

COLLATERAL

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POETRY

Really Close
Ron Capps

Yeah.
I keep the kitchen knives sharp
Crazy sharp, you know?
You could shave
really close
with the boning knife

I get a haircut
even when I don't
need it sometimes
Because I like
the way the razor feels
on the back of my neck

It's just to feel something sharp
and dangerous because there
is nothing sharp
or dangerous
in my life anymore

No.
Nothing remotely dangerous
Just the everyday
Just the commonplace
Dull, dull, dull

Once, there, before I knew
how much my body would
ache for adrenaline
rushes, I said
I wanted dull life

I wanted to be home
with the dogs and my wife
and a book,
maybe some music
on the radio. No TV,
surely not a
movie theater

Here, now, it's all so vanilla.

The cars on the freeway
The cable bill
The deaf dog across
the street endlessly barking
at nothing

So I leave the kitchen,
get a haircut, and then go stand
at the edge of the subway
platform. Close to the edge.
Really close.

Ron Capps served in the Army and was a Foreign Service officer. His memoir of service, *Seriously Not All Right: Five Wars in Ten Years*, was published in 2014. He lives in Maine.

About this poem, Capps writes, “*The Afterwar* is a weird place. In theater, your every move or act is consequential. At home, not so much. This drives some returning combat veterans to risky behavior: driving too fast or drinking too much, or both. For me, just being a little on the edge of something helps.”

little black ops

Olivia Garard

request
slim-fitting
LBD
playtime
TBD
expect
long-loiter
check-in
as fragged
stilettos
pumps
rolex
glitter
sequins
silk
sparkle on
sunshine
sheath
pencil
no joy
shift
V-neck
A-line
contact
strapless
dark star
steady
go for size
bingo
zip lip
hot
damn
hose
(ripped chute)
what luck
check-out
chattermark
off-station
buzzer on

To Avulse:
Olivia Garard

We were taught another word for it:
degloving, like a delicate plucking,

one finger after another, counting
off exposed, the skinned-soft gauntlet

thrown down. *How can you caress
the carcass of your self?* Avulsion:

the sudden separation of lands
by water. Rivers, diverted, sever

holdings. *Skinless, do I still float?*
Sun burns the fleshless, freshly

unguarded form—a tearing, torn.
How do you hold onto your own hand?

Olivia A. Garard served as an active duty Marine Officer from 2014-2020. She is a member of the Military Writers Guild and tweets at @teaandtactics. She has published poems with *War, Literature & the Arts*, *Inkstick Media*, *War on the Rocks*, and *The Wrath-Bearing Tree*.

“To Avulse:” explores a kind of violence that leaves both the shell and the meat exposed.

“little black ops” is an attempt to place a quotidian civilian activity, like shopping, in the context of a military operation.

Country Dark
D.A. Gray

Outside the city limit signs the trees
bring night before the sun sets,
sky hiding in a silhouette of cedar, oak
in the thin lines between them
souls of the departed. A soldier
I once knew who wouldn't say
he had nothing waiting for him back home,
in the days before shooting himself.
An old girlfriend who thought she
could make a left turn in front
of the speeding pickup truck, just before
the phone call dropped. My grandmother
who desperately wanted to tell me
a story I was too busy to hear.
A boy amid fragments trying to breathe.
An Iraqi father whose rake looked much like
the barrel of a rifle to a nervous kid.
Seven o'clock contains a howl;
it's the dark we see just past
another person's head. Sometimes
it says nothing; sometimes it whispers.

Twelve Years Ago I Leave You Stay
D.A. Gray

Every time the temperature quickly drops
in Texas—the scene replays itself.
You are parked near the arms room,
running the car engine for heat.
I'm in uniform, duffels hanging from each shoulder
by one strap, waiting.

Draw weapons;
board the bus; attend the farewell ceremony;
ride to the airport; become the stranger
that neither of us know.

Some years around here it never freezes,
but at this moment stuck in amber
the ground is hard as limestone.
We're looking at each other, stoic.

Everything is fine. *Everything is fine*, we say.

With time and rain, rock expressions dissolve,
become holes in our word. But that is too far
away for the actors in this scene to see.

We say we don't believe in omens.
Then the car battery dies. Then a cold wind
whips around the building edge. Then
the buses don't arrive. And we stand,
huddled around the hood running jumper
cables from a buddy's car and cutting
the silence with jokes about checking
one's equipment.

What we think we know
at this moment will change. We don't know how.
Summer will return, hotter than last.
We'll find ourselves shivering on lonely nights
when the air cools to ninety degrees;
our minds will make up sounds in the silence.

Everything will be fine, we'll tell ourselves.

We'll meet back here and whatever remains
will be the important pieces of our lives

Fruit on Fire
Kathryn Jordan

Stare out the window at the Irvine Ranch, but it's not a ranch,
it's the Air Facility hangars for the blimps. It's 1966.
Like Okies, we drove from South Carolina, where kids my age
wear red Keds and jump rope, to California and kids in fishnets
going steady. My mom wants to get close to Chu Lai, Vietnam.
In his khakis, captain's bars, Garrison cap, my stepdad kneels down,
puts his arm around me. *Take care of your mother, okay? And write.*
But what kind of address is NAVACTS COM, NY, NY?
Ride the bus to Nelson Elementary, watch monster bulldozers rumble
like tanks, shoveling orange trees, root side up, into piles to build condos.
Fruit on fire. Nights, I sneak out, pull up stakes around the green grove
next door. I don't want them to cut down my trees. When I'm grown,
I'll recall how my mom would always find a house at the end of the world.
At night, Walter Cronkite brings the war into our living room; he looks sad,
like my grandpa, shuffling papers, telling us about dead GIs on stretchers,
pouring sour milk on the cereal of our lives. My mom tries to keep up,
but she goes out at night, I don't know where. I'm afraid to ask her not to.
She can't afford to think of what she's doing to her kids.

Kathryn Jordan is a retired choral music teacher from Berkeley, CA. Her chapbook, *Riding Waves*, (Finishing Line Press) touches on life as a military kid during the Vietnam War. A recipient of the San Miguel de Allende Writers' Conference Prize for Poetry and the Sidney Lanier Poetry Award, Kathryn's poems appear in *The Sun Magazine*, *Comstock Review*, *New Ohio Review*, and the *Atlanta Review*, among others. The poem, "Fruit on Fire," is an attempt to give voice to the isolation, bewilderment, and pain children feel when a parent goes to war. Kathryn's website is <http://kathrynjordan.org/>

So the first thing they did
was give each of us a number,
mine 11E10, and march us to

the barber and cut off our hair,
young Samsons, the lot of us,
the hair gathering randomly

on the cold tiled floor, clouds
of the stuff wisping in a breeze
created by the barber's feet

as he circled you and the chair,
like Dante in the underworld,
until he said "You're done"

and you stood up, cut down,
rubbing your palm across
the sharp and prickly sphere

of stubble left to be known,
from that moment on, as you,
a number for your name.

V.P. Loggins is the author of *The Wild Severance* (2021), winner of the Bright Hill Press Poetry Book Competition, *The Green Cup* (2017), winner of the Cider Press Review Editors' Book Prize, *The Fourth Paradise* (Main Street Rag, 2010), and *Heaven Changes* (Pudding House Chapbook Series, 2007). He has also published one book on Shakespeare, *The Life of Our Design*, and he is the co-author of another, *Shakespeare's Deliberate Art*. His poems have appeared in *The Baltimore Review*, *Crannog*, *English Journal*, *The Healing Muse*, *Memoir*, *Modern Age*, *Poet Lore*, *Poetry East*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, *The Southern Review* and *Tampa Review*, among other journals. About "11E10," Loggins writes, "'11E10' is a reminiscence of the first day of my active military duty, when I arrived for basic training at Fort Knox, Kentucky."

Trigger

Kate Meyer-Currey

Her sniper gaze
Locks and loads
Point blank
In the guts
In the heart
Her last bullet
Bears her
Lost soldier's
Name, aimed
At her head
With her
Finger gun,
Even if
She gets out
Of this
Locked bunker
He's never
Coming home:
Bang she's dead
Every day
Of her life.

Kate Meyer-Currey was born in 1969 and moved to Devon in 1973. A varied career in frontline settings has fueled her interest in gritty urbanism, contrasted with a rural upbringing. Her ADHD also instills a sense of 'other' in her life and writing. Dancing Girl Press will release her book *County Lines* in 2021. "Trigger" is based on her personal experience working in secure forensic settings.

When We Begin to Think of Home
Fasasi Abdulrosheed Oladipupo

We remember our friends, those who now have children
Those whose names are called with more purpose.

We remember our mother, mama aging, full of longing
Wanting to carry on her back her grandchildren.

When we begin to think of home, we remember the graves of
Our fathers, our siblings who died before they were ripe,
younger ones rushed home to be buried like corn.

We remember the nightly griefs, the terror watching from distant villages,
We remember our childhood, taming grasshoppers, full of dreams our land killed.

We remember the savor of the rain on famished soil, night whisperings of lovebirds
Under the oak tree, the savor of newly baked bread, the rainbow on festive days.

Fasasi Abdulrosheed Oladipupo is a Nigerian poet & a Veterinary Medical Student, whose first love is art-making. His works have been featured or are forthcoming on *The Night Heron Barks Review*, *Stand Magazine*, *Louisiana Literature*, *Olongo Africa*, *Obsidian: Literature and Art in the African Diaspora*, *The Citron Review*, *Kissing Dynamite*, *Praxis Magazine*, *433 Magazine*, *WriteNow Lit* and elsewhere.

About this poem, Fasasi writes, “No matter how good we are in dancing to the exilic song, one day our home will find us. After which its thoughts will flood our minds, we won’t be able to help thinking of our diseased fathers, dying mothers, and our sisters rushed home to be buried like yam seeds.”

What I Missed
Lao Rubert

For fifty years I wondered why you went to war without a fight,
ready to raise the flag, go to battle, wear
the face paint, never thinking about the slog through mud
or the pack on your back, only of glory, medals, applause

that never came, just the disdain you didn't understand.
I see, now, in the mothers of young soldiers, what I missed then:
fear mixed with flags, with red, white, and blue cakes,
fireworks and uniforms.

I see what every family was saying but never out loud,
the one thing they couldn't say, wouldn't say.
I believed the chin-up language
until I watched her trembling face, her tightened lip,

heard her describe her life—military wife—
saw worries cover her like fog wisping around heavy boots,
jaws clenched, alarms buzzing as the news broadcast soldiers
making rounds unwelcomed, unwanted by staring children.

How had I missed the dread swirling around the parades,
the pageantry, the spotless uniforms, the big talk that was the only way
to push back the terror that brightened a family's eyes
when their son walked—all crisp and decorated—out the door?

Lao Rubert is a poet and advocate for criminal justice reform living in Durham, North Carolina. Her poems have appeared in—or are forthcoming—in *Adanna*, *Atlanta Review*, *Barzakb*, *New Verse News*, NC Poetry Society's *Poetry in Plain Sight*, the *Davidson Miscellany* and *Writers Resist*. "What I Missed," according to Rubert, "grew out of a workshop which included several military families. Until then, I'd only seen parades and bravado when the military was present. These families revealed—and I finally saw—the fear they lived with on a daily basis."

What's Lost
Katherine Schneider

Sometimes all I see is what's lost.

I face backwards,
floating out to sea
on the ebbing ache of tragedies,

holding my collection
of fossilized dreams,
once indefatigable,

now extinct.

First there are smaller sighs:

stilled anticipation,
hopes wasted on wind,
the diminishment
of acts magnified

by a quixotic imagination.

And then what I
can hardly bear to think—

your friendly face
has gone to the grave,
I can eat up my memories

but taste nothing sweet.

I'll get over it, I say,
but I'm not the same,
especially in
such moods as this,

when voids are the only things
I can name.

Katherine Schneider is an adult ESL professor and poet, as well as a co-founder and co-host of

the literary livestream FUMFA Poets & Writers Live. In addition to her writing and teaching work, she is a mentor with We Are Not Numbers, a project helping young Palestinian writers to tell their stories and publish them in English. Her first book of poetry, *I Used to Remember the Story of How*, was published by Finishing Line Press in November 2019. Her poems have appeared in *Ruminare*, *Blue Line*, *The Poetry Porch*, and *The Paddock Review*, and her poetry has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She has collaborated with musician/producer Dave Robertson to record and release several poem songs under the name The Story of How. Her poem “What’s Lost” is about grief for losses both seemingly small and overwhelmingly large and how that landscape of grief can hold the mind and heart captive.

*

F I C T I O N

Seeing Ghosts
Thomas Gamache

It all started with convoys. Convoys were tense, with the threat of death waiting in any car, on any rooftop, in any window, in any ditch or pothole or trash bag on a sidewalk. The insurgents knew it, knew how to play the guerrilla game, and they hinted at danger everywhere; cardboard cutouts and posters in windows, trash piled in alleys to look vaguely like people, clothes hung just-so on the edges of rooftops, where no Iraqi would ever hang laundry because of the frequent dust storms. They put possible threats everywhere to keep us on edge, to heighten our intensity. And because they were everywhere, we started seeing threats anywhere, even when there wasn't another living person for miles. We called it seeing ghosts.

Boo.

*

Another helicopter down, this one outside of Baghdad. About ten minutes and the Downed Aircraft Recovery Team (DART) is on the road, three dune buggies speeding ahead and a pair of trucks lagging way behind. We mark on-site exactly 24 minutes after the dispatch; two aviation soldiers scurrying across the downed bird and stripping night vision sensors, weapons targeting systems, classified avionics. The rangers who drove the buggies stand watch, our lives in their hands as we focus on the mission. Our support trucks arrive in the dark, drivers wearing night vision goggles and driving without headlights. Flares and anti-air tracer munitions provide intermittent light like fireworks, but NVGs are necessary for blackout driving.

Voices speak Arabic, loud and excited, coming for the downed helicopter. They're close, close enough to hear footprints and the rattle of rifles as they move. Soldiers jump from the trucks, rush to the bird and carry away all the tasty-bits we've carved off. It's thanksgiving in April, and we're about ready to cook. One load, two loads, parts thrown into the back of the trucks, barely muffled by the wool blankets laid in piles on the truck bed.

Voices grow louder, theirs at first then one of ours. "Contact, 12 o'clock. Kill goggles and light it." We don't have everything, but we've got enough. The trucks are pulling out already, heading back the way they came. "All-clear" screams over the radio, and as soon as the buggies are turned around we hit the bird with thermite grenades. There's a lot of light, a lot of smoke, and about 60 million dollars' worth of melting slag to cover our heart-hammering evac on speeding dune buggies.

The white light behind casts shadows all around us, and in those shadows we can't help but see the dark shapes of people. Watching. Silent. Hovering somewhere between being there and not, possibly existing only because we think they do. They're everywhere, and they follow us on every op we run.

*

We officially hit “The Highway” on March 20, 2003, and on May 1, 2003, Bush gave his famous “Mission Accomplished” speech aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln. Later that night, I lost a friend I’m not supposed to talk about on a mission that didn’t happen. The sun hung low, casting just enough light to watch dust curl in the wind along the road. I was one of the “lucky ones,” my Humvee two vehicles behind when the IED blew. There was no daisy chain, no follow-up sniper fire, just a single device that took out a single truck and killed a single soldier inside. A medic struggled in vain to save his life, while I secured the perimeter and looked for enemies who were not there. I didn’t realize what seeing ghosts really meant.

Boo.

*

Five years down the road, I’m driving my pickup home on a snowy New England evening. It’s a long drive home from UCONN, and that last course really got my mind wandering. I’m on autopilot, cruising down a mostly empty road and thinking about Cartesian Dualism. The streets are well-plowed, the snow a light powder. It’s so light that it blows along in the wind, curling in the evening light and drifting along the side of road. Like dust.

I see the flash, hear the explosion, feel the concussion of the blast and the force of my body pressing against my seatbelt as I lock up the brakes of my truck. None of this is real of course, or at least none of it is happening right now, despite what my mind sees and my body feels. Danny is gone, and I’m not really in the desert.

The seatbelt; the seatbelt is real. I take a breath and come-to at once, back in my truck on a snowy New England road. But I’m not driving. I’m stopped just off the road, well into someone’s yard, my foot pressed so hard on the brake my leg trembles. My heart hammers through the tightness in my chest, and there’s cold sweat on my forehead despite the breeze blowing through the open driver’s side window. There’s nothing there, nothing ahead of me, but I see it.

*

The “war” was over. “Peacekeeping” had begun. We spent less time on the road in hot zones, more time safeguarding bases against acts of guerilla warfare. We didn’t grow complacent, but we grew more comfortable, stopped seeing ghosts. We allowed ourselves to believe the things we were told, instead of trusting what we’d learned. We befriended locals, talked to children on guard duty through interpreters and tried to be ambassadors to the people. And then, in the middle of a dust storm, a little girl walked to our gate draped in explosives. It wasn’t her choice; she didn’t want to do it. Tears cut trenches through the sand and grit on her cheeks. She trembled as she walked, sobbing uncontrollably and knowing full-well her fate. She had a stuffed animal in her arms, a gift we’d given her one week before. She held it tight against her chest, squeezing it to her heart as she took her final earthly steps. She was ten years old, celebrating her first birthday as a free Iraqi citizen.

Boo.

*

Another decade goes by. At least there's rest in sleep, until there isn't. There's a creak, a sound that doesn't belong in the silence of the night, and I'm bolt upright in bed, my wife still asleep beside me. The door to my room is open, a faint glow from the hallway nightlight silhouetting its outline. I see a person there, a shadow made real, before I tell myself it's just a ghost. I'm seeing ghosts again. My heart races, my chest tightens, but I know to focus on my breathing. So I close my eyes, squeeze them hard, tell myself I'm in bed and we're safe. That when I open my eyes there will be nothing there but my bedroom. And then I do, I open my eyes with slow deliberation. And I see a girl. She has tears streaming down her face. Sobs choke her breath, make it hard for her to speak. There is fear in her eyes; real, primal fear that we forget about if we live in safety long enough. She has a stuffed animal clenched tightly to her chest by two trembling arms. I want to tell her to stop walking, stop taking those steps, but I know she won't understand. She's somewhere else, just as I am.

"Daddy, I heard a monster," my daughter says. Her pound puppy is quaking as she stands in terror, shaking along with her body. "Come here honey," I say. We snuggle together, trying to remember we're safe, that everything is okay.

"Don't be scared," I say, holding her and sharing her tears, her trembling. "You're seeing ghosts. You're only seeing ghosts."

Boo.

Thomas Gamache is a veteran of the Third Infantry Division and Operation Iraqi Freedom. He currently writes in a quiet Rhode Island beach town, focusing on mental health and the not-so-quiet struggle within. He is blessed with a loving family, remarkable friends, and an ocean of peace and storm. He can be reached at Thomas@ScrybeDigital.com

About this essay, Gamache writes, "PTSD doesn't heal, it merely goes into remission. It waits and bides its time, resurfacing during unpredictable, personal, vulnerable moments in one's life. *Seeing Ghosts* is an attempt to peel back the curtain on PTSD, showing its impact on veterans and their families years after they've left the combat zone, and to express the fear perpetually lying just beneath the surface.

Boo."

American Flag
María José Maddox

The waitress asked if we needed refills.

“I’ll have another,” Tom said. He had little scars all over his face, and his left eye was half-sealed, a dim opening. The product of an IED. I was on the reckless end of my Big Sad, and I needed novelty, or a shock. I also wanted to see what a *chiseled superhero* wore off-duty. Charcoal jeans and Converse All Star. Feeling buzzed, I let my knee touch his fidgeting leg, leaning in closer. Close enough to get a whiff of his scalp.

I warned Tom about this bar being unbearably hipster, but he didn’t mind. I didn’t tell any of my friends I was going out with him. Like many returning soldiers jostling signs of PTSD, they would’ve thought of him as a walking red flag. He’d been deployed about a dozen times. He showed me an app on his phone that counted the hours, minutes and seconds until retirement.

*

After his third round of whiskey, he told me he missed the war. He missed the nights in Afghanistan. But I’d seen *Restrepo*, and I thought the Korengal Valley was hell. How was that possible?

“*In combat your mind is jammed.* You have a mission, and that’s all you can think of,” he explained. “There’s no room for worrying, for being scared, or sad. There are no bills to pay, no wife to deal with, and the future doesn’t matter.” Afghanistan was the only place where he slept like a baby, knowing that every single one in his platoon had his back. Ever since homecoming, he felt alone and listless.

The second revelation that night: he hated guns. They had no place in civil society. He was so sickened by stitching gunfire victims from Denver’s rowdy Colfax Ave, that he transferred to a secluded mountain town. Nowadays, his shifts as a paramedic were mostly uneventful. There were nut allergies, overbearing mothers, and on rare occasions, a hiker mauled by a bear who needed to be airlifted.

We were exactly the same age, born a few days apart. And we both loved hyaenas. I told him that the females gave birth through their giant clit. He said they were tough as fuck. “Cheers!”

When he whispered in my ear: “I voted for Obama,” I knew then we were going to sleep together.

*

He let me touch his tattoos. It saddened me when he cautioned about one that he labeled cheesy. “It’s patriotic. One of my buddies carved it when we were stationed in Baghdad and we were bored out of our minds.”

“Looks painful.”

“Very.”

His American flag stretched out to touch the wings of Saint Michael the Archangel. “To protect us in battle.” Against wickedness. Hovering over his heart, the silhouette of a man pressing a gun to his head. “A reminder of when I hit rock bottom. We were playing Russian roulette, and I pulled the trigger twice.”

Without his clothes, he made me think of a pitbull.

I told him I liked his body. “It’s covered in scars.”

*

The ease I felt around Tom was akin to the comradery I only experienced when mingling with third culture kids and people who were missing a screw. People who’d poked America’s bright-sided glass and could do without the small talk.

Paradoxically though, I was writing about the psychic aftermath of the military coup in my homeland. I studied the poet María Teresa Adriasola, who wrote “La Bandera de Chile” (*The Chilean Flag*) in 1981, shortly after being released by the secret police.

*

On a day my roommates were out of town, I invited Tom over. He followed me into the kitchen and grabbed my face. *The mouth is a large brain*, I remembered. I led him to the garden, where the air was warm, and the moon bold & bright. He asked how I was doing.

“I’m okay.”

“Are you really?”

No. But I didn’t want to sour the evening, so I talked about chimpanzees. “When they’re bored, they gang up on solitary males, and they beat them to death, just because. And they use sex for favors.” Much like humans. Tom added: “You have no idea how awful people can be when they think no one’s looking.” I didn’t really want to know. I scratched his back and we stood motionless in a hug for a really long time. Eventually he asked if he could go down on me. I nodded, and he pulled me closer to the edge of the bench. He knelt on the grass and lifted my dress. It was there, in the moonlight, that I realized his right eye was blue.

The neighbor who liked to smoke by the window upstairs could’ve seen us, but I didn’t care. Tom took his time, his tongue flat.

*

Last Summer, I was at Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico. I was sitting on rocks, sipping water, waiting for the sun to go down. Waiting for the bats. The road trip took me further south to Texas, where the oil rigs reminded me of hounds. I learned then that vampire bats don't really *suck* blood. They lap it up like a dog.

*

When I explain why I left Chile, I alternate between "I needed a job," and "I was tired of reggaetón."

To be honest, I left because I couldn't sleep.

There was something off about the apartment I shared with my younger brother. Things seemed to always be falling down, slipping off the edges of counters. If you were in the bedroom, you'd hear forks, spoons, or glassware making their way to the floor in the kitchen. If you were in the living room, you'd hear trinkets falling in the bedroom. To make sure it wasn't folie à deux getting the best of Andrés and me, I invited some classmates over to study, drink borgoña, and eat pasta. Eventually they witnessed it too, and when the last drop of Carménère was gone, they were hasty on their way out: "there's no way we're spending the night."

Other times, from the corner of my eye, I thought I saw a shadow move. I can't say that I was scared. It felt like an anodyne quirk. I told myself it was kinda stupid, and there was no reason to worry. When my brother was out partying, however, I couldn't sleep unless the lights and the TV were on.

On one occasion, while I was working at my desk, I heard what sounded like distinct footsteps. I could feel the intensity of someone's stare, so I turned around, ready to snap at Andrés. But I was alone.

*

My brother fell head over heels for an older woman named Isabel. They kept breaking up and getting back together. During one of their ill-fated hookups, she got pregnant. Andrés suggested they 'take care of it' since the relationship was doomed, and neither of them wanted kids. Isabel decided to keep it nonetheless, and weaponized his suggestion to keep him from ever seeing the baby. Shortly after, he stopped eating. He also drank himself senseless.

'I'm not my brother's keeper,' I told myself when I moved out. Andrés was the type of depressed person who was hard to be around, and I gradually lost touch with him.

Some months went by before I felt a sudden urge to see him. It was a crispy Autumn day, and I could've walked the thirty minutes that separated us, but the sense of urgency made me hop inside a crowded metro.

“Andrés?” I called out. I was met with silence and the wind shaft made me regret my skimpy tights. “I know you’re in here.”

The windows in his room were wide open, and it was colder than the outside air. Andrés was lying on the floor, his legs unnaturally bent. He was already blue. I held him up and his weightlessness shocked me. The doctor later said that if I’d been a few minutes late, we would’ve lost him.

*

Tom was often gone for weeks at a time. Before leaving for a military training at Fort Carson, he handed me the keys to his place along with a calendar. He highlighted all the days he’d be out of town.

“So that you can write peacefully... or what is it that you do?”

I teased him with: “What if I steal from you?”

“I wouldn’t be too broken up about it. Things are just things, you know?”

*

It was already nighttime when I got off the train. I hurried my pace and attempted a poker face *that revealed nothing* as I walked past men who were drinking by the street. It was too dark to make them out clearly, but I could tell they were the type of men who’d make the American flag look scary. Like a warning.

By the time I arrived at the building, I’d grown paranoid. “What if it’s a trap? What if I get trafficked...? What if the key doesn’t work, and I have to go back out in the dark?”

I took a deep breath before door #207.

It was unlocked. And it was quiet, as Tom promised. When I turned on the lights, I saw that all things were impeccable, and then I spotted his black desk.

*

There were a few pictures on the walls, and several military decorations. A leadership award for his performance in Iraq. A silver plaque stating that his sacrifice, his loyalty, and his performance of duty were aligned with the Army’s *Warrior Ethos*. I winced when I read that his selfless service to this nation would never be forgotten.

His closet was just as meticulous as the rest of his place. I spotted the uniform I’d seen in pictures along with his helmet and boots. When I grabbed the metallic box I found in the back, I knew I was intruding. The box contained pictures: smoke breaks in the desert. The portrait of him that I studied so hard before we met. Standing in front of a Humvee, Tom’s whole face was covered in dirt. He

was squinting, and it was hard to tell in which direction, or *what* he was looking at. His pillowy lips remained pink. He looked handsome, in a Marlon Brando type of way, or a less puffy version of DiCaprio.

There were also homecoming shots, Tom kissing a bulldog in his arms. Pictures of him and his ex-wife. She was almost as tall as him, and much prettier.

Buried at the bottom, the last polaroid featured a white cake with black frosting that read: "I'M SORRY I BLACKED OUT, TRIED TO KILL YOU & ALMOST GOT US ARRESTED."

*

"How can you sleep with a guy like that...? What if he snaps?" There was a lot I didn't know about Tom. I knew he'd hurt people. But he was also trying to course-correct and do good. Most importantly perhaps, our bodies liked each other. He enjoyed playing with me until I was left dry-mouthed and raspy.

I didn't fool myself thinking we belonged together. I understood the healing aspect of physical touch. And it was only trapped between him and his new bulldog, Spade, that I felt safe. Sometimes Spade would rest awfully close to me. I could feel his warm sighs, and the dainty stroke of his eyelashes on my bare back.

*

In my dreams, I'm always back at the apartment with Andrés. The wind takes its toll on my lips, and everything's sanded blue. Sometimes they're able to pump his stomach on time. Other times, he's hanging from the ceiling, and I'm a few minutes too late.

Tom stays up listening to podcasts with earplugs. Every now and then, he touches me or draws me closer to him. He says that when he sleeps, he's often back in Iraq. They're speeding, fleeing enemy fire. "It's not that easy to stop a Humvee." He stares into the little girl's eyes right before they run her over. Other times, it's a man he shot in the face. He survives the blow, his jaw hanging from a tendon.

I rest my eyes shut until four or five in the morning, when we both give up, get dressed, and drive to LaMar's for coffee and donuts. I suggest we go to the movies, or to dinner sometime. He agrees, but never makes it happen.

*

Some weeks later, Tom had an event in Missouri. Maybe they'd add pins to his already busy chest. He was acting like it was a drag, and as he packed, he swore that he hated wearing his 'fancy' uniform.

"Why?"

“Because some people, people who don’t know anything about me, treat me with respect.”

*

The last time I spent the night at Tom’s on my own, I noticed some of the hair Spade shed was covered in dust. Tom’s trash can was full of empty bottles of Jameson. There was a single strand of hair attached to the bathroom sink. Up close it looked blond. By its length, I assumed it was a woman’s. Maybe he had a friend over. But there wasn’t anywhere to sit. And Tom had recently installed sleazy red lightbulbs. Then I noticed straight black hairs in the corner of the room. And a ginger curl on the sheets. My heart hiccupped, and I blushed.

My hair was blue.

He once told me that if I really wanted to understand how he felt, I’d have to read Karl Marlantes and watch *The Hurt Locker*.

“Pay attention to the cereal scene.”

“Cereal?”

“Yeah, this whole country is like that fucking cereal aisle.”

It took several months to get around to watching *The Hurt Locker*. Inside the grocery store, Jeremy Renner’s character, Staff Sergeant William James is supposed to grab cereal. His state of hyper-alertness is contagious. When he finds the aisle, he’s overwhelmed, and rendered useless in front of boxes of Cheerios, Lucky Charms, Nesquik. The camera’s low angle exaggerates the seemingly endless reiteration of labels and products. It’s unnerving. It’s almost like the hallway in *The Shining*, but bombed with fluorescent lights.

Then there’s a scene when James is home with his wife and they’re prepping dinner. He argues that out there in the Middle East they need more specialists like him to deactivate the bombs that are killing so many people. He tells the story of a man in an Iraqi market who offered free candy until he lured enough children and civilians around his truck. When he detonates, he kills roughly 59 people. His wife replies by saying: “Can you chop these [onions] for me?”

*

Everything’s changed. The COVID-19 pandemic keeps almost everyone indoors. Heeding CDC guidelines, I haven’t touched anyone in months. Initially, it seemed like a blessing in disguise. But I was promptly shook and slapped out of my rosy-colored stay-cay.

I unearthed an interview Elvira Hernández gave back in the 1990s. Paraphrasing Baudelaire, she said there were three types of people in society: the warrior, the priest, and the poet. All of them

deserved respect and somehow needed each other. It wasn't entirely convincing, but it made me think of Tom.

Out of the blue, he texts: "Can I see you?"

"We're in the middle of a pandemic."

"I could really use a hug right now."

"..."

I cuss when I reply:

"Me too."

When Tom holds me, and repeats "I got you," I appreciate the sentiment. I run my fingers through his head, tracing a 'C' behind his ear, hoping it'll soothe us both. But I've begun to see a shadowy figure from the corner of my eyes, and I know it won't make any difference.

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"American Flag" was born out of conversations with a combat veteran and her research into what Karl Marlantes calls the psychological intensity of war. She incorporates elements of fiction and horror to add nuance to the portrayal of harrowing and very raw experiences.

Grandma's Way
R. L. Peterson

Grandma is white bones now, but before she died, she insisted I get a dog. "Not a teeny, little one like that hotel heiress sticks in her pocketbook, but a real dog. A German Shepard, or a Pit Bull."

"Why's that, Grandma?"

"Crippled up like you are," she said, "it'd keep your mind off what happened in Afghanistan and keep ya from pinin' over the likes of Candi Anne Baker. Even in a wheelchair you can feed a dog, clip its toenails, give it worm medicine and rub on flea powder."

"Sounds like work."

"Not work. Care. Life's more bearable when you do for others. Even a dog."

Grandma's gray head is at 1100 hours, outlined by cumulus clouds that snipers hate because the white reflects the sun, making environmentalists hard to measure. Target prep's only good for three seconds anyway.

"Candi Anne married that yellow-haired Cartwright boy whose family owns the bank here in Bluebonnet and opened 'nother one in Freeburg. She's set for life."

I know Candi Anne's hitched. From the seventh grade on, everyone in school knew she'd be Mrs. Clay Cartwright someday. Clay started as end on our football team though he's skinny and slow, but his Daddy was on the school board. We didn't throw the ball that much, so what the hey.

In high school, Clay would blast through Bluebonnet in his red '64 Thunderbird Classic, Candi Anne's blonde hair blowing in the wind, red lipstick on her pouty lips, sunglasses shielding her baby blues, clutching his arm as they'd slide into the "S" curve just past the high school—their private Le Mans. You can do that in a town where what your Daddy doesn't own, your Granddaddy does. Candi had Clay measured for the ball and chain long before they tied the knot, no matter how his momma tried to break them up.

Now, Grandma eyes the 4x4s I've laid out like railroad tracks up the hill. "This gonna go all the way up?"

"Roger."

"Nice." She holds out an envelope. "From yo' momma. She asked about ya. As usual."

"I don't read mail from a convict."

“Convict or not, she’s yer Momma. Grudge holdin’ makes a person sour.” She looks at the boards piled in the grass.

“Why wood?”

“I can’t lay rock or stone in a wheelchair. And plywood’s cheaper.”

She throws another bone. “In high school, Candi Anne cottoned to you cause you scored touchdowns like you was Earl Campbell. Now, it’ll take a woman who ain’t squeamish to be your wife. Looks don’t bother a dog.”

“You saying I’m ugly, Dorothy Snead?”

A faint smile. “No, cause I know your insides. Outside, you’re right ugly. That don’t bother me, but I ain’t here much longer.”

“Where you going? To IGA for groceries? Orscheln’s to drag home a rich farmer?”

She almost grins. I take a panel of plywood from the stack, pull it across my lap, turn my chair and roll up to where the path ends. Using a long-handled brush, I smear glue on the 4x4s and cross braces Rob Lee and William Junior set in concrete two days ago, lay the wood in place, and on my belly, wham, wham, shoot it with the nail gun.

When the walk’s finished, Grandma and me will sit under the pear tree at the top of the hill and count the cars crossing Copperhead Creek into Bluebonnet. When I die, they can shove my chair downhill. Where I stop rolling is my grave.

“How long ‘fore it’s finished?” Grandma asks.

“Two weeks or so. If my back holds up and this keeps working.” I wave the nail gun.

“Good. I wanna walk on it ‘fore I die.” She wipes her face with a red bandana, the one I tied around my neck the year I dressed as Scarecrow at Halloween. I was ten or eleven.

She says, “Don’t expect an invite to the Harvest Parade. Folks don’t like seein’ soldier boys in wheel chairs. They want their heroes pretty as that Hanks feller in th’ movie about *Forrest Gump*. Blown off legs take away the romance of war.”

She taps off toward the house, flinging one last bone. “Your momma likes flowers. Any kind.”

*

I knew the intel on Candi Anne. She and I had a pact, once. “My momma’s the prettiest lady in town. She says looks don’t last forever so use ‘em while you got ‘em. If I marry for love, it’s you, Ken Snead, but Clay’s got the money. Maybe you can work for him someday.”

Another time, “Clay loves me, and I love what he buys me.”

I laugh. “Can you outsmart his momma?”

“With your help.”

I bought Candi Anne’s ticket and wrist corsage for the Senior Dance. Clay’s dead mule stare at Candi Anne scared his momma, so she connived with Mrs. Underwood for Betsy to be Clay’s date. Candi and I dance together until Ladies Choice. Then, Candi grabs Clay, and they disappear, leaving me with Betsy’s twelve dozen roses and two-hundred-dollar gown.

Betsy’s daddy owns the lumber yard and Fluff and Fold Laundromat, but he’s not in the same league as Clay’s family. “Looks like we’re stuck with each other,” I say.

Betsy tries to smile through saying, “I don’t know what he sees in her.”

“Me either. She has nice tits, a great ass and is smart as hell. What’s there to like?”

“Isn’t your mother in prison?”

“True as an arrow to the heart.”

“Doesn’t that limit,” she searches for the right word, “your prospects?”

“Yes, but I’m not searching for gold, only happiness.”

*

Saturday a week later, Clay took Betsy to the movie in Freeburg, courtesy of Clay’s mother. Candi texted. “Star gazing on Hockaday Hill. Mickie D’s at 7.” With her long blonde hair and cheerleader moves, there’s not a running back in two counties who won’t gladly trade a twenty-yard touchdown run to lie on a blanket next to Candi Anne and pretend to look at the stars. As I did.

“Clay and Betsy together is kinda of cute,” she said. “But he’ll come home to Candi.”

*

Mrs. Cartwright’s annual shopping trip to Kansas City is the first week in November. When her car disappeared down Highway 54, Candi Anne hopped in Clay’s T-Bird and they checked in at the Motorcade Lodge in Freeburg. They came up for air two days later. A month or so later they announced their wedding plans.

As Grandma says, first comes the huggin’ and kissin,’ then comes the baby. I was in Afghanistan when Candi Anne squeezed out a boy.

*

A bell rings when I roll into Candi's Land Boutique. "Be right there," she calls. "Help yourself to coffee."

"Thanks. I can't reach it."

"I know that voice." She sticks her head through the dressing room beads. Her eyes go big. "Ken Snead. What a surprise."

Her hug is quick. "That permanent?" She means my chair.

"Yeah. 'Till I get iron legs."

Her eyes shine. "Wow. Things are sure different, huh? Me married. Two kids. You..." Her voice trails off.

Before I can answer, she says, "Clay's a good father. And husband. His momma wants me to close the shop and try for a girl. I don't know..." She stops mid-sentence. "You back for good?"

"Yeah. If I can stand the excitement."

A tall blonde in purple Under Armor sweats and neon Nikes comes in. She and Candi exchange air kisses. "I laid out some new yoga pants for you, Blair. Back table. I'll be right there."

Her smile is quick. "Thanks for stopping by, dear. Clay'll call you. We'll get caught up." She hurries to push my chair out the door.

I'm still waiting for Clay's call.

*

It was a warm fall day with a high sky and no clouds when Ray Shields, the VFW Harvest Parade muckety-muck, knocked on Grandma's door. Weather like this in Afghanistan, chopper pilots wear extra dark glasses and fly zig zag routes so the Taliban shoot at moving targets.

Ray gives me all that crap about vets being the backbone of our country and how we'll lead America someday. "Personally, every man or woman who served should ride in the Harvest Parade. It's just this year we ain't got enough vehicles for everybody. We're requestin' them in wheelchairs or need ambulatory help to skip the parade and join the festivities at the hall." He smiles. "Free barbeque and adult beverages. Hope you understand."

I get it, asshole. I was warned.

When his car pulls away, Grandma comes up. “You’d be on the Heroes Stand at the festivities, except folks don’t like bein’ reminded our boys are human. This ain’t World War II, where everyone had a job to do. Buck up. Show ‘em how a real hero handles things.”

*

When Candi and Clay announced they’d get married the first week in June, lots of folks said that’s why I joined the Marines. Not true. I stepped over the yellow line and put my feet in the green footprints painted on the concrete floor and raised my right hand and swore to protect and defend the Constitution of the United States at the St. Louis Military Career Center, June 10th, 1999, to escape a town where everyone knew I lived with my sick Grandma and my momma was doing twenty to life for selling marijuana and robbing a Western Auto store of \$37, and my daddy died in a car crash when I was five. When the Twin Towers fell, we Marines trained like hell in house-to-house warfare. That paid off soon.

Middle school, I worked at the IGA, Tuesdays and weekends. “Hey, Dopey,” they’d yell, “shelf these tomatoes, then sweep the meat department floor and empty the trash.” Dopey was Momma’s name when she raised hell around here.

One day the chief butcher asked, “You kin to Dorothy Snead?”

“Yes, sir. My Grandma.”

“A damn good woman. When her husband died, she took over his business like a man. Many a farmer ‘round here owes her more’n gratitude for haulin’ livestock to market durin’ hard times for just gas money. No per head charge.” From then on, I was Ken or Snead.

*

I was eight or so when Momma went to prison. We’d holed up in The Starlight Motel eating potato chips and Mars bars. It took three days for Momma to feel good enough to sit up. The TV was on, a local show about how good deeds done to others bring rewards.

I believe that. And that rabbits lay chocolate eggs.

Sirens scream. Tires screech.

“Act like you’re here alone,” Momma says. She dives under the bed.

The door crashes. Cops burst in, guns drawn. "Everybody freeze!"

I’m too scared to cry.

A cop drops to his knees beside the bed. “Come out, Agnes.”

He pulls Momma to her feet. Her torn tee shirt shows white breasts. Her pale green panties are around her knees. The lady on TV displays Valentines local school kids made that they'll mail to boys and girls in Iran.

They drag Momma away. It's the last I see of her until prison. A policeman brings me a cold cookie and warm chocolate milk. A lady in a blue uniform sits on the bed. On TV, a pretty girl gives the three steps to housebreaking a dog.

"I have a son," the lady says. "He's older than you. Wanna watch Sesame Street?"

I nod. I have to pee, bad. After what seems like a week, Grandma comes in. She's my Daddy's momma. "Get dressed. You're going home with me."

"Can I pee? Please?"

"My goodness, child. I haven't been around men for a while. I forget their needs."

I remember that whizz. I'd like to let it fly like that now, move the ammonium cake in the urinal, not dribble into a funnel. If I convince the VA I deserve legs, someday I'll rip the buttons open on my 501s in one pull and piss like a man. I just have to prove I lost my wheels in combat. The VA's searching records to disallow my claim.

*

Before Momma became a druggie, she taught me to read, so school's a piece of cake. When I turned fourteen, I begged Grandma to fill out papers saying she's a farmer so I can get a license to drive farm equipment. When it came, I hired on at Ray's Feed and Seed delivering hay and seed corn and fencing material after school and weekends. My apprenticeship, Grandma called it.

Delmar, who lost his license for drunk driving, taught me to log mileage, read a map, and plan routes. That's why I knew those things in the Corps and got a motor pool MOS. Every three months Grandma takes me with her to the ladies prison in Chillicothe to visit Momma. The waiting room is gray and smells like sweat and stale perfume, filled with fat ladies and crying kids.

One time a pretty girl in a red and yellow dress smiled at me. "Aren't visiting days hell?"

A prison guard, excuse me, Corrections Officer, in blue uniform, belly hanging over his belt, escorts Momma in, feet shackled, hands in cuffs. She wears a pink jumpsuit with Prisoner lettered on the back. Tears stream down her face. She begs for a kiss like I'm a girl. The people she yaks about, Grandma and I don't know.

Grandma has plans. "After yer outta school, we'll buy another truck. I'll do long hauls, you stay local. Junior college mornings, deliveries afternoons." Cancer and two heart attacks killed that idea. My junior year in high school she sold her truck and ran things from our front room.

I figure it'll be small-town life for me. Work with Grandma. Deer hunt in the fall. Pretend high school football games are important. Fish. Get married. Grandma says, "Don't waste your years waitin' for me to kick off. You'll hate me later."

*

Career Day my senior year, the Marine recruiter and I talk. I enlist for four years. After a year of infantry training at Camp Pendleton, I come home on leave. Saturday night I go to the Skyview Drive In. Sure enough, Candi and Clay are there.

When Clay goes for refreshments, I crawl in next to Candi. Her watermelon belly scares me. She lays her head on my shoulder. "What did I get into, Little Brother?"

Clay comes back, shoulders slumped, eyes squinting, with popcorn, Good 'N Plenty, and Coke to mix with his Maker's Mark. I know why I left this berg now.

On my way back to my rental, I run into Doris Wannenger in tight jeans and tube top. To her, I'm the high school jock. To me, she's a friendly smile. It takes persuasion, but she leaves her sister and her sister's fiancée and watches the rest of *Smoke Signals* next to me. She's a good listener. Smart. She laughs at my Marine Corps stories and agrees that motor pool is wheels for the infantry. She's enrolled in nursing school.

About the time the two idiots drive the car backward through town for the fourth time, I get my hand down Doris' jeans and rub her thing with my little finger. That's as far as I get.

*

Counselors say it's important we cripples stay busy. Hard to do, especially when rancid sweat turns sheets into wet sand and I forget my legs are gone and jump out of bed and fall in a heap on the cold floor. Once, I laid for an hour cussing, tears in my eyes before I dragged my worthless ass to the head, pulled on my workout gear and hit the iron pile at the gym. On each exercise, I force one more rep. And one more. And another. Burn away negative thoughts and bad memories, Grandma says.

The days pass, each the same. The gym. Sweat filled nights. Jumbled memories. Grandma getting sicker and weaker. Boring TV. Fox News yammering. CNN repeats the same shit over and over. Monday Night Football is a religion to some, but I figure Kurt Warner and Marshall Faulk will score their touchdowns—they make the game look easy. Peyton Manning is supposed to be good. He and Vinny Testaverde would last maybe fifteen minutes in Afghanistan.

My Final Resolution comes. Five paragraphs of mishmash that deny my request for prosthetics. Something about my current civilian status and no doctor's request after my last operation.

I miss my old unit. I know I'll never rejoin them now. I feel guilty being Stateside, safe, and secure, but hell, they're at Pendleton with nearby beaches and fast food everywhere. One night my feet burn

so bad I cry, snot filling my mouth. My ears ring. My head's gonna explode. I take Grandma's .44 from the drawer next to my bed, pull back the hammer and jam the cold, oily tasting muzzle into my mouth.

My choice. Eat a bullet or drink the counselor's Kool-Aid.

After maybe an hour, I crawl to the back porch, wrap the pistol in oil cloth, and hide it in the tool chest. The next morning going to the mail box, my wheels mire in mud. I pull myself on my belly to the tool shed, get a shovel, crawl back and dig the chair out. *That's it, I'm building a God-damned walkway.*

Before the IED ruined me, this would take three, maybe four days. Now, I lie like a bag of rice on the plywood to screw galvanized fasteners flush. A counselor's silly statement keeps repeating: *keep your mind and body in the same place.*

He has two good legs and a good job. I'm a convict's crippled kid who messed himself up in war. I don't eat for two days. Grandma says, "Feelin' sorry for yourself don't help none. Decide what you want in life and do it."

Maybe she's right.

At night if I concentrate real hard, I don't smell sun baked yellow dirt or hear the bleat of sheep when a kid sneaks from the mud hooch where he lives with six brothers and five sisters and a mother who never speaks and a black-bearded father. The kid yells, "Sergeant! Reese's! Min fadlak."

I register his "please" and turn to wave. The earth blasts open, and heat shreds my cammies. I fly heavenward, then slam into the ancient soil like a deflated football, spitting blood and teeth and I can't hear Staff Sergeant Vasquez, only read his lips, *What the fuck!* and my heart beats fast, and I can't reach my carotid artery, then guys in blue-gray dungarees strap me into a Huey, because of a sack of ammonium nitrate in a shallow hole with a blasting cap and split-wire glued to a board so the slightest pressure makes the wires touch the terminal of a AAA battery, and the world goes boom and I'm on an airplane, and hours later wheeled into a room with maybe fifty other blown-to-shit Marines and Army guys and a nine-year-old little fucker the doctors put back together after a Russian PKM machine gun tore off his arm and both feet. The name tags of those who bend over me read Dr. Kee or Dr. Abdullah or Dr. Cortez and their green scrubs are stamped US Navy.

*

One last day of belly-crawling to install solar lights. Three trips up and down with Grandma's Hoover and the carpet's clean. Rob Lee and William Junior walk with me to the top. They drink Pabst Blue Ribbon and argue who mixed the best mud or dug the straightest trench. It'll cost me a twelve of Sam Adams for them to plant Old Barnyard Mix hollyhocks where the walkway curves and Sweet William carnations where it's straight. Big money this time of the month, but I pony up. Grandma's long body is sharp bones when she climbs on my lap. I muscle us up the hill. Dark altostratus clouds hang in the east. Rain, maybe snow, is on the way. The cold wind tears my eyes.

The leaves on the pear tree give off death rattles. Grandma looks out at Bluebonnet and giggles. “Mary Louise Stock’s wash is still on the line.”

A little later, “Them hollyhocks will grow come summer. Now, get a dog. An Affenpinscher or Akita. You’re different. Your dog oughta be too.”

She dances like the night I scored three touchdowns. “I walked it like you promised.” She throws her arms into the air and falls backward into the grass.

What the fuck?

My heart beats like I’m in an ambush. I should’ve waited for Spring to bring her here but was afraid she wouldn’t be around. I pull her limp body across my lap, roll downhill, up the ramp and into her room. Her face is pale as ice. The bed’s too high for me to get her under the covers.

I dial Shirley’s number. The State pays her to nurse Grandma. No answer. I roll to the closet, grab a blanket, and spread it over Grandma, then hit redial. A lady answers. I state my priority and 10-20.

“A colleague is scheduled at your location within the hour. I’ll call to confirm.” Grandma’s breath barely moves her blanket. *Is she dead?* A car motor down by the gate. Hours later, footsteps on the porch. I yank the door open. Doris Wannerger, my high school friend I last saw at the Drive In two years ago, stands there.

She sees Grandma and drops her purse and blue canvass bag. She gently rolls Grandma to the far side of the bed, pulls the covers down, rolls her back and snugs the blanket under her chin. It takes maybe ten seconds.

Doris straps a monitor to Grandma. Numbers march across the small screen. “Probably a stroke. Her blood pressure’s high. Her body temperature low.”

She turns to me. “I saw in the paper you were home. I drove by. You were working, so didn’t stop.” She spreads a space blanket over Grandma. “Shirley’s off today. I’m her backup. I asked for this assignment when I saw Miss Snead’s request. She moved us to town when Daddy died. For free. Her grandson and I went to school together.”

I know. I played with your thing, remember?

“You all right?”

I nod. I feel hot. I’d forgotten how green Doris’ eyes are. She looks out at the walkway hugging the hill. “You built that, you can do anything.”

Grandma whispers, “He needs a dog.”

“Shush, Miss Snead. Rest. Dr. Gish is on his way.”

Doris looks around. Drawings and plans from *Carpentry* and *Handyman Magazine* next to my laptop. My honorable discharge on the wall. Piles of geography books. Football on the shelf, next to my radio.

“You require any special equipment?”

“Just my chair. Shower stool. Crutches. The kinda stuff any fucked up Marine with no legs needs.”

She tilts my face to the light. “You look fine to me. I notice you favor your shoulder. What gives?”

“Smashed. Titanium implant. Right arm shorter than my left.”

“Pelvis?”

“Shattered. They even built me a new rib cage. I did a real number on me.”

“What’d you mean, you did a number? You blame yourself?”

“I looked at the kid and stepped on the IED. We’re warned not to fraternize.”

“Maybe they used a cell phone to set it off.”

“You know about that?” I stammer. “I, I, I can’t walk. Or wear 501s.”

“I didn’t know jeans were important.” She smiles.

“Same threads every day. Twenty minutes to get into my uniform of the day. Work out shorts and a fucking tee shirt. My hips go numb if I’m in the chair longer ‘n an hour.”

Her hair’s not as red as I remember, but curlier.

“I know it’s tough, but you’re tougher. Any surgeries scheduled?”

“Nope. The VA says I don’t qualify for prosthetics.”

“Really? Phantom pain?”

“Nights. Feet burn like napalm.”

“How do you handle it?”

“No booze. No drugs. The counselors say we can control pain with our thoughts. Shit like, imagine you put it in a box and carry it out. Deep breathing. Anything to keep the mind busy. I memorize baseball rosters. All teams. Any year. Or study and alphabetize nations of the world.”

“Good.” Her smile would stop a Humvee. “Use the internet?”

“Nope. Books.”

She nods. “A certain Marine put his hand down my panties once. Ever think about that?”

“All the time. If it’s true, the one on the bottom has the baby, I’m in trouble. That’s my only position.”

“Maybe you can research that.”

Grandma mumbles, “I hear every word.”

“You’ve heard worse, Dorothy Snead.”

“Not from you. You need a dog.”

Doris says, “I know where there’s a half-cocker, half-poodle pup. Free. What if I come by tomorrow and we go see it?”

The next afternoon we brought home a pile of wiggly brown fur and black eyes. We named him Homer, after Grandpa. Doris comes by evenings, even when Shirley’s on duty. Her smile and green eyes are welcome. Plastic tubes dangle from Grandma’s nose like walrus tusks.

Twice a day, I walk Grandma across the room. We talk baseball. She forgets current Cardinal stars like Pujols and Molina but knows Musial hit .337 in 1963. Hank Williams and Patsy Kline blast from my boom box, or Chris Jones and Bluegrass Junction. Homer sleeps at Grandma’s hip.

I ask Doris for a date. Her smile makes my throat tight. “Not while I’m on the case. It’s not professional.” I was alone when I learned Tanganyika and Zanzibar merged in 1964 to become the United Republic of Tanzania with a GDP of roughly \$35 billion a year.

One afternoon Doris asks, “Still think the IED was your fault?”

“Yeah. Lost concentration when I looked at the kid. Damn near killed me.”

“It didn’t. What’s the lesson?”

“That it takes two legs to walk?”

“Maybe it took a blast to get your attention?”

"What'd ya mean?"

“You’re still pissed at your mom, right?”

“You writing a book?”

“We can carry anger around forever. Or forgive. Our choice. The same with the IED. Stay pissed or accept what is.”

“You my therapist?”

“No. Just someone who cares.” She smiles. I want to cry. “It takes a big man to forgive.”

“So I’ve heard.”

She kisses my forehead. “Coach Howsom used to brag how coachable you were. You still are.”

Grandma’s slipping fast. Homer won’t leave her bed except to eat or go outside. I smear Vaseline on Grandma’s lips and lie that the Cardinals win every game. Her blue hand is cool.

One Friday evening she sits up. “Give the ball to 16.” My jersey number. “He’ll get a first down.” Her last words.

Tuesday, after the funeral, Grandma’s room is bare as a winter sycamore. Homer prances and whines. I pull him onto my lap and cry into his fur. I miss my old unit and wonder why no one, not even Gunny Sergeant Vasquez, answers my texts anymore and think that someday a kid will ask his Dad why so many old men are on crutches or in wheel chairs. “Was there a disease going around or something?”

I miss Grandma.

Homer and I fall asleep. When we wake, I fix Grandma’s favorite breakfast: beef hash, poached eggs, and French toast, using my Coleman since the gas range is too tall for a guy in a wheelchair. I clean the kitchen and roll out on the porch. The clouds are stratocumulus, easy to move with thoughts. The weather’s gonna change. Around eleven, Doris drives up.

I read somewhere that dogs don’t immediately sense if a person’s untrustworthy or not. Instead, they react to their master’s intuitions about that person. Now, Homer wiggles and rubs against Doris like she has a juicy steak just for him.

Doris sits in Grandma’s yellow metal lawn chair, the one we’ve had since I was a kid. Homer’s head is on my stubs, his rump on Doris. Sparrows scratch under the spirea. A blue bird hops in the grass.

“A crippled Marine with a dog would still like a date.”

Doris’ green eyes find mine. “I don’t date cripples. I’d be honored, however, to go out with a Marine who sacrificed his legs for a cause. He knows it’s not where you start that’s important, but where

you're going. He's the only guy who ever put his hand down my panties." She laughs. "I even like his dog."

The wedding was on a sunny day in May with a high sky and no wind, the kind of weather Marines like because it's easy to work up a sweat. In June, with Doris' help on my appeal, the VA gave me aluminum legs. We razed the smokehouse and built a three-car garage with room for my work bench where I make wooden license plate holders, and names of nations of the world carved from recycled wood that we sell on Amazon and Etsy. We park our Ultra Glide with specially designed hand controls in the garage.

Doris rides behind me to the ladies' prison where Momma comes up for parole soon. Most nights Doris and I roll up to the pear tree, sit at the glass table and play two-hand rummy, the moon rising in the starry sky, Homer on the ground between us.

Grandma's way was that I get a dog and find a wife who wasn't squeamish. I have both. And a walkway that runs to the top of the hill where you can look out at the whole world.

A former Marine who served at American embassies in three countries, **R.L. Peterson** is active in Veteran Outreach programs that stress writing in overcoming alcoholism and addiction issues. His work has appeared in numerous publications and several anthologies. His short story collection, *After Midnight*, (Pallamary Publishing), is available on Kindle and Amazon. A 2020 finalist in the Regal House Publishing's Petrichor Prize for Finely Crafted Literature, his "Leave the Night to God" is scheduled for release in 2022. About "Grandma's Way", Peterson writes, "I wrote this because, as a volunteer at a Veterans Center, I meet some vets who are understandably tied to past slights and wrongs by the government or agency and never progress. Others, more resilient, seem to roll with the punches and make amazing strides. 'Grandma's Way' was my attempt at explaining the difference. We are not alone unless we decide to be."

*

CREATIVE NONFICTION

what my coworkers don't understand

Sandie Cheng

is that most days, I don't want to wake up. It's not that I am suicidal nor have I planned a time. It's just that I watched a man nonchalantly grab a shotgun, place it under his chin, and pull the trigger without hesitation. It's just that my whole body froze when I saw the way his body fell limp on the chair and his head exploded like a crimson, sticky firework; the way his dog walked in to see what the commotion was all about, and the knowledge that his mother had watched the whole thing on a live feed. It's just that I didn't scream, cry, or react at all. I simply put my phone down and lied awake until the next morning, the supercut of a stranger's death playing over and over in my head. And when I told my coworkers—the same ones who are responsible with serving you ads on social media and all over the Internet—over Slack the next day, they said, *Oh, I'm sorry you had to see that*, annoyed that I had changed the subject to something other than click-through-rates and budget allocations. I sent them an article written by NBC to prove that it was true, something TikTok, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram were simply *scrambling* to delete from their platforms. Their AI (see: traumatized moderators located in third world countries) just couldn't keep up with the speed in which anonymous users uploaded the video. A real, topical issue for advertisers like themselves. It was relevant, I swear.

I forced myself to smile through the rest of my Zoom meetings, wondering what algorithm knew that it's not that I'm suicidal, it's just that I don't know what there is to live for anymore, and I haven't known—not really, anyway—as long as I am not white in the United States.

We all survive in different ways.

After all, *Grief is non-linear*; I said 3 months earlier to the newly formed DEI committee when George Floyd was murdered. It's not that my coworkers are racist. At least, they do not mean to be. It's just that they watched a broadcast of a white cop nonchalantly kneel on a Black man's neck for 9 minutes and did not budge once, even when he begged for his life,

*I can't breathe,
I can't breathe,
I can't breathe,*

and finally whimpered

...Mama...

to the hard asphalt smashed against his cheek
unable to turn his head toward the sky.

Every agency had a DEI committee then. Every corporation released a statement. My coworkers committed to do better, to make sure this never happens again and again and again as if they could advertise their way out of systemic racism and violence. One coworker lectures me about bringing

politics into the workplace and asks—no, let me rephrase—challenges me, like the Devil himself would: who would I call, if not the police, when I am in danger?

The CEO reads *White Fragility* and sends his book report in an email. There is a Zoom meeting about it. All four of the Black employees turn off their cameras, and I follow suit. Later, I get a Slack and she tells me, it's not that her eleven year old son is suicidal: it's just that he jumped out of a two story window once after HR told her that the racism she reported would "resolve itself :)" and he could no longer bear to see his mother so heartbroken.

Mothers everywhere rose up in Portland and across the United States. Precincts erupted in flames, storefronts were destroyed, and from their ashes: heart wrenching, earth-shattering grief. When I found out a maskless, white man coughed and declared *Make America Great Again* toward my father, the only Asian face in a socially-distanced line at a Bank of America in California, I too wanted to burn down every bank until I found this man and brought him to his knees.

Which bank was it?

Why did everyone just stand there?

My father just shrugged and said,

This is just how Americans are when they are afraid.

When I was younger, my brother, a former U.S. Marine and Iraq War veteran, watched *Band of Brothers* over and over again from the DVD box collection I gifted him one Christmas. There's a scene that goes like this: the American soldiers see the horrors of Auschwitz and immediately go to the nearest town to get bread for the starving, dying Jews. The German baker yells at them to stop this at once, as the Americans raid his bakery and load up their trucks with every scrap of food they could get their hands on. Distraught and furious, one of the American soldiers grabs the baker by the lapels, points a gun under his chin, screaming, *You Nazi fuck*, accusing him and all the German citizens of being bystanders to the horrors of the Holocaust. *You're not a Nazi? How about a human being?! Hub?!*

So then,

why did everyone just stand there?

Meanwhile, concentration camps have long lined the borders of the States. And as I write this, we know that thousands of detainees have been raped, sterilized, tortured, and sex trafficked. There is a genocide right at home. I wonder, who will be our saviors, grabbing us and shaking us, screaming, *You ICE fuck. Are you a human being? Hub?*

Well,
are we?

What my coworkers don't understand

is that, most days, I don't want to wake up. It means nothing more and nothing less.

it's just that
if I am honest,
it means I already feel the weight
of shame,
as the eyes of history stare
back at us and see

that all the likes, shares, followers, comments, clout, hashtags, Zoom meetings, ads, engagement rates, click-through-rates, analytics, emails, professional development, touchbase, impressions, conversions, cost-per-click, total spend, follow ups, and DEI did not save us from burning

after all.

Sandie Cheng is an Asian-American writer, producer, and actor from Riverside, CA and now lives in Brooklyn, NY. Her work focuses on amplifying women of color's voices, championing invisible or untold stories, and examining intergenerational trauma. She has been featured in *Hyphen Magazine*, *Cosmonauts Avenue*, *Bustle*, and more. This piece ("what my coworkers don't understand") was written in 2020 in the height of the pandemic and after the murder of George Floyd. The piece calls to examine the brutality of capitalism, the ever-present static of PTSD, and the longstanding effects of imperialism. She hopes readers will take a deeper dive into the aftermath of COVID-19 and the violence of white supremacy, and if "normalcy" is actually what we aspire to go back to.

Veterans Day Special
Guy Choate

I try to stay away from doughnuts now that I'm 36 years old and my metabolism has all but abandoned me, but I'm a veteran and it's Veterans Day and if certain doughnut chains are patriotic enough to give me a free doughnut, I feel like I should be patriotic enough to show up and eat it. A doughnut—much like freedom—generally isn't free. But it is today. So, I put my 17-month-old son Gus in his carseat and we drive 15 miles across town to the closest Krispy Kreme. There are multiple doughnut-selling establishments much closer to our house, but part of the modern day veteran experience is about not paying for the doughnut, even if the gas required to get me there retails for more than the doughnut itself. I don't know the psychology behind it, but I know the feeling to be true.

A young woman stands over the see-through doughnut display case. She asks what she can get for us.

“Do you guys have a Veterans Day special?” I ask. But of course, I know they do. I looked it up before leaving the house. I've been planning it all week, if not since last year. *USA Today* and a dozen other media outlets publish an annual list of the national food chains that give freebies to veterans on Veterans Day.

“Veterans get a doughnut of their choice and a small coffee,” the Krispy Kreme clerk says. I imagine this is exactly the language her manager used in her explanation earlier this morning. “Are you a veteran?” she asks.

“I am.”

I am ready to pull out my wallet to show her my Arkansas driver's license, which says VETERAN in all caps on it. That's a new thing. I had to show them my original DD 214—the document that categorizes my military service—at the DMV in order to get that label on my license, which was kind of a hassle, but it beats carrying around the printed sheet of paper I used to carry with me on Veterans Day that was a picture of me in uniform deployed to Bosnia in 2003, as a 21-year-old. I printed it straight from Facebook, which degraded the quality of the image so I kind of looked like a blob of green camouflage with a face.

The woman at Krispy Kreme doesn't ask me for identification. She goes straight to asking me which doughnut I'd like.

“I can get any doughnut I want?” My surprise strikes doubt in the young woman, who looks to her coworker behind the cash register for confirmation.

He nods.

I choose the Bavarian crème-filled long john and waive the coffee. She puts my doughnut in a white paper sack, then throws in a few doughnut holes for Gus, despite his not having served the country. He seems to be enamored with the whole experience on a pretty basic level. The commercial transaction itself captivates him.

These strangers have given us food in a bag in exchange for something I did 14 years before his birth. He probably thinks we are in this woman's home. We are sitting at her table—without her—and putting on her novelty vintage-style paper hats.

As I loaded him into my truck this morning, I worried about Gus ingesting fried dough glazed with sugar—it's not exactly food that encourages healthy growth—but the boy only shows mild interest in the pinches I give him anyway. He is still plagued with trying to understand the functional attributes of restaurant commerce. At one point, I turn his high chair completely away from the table so he can more easily watch the people coming in and out of the store and their interactions with the Krispy Kreme staff. I'm blown away that he's ignoring the doughnuts. At school they call him Gus the Hungry Bus because he will eat until he bursts at every meal.

Since he isn't even looking at them, I quickly pop a couple of his doughnut holes into my mouth, but stop short of eating them all because Dunkin' Donuts is just a couple of miles away and they have a Veterans Day special too.

When we get there, I carry Gus in and set him on the counter while I survey the doughnuts. They have the same options that Krispy Kreme offered, but they call them different things. I tell myself I will take this new doughnut to Liz, because I don't need the calories or sugar or something, but I'm unsure of her favorite flavor. We don't eat doughnuts together ever since we stopped working in the same office, and even then, someone just brought a dozen glazed, so I know she likes those. But I'm not going to waste a Veterans Day choice on a plain doughnut—I didn't give six years of my life for a simple, glazed doughnut. I go with the Boston Crème, then carry Gus back out to the truck, where we sit for a moment. I'm behind the wheel and he's in the back in his carseat. I text Liz, who is studying at her mother's house for an upcoming nursing school exam. I ask her if I can bring her the doughnut. I think it might be romantic. She texts back and says she doesn't like cream-filled doughnuts. I am blown away at how little I know about the woman I married. We share a child.

Not far from where we are parked, a homeless man and woman rest against a tree. I consider giving them the brown bag with the doughnut in it, but when they suddenly erupt into an argument that seems to have the potential to get violent, I decide to go surprise friends with the doughnut instead. I want to share what I have earned—my sacrifice—with someone. But they are out of town, so I drive to my sister's house, where I discover her family has apparently already gone to church. And so Gus and I take the doughnut home with us. I recommit to myself that I will not eat the doughnut. We have a long day of eating ahead of us and the problem of what food industry executives refer to as “the fixed stomach,” and economists call “inelastic demand,” is very real.

*

Gus is still taking his nap at 11am when I'd like to be sitting down at BJ's Brewhouse, eating a free Veterans Day lunch. My plan was to eat an early lunch at BJ's, then a late one at Chili's, but as his nap creeps closer and closer to noon, I realize I'm going to have to abandon the plan I've had set more or less since last November.

By the time Liz and I click Gus into his carseat, it's well after noon and the parking lot at BJ's is already packed with vehicles displaying military license plates and decals—combat ribbon stickers, oversized unit patches, scaled outlines of C-130s. One jacked-up truck showcases that crude sticker of Calvin (of Calvin & Hobbes fame) peeing on the word *ISIS*—the juxtaposition appears to be homemade. Inside the restaurant, the room is full of men and women who move with that unmistakable military confidence. Lower enlisted families with young children are scattered throughout the restaurant. They mostly wear t-shirts that feature some distorted version of the American flag. That distortion has become the symbol of the modern patriotic movement. The image suggests these patriots are in the midst of a revolution and not sitting safely in a restaurant in self-proclaimed God's country where they are literally getting a free lunch. It feels like the intent of these variations on our country's flag is to celebrate the countless battlefield stars and stripes that combat has repeatedly threatened, but never conquered on a large scale. These t-shirt images are meant to pay homage to the American flags raised at Iwo Jima or the ones still standing after Pickett's Charge. But the artist has drastically missed the mark. These new flags appear too synthetic to have an actual appreciation or even a vague understanding of American history. They are the auto-tuned version of the Star-Spangled Banner and if you ask me, our veterans deserve better from those responsible for mass-marketing to us. No one has ever asked, though, and the successful proliferation of the adulterated flag within military communities makes me think no one will ever have a desire to. The new patriotism is selling well.

The hostess tells us the wait will be 35 minutes. Liz gives me a look that says trying to keep our son happy for that long before we even get to the table might be too much for us to endure, but I tell the hostess we'll wait. These colors don't run, I whisper to Gus.

"I'd hate to get Gus loaded back up and we drive somewhere else and find out the wait will be just as long," I say to Liz. "Maybe something will come open sooner." Nevermind that we're at fucking BJ's Brewhouse and could go to a local establishment without a wait that we would enjoy more anyway—it's not about that. Today is about something bigger. It's about validation of the choice I made as a teenager to put my life at risk in exchange for a \$3,000 signing bonus spaced out into three payments over six years. And then taxed. Or something like that.

This is our third Veterans Day together. The day before our first, I sent Liz my agenda.

1. Bar Louie to split an entrée for lunch or dinner today.
2. IHOP for breakfast in the morning at 7, before the lines form.
3. Cantina Laredo to split an entrée for lunch at 11:30.
4. Swing by Great Clips to pick up the free haircut card after lunch.
5. Late afternoon, swing by Sport Clips for a free haircut.
6. Hit Meineke for the free oil change.
7. Hit Splash for the free car wash.

8. Then it's your call on dinner. I know you favor Golden Corral—for good reason—but in years past the lines have been crazy long, so maybe BJ's Brewhouse? Or we run back the Bar Louie situation? I dunno.
9. (Menchie's Frozen Yogurt for after-dinner free yogurt is something to think about.)
10. If you want to try and 4th meal...I'm not saying it's off the table.

GET HYPED.

That was before we had Gus, before we were married. We were still beginning to learn each other and we “*got hyped*” about doing anything together. In regard to item #8 on the agenda, Liz had only been to Golden Corral once before, when I took her. I think she described it as “Not as bad as I thought it would be.”

I've made an agenda in my head for this Veterans Day, but I don't share it with her because her potential for getting hyped about spending an entire day dropping into local nationwide food franchises where she would rather not see people with whom she graduated high school doesn't appeal to her as much as it did when we first started dating. Understandably, she would rather pay full price for a good meal than have to wait 35 minutes to get a fair meal at a discounted price. But we're married, and she loves me, and she knows Veterans Day means something weird to me. So she waits without complaint.

Our table is ready in five minutes, despite the promised wait.

“Do you have a Veterans Day special?” I ask the waiter. Asking is a formality, of course, but it adds a level of humility that doesn't exist when I simply tell them, “I'm here to eat for free,” which they interpret as, “I won't be tipping.” (For the record, I tip appropriately, based on the pre-discounted check.)

“You get a free entrée up to \$12.95,” the server explains.

I do my best to look genuinely engaged. Like I'm interested in the “new” information he has given me.

“Or if you want something more expensive, we'll just put \$12.95 against the cost of that entrée.”

“Oh!” I say. “That's nice.”

I order the Fire-Roasted Barbacoa Chicken, which is exactly \$12.95, which is exactly why I am ordering it, to maximize the monetary value of my payoff.

While we wait for our food, we do our best to entertain Gus in his high chair. The server brings him crayons and a colorless, kids-themed BJ's Brewhouse advertisement to draw on. As each crayon inevitably hits the floor, Liz hides it.

“These floors are filthy,” she says.

It feels good to be out and about as a family on this Sunday afternoon. In fact, it feels for a moment like one of the real holidays, albeit one that none of our extended family celebrates. Or our neighbors. It’s just a day that our little family of three and a range of commercial establishments share, but it feels for a moment like that’s enough. Neither Liz nor I have work or school to run off to. We want to prolong the day. To keep spending time with each other the way people should on holidays.

“We should go do something fun when we leave here,” Liz says. “I wish it wasn’t so cold so we could go to the park.”

“Yeah, we should go do something,” I say. “Until we’re hungry again.”

The decline of the traditional suburban shopping mall has forced mall property owners to get creative with their real estate, which is why you see restaurants like BJ’s Brewhouse cropping up in unused mall parking lots. Liz and I haven’t been to the mall down the street from our house together more than a handful of times. We decide we’ll be able to treat it like an indoor park, a safe place for Gus to run around.

Liz gets excited about looking at shoes. We make a brief dip into Dillard’s, but otherwise avoid actually entering any stores so as to minimize the possibility of our son breaking something we will be forced to buy. He likes walking the wide hallways of the mall and when he shows an interest, we put him in a coin-operated Flintstone Car kiddie ride. He has so much fun turning the steering wheel back and forth that we see no reason to insert coins. I’m reminded of my own frugal childhood. During the few times when I remember my parents ponying up the quarter to make the ride actually turn on, it did nothing much more than disappoint with its lack of capabilities.

When we ask Gus if he’s ready to go home, he shakes his head violently, but eventually we pull him from the ride and we walk to my truck.

“We have to go home so we can get hungry again,” I tell him.

*

Liz is reluctant to take our toddler to an establishment with the word *bar* in its name, but she relaxes a little when the hostess tells us they indeed have high chairs available, meaning that at least one parent somewhere in the past has thought that Bar Louie is not an altogether inappropriate place for a one-year-old. It’s not that we’re uncomfortable drinking alcohol around Gus, but we’ve both been bar frequenters way longer than we’ve been parents, so we’re still figuring out what is socially acceptable behavior on this side of the divide.

“Do you have a Veterans Day special?” I ask our server, who is so far removed from children that she asks if Gus—who has only been walking for a few months—needs a menu. As much as Liz and I love Gus, we agree it would be nice to be taken back to a time in our lives when we too might’ve

not known the difference between a one-year-old wearing a bib and a five-year-old toting a copy of Green Eggs and Ham. Even for just a day.

“I’m thinking about getting a bloody mary,” I say.

“YAAASSSSSS,” Liz says.

We sip at our savory vodka drinks and try to keep Gus engaged by sliding his clear plastic pacifier case around the table. When it hits the floor, Liz makes a groaning noise—*grrrrrr*—and slyly tucks the case into Gus’s diaper bag.

He reaches for a straw. We are out of other options, so we give him the straw, but keep him on a short leash with it. We don’t know what he is capable of with this new choking device.

My Veterans Day discount has gotten us a Thai Chicken Flatbread to split—yes, drill sergeant! But whoever made it went crazy with the peanut sauce, and the flatbread is nearly too salty to eat. I want another cocktail, but Gus has lost interest in the straw and it won’t be long until we’re out of plain flatbread crust to give him, so I ask for the check.

Maybe a change of venue will give him the forbearance he needs to be our chaperone. This day is the closest thing Liz and I have had to a date in months.

We make the two-minute drive across the avenue to Chili’s, where there is a line at the host stand. The hostess says it could be 45 minutes before we get a table, and we wouldn’t wait, but there’s a Barnes & Noble next door and the hostess says she’ll text me when our table’s ready.

At the bookstore, I follow Liz and Gus to the children’s section, where they peel stickers from a sheet that’s been laid out—free for the taking, regardless of service to the country—on one of the tables. Gus puts the stickers on his mother’s face and laughs. He finds the act more and more funny the more he repeats it. He picks up stuffed animals and carries them around until something else draws his attention. He runs to my arms and I pick him up. When I do, I catch the unmistakable smell of what we in our house refer to as “poo-poo.”

I work better under pressure in strange diaper-changing environments than Liz, so I carry him to the men’s restroom, and let down the Koala Kare changing table, which looks to be on its last leg. I don’t feel comfortable putting Gus on it. He’s kicking at the very idea of it. We forgot to put wipes in the bag. Nothing is going as it should. I carry him back to the sales floor without changing his diaper.

“Let’s just take him home,” I tell Liz.

When I get the automated text from Chili’s, I respond that we won’t be needing the table they’ve reserved us. Liz can tell that altering my Veterans Day plan again has deflated me. It shouldn’t be that big of a deal, but it is. I don’t exactly know why. Maybe it has something to do with my inability to enjoy the benefits of what I’ve earned. If this is a country in the midst of a misguided patriotic

resurgence, I want the baby back ribs I am due. I don't know. Maybe I'm just tired of not being able to come and go as I please because I have a kid now. I went 35 years without one, so it's reasonable that there should be a transition period for my new lifestyle, just like the Army told me there would be a transition period for my return home after deployment. There's always a transition period.

"I'm sorry you didn't get to enjoy all your Veterans Day meals," Liz says.

"It's okay," I tell myself as much as I'm telling her. Because it should be okay. I know that.

We sit for a few moments in silence as we drive down the road, away from the slew of chain restaurants who want to give me their mediocre food in exchange for the times I left my family for training over and over again, and the time I left to go try not to step on landmines, or get blown up when my drunken Russian counterparts rolled a bomb off the back of a truck into a hole where I stood, or the time I wondered if I should shoot the local civilian emphatically spouting a language as he rushed my battle buddy the first time we ventured outside the wire, or the times my heart broke when I visited the orphanages full of children whose parents had been slaughtered as part of a mass genocide.

"How about we go to Mom's, give him a bath, and then after we put him down, if you still want to go do your Veterans Day thing, you can."

"Are you sure?" I ask.

"Of course," Liz says. "I know how much it means to you."

"Thank you," I say. I reach across the console and place my hand on her leg.

Army Public Affairs Veteran **Guy Choate** has published essays in *War, Literature, & the Arts*, *Hobart*, and *Cream City Review*, among other places. He earned his MFA from The University of New Orleans, but now he directs the Argenta Reading Series in Little Rock, Arkansas, where he lives with his wife and their sons. Guy wrote "Veterans Day Special" to help him reconcile how he perceives his role in the country's military with how the country perceives that role—viewpoints that often vary. You can find him and his book *GAS! GAS! GAS!* online at guychoate.com.

Locked and Loaded

Kristen Dorsey

I'm reading a paperback, struggling against the 2 a.m. weight of my eyelids when I hear a rustling sound. *Probably just another gecko*, I think, but swing my legs to sit at the edge of the foldable green cot provided for the Marine on fire watch. I turn my head to peer out the nearest window; I stop moving and breathing to listen.

The Okinawan night is black and noisy with the buzz, chirp, and click of millions of oversized bugs that inhabit this tropical island. My cotton-stuffed head won't stay focused, and I recall the four-inch-long, orange, horror-movie-sized waterbug that crawled, earlier today, from an old concrete cistern outside the door, just a few yards from where I'm sitting.

It's time for my mandatory hourly inspection, anyway, of the interior of the squat brick building that serves as the Finance Office on "The Rock," Marine Corps Base Camp Smedley D. Butler, Okinawa, Japan. I stand and tug at the green wool uniform skirt that has ridden to the top of my thighs under the heavy utility belt that holds the holstered .45 caliber pistol. *Damn, I wish we could wear our Cammies on guard duty.* Wearing camouflage utilities with pants and boots would be so much more comfortable. I smooth the creases from my skirt, then reach under it to pull the twists out of my pantyhose. I spin the holstered .45 back into its proper horizontal arrangement on my hips—no sassy, low-slung, John Wayne-angled gunbelts allowed.

My jaw pops with an enormous yawn. I begin my tour of the building by "getting a visual" on the floor-to-ceiling battleship-gray steel vault that holds all the money on the island under a silent alarm. Next, I check the heads, military lingo for bathrooms, then I walk through the doorway into the dark, spacious, main office area.

I don't bother flicking on the overhead fluorescents; I work here, I know the terrain. I spend my uninspiring days calculating other Marines' paychecks. Despite my lifelong struggle with all things math, I scored well above the average recruit on the military aptitude test, called the ASVAB. *So much for the intelligence of the typical Jarhead*, I think with a snicker.

I pass Sgt Montgomery's desk: a perfect example of USMC brilliance. Every single day, he conducts a mandatory inspection of *just* me and PFC Johnson, the two women Marines, and he always smirks at the other men and says the same thing: "Your skirts are too low, and your top buttons are too high, Marines." The other male Marines that work in the office laugh, right on cue. *Fuckin' hilarious.* These daily "inspections" used to make me flush hot with shame and indignation, until Johnson, a tough city girl from Milwaukee, told me to just look past him and plan my weekend. That helps.

I continue my inspection. *Why do they call this fire watch? It's guard duty.* I sigh. *USMC jargon. Like learning a new language.* I continue down toward the front entry, glancing out windows as I go. I lift the hinged walk-thru panel of the front counter, cross to the office's front double-doors, and twist and tug on the doorknobs to ensure they're still secure. *As if they won't be* I yawn again and rub my gritty eyes.

“Fuh-*reeze!*” A thunderous, drawn-out bellow shatters the silence of the unlit room, and I spin around with a reflexive scream.

“Hands up! Don't move—Do! Not! Move!” the voice roars. “Do you hear me? I said *freeze!* Get your *Goddamn hands up, Marine!*”

I throw my hands up with a choked squeal. Pale light from a streetlamp through the front door window reveals the business end of a handgun, a scant arm's length from my forehead.

*

The first time I looked into the barrel of a handgun, it was a Ruger Blackhawk .44 caliber Magnum. It was 1970 and I was seven years old. I was playing dress-up at Mom's vanity, a rarely granted delight.

I wore Mom's chunky-gold, clip-on earrings, and multiple long strands of pink and white Jackie O. pearls—I loved the click and clack of them as they swayed across my slim torso. I was applying the sixth shade of lipstick to my clown-face when my two brothers entered the master bedroom.

“Hey, get out!” I said. “Mom let *me* be in here, not *you*.” I pointed with a lipstick at Mikey, two years my elder at nine, and little brother Dougie, six.

“Shut up, Krissy,” sneered Mikey. “Little crybaby.”

He made a beeline for my father's forbidden nightstand. Dougie paused in the doorway, wide-eyed, the fingers of one hand stuffed in his mouth. I slid off the harvest gold-colored crushed velvet stool. Indignant, I stomped between Dougie, still in the doorway, and Mikey, who slid open the nightstand drawer and peered inside. Slowly, reverently, he reached in, whispering under his breath. He turned. My father's .44 Blackhawk looked cartoon-sinister in Mikey's child-sized palms. He extended the gun with both hands, as he'd watched Daddy do countless times while shooting wax bullets—which are safer than regular bullets but can cause serious injury at close range—at paper targets in our garage. He closed one eye; his lips curled in a naughty grin.

I froze; a grown-up voice inside me calmly explained he was going to shoot me. He pulled the trigger.

The report was deafening in the small room—I barely heard my scream. I collapsed to the shag rug, shrieking and writhing in that involuntary response to intense pain. The wax bullet struck my right hip bone, missing soft tissue. During the ride to the emergency room, my mother squeezed me too tightly on her lap in the passenger seat as I sobbed against her chest. My father white-knuckled the steering wheel in silence. My two brothers huddled together, blonde crew-cuts pressed close, in the back seat.

“My children will *never* see or touch a gun again,” Mom growled through clenched teeth while pointing a manicured fingernail in my father's face.

I had an impressive, rainbow-colored goose egg on my hip and walked with a limp for weeks. Mom barely spoke to Dad until I healed.

I didn't see a firearm again until boot camp.

*

Parris Island, South Carolina, Marine Corps Recruit Depot, 1981. We crammed into cattle cars and rode to the rifle range to familiarization-fire the M-16 combat rifle; women had only "fam-fired" the M-16 since 1979. We spread out along the grassy ridge, the human-torso, black silhouette targets so far in the distance I had to squint to see them.

There was a male Marine rifle range coach assigned to each recruit. They were strutting around, laughing, and loud-talking. They took bets on which of us would get the most hits on the targets.

"I'll bet five bucks on...this one," one of the range coaches said as he pointed to me.

"OK," an adjacent Marine laughed. "I'm bettin' on this one." He indicated another woman in my platoon by flicking the brim of her starched camouflage cover with his thumb and forefinger.

We were to fire 50 rounds total, in four positions: standing, sitting, kneeling, and prone.

We'd sat through classes about the M16 combat assault rifle: we broke them down, cleaned them, reassembled them, drilled with them. Now it was time to fire.

We prepared for the first volley: standing position. The Marine range coaches reminded us again how to sight the target, to stop breathing, to squeeze—not pull—the trigger.

"Ready on the right; ready on the left; all ready on the firing line," the tower NCO called over the loudspeaker in his sing-song voice.

I had never fired a weapon. Ever. I looked through the rear sight. The tiny target zoomed in to sharp focus—the head and torso of a man. I steadied my shaking hands. I held my breath.

"Commence firing," came the order.

I could not squeeze the trigger; I imagined a deafening blast and harsh recoil.

All around me came the sounds of the other women's rifles.

"Cease fire, cease fire," came the song from the tower. A red disk is waved back and forth in front of my target, indicating a complete miss.

“Oh shit! Maggie’s drawers! She dry-fired!” said my assigned Marine. “There goes my beer. Christ,” he moaned as he slapped some bills into the other Marine’s hand. Then he leaned down, his nose inches from mine.

“Do *not* do that again, recruit,” he yelled into my face. “Fire your weapon!”

My range coach thumped my thigh with his polished, thickly cleated boot as I prepared to fire from the cross-legged, sitting position. “I’m counting on getting my beer money back, recruit,” he laughed.

I fired that M16—it made a small *pfloof* and barely rocked me. By the time we got to the prone position, I hit the target’s center every time. I was stunned at the ease of firing this deadly weapon at a silhouette that could be a person. And I surprised at myself—my fear morphed into exhilaration. I was *good* at this. My coach got his money back and then some.

*

After boot camp and MOS training, I got orders to Okinawa, Japan. I was good enough at my underwhelming payroll job to get promoted to Lance Corporal just before I turned twenty years old, and I joined the mandatory rotation for fire watch: staying up all night to guard the vast stash of money in the base vault. But first, I had to qualify to carry the Finance Office’s .45 caliber pistol worn by the Marine pulling that day’s 24 hour guard duty.

My range coach took me seriously this time; there was no teasing or betting. He showed me the sidearm, explained how it worked, gave me the safety briefing. He was a handsome Staff Sergeant in sharply pressed cammies, and I felt all fluttery when he looked at me with his cinnamon-brown eyes.

On the firing range, my coach stepped behind me, gripped my elbows, and instructed me to hold my arms with tension. *This pistol is so small compared to a rifle*, I thought confidently, *and I kicked ass with that M16*. I didn’t realize that the recoil of a weapon has little to do with its physical size and shape.

I gripped the gun in both hands and looked down the barrel. It was hard to concentrate—the Staff Sergeant stood close behind me, and I imagined what it would feel like to lean against his chest. I smelled his cologne and felt the tickle of his breath on my neck as he spoke.

The tower NCO cleared the line, then gave the command to fire. I squeezed the trigger.

Boom!

The weapon recoiled with a violent kick—and I was unprepared. My arms, still held at the elbow by my sexy range coach, flew straight up into the air. I lost my balance and toppled onto him, and together we crashed to the ground.

“Range violation!” someone screamed and in seconds, three other Marines rushed to pull the firearm from my hands.

I was horrified. I climbed off the Staff Sergeant and stammered multiple apologies. My face was so red I thought it might combust.

“It was my fault,” the range coach said, palms up, fingers spread. He shook his head and dusted off his cover, which got knocked off his high-and-tight during our tumble. “I failed in my duty to properly explain the weapon.”

The other Marines walked off, slapping each other, guffawing, and hooting “ooh-rah!” and “out-*stand*-ing!”

I wanted to crawl under a rock and die.

We continued, more soberly, and I qualified. As I left, my coach assured me that I did fine. Besides, I would likely never be on either end of a .45 in a real exchange of fire. I was just a female admin support Marine.

*

I hear a series of metallic clicks. Five slow-moving shadow-lumps slink closer. The overhead lights snap on—I cringe and squint and barely defy the impulse to drop my hands and cower. In the glaring light, my eyes lock on to the cannon-sized black hole at the end of the MP’s gun. In my peripheral vision, I see a bloodshot eyeball through a slit down that long, long barrel. I am at utter, petrified attention; freezing-hot waves prickle my arms and tingle my scalp. The five MPs scattered around the Finance Office are also motionless, firearms locked and loaded.

“Do *not* move. Do *not* lower your hands,” barks the voice behind the loaded weapon in my face. He removes one hand from his pistol, but the dark hole of the muzzle and his eyeball don’t waver. He extends his free hand and slides slowly toward me.

“I am going to remove your sidearm,” he states, loud enough for all to hear, and the black hole looms closer to my forehead. My hip rocks as he grips my .45; he uses his thumb to flick open the snap that holds it in place. He slides my firearm from the holster and steps back.

“At ease. Stand down!” my MP orders over his shoulder without releasing me from his stare or his pointed gun. The other MPs rise from their crouches as the sound of safety locks click-click-click through the room. My captor raises his .45 vertically to his shoulder and takes another backward step, rising to full height. My vision snaps away from that endless black hole, and I whimper and lock onto his face. He and the others are in full Military Police gear—vest, armband, loaded utility belt, firearm. All six Marines holster their weapons.

“At ease, Lance Corporal,” he says again, this time at me. I slowly lower my arms with jerky movements that quake through me. “What’s your name, Marine?” he asks, and he grips my elbow and propels me into a walk in front of him. I flinch and stumble but allow it. Two years ago, before

boot camp, my 18-year-old self would have crumbled to the floor in a hysterical puddle. Now, it only happens on the inside.

“Lance Corporal Dorsey,” I whisper. My teeth chatter, so I clamp my jaw. He continues to push me to the back of the building, where minutes before, I’d sat on the duty cot. The back door is wide open, and the laughing, loud-talking MPs swarm the area. They don’t acknowledge me. My MP pushes me to the duty desk; a second MP slaps a sheet of paper on the desktop in front of me.

“Gecko probably walked across the vault and tripped the silent alarm,” my escort says. “We observed you a while from outside, so I knew it was a false alarm.” He thumps a thick finger twice on the signature line of the report.

“Sign this,” he says. In a daze, I look at the paper. It is an incident report, and in bold, square print, it reads: “False alarm. Building secure. Converted to a training exercise.”

“Training exercise?” I whisper under my breath and sign as the Marine on duty. My signature is spidery—jagged and broken in spots. There’s a loud buzzing in my ears and I cannot quite piece together the meaning.

“Yep. Made the call,” he said. “Why waste a good training op? Captain will be pleased.”

He slaps his palm over the report and snatches it up with one hand; the other waves in a circular motion above his head, signaling.

“Let’s go, Jarheads,” he heads for the door. “Quit the smokin’ and jokin’.”

They stomp off into the night, their laughter fading. I close and lock the door behind them, then stumble to the head, hug the toilet, and vomit.

Kristen Dorsey is an award-winning fine artist, freelance writer, and USMC veteran. Her work has appeared in the *Chautauqua Literary Journal*, *Press Pause Press*, and the *Atlantis Magazine*. Her nonfiction piece, “Semper Fi,” was nominated for the 2020 Pushcart Prize in Literature.

Kristen believes that writing about being a woman in the military—all aspects of the experience—will result in positive change. “I served during a time in our culture where sexism and harassment were an expected and accepted element of military service,” Kristen says. “I boxed up and stored away most of my USMC experiences until the #metoo movement gained momentum. I was assured by women serving on active duty that gender bias and misogyny are still alive and well in our armed forces.” Kristen encourages other women veterans to find their voices and share their stories.

VISUAL ARTS FEATURE

INTERVIEW WITH TERUKO NIMURA, ARTIST

Teruko Nimura is a visual artist based in Washington state. Her diverse multi-media practice includes installation, sculpture, drawing, video/performance, social and public art. She is interested in themes of interconnectedness, collective memory and trauma, cultural, racial, and female identity, motherhood, and the climate crisis. Her varied explorations of mediums and modes are united by an emphasis on process, with the use of multiples and repetition as ritualistic discovery. She has an appreciation for the inherent language of materials and the variations and flaws in handmade objects.

Teruko received her BFA from San Francisco Art Institute and her MFA from UT Austin. She has exhibited in the U.S., Mexico, and Canada. She was an OX-Bow School of Art Fellow, a mentee artist in the City of Austin's Launchpad program for emerging public artists, featured in the 2017 TX Biennial, and one of five Austin artists invited to create work for New York City Highline's traveling joint art initiative "New Monuments for New Cities." Since moving from Texas to Washington to be closer to family, she was selected as a 2020 Public Art Reaching Community artist with the City of Tacoma and will be exhibiting at the Bellwether Festival in Bellevue in 2021. She lives and works in University Place with her husband, two young children, and three cats.

[Link To Watch Interview](#)

Abby E. Murray, Collateral Editor in Chief:

Hi, everyone. I'm Abby Murray and I'm the editor of *Collateral*. I am here today with Teruko Nimura and we are going to be talking about her work. This is for our spring issue that'll be going live on May 15th. Teruko has a lot of different sculpture work to talk about, a lot of range. I'm just so glad that she's here to talk with us about the impact of her work. And we'll see in some of the discussion too, how her work touches on the theme of *Collateral's* mission. Welcome.



Teruko Nimura, Artist, Tacoma WA:

Thank you. I'm so happy to be here.

Abby:

I'm really glad to have you. I'm really interested in—I really like hearing artists' stories about how they chose different mediums, especially when they work in multiple mediums. I want to know a little bit more about how you

first approached—why sculpture, why this art form?

Teruko:

Well, I started out doing drawings mainly. I loved pencil and charcoal, and those are both really physical mediums. You smudge them, you erase them, and I ended up using it almost as though I was rendering in three dimensions, because it was a flat surface but I would create a format of these blobs of flat color. I moved naturally to clay from that, which is also a really tactile medium. I think I've always been drawn to things that include or activate the senses—just personally—but also just my enjoyment in life, like my experiences and things.

I think, from drawing and touching the paper and the graphite, [I] went to clay. And then from clay, I did a lot of rendering the body, doing traditional figures in clay. I enjoyed that, but it was so technical. There's so much to learn with clay and I still love it, but going to grad school, I had so many disasters with clay. I actually went in with an emphasis on clay and then started jumping to things that I could get my ideas out easier, and that was fabric and that was paper. Still sculptural mediums, tactile mediums, but they had less technical obstacles.

That just led me to installation. I jumped, I feel like, in this natural progression for me, starting with just the love of the tactile. And then the installations, I feel like with fabric and paper, they were able to activate all senses. It was satisfying—that desire to appreciate the senses of my work.

Abby:

Yeah. When I think of graphite and charcoal and smudging, you were saying, that's an art form that it quite literally rubs off on you. You carry marks. You're marked by your art.

Teruko:

Mm-hmm.

Abby:

You can almost see where the artist has been just by looking at her hands.

Teruko:

Yeah. I did a performance piece, one of the only public performance pieces that I did, that was using a sculptural thing that I made out of paper, but I used charcoal as well. It ended up being like I was drawing on these objects almost, with the smudging of the charcoal. It was interesting that you say that, because I was starting to bridge all of these things together, all the mediums just started mixing around and then just expanded into installation and performance work.



Abby:

Yeah. I'm glad that you mentioned, too, that your work is physical work. That it started in drawing, which is physical, and so is sculpture, because I think we often forget that art is physical, including the literary arts, writing out or typing.

Teruko:

Mm-hmm.

Abby:

It's something that we have to use our bodies for. Our bodies are present in our work as well. I'm glad that you mentioned that because not very many people bring that up.

Teruko:

It was always easier for me to create, to understand, perform in space, rather than try to make the illusion of it. I couldn't in two dimensions. So say with drawing or something, you have to use color and your understanding of light, to create a form. But in sculpture, you create the form and that's where you start. I could touch it and I could see it and move it around, and that's how my brain could understand it. It was easier for me to know it and study it.

Abby:

Yeah. Did you become an artist at a very young age? Did you recognize yourself as an artist when you were young?



Teruko:

I was always doing these periodic exclamations of like, "I'm bored. I'm bored," all the time, "I'm bored." And my sister started packing me these little backpacks. She called them "I'm bored bags" and they had things to help me, because I was always just needing to do something.

I think I started drawing really early as a way to divert some of my anxious energy. It helped to

calm me, it helped with my hands busy. I was able to focus in my mind and could calm down and be more clear. [My sister] recognized that pretty early I think. I would go into my room and just draw all over my body. I wanted to cover myself in color for some reason. There were lots of markers just everywhere and my parents didn't discourage it. They were okay with it. It washed off. It was fine. I think with that non-shaming, they let me do that and they encouraged me to do that, I think that helped to cultivate that being an artist is just what I want to do, and it's okay.

Abby:

Yeah. Well, to recognize it as art—and I think sometimes we can tend not to recognize art when it is in the bodies and hands of young people—to hear that [your family] embraced that and also saw the practical reality that colors wash off.

Teruko:

Yeah.

Abby:

Yeah. Why not embrace it? Actually, that's one of the things I wanted to say about your work, is that in looking at your different projects, all of them, really the common observation I have, is that they have such freedom of movement, not just in the three-dimensional form, but also across the color spectrum. There's always great contrast in your work, bright yellows and reds up against dark browns and blacks. I see that as movement. It appears that your sculptures are moving. As an artist, how do you perceive movement in sculpture?

Teruko:

I think I like to use repetition and color to create movement in static sculptural objects. I think for me, they express more when I'm asking the viewer to move with the work, like with their eye or with their body. With the way that I use repetition a lot or detail, I like to create an impression with an overall object and then hopefully the details or all the little things that are in the work, bring the viewer closer. And that movement of discovery or leaning in toward the work creates another layer of experience or understanding for the viewer. The details are important.

And then I'm hoping that once they see the details that brought them in, that they again move back and look again with the detail now understood or in mind. I try with the work, to have these layers of experience for the viewer to ask them to actively engage with the looking process in stages.

Abby:

Yeah.

Teruko:

I think with movement, that's kind of not only visually, but sort of with the viewer in mind and their body and their experience of the work.

Abby:

Yeah. It's funny that you say clay was so technical, when I look at the origami work that you've done and it seems very technical. I have yet to fold a paper crane without ruining it. To see such fine detail, the fine creases, the fine point, the bend versus the break. That's



something that I see in your work, so it's funny when you say it's so technical. I'm like, "What are you talking about?"

Teruko:

The definition of technical moves around.

Abby:

When you talk about the viewer of your work too, I wondered—and this wasn't a question that I had sent to you beforehand—but I wonder, people always ask, "who is your audience?" I want to ask you, who is your audience? Who do you want to reach most with your work? Not necessarily who may be experiencing your art, but is there an audience that you want to reach that you may not have yet? Is there an ideal audience for your work?

Teruko:

An ideal audience... I feel like I always hope to shift perspective somehow. Maybe my ideal audience is somebody who maybe doesn't see a lot of art or like thinking about art, but there's some way that they access it, like a public piece that I've done or something they encounter outside that I've made. Ideally, it is somebody that I've sparked something in that maybe they didn't realize. It doesn't have to be the art world or anything, so any regular person.

Abby:

No, that makes sense I think, especially because your work touches on some universal human themes that apply to all of us. War impacts all of us, not just the people who are sculpting and are curating and visiting museums, it impacts all of us. I think that makes sense. I feel connected to you in that, as a poet, my ideal audience is someone who is suspicious of poetry, because I like to say I'm suspicious of it as well.



Teruko:

That's wonderful. Yes.

Abby:

Yeah. Readers of *Collateral* will have a link to your work, but can you tell me a little bit about "For Every Sadako"? I want to know how this project was conceived and prepared and presented. It was the first of your work that I saw.

This is just a side story—I went to Catholic school when I was very, very young in Puyallup, Washington, and the nuns used to walk us from our school down to the site

where Camp Harmony was, and Japanese and Japanese Americans [had been] behind fences there. My grandmother remembers playing with kids on the other side of the fence, kicking a ball, and running up and down. It's now the fairgrounds, this place where you hear happy screams of people

on rides and eating cotton candy. The nuns used to walk us down there and tell us what had taken place there and what was still there on the land. When I saw “For Every Sadako”, and having read the book, which is for children and young adults, it was very powerful to me. It brought me back to when I was small and when I was first starting to realize that grownups could be evil. That’s really disturbing as a kid.

Teruko:

Yeah.

Abby:

Your parents are constantly telling you, “You need to be kind. You need to be respectful because otherwise you’re going to fail at being an adult.” And then when we’re young, we inevitably learn that some adults missed the memo. Anything you want to tell me about “For Every Sadako”?



Teruko:

Well, when I was six years old, I went to Japan with my parents and sister. We went to Hiroshima Peace Park, which has a giant monument to Sadako. I think of it now, looking back, that it was like the first public art piece that I encountered. It made a huge impact on me, because not only was it the first time I really understood that a child could die—and I was a child at the time—but that the reason that she died was not... it was external and it was something that was imposed upon her. And then of course the whole tragedy of Hiroshima. I also learned to fold cranes on that trip. It was a very tactile experience too, going to the site, experiencing the monument, learning the story, and then connecting with this other child that died, and realizing that I could die too. Then the following year, my father died unexpectedly.

That was this huge life event. I think through that loss and in turn, that kind of loss of a connection to my culture, or that side of my culture, because my mother is Filipino American. I’ve had this great desire to connect with Japanese culture and craft, in an attempt to connect again with my father in some ways.



I think that story, it just stayed with me and it continues to influence so much of my work. Now that we have so much tragedy in the world that I just can't fathom and it overwhelms me on a daily basis, I think back to how I can process all of that. It's just through making, I guess, trying to express or understand or communicate through making. ["For Every Sadako"] was inspired by the legend of the cranes and this wish for humanity really, to wake up and realize, with the coffin—it's a mirrored coffin. If the viewer is looking at this object, then they're implicated in this reality that you either have the potential to make this world better, in terms of anything I suppose, or you kind of stand by the wayside and become complicit.

That mirror is meant to bring the viewer in more, pull them in more beyond just a spectator. Their face if they look down, the cranes are above them. You can see that they become part of your work.

Abby:

Yeah.

Teruko:

And it's almost dependent on them too.

Abby:

Yeah, definitely. It's a dialogue piece, the reader needs to experience it.

Teruko:

Mm-hmm.

Abby:

Having known that you were six years old when you went to Japan, experiencing the coffin and the mirror in particular, has a new meaning.



Teruko:

Yeah.

Abby:

It's a horrible new meaning, but it is also terribly vulnerable. You're inspiring other artists in the making, to make through this devastation that we can't even really articulate. It's gotten so bad.

Teruko:

Yeah.

Abby:

What are your fears in creating? I mean I have my own as a poet, but I think all artists have, honestly, a string of fears. We could just list [them] over and over, and I'm afraid that, I'm afraid that...

Teruko:

Yeah.

Abby:

We'd have pages and pages, or worse, some kind of Mobius strip.

Teruko:

Yeah. It's these cycles of things.

Abby:

Yeah.

Teruko:

Absolutely. Yes.

Abby:

What are your fears?

Teruko:

I think fear is definitely there almost every time I try to attempt to make anything. The fear that I won't be able to make it, fear that I won't be able to say what I want to say, fear that what I want to say is stupid or not worth saying, and fear that I'm not doing enough. It's so much fear all of the time.

Abby:

Yeah.

Teruko:

Sadly, it does motivate. I know with the last couple of weeks, I did a really intense proposal for a public art project that I am hoping to get at Bainbridge Island. I was afraid the whole time, that I couldn't. I was like, "I can't, I'm just not ready. I can't do it." But I pushed through that fear and I surprised myself that what I could do; I actually was able to communicate what I wanted. I feel really happy with where the proposal went and I'm just hoping that it gets accepted. But I think that getting to the other side of that fear, that's art-making for me in some ways too.

Abby:

You say you push through it. And I wonder (I feel artists are always trying to learn from one another, especially when it comes to enduring and processing our own fears) in that experience in particular, with this proposal, how did you push through it? Hindsight is a wonderful thing and now you can look back. You said that you surprised yourself, but how did you do it?

Teruko:

I wanted it so badly. I just feel like it's such an amazing project. It's part of the Japanese American Exclusion Memorial; there's a call for art to be put on the existing memorial or supplement the existing memorial. It was such a wonderful project that I just wanted it so badly. I don't know. That's all I can think of to say for that. It just seemed like the perfect opportunity and I just had to get through it.





Abby:

Yeah. Really embracing the want. I mean want is an action, it's something that we do. It's not something static. Wanting something is a way of pushing something, it makes sense to me. Before I get completely off track, "For Every Sadako" started when you, I would say, when you were six years old. How did you start it when you began working with materials for the installation?

Teruko:

I've been working with folding cranes for a while and just the potential of what just

that gesture could communicate on its own. Knowing the legend and knowing this cultural connection and this story—sorry, my child is screaming. I don't know if you can hear that... [Zoom life, people!]

Abby:

I can hear that and I'm so glad it's not my kid.

Teruko:

Yeah. I'm starting to explore more materials, like the inherent language of materials and what materials can say on their own, but also then that gesture and how that can build meaning too.

Abby:

Mm-hmm.

Teruko:

I think that I was using the cranes a lot, just because of all of the wars and atrocities that are happening around the world. I had to use my lens somehow to talk about it.

Abby:

Mm-hmm.

Teruko:

That was the story that came to me, really to address all the injustices that are happening now around the world. ...I'm not sure if I answered your question.

Abby:

You did. Thinking about, just at the tail end of your response, and you are



acknowledging the impact of war on so many of us too, which we talked about in the beginning of the interview. We often talk about the impact of war on art and on artists. *Collateral*, specifically, is publishing work that examines the impact beyond the combat zone. So not the battle story, but the ramifications, the long lasting ripple effects of violent conflict. But I wondered, do you see it as reciprocal? And I'm asking this I guess, just artist to artist, because I'm curious, do you see art having an impact on violence in the world?

Teruko:

I have to hope that there is some sort of impact, that we are dampening it somehow, whether it's been just at the smallest level where we sparked something in somebody and they decide that they want to be more involved in activism or something changes their perspective somehow. My greatest hope is that we just affect humanity, that we can show through our work what kind of damage that can have, like emotional, physical. And that it helps to reveal that humanity and stop the othering of the enemy somehow.



Abby:

Mm-hmm.

Teruko:

I have to hope that. I don't know if there's a real quantifiable impact, but I have to [hope].

Abby:

Yeah. I understand that. Just the repetition of, *I have to hope that*. Because I'm unfamiliar with what the alternative is.

Teruko:

Yeah.

Abby:

The alternative to hope isn't something that I'm familiar with I guess. That makes sense. That's something to think about. Speaking of repetition and how to keep going in spite of the horrible things that spark our work, do you have an artistic philosophy or mantra? Do you have something that always comes to mind that keeps pushing you forward?

Teruko:

I think that losing my father at such a young age, and then having that awareness so early of death and loss, thinking of every day as a gift is kind of the only thing that kind of, I feel like, keeps me



going. You don't ever know, but every day, what can you do and how can you make use of that day? Every day is a gift.

Abby:

Yeah, that makes sense. And it's something that I haven't...I think I needed to be reminded of that. Before I conclude the interview, I wanted to know, do you have any works in process right now that *Collateral* readers could check out? This interview will be featured on May 15th, but if you have stuff that's coming out in 2021, I'd love to know about it.

Teruko:

Thank you. Yes. I was accepted as an artist for the public art reaching community program through the city of Tacoma. I was a cohort of I believe 10 or 12 artists. We did sort of a training session with the city. We were also enlisted to create a work, a temporary public project, in Tacoma. Some of them launched

already. Some of them got delayed. Mine got delayed because of location and the pandemic and what have you. I'm going to be launching that sometime, either early summer, late spring, not quite sure, at one of the parks in Tacoma. The piece is about basically the pandemic and this fear of losing the ability to relate to one another, and this hope that we can come back together. I'm using the prayer flags basically. And if you can see behind me, there's this black circle.

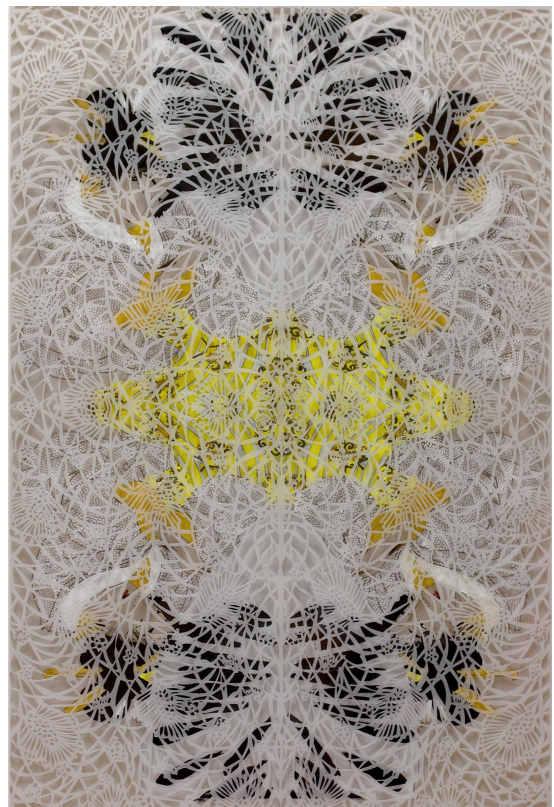
Abby:

Yeah.

Teruko:

That's one of the sketches for the work, but it's going to be this 12 x 12 foot series of flags. They'll be all cut up in strands and then it'll be a circle and it'll be—it's hard to explain. When you approach the work, it looks like the circle is not evident, you can't see it. But when you walk around the work, the circle emerges. All the flags create the image of the circle. I'm trying to express a feeling of unity, that we move past the chaos and find the right perspective. And there it is, we're connected again.

That's the goal of the work and it should be up for a couple of weeks, probably out in one of the parks. If it



happens before the issue comes out, I'll let you know the specifics, but I'm still working through those with the city.

Abby:

Okay. Yeah. Again, with the movement of your work. The viewer has to move around it in order to see what emerges—that's beautiful. And people can follow you on social media. Can you share how people can do that?

Teruko:

Yeah. My handle is my name, TerukoNimura_art. I share a lot of my process on that, and finished works and things.

Abby:

Awesome. Well, hopefully people will follow you on Instagram. I follow you on Instagram.

Teruko:

Thank you so much, Abby.

Abby:

Thank you so much Teruko; this has been really helpful. I want to go back and look at all of your art again now. Getting to know you a little bit and taking that into the experience of your work, I think makes it all the richer.

Teruko:

Oh, thank you so much. Thanks for taking the time.

