COLLATERAL

ISSUE 5.1
FALL 2020

EDITORS

Abby E. Murray
Jenny L. Miller
M.L. Doyle
Jerri Bell
Eric Wilson-Edge

↓ IN THIS ISSUE ↓

Poetry

Creative Nonfiction

Fiction

Visual Arts Feature

POETRY

At a Photography Exhibition by Teenage Afghan Refugees

Matthew J. Andrews

Hot coffee, Styrofoam cups,
cookies laid out in rows
and easels arranged in a circle,
as if around a campfire.

*

Image one: bright yellow
sunflowers, heads high,
lattice-shadowed by chain link.

*

One man remarks, *this is so cliché.*
The young artist does not hear him,
is deep in conversation with a woman
fighting back tears. The man throws
his white cup away, half empty.

*

Another image: a butterfly
punches its way out
of a cocoon prison.

*

I remember no names
or titles but I remember
the young artist
alternating his weight
from one leg to another,
his right hand holding
the left in front of him,
his work standing
by his side, up to his shoulder
like a younger brother.

*

His piece: budded branches
of a tree sneak like secrets
through a slat in a wooden gate
and bloom.

*

Every artist statement: a murder.
The walk between each one: a mourning.
Their accumulation: a massacre.

*

Another: a garden with colors
from every edge of the spectrum.
Or so you imagine – the photograph
is washed of color, leaving only
light and its shadow.

*

I remember I once learned
cliché is the creation
of French printmakers,
who derived it from a word
meaning "to click"
to embody the sound made
when crafted molds
were pressed down hard
into molten metal to create
a solid impression.

The critic has already left,
but he wouldn't have cared.

*

Another: a bird takes flight
next to a decrepit building. A window,
busted, shards spilled like blood,
haunts the background.

*

I lose myself imagining
my children buried under rubble
after a building has exploded
then collapsed like a dying star,
my wife dragged by her hair
from our house, bodies
piled on the street's edge like plowed snow.

*

Another: a young woman
in a hijab looks away
from the camera, facing the past, behind
her. We look with her, but we cannot
see the things she has seen, is seeing.

*

I learn the Farsi word for art: هنر.
A woman, the mother of one artist,
tells me to pronounce it by saying *honor*
with the words coming from deep
down in my chest, near the heart.

*

Last image: the sun rises
over the valley we share, this home
of ours, the rays illuminating clear skies,
thick groves of almond trees, green
with life, a house with an open door.

Matthew J. Andrews is a private investigator and writer who lives in Modesto, California. His poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Funicular Magazine*, *The Inflectionist Review*, *Red Rock Review, Sojourners, Amethyst Review*, *Kissing Dynamite*, and *Deep Wild Journal*, among others. He can be contacted at matthewjandrews.com. "At a Photography Exhibition by Teenage Afghan Refugees" is a response to a small photography exhibit supported by JAYU (https://www.jayu.ca/) and World Relief (https://worldrelief.org/) that he found to be significantly more impactful than any professional art show he had ever attended.

Body of god
Jide Badmus

Some were eager for me
To grow in stature—
Others mocked, taunted,
Said I was cheated by nature.
None could see the gift, miracle
That my body is.
The clock grows in silence.
Air does not age!
These teeth clap in laughter
As though lips have never
Crashed a smile—
This body, it heals
…it heals.

Jide Badmus is an electrical engineer, a poet inspired by beauty and destruction; he believes that things in ruins were once beautiful. Badmus explores themes around sensuality and healing. He writes from Lagos, Nigeria. You can reach him on twitter @bardmus, IG @instajhide. On "Body of god", he writes, "A younger colleague once looked at me and said I had cheated nature. But this body only mastered the art of healing."

ya besha
Antony Fangary

gidu taught me this phrase—

auqdit el khoaga

khoaga means

foreigner
it means
the westerners
who came to egypt
tumbled into our capital
like
a ball of snakes mating

auqdic,
he said,

is a knot
a tangling of string

this inferior feeling

shedding skin
from village
to village

auqdit el khoaga, he said,

they saw our complexion
flexed against the riverbanks of the nile
& thinned us to a flattened python
a paved road

dear diary
Antony Fangary

diaspora is a city
& i feel like
a toeless pigeon
nesting wire
& string
instead of branches

pecking
asphalt for crumbs
like keys

Antony Fangary is a Coptic-American Poet, Educator, and Artist living in San Francisco. His work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in The Oakland Review, New American Writing, Interim, Welter, and elsewhere. His chapbook, HARAM was published by Etched Press in 2019. Antony was Honorable Mention of the Ina Coolbrith Poetry Prize, Finalist for the 2019 Wabash Prize, Runner-up for the 2020 Test Site Poetry Series, and holds an MFA from San Francisco State University.

Aftershocks
Laurie Kuntz

It starts slowly, a rumble
a faint tremble, the light bulb shakes
the windows wrench, crushing glass sounds—

the reign of distant chimes.

In the end, all things not secured tumble.

A woman from Syria
rarely goes out, and it is not without
a scrutinizing eye—
the safest corner.
A table away from windows.
She avoids buses, walks everywhere,
but not in that carefree swagger
barely afforded to the children who walk beside her.

My Cambodian neighbor wakes most nights.
The same dream jolts her—
mistaking the wind for thunder,
thunder for memories,
the picture of her eldest
falls off the night table.

So many years ago now,
my sister drove over the Brooklyn Bridge.
She smelled the charred papers
that fell from the sky for days.
Excavations, foundations set,
blueprints blown against an approaching wind—
not a bone was returned to her.

In the end, all things not secured tumble
into a reign of distant chimes.

Rescue
Laurie Kuntz

Miklos Radnoti was a writer from Budapest. The Jewish Hungarian poet was shot in the head by German guards on a forced march from Yugoslavia to Hungary during the last days of WWII. In a massgrave, two years later, Radnoti's body was discovered and exhumed. His last poems, written on postcards, were found in his coat pocket.

Radnoti, a twin, rescued at birth, lived in halves,
thinking of the mother and brother who didn't survive,
and how from the wondrous womb,
he hurled into a world where fathers, too, leave,
a year before a boy becomes a man.

Left with whole lives gone,
Radnoti suffered the copper mines,
labor camps and death marches,
nothing spared, but his words—

Poems written to his wife,
on bits of paper, backs of postcards,
cured from the ground to seed against time
and the hands of men raking lands irreverent—

All unearthed, as Radnoti wrote,
"Patience flowers into death now."

Delphiniums grow from the dirt,
the discarded mass, the rancid heap
where Radnoti's body rotted,
bone on pebble, ink on gravel,
all that is rescued from soil to flower.

Laurie Kuntz is an award-winning poet and film producer. She taught creative writing and poetry in Japan, Thailand and the Philippines. Many of her poetic themes are a result of her work teaching in Southeast Asian refugee camps for over a decade after the Vietnam War years. She has published one poetry collection (*Somewhere in the Telling*, Mellen Press) and two chapbooks (*Simple Gestures,* Texas Review Press and *Women at the Onsen,* Blue Light Press), as well as an ESL reader (*The New Arrival, Books 1 & 2,* Prentice Hall Publishers). Her new poetry collection: *The Moon Over My Mother's House* is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press in 2021. Her poetry has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and her chapbook, *Simple Gestures,* won the Texas Review Poetry Chapbook Contest. She has produced documentaries on the repeal of the Don't Ask, Don't Tell Law, and

currently is a researcher for the documentary, *Strangers to Peace*, about the peace process and reintegration of guerrilla soldiers in Colombia. "Aftershocks," a memory poem, attempts to lead the reader out of trauma to a place where memories can chime with healing. "Rescue" is what poetry can do even in the aftermath of war and death—a poem can rescue us, to once again, flower. Her website can be found at https://lauriekuntz.myportfolio.com/home-1.

CIA Headquarters
Frances Mac

An erasure of Donald Trump's remarks on January 21,2017

stop

there is nobody
there is nobody behind
the so much we need

we will not ask
you to raise your hands
we are all we took
wars for wars
restrained we rid
yesterday of the other

you understand what happened
something nobody time
a certain everybody
to cancel
little games with night

imagine the world thrilled
a star to lose
winning young
winning things
the spoils:
oil oil
reasons oil money
oil oil

believe us
don't think
of havoc and fear
this sick human feud
exactly the opposite
exactly empty
a minute where nobody
stands scared

god started it
the truth
sunny and honest
monument and mistake
this field of all
we caught

a price the beautiful
kings like us
take back

history a cover
to be broken
time a line
to even

4th of July Military Appreciation Event
Frances Mac

An erasure of Donald Trump's remarks on July 4, 2017

what that means
to celebrate our freedom
there is a side
never heard
the here first
where america is
standing

we have force
in years
the old tomb
unknown
to every
serving of free
we lay claim

a navy roved
the sphere
what magnetic
hope inking
the lily self
striking hearts
our petty fireworks

gave to rare
fear watching us
thankless sacrifice
there could be
no wavering mission
our coming
always a raid
after the pearl
of territory

Frances Mac hails from the Texas Hill Country and currently lives in Washington, DC. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The MacGuffin*, *Santa Clara Review*, *Lammergeier*, *Lily Poetry Review*, and others. "CIA Headquarters" and "4th of July Military Appreciation Event" are part of a book-length collection examining truth-telling in politics through erasures of Donald Trump's remarks and statements. Learn more about her work at www.francesmacpoetry.com.

Visiting Your Grave

Juan J. Morales

Your white marble tombstone holds
your name, rank, and wars
in a newer row at
the Pikes Peak National Cemetery.
I speak to you by talking to the stone.
I read your favorite
psalm and then a poem.
Some of my family are
behind me, waiting in the grass

because it's a hot day in April,
the day after your birthday.
Just before we arrived, I took a wrong turn
and kept driving
east into the plains, where
antelope were trying
to tell me something about you.
Some grazed and others rested, blending in yellow grass

under a blue, cloudless sky.
We agree you would like it here.
Pikes Peak still holds a tough cap of snow,
and I'm thinking of rivers running
high this summer,

hiding behind sunglasses, crying
a personal flood. I promise to visit again soon
with a kiss to the top of the white
rock, like I used to peck
you, my beautiful father, on
your stubbled cheek.

Dad Watching Jackass
Juan J. Morales

He was mostly gruff, with heft of PTSD
and work shifts dragging behind him, but then there were days,
when I discovered him watching MTV's *Jackass*—
men thrown around by a bull in heat,
guys snapping mouse traps on their nipples and crotches,
and morons taking turns getting flipped in porta pottys.
My dad always called them, "dumb sons-of-bitches,"
cackling to tears when they raced grocery carts
into brick walls and launched themselves with giant slingshots
into thorny thickets. He rode the wave
of slapstick, with the same howls that I can't hold back
watching fail videos that speak the international language of
a ball smacking someone in the face.

I carry on and watch *AFV* in his honor. I seek out the balance
of cute animals, childhood mishaps, and adult tantrums,
that makes me laugh with my whole body. I keep searching for
the late night movie Dad saw on Univision, where
a man farted whenever he saw a gun. I remember my father in tears
taking me scene-by-scene through every fart—
the bank robbery, the car heist, and the track meet
where even the calm before the starting gun
was interrupted by a man's flatulence. I don't know how it ends because
Dad couldn't stop laughing, but I take comfort there is
a film out there, committed to what conjures
your twelve-year-old self back with laughter
and plenty of jackasses offering themselves up for those
who don't get to laugh enough in this life.

Juan J. Morales is the son of an Ecuadorian mother and Puerto Rican father. He is the author of three poetry collections, including *The Handyman's Guide to End Times*, winner of the 2019 International Latino Book Award. Recent poems have appeared in *Crazyhorse*, *The Laurel Review*, *Acentos Review*, Breakbeats Vol. 4 *LatiNEXT*, *Dear America*, *Pank*, *Verse Daily*, *Poetry Daily*, and elsewhere. He is a CantoMundo Fellow, a Macondo Fellow, the Editor/Publisher of Pilgrimage Press, and Professor and Department Chair of English & World Languages at Colorado State University-Pueblo.

Of the two poems in this issue of *Collateral*, Morales writes, "My father passed away very suddenly in the beginning of February 2019. In an effort to elegize him, I have been writing poems like these that celebrate my father's life, his 31 years of military service, and the Boriqua wisdom he shared

with us. I am also writing to explore how my relationship with him carries on through fail videos, the art of profanity, dreamscapes, and upon speaking with him at his grave in the Pikes Peak National Cemetery."

The temple is not the mind
Emily Murphy

The temple is not the mind
is not the body is not the wasting
that carves away flesh
holding shapes in the heat

Not the fleeting pleasures bodiless
but their movement towards
all else cast away how leaves
curl up in fall hold summer

just a minute closer, always just a minute
closer to the stem there is a myth
known to certain trees that if a leaf reaches back
catches its own stem in its veins and radiance

no solstice no eclipse no shattered night comet
only the collapse of stars rolling out like waves

Emily Murphy is an MFA student at The University of New Mexico. Her work has appeared in *Manzano Mountain Review*, *Beech Street Review*, *Inklette*, and *Garbanzo*, as well as a very talented pigeon delivering hand-rolled poems to upper story apartments. You can follow her on Twitter @weightsandmeans

Family Reunion
Mark S. Osaki

It was always worst
just before we disembarked
while the Hueys hovered,
hurling grass sideways like sleet.

Pointing to me, someone shouted
Throw him out first,
one look and the gooks
will think we're friendly.

That's right fellas,
the CO laughed,
this boy has kin
out there.

It amused me too
to imagine someone hiding
below us in the grass
with my photo in his wallet.

It was a joke to be shared
with everyone
we killed.

South of the Border
Mark S. Osaki

When they uncover what you buried here,
how will you explain an order carried out
in the heat?

Your good intentions evaporated
in every seething village until, like fever,
you broke.

Surprising how a body warms
to oppressive surroundings.
Things rot quickly in the tropics.

This too, you can blame on the climate.

Mark S. Osaki was born in Sacramento, California. He attended the University of California, Berkeley as an Alumni Scholar and went on to do graduate work in International Relations and Security Studies. His work has appeared in various journals and anthologies, including *The Georgia Review*, *Carrying the Darkness—The Poetry of the VietnamWar* (Avon, Texas Tech University Press), *South Carolina Review*, *Men of Our Time—AnAnthology of MalePoetry in Contemporary America* (University of Georgia Press), *Breaking Silence—An Anthology of ContemporaryAsian American Poets* (Greenfield Review Press), *Onset Review*, and *Báo Giấy—Vietnamese Poetry.*

He has received awards for his poetry from the Academy of American Poets, University of California at Berkeley, San Francisco Arts Commission, Seattle Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts. Of his poetry, Osaki writes, "Moral ambiguity is the main theme of my poetry; the realization that ethical considerations compel us towards a confrontation. That even good intentions often lead to corruption."

Where God Lives
Roni Sosis

Summer of 2006: The Second Israeli-Lebanese War

Under the missile-streaked sky the windows are empty in Israel,
and the cats lay stomach-up in the street, smothered quiet
by the midday heat. An old man sits under a whispering
olive tree, watches his city fall apart, begs God.
A girl plays monopoly in her grandparent's basement in Pennsylvania,
too young to know that she is a refugee. Strange,

she thinks, she's rolled two sixes in a row. It's strange
to be so lucky. On the TV they point to a map of Israel,
then zoom in to ground view. She watches from Pennsylvania
as a missile floats down to her street like a dandelion seed when God
is looking away. A cat runs from the rubble. Blocks away in his quiet
home, the old man palms backgammon pieces, thinks of whispering

stories to his granddaughter on his knee, whispering
how the thin white pieces were slivers of the moon. So strange
to remember. He looks out the window and asks God
where all the people went. Flying from Israel
on the wings of eagles, God answers, and the old man is quiet
But he wants to beat the earth and scream. In Pennsylvania

it is night and the girl watches streaking stars. Pennsylvania
is where God lives, she thinks, and the whispering
moon casts strange shadows onto the underside of Israel.

Roni Sosis is an undergraduate student at Carnegie Mellon University studying Creative Writing, Global Studies, and Arabic. Roni hopes to pursue a career in Human Rights law and advocate for Middle Eastern and Arab refugees. The poem is inspired by Roni's experience as a child living in Israel during the Second Lebanese War.

Bargaining
Meredith Trede

A tiny brown spider rappels along
the outdoor shower's drainpipe. I flick
water at her web. Go away. Please.
Can we make a deal, Arachne? I don't
want to harm your child. Intercede.
Protect our boy if he re-ups or deploys.
I must write with care. Syllables can turn
life topsy-turvy. It won't be said. Never
call a fear by its name. Never say storm
when at sea. Ease the spell-casting spin
of words. My weave weakens. Athena,
you once took pity on a boasting girl,
shield my child, safeguard his humanity.

She Was My Friend
Meredith Trede

I wrote a note.

My boy had joined
the Marine Corps.

She wrote back glad
that her grandson,

a musician,
shared her morals.

And that was that.

Meredith Trede's collection, *Tenement Threnody*, persona poems in voices from her city childhood, is from Main Street Rag Press. Stephen F. Austin State University Press published *Field Theory*. A Toadlily Press founder, her chapbook, *Out of the Book*, was in Desire Path. Her extensive journal publications include *Barrow Street*, *Cortland Review*, *Friends Journal*, *Witness*, and *The Paris Review*. She was granted fellowships at Blue Mountain Center, Ragdale, Saltonstall, and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. She serves on the Slapering Hol Press Advisory Committee.

Of her two poems in this issue of *Collateral*, Trede writes, "They are part of a manuscript that began when my grandson joined the Marines. The knot of fear that surrounds the poems has not been diminished by their writing. But it is only in writing that I can stumble my way through the fog of endless war and more unnecessary death, as the political becomes all the more personal."

Bronze Medal
Josie Emmons Turner

When your body was as straight as Ocean Avenue, you dove
in the Pacific, after morning fog lifted, after dolphins
traversed south, after pelicans finished breakfast. Your
sexy, lean chest, never sunburned, stronger than crosscurrents

that consume us now, dragging us under, taking us
south (if only to Big Sur). Your spine drips and bends,
a crumbling corkscrew, a tortured skeleton, a war-torn
southeast Asian souvenir, that present you did not intend

to ever unwrap, did not want to ever feel, consume
when you were standing on her deck in your flak jacket,
hands on hips, shouting orders that someone else had shouted
you, holding binoculars, spotting targets shrouded in smoke.

Sometimes the shrapnel embedded into a sailor's
body is not shot or metal, bullets, or iron but remnants
of chemicals oozing out of an aging nervous system,
destroying perfection, and a beautiful bronze medal mind.

We'll not swim at Carmel Beach again and that doesn't matter
because the water is now too cold, and I never liked
seaweed and salt. For now, we read, eat chocolate, drink
red wine, light fires, forget therapists, and for now, it is, now.

Josie Emmons Turner was Tacoma Poet Laureate 2011-2013. Her work was recently published in High Shelf Press and has been published in *California Quarterly*, *Floating Bridge Review*, and *Backstreet Quarterly*. She earned her MFA at the Rainier Writing Workshop at Pacific Lutheran University and for the past 11 years has been teaching literature and writing to 12th grade seniors at Clover Park High School in Lakewood, Washington. In spring 2021, she is taking extended family medical leave to care for her husband and fight for his VA care. She hopes this leave will also give her time to write, reflect, and love the present.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Pain Like Laundry
Jacqlyn Cope

My mother taught me to fold pain up like laundry: flatten the surface, crisp the corners, and store it away in a drawer or a cabinet.

As I stood in line at the chow hall in Afghanistan during my 2012 deployment, I thought of her. The men in front of me smelled of dirt and sweat; I pulledmy tan T-shirt up to my nose and smelled the same. I tried so hard to remember the scent of her Chanel N5. The powdery clean sophistication of the perfume that stuck inside the threads of her jacket that I wrapped my 4-year-old self in while she was at work. I wished I had a bottle to spray myself down.

I'd sneak into her bathroom sometimes, look above the counter on my tippy-toes, and blindly try to grab at the bottles and hair products organized there. I'd feel the squareness of the black cap of the bottle and would drag it along the porcelain counter top, creating a sound that made me stop every now and then because I thought I might get caught. It would finally reach the edge and my small hand could grab hold of the whole thing.

The amber color of the perfume always reminded me of caramel. I would pull the cap off, examine the shiny gold of the spritzer and see my reflection within it. I wouldn't completely press down on the spring, only slightly, to run some of the smell over my wrists like I had seen my mother do.

Standing in the line, three men with beards, probably Special Forces, gave me a smile and raised their brows, laughing with one another. I ignored them and wished I could go back to the moment in my mother's bathroom.

*

She was also on my mind when I flung my body on the ground during my first IDF attack. The beads of the rosary she had given me rolled between my fingertips rapidly in succession with the sounds of war. I laid belly down on the floor, knees throbbing, trying to squeeze all the religion out of the cross like a lemon. She had given me the rosary in the airport as something to keep me safe, but she didn't know that there was more to war than just the rockets and IDF attacks. She didn't know that I would have to push away the images of bloodied stumps of amputees, faces shredded by shrapnel, or the machines that sucked and pushed liquids into dying bodies. She didn't know, but she had prepared me to lock all of that away for later.

My mother taught me to fold pain up like laundry: flatten the surface, crisp the corners, and store it away in a drawer or a cabinet.

It occurred to me during my 5 months stationed at Bagram AFB that I was more like my mother than I knew. She was a master of mastering her emotions, which I became too. I carry small fragments of memories where she took the brunt of our family's emotional burden and kept going. Especially when my father became a paraplegic.

*

A herniated disk in my Father's back had made a home for itself, growing rotund, its belly resting against his spinal cord until the pressure caused permanent damage. He was thirty-two years old and had to re-learn how not to shit or piss himself. Being reborn again so late in life, with paralysis from the waist down, took him and split him in the middle, a tree struck by lightning, half gone, half there.

They were both factory workers at an envelope packing company. She continued to work her shifts while he was in the hospital for six months. My sisters and I never saw her cry. I know now that crying meant facing her own pain, unfolding the laundry, and publicly admitting to everyone her fear, a weakness.

I was five years old when I went to see him. A nurse had pushed the door open to a room, and I could smell sickness seeping out. Curdled milk mixed with bleach, a sort of clean-rot. The clean-rot smell that all the patients I helped lift onto planes in Afghanistan were permeated with.

When you're five there aren't many things you remember, but I have distinctly linked spoiled milk and hospitals. I felt my stomach turn every time I had to load a patient onto a plane during a mission. It turned not only because of the smell, but because I was reliving the moment I saw my father in that hospital bed, and every other hospital visit he inevitably had to go through afterward. I thought of the lives of these men and women and whatthey would have to go through the rest of their lives, reliving and overcoming the moment of injury. I also thought about how I would do that too.

Would I be able to lock away the pain? I still have the vivid memory of my father that I can't walk away from.

*

A hospital gown, untied at the top of his neck, revealed pale skin, tempered with a red rash, a rash bred from frustration. Dark circles set his eyes back, and he was unshaven with yellow-tinged skin. His voice cracked like a loudspeaker turning on or like one of those static devices that captures the voices of ghosts. I was unsure of him and didn't stepcloser than the end of the rails by his feet.

"It's okay. You can come give me a hug on the side over here."

Tubes cascaded from the top of his hand, from his nose, and under his gown by his lap, like clear spaghetti. I pulled myself up next to him and hugged him, crunching some of the tubes between us.

My mother stood in the back of the room, watching. This moment in my mind is like a scene in a snow globe, where I am no longer a participant but an observer from afar. She crossed her arms and let the moment happen, and I never felt her quiver with sorrow or sadness. I wonder how hard it was to hold back everything that was building up inside her. Her tears must have become paperweights, too large to slip onto her cheeks.

I don't remember feeling any one emotion. Maybe I was scared, or afraid of what was going to happen next. Or maybe since I can't remember, it means my mother took all my feelings, my pain, and pulled them out like a cipher, filtering my experience. Or maybe I had learned to adapt already, folding my own piles of laundry, putting them away for later, allowing me to compartmentalize what I know now about war.

I can take out my pain on a pair of pants with my iron, starching my creases stiff, like the edge of a knife that can't cut.

My mother taught me to fold pain up like laundry: flatten the surface, crisp the corners, and store it away in a drawer or a cabinet.

Jacqlyn Cope is an 8-year Air Force veteran. While writing this piece, she had to dive deeper than she has ever gone into the trauma of her PTSD. She hopes that it will help others tell their own stories. She worked as an aeromedical evacuation mission controller who decided to leave the military in 2016 to pursue her writing career and education. She has an MFA in creative writing from Mount Saint Mary's University and is currently a 7th grade English teacher for LAUSD.

Undone
Dean Ford

They kept their crazy on the middle floor where it's harder to escape to the ground or the roof. It was usually the addicts who tried to run. Not like us, playing 1000-piece puzzles till meatloaf came on plastic trays. The walls that faced the nurses were fake glass. We were like fish in tanks. Near the exit was a window to the channel that cut the Portsmouth Naval Hospital off from Norfolk like a moat. I was stationed at the base in Norfolk fixing Blackhawks until I wasn't.

From the window, aircraft carriers shoved off like logs floating toward the ocean. The patients waited. Sleeping through the day was prohibited although some still got their way. Most of the patients were Navy—comradery still between us, another joint trial. It was clear who was civilian—the broken housewives. Marriage was economical in the military. Double the income for towing a spouse across the country, double the space in family housing. One housewife, Pink, had come in after an incident with kitchen cutlery and her arms. We weren't allowed to hug each other but she'd mime it, wrapping her arms round what clothes they let us keep—no drawstrings, no zippers.

When you're gone, outside of yourself, often you cannot see the mess of thread you become, but I could see her, and it made me feel put together. If Pink wasn't confessing her love to strangers, she was crying and there was comfort in the distance between us. Underneath her glow was an emptiness we shared. She wanted solid ground.

*

I had an itch, an itch like I sat in ants, scratching my thighs and crotch till blood welled, unable to sleep. I'd watch the clock till 5:30am, staring into the shadows that bordered my roommate. Getting out of bed was like wading in water, shivering in the icy air from a frozen window. I'd dress in digital blue NWUs—thermals, belt, blousing straps, jacket, cap—only to change into aviation overalls at the hangar where I'd try, try, try to do the job I'd trained 9 months for, counting minutes between smoking breaks, socializing with stones. The gloom of winter was infectious. Most of us were dust on the cogs of the military, rarely productive enough to make our keep, knowing we would be released but unable to see beyond each day.

I dropped out of high school at 15, the year I felt another boy's touch. A boy who Judas and Peter'd me. With such a shit first impression, homosexuality didn't fit into my conventional idea of love. Sexuality was a game of choosing sides. I fought to please God and company in Calvinist fashion in a church that preached love and forgiveness. I want to say I came to an ultimatum, that years of fighting desire burned me out, but it was more complicated. Christianity was an addiction I'd relapse into. Little prayers sent to space work like quick fixes. Abandonment of faith was a rejection of self. It meant mocking my Sunday school childhood.

I went to bootcamp days after my 20th birthday, planning to serve my four years and enter college for music. After bootcamp, I spent 9 months in Pensacola, Florida rushing through the basics of aviation technology. I joined the performing arts unit in Pensacola and sang patriotic jingles at retirements, anniversaries, and award ceremonies, eventually leading the vocal unit and teaching new

airmen the songs. I'd march the American flag to and from the main pole for colors. The extra work gave me privilege and I split a nice room in a new barracks with a lax curfew.
The money then was good. There were few expenses beyond my car insurance and phone bill. The excess went to hotel rooms and paying back the friends who'd buy my liquor. We'd soak up the sun and salt water on white sands, relishing the springtime of our youth. But when the drum of the day dulled and the party was over, I would stare into the night sky chain smoking southern cuts, listening to Björk, getting my spiritual fix.

The time away from home in Houston, away from the biweekly sermons and my family's glossolalia, wore down my faith in anything. Increasing carnality, my church was the joining of flesh. Nothing felt so strongly than exchanging body heat between shipmates. Though the fearful jolt of a surprise barracks inspection came close. We dusted the back of the fridge with our fingertips.

The bonds that put meaning into the space I inhabited were pruned as my friends were flung to all corners of the world, and with the growing unfamiliarity in the faces of the other airmen, I knew my time in Pensacola was over. My assignment was meant to be celebrated. I'd never see a ship working on Blackhawks, while most went to those cities on the sea, aircraft carriers, trapped like rats in a maze or in submarines, tiny little things. I'm a tall man, admittedly much skinnier then than I am now but big all the same.

When I arrived at the HM-15 hangar, I found myself surrounded by disappointment. Not my own but that of my peers. They were disappointed in me. It doesn't take long for others to realize I'm gay. Surely, within the first sentence they could tell, my mannerisms and sensitivity dripping off each word. I never called another man 'bro' or 'dude'. I couldn't even fake at relating with hetero attraction.

The manly men of HM-15 saw me as an outsider, a blemish. Even the new ones would take to exclusion. They wouldn't point a toe at me in their conversation, closing their circles tighter and tighter. It wasn't a direct malice. It was more like everyone was just ignoring the elephant in the room.

We worked 12-hour days 6 days a week. Half of it probablyspent under the smoke tent taking slow drags in the frosty winds. I smoked more than ever. A pack a day at least. My mouth little more than an ashtray. Mostly it was to connect with the others, to show we weren't so different.

*

They told me I stayed in the nicer barracks at the Norfolk Naval base. My kitchen was infested with fruit flies from the food left by sailors who shipped out. It was a cyclic affliction. A guy would settle into the room and buy a load of groceries to rot for the next lucky bastard. Those who had lived on the ship viewed my barracks like a paradise. I could only see the fruit flies. Black dots whose brood slept in the cabinetry and refrigerator. Dead over the stove top and between the oven and counter; corpses settled like dust in far-to-reach places.

I took it upon myself to clean it all. I would not be leaving anytime soon. It was my new home and only refuge from work. I bought rubber gloves, bleach, raid, trash bags, a mop, a broom. I trashed all the food with little discretion to what was forgotten and what my current roommates may have

bought for themselves. The flies survived from inside the sink and behind the fridge. They were the rightful inhabitants of that place and me the intruder.

A month into my stay, a seaman moved into my bedroom. His name was Red, and he was like me, like some mirror showing my disease. The men I had been with before him were not like me. They were incognito and discrete. We would make clandestine maneuvers in dark spaces. I stored my love and feelings like gems in a museum. Natural cut stones glimmering behind a glass case in a dark room without utility.

Red and I fooled around in our shared bedroom, but he felt for me in ways I could not reciprocate. He wrote me poetry. He took me to a bookstore that stacked their collections without shelves, monoliths of dusty jackets. He gave me his confidence.

I wonder what I would be now if not for him. If notfor our fight and the threats he sent me and the blows I gave him.

*

I dreamt I was made of string like a doll. The layers of me sewn together emitted a glow. When I pulled at the frays, I came undone, yet I couldn't stop pulling. Each blood vessel that made up the trails of my body turned to yarn which fell into a coil. If I could lay myself out into this ring of thread and find what was glowing underneath, I could understand what made me do the shameful things I've done.

When my body fell lax and the cords of my ribs opened, I reached into myself, passing my hand through the gap like a stretched-out doily. I felt nothing in the space inside me. I pressed into the underbelly and around to where my spine should be and found it cool and soft like velvet. I contorted to reach a conclusion but went numb as I came undone.

I abandoned myself to the outer systems of my world.Animalistic desire, unreasonable reactions, violence for the sake of violence. There are those who cannot fit into this world so they must end. Self-destruction seemed the obvious conclusion.

One night I locked Red out of the bedroom and pretended to sleep. He pounded on the door for so long I was sure his knuckles were bloody. I let him in to stop the pounding and he pushed me coming in. I pushed him back and he threatened me. *If you even touch me again, I'll fucking kill you.*The threat set me off, swinging wildly, missing connection, slamming my arm against the wooden bed frame over and over till my bones cracked. I drove myself to the ER and got X-rays taken.

When I fractured my arm attacking Red, I knew it was the beginning of the end. Somewhere along my time in the Navy, the chemistry of my brain changed. I was alone in freezing lot outside the ER, scratching the cords of my thighs. Dejected, staring at the ground, shivering numb in the night. My mind undone, the itching still intact. I plucked the loose ends, pulling out lint and blood, which dried and flaked away.

Parts of me neatly ordered and understood like a timeline of cause and effect, a Venn diagram of desire and shame, Freytag's pyramid pointing at the fight with Red. Underneath what's underneath is

still beyond me. Parts of me unbreakable and intrinsic, holding me up while the rest of me lay coiled on the floor.

I tried to delay my undoing with visits to the dermatologist for the itching, negotiating with my chain of command to ease the stress. But there came a point when I realized that I was nobody and as nobody, nothing I did mattered. As a nobody, it no longer mattered to me that my failure had gone from social to occupational. The men at HM-15 were right with their disappointment. They could see past my layers and into the emptiness within me. They knew I would never survive in their world. I told them I got in a fight and fractured my arm and they laughed at the idea I'd do anything as manly as fighting, though there was nothing manly about my violence.

*

Shortly after my fracture, under the advisement of my mother, I checked myself into the psych ward. I was under observation for a week, meeting with the doctors under some undisclosed deadline for diagnosis. It was an island of misfit toys, all broken someway. Some worse than others but all vulnerable and raw. I held on to them, listening to their stories about why they were in the loony bin. Self-harm a common thread.

Pink was a newlywed to a Navy man. This was her third time as an inpatient. She described her mania as a warm energy that called her to new levels of productivity and desire. Her depression, the pit she couldn't climb out of, an antithesis to her usual cheer. Her mood swings affected her relationship and deteriorated her chances at staying together. Where would she go if they didn't work out?

There was a man, Yellow, who cried during our board games. He told me his father used to smoke crack with him when he was growing up. He told me of the sexual abuse between sobs. Yellow had been in longer than me and had spent time abroad becoming an indispensable member of his company. Educated and experienced, he was needed. He said it was his first time in this wing of the ward away from the addict side. He had faced Captain's Mast (military court) for the past times he didn't show up to work and they found him drunk somewhere. It resulted in mandatory rehab and monetary fines, but he was still expected to return to duty after he was fixed.

As time in the ward passed, they put me on Seroquel, making me drowsy and slow. They asked me if I wanted to leave the Navy or if I wanted to return to duty. I felt yellow. I decided I was done.

I don't remember if the doctor told me my diagnosis or if I read it first. Maybe he told me, and I couldn't process it. When we talked, I was so weird. I didn't realize how odd the things I said were and the way I behaved till I read the doctor's report. Bipolar type 1 with psychotic features. Invisible bugs crawling on my legs and round my crotch. The same diagnosis as Pink. Her crazy is my crazy.

He told me I should reconsider having any children as it's a genetic disorder and lifelong affliction. Why was I talking about having children? There of all places? Conventional ideas of family so pervasive as to become a topic in my distress. It's as if I thought having a kid was the remedy to my failing mental health.

This began my 6 months of limbo as I severed from the Navy. I didn't see Pink again, but Yellow I saw around the hospital. We, those broken boys and girls, stayed at the barracks near the hospital

where they still expected us to work while they sorted our papers. We would muster in formation on the 7th floor, one floor above the ward, where Veteran's Administration held its office. They had me answering telephone calls from veterans seeking benefits. Some people you could tell had nothing wrong with them. They managed to squeeze their way out of service. I couldn't help but feel no different than them. Cowards escaping hardship. Useless bodies.

A couple weeks after my time in inpatient care, I walked back to my barracks from the telephone duty and saw a door flagged with yellow tape and Military Police surrounding it. A guy shot himself dead two stories above my room. The yellow tape on the door hung like a Halloween decoration. KEEP OUT. KEEP OUT. KEEP OUT.

Past the haze surrounding my time in the ward, I promised myself to never be that person. Whether it mattered or not if I killed myself wasn't as importantas my pride. Fuck the diagnosis and all the shitty things that the doctors wrote about me, I wasn't going to end up a splat on the wall. It only adds to the chaos of the world. If I was going tobe undone, I wanted it to be like Pink: inappropriate affect, paper doll love.

*

They moved me back to the Norfolk base to wait for paperwork, 6 months for a disability percentage and a DD 214, working as a janitor for a new barracks. I befriended a nymphomaniac from Guam. We swabbed stairways nobody used. We shared a man once in a tequila induced haze. I stayed close with Yellow and eventually moved in with his girlfriend who was also a different brand of crazy. She was in the middle of a divorce witha John who was abroad.

They had three dogs, got rid of two as they moved into another place away from John and got two cats. I stayed there, living between the barracks, their apartment, and a neighbor's place till those 6 months finally ended.

When it was time to finally return to Houston, they gave me the third dog, saying it loved me more than them. It was the ugliest thing, but she grew on me. She'd sleep in my lap. It forced me to sit still, and in that stillness, I started to pick up the pieces.

Dean Ford is a gay veteran and writer living with bipolar disorder and residing in Houston, Texas. He is the current prose editor of *Defunkt Magazine*. He has a B.A. in English from University of Houston. He has a story published in *R2: The Rice Review*. Follow him @stevendeanford on Twitter and Instagram. "Undone" is an introspective review of the events surrounding the author's bipolar diagnosis while in the Navy.

Hidden Wounds
Dan French

"Ten-hut."

Eight brothers. Bob, Thomas, Tom, John, Greg, Dan, Steve, and David, ages thirteen down to seven, lined up stiff and tall by age in the living room. Dad's puffy red face, alcohol smell, and seething anger filled the room. We stood at attention as if in a military barracks, waiting for inspection. Maybe he thought we were his new squad, like the one he led on the front lines through northeastern France, Germany, and Italy during World War II. World War II. Sometimes the reason for our gathering was a misdeed by one of us, other times he was just mad at the world. Today was the second reason.

Often, we heard a roar. In this case, I hadn't been at the scene, so Greg had muttered as he went by me, "Dad wants us all in the living room." That was not a good sign. I had seen a trickle of other brothers heading toward the same location, some from outside, others from inside. Once the call had been sounded, we all knew the routine.

The wide black belt hung in the living room closet, alongside his volunteer fireman's uniform, ready to strike fear in our minds and hurt in our behinds. Glaring straight at us, almost growling, he opened the closet door and eased the belt off the hook. I knew not to flinch nor smile. Any snicker, false move, or slouch fed his fury. Silence permeated the room, except for Dad's heavy panting and occasional snarl. We waited for the next instructions.

"Touch your toes."

I took in a breath, leaned over, and touched my toes. I couldn't see where he was nor whom he chose as his first victim. I braced myself and waited to hear or feel the first crack of the belt. "You good-for-nothings." His voice was right next to me, so it must have been Steve who got the belt first. I held my breath, knowing I must be next. Sure enough, a sharp pain hit my backside. I wanted to jump up and scream but held my tongue and body in check. The first hit was the worst, because of the surprise factor. And then, the whacks became methodical, down the line, oldest to youngest and back up again. Smack, crack, whap, whop. I wanted to look to my right at Greg or to the left at Steve, but I only did it once and learned my lesson. A kick in the pants. "Look down at your toes, no twirling your head all around. This ain't no game."

*

One time, as we all gathered and began to line up, David reported to the living room with a puffed-out backside. He grinned from ear to ear. Dad had yet to come into the room.

Steve whispered, "What are you doing? What do you have in your pants?"

David laughed. "A pillow. It won't hurt now!"

"You know he'll be able to see it."

"No, he won't, he's too drunk. And don't tell!"

Dad lumbered in. His words slurred, his gait uneven. He grabbed the black belt from the closet.

"Ten-hut! Touch your toes." Dad started in, going up and down the line. Sure enough, he was too bleary-eyed to notice David's bulging rear end. He laid the belt on David several times. He slowed down, clearly near the end, when David started to giggle.

I couldn't look while staring at my ankles, but I didn't need to. I could feel the heat rising.

"This isn't something to be laughing at."

I tried to telepathically communicate to David to shut up. My butt was sore; I didn't need Dad to get even more riled up and continue whipping all of us. But my magical powers did not come through. David kept giggling. Damn, he could never keep a secret.

Dad lumbered over and gave David a hard kick. Whether he felt the pillow with his boot or his eyes cleared enough to see what was obvious to the rest of us, he realized that David's backside was stuffed with a pillow.

"What's in there, David? What's in your pants?"

David finally understood the gravity of his giggles. "Uh, a pillow, Sir."

"A pillow? You aim to make a fool out of me? A pillow?" Just when things were calming down, you could see code red in Dad's eyes. "Get that damn thing out of there, and then we'll see if you laugh."

David unbuckled his pants, slid them down, and outburst a small, fluffy pillow. I wanted to chuckle and scream at the same time.

Dad didn't wait for David to pull his pants back up. He laid it on him good. David was like that. He coped with being the youngest boy and with facing more than his fair share of teasing and torment by always being the jokester, keeping a cheery demeanor, not anticipating the consequences of his pranks, quickly throwing off frustrations. At least externally.

*

We never knew how long it would take for Dad to expend his fury and put the belt down. Having eight boys in the line helped, as it took him a while to spread the blows amongst us. I learned to wait it out by fantasizing about things like baseball or my favorite rock and roll bands. I made up situations and played them out in my head until the commotion on the outside settled down.

And then, as in a flash hailstorm, the sounds of the whacks stopped. "Ok, boys, that's it. Did you learn your lesson?" We all stood up and nodded. I had no idea what the lesson was, since I didn't know what had gotten him mad, but I was smart enough to nod. I watched his face, shoulders, and bulging biceps relax. Dad laughed, and clapped Bob, who was nearest, on the back as if nothing had happened. He wanted to clear the air, crack a joke, as if we had gone to the beach and had a swell time. "Just don't do it again."

He ordered us to clear out until dinnertime and finish our farm chores. We piled out through the front door.

I got to know the pattern. We all did. I watched the anger rise, like a kettle building up steam and pressure. The boiling water released little bubbles and a low rising sound, and then exploded with a shrieking whistle. He entered another time, another place, one we had no access to. Sometimes the kicks or belt straps were not as hard as they were at other times. Maybe he was far away in that other zone, or maybe I had a chance to steel myself for the blows, or maybe he just didn't want to hurt us as badly as he knew he could.

I never wondered why he was so angry at these times, nor why he whipped all of us for no apparent reason or when only one brother had angered him. I didn't wonder about the injustice of it all. I never connected Dad's impulsive anger and violence, his incessant drinking, nor his wild and spontaneous mood swings to his being on the front line in World War II. I accepted whatever came my way. There were so many things we weren't told, it just seemed the way life was. Or maybe that resignation was my defense mechanism, as I couldn't do anything about it anyway.

*

Edward French took leave from Harvard University after completing his freshman year to enlist in the Army, eighteen months after the United States declared war on Germany. He officially entered into active service on July 6, 1942 at the age of nineteen. He spent 26 months in training before his division shipped out to join the fight in Europe. He left the States as Staff Sergeant of the Anti-Tank Platoon, 411th Infantry Regiment of the 103rd Division.

The 103rd Division sailed into Marseilles, France in October 1944, the first Allied troops to arrive in southern France. The division swept north, virtually unimpeded, to join the rest of the Seventh Army on the outskirts of the Vosges Mountains, a rugged, rough-hewn mountain range filled with dense forest and undergrowth where the German forces had set up their defenses, a natural barrier which separated the Seventh Army from German soil.

In mid-November 1944, orders came down for the 411th Infantry to seize and hold the high ground above St. Die to enable the 410th Infantry to storm into town unheeded by enemy artillery. We learned about the site of Dad's first battle many decades later from my mother's written description of their 1947 trip to France. Soon after my parents married and graduated college, Dad took Mom to France. While in Paris, he wanted to take a day trip to St. Die. He mumbled about visiting a town where he was in combat. She didn't ask for details.

Once disembarked in St. Die, Dad was a man with a purpose. They walked out of town for a couple miles until they came to a house on the right-hand side of the road in a tiny village, Rougeville. The house still bore the scars of war. Part of the frontside was blown out, revealing the inner sanctum of the living room, kitchen, a set of stairs leading to the second floor, and two bedrooms. Mom could see blue wallpaper in the closest bedroom.

Dad nodded at Mom, a sign that this was the place he was looking for, and walked out back. The bucolic scene revealed a field, a rough-hewn stone wall bordering one side and a brook gurgling on the far side, with a wooded hill beyond. The high ground.

He surveyed the field, his feet stuck to the ground, immobile, entranced and seemingly transported back in time. Eventually, he turned, his face grey and ashen.

"I took my men and charged across this field, through the brook, and up the other side in order to take out a German machine gun nest controlling the road."

"Why did you do it?"

"We had no choice."

He didn't say a word more to Mom. He wasn't able to share the emotions that drove him to make a long day's trip to Rougeville, to this backyard of a country home that now looked like a broken doll house, where he first engaged in the horrors of war.

After liberating St. Die, the 103rd Division fought its way through the Vosges Mountains. The rocky terrain, dense forest, and undergrowth made the fierce fighting more difficult. Each one hundred yards gained was a victory. Throughout the Vosges campaign, a steady, chilly rain drizzled in the late fall and well into December, day after day after day. Trench foot, dysentery, and exhaustion set in. The constant rain wore down the souls already stretched by vigilance for an enemy that could not always be located, as the woods were too thick to track the Nazis' exact movements. Night operations were useless; due to the dense forest and overcast skies, you couldn't see anything and soldiers quickly got lost. Tree bursts, projectiles that exploded upon impact on top of trees, sent showers of shrapnel and large fragments raining down on those below; soldiers learned to "hug a tree" when the bombs exploded above rather than lie down on the ground and be maimed or killed by falling shrapnel. Come mid-December, the weather turned to snow and temperatures plummeted to below zero, leading to frostbite for many soldiers. Tanks and artillery bogged down in the steep, rain-soaked, and as winter set in, icy slopes. Easy prey for the Nazis.

Eventually, the 103rd Division forced the Germans out of the Vosges Mountains and down into the towns of the Alsace region. It had been a hard-fought battle of six weeks and fifteen miles.

Over the next four and a half months, the 103rd Division fought their way into Germany and then south into Austria and finally Italy. During that time, they liberated a series of concentration camps in the town of Landsberg, Germany, subcamps of theDachau concentration camp. By the time the Division met up with the 5th Army at Brenner Pass in Italy in early May 1945, they had traveled five hundred miles in six months through France, Germany, Austria, and Italy. Germany surrendered. The war was over.

Starting out with 14,253 soldiers, during those six months of combat, including replacement troops, the 103rd Division suffered 6,762 casualties, with 848 deaths and the remainder wounded, missing in action, or prisoners of war.

Dad sailed home from Southampton, England in the fall of 1945, 13 months after he had left the States, with a full complement of medals. In November 1945, three years and five months after he enlisted, he was honorably discharged at age twenty-two. As he left Fort Devens, Massachusetts with his cache of medals, the war raged on inside him.

*

"Ollie Ollie Infree," Dad's voice bellowed out. That Appalachian call for everyone to come out from hiding always carried with it a sense of foreboding, something about to happen that was usually not to our liking. I shrunk back into the shadows. I wanted to be unseen and forgotten. A minute later, the voice came out loud and clear again. "Ollie, Ollie, Infree." No use to pretend I didn't hear it. Not responding bore worse consequences than showing up. I trudged out from chopping wood behind the barn toward the front lawn where he waited for us.

I could see the other boys creep their way around corners and bushes as they made baby steps toward a dreaded ordeal. Nobody wanted to be first nor last. We shuffled onto the front lawn, not talking nor looking at each other. I stared at my sneakers and waited for orders.

Dad had spread bars of soap on the lawn and hung white towels over the side fence. He held a hose in one hand and grinned, as if he knew he was getting one over on us. We pretended we didn't know what we were doing and waited for a reprieve that never came.

"Ok, you know the routine. Off with them." Dad smirked. I wanted to turn the green hose on him and force him to dance, with us leering at him. See how he felt. Instead, I tugged at my sneaker laces and pretended they were double-knotted and tough to undo. Everyone else did similar things with seeming difficulty—picking at shirt buttons, tugging at belts—as if our clothes and footwear were somehow glued on.

"Let's get going, you sissies. Off with them."

I sighed. No point in delaying the inevitable. I started taking off my clothes. So did the others.

"All the way now. Don't be shy."

I tried not to look to the left or right, and especially in front of me. I hoped no driver had stopped to gawk at us. Mostly shaded from the street, there was about ten yards in which passing cars had a clear view of the lawn.

A minute later, all eight brothers stood buck naked on the front lawn. We held our clothes, shielded ourselves, and waited for our next orders.

"Put your clothes on the fence so they don't get soaked and force your mother to do another round of laundry."

I wanted to jump over the low-slung fence and dash through the field toward the woods. I dumped my clothes at the fence and walked back to the center of the yard, exposed to the world, like I was in an ancient Roman coliseum filled with spectators watching my every move. They pointed and howled with delight to see us standing there naked. I had nowhere to hide.

I snuck another glance backwards. Sure enough, a car had stopped by the side of the road. A man and woman peered out the passenger window in seeming disbelief at the sight of eight naked boys standing, shuffling their feet on the lawn. "Great, I'm in a zoo for others to look in on and wonder," I thought to myself. "Where's the popcorn?"

"Don't pay them no mind," Dad said.

I closed my eyes and willed myself to be invisible. I wished I could melt away.

Satisfied that not a shred of clothes remained, Dad turned on the hose. Before I opened my eyes, a cold stream of water slapped against me and transformed my entire body to full alert. Even on a hot sultry day, the water felt like a numbing blast. I held my feet firmly to the ground to avoid falling backward and becoming subject to further ridicule. A few seconds later, the hose was onto the next brother in line.

"Soap up," came the call. "Let's not waste the water."

I was mindful to avoid stepping on the piles of sheep dung that lay in patches throughout the lawn. To save on gas and labor, we used our ram, Buster, to mow the lawn. Leashed by a chain attached to a metal stake, he roamed the lawn, free to eat all the grass within reach. A couple of days later, with the grass nibbled close to the ground, we'd move him back to the fenced-in field with the rest of the sheep. Left behind were patches of sheep shit. Whenever Buster's poop slid up between my bare toes, my stomach got queasy.

I lathered up my wet body. Dad looked over and shouted, "The hair, too. Get it squeaky clean." I rubbed the soap bar into my hair. Dad saw I was ready, and turned the jet spray onto me, while I tried to shield myself from the full blast of theoncoming water.

Dad yelled, "Oh, come on. Stop dancing around like a girl. Make sure you rinse, all of it." I put my head down to take on the full power of the water. It pounded away at my skull. I turned so my backside got the remainder of the spray.

The car idled on the street. The two spectators watched eight nude boys in various stages of soap suds, while their father manned the hose much like I imagined he manned a fire hose. This was our weekly shower. During summer, no indoor showers were allowed.

He sprayed us down to cleanse us of the accumulation of dirt, sweat, sawdust, and manure. All the while, he smiled and chuckled. He enjoyed our discomfort being on display. The passersby peered at us, curious to see this surreal, movie-like spectacle. If only I were a plastic model that felt nothing, that could just stand there and take it. I just wanted to get it over with and be left alone.

Years later, I wondered what was behind this ritual. Why did he humiliate his eight boys, in various stages of puberty, by forcing us to stand naked in the front yard, soaped up and hosed down? Why do it so publicly? How did this connect to his wartime experience? Whatever the reason, each time the experience left me feeling powerless, self-conscious, and insecure—traits I carried and struggled with into and through my teens and adulthood. Maybe the powerlessness is what he intended, matching his own.

Fifteen minutes in, although it felt much longer, Dad turned the hose off. His mind had switched to other things, so he growled, "Get those clothes on, it's chore time," and walked off.

We avoided looking at one another as we dressed. No one said a word until David broke the silence. "Anyone want to go for a swim?"

Tom's death stare quickly told David to shut up. I distracted myself by thinking about collecting the eggs and watering the cows—which would I prefer to do first?

I glanced over my shoulder out at the road. The Chevy with the voyeurs had left.

*

"What are you all doing in here?" he said to us Little Boys. It was late afternoon, we had finished our farm jobs for the day, and were playing cards in the living room. Dad clearly had had one too many too early. "It's a beautiful day outside, and I find boys inside the house with nothing to do? Get outside where you belong, before I assign you more work," he growled.

My first mistake was that as everyone else headed out, I went to the bathroom. My second mistake was that I chose to head out through the living room front door instead of through the kitchen.

My three-year old sister Liz crawled around on the couch. Dad rocked back and forth, as if he were a thin reed at the mercy of a breeze. My eyes on the front door, I wondered, "What am I doing here? How dumb can I be coming this way?" Like a cornered cat, my eyes flitted this way and that. Dad seemed unaware I was in the room. I pretended I was the Invisible Man. I slid along the wall to remain inconspicuous and hoped for a clean getaway to the outdoors. I was five or six feet from freedom when Liz cried out, "Daddy, what are you doing?"

Like a boxer coming to his senses with a whiff of smelling salts, Dad lurched upright and snapped to attention. He caught me squarely in his sight. Dulled eyes looked me over, a vague recognition registered. He lumbered over to the couch and collapsed onto it. He patted both pillows on either side of him and gestured, "Comeere, both of you. Iwant you to come sit down."

My mind whirred. If Liz hadn't cried out, I would have been outta here. Now what? Sit down?

Dad motioned again. I knew not to keep him waiting, so I sat down next to him. I didn't want to upset him to the point where I snapped his reverie. I studied the messy knots in my sneakers and the dirt caked on either side.

Liz sat on the other side of him, likely thinking, "This is fun, all three of us on the couch; what are we going to play?" My only solace was that what came next could only be half bad because Liz was here. Dad never did anything real bad with her around.

Dad's eyes were glassy, his breath stale, his movements clumsy. He reached over to a photo album and opened it on his lap.

"What's that, Daddy?" Liz asked.

"Pictures of you, my princess, and your brothers."

We looked at the first one, Liz on her first birthday. She sat at our dining room table—a long, old-fashioned maple table that fit eight boys, Dad, Phee, my stepmom and Liz's mom, and Liz, with multiple dogs and cats under the table. The dogs and cats were especially helpful when Phee served food we didn't want to eat. We fed them lima beans and other undesirable food under the table, quietly and carefully so Dad nor Phee could see.

Liz was a princess in her high chair. Phee placed a birthday cake in front of her—one candle on a sponge cake with white frosting. We all sang Happy Birthday. Liz, frenzied with the excitement and attention, thrust both of her hands into the cake. We all ate a piece of her hand-flavored cake.

"That was your first birthday party, honey. You were one year old."

"That's me, Daddy, that's me in the picture."

"That's right, my sweets, that's you in the picture." He sounded wistful.

Liz squealed in delight. I stayed silent. Dad didn't look too good. All of a sudden, I felt his arm go around my shoulders. I flinched, as I anticipated a bear vise-grip or a death squeeze of the neck or some other form of torture.

His arm held me tight, and he enfolded Liz with his other arm. I thought, "What is going on here? Are we on another planet?" This affection was beyond my realm. It felt like an out-of-body experience. I struggled to imagine what might happen next.

Dad's head hung forward. At first I thought he had nodded off. I calculated, "Good, this will be my chance to ease out of his hold and sneak out the front door." He lifted his head, and I saw something foreign, something I had never seen and never did again. Tears dribbled down his cheeks. He made no attempt to stop them nor hide them. His face was puffy red. I blinked and looked twice to make sure I wasn't imagining it.

Who would have thought that my father, a soldier, could cry? The one who snapped at you, called you sissy, taunted you until you stopped your tears?

I knew what to do when he was silly drunk, or mean drunk, or loud drunk, or at least I knew the various possibilities. But I had no experience with sad drunk. Dad crying? And how in hell was it me that got stuck in this situation, with no idea of what to do? This wasn't going to come to any good, I knew it. I wanted him to scream at me, do anything familiar.

He gave us each another squeeze, a hard hug. I worried about Liz getting the breath wrung out of her, but he always handled her with a dose of tenderness, regardless of what state he was in.

"Daddy, what's wrong? Daddy, you have tears on your face. Are you sad?" Liz asked.

My brain did cartwheels to figure this out—it didn't fit into what I knew. I wanted some dictionary I could flip through to find out what was going on and why. He kept crying, hugging the two of us, and saying, over and over again, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

When he looked at me, I cast my eyes downward, embarrassed for both of us. The panic rose in my chest. I thought, "Will you please stop it? I mean, stop it right now, right this second. Come back to reality, will you? You don't know what you're saying." I was in uncharted territory, more ill at ease than I had ever been. I didn't know what to make of this blubbering father with his arm wrapped around me. He seemed to be hanging on for dear life. I just wanted to get away, run out of the house and into the woods, find my brothers and play ball or anything, so I could think about something else. I wanted him to tell me to *snap to* or get the other boys and line up—*ten hut*, ready to go up and down the line with his belt whippings, yell at me for being in the house during daylight, or scream about not finishing my chores, make fun of me for bending a nail as I hammered in a wooden fence for the cow pasture. I just didn't want him to sit there crying and chanting, "I'm sorry."

I mumbled, "That's all right, Sir."

It felt like hours, but probably lasted five minutes. I had a close-up view of his hidden side. Every second seemed like an hour as Dad apologized. "I'm sorry, I'm just so sorry," again and again.

Liz crawled all over him. She said, "It's okay, Daddy, I'm sorry, too!"

He became silent. He snuffled and coughed. The tension was too much. I imagined my heart was bursting wide open, causing massive internal bleeding and death.

I worked up the courage to ask, "Sir, can I go outside now? I need to go finish my chores."

Dad nodded, but I couldn't tell if he had fallen asleep or given his assent.

"Sir, I should go finish my chores."

"Oh yes, Danny, you go ahead. You're a good boy."

"I'll stay with you, Daddy," squealed Liz, happy to have him all to herself.

I eased my way out from Dad's embrace and stood up. My legs carried me toward the door and without looking back, I headed outside.

I heaved a great exhale of relief, breathed in what tasted like wonderfully hot summer air, and trotted out toward the chickens to collect the late afternoon eggs.

Dan French began writing creative nonfiction after a career in public education. He has had personal essays published in *Potato Soup Journal*, *Bloodletters Literary Magazine*, and *Academy of Heart & Mind*, and has forthcoming essays in *Ink & Sword Magazine* and *Down in the Dirt*. He is currently working on a memoir that explores the intergenerational collateral impact of a returning war veteran, undiagnosed and untreated for PTSD, on his family.

FICTION

Surrender
Brian O'Hare

He'd woken on the too-short couch, legs stiff and bent beneath him. Above, the curtainless window exploded in white light, the winter sun flooding the small living room. In the other room, a parlor possibly in a more genteel era, a set of French doors dividing the space—he heard Gordon, rooting through his possessions, cursing to himself. Francis buried his face into the cushions.

"Stop making so much goddamn noise."

"I'm looking for my satchel."

"Americans don't carry 'satchels'."

Francis burrowed beneath his Marine-issue 'All Weather' coat—like the trench coat Bogart famously wore as melancholy cantina owner Rick Blaine in *Casablanca*—that he'd been using as a blanket, since his discharge the week before. Gordon flung open the French doors, boots slapping heavily on the wood floor. He loomed over the couch—draping a scarf artfully around his neck, like some B-team existential poet, a suburban Camus.

Francis removed the coat from his face, took in Gordon, his satchel. "They make those for men too?" Gordon ignored him.

"Would you mind heading over to Lily's this morning? The guy who runs the halal cart on Eighth and Twenty-Third has been harassing her."

Francis sat up.

"Some Egyptian. Or something. Last week, she's leaving for work, he *follows* her, making this sound with his teeth—a *sucking* sound." Gordon demonstrated. "Some Egyptian thing. Anyway, the other day? He *cornered* her in the doorway of her building."

"Call the cops."

"Because he's Arab?"

"Because he's *harassing* her."

"As if the cops would do anything. Welcome to New York."

"Have a little talk with him then."

Gordon made a sound midway between a laugh and a snort, as if this were the most preposterous suggestion in the world.

"I have to be at Pratt by 7:30. I'm teaching. Anyway, I can't just threaten everyone who looks at Lily funny."

"Ah. You want *me* to threaten him."

Gordon sighed with a practiced exhaustion.

"No. I didn't say that. *You* were just in the Gulf. I thought you might have some…expertise, whatever."

"I have *no* expertise, whatever."

Francis lay back and squinted at the blank sky. A not unpleasant image of Lily in her junior partner uniform appeared: pinstripes, stockings, heels. Professional. Just this side of brusque. Brains too. The 'whole megillah' as his father would say. Gordon's voice, infused now with a theatrical impatience, interrupted Francis' vision.

"I have to go. I'm late."

Francis stretched involuntarily, Lily and her junior partner uniform dissolving into sparks of light.

"He speak English?"

"Don't *you* speak some Arabic?"

"Yeah. I can say 'Hands up.'" Francis raised his hands in mock surrender. "*Erfah edak*." The image of Lily crackled stubbornly in Francis' head, like a campfire refusing to die.

"Maybe I'll head over there." The bony finger of a tree branch tapped against the window like an accusation.

"Good. I'll see you at Odeon at 6:00. We've got drinks with Annina Nosei, Basquiat's first gallerist…" Gordon's voice muffled as Francis disappeared again beneath his coat.

*

The March wind struck Francis as he stepped onto 8th Avenue, leaving him momentarily dazed. He looked for the World Trade Center to orient himself, the buildings sparkling and wavy-bright through tear-filled eyes.

The cart, somehow smaller and more pitiful than he'd imagined, rocked in the wind, perfumed with bacon grease and river bottom. The sidewalks were choked with New Yorkers, grimly getting where they were going. Francis marched toward the surprisingly delicate cart, wondering how it survived such an environment. Covered in pictographs—chicken and rice, lamb and rice, lentils and rice—like modern hieroglyphics, the cart glowed florescent in the sober gray. He rehearsed possible speeches in his head, stopping suddenly: *Why* was he doing this? That Gordon was manipulating him crossed his mind. It wouldn't be the first time. And then he thought of Lily, thrilling at the promise of her gratitude.

Inserting his face into the small window, Francis startled to discover not the leering reptile he'd imagined but a youngish woman, an expectant look on her face.

"May I help you?" she raised a perfect eyebrow. This woman was *beautiful*. Struck dumb, Francis managed to point at a coffee and bagel combination, studying the pictograph as if it held meaning beyond "Enjoy a cup of Good Morning!" She poured his coffee. Handed it to him. No-nonsense. Matter-of-fact.

"Very hot. Be careful." Her English precise; her warning vaguely maternal, affecting in a way he couldn't quite place. Francis imagined her studying a book of English grammar in between customers, the image oddly endearing. She turned her attention to the bagel.

He held the cup and took a cautious sip. The caffeine hit, giving him the confidence to rest a proprietary elbow on the small counter. He watched her work, her movements graceful in the snug cart, with just enough room to turn slightly left and right. She worked quickly, efficiently, infused with a New York specific hustle, the ancient enterprise of the immigrant.

A buttery warmth, reminiscent of other mornings, other kitchens, radiated from the small space. He studied her face as she worked, her skin a sovereign bronze, eyes large and impossibly black, of seemingly endless depth, spaced wide on her delicate face, somehow serious and welcoming at the same time, their undeniable intelligence lending a certain nobility to the mundane task of toasting a bagel for a stranger. Aware of his attention, she smiled politely, thrusting the hot bagel at Francis. He flushed, placing his coffee on the counter, as if building a wall to hide behind. Frowning, Francis dug his wallet from his pocket: a collection of credit cards and small pieces of paper, bound by a thick rubber band from beneath the mailboxes in Gordon's building. He placed the wallet on the ledge, next to the coffee, as he searched for cash. She watched without expression, the picture of patience. He finally looked up, smiling blankly:

"I'm out of cash…"

In his embarrassment, Francis remembered a checkpoint on the Coast Highway. The Saudi guard had smiled at the WM, or 'Woman Marine' truck driver, and instead of simply waving them through, made a crude 'V' with his fingers, a 'reverse peace sign' as she later described it, simulating sloppy cunnilingus with his swollen tongue. Francis took in the cart's name: *King Tut Halal*. Beneath it, a mocking parade of cartoon Egyptians danced stoically. Eyes of Horus watched him, unblinking and judgmental—he felt a flash of anger.

"Where's the King?"

"Excuse me?"

"The bossman. King Tut. He around?"

"It is just the name of the cart. King Tut. From Egypt." She cocked her head. "You have no money?"

"No. I don't. Did you not understand me…?" He took in her face, surprise giving way to confused hurt.

"But where's the *guy*? Who works here?" Her hand tightened on the bread knife. "You related?"

Her face hardened, mustering an unexpected toughness, causing Francis to retreat into his coat. He summoned the courage to look at her. On her face he saw the Cairo girlhood, the overflowing Queens apartment, the heartbreak and disappointment that would've snapped Francis in two, like a dead branch.

"My cousin? You have business with him?"

Francis looked away, down Eighth Avenue toward the World Trade Center, unable to withstand her eyes. He briefly thought of apologizing; fleeing to the safety of Gordon's couch. Instead, he plowed forward, like a good Marine.

"My friend's fiancé. She lives in that building over there…"

He nodded toward a colorless deco building, maybe eight stories, with clean lines, a blocky eagle, meant to convey solidity, above the entrance to a bank branch. The building offered no comfort, no empathy, impassive in that way only New York buildings could be impassive, seeming to make the sidewalk even colder.

"…your cousin, whoever, has a habit of following my friend's fiancé down the street…"

She cut him off. "He is in Egypt. The money?"

"I don't have it, okay?" He paused. "You tell him: stay away. Because if I hear otherwise, that he's harassing her? Well, I don't know…" He stopped just short of making an actual threat. "That apartment right over there…" Francis aimed an accusing finger toward the building.

"Understand?" He sipped his coffee. It was cold.

"Oh, I understand. Very well. You must leave."

He raised the paper cup in mock salute, pouring the coffee on the sidewalk, pinkie upraised in sham sophistication.

"Your coffee *sucks*."

He flung the cup with a snap of his wrist. It fled with the wind, down Eighth Avenue. Without any idea of where to go, Francis executed a perfect 'right-face', heading in the direction of his coffee cup. He felt her eyes on him, *hating* him.

He didn't care.

*

He awoke to roaring daylight, like truth itself. The tree branch tapped accusingly against the window. For a long moment, he lay stung with guilt, as the previous morning replayed in his mind. At best,

he was an ass. At worst, a bully. And, as if in karmic retribution, Francis' wallet was missing. And it could only be one place.

*

Francis walked with what he hoped was confidence down the same loveless sidewalk, past the same trash pirouetting hopelessly, the same impassive buildings, towards the now familiar cart. In his mind, he'd rehearsed apologies; justifications for his behavior, abandoning them as he approached the small window.

"Good morning." Jesus. He sounded like a cop. Exactly the wrong tone. She looked up from the sink where she washed a cutting board.

"I was here, yesterday morning…" Francis paused, absorbing her stony silence. "I wanted to apologize." He looked at her expectantly. She fixed her head, as if trying to place him.

"I have the money I owe you…" He held up a five dollar bill as proof.

She shook her head, wiping her already spotless work area. "I don't want your money." Then, as if surprised at his still being there, said: "It must be nice. To think so well of yourself. To have everything so easy for you." She indicated her workspace. "Now please. I am working."

Francis shifted, removing a small piece of paper from his coat pocket, carefully pronouncing the Arabic words written in pencil: "*Ana aasef giddan*." *I'm so sorry.*

She looked at him with something resembling pity in her eyes, her laughter filling the small cart. Followed by something in Arabic; something needing no translation. He nodded in agreement, raising his hands in surrender. "*Erfah edak*."

Francis placed the money on the counter, underneath a napkin dispenser and turned to leave. She leaned out of the cart, waving his rubber-band wallet.

"Excuse me…"

With elbows placed primly on the small ledge, she regarded Francis, shivering before her: "You meant to say *ana astaslim*—'I surrender'."

*

That night, as he lay on Gordon's couch, huddled beneath his coat, Francis experienced an awareness that comes only as one straddles the conscious and unconscious, when one is their truest self. This woman, whoever she was, towered over him, as on a movie screen; wreathed in silvery shadows and secrets. As he drifted off, he dreamt not of her beauty, but of her quiet courage; an enviable strength he could only hope to emulate, a kind of beauty in itself. She had slipped the blindfold from his eyes. What he saw was distorted, yet somehow still recognizable, as in a fun house mirror. But instead of embarrassment, or anger, or even shame at his discovery, Francis felt strangely unbound. And while he may have surrendered, Francis realized he was no prisoner, for she had unlocked the cage.

All he had to do was walk out.

Brian O'Hare is a U.S. Naval Academy graduate, former Marine Corps captain and disabled combat veteran. He's a former Editor-at-Large for *MovieMaker* magazine and an award-winning documentary filmmaker. Brian's work has appeared in *War, Literature and the Arts, Liar's League, London, Fresh.ink, The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature, SantaFe Writers Project, The Bookends Review* and others. He lives in Los Angeles. You can follow his work on Instagram and Twitter at @bohare13x.

He writes, "What fascinates me most as a writer is the ability to revisit significant moments in life; stubborn memories that have somehow woven themselves deep into my personal mythology. "Surrender" is based on one such moment. During the Gulf War, the only Arabic phrase I'd memorized was '*Erfah edak'* — 'Hands up!' A practical phrase no doubt, given the circumstances, but far more damaging than memorizing 'thank you' or 'please' or 'hello'. Fortunately, I didn't have to use the phrase, but I did see thousands of Iraqi soldiers who'd surrendered and doubtless understood the subtleties of that phrase intimately. That got me thinking about the nature of surrender; that it wasn't necessarily a term of defeat or capitulation, despite being perceived as such by my fellow Marines. Intertwined into this idea is the identity of oneself as a 'sheepdog' or protector—one of the reasons I'd initially been drawn to the Marine Corps. But at what point does that ostensibly noble identity become something less positive? When does one cross a line and become a bully? As much of my work is focused on demythologizing the hero myth, especially as it relates to the U.S. military and American masculinity in general, the 'surrender' of an American male to an Arab female seemed like an ideal environment to explore these concepts. This struggle is where humanity resides; where the act of living blossoms into something truly beautiful."

Solomon's Compass
Mark Sadler

It is surely no surprise the rebels chose the town of Dahizz, close to the western border, to stage their counterattack. The wadi Hijarhar points, like a crooked rifle barrel, down the length of the country. The region has served as a Petri dish for war since the early golden age.

When my friend, Yaseen, was a boy, his father told him that if you stood in the dry canyon bed, facing east, and looked through binoculars, you could see, framed within the vista, the coastal town of Rimm'yanhar, hundreds of miles away, where thehouses have white, sloping rooftops. Yaseen's father was in the military. He would hold a pair of compact field binoculars up to his face. His small, neatly-trimmed moustache would move up and down as he described the scene before him: "There are lots of boats out on the water today... and cruise ships. There are fish jumping out between the waves. On the beach there is a big wheel and a man turning a handle to make it go round. There are children eating ice-cream..."

The boy would jump up and down franticly at his father's side, begging to see for himself, grabbing at the bent elbows of his father who stared into the distance, unmoved.

"These binoculars are for army use only. I need them to spot any rebel activity," he would say, returning them hastily to the leather pouch on his belt. I think that, maybe, he did not want to run the risk of light flaring off the lenses and catchingthe attention of a sniper.

His son continued to strain his eyes towards the coast. Although he did not know it until later, the scenery that his father described was better than the truth. The wadi does not point directly towards Rimm'yanhar. It passes between the stumpy sandstone cliffs of a winding mesa for two-hundred miles, until even the rocks grow tired and sink into the desert.

Close to the spot where Yaseen used to stand with his father, there are ruins that date to the biblical era, when the land was fertile and prosperous. Of particular note are the remnants of a palace that was built by King Solomon; the surviving walls gnawed down to the foundations by time and desert winds. Until a few years ago, a tall pillar with smooth rounded sides, that bulge out slightly at the centre, stood upright in the gritty sand.

In 2014, the ground nearby was struck by a wayward artillery shell. The impact shook the air, permanently warping the shimmer of the heat haze. The pillar toppled over and fractured across the middle but did not break apart. It rolled into the shallow crater made by the explosion. Ever since that time it has crept, imperceptibly, from one side of the depression to the other, and then back again, as if being moved by an invisible force; a stray, toothless cog in the broken engine of war, unable to come to a full-stop; instead fated to traverse a rut worn into the landscape by endless conflict.

The coarse sand is ground to fine powder under the crushing weight of the stone. In the wake of the pillar, it rises up from the parched bed of the wadi. Maybe you will not believe me when I tell you, that this insignificant crater is the source of the four-year sandstorms that gather on the spot months before the roiling dust floods over the high cliffs.

On many occasions, I have measured the time that it takes for the pillar to journey from one side of the crater to the other. It is always four years. The same four years playing endlessly forward, or in reverse. If the pillar rolls to the east, then I know that we are progressing through time, advancing into further conflict. If it rolls to the west, then everything will be as it once was. The dead will return to life. The undocumented mass graves and secret prisons will vanish from the land, replaced by the cereal crops, of seasons long past. The fallen buildings will take root on the sites of their own ruins and gradually reassemble themselves. Yaseen and I will be young men again, untouched by our recent hardships and sorrows, yet somehow fated to relive them.

Six months before I make this observation, on the fifth day of November, 2017, my friend, Yaseen Hineti, and his wife, Fatima, return to Amarmoch, the town of their birth. They stand in the ruins of the home that they abandoned over three years ago. In their bedroom, a bullet-ridden double mattress, with a torn and stained covering, has been gutted of its filling by the scavenging ravens and black kites, who have used it for nesting material. The coiled springs poke out from the remnants of stuffing, like the ribs of an animal carcass.

There are two large holes in the bedroom wall that provide views overlooking the street. Turquoise scraps of painted plasterwork lie strewn across the floor like the shards of a broken pot. Fatima finds three pieces that fit together so perfectly that she can barely see the join between them. She lays them carefully on the floor, kneeling over them. Trembling, she sinks down slowly onto the flats of her hands. Her palms move around blindly in the dust as if they are searching for fragments of her old life that has been ground to powder and re-shaped by the overlapping bootprints of strangers.

The year before, when the couple are refugees, Yaseen begins gathering together the tools and building equipment that he will need to make the repairs on his home. He stores them in the house of his brother, Abed, underneath a blue tarpaulin, next to the television set. When I see him in the year 2018, I do not tell him that it is a pointless effort; that before he even mixes the concrete he is always blown back to where he is now, and beyond, almost to the start of things.

Abed has already visited the old house. When Fatima is out of the room he tells Yaseen: "Nearly everything is ruined. The garden courtyard is gone. It is like it was never there. The soldiers destroyed every last piece of furniture. They even shot the toilet to pieces."

He shows Yaseen a pillowcase, filled almost to the brim with spent brass shell casings from a machine-gun. He plans to make the 70 mile journey to Egila and sell the casings at the metal market. He says he will give half of the money to Yaseen.

He takes something small and shiny from out of his shirt pocket and places it in the hand of his brother: "A gold tooth. For you. I found it inside a hole in the wall of your bedroom. Maybe it is a sign of good luck."

On the 5th May, 2015, the siege breaks. The rebels are driven out of Amarmoch. They flee into the wilderness in scattered groups. An advancing column of loyalist troops and creaking tanks, that would be regarded as war museum antiques anywhere else in the world, moves in to reclaim the town.

The rebel colonel, Moonif Antar, takes one final lingering look around the building that has been his home for the past fortnight. He peers through one of the holes that he made in the wall for the

machine-gunner and the spotter. He imagines a sniper's bullet penetrating the gap; his head rupturing, exploding in all directions at once, as his body falls lifeless to the ground. The thought fills him with a strange feeling of exhilaration.

On the opposite side of the room, he thoughtfully drills one finger down inside a tapering bloodstained hole in the plaster. At the bottom, he feels the smooth surface of Marwan's gold tooth, embedded two-inches-deep in the mud-brick.

He loads a belt of ammunition into the machine-gun and walks through the house firing in short bursts at the walls and the surviving furnishings. The mattress, soiled with blood and sweat, erupts into fibrous white clouds. The western-style toilet explodes under sustained fire, as he uses up the last of his bullets.

Time continues to creep backwards, through the early stalemate; the slow-turning months of the siege that passes under a haze of gun-smoke; the two sides suspended in the doldrums as their momentum stagnates. One by one the bullets and shells remove themselves from their final resting places. Temporarily reprieved from the shot that kills him, Marwan, picks Khat stems from between his teeth. He runs his tongue along his upper jaw and feels the smooth texture of gold among bone.

The fog of war withdraws to its home inside the barrels of guns. When the air finally clears we have returned, once more, almost to the beginning; late May, 2014. The rebels are still regrouping, following an earlier retreat from the interior. In their propaganda they call it 'a strategic withdrawal.'

Only a little further now, to the start of things: Today, Yaseen and Fatima move into their new home with their son Halil, who is four years old and will not live to be five. On their first morning, Halil runs around their bedroom with his arms stretched-out like an aeroplane. His fingertips brush the sky-blue walls of the room, which are smooth and cool to the touch.

A few miles from the town, I walk with my friend, Ferhad, along the dry riverbed. I have recently graduated from the university in the capital with a degree in physics. My head is filled with theories on time and space that do not yet correspond with anything in the world that lies beyond the campus library.

We both sense that strange quality of stillness in the air that heralds incoming artillery; the approach of a shell hurtling through cloudless blue sky, erasing its own sound and all other sounds around it. It strikes the ground with a decisive thump. We feel it reverberate through the soles of our shoes. The aftershock of the explosion, which is hidden from our view, races between the cliff walls as a tepid shockwave. We both watch as it changes the shape of the heat haze forever.

Ferhad immediately runs home to his family. I walk to the site of impact. I see the pillar unseated from its buried foundation, lying on its side on the western slope of the smouldering crater. Though it appears stationery, I am that struck by the notion that it is rolling very slowly towards the bottom of the depression. I am taken by the urge to place my hand upon it and stop it. When I do, I feel a resistance; a relentless energy, like a magnetic force emanating from within; stronger along a shallow fissure that has appeared around the circumference.

I do not leave the crater again. I begin my vigil, sitting at its edge, observing the column's ponderous back and forth transition across the span of four years, as if endlessly deliberating on a final

judgement. Like the moon that controls the tides, it seems to exert a strong localised force upon the ebb and flow of time. Within its vicinity I am guarded from hunger or thirst. Events creep forward and I see them in my waking dreams: Glimpses of Yaseen and Fatima, and Yaseen's brother, Abed, who I have never met, and strangers—soldiers on both sides of the conflict, who live and die and then live again.

Time advances to the day in 2018, when I meet Yaseen. We have not seen one another in person in over four years. He has returned to Amarmoch to rebuild his home and start a new family. He is amazed that I am alive. I feel only a pervading sense of déjà vu. I have stopped counting the times I have lived in this moment.

I tell him: "From here I am able to spectate upon a small area of time and space, and form judgements."

He regards me sympathetically. Though he does not say it, he believes my mind has been damaged by my experiences in the war. I can see it in his eyes. I direct his attention towards the toppled column, the engine of our mutual entrapment.

"It is a thing of terrible perpetual motion. We are caught within the gravity of its eternal back and forth."

There is a lull in the conversation as the creeping transition of the fallen pillar ascends to its eastern-most zenith, then imperceptibly reverses its course, gradually erasing our recently-spoken words.

Later, I watch Yaseen recede backwards into the skyline, heading east, like a pilgrim, towards his childhood memory of Rimm'yanhar on the coast. He disappears into the flatness of the horizon that warps and shimmers in the dry heat. I remain within the crater and await his inevitable return.

Mark Sadler lives in Southend-on-Sea in England with a chameleon named Frederic. His stories have been performed by Liars' Leagues in Hong Kong, London, and New York City, and have also appeared in a number of online and print publications that include *The London Magazine*, *The Ghastling* and *Litbreak*.

This story was inspired by a visit to the town of Senafe, in Southern Eritrea, in 2003. At the time, the population were picking up the pieces of their lives in the aftermath of a border war, subsisting among buildings that had been structurally damaged by the fighting, many past the point where they could be repaired.

A Good Day
Zephaniah Sole

At 7:28 a.m., Jacob and Elna, hand in hand, entered the Starbucks directly across the street from Jacob's condominium. Jacob wore his athletic-fit, single-breasted, navy blue suit with a white dress shirt. Cutaway collar. No tie. Elna wore her low rise, cigarette-leg stretch jeans, with camel suede heels and matching leather jacket with a belted waist. Elna was even taller in those heels, reaching Jacob's height when she corrected her posture. She was a redhead, a real one, with green eyes, a rare find, and lightning didn't strike half as hard as her figure, so Jacob was used to the stares the coffee shop denizens cast in their direction. He was also used to the underlying tension in most of those stares.

At 7:31 a.m. as Jacob and Elna waited on line, a man entered the Starbucks and casually stepped directly in front of them.

Jacob breathed and told himself there was simply some misunderstanding. He counted to five. But this man, his back to Jacob so only the light brown hair of his slicked back 'do was visible over the collar of his grey sharkskin suit, did not budge. Jacob looked to Elna, but her eyes were glazed, lost in deciding whether to get her usual tall shaken iced green tea, or treat herself to a tall iced caramel macchiato. Jacob stepped over to the man. He and Elna had discussed these very situations the night before when she'd given him the news. It worried her, she'd confided, the ease with which he fell into a rage when such incidents occurred. "You need to let stuff go," she had said, and Jacob had closed his eyes in thought. "You ever swim with a life jacket on?" he'd responded.

"Of course," she'd said.

"No, I mean, like swim, swim. For a long distance."

"I don't understand."

"It's easier to swim without one. But it's safer to keep it on, right? So I hear you. I'm just saying, it's not that easy to let go of your life jacket."

She'd nodded and taken his hand and placed it on her lower belly.

Then she'd said the most beautiful thing he'd ever heard.

So, with those words ringing in his ears, Jacob decided to not startle the man, or Elna, or any of the café habitués. He forced his voice to leave his throat as softly and evenly as possible. "'Scuse me, sir. There's a line."

The man did not respond.

Elna shifted her feet and kept her photogenic eyes trained on the menu overhead. She chewed her bottom red-painted lip in vacuous indecision. *Let us be your life jacket*, she had said to Jacob the night before. *Do you have any second thoughts?* she'd asked, and Jacob had shaken his head with a vociferous 'no.' *Then let us be your life jacket.*

"Excuse me," Jacob cautiously repeated to the man. "There is a line."

The man looked through Jacob as if he weren't there. "Wasn't trying to skip you, buddy."

"But you just did."

The man turned his back on Jacob and stepped to the cashier. "Yeah, I'll have a…"

Jacob's body delved into that familiar mode of fight or fight. He had no interest in flight. He thought to physically brush the man aside, tell the cashier he and Elna were skipped, then place his own order. If anyone had an issue with that, it was just that, *their* issue. Then again, there were other perspectives to consider, particularly Elna's. And maybe at some point, as Jacob had once read, a man does need to accept that when a specific issue rears its head over and over again, like it did so many times before—like it did with Katherine—then it may be time to look within instead of without for the necessary change.

Jacob leaned toward Elna as the man said, "…tall vanilla latte." He kissed her on the cheek. "I love you," he whispered.

Elna smiled and returned his kiss in a way that felt as if she were rewarding him for positive behavior. "Me too," she said. "Sure you don't want me to come back tonight?"

"Me and Danny need a boys' night out."

She squeezed his hand. The sharkskin man vanished, banished by Jacob's efforts to ignore him. Jacob placed his order. "Chai tea latte. Please. Tall. And whatever she's getting." Elna smiled at the cashier. She decided to stick to her iced green tea. "Less caffeine," she said and winked at Jacob, who grinned back with the effort to banish his own second thoughts.

*

At 8:17 a.m., Jacob shifted at his ergonomic standing desk and re-read his most recent e-mail: "It's still Monday morning Jacob. Give people time to respond to your request."

Jacob did what he often did in such moments of electronic conflict. He cast his eyes toward the crystal statuette sitting in the corner of his cubicle. That statuette had been handed to him the year prior, by the Director himself, in recognition for Jacob's Dedication to Service and Teamwork throughout the execution of a multi-pronged consolidation project. When confronting new challenges it was good to remember past success. He hit reply-all: "I don't mean to rush anyone, but it has been three months."

At 8:19 a.m., Jacob's gaze was drawn to Drew's IM response:

"Please call me."

Jacob took a breath. Peered at his statuette. Thought about the pale fullness of Elna's body and the visible changes it would soon undergo. Then he mentally constructed the sequence of five premises he would posit to Drew in a most calm and objective manner:

One. Three months ago, Pat, a member of Drew's staff, had been tasked with an analysis for the Ellison project, which Jacob was managing.

Two. A month and a half after this tasking, Pat had not initiated any steps toward its completion and stated he would not do so since he wasn't a member of Jacob's working group.

Three. Jacob told Pat that the assignment came not from him, but from the front office, as Pat was the only available analyst, and that if Pat had an alternative solution in mind he would be happy to consider it.

Four. Pat told Jacob he would speak with his direct supervisor, Drew, and get back to him.

Five. After another month and a half with no communication from Pat, Jacob had no choice but to initiate the flurry of messages that started at 8:04 a.m. when Jacob e-mailed Pat, cc'ed Drew, and requested a status update.

Jacob planned to state these unarguable facts. He also planned to not state the unavoidable conclusion: that Drew needed to manage his team and tell Pat to do the job, or Drew needed to assign it to someone else. No, Jacob would let Drew draw that inevitable conclusion independently. Then he would thank Drew, profusely, for Drew's insight and problem-solving capability. And when Pat, or the suitable replacement, completed the analysis, Jacob would extol their efforts regardless of the fact that Pat had placed the project three months behind. Jacob planned to do these things because that, he thought as he remembered Elna's hair cascading over his belly that morning, was how you won friends and influenced people.

Smiling congenially, for he had also once read that people can feel your smile through the telephone, Jacob dialed Drew's extension.

"This is Drew."

"Hey, Drew. Jacob."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm… fine."

"Just, the tone of your emails, man. Very antagonistic."

"I… I didn't mean to be antagonistic, I'm just trying to get—"

"Well, if you want people to work with you? You should show a little more tact."

"Drew, it's been three—"

"And I'm sure this issue has come up with you before? In your past?"

"My past?" Jacob looked at the crystal statuette of his Director's Award. "How has… look, we're really behind."

"Then I suggest you get that analysis done."

"Pat was—"

"Pat's overtasked. I already told the front office."

"Do you have anyone else?"

"No, Jacob."

"Drew, this isn't—"

"You're a rock star. I'm sure you can figure it out."

"Drew—"

"Have a good day Jacob." Then Drew hung up the phone.

*

At 5:37 p.m., Jacob walked down an avenue in the city's gentrified warehouse district. He glanced upward at the condominium conversions on either side of the street and wondered if he could sell his current home and purchase one of these instead, for the condos here tended to have walls of exposed brick. Jacob loved exposed brick. He also loved Katherine, his ex, who walked beside him. Katherine was tall and slender and pale, like Elna. Jacob definitely had a type. Unlike Elna, Katherine's hair was jet black. With her ice-blue eyes she struck a dramatic portrait in color. Jacob was certain that Katherine did not love him. He wasn't certain if she ever did. To her credit, she did love Daniel, their son, age six, who strolled and ran in spurts ahead. Jacob kept one eye on Daniel and one eye on the man across the street who walked parallel, staring and sneering.

"I'm sorry," Katherine said.

"It's like that award came with a muthafuckin target on my back," said Jacob, "all complete with the bullseye and shit. Front and center. Saying, keep this dude in place."

Katherine laughed uncomfortably. "I think you're overanalyzing."

"Really?"

"They are assholes, but *that's* got nothing to do with it."

"*That's* got everything to do with it. Look how those assholes still feel they can recreate my past."

Katherine shook her head and avoided eye contact and Jacob chose to close his mouth. He reminded himself they were not together anymore. There was no need to re-hash their differences in such conversations. Their relationship had taught him lessons he needed to learn, lessons he would apply in his current commitment to Elna. As for the lessons Katherine did or did not learn, Jacob hoped—for Daniel's sake, not his own—that Katherine would one day pull her head out of the sand.

Then something wonderful happened.

The man across the street, still walking parallel, shouted. "Hey! Hey! What do you call a…." he interrupted himself with a cackle. "A black lawyer. A black doctor. And a, a black president?" The man laughed again.

Katherine sped up. Jacob chuckled with a strange joy. "Here we go."

"Yeah, you got it," the man continued. "A bunch of fucking niggers."

"He's mentally ill," Katherine said. "Ignore him."

"Danny," Jacob called, and their son turned. Jacob beckoned the boy toward them. Daniel obeyed. Jacob grabbed his hand. "Need you to stay close now, all right?" The boy nodded.

"That's right," the man across the street pointed at Jacob. "I'm talking to you, nigger."

"Katherine," Jacob said, "take Danny in case this shit breaks bad."

"And what the fuck are you doing?" The man pointed at Katherine. "Fucking this monkey. Making nasty little monkey babies."

"Just ignore him," Katherine said mechanically.

"Katherine. Take Danny. Now."

Katherine sighed and picked up Daniel and she and Jacob kept walking.

"Yeah, that's right. You're still just a fucking nigger."

What struck Jacob most was the reaction, or lack thereof, of the pedestrians walking up and down the avenue in full view of this incident. They walked by, oblivious, or doing a good job of pretending to be. Even Katherine, a direct recipient of the man's vitriol, refused to look anywhere but directly ahead.

The man screamed. "Support your local KKK!"

"I just want to stay positive," Katherine muttered.

*

At 6:24 p.m., Jacob sat on a park bench, looking at the golden brown skin on his son's naked back, and felt himself immersed in the blueness of time.Oceans had been crossed. Bones had been burnt. Lives had been evaporated. And still, Jacob and Daniel were there.

Daniel jumped and splashed in the playground fountain by the small man-made lake downtown. He made friends easily, and when he grew bored with the fountain, and made his way to the concrete steps before the lake, two little girls about his age, who appeared to be sisters, followed. Jacob watched the three children talk amongst themselves casually, wading up to their knees in the lake. A mother duck, four of her babies in tow, swam nearby, and the two girls grew excited at the sight of the ducklings. Daniel grew calm and gently placed his hand, palm up, on the surface of the water. He waited. As the girls giggled, the ducklings swam toward Daniel and gently pecked at his palm. The mother duck, close behind, monitored the situation.

From a bench nearby a woman sprang to her feet and rushed toward the lake. She wore a chiffon blouse that showcased her breast enhancement and high-waisted tailored shorts that displayed salon-tanned legs. "Girls," she called out with a voice whose severity did not match her porcelain features and strawberry blonde hair. "Don't touch the baby ducks." One of the girls, a spitting image of the woman rewound in time, looked up and was about to protest, but the woman yelled as she stepped to the lake, "The mama duck. Will. Bite you."

The mother duck grew agitated, opened her beak, and swam closer to her ducklings.

"See?" the woman said. "Don't touch the babies."

"You can touch them," Daniel spoke up. "You just have to—"

"I'm not talking to you," the woman snapped at Daniel. "I'm talking to *my* kids."

That was enough. Jacob hustled over to the lake, ignoring the woman who also ignored him, and beckoned to Daniel. When Daniel reached Jacob, he handed the boy his shirt and tousled the wet curls of his hair. "Ice cream?" Jacob said. Daniel smiled, put on his shirt, and took his father's hand. Jacob led him away from the lake. "After ice cream, there's something I want to talk to you about, man to man."

"Okay," Daniel said and waved goodbye to the girls, who waved back.

"Don't talk to boys like that," Jacob heard the girls' mother say. "They're just show-offs."

*

At 6:47 p.m., Jacob's cell phone rang. He saw the incoming call was from Elna. He ignored it. She knew better than to bother him while he was spending time with Daniel. They were standing on line, hand in hand, in one of the trendy artisanal ice cream shops downtown. Jacob looked up at the menu. He knew Daniel would eat anything chocolate. He decided he would try one of the new flavors that involved blue cheese. Why not?

Daniel looked through the floor-to-ceiling windows of the ice cream shop as couples and families waited and conversed happily amongst themselves. The spring sunset cast a bluish-green hue over

the downtown buildings, and cool air wafted in through the open door. Air that had traveled from the nearby mountain and the nearby coast. Air that entered Daniel's chest and made him smile. As the line moved away from the door, Daniel instead moved toward it. His father pulled him close. He looked up at Jacob. "Can I wait outside?" Jacob glanced around, hesitant. "Yeah man, just stay by the window where I can see you, all right?" Daniel nodded and rushed out of the store, into the air that beckoned him to walk toward the sunset and toward the ocean 80 miles west of the city. But he did not move. He obeyed his father. He stayed in front of the shop window. Leaned against it. Breathed in the evening.

Inside the shop, the line moved forward and Jacob's phone beeped. He pulled it out. It was an old school flip phone. Jacob hated smart phones. But he could still discern Elna's text on its tiny exterior screen: "Did you tell Danny the news?!" He silenced the phone then looked out the window to check on Daniel. Jacob froze.

The line extended to the exterior of the shop, and on the line, outside, was a large, bearded man who appeared to be in his 60's, holding a cane. For some reason Jacob did not care to determine, the man was poking Daniel in the ribs with this cane.

Jacob rushed outside, caught the hurt and confused look on his son's face, and stepped between Daniel and the man with the cane.

"What are you doing?" Jacob demanded.

The man was very tall and he looked down at Jacob and spoke as if Jacob were also a six-year-old boy. "He shouldn't lean on the window."

"You don't need to poke him with your cane."

"Well," the man said with a smirk and a glint of mirth in his Santa Claus blue eyes, "He didn't respond to 'Hey, kid.'"

"His name isn't kid." Jacob let the full force bass of his voice loose from his belly and chest. "So why the fuck would he respond to that?"

The line grew silent. Two men, Jacob's age, approached the man with the cane, and stood by his side. One of these men spoke. "Do we need to call the police?"

Jacob reeled. The man with the cane, emboldened by the receipt of communal support, stepped closer to Jacob. "Calm down," he said. "Maybe take a walk. It's a nice night."

"Step back from me and my son," Jacob thundered.

The man smirked and took another step forward. "Calm down. Go take a walk."

The phone buzzed again. Jacob gripped it tight, turning his fist into a more effective club.

"Go on," the man said. "Take a walk. Answer your phone."

Jacob considered the calculus of striking the man in the jaw. The man tumbling to the concrete. The ensuing chaos. The two younger men rushing Jacob. Daniel getting hurt in the melee. Someone from the crowd of eyes calling 911. The arrival of thepolice. Jacob's attempt to articulate why he stood his ground and struck this man who had crossed the acceptable physical boundaries of both himself and his son, a six-year-old boy, an innocent, who stayed by the window as his father had commanded and watched this scene unfold, trembling and imagining a day when he would walk and walk to the crashing surf of ocean shore, wade into the brinyblue and swim and swim and swim.

Zephaniah Sole is a multicultural entity writing from the Pacific Northwest. His writing is published or forthcoming in *Epiphany* and *Gargoyle Magazine*.

Runaway
Meredith Suter-Wadley

Before sunrise one summer morning in South Texas, a mockingbird flew to the topmost branch of a crepe myrtle to begin its predawn trill. The myrtle grew in the yard of a farmhouse surrounded by a citrus grove. These were the days before air conditioning, and the house's windows were all open, many already glowing. Gloria, an airman's wife and mother of three kids, was up early, to get her ironing done before the heat.

In an upstairs bedroom, Gloria's youngest, a toddler, stirred. Janey loved the mockingbird. It could sing pretty, honk like a bike horn, and even bark like Sepp, the family's black-and-white rat terrier. She saw the lit hallway, stood in her crib, and scratched, setting in motion several of the little white rocking horses on the red fabric of her pajamas.

Janey still slept in a crib, but she was old enough to climb out. She shared a room with Steve and Isabel, both deep and late sleepers. In the hallway, a box fan rumbled. Janey headed directly for the stairs and slid on her belly down to the ground floor.

The front and back doors to the house stood open, creating a breezeway. Several moths batted the front door screen, and music came from the front room, which meant Janey could find her mama there, but the mockingbird's trills had come from the backside of the house, so she headed that way, into the kitchen.

The family terrier peered through the latched screen door. Sepp spent his nights in the cool crawl space under the house. Earlier, waking to Gloria's movements, he'd dragged his chain—two links short of reaching the cat's food bowl—up the back steps and scratched to be let in.

Gloria had ignored him. Janey would not.

He yawned and shook himself. His chain rattled.

"Shhh," Janey said. "Bird." Stretching onto her tippy-toes, she reached for the screen-door hook, and Sepp yipped. The mockingbird flew off.

Meanwhile, in the front room, a ceiling fan above Gloria stirred the floral scent of the spray starch she used, and a border station on the radio played its early-bird program, new albums in their entirety. Dressed in a light cotton blouse and pedal pushers, she rocked her hips to Barbara Lynn's bluesy "You'll Lose a Good Thing."

*

A mile or so up the road from Gloria's, the lights of a weathered shotgun house also burned. But they'd burned all night long. Rachel, who wore yesterday's threadbare jeans and a stained T-shirt reeking of goat and Gin, lay sprawled across her made bed. A floor flan sweeping left and right lifted tufts of her short dark hair. Like Gloria, Rachel was an airman's wife; both houses sat on a country road a short drive from an airfield. Unlike Gloria, Rachel was not a mother, and right now, her head

felt crammed with roofing nails. An actual box of nails sat on her dresser next to her husband Wayne's flight school graduation photo.

The milking goats she kept began bleating, and her head pounded. She drew herself into a fetal position but could not sleep. She heard a rhythmic scratching coming from inside the house, checked her cowboy boots for scorpions, and then shoved her bare feet in.

The scratching came from the front room. A stack of Patsy Cline albums spun on the record player, and the needle rubbed the label of *Sentimentally Yours*: "Gin tonic, gin tonic, gin tonic."
Rachel had spent many nights alone, yet until last night, she'd never tippled on her own. She felt mighty miserable.

*

Gloria's husband Andy was stationed in Goose Bay, Labrador. Last week, he'd been home on leave. The five days of his furious passion—mornings and nights—had left her with a yeast infection, dammit, and swaying her hips to the music aggravated the itchy, crawling sensation attacking her. Unable to resist scratching, she nearly dug a hole in the crotch of her pedal pushers. God, she thought, I hope I'm not pregnant again.

From the clothes pile, she plucked a smocked dress. Sewn for Isabel, the dress was now worn by Janey. Its hem flopped open, and Gloria rolled her eyes. Janey and her rips and tears. This one likely occurred at the base nursery school. Housed in a Quonset hut, the school overlooked the airfield's ramp. Last time Janey had worn the dress, she'd tried climbing over the playground fence. Had wanted to go find her daddy.

In general, the ladies at the nursery found Janey and her antics manageable—even "adorable." So did Andy. Gloria herself found her youngest less than manageable and less adorable than Steve and Isabel. She reckoned, however, that she'd come to feel as close to her youngest as she did to Steve and Isabel. In time. The child just made closeness so damn difficult.

Gloria scratched. As she did so, Janey, on the opposite side of the house, pushed a chair to the back door, climbed upon it, and popped open the hook.

*

As if, in her state, Rachel needed more irritating noises than bleating goats, her two massive black mutts begun barking. They barked as if egging each other on, which usually meant they'd cornered something—rat, armadillo, snake, or feral cat. Running late already, she skipped her morning coffee and swallowed some aspirin before heading out to see what was what.

In the light of the back-porch, Sammy's nose glistened. At his feet lay a juvenile rattler. Sunshine stood over the chewed-off head, which Rachel tossed into the burn barrel, afraid it might still be venomous. It landed with a thud. Recently, as she'd helped Wayne clean 'round the place, a rattler struck her on the hand; a dry bite; she'd been lucky. She wiped her bloodied fingertips on her filthy jeans and set out for the goat shed.

*

With dawn just a scent away, Sepp marked the sprinkler, the backyard swing set, the pump house, and every odd post of the backyard fence, until he came to the gate.

Ajar.

Here was a chance.

He nosed himself through and trotted to the car. Its tires brought home wondrous stories. Its interior, though, stank of going to the vet.

The dewy lawn soaked the footies of Janey's pajamas. Their heavy wetness bothered her, but she couldn't stop to shed them. She slipped through the open gate and trotted down the side of the house, the windows casting crooked panes of light, and music playing.

Ahead, the citrus trees lining the drive held tightly to the dark, but the easing sky now silhouetted their crowns. Janey muttered "no, no, no" to herself as Sepp sniffed his way closer and closer to the country road.

*

Before Wayne had left Rachel for jungle training in Panama—preparation for a Vietnam tour—they'd done work around the place, stacking bales of sweet hay and straw in the goat shed and clearing the junk piled against it. She'd burned barrel after barrel of trash and gotten in the way of that angry rattler, and he'd hauled the rusted pails, bent tools, and knots of baling twine he'd found to the county dump. He even mounted a motion-activated light on the house, nailed down loose roof tiles, and asked the landlord if he could paintthe house and outbuildings in exchange for three months' rent, but the landlord nixed the idea.

On those nights, he treated her uncommonly tender, drawing warm baths and scrubbing her clean. And he touched her as if her curves were ports new for him to explore. "No more pregnancies," she cautioned, and he said he'd miss her—words that'd had a double meaning she now knew. Yesterday, he returned from Panama without his flight bag and wearing civies.

Said he'd left his things at Holly's apartment.

Rachel stared at Wayne who stared at his hands. "Holly?" she said. "The box-blonde hoochie who sings at the O club?" The woman specialized in Patsy Cline tunes—hitting notes in key, not so much.

"She's carrying my child."

Rachel didn't go crazy. She didn't fall to pieces. She didn't stop staring.

"It just happened," he said.

"Nothing to do with you?"

He'd looked away, and she'd scoffed.

"You sure it's yours?" she said, and the back of his hand answered her.

So now, here she was, thirty-five and having lost just about everyone important to her. Three pregnancies to the toilet. Daddy to one last, explosive thrash of his dear, dear heart. And Mom to a forlornness that'd expressed itself as lymphatic tumors. And, damn him, Wayne, too.

She neared the goat shed and triggered the automatic light. Wayne had grabbed a few things before leaving yesterday, but not everything. Not many, many other things.

Sunshine and Sammy looked on and wagged their skinny tails, as Rachel made several trips between the house and the burn barrel. First, in went the Patsy Cline records. Crash. Next, the rest of Wayne's albums and his gear—from skivvies to the Sunday suit he'd married her in. Into the barrel went old engineering textbooks, winter uniforms, insignia, and golfing togs. The wing-tip shoes she'd given him last Christmas, a fine pair she'd had made for him in Matamoros, topped the pile. She chuckled. No more playing a round, hey, Wayne?

Unfortunately, she found the gas can empty, so she splashed the dregs of last night's sorry gin over an alligator shirt. A weak flame flickered and went out.

*

Sam Cooke sang that he didn't have long to stay. Gloria had once seen Mr. Cooke sing, in her Dallas days. She and her college girlfriends would hunt for a taxi with a driver who'd think nothing of taking three white girls on a Friday night into Deep Ellum, where a few rhythm-and-blues places had survived the war years. They'd danced as best they could in their segregated corner, taking care—or not—against the lascivious moves of the fair-haired men packed alongside them. And Sundays, in church, she'd pray that her Friday night urges be extinguished. And God bless, Andy, a slender young pilot, appeared at the next church function. Following three months of tame cinema and soda-fountain dates, he proposed, and Gloria obeyed God's Will.

She set down her iron and scratched her crotch. Andy had been shocked by her taste in music. Did not approve of listening to border stations. She scratched and scratched. Ah, there she'd gone and done it, splitting her seam.

*

In the twixt of twilight, Janey could make out the whiteness of Sepp's coat as he scurried down the country road's shoulder. Had she known how dogs could get hit by cars, clawing and thrashing their way to kingdom come, or how toddlers could be hit too, she might not have followed him.

Ahead of her, Sepp kept his nose low, his nostrils fondling each ghostly roadkill scent until he reached dog, fresh on the air. Male. And something unpleasant he'd detected once on the tires of the family car. Grass eaters.

Spotting a mailbox pole to mark and oblivious to an approaching pickup, he trotted across the road.

Janey ran after him, herself oblivious to the danger. In her sheltered experience crossing intersections in town, drivers always stopped, so she didn't give the fast approaching truck a thought—but then it wasn't slowing, and she cried, "Sepp!"

*

Rachel, seated on a stool, pressed her face into the warm flank of her last doe. Mabel jerked against the milking table's stanchions, and the nape of Rachel's neck tingled as if someone stood behind her. Wayne, she thought, already regretting having trashed his things. She touched her cheek where he'd slapped her and did not regret having trashed his things. She would wait for him to seek her.

But she hadn't heard his pickup, and the dogs weren't going berserk. She reached for her pitchfork, and as she spun around with it, a child's voice said, "Goats."

Framed by a flamingo-pink sky and her hair a ratty halo, Janey. Naked.

"Gracious," Rachel said.

"Babies."

Rachel knew this child.

Only recently, Gloria had appeared at Rachel's front door, Janey propped on her hip and the older two clutching her skirt. "A flat tire," she'd said, gesturing toward a silver-blue Impala blocking the end of the drive. "Just a mile from the house and a day before my Andy gets home on leave—he's an airman."

On that occasion, the dogs had beat the devil out of town with their nonsense. Odd, their silence. Still, Gloria had to be around; the child couldn't have gotten here on her own—but what a state she was in, her feet as wrinkled as if fresh out of along bath yet filthy.

"We're in here, Gloria!" Rachel yelled.

On the day she'd changed her neighbor's flat tire, she'd offered Gloria coffee and the children milk and oatmeal cookies. The boy had picked the raisins out of his and announced that the milk smelled like dirty socks. "You'll die if you drink it," he'd told the girls. They'd left their glasses untouched.

Rachel considered Janey's filthy feet—she couldn't have walked here, could she have? She released the herd into their enclosure to graze, picked up the milk pail and Janey's hand, and said, "Let's get to the bottom of this."

As soon as they were out of the shed, Sepp trotted into view, and Sunshine and Sammy exploded from around the side of the house. Barking savagely, they hit the ends of their chains, and Janey clutched Rachel's legs. "Bad dog," she said.

Sepp casually lifted his leg on the burn barrel.

When Rachel let her pair off their chains, they tore after Sepp, who dropped and rolled, four paws in the air. In a dust-raising scuffle, the three sniffed each other nose to ass, ass to nose. All good.

"Come on," she said, "let's clean you up and get you home."

The child thrust her arms upward, and Rachel hesitated at the gesture. Honestly, how could she hold this adorable child and keep the desire for her own at arm's length?

Especially now that any hope for one was gone.

Up, up, Janey's arms insisted.

She scooped up the child, put her on the john, washed her feet, and brushed her mess of thick brown hair—more like her own than Gloria's. Her fingers could hardly leave the luxury of touching it. It'd been too long since she'd had a small child herself, going way back to her babysitting years in high school. She plaited two braids, just like her mama had once done to her hair.

"Pink!" the toddler cried at the T-shirt Rachel slipped over her head, covering the mite from dimpled elbows to dimpled ankles. Janey twirled as if wearing a dress.

The T-shirt had come from a trip to Playa Bagdad in Mexico; it should have gone into the burn barrel along with Wayne's gear. They'd gone there after her last miscarriage and taken Sunshine and Sammy along. While watching the dogs playing in the Gulf surf, Wayne had said, "Let's not give up. Not just yet." He'd refused her suggestion of adoption, but then brought her two does, now her milking herd of six and a satisfying little business selling fresh milk and potted cheese.

*

Gloria carried the hamper of ironed clothes past the children's room. Steve and Isabel slept with mouths gaped and their sheets twisted around their compact bodies. Good little sleepers. Not a peep from the early riser, she thought, having failed to notice the empty crib. She shed her ripped pedal pushers, slipped into a Mexican cotton dress, and made her way back downstairs, where she lathered a sanitary napkin with cooling yogurt from the fridge to wear against her miserable parts. Why couldn't she have met and married a nine-to-five man?

Outside, a mockingbird trilled. The heavens triumphed morning in citrus pinks, oranges, and yellows, and a T-29 flew overhead.

*

Getting the terrier into the car wasn't going to happen. He ignored Janey's calls and Rachel's commands of come, sit, and stay, and disappeared into the citrus groves as soon as she opened the back end of the car. She set Janey on the front-seat bench. "Let's get you home."

She would have phoned Gloria, had she known her neighbor's last name. Both may have been airmen's wives, but the two had never socialized; Rachel avoided the young mothers. And maybe she should have realized sooner that Gloria must be going crazy with worry, but Rachel was not herself this morning.

Sunshine and Sammy, back on their chains, tilted their heads, their eyes glistening with the love of car rides. Maybe they, too, recalled romping on the Bagdad beach.

"Bye-bye Sunshine, bye-bye Sammy," Janey cried. She broke into a booming "This Old Man," her "nick knack, paddy whack" a "ni nah, wanny wah" that broke Rachel's heart. If only she could keep her. She thought of Wayne cradling a child, not hers, and at the end of the drive, she braked. A crazy idea came to her: Turn left, head to Mexico. Keep the child.

"Give the dog a home," Janey sang.

She could back up, load the dogs, and be on the beach before noon.

"This old man came rolling home."

Who would be the wiser?

The car idled. Rachel could not lift her foot. Her leg began to shake.

Janey pointed to the goats' enclosure. "Mabel!" she cried.

The doe trotted along the fence, her teats swinging. She bleated, and several answers followed. Then her kid came running. He bumped her bag and suckled. Rachel pictured her ladies in the evening, huddling against the shed, anxious to be let inside to be milked, and their bags as full as grief—

Crazy. *Crazy* idea. Rachel's foot came off the brake, she turned the steering wheel in Gloria's direction. What kind of crazy woman would abandon her goats?

*

Gloria recognized the car coming up the drive and wondered why the goat lady would be visiting this time of the morning. Her quiet time was now truly over, and she expected to hear Janey crying "Mommy!" from upstairs—but the child's cry came from outside. Her youngest was in the goat lady's arms, dressed in pink. What the h-e-double-l?

In a burst of possessiveness, Gloria marched. The screen door slammed, the porch steps groaned, and the rows of citrus trees shook. She snatched her baby from Rachel so fast the little one's head jerked, and it was all she could do to keep from saying, "How dare you!"

Rachel, having anticipated a happy mother and child reunion, gasped.

Janey, unfazed, said, "Pink, Mama!" She twisted in Gloria's arms as if to look for something. "Bad dog."

"I couldn't get him into the car," Rachel explained.

Gloria's eyes narrowed. "You have my dog? What's going on here?"

"Janey and the dog just showed up. I was milking the goats." Rachel ran her hands down her jeans, realizing she hadn't thought of changing into something clean. As she did so, Gloria eyed her top to toe and frowned.

Janey squirmed to be let down.

"She showed up naked."

"She does like to shed her clothes," Gloria allowed. She smoothed the front of her dress and pardoned herself. "I wasn't aware she was gone."

"Well, she's safe home now."

"Yes, thank you." Indebted to this woman twice over, Gloria felt obliged to offer coffee, but she didn't want the goat lady inside her home, considering the state of her. "Please," she said, indicating the swing on the front porch, "let me offer you coffee or an ice tea."

In the kitchen, Gloria saw the chair her youngest had used to escape. From the sink window, she saw the open gate. Damn monkey.

Once, at the Base Exchange, before she'd even noticed her youngest had gone AWOL, she caught sight of the child on the shoulders of an enormousblack sergeant. To an apologetic Gloria, the man said, "I figured she'd be missed, ma'am. We're picking out a birthday card for my gran. Can't get home for her eightieth." He swung Janey to the floor and asked her, "This one?" and she grinned at his choice. He placed his hand over his heart, touching Gloria with his sign of affection. Janey could be, after all, a sweet child. But a damn monkey all the same.

As she readied the coffee tray, Sepp appeared, nosing the screen door, panting, business as usual.

*

Heading home, Rachel nudged her car onto the wide shoulder without slowing to allow a yellow convertible room to pass—as one did in Texas. She shuddered to think of naked Janey and Sepp ambling along the same shoulder. In the dark. How easy her life could have ended in tragedy.

The passing driver waved thanks, a young man, his girl nestled against him. High schoolers, maybe. Rachel had met Wayne in high school. Together, they'd walked down sidewalks, the church aisle, and hospital corridors. It would have killed her daddy to know of Wayne's crime against the sanctity of marriage, of his backhanding her for his own damnable sins.

She gave Sunshine and Sammy the run of the yard. They took turns lapping water from their bowl before running up the porch steps. Something by the front door excited them, a lump as red and lifeless as afterbirth.

But Rachel's does had all kidded, and they were in their enclosure, grazing in a strip of shade cast by the citrus trees. Their kids napped. She'd recently hired a billy to cover the does, starting a cycle she had never completed, would never complete.

She poked the red wet pile with the toe of her boot, making out small white rocking horses—toddler pajamas, their sodden footies filthy and torn. No wonder the imp had taken them off. Little mite.

Rachel carried them to the burn barrel.

It lay on its side, shards of glass and black vinyl reflecting the hard, early sun. She righted it. So, the man had come rolling home, and he'd taken everything—maybe even the severed snake head. She imagined it raising a stink. Fine.

The pajamas hit bottom with a splat, and Rachel recalled naked Janey. Picturing herself naked, she removed her boots and her belt. Wayne's jeans slid easily to her ankles. Off came his stained T-shirt. Into the barrel, they both went. There was plenty for her to consider, the legalities of her new situation and how to support herself; first, though, she had a pen to muck out, fresh bedding to lay, and a body to scrub clean.

Meredith Wadley lives and works in a medieval microtown on the Swiss side of the Rhine River. Her most recent longform fiction appears in *Longleaf Review* and *Line of Advance* Pieces from her series of idioms reimagined as flash fiction have appeared or are forthcoming in several venues, including *Bandit Fiction*, *Fiction Kitchen Berlin, Gone Lawn*, *JMWW*, *Lammergeier, Lunate*, and *Orca Lit*. Please visit at www.meredithwadley.com. She tweets at @meredithwadley.

VISUAL ARTS FEATURE

INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTINE SLOAN STODDARD, ARTIST

Christine Sloan Stoddard is a Salvadoran-American artist whose creations include books, films, plays, installations, and other imaginings. Her latest book is *Heaven is a Photograph*, a collection of poetry and photography about an art student finding power behind the lens. Her film *Bottled*, which premiered at the New York Long Island Film Festival (NYLIFF), is now available on Amazon Prime Video. In Summer 2020, Stoddard was an AnkhLave Garden Project Fellow at the Queens Botanical Garden and installed her piece "Rabbit's Storytelling Throne". Stoddard discusses her inspiration and process for the piece in the new documentary *Artists Unmasked*. The book *Two Plays*, which contains her play "Mi Abuela, Queen of Nightmares," is now available from Table Work Press. Find out more about Stoddard at WorldOfChristineStoddard.com.

Abby:
Hi everybody. My name is Abby E. Murray, I'm the editor of *Collateral Journal*. And I am here today with Christine Sloan Stoddard, featured visual artist for our fall 2020 issue. And we will have a bio on the page with all your many accomplishments, but I want to get started right away in just kind of getting to know you. Can you tell us just a little bit about yourself? Where did you grow up? With who? How'd you grow up?

Christine:
Yeah, of course. Thank you for having me. I'm from Arlington, Virginia originally. This is a military town that's right outside of Washington, DC. It's home to the Pentagon, Arlington National Cemetery, and a few other things you might've thought were in DC proper but are not. My mother is a Salvadoran immigrant, and my father is a born and bred New Yorker who has lived many different places.

I have two siblings. We're all very close in age. I went to Yorktown High School, which is probably best known for being the same school that Katie Couric and John Glenn went to. Not the same school as Sandra Bullock. Many people ask, "Oh, did you go to the same high school as Sandra Bullock?" because she's also from Arlington. No, she went to my rival high school, Washington Lee, which might be renamed actually.

Abby:
Great.

Christine:
Like many other schools in Virginia right now. Their names are being reconsidered, and in some cases formally changed.

Yeah, my mother is a housewife, was my entire childhood, and my father is a journalist. My parents met in El Salvador during the civil war. And that is something that I have started to learn more about recently, just doing more research about El Salvador, the war. I didn't have much connection to the country or that point in history, because like many immigrants who leave during a war, my mom didn't technically have refugee status, I should say, but like many immigrants who are fleeing

war, poverty, other difficult situations, my mother just wanted to separate herself as much as possible from the trauma and difficult memories. So that's my very simple origin story, summary.

Abby:
Wow, that's a quick summary. You've written before that you are starting to think more critically about the impact of war in El Salvador on your own life, and also on your art. And I kind of, the question that just comes to mind is, where do you even begin? And where have you ended up?

Christine:
Yeah, of course. I think like many children of immigrants, I experienced a certain amount of shame as a child. I think especially if your parent or parents are from a developing country, a third world country, there are all sorts of stigmas about that place, that othered place being dirty, or unattractive, or even unworthy in some way. Arlington County itself is quite diverse, and it's gotten much more diverse since I was a child. But my part of Arlington, North Arlington, was very white, American-born, protestant, very few immigrants. So in my immediate neighborhood and at my elementary school, my mother really was one of the very few immigrants. Most of the otherimmigrants were nannies, so it was very common for people to confuse my mother for my nanny. I don't think they necessarily realized that that was an offensive or just rude assumption to make. But it was very common. And my father had, has, an intense career, so he was a good father, a good provider, but he just wasn't really involved in our school life very much. My siblings and I. So people would see us with our mother, but they wouldn't see us with our father. And again, there was just this idea that, *oh, that's their nanny*.

And of course, many people upon learning that she was from El Salvador had never heard of that country, or they assumed that she was Mexican. I remember my mom telling this story, it happened when I was little. And I don't think I was actually there when it happened, she just told me later on, maybe when I was in middle... yeah, I think middle or early high school. That she had once told a person that she was from Central America, because she learned pretty quickly, "Oh, if I say El Salvador, they're not going to know where that is." And that person looked very closely at her and said, "Really? Like Kansas?" Because the guy thought that she meant the central part of the United States, like the Midwest. That's what he thought.

Abby:
Oh boy.

Christine:
And then he said, to make it even worse, he said, "Yeah, you don't sound or look like you're from Kansas." Terrible, terrible. So that was just, again, just a lot of shame and confusion in early childhood about having this immigrant parent, having no close connection to El Salvador whatsoever. My family never went there. I did not go until I was in grad school. That was how much

of a separation my mother and my father had put into place. My mother didn't want to go back to visit, and my father, because he had only been there during the war, also supported her choice and said, "You know what, we don't have to go visit. We can take trips to other places."

Abby:
Did you talk about it at home?

Christine:
There was a lot of pushing away from the subject. So when my sisters and I were little, we would ask all kinds of questions, and over the years it became clear that my mother especially was not comfortable talking about many things, even with her children, and even once we got to high school. She just didn't want to share a lot of what she had seen, and experienced. It wasn't until I was in college that she started to open up a little bit more, but yeah. When I was a kid, she limited the conversations more to food that she missed. And she would try cooking a lot of those things when it was possible to, because she couldn't always find the same ingredients. Fruits especially, and vegetables. Produce in general, that was where the biggest discrepancy was. Because she could find a lot of the same seasonings at the Mexican supermarkets nearby, but some of the fruits especially were just really specific to where she was from, which I found later on when I went to visit. Like oh, here are all these mythical fruits I heard about growing up.

So she would try to pass on part of the culture through food, because that was a good memory, and she was comfortable doing that, and she loves cooking. Has always loved cooking. And as a housewife, she had... that's part of her job, right? She knew the traditional homemaker tradition of cooking and passing on love and culture through food. She also was very happy to share memories related to animals and plants. And I think one of the reasons... there are a few reasons for that. First of all, we lived in Virginia, and even the suburbs of DC are pretty woodsy and green. It does start to get more cookie cutter, McMansion-y as you get an hour away from the city, but close to DC, the houses are smaller, there are lots of trees, you have the Potomac River, the Anacostia River. You have a lot of the historic estates that American children learn about in elementary school, like George Washington's Mount Vernon for instance. So I grew up playing in the woods. Even in a suburb, I had the woods. I had access to the woods.

And because [my mom] was a new immigrant, she came just a little bit before I was born, just a couple years before I was born. My parents met in El Salvador. My mom came to Miami where my dad was living at the time, and they got married, and a year after that, year and a half after that, I came into the world. And they were already living in the DC area by that time. So she hadn't been in the US that long when I was born, when I was little, and she was learning the names of all these

different plants and animals, and at the same time, really the same time that my siblings and I were like, "Oh yeah, this is an oak tree, and this is a pine cone, and that's a cardinal, that's a magnolia, that's a bluejay," and she was fascinated, because she would look for the similarities and differences between the animals and plants that she knew from El Salvador.

And she just naturally, like many people, loves and appreciates animals and plants, and a good view. So that was a happy way to relate memories from her home country. Yes, some of the nature was destroyed during the civil war, but... and through some of the agriculture related to coffee plantations too, but for the most part that was a more consistent thing, more consistently happy thing throughout her time in El Salvador.

Abby:
It's interesting that you said that she returned to cooking, and the first thing I thought was, cooking is an art form. We return to the memory... I don't think anyone would disagree or push back that the experience of war is traumatic, and we're not naturally drawn to trauma. We're naturally drawn to survival, and how we survive that trauma. So turning to cooking and turning to art is really not... I mean, I guess that's not surprising, and that's something that I'm seeing too as well, in your work, is you've said before that we need to have hope through a crisis. We need to have that, and so where do you see hope in work that confronts crisis? Like war, but also the pandemic as well.

Christine:
That's a tough question.

Abby:
Yeah, sorry to drop that on you.

Christine:
No, that's all right. I'm just... I'm always hopeful. I think as someone who was raised by two people who experienced war, and survived it, and unfortunately knew many people who did not survive it, or survived it with much more damage than they did in a lot of material ways, I think I can't help but be hopeful. A lot of children of immigrants talk aboutthe expectation that you will do better than the previous generation in terms of material wealth, in terms of education, in terms of having a strong family unit that's intact and not separated by war or other political factors or outside factors. So I always had the hope, as someone whose mom didn't finish her schooling. And even my dad, as an American, he still had a lot of working class struggles, and did go to college, but has put himself

through school, took several years to do it. I just always had the hope that I was going to go to school, I was going to achieve a stable middle class life, and also have a stable family.

I'm married now, and I do hope to have children. And we, my husband and I, have created a pretty stable... even during the pandemic, we've been very lucky. We have a pretty stable life. And all of our basic needs are met. So that hope is just something that I was forced to have as a child. I remember. And it wasn't always a good thing. I remember as a child complaining, or being negative, and immediately my parents would say, "You don't know how good you have it, you have food, you get to go to school." My mother comes from a place where many girls, I would have to look up the rate again. But many girls do not complete their schooling, because socially you become a woman when you're 15 years old. There's a lot of teen marriage, a lot of teen pregnancy. And education is not a guarantee there.

There are not the requirements that you, like in most US states, you have to stay in school until you're 16, and in some states it's 18, unless you graduate. But they make it so that it's not necessarily easy and it's definitely not equal from neighborhood to neighborhood. But you have to go to school. And yeah, I was just raised with the idea that I was going to do the best that I could with all the privileges that I was given in life.

And I think that's... education especially was always valued in my house, but also self-expression. And in many ways, my mother in particular would be seen as a conservative, traditional person, but if you compare her and her lifestyle and her views to where she came from—huge, huge change. Huge gap between where she used to be and where she is now, which is something I think she and a lot of people who come from similar backgrounds should be commended for. Because it's one thing to be raised with certain beliefs, and just be raised in a progressive home, and have a progressive education, and move forward from there. But if you're raised in a very closed, conservative society, and are able to move outside of that, and progress your views that... that's a big accomplishment.

But anyways, self expression was always very important in our home, because again, my mom comes from a place where girls especially are not entitled to a lot of self expression. It's a Catholic country, in the sense that... it's not just that people are Catholic. No, the government is a Catholic government. It's similar how to, in the middle east, there

are Muslim governments, right? So you have this very traditional church telling women what they can and cannot do.

This 14 year old girl, this made international headlines a few years ago. Maybe two years ago? I'd have to look up all the specifics. But there was a 14 year old girl who had been raped by her stepfather repeatedly, and there was documentation of this. There was evidence, it could be proved. And she became pregnant by him and was not allowed to have an abortion. You can be tried for murder as a woman for having an abortion, even as a child raped by your relative. Extreme cases. So again, I know I'm rambling. But just with that kind of background that my mom had, and that my father witnessed, that kind of environment that he witnessed, just education, self expression, and hope were just such a big part of my childhood.

And I think now, during the pandemic, we have to be hopeful. I don't care if it sounds corny. I don't think it's corny. I think it's a way to survive. That if you don't believe there's going to be a tomorrow, you will stop trying. And it is easy to give in in a lot of ways. I don't think hope needs to mean total... it shouldn't mean total ignorance. You need to be informed and hopeful. You need to... I think in order to really be hopeful, you need to... you have to be informed, so that you can make a realistic effort toward survival. And not just surviving, but actually thriving too, when that's possible. Yeah, so hope. I'm big on it.

Abby:
Hope, I'm big on it. I think as you're talking, I'm thinking perhaps the question needs to be reversed then. I'm asking, *where do you see hope in art that confronts violence*, when really it's *where do you see art in hope that confronts violence*, that hope is an act of art, and art is an act of hope. And yeah, I'm starting to see that as you're telling these stories. What about your art in particular? We're kind of talking in a more general sense about hope, hope of nations, hope of individual families. But what about your artwork in particular, how has it developed with not just the pandemic, which I think has shaped, has really shaped artists in a way they couldn't have predicted, but also with exploring your childhood, your mother's life, how do we see that reflected in your work?

Christine:
I think I have started to honor a lot of things about a country and a culture that I did not have a strong connection to. And there's been... I've had a lot of hope in learning more about my mother's past, more about the history of El Salvador and the civil war in particular, hope in different immigrant stories that I've come to hear from others, mainly Salvadoran, but also some Mexican and Guatemalan, Honduran, where there is definitely some overlap.

And also hope in my development as a woman. I think one of the... I think I've always been a late bloomer. And maybe... sometimes I've said that and people are like, "No, there's no way. You've achieved a lot for a young person." But I don't think emotionally I really developed as... I shouldn't say as quickly, because it's not a race, but I don't think I developed emotionally... I was on the same track as a lot of my peers. That there were some things about me even in college that were still a little bit childish. And confronting my mom's past, going... I actually went to El Salvador on a research grant that I won in grad school, because I realized that my mom was really never going to go back. I think that as a child, I had this hope, and even disbelief. I thought, "No, she has to go back at some point. Isn't she going... doesn't she wonder about so many things?"

But yeah, by the time I was almost 30, I was in my late 20s, I just accepted she was never going to go back. And us going together was just not a possibility, that was impossible. So if I just stopped treating this place like a forbidden place, and all of these stories like forbidden stories, and defy my mother, which was not easy, and just go through this artist's residency, because I knew I had to be safe. There was still a lot of violence, and especially a lot of violence toward women and nonbinary people. You hear... there's a lot of femicide from domestic partnerships, but also the killing of trans people, killing of foreigners, and I would be a foreigner. I would be definitely considered a foreigner there, because the culture is so homogenous that even if you speak Spanish and have a Salvadoran parent, you are not Salvadoran unless you're Salvadoran.

Yeah, I just had hope that I was going to find out more about myself in going to this place. And it took a lot of resolve. My mother was very unhappy. When I found out that I won the grant, I was conflicted, because I knew that she would feel that I had betrayed her in a sense. In fact, her first question when I told her that I was going was, "Oh, so you're just going to go digging through my past, aren't you?" Like—oh.

Abby:
Ow.

Christine:
I mean this is... and it turned out that there were many family secrets that brought a lot of insight into my life. And so I now, in hindsight, understand some of her concern. But I did feel that I owed it to myself to find out more about who I was. And also just to do, to be a bad girl. Because so many women are raised to be good, and soft, and to say yes and to—

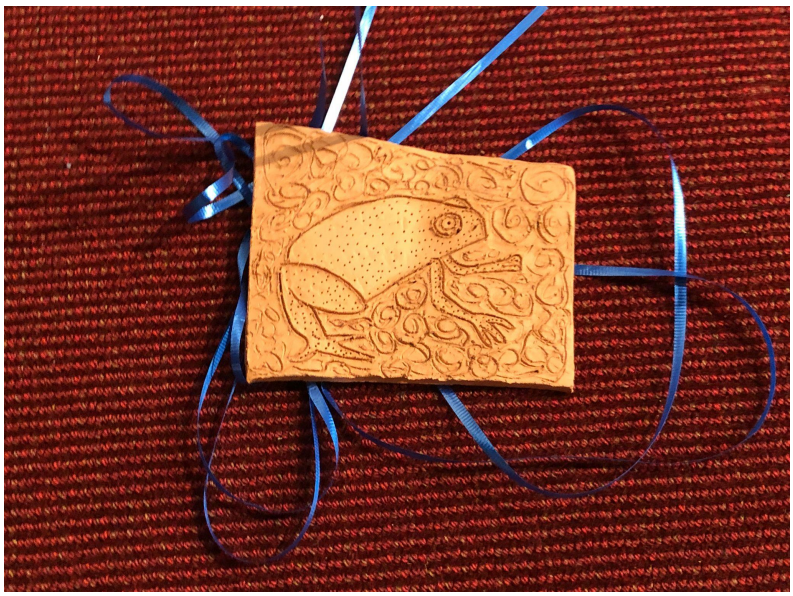
Abby:
That's a challenge.

Christine:
Right. And you know what, okay, fine. You don't want me to go? I'm going to go the safest way possible with full funding, money is not an object, I'm going to be fine. And if you don't like it, you don't like it. I'm sorry. And even just rebelling in that way was very powerful for me. And I had been

a good girl for a lot of my life. I still am a good girl in many ways. But yeah, it was important for me to do that for myself. In isolation of everything else, just doing that, just that kind of rebellion, was very important for me.

Abby:
And did it have a really deep impact on your work?

Christine:
Yes, back to my work. Okay. Yes. Yeah, so one of the projects that I did in, as a result of my trip, was Heaven is a Photograph. It's a book that just came out, and it's a collection of poetry and photographs. And it's all about... it's para-fictional, but definitely my protagonist and I are related. And in it, my protagonist is hesitant to approach photography as an art form, because she feels overshadowed by her father's war photographer background. And she also was raised with this idea that photography is a masculine pursuit. Which in this day and age seems so... almost foreign, because now everyone takes photographs. But even a couple decades ago, it was still seen as more of a masculine art form than a feminine art form.



So the protagonist takes up photography in secret, and this is her little taboo practice. And she does eventually make her art form public. But again, it relates a lot to my personal rebellion of just going to this place and doing what I wasn't supposed to do.

In the ceramic work that I submitted to *Collateral*, I think there's the... there is some rebellion in the sense that I'm... I did some things with clay that I was told I was not supposed to do. Like one of the things I did was use old camera parts and old electronics to make imprints in the clay, and that's... first of all, you're not supposed to use stencils or cookie cutters or anything like that, because that's considered cheating. Or it's, in a fine art context, that would be seen more as craft. Why don't you just make a pot? Why don't you just look at a catalog and throw something on a wheel, and make a pot that you're going to sell at a craft fair? But yeah, I just rebelled in the sense that I was going to do things I wasn't supposed to do within a fine art context. And I also didn't care about making ugly things.

And I didn't care about glazing, which is another thing. In fine art ceramics, you almost always glaze things. That's an overlap you see in pottery and ceramic sculpture. Almost everything's glazed, or at least painted. There's some kind of color that's added to the earth. But I was interested in leaving the work, just leaving the clay just bare, just muddy. Because I was thinking about an archeological dig. I've displayed these works, and I have so many of them, dozens. I've displayed these works in a few different ways, like installations where things are more in a pile, and sort of like an archeological dig.

And just thinking about how, yeah, when I went to El Salvador I had to do all this excavating of personal, family history, state history, government history, indigenous history, in the Mayan inspired ceramic for instance there. I was clearly looking at some of the folklore and indigenous history in the country. That's another form, that's another form of rebellion, and also hope comes into it, that almost everyone in El Salvador is mestizo, mixed European and indigenous, because the Spanish came and conquered and raped, and generations later we have a race that's really a mixed race of people. But there's still a lot of denial of indigenousroots, indigenous culture.

My mom is light skinned. She's yellow, she's not red brown. She has olive skin. And she will be the first to tell you that she is white Hispanic, which is a term that some people use. But she, like many people, also did one of those DNA tests, and of coursethe majority of her heritage is indigenous, and she was not happy about that. But that's a big idea in that country. Almost this national lie. There was this indigenous genocide in, I can't remember, I guess in the 30s, early 40s. There was this big state ordered indigenous genocide. In recent history. There are grandparents and great grandparents who remember this time.

And there was this idea that all of the Indians were killed then. Well, what? And there were no more Indians after that. I remember going to the Museum of the Word and Image in San Salvador, and there being this whole exhibition about how the government lied to the people about this genocide, they tried to cover it up, and when it was revealed they said, *Oh, yeah. Well the good thing is we don't have any more Indians in this country, so this is great. You're all Spanish. Look at you, Spanish people. You white people, you.*

So I have a lot of hope in indigenous narratives, learning more about that. That's something I want to be more open about, and I'm hopeful that other people will be more accepting of those roots, and histories. And just acknowledge that a lot of Salvadoran culture, a lot of Latin American culture in general, has indigenous origins. It's not all Spanish, Catholic this and that. So another long answer, but...

Abby:
No, that's good. I like long answers.

The idea of really confronting the lies of sanctioned history is something that, it's very present at the forefront of not just artistic communities but everyone really, suddenly looking at the government that they've been part of or ruled by and saying, "Wait, this didn't happen, it isn't like that."

Christine:
Yeah, I had no idea about that genocide until I went to that museum in San Salvador. One of the reasons why the trip was so important was that, to me personally but also I think just as an

American, is that it reminded me of all the atrocities that this country has committed. I mean, you cannot say Reagan's name in my parents' household without them getting very upset. But that, even still a lot of that, even US involvement in the civil war is not something that's talked about a lot in this country. I think under Trump, there's been more mention of it because of the anti-immigration policies and all the unaccompanied minors. *Why are all these small children coming to the United States? Where are their parents? They have such bad parents*. Okay, well, can we look at why some of these children are actually leaving, and how our country has played a part in that. And just going to El Salvador and seeing a lot of the poverty, and hearing and talking to people, and hearing about different ways their families have been broken up, even today, how their families are breaking up because of things that happened 30 years ago, 40 years ago, and the US still is not taking responsibility for most of it.

Abby:
Well, and it's taking an active part in covering it up as well, or taking an active role in denying it. Yeah, wow. Geez. This is a lot to consider. It makes me want to look at more of your work, just because you work in such a range of... one of the things that I was really drawn to in your work was that you cross borders between mediums, between audiences, between kind of everything. Nothing seems off limits, everything is really available. And I think as a writing instructor, I often see people sort of putting up barriers around themselves saying, for example, I write novels, I don't understand poetry, I can't sculpt, what are you talking about? The other arts, it becomes a comfortable place to say that some of the arts are off limits. And thatdoesn't seem to be the case in your work, and you will work with all kinds of art. And so that was really intriguing to me, and it's also really inspiring.

So you run Quail Bell Press and Productions. You paint, you sculpt, you draw, you write, you perform. Do you recall, where... I get asked this question a lot and I never know what to do with it, so I apologize for doing it to you. But do you remember which art expression came first, or how you sort of entered into an artistic consciousness?

Christine:
Yeah, I think drawing technically came first, because my mother was always drawing and my siblings and I would draw together. I didn't go to preschool. That was something a lot of Central American parents don't want to send their children to preschool when they come to the United States, because it's not something that really exists in their home countries. So there's some adjustment too. And I think also because my mom was taking English classes and trying to achieve her path to citizenship, she likes learning with us. She likes kind of studying with us, reading with us, watching things with us, making things with us.

So writing came next. Writing little stories, making comics, writing plays and songs and performing them for my family, or even with my family. Doing my own radio show when I was a kid. And I

think writing more than anything has informed my different approaches to artwork. Yeah, so drawing first, then writing, and writing is probably what has stuck throughout all of it. And I think that just goes to storytelling, my interest in stories and language too, because of the English and Spanish backgrounds. Just always considering translation is something that has interested me since I was a kid.

In terms of just approaching so many different creative forms of expression, I think again it goes back to learning many things around the same time that my mother did. Because again, she didn't finish her schooling. So once she was in a comfortable middle class American environment and had the privilege to spend time with books and art supplies and documentaries, and different kinds of... this was in the days of cassettes, right, so lots of different tapes and tape programs.

She would come across something, and she would immediately want my siblings and me to come listen, or see, or do it, because she was excited. She was so excited to learn. And she would always encourage us, too. Like, "Oh, you should try that. Or have you ever thought about..." She's a very imaginative person, and I'm so sorry for the ways that she was stifled at an early age, because I think she had, has, a lot of potential to express herself in other ways that she's really only been comfortable trying in front of my siblings and me. The home was a safe space where she could come up with her own jokes, and ideas for plays, and books, and films. But she would always encourage us. Like, "Oh, have you ever thought about what would happen if a theater curtain could speak?" I remember her actually asking those kinds of questions, like *what do you think a theater curtain thinks about all day? If it had a mind, what sort of thoughts would run through its head?*

So just having a very imaginative, playful mother who had the luxury—because our dad worked hard and was lucky to be well-compensated for his work, she had the luxury of staying home with us, and just trying different things with us. I mean, definitely I have been discouraged by other, outside forces. Rejection is definitely a thing. But I'm not interested in mastery. That's something that I'm still learning how to articulate it, but I'm just interested in creative expression. And there are so many hierarchies related to mastery, because it's almost always white, protestant, able-bodied straight men who have been recognized as the masters, and their approaches to technique and to expression set the standard for what is mastery. I don't care about any of that. I can enjoy some of that work, or some of that work can resonate with me, but I don't see why my work has to meet the same standards or should meet the same standards. Sometimes it will, sometimes it won't, and I'm

fine with that because I don't fit into that box. Most people don't fit into that box. Most of us are outside of that box.

I think everyone should try new things. It doesn't mean that it has to be a lifelong commitment. I do think that art and creative expression is a lifelong commitment for me, and I think those things should be open to everybody throughout their whole lives. It doesn't necessarily have to be the job that pays the bills or what you study formally in school, but it should be something that everyone feels open to try.

One of the things I love about El Salvador's art forms is that folkloric art is really respected. It's not seen as this lowbrow art form. Like La Palma style is this little, it was technically developed by one artist and based off of kind of like this faux indigenous narrative. He did run with a lot of things and make up a lot of stuff for the sake of his art form. But that style is beloved throughout the country. Whereas you say folk art in the United States, and a lot of people get snobby about it, or there's still this whole tension between fine art and craft.

Or in literature, you do hear about highbrow and low brow. In theater, same thing, in film... really in any art form, there's this tension between those things. And I just don't care. I think as I get older, I care even less.

Abby:
Well I definitely see that in... I mean, even in *Collateral* and the writing that we publish, there's definitely a sense of who has the right to be impacted by violence, who has the right to be impacted and to express that impact? And there is definitely a sense of certain people feeling like they know who has the right and who doesn't have the right. And I do think the response to that is, I don't care.

Christine:
Yeah, why? Why? So I went to BCU Arts, which is a public art school in Virginia. It's tied to Virginia Commonwealth University, and they love to brag about how US News and World Report ranks them as the number one public art school in the country, and blah, blah, blah. And we had a lot of professors who had been big names in New York and LA and London back in the day, and definitely in art school there was a lot of, "You can't make that. No, don't do that. These things are off limits." Why? Why?

Abby:
Yeah, well it sounds like your approach is really taking, to go back to what you were saying just a couple of minutes ago, is that your mom would feel comfortable in the family and at home being imaginative, asking questions. What would a theater curtain say, think, or feel, and this is your

approach to art really is making the world that family safe zone, where the whole world, the entire artistic audience is a place where you can ask questions like that.

Christine:
Yeah. I think artwork definitely should be, it should provide a space for asking questions and considering possibilities. That's one of the things that I love most about making art, looking at art, reading art, experiencing art. Just really letting your imagination go wild. And sometimes it does have very real life implications, too. It doesn't mean that everything has to be pure fantasy. One of my favorite Salvadoran artists, who I've learned a lot more about over the past couple years, is Simon Vega. And he takes a lot of trash, what most people would call trash, and he makes spaceships. They would fill a room, that scale, and he'll do drawings and installations around these spaceships. And a lot of his art deals with what it was like to grow up in El Salvador during the civil war, which was kind of the cold war, the broader global cold war, and also watch science fiction, read sci-fi as a kid. And how as a third world country, El Salvador wasn't part of the space race, or it was left behind. Very, very behind. So for him to see what the US was doing, just it made, all of just watching the news coverage made space travel seem even more fantastical than what it was in the imagination of a lot of American children who were growing up at the same time.

So at first glance, his work is very playful. Like look at these spaceships, so fun. And they are fun, they look great. You want to get in them or do something with them. But I think the real world implication of that kind of work is just, so how do we get our country to compete in, not necessarily the space race, but in anything? How does a third world country catch up with the rest of the world? At what point are we allowed to do those things? Why is it that predominantly white countries get to do X, Y, and Z first, and then when it's our countries, our brown or black countries' time to catch up, that kind of industrialization is considered bad? But we never had a chance to do it in the first place. Yeah, pollution is horrible, right? But why is it that a first world country gets to benefit from factories and all that stuff, and a third world country didn't even get the chance to reach that point?

So I think art can definitely have a lot of real world implications. I was telling you before our official Zoom recording that I did this residency at Annmarie Sculpture Garden in Maryland, southern Maryland. And when I wrote my proposal and submitted my designs, I kept it very open-ended. They told me, "You can do almost anything you want with the recyclables that we have in this recycled art center, and you also get access to anything that our volunteers collect from the grounds,

but you need to make something that's going to educate the public and get them excited about the nature of the Chesapeake, of Chesapeake, Maryland."

So I ended up making these 11... the sculpture series of 11 pieces, each one made out of junk that came directly from the site. And it was everything from corkscrews to random little LEGOs to pennies, bottle caps, whatever. I had a crab, a deer, a raccoon. 11 different Chesapeake animals. And the naturalist onsite, because this was a Smithsonian center so they had, like most Smithsonian places, they have an arts team and they have a science team. And the two will collaborate. So the naturalist actually started to use the sculptures in her public programming to educate people about the different animals on the grounds, and the kinds of trash that people have left behind, and the way that trash harms the local wildlife.

So there, my art work did have some kind of real world implication. Yes, it was very fun and fanciful, but it did try to move toward a solution, help the community move toward a solution, very basic, "Stop throwing stuff on the ground and in the water."

Abby:
Yeah. Well really seeing art as not just... I'm reminded of Audre Lorde. "Poetry is not a luxury." Seeing art not as something that you do if you have time, but art is something that you do because we don't have very much time. I think that's important to remember. You mentioned Vega's work, so I really wanted to ask what artist... I always ask poets, who are you reading? But what artists inspire you right now?

Christine:
Yeah, I'm glad that you said "right now" because— [laughing]

Abby:
Yeah, I'm not going to ask you who your favorite is.

Christine:
Yeah, because even a week from now my answers would be different. So right now I'm reading Patti Smith's *Just Kids*. I'm late to the game, it's my first time reading it. But something that I admire about her really lifelong practice is that she is also someone who expresses or has expressed herself in many different creative ways. She's written poetry, she's painted, she's made jewelry. Everyone knows about the music, but she's done all sorts of things too, and she was just, at least in the book she portrays her early life as being this scrappy individual, being extremely resourceful. And that's something I admire about others in general. Anyone who's able to do that, to do a lot with very little. It's how I was raised. Just do what you can with what you got, or what you can get access to.

I like a lot of Shelley Jackson's different hypertext work. I think the mix of, yes, the fiction and poetry with photography and illustration or collage in some kind of web-based, or I guess CD-based, some kind of digital work, is very interesting. And it allows... I just love the idea of giving the audience some kind of control over a work. Or not even control, but just power within a work. I think that's interesting. I love Romare Bearden. Romare Bearden has been, ever since childhood, I've always loved his work.

Abby:
So I could've asked that years ago, and the answer still would've been—

Christine:
Yeah. No, I think that, I think he will, week to week, be on the list, because I love the way his collages tell stories. And I also like how his work shows how he was a very resourceful person, taking all kinds of scraps of everything and making new stuff. And I also like Kukuli Velarde. She does, in relation to ceramics work, she does a lot of weird things with ceramics. A lot of self-portraiture, and also looks at different kinds of indigenous narratives, national narratives, and plays with those.

Abby:
What do you have up next? What do you have on the horizon? I mean, it's hard to... I don't know about you but my horizon looks a lot different than it did in January. But what do you have coming up that people can look forward to?

Christine:
Yeah, sure. So I did mention *Heaven is a Photograph*. This is available from Clash Books now, and as I said, it's full of poems and photographs. So anyone in the world can order this. I have a new short film, it's called *Bottled*, and this is a narrative, also para-fictional film. And that's available through Amazon Prime as of August 3rd, as of yesterday. Andfor anyone in New York, I will be participating in a socially distanced, very safe show on September 10th. It's going to be at New Apostle Gallery, and... nope, now that I think about it you're publishing this in October, aren't you?

Abby:
November, November 15th.

Christine:
November, November 15th. So that, yeah, who knows what's going on in person, so scrap that. So two online things you can experience. But I also update my website, World of Christine Stoddard regularly, almost every week. I will add virtual events, and just things that have been published or showcased in some way. And a lot of that work is accessible anywhere you have the internet.