

# COLLATERAL

Issue 7 Volume 2  
Spring 2023

Editors:  
Jacqlyn Cope  
Marianne Kalinowski  
Jenny L. Miller  
Abby E. Murray

WWW.COLLATERALJOURNAL.COM

↓ IN THIS ISSUE ↓

---

POETRY

Gale Acuff  
S.Y. Ball  
Kevin Carollo  
Layle Keane Chambers  
Ben Corvo  
Paula Friedman  
C.C. Garrett  
Sonia Greenfield  
Susanna Lang  
Andrew Shattuck McBride  
Peter Schmitt  
Lisa Wujnovich

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Jason Arment  
Brecht De Poortere  
Andy Flaherty  
Mitzi Weems  
Christina M. Wells

FICTION

Jerome Gold  
Diane Lefer  
Andria Williams

VISUAL ARTS

Interview with Eric J. García



POETRY

After Sunday School today I walked home  
as usual but it wasn't really  
because I got saved, at least I think so,  
or maybe only thinking so isn't  
good enough but I'm only ten years old  
—what do I know even if I know it?  
Miss Hooker was pounding the old upright  
and leading us in “Onward, Christian  
Soldiers” and I got carried away—I  
want to be a soldier when I grow up  
and face the enemy and kill him if  
it comes to that, or them, and earn medals  
to prove it and my folks won't let me be  
in Cub Scouts but when I'm of age, is it  
18, I'll join for a hitch, the army  
I mean, and work my way to General  
and later maybe be the President  
and probably get assassinated  
but what price glory? That's the way it goes  
even if it shouldn't but maybe things  
go the way they go because folks make them  
and not God, I mean He doesn't make things  
go the way they go, people do and blame  
a bad direction on Him and Jesus.  
Anyway, the front door of our classroom,  
one of our new portable buildings at  
church, kind of like a Quonset, our classroom  
I mean, was open and I marched right out  
onto the two-by-four and plywood porch  
and down the double two-by-four steps and  
around the building and then back inside  
right where the end of the line of classmates  
was marching, *the Cross of Jesus going  
on before*, and I don't think anyone  
missed me. If that's not *saved* I don't know what  
is. After we said the Lord's Prayer and  
shouted *Amen* like it was *Ten-Hut!* I  
stalked up to Miss Hooker, I didn't march  
because I was a civilian again,  
and saluted her. She said, *As you were  
and anyway you're out of uniform*  
and laughed and then I laughed and then she said

*Enjoy your one-week pass and I'll see you  
in camp again next week.* Yes ma'am, I said,  
and headed home. The place that I'll die for.

---

# Time Travel

Gale Acuff

In Sunday School today Miss Hooker told  
the one about Moses parting the Red  
Sea, in half he did it, so his people  
could hurry over before the Pharaoh's  
charioteers could catch up to them and  
*slay* them. That means *kill*. I wish I'd been there  
to see all that. I wish I could've been  
a fish high up in one of those halves and  
wondering if I'd become a bird as  
I looked down on the proceedings until  
those folks made it safely to the other

side, Moses maybe the last like a good  
shepherd, then raising his rod high to make  
the waters fall into the Sea again,  
drowning all those soldiers and horses and  
waterlogging their chariots. Then I'd  
splash down pretty hard, I guess. I'd hope  
to swim again to talk about it, not that  
fish can talk but to other fish maybe,  
or to their small fry. Then it was time to  
go so Miss Hooker called on me to lead

the class in the Lord's Prayer. I stood up  
and bowed my head and closed my eyes  
and prayed it like I meant it, as if I  
was Jesus myself, if it's not a sin  
to say so, and when I came to *Amen*  
my classmates and Miss Hooker and I said  
it all together as one big shout. Then  
I opened my eyes and sat down to hear  
her dismiss us with *God bless you, children,*  
*have a good week, I'll see you next Sunday,*  
but I was last to leave because I love

Miss Hooker and if I was Adam she'd  
be my Eve—if that's not love I don't know  
what is, the marrying kind anyway.  
*Yes, Gale—do you have a question,* she asked.  
*Yes ma'am,* I said. *Superman can travel*  
*back through time but can't change history is*  
*what my comic books teach me but it would*  
*be keen if he could so he could go back*  
*and stop Adam and Eve from eating that*

*apple. If I was Superman I'd try  
it anyway.* She took off her glasses

and held them up to the light through the door  
and then over to the window, then took  
a tissue out of her pocketbook and  
rubbed and rubbed the lenses and then put them  
back on and reminded me of Clark Kent  
and how Lois Lane can't tell he's really  
Superman even though they share the same  
face, I mean Clark and Superman, not Clark  
and Lois. That's literature for you  
—sometimes it's as screwy as religion.  
*Well, she said, I guess that would be keen but  
history always moves forward and that's*

*why we have the past, it gets left behind,  
sort of like a road you're driving over  
except that you can never drive back, God  
doesn't give you a Reverse, only Drive,  
and though you can look over your shoulder  
at where you've been, or recall it, you can't  
go back.* She took her glasses back off and  
smiled. *Oh, I said. Yes ma'am—it's just pretend  
to go back in time. Yes, I'm afraid so,*  
she said. Then she stood and gathered up her

pocketbook and Bible. *You may walk me  
to my car,* she said. *Yes ma'am,* I said, and  
as we walked out the door I didn't look  
back because all that past was gone even  
though I'll see something like here next week,  
in the future that is, and when I'm there  
in the room then it will be the present.  
So the only way to visit the past  
is to return and that means the future  
which is the present while you're in between

the two. I wonder why God made it so.  
I opened Miss Hooker's door for her  
and she got in and I shut her door, hard,  
like our Amen. She started her engine  
and waved goodbye and I waved and she drove  
out of the church parking lot and that was  
the future where she was going and I'm  
the past she left for later and even  
if she'd turned around and come back to say  
something she forgot—*I love you,* maybe



—and I was still standing here, we would both  
be older. Sometimes I'd like to be born

older, even dead, and then grow younger  
and expire on the day I was born, just  
for laughs, maybe. I'd be living backwards  
but if Adam and Eve were our parents  
then I might die all the way back to them.  
Adam would be about to take a bite  
and maybe I could stop him that way, by  
being one atom of obedience  
in his brain. Or maybe stop at Moses  
and think a little harder about how  
to get the Israelites across and  
save those horses. Oh, yeah: the soldiers, too.

---

“I suppose that each [poem] is a kind of narrative-rhetorical study, of a boy who  
somewhat unconsciously deconstructs the adult world of religion, at least in his  
community. We all inherit what we become, in a way; this is perhaps the nexus of  
self-insight.” —Gale Acuff

---

**Gale Acuff** has had hundreds of poems published in fourteen countries and has authored three  
books of poetry. He has taught tertiary English courses in the US, PR China, and in Palestine, where  
he teaches at Arab American University.

---

# Last Dance

S.Y. Ball

Yancy dies ten months after asking me instead of a cool girl to dance.  
Porkpie straw hat, honey brown skin, Tennessee drawl,  
cousin of the kids throwing his going-away party.  
Before shipping out to Vietnam, Yancy visits family and his father  
who works on a gas pipeline outside of town.  
Yancy touches my hand without demand, softly.  
We *Shotgun* to Junior Walker, slow dance to Smokey Robinson. We talk.  
My back bleeds from the daggers aimed from other girls' eyes.  
Yancy cuts like a diamond on glass in the memory of a teenage fat girl.  
I find his name etched on The Wall in D.C., the official photo  
of his baby face posted on-line, his death profiled by Army scribes.  
*Hostile small arms fire, died outright, body recovered. Age 20.*  
His cheated life, I still ask why he picked me.

# Shadow Dance

S.Y. Ball

Desperate to stay focused on their beauty not their payload,  
I watch B-52's take off, slant wings lifting as they rise higher  
in teal skies above Okinawa, bound for targets where  
designated enemies live, raise families, fight, and burn.  
I catch a whiff, avoid the full-on stench staged from a fortified island.  
I see shadows, don't part the veil for fear of seeing more clearly  
the size of the weight pressing up and down on us and them.  
Marry into the military, love travel, adapt to places where  
I'm the foreigner and it's normal not to belong,  
instead of not belonging because I'm not normal.  
The music I spin on armed forces radio and sing with  
my American band dances at the edge of war.

# Battle Dance

S.Y. Ball

I prance in black hot pants and white go-go boots, sing  
for mostly conscripted soldiers with blood on their hands  
smeared upside the heads of dependent wives and off-base women.

*Sockin' soul,*

my band deploys  
thrumming guitars,  
horn blasts,  
bass licks,  
rim shots pounding  
like distant guns.

Sellin' sex,

my hips grind out *Let's Get It On*,  
my hand grips the mic close to my lips,

I moan through *Jungle Fever*,

Bounce up and down to the beat, smiling, fearful,  
make eye contact with exorcised Marines who want to believe

I'm begging them  
to pull me off the stage  
to hold me down  
to gag me thrashing  
to the music.

Always faithfully  
cocked like a sidearm,  
battle dance

c o m i n g

c o m i n g

h o m e.

---

**S.Y. Ball** is retired and working to finish her undergraduate degree after fifty years. Her poems have appeared in the Silver Birch Press Series One Good Memory and in the anthology Confluence from FootHills Publishing. She lives with her second husband in upstate New York. The Vietnam War shadowed her teenage years and her first marriage to an Air Force sergeant. They were stationed in Tokyo, Okinawa, and Taiwan during the last years of the war. Her poems "Last Dance", "Shadow Dance", and "Battle Dance" are her first attempt to write about her indirect but life-changing experiences of war.

---

# Some Interrogation Questions

Kevin Carollo

*We soldiers were like sheep, fighting comic book wars. —Hassan Blasim*

Does it matter that the above epigraph comes from a work of fiction?  
Is it important to know that the author was born in Baghdad and now

lives in Finland? The translation from which the above epigraph comes  
dates from 2013. Would fact-checking the above author's current location

(i.e. Google search) make this poem more accurate, more of the moment,  
more authentic? Is reality indeed stranger than fiction? Is it more brutal

or graphic? If I turned this poem into a comic book or graphic novel—  
if I put names to faces, as it were—would it be more effective? Should

I add that a *heavily edited version* of the above author's stories appeared  
in Arabic only to be *immediately banned in Jordan*? How relevant is it

that the above epigraph was originally published by Penguin Books,  
an American publisher now potentially profiting from the U.S.'s illegal

invasion and continued occupation of Iraq for over twenty years? a) not  
relevant b) somewhat relevant c) somewhat ironic d) totally relevant

e) N/A. Another way to pose such a question: can one write a decent  
poem without mentioning the material conditions in which the translation

that inspired the poem was produced, such that the poem's omissions  
become complicit in promoting a geopolitical narrative of hegemony

that assumes an absolute separation between the language used to  
describe genocide and genocide itself? In order to answer this question,

react to the following synopsis on the back cover of the translation: *an  
explosive new voice in fiction emerges from the rubble of Iraq to show us his war-torn*

*country from the inside*. Does it matter that the story collection was originally  
sent to the poem's author as an unrequested instructor copy almost ten

years ago? What is the statute of limitations on complicity? On poetry?  
On genocide? On empathy? Name at least three things you are willing to

do to gain your freedom, then sign your full name with a loved one's blood.  
With the time remaining (i.e. the rest of your life), compose a better poem.

# My War-Porn Country

Kevin Carollo

*What I'm saying has nothing to do with my asylum request.  
What matters to you is the horror. —Hassan Blasim*

Furthermore, the translation's back cover exuberantly offers *a pageant of horrors, as haunting as the photos of Abu Ghraib*. It feels like 1968 all over

again, coming out of the womb like a time-bomb, born into a world of war porn. On my fifth birthday, they murdered Allende in Chile

and installed Pinochet. I required four stitches on my right foot due to a game of hide and seek that got out of hand. Comrade, I am still

trying to find the unknown soldier behind the basement bookcases of my hoarder father. It feels like Deer Grove 1979 all over again,

a photocopy of an image of Mickey Mouse giving the finger whilst saying *Fuck you, Iran!* We were standing with Iraq, then Afghanistan.

One Passover Seder, everyone cooed when the beautiful Iraqi refugee said the word *Israel*. I forget her name, but remember how much she

loved Billy Joel's *Glass Houses*, released in March of 1980. Teen angst is so Cold War, so Missile Command. As Pac-Man, I ate and ate so

many dots and monsters but could never be sated. I got a *C* in Russian History. Igor wore a T-shirt that said *RUSSIA* but with every other

letter crossed out. Every single day, I lived a double life many times over. I had to redact my virginity, my humanity. Then, over the Gulf,

a thousand points of light. I tried to find my sea legs in the classroom, the peace march, the psych ward. For a vertiginous moment over half

my life ago, I held a bottle of pills in the palm of my hand like a grenade. The rest, as they say, is ancient history, an extraordinary rendition of a

timeless classic. I know that a war is a war is a war, more or less. And for my final 101 at MSUM, I'm teaching *MAUS* alongside *Footnotes in Gaza*.

I teach "The Diameter of the Bomb" alongside "Beyond Identification" until it becomes impossible to describe the borders of a nation. Today

I stand before you to request asylum from the administration of today. Hassan, your horrific words are my Abu Ghraib. I can never look away.

---

“The poems ‘Some Interrogation Questions’ and ‘My War-Porn Country’ are the first two of a series of ‘fugue sonnets,’ both riffing on the short story collection *The Corpse Exhibition and Other Stories of Iraq* by Hassan Blasim. I invented the form last year—essentially a double-sonnet of 14 ghazal-like couplets (each with an epigraph, intertextual and dialogic references, etc.)—to reflect on the colonial-imperial, military, late-stage capitalist, and institutional imperatives of English as mother tongue, particularly in light of teaching world literature in translation at a university which has gutted its arts and humanities. The fugue sonnet is therefore a dialogue ‘between a between’ (Darwish), between ‘East’ and ‘West,’ and between the linguistic imperatives of the institution and the literary possibilities for revolution.” —Kevin Carollo

---

**Kevin Carollo** lives in Fargo, North Dakota, and has taught world literature and writing at Minnesota State University Moorhead for 20 years. He is author of *Elizabeth Gregory* (Rain Taxi/OHM Editions), a chapbook of poems about early onset dementia, as well as the forthcoming hybrid nonfiction work *Shred: Running and Being in the End Times* (NDSU Press). His father, Jack Ronald Carollo (3/26/42-6/8/18), was a U.S. Army veteran, having served in the Vietnam War a couple years before Kevin was born (on 9/11/68).

---

# Last Seen

Layle Kean Chambers

I saw my son near Bangor ME, near St. John's  
near Keflavik and Faroe  
climbing a bolted route through clouds  
I saw my son body surfing Folly between tides  
soaking in the homelight

I saw my son as a green line on a computer screen  
ending at 1:46 am

in the shock of 21 guns  
kneeling to offer  
packing his bag again

I saw my son crying in the shadow  
of the clocktower  
finding the deep water of the stroke  
I saw my son near Farranfore, 4:56 UCT  
two-fisted, lifting the weight  
of a man who was father to him

I saw my son sipping scotch in a Glasgow pub  
twisted in the canal  
waving from the porch

I saw him grieve a dream, un-gnatl history  
wear an open-heart t-shirt  
float a feather in the upstream  
in his driveway, in his Jeep

in Tallinn, in Landstuhl  
in Rzeszow, in Constanta  
on Strada Tudor Vladimirescu  
near the Black, Caspian, Baltic Sea

I saw my son nearing Cartwright, Canada  
on this side of the world again

I saw him

check his phone

---

"I began writing 'Last Seen' after reading Khadijah Queen's 'I slept when I couldn't move'. I was drawn to the use of refrain to bring lightness into a darkness, letting the



choral do the heavy lift; in this case, of tracking movement on flightaware.com which literally shows complete real time world-wide aviation traffic. The poem also engages the need to frame every moment as a possible 'last seen.'" —Layle Keane Chambers

---

**Layle Keane Chambers** is a teaching/artist currently living in Folly Beach, SC. She received her BFA from Ithaca College and MA from UTEP in Theatre Arts, is Professor Emeritus of Theatre at Doña Community College, an MFA Candidate in Creative Writing at New Mexico State University, and Proud Air Force Mom.

---

# White Cranes

Ben Corvo

*(Dust Storm, Jerusalem)*

All around, topsoil is blowing away.  
The air is drawing close around us.  
Were our eyes keener, we would see  
flocks of tiny swallows, or a flotilla  
in miniature: fishing boats, dinghies, rafts.  
Instead we see the disappearance of  
outlying neighborhoods and the near ones.

We are glad to see certain things go:  
the megaliths of the Holy Land complex  
lurking like creepy uncles, the Herodian  
arrogance of certain public buildings  
in the city center, or sites of minor  
mortifications, as if places could be  
the architects of our *fashlas*.

It is our own disappearance that disturbs  
—evenings, say, coming back to apartments  
after a long workday, the dust muffling  
the traffic noise outside, the narrow  
cone of lamplight seeming narrower than  
last night's, preparations for dinner,  
table, silence, hours reading while we eat.

I have seen the Old City only once  
since I returned, and then from a distance,  
from an opposite ridge, the yellow walls  
blending with a yellow sky, and now,  
even inside, I fear, I would not see  
a city at all but only gaping  
mouths of doorways, mouths of alleyways.

The burnt-out tank in San Simon Park  
was gone long before I arrived, and now  
new disappearances threaten: playgrounds,  
a basketball court, centennial spiral of  
olive trees, live oaks, children's birthdays.  
This is to say nothing of a gun  
metal flash seen shortly after sunrise.

High above the haze over Jerusalem  
ragged lines of cranes are keening

as they wing south along the long rift  
running from the Beqaa to Olduvai.  
When they return, they will find our hills  
dun-colored, smoothed  
beneath a thick blanket of loess.

---

“I have lived much of my life at the fringes of war, and my work often focuses on how personal, familial, and communal memories of war and violence are both revealed and concealed in the fabric of daily life. I wrote ‘White Cranes’ several years ago following a choking dust storm here in Jerusalem, which was said to consist of churned-up topsoil from the civil war in Syria, maybe a day’s drive away.” —Ben Corvo

---

**Ben Corvo’s** poems have appeared previously in *Salmagundi*, *Magma*, and other publications.

---

# My Father Didn't Talk About The War

Paula Friedman

Wakened by my father's pacing,  
I saw the strangest thing:  
layers of him had loosened  
like a lizard shedding skin.

Those shadowy slips of him  
were looking for their home, but  
he could not claim them, nor grasp  
that they belonged to him.

The house brimmed with orphaned  
memories. Once, we kids saw, or thought  
we did, a giant cockroach on the pantry floor;  
we poked at it to see if it was real.

When a sudden hunger distracted me,  
I stuffed my pockets with saltines,  
spilled some water in to make a stew  
and soon the others wanted some.

After all, we were having our own war.  
Even hide and seek seemed a deadly game;  
the door held shut as one of us sank back,  
voiceless, into a dark and airless room.

We'd heard occasional whisperings: one  
morning at Auschwitz, my father was late  
for roll call, so a guard bashed his teeth  
with a gun butt. The ones in front are fake.

Violence often broke out among us:  
Usually, the biggest got the most licks in,  
the others cowering away, but time flicked  
roles round and round. Eventually, we came

to despise one another. More ruinous still,  
we came to despise ourselves. What better defense  
was possible against that awful whispering—  
about an infant daggered to a tree?

---

“This poem was inspired by my family history in conjunction with an article written by psychologist Irit Felsen, who writes about second and third-generation Shoah survivors. She looks at the epigenetic changes affecting family health and dynamics.

While the outcomes Felsen finds are by no means guaranteed, she does find repeated patterns of destroyed family bonds by the time the second generation begins aging, thus extending the devastating reach of genocide. The family is once again destroyed.” —Paul Friedman

---

**Paula Friedman** has taught a variety of literature and writing courses at UC Davis, California College of the Arts, and Saint Mary’s College of Moraga. While completing her doctoral program, she received the Ina Coolbrith Memorial Poetry Prize. Her poems and reviews have appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *The Columbia Poetry Journal*, *The Michigan Quarterly Review*, *The New Criterion*, *The New York Times Book Review*, and many other publications. Her chapbook, *Undreaming Landscapes*, was published in 2015. Currently, she lives in the Sierra Nevada foothills and teaches poetry on Zoom.

---

# The American Dream

C.C. Garrett

At an early age, I knew freedom  
Was not that much different from Hell.  
Only a bit cooler. Inside books  
Read aloud from white hands across black skies  
Ancestral stars of symphonic scarred lightness,  
Reopen with every stammer over BLACK, or NEGRO  
Scream-striped in white font on the face of a 9 year old kid  
Who couldn't understand why no one was pissed off.  
Anger, often the accomplice of youth  
So I kept my hands tied  
Louisiana hands wrapped inside  
    A caged dog  
Scarred from learning of burning crosses  
That underneath every white glove, are rope burns  
From hoisting the weight of 40 acres and a mule  
Blood is soaked into the roots of oak.  
Oak used for crosses.  
In Louisiana streets  
White folks spent a century telling stories  
Of the happy slave, but  
You can't sweep blood under the rug.  
Ancestry laid to rest with pain  
That will last long after we get the history right.  
Our very own American Dream.

---

“I don’t mind saying this, because I know my family never reads my poetry. As a child of the 80s and 90s, I was thrust into the white world. The only colored boy in class, on the team, at the bbq, at the summer enrichment program. At the time it was believed that this is what a child of color would need in order to survive in the white man’s and woman’s world. As with most insurgence, the scars come with little explanation. So I processed it all the best I could.

I wrote this poem right at the height of academic backlash for the whitewashing of history. The mother of my children is a school teacher. Social Studies/History but holds extremely staunch views in regards to race relations and socioeconomic inequities. So much so, that I worried my children would never really know and understand the significance of being BLACK. Especially since they are BiPOC. I thought I needed validation from the white kids, that my black experience was real. It never came. I thought I needed validation from the black kids, that I was still down for the cause, that I was still black.” —C.C. Garrett

---

**C.C. Garrett** is a father, brother, and son based out of the Hub City of Acadiana, Lafayette, Louisiana. He is the eldest of a very conventional, black southern family. The White sheep, among black wool. He is, at-present, pursuing a Psychology Degree with an emphasis in Forensics. Plays flanker for the Baton Rouge Rugby Club’s Men’s Semi Professional Team. He is widely published as an author and poet. He was the 2021 recipient of the National Performance Network’s Take Notice Award and hopes that he can stay true to the craft of writing, as writing has for him.

---

# Etymologies

Sonia Greenfield

A concertina, like an accordion,  
made music with air drawn  
through bellows. The squeeze box  
wheezed *Flight of the Bumblebee*,  
buttons controlling each exhale  
so the sailor in his striped shirt  
could lean against the mast, pull  
a minor chord and hum  
something of the sea.

Between the wars  
many played until *concertina*  
was unbellowed and skinned down  
to the wire like a word stripped  
of its better meaning. Each coil like  
an unsprung spring, soldiers made  
concertina themselves from barbed  
wire built-up into elaborate patterns  
like small symphonies, each razor  
a rest when their hands  
became bloodied.

What tune  
their prisoners may have heard  
on the opposite side of the stacked  
helices where bees made lazy work  
of the meadow. A swarming  
sound like breathing.

---

“I wrote ‘Etymologies’ to try and explore the way a word can be appropriated and have its meaning changed. A concertina was originally a musical instrument, but the word now conjures a kind of wire fencing associated with images of military stations and battle. The poem is meant to evoke, in tone, that change in meaning.” —Sonia Greenfield

---

**Sonia Greenfield** (she/they) is the author of two recent collections of poetry, *All Possible Histories* (Riot in Your Throat, December 2022) and *Helen of Troy is High AF* (Harbor Editions, January 2023). She is the author of *Letdown* (White Pine Press, 2020), *American Parable* (Autumn House, 2018) and *Boy with a Halo at the Farmer's Market* (Codhill Press, 2015). Her work has appeared in the 2018 and 2010 Best American Poetry, *Southern Review*, *Willow Springs* and elsewhere. She lives with her family in Minneapolis where she teaches at Normandale College, edits the *Rise Up Review*, and advocates for both neurodiversity and the decentering of the cis/het white hegemony. More at [soniagreenfield.com](http://soniagreenfield.com).

---



# To Anna Who Is Afraid

Susanna Lang

*after Anna Akhmatova*

Your neighbors won't call this  
a war

like they won't complain  
about the price of sugar.

They'll ask their mothers  
how to make honey cake.

They turn away  
when they see you on the street,

avoiding questions about your son  
who has not called in weeks.

They know as well as you  
he's fighting in what they won't call

war

but allow themselves to forget.  
When you wonder

if you only dreamed a son  
read your namesake's poems,

another Anna, born in the country  
where your son disappeared, like her son

who vanished into prison. Though she tried  
*to slaughter memory*

she could not. Instead  
she promised to find the words,

promised to wail  
with the wives of the murdered

*inconsolably*  
*beneath the Kremlin towers.*

You can join her there:

she will stay with you  
when they take you inside.

---

“‘To Anna Who Is Afraid’” grew out of a correspondence between a friend of a friend and a woman in Russia who had helped her facilitate workshops for women. The American woman invited others to send encouragement to her Russian associate, who was aghast at what her government was doing in Ukraine.” —Susanna Lang

---

**Susanna Lang**’s chapbook, *Like This*, is forthcoming from Unsolicited Books. Her e-chapbook, *Among Other Stones: Conversations with Yves Bonnefoy*, (Mudlark: An Electronic Journal of Poetry & Poetics) and her translation of *Baalbek* by Nohad Salameh (Atelier du Grand Tétrás) were both published in 2021. Her third full-length collection of poems, *Travel Notes from the River Styx*, was published in 2017 by Terrapin Books. Her poems, translations and reviews have appeared or are forthcoming in such publications as *The Common*, *december*, *Delos*, *New Poetry in Translation*, *American Life in Poetry*, *Rhino Reviews*, *Calyx* and *The Slowdown*. Her translations of poetry by Yves Bonnefoy include *Words in Stone* and *The Origin of Language*, and she is now working with Souad Labbize and H el ene Dorion on new translations.

---

# Bosque del Apache

Andrew Shattuck McBride

I broached driving south so Mom could see birds  
at a rest stop along the Rio Grande flyway.  
She was intrigued, but ultimately declined.  
Deal breakers: hours each way in a car, dearth  
of rest stops for her. Worse, me behind the wheel,  
in control, the possibility of argument.

We wouldn't have argued about the Iraq War.  
Mom and I were against it. Even Aunt Bonnie  
was bitterly opposed. Aunt Bonnie worried  
I would be sent to Iraq. In 2003, I assured her  
sailors with my specialty weren't needed.  
She brought it up each time I called; I stopped calling.

Mom loved birds: birds of prey, cranes, crows.  
I wonder if the idea of going grew till she *had* to go.  
Mom made it without me. I received her postcard  
of a lone Whooping crane with a swoop of Sandhill  
cranes. On the other side, *Your Aunt Bonnie passed  
away. We sent flowers, added your name. Love, Mom—*

# Koa

Andrew Shattuck McBride

*Acacia koa, a tree native to Hawai'i. Also, a warrior.*

1.

After my tenth birthday and her move to the Mainland,  
Kit—the younger of my two sisters—enlisted in the Army.

Kit was stationed in the lower forty-eight, served her hitch.  
A Vietnam-era veteran, she reminds me of Dad.

Lean and capable. Whip-smart. Fearless.

2.

Dad asked, *What is the tree that goes  
to war?* To his delight, I answered, *Koa.*

Dad had me plant the koa sapling  
he brought home several yards away  
from the towering 'ōhi'a tree  
he could see from his kitchen window.  
We called the koa *my tree*.  
It flourished, soon grew tall as the 'ōhi'a.  
While mowing the lawn, I found  
seedlings around the koa's base.  
I ran to tell Dad, *I'm a father.*  
*The koa has keiki!* We planted  
the koa's keiki along the property line  
and throughout Dad's backyard.

3.

On my sixteenth birthday Dad said, *We're going to see Kazu Okamoto  
the postmaster.* Dad drove me to the Volcano post office.

Dad's friend Mr. Okamoto—with two sons of his own—  
watched as I registered for the Selective Service.

I remember how kind Mr. Okamoto was,  
how his eyes twinkled with humor.

4.

Before I left for college on O'ahu, I saw my koa had rot at its core.

It disturbed me, but I didn't tell Dad. He would know, soon enough.

5.

Two of my friends were in Air Force ROTC.  
They urged me to sign up. One said, *ROTC pays  
for our books, and we get to wear this uniform.*  
The other added, *You just have to pledge  
a two-year commitment.*

I remembered the Vietnam War. The lies, the carnage,  
the burning, the nightly recaps with body counts.

I was adamant. *I'm not joining any ROTC.*

6.

Dad offered, *When these koa trees get big enough,  
you can sell the logs. Or, you can build a new house  
or refurbish the old house with the wood.*

Mortified, I thought, *Oh, hell no. Are you kidding me?*

7.

In 1984 I was out of work,  
needed a job desperately.  
I joined the Navy.  
From New Mexico, I called  
long distance to inform Dad.  
I thought he would be pleased.  
Dad was groggy from being  
woken from a nap. The line  
crackled with static, disbelief.

8.

In 1994, my ship USS *Peleliu* (LHA-5)—named for  
the 1944 battle my father fought in—stood off its namesake,  
a low dense green island, to observe the fiftieth anniversary  
of the battle. In my Dress Whites, I stood in formation  
on the flight deck, paying homage to Dad.

9.

If I had my way, the biggest, straightest koa from Dad's  
property would be carved into an outrigger racing canoe.  
Even better, carved into one of a Hawaiian voyaging canoe's hulls.

10.

I attend the Bellingham Peace Vigil occasionally,  
stand with fellow vigilists holding signs.  
I show the peace sign to occupants  
of vehicles. An offering.

---

“After my parents divorced when I was six years old, I learned love for trees from Dad and love for birds from Mom. Dad and Mom each passed away many years ago; these poems are my way of continuing to talk with them.” —Andrew Shattuck McBride

---

**Andrew Shattuck McBride** is a Navy veteran. Based now in Washington State, he is co-editor of *For Love of Orcas* (Wandering Aengus, 2019). His work is forthcoming or appears in *Rattle*, *Clockhouse*, *Crab Creek Review*, *Black Horse Review*, *Empty Mirror*, *Pensive: A Global Journal of Spirituality & the Arts*, *Evening Street Review*, *Pontoon Poetry*, *The Ravens Perch*, and *Months to Years*.

---

# Pocketwatch

Peter Schmitt

*Kano, Nigeria, WWII*

Useless now: glass crystal melted and lost,  
numerals against the charred face ghostly,  
hands stilled at impact, the once-fine Swiss Longines,  
blackened yet unbroken only its long chain.  
He had found it, the plane's navigator,  
in ashes still smoldering a day later,  
where like newborn birds the crew kicked out the hatch,  
fell to the earth, and ran with joy, the watch  
slipping from his pocket, millions of minutes  
yet waiting, marriage, children, a life, young man  
one day my father. To whom will I will it,  
childless? A watch that stopped, but how time didn't.

# Navigator

Peter Schmitt

A double string of pearls is how my father  
described the runway lights his crew searched for  
returning at night over the water  
from combat zones in the Second World War,  
the Florida coast under blackout orders  
to thwart the German subs lurking offshore,  
torpedoes striking the merchant ships afire,  
pilots helpless to stop it from the air.

I will not perish without my bearings.  
My father served that I might someday be spared.  
Still, tonight across a noisy, crowded floor  
where so many to me seem unfamiliar,  
when I see the necklace I know is yours,  
then glancing my way, your face, I'm home, safe, here.

---

**Peter Schmitt** is the author of six collections of poems, most recently *Goodbye, Apostrophe*, from Regal House. He has also edited and written an introduction for his late father's *Pan Am Ferry Tales: A World War II Memoir* (McFarland, 2022). The poems published in this issue were inspired by passages from that memoir.

---



# Not the First

Lisa Wujnovich

I am sixteen, in Florida, a lifeguard  
at the NCO Pool on Homestead AFB.  
I tell myself, I will not go out with a GI.  
No, I will wait for a college boy,  
brainy with long hair and a smart-aleck mouth.  
I will not imagine  
splashing soldiers as high school boys  
with feathered rock star hair and soul train afros.

I am in the barracks, on break and a dare.  
No, I will not go out with a GI,  
not even one with the bluest eyes,  
so shy he sends his friends to flirt.  
Crouched on his metal bunk bed,  
I am trying to be one of the guys,  
tanned legs inches from theirs,  
passing the bong pipe, Led Zeppelin  
raging to black light-convulsed rock posters,  
incense, lava lamps, bared teeth.

Unlucky, like their numbers, I see my father,  
signed up for an American Dream,  
immigrant son, steel mill dodger,  
retired before forty, dazed in front of TV,  
shirtless, sweating through couches, unemployed  
WWII, Korean War and Vietnam War veteran.

Shivering in air conditioning,  
bikini damp under my oversized tee shirt,  
I refuse the pass—I am on duty.  
Their ghost boy eyes devour me; I surf turbulent  
waters of dismembered bodies and Agent Orange,  
ignore burning children and sighs exhaled  
from coffins disguised as footlockers.

No, I will not go out with a GI,  
I will lower my eyes, joke, laugh—  
but not too hard, worry my safe return  
down the fire escape,  
back to the lifeguard chair, above  
their cannonball jumps where I pray,  
I won't need to save those  
whose strong arms barely flap to the side.

No, I will not go out with a GI,  
but yes, I will say after his friend asks again,  
and again. I already know the end of summer—  
I will give back the halved-heart necklace  
he will clasp around my neck,  
No, he will not be the first, not the very first.

---

“‘Not the First’ wrestles with coming of age on military bases during the Vietnam War era. I grew up hearing amusing stories of military antics by my soldier father with violence, pain, and war unspoken, but palpable.” —Lisa Wujnovich

# Science-Based

Lisa Wujnovich

The trouble with 7<sup>th</sup> grade science was,  
Mr. Stevens preferred his own voice  
to our messy hands and clumsy mistakes,  
or maybe there just weren't funds  
for class experiments  
in my farmers' school, circled  
by tomato fields and avocado groves,  
and so from his elevated lab desk,  
he droned each weight and measure,  
salt water solution,  
over Bunsen burner and boiling water.  
Mr. Stevens believed in alphabetical order,  
so in the back by the door, I sat,  
experiments telescoped in miniature  
behind sweaty heads, lulled by muggy breezes.

Robert, my *lab partner* and I *observed*,  
his boy arm inches from my girl arm,  
both of us concentrating as best we could,  
scribbling daily lab reports,  
my thin arm tanned a freckled  
brown and beige with a hint of pink,  
Robert's more defined forearm hued purple  
and blue, not really black at all.  
The air between us prickled with *whys*  
and *why nots*, *what ifs* and *how comes*,  
*because*s and *I don't understand*s.

Behind Mr. Steven's back, I rolled my eyes,  
snuffled cartoon snores, whispered  
hypotheses to touch Robert's hand,  
compare and contrast my monkey bar callous  
to his. The rare quiet boy, he let me;  
grinned silent, I took as niceness.  
Like me, he lived on base, so there he was,  
instead of at the other school,  
where we would have never met.  
Didn't matter his father ranked higher than mine;  
he wrote neater, divided quicker,  
shirt always tucked in, hair in place.  
Didn't matter I palmed a free lunch card  
and he carried a neatly folded lunch bag.  
The lines were clearly draw, unproven, but  
conclusive—not science based.

Blurred into submission, little survives  
from that class of bouncing fingers  
and feet itching to kick ideas against walls.  
I like to think I grasped a few concepts—  
simple inclined planes, chemical and physical changes,  
what alters, and doesn't, *what is not, but can be.*

---

“‘Science-Based’ tries to explore racism, poverty, and classism through my junior high school memories. It took me years into adulthood to recognize the roles civilian and military life have in all three phenomena.” —Lisa Wujnovich

---

**Lisa Wujnovich** is a poet and organic vegetable farmer rooted in Hancock, NY, but raised as an Air Force brat. Lisa has two published chapbooks, *Fieldwork* (2012, Finishing Line Press) and *This Place Called Us* (2008, Stockport Flats Press). Her poems have appeared in anthologies like *Ghost Fishing: An Eco-Justice Poetry Anthology* (2018, University of Georgia Press) and *NOW, the online journal of Hobart, Festival of Women Writers*. Her poems can be found recently in *Calyx*, *Banyan River Review*, *MERVOX*, *Snapdragon* and *FEDCO 2022 Seed Catalog*. She co-edited the anthology *The Lake Rises*, by Stockport Flats Press. She has an MFA in poetry from Drew University.

---

CREATIVE NONFICTION

# Omubbi

Jason Arment

The more pedestrian posts on larger bases in Iraq were stood by private contractors—mercenaries. The posts requiring fluent English were stood by young men from India, and the posts requiring fighting prowess were manned by Ugandans. Unlike mercenaries from the West, who seemed to take themselves too seriously, with dour dispositions, the Ugandans were outwardly friendly. They were quick to joke, laughing easily and often. During the day, those not on post could be found sleeping in hammocks, or on patio furniture around their barracks, unphased by the desert heat.

Marines took to the Ugandans, asking them about their experiences with war and about their homeland. The Ugandans had stories of civil war back home, and bullet wounds and scars as visual aids. As a group, they seemed to be more collectively minded than Westerners, and didn't hesitate to write messages on the walls with spray paint to form a kind of collective thought. One message appeared again and again around the base, especially near their barracks.

“BEWARE OF OMUBBI!”

It struck us as odd that men so easygoing in nature but fierce in battle would fear any man. Eventually, curiosity got the best of me, and I asked.

“This Omubbi, who is he? And why are you so afraid of him?” I asked a Ugandan standing post at the chow hall. “To rate written warnings all over the base, he must be one bad motherfucker.”

“No, no. Omubbi is not a man,” the guard answered with a thick accent.

I nodded gravely.

“Oh, I see,” I said. “Is Omubbi some sort of evil spirit?”

The Ugandan's dark face split by the white teeth of his smile, and he shook his head.

“Omubbi is a type of person who takes what is not theirs,” his brow furrowed as he searched for the right word. “Thief! Omubbi is a thief!”

As I sat and ate in the chow hall, I thought about Omubbi. How, when Echo Company had first arrived in country and moved to live briefly at Camp Habbaniyah, myself and other Marines had left our barracks at night to explore the base. Any gear that wasn't bolted down, we pilfered. In the Marine Corps there was a saying: “Gear adrift is a gift.” There was also the saying, “Marines are heart breakers and life takers.” Although the Ugandan mercenaries had a great deal in common with Marines, they seemed to carry an innocence with them, something that made Marines like them but also realize they were fundamentally different.

The Ugandan mercenaries were thrust into war against their own people at an early age, then carried on with soldiering as a profession. Marines chose to join the Corp, the hardest and most elite branch of the military that wasn't special forces, voluntarily separating from their people to live by the sword.

As I left the chow hall and stepped back out into the desert of the Al Anbar province, a brewing sandstorm colored the air a brown tinge. As I passed the chow hall entrance, I waved to the Ugandan guard. I wondered if the Ugandans realized that Omubbi wasn't one or two people, but every single Marine who walked among them. We were there to take, be it take ground back from extremists or the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people or the Ugandan's gear or the lives of our enemies.

The walk back to Echo's barracks I tried to keep my breathing shallow with a scarf around my face to avoid taking in too much of the desert's sands; sandstorms could cause respiratory and intestinal infections. I wondered how the Ugandans managed to keep a hold of their innocence through it all, how they still managed to greet every man as a brother. I realized a big part of why I was drawn to them was how they reminded me of something good I'd left behind years ago.

After this, I stayed away from the Ugandans.

---

“War doesn't only tear people apart, it also brings people together.” —Jason Arment

---

**Jason Arment** served in Operation Iraqi Freedom as a Machine Gunner in the USMC. He's earned an MFA in Creative Nonfiction from the Vermont College of Fine Arts. His work has appeared in *The Iowa Review*, *The Rumpus*, *ESPN*, the 2017 *Best American Essays*, and *The New York Times*, among other publications. His memoir about the war in Iraq, *Musalabeen*, stands in stark contrast to other narratives about Iraq in both content and quality. Much of his writing can be found at [jasonarment.com](http://jasonarment.com).

---

# The Birth of Courage

By Brecht De Poortere

On 17 December 2010, a young man, doused in petrol and despair, sets himself on fire in front of the police station of Sidi Bouzid. He had been stripped of his livelihood and *karama*—his dignity. The authorities try to extinguish the flames with censorship. The story is a footnote in the international press. Everyone is certain it will blow over. This is Tunisia, after all: an island of stability. An economic miracle.

But courage is born out of humiliation.

The fire smoulders and protests spread. I sit at an ironing board and check the news while having supper. I have recently moved to Tunisia, so I have no furniture. My marble-floored living room is so large the echoes take a while to travel and the sounds are distorted—much like the truth in this country. Many websites are blocked. Error 404. *Ammar 404*. The authorities don't want you to know what is going on.

But courage is born out of deceit.

Social media are ablaze. Hashtag Sidi Bouzid. Protests spread to Menzel Bouzaiane, Al Ragab, Meknassi. People shout “Bread and water, no to Ben Ali”. The police respond with bullets. There are casualties in Thala, Regueb, Feriana, Kasserine. A sacrifice of children to the chief deity of Carthage. But each funeral sparks new protests, resulting in more deaths, and more bodies to be buried. This is not just another “bread riot”. This is Tunisia's Bloody Sunday.

And courage is born out of bloodshed.

I start my new job in a country full of unemployed. But focusing on work is impossible. I check the news incessantly—ctrl R over and over again. Expats are urged to leave the country. Embassies and foreign companies shut down. My employer wants me to keep calm and carry on—until tear gas shrouds the building and guns are fired in the street behind. I flag a taxi and rush home (I can't believe taxis are still working). I try to stock up on groceries on the way (I'm surprised the shops are still open).

But courage is born out of necessity.

*Fabim tukum*, Ben Ali announces on television. I have understood you. He sacks people from his inner circle. Releases prisoners. Promises free press. Shortly after his speech, cars honk in the streets. There appear to be celebrations. Is the revolution over? But something's fishy. There is meant to be a curfew. The cars honking have blue and white license plates: they are hire cars. The celebrations are fake, staged. Yes, YouTube is now uncensored—but is that what people have died for?

Courage is born out of contempt.

I sleep on a mattress on the floor and I am woken in the middle of the night by helicopters and gunshots. The presidential palace is a stone's throw away from my house and it's clear: there is



trouble in the gardens of Hamilcar. Daughters of Dido. Sons of Hannibal. They've had enough. A wind of change is blowing through Carthage.

Courage is born out of legends.

January 14<sup>th</sup>. Avenue Bourguiba, the Tunisian Champs Élysées, sees the largest gathering of people it has ever seen. *Rajes Lebled*, Mr President, what are you scared off? The people have no weapons, but the flags they wave, the signs they brandish, and the songs they chant. *Ben Ali ala barra*—Ben Ali get out. The people are not scared, because they have nothing to lose. The people have nothing, but each other.

And courage is born out of unity.

That night, Ben Ali flees to Jeddah, tail between his legs. Headless, the country descends into chaos. Villas are plundered, supermarkets burnt down. I decide it's safer to stay with friends. We make a modest meal out of our limited supplies and, from the balcony of their apartment, we watch the sun set. The sky turns the colour of harissa, the colour of the Tunisian flag, the colour of martyrs' blood. In the street below, the neighbours build barricades to keep the looters out. Women bring meals to the men who will spend the night defending their homes.

Courage is born out of solidarity.

The next day, I head toward the airport. The roads are deserted, shops boarded up. Then a scene I will never forget. A young man in black jeans, leather jacket, trainers, places a ladder against a gigantic poster of Ben Ali. He climbs up. He looks miniscule in comparison to the head of the president. It's David versus Goliath. Then he grabs a corner of the poster and pulls, and a huge tear appears across the smile of Ben Ali. His whitened grin ruined forever.

Courage is born out of anger.

The airport is packed and chaos reigns. Flights are delayed or cancelled. When our plane finally takes off, I am relieved that I will soon be reunited with my wife and children back in London. I watch Tunis get smaller through the porthole—the white sand of its beaches, the sky-blue water. Winter will soon turn into spring. Ba'al Qarnaim, the Lord of Two Horns, will make the jasmine bloom. A fresh breeze, *nessma*, will carry the seed of revolution to neighbouring lands, to Egypt and to Libya, and sow an Arab Spring.

Because courage is contagious.

---

“I arrived in Tunis a few weeks before what became known as the Jasmine Revolution which brought an end to president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's dictatorship. In this short piece, I tried to capture some of my emotions and experiences of that time but, above all, I wanted to bring an ode to the brave people who led this revolution.” —Brecht De Poortere

---

**Brecht De Poortere** was born in Belgium and grew up in Africa. He currently lives in Paris, France. His writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *Grain*, *Consequence*, *X-R-A-Y* and *The Baltimore Review*, amongst others, and has been nominated for Best Small Fictions and Best Microfiction. He is a reader for *Consequence* journal. You can follow him on Twitter @brecht\_dp or visit his website, [www.brechtdepoortere.com](http://www.brechtdepoortere.com).

---

# Hover

Andy Flaherty

I arrive just in time to be taunted by the sun's disappearance. A flight of kestrels playfully chitter above the entrance. The building itself, set back into a copse of trees, reminds me of a child's pinwheel. I enter the nucleus where the nurses gather and from there four wings extend out to provide space for ten large rooms; five on each side of the hallway and spaced for privacy.

Dad was moved here from a hideous rehabilitation center. We are relieved, despite the truth that this hospice decision reveals. Each wing has a private garden ready to burst with golden daffodils and green vines heavy with yet to be identified progeny. His room is a reluctant yellow khaki and filled with uninspired paintings. There is a sitting area to the right framed by large windows opening onto a hillside of slowly awakening flowers where I make my temporary home.

The ambient noises abate with the sun. A cardiac machine commands the space just as the brass Fanfare of German marches in the corner of our living room. This monotonous sound references the potential absence of the lub-dub, the vital first movement of a heart's contraction. And now, in the corner not twenty feet from his mechanical bed, I sit listening to the retreating pulse of my old man as I fall asleep.

"Hey, little roo. When did you get here?" he mumbles.

"Last night about seven," I mumble back through the fog of awakening.

"Sorry to bring you all the way up here from Chicago for this. Where's your mom?"

"I told her to go home to get some sleep, that I would be okay with you."

"Nice. Glad you did that. She blames herself you know. Since you found me on top of her when I fell off the toilet, she blames herself for not being able to take care of me on her own."

"Yeah, I know," I say in a growing storm of anxiety.

The short walk across the room takes 40 years. Each footstep a weight lifted. Finally, I grab his arm. He makes no fist to hit, nor does he turn in silence.

My mind races, my breathing—like a pilot light on a stove that will not ignite—is full of fits. I think back to six months earlier, how his femur snapped, and I knew. We have not yet reached his end, but we are circling the runway.

Our faces meet.

"Hey Dad, would you like a shave?"

"I guess so," he says, folding the newspaper he holds despite the fact he can no longer concentrate.

"Let me check the bathroom for supplies and I'll be right back."

The bathroom has a sterile shine. Like antibiotics that eradicate without discrimination the good and bad, the disinfected is stripped of personality. I feel so alone, so empty, so absorbed that I begin to smell vinegar in the morphine drip, then crave its numbing effects to relieve my sadness. The mirror startles me, but I reach for the razor and shave cream anyway. I muster a false face, grab a towel, and return to Dad's bedside.

"Here we go. Let's get you sitting up in bed," I instruct while pushing the button to raise the headboard.

"You are going to have to pull me up on the bed," he begs, as I notice his head now slumped over his chest.

The words "Got it, Dad," leave my mouth, but I am relieved when the attending nurse comes in and shifts my father's head for comfort.

The room darkens from the obstruction of clouds. I reach for the side table light, but it is loose and there is a delay. When it alights, the boyish handsomeness of my father, the air force major, my family's navigator, has disappeared. His hands are his mom's, mangled with arthritis, his head is his father's, bald with scaly patches of lichen-like spots, and his face is disappearing in the forest of gray stubble. His eyes are partly cloudy.

His breath is sour as I rub my hands to make peace with the menthol before applying it to his fragile face. He jumps despite my efforts but then relaxes into a smile. I slowly scrape; with each scrape, a painful memory falls. His hollow cheeks make me afraid I will rip him apart.

To be speechless after years of having too much to say is unnerving. Talking had been a way to soundproof my brain from his judgment. Now, I want to hear him again. Hear him maybe for the first time. Want him to open up the pages of his life: they matter. I sputter, but manage to say, "Dad, can you tell me that story again about you and John going up in your Cessna from Truax to Superior?"

"You don't want to hear that old story again."

"Yes, yes I do, please!" I blurt out.

I continue his shave, wiping the blade between each swipe. After clearing his voice, Dad begins, and we lift off together in the single-engine Cessna I have always refused to ride in.

"We were cleared for take-off at 6:55am, just before sunrise. John and I had made this trip to Superior about a hundred times. The take-off was good, I applied the right amount of pressure to raise the nose and the pitch of the plane. Since the air traffic was going to be at a minimum, I decided not to ascend immediately to thirty-six thousand feet. With the wings expanded, the lift force set us in motion, and we broke from the pull of the earth."

His tale has barely taken off before it stalls. A long pause ensues as I move the razor up the left side of his cheek. In his silence, the blade glides. As I wipe the clippings, Dad leans toward me with a whisper.

“I can’t really remember.”

“It’s okay Dad, I can try and help. You always say next that you decided to try to replicate...”

“Yeah, that’s right,” he proceeds cautiously. “...It was an old maneuver I learned when goof balling around on Okinawa in 1945. I used the engine forward thrust and the wings’ lift to hover like the hawks and kestrels. That is when the miracle occurred. As the Cessna settled into a hover, from out of nowhere a kettle of hawks appeared and flew with us in tandem for what seemed like miles moving up and through the cumulus and stratus as we flew into the violet sunrise. For a brief moment, we were free...”

“Yes, you were free!” I interrupt with relief and quiet tears.

This telling has exhausted him, and Dad is out of gas. I stand watch. His labored breath is punctuated with small shaky eruptions. There is a combination of raspy efforts followed by long periods of silence. Here on death’s front line, I cannot reconcile Dad’s freedom flight with John and the story we never spoke of. The time Dad was shot down and had to parachute out of a C-47 with a silk map that floated until he was saved. He never spoke about the Distinguished Flying Cross. Stories find their way into our lives in so many different ways.

As Dad slips into sleep, our reflections mingle on the expansive windows. There is an urgency now in my desire to make sense of his passion for all things that fly. How his life had been informed by words of reason and beauty. A need to alphabetize the beloved books that reveal who he strove to be. Ways to capture the awe of the “roll and glide” and “wheel and spin” of his in-flight poetry. When I free him from time, Dad makes clear sense; past histories taught lessons and future explorations prophesied innovation. I sit silently and hope that he has read Marinetti’s Manifesto:

*In an airplane, seated on a cylinder of gasoline, I felt the ridiculous absurdity of the old syntax inherited by Homer. A furious need to liberate words, liberating them from the prison of the Latin sentence... This is what the propeller told me as I flew at two hundred meters over the powerful smokestacks of Milan.*

Dad was ordered to respect authority and he demanded it of me. When I didn’t, we collided. It was always a game of sinking the battleship with us, father and son. We were constantly fighting a war that could not be won. If only we had been freed from that struggle. But in those days, I was his Icarus, a boy ignoring the advice of his father. A child who did not pay attention to words because they felt too confining.

My resentments, like our reflections, fade. His books will be forgotten, but not the quotes. Those slips of paper he glued inside their covers write their own prescient stories. I think of one.

*Anthology of William Shakespeare*

*February 13, 1968*

*Montgomery Alabama*

*High 65, clear skies*

*“The price of greatness is responsibility.” Winston Churchill*

While I am staring at his increasingly vacant face, a flicker of feathers behind me leads me to turn as a hawk dives to desecrate a mouse; Dad was both the soldier protagonist charged with greatness and the Shakespearean antagonist whose ambitions could be ruthless. As much as he loved words, he knew that words were often a foil for the deceptive and sinister. His bi-cameral mind collapsed when he discovered that his beloved words were merely approximations; that ambition and responsibility were not always conscious of each other.

But that was then, and this is now. The unexpected challenges of our lives no longer provide sufficient force to feed my transgressions. Our torn relationship fuses like a hope muscle and only the essential remains.

I am awakened from midnight's darkness. The room is without air. My bed, the gray couch where I attempt to sleep, is damp from thrashing. I hear the nurse's feet pad the halls, a shuffling reminder of the palliative care to come. An occasional phone rings, an anonymous voice attempts to comfort some absent family members. I start to spin but my finger finds a tear in the fabric, a cord-like thread that I pull in the sky of silence. I listen to his sleep, for signs it is not death. What comes surprises me, and I muster the courage to parachute into his dream.

"What's that hammering, Mom?" Dad blurts from the bed.

"I thought they might be building over on Briar. It must be a new house."

"Hey Mom, I am in the backyard. Bud said he would come by and we are going to walk over to the river."

"I already told Pop. He's in the garage working on that shelf you wanted for the side door entrance."

The room is extremely still. Dad and I are copiloting the plane and we begin to glide.

"Love you, Billy. You are a bright, beautiful boy. Be careful," I add as if I was his mom.

Maybe it is true that dreams signify ambitions. It is infinitely clear that his papers have arrived. The next mission signified by his half-opened eyes and the matt gray of his skin. If only I could pour him a brandy just to hear the ice cubes clinking again in the glass; to toast a life well lived rather than his stubborn refusal to listen. I cross the room and pull the chair as close to his bed as possible. He is already floating in the sea of sheets tucked around his shrinking body. I am fully in the cockpit to help navigate the trip home. I do not try to discourage, or make comfortable, the unknown. His words sputter like an old movie on a continuous loop. There is no beginning or end. Characters just appear, telling stories that originated in the yellow house on Beverly Court, his childhood home. It is a celestial sphere where words and actions fall away and love hovers in a violet sky.

It is inconceivable that I would become my father, but then he hands me the controls. For five more days and nights, we negotiate the sharp edges and dark corners of our lives until Dad reaches the Karman Line, roughly 60 miles above the earth, where he circles for the last time.

---

"My relationship with my adoptive father is one marred by disappointment, impenetrable silence, and occasional injury. The path to forgiveness from him to me

and me to him has been one of the most extraordinary and rewarding journeys of my life. Magically, the healing blossomed during his extended dying. I wrote this essay to honor his past, my past, and our present.” —Andy Flaherty

---

**Andy Flaherty** is a second career educator whose life has been enriched by immersion into poetry, writing, photography, and the minds of generations of students. “Hover” is his first published work. His current effort is a series of fictional stories about navigating the landscape of a midwestern city in the late 1970s.

---

# Sour Milk

Mitzi Weems

I wake long before sunrise, rubbing my eyes, feeling like I am more exhausted than I was when I dozed off three hours ago. I'm pretty sure I never made it to REM sleep, the sounds from the baby monitor keeping me always on the edge of anything restful. When I walk into his room, he is already awake. I can see his big eyes looking at me in the dim, yellow light of the motion-sensor nightlight. He protests when I pick him up and relocate him to the changing table. His little whines and scrunched-up face compel me to work quickly.

His bed and his clothes are soaked through. I guess it's time to move up to size 3 diapers because this is the third time this has happened. I don't have time to give him a bath, so I wash him down with a wet washcloth and put a fresh diaper and bed clothes on him. Zipping him up from the bottom to the top, I think whoever designed the sleep sack was a genius. I put him on his play mat while I change the sheet and the waterproof pad under it. No chance I want a fed, content, and sleepy baby to wait on me to do it later.

I sit down in the rocking chair with him in my lap, happy his protests will end soon. When I can't remember which side he finished on last, I feel of them both. The right side feels fuller and is leaking warmly down my stomach. As I maneuver his head to the right, he starts to cry. But when he has it, he latches on and starts to nurse as if he hasn't eaten in days, rather than four hours. His jaws open and close in a noisy suck-swallow rhythm as I stroke the soft hair on his head.

Thinking I might jot down a few motherly memories, I reach for my journal on the table next to my chair. The light goes off. No movement, no light. So, I sit in the dark as he eats, worried I will fall asleep from the oxytocin flooding my body. I think of all of the work I need to do, stressing myself out before my day even starts.

When he detaches himself, I flip him over so he can nurse on the other side. He sucks with less frenzy than he did before, and I know he will not take as long on this side. As he nurses, it feels like he is sucking all of the energy from my body. My bones are tired. But he is worth it.

About fifteen minutes later, the oxytocin having drugged me to sleep, I wake up to the tiny feeling of something missing and cold air on my wet nipple. He has detached, asleep, with milk trickling out of the corner of his mouth.

I stand up and carry him to his bed, moving quietly and slowly to put him down without waking him. The light comes on as I move across the room, so I hesitate until I'm sure he's still asleep. Gently, gently, gently, I lower him to the blue and off-white sheet with little cars and trucks on it. I lightly lay my head on his chest and tummy so he doesn't feel like he is alone and wake up. The soft fleece against my cheek, the sound of his heart in my ear—the light goes off again—I enjoy the rhythmic in-and-out of his breathing. I could stay this way forever. About two minutes later, though, I slowly stand up and look at my sleeping angel. He's looking at me with those huge eyes again. Why does he open his eyes wider in the dark? Does it help him see better?



I have to get ready for work, so I slowly move toward the door, hoping he will decide, just this once, he will be content in his bed by himself. When I get to the door, the sound of discontent assaults my ears and I sigh deeply.

“Hey, sweet boy. Mommy’s gotta go to work. Are you sure you don’t wanna just go back to sleep?”

He wails his answer to my question. I pick him up and hold him to my chest with his head on my left shoulder and sway back and forth, jiggling him up and down gently in hopes he will relax and decide to let me go. But he is holding his head up and away from my shoulder and looking at me with those big, round eyes. Clearly, he is wide awake.

I take him into our bedroom where my husband is fast asleep. I say my husband’s name and touch his arm. He continues to sleep and turns to the other side, making a little snorting sound as he does. I say his name again and push his shoulder a little more firmly to wake him up.

“Tag, you’re up. I have to get ready for work.”

My husband sits up slowly and takes one of the three partially-used burp cloths from his nightstand and throws it onto his left shoulder. He sleepily puckers his lips for a kiss before he takes the baby and puts him on his shoulder. Both are back to sleep immediately. How does he do that?

I lightly kiss my son on the back of his head and my husband on his forehead and then go into the dark room across the hall. I can just barely see the sleeping forms of my other two sons in their bunkbeds. I lean down and kiss the head of the form in the bottom bunk. I hate that I can’t reach my oldest son to do the same, so I kiss my fingers and gently touch them to his forehead. Then, I go into the bathroom and close the door to get ready for work.

Three hours later, I’m on a packed Bluebird bus with forty-six other Airmen. There are two more busses like it in the convoy traveling across the white Utah desert.

I’m sitting in the front seat by myself, reviewing the training orders for the day. As the senior member of the group, I am responsible for overseeing the safety of and “commanding” the troops for the training trip. I guiltily wish I was not the senior member. It is so much harder to give orders than to take them. It is so much easier to carry out one part of the mission than to oversee the entire thing.

My breasts start to hurt under the twenty-five-pound weight of my old-style training body armor. So, I take my vest off, thankful for the fact I possess the only seat on the bus with an empty space—a perk of the position. I lay my body armor on my three-day pack next to me on the seat.

The familiar pins-and-needles pain of my milk letting down tells me it is time to pump. In our home, more than a hundred miles behind us, my baby boy is either eating or about to eat.

I can feel milk cooling in concentric circles around my nipples. I discreetly reach under my uniform top and feel of my desert tan t-shirt. I feel what I already know—wet spots on both sides. I ask the bus driver how long it will be before we get to the training range. He says forty-five minutes.

Great, I'll be drenched by then. Oh, why didn't I put nursing pads in my bra cups? I was focused on making sure I had the gear I needed and focused on getting to the armory before the report time. That's why.

I am torn between wishing I had weened my son before this short-notice predeployment training and feeling like I owe him more than the six months he's had. When I received my orders last week for the training, I went to my PCM for something to dry up my milk so I could just be done with it. But, in usual form when it comes to women's issues, my twenty-nine-year-old male doctor literally told me to "suck it up"—those exact words. He didn't even try to help.

Stopping cold turkey wasn't an option for the baby or unless I wanted another mastitis infection, one of the most painful things I have ever endured.

I return to the plans for the day and try to focus on them so my milk will stop leaking. I actually fall asleep and wake up when the bus stops at the entrance to the training range. One thing nursing three babies has taught me is how to go from dead asleep to instantly productive, something I'll find useful downrange.

I get out of the bus and show the combined orders and my ID to the gate guard. He looks at them, hands them back, salutes me, and waves us through the gate. All without a word. I smile and say "thank you," returning the salute.

"Have a good day, ma'am."

We enter the expansive range, almost a million acres. Traveling to the training area, we occasionally disturb pronghorn antelope as we go. As the road curves around a bare hill in front of us, I look back and see our small convoy of three buses and two HUMVEES has left a slowly dissolving trail of tan dust behind us. It is only 1000 in the morning and already 105 degrees. I pull a small, waterproof spiral notebook from my cargo pocket and make a note for my "After Action Report" that this terrain is certainly appropriate to prepare these Airmen, including me, for deployment to Iraq and Afghanistan.

When the busses eventually pull up to the training area, I note several desert tan tents, various vehicles, and a water buffalo (a vehicle designed to provide drinking water to troops in the field). I leave the bus and talk to the training supervisor, a retired soldier working for a defense contractor that provides combat training at the range.

We are to dismount to a staging area with our weapons and gear and stand by. Given the training schedule for the day, I decide it's time for everyone to visit the latrines, fill their canteens, and pull out MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) for an early lunch. I give instruction to the senior member on each bus. Then, I selfishly look for a bathroom.

I find the line of port-a-potties behind a long, tan tent. Taking off my body armor, I lean it against the outside of the port-a-potty before stepping up and closing the door. In the 110-degree day and tiny space, it smells like I am inside of a sewer.

I take out a small, hand-operated breast pump from the cargo pocket of my pants and attach a breast-shield, a cone-shaped device with a hole in it, from another pocket. The hand pump is not as

quick as the industrial-strength electric one back in my office, but it will have to do. I unbutton my uniform top, peel my wet t-shirt off my midriff and breasts, and unclip the left cup of my nursing bra.

After positioning the breast shield over my nipple, I quickly pull and push the little cylinder in and out of the hand pump. I don't have a bottle to attach, so I start to pump without one. At first, nothing. So, I close my eyes and imagine I am back in my rocking chair, with my baby, nursing. It is so annoying how my milk lets down at the worst times, but then not a drop when I'm trying to pump. As I stand leaning over the toilet hole, I try to relax. After thirty-seconds or so I feel the intensity of my milk letting down, and it starts to flow as the pump continues to pull at my swollen breast. In the dim light, I see milk splatter from in-between the small valve and the tiny white membrane on the bottom of the pump.

When I travel, I usually take home a replacement supply to my husband, the "keeper of the milk." Alongside my uniforms, I usually pack a briefcase-sized breast pump, supplies, and a little ice chest. Finding a place to pump is never easy. Neither are logistics. Since 9/11 it has been almost impossible to get liquid on a plane, but I fight until I win those battles.

Pumping in the field, especially in a port-a-potty, is not sanitary. So, this time I "pump-and-dump." My husband will feel uneasy—there is no milk to replenish what he uses today and tomorrow.

My husband is adept at melting and warming the little bags dominating our freezer at home, never using the microwave, of course, since it kills the natural immunity-boosting properties. I think of the little frozen zipper-top bags, a few ounces each, lined up in containers and organized by date—pure gold. I feel guilty. I know their number is dwindling and that formula will soon be a reality for my baby. I feel guilty I am not there to feed him right now. But I know he's safe and fed, even though he is not with me.

Milk splatters into the toilet hole, onto the bench beside the hole, on the floor, on my desert boots, and on my camouflage pants. I wish I had brought a bottle so it doesn't splatter everywhere.

In six or seven minutes, when my triceps start to protest the exertion from the in-and-out motion, I notice very little is coming from the pump. After shaking the droplets of milk from the breast shield and unscrewing the hand-pump, I put the breast shield in a zip-lock bag and stow them both in my cargo pockets. At least pump-and-dump doesn't require me to keep all of the little parts of the hand pump apparatus pristinely clean. At least there's that.

I don't have time to pump the other side, although it protests with fullness and leaking. I put a folded, desert-tan bandana into each bra cup. I don't have time to go the bathroom, either. I've taken too much time as it is. I clean up the splattered milk as best I can and open the door.

As I leave the port-a-potty, there is a line of Airmen waiting for the latrines. I feel guilty I have taken so long pumping. I go into the cadre tent to find out if our instructions for the day are ready. The air in the tent is cool, but I hurry out as fast as I can, knowing one of the downfalls of morale is the irritation of "hurry up and wait," especially when it is inching above 110 degrees.

Later, we sit on tan, silty sand under a covered (blessedly) open-air classroom and receive refresher training. Cadre also issues MILES gear (Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement System) and instructs

us how to use it. The sensors on the torso and helmet harness alert us when we are hit by a beam from the MILES attachment on the barrel of a weapon. When our sensor alerts, we are to drop to the ground and stay in place. Cadre will issue a KIA or other casualty card. The MILES gear, coupled with blank ammunition rounds, is intended to simulate the reality of combat.

In my experience, MILES gear functionality is not great, but better for this open-environment training than the sim rounds we sometimes use. Sim rounds are live rounds with modified real projectiles and are better used for MOUT (Military Operations in Urban Terrain) training since MILES doesn't work inside structures. Sim rounds can leave very nasty bruises and sometimes some bleeding—if one is hit. I try not to get hit. Both produce the sound of small arms weapon fire to remind us this is not a game.

I divide personnel into squads, making sure to assign squad leaders who need leadership experience but who won't totally tank this important responsibility. These Airmen don't get much field training or weapons training before they are split up and sent downrange to work mostly in Army units, so we need to make the best of today.

We begin to rotate through the training lanes which meander through ten-or-so acres. We practice everything from combat formation movements to realistic battle scenarios to combat first aid to casualty reporting and evacuation.

Several hours later, exhausted, I sprint through pinkish haze from a smoke bomb and drop to the ground for a fifty-meter low-crawl under barbed wire with my M-16 in one hand and dragging a field med bag in the other. I'm just glad somebody else has the dead weight of the two-hundred-pound casualty dummy to drag this time. When I hit the ground for the umpteenth time, I feel the full weight of my vest, my gear, and my body on my engorged breasts once again. The pain is intense.

At the end of the lane, I stand up and spit dirt and dried weeds out of my mouth. Sand crystals crunch between my teeth. My bandanas are otherwise utilized, so I blow the muck out of my nose into my hand, wiping it on my pants.

I move out of the way of the Airmen emerging from the low crawl behind me. Mixed with my dripping sweat, milk is seeping out from under my body armor. My uniform is soaked and I smell a unique sour odor. The milk is doing what unrefrigerated milk does after hours at 118 degrees—spoiling. Great! Something else to try to explain, or hide, in my male-dominated reality.

I do not like it, but I ditch the next lane and return to the port-a-potty. I am exhausted, and the day is not even close to over. Plus, I didn't get lunch, so I'm famished. I down a half of a canteen of water, knowing I'll never make it if I don't hydrate, especially when my body is using twice the usual amount of water.

Not knowing when I will have another chance, I pump both breasts—RELIEF—and change into a t-shirt and bra from my three-day pack. I wish I could change my uniform, but don't have time to remove my boots and peel off these sweat and milk-soaked pants in the small space. It would take forever. Just getting gear off and pulling my pants far enough down to urinate is hard enough—men have such an advantage.

After another few hours of physically grueling activity, the sun is getting low on the horizon. We move to the next segment of the training. Cadre assigns us to the “base camp,” which we must defend, and informs me we will accomplish various missions throughout the night. Mission orders will be issued at the “appropriate” times.

When I get to the command tent, it is already getting dark. We need to get our defensive positions set up. Since we are just a hodgepodge of personnel from various units, I have to quickly assign the functional leadership duties to my senior folks—logistics, operations, security, etc. I assign resources and tell them how many and which troops they have to carry out their duties.

After getting my bearings, I sit down in an actual chair for the first time since we got off the bus that morning. It feels good to sit even if it is a hard folding chair. Cadre appears and tells me we have twenty minutes to mission-plan our first mission. It is a convoy mission to deliver fuel to the fictitious FOB Anchorage.

During the night, we endure five attacks on our base camp and run three convoy missions to various fictitious FOBs (Forward Operating Bases). I command the first convoy mission. Almost to the FOB, we encounter a simulated IED, which disables the lead vehicle. Smoke billows around the vehicle I am in, blinding both the driver and me.

“Contact left! Contact left!” echoes over my radio a split second after the explosion.

We are taking small arms fire on the left of the convoy. I hear the M-16s in the turrets of the HUMVEEs firing at “the enemy.” We don’t train with 50-cals up top like there will be when we get to Iraq.

Following the most current TTPs (Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures) at the time, I dismount to take cover behind the axle of my vehicle. My legs are way too short to get out of a deuce-and-a-half quickly. I feel the full weight of my body, my vest, and my gear on my tailbone as I hit the ground when I jump down. I will be reminded of this fall, and the resulting herniated disk, every time I do sit-ups for the rest of my life.

I recover quickly, but then struggle to take a prone position with the too-long M-16 rifle. I wish I had been issued an M-5. Its collapsible stock fits me perfectly.

When prone, the back of my too-large body armor pushes the back of my too-large helmet, which, in turn, pushes the front of my helmet down in front of my eyes. As I struggle to see and fight, cadre hands me a card that says, “Your fuel transport vehicles are damaged, but repairable.”

The vehicles in the convoy lose radio communication with each other. Amid the craziness of yelling, weapons fire, smoke, and noise of non-fragmentation grenades, my MILES sensor alerts as I try to move between vehicles to communicate orders. I kneel to the ground in place and stop fighting. Cadre, lurking in the dark, appears and gives me a KIA card.

“Oh, how I have failed as a leader,” I think as guilt washes over me and I lay down on the ground, waiting to be revived.

The “tat . . . tat, tat” of small arms fire surrounds me. Someone has taken my position, using the cover afforded by the vehicle’s steel wheel. My troops continue defending the cargo as I lay there in the dark on my back on the side of the road. My adrenaline subsides as I relax, marveling at the stars in the vast Utah night sky—until I remember there are camel spiders and venomous scorpions and snakes crawling this desert.

Over the next twenty minutes, I feel dozens of imaginary creatures crawling over me, up my sleeves, and into my boots. Blessedly, the engagement ends and I am revived by cadre before anything gets its fangs or stinger into me.

After the engagement ends, I request a LACE report (Liquid, Ammo, Casualties, and Equipment) from the vehicle commanders. Cadre lurks around us, grading us, as we render combat first-aid to the casualties while the mechanics work in a frenzy to repair the “disabled” vehicles. Then we load up our casualties and complete the delivery. Fuel delivered, mission accomplished, we return to base camp.

Later, as I plan the last mission of the night with my deputy and functional leaders, I know I need to pump. But, before that, I really should conduct morale visits at the perimeter DFPs (Defensive Fighting Positions) while it is quiet. I want to ensure troops defending our camp have what they need, are awake, and have their heads in the fight. At one position, I relieve a female troop long enough for her to go to the latrine, and then I get stuck fighting during an enemy attack. Finally, I return to the command tent.

Exhausted and needing sleep, I take my folding chair behind the command tent in the pitch black of the desert. The odor of urine strikes me—I’m not the first to be back here. I lean forward and start to pump directly onto the ground. My arms are tired and bruised, and I almost don’t have the energy. I adjust to face the tent. Hopefully the sandbags and the concrete t-wall will shield me from any NVGs (night vision goggles) looking back this way.

As I pump, I regret that any other nursing mothers on this training trip have even less privacy and less time to pump. There certainly is nothing in the *Airman’s Handbook* or the many hours of “professional military education” to help us deal with the reality of womanhood or motherhood while carrying out our duties. And there are no accommodations in war. We just have to “suck it up” and deal with it the best we can.

I know I need to wean my baby boy before my deployment next month. But I’m trying to do my best for everyone for as long as I can.

Relieved but famished, I decide to replace some of the calories I have burned. Training taxes all of our bodies. But, for me, the energy sapped by producing milk is greater than the physical exertion of training.

I eat “bar-b-q ribs” cold, having removed the heaters when I field stripped my MREs yesterday. As I eat the rectangular piece of processed meat on the dense, heavy MRE bread, I hydrate with the included electrolyte drink mix. I put it straight into the water of my canteen even though I know I’m not supposed to.

Squeezing applesauce into my mouth from the corner of a tan pouch, I peek out of the tent flap. The cloaked sun's glow at the edge of the desert tells me our training is almost over, and that it's about to get hot again.

Troops and gear packed up and on the way back to our home installation, I work on the after-action report. The bus smells like BO, gun powder, and dust—and sour milk. I look at the Airmen who are exhausted and filthy. Some sleep. Some stare out the window. Who knows what kinds of collateral damage and personal sacrifices their deployments will bring them? I wonder how many of them feel like they are cheating someone, or a lot of someones, in their lives by leaving.

Back at the installation, we clean our weapons, count ammunition, and return it all to the armory. We organize and turn in our gear. We try to ignore our screaming muscles as the pain attempts to interfere with what we have to do. After the last troop is gone and the last thing is done, I go home.

When I walk in the door, my two oldest sons are running in circles in the living room. The oldest is chanting “Mommy’s home, Mommy’s home, Mommy’s home” over and over. My three-year-old’s efforts sound more like “Me gnome, me gnome.”

I kiss the big boys on the top of the head, and my husband appears from the kitchen with the baby, who starts to wail violently when he sees me. My milk lets down at the sound of his cries. My husband gives me a quick kiss and tells me he kept the baby hungry, just for me, but he can't wait much longer.

I drop my gear in front of the door and take off my uniform top, trading it for the baby. My husband holds the uniform top at arm's length, but doesn't say anything about the emanating stench. I realize I am way too dirty, regardless of how hungry he is. So, “mommy’s sorry,” and I kiss him, hand him back, and then disappear into my bedroom.

Dust wafts out of each boot as I unlace and remove it. One of my socks is soaked in blood, the corner of my big toenail having eaten into the side of my toe. I peel off my filthy t-shirt, pants, and socks and brush my teeth in a hurry. During my quick shower, milk pours down the front of my body because I haven't pumped in hours and because I can still hear my baby crying. The warm water, white milk, and blood mix at my feet on their way to the drain.

I make another entrance. The instant my older boys see me, they start up again. Or maybe they never stopped. I sit down on the couch in the living room with my hyperactive sons chanting as my husband disappears to finish dinner.

The baby is angry at me and is screaming at the top of his lungs. I position him in a football hold, and the comparative quiet when he latches on is startling. He acts like he hasn't eaten in the two days I have been gone. But I know Dad has fed him every four hours since I last walked out the door.

I start to relax as he nurses. My six-year-old tries to crawl into my lap with the baby, his knees and elbows hitting every bruise. Not comfortable, he finally settles for sitting at my left and rubbing the baby's head as he tells me about his day. As I listen and look out of the picture window in front of me at the mountains, my three-year-old is still running in circles, “Me gnome, me gnome, me gnome.”

I know my husband and my babies have sacrificed. I know they are about to make more sacrifices, ones my babies won't even understand. And I know when the baby stops eating and soaks me in warm spit up, I will smell, again, like sour milk.

---

“Sour Milk” is an honest and revealing look at the intersection of military service and breastfeeding. That intersection, possibly the least talked-about aspect of military service, can have an enormous impact on military families.” —Mitzi Weems

---

**Mitzi Weems** balanced the important identities of “Mom” and “Sir/Ma’am” and “Honey” for twenty years and retired from active duty in 2018. While she enjoys writing about a variety of topics, her current writing focus illuminates neuro-differences and neurodiversity in our society. Mitzi has been a licensed attorney since 1997 and is published in that field. In addition to writing, Mitzi is passionate about her family and about tending her garden and her chickens.



# Intuitive Guide to Battlefields and Violence

Christina M. Wells

1. Take the winter tour of Christmas lights past the field where soldiers ran, their feet slipping in the grass with their guns braced against each other. Now there's a slight snow, and there's cocoa in the car with the station that plays nothing but holiday music from Thanksgiving to New Year.
2. Note that for you, nothing much happened here except a picnic you took one summer. You were a few blankets over from two women in sarees, and you watched a little Black girl with plastic pink barrettes at the end of tiny braids. She was running after a little boy, but there was laughter. Not blood.
3. Play volleyball at the end of the field if you can stand it. Otherwise, run for the trail in the woods that has a bench at one curve. Don't think about how long this dirt has been here and whether anyone hid behind trees, or for that matter, whether they do now. Watch the wind blow leaves past you, and then, wonder what else is hiding in the air.
4. Think about how long it takes for the ground to absorb blood, how many layers down the DNA is. Even without a body, so much runs like a river below the mud your sneakers hit.
5. Or go to a winery on this land. A man plays guitar on a back porch, his speakers playing a heavy bass. Glass cases line the walls. Knives and guns are artifacts, but the signs are incomplete. There are no obituaries here—only weapons that sit by tables where you pour red from a bottle to forget red underground.
6. Or go somewhere else. It's a cloudy wind a few hours north. You could go to a well-lit lunch spot in the rain and have a salad in a giant bowl, or you could go to a battlefield where state names commemorate. These are your options.
7. You can walk with your green ski jacket and mittens with only the wind pushing you as you go forward. Note that it may feel like something else is here, though, and I don't mean the shady guy with a Confederate flag on a plate at the front of his big red truck. Something else plays off of you both, and it's not one person as much as it is the whole lot of them, everyone who was here before it got to be a park.
8. Go downtown. There's a house where a lot of tourists go because something happened there, one day. Even if nothing else ever did, that day outweighs the rest of them. Two women with sandy hair and a balding guy with glasses each say there are cold spots where there isn't a vent. See how hard it is for you to go through the door to leave.
9. Take a ghost tour at night, because who wouldn't in a town with more dead than alive? Get electronic gizmos for your time. Walk in the dark toward a house with cars out front and a light on at the top of a staircase. See if your ghost gear seems to beep for the dead, and not the living.

10. Scoff at the woman who claims to see things when she clearly doesn't. Spend time thinking about how often the box you carry makes noise no matter where you walk. Someone is here, was here, is/was here simultaneously. Remember the red river some feet under the gravel, the mud, the battle off the battlefield. Prepare to scare yourself with the war that wasn't in uniforms. War isn't so uniform. Sing hymns in the car and tell the dead to stay.
  11. Get on a plane. When it's someone else's war, maybe you won't feel it. Find a castle with yellow flowers growing out of gray walls and wonder why it's missing the roof over the great room where girls in long dresses walked. Think about how hard it is to imagine reasons why a sturdy ceiling would disappear when walls remain. When the ground takes them back.
  12. Check the travel advisories before you get on another plane. Wonder at the advice that you should worry most about the places where the roof isn't already gone. Have a drink. It's complimentary, after all.
  13. Go home. Read the celebrity column in the news to miss what could happen here, there, somewhere.
  14. Spend time in a museum where they check everyone's bags individually, then tell you that they hope you have a good time. Think about the time you walked from one quadrant of the city to another because someone shot a guard in a museum about atrocities in a war and nobody knew whether he'd been caught. Think about how you looked over your shoulder for blocks.
  15. Think about where you can't hold hands. There's no war outside those houses unless it's yours.
  16. Go to the library. Try not to think about the sign outside where there was a battle once. Now people drive too fast, screeching up to a light. There are asphalt and yellow lines where there might have once been red.
  17. Turn left, then right. There's a church where something happened with a war. You don't remember what, but this means war crosses your mind on the way to get coffee.
  18. Or go to that other coffee chain instead. It faces a road named after a Civil War figure. Note that the people who work there are nice, though, and the lights over the people with laptops aren't even fluorescent.
  19. Make a list of everywhere you aren't safe. Stick it on your stainless steel fridge, the one that doesn't absorb your handprint. Think about the therapist who said to make anxiety positive. Go back and put a list of where you feel safe. It's a short list under a magnet from a museum where a guard rifled through your purse.
  20. Stay home where it's safe. Bundle yourself in a quilt on the couch with your therapy cat and your therapy dog. Watch a documentary about war. Get up and lock the door.
-

“Though my wife served in Bosnia and Iraq, this piece comes from my observations, mostly in this country and occasionally abroad. It’s intended to address the commodification of war, and the places with devastating histories where people go for ‘fun,’ forgetting or ignoring the wars that have happened, are happening, or could happen.” —Christina M. Wells

---

**Christina M. Wells** is an editor and coach. She has published in the *Northern Virginia Review*, *Crab Fat*, *bioStories*, *Big Muddy*, and *Sinister Wisdom*, among other magazines. Her work also appears in five anthologies, including *Real Women Write: Seeing Through Their Eyes*, ed. by Susan Schoch for Story Circle Network. She has an MA from University of Arkansas and a PhD from University of Maryland and was a finalist for the 2022 Conger Beasley Jr. Award for Nonfiction (*New Letters*). She also has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and is currently working on a novel. Find her at <https://bychristinamwells.net>.

---

FICTION

# What We Have Now

Jerome Gold

The hospital scenes were particularly hard for Ruth. Small sounds of denial issued from her throat during these and other scenes depicting the degradation of the human body.

For Harry, the hardest parts were the combat scenes—the hyperreal speed with which everything happened, the uncertainty about what actually was happening, the abrupt head and limb movements of the actors, the staccato voices. Toward the end, the scenes of solidarity and renewal were hard, too. Some of those scenes were perhaps the hardest.

Halfway into the movie, Harry took Ruth's hand. She pressed his in return. As the lights came on he put his hand on her knee. He was not sure what he wanted, but he was unwilling to relinquish the intimacy that had grown between them during the course of the film.

A short time later, after they had found a place for coffee and had sat down, Ruth said she had been looking at her photos from Vietnam and had come across some of the children. She had forgotten that she had worked for a time in a children's ward. Only recently she had told a friend that she never saw a child when she was in Vietnam, and then she came across those old photographs. She had completely forgotten them, the children. She had put them out of her mind entirely. Isn't that strange, she said.

One of the photos showed rows and rows of cribs. Only when she saw that photo did she remember that she had worked in that ward. Wasn't it strange how she had blocked the children from her mind? If she hadn't seen that photograph she might never have remembered them.

So she had them, these children. All of them were amputees.

In 1969 a patient, a young Marine, died. She never learned his name. Although it was the corpsman who failed to mix the solution before injecting it, the patient was, in fact, hers and she felt responsible for his death. Whenever she went to The Wall now, she looked at the names for 1969. The Marine's would be one of them.

And so she had him, too.

She still hallucinated, though not so vividly as before. She hallucinated every day, but she always knew where she was now and she always knew what she was doing and she always knew that what she saw on top of what she was seeing was a hallucination. She missed the intensity of her hallucinations as they were when they were new, she said, the brightness, the opacity of how they used to be. She could be driving through Portland and she would suddenly be in Danang; all the lush color of Vietnam masking the dull gray of Portland. If she could have the hallucinations back the way they were by wishing, she would wish for them now. And, of course, the bodily sensations that went with them, that alertness and sense of belonging.

"I remember thinking almost as soon as I came back from Vietnam, 'I don't belong here; I'm supposed to be dead,'" Harry said.

She had been suicidal only once, she said, and she had called someone and this person had talked her out of her mood, if it was a mood. She cut herself now, just enough to draw blood. When she bled she found release. Recently she found a piece of glass in her garden. She squeezed it, cutting her hand, then continued gardening, mixing her blood with the soil.

Harry said he had recently seen a documentary about Project Delta, the old Delta, the first Delta, the one that got wiped out in '66. The film did not identify the unit but he knew it was Delta because he recognized one of the signalmen. Harry had not liked him; he wore his nerves too close to the surface of his skin and Harry never knew which way he was going to jump. Still, Harry had known him. He died in 1966. His name was Dunne.

Seeing him again, twenty-six years old, flapping the yellow panel to bring the helicopter in to extract his team, Harry envied him his celluloid reality. In that reality Dunne was always alive, always signaling the helicopter, waiting forever with his team to be brought out of the bush, while Harry had come back to America. In that reality Dunne lived without thought, without emotion, in time without end, while Harry had yet to die. In Harry's reality, he envied the dead.

Harry had had a friend who killed herself. She had attempted it once when she was in college. Killing herself had seemed the most reasonable thing to do, she said. "I must have been crazy," she told Harry. But then, five years later, she did kill herself.

"It's a release," Ruth said. "Anticipating it makes you feel good."

Harry said that looking at suicide as reasonable was something he watched out for in himself. He knew he was capable of it, and that line of thought scared him. It's like a lateral shift in thinking that results in something that seems to parallel normal thought, but leads to death instead of life.

"That's what it is," Ruth agreed.

She grieved for her patients of twenty years ago, she said. But she didn't think she would ever kill herself now. "Not while I have my garden."

There was nothing more to say, but neither of them wanted to get up and they sat without speaking. Finally Ruth told him how much it had meant to her to march in the Lesbian and Gay Pride Parade a couple of months ago. Which made it fine, even good, for knowing that there could never be anything more between them than what they had now, Harry could relax. He smiled and Ruth seemed to relax also.

She asked if he thought he would ever remarry. Harry said no, that since his divorce he had grown further and further from any idea of marriage. He had been single for a long time now, he said.

He asked if she was living with anybody. No, Ruth said, she wasn't able to get close enough to anyone to live with her.

"But that doesn't mean we can't have what we have," she said.

"Oh, you have someone then," Harry said.

“I mean you and me. We can be good friends. I know that sounds like I’m shining you on, but I’m not. I’m trying to salvage something.”

“We can be friends,” Harry said. “We have a connection, I think.”

“We’re both drawn toward death.”

“If it can’t be sex, it can be death.”

Both laughed.

“It’s funny how people find each other. If I hadn’t met you at that reading...”

Harry nodded.

They were able to get up now. Harry walked with her to her car, then went on to his own. She drove by as he was unlocking the door and they waved to each other. Harry thought he would call her again. Soon. A poetry reading. A movie. Dinner. Conversation. *If not sex, then death*. He laughed at his own witticism again.

---

**Jerome Gold** is the author of sixteen books, including *Children in Prison: Six Profiles Before, During and After Incarceration*, *In the Spider’s Web* and *Paranoia & Heartbreak: Fifteen Years in a Juvenile Facility*. Russell Banks said about *Paranoia & Heartbreak*: “I’ve finished reading Jerome Gold’s terrific book cover to cover without a break... It’s a powerful and very tenderhearted book without a soupçon of sentimentality. Unforgettable!” Mr. Gold’s novels include *Sergeant Dickinson*, about which the *New York Times* said: “[It] belongs on the high, narrow shelf of first-rate fiction about battlefield experience” and the *Asian Wall Street Journal* said: “[Jerome Gold’s] novel stands out for the artistry of his prose and the eloquent expression of the brutal realities of war.” Rebecca Brown called his collection of poetry and prose narratives, *Prisoners*, “a ruthless, powerful book... Gold makes us think about both the individual and the cultural inheritance of violence.”

Mr. Gold received a Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Washington. He did fieldwork in Montana and American Samoa. He chose not to pursue a career in academia, but instead worked as a rehabilitation counselor in a prison for children in Washington State.

His story, “What We Have Now,” is based on a conversation he had with the poet Marilyn McMahan. He resides with his wife on Fidalgo Island in Washington State.

---

# A Person Like You

Diane Lefer

“Ian,” I want to ask him, “did we know Judith Cohen? I know we didn’t *know* know her, but did we meet her? Maybe as Judy? It’s a common name, but did we?”

I could phone him right now and say Ian, you were right, I was wrong. Maybe.

The conversation started like this: “What do you think of Biden?” he asked.

“He gives me hope. It’s never too late to achieve what’s eluded you for so long.” He laughed, so I pushed on. “Prince Charles probably looks at Biden and thinks, well, OK. Though of course he’s been a prince all his life and Biden a Senator and VP. Not exactly like us.”

And I don’t really have hope.

We’re old enough to have had it and lost it over and again.

\*

This country is fuckt fuckt fuckt. According to Ian. I told him how someone recently said when you’ve given up, you have to recover your sense of awe. I can still see a sunset, an amazing tree, a hummingbird, the night sky...

“Shock and awe,” he said.

Nothing breaks through what’s numb like a hit of destruction....*the rocket’s red glare...*

\*

Ian and I grew up on the same block but it’s not like we were friends. Being aware of someone is not the same as knowing them. I knew things *about* him because his mother would tell my mother. He was two years older than me. Smart, popular and cool. Older girls would sometimes cruise by, looking for him.

After years of protesting the war, he graduated college and was drafted. He could have gone to Canada or prison. Instead he went to Vietnam.

It was only after he got back and couldn’t sleep, he’d phone me. He was home again on the east coast, I was in California, the only person he expected to still be awake when he needed to talk.

We talk about politics, books to read, music to listen to—almost never current music but where to find old footage of blues musicians on YouTube. We don’t gossip about people. What would be the point? We never moved in the same circles.

Those late night, sometimes all night, conversations forged our friendship.



“You know what gets me about the Republicans?” he asked.

“That list is too long for a phone call,” I said.

“Guns!” and he went on about gun control. Common sense gun regulation. He couldn’t understand Republican intransigence, not when everyone in the country has a connection to at least one person shot dead in gun violence. Including every Republican.

“Not me,” I said. “I don’t know murder victims.”

But after we said goodnight and hung up, I thought of Judith Cohen.

Who may or may not be the same Judith Cohen who is now in the news, her cold case murder now re-opened.

\*

It was during one of his visits to LA when Judith Cohen, *a* Judith Cohen if not *the* Judith Cohen, latched onto me.

“Why are you here?”

“*Here* here?” My purpose on earth? Or the event? A reception with free food and drink and I did, I remember now, drink a lot, probably too much.

It was a political event. Meet and hear from a former interrogator, i.e., torturer, from the War on Terror, a man overcome by what he’d seen and what he’d done. His therapist spoke first, to talk about the affliction of moral injury. About how you grow up tying your identity to your values, your principles, to certain convictions and beliefs. But when you violate them, who are you? Then we waited. After some awkward confusion, the therapist explained that for the morally injured man, speaking openly was supposed to be a healing step, but he was too ashamed and traumatized to appear.

I think we have moral injury, me and Ian, but what is the source? Throughout seven decades of living, there are so many causes. So much has happened. So much hasn’t.

What happened to us, Ian?

\*

The event had to be in 2008, because my job had evaporated and that’s probably why Ian came to visit though he’s always claimed to hate LA. *How can you live in all that concrete?* even when I take him to Griffith Park or wilderness canyons or all the way to Joshua Tree. I wouldn’t have flown east to see him that year because I was broke. And that’s probably why we were at an event with free food and drink. Plus I thought it would do him good. There was a connection to Vietnam, I was sure, something he never talked about.

But if this happened in 2008, it maybe wasn't a torturer who didn't show up, but a drone pilot. Introduced, probably, not by a therapist but by someone from, for example, the National Lawyers Guild, and if I've forgotten, it's willful forgetting. Because if a drone pilot who killed at a distance, watching on a screen and never dirtying his hands, if he could suffer such a profound moral injury, if it devastated him to the point where he no longer recognized himself and couldn't face us, what about us? Sitting at home, funding state-sponsored terrorism with our tax dollars, and voting for more of the same, more war, more torture, more rendition, more Gitmo. Though on the horizon those days, Obama, and hope, and if it really was 2008, our hope hadn't yet proved naïve.

But that night it had to be healthier not to feel, not to know, and there we were, a bunch of sociopaths, happy enough the speaker hadn't shown up so we could stand around eating from the buffet and serving ourselves from the no-host bar.

The food was excellent and I went through the serving line at least twice. Mediterranean food, which was a euphemism by then for Middle Eastern or Arabic. Falafel and hummus and eggplant and skewers of chicken and lamb and tabouleh and rice and couscous and a not very Islamic selection of California wines.

While Ian was chatted up by one, two, three attractive women, Judith Cohen came at me. Too old for the black leather miniskirt, she wore gold lamé boots and patterned stockings, a bustier instead of a blouse, midnight black hair and lots of kohl around the eyes. Over the top even for LA. A special assistant to the Mayor, so she said, and if she'd been 18 or 20 I would have imagined the kind of special assistance she rendered. In her case, I assumed she was lying.

\*

On the news covering her murder, the photograph they use is a standard headshot. Too much mascara but basically normal. Without her flamboyant attire, I look at that face and I'm not sure it's the same Judith Cohen.

They're questioning her son, and her childhood friend.

\*

I don't know at what point we filled our plates and moved away from the crowd and found a couch to sit on. She got up and returned with more drinks.

"I'm very intuitive about people," she said. "And you—"

"You're going to tell me my aura's brown and needs cleansing."

"Are you happy?" she asked. Which had to mean she wanted to sell me something. "If you could be a child again," she suggested, as though this was sure to evoke memories of innocent, animal joy. But that was never me. Even as a little kid—stubborn, determined, even smug, the kind of kid who had to win at everything—I always had to be right.

"I'm not sure *happy* is the right word. I'd like to manage some peace of mind."

“*He* looks happy,” she said.

And good. He always looked good and in shape and—if you didn’t know him—successful.

“We’re actually here for him,” I said. “To help him.”

She cut her kohl-lined eyes in his direction. “You love him.”

\*

There was nothing calm or reassuring about Judith Cohen. She was not quite right. She vibrated with a nervous energy, bad judgment, recklessness, but I was suddenly alert. When she vibrated, I tingled, which reminded me of the first time Ian called me and so I told her—if I remember right—more than I meant to.

“He assumed I’d be awake,” I may have told her, “but I wasn’t and of course I didn’t know that was the reason. The phone woke me, and when it was Ian, I was confused. I thought I was dreaming, and then I was fully awake, my pulse racing but at the same time I froze. Terror, uncertainty. What could he possibly want? I couldn’t speak and I think he perceived my silence as calm. I think my panic made him feel safe.”

Across the room, the young women tossed their hair, bared their throats.

\*

“Love? Sure,” I said. “In some sort of way. He’s married.”

“You’re fooling yourself,” she said.

I must have told her, *No, it’s not like that*, and if I did, she would have given me a knowing smile. Just like what happened before, once, when Ian was yelling at me in public, on the street, and a total stranger tried to give me contact info for the shelter. The stranger gave me that same knowing look when I insisted *it’s not like that*, something she’d of course heard too many times before.

“He isn’t really able to express anger,” I told her. “He feels safe enough with me to let it out.”

“What about you? Are you angry?”

“Sometimes at work. Sometimes slamming down the phone or tossing papers in the air is the only way to make them hear you.”

But if I was working when we met, it couldn’t have been ’08.

I’m trying to figure it out, because the date matters.

“Do you get angry at *him*?”

We do disagree. We talk freely about stuff that matters. Like defunding the police. He's all for it. "How do they live with themselves," he asks, "when they kill some unarmed kid?"

The problem isn't the police, I think. It's too many guns. When a cop assumes everyone is carrying, of course you shoot first. "OK," I say. "So get rid of patrol cars and beat cops and military hardware. What about homicide detectives? Crime scene people?"

"You've been brainwashed by all those TV shows," he said. "You glamourize the cops."

\*

Sometimes when we argue, I imagine him dead, just to test how I'd feel.

And I remember that night with Judith Cohen because it was strange to be talking this way to anyone—especially a woman. Even in high school, I didn't have female friends, just girls who chose to latch on. Women always want to sympathize as though I'm in need of their sympathy. With women friends it's better to say nothing, but Judith Cohen? It's not like she could ever be a friend.

I told her, "I only pretend to be mad at him. It's like, what would you call it? Aversion therapy. I want to keep him away from anything that might hurt him."

She said, "You're not his mother."

Judith Cohen was a mother. Her son may be the one who killed her. Ian and I? Neither of us has kids. Him, as far as he knows. Me, a woman, well I could hardly be in doubt. If I'd ever had a baby, I could hardly not know. If I'd ever had a baby and given it up for adoption, I'd have something to wait for. I could still be surprised by someone looking for me, someone who someday might find me.

Someone putting a bullet in your head, that's a surprise, though if Ian is right about statistics it shouldn't be.

\*

There were many times I berated him, insulted him—never in public—telling myself it was only to protect him. He said I took "vindictive relish" in my words but I'm sure he doesn't remember. If he did, how could we have stayed friends?

While I remember almost everything. Except when we met her.

Overdoses? I could have named six right off the top of my head. Suicides? Two, and neither one using any sort of firearm. But gun violence, whether by accidental discharge or murder—nothing.

I don't need a better memory. Better memories would be nice.

\*

I had his best interests at heart.

When he announced his plan to go to grad school for anthropology: “That’s the most idiotic idea I’ve heard from you yet.”

“I thought you were interested in tribal people.”

“Yeah, when I was young and stupid.”

He’d had the chance in Vietnam, dropped by parachute among the Hill people, the Montagnards. It’s not like he studied them. Whatever happened in those hills, it was something he didn’t talk about. He couldn’t face it. He needed to steer clear of anthro, of anything that would cause the memories to come back. I humiliated him—*idiot!*—for his own good.

Because for a long time, I didn’t think he needed to face it. I didn’t think it was important to know the details. I knew enough. There were no American heroes in Vietnam. The only heroes those days were in Mississippi.

\*

I’m still stuck, not sure when we met her.

I go through my photo albums. Before phones, that’s what you did, you took photos, had them developed and printed and you stuck them in albums. Not to be confused with record albums.

I always took pictures of Ian when we were together. If the photos were dated, I could maybe figure out what year we’d met Judith Cohen.

There I am, looking joyful. If I never felt that way in childhood, here at least was proof I could be giddy with delight. 1987, I’m in the street, celebrating my Lakers, NBA champs! When did I get the idea competition was bad? We did it! Defeated Boston! And this mattered because the most recent man to hurt me badly at that time was a Celtics fan. The look on my face is not the joy of shared triumph. This is not a little girl chasing a butterfly and happy to be alive. It’s the exhilaration of revenge.

\*

War crimes in Fallujah, 2004. Pablo Paredes and his fight for conscientious objector status, also 2004. Was the event about bombing Afghanistan? Withdrawing from the International Criminal Court? Maybe it had nothing to do with Iraq and Afghanistan. Maybe a military whistle-blower? Going back further, someone who trained Latin American torturers at the School of the Americas? Was it the CIA officer who oversaw the torture and rape of the American nun in Guatemala?

\*

Judith Cohen, the one who was murdered, was killed in 2002. If we met her after that, it wasn’t her.

“You brought him here,” she said, “you want him to remember.”

Yes. But not—never—to hurt him.

I told her a story, without knowing I had chosen to. “We were driving and up ahead of us we saw a dog with a cat in its jaws. Ian slammed on the brakes and ran from the car.” Too late. The cat was dead. “He came back and opened the trunk. He took out a black garbage bag and loaded the cat inside it. I swear he looked like Frankenstein.” Then he dropped the bag in the trunk.

“Frankenstein’s monster,” she corrected me.

“Or a zombie. Something from a horror movie. It was a body bag. That’s when I knew more happened in Vietnam than he ever wanted to say.”

\*

More recently, I thought the fall of Kabul might finally prompt him to talk.

“This country never learns,” he said.

“We certainly don’t know how to lose gracefully.”

“We did,” he said.

“We did?”

“You and I.”

\*

“You’re the one who got him through,” she said, or I wanted her to say. “You saved him.”

I did help him. For a while. I paid a few months of his rent. I doubt I told her that. It wasn’t something I ever said out loud. How I sent him money month after month, rent, at least that’s what he said it was for, and I couldn’t bring myself to say I didn’t believe him.

Somehow, it felt more shaming to me than to him.

\*

Even his name was special. Ian. You think Judith Cohen is a common name. There were four other Barbaras in my high school graduating class.

\*

*Barbara! Barbara! Barbara!*

I was walking home and there was one of the others, waving at me, frantic, trying to climb from the window of a black car. Help! A nun—in the old get-up of black habit and wimple—pulled her back inside. What had the other Barbara done? What were they doing to her?

What was I supposed to do?

\*

Who should I call? Who will be awake? Ian doesn't answer. I leave a voicemail for him to find in the morning: Do you have old calendars? Did you visit me in 2004 or 2008? Earlier than that? Do you remember the night we went to hear about moral injury?

\*

When he calls back, I ask, "Do you remember going to an event, we met a woman named Judith Cohen?"

He remembers, or thinks he does. "She was cruising you."

Now that really made no sense. Why would she—or anyone—be cruising me? What was it about me that made her hit on me, I mean choose me, to talk to? She said I wasn't using my potential. She said "a person like you—" But where did she get off thinking she knew who I was? Judith Cohen in her ridiculous get-up and there I was, when Ian had gone off to be encircled with admirers, how foolish and alone I must have looked, all available for the taking.

In spite of which I've always felt superior. There were always things I could know that he wouldn't be able to handle.

While Ian was in Vietnam, I was south of the border, hoping to apprentice myself to a shaman. I'd chew peyote, eat magic mushrooms and enter an Indigenous society where people shared what they had and the worst thing you could call someone was selfish.

When I heard his tour of duty took him to live with Montagnard tribals in the hill country, I thought he'd really lucked out.

*What was it like? How did you get there? Did you learn their language? What's their kinship structure? Do they live in nuclear families or in communal longhouses? Were they animist with an overlay of imposed religion? Do the women get sent to menstrual huts? What are the food taboos? Do they hunt wild animals? Do they have domestic livestock like chickens and pigs? Are they divided into groups with different totem animals? But what did you do? Did they spy for you? Do they weave their own clothes? Do they have traditional remedies? Knowledge of medicinal plants? What was it like living with them?*

He said, "It was lonely."

\*

Before Covid, we would manage a visit once or twice a year. I'd usually go east but never in winter. I hate the cold. After he married, we got together less often. The few times he came west then, he came alone. His wife won't fly. He always refers to her not by name, but as *my wife*.

Now we talk, but we never use Skype or Facetime or Zoom. We feel closer—or I do—when it's just our voices, alive in the dark air.

\*

Judith Cohen said, "You have a funny way of breathing." Just one of the comments so personal I wanted her to shut up but keep talking. "Why not take a deep breath?"

I wasn't aware I didn't. But it might be a good idea, not drawing the contamination, all the pollution and particulate matter, deep into my lungs.

"Do you worry about taking more than your share of oxygen?"

"Not since the Sixties," I said.

It occurs to me now that I didn't ask *her*, Why are *you* here?

\*

"When Ian was in Vietnam, you want to know where I was?" I said. "South of the border. I had the fantasy of apprenticing myself to a shaman. I ended up instead in Guatemala. People who actually lived there were being arrested, disappeared, tortured, killed but I could go anywhere without fear. No one would assault me. No one would rob me. I could get a bed for \$1 a night and not care there was no lock on the door. I could get the best coffee, sweetest oranges, cheapest steak in the world. What I learned was a white American could be happiest in someone else's police state."

\*

When Ian and I began our visits, did he even notice how, when we'd stop for a meal, as soon as the menu was in front of me, my teeth would chatter, the rest of me numb. Unless I knew I was paying for myself or for us both, I was afraid to order. Maybe he thought I had an eating disorder. Or was on a diet. He never asked. He accepted me—accepts me—as I am.

"We're mysterious to each other but bonded for life."

She said, "He is not a cat."

\*

Somehow with all the conversation and wine poured and imbibed, she learned I was not employed and she marveled that a person like me could be without work, though I do not remember what I must have said for her to imagine she knew what a person like me was like.

"There must be a place for you at City Hall," she said. I didn't jump at this almost offer because I didn't believe her.

"Of course you'll have to execute the SDO. Ten copies."



You couldn't get money from LA without signing the Slavery Disclosure Ordinance, attesting you'd never sold, owned, transported, or insured slaves.

\*

When I phone Ian, this time I remind him about the ridiculous SDO.

"Imagine a future," he says. "Substitute the words *fossil fuels* for *slaves*."

\*

"What about *your* moral injury?" she said. Not that it's anyone's business. "You're not here only for him," she said. "You're here for a reason."

So she was one of *those* people, *Everything happens for a reason*, that inane line.

"I'd give you my card," she said, "but I can tell you won't call," and I assumed this was because she didn't actually have one. "Give me your contact info and I'll call you."

I can't remember whether by 2008—or whenever it was that this happened—people kept all sorts of info on their phones. But she instead handed me a little notebook, the kind you get as a gift when you subscribe to the *New York Review of Books*, and a pen and I scribbled my name and phone number along with a friendly note, something meant to reference moral injury and the happy happenstance of our meeting but it was only after I handed the book back to her that it occurred to me: my phrasing had been all wrong and my words might read like a come-on or in talking about injury I might have said too much. I was drunk, after all, and I wasn't sure of what I'd written or how it might be misinterpreted and I worried about it, especially when she never called.

\*

I began to fear I'd written something unpleasantly ambiguous or altogether too revealing. I realize it's ridiculous, but I've worried about this for years. It's only now that I've learned she was murdered that I realize she may have had a valid reason for not getting in touch. But with her case reopened, I still wonder what I wrote and whether this certainly innocuous message will bring detectives to my door and I'll have to answer for it.

Was it her son, or her childhood friend? There's even a podcast now. Of course I listen.

\*

When did this happen? When was it we met her?

"Ian, can you remember what year it was? Do you keep old calendars? Bank statements—billing for a ticket to LA?"

"My wife keeps everything six years for the IRS. After that? She's ruthless about throwing things out."

“Maybe you happen to remember what specific moral injury was the subject?”

“In a post-genocide society, you have to ask?”

That’s Ian. If you care about these things, you’ve got to love him.

If I really respected him, I would speak openly to him.

But I’m the one who always knows better, who always knows best.

Imagine such grandiosity! Who do you think you are? Who did you think you were going to be?

\*

Judith Cohen probed. She pried. No wonder someone had to kill her.

Did she ask the wrong question? Say the wrong thing? Didn’t know what to keep private?

If I could only pin down when. The date of her death is a matter of public record. So if I met her after that—a Judy Cohen, not *the*—it’s obviously not the murder victim. But if I did meet her before the murder, how much before?

I don’t care that she was murdered. To me, it only matters when.

What kind of person does that make me?

\*

Who should I call? Who will be awake? I’ve been up all night. He is in upstate New York. Is it too late to call?

I want to be reassured I’ve done nothing wrong.

Ian, I want to say: I don’t like the gun fights and the torture porn. And it’s not just me. Remember the hardboiled detectives of, when, the ‘30’s? They’re loners. Today’s cop shows, it’s not about violence. It’s about loyalty. That’s why I—why millions of people—watch. To see people working as a team. People who will be there for each other, life and death, no matter what.

*That’s an adolescent fantasy, he would say. And you are 70 years old!*

\*

At our age, even if we don’t take a bullet, we could die at any time. Lately, when Ian disappoints me, I’ve taken to imagining his death. I test out how I’d feel if he were gone.

Would the loss cut deep? Would I miss him?

Better not to think, not to ask, not to know.

\*

Some suspect her childhood friend. Some say it was her son. If she were alive, I'll bet you anything she'd say she never saw who killed her. Whichever of the two, she'd protect him to the end.

\*

Eyesight, reflexes, I no longer drive. Before Covid, I'd get into conversations with people at bus stops, on the bus. Then the pandemic. People sat with their masks on staring straight ahead. No one spoke. We were afraid to breathe on one another.

The isolation was comfortable. *I could get used to this.*

During lockdown, I had no one but Ian.

He's never been interested in me, or my life, or what I've gone through. He respects my privacy. Awkward histories are better left unsaid.

We talk about stuff that matters.

But today, the woman behind me on the bus started talking to get my attention. Most people here are vaccinated now and less afraid. Her words were muffled by the mask, something about my hair. I thought she was complimenting my silver curls. No, there was a flying insect on my head. She wanted to shoo it away but didn't want to touch me suddenly, without permission. Yes, please, get rid of it! And just as light as the landing of the bug, her hand reached out and I said *Thank you*, though I didn't feel her touch.

---

“The characters and situations are invented but it's true I'm obsessed with moral injury and American violence. As I wrote, I was haunted by two ghosts: the close friend who always minimized the effects of his service in Vietnam until the trauma caught up with him and turned life upside down in the years before his death; the casual acquaintance I assumed was still alive until her murderer went on trial and I found out she'd been shot and killed shortly after we last met.” —Diane Lefer

---

**Diane Lefer's** novels feature scientists who become suspects (*Out of Place*) and baboons with broken hearts (*Confessions of a Carnivore*). She is the author of three story collections, including *California Transit*, which received the Mary McCarthy Prize. She has completed a novel inspired in part by her visits to the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center in Twentynine Palms.

---

# In the Cafeteria at Walter Reed, 2009

Andria Williams

*What if we had? What if we had done? What if we?*

The air here was poisoned with regret. We had said “yes” to these boys, you can go do this, if you really want to; for not getting to the hospital fast enough when they were *evaced*, gravely injured, though we had all sprinted to be by their sides. We were somehow worst of all, for not having been enough to keep them here, to have been a good enough mother, sibling, lover that they wouldn’t want to have gone at all. All of us there in the cafeteria, trying to eat, though that poisoned air smelled like bleach and refrigerant, hydroflourocarbons, reconstituted eggs in a steaming pan. We sipped ice water, trying not to cry. The woman over there poking at her toast, sitting across from a husband whose face looked as if he were utterly bereft. The nineteen-year-old wife at the far table who’d gotten married days before her husband went to Iraq. The sister of the burn victim who now lay wrapped in bandages because almost no part of his skin could be exposed to air. We were there, trying to be human, trying to be civil, trying to be optimistic. Trying to be. We thought the power of our love would save the people around us, because it was the biggest thing anyone could give, and it was horrifying to learn that this wasn’t enough. Nothing was enough. We felt like failures, joined by our grieving.

And still we chastised ourselves. We had lost Tommy and we might be losing Miles. Miles’s mom and I tried to smile over our coffee. But I knew the refrain ringing in our heads like a gong: *what if we had, what if we had, what if we had?*

---

“This is a brief excerpt from my work-in-progress, a novel called *The Book of Unsent Letters*. It is about a pair of childhood friends, Miles and Leah, growing up in northern California in the 1990s, and how their lives are eventually shaped by the criminal war in Iraq. While the war is a central part of the story, what’s most important to me is their friendship, and the way that they show up for each other in different ways, over decades, throughout the course of their lives.” —Andria Williams

---

**Andria Williams** is the author of the novel *The Longest Night* (Random House, 2016), about the United States’ only fatal nuclear accident in Idaho Falls, Idaho. She is the former editor-in-chief of *The Wrath-Bearing Tree* literary magazine, and founding editor of *The Military Spouse Book Review*. She received her bachelor’s degree from UC-Berkeley and a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities.

---

# VISUAL ARTS

## INTERVIEW WITH ERIC J. GARCÍA

---

### on art & childhood:

I grew up in the South Valley of Albuquerque, New Mexico, which is predominantly an underserved part of the city, mostly working class and Chicano families. My parents are very creative people. I think that's why I learned to not only make art, but to dabble in a variety of processes. My dad, he's a jack of all trades. He's a carpenter. He eventually got a job drawing blueprints for a living, but he's also a blue-collar worker who poured concrete, drywall, digging ditches, working on a ranch. I was always around him, making different things in his wood shop. My mom's the same. She's a seamstress, she's a baker. She used to make elaborate wedding cakes with all the different floral designs and stuff.



Follow Eric J Garcia at [garciaink@twitter](https://twitter.com/garciaink) or friend Eric J Garcia on facebook.

They were both creating around [my siblings and me]. I don't think it was necessarily with the idea of making art but the idea of necessity. They were a working class family with four kids and needed to cut corners to live. They said, *Well, I can do it myself instead of paying someone else.* And they were encouraging of me becoming an artist. There was no hesitation or questioning. They encouraged me through all my career. I grew up in that kind of environment, and that's why I started creating and making.

I've been drawing since I was small. It was just something I always had to do; I had to have a pencil in my hand, I had to be drawing something. I don't think I took it seriously until I got out of the military and I made that my major in college. That's when I finally put all my eggs in the basket and said, *This is what I want to do. This is what I'm going to do.*

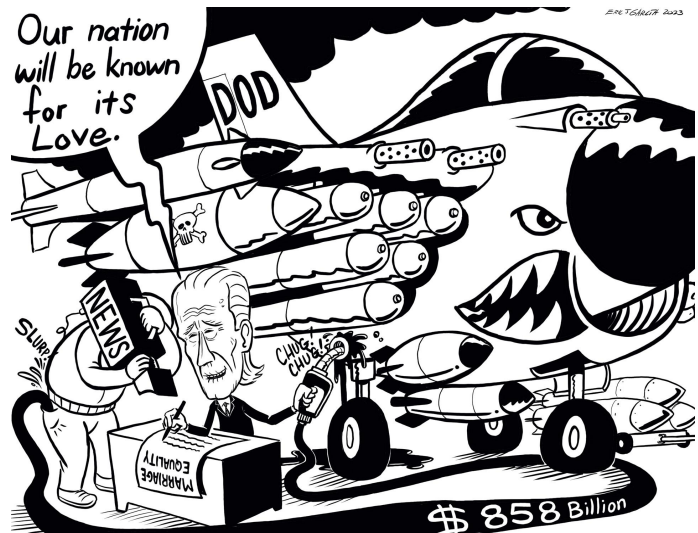
## on political activism & inspiration:

My parents weren't activists or even very political. They were in more of a survival mode, trying to support their four kids, get good jobs, stay out of trouble, and try to live "the American dream" as Chicano/Mexicano parents. They were trying to survive in the States, trying to assimilate, trying to get by.

My love of history and politics comes from my brother, who's ten years older. He's a history professor specializing in Chicano and Southwest border studies, and he's always reading. He's always talking about what's going on now, and what was happening in the past. The running joke in my family is that he's a doctor, but he can't cure anyone. But I think teaching history can be a cure. Knowing history could be a societal cure that helps communities understand ourselves and others.

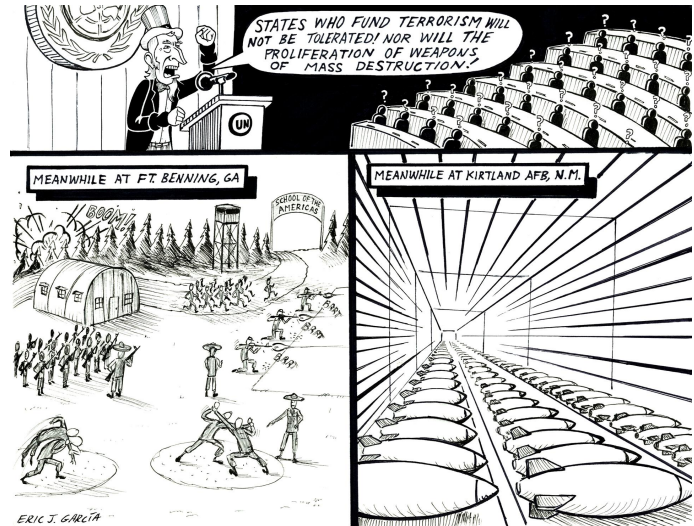
[Our parents] are like, *You should be doing something other than this activist business, because it just makes people mad. You can get in trouble, you can get thrown in jail.* And you know what? He has been in jail, because of his activism. And my mom told me, *Be careful. Look what your brother did. You can get in trouble too.*

I think me being an artist is a different type of trouble that my parents might not be aware of. Art has a softer, more go-around way of causing trouble that might not put me in jail. I could maybe lose my job. I could get thrown off of Twitter, or social media might ban me or something. But I know these are ways of getting trouble that might not compute to them.



## on getting started:

I don't listen to music when I'm in the studio. I listen to news; I want to know what's happening in the world. I constantly have NPR in the background—I'm often inspired with news that's maybe a blip on the bigger scale of what's going on. I'll wonder, how come that was just a small little segment that just got buried under Trump's tweets? How can I make it more prevalent in the newsfeed? And I'll say, let me make a visual of it. Let me help accompany this news with a visual so it won't be forgotten so fast.



Once I get an article or an issue I'm intrigued by, I start thinking of a way to illustrate it. Sometimes, it can be as easy as the news anchor giving me the metaphor right out of their mouth. They'll say, *The earthquake that destroyed Turkey was like Godzilla coming down.* That's the visualization. They just give it to me right there and I draw Godzilla devouring Turkey.

But there are two ways of going about creating a political cartoon for me. It's either making a metaphor (something is like something else—like the economy of the United States is a balloon about to pop), or the other strategy is creating a more literal depiction of what's happening. Like when I depict Uncle Sam making out with gun dealers while innocent citizens are gun-downed in the background.

And [my cartoons] used to be hand drawn at first. I would draw it in pencil then ink it, scan it, and then I would manipulate things on Photoshop, erase things or tweak things, and then I would send them off digitally. Now, since my son was born, I bought an iPad. I'm doing everything digitally. I'm cutting out a few steps in my process to make it faster.

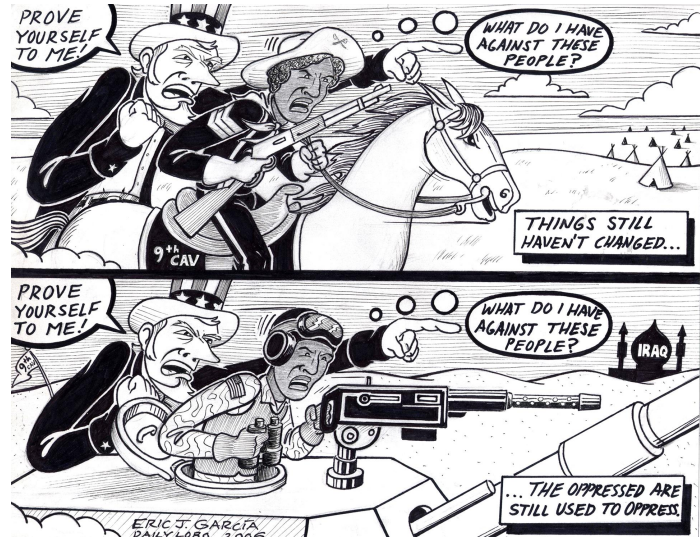


**“There’s this myth that when you’re an artist you’re just in the studio, making, until someone comes and buys your art, and that’s how you survive. I had this idea that I’d be working in my cave, and some curator would come and buy some art, and then I would keep eating. But that’s not the reality.” - Eric J. García**



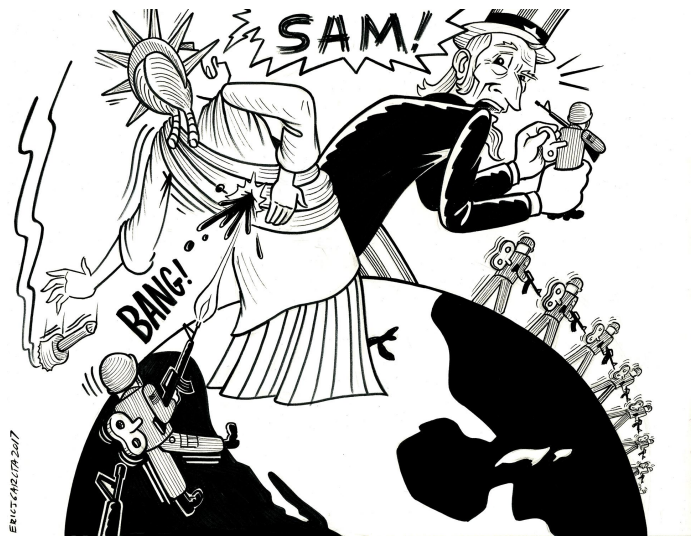
## on revolutionaries & America:

So many activists, entertainers, and athletes have put their careers on the line to talk about critical issues, to question the establishment. I say, let's remember them. Let's keep remembering them. Let's honor them. Sometimes these heroes of the United States have been whitewashed, commodified by the establishment. We honor Dr. Martin Luther King, but we've got a cotton candy version now; he was a radical in his time. People didn't like him. And now we have a day to honor him. Are we really honoring what he said though, and what he meant, what he was trying to do? It's weird how the United States is able to co-opt these revolutionaries and make them their own nice, friendly, non-aggressive heroes in their own shape of Americana.



And it's getting harder and harder to teach the basics of history in schools. If we talk about what's happening in Florida right now, banning African American studies, which is the main part of US history... They're just trying to dice it up so that the only history being told is a patriotic and rose-colored version of what really happened in this country.

If people are scared that their children are going to feel bad because they're learning US history, then all of US history should be banned. You shouldn't feel good about the genocide of Native Americans. You shouldn't feel good about the enslavement of African Americans. You shouldn't feel good about conquering other nations with the idea of manifest destiny and material greed.



I'm not shocked that history is looked upon as something dangerous, as a way of causing our youth to become critical of where they live and who they are. Because our history is not pretty. I don't think it should be rose-colored. I think we need to talk about these important issues that happened in the past to make sense of the present, and then we can move forward into the future.

--

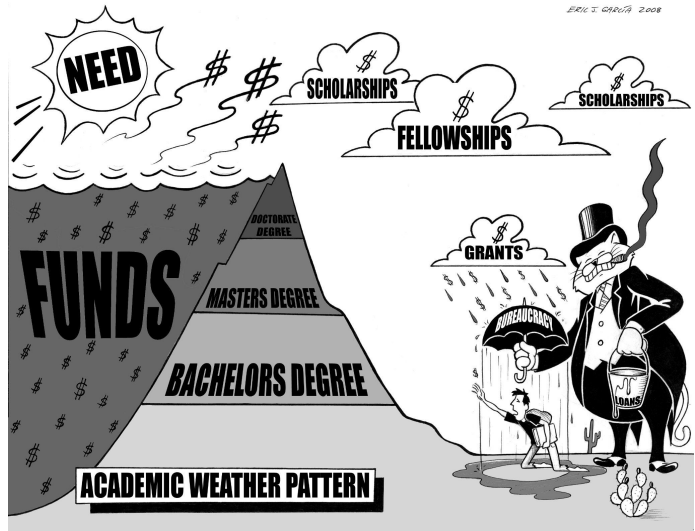
## on art, healing, & hope:

I think [art is] not only therapeutic, I think it's a medicine. I'm not a big talker, as my wife could tell you. The way I [speak] is through art. I put all my passion, my anger, into creating, into making art.

I get antsy when I'm not making something, when I'm not creating. I need that release. Since my son's been born, my new release as a father is creating my new series called *Tales from the Crib* where I illustrate him and all his antics. It's a new way of releasing my emotions as a father.

I would love to say [I have hope] because I have a kid now, but I don't know. I've been told that I'm one of the most positive pessimists you'll ever meet. It all just seems so daunting, the task at hand, the task teachers have. How do you wrangle twenty-five kids in a classroom when you're underfunded, understaffed, and the parents and the higher ups are on your back? It's a daunting task for any kind of teacher right now. Then your books are being banned; you can't even teach all of the proper information to your students!

I was listening to a banned author in Florida the other day. They said one of the good repercussions to come from this is that their name is now talked about even more. It's a badge of honor to be on a banned list. And students, being the angsty teenagers they're going to be, they're going to go look for [these books] because, *Oh, what's this banned thing I shouldn't be looking at? I'm going to go read it!*



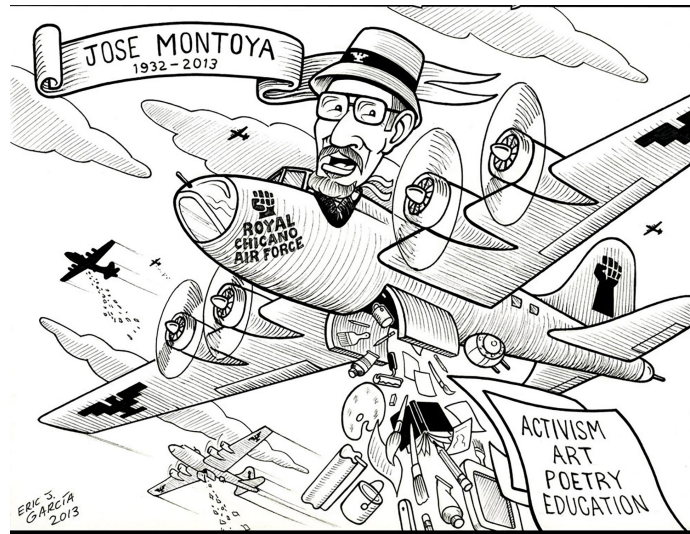
## on becoming a teacher:

I didn't start teaching until later in my career. After grad school, I luckily went into education, and I worked for the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago for over a decade. That's where I was not only introduced but came into being as a teaching artist. I finally came to terms with understanding that my art has always been a teaching device. My work is specifically created to be a tool of learning, and examining, and educating.

When I was in Chicano studies in undergrad, I was filled with all of these really interesting stories that I didn't know about my own history. I said, *Well, how come there's not a visual to complement this text, to help people get inspired or get some understanding of who this person was or the situation was?* And I decided, I'm going to create a visual to accompany it, to amplify this story that's been lost or sometimes erased. That's a tool for educating.

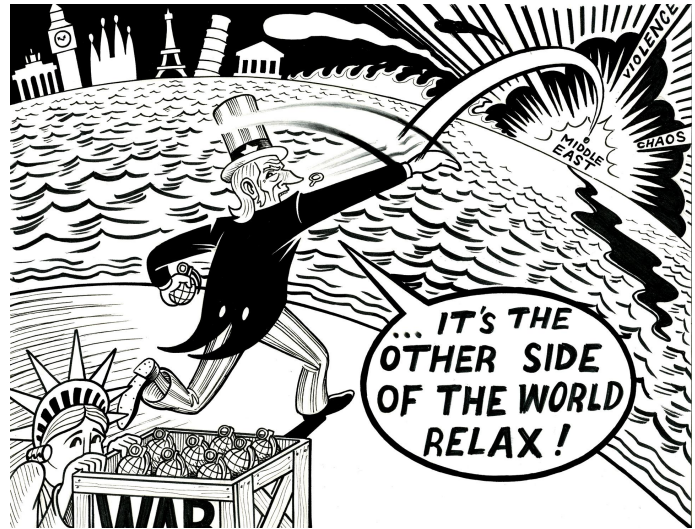
I've been working on murals with students [since] prior to that, when I didn't realize I was a teacher. I think that's how I came to terms with the idea of me being a teacher: being a teaching artist that's not only using my own artistic abilities, but sharing techniques with others so they can realize their own expressions.

The arts are a different way of teaching, too, of helping students understand the world. There are different ways of talking about "the basics." One of the ways [of teaching] that I learned at the museum was arts integration, where we would go into the classroom, a science or social studies room, say, and work side by side with a teacher to give them artistic ways of teaching something that might not seem related to the arts. For example, in the science class, we studied Leonardo da Vinci because he was a scientist that worked with understanding the world through art. There are different ways of understanding mathematics (and reading, and literature...) through creative ways. And I think without those creative methods, there's a whole population of students that can't maneuver into these subjects.



## on negative feedback & the point of political art:

I get plenty of people on social media saying, *We don't like your work, go back where you came from*, stuff like that. And I can't speak for every political cartoonist, but for me it's a badge of honor. I think we gravitate toward negative feedback. That means our cartoons are working. They're pushing buttons. If anyone wants to spend the time to type and write me back, then the cartoon worked. It made some gear in their head move. The ultimate goal of our cartoons is changing minds. And the world is so polarized, it's hard to break through any of those shells.



I want to start dialogues. My cartoons aren't answers. They don't give the answer to problems. Sometimes they pose more problems than answers! I want people to think. I want people to really have deeper, more critical dialogues about what's going on. Hopefully these cartoons create new perspectives and say, *Let's talk about that. Let's question what this cartoon is saying, what it really means.* That's what I want.



how to engage with García's work:

Current exhibition: [Aim High at Ogden Contemporary Arts](#) in Ogden, Utah

The OCA writes: “This May, Ogden Contemporary Arts presents a solo exhibition for New Mexico artist Eric J. García, the non-profit’s 2023 Artist-in-Residence. García, who arrived in Ogden for his residency on March 1st, has utilized OCA Center’s Studio Lofts to further develop specific concepts within his work, particularly around immigration and the term ‘alien’ as presented in various contexts. His completed body of work is revealed for his solo exhibition, *Aim High*, at OCA Center on May 5<sup>th</sup>...and will remain on display through July 16th. As part of his residency, García spearheaded a community mural project that will also be unveiled at The Monarch in conjunction with his exhibition opening. The mural was created with input and direct participation from local residents, leading to an environmentally themed piece that is specific to Utah.

Upcoming: Inclusion in [Dr. Frederick Aldama](#)’s forthcoming anthology, *From Cocinas to Lucha Libre Ringsides*.

Ongoing: Connect with [García’s work through Justseeds](#), or follow up with his latest announcements [here](#).

Previously: Check out [Drawing on Anger \(2018\)](#), published by the Ohio State University Press, or watch [this episode of Colores on PBS](#)

---

**Eric J. García** uses history and a graphic style to create political art that confronts our understanding of the present. Using sculpture, mixed media installations, murals, printmaking and his controversial political cartoons, he aims to challenge his viewers to question sources of power and the whitewashing of history. After receiving his BFA with a minor in Chicano studies from the University of New Mexico, Eric Garcia went on to complete his MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He is a core member of the printmaking collective, [Instituto Gráfico de Chicago](#), one of the newest members of the [Justseeds Cooperative](#), a part of the emerging [Veteran Art Movement](#), and is a dedicated teaching artist. García has exhibited nationally and his work can be found in the collections of the National Museum of Mexican Art, the National Hispanic Cultural Center, the Art Institute of Chicago and the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

