ever changes  
is the uniform

\*

### **a poem**

You don't have to make everything  
a poem, she said.

Or about  
being a Veteran.

\*

### **just-another-day haiku**

Anyone know why  
flags are at half-staff again?  
Second time this month.



**Michaela Coplen**

**“Beware Radioactive Wild Boar”**

Michaela Coplen is a lifelong Army brat and current Marshall Scholar studying for a Masters in International Relations at the University of Oxford. In 2013, she was appointed National Student Poet by Mrs. Obama and the President’s Committee on the Arts & the Humanities. Her poems have been published online with *The Atlantic* and poets.org, as well as in print with the *Bellevue Literary Review*. She was published in Copper Canyon Press’s eco-poetry anthology, *Here: Poems for the Planet*, and recently won the 2019 Troubadour International Poetry Prize and the 2020 Jon Stallworthy Prize. “Beware Radioactive Wild Boar” was inspired by her research on the long-term environmental effects of nuclear disaster and nuclear war—combining a real news story with the often-mythologized image of a monstrous, supernatural boar.

## **Beware Radioactive Wild Boar**

Michaela Coplen

*“Boar are thought to be particularly affected because they  
root through the soil for food.”* – The Telegraph

The old myth-makers built their boars  
from human sin—bristled hoar  
with tusks to tear & hooves that trod  
good farmland into waste—

we have no use for mortal monsters now  
mushrooms like grief bloom & twist  
where years ago nuclear mist  
fell on the forest floor

In this new myth the formula's the same,  
except the boar is only half-alive  
& named Chernobyl, Hiroshima,  
Product of Our Latest Sin—

She haunts the darkened countryside,  
no demigod to strike her down

**Jessica Evans**

**“spouse, dependent, side car”**

Jessica Evans is a Cincinnati native who gets the chance to recreate home every few years. Most recently, she called a Bavarian forest home, and soon she'll be establishing new roots in Washington, DC. She's a previous Pushcart nominee. A mentor for the Veteran's Writing Project, Evans is enthusiastic about finding ways to connect veterans with the right resources to tell their stories. Her work explores the concept of self and home and this publication in *Collateral* is a reflection of that. Connect with her on Twitter @jessica\_\_evans.

## **spouse, dependent, sidecar**

Jessica Evans

because I don't know if I've earned that right  
(to call myself milspouse) when so many other lifetimes have come before  
Hail and Farewells &  
lederhosen events; I spoke other languages  
before saying two words at a county clerk courthouse in Oklahoma, my  
only option to get onto post, to begin the silkworm cocoon of learning

a spouse who comes with shoulder bars means a spouse who  
comes with pain; I was too old to believe that  
readiness is birthed from unit groups, too mystified not to learn  
how to abbreviate my life into acronyms that sound as complex  
as these constant permanent changes of station (though my station—  
spouse, dependent, side car—never seems to change)

when people ask how much I love “seeing the world”  
vague responses are best,  
(too) afraid the complexity of unknowns will be crowded  
in an already busy and full mind; I Vaseline smile, never thrilled  
but always aware we have to  
attend another event, where I'll be reminded again  
I am not the service member, so  
my service comes for free (a family business, this)

and I learn to exist in and out, rely on the four crow calls to  
alert me to an enemy, time or distance, or failed communication, integration  
terms like vigilance and readiness when the only thing I've ever wanted  
in dusty dry Lawton  
was to love my chosen—

the Army Wife Handbook does not prepare one for the  
litany of loss that we learn, a cascade of disappointments  
Lego stacked and clipped together, worse on special days when  
Force conditions & protections have been elevated and field time extended,

when there's always one more memo to write, a brief to proof, a meeting to attend,  
and the sidecar sits low to the ground.

**Alex Ewing**

**“Withdrawal”**

Alex Ewing’s poems have appeared in *Juked*, *Genre Urban Arts*, *Dying Dahlia* and more. Her fiction has appeared in *Not Your Mother’s Breastmilk*. She lives in Central Ohio. On “Withdrawal” she writes, “This is a story of self-medication as a means to escape extremely painful memories, and the confusion that arises in those who witness it.”

## Withdrawal

Alex Ewing

In the middle of the  
Night, the light is on  
Under the bathroom door

The story goes  
My father's home  
I see his shadow  
Beneath the door

He makes sounds  
I never heard before  
A pain  
Hollow retching  
Screaming then silence

I am watching  
The door with  
Every scream  
I anticipate an escape  
Danger, a stranger

I do not know  
This man  
He doesn't know  
I'm watching.  
He emerges

I do not cover  
My eyes  
I've seen  
Too much now  
My dad, his pain

He goes in and out  
All through the night  
Haunting sounds  
Retching then  
Silence

The next morning  
Like nothing  
Ever happened  
My dad would tell  
Jokes and my mom would

Laugh until  
Poof, he was gone again

**David Groulx**

**“Bomber Pilot Entry Log: Somewhere in the Middle East”**

David Groulx’s 11th book of poetry, *From Turtle Island to Gaza*, was published last year. On this particular poem, he writes, “The dove, being a symbol of peace, phosphorus, a fertilizer used to grow things—none of that is present here. What makes the poem is what is missing.”



**Bomber Pilot Entry Log: Somewhere in the Middle East**  
David Groulx

The bombs fell like doves  
their whiteness  
murdering everything

**Sara Hailstone**

**“Roses and Concrete”**

Sara Hailstone’s writing is born from navigating the raw connections that scouring collapsed domestic landscapes project. She is an educator and writer from Madoc, Ontario, who orients towards the ferocity and serenity of nature and what we can learn as humans from the face of forest in our own lives. A graduate of Guelph University (B.A.) and Queen’s University (M.A. and B.Ed.), she is currently completing her Masters in English in Public Texts at Trent University. “Roses and Concrete” is one poem amongst a poetic series entitled “Peaceful Societies,” in which she negotiates the demands of living amongst a harmonious collective.

## Roses and Concrete

Sara Hailstone

*“Respect for the rights of others is peace.”*  
—Benito Juárez

under attack,  
angry children can pull  
leaves off small trees,  
plants left in the dark  
without water,

drying up,  
expel themselves of themselves,  
slowly,  
a quiet survival amongst  
hostile environments,

unless,  
with the right amount of  
sunlight,  
a taste of water,

resiliency is stoic,  
a budding new branch,  
tuber and rooted,  
green grows back,  
pulp forms over a gnash,  
skin and scar,

adaptation is  
characteristic,  
camouflage,  
poison and thorn,  
fleeing is a dandelion seed  
floating safely,  
windblown wishes,  
or the blue jay dropping  
a sunflower shell,  
never forget,  
roses and concrete.

**Kristine Iredale**

**“Maybe Next Time”**

Kristine Iredale is an Iraq War veteran. Her poems have been published in Eastern Washington University's student literary magazine *Northwest Boulevard* and The Veteran's Writing Project quarterly publication *O-Dark-Thirty*, among others. This particular poem was inspired in part by Poets on the Coast: A Weekend Writing Retreat for Women and Iredale's experiences of serving in the military.

## Maybe Next Time

Kristine Iredale

All shit is brown in Yakima,  
like the one time that  
sergeant first class asked  
if you were wearing lipstick.  
Yeah, like there's someone here  
that I'd like to impress.  
Cold winds always leave  
my cheeks and lips bright red.  
Skin pale like death. Yeah, if  
there's anyone I'd like to impress  
it's death. We've brushed past each other  
a few times in the hallway.  
Born not breathing. Those mortars  
in Mosul and we mustn't forget  
the VBIED. Maybe next time  
I'll have the courage to press  
my body up against his. Plant  
a kiss on his lips. Take him back  
to my room or hell, go back to his.  
It would be our little secret.  
Just let the soft animal of your body  
love what it loves.

I saw a turtle crossing the street  
as I was driving on a country road.  
It made me think of John Steinbeck's  
novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. Maybe  
I should have stopped to save it,  
instead of driving by listening to  
Johnny Cash's "I Walk the Line."  
Death is always so much cooler and  
less messy on television. Although I  
see mountains and ocean. I still  
dream of desert and hear  
the hum of airplanes.

**Imran Boe Khan**

**“The Earth Is Suspended”**

Imran Boe Khan has recent work appearing, or forthcoming, in *The Rumpus*, *Cosmonauts Avenue*, *Routledge* and *Juked*. He has won the Thomas Hardy Prize and has had poetry nominated for Best of the Net. Khan lives in Christchurch, Dorset with his wife and children. He writes, “Before I wrote ‘The Earth is Suspended’, I spent a bus ride contemplating my own sense of our natural world, what I do to it and what it does to me. Then, I imagined the entire natural world going crazy. I’m generally an optimistic person when it comes to human nature but, in this poem, I thought of humanity sitting back and enjoying the spectacle of the world breaking down—as if we had the right. This poem is about the vulgar spectacle of conflict—how some have become desensitized to the cruelty of war through experiencing conflict as faraway consumers.”

## **The Earth is Suspended**

Imran Khan

The only noise was my own body  
growing leaves from its throat.

A world settled like an elm on my lips.  
Any part removed would learn to grow back.

The skies slowly cleared like all captured life,  
thin nails held the sun back.

I stood still as nature waded the pool in your chest,  
husked each horizon.

And so I wore the shame every day, the mournful knot  
of fate bound and shuddering. I pulled heat from a life

that fluttered through oil and gold. I ate smoke and spoke of change.  
My mouth began to taste madness poured out as salt and water.

It turned the elm into a witness to the terror. There's nothing  
to be done about a world baptised in the pit of my core.

In this new screaming game, I am royalty. I have trouble  
naming myself in a land where devouring comes home,

where light falls in patches, turns leaves florescent.  
I have lived the life you hunt in the darkness.

The world is in flux.  
We have all come to watch.

**Jim McGarrah**

**“In a Meadow Where Things Belong”**

Jim McGarrah is the author of ten books. *Running the Voodoo Down* won the Elixir Press Poetry Prize in 2003, and his new collection of poems, *A Balancing Act*, was published by Lamar University Press in May 2018. A memoir of war entitled *A Temporary Sort of Peace* (Indiana Historical Society Press, 2007) won a national Eric Hoffer Nonfiction Award. Blue Heron Book Works published McGarrah’s newest nonfiction book in 2017 entitled *Misdemeanor Outlaw*. Of the poem in this issue in *Collateral*, McGarrah writes, “I suspect that most poets don’t come to a poem initially. The poem comes to them. It is not a product of the will but more a happening. Call it inspiration, the muse, Duende, or luck, I wasn’t looking for a tennis ball in the middle of a cow pasture, nor the memory it generated. That is what makes writing poetry exciting.”



**In a Meadow Where Things Belong**  
Jim McGarrah

In the small patch of barren dirt  
seeded with grass refusing to grow,  
a neon green tennis ball sprouts.

I am miles from any tennis court  
in a meadow preserved for birds,  
squirrels, chipmunks, and worms,

which proves to me that ironic  
juxtaposition is a flaw in human  
behavior and not the quirk

of a chaotic universe. Reflections  
such as this remind me of Rick,  
our Navy corpsman in combat—

he was gentle, curing children  
with chocolate bars and patching  
the wounded as we bled

until he arrived where he didn't  
belong, in a meadow reserved for dying,  
not healing. Not wanting to upset

the balance of nature, he placed a rifle  
beneath his chin and compressed  
the trigger softly, as if it might break.

**Mary Ellen Talley**

**“All for a Snowball Viburnum”**

Mary Ellen Talley’s poems have appeared widely in publications including *Raven Chronicles*, *Flatbush Review*, *Banshee* and *Vietnam War Poetry*, as well as in several poetry anthologies such as *All We Can Hold* and *Ice Cream Poems*. Her poems have received two Pushcart nominations. Talley has tried to do “yeoman’s duty” during her Navy submariner son-in-law’s many deployments by assisting as a not-too-far-away grandma and garden helper. During the Vietnam era, Talley married early when her boyfriend joined the Navy. They just celebrated their 50th anniversary.

## All for a Snowball Viburnum

Mary Ellen Talley

Blackberry canes ascend from knobby roots.  
Thin thread vines meander and spindly spread  
jagged barbed wire—around and through bushes,  
anchor new roots in bare paths between trees,  
even to invade shorn grassy paths. One woman  
wearing leather gloves to her elbows stands  
fenced in with thorns, gloves a gift given  
because she kept pulling and yanking thorns  
in long strands. She enters the thicket to lop off  
thick canes as close to roots as she can bend.  
See her open and close the long handles,  
cut pieces and pack into yard waste bags.  
How else will her family avoid encumbrance  
of briars? See the bit of dark fruit, cupful  
she holds, that now she will savor and share.

She fans her face. Older grandson brings a glass  
of ice water. There's high fire danger now. A ban  
on outdoor burning. She fills the last 30-gallon  
yard waste bag, wondering how stupid to haul  
all in her Subaru to pay extra for her own Friday  
yard waste pickup in the city, then removes tough  
gloves to inspect a row of bloody thorn pricks  
that snuck in despite the gifted protection.

A small forest of pine and bushes surround  
the mown lawn. She carves a space to plant  
her daughter's favorite photo backdrop, a white  
snowball viburnum with petals of popcorn balls  
to dip and dance in breezes in honor of her new  
babe snug-tucked inside sling-carrier, who will  
hear the story of grandma's reminders  
to water often until each root takes hold.

**Anne Ward-Masterson**

**“Deployment”**

Anne Ward-Masterson was born and raised by a military family in New Hampshire. She later attended university in the Boston area. After graduating library school and working for a short while at MIT, she traveled the world with her USAF husband. She writes about being a military wife and the natural world she encounters in their travels.

## Deployment

Anne Ward-Masterson

Living. Not by the tug of  
sun or moon. Nor hunger  
or even exhaustion but by denying  
those and pressing on with  
the job. One where they pay you but  
you're the one who signs the  
check. You see the world airport by  
airport, base by base. Spend the night  
in another billeting tent city,  
before entering the box. Give  
your letters to someone you trust,  
in case this is your day. Spend life-  
times eating sand. Realizing no  
amount of baby powder keeps  
it from sticking to or grinding  
away the skin at your ankles,  
upper thighs. Great guys on your right  
and left, elbows in each other's  
ribs. Now, out patrolling,  
take turns on point and  
six. Back on base between workouts,  
briefings, attempting to sleep.  
Use humor to subvert rage you  
don't want to feed.  
Clean your guns in the dark, to stay  
sharp. Wish nights were still reserved  
for deep kisses and phone calls home  
that weren't stilted by secrets: protecting  
one another from anything  
but good news, happy endings.  
Stop holding your breath against  
IEDs, snipers, and sandstorms that  
foul the engines of aircraft.  
The night before you rotate home: play  
cards one more time. One. More. Stogey.  
For a brother whose check got cashed.  
For the kids, bring home the Lego corvette  
maintainers grew bored with,  
endlessly building and tearing down,  
plush toys with the name of the  
latest deployment country  
stitched prominently on the chest,  
purchased in an airport hundreds of miles  
away from where sand ate at your heart.

The real souvenirs, sand and pollen,  
wait in your A-bag.

# Creative Nonfiction

**C. Christine Fair**

**“The Animals Bear Witness to Their Crimes”**

C. Christine Fair is a provost’s distinguished associate professor within the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. She studies political and military events of South Asia and travels extensively throughout Asia and the Middle East. Her books include *In Their Own Words: Understanding the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba* (OUP 2019); *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army’s Way of War* (OUP, 2014); and *Cuisines of the Axis of Evil and Other Irritating States* (Globe Pequot, 2008). She has published creative pieces in *The Bark*, *The Dime Review*, *Clementine Unbound*, *Awakenings*, *Fifty Word Stories*, *The Drabble*, *Sandy River Review*, *Sonder Midwest*, *Black Horse Magazine*, and *Bluntly Magazine* among others. Her scholarly website is ChristineFair.net. She blogs at <https://shortbustoparadise.wordpress.com/>. She tweets at @CChristineFair.

“The Animals Bear Witness to Their Crimes,” is comprised of three accounts from ongoing or recent wars in Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Afghanistan, presented from the vantage point of the animals who bear silent witnesses to the crimes and violence of the conflicts. These are all wars she has studied on the ground. They are all wars that haunt her.



## **The Animals Bear Witness to Their Crimes**

C. Christine Fair

### I. The Old Lagoon Dog Bears Witness to the War's Atrocities

Whelped behind an old Hindu temple on the road linking the beach of Mullaitivu and the lagoon, she was the lone survivor of her pack, easily recognized by her light brown coat, perky ears, pointed snout and delicate feet.

The others—her children, siblings, sires, foes and friends—had died in the war or in its genocidal aftermath, from bombs, gunfire, mines, starvation, thirst or illness.

She hunted alone, trying to avoid eating those bodies strewn on the beach even though they were as omnipresent as her hunger.

She knew these Tamil humans by their scent, their voice, the colors they wore before becoming this etiolated bloat. Some fed her. Others kicked her. She followed them to school, to temple, to market. They were her familiars.

She watched as the Sinhalese soldiers—The Others—closed in on them. She cowered from the inescapable thunder of the mortars, the hissing of missiles, the shrieking of jets passing overhead whose bellies were heavy with bombs. Her ears rang with the cries of mothers wailing, clutching their dead children.

She crouched low in the dirt, watching the Tamil Tigers knock on doors, rip the terrified children from their families and foist the guns into their puny arms to fight The Others.

She smelled the offending odors of The Others' sex whose scent lingered on the female humans she once knew before they became empty.

She felt the rumbling of the war machines before they could. She barked, whined and pawed at them.

She tried to tell them to get into the trenches so many had built for such moments.

In that madness, they had no patience for the noisy bitch. Some threw discarded coconut shells at her or brandished sticks or stones. She slinked away, tail tucked, in sad confusion.

One by one, she watched them die. With the planting seasons abandoned, she could not mark time.

New humans came, speaking like The Others. They erected new buildings upon the carcasses of old. The town was not familiar now.

Her eyes became marbled clouds. Her hearing diminished. Hips ached. Unable to hunt the chipmunks, they frolicked in front of her with increasing impunity.

Her body trembled from starvation and illness. Mange sunk deep into her flesh.

She pondered her loneliness and why she had survived these atrocities. She sought the comfort of sleep and nested in the dirt alone some distance from the Vaddu Vakal Bridge.

In the early hours of no-morning-in-particular, 'The Others' truck sped over her frail body. She took one last look at her beloved Nanthi Kadal lagoon, unable to move and in a pain she could not endure. She closed her tired eyes.

She had not yet given up her life when the clatter of hungry birds descended upon her soft belly to pick out her pink entrails.

Too weak to move, bark or whimper, the last witness was no more.

## II. The Goat of Ghundikala village

She was young with a wobbly head and the uncoordinated gait of a kid. Her youth spared her from this year's Eid sacrifice.

During the day she'd root for discarded scraps of vegetables or fruits. Yellow melons, musty and limp in the searing heat, were her favorite.

Water was always scarce. She liked stumbling upon a pile of watermelon rinds which gave up their moisture as she chewed them.

She nuzzled chickens roaming around and played with the old bitch's young pups who survived the cull.

When she was first separated from her mother, she quivered and shrieked with fear when the Noise happened.

Then the explosions ceased to terrify. The mysterious men, packed into the back of the small pickup trucks that crisscrossed the Waziristan landscape like busy ants, became familiar.

The Truck Men, with their covered sun-drenched faces and guns, and their speeding trucks no longer intrigued her. Now, she rarely looked up from her beloved trash heap as they sped by.

The mangled bodies she would stumble upon as she rooted along the roads for nourishing things the Humans discarded no longer fascinated her either.

Sometimes she overheard the Humans discussing the Still Men's crimes.

At night her Young Human tied her to a tree with an old rope she loathed. The stench of urine and defecation of so many strange Animals who had come before her disquieted her.

Usually, the Men in Trucks stayed far from her home, which she came to understand was Good. They would come down from the mountains to pick up Things and Animals like her, then retreat, which was sometimes Bad.

When the Truck Men lingered at Others' homes, the Sky Beasts swooped down. The animals could hear their unnatural buzzing long before the Truck Men and Others could.

When the Truck Men stayed, flashes of light and thunderous explosions would follow which tossed dust and the remains of incinerated Humans and Animals into the sky.

That night, tied to her tree, she watched the Truck Men arrive. They boisterously stepped down and disappeared into her Humans' compound.

Her body stiffened. Her hackles stood up. She bleated as loud as she could, her ears back. Her Humans did not come. She kicked the ground, throwing up dirt behind her. She paced. She tried to warn her Humans when she first heard the buzzing. She yanked at the tree and bucked in hopes of breaking the rope. Maybe then she could warn them.

As the noise became intolerably louder, she crouched low to the ground as something came shrieking towards her. She tried to make herself as small as possible before the Flash came.

The next morning the wary neighborhood men came by to inspect the damage and count the dead. Relatives came by to pick whatever remains they could bury.

She and her tree were smoldering detritus, unnoticed.

### III. The Cat in Haji Nur Mohammad's Compound

Cat was special with her white coat, large ears and wide, oversized black eyes on her small triangular face.

She lived with several others in one of the Warlord's private compounds on the outskirts of Kabul.

When Haji ate well, they all ate well, feasting off the discarded bones and offal of the animals he routinely slaughtered for his revolving entourages of boisterous guests.

Tonight was such a night. Haji's men came back with a large, terrified goat. Within minutes, they slit his throat and let his blood run out. The cats watched from a distance in anticipation as the kasab hacked the still-warm animal into chunks that would be variously fried, roasted and stewed.

Haji's cooks served the meat and morsels of fat over pillows of fragrant rice with sweet carrots and raisins. They rendered the feet and head into a tasty stew their Pakistani mehman savored.

As night began to fall, the guests began to arrive in their Pajeros, Land Rovers and Toyotas.

They assembled in Haji's great hall, seated upon luxurious carpets and bolsters. The food was brought out on silver platters atop plastic sheets with oddly floral prints. The men began lapping up gravy with fresh naan and foisting chunks of charred flesh and fat into their mouths with their fat, ringed fingers.

Some drank tea or even daru. Others smoked hashish or opium.

The men were buzzing with excitement.

Cat knew why. Haji was known to have the most beautiful dancing boys in Kabul. Businessmen, warlords and traffickers were honored by Haji's envied invitations.

Tonight, Haji would bring out the Hazara boy they called Chinoise.

As the musicians began to assemble, the men stretched out. They picked the meat out of their mangled teeth. Restless in anticipation, they stroked their beards.

Chinoise made his appearance in a blur of colors in motion as he spun and twirled to the delight of the assembled men as the musicians behind him played Pashtun folk songs.

His striking grey eyes were outlined in kohl. He dazzled in a red blouse bespeckled with sequins over a dark blue velvet skirt and a silk tasseled scarf he draped coyly about his face and shoulders. His ankles and wrists bedecked with the boisterous bells he famously played with the undulations of his body.

As he danced the plates of abandoned food were taken away and the Cats began to feast.

Cat no longer paid attention to the Men or Chinoise until, late in the night, the Guests retreated to their vehicles and sped off into the star-strewn night likely to meet their expectant wives.

Cat followed Chinoise to his private room and watched him undress then fill an old, green bucket of tepid water. Cat could smell Those Men's' musky odors on his body. Chinoise poured water over his frail body from a cup.

He lathered himself with soap then ladled more water over himself to rinse. He scrubbed his face to remove the makeup. But the scent of Those Men lingered.

Chinoise put on his night dress as Cat cautiously strode up near him. Chinoise slid into bed and motioned Cat to join him. Cat jumped up on the rope bed and situated himself on Chinoise's pillow and purred deeply.

He drew Cat near and stroked her. Chinoise clutched her close as he cried bitter tears into Cat's fur. In these moments, the self he had to protect from Those Men, cautiously leered out from the shadows.

He missed his mother most of all. She wept furiously when his father announced that he had sold him to Haji. She beat her chest when Haji took him away and renamed him like a pet. Only when Haji felt tender did he call the boy by his real name: Zahid.

Zahid longed to be Cat, to leap with her over the compound walls and escape and survive Out There.

Away from Haji and Those Men who supped upon him like a communal plate.

Away from the things they did to him, made him do to them.

Away from their sickening stench, greasy hands, and the shame he could not wash away.

He longed to be innocent again, nestled near his mother as she made tea in the morning. He longed to be Zahid.

**Chelsey Mae Johnson**

**“A Simple Catch”**

Chelsey Mae Johnson is an MA candidate in the Appalachian Studies program at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. A former Portland bartender, she now researches and writes about kitsch foodways and Appalachian folk artists. Her work has been published in *The Bitter Southerner*. “A Simple Catch” explores the gray areas between combat zones and safe spaces.

## A Simple Catch

Chelsey Johnson

*“We had a suicide here—well, we’ve actually had multiple—”*

*“Wait, here?” I interrupt, pointing to the floor in a gesture that signifies all of this place.*

*“Well, out there.”*

*Julie waves her hand vaguely across the room, sending my gaze toward her 21 shooting lanes. At this hour in the morning, the fluorescent lights illuminate only partitions of empty space. Thick windows in the dividing wall reflect back the microsuede sofa where I sit now, peering into this gallery where I suddenly know people have died.*

The Place to Shoot sits on the farthest northern border of the city limits, on a spit of land that tickles the armpit formed by the Columbia and Willamette rivers. The neighborhood is ringed by acres of tractors severed from their trailers, kept company for better or for worse by sprawling warehouses and a Walmart that feels appropriately exiled from a city promoting weirdness as a marketing initiative. If you could float to the very top of the highest tree in nearby Delta Park, you would be surprised by the relative nearness of downtown Portland, its high-rises of rose gold and white marble glinting only six or seven miles to the southwest. But standing on a half-acre of concrete at river-level, it is impossible to shake the feeling that this far corner has been cordoned off and consecrated to things big and loud: the chaotic resonance of diesel engines idling at truck stops, the ecstatic whizz of turbochargers spooling up on the drag strip due west, and here, inside the city’s only public shooting range, the rapid discharge of handguns in perpetual canon.

*The first was a woman, twenty-seven years old. Middle of the summer, 1995. She waited for a lull in the day, waited for the other shooters downrange to clear out. She waited, then she sat down on the floor with a 9mm and quickly executed herself.*

*I am struck by the deliberate nature of this act, a delicate sadness ballooning in my chest as I consider the mood of this woman passing time. Emptying round after meaningless round into a paper target for nearly an hour. Waiting for each neighbor’s arbitrary inclination to pack it up for the afternoon; one final consideration quietly given.*

This square of cinderblock in a strip mall could have been anything—someone’s low-rent office complex, a dentist’s office, a center distributing things no one ever thinks about. To function as a firing range, the floorplan has been divided neatly between living room and live-fire. The range portion exists with a sort of industrial purposefulness: the people need a place to shoot without getting rained on. Here is an empty box, lead-proofed, compartmentalized, and well-ventilated; here is a space for bullets to fly freely. The lobby side is mostly empty space, yardage of industrial gray carpet punctuated infrequently by freestanding racks that offer a small selection of useful things for sale—ear protection, eye protection, specialized targets that generate intensely visible chartreuse blooms when punctured, like early video game graphics brought to life.

*Julie is composed in the telling of this story, if perhaps curled a bit deeper into her recliner, but the floodgates have opened. The quiet emotion mounting in the room bounces from her to me and back again, and I can barely keep up.*

I met Julie Houghtling months prior at a bar downtown. At 53, welcoming me into the range she's managed for twenty-eight years and owned for the last nine, she beams light into every corner not quite reached by Oregon's moody morning sunlight. She is immediately open and laughs easily, her brown eyes widening in amusement or astonishment or honest-to-God interest at every other thing I say. Swaths of satin and saucer-sized medals glint from among the piles of supplies around the shop: medals from completed marathons and triathlons. She shows me photos of sweaty women wearing paper numbers, beaming up at the camera. She makes a point that when she is out with her friends, in *her* leisure time, she is the Republican outlier. She drags the group mean towards the center, she presents herself as a reason to stay open-minded. There's an air of productive complexity about her.

*I don't intend to, but I visualize the aftermath as she tells it to me: Julie standing panicked on one side of plate glass. Julie watching the flashing ambulance lights in the parking lot, watching the swarm of EMTs on the sidewalk, all of them remaining out there, staring holes through their own reflections to find her faint outline in here. Julie pacing, not understanding, not opening the door. Realizing as the repeated shouts of "OPEN THE DOOR!" drift through her mental fog that she should, actually, open the door.*

When assessed only with a quick appraisal in the ten steps it takes to get from front door to front counter, the place does not convey much. On a slower look, the lobby becomes more of a lounge. In a back corner, Julie has installed accent lighting and a wall of reclaimed barnwood paneling over a backdrop painted a stylish navy blue. There is intention here, and there are houseplants: several broad-leaved species hold court in low planters, and a Seussian dragon tree has run its three wiry trunks all the way to the drop ceiling and now grows horizontally along the styrofoam grid. The overall effect is incredibly welcoming. Feminine, even.

*I see a parade of uniformed legs stumbling over the large cement-potted shrub that props a gap in the door this morning, in 2018, and have to take a moment to adjust my imagination, to remove the doorstep and color-correct for the passage of 24 years. I see Julie being gratefully overwhelmed by a mass of first responders who will only later gently explain to her the nuanced protocol for entry into premises that contain active or once-active shooters and potential hostage situations.*

On this Wednesday, I'm with two friends, and Julie is dogsitting. Penelope, a wiggly bulldog with a cartoon underbite sits sidesaddle on the floor, her back mushed up against the front counter. Behind Penelope is a jewelry case where, usually, rental handguns are arranged neatly, barrels pointing out. Penelope's owner is in Singapore, but Julie watches her regularly, is happy to play dog-aunt anytime. "So I don't have to get my own," she says.

Today, the rentals have been pulled from the display case and moved to a large utility cart sitting several feet behind the high counter. The guns are organized, maybe being cleaned or checked for safety, but the quantity, all of them right there in a pile... I feel slightly unsettled, then I feel like a cliché. Penelope sighs and adjusts herself, sitting on my toes.



*It isn't until later that Julie learns the woman was a mother, that her family knew she was on the brink of serious self-harm, that her children had been recently taken away as a precaution.*

*It isn't until much later that I realize Julie was exactly my age—thirty—when it happened. The woman was only two years younger than us.*

Julie brings me four pistols with the tops cracked open—I learn that “benched” is the proper term for this—and asks simply which one feels best. She seems surprised at my answer, but shrugs and returns with a sand-colored Glock 17 nestled barrel-down in a small red bucket, a few boxes of ammo peeking over the rim.

On the range, everything has weight, is heavy. The wobbly florescence, the slanted cement of the back wall, the mandatory earmuffs—it feels like being at the bottom of a swimming pool, knowing a cannonball is coming. Everything is muted until suddenly it's not, until the surface rips and reverberates with rapid fire from a few lanes over. I feel ridiculous in my plastic safety gear, and uncomfortable. My uneasiness with my own lack of experience seems to manifest physically, the hard edge of the too-tight earmuffs digs into the face muscles to keep my jaw half-clenched and burning with lactic acid. Spent casings stick in my boot tread and I'm sweating, even in the heavy A/C.

*She cradles a recently delivered FedEx box in her lap, picking at the corners of the packing tape with varying intensity as she quickly recounts the second suicide, polar opposite in nearly every aspect: Friday after Thanksgiving, building and range impossibly crowded. Julie worries for years about a fourteen-year-old boy caught among other adults that day, with a body between him and the exit. She tells me that his father thanks her later for her calm during the frenzy that immediately erupted. She tells me the boy will never touch a gun again. She tells me it was horrible.*

Downrange, block letters spell out rules on large panels that ring the walls in a high-impact font carrying all the bravado of new tech in the early nineties. *Keep Your Muzzle Down. Clear and Bench Guns During Ceasefire – Step Behind Safety Lines. No Exceptions. Be Safe and Responsible.*

*After the third suicide, she changes the rules, adds a simple catch that is slowly becoming industry standard: nobody rents alone without their own firearm in tow. The requirement is presented as a safety measure in a long string of range rules. It is occasionally puzzling to newcomers but for the most part easily glossed over. Of all the fears we must suppress when in a room full of strangers holding loaded weapons, range owners want this worry of witnessing at the bottom of the list, or not on the list at all.*

*“But do you still worry about it?” I ask. “Even though it's been years, even with the new rules?”*

Julie appears with a .45, gets my grip situated around it. She touches my shoulders, then waist, then hips, adjusting my stance with the calm, open-palm pressure of an experienced yoga teacher. Suddenly, all my shots go in the orange. I make a near perfect grouping, just a little to the left.

*“Every day.” She nods decisively and simultaneously shrugs: yes, it consumes me; no, I do not allow it to consume me. “Every day, all the time.”*

# Fiction

**Amanda Cerreto**

**“Acceptable Damage”**

Amanda Cerreto is a writer and marketer who lives in Rhode Island. She has published several short stories and a young adult novel, *Fall From Grace*. Her work often focuses on trauma and the aftereffects of conflict. She has an MA in English with a focus on creative writing from Seton Hall University.

## Acceptable Damage

Amanda Cody

Wednesday mornings between six and eight were the only times I felt glimmers of real hope. Ryan would sometimes gain access to the unit's computer and use a webcam to call me. To see his face, full and happy, on the screen, did enough good to last me the rest of the week.

He rarely talked about his experiences; more often than not, he pleaded to hear my boring stories of local drunks at the bar or asked how my classes were going. He was desperate to keep his ties to home, no matter how monotonous they seemed to me.

So I sat up in bed, my laptop open, feigning indifference for an audience that didn't exist. *It's okay if he can't call today, Mackenzie. He's busy. It doesn't mean he's dead. Get a grip.*

The clock read 7:04. I perused my email and wrote down assignment adjustments from professors. Cool, another six chapters of reading added to the syllabus; that'll help pass the time between customers.

I checked that the volume was all the way up on the laptop so I'd hear it if I moved. I picked up a book and put it back down almost immediately. I watched the sun filter in through the semi-sheer curtains. Ryan had helped me repaint the bedroom before he left. It was too dark before, he said. It was more likely that he Googled "How to help your wife after losing a baby" and found something ridiculous like "Make the bedroom a retreat that relaxes, in order to avoid the memories of conception." He repainted the bathroom, too, but he couldn't paint away those slight traces of blood that had caught in the grout from that morning. I knew exactly where they were; my eyes trained on them every time I walked in.

I wondered what I'd find if I Googled "What to do when you lose your baby and your husband departs two weeks later." Probably too specific.

I did run one search, one time; I wanted to learn what the grieving process should be. I mean, it was only three months in. We hadn't even found out if it was a boy or a girl. And I had been so freaked out about the whole thing anyway, shouldn't I have felt some sense of relief? I wouldn't have to be a parent, not right then. I could grow up, first.

The sites were godawful. Sanctimommies up in arms about strangers' questions. Stories of people coming home to nurseries all set up without a baby fill them. The old adages: "Every grief is different. Talk with your partner. Communication is key."

Kind of hard to do when he's thousands of miles away getting shot at. And wouldn't that be rich? *Hey, boney, I know you're in a war zone, but let's set aside some time to talk about your feelings. I know I failed you by losing our baby. How can I help?*

My laptop jangled loudly and I snatched the computer closer to me, fumbling with the trackpad. I hit accept and held my breath until I saw his face, full and whole, on the screen. The familiar relief flooded through me like a dam opening. It was dizzying, wonderful, cathartic.

“Hey, baby.”

I bit the inside of my cheek to stop myself from crying. What was wrong with me? I was never the girl to cry, but now that Ryan was away, I was a bad screenwriter’s trope.

I stared at the screen hungrily. Ryan’s hair was cut short to his head and the lighting there was dim, so the blond wasn’t nearly as vibrant as it should have been. His eyes were still a piercing blue, but there was something different about them, this time. I moved the screen closer to me, as if that would help. It was hard to tell, but they looked red. As if he’d been crying.

“Ryan? What is it?”

I hated the panic that was creeping its way up my throat. The relief that had been so strong just seconds ago was vanquished by the ever-present fear, the flickering images of flag-draped coffins and the battlefield cross and the spouse weeping over a casket.

“Everything’s good,” Ryan said. His voice sounded hoarse. “Mack...we saved a kid today.”

I never understood, until that moment, what it meant when someone said they went completely still. But I got it. My legs stopped rustling under the covers, I couldn’t lift my hand to brush away my hair. The sounds of birds chirping outside were muted. No cars rumbled by on the street. Even my heart dragged to a stop.

I didn’t know much about his job, partially because he wouldn’t talk about it, and partially because if I researched it I’d be haunted by whatever photos popped up. I did know that as a combat medic, he’d seen the worst of war.

“What do you mean, saved a kid?” I asked, fighting the discomfort that was rapidly swelling inside of me. This wasn’t Ryan. It didn’t sound like him. It didn’t even look like him. His eyes were darting back and forth, like he couldn’t focus on the little round camera at the top of the screen.

“There was this little boy...maybe four or five,” Ryan said, “and he had a GSW to the head.”

“A what?” I interrupted. A stab of annoyance hit my gut, releasing some of the anxiety that was making my chest inflate like a balloon. I hated it when I couldn’t understand his world, his terms, his life. We were supposed to be a unit, but I was way off in the land of reality TV and first world problems.

“Sorry. Gunshot wound,” he clarified.

Oh, good. Glad I asked. No big deal, just a GSW to the head. No wonder why he was able to clean up the blood so easily in our bathroom. Gunshots probably produce way more blood than miscarriages.

Ryan’s face looked altered, transformed. There was a hollowness in his cheeks that I had never seen before, and his eyes glistened as he continued his story.

“So you know, he’s bleeding out, and I couldn’t get the IV in with him shaking around. His father was yelling and crying and...God, Mack, it was just the most intense situation I’ve ever been in.”

I wanted to tune him out, but I hung onto his every word. This man, my husband, whom I thought I knew so well, was a completely different person because of whatever just happened. Was this the moment it would all fall apart? Was I in the privileged position of witnessing, in-the-moment, the point in time that would change us both forever?

He started talking about the blood, and I felt myself losing focus. His voice sounded far away and I wondered what blood does when it’s mixed with sand. Does it coagulate? Do they clean up afterwards? Shovel it up and dump it somewhere? Would traces remain for the little boy’s parents to find, long after the worst happened?

“I thought he was dead,” Ryan was saying. He clenched his jaw tightly a few times before speaking again, fighting some kind of emotion. I mimicked the movement; it didn’t help.

“I thought for sure he was a goner. But word got back to us that he survived. Mack, if we hadn’t been able to get him those fluids and staunch that bleeding, that little boy would have died.”

I watched his pixelated face and ached to reach out and brush the tear gathering at the corner of his eye. Ryan didn’t cry. He fixed things. My whole life, he had fixed everything. Until the baby, anyway.

“I’m glad you were able to save him,” I whispered. I hoped my voice sounded the way it was supposed to: passionate, proud, compassionate, the right amount of sultry and sweet. It was hard to tell what I sounded like for sure, because I was fighting back the bile rising in my throat. What was I supposed to say here? *Well done, Ryan! You did it! You’re the hero of Iraq. This is what you signed up for, right?*

What was *wrong* with me? I had waited seven days, one hour, and thirty-three minutes for this call. And now all I wanted to do was shut the computer and block out his face. It wasn’t fair that he was out there saving children, leaving me to an empty home and empty womb. And there he was, smiling and crying like saving some faraway kid somehow canceled out the loss of our own child? What, because our kid was twelve weeks old and not twelve years old, that somehow made it less of a loss? Easy for him to think so. He wasn’t the one who had to sit in a pool of blood, wondering which fragments were his child.

I hated all of this. I tried to be understanding. I tried to be selfless. I just failed at it. The other wives were so put together, baking cookies and putting care packages together, babysitting and offering moral support. They had ladies’ nights where they talked and drank wine and cried and painted each other’s nails. I was not that person. I couldn’t believe in the greater good that they thought they were accomplishing. I hated that Ryan was away, saving other people’s children and husbands and wives, instead of here, with me, in our own universe. I wanted to be selfish. I wanted to be the only one saved by Ryan Luck.

“Baby? Tell me about your week.”

“How did you find out he survived?”

Ryan shifted; I saw a blur of fast movement behind him. “What?”

“I mean, was it a doctor who told you? I thought you never found out what happened after you brought them to the hospital.” I heard the accusation in my voice. I couldn’t stop it.

“I...Neely went back to the hospital the next day on a call. He heard.”

Neely. It didn’t seem right to me that he would be the one to ask about it. When I thought of a stereotypical, macho, heartless military guy, John Neely was the one I thought of. The excessive swearing, the masculinity that bordered on insulting, the way he appraised every woman in his path except his own wife. Not that I blamed him; his wife was a pain in the ass.

“Honey, I have to go. I have an early shift.”

I lied to my husband. I supposed that’s how it starts: the little white lie that blossoms into the ugly patchwork of deceit, covering up all the weak points in the marriage until it’s unavoidable and the seams begin to come undone, stitch by stitch.

“Sure, baby. You okay? Cassie told Neely she hasn’t seen you at the meetings.”

Because she hadn’t been to the meetings herself. She was too busy banging Neely’s best friend. Everyone knew it.

“I’m good. Work is just really picking up. Please be safe, okay?”

“I love you, Mack.”

“Love you more, Ryan.”

I let my finger hover over the button, wanting but unwilling to end the call. I wanted him here, that was all. If he were here, we could talk about it. I couldn’t talk about it over a computer, that was all.

I had no plans to go in for an early shift, but I needed to get out of the house. So I took my usual walk down to the store to pick up coffee and a donut. The streets were quiet and peaceful, probably so unlike the streets Ryan walked down every day. That world and This world were so disconnected. I wasn’t doing my part to keep them together, that was for sure.

There was a table set up in front of the store. A couple of kids, probably high school aged, holding clipboards with smiles plastered on their faces. They were wearing bright red shirts, so bright they razed my eyes like a mortar attack. I squinted and put my head down. How would I dodge them? How could I get around whatever it was they were selling today?

“Do you have a few minutes today to save children?”

Yeah, kid. I’m a prime candidate for saving children. I couldn’t protect my own, so what makes you think I could save any others? Maybe my husband could help you.

I stuck my hands in my pockets and kept walking. I couldn't have coffee when I was pregnant. The caffeine was bad for the baby, I read. Maybe if I had coffee once in a while it would have fought harder to live. I wasn't sure, but maybe I'd rather have a living baby with coffee damage than a flawless dead one.

My mother suggested having a funeral for it, even wanted to buy a little gravestone. But there was no body. There was nothing to bury. It was symbolic, she said. A place to put my grief. Like it could be boxed up, contained, and put away, and then I could choose to go visit it when I wanted to feel it. Did it work that way? Maybe I should have agreed to it. But instead I put my foot down and insisted that I just wanted to get on with my life. That I didn't want Ryan's last two weeks home to be filled with morbid baby tombstones and memorials with candles and balloon releases. You know that those balloons kill thousands of wildlife, just so we can have our moment of peace and symbolic letting go?

Newsflash, Mom: I could release ten thousand balloons and my grief would not lift with them.

I paid for my coffee and headed back toward home. The child-savers didn't bother me this time.

Cassie tried to tell me once that I would see symbols everywhere that meant my baby was watching me and loving me from heaven. Like a rainbow or a butterfly. She told a story of a lady and her son who fed the ducks every morning. And then her son died and she started seeing ducks wherever she went. But I told her it was just that frequency illusion thing, like when you buy a Honda and then see them everywhere. Or, in Cassie's case, when you have sex with one guy that's not your husband and then see more bangable prospects everywhere. She bought me a pendant with an angel's wing on it and told me it was for my angel baby. I think she expected me to cry or hug her. But I just looked at it. And I haven't seen angel wings anywhere, even when I actually looked for them, so it turned out her theory was wrong.

Ryan and I used to take this walk together every day, even when I was pregnant. He'd get a large iced coffee and three donuts. We'd eat on the walk home, dropping sprinkles everywhere. He always split the last donut with me. There was nothing cuter than seeing the powder on his lips while insisting that I eat more.

I ate while I walked. The sprinkles didn't fall. Maybe that was a kind of reverse sign. My baby was not out there, and neither was Ryan. Everything was too far away to reach me with tiny signals. I burned my tongue on the bitter coffee.

On one of our last walks before he deployed, Ryan told me a story he heard from a friend of a friend, one of those military stories that gets passed through the ranks just prior to deployment. This guy's unit had to get somewhere, but they had to cross a roadway littered with explosives. Because time was of the essence, they had to press forward with only handheld devices instead of calling for the specialized team, risking the casualties. The Army called it "acceptable damage," he said.

"But where is the line between acceptable and unacceptable?" I had asked, my mouth half-full of donut.

He had shrugged and continued on, clearly indicating it wasn't his problem to decide those things. But it stuck with me. Where was the line drawn?



I thought about that now, as I walked. I wondered if I had to itemize acceptable damages in my life, where I would draw the line. Broken glass at the bar: acceptable. C+ on a paper: mostly acceptable. Marriage falling apart: borderline unacceptable. Loss of a baby: well, we all knew that one. I wondered what the Army did to prevent the “unacceptable” damage. What could I have done?

I slowed down as I approached the final stretch before home. There was graffiti on the sidewalk up ahead, covering only two squares. The artists seemed to have a pact amongst themselves to keep everything in the lines and tidy, maybe in artistic irony, a juxtaposition to life. It had been there for a month. But still, I slowed down, and watched it closely as my feet passed over it. I could recite a list of what was there without looking: LOOK UP! in red paint; a black heart; a giant eye; random orange scribbles that layered over a rival tagger’s name; Tom ♥ Daphne; FREE MIKE in a heavy black scrawl that covered half of the weird mural.

I stared at the squares without really seeing them, wondering what I would fill mine with if I was an artist. Two squares of symbols. Donuts would be in there, for sure. Maybe a beer stein for the bar, a notebook for school. What could symbolize Ryan? A heart seemed trite. I racked my brain to think of something that could symbolize our times together; the time we installed wood floors in the living room, or the day we went to a baseball game and he dropped a snow-cone on his lap. Maybe those oppressive summer nights where we couldn’t stand the sticky heat and jumped into the quarry, screaming with exhilaration like a pair of teenagers.

The longer I stared, the more images came to my head, unbidden. A cluster of balloons lifting into the imaginary sky. A tiny headstone. And in the corner, barely noticeable, only shimmering when the light was right, a tiny wing.

I sucked in a breath too quick and the graffiti came into focus again. I forced my feet to move. I knew what was there, and I knew what was not. I walked around it, pretending not to look but straining my eyes in hopes that maybe this time would be different, that maybe this would be the day where I would glimpse a tiny angel’s wing to tell me everything would be okay.

No such thing. I continued toward home, calculating the time until Ryan’s next call, measuring the hours in steps.

**Anita Lakshmi Powell**

**“If I Get Out of This Alive I Will Make Pasta”**

Anita Lakshmi Powell is a journalist based in Southern Africa, who has covered conflict around the world. Her short stories have been twice consecutively longlisted for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize, and her first entry to a fiction contest was published by Commonwealth Writers and was their most-read piece of 2018. She has also been published by the *Bangalore Review* and was a finalist for the 2020 Key West Literary Seminar's Cecelia Joyce Johnson Award. She was born in Australia to immigrant parents and now lives in Johannesburg with her family, which stars her four-year-old daughter.

She writes, “This short story stemmed from a conversation with soldier-novelist Ryan Leigh Dostie (author of *Formation*, a wonderful, harrowing, memoir of her time as a service member), that unearthed our mutual outrage and unease with the perception that, somehow, our gender kept us from seeing the harsh realities of conflict and disqualified us from telling our stories. That’s made clear to me in the emphasis on technical verisimilitude in war writing—evident in the genre’s liberal use of acronyms and terminology. My experience as a radio reporter has taught me, however, that emotional truth—or as Tim O’Brien puts it so perfectly in *The Things They Carried*, the “truth-goose”—also carries significant weight, and can carry a narrative as much as name-checking that particular weapon or armored vehicle. This entirely fictional story of a mom doing her job on a particularly bad day covers the complicated emotional truth of these historically significant events, in a way that I think rings, well, true.”

## If I Get Out of This Alive I Will Make Pasta

Anita Lakshmi Powell

Whose dumb-fuck idea was this, is what everyone is thinking as we mount up for the dumbest fucking idea short of, well, like, I don't even know. I suppose coming to this fucking sandpit in the first place.

The colonel seems pumped, standing in the middle of a huge circle, clearing his throat like he's about to give a graduation speech because there are just so fucking *many* of us, lined up like little toy soldiers in our stupid baggy war pajamas, fresh-faced and ready to die.

We need to show them, he says, our commitment to democracy. They are voting tomorrow because of *us*. *Our efforts*. We did this. So they could be free.

He points at the still-dark sky, and some of the dumbshits bother to look up.

Command, he says, wants us to make a real show here. Smile, wave, show the citizens we're having fun. Show them we're not afraid. You, too, don't need to be afraid tomorrow when you cast your vote. This is our chance to be *heroes*.

52 fucking vehicles in a row, going 10 clicks an hour through this entire filthy city, splayed out and helpless like a drunk cheerleader at a house party, just asking for it.

Yeah, I am afraid, asshole.

\*

Anyone who drives for a living knows there's much more to it than simply getting from Point A to Point B. I tried to tell Branden this, once, and he told me I was trying to make my job seem all fancy, which is rich coming from *him*.

I hate Branden and he hates me, but together we somehow manage not to hate Chloe and Jayden, which seems like a goddamn miracle to me sometimes because I love the little shits to death but they look so much like him I wonder how that is even possible. The heart is a funny thing.

He's such a shitbag piece of shit that when given the option of taking them during the deployment, he reminded me that since we were never married or anything there's really no benefit to him if I die, which was a super shitty thing to say, but then he topped even that bit of prize-winning fuckery that by informing me that truck drivers aren't exactly prime targets, like he knows anything about anything.

What's the first thing the enemy tries to do? I ask him.

He looks at me with that dumb blank face of his.

Bomb them? he says. I don't know, babe, I sell car audio solutions. I'm no *war expert*.

He smiles as if this is funny. We're so long since done fucking that he doesn't even try to impress me anymore.

Disrupt the supply line, I say.

Okay, he says. And what's that got to do with you?

You know what, nevermind, I tell him.

Seems my destiny in life is to keep attracting shitty men.

\*

What do you want? they ask us when we get to Kuwait, middle of the night, groggy, slumping in a wobbly line off the C-130, forming a human chain to unload our mountain of sea-bags. Trying to get us all hooah-ed up as we adjust to the sand fleas, the heat, the food.

Sgt. Maj. faces down Teeter, who looks like he's the wrong side of 50. He's an insurance adjuster in Waco, he tells me, which the Army decides qualifies him to do civilian-military affairs. Says he was stunned when the mobilization orders came. You and me both, buddy, I tell him.

TEETER, Sgt. Maj. booms. What do you want?

Teeter blinks his wormy eyes. Thinks about it, reaches back into his brain. Begins, slowly:

This recruit does not—

Jesus *fuck*, Sgt. Maj. spits. Christ on a cracker. Ass on a sandwich sonofabitch motherfucker.

He takes a deep breath. Closes his eyes. Centers himself.

Okay, people, he says. I get it. This is all new to you. You all have *jobs* and *lives* out there. You probably never in your pansy-ass lives thought you'd actually have to put your pansy asses on the line. But here we are. And for the next year, you belong to Uncle Sam. And what Uncle Sam wants, *you* want. So what the fuck do YOU want, Teeter?

Teeter hesitates.

Um, he says. To...win?

Sgt. Maj. makes a face like he's going to shit out a whole apple. Turns, looks at me.

TOMATO, he says.

We all stand still. My new boots are rubbing a blister into my left ankle. I try to ignore it.

TOMATO, he repeats, points at me. YOU.

It's, uh, D'Amato, sir, I say.

YOUR NAME IS WHAT I FUCKING SAY IT IS SOLDIER, he says.

YES SIR, I say.

Don't you ever call me sir again, soldier, he says. I work for a goddamn living. Now Tomato, WHAT DO YOU WANT?

TO NOT DIE SERGEANT MAJOR, I say.

YES, he says. That is correct. Do that day in, day out, for the whole year, and you'll have accomplished your mission. Hooah.

HOOAH, we all say.

\*

I liked Teeter. His wife worked at the post office back home and knew how to get all kinds of shit through. Whiskey in Lipton Iced Tea bottles. Vodka for Perrier. And once, for me, some red wine in a bottle of Ocean Spray Cran-Pomegranate.

He was a Crown Royal man, he said, and brought with him a purple-and-gold patchwork quilt Norma had made him out of Crown bags. He'd invite us around to his hooch and host movie nights, and we'd fight like a backseat full of kids over who got to huddle under the blanket, feel something soft against our skin.

He was a good dude.

\*

You get a lot of time to think in this job. Mostly I think about Jayden and Chloe, about how she came out with funny old-man hair, like completely bald in the middle with a ring of fuzz around the sides, and I started to see some logic in combovers, because that's no way for a poor little baby to have to look.

We're four clicks down. I could've told that colonel that 10 mph was not even remotely possible in Baghdad traffic, that six hours straight through—and no one getting blown up—is optimistic as all fuck. It's gonna be a pissing-in-a-Coke-bottle kind of day.

Jayden, meanwhile, is obsessed with both firetrucks and octopuses, which Mom says he refuses to believe don't go together, and I have to admit, eight arms would be super useful if you had to put out a fire, or at least help you climb out of a tank fast enough to keep your eyeballs from popping like what happened to those poor bastards in 3rd Cav.

Jayden says Mom has been making him Octopus Pasta, which is basically a handful of dry spaghetti stuck into cocktail wieners and then boiled, which is a direct hit to her tender Italian heart, but he'll

get there, eventually, we tell ourselves. Because the thought of being unable to fill him with our love is too much to bear.

Branden had the gall to tell me I was a lousy cook because I couldn't make anything without garlic or tomatoes, one of which gives him gas and the other, palpitations, and I was like, well, if you can't handle Italian food you probably shouldn't be with an Italian woman, which I sort of regretted at the time, but not really, because he was a douchebag.

At the Camp Liberty salon they will rip everything—like, *everything*—off your cooch for \$25, which they like to remind you is a bargain, that shit costs \$100 in the real world, and that's before the tip, as if you're supposed to be grateful for the discount you get for Doing Your Part for Freedom.

The woman who runs the place is a fat Ukrainian with a huge-ass mole on her chin that sprouts nasty wiry black hairs, and I wonder why she doesn't wax *that*, but then I bet it would a) hurt like a bitch and b) maybe she's making the completely valid point that you don't have to look even remotely fuckable around here to get fucked.

He lets me call him by his first name, Devin, when we fuck, as long as we can do it the way he likes best, which is doggystyle. Sometimes he likes it when I call him Papi, which I do because then I can close my eyes and pretend I'm fucking someone worthwhile and not some douche who told me once, after enough shitty Iraqi gin, that back home he sometimes likes to wear eyeliner and a fake nose ring. When he gets back, he says, he's gonna get gauges in his ears. It'll look so *badass*, he says, like Fred Durst.

My roommate disapproves, not because he's a douche but because she never hesitates to remind everyone that she used to be Active Duty and there are rules the rest of us Weekend Warriors could never understand, like, you never fuck out of rank. She has a point, because if you can swing it logistically you can get roommates to pair off with other roommates and then you don't have to screw with all of this scheduling just to screw. It's like Chinese fucking Checkers around here.

\*

Jayden is determined that I will make him Octopus Pasta when I get home, which Mom doesn't want to tell him when that might be, and I'm not allowed to really say stuff like that over the phone anyway, OpSec and all that. Five-year-olds don't really have a great sense of time, so it's not like it matters. He says I've been gone *foreeeever* and he has a point because when you're five even six months would be a big part of your life.

When I get home I think the first thing I will do, after of course folding those two monsters into my body and kissing every part of them they will let me kiss, is take a nice long bath. With a big-ass glass of red wine. That was my drink of choice, but since Teeter I've been making do with local gin, which is shit but what can you do.

Then I will blow-dry my hair, leave it down, which honestly I don't really remember what it even looks like anymore, maybe that's a terrible idea. I'll put on makeup. And something nice that shows my knees, and some stripper heels, and I'll call up the girls, we'll go to a nice place for dinner, then to a swanky bar with bottle service and we'll sit on white leather sofas and drink champagne or else Cosmopolitans and I'll meet a hot guy who can actually dance, like a Jaime or a Miguel, I've never

known a not-hot Miguel, and he will fuck me slowly, looking at my face, whispering in my ear and I will call him Papi and like it, and when he asks me what I do I'll tell him I drive for FedEx because I've learned that the only dudes who get hard over War Stories are not dudes you want to be around.

\*

About this spaghetti, I tell my mom, have you tried doing it with meatballs? I mean, cocktail wieners are so gross, unhealthy too. How about sticking the spaghetti into meatballs instead, then you have an actual dish, not this Frankenstein shit.

She sighs.

You ever tried to boil a meatball? she says. It's a bad idea.

Cherry tomatoes, then, I say. That could work. Healthier.

I'll try, she says and we both know she doesn't mean it, will absolutely not try. I am starting to feel she resents me, and I want to yell that this wasn't my dumb idea to come over here and leave her holding the bag, and besides, her daughter is Serving Her Country and she should be proud, not irritated, even a little bit worried from time to time. I want to tell her but don't want to worry her about what it's really like here.

While I drive through this stinking city I try to come up with alternatives that might work for her. Of possibilities with tortellini, which if you think about it, look like ears or assholes, neither of which you'd try to feed a kid. Raviolis are really just pillows, and you could cut them into fun shapes, though who has the time for that. Ziti—now, there's a possibility. Like what if you stick a piece of broccoli in there, you'd get Pasta Trees. Or you could do it with carrot sticks or green beans or...

It'd just fall apart, Mom sighs.

\*

The sun is high and I am melting and have filled half a Coke bottle with dark-yellow piss and we are not even a third of the way there. Fuck this colonel and whoever told him this was a good idea. We are all going to get fucking iced out here, and because there are just so fucking many of us and we're so close, too close, my brakes are so not happy with me right now, those freaky Eddie-Munster Mortuary Affairs types are going to spend absolutely forever pulling us apart and at the end of it all they'll just end up with piles and piles of pieces and really, someone should just tell them that no one really cares that the correct knee is with the correct elbow because you're fucking dead and you're basically just macaroni in blood sauce at that point.

We are going at a crawl and I am getting jumpy and wondering why the fuck we couldn't just airdrop these ballots, like paper the whole damn town, a ballot for you, a ballot for YOU, Oprah-style, everybody gets a ballot! Democracy for all! I mean who really cares who they vote for, it's gonna get cooked anyway, none of us are that stupid, we see how they do things around here.

\*

If I ran this war, I think while idling the engine and trying not to think about the 18 million snipers training their sights on all of us right the fuck now, I would do things differently. I would give every woman an AK-47. That would solve so many of our problems in life.

Don't like your dinner? Fine, sweetie, eat some lead.

Cheat on me with Amber from work? Boom, motherfucker.

Don't want to look at me while we fuck?

Well, actually, that last one is fair.

\*

A woman comes out of her house in that black billowy gown like she's all Jihad Batgirl and is waving at us, and I'm like, lady, why would you be outside if you have to on a day like this, go inside, leave us to our misery of winning your Hearts and Minds.

But I smile and wave, because the colonel told me to.

She's surprised to see me, which is fair since we mainly drive at night, so seeing a chick behind the wheel of a big-ass truck would be a sight to see if you lived in the 11th century.

We're under strict instructions not to alight from our vehicles but a round little terp trots over from one of the Humvees and talks to her. She's waving her arms, pointing at us, our long line of dumbasses, then pointing back at her house, yelling almost.

The terp nods gravely, trots back to his vehicle. Over the radio they explain. A female in the home is in labor and we're blocking the damn road because of course we are, crawling along.

Medic, they say, medic.

I feel sorry for her. I had both of mine at proper hospitals, which are nonexistent here. Chances are, if she could even make it to one of the bombed-out, roach-infested shitholes that calls itself a hospital, she'd have to squat on the floor and push the thing out of her cooch without any help or even drugs. Sucks to be Iraqi, unarmed, and female.

\*

A medic runs over. The woman is hysterical, waving her arms, looks like she's about to take flight. Shakes her head violently. The terp argues with her, shakes his head, no, no no no, points at the medic, who lowers his head like a kid caught in the middle of his parents' fight.

The woman points at me and I see her full face. She looks crazed, frantic.

The medic comes to my window.

Hi, he says.



Hi, I say.

D'Amato, is it, the medic says. He points to his chest. RODRIGUEZ, it says.

I feel like this is a weird time to be making introductions.

The radio, he says.

I pass him the radio.

He explains the situation.

The colonel comes back on the radio and, instead of suggesting that we call in air support, get the poor woman up on the roof and airlift her to an actual health facility with proper doctors and shit, tells me to pull over. The convoy will continue its snaking path to the depot. But I will stay, with a truckful of meaningless ballots and with Rodriguez here and B-squad from Company Whatever from the shit-for-luck boys of 3rd Cav., and I will represent the United States of America by sticking my fingers, hands, elbows, whatever I have to, into this poor woman's vag, pulling out a baby and hoping she names it George Washington Bush Al-Akbar Hussein or whatever.

Hearts and minds, the colonel says to me over the radio. Hooah.

Roger that, sir, I say.

\*

Okay, Rodriguez says in what I imagine he imagines is his best baby-delivering voice, as we look at the squat, square, mustard-colored house, we're gonna do this together. I'll be your brain, you be my hands. Easy does it, we'll be fine.

He seems nice. Pretty eyes, long lashes. Same rank as me. Knows his way around a cooch.

Roger that, I say, even though that sounds like a dumb-shit idea but what choice do we really have. The woman is pulling at my elbow and I flinch because that hand is on the trigger of my rifle and I've turned off the safety just in case because this is all a dumb fucking idea and if a woman were in charge none of this would ever, ever fucking happen. I wonder what proper muzzle awareness is when your hand is up someone's vag. Devin and I have never done that but a lot of people get off on that shit, mixing the firearms with the fucking. It occurs to me we should try.

The woman meets my eyes again and I wonder if she knows I am thinking, at this very moment, about fucking.

Instead she looks at me, calm all of a sudden. Reaches out a hand, as if to bring me along. I notice her fingernails are unevenly stained, from yellow to red to deep brown. Those nails. I'm looking at them when suddenly she squeezes her hand into a fist. Then she smiles and I feel my insides scrunch up against each other, kidneys and lungs and heart in a little bag of skin.

Allah Akbar, she yells, and everything goes bright.

I see Jayden and his stupid spaghetti octopuses, flailing, all eight legs sparkling with fire, before my eyes. How I would make them, or any stupid fucking thing he wants to eat, if I could just hold him in my arms again. I see Chloe dancing in that strange slow-motion way she does, like she's underwater and sinking, drifting away in the undercurrent, and I want to pull her back to me, smell her hair, cup my hands over her round little butt, her smooth back, her downy cheeks. I see Mom smiling, holding her hands up, like, what can you do, and I feel a twinge of guilt for being such a shitty teenager and all the other stuff. And, as things get fuzzy and I feel my organs smashing against each other in a way I didn't think they could even do, fizzing like Pop Rocks, I see fucking Devin closing his eyes and rolling his eyeballs back as if he's going to explode, right there, as he fucks me from behind. Rodriguez' face is frozen in a smile as we look at each other like, Seriously?

And, I think, well, at least I won't have to get my vag waxed ever again. Shit fucking *hurts*.

# Visual Arts

## **INTERVIEW WITH HUMAIRA ABID, ARTIST**

Humaira Abid gathers ordinary objects from everyday life and transforms them into something extraordinary. Her turned and carved wood sculpture and paintings—known for their exquisite detail—depict human relationships, societal repression, and the consequences of keeping basic truths from being discussed and shared. She was born and raised in Lahore, Pakistan. She immigrated to the United States in 2008 and now lives and works in Seattle, WA.

## INTERVIEW WITH HUMAIRA ABID, ARTIST

### Collateral:

You grew up in Lahore, Pakistan, and studied at the prestigious National College of Arts. You've talked before about studying sculpture and realizing early on that there were very few women exploring woodwork, and how that inspired you to move into the field. How did that work?



### Humaira:

Actually, when I went to high school, I knew I would take Fine Arts as my major but was not sure what my main medium would be. All the departments—Architecture, Design, and Fine Arts—these are all together in the foundation year. Once a week we had sculpture class, and it was one of the classes everybody was scared of.

In second year, we all decided on our own departments and I was in the Fine Arts department. We learned more about the specific mediums then, like painting, printmaking, sculpture, and miniature painting. In the third and fourth year, the final two years, we had to decide what our major would be. I was doing really well in all subjects. Sculpture was the only one that my teacher didn't ask me to take as a major. And I started noticing there are not many women working in 3D mediums, especially wood. There were only a few sculptors, and they were men. I felt there was a lack of women's voices in wood.

I was very interested in this medium, along with miniature painting. Miniature painting started as book illustration and was mostly considered a medium of craft or design. I thought that I could do something different, new, push the boundaries, bring a woman's point of view. I also took it as a challenge. I said, "Everybody's warning me, I have to see what's so tough about it." This is one of my qualities. If people warn me not to try something, I do it, to show them that I can.

### Collateral:

Is there a medium you haven't really spent a lot of time with, perhaps like a challenge waiting?

### Humaira:

There are many mediums I tried, and they just didn't speak to me. One medium I don't work with, for example, is stone. I have never felt that I'm not picking up a medium because it is a challenge. I have combined many mediums with wood in my installation-based work. I just don't work in some mediums as much because they don't speak to me like wood does. But I am open to exploring new mediums which I feel will add to my work and expression, conveying the message successfully.



**Collateral:**

You are an instructor and mentor for several institutions and many artists. What do you tell students about listening? What does it sound like when art speaks to you?



**Humaira:**

Often students and upcoming artists—sometimes even actors—ask me this question. I do online mentoring and I teach at institutions, and this is one of the questions I’m often asked. I totally believe that whatever comes from your heart that you feel passionate about, that’s what you should pursue. And no matter what kind of medium it is, you can make it work. I totally, totally believe that. I don’t think anyone should be scared. It’s okay to believe if it speaks to you.

I mean, I still get scared. Whenever I start a new piece, there is a time when I question it. I ask, *am I going in the right direction?* It happens to everyone. No matter how experienced you are in certain mediums, you’ll still ask questions. I sometimes change my pieces in the middle of the process. Everyone should be flexible [when] the medium speaks. That’s what I enjoy most—sometimes I start a piece with a different point of view, and it changes during the process. It makes me even more excited about it.

**Collateral:**

You grew up in spaces where discussing trauma and personal struggle was discouraged. Can you tell us about that time in your life?

**Humaira:**

In Pakistan, society is generally closed. Talking about many subjects, especially related to women’s issues—periods, puberty, sex, even relationships, miscarriages, things which are so common and natural are taboo. Not many people talk about it. There are many things which are disturbing, especially concerning women. For example, the tea ceremony at the time of matchmaking. This is a tradition where a boy’s family comes to see a girl at her house (to arrange a marriage); she brings tea and is presented and looked upon as an object. My installation ‘Tea Ceremony: Proposal Parade’ reflects on that and it is also an attempt to raise the issue of ‘dowry demand’, which is considered normal. When a girl doesn’t bring





enough dowry, it can result in bad treatment for her, or even divorce. These traditions are still happening. I mean, many marriages are arranged by two families. And many girls go through the process of bringing tea, serving people, being judged—they are presented as an object, and nobody's talking about this. I don't know why.

I grew up in a society where I witnessed such situations on daily basis, and it frustrated me. I don't know why I'm this way. It bothered me. When I was in art school, that is what I wanted to highlight in my work because I thought, *not many people are talking about this. I need to talk*

*about it.*

Then I moved to the U.S. and I had multiple miscarriages, and nobody was talking about that either. Even my close friends who miscarried wouldn't talk to me about it. I remember once I asked a friend why. She said the reason is because women often end up getting the blame, so they stop bringing it up. They try to hide. I don't think this helps anyone.

That gave me a reason to talk about it, and I did a whole series on miscarriages and fertility issues. Some women came to the show and started crying, and it became a very emotional experience for me. And I think at that time I said, *this is exactly what I want to be doing.* That gave me a clear sense of direction. I mean, I knew it already, but that was the moment of realization.

Art has the power to touch people and artists have a responsibility to educate society, and open discussions, which I believe is a step towards realization and change.

### **Collateral:**

Do people who respond intensely to your work come back and share that experience with you?

### **Humaira:**

They do, and I'm grateful for that because every time it happens, it gives me more strength and determination to continue to do my work. A couple of years ago I had created a piece 'My Shame' for a show. It was a very pretty wood carved chair which was then gilded with 24k gold. And then the cushion part of it, which is bleached pine wood, has a red stain on it. So it's like a woman was sitting there and left the menstrual stain on it. I also carved a pair of underwear with a menstrual stain on it in the same series.



A friend of mine wrote to me and said she had come to see my show with her mother. She said, "After your talk, as we were moving towards the gallery space, my mother told me that she often



regretted how she had treated me when I began menstruating. She said she didn't know why but she had felt angry and was rough with me. For a long time, I accepted that she did the best she could, but a healing did take place for both of us [when] she was able to verbalize this sorrow. I really doubt that these words could have come out if we hadn't experienced your show together."



My friend said this is one of the strongest moments in their lives, to let go of what they have been holding for so many years. And my work gave them that opportunity to open up. I feel grateful that I'm able to do something which is affecting people and giving them this courage.

**Collateral:**

I can see how that strengthens your commitment to your art.

**Humaira:**

Yeah.

**Collateral:**

Is there a particular artist who's inspired your work?

**Humaira:**

People who have given me inspiration, not really working in a similar medium, but maybe the artist who in their own medium pushed through people's expectations. For example, Brancusi started working on contemporary-style sculpture when a lot of people were doing realistic sculpture. Louise Bourgeois was so ahead of her time, using symbolism in her work that nobody at that time was really doing. You know, people who think ahead of their time, people who push the boundaries of mediums. I feel connected with a lot of artists who are doing this, not just one artist, one style.

**Collateral:**

Your work in *Searching for Home*, specifically, and your recent projects, bring immigrants and refugees to the forefront of conversations around the arts. How have you interviewed immigrants for this project? Are there particular memories that immediately inspired your medium?

**Humaira:**

Yes. I did interview many myself, and then there were some interviews conducted through another person. In Pakistan, there was a center where they had women refugees who, some of them ran away from their houses, from organizations or their own family members. There was an





extra element of protection for them. I had to go through a lot of security screenings, and I didn't have time when I was in Pakistan. I had another friend who already had credits. I gave her a list of my questions and she went there and asked questions on my behalf.



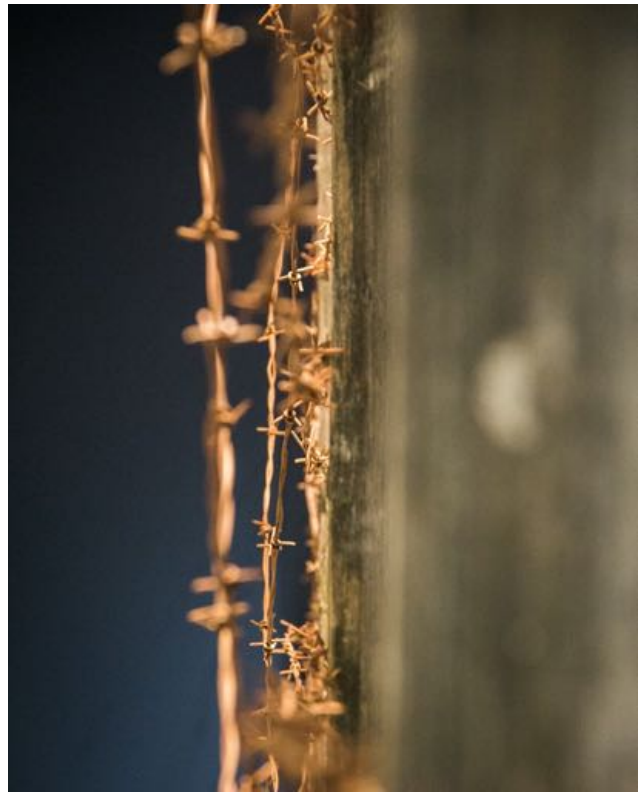
I was interested in asking questions nobody else was asking. There were not many women telling their side of the story; it was mostly the male member of the house telling their perspective. For example, I could never find any answer to, "What did [refugees] do if they had a menstrual cycle? If they were pregnant, if they had an infant?" They were on their own. I remember, in that center in Pakistan, the supervisor said they received some women covered in blood because they didn't have anything.

This touched me on a deeper level. There was no question about carrying breast pumps or

things of personal use. Often the male member of the house decided what [women] could take with them because of the limitation of what could be carried.

And then I met another woman here in Seattle who is originally from Zambia. Such a strong woman. She got married when she was 14 or 15, in ninth grade, and he was a diplomat posted in the U.S. later on. He promised her family he would wait for her to reach puberty and will let her continue education. It was his second marriage. They got married and he already had a wife in the U.S. Right away, he did not keep his promise. She got pregnant in a year, and then she was going through a lot of domestic abuse. Eventually, she had three kids. Because she was a strong woman, she wanted to continue her education. Her husband felt he couldn't control her the way he wanted, so he took her passport and brought the kids with him to U.S., leaving her behind.

This woman, being so strong and smart, she decided the passport was about to expire anyway so she applied for a new one. She got a U.S. visa, came to the U.S., met her husband's first wife (who helped her actually) and brought her kids from shelter to shelter for two years until she found the Refugee Women's Alliance in Seattle. They brought her to transitional housing, helped her go to court and get custody of her kids, then apply for child support. Then she got her residency here. When I met her, she was finishing her high school degree. She went to nursing school and actually just graduated.



That's a story of strength and determination: moving here, then making her home again, and she's so successful. This is important for people to see; we need to support people who move to make their home again.



**Collateral:**

Do you think conditions and policies are getting better for women fleeing abuse and war?

**Humaira:**

It's getting worse. You can see the situation in Myanmar, the Rohingya Muslims. It just started happening in China, in India. In Japan, I hear so many stories of struggle and abuse. In the past

few years, it's gotten worse. I was hoping things would get better, but it is just so sad to see the situation escalating at this time. And the U.S. government is not helping the situation.

**Collateral:**

Do you see art as a way to address the pain caused by governments turning away from people?

**Humaira:**

I do. I really do. I think we artists have a responsibility. I believe in art for a cause, with a purpose. It makes a difference. A lot of people still do not understand the actual situation. They don't really understand there are reasons why people have to migrate.

One of the girls I painted, a young girl with a broken shoulder, then other girls... all they talk about is home. They had to leave, and they want to go back. Even if there is war. It's not easy for people to leave their home and everything behind. In many situations, women don't have a choice. If they move and go to a new country, all they need is some support, empathy—people who understand their situation and make it easier for them. Not more difficult. Not telling them, "Go back to your home." But saying, "Welcome. You can make your home here also."

**Collateral:**

How has your sense of home changed or developed while living in Pakistan and Seattle?

**Humaira:**

My parents were refugees. When they were kids, they moved from India to Pakistan at the time of partition. When I was growing up, I saw a lot of refugees around me because Pakistan was in the top five countries taking the maximum number of refugees, mostly from Afghanistan and some from other neighboring countries.

I saw refugees around me struggling, trying to make their home again. They had to migrate because of the war between the U.S. and Afghanistan. A lot of people were pushed into Pakistan. I saw them struggling. And then I moved to U.S.—that was my choice. I met someone who was in the U.S., so that was my reason to move.

When I moved here, every time I went to Pakistan, a lot of people would say, “Oh, you’re going home.” For them, my home was where I was born. But after so many years in the U.S. I feel like this is my home too. But for a lot of people, my home was Pakistan. I started asking this question to myself: what is home? Is it a place where you are born or is it a place you feel you belong?

**Collateral:**

Home becomes a fluid concept.

**Humaira:**

Yeah. When people were pushed from Afghanistan to Pakistan, some of them were kids. They grew up and didn’t remember anything about Afghanistan. And when the situation in Afghanistan became more stable, [refugees] were pushed back *again*.

But they’d grown up in Pakistan. I’m not debating this issue, whether it was a good or bad decision. But they were pushed back—forcefully, some of them—to Afghanistan. Some of them said, “I spent most of my life here. I don’t even remember Afghanistan. That’s not home for me anymore.” For them, Afghanistan became a foreign country. And they were pushed back. They were forced to go back.



**Collateral:**

Do you think there will ever be a time when it isn’t a matter of men or government *letting* women and families be independent, but women and families choosing and pursuing independence freely?

**Humaira:**

It’s difficult in some countries. In countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan, men are still making most decisions for women. But yes, there are strong women. Women who run away from a husband or a family or an organization like the Taliban. In situations with domestic abuse, groups are helping women resettle in a different country. Yes, it’s happening. There are strong women, yes, but still it needs to improve. It’s difficult for many women still.



**Collateral:**

Can you tell us about some of your upcoming projects?

## **Humaira:**

My solo show *Searching for Home* is currently on view at the Center for Art in Wood in Philadelphia until the end of July. The show is going to travel to other museums for the next three years.

I am also developing a new body of work for an upcoming solo show at the Greg Kucera Gallery in Seattle. The title is *Sacred Games* and it is about taboos and issues related to religion and society. The customs and ceremonies may be different, but vulnerable people are abused and mistreated everywhere. All societies have extremists that twist religion (or other social institutions) and use it to their own benefit, to oppress women and defenseless people. I am working on many installations combining sculpture and painting to address these issues. I deeply believe that a work of art should have a purpose. As an artist, I have a responsibility to educate the society in which I live, and to be a voice. This has been the main purpose of my work and will always be.

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Humaira Abid received her BFA in sculpture and miniature painting from the National College of Arts, Lahore, in 2000. Her works have been exhibited in museums and galleries and documented in publications around the world and reviewed by local, national, and international news media. Abid is the recipient of numerous honors, most recently the 2019 Artist Trust Arts Innovator Award. Her work has been published in books and other print media and she has been the recipient of prestigious awards and grants. She has lectured widely and participated in residencies and symposia around the world. Two documentary features focused on Abid and her work, produced by the KCTS9 branch of PBS and Seattle Channel, were both nominated for Northwest Emmy Awards. The artist is represented by Greg Kucera Gallery, Seattle. Find more of her work at [www.humaira.com.pk](http://www.humaira.com.pk).

