

COLLATERAL

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POETRY

Robert Gibb

Robert Gibb's books include *The Origins of Evening* (1997), which was a National Poetry Series winner. Among his other awards are two NEA Fellowships, a Best American Poetry, and a Pushcart Prize. A new book, *After*, winner of the Marsh Hawk Press Poetry Prize (Mark Doty, judge), was published in spring 2017.

Imperialism in Pleasantville, New Jersey
Robert Gibbs

Summer in the fifties' now-merged blur. One of my cousin's navy father's stateside posts: coastal and near enough to Pittsburgh that we're visiting. What I remember mostly, tagging along, are sidewalks and fences and cloistered lawns, one block the same as another. What I remember mostly is the presence of trouble surfacing steadily in the boy we met, the neighborhood tough who menaced us with a handful of dog shit, threatening to tar us with its feculence and stench. Neither of which bothered him at all. What he held, he held over us, a carrier immune to what he carried. And unlike Thoreau, who wondered what life might look like, reduced "to its lowest terms," he'd already seized the worst those treed streets had to offer, himself their "genuine meanness." It's probably unfair to equate all this—shit, death, the anal-expulsive bullying—with my cousin's father and some ugly clamped-down aspects of the military mind, but I do. What I remember is being run off at last without a fistfight or the laying on of hands: "Don't let me catch you around here again." *All this is mine*, he was saying, as if the foulness he'd cupped were ambergris the sea had rendered up.

Devon Moore

Devon Moore is the author of the poetry collection, *Apology of a Girl Who Is Told She Is Going to Hell*, which was released in 2015. A former Syracuse University Fellow and Constance Saltonstall Foundation for the Arts Juried Fellow, she has an MFA in Creative Writing from Syracuse University. Her poems have appeared in *Gulf Coast*, *Meridian*, *The Cortland Review*, *New Ohio Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *Juked*, and elsewhere. She currently lives in Syracuse, NY where she teaches writing at Syracuse University and the State University of New York at Oswego.

Dear Yellow Jacket
Devon Moore

I've been taught to wish
on discarded eyelashes.
You are light as an eyelash,
your stinger curving in on yourself,
each leg delicately tucked in,
so fetal, so noble.
I can't resist bringing you to my lips.
Dear yellow jacket, I have something to tell you,
your black-yellow exoskeleton reminds me
of the samurai armor I saw strung up with steel cables
behind the museum's exhibition glass.
The samurai's armor had long ago been disentombed
& separated from his body & blade.
Dear yellow jacket, don't worry,
I won't be taking any part of you to display,
I'm leaving you whole,
attached to your venom-tipped blade.
Dear yellow jacket,
let me hold you tenderly,
like a mother cradling her dead samurai son
from behind while he lays on his side,
his feet tucked up to his chest,
a blade cupped between his hands.
Wouldn't that be an honest funeral?
Dear yellow jacket, I've been meaning to tell you:
When my father died he was the strongest man
I ever met & he cried for his mother.
My wish is for that not to be thought of
as a contradiction. Dear yellow jacket, thank you
for your honesty, wholeness is only possible
for the time it takes an eyelash
to fall from my eye, when I drop you down
to your grass grave your siblings will come
& carry you off, piece by piece,
in their pronged-mouths.

Forbiddance
Devon Moore

My father, who preferred the couch to his bed
because the TV helped him escape his helicopter-mind's noise,
said he didn't want me learning about war. But I wanted
to understand him & why he cried out at night, so I read secretly
about O'Brien's water buffalo & how to tell a true story,
& other narratives from war's point of view:
the Gestapo, the slave holders, the guillotine masters.
I saw my dad's picture of his parachute, snapped
right through his eyes, the sky so calm,
& the famous one of the screaming girl
running from the napalm, whose expression I would see again
in other photos, in different times & places –
After, I wanted to know how the skulls
in the Murambi School in Rwanda
got accumulated & stacked,
the Western World's cameras shuttering their lenses,
& why Alexander the Great, the king of Macedon, carried the blind poet
Homer's words on his person as he conquered his known world –
So many armies moving like lava about the earth,
each commander carrying within them their own
private-Odysseus, their own Manifest Destiny.
I held my eyes open, am still
holding my eyes open
for the image of SS guards after liberation
who were made to clean up what they had done–
In the picture, I think the body they're holding
like a taut jump rope is of a starved woman –
the place where her pelvis & legs meet
so flat & sharp I am embarrassed to say
I saw her bones overlaid with her skin
& thought she looked more like the hinge
of a barbecue tong than a daughter–
I think that's what my father didn't want me to know:
how easily a body can become a sharp instrument,
that even my dad had allowed himself to be a blade.
As I left childhood,
Agent Orange came for him,
like a sleeper cell in my dad's throat,
& I remembered his forbiddance,
was happy I had ignored it,
he needed me to know him then
& his certainty, he said as he died,
that no good god could forgive him.

Marilyn Nelson

Marilyn Nelson is the author or translator of seventeen poetry books and the memoir *How I Discovered Poetry*. She is also the author of *The Fields Of Praise: New And Selected Poems*, which won the 1998 Poets' Prize, *Carver: A Life In Poems*, which won the 2001 Boston Globe/Hornbook Award and the Flora Stieglitz Straus Award, and *Fortune's Bones*, which was a Coretta Scott King Honor Book and won the Lion and the Unicorn Award for Excellence in North American Poetry. Nelson's honors include two NEA creative writing fellowships, the 1990 Connecticut Arts Award, a Fulbright Teaching Fellowship, a fellowship from the J.S. Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, and the Frost Medal. She was the Poet Laureate of the State of Connecticut from 2001-2006.

Nelson writes, "In 1953 I didn't understand why Santa would bring me an un-cuddly, scary doll with blond hair and blue eyes, instead of a doll who looked like us. Years later I realized that white dolls were probably the only dolls my parents could find to buy on a Air Force base in the middle of nowhere."

Sleep Eyes

(Smoky Hill AFB, Kansas, 1953)

Marilyn Nelson

Santa can find you wherever you are.
So being transferred here in November
won't be a problem, Mama says. Santa
will find us on this new base where Daddy
flies airplanes. Our new house is different,
and the land around this base is different.
The trees here are skinny and far apart,
wide fields of snow-blown stubble between them.
The only real people here live with me.
Everybody else is pale and faceless.
I feel as lonely as a prairie tree.
But Santa does find me. He brings a doll
I do not name. At night she stares at me
out of the corner with her blue sleep eyes.

Stacy Pratt

Stacy Pratt is a Muscogee (Creek) freelance writer and musician living in DeRidder, LA, where her husband is stationed at Fort Polk. She has a doctorate in creative writing from the University of Southern Mississippi. She has taught composition and literature in colleges in several states, most recently New York. Her work has appeared in *Hello Giggles*, *Catholic Digest*, *This Land Press*, and *Indian Country Today*. She is an assistant editor at Jane's Boy Press.

She writes, "I wrote "For You" in 2005, when my husband was deployed to Afghanistan with Chosen Company, 2/503 173rd Airborne. We were living in Camisano Vicentino, Italy, and our internet connection was not strong. I had written another poem, and a computer glitch erased it from the world. This poem is the result. So many things and people were gone suddenly that year."

For You
Stacy Pratt

I'd like to write
cool as your red shoes
and cuffed jeans,
your CD collection
of Johnny Cash
and Cause for Alarm,

a novel to give you fits
because you hadn't written it
yourself, and poetry
to make you slam
the book down, cursing.

I just lost three pages
of golden haze
behind rain in Camisano
when something crashed
and I didn't have the heart
to start over.

I wanted to write
the unusual light
you missed in the war,
a year of weird rain,

A sentence,
at least,
that says what I mean.

NONFICTION

Michelle Kerouac

Michelle Kerouac is a Navy Veteran and Nurse Practitioner for the Greater Los Angeles VA in Santa Maria. She has performed in *So Say We All's* VAMP Showcases, and has a story pending production on the *Incoming* radio series on KPBS.

In her story “She Was Sixty-Four”, Kerouac captures the mourning that begins when her husband is deployed to Afghanistan, and her mother-in-law, the rock in their lives, falls ill. Michelle workshopped this story with *So Say We All*.

She Was Sixty-Four
Michelle Kerouac

When I walked into the hospital room, it was chaotic with the transport team ready to go, and despite the commotion I was comfortable with the chaos that only a hospital can elicit. The Critical Care Nurse in me felt at home. The smells of antiseptic soap and stale air and the sights that deter most from continuing down the hall were what drew me in. I followed closely behind as the team quickly and expertly maneuvered the bed through the corridors and up to the ICU. Only this time I wasn't on duty, and this was not my patient. This was my mother-in-law. This was someone I loved.

When she was diagnosed with leukemia I was the first person she called to tell. She asked me to be the one to tell her son, who was a world away, ten grueling months into what was supposed to be a fifteen-month deployment. I had to be the one to tell him her only chance for survival was a bone marrow transplant. His command allowed him to return home early.

His first few trying months at home, we spent days and nights trading off caring for our kids while the other of us spent nights in the hospital hours away, caring for his mom. We weren't given any room to breathe as we went from living day by day unsure if he'd make it home, to this moment, where we weren't sure if she would.

As staff connected her to monitors, and attached tubes and machines to support her failing body, I stayed by her side. Her bone marrow transplant failed her. My husband was at our home with our children. This was our turn to be with together, where I was needed most just as she had been there for me so many times before. She was strong, but the odds were against her.

Just months earlier she'd been a source of strength for me more than anyone could ever know. She was there for me when the bottom fell out from under me, when my husband deployed to Afghanistan. I had left my career to stay home and take care of our children. My youngest was just a few months old. My mother-in-law gave me space to mourn, knowing he'll never come back the same, and gain my footing for the months I had ahead, but she was by my side the moment I needed her to be. She was quiet, and observant, and strong. She offered her time and her help, no matter the distance or inconvenience it may have brought.

Now? She was frail. She was broken. She was beautiful. Now I was taking care of her.

Her nurse in the Critical Care Unit was kind and gentle. He came to bathe her and try to make her more comfortable.

At first when I reached out for the supplies he was so delicately preparing, he hesitated to let me help, but he let me assist with removing her gown, and changing her soiled linens. We hardly said a word to each other, but I could tell he studied me to see if I knew what I was doing. I'd been a nurse for several years. I didn't tell him this. I used to hate having outside nurses at the bedside.

After I prepared the washcloth, making sure temperature of water was just right I asked, "Would it be okay if I bathed her on my own?" Without any hesitation he quickly slipped away.

I started with her face. Gently wiping the creases of her closed eyes. Tears had accumulated in the corners, and though she was motionless her face was not at peace. She was in pain. So was I. The tears welled up in my own eyes.

* * *

Just 12 desperate months earlier, when I drove away from the send off for my husband's deployment, with my 4 children solemn and tearful in the back of the van, I didn't waver. It was my job to stay strong. All I could do was tell them it'd be okay. We'd be okay. Daddy would be okay. If only I could have convinced myself of that.

From the outside it looked like I had it all put together. At least that's what I tried to portray. With most of my friends in different time zones from having just left my own active duty career, and most of my family hours away, it was easy to hide my reality from those that knew me the most. I didn't have to hide from her though. She would always make me feel like I could let my guard down, and it was only with her that I shared my failures with. She never said anything when the kids would tell her we had cereal for dinner, again. She never questioned me if I spent days in my pajamas, or spent my nights awake unable to pick myself up off the couch. She just gave me all the support she could, and it was all I needed.

During this deployment, my husband was part of a detail unlike any he'd ever done in his sixteen years in the Marine Corps. He and his British counterpart were part of an inspection unit that investigated any vehicular accident that happened on or around many of the military installations in Afghanistan through warzones.

Just weeks into his arrival to Afghanistan, he called to tell me he'd be going on a convoy and that he didn't know how long it would be before I'd hear from him again. Before we could say our goodbyes, he was cut off, but not before I heard the sound of an explosion saturate the empty sound on the line. I slumped to the floor. After that? I don't remember.

I did remember spending those days waiting. I would barely leave the house. I never slept at night, and when I did it was fueled by bottles of wine. I just waited. I waited for anything, a call, an e-mail, something. Sometimes I even waited for a knock at the door from his command, where men would be there to inform me he would never come home, because I never knew if he would. In those moments, when silence from his end seemed to go on forever, my mother in law would always be there with me.

She would pick up where I would leave off with the kids, when I felt I could no longer continue with frustration, exhaustion, or anguish I felt so often trying to parent on my own. She would give me respite and she never made me feel like I wasn't doing enough. She took care of me even when I didn't know I needed her to.

A few more forsaken months in, he called from his satellite phone. Before he could even speak I knew something wasn't right. He rarely called me when he was outside of the wire, which was the only time he would use his satellite phone. He was at an investigation site near a village, waiting for the all clear to return to base in the caravan. He described the scene to me in horrific detail, and ended the list of casualties with the name of his British counterpart. Just a flip of the coin, the call could have come from the Brit.

When I was on the phone with him, I couldn't let him know how this news made me feel. I didn't want him to feel like I couldn't handle it or that I was too weak.

I could tell he was smoking on the other end of the line. We had both quit smoking a few years before we had our children. I scolded him. The line went silent. Our connection was lost.

I cried. Crying was something I seldom let myself do during these lonely months, especially in the presence of others, but I couldn't hold back any more. She was next to me. All she said was, "is he ok?" I shook my head, "yes", and we just sat there, together, in silence, waiting for the phone to ring again, but it didn't, not for days.

* * *

I began to wash her neck and chest lifting the tubes and the wires from one side to the other. I watched the rhythmic movement of her lungs filling and exhaling with the air of the ventilator. The steady beats on the monitor and the pumping of the IV pole filled the room with sound, drowning out the silence.

* * *

Three lonely months earlier he was given ten days R&R. We had planned to go to Tahoe for the week. His mom came with us, and just like always, he insisted on being in the driver's seat the whole way there. We were all loaded up in our minivan with our bikes strapped to the back. It was dark. The kids were all asleep. There seemed to be nothing but semi trucks on the road, and as we were being passed by one we were nearly boxed in. He began to white knuckle the steering wheel and hug the shoulder closely. I could see the focus in his eyes. I tried calling his name, but he didn't respond. He wasn't in the same moment as us as he drove 75 miles an hour hugging the shoulder of the road. When he finally pulled off at the next exit he immediately got out of the car and walked away. I didn't follow. My kids were still in the back seats sleeping. His mom was sitting behind me. She placed her hand on my shoulder. I reached for her hand. We sat in silence as he paced on the side of the road.

I washed her arms. Her shoulders down to her hands, being sure to keep her covered and warm as I washed one side then the other. I reached for her hand. I didn't want to let go.

I knew she wasn't going to recover. I knew I wouldn't have her by my side again. She was dying. The thought of having to go through the next deployment without her by my side terrified me.

When my husband came home early to be there with his mom, there was no preparing for what was ahead. His mom was by this point in and out of the hospital receiving treatments leading up to her bone marrow transplant. Having him home was such an unfamiliar feeling to me. He was still there. He never came back alone before without his Unit. He didn't really come back. I was waiting for him to go again.

Before her final hospitalization, she stayed with us in between her treatments. She sat with me as he would get up from the dinner table abruptly and walk away. The noise or movement of the house would seem to be too much for him. She would sit with me as he walked the streets trying to find a way to return home. Even when he did return he wasn't present. She watched and remained silent and calm as I walked on eggshells watching every look or movement my husband would make. Waiting. When the kids would run and yell and laugh and play in the house, I would have to stop them or send them outside. I watched the sound of laughs and screams send chills down his spine.

She was the only one that I let see our struggles as we tried to regain our footing. She was the only one I felt I could confide in. I didn't feel like I knew my husband anymore. I didn't know how to talk to my husband anymore. We had become so disconnected in dealing with our own struggles. He felt like a stranger. I would only share this with her.

* * *

In the hospital that day, near the very end, by the time I'd finished bathing her, the family had returned. I had made her as comfortable as I could.

I couldn't stay any longer. I had to go back to my own children at home, so my husband could return to be by her side. She never knew what I had done for her the last night I spent

with her. She never heard me tell her what she'd done for me. She would have known. It wasn't our way.

She died a few days later, with just her children by her side. I was at home with my own children, by their side. Waiting, for their dad to come home.

FICTION

Sarah Kishpaugh

Sarah Kishpaugh writes, works, and parents in Edmonds, WA. She earned an MFA in Creative Writing at Goddard College and works at a public high school as an administrative assistant. Her debut book is a memoir forthcoming from Red Hen Press in fall 2018. She is online at www.sarahkishpaugh.com and twitter @sarahkishpaugh.

She writes, "I wrote this from a place of frustration and empathy for the caregiver and the wounded - veteran or otherwise. It's a reaction to the systems of oppression that leave people with a traumatic brain injury (and those that love them) feeling isolated and lonely. The piece is personal, though fictional in the sense that the people in my life affected by brain injury are not military-related."

How to Break Up With a Brain Injured Soldier

Sarah Kishpaugh

If the relationship is fresh and your soldier is in active duty, call his mom. Say you appreciate his service and you wish you could visit him at Walter Reed. She'll curse that the portable eye-tracking device didn't work to monitor his brain damage. Tell her you've done some research and refer her to the Center for Disease Control or the Mayo Clinic. Give her the link to the guidelines for managing combat related head trauma.

If he's been home for a while and the relationship was exclusive pre-deployment, let it breathe. No one appreciates a quitter. Take a chapter from your Yoga girlfriends and *Simply Be*. Pretend you're a scientist and look at his rehab with interest. When the stress makes you scratch at your scalp so it bleeds, see a nurse practitioner. Don't be shy about asking for a prescription for Xanax. She'll say: This is what it's *meant* for. You'll say: But what if I become addicted? She'll say: From the looks of you I'd say you'll be fine.

Organize his speech therapy sessions before you split. Make a spreadsheet of his appointments and give it to his brother's ex-wife, the nice one who teaches second grade. If you have kids, don't wait around for spousal combat pay. Devote energy into your moneymaking and exit strategies. At the counselor's office, he'll say: I'll never be okay with her being the breadwinner. It'd be considerate to stay quiet, but if you must, counter with this: The sex is boring. And he never asks you a single question about yourself. Say: you are tired, tired, tired, you young caregiver, you.

Still, be a patriot and lobby for his purple heart. Let him represent all soldiers with undiagnosed multiple concussions. This will end in your favor later, for your absenteeism will be assuaged through his heroism. If the cognitive impairment is secondary only to visible wounds such as a limp, missing leg, or a droopy eye, there won't be overmuch judgment from family and friends. Say: Honey, you can't do this alone. There's a whole community out there to connect with. Call your local Brain Injury Association and get him on the mailer list so he can apply for quick and free legal aid. Then contact the Veterans Association and fax over his medical files. Make copies of his records for yourself and keep them organized in a small file cabinet in the basement by your desk. You never know when you might need them for a story.

Unsubscribe from the International Association of Industrial Boards of Commissions. Tell Heather, the manager of membership and marketing, that no, you won't be attending next year's conference. Respond one last time that you are not interested in the webinar on jurisdictional perspective on video adjudication and you don't need the newest white paper release on the Opioid Policy Guide. Turn off your Google alerts for Traumatic Brain Injury and get off the mailer list for the Professional Patient Advocate Institute. When they pester you for donations, say, thank you, no. It's unnecessary to inform them how their workshops are rote and events irrelevant.

When you're packing his stuff be sentimental to a point. Ask your best childhood friend over and together fold his messy clothes and put them into boxes. Keep the chocolate brown suede Filson gentleman's jacket you gave him the fall he turned thirty. In a year maybe he'll remember: give it back when he asks. For now, tuck it in the corner of your closet. Smell it from time to time when you need a reminder of his hunkishly sap- smelling neck.

Brain injury is a lonely club. Call a renowned industry psychotherapist and get on her waiting list. Sign the kids up too. With the donated cash from relatives, purchase a Reiki session

or three; they should get you feeling like a woman again. If money is an issue – and let's be real, when is it not? – skip the massage and phone the ladies at St. Vincent de Paul for help with the utility bills and groceries. Schedule the visit for when the kids are in school. De-clutter the living room and stash the Modern Warfare games behind the TV. Tell them your story, let them pray for you, cry on their shoulder.

Understand the disease so you can explain to family and friends why you're leaving. Try not to say: This summer he charged one thousand dollars on the credit card for Scuba gear! Or: He called me an asshole at the dinner table in front of the children! Nobody wants to hear you ask how *they'd* like it if your husband slept fifteen hours a day. Instead, chair the committee for the Brain Injury Gala and put yourself in a docu-drama promotional video. That way, friends and family – notably his mom – might have the heart to absolve you from the crime of dissolution.

Getting caught with a lover would make you the bad guy, which sounds like an easy out, but don't do that. It doesn't matter if you spent one or ten years nursing him back to life; he's a Marine and will find a way to haunt you for your betrayal. People like him get metals. People like you get stuck. Which is why you have to be honest. Say: It's time to cut our losses. Don't be shocked when he agrees. Put your arm through his and stroke his bicep. Let him snap nude pictures of you and give him one last blowjob. Swallow so he knows you still love him.

When he does leave, do the following:

1. Go first thing in the morning to the local DSHS and apply for food stamps. It will take all day, so bring a book and charge your phone. Be gracious to whoever walks you through your new client interview. Say: You are so nice. This must be a hard job. Smile with all your teeth. Don't be ashamed when they ask if you need Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. This is Welfare. Take it. Refrain from sharing this news with your soldier. His pride is still so huge and you don't want to deal with a suicide.
2. Tell your oldest friend you need her to hold your hand at the food bank. Try not to turn your nose up at the massive bags of uncooked lentil beans and molding vegetables. There will be whole chickens, white bread, blocks of cheddar cheese, and three-day old pastries. Don't forget the sundries station – it is surprising how fast shampoo, toothpaste and dish soap run out.
3. Give his claims manager a heads up he's leaving. Email his medical team, starting with his physiatrist. She will likely respond with at least a hello, but don't expect a warm exchange. Call his ophthalmologist, speech pathologist, psychologist and neurologist. They will want to know the details but they won't ask. Tell yourself: managing their disappointment is not your job.

Take yourself to as many parties as possible. A prudish mom friend might ask twenty questions at a white elephant party over the holidays. She will urge against sleeping around. Say: Have you been through divorce? Oh no? Well. And leave it at that. High-five your doubly-divorced friend who'd been eyeing your reaction from the corner. If you can't find a partner in crime, smoke a bowl of fat buds in the backyard by yourself. Who cares?

If mystery is your style, craft a macabre email form letter to you friends outlining how much you are falling to pieces. Blind copy hundreds: the ones who have forgotten you and the ones who won't leave you alone. Tell them that in case they don't hear or see from you in a month, it's because you are benching yourself for a while. Inform your soldier's buddies on the haps vis-à-vis private messages on Facebook. Consider blocking your soldier's access to your posts. Does he really need to see you having all sorts of fun without him?

Relinquish your rights as a VA fiduciary. Hand over the on-going claim for his Pension. Tell him to look up vetsuccess.gov for help. The Mortgage Delinquency Assistance program won't change due to marital transition, and USAA will still carry your insurance.

A thoughtful thing would be to make a list, including the contact info and address of services for which he qualifies. Craft a lengthy, informative email to his mom identifying everything you know about the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation and Social Security Disability Insurance. Blind copying his lawyer will secure your position for primary custodial care, but you needn't worry about that. No judge will give him the kids.

For your first Christmas without your ex, pre-forgive yourself for overdrinking. This is *your* year, the one for which people, even your mother, ought to forgive any belligerence. If having a friend's holiday is an option, do that, and bring nothing except yourself and a bottle of something you plan to finish. Likewise at your neighborhood dinner processional, if looking at the couples in Christmas sweaters spreading cheer makes you want to hide in the bathroom puking over a cinnamon scented Yankee candle, politely tell the host that you are not up to it this year. Pack another big fat bowl of the pot your younger ballerina writer girlfriend gave you, smoke that, and stretch on the floor listening to Mazzy Star. If possible, on Christmas morning, instead of church, attend one of those Lonely Hearts Club prayer sessions. Don't think of it as a-misery-loves-company type deal, but a natural part of the grieving process you endure with likeminded humans whose hearts feel like they may collapse at the sound of another carol. Let the grief soften your structure. Say: Tomorrow is a New Day. Breathe.

Walk to a neighbor's house, those cool music teachers who don't have children, for a very dirty martini stirred especially for you. Listen to jazz on vinyl and read their Dennis Leary's "Merry Fuckin' Christmas" coffee table book. If, when you crawl back to your house bleary-eyed, your children have put themselves to bed, chocolate smeared across their face and their Christmas dinner clothes still on, don't feel too bad. This is character building and not only will they likely not remember, but if they do, they will be better for it. Be unique. You've made it this far. Keep going.

When you pack away decorations, think twice about tossing the hand painted ornament your Nana sent you when you told her you were in love. The sparkly gold angel has you and your soldier's name on it. Stick it in a drawer, along with the framed photo of the two of you at Disneyland with the princesses. After New Year's is a good time to start writing your book. Set your alarm for 5 a.m. and warm a hot bottle for your belly. Outline chapters about his sketchy roommates at the hospital, a fictitious support group for caregivers, and the affair you fantasized about having with his hot surgeon. Weekends bring sophisticated wine to writer parties where you dance, smoke, become sultry and invite yourself to a racecar driver's bed. Don't feel bad he is fifteen years older. He will take care of you for a few days. Hold this memory close for lonely days are sure to follow. Your soldier need never know.

As for dating, don't jump into anything too soon. Have phone sex and make out at the bar, but dear god, do *not* marry your rebounder. That ex-boyfriend calling you? Sure, roll around with him and laugh about old times, but listen when he says you need to be alone. It may feel like you want to worry and clean and cook for someone, but once some time goes by, that bed of yours by yourself will feel great. Buy yourself some high thread count sateen sheets, make tea, eat half your Xanax and read surrealist lit and poetry. Promise yourself you will do this for no less than a year. A warm body with emotional and physical needs will not stop your witching hour adrenaline rushes, so what would be the point of putting your kids through having a strange man in the house? Just wait. Your happy ending is on its way.

Be fair and throw nothing out. Buy a box of large Ziploc baggies to store his miscellaneous personals: an old wallet with business cards and a 3x5 of your wedding photo; his expired helicopter's license, some childhood marbles, an inscribed Swiss army knife, and his dad's U.S. Army pin; his wedding ring, a set of bonsai clippers, a set of 2.0 pencil lead and his favorite Staedler mechanical pencil and sharpener, a Factic extra soft eraser, and the twisted brass bracelet you bought in Puerto Vallarta on your honeymoon; a handheld voice recorder machine, a Li-ion 3.7 V battery for his ski helmet camera, and a book of matches whose logo of a pole dancer is underneath the tagline, *Steak and Legs*; a Hohner international harmonica in the key of C, a piece of what looks like a computer chip, inside a pink plastic baggie labeled, "The Memory Place," and his arrowhead, styled into a necklace, that he found in the desert when he was ten.

The emergency epilepsy I.D. bracelet, the one with the weird American Medical insignia that's like a thick red star with a snake hugging a staff, is yours to keep. On the back is your name and number. He never wore it and won't miss it. Store it in the bottom drawer, along with the government memo identifying the date, time and details of injury. He may or may not keep the green silk satchel filled with good luck charms stuffed last year into his Christmas stocking: a gourd, a four-leaf clover, a shooting star, a horseshoe, and a pair of dice. Just put them in the box. They are his.

Chin up, you're halfway there.

Merrell Michael

Merrell Michael has worked in Law Enforcement for ten years and the military for six before that. Michael is interested in telling stories that possibly do not fit the popular narratives on war and other subjects, and has a short fiction piece that will be published later this year in the journal *As You Were*.

Vetpreneur
Merrell Michael

Rebecca Galvan knew that everything was going to hell when the director thanked them for their service.

The director was a squat little man, with gray hair worn a little too long and round John Lennon glasses with clear frames. He spoke in the no-accent of someone from California or New York, which he was, and he was heartfelt in his passion for the work and in his criticisms, all the way up until the moment in which he wasn't. He repeated the comment, and a horrid chill went up Becky's spine.

"And I mean it," he said. "The fact is, you've already overcome so much- especially the women- that doing this sort of thing for you is an honor. I mean, I've just done some work out west- commercials and such- and the people we work with aren't even in your league, when it comes with what you've done. So let's get out there tomorrow and really own it."

Becky didn't say anything, but she could tell that the other players felt the same. The program was called Arts for Combat Vets and it was supposed to bring real Hollywood players out in contact with people like her. Instead she had this blubbing director of commercials using all the hype words civvies told them all the time... and while she was at it, what was that part about especially the women? Was she an extra special victim/hero because of her gender? All of this was getting her angry, which was giving her a headache. She had been off her meds for two days, in order to keep a clear head for the play, and now she was debating on whether or not to go ahead and take them. She gave in and did, and the night of the play, suffered the consequences.

The play was Doubt. The players had been unanimous about picking something without direct military connotations. All of them, especially Becky, wanted to prove to themselves that they could pull off serious work. And Becky had worked hard, getting picked right away for the role of Meryl Streep's nun, the leading role, and she put her whole self into it. Even channeled some of that anger into it that always lurked in the back of her mind.

But the evening of the play she was heavily under the meds and nodding. There was a peaceful type of bliss around her body, like a warm halo, and she tried to fight it with coffee. Coffee didn't seem to work all that much, except to underscore the terror lurking behind her nod. She got dressed in costume and went out to look at the crowd, and the terror rose. The house was full.

Her mother and sister were there. Will too, of course, even though he hadn't bothered to wear a tie or even a collared shirt. But there were plenty of other serious looking people; the news was in the back row, with cameras. She could hear words like brave and such a good thing, even though she was too far away to really hear them.

When the curtain rose she tried to give it her best shot. She had memorized all her lines, that part was easy enough, but the actor playing the priest was horrible. He was a gulf war vet who

looked much older than he was, and he did that terrible thing where when he pointed he tucked his thumb into his palm and straightened his fingers to form a knife-hand. Several times he added “Dad-gone.” Into his lines, and the first time he did it the audience actually laughed.

It got to the point where she had given up without actually quitting, just repeating the lines from her head, and with each monotonous reading the priest got more frenzied, but he didn’t sound anything like a priest, he sounded like a senior NCO lecturing a junior enlisted on the finer points of something or another. When Becky said “I have such Doubt” it was flat and hollow and the audience didn’t remember to clap until the curtain had already fallen.

She managed to say she wasn’t feeling well and avoid anyone’s remarks afterwards. When she was in the truck Will packed his lip and said nothing for a while, spitting into a clear plastic water bottle at intervals.

“I got this idea,” Will said, finally.

“What.”

“I want to sell t-shirts.”

“What?”

“Like the whole military lifestyle brand thing. I mean, I’m going to market the whole thing to vets, or first responders, or whatever.”

“I don’t care what you do.” Becky said.

“There’s a market for it,” Will continued. “I mean, there’s an army guy that does it. And a marine. And there’s like, specifically Vietnam themed stuff, and little niches like that. But I think I can get in there and do something.” She wasn’t listening to him anymore but he kept on talking and she would catch little key words here and there when he didn’t know what he was talking about. Things like *profit margins* and *customer profile*. Will must have picked this up from the internet. One of his veteran’s groups online. He held out his phone.

“Take a look,” he said. The shirt on the phone was generic enough to the point where Becky couldn’t tell what it said. A reverse facing flag was screen-printed on one arm.

“Did you pay for this?” she asked.

“It’s just Photoshop,” Will said. “I mean, yeah, I paid for the guy to put it together in Photoshop, but only like, twenty-five thirty bucks or something.”

Becky put the phone down on the center console and said nothing. She was staring out the window. She did this before when she was little. Her parents would disappoint her in some way, and she would stare out the window of the car so as not to cry. But she didn’t want to cry this time. She felt tired in a way from the VA meds but wired with anger at Will and hurt from the theater. She felt as if there was a great hole in the middle of her frame that had gotten carved out

recently and been filled up with Styrofoam peanuts.

“Hey,” Will was saying, “Hey.” He was reaching for her leg, but she was pressed far against the door to the window. The phone lit up between them and he grabbed it instead.

Matthew Sterner-Neely

Matthew Sterner-Neely is a profoundly progressive person of faith who loves teaching children's literature and composition at Pueblo Community College in Pueblo, Colorado. His favorite activities include discussing how to dismantle the patriarchal hegemony, choreographing tap and ballet numbers, and joining his children and his partner for tea in the middle of the living room floor. He is a veteran of the US Army, and served from 1994-2004, with a final stint in Iraq. He is currently enthusiastic about studying gender and queer theory applied to pop-culture and children's literature and the ways in which each influences the other. His work can be found in *Pilgrimage*, *Dirty Chai*, *The Open Face Sandwich*, *Gambling the Aisle*, and *Tempered Steel*, the literary journal of Colorado State University-Pueblo. In addition, one of his stories was recognized as a top-25 award-winner of *Glimmer Train's* July 2014 Very Short Fiction Award.

He writes, “‘Entertaining Angels’ is the first story in a larger work titled *The End of Fear*. This unpublished novel-in-stories follows a soldier with PTSD who witnesses his best friend killed in Iraq. Upon returning home, he is convinced that he has died as well. Although fictional, ‘Entertaining Angels’ is informed by my former life as a soldier and my current life as a teacher, both of which have shaped who I am as a writer and who I am as a human. I found my humanity in the faces of the people I have encountered—American soldiers, Iraqis, and middle school students. I have had the privilege of entertaining angels, and now, I have the privilege of sharing those experiences in this story.”

Entertaining Angels
Matthew Sterner-Neely

A straight-A student hugs her boyfriend in the parking lot of Link Classical Academy before climbing into her grandmother's minivan. This embrace is against LCA's "No Touch" policy. The principal, Mr. Sterling, watches them hug, and from the gray and blue striped brickwork that stands out among the bike shops and fast food places of downtown Atheria, he raises his arm and calls to Grandma. Grandma pulls back into the parking spot. Sterling, silently stroking his beard, walks to the van, opens the sliding door, and gives the girl and her boyfriend 15 minutes of detention. She protests. Sterling gives them 30 minutes. She stops protesting, and instead, she starts a Facebook rebellion with blue ribbons and gray string. The next day, everyone is wearing blue and gray, and it's not even the 1860s. By the time the dust settles, she is in danger of getting suspended for insubordination if she so much as wears blue *jeans*. This is stated in a confidential memo to faculty and staff.

* * *

A young woman walks to her barracks room from the community showers that all soldiers share in the middle of the desert on a base outside of Ar Ramadi, Iraq. Her hair drapes her shoulders, which is against US Army regulations. Six men, three who wear weapons across their backs, stare in her direction. She shifts her weight, and her ass moves just a bit more in each direction as she walks. The men slap their thighs and call her words like baby and honey. She looks over her shoulder. She places her hand over her face because it makes her seem coy to the silly boys. They hoot. They holler. They talk about *that ass*, so she shakes it a little more. She flips her hair. And then, when she turns her head back to the front, she runs into a man with two black bars on his collar. He questions her behavior. He asks her to explain just what the hell makes it okay to tempt those poor, poor boys, ten thousand miles from home. She protests. He reminds her that she is the one with a usable brain (*nudge, nudge, Corporal Plath*), and so the responsibility is hers to "keep our boys in check." She protests. He dismisses her and begins court-martial proceedings, which are soon reduced to simple non-judicial punishment. By the time the dust settles, she has lost her rank and she has lost her mind. Well, not *lost* it. We know where it is: it's on the ceiling and the walls in a guard tower in the middle of Iraq. This is stated in a confidential memo to officers and NCOs in Alpha battery, 1st Battalion, 7th Field Artillery.

* * *

It's not that I hate memos, necessarily; it's that the memo to the faculty and staff is written in Comic Sans, and when Sterling strokes his beard while reading "confidential" Comic Sans memos in faculty meetings, these moments are certainly Sans-Much-the-Fuck-about-Anything. This dude even *speaks* in Comic Sans—hell, maybe the full effect can't be understood without Sterling and his stroke-able beard. But the memo—at least I can share that. As a favor to me, Baker keeps reading the fucking thing, his voice oozing blackboard lettering and jovial spirits. He's dead and he just keeps reading, and I am fine with that. He's not the first dead man to come back and read a Comic-Sans fonted memo. He's dead, but he just keeps a-Comic-Sansin' away.

My wife Daley—who is not dead—but who sure as hell talks like a dead person—would say that including the memo in Part II: Chapter Eight, "Confidential Memo" is passive-

aggressive—she would say it is passive-aggressive, and then she would read the memo *properly*, probably in Times New Roman or something else serif-y. If she spoke at all, I mean. For Baker, though, it's all kicking ass and reading memos, and we are all out of asses.

Not everyone uses Comic Sans to discuss the expulsion of a student involved in such horrifying acts of disobedience as what the administration of LCA calls “The Facebooks.” The assistant principal, Mrs. Sterling—who just *happens* to be Mr. Sterling’s mother—you can’t make this shit up—Mrs. Sterling thinks the whole thing is a bit silly. I tell her how I am frustrated about the whole Facebook’s Rebellion thing, and about how Baker and I read the shit out of some memos, and she is very sympathetic to my plight of passive-aggression. She asks me if I am writing about it, and I say that yes, I am, and she says that this is a great idea. So here I am, writing about the girl with the blue-ribbon rebellion.

I warn this girl about violating the No-Touch policy again. She assures me that she doesn’t want to get into trouble and that she is done rocking the boat. We go back to class. Some asshole—probably Baker—tells Sterling that I warned her about the seriousness of blue ribbons and the Facebooks, so the next day, Mr. Sterling calls me into his office, and during my planning period and my lunch half-hour, he and one of the school district’s board members speak to me about violating the confidentiality of the memo by warning this kid in my class. They tell me that I am an asset. Then they tell me that men in blue with silver badges will carry me away if I commit such acts again. They tell me about the obvious dangers of the Facebooks. They do this for an hour and a half. After that, they tell me that my pants are frayed. Then they smack me on the ass and tell me they hope I am able to get some lunch. Surely this is some kind of joke, I say at one point. No, they say. This shit’s serious, they say, and don’t call me Shirley.

* * *

Sandra Plath—the “Plath” in “Sandra Plath” is an allusion to baking oneself in a fucking oven, so the wondering can just stop—Sandra Plath and I used to sing when we were on guard together, and she had a terrible voice. All the dust in the wind, probably. Our guard tower faced north, not that “north” meant anything—not when “*DOWN*,” as in “Get the fuck *DOWN*, Private!” was more immediate. After she shot herself, some asshole compared her life—written on the walls and the ceiling—to a visit from Santa Claus. At her memorial, the battalion commander said that rules were rules—he said it was black and white. He said that misery comes from disobeying orders, but that a death well-ordered meant something. After the service, I overheard a sick fucking joke:

What’s black and white and red all over?

Half a Plath in a tower.

Plath would have laughed her ass off.

* * *

While “The Facebooks” may be dangerous to young minds, the administration tells us that a walking field trip in the middle of downtown Atheria, Oregon is A-Okay. My students and I stroll to the ice skating rink as cars zip by on 6th street. We cross Main Street and enter the parking lot when a pickup truck drives by. The driver is moving the vehicle at a snail’s pace, and it is coming towards us, so we all kind of pause to see what is going on. I do nothing to shoo my kids aside, and this would be something I would regret for many, many moons.

For as the truck rolls by in freeze framed motion, out of the window hangs a big ass. I stare, open-mouthed, at this one-eyed monster, purple with cold and who-knows-what else. Some of my students laugh, and not a few of them scream and back away. One kid, a tall, beefy

eighth-grade boy, glances at me. I see what he is going to do, and I make no move to stop him. The image of this slow-motion, purple butt, with its pimply hair is forever burned into my brain, and I just can't move. This giant of an eighth grade boy glances at me, winds up, and there's the pitch, a line drive down the 3rd-base line. At least I think touching someone's ass is 3rd base. I never know anymore. I am sure that it might warrant detention if I had seen anything, which I didn't.

* * *

Once, a convoy of SeaBees got shit on.

* * *

Teachers never get to pee. Or poop, for that matter. And in my school, where there is no staff bathroom, and when it is a poop that is coming out with the pee, we scoot our feet under the stall that barely hangs to below our knees. It doesn't matter; the kids come in, inevitably in twos, and they comment.

"Dude, it's Mr. Steel! Pooping!"

"You know I can hear you, right?" I say.

"You *heard* that?" they ask.

* * *

26 men and 8 women, all members of the 1st Naval Construction Battalion—Navy SeaBees—waited on the south end of the base for a patrol briefing. Their commander, a young Navy Looey named Edward Teach walked out of the Marine briefing room and towards the group of SeaBees. He stopped some distance away from the sailors and lit his pipe so that his head was briefly consumed in smoke. He spent moments on that pipe—not magical moments—just normal ones. But they were important ones. As he finished his ritual lighting, he did not speak. He did not say "Shiver me timbers!" or anything else that pirates supposedly say, for before the words could come out of his mouth, a bullet-shaped, green thing spat from a tube 1.2 miles away. The men and women of the First NCB heard the thunk of the first mortar and the thunk of the next 16 shells being launched from their tubes. Ol' Blackbeard, the SeaBees called him, though Lieutenant Teach was far too engrossed in his own world to understand the reference—ol' Blackbeard shuffled his feet and smoked his pipe and almost spoke. Two times he almost spoke before the mortars dropped in the middle of the briefing, which blew them all away—except Teach, who shit himself.

* * *

The bathroom can, indeed, be a very scary place. On this day, I walk into the bathroom, and a boy is furiously washing his face. I ask him if he is okay. He says it's nothing; just that someone smacked him in the face and now he is trying to clean his face so that he doesn't get any STDs.

"Someone hit you?" I say.

"With a condom," he says.

"Oh my God," I say, and I try to keep my anger and my anxiety in check.

"It's no big deal," he says. I ask him to tell me what happened and if he has told the principal.

"We were walking and someone smacked me with a condom," he says. "Mr. Sterling is talking with him now."

“And you?” I ask. “You’re okay?”

“Yeah,” he says. “Not a scratch. Just worried about STDs.” I look at him and he gets my confusion. He pulls something from his pocket. It is the condom, still in its wrapper.

* * *

People fucked in the latrines. It just happened. It was the only door with a lock—we all knew that. So when two US Marines on security detail for the SeaBees, Lance Corporal Gene McKnead and Private First Class Nicole Westerland, went into the latrines, no one blinked an eye—or they wouldn’t have if anyone had witnessed them. They went in there, *him* to do his business, and *her* to do his business, and he had his pants around his ankles when the mortars landed. For the sake of brevity, they chose to leave their flak vests on, but they definitely got caught with his pants down. First time in history, someone said, that a medic had to treat a *sucking dick* wound. Or they would have said that if anyone had found them before the sun started rotting their flesh.

* * *

Every year, after lessons on paragraph writing and lessons on expository essays, I teach a bit of creative writing. I transition from theses and essay maps to the use of description to setup a mystery story, and we lumber through exercises on how to write clues and how to introduce suspects and how to reveal endings, and then they begin to write. What comes from Aubrey is something like this:

A girl walks across a floor, silently stepping over the wooden planks, each creak threatening to give her away as she tries to escape her parents’ grasp. She reaches out to the handle and turns it silently, afraid that the very motion of her hand will give away her presence. She opens the door, away from her, and begins to place one foot into the darkened hallway. She pauses, takes one last look around, and then is gone.

In my essay on mystery stories, I am going to tell you all kinds of things about my main character, Aubrey. First, I am going to tell you how Aubrey got away from her house that night. Next, I am going to explain the clues that you need in order to get all the information you need to solve this mystery. Then, when all is lost, I will explain how the detective comes to her rescue. Finally, I will wrap it all up.

When I ask her about this second paragraph, with its precise thesis and essay map—middle school style—and why she decided to divert her attention away from the incredible story that was unfolding at the beginning, she just stares at me. Her face becomes flushed, and I can see her eyes begin to well up.

“But Mr. Steel,” she begins to sob, and I want to sob back. She breathes at me—middle-schoolers can do that—and the tears get sucked back into her eyes because she sees me want to cry. Now she is an annoyed cop calming the suicidal jumper. Her eyes stop welling, and instead, her concern might as well have said *Look here, dumb-ass. Go ahead and jump. Go for it, you selfish prick. But first, you are going to tell me what the fuck to do for a goddamn A in this class.*

“With essays, Mr. Silly,” she says. “You told us to introduce our writing with ‘First, next, then, last!’ I wrote it just like you said!”

* * *

I was on the Base Reactionary Force, so I got there first—besides the SeaBees and mortars, I mean. When I first came upon the scene, the medic in my truck, Corporal Sandra

Plath, threw the door open as Baker slowed the Humvee Gun Truck down. He raced after her, and from the gunner's hatch, I heard Ortiz swing the .50 caliber M2 Browning to the rear.

"Damn, that bitch is fine."

"Ortiz," I said, "don't be a pig."

"What, Sergeant? You want I should treat her like some Frida Kahlo painting?"

"I have no idea what that means."

"You're the uncultured swine, Sergeant."

Plath came back to the truck to grab extra supplies moments later. Ortiz yelled to her.

"Plath! You're prettier than a thorn necklace!" Plath smiled.

"Not the time, but thanks."

"All I am saying is that you're a damn fine woman, Doc." I hit Ortiz on the leg.

"What Sergeant?" Ortiz said. "Thorn necklaces and hummingbirds: I did it just like you said!"

* * *

Link Classical Academy is the kind of place in which the mediocre become good. A few even become *very* good. And the great—they become *good* too. At our school, we teach future doctors and lawyers and rocket scientists, and our students have gone on to become senators and congressmen, doctors and Yale Divinity School graduates, and Harvard Medical School attendees. One even became Miss America, and after that, she became a porn star. She is doing quite well, from what Sterling tells us. She doesn't come to visit us much, which I understand. On Tuesdays in October, we have Career Days; someone keeps booking her. Each Wednesday in October, Sterling opens the morning announcements with a disappointed sigh, saying that she "stuffed us." When his mother, Assistant Principal Mrs. Sterling says, "That's what she said," Mr. Sterling glances up from his notes and says, "Who?"

Mr. Sterling has a picture in his office that she sent the school, with her winking and blowing a kiss to the camera. It is usually on his desk next to a box of tissues, and I am convinced that he has no idea about the connection between the two objects.

LCA is rigorous, and most go on to do great things, such as sit on the desk in Mr. Sterling's office. Mr. Sterling's philosophy is that every student deserves a chance to become good at something, and not all students can become Miss Americas—or work in the adult media industry, as much as he wants them to. So for those students who do not pass the standardized tests each year, a unique opportunity is presented: Cleaning Olympics. They are taught how to sweep and mop and dust and polish and vacuum, all because Sterling's rationale is that *someone* has to take out the trash. Our school prides itself on the resources that they provide to the students, whether it is in teaching them how to dissect information or how to switch on a vacuum. I am not even going to make a joke about how much that must suck. Cleaning Olympics runs from the beginning of the school year until the manners competition in November when they learn how to flip burgers. These are the kids who fail the tests. The ones who score advanced get to learn how to eat them with a fork.

Obviously, those who eat the burgers don't actually flip them.

* * *

"Goddamn, Steel. You are going to get into trouble with that girl."

"You should have seen her, Smoke," I said. "She dug into some bloody shit today."

"She's a mother-fuckin' fine-ass medic, Smoke," Ortiz said. Baker said nothing.

“Yeah, well, leave her alone. She’s toast.” I handed my platoon sergeant a form I had finished filling out.

“You want this, Smoke?” He looked at me and raised his eyebrows. “I put her in for an ARCOM with a V,” I said. “With your support, I think she could get a Bronze Star.” My platoon sergeant, Danny Milosz—Smoke—took the paper from my hand and tore it in half.

“She going up for an Article 15, Steel.”

“But you should have seen her, Smoke.”

“It doesn’t matter. If the commander gets his way, she’ll be flipping burgers in a month.”

* * *

On Fridays, we have fun. I let my students take their spelling tests in dry-erase markers on their desks. I make the spelling words rhyme, and then they write the word on the desk. I walk around the room and write tick marks on my grading sheet, and they erase the words with Clorox wipes. They have a little bit of fun; the desks get clean, and I get to sing and act like a British arse, and sometimes, I try to rap a bit with them.

My principal walks in last week as I freestyle the following phrases:

A to the B and the C and D,

I said, hooked on phonics worked for me!

If you’re doin’ somethin’ bad, I’ll ask you to be stoppin’ it

And if you do it again, I’ll say, “Please do the OPPOSITE.”

The students have given me my own rapper name: R. E. Cent, wherein the C looks like the “¢” sign. I absolutely know that they are making fun of me, and I absolutely do not mind. Better that they laugh at me than at each other. The latter kills me, and sometimes, it kills them—but that story another time.

So my principal walks in to my room and watches me rap the words. Had I known he was there, I would have said “opposite” in a non-rapperish way. I am a little embarrassed when I turn around. He frowns as my kids write their words on their desks, and he asks me to step in the hall.

Shirley, my rapper days are numbered. Sterling speaks.

“Mr. Steel,” he says, as he strokes his goatee. He spends a lot of time stroking that facial hair, most of it while examining the picture of Miss *PornTube* on his desk. His beard-stroking has become a staple in the school, and I honestly wouldn’t know what I would do without this. I bet ol’ Blackbeard stroked his own black beard.

“Mr. Steel,” he says, “I think that, while ‘The Rapping Rhymes’ (he actually says ‘The Rapping Rhymes’—I’m telling you—you can’t make this shit up) are a fun tool, I don’t think it is such a good idea to write words on the desks.”

“Okay,” I say. “They will clean them up.”

“Oh no,” he harrumphs—his stroking increases in its rigor. “That’s not the problem.” I try to talk, but he holds up his hand, and then moves it back to his beard for continued—and rigorous—stroking.

“The problem,” he strokes, “is that these kids won’t transfer their learning from dry erase markers to pencils as they write.” I almost laugh. *Almost.*

“Really?” I say.

“Well,” he says. “You are really doing them a disservice as they write their words with dry-erase markers.”

“Uh...okay,” I say. “No dry erase markers.”

“But ‘The Rapping Rhymes,’” he says, “that’s cool, homie.”

* * *

The last time that Sandra Plath and I spoke, we rapped “The Rapping Rhymes.” Well, we sang—terribly—but connecting that last vignette to this with “The Rapping Rhymes” needed to happen. So we rapped. And we laughed that night. A lot. And after that, I went to sleep. And after that, she blew her brains onto the roof of the tower.

* * *

And then there are the hall passes. I hate these things. I have a phone hall-pass, a drinking fountain hall-pass, and a restroom hall-pass, all given to me by my administration so that we can ensure that students are doing the “right thing.” But even though there are three hall-passes, the school policy is that only one student can be out of the room at a time, so I don’t really know why I have more than one hall-pass.

Today, I don’t notice a student standing at the place where I keep my passes. He stands there as I talk to a group of English students about their topic. A few minutes before, he had asked to go use the pass, but he hadn’t left yet.

“Mr. Steel?” he says. “I have to go to the copier.”

“Go,” I say. “It’s right there.” I point in the direction of the copier, which is placed just outside my room.

“Which pass do I take?”

“You know, I’m not sure.”

We laugh, and after that, no one goes to sleep. And after that, no blows their brains on the roof of a tower.

Instead, it leads to the students in my homeroom class making me even more hall-passes—for every occasion that they can think of: sink hall-pass, copy hall-pass, out-in-the-hall-for-a-sec hall-pass, microwave hall-pass, looking-wistfully-out-the-window hall-pass, and just in case, a pooping hall-pass. But I don’t know why they made that last one: I am sure I will never use it.

* * *

The day after Plath shot herself, which was a day after the base declared a lockdown because they couldn’t find two Marines, a young lieutenant—ol’ Blackbeard—clenched his butt cheeks together. Tried all of the latrine doors. All were locked, and the smell coming from them was horrendous. A knock confirmed their use—except the last one. He could tell someone was in there—too much sun always betrays the shitters, but no one answered. He knocked again. Under his breath, Lieutenant Teach cursed and went to shit someplace else. After relaxing his bowels and returning to his room, he carefully folded the ends of the toilet paper and placed the roll above his bunk. He went back to the occupied latrine and shimmied the lock. A man and a woman who had been engaging in what Blackbeard would later call “oral copulation” fell onto the sand. Her head was still in his crotch, and when they rolled her over to begin the job of packing and zipping and tagging and shipping, his penis came off with a popping sound and dangled from the woman’s mouth. The new medic, Private First Class Maria Melendez, walked near me.

“A damn shame,” she said.

“I suppose it is.” She looked out towards the guard towers.

“A real damn shame,” she said, and she put on her latex gloves and dug right in.