

# COLLATERAL

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\*Pushcart Prize nominee

# POETRY

# Kargil

Ankush Banerjee

*(after Sudeep Sen's "Kargil")*

The War works with unparalleled diligence,  
Yet no one gives it  
a word of praise  
—Dunya Mikhail

Praise the war that cannot  
change course of rivers in this valley  
of omens and bomb-wounds.

*Dear son, last evening, it took us forty-five minutes  
to defrost a tomato in water  
heated from Kerosene brought here last October.*

Praise the war that could not  
puncture peaks—4590, 5140, Tololing;  
adorning them instead with ghosts  
of new martyrs and old narrative.

*We don't bathe from October to March.  
The truancy of hope keeps Chillblains away.*

Praise the war that cannot  
melt ice, grow a tree, father fruits—  
in this valley of 'whispers and small town clamour'

*Ponies the size of logs  
carry 25 litre barrels  
in minus three degree. I accompanied a  
sprightly pony  
called Tillu. During our climb,  
Naik Birju Ram  
got frostbite. The pony was okay.*

Praise the war that cannot  
not end; rising like a threnody from mountains,  
always approaching, but never quite there,  
until we find it like a stray bullet and silence

*We take blood thinners. We melt ice water for  
drinking. Canned food slowly grows  
on you. Birju's ankle was amputated. The pony is okay.*

Praise the war that gives us  
memorials, stories, films, novels, museums,  
advertising jingles, *a reason*, perhaps

*The last blizzard blocked the TV antenna.  
I need to put out this Kerosene lamp.  
Moon shines on snow. I miss birdsong.  
I miss that pony called Tillu.*

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“I remember, reading Sudeep Sen’s poem “[Kargil](#)” had made me very uneasy. My unease expanded manifold, and in different directions, when, in March 2022, I visited this border town, which had been one of the epicenters of the 1999 India-Pakistan conflict. This poem is an attempt to articulate that unease, and fashion a certain kind of narrative, that from a combatant’s perspective, which is otherwise often misrepresented, or exaggerated, (or completely left out) in cultural representations.” —Ankush Banerjee

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**Ankush Banerjee** (he/his), poet, Culture Studies PhD research scholar and serving Naval Officer, is the author of *An Essence of Eternity* (2016). He has been recipient of the 2019 All India Poetry Prize, as well as the United Services Institution of India Gold Medals in 2013, 2017, and 2022, for his essays on Military Ethics and Leadership. His poetry, reviews and essays appear in *Eclectica*, *Cha*, *The Bombay Literary Magazine*, *The Tupelo Quarterly*, *Kitaab* and *The Indian Express*, among others. His work has also appeared in the anthologies *Yearbook of Indian Poetry 2020 and 2021*, *Best of Asian Poetry 2021*, and *Converse: Contemporary English Poetry by Indians*. He is currently stationed at New Delhi.

# The Year You Served

Naomi Dean

The fear of a closed casket,  
the fear of an open one: it was  
a ragged year, a year of fear.  
We feared flower arrangements  
and hymns, dates chiseled in stone.

The flag we flew and the yellow  
ribbons we wore wouldn't be  
enough, we feared. I worried little  
about my pregnancy, more about  
whether you would meet your  
nephew. I was trying for hope,  
settling for worry when I was  
lucky enough to avoid fear.

Before I was pregnant, before you  
were gone, I feared this would be our  
last meal together: dinner in the Haight,  
too much sangria, or too little,  
*plátanos fritos*, black beans and rice.

The next morning, the fear that  
the drive to the airport would be  
the last one: the ride too long  
and not nearly long enough,  
with everything and nothing to say.  
What did we talk about? Farming,  
I guess, to calm us: back to our  
roots and our hope for return.

The fear of southeast Baghdad,  
of your next mission, the one  
you'd mentioned on the webcam,  
the one you'd do in your morning,  
while we slept, or tried to.

We didn't know everything to be  
afraid of until you came back  
to tell us. It turns out there was  
fear even in our hope: your  
replacements. Still green, they  
stopped a car they shouldn't have.  
You had a creeping feeling as you

searched the trunk, a fear of explosives.

Above all, I feared the phone.  
I ran to it; I wanted to forget it.  
I wanted to forget phones  
setting off blasts. Would it ring  
in my classroom, or on my cell?

No bomb, no IED. A phone just  
a phone again. Our fear cuts  
loose from our bones. Our lungs  
relax, like we forgot they could.  
Take us home with you, now,  
where we'll answer the phone  
like we're normal and forget  
with our muscles, when we can.

---

**Naomi Dean** has taught English and Spanish in Brooklyn, New York, and Palo Alto, California. She currently teaches ESL at a public elementary school in the Twin Cities, Minnesota, where she lives with her husband, son, and daughter. Her poem "The Year You Served" is about her experience of her brother's deployment to Iraq with the Minnesota National Guard. Naomi's work has recently appeared in *Poetica*, *Sylvia*, and *The Madrigal* and is forthcoming in *NiftyLit*.

# Little Boy Man

Lenora Rain-Lee Good

You wear a pair of camos, size small,  
still too big for your slight frame,  
but they are yours. You wear my old  
combat boots, ready to fight  
all wars, real or imagined. After all,  
you know how it's done—you've  
seen all the Rambo movies several  
times over, you've flown as Top Gun.  
(You generously left John Wayne for me.)

I watch you strut down the street  
surrounded by your platoon,  
on the lookout for the enemy  
who is known to set up ambushes  
in the imaginary jungle, the village streets,  
wherever the war of today takes place.

Near-mortally-wounded by  
ambush in our front yard,  
you manage to drag yourself,  
and your equally wounded  
buddies out of danger, behind  
the rhododendron, then charge  
the enemy behind the lilac bunker,  
take out that nest of machine  
gunners. You and your buddies  
have saved the day, saved your mothers,  
saved your country, and perhaps even  
more importantly, saved your lunch.

I wonder, how brave will you be  
if you ever face the actuality? I wore  
the uniform in the hope you never will.  
I hope you will never hear the scream  
of bullets, the cries of the wounded, the shriek  
of rockets, the explosions of bombs.  
I hope you never get a snootful of the copper  
stench of blood as it flows freely  
from gaping wounds, the stink of bowel  
and bladder released by fear,  
or pain or death.

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“‘Little Boy Man’ was written about my son, who wore my combat boots to play soldier in his youth.” —Lenora Rain-Lee Good

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**Lenora Rain-Lee Good** is a veteran of the Women’s Army Corps (Viet Nam era) and the Air National Guard. She is the author of three and a third published books of poetry—*Blood on the Ground* (Redbat Books, 2016), *Marking the Hours* ([Cyberwit.net](http://Cyberwit.net) 2020), and *The Bride’s Gate and Other Assorted Writings* ([Cyberwit.net](http://Cyberwit.net), 2021). She co-authored *Reflections: Life, the River, and Beyond* (KDP 2020), with Jim Bumgarner and Jim Thielman, hence “the third.” She may be reached through her website <https://coffeebreakescapes.com>

# Exodus

Lily Jarman-Reisch

We celebrate in exile, freed  
from shelling across the border,  
safe for now.  
My children's names, blood types  
marked on their clothes,  
we fled Mariupol  
through ash-thick air rank with sulfur.  
Bullets pelted the streets.  
Missiles smothered my sister's howls  
in a delivery room crushed under concrete,  
my grandfather sliced by shrapnel  
while hugging his panicked dog.  
We lowered his body  
in gouged ground.  
We wailed from singed throats  
when they bombed Babyn Yar.  
Our shrines, our homes gone,  
our city stranded by a scalded sea.  
There is still  
a scarf for a seder plate,  
the bitter herbs—spears of grass  
torn from cold ground.  
A soup can awaits Elijah.  
From this narrow place, we wait  
to emerge in open air.

To emerge in open air  
from this narrow place, we wait.  
A soup can awaits Elijah.  
Torn from cold ground  
the bitter herbs—spears of grass.  
A scarf for a seder plate.  
There is still  
our city stranded by a scalded sea,  
our shrines, our homes gone.  
When they bombed Babyn Yar,  
we wailed from singed throats.  
In gouged ground,  
we lowered his body—  
while hugging his panicked dog,  
my grandfather sliced by shrapnel.  
In a delivery room crushed under concrete,  
missiles smothered my sister's howls.  
Bullets pelted the streets.  
Through ash-thick air rank with sulfur  
we fled Mariupol.  
Marked on their clothes,  
my children's names, blood types.  
Safe for now  
from shelling across the border,  
we celebrate in exile, freed.

---

“Exodus” is a palindrome or mirrored poem, in which the second half mirrors the first by repeating its lines in reverse order. With its pattern of repetition, a palindrome seemed a fitting form for conveying both the hauntedness of Ukrainian refugees, and the recurring exoduses from persecution—the “narrow place” mentioned in the poem—experienced historically by Jews, including Ukrainian Jews. Many of those who fled last spring from Russian missiles to other countries marked their freedom at Passover. The holiday—suggested in the poem by the seder plate, the bitter herbs, and the soup can used for Elijah’s cup—was first celebrated after the exodus of Israelites from slavery in Egypt.” —Lily Jarman-Reisch

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Lily Jarman-Reisch’s poems appear or are forthcoming in *The Military Review*, *Journal of Veterans Studies*, *CALYX Journal*, *3<sup>rd</sup> Wednesday*, *Snapdragon*, *The Fourth River*, *1807*, *Route 7 Review*, *Rise Up Review*, *Light*, *Dendrop*, *Gleam*, *MONO*, *Mediterranean Poetry*, and other international literary journals. A poetry reviewer for *The Los Angeles Review*, she has been a journalist in Washington, D.C., and

Athens, Greece, and has held administrative and teaching positions at the Universities of Michigan and Maryland.

# Educating Innocence

Gordon Kippola

I feel the time has come for us to chat, Willy;  
if you concur, keep barking. Pam, my neighbor—  
your owner, suggests that you are more afraid

of me than I'm afraid of you. Pam also suspects  
my terror is pulling your trigger. She's got a point:  
fake calm is kind of my thing. As I walked past

the cottage due east of this chain-link from mine,  
the house that you guard, you slipped your leash.  
Forty Rottweiler kilos of claws and Willy teeth

ran fast and straight at Antiquated Me. I froze.  
You chomped my wrist, but didn't break the skin,  
which gives me hope that you and I can still arrive

at mutual respect. It's vital that you learn, good boy,  
as mammals go, man is yellow-jacket-adjacent, just  
orders of magnitude awfuler. Fomenting assholeries,

we perfect our nature in war. Our swollen brains,  
our talky-tongues, and these opposable thumbs  
makes *homo sapiens* your pesky apex predator.

Preferring dogs to people, I'd love to be  
your friend, but if instinct makes you wary,  
that's okay. Some distance might be safer

for you, Willy. While you growl, I'm reflecting  
on resolution options should one more bite occur:  
call Animal Control – poisoned treats – my pistol –

maybe a club. Spit-balling prior to alibied schemes.  
It's business, but such unpleasantness feels impolite.  
Who needs that? Help keep me far from being human.

---

“I don't like to think of myself as genetically and historically predisposed to violence, even to murder, but of course I am. “Educating Innocence” is based on a real life nip I received a few years ago from a neighbor's dog. I've changed the dog's name, swapped its gender, and shifted the neighbor's house to the opposite compass point ... so my neighbors (neighbors I really like, by the way) will have no idea I wrote about their dog!” —Gordon Kippola

# Gratitude of a Nation

Gordon Kippola

It's rarely wrong to be polite, so, sure: a nod  
a smile-stained-sad, and my thank you in return,  
Dear Citizen! If you also swore a military oath  
(don't fear, I'll never ask), I presume you'd concur

that it's better to be praised than spat upon. Sure,  
we do more before 9 a.m. than most people do  
all day, or so the eighties recruiting ad bragged.  
Speaking semi-honestly of my own three decades,

here's the sacrificial scoop: when working hard  
was unavoidable or helped me advance in rank,  
I busted ass, while mostly perfecting the sham.  
I choose to think I'd have died for the Soldiers

I served alongside, if death became insistent,  
but I can't prove it. Die for King and Country?  
Die for parchment, honor, oil, and flag? Die  
for you? I'd be the laughingstock of Valhalla.

After eight years of retired-old-man jogs,  
not quite chased—or in pursuit—any more,  
texts from a hidden number war still ding  
at night: if Valhalla isn't real, I'm screwed.

---

“The nature of my Army job put me in constant contact with large numbers of civilians. The ribbon stack on my uniform was befitting of a North Korean General, including a Bronze Star Medal (without a “V” device it meant nothing more than me being a pretty senior guy who successfully got through a year in Iraq). I was thanked for my service thousands of times, all the while feeling like a fraud. When my pre-retirement career becomes known, I still receive thanks sometimes. I trained myself to accept gratitude with a smile, imagining that I'm a stand-in for a service member important to that person, or for an idea they have of the U.S. military.” —Gordon Kippola

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Following a career as a U.S. Army musician, **Gordon Kippola** earned an MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Tampa, and calls Bremerton, Washington home. His poetry has appeared in *Rattle*, *Post Road Magazine*, *District Lit*, *The Road Not Taken*, *The Main Street Rag*, *Southeast Missouri State University Press*, and other splendid publications.

# Stratus

Kyra Kyle

1

Clouds form road  
maps overhead  
Petra traces a house  
shares it with Milena  
promises they'll leave  
the country and find  
wherever clouds  
lead them, a home  
without war, without  
her brother bleeding  
rivers feeding vermin  
in back alleys.  
Clouds lead to peace,  
lead to safety,  
escort them to freedom  
they dare not find  
until after a home  
among clouds.

2

Some gentleman floats above the field. He wants to see grass, but clouds shield blades from eyes—  
people, too.

He aims to open up the people and discover a glow inside. Shed light to build rivers and feed vermin  
in back alleys. He searches for freedom in spread sheets and target lists and righteous vengeance.

The gentleman swims in air, hovers over the field, but a second and third pass and the clouds don't  
behave. He must leave, so he can return another day to ignite a spark that can build rivers.

3

Clouds block Lowell's vision as he searches fields  
for radar and enemy soldiers. When he asks  
for help more experienced analysts suggest  
cloud eradicator. Just a few sprays on a computer  
screen eliminates any cloud trace. Lowell spritzes

his monitor twice, using as directed, but clouds remain.  
The spray bottle reads, DARK KISS FRAGRANCE MIST.

4

Lowell shambles through fog, en route to targeting vans guarded by air conditioning units, clouding his anger toward a satellite hunting people half a world away: a place where the sun shines while his family, safe in their beds, sleep through the dark. Tarah had kissed him goodnight before he left at sunset. She doesn't know how bombs and missiles work, Lowell has lost their purpose, and the United States forgets that they fight a war.

5

Pretty please  
with crushed birds  
lining whiskey tumblers  
filled with rusty nails  
and the promise to stop  
asking me who I killed  
for the military

I never learned their names  
Tarah stops asking  
And I do my best to shove rusty  
nails into my head  
until I can't tell

---

“A battle doesn't end after the bombs drop, even if someone's half a world away while guiding them.” —Kyra Kyle

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After several years in the military **Kyra Kyle** came out as non-binary. They are an author of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. They live where the Platte and Missouri Rivers meet with their wife and kids. They hold a BFA in creative writing from the University of Nebraska at Omaha, and their work has appeared in *Menacing Hedge*, *Spank the Carp*, *Danse Macabre*, *The Door is a Jar*, *The Collidescope*, and other journals and anthologies.

# Daisy\*

Leeor Margalit

Daisy is blonde in the way that sunshine is blonde.  
I know that doesn't make sense, but it does.  
Daisy has a smile on her face  
and scars all up and down her arms and legs  
which doesn't make sense, but it does.  
Silence is the loudest cry for help,  
which doesn't make sense, but it does.  
If a girl shoots herself in the middle of a field  
and no one is around to hear it,  
did she really die? did she even live?  
She was alone in that field for three hours  
with a loaded gun  
and when I was told she never pulled the trigger  
I let out a rattled sob of relief; had I been told otherwise,  
there would not have been enough oxygen in the world;  
I could have chased it for the rest of my life  
and never caught my breath.

**\*Pushcart Prize nominee**

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“Daisy was written towards the end of my service and while it deals with difficult topics, ultimately it is a poem meant to be finished with a sigh of relief, embodying my service as a whole.” —Leeor Margalit

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**Leeor Margalit** is a 24 year old Yemenite/Ashkenazi woman from Southern California currently studying at Tel Aviv University. Her work has recently appeared in *The Sutterville Review*, *As You Were: The Military Review*, *The Thing Itself*, and *Rigorous Magazine*, among other publications. You can find her work on nstagram @leormargalitpoems.



# Dream Catcher\*

Kari Martindale

I want you to dream. Dream big!  
But don't let your Girl Scout troop leader  
write *Keep on dreaming!*  
across the balsa wood hoop  
of a dream catcher craft,  
hanging strings  
    of green trefoils  
from the bottom of the loop,  
in cheap pursuit  
    of a dream catcher patch  
for the back  
    of your vest—  
a project overseen by a non-Native leader  
whose understanding of dream catchers  
comes from the one-inch-square tag  
on a bag full of trinkets made in China,  
produced for the colonial masses—  
plus the profit,  
    minus the blessing,  
trading the sacredness of a dream catcher  
for the same-ol' banal messaging:  
*Keep on dreaming!*  
Big dreams  
    for big bedrooms in the suburbs;  
nifty aesthetics to hang  
    with all the Pocahontas Halloween dresses,  
making costumes out of Nations—  
taking what was theirs to make it ours,  
to decorate our McMansion walls.  
Don't get caught in this web of appropriation,  
taking what belongs to another girl's nation.  
Dream catchers aren't a spoil of war.  
Your troop leader doesn't get to decide what they're for.  
So yes, *Dream Big!*  
Bigger than her,  
of a day when culture  
and dreams are shared—not strewn  
    across a picnic table,  
with markers, trefoils, string;  
and patches to give out—  
*Girl Scout bling!*—  
to commemorate what fun appropriation can be.

**\*Pushcart Prize nominee**

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**Kari Martindale** is a poet and spoken word artist living in Frederick County, Maryland. She has been published in several journals and anthologies, and she was featured in Berks Bardfest 2021. She sits on the Board of Maryland Writers' Association as the President of the Frederick Chapter and was recently appointed Co-editor of the literary journal *Pen in Hand*. She is also a managing partner in EC Poetry & Prose. Kari served as a panelist for the Maryland State Arts Council Independent Artist Awards 2022. She is a finalist for *Line of Advance's* 2022 Wright Prize. She has a Masters in Linguistics from George Mason University, is a veteran of the Air Force, and has visited all 50 States and nearly 40 countries. She can be found at [kariannmartindale.com](http://kariannmartindale.com).

Kari continues to serve her community, including as a Girl Scout leader and service team member. "Dream Catcher" was inspired when she noticed dream catcher kits and patches for sale on a Girl Scouts facebook page; cultural appropriation is just one of the social justice topics that she tackles in her writing.

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# broken boyz in the endz

Idman Omar

Thug mentality is to  
stay up, pray for revenge  
don't get caught slippin  
too much time on their hands  
fam  
enough man talk too much  
breathing, for any unreasonable slight,  
slight  
send a man to heaven  
that's just the operation in the endz  
hard and thick as bricks  
but bricks stay longer than dads  
all faith lies in the knife  
all energy in the way their toes spring  
fear lives at the back of the mind  
when the feds roll up  
bad boy energy costs  
money they take by force  
rude boys  
pumping my mother's first car for  
moped petrol in broad daylight  
in front of our eyes  
postcode wars  
robbery, drugs, fights,  
holding heat, foxes as tenants  
rucksacks, burner phones, tracksuits,  
always wearing hoods in the hood  
thinking they're rich in  
bossman dealings, gangrene flats,  
to be alone is to be a prick, group  
upshot, basketball in the summer  
the time Sky sang Usher's 'Burn' on  
top of our street sign and we laughed  
when Martin chased us up the stairs but  
it wasn't funny, mental health issues ran rife  
those girls were racist when we played  
outside bad boy energy exhausted me.  
we had to walk past them as they  
smoked weed on our staircase, my  
father took warm water in a bucket and said  
*'Times up boys. Let my daughters pass'*  
he didn't ask, he told the  
cocky crew but they respected him

*'No problem bossman'*  
then they shot  
music videos while we slept  
us girls bathed and hair oiled, scared to leave the  
flat sometimes when mum sent us to buy  
beef all the time, paigon this and  
wasteman that. The block was  
immigrant soaked. Mum called them  
*Iyaala Souq*, kids of the street  
spent every day making sure  
we did not become of the street  
the place we used our free will to  
run so far from, a place we were  
brought to, to flee home.  
To flee violence.

---

# Breaking Our Fast with Salt

Idman Omar

Past hungry, lips white,  
breath like death.  
Bro hugged me like decades had passed.  
Like he had not stayed at ours last weekend,  
as if his arms had just that very second  
spouted.

I'd just learned lipstick and  
my headwrap was punishing me  
my neck bled while  
our stomachs sang like rocks dragging.

We sat around the table,  
boys and girls wearing trousers  
thinking of sin  
pending dining to get rid of it just to  
repeat it again tomorrow.

The air reminded me of cigarettes,  
hazy like a desert for smokers.  
Uptown dining pacified us.  
It wasn't time yet so  
we spoke of what we wanted.

Burgers, chips, tired closeness.  
We ordered what we needed.  
The waitress was nowhere to be seen when  
the adhan rang loud on all our phones  
to the minute, until bro  
passed the salt around and we all  
said 'Bismillah' licking a few crystals,  
wincing and feeling renewed again.

---

“Both these pieces reflect my upbringing. Living as the child of immigrant parents in the UK made me aware of culture, religion and socioeconomic status. My work tries to assess and reason everyday life. To sit in the nooks of reality and try to gain deeper meaning as well as clarity from the blur of city life as a British Somali.”

—Idman Omar

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Originally from Somalia, **Idman Omar** is a freelance writer. She has previously been published with *Southbank Poetry*, *Wild-Court* and *Guernica*. Idman is a MA Creative Writing graduate from Birkbeck, University of London.

# Crush & Feel

Jonathan Pessant

There's a technique  
in loving someone you know  
you'll be divorced from some day

Clear-cut

much like a deployment  
a leaving behind  
a kiss every 6 months  
moonlight in the morning  
grasping for you  
the way a mason does  
out of repetition  
faithful to the process

Prison bricks witness a technique too  
At the USDB there's a way to crush and feel  
along the blunt creases of an inmate's uniform  
a way in which fingers bend muscle  
the way knuckles graze the groin  
a way a hand passes over another's heart  
too fast to feel what needs to be felt  
almost as if it wasn't really there

When you left me  
on a scorching day in June  
you laughed  
*This beat'll get me ready for Afghanistan...*  
*will you miss me?*  
I winced  
as your hands pressed into my back,  
last night last lovemaking  
*goodbye-remember me* fingernail marks

I remember the technique of gone,  
the tongue twisting tiny truths like bricks,  
my teeth chewing them down  
enough to turn any oasis to desert

He stands in front of me  
honest, naked, feet rooted  
on the cold concrete  
of the inmate bathroom

He hands me his shirt, his pants  
His clothes still smell like perfume  
Visitation's over and we must  
follow procedure  
We must crush and feel;  
He kisses his wife, his girlfriend  
every weekend, every afternoon  
he inhales her breath  
he presses the flesh  
of his hands into the flesh  
of her back, waits  
He crushes time  
like I can't

I hear a whisper:  
*Do you know what your wife's been up to over there...*

You hear the same whisper:  
*You've been gone so long he's practically a bachelor again...*

Gone-ness is  
equal measures  
snail mail love letters  
and slammed landlines

Deployment distance  
is a real excuse  
for two islands tempted  
every night

Today, far away  
from any walls  
I keep  
having dreams of our Fort Leavenworth house  
mowing the front lawn  
edging the edge of the boundary  
of the cement sidewalk  
and the earth  
where your bare foot  
touched my bare foot

---

“Crush and Feel” is a poem about my time as a Corrections NCO in the United States Disciplinary Barracks at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. It explores what it was like to be married to another soldier who had multiple deployments, and its effect on our marriage.” —Jonathan Pessant

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**Jonathan Pessant** is a Maine poet. He is a veteran and a graduate of the Stonecoast MFA program.

**spoils**  
Mary Silwance

since rape  
is a weapon  
of war

where are  
the ROTC posters  
dog tags  
21-gun salute  
veterans' day parade  
the Denny's discount  
the thank you for your service

to downy-haired daughters  
and toothless grandmothers  
impaled on soldiers' erect rifles

their bodies bloodied  
into unmarked wombs  
unmarked tombs  
unremarked upon  
in history books  
for every god and country

---

# the disappeared

Mary Silwance

term to describe  
people erased  
for existing  
against the grain—

the disappeared

gone  
not like the rapture  
not from natural causes  
diseases accidents age  
but deleted

the disappeared

aborted  
long after birth  
tossed into  
the garbage bin  
behind history books

the disappeared

expunged—  
blue contacts over brown seeing  
flat iron over kinky locks  
jeans *galabeya*  
Irish Spring over cumin and garlic  
the letters of your name  
syllables of you  
forever on papers  
rearranged to match  
a stranger in a strange land's ear

---

“The poems ‘spoils’ and ‘the disappeared’ are part of a continuous dialogue both internal and external regarding marginalization. Who and what gets foregrounded and who and what gets tossed aside in public and private spheres. Specifically, the very personal poem, *the disappeared*, is an exploration of the process an immigrant takes on in order to assimilate. *Spoils* is an indictment of the war machine that turns a blind eye to the most common and intimate war theater, female bodies. And yet the victims and survivors are perennially disappeared from any accounting of war.”  
—Mary Silwance

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Originally from Egypt, **Mary Silwance** lives in Kansas City and is the mother of three daughters. Mary has been an English teacher, environmental educator, worked in green infrastructure and is an herbalism apprentice. Mary serves on the editorial team of *Kansas City Voices* and provides workshops on writing. While her poetry and essays appear in numerous publications, Mary explores ecology from an intersection of justice, spirituality, and embodiment in workshops and at <https://www.marysilwance.com>. Mary is a recent attendee of the Bread Loaf Environmental Writers Conference.

# After Watching Footage of the War

Meghan Sterling

The car was suddenly upside down and backwards,  
all wheels and undercarriage rust and a young man  
in tears on the sidewalk. Walking home from the crash  
in the rain, I fall at a certain slant and wonder if I am fated  
to walk with my father's limp. My people the sun colliding.  
My people the collision. We watch the news and our cells remember,  
the cells of our ancestors and the escape from a country that didn't  
want us. All the earth left was scrap metal and broken teeth,  
a century of apocalypse like a can of beans opened with a knife,  
a drizzle that won't let up, all the people in Florida watching the news  
from their chairs. Here I learned our bodies were in argument. Here  
that our bodies long for anything resembling safety. That I will cry mama  
when I am dying. That you will too. My people won't let themselves  
into their bodies, their legs are shut doors, their mouths are windows  
smeared with paraffin. They have worn their body like armor, breastplates  
nearly caved in with blows. I have worn this body long enough to know  
that what is underneath soon appears on the surface, rises like bones,  
like rust, like fat to skim off the broth. I have worn this body long enough  
to know that there are many ways to die and all of them brutal.

---

# Somewhere There Is a War

Meghan Sterling

But not in New York. I come to New York in dreams  
sometimes, the Empire State Building a monolith of steel,  
colored yellow and blue for a day to honor the invasion of Ukraine,  
a fact which is happening a thousand miles away from the bars  
and jazz and gelato, the mile long line for a late-night pizza  
at Ben's. The streets are a sea of masks, all of us in our black  
coats and shoes and cloth over our mouths like gags. For a few  
days, we vacation with this million-dollar view—silver high rises  
and rows of staggered buildings in shades of brick and beige  
like striated dunes in the Sonoran Desert. While Ukraine quakes  
and trembles, here we are besieged by all the small decisions:  
Where to get coffee. Move the car now or wait until after dinner.  
Go out for pastries, or bring them back to this king-sized bed heaped  
with a high thread-count, this view of a city that is not being bombed.

---

“I think war is a trauma that lives in our bones, gets passed down to the next generation as a kind of constant vigilance. I saw the way my grandparents were shaped by war and that has shaped me. The war in Ukraine, which is the land my ancestors fled, has brought it back—the stories, the landscape, the fear. Writing it down lets me look at it again, unearth the bones, examine them, keep myself awake.”  
—Meghan Sterling

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**Meghan Sterling** (she, her, hers) lives in Maine. Her work is forthcoming in *The Los Angeles Review*, *Rhino Poetry*, *Nelle*, *Poetry South*, and many others. *These Few Seeds* (Terrapin Books, 2021) was an Eric Hoffer Grand Prize Finalist. *Self-Portrait with Ghosts of the Diaspora* (Harbor Editions), *Comfort the Mourners* (Everybody Press) and *View from a Borrowed Field* (Lily Poetry Review's Paul Nemser Book Prize) are all forthcoming in 2023.

# Elusive Enemy

Frances Wiedenhoeft

Never the soldier  
with the flag  
draped over my heart,

I looked for the enemy  
diligently  
in every bloody cavity.

I peered into bullet holes  
of eleven-year-old  
Taliban fighters,

down the dissected gash  
of a known Al Qaeda operative  
split lengthwise by a Hellfire missile,

through the perforated heart  
of a taxi driver  
turned terrorist,

the fuel of anger and resentment  
like a bitter argument  
whose origins are lost to memory,

blow through the market bus  
showering remnants of women  
and children,

they hit the ground with the soft splat  
of a large raindrop,  
a shoe here, a headscarf there.

I search through crowded bazaars  
and vast streets  
of abandoned rubble.

I thought I found the enemy  
through the face of a friend,  
his charred features distorted beyond recognition,

I thought I found the enemy  
in the chest cavity  
of a man/boy,

heart and lungs fenestrated  
by a bullet's ricochet,  
remote detonator grasped tightly in hand,

all of his blood  
cascading onto the floor,  
leaving him a ghost.

In the dust choked  
minefields  
of Afghanistan,

somewhere between the Tigris  
and Euphrates,  
I found only an illusion,

deceived,  
I found only  
Myself.

---

“This poem is a journey through many of my combat experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan and my attempts to understand these events and my role in the wars.”  
—Frances Wiedenhoeft



# Hunger Is My Friend

Frances Wiedenhoeft

Hunger is my friend.  
the empty  
hollowness  
of it

fueling  
a measured  
flow  
of adrenaline,

s  
h  
ar  
pening  
senses

so that I can hear  
more acutely changes  
in the multitoneal  
beat of my patient's  
heart,

like the deep croaking of an old bullfrog,  
rrrrbttt rrrrbttt,

monitor the w-h-o-o-s-h, the *sigh*,  
as I push air into the patient's lungs,  
hear the slightest *whoosh* or change in pressure

Hunger keeps me AWAKE,  
fuels me  
as bloody night  
r  
u  
n  
s  
into bloody day  
and  
back to night

Hunger is my ally against the long scream of emotion,

hungerismy

p o

w

er

food becomes the enemy  
in the battle for emotional obliteration

hunger becomes a habit.

After I left the bloody land and returned to the nation of bountiful  
meals food no longer made sense, platters and serving bowls  
laid out for my homecoming fluoresce under unnatural  
light, I don't even remember what I like, I eat the  
plate offered to show gratitude and normalcy,  
I choke down a morsel and excuse myself

a

cube

of chicken here,

a bite

of pasta salad there,

signify my gradual reintegration

combat soldier

to *restless* civilian

but

I give you hunger

as frame

a of

reference

to understand my experience,

to know

my war

---

“My military specialty was 66F, nurse anesthetist, and my role was trauma resuscitation and anesthesia. I used withdrawal from food and rigorous hunger to blunt emotional pain and fuel a constant adrenaline surge to cope with my combat deployments. This poem is an attempt to communicate this to readers through imagery and language.” —Frances Wiedenhoft

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**Frances Wiedenhoef** studied journalism and creative writing at Madison College, where she received a Journalism Certificate in 2015. Her work appears in *The Wisconsin State Journal*, the 2015 *Ariel Anthology*, a collaborative peace poem in *Praxis Magazine Online*, the *American Journal of Nursing*, the Spring 2020 issue of *Deadly Writers Patrol*, and *The Adelaide Review Literary Magazine*. She completed a residency at Write On Door County in March 2021. She is a writer, poet, mother, grandmother, and twenty-two-year Army veteran with service in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Desert Storm. She volunteers as a reader for *Gemini Magazine*.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

# I Follow Her Between War and Not War

Gail Hosking

I always begin telling anyone who asks about my mother with the images I have memorized. She is wearing her favorite cork sandals that she bought in an open-air Italian market while on vacation with my father, a life-long soldier. She stands under a sign for Milan and Genoa, and later near a rock wall with grapevines behind her as my father takes her picture. The Mediterranean Sea air blows gently across her face, and on this sun-drenched day, the camera reveals her loveliness—legs shapely and lean and a head of rich, brown curls. I use the word innocent to describe my mother because that was who she was in so many ways—“*the most innocent young woman I had ever laid my eyes on,*” an old family friend once said. My mother had no idea what life would be for a soldier’s wife. She wanted only adventure and love.

My mother, daughter of a farmer, a coalminer and a preacher, slips her sexy naked feet into cork sandals as she stands on the Riviera with my father in towns like San Remo, Nice or La Spezia, or sips espresso with him at outdoor cafes as the moon rises over the Apennines. In another picture she wears these same sandals to a picnic in a Bavarian field on the edge of a hill with other army families. The summer grass is dotted with olive drab wool blankets—army style—and occasionally someone brings a silk camouflaged bedspread made from an old military parachute. Campbells Soup cardboard boxes from the Commissary and coolers of food sit in the background. I am a five-year-old blur wearing a Davy Crockett sweatshirt as I run toward a fellow army brat with a stick for roasting marshmallows. There isn’t a sign of this Meisbach location, nor does the photograph reveal that a war was fought on this soil ten years before. The Cold War surrounds the air my mother breathes here, so palpable with the tension of imminent fighting as I run freely across the grass behind her.

My father stands off to the right with a bottle of beer in one hand while the other hand tugs to pull down his civilian shirt. His crew cut and tattooed arms give him away as a soldier even though he isn’t in uniform. He stares at my mother and looks like he is ready to call out her name. She holds a jar of iced tea in one hand and a glass in another. She wears her favorite striped shorts. Her hair is cut short, her nails are painted, and she looks happy. The only shadow of any poverty on this luxurious summer afternoon is my mother’s childhood scar on her left leg, caused by boils that came from malnutrition during the Depression. I can almost feel its smooth indent, the way it tucks like a secret into the middle of her slender white leg. Something about that look between my parents reminds me that she will do anything for him, follow him anywhere.

I tell anyone who asks that if my mother wanted to be an army wife, then she had to pose with her three blond little girls for a passport, wear dog tags, and carry an identity card. These were her tickets from one country to another, one base to another, one life to another, though it was much further between these places than she ever said. My father is not inside her passport. He has his own, which is to say the army separates him from his family.

The music of Brenda Lee from one of the many 45s that my mother collects folds into these familiar images. *I’m Sorry* or *All Alone Am I* play repeatedly while my mother changes my brother’s diapers or makes meatloaf for dinner. When this music is over, she puts on the records of Elvis Presley—her favorite—and then Chubby Checker’s twist, and we dance together in our enlisted men’s housing

until my father comes home from the base across the street where he teaches everything there is to know about heavy weapons, whatever that means.

While he spends his days with other soldiers, my mother lingers around a kitchen table with other women, listening to the details of someone else's life, even if it takes all afternoon. When we are stationed outside Fort Bragg in North Carolina, and she sits in Doris Ladacini's trailer near other military nomads. My mother and Doris smoke cigarettes, sip sweet iced tea and give each other a Tony perm or paint their nails red. There is always talk of their men, the ones they do not wholly understand, the ones who are often gone on maneuvers or preparing for the next possible war.

She will tell you that she just wants to have some fun and forget that the world is falling apart, so she pulls taffy with us when my father is away, shows us how to make banana pudding, or sleds down the hill between identical military apartments at midnight in Germany. She gets her ears pierced so she can wear earrings and look beautiful. Beauty is all she has to offer. That and her loyalty, along with her capacity for accommodation, something she will pass on to her daughters.

My mother teaches my sisters and me how a day could be filled with talk and other women and still be worthwhile. The smallest events mattered, and the longest conversations weren't about wasting time, but were instead what life was about. A good story took time, people you cared about took time, and time was something she had. As a child I took her pace for granted, thought that the whole world lived this way, and at the same time wanted life to be something else. Something more. When her sister Lorraine turned my hand over and contemplated my future while she brushed her nails along my palm lines, my mother might think for hours afterwards what it was that Aunt Lorraine meant by a divided lifeline. She'd get up for more iced tea, pull the curtains back to let in more light, and then return to the subject knowing it demanded serious attention.

Eventually the images of my mother shift, no matter how hard I try to freeze time. As though from another lifetime, I see my mother and me, many years later, by the kitchen window, eating lunch in a housing project. My father is gone to war again—this one in Viet Nam—and though neither of us know it yet, he will not return. I am sixteen and my mother thirty-two. The Illinois sunlight comes through the window and reveals a stack of unwashed dishes at the sink. My mother is drunk when she leans forward on her elbow and slurps her soup. I have come to depend on politeness and manners to cover over a multitude of failings; but here is my mother in the afternoon stillness after another long drink, and nothing can hide that fact. I want to take the spoon from her, want to throw it against the wall. "Stop drinking!" I want to say. "Stop looking so helpless. Be someone else!" But instead, I swallow my words and mimic the way she moves the spoon to her lips. I roll my eyes with disgust. Tears well up in her eyes like a child who has been reprimanded. She blows her nose and looks over at me.

*This is who I am, Gail, she says. Leave me alone.*

Stories that jump back and forth between these two worlds are caught in my throat just like my mother was caught between the world of the military and the world of the family she wanted. Between war and not war. Between love and its loss. Clutched between the way things were and the way things were supposed to be sits the public and the private, her ability to say yes and her desire to say no. The material of my mother's life insists on claiming me even though I have wanted to forget it all. But I cannot put these pictures away, and like the army in war, I cannot leave her body behind.

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“I’ve been working on a memoir about my mother off and on for twenty years because a mentor insisted, because a wife of a VN vet said she really wanted to know about “that woman,” and because it seemed natural to write the other half after publishing a memoir about my father, a recipient of The Medal of Honor. I finally finished it just as the pandemic was coming to a close and my cancer treatments were finished. It’s traveling out there in the world now looking for a home. This essay comes out of that work.” —Gail Hosking

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**Gail Hosking** is the author of the memoir *Snake’s Daughter: The Roads in and out of War* (University of Iowa Press) and a book of poems, *Retrieval* (Main Street Rag Press). She has an MFA from Bennington College, and her essays and poems have been published in such places as *Timberline*, *Post Road*, *Iowa Review*, *Reed Magazine*, *Chattahoochee Review* and *Consequence Magazine*. Several of Hosking’s pieces have been anthologized, the latest in *Proud To Be: Writing By American Warriors* (Southeast Missouri State University Press). She has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

# Countdown to Peace

Caroline Goldberg Igra

10

Riots on the Temple Mount. I've been there. Once. Before I was Israeli. My memories are hazy, blurred by the dust and glitter of that sparkly dome. There was a huge rock deep underground from which Muhammad was said to have leapt straight to heaven. Now my vision is clearer, but I can only see what's broadcast: violent clashes between extremists determined to ruin any chance for coexistence and a police force doomed to overreact. The thousands who come to pray in the mosque are barely mentioned as politics supersedes peace.

9

The conflict over Sheikh Jarrah has moved front and center. Israelis are discouraged from visiting this neighborhood of Jerusalem as it has become symbolic of the never-ending struggle between Israelis and Palestinians, our chicken and egg. I wonder if it will ever be possible to live together, sharing the same space without contests and claims. Everyone populating this land has a hearth and a family. The shouting faces, red and swollen with emotion, prove that's not enough.

8

Outbreaks of violence from too many corners to count. Pockets of frustration and anger have boiled over into a conflagration fanned by the Jewish ultra-right and Hamas proxies harvested from the Israeli Arab community. The former, known as La Familia, a lame attempt to adopt the mystique of the Mafia, converges on a gas station ten minutes from my house, the one where my parents met my first baby. Then it was a quiet corner with a little hummus place. Now it's the site of an angry mob. I pray that the blistering blaze will fizzle out but fear that we're past that. I live in a land where tempers are high, and emotions are raw, yet the birds greet me peacefully each morning.

7

Hamas has launched rockets at Jerusalem, a place sacred to both Jews and Muslims. This changes everything. My son comes home midweek. We share a vegan pizza at a local dive and enjoy our privileged lives: his ability to opt for a diet with endless strictures, my right to be annoyed by it. Several bites in, he announces that he has come for his military gear. I freeze, midbite. He looks me straight in the eye and assures me he won't need it. I don't trust him. Seven years ago, he told me he was safely tucked into an army base nearby. He wasn't.

6

The sky is falling. I imagine Chicken Little, hysterically trying to find shelter. It's worse in the South. I couldn't live there. Here in the middle of Israel, just a half hour north of Tel Aviv, it's strangely quiet. My reality is completely different from that of most of the country.

5



My daughter spends a night of shelling in Tel Aviv crouching in her apartment's stairwell. She is terrified, this experience replacing former horrific ones, like vomiting in front of friends and being groped while drunk. My son sits beside me, watching our world fall apart on TV, awaiting *that* call. I search for comfort and find it in simply knowing where they are.

4

Huge buildings in Gaza housing military installations are felled by the Israeli air force. The dramatic video becomes the footage du jour. I can't look away, so grateful for the pilots. Because of them, there may not be a ground invasion. My son's gear is poised by the door to his room. I stare at his jittery leg, proof of the nervous energy coiled up inside. He looks like a normal kid, but life has made him different. I want to hug him but restrain myself. It will only add to the tension.

3

Sirens. Rocket alerts flash across my telephone screen in an endless stream, a tickertape of horror. The news is replete with the damage: buildings punctured with holes, homes destroyed, lives lost. But the threat from outside doesn't compare with that from within. Those who want to shake things up have resorted to local violence. My favorite restaurant in Akko, the one that serves raw tuna with a dribble of sweet balsamic, is burned down by an angry mob looking to punish. I know that this isn't how most Israelis feel—Jews or Arabs—that there isn't that much hatred. But that doesn't make it less scary or hurt less.

2

Filled with despair, I call my housekeeper, the woman from the neighboring Arab town who has accompanied decades of my life, watching my children crawling around in diapers, strutting in jeans and army greens. She too is scared. We talk about wanting peace, wanting to enjoy our families, our simple lives. We bemoan the fact that the crazies get to call the shots. Fear segues to sadness.

1

Fewer sirens, less bombing. A new norm squeezes through the cracks of the muck, as welcome as the sunshine. My daughter grabs a meal at her favorite vegetarian restaurant between the rocket blasts, jumping into their shelter when the sirens sound then returning to finish her salad before heading to the beach. My son puts away his army gear and returns to Tel Aviv. There won't be a ground incursion. But what comes next? The country exhales with relief, hope and weary hesitation. How does this story end when the countdown finishes?

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“I wrote ‘Countdown to Peace’ in an effort to capture the personal strain of the periodic flare-ups in my ‘neighborhood.’ I wanted it to reflect the way abject fear is diluted to the mundane by the simple desire for calm and normalcy.” —Caroline Igra

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**Caroline Goldberg Igra** is a freelance writer, an art historian, a triathlete, and a mother. She lives in Tel Aviv, Israel, but maintains close ties with her hometown, Philadelphia. A former assistant professor at Haifa University, she has published numerous academic art historical articles on 19th-century European art, several exhibition catalogs connected with her curatorial work, and a monograph on J.D. Kirszenbaum (Somogy Editions d'art, 2013) chosen as one of *Slate Magazine's* Best Books that year. Her nonfiction has been featured in several online journals, including *Collateral*, *Away Journal*, *Mothers Always Write*, *Pandemic Journal*, and *Another Chicago Magazine*. She has published two novels, *Count to a Thousand* (Mandolin Publishing, Jerusalem, 2018) and *From Where I Stand* (Koehler Books, Virginia, 2022), and is presently working on her third.

# War Fever

Kathleen Tighe

*“War is like love. It always finds a way.” —Bertolt Brecht*

One afternoon during a rare visit home, my son Chris sauntered into the kitchen carrying a gas mask encased in a jungle green knapsack.

“I found this upstairs, in the closet,” he said. “Let me show you how it goes.” He deftly snapped straps around his hips and in seconds the knapsack was attached tightly to his left thigh.

“So here’s what you do,” Chris continued. “You’re in imminent danger. You lift the flap, pull out the mask, put it on.” He demonstrated. Chris had just completed months of training as a newly commissioned officer in the U.S. Marines. That experience included exposure to chemical weapons.

His speed impressed me, even as my stomach twisted familiarly at the possibility he might need it. “Is that mask like the one you used at Quantico?”

“Nah,” the new Marine sneered. “This one’s way old.”

In the safety of my Michigan kitchen, I gazed at the gas mask, remembering that it was already old when I first saw it, over 25 years ago in a far-off land, when I hoped it could save my life.

\*

Today, cable TV fills my home with burning buildings, shell-shocked refugees, tank convoys, grieving victims. The images shock, reminiscent as they are of old WWII documentaries, yet horrifyingly immediate. War has engulfed us again. This time it lands in Ukraine, an unprovoked attack by its neighbor, Russia. Nations have unified in opposition but the aggression continues unabated.

\*

My earliest childhood memories include scenes on the nightly news of young men clad in jungle camouflage running through rainforests or rice paddies, helicopters whirring overhead, daily tallies of death. In fourth grade, a classmate’s older brother was killed and we were all somber for a day or two, contemplating the unimaginable. By the time I discovered Holocaust-themed novels, Saigon had fallen and the United States had retreated from Southeast Asia.

\*

As a young adult, I assumed my place in the world with confidence. Even as I traveled to countries with conflicts, through unsettled regions, I moved with complacency, as though wrapped in a cocoon of protection. Its proof was the blue passport I wielded. That, and the Cold War was ending. We were entering an era of peace. My optimism was based on naiveté.

The West's euphoria over the fall of the Berlin Wall and the crumbling of the Soviet Union ended abruptly when Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, setting the stage for a new hot war. For months the world's leaders debated responses while Saddam Hussein rattled sabers and promised "rivers of blood." In the staff lounge of the international school in Saudi Arabia where I taught, colleagues shared news, rumors, fears.

The school year had barely begun yet families were leaving. As students withdrew, the staff grew nervous. A few teaching couples resigned. Others talked of it.

The US Consulate warned of possible terror attacks, so we held drills on campus, amassing the entire student body into the gymnasium, a Quonset hut set far back from the highway. Could a school be targeted? Surely not. Deniz, a Turkish student in my 7<sup>th</sup> grade class, walked alongside me as we hurried to the gym. "We'll be fine," she assured me. "My mother says the Americans would close the school if it wasn't safe."

Today's Twitter feed features the destruction of Ukraine. Heavily-pregnant women are led from a devastated building, a maternity hospital. A theater sheltering frightened families with children is bombed. People lined up for bread are shot. Warmongers know no bounds.

From my classroom window, 30 years ago, I watched as military forces poured into that desert kingdom, C-130s landing on nearby airport runways, unloading, taking off again. As I read aloud from *Where the Red Fern Grows*, fighter jets flew sorties overhead, so loud I had to stop reading. The buildup was called Operation Desert Shield. We were safe within the shield, our school administration asserted, echoing State Department officials. Staff could leave if they were afraid, but leaving would result in termination. In any case, the school would remain open. It was a symbol of security. Close, and too many people would leave. Oil production would slow down.

All these years later, I still feel the uncertainty, that deer-caught-in-the-headlights sense of not knowing what to do. Leave, and lose a job I loved. Stay, and risk being caught in a war's crossfire. I remember the anger I felt toward those who would use a school as a political pawn. It was a moment of profound disillusionment, one that has shaped my skepticism toward our government ever since.

This morning my email inbox is flooded with pleas for donations, anything to ease the plight of millions of Ukraine's evacuees fleeing their homes in desperation. It is impossible to imagine, yet the scene is astonishingly familiar. It replays itself, it seems, every few years or so. Only the faces and locations change. I think of the highway I took to campus in Dhahran, its westbound lanes choked with cars, station wagons, minivans, all laden with suitcases, grocery bags, mattresses lashed to rooftops. President Bush's deadline in the sand was drawing near. In my classroom, dwindling numbers of students awaited me. The Clash played on repeat in my head: *Should I stay or should I go now?*

My husband and I were awakened one night in January as waves of jets roared overhead, streaming 200 miles north. The dreaded war had begun. I pictured Kuwait's modern coastline city and the destruction heading its way.

A few nights later, scud missiles were launched our way.

The first hit as I prepared for bed, brushing my teeth in a second-floor bathroom. Despite the concrete construction of our villa, the percussion rattled walls and windows and all illusion of safety. I took the stairs two at a time, swallowing toothpaste as I leapt, racing for the safe room we'd prepared in a closet beneath the stairs.

The night sky exploded: Iraqi scuds were lobbed indiscriminately toward Dhahran where the US military controlled the international airport, and Patriot missiles overtook them midflight. As interceptions thudded overhead, I remembered the words of a young soldier reassuring me as he wolfed down Thanksgiving dinner in our dining room a few months earlier. "Don't you worry, ma'am," he said earnestly. "We'll take that scud out before it even leaves Iraqi airspace."

Rumors of chemical-laden missiles flew rampantly, and we now clutched Vietnam-era gas masks, shipped to us from Dan's brother, who had found them in an Army Navy surplus shop in Florida. We were glad to have masks, but they offered scant comfort as we huddled under the stairs.

The gods were kind that night. Fragments of exploded missiles fell harmlessly into the desert surrounding our housing compound. The dreaded chemical warfare never materialized.

\*

Six weeks later, Iraq abandoned Kuwait. Americans view this as a "success story." Three days before the war ended, one last scud missile was launched. It hit a US Army barracks, killing 27 soldiers and wounding 98. That barracks, just miles from where we lived, was located behind a toy store where I would later bring my two little boys to shop.

One of those little boys is now in Europe, prepared to defend NATO if the war in Ukraine spreads. I stumbled too close to a war unintentionally; my son has chosen the life of a warrior. Thoroughly perplexed, I once asked him why. He answered simply, "You always told me to find a way to serve others. Not everyone can do this. I can."

Humanity is stuck in a continuous spiral, despite our best intentions. We grow up learning of evil men – Josef Mengeles, Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin – and we admire the heroes who stood against them. We turn the page, close the chapter, assure ourselves that particular horror is behind us. And then it rises again. And again.

In the face of it, it is easy to despair, but I seek out glimmers of hope.

As leaders around the world fail us, others step up. A comedian-turned-politician becomes an inspirational giant; a chef sets up field kitchens to feed the hungry; young men and women willingly shoulder new burdens to once again defend democracy.

In Ukraine, a grandmother fills the pockets of her invaders with sunflower seeds. She tells the Russians when they die on Ukrainian soil, sunflowers will grow where they fall.

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“As the drums of war began beating again in Eastern Europe, dusty memories from my experience in Saudi Arabia during the first Gulf War were revived. Those memories, the ongoing war in Ukraine, and my son’s military service resulted in this essay, ‘War Fever.’” —Kathleen Tighe

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**Kathleen Tighe** is a writer and educator based in Michigan. She writes creative nonfiction, flash fiction, and poetry. Her work has appeared in *The Write Launch*, *Dunes Review*, *Still Life*, *Qua Literary and Fine Arts Magazine*, *Writing From the Inside Out*, and *The Purposeful Mayonnaise*. Her lifelong travel influences much of her work.

FICTION

## Guam, 1988

Kathleen Toomey Jabs

Lieutenant Lucy Chapman strode into the ready room and began flight preparations. As the helicopter aircraft commander, HAC for short, she had ultimate responsibility for the day's evolution. She called the local weather forecaster. A storm was brewing two hundred miles to the north in the middle of the Philippine Sea. The first of the season's typhoons was predicted to hit Saipan by late Saturday.

She found Lieutenant Swanson and the crew chief and briefed the flight. Delivery of mail and a replacement turbine blade to a pre-positioned ammunition ship. "You good on this, Swanny?" She asked, and got an *aye, ma'am* in response.

Swanny followed her to maintenance control and reviewed the logbook while she signed for the aircraft. Her signature, her decisions, the entire flight her responsibility. Together, they walked to the field. Vapors from the recent fueling were visible in the warm press of tropical air. The sun was naked and white in an unbroken blue sky. The helicopter seemed to shimmer and shift in the distance.

Swanny swung his helmet by its strap and took long, jerky strides each time it sailed forward so that he stayed a half a step in the lead. He had wanted jets. Now he tried too hard to adopt the swagger and surety of fighter pilots and made jokes about his plight as a *rotor head* and *helo-bubba*. Lucy hated to see his disappointment, but she found his complaints draining. Love it or leave it, she thought; she'd worked too hard and sacrificed too much to be dragged down by Swanny.

She carried her helmet under her left arm and hoisted the mailbag over her right shoulder. It occurred to her she'd forgotten to remove David's letter from her flight suit pocket. The hard lump of paper pressed against her left breast. *Lucy, I've tried calling several times*. She had the opening line memorized. All the lines really. Why had she read the letter before flying? So dumb. Commander Harris had noticed and told her, "Never open personal mail until the evening. It should be the last thing you do every day. The very last." Lucy had slit open the envelope that morning during squadron training, expecting to be cheered by David's words, buoyed by his old-fashioned twists of phrase. She missed him. Thought he missed her just as much. *I hope you understand why I wrote a letter. I didn't want to leave a message*. Reading the lines, Lucy felt a damp chill, her breath had come short and shallow. Now she felt the shock rising up again, the same strange grip in her chest. It was a distraction she couldn't afford. Not now. She shook her head and lifted her boots to match Swanny's pace. The tarmac was gluey and her boots sank slightly into the pitch. With each step the odor of petroleum and melting tar grew stronger.

On the flight line, she directed Swanny to complete the final safety check. The flag on the ops building made a brisk, clapping sound. Winds were coming out of the north, five or ten knots. The morning's clouds had thinned to shreds of white and the sky was as clear and sharp as the blue edge of a flame.

She handed the mailbag to the crew chief and climbed in on the starboard side. They had bird five, her favorite. She traced the slit in the seat with her finger and pulled out her checklist, confirmed the



circuit breakers and switches were positioned correctly, tested the safety lights, then lit off the auxiliary power unit.

She turned to Swanny. “Do you have your qual book?”

Swanny pulled the book out of a pocket on the leg of his flight suit and passed it to her. She flipped through it. “What’s left?”

“If I do the replenishment, I’m almost done.”

“It’s yours,” she said. “Don’t say I never gave you anything.” She watched with satisfaction at the smile he tried to bite back as he pulled on his gloves. She took out the fuel log, made a notation on the level, then called, “Chief, all good?” to the crewman in the backseat.

The crew chief gave a thumbs up. “Roger, ma’am, good to go.”

Swanny started the engine, dropped the rotor brake, and the helicopter began to pulse and shake. A whirring, sputtering noise echoed in the cockpit. He got clearance from the air traffic controller, lifted the collective, and guided them upwards.

Lucy felt the throb in her seat as the rotors began to beat the air. She breathed in the moist, faintly sweet breeze and waited for the familiar surge of power and sheer wonder of flight to overtake her. That moment of sublime concentration and fierce focus had hooked her from the start. Especially in the CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter, an aircraft that defied physics, a mass of metal that shouldn’t fly but still somehow did. *You love to fly, Lucy, I know that. I wouldn’t want to be the one to stand in the way of that.* David knew her. He’d said he understood. What had changed?

She watched as Swanny steered them west over barren red-brown hills where only a year earlier a Japanese soldier had been discovered and, believing the world still at war, surrendered. In a matter of minutes, the helicopter soared over groves of palm trees, a spine of sand. Then land disappeared, and they approached the vastness of the coral-studded seas, the island just a hint of pink amidst the endless blue domain.

Lucy studied the control panel and adjusted her helmet. The sudden crackle of static reminded her of an international phone connection. The mental fogginess of working through a ten-hour difference, Lucy and David talking across different days divided by the date line and so many miles. All the repeated words and phrases, the echoes and talking over each other until even “I love you!” sounded almost like an accusation. It struck her that David must have met someone else. That’s what he wouldn’t admit. He hadn’t fallen out of love with her so much as he’d fallen in love with someone new. That was why the letter sounded so antiseptic and formal. She started to unzip the pocket to remove the letter. *Don’t do it,* she chided herself. *Stay in the box.*

Ahead of her, the sky was cloudless and the sea immense, flat, and calm. The blades beat the air. She had to focus on what was happening now. The demarcations of shallow and deep water were clear, surprisingly straight lines, no gradation or subtlety, just a shift from aquamarine to turquoise then to midnight blue.

An hour into the flight, she spotted the ship, a black dot against the expanse of deep blue.

As Swanny began the descent, she studied the roiling slope of the sea. The ship, which had seemed to bob lightly from high above, was plunging back and forth at sharp angles. Waves smacked the hull. The flight deck crew struggled to stand erect, their jerseys rippled with wind. It looked too risky for the helicopter to land. If Swanny could hold position, she thought, it would be safer to lower the cargo out the main cabin door using the internal winch.

She called the ship on the radio. Swanny eased the helicopter down towards the gray hull and held it steady in a hover. The crew chief repacked the turbine blade and the mail in an orange mesh bag, hooked it to the hoist and lowered it out of the helicopter. Hot air rushed in, rocking them. She felt the sway of the machinery, how easy the wind batted them around.

Swanny braced himself, clutched the collective. She monitored it all. Especially their distance from the ship.

The sailors unbuckled the bag and released the net. As the mailbag collapsed onto the deck of the ship, the white glint of the envelopes caught her eye. She wished suddenly that she could take the letters back. The crew's connections to home and a whole other world lay inside the bag. To survive the six-month deployments, you had to steel yourself for heartbreak and keep all your emotions in check. Compartmentalize. She wondered if that hardened your heart over time. Had the process started for her? She felt brittle with the strain.

The ship's captain saluted from the conning tower. Lucy returned the salute and requested clearance to depart. The words echoed strangely in her ears. Clearance to depart. That was what David wanted, she thought.

The signalman approved their take-off. Just then, an updraft of wind caught the helicopter and jolted it sharply right, jerking Lucy towards the door. Her right arm banged off the side. Without thinking, she grabbed for the collective and pulled for power to get away from the ship. The helicopter banked steeply towards starboard. She was going in the wrong direction, she realized, overcompensating. They could go into an uncontrolled spin. Wind thrummed against the doors. Her body tensed and she watched in terror as they tilted sideways.

"Hey," Swanny yelled. "Ease off. I've got the controls."

His voice broke through her consciousness. She released her grip. Swanny maneuvered the helicopter back to port and straightened them on course. In less than five seconds, they were righted and back in sight of the ship.

"Is everyone okay?" she asked. Her voice shook.

"You haven't killed me yet," the crew chief called from the back.

Swanny nodded but didn't speak. His hand was wrapped tight on the collective. He was breathing hard, chest heaving.

"Wind's picking up," she said to Swanny. "Good recovery." The rush of relief at being saved did not calm her. Instead, she felt a knot of insecurity. She had always trusted in her ability to fly. She'd put in hours on the simulator, signed up for extra flights. The internal coordination had become instinctual: hand, eye, foot, ears. She'd learned to get in the zone and stay there. Mission only.

Mission first. Now, she'd slipped. Her fractured concentration, the wandering thoughts of David and her own bruised heart, could've caused them to crash into the hull of the ship or drop into the tumult of the sea. She chewed her lip.

"I..." she started. "Sorry about that."

"No problem," Swanny said. His gaze was fixed on the horizon.

She couldn't tell what he was thinking. She let him fly the whole way back. He touched down softly at the field. She signed his qual card and started to fill out the flight report. She hesitated over how much to say. Technically, nothing had happened, but that was only due to luck and Swanny's quick reaction. Nothing had happened, but something had changed.

Swanny had something on her.

"Do you have any concerns about the flight?" she asked.

"Wind shift," he said. He shrugged his shoulders. "Rogue waves. Rogue wind. Who knows? I'm not going to say anything."

She nodded. "I owe you one."

\*

The typhoon warning had been upgraded and the wetting down party was well underway by the time she appeared at the officer's club. The bar was filled with bodies and shouting. Kenny Loggins yelled about the danger zone over the sound system. Swanny called out to her and brought her a glass of punch. "For the lady who taught me everything I know," he said. He smiled at her with what seemed like conspiracy. He wore cowboy boots. His eyes were almost level with hers.

"Thanks," she said. Her hair hung loose on her shoulders. She wore jeans, flat sport sandals, a yellow, collared shirt. On her face, a hint of powder, pale lipstick.

"I appreciate you letting me fly all afternoon," Swanny said. "Hear that wind, now?"

"We ran into the outer edges of the storm."

"We ran into something." He started to gesture with his hands. He rocked on his heels to demonstrate the shear of the wind and brought his hands together at a sharp angle.

She smiled, surprised at his enthusiasm. He might make a convert to transport missions after all. He'd certainly reacted well today. He'd saved them. She didn't know if she would've pulled out in time or not. She couldn't dwell on that now. It was show time. She had a part to play—untouchable, unflappable, able to hold her own. She excused herself.

Deeter called her over to the game table. A group was playing Scrabble, the board half-full, the word *crazy* stretched across the middle. "Cover for me," Deeter said as he dumped lettered chips in her hands.

She studied the board and when it was her turn, she arranged her letters vertically and announced with a mixture of bravado and rum, “Put the ‘k’ in Lucy and you get Lucky.” The crowd around the table laughed. She pushed her advantage. “You know what they say: Better lucky than good.”

“Lucky, huh?” Harris asked. “Sounds like a call sign.” He kept his dark eyebrows raised, his lips seam-straight, so that she couldn’t tell if he was challenging her or encouraging her. Every conversation was a new test.

“I’ll take it,” she said.

“Go ahead, pretend you have a choice,” Harris countered.

Badger sidled over and flung his long arm around her shoulder. “I feel Lucky,” he said.

“Your Luck-y’s running out,” she replied, lifting his arm off of her like a soiled engine rag and letting it drop. The group hooted and laughed. Badger scowled and moved off.

“Nothing personal, Badger,” she said. “No one’s getting lucky tonight.”

Before Badger could escape, Deeter returned, holding a tray laden with drinks and lime jello shots. He balanced the tray on the couch. “I can’t drink to no one getting lucky,” he said. “Although, that fiancée of yours might want us to.”

She bit the inside of her cheek so hard she tasted blood. The entire squadron knew that her wedding was set for December, the next time she had leave. She wasn’t ready to share the news. She tucked her left hand in her pocket. “You never know with you men,” she said. “He might not.” She forced a laugh.

Harris leaned back and studied her. He had to know, she thought. She did her best not to flinch. Deeter handed her a beer. She drank a long swallow. When she finished, Harris was busy lighting a cigarette.

“Damn men,” Deeter said. He slapped his thigh and his chipped tooth sparkled. He retrieved the tray. “You’re right about us. You never do know.” He winked and began to distribute jello cups.

“One, two, three,” Deeter said. They all squeezed the jello into their mouths.

Lucy wandered towards the pool table. The air conditioner was programmed so cold, the window glass beaded with condensation. Next to her, the guys were talking football odds. College bowl games. Coaches and players she’d never heard of. Some rock group screamed through the speakers, the lyrics inaudible. She glanced at the clock. Another hour and she could retreat. *We have always been apart more than together. There was a romance to that, the meetings, the splendid holidays. There were just so few. So many weeks and nights I’ve wondered where you are, and I’ve had no way of knowing.*

She was filled with longing for David. For quiet, honest conversation. She had trusted David with her doubts, shared her secrets. He reminded her there were other ways to live that were true and fierce and didn’t require a constant state of watchfulness. She was suddenly weary.

*Forgive me Lucy. I think it's best to call off the engagement. In your heart you must know it's for the best. Again, I'm sorry for the letter. With love always, David.*

About midnight, Deeter waved his right arm in a circle, spinning a red rag and calling out, "Who's up for Tumon? Let's go downtown and do some shooting," Tumon Bay was a crescent of beach catering primarily to Japanese businessmen. The streets were lined with all-night t-shirt stores, restaurants selling imported beef, shooting galleries, and exotic dance halls.

Deeter flicked the rag at her. "Want to go?" he asked.

"Am I really invited?" The guys always sidestepped her when going to Tumon. She'd assumed that was because she was female, and they would have to limit what establishments they chose. Now she wondered if it had been David, her status as "off-limits."

"Of course." He slapped her on the back. "You're one of the best shots we have."

"You're going to a shooting gallery? Ha!" She rolled her eyes. "I know where you're going."

"Not right away," Deeter said.

"Nothing good happens after midnight."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Go on," she said. "Maybe next time." She watched them file out ahead of her then escaped to the bathroom. When she emerged, the room was quiet and dark except for the flashing gold and white beer sign. She sat down on the couch and shut her eyes. Finally, peace. The vinyl felt cool and smooth to her cheek. The room spun slightly. She shouldn't have drunk the tequila. Base security was posting roadblocks. Her red jeep would be an easy target.

"You're still here," a voice said. She heard the tap-squeak of boot on wet tile. Swanny appeared from the shadows. "Need a ride?" he asked. "I'll take you home. Partners are supposed to do that, you know."

"I'll be okay." The wind had subsided, and the rain no longer pinged on the windows.

"Nothing to fear, Lucy-Lucky. The sky isn't going to fall."

"You're okay to drive?"

"Aren't I always?"

"You were this afternoon."

"I am now, too," he said. He opened the door and a wet breeze floated in, carrying the scent of jet fuel and salt.

She stepped outside and Swanny followed. “Must be the eye of the storm,” she said. The night seemed full of whispers.

“That’s Guam for you. You ever wonder what the hell we’re doing out here in the middle of nowhere?”

“I try not to,” she said. “You start wondering about those types of things and you might never stop. All the *what ifs*.”

“I can think of a few,” he said.

“We all have them.”

On the road outside the gate, Swanny veered off towards the left. “Do you mind? I want to show you something,” he said. He turned down the tourist road and headed for Punta dos Amantes. “You know the story, right?”

She nodded. The legend was that two Chamorran lovers had jumped from the famous cliff so that the girl wouldn’t be forced to wed a Spaniard.

“Have you ever been here at night?” he asked.

“Nope.”

He parked, opened her car door, and led her to the overhang. The water below twinkled green and white as if sparks from falling fireworks were scattered upon it.

“Phosphorescence,” he said. “Sit here for a second.” He patted a spot on the cliff.

She peered over the edge. “It’s beautiful.” She was mesmerized. How had she missed this? She realized how little she knew of Guam outside of the base and the flights over it. She turned to lie on her stomach and hung her head over the edge. “It’s like the stars are in the ocean.”

“It’s bioluminescent phytoplankton. Thousands of microscopic sea creatures emitting cold light. No heat. A chemical reaction.”

“I didn’t take you for a science geek.”

“Nobody does.” He turned to roll on his stomach as well. “None of us know anything about each other, do we?”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Lucy said.

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

Lucy rested her head on her hands and turned her face back to the water. “I’m not engaged anymore.” The words sounded strange to her ears. It was the first time she had said them out loud and she was struck by the permanence.

“The letter?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“You knew before we flew, didn’t you?”

Lucy pushed herself up to a seated position. She felt vulnerable but tired of pretending. “Wait till you get home to open personal mail. There’s a reason for that rule.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” Swanny pushed back and propped his head on his hand. He took out a flask, swallowed and passed it to her. “Sorry about the break-up.”

Lucy wiped the mouthpiece and took a long drink. “Your turn. Tell me something I don’t know.”

“I like helicopters. I think I’m going to stay.”

She laughed. “That was a big risk. Sharing that. You can go deeper, science guy. What’s next?”

Swanny took another swallow from the flask and passed it to her. “You made me like them today.” His voice was thick sounding, heavy with alcohol and something akin to longing. Lucy kept her head down. The sudden intimacy unnerved her at the same time it made her feel strangely curious to know more.

“Up there today in the cockpit. It’s the first time I actually had a sense of danger.”

Lucy forced a laugh. “Yeah. Sorry about that.”

“I’m not sorry.” Swanny reached across and touched her cheek and tucked a stray hair behind her ear.

Lucy scrambled to her feet and backed away from the edge.

“I don’t mean to scare you,” Swanny said. He walked towards her. “I think you know how I feel. I just... Can I touch your hair?”

Her cheek tingled where his fingers had brushed it. How long since anyone had touched her? Her last visit to David was four months ago. “This isn’t a good idea.”

Swanny held the flask towards her. “I promise I won’t pull your hair,” he said and gave her a crooked smile. “It’s always so tight in the braid.”

She took a long swallow. “Fine,” she said.

Swanny approached slowly and raised his hands. He rested them on top of her head with light pressure and slid them back cupping her scalp and gliding his fingers along her skull until his palms rested at the back of her neck with his fingers wrapped in her hair. His eyes were closed. Lucy had the sensation she was being anointed. When Swanny opened his eyes, they were moist and pleading.

“Can I hold you?” he asked.

She shifted her weight. His hands had left a trail of lingering warmth. “I guess so.” She shouldn’t have told him about David. Having a fiancée had shielded her, freed her from worry and lessened the threat from and to her.

Swanny pulled her in close while she kept her body stiff. “Hold me back,” he said. He rubbed his hands along her shoulders and her arms then started to cup her buttocks.

“No,” she said. He tightened his grip and leaned in to kiss her and she struggled to free her hands. Then she locked her leg behind his and pushed him back and he fell to the ground, pulling her with him. Her legs landed tangled around him. One elbow struck rock. She kned him and rolled free, then stopped suddenly and froze. She was inches from the edge.

“Dammit,” Swanny moaned. He curled on his side and clutched his ankle.

She waited until she saw he wasn’t going to move, then she eased back carefully from the edge and stood over him. “What the fuck was that all about?”

Swanny rolled onto his back. “I’m sorry. I don’t know. Too many shots. Too many stars.”

“We’re supposed to be partners.”

“It won’t happen again.”

“You’re right about that.” She felt strangely triumphant, as if she had just scored a winning point.

“You’re not going to say anything, are you?”

She glanced at the shimmering waves below. “Nothing happened. Rogue move. Two in one day. We’re even. Give me your keys.”

“What?”

“When I get out of the park, I’ll call you a cab.”

She headed down the path. The wind had picked up and it buffeted her. She walked quickly. She knew what awaited her: the silent apartment, her finger empty of a ring and its attention, a further closing off from her squadron mates. She’d have to be more careful, even more on guard. She would get over David, it would take a while, but eventually time and distance would work. She wanted to believe that. She needed something to hold onto. In the meantime, she and Swanny each had something on the other: a bond more durable than love. She looked back towards the empty trail then up at the sky. Clouds were sweeping in from the northeast, brushing thickly over the moon, eclipsing the stars. She climbed into Swanny’s car and headed off into the night.

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“During my years living in Japan and Hawaii, I had the opportunity to stay on Guam multiple times and was hosted by a Navy helicopter squadron for one particularly memorable visit. In “Guam, 1988”, I wanted to tell a story that captured the atmosphere of the island, the sacrifices and strain of trying to maintain a long-distance relationship, and the challenges of performing a wartime mission that demands total focus.” —Kathleen Toomey Jabs

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**Kathleen Toomey Jabs** graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in one of the first classes to include women, earning a Bachelor of Science in English with minors in Russian and Engineering. She completed six years of active duty, then transferred to the Navy Reserve where she commanded three units before retiring in 2017. Her military career spans a variety of active duty and reserve positions, with service in Japan, Hawaii, Panama, the Pentagon, and military installations along the East Coast. From 2019-2022, Kathleen served as the Acting Secretary and Deputy Secretary of Veterans and Defense Affairs for the Commonwealth of Virginia where she worked to coordinate state and federal resources to support Virginia’s veteran community and liaison with federal defense facilities.

Concurrent with her Navy work, Kathleen earned a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from George Mason University. Several of her short stories have won awards and appeared in literary and national publications, including *Good Housekeeping*, *Hayden’s Ferry Review*, *Other Voices*, *The Baltimore Review*, *Proud to Be: Writing by American Warriors*; and other journals. Her story, “Safekeeping,” was selected for the Random House Operation Homecoming anthology and the NPR Selected Shorts program.

# Safe

Nathan Perrin

Khalil put the rest of his dinner plates in the dishwasher, started it, and made his way out the door to the backyard.

His neighbor's son, Sam, was playing in the yard next to him.

Khalil waved and opened up a hatch on the ground.

"Where are you going?" asked Sam.

"Going to check a few things out," said Khalil.

"What's that?"

"It's a bomb shelter," he said.

"That's neat!" Sam shouted. "I wonder if we have one."

"Maybe." Khalil laughed nervously. "Well, have a good night, friend."

As he climbed the ladder down, he said a silent thankful prayer for his real estate agent. The only way Khalil felt safe was if his new house had a shelter. After months of searching, he finally found his home.

When he moved in that summer, the first thing he did was go to the grocery store and buy canned goods to line the shelter's shelves.

\*

*The bombs rattled the dust off the walls.*

*Khalil held tightly to his mother, only looking at her crucifix necklace.*

*With each loud explosion, he held her tighter.*

*Why was Iran bombing them? They did nothing. Saddam promised liberation to them too.*

*"Are we safe?" Khalil whispered.*

*"Yes," his mother brushed his hair back. "We are safe."*

\*

Khalil woke up, turned on the lantern, and made his way up the bunker's ladder.

It was a bright fall morning. Clear skies. He smiled and made his way into the house to get ready for the day.

“Thank you, God, for this day,” he said.

It was another calm day in Paramus.

\*

On his way to the office, Khalil stopped at his usual corner shop for a cup of coffee. He had quickly adopted the American sweet tooth, and now preferred his coffee “light and sweet.” Besides, no shop coffee ever tasted as good and filling as his mother’s. Only a small cup was needed of the syrupy coffee. Anything more, and Khalil’s heart pounded with caffeine and he sweated uncontrollably. Here, in the corner shop, he wove his way through the small crowd to the counter.

Everyone in the cafe was quiet and still, nearly all of them looking up at a TV. The guys behind the counter weren’t even taking orders.

“Excuse me,” Khalil smiled at the man behind the register.

“Aren’t you seeing what’s happening on the TV?” The man pointed above him.

Khalil looked up at a cable news station to see the Twin Towers up in smoke.

“My God,” someone whispered behind him.

He turned around and walked away, heart beating faster and faster with each step. It was happening here too.

\*

*Khalil covered his eyes in the corner of the shelter as his mother relieved herself across the room behind him.*

*“Are we going to be okay?” Khalil asked.*

*“Yes,” his mother said. “As long as we stay in here, we will be okay.”*

*Khalil sighed, “I can’t wait to get outside.”*

*“When you grow up, promise me you will change everything,” his mother said. “Promise me you’ll do good.”*

*“I promise,” Khalil smiled.*

*“You can open your eyes now.”*

\*

Khalil walked around a nearby park and tried to do the breathing exercises his trauma therapist taught him.

“It’ll be okay, it’ll be okay,” he whispered over and over to himself.

People around him were either catatonic or crying.

Just like in Iraq.

“It’ll be okay, it’ll be okay...”

Nearby, a woman got on her knees and started cursing out loud.

Khalil’s steps quickened. Things like this weren’t supposed to happen again. America was supposed to be safe. That’s why he came. He made certain his whole life was safe, figured out. Memories of explosions, of quaking earth, faint air raid sirens hovering beneath quiet conversations, once fading and unobtrusive, crashed through his head and into the front of his brain. His eyes throbbed with remembered concussive blasts. He curled over his body to protect his vital organs from shrapnel. His breaths short, convulsive, brought no oxygen and his vision contracted. He knew the bombing sounds following him weren’t real, but his body didn’t know the difference.

“This isn’t Iraq, this isn’t Iraq, this isn’t Iraq...”

“Why?” cried a voice behind him.

Khalil rocked back and forth on the sidewalk in the fetal position.

He could hear footsteps around him walking in different directions.

In his mind’s eye, he was a child all over again, clinging dearly to his mother’s side.

*“There’s blood all over him!” Khalil shouted as he saw his neighbor try to wake up a dead man.*

*“Just keep walking!” His mother gripped him harder.*

He lay down on the dusty, smoke-smelling New York sidewalk and cried, gripping for anything.

*The sirens blared.*

*Khalil shouted out his mother’s name when a bright flash of light blinded him.*

*A thundering explosion pushed him across the street.*

*“Khalil!” his mother shouted.*

*He felt her hands on his face.*

*“Khalil!”*

*His vision cleared and he stared into her eyes.*

*"We need to get out!"*

"We need to get out!" Khalil yelled.

His eyes darted back and forth to see he was still lying on the sidewalk.

"Count backwards from a hundred," he breathed. "Just like you were taught."

"One hundred, ninety-nine, thamaniya wa tis'un, sab'a wa tis'un..."

Memories of bombs dropping next to his house repeated themselves in his head. The only comforting thought was his mother holding his face in her hands when his vision returned.

"Just get home, just get home, just get home..." he whispered in Arabic.

Somehow he found his car. Exactly where he parked it, but he couldn't be sure how he got there from the sidewalk. He gripped the steering wheel and prayed for safety.

*"We need to get out!"*

\*

*"Why do people hate?" asked Khalil.*

*"Because people don't understand that we need each other," his mother answered.*

*They ate canned food next to the lantern light.*

*"We need each other?" Khalil raised an eyebrow.*

*"Yes, habibi," she said lovingly. "The world is so used to looking at each other with hateful eyes that we forget we need each other to be safe. We need each other to be loved."*

*"The world out there doesn't seem so safe." Khalil cuddled his mother.*

*"Promise me wherever you will go, you will never lose trust in people or humanity," his mother whispered.*

*"I promise," Khalil answered, hugging her tighter.*

*"Do you really?"*

*"Yeab."*

*His mother kissed his forehead.*

*The bombs started falling again, but at least they were there holding each other.*

\*

Khalil flung open the shelter hatch, threw off his suit jacket, and started to climb down the ladder.

“Mr. Masih?” asked a familiar voice.

Khalil crawled back up and saw Sam.

“Yes?” he asked.

“My dad’s at the towers,” Sam sniffled.

Khalil climbed out. “Are you okay?”

Sam cleared his throat, “I’m scared.”

“Is your mom home?”

“I don’t know where she is.”

As Khalil stood still, he realized that his body and memories were telling him not to help Sam. The world was just as cruel as he remembered. Even in the United States, buildings exploded for no reason.

“Do you want to come in with me?” asked Khalil.

“Yeah,” said Sam.

As they both climbed down, Khalil turned on the lights.

Sam sat down on one bed and picked up a nearby book.

Khalil closed the hatch door and sat down across from Sam.

He noticed Sam wearing a cross necklace.

“Are we safe here, Mr. Masih?” Sam cried. He hid his face from Khalil, even now on this day ashamed to show such distress.

“Yes,” Khalil replied. “We are safe.”

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**Nathan Perrin** is an emerging writer and Anabaptist pastor in Chicagoland. He holds an MA in Quaker Studies from Barclay College, and is a doctoral student studying Christian Community

Development at Northern Seminary. His story, “Safe”, is inspired by his experiences with Community Peacemaker Teams and the local Assyrian community. His Master’s capstone also partially dealt with the ways Syrian Christians responded to war and conflict, so this story is a natural outpouring of that passion. His other work has been published in the *Dillydown Review*, *Bangalore Review*, and *Esoterica Magazine*. He is also a screenwriter for an unannounced indie comedy series. For more information, visit [nathanperrin.weebly.com](http://nathanperrin.weebly.com).

# Glimpses of a Girl's Life

Krista Puttler

Haley's Comet passes Earth once every seventy-five years. It appears often enough for us to remember the dinner table arguments over whether it is named after a boy or a girl, but rare enough for us to wonder if it ever visited at all.

On a grey autumn day, when the wind whipped between the bare maple tree branches, an Army Chaplain knocked on a young woman's front door. She answered wearing a grey cardigan buttoned tightly around her swollen belly. The Chaplain held his hands in front of his chest, just long enough for the woman to recognize the patch on his left shoulder: two letter As configured to look like a jousting helmet. He pressed a single dog tag into her palm, and grief transferred from body to body, up her arm, down her chest, and into her womb, soaking in like rain on a parched ground.

Later that night, the delivery nurse checked the woman's empty, yet still swollen belly, nodded, then walked over to the bassinet in the corner. Kirsten had wiggled out of her blanket. She was crying. She had never felt cold or alone before. The nurse expertly swaddled Kirsten, lifted her out of the bassinet, walked over to the moonlit window, and swayed the baby to sleep. Kirsten's mother lay on the bed, too sore to shift position, and gripped the dog tag until it cut into her palm.

At three years old, Kirsten found a mouse shivering in the long grass beside their house. She crouched down, folded her body together, chin on knees, and stared at the mouse. It had eyes as dark as the sky just before a storm. They did not blink. Kirsten slowly moved her arm away from her knee and out to the mouse, one finger extended. She touched the mouse's rough fur, a snarl of hair against her fingertip. The mouse closed its eyes and buried its nose beneath a blade of grass.

Kirsten's stomach pains started later that evening. Kirsten's mother found her rocking behind the bedroom curtain, hair tinted gold in the moonlight, rubbing the words stamped into her father's dog tag. Her mother lifted Kirsten's trembling body, removed her sweat-soaked pajamas, and placed her into the bath. As Kirsten's mother scooped water into her hands and up and over Kirsten's shoulders, she whispered the words written on the little disc of metal.

That night, Kirsten lay propped on pillows in her mother's bed, her body aflame like the sky right before the dawn, each inhaled breath a shard of blinding light to her abdomen.

By morning Kirsten was vomiting, unable to drink the water her mother offered.

By noon, she was bundled onto a gurney, the dog tag passed from child to nurse to mother. They whisked Kirsten away, down a bright sterile corridor and through a swinging pair of operating room doors.

Her appendix has ruptured.

The inflammation is everywhere. Even her pelvic organs are involved.

She may never be able to have children.



At five years old, with a thin metal chain around her neck and the dog tag safely tucked beneath her blouse, Kirsten went off to school just like any other girl. She played house with her dolls, played Mama to her teddy bear family, and turned ordinary tap water into dragon-berry tea. But sometimes at night, when a sliver of moonlight appeared beneath her bedroom curtain, the scar on Kirsten's belly would burn like a match. If she removed the chain from around her neck and pressed the disc of metal into her scar, the fire beneath the ridge of sutured flesh would ease, and Kirsten could return to counting the stars again.

One afternoon, at eight years old, and after a day of rain, Kirsten walked out of her house and down the sidewalk, the cement panels as slick as mirrors. The rainwater flowed along in the gutter next to her, pooling around a pile of fallen leaves, then disappeared down the gurgling drain.

The sidewalk ended at an empty lot overgrown with dandelions and clover. Kirsten stopped at the cement edge, her toes just touching the grass. The wind blew all around, rustling the clover, confusing her search for the four-leafed one she knew would be there. She closed her eyes, waited for the wind to quiet, and then opened her eyes again.

A single yellow leaf lay on the ground in front of her feet. She picked it up by its stem; it was unlike any leaf she had ever seen before. The stem had many tiny lines all packed together along its length. Then as the stem flattened into its leaf, the lines, its veins, remained straight, without a single branch, just like a dainty fan. Kirsten stood up and shaded her eyes with her hand. A ginkgo tree stood at the far end of the empty lot, its leaves a sunburst yellow, its branches pulsed with a golden light. She looked back down at the leaf and twirled it between her fingers. Somehow, when all the other trees were making leaves with branching veins, the ginkgo had remained, steadfast, unchanged.

One morning in the shower, at twelve years old, Kirsten looked down between her legs, and for the first time saw the red splatters on the porcelain between her feet. She crossed her legs, but the red kept falling. She screamed to her mother that she was dying. Her mother rushed through the bathroom door and drew back the curtain. She looked down at the splatters of blood mixed with water, crumpled to the bathroom floor, and wept.

At eighteen, while her mother was still asleep, Kirsten removed the chain from around her neck and placed it on the kitchen table. The words on the dog tag were rubbed smooth, the ridges just a faint impression in the dulled metal. She took out a yellow ginkgo leaf from the inside pocket of her jacket and tucked the stem underneath the metal disc. Then she walked out of the door and went to school. She learned about the beginning of things, about where moons and comets came from, about mouse diseases, and human anatomy, and why the ginkgo leaf's veins stubbornly refused to branch, a botany miracle when miracles were not supposed to happen.

One afternoon, many autumns later, the ginkgo tree was bulldozed to the ground. The little fan-like leaves scattered across the field of clover in flashes of golden light.

Years passed.

Everyone forgot about the comet that was only halfway around its orbit.

One winter morning, when the shifting winds bring the first green smells of spring, a wailing ambulance pulled up in front of the sidewalk by an old woman's home. Two men carried a gurney up the stairs and into the house. Minutes later, they returned carrying the woman wrapped in bloodied sheets. They placed her into the ambulance and drove down the empty street.

Don't call her. I'm already dead.

And then the ulcer deep inside her started to bleed again, like a pile of leaves flushed from the end of a drainage pipe, and the doctor pounded on her chest, but could do nothing to save her.

Later that day, Kirsten and a small child were led into the empty resuscitation room. The body was covered with a grey sheet, the monitors silent. Discarded clothing lay in a pile on the ground. Kirsten picked up the top garment. It was half of a grey cardigan cut through with bandage shears up one pocket and just to the side of the buttons still fastened in their place. Kirsten reached into the remaining intact pocket and pulled out a slender cardboard box held together by a piece of string. She untied the string and lifted the top off the box. Resting on a square of pillowed cotton sat a brown ginkgo leaf, the edges curled like tiny parchment scrolls.

Mother, what is that?

A miracle.

Kirsten presented the leaf to the child, whose fingers, clumsy with delight, grasped the fan instead of the stem.

As Kirsten crouched down to comfort her child, staring into the swirl of tears and space, the brown flakes floated down like dust in the afternoon sun and gently came to rest upon the ground.

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“There is a ginkgo tree at the corner of my daughters’ school, and every autumn the leaves turn from dark green to a bright yellow, seemingly overnight. The first time I saw the glowing, golden heap of leaves at the base of the tree, my inner monologue of worries and to-do lists stopped, and all I saw was this blinding, radiant light.”

—Krista Puttler

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# VISUAL ARTS FEATURE

## INTERVIEW WITH EHREN TOOL ARTIST & VETERAN

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When our Zoom squares flicker to life, I see **Ehren Tool**—artist, Marine Corps veteran, and self-described “sphincter of ceramics” at UC Berkeley—sitting in a cramped studio behind a table covered with not-quite-dry ceramic cups. His grey beard almost reaches the top seam of his green, clay-spattered apron, just as the wall behind him (I *think* there’s a wall in there) almost reaches toward and past him, into the camera. Its floor to ceiling bins, posters, bags, colors, buckets, flags, and tools seem to crowd over his shoulders as if to get a better look at what he’s making now.



If you ask Ehren what he does as an artist, he doesn’t hesitate. “I make cups!” Then he laughs. But that isn’t all that Ehren does. He also talks and listens to people who receive these cups, considering they aren’t for sale but will be exchanged for dialogue—often about war and the military experience, but not always.

Here are some edited highlights from the conversation *Collateral* had with Ehren, which you can [watch in full on our YouTube channel](#).

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### **When you ask who he is, Ehren says:**

When you asked that question, it really threw me off. Like, *who am I?* ...deep!

I’m Argil’s dad, Sara’s husband, David’s son, Bill’s grandson... Anyway. I make cups. I work at UC Berkeley. I’m the sphincter of ceramics there: I’m what everything passes through, floating through the kilns, and firing the kilns. I’ve made and given away about 25,000 cups since 2001, mostly to vets and their families, but you know, other folks that war resonates with.

I’m a Marine Corps veteran of the ‘91 Gulf War, so issues of war and violence are close to me, but the military doesn’t have a corner on the market of trauma and violence. You know, war is murder, and military sexual trauma is rape, and lots of folks outside in the civilian world suffer from those things also. But there’s no place to talk about that so they kinda end up—the cups bring up different things for different people.

I just make cups. That’s who I am: the guy that makes those cups.



### When you ask *why art school?*

So I joined the Marine Corps [because] I wanted to be a cop, right? LAPD, “to protect and serve,” that was what I thought I wanted to do. After the Gulf War, I was less interested in carrying a gun to work. I actually volunteered, after the Gulf War, for embassy duty, and had two hardship posts back to back. I was in Rome fifteen months, and then Paris fifteen months. A hundred pounds ago, I looked good in a uniform!

But then I got out, took the GI bill, and was just swinging from class to class [at Pasadena City College]. But you know, the idea was, find something I like to do, and do it well, cause if I do it well, someone will pay me. The “pay me” thing has been a bigger trick... but maybe I’m still not doing it that well, even though I enjoy it! [*laughs*] All things in time.

### When you ask if working with ceramics came naturally:

No. Actually, as a young man, I thought being able to take a life was power. But after you see somebody flopping around on the ground, bleeding out, you feel like—you know. Being able to save a life is a bigger thing. So I took an emergency medical technician course and couldn’t complete the training because I broke my ankle drinking too much one night. I was taking a drawing class, and I asked if I could join the painting class, because I couldn’t complete [the EMT course] and I wouldn’t meet my full units for the GI bill.

So [Ben Sakaguchi](#) (drawing & painting faculty at Pasadena City College), a Japanese American, raised in internment camps, says *all art is political*. And he lumps my work in with the feminist movement as the “personal is political.” And it’s like, what the hell did you say? Then he retired, and his best friend was Phil Cornelius (ceramics faculty at PCC). Prior Army [service] between Vietnam and

Korea. And, you know, I'm trying to center the clay, right, a Marine, and he's prior Army, [saying] *look at Big Sergeant Tool, getting his ass kicked by five pounds of clay!* [laughs]

And [Cornelius] said I couldn't decorate my work. So I went home and made molds and started decorating my work, and I've been doing that now [for a long time]. Actually [*holds a ceramic mold up to the camera*], this might have been one of those molds. That mold is probably twenty years old.

I swear I think a lot of school for me was teachers telling [me] how it is, or the writers, or the art historian, or something. And then me saying, *No, I don't think so*, and going in a different direction. Like, *okay, is that so? Clement Greenberg, huh?* Like, what's your relationship with the CIA, you know? That's the thing with art. And that was the deal.

After my disappointment in the Marine Corps, you know, I joined for good and noble reasons; I was gonna do good and noble things. The gap between what I thought I was gonna do and what I did was vast and painful. So that gave me the strength actually, to go to school, like [*blows raspberry*]! You gonna tell me I can't do that, this is wrong, this is right, this is—I'm just gonna go to school and see what I want to do with my life!

And I was hoping to find something above crass commercial garbage, right, like art, science, medicine, religion; those things should be above, you know, just *makin' that money*, but...womp! Nothing in our culture is above it.

In grad school, some guest artist came and talked, and their advice was, *Follow your heart*, and I was like, oh my god, did we pay this person to come in? That is the dumbest thing I've ever heard! But then people [said to me], *tell me about the trajectory of your career*, and I was like, *I kinda just followed my heart*. I mean, I would never say it like that, but if you break it down it's like, this gig felt good, that one felt bad, I said yes to this, and no to that.





### When you ask *why cups?*

Stalin said *one death is a tragedy, one million is a statistic*, but in war, one million is an incalculable tragedy! Everybody had a mother and a father, and that's gone. Even thinking about the thousands of cups that I've made and the millions or trillions of bombs that have been made, you know, and for what? If everything goes according to plan, they blow up and destroy a bunch of other things? And yeah, we're doing it "to protect American lives" but you know what protects American lives? American doctors. Killing random people doesn't save other random people. And the money that we spend on it, what are the returns on it? Clean water for the planet?

### When you ask *why conversation?*

So I think LAPD, "protect and serve," [and] Marine Corps rifle squad, "locate, close with and destroy the enemy by fire and maneuver," right? And now I'm an artist, [and] I still want to locate, close with, and destroy the enemy. But through shared experience, and maybe a couple beverages, and a *conversation*...

That was the thing, I got out on Embassy duty in Rome, and I was discharged overseas and was coming back through Siena, and was drinking and talking to the waiter, and it turned out he was from Jordan, and he got drafted during the '91 Gulf War, he was studying medicine in Iraq, and now he was in Siena studying medicine. So he got off work and took me all around Siena and introduced me to other Gulf War vets from the Iraqi side, who are all working bars.

Anyway. It's the conversations. A little empathy, a little insight. I'm so grateful to the people—and having been in the military, right—I'll meet trans people, Black, Native, disabled, rich, poor—but they're *vets*. So, in a bar or a car dealership or the subway, immediately there's a conversation, there's



a trust. My hope is, through the military connection, I can reach out into the trans community, reach out into the Black community.

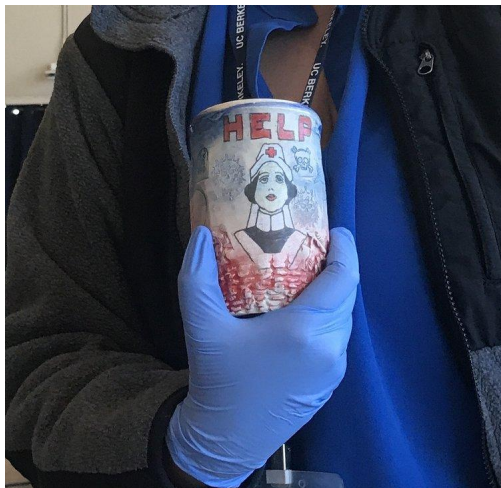
**About divisions and disconnects in the military, during and after war:**

There's an image from a Marine Corps manual, an image of how you fold up an American flag when somebody passes, you know, and you give it to the family? I painted one with brown hands, and people lost their minds! I was like, *what?!* [They said] "I didn't serve in the Marine Corps with any Black guys, they were dark greens!" But now, how can you say Black lives don't matter? They've been in every war since the beginning, and we cared about them, and they cared about us. Now, Navajo code talkers, you're gonna turn your [back]?... there's still no clean water on the reservation! If you say that we're America, and we're gonna support each other in combat, then how do we turn off when we come home? We can train together, we can fight together, we can die together, we can be buried together. There's no place in the United States that we can all live together.



**If you ask whether *all* the cups are given away eventually:**

Or thrown away, or dropped. I've sold a couple for charity stuff. Man, they're just cups. I had my first show in Los Angeles, and the gallery owners said, *I'm gonna give you this show, even though your work isn't relevant to anything that's going on in Los Angeles.* And the show opened the month after 9/11 and people were like, *oh my god, your work is so timely!* People were all excited about it.



I had 1,000 cups with military images and letters I'd sent to the Pentagon and the White House, and there was some gallery owner from another gallery who was like, *all the other artists, they're bitches man, this was a coup de grâce, that's the best show that ever happened in Chinatown, oh my God, I want to sign you!* I didn't say anything, but I was like, no thanks. If you're talking about other artists that way, I don't want to work with you.

So I was feeling all up about myself, and we went out to dinner, and then coming home, walking back to the car, [I saw] there was like cups with cigarette butts in them, and shards in the gutter, after people have been crying and telling me these crazy stories. But in the end, you know, *meh*, it's just a cup.



### When you ask about the kind of art he likes:

If it just says *Art*, then it's white, bougie art, and I'm not such a fan. If it's queer art, if it's vet art, if it's disabled art, if it's Black art, if it's Latin art, if it's outsider art, if it's street art—that's interesting to me. But *Art*? No.

### When you ask if *Art* is basically hotel lobby art:

I mean, some of that's not fair, right? There's a lot of stuff that I just don't get, but it can be moving, and the work represents who it was made for, you know? They didn't make those 8x12 foot paintings for, you know, veterans. [*laughs*] Maybe for the Raytheon lobby...

I don't like talking smack about artists for sure, but it shouldn't be like, because I think that a cup is the appropriate scale to talk about war, that doesn't mean I think people who are making paintings or big sculptures *shouldn't*.

With artists, with doctors, with anything you're doing, the best thing you can do is be true to yourself, right? Do the thing that you really want. If you're in a situation where you gotta make some stuff to sell, I'm not knocking you; make that stuff to sell. There's worse things to do. But don't give up on that stuff you really want to make, even if it doesn't sell, even if nobody wants to read it. It's really important that you make that thing that makes your heart sing or cry. We don't need any more products; we need real, sincere expressions of being human.

That's another thing: as a cup, [my art] can live for a while on a pedestal as 'big A' *Art* and then the show's over and it's in storage, and then it's at Goodwill, and now it's an ashtray for some vet. So then he passes, then it's got an opportunity to live, as *art*, or as a functional thing.

To have your work interact and resonate with people... [Emory Douglas](#), the Black Panther and Minister of [Culture] in Oakland, I asked him what he thought success was, and [*snaps*] right away, he said, *when your work resonates with the people*. No question. And I've never heard any other artists say that's how they feel: that the success is when your work resonates with people. As an artist, I'll say that that is absolutely the best feeling, you know, when it—I don't wanna say *when it makes somebody cry*, but when it makes somebody cry! It's resonating, somebody's getting it!

I have a lot of people that come up and say, *I don't talk about my experiences in war, I can't talk about my experience in war*, and a few of them have thanked me, but just to have it out there... it's true, I think, that the people who talk most about war are liars, you know. It's entertainment and politicians—it's not combat vets, that's for sure. And with so much garbage talk out there, it makes it harder to have honest talk about anything. Like, if you're not blowing it up as a patriot and *rah, rah, rah*, any kind of questioning of the morality or the price you're paying gets twisted.





**When you start talking about how we define our own art, and the art of people around us:**

I think a lot of the time, artists think, *look what I made!* [And] the stuff I made twenty years ago, if I win the lottery, I'll gladly buy it back and smash that stuff up, cause I was so proud of it the time, but man, it's some bad work!

And I think that continues: you know what you know, and you think you're relevant. So criticism, positive or negative, is like, *interesting, we'll see what the critics say in a hundred years!* It's out of my control, you know.

**What he says about art as commodity:**

When I left undergrad, [I was] with [Ken Price](#), and I was like, *man I'm super frustrated because I know there's stuff I'm gonna want to know, that I'll wanna ask you, but you're not gonna be around for me to ask.* And he was quiet for a long time, then he said, *yeah, I'm trying to think of something good to say.* He said it sucks when nobody knows you, nobody knows your work, obviously you're broke, you're not selling. And it sucks when they do know you because they want you to do [just] that one thing. They want you to make that product over and over again.

I'm actually hearing from a gallery owner, too, like it's a big fancy gallery owner in L.A., he came to the show at the [Craft and Folk Art Museum](#), and he's like, *hey, come to the gallery.* And I was like, yeah, right, he's blowing smoke. But I went and the dude hung up his phone and was like, *get the catalogs on*—I'm blanking on the name—he's got this whole stack of catalogs on this German artist who left after WWII and came to the States. [Note: after this interview, Ehren clarified: the catalog was work by Swiss artist Hans Burkhardt, who left Europe before the war.] It was really political, and this gallery owner was almost in tears, showing me this guy's work that he had, and he was like, *I want to give it away. I wanna give it to somebody who appreciates it, but I can't. It would destroy the market value of his work, and all this stuff would end up in the dumpster.* It would. So [he had] this frustration of having to collect it, and having to restrict access to it to make it valuable enough that it doesn't all get discarded.



So, there again with the cups, with the weirdness, I'm just lobbing them into the ocean. I've got them at the Smithsonian, but...the cups at the museum are dead. They're just sitting on the wall, all gone. The cups that are out in the world are still collecting stories, and conversations are happening. I don't know that objects actually have auras that they collect, but it does feel like that's *more*. Like I give the cup to you and then, when you're

gone, the people that care about you will care about the cup, because you cared about the cup, right? So having the work move through the world in that way is so much more interesting than having it out on consignment or loan from this museum to that museum.

### When you talk about hope and art:

[Paul Soldner](#) is a big American ceramics hero, and he [helped] liberate a death camp as a medic [in WWII], and the story his daughter told was that in one of these barracks, somebody had drawn these just beautiful pictures of some park scene, and he was like, *fuck it, if these guys could do it in those situations, I sure as hell can make art*. And another, [Peter Voulkos](#), you know, was in the Army Air Corps, bombed Japan, and his thing was, he said that he was gonna make something beautiful every day after having taken part in that. But again, we're not the only ones. A Black man aged 18 to 30 is statistically safer in the Marine Corps in Afghanistan at the worst part of the war than in any large city in the United States. So how can [Americans] say with a straight face that we're out here for freedom and democracy? We can be better. Universal healthcare, universal basic income, some housing, that would definitely lower the stress level of people who are on the edge anyway [with their] mental health—then you take their housing, you take the healthcare, and they're gonna be in a much worse space.



### When you ask what he'd like to create next:

I've had this fantasy of an occupation, like a military occupation, [to] set up a bunker made of bags of clay, with wheels and concertina wire and big kilns, and then camp there for as long as it takes to take the bunker down. Take the walls down and turn them into cups.

You want to protect yourself, protect your community, so the temptation is to separate yourself, separate your community; but another way to protect yourself, protect your community, might be to expand it. Destroy your enemy by making them friends. So, take the bunker down, turn it into cups, and give the cups away, then that creates some kind of weirdo community of people that have the cups and have conversations.

And that's what I'm trying to do, twenty-something years into the cups, I'm trying to figure out [how] we've done all this, we've been through all this, and to what end? It's like [Thich Nhat Hanh](#), the Buddhist monk, talking about veterans being the light at the tip of the flame. And if we can find a way to deal with our pain and trauma, then we can light the path for the rest of the world. So that's the hope.

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To learn more about Ehren, [check out this short video](#) from Craft in America, or start making art and conversations that create healing community bonds.