COLLATERAL

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<u>POETRY</u>

Adrian Bonenberger

Adrian Bonenberger is a veteran of Afghanistan, where he deployed twice as an infantry officer with the U.S. Army. His poetry has appeared in *The Southampton Review*, and his nonfiction work has been published in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Forbes*, *Foreign Policy*, and *Deadspin*, among others. Along with four other veterans, he co-edits *The Wrath-Bearing Tree*. Bonenberger's war memoirs, *Afghan Post*, came out in 2014. And he co-edited and contributed to *The Road Ahead: Stories from the Forever War*, an anthology of original veterans' fiction.

Kyiv at War
Adrian Bonenberger

1

Western faces crowd Kyiv's underground,
illuminate the holiday commute,
dotted sequential, on big-knotted wire
(wrap it around the pine and plug it in).
They shine like annual Christmas cheer,
the merry green and red lights, blinking
in and out, winking, pages from my life:
her, a leisurely Madison Ave stroll
some summers back, in the heat wave.
The heavy blond child practiced math,
now builds quantum circuits for MIT.
But a wavy-haired Porsche stuck on LA's
four-oh-five transforms, struck by Einstein
Stalin to a cheap-coated tremble-mouth,
swaying in the black fake leather boots
his Red-Star grandpa kicked in Army
while grandmother was raped by the sea.
An old lady chairs reference at New York's
public library by prehistoric, formal ferns.
She wears a fearful expression to work:
hair tight, shoulders flat, chest thrust so,
quoted by Thursday evening anchors
on lonely news-channels, real estate's up
doesn't mean her plants can't rage or hurt,
(ancestral seeds grazed by saurian beasts),
her fur coat's sly nod, hung by an open door—
antediluvian clocks and ferns can't wilt
on Kyiv's red metro line, and New York
seems more improbable by the meter.
People shift, stretch, nod, dissociated,
await the sick, wailing train to nowhere,

I've been seeing these faces my whole life.

A garbage bag filled almost to bursting,
gripped in the square-knuckled hand
of a professor I heard lecture in college
about Gatsby and Jean Toomer, and
modernism's futuristic fascist tic—
now bound for Kontraktova Ploshcha,

traditional marketplace of Kyiv's Jews,
while pretty young lovers from Brooklyn
embrace below his clutching, bale stare.
The plastic sack crinkles with malice,
while his other hand, sinister, plies its
secret trade below a Sam Browne belt,
just like home. Demented Maine men,
hardscrabble Virginia coal transplants
in San Francisco, Montana or Texas
European eyes in a melted iron pot,
screeching underneath steel wheels
and corrugated, rusting track, such metal
marking minutes subway clocks prosperity,
dapper urban doppelgängs, redeemed
by morose Ukrainian mongrel clones,
our European twins—sybaritic, hostile
amoral, our poorer, undestined selves.

2.

The president is late. All rise. Tap your antique cap,
sink your neck, bend the submissive knee, wink wide.
Alexander spears friends for less-hacks jobs, cuts lines,
he doesn't wait, our president. Nor she. All rise, hail
the ram's horned leader, cucked, dirtied, deified,
reified on coins and bills, for all to see: they said
she shouldn't do it, swore it was an acrid plan,
who dares laugh, now? All rise, amen, be seated.

Telling us like it is, straight,
lists odd-textured hats:
felt and wool and silk,
here's a thinking cap in
purple, grandfather smells
weak again. The cap lies,
says pro bono won't work,
says make me too big,
over people the system
with administrators. Hats
and caps and baseball brims,
too many to revise--
pick your favorite team.
Then: root, root, root until
the band comes home.

Honduras was bad, we cleaned it up
with Venezuelan help, and Mexican,
who were bad, or were to be—ergo
China, Japan, Africa, Iran, Iraq.
A loaded word, that last.
Like frying onions, or football,
or clean groomed Vets' Day lawns,
happy kids and meat-filled pants

Two boys imprisoned by their arms
interlocking, back-to-back, a flag
wind whipped, causes them to look
away, and down--what danger waits
to feast upon their twinned complaint?
Chains nor handcuffs keep them set,
is it their mutual apathy, warm comfort
of another human's soft frail touch
that keeps two shirts plastered tight,
taut against a storm's elemental fury?
Or a more assertive force, an active hope,
perhaps certain backs were made to meld
and merge, cannot avoid doing so, apart—
like Ukraine from Europe. A baby screams.

3.

Partly made buildings loom, antique
and incomplete in the winter dawn.
Grotesque, they seem to me, devilish,
warning against imprudent spending,
incautious investment, misplaced trust.
I wander the morning streets of Kyiv
bedazed, I tongue my chapped mouth,
wetly whistle forbidden martial tunes
blow air before me in wide pearl bursts,
like a frigid fiend from hell's ninth circle.
Below, a train screeches its arrival at Metro
Minska, filled with fur coated, slash-mouth
trembling penitents. No forgiveness there.

Dead construction cranes cage the sky
and skeletal, keep me from the clouds
I once aspired to call my heavenly home.

Tami Haaland

Tami Haaland is the author of *What Does Not Return*, forthcoming in spring 2018, and two previous books of poetry: *When We Wake in the Night* and *Breath in Every Room*, winner of the Nicholas Roerich First Book Award. Her poems have appeared in *High Desert Journal, Consequence, Ascent, The Ecopoetry Anthology* and many other periodicals and anthologies. Haaland's work has also been featured on *The Writer's Almanac, Verse Daily* and *American Life in Poetry*. She has served as Montana's Poet Laureate and teaches at Montana State University Billings. Haaland writes, "In 2010 I was teaching a creative writing class when a lockdown occurred, and text messages from students' friends and parents confirmed that men with rifles had been sighted in our building. Though it eventually became clear the guns were not real, the incident caused much anxiety and panic."

Noon Lockdown

Tami Haaland

We ask if it is real and the cell phones
say yes. Some students soothe themselves,
some panic. Write, I tell them. But
they write about Columbine, how they
came back from lunch and heard the news.
More texts come in: men with guns
two floors down, swat teams,
nine police cars. We plan what to do.

We say we will throw desks and bags.
I tell them our chances are good, so many
rooms in a building. We talk to someone
who struggles to breathe. We are
into Lamaze now to keep her
from shaking apart. Two students
turn the flimsy teacher desk over,
their only shield. One is angry because
her mother failed to text love,
so I kiss her head as I would kiss
the heads of my own grown children.

Then suddenly it is over: ROTC fake guns,
a simple mistake. No apologies.

Later, I visit my mother whose mind
loses everything, whose mind has turned
to lace. I hold her hand as if
there is nothing to say. We rock
in our chairs with the women. I don't
tell her a thing she will forget.

Rachel Michaud

Rachel Michaud is a prize-winning poet and essayist. Her essays have been published in *The Washington Post* and the *Hartford Courant*, and heard on WAMC-Northeast Public Radio. Her poems have appeared in several literary journals. Rachel made her living as a literacy teacher, and later as a researcher and writer for non-profit organizations. She divides her time between Washington, DC, and Cambridge, NY. Michaud writes, "I am the wife and mother of physicians who treated wounded soldiers at Walter Reed Hospital. They brought the cost of war home with their discussions of cases and the blood stains on their white lab coats. Still, when my girlfriend asked, 'Should I keep seeing this fellow?', my answer surprised me."

Since You Asked Me
Rachel Michaud

"If he knocks at your thin door, let him in"
Adam Zagajewski

If he knocks at your door
let him in
the man who teaches
young soldiers how to survive
in Iraq, in Syria,
all those bloody places
where helicopters and hope
are shot out of the sky.

If he knocks at your door
let him in
the man of ex-wives and ex-addresses
the man who is always packed
who travels light.
He's the man the general calls
when our side is losing.

He's the man without a uniform
who like a man in uniform
saves and rereads your letters
unfolding them in airports, taxis, silent rooms
when he is between assignments, time zones, continents.
He's the man who remembers you
lush in your plush bed.

If he knocks on your door
let him in
the man you cannot count on
cannot even locate in space
who drops
like a paratrooper into your life
hurt in some way you can't find.

If he knocks on your door
he's a refugee
from the world and our wars.
Take him in.

Sheryl Slocum

Sheryl Slocum lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where she teaches English as a second language at Alverno College. Her poems have appeared in numerous small press publications, including *Blueline*, *The Anglican Theological Review*, and *The Wisconsin Poets' Calendar*. Some of her poems are informed by her Peace Corps experience of living in a country torn by civil war and by the conflict experiences of her refugee students. A Pushcart nominee, Sheryl is a member of the Hartford Avenue Poets and the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets.

Refugees
Sheryl Slocum

Forced to wander without
  language,
those memories leave
  footprints,
the kind that made
  you tremble
and hide, try to still
  the klaxon
thudding of your heart,
  stifle
the animal rasping in
  your throat.
Those silenced rhizomes
  shoot out runners
to snare and trip you at
  ordinary moments:
meat searing on a stove,
  an infant's cry,
a whiff of dank mud
  after rain.
You sleep with the light on,
  but still
the wordless ones fasten
  clammy fingers
around your throat.
  You wake,
gasping syllables of
  that tongue
you locked away, those
  expressions
your children will never know,
  those words
nobody here can understand.
  You refuse
to recognize them.

Snipers on the Roof

Sheryl Slocum

Washington, DC, April, 1968

Tourists fresh from Wyoming
to a closed-down capital,
we made a game of counting them:
43, white like us,
in fatigues—no cowboy hats,
long guns resting carelessly
on knees or in the crook of an arm.

I was too young to know
there were more
behind the opaque windows
of those graceful buildings,
and my father too trusting
of military self-control,
and all of us too ignorant

to understand why
the black family
in the car from Illinois
followed so closely behind
and did not seem to be counting
the snipers as a souvenir
or a game.

Lisa Stice

Lisa Stice is a poet/mother/military spouse who received a BA in English literature from Mesa State College (now Colorado Mesa University) and an MFA in creative writing and literary arts from the University of Alaska Anchorage. While it is difficult to say where home is, she currently lives in North Carolina with her husband, daughter and dog. She is a Pushcart Prize nominee and the author of a poetry collection, *Uniform* (Aldrich Press, 2016).
You can find out more about her and her publications at lisastice.wordpress.com and facebook.com/LisaSticePoet. Stice writes, "For several months, I read collections by poets who write/wrote in times of conflict, and Judith Wright's *A Human Pattern* was among them. Wright wrote in support of the people with the least amount of power: indigenous tribes, women, and children. I wrote "Dear Judith Wright" to the spirit of Wright, knowing she would empathize with the military children who are too young to really understand or express their feelings."

Dear Judith Wright

Lisa Stice

My daughter had that nightmare again
(this is five nights in a row now),
and when I ask her what it was about,
she lacks the words to tell me
or maybe she remembers only the fear
and the waking and her all alone.
I tell her *it is only our past and future*
troubling your sleep, then she nods
and I wipe away her tears because
that is all we can do in this moment.

* Judith Wright (1915-2000): Aboriginal land rights; author of *A Human Pattern: Selected Poems*, selected by Judith Wright (Fyfield Books, 2011); italicized words taken and altered from “The Trains”

Laura Madeline Wiseman

Laura Madeline Wiseman teaches writing at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and 24 Pearl Street. She is the author of 26 books and chapbooks and is the editor of two anthologies, *Bared* and *Women Write Resistance*, selected for the Nebraska 150 Sesquicentennial Book List. She is the recipient of 2015 Honor Book Nebraska Book Award, Wurlitzer Foundation Fellowship, and an Academy of American Poets Award. Her book *Drink* won the 2016 Independent Publisher Bronze Book Award for poetry**.** Her latest book is *Velocipede* (Stephen F. Austin State University Press), a 2016 Foreword INDIES Book of the Year Award Finalist for Sports. Wiseman writes, "I wrote "Easy" and "First Warrior" after many years of practicing yoga. Mythology, legends, and the historical have long fascinated my work. These poems are in part a response to the physical practice of yoga, but also to the larger stories we tell about the body, athletics, and those who serve."

Easy
Laura Madeline Wiseman

sukhasana

You arrive early, but still, you remove clothing, sit on a mat. Soon others join, the teacher dims lights, locks the door, then starts the music. You ease into the space where your knees can still take their lucky fold. Your hands palm like a mythic hero. Gravity drops through you, spine to pelvis to sit bones to floor, doing its steady work. Do you know how open you are or how much you can turn? Does your gaze lock with a reflection in a mirrored wall? Or does it soften towards the window's open horizon? Weekends, this field is awash with a wind that bends golden grass, purple blooms, variegated ivy. When the mowers come, the swallows follow the wake, insects whirling through the air. In storms, lightning pierces the middle-distance that bucks with trees. At night, it might be the one place left in the city that knows complete darkness. Should you walk into that field, you would disappear without witness. Is this why you're here? It's too soon to see the snow or ice, the ravages of natural disaster, yet yesterday the floor rippled. Photographs swayed on the walls. *Earthquake,* someone said later. *Bombs,* said another. *The first sign of the new war,* said a third. When the ground moved, why had you mistook the sensation as breath finally awakening?

First Warrior
Laura Madeline Wiseman

virabhadrasana I

Like an ax prepares to bury into the game the tribe needs to live, you hold arms high. Like fingers that point towards a permission to kill, your hands grip. Like any prelaunch crouch to cleave what others have downed with arrows, you bend one leg. Like anywhere is better. Like a heart could be open. Like a gaze could see through the sky. But her eyes are wild, back bending, paws scuffling the dust, she writhes. You hold the weight of this. Half-flexed, you breathe. How many poses are there until the final blow?

*

Maybe you're not mid-battle. Maybe you're a length of hair once traced by a lover, if yanked and beaten into the ground. Does violence give birth to heroes or friends? Does myth or pose invite reflection? What's the true story? What's belief? No one waits in hunger. Nowhere on mountains do feral animals arise in a shriek. If many have been humiliated, no one needs you to do this.

*

If not a hero, who will you be in today's practice? In this ordinary fitness room, you've come for balance. A lamp shade patterned by iron casts light beside a coiled rope as thick as your thigh. Other equipment (weights, resistance bands, risers) evoke hours of strength training (power pump, boot camp, Tabata). Beside the stereo, the gym instructor adjusts her phone, then a beat begins. In the mirrors made exponential by reflection, you stand not in one room, but in hundreds. They cascade behind you as you lunge with everyone in class. A thousand heroes thrust imaginary swords. You focus on breath, alignment, balance. The curious image of friends echoes into a distance without end.

Nicole Yurcaba

Nicole Yurcaba, an instructor of English at Bridgewater College, is the daughter of a Vietnam War-era combat medic. Much of her current poetry focuses on the experiential translation of combat veterans' experiences. Yurcaba is the third place winner of Virginia's Skyline Poetry contest for her poem “Kenova.”

Unopened
Nicole Yurcaba

for my father

we are told not to look
we are told this never happened
we are told to clean it up

eight hundred feet short jumped
turns a man spins him face-forward
smelts flesh bone blood fluids
crunching sand

disjointed unrecognizable wooden doll

what was his name?

we are told to forget it
we are told this never happened

While Sitting on the Bus to Airborne School

Nicole Yurcaba

Asleep
against
the pane
of a window
locked
to not
lower.

<u>NONFICTION</u>

Travis Burke

Travis Burke has worked in conflict and development in Afghanistan, Somalia, Ukraine and Thailand. For two years, he was part of the civilian surge into Afghanistan, and worked alongside the US Marines and British forces in Helmand Province for USAID. He mentored the Afghan government, met with tribal leaders, and advised ISAF on development and governance. “Crawling Uphill” comes from this experience. Burke writes, “In late 2011, the District Governor was killed in an IED ambush, and I used writing to attempt to understand both Massoud's death and the war writ large. When I returned to the United States, I found the wilderness to be the best answer to questions lingering from Helmand, and included these elements in my work.” Currently, Burke works in international development consulting focused on youth skills, but he is always writing. Originally from Reno, Nevada, he writes poems, stories, and essays on the outdoors and politics at https://thebigwild.net. His work has also appeared in *Pedestal Magazine*, *Euromaidan Press*, and *Brushfire*. He is based in Portland, Oregon.

Crawling Uphill
Travis Burke

I return to the same place in dreams. It's the withering years, dust on dust, sand screaming out from underneath Osprey. Dawn just out, light coming in from Kandahar, glancing streamers off the Helmand. Metal, carved and curved, twisted into itself. In dreams, Massoud still clutches a halved steering wheel, face streaming blood that makes no mark in the gravel. And here, poppy shoots writhing up through mud-baked walls.

Waking, Afghanistan fades. No ghosts of dead friends walk my apartment. Morning rituals of grinding coffee and boiling water, but the light streams in through slanting blinds. Dawn rises early in Seattle, and discipline wakes me with it. I holster a backpack and head north, away from the Puget Sound metro mess as opposing cars line up toward downtown.

NPR and they are talking about the "transition." There was no transition I saw, simply a slow about face executed in full view of the Afghans we left behind. An expert is interviewed:

"The transition is underway, moving men and women and material out of bases and back home. The Afghan National Army is gradually taking over these redoubts, working with ISAF to ensure the Taliban lack footholds in key provinces. Here, in Kabul…" I lower the volume. Is it better to listen to these experts and their assessments from wherever the war isn't, or just ignore the chatter? My blood surges when I hear them. Years later, I cannot listen to Serial and its description of Bowe Bergdahl's imprisonment and rescue without stopping every few minutes to try to explain something not quite on the tongue to my girlfriend. I can't get it right, can't fit together the world with Afghanistan.

"This colonel, he doesn't know what he is saying," I try.

"Okay," she listens. "What should he say?"

"It's not the Taliban—well, it is, but it isn't. It's not on them, it's on us. But it's everything—the PowerPoints, the poppy, the money, the Special Forces. We…we didn't know how to win." And then we listen to the strangeness of Bowe's return. I finally stammer, "I'm just glad he's home." I feel emotional and tired and sad, not just for one lost sergeant, but for everyone whose boots were lain at a makeshift cross so far from home.

But today, today I'm heading towards the black and white and green Cascades, with no one from Kabul riding along to explain away our collective failure. I search for a pop song—Katy Perry—and memories of shouting "Firecracker" with the Marines trace my route along river and mountain pass. The sky is blue overhead, and the Skykomish rushes with snowmelt towards the Puget Sound and the Pacific. The Helmand, dull and turgid, is rolling slowly some 3,000 miles away, and they are probably walking among the poppies now, scoring the pods with little knives. Another time, another world.

Down in southern Helmand, we were the first of the blooms. From helo bay doors, we would strain to see the colored floral carpets of Afghanistan spread below. Reds and whites and purples. It should have been the national flag, some said. In a meeting, the head British civilian told us that poppy production had been effectively eliminated from the Helmand Green Zone. This was said with a straight face; everyone at said meeting had flown over the square plots blooming in the desert. It was taken for what it was worth, and we moved on to the accomplishments achieved in the last 90 days. Small ticks in absurd boxes tracked the transition—we had been told to only report the "strides" towards governance. A room without Afghans discussing the future of Afghanistan, and none of us able to whisper what we knew was coming.

The Cascades are always green, but spring wakes them. Waterfalls cracking rock, trees hungry for sun. Looming mountains outlined black teeth against the sky. Mountains are my home, the cloister of hills and rock. I am safe in the mountain passes, amongst the granite spires and towers. Afghanistan is supposed to be a nation of mountains, but Helmand lies flat against the bleaching sky. Up in Kajaki, during my second year, we would look out over the crenellations of sand and bedrock folding up toward Taliban country in northern Helmand. At night, we could sight the summit outposts of the Afghan Army as tracers lit back and forth up and down the peaks. But my memories of Helmand are the dry expanses, leaving mountains clean.

I shoulder my backpack and hike. The simple steps eat miles, slowly rising, then climbing to a white-blue still frozen alpine lake encircled with black peaks and glaciers. Snow flows downward, melting into the lake, rushing out to water the apple trees of Peshashtin and Wenatchee. I make camp on a granite bluff above the lake, and from the tent flaps I watch the sunlight slant and color the massive faces of the cirque. The names are a fairytale—Enchantment Peak, Aasgard Pass, Dragontail. I let imaginary stories of bravery and valor weave me to sleep.

In dreams, Massoud returns. He holds the small deer he kept on the Afghan side of the base. The deer is dead. Massoud is dead. We walk through the bazaar in dreamtime, and he hands candy to young children who turn away and vanish.

"You remember when you first came here?" Massoud's voice is the same, high and soft. The voice of a young Afghan man, thrust into leadership. A district governor with a district gone.

"Yes, you introduced me to Haji Wakil, and he yelled at me for an hour, then we ate chicken wings."

"Ha-chee, yes! He is a good cook. I miss his food." The bazaar is empty but for some disappearing children. The stalls are open and stocked, the blacksmith's stove still lit. We walk through the small park where roses grew in the spring. Somewhere a motorbike is buzzing, but the sounds are all echoes.

"Massoud, I wasn't there. I couldn't stop it. We couldn't stop it. I—we don't know how."

Massoud would end meetings with proverbs, something to impress whatever visiting dignitary or military man. "An ant crawls uphill to go home."

He reaches out for my hand, but his curled fingers are now covered with blood. The deer's throat is slashed. The muezzin's call crackles through the streets. Massoud is no longer holding the deer, but clutching a bent steering wheel. Blood lines his face. He turns away and walks back towards the mosque. Alone on the street, I see poppies growing through the roses.

I wake to pre-dawn twilight. Massoud is gone, Helmand gone. In front of me is a mountain. I pull on my boots, grab an ice axe, and move uphill.

The snow is frozen and the climb is steep. Midway, the sun crests the ridge, but the path stays firm. Up and up and up. The lake shrinks to a teardrop below me. I make the final footsteps over the top, and the entire Enchantment Basin is laid out before me, covered in late season snow. In Helmand, men would be boiling water for tea or praying or sleeping in the rushes along the river, waiting till night to move on. But I am in the mountains. There is no one but a lone ptarmigan molting from white to brown and grey. I could yell and scream at the peaks, demanding answers. But I don't. The peace of this place is quiet, ephemeral.

One night in Helmand, we climbed up one of the ancient, crumbling guard towers of our mud-brick fort. In the distance, a storm was battering the desert. Lightning strikes flashed down, turning the underside of the clouds orange. The air was completely still around us, and

nothing carried any sound. We watched the mute torment while the infinite stars shone around the edges. It was quiet. Later that night, we were mortared, and the explosion knocked down the sandbags I used as a wall. The sound of thunder, simply removed a few hours.

In the Enchantments, I light a pipe and smoke. The acrid smell contrasts the cold mountain air. The ptarmigan sits completely still, hoping to blend into the rock and ice. The sun warms the snow, releasing small avalanches sliding down the slopes, a whispering, inevitable sound. Is Afghanistan the bird, waiting patiently for me to leave? Is Helmand the slowly collapsing snow? Or is every metaphor cheap, comparing the silence of this place to the dry wind of somewhere we never understood? My pipe fizzles out, and the ptarmigan finally flushes when I stand up to make my way back home.

The Taliban take back southern Helmand in the fighting season of '16. Northern Helmand stumbles and staggers into their hands over the course of the summer. An errant Afghan Air Force strike kills another good friend, his smile gone in a flash of fire, and he joins my dreams. Now, 4,000 men and women await orders to do what 30,000 couldn't. "An ant crawls uphill to go home," Massoud said. I'm in the mountains carrying ghosts above tree line, toward the sky.

Kay Henry

Kay Henry is a writer with roots in the American Midwest, who now lives with her husband in northern Spain. She holds her MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts. When her parents died, Kay inherited a number of artifacts from World War II including memorabilia from the USS Oklahoma, the battleship on which her father was serving when the bombs fell on Pearl Harbor in 1941. This essay is one attempt to understand her parents' lives during those years, and to explore how memories of war are passed to succeeding generations.

Seventy-five Years Later, What I Still Don't Know
Kay Henry

December 7, 2016.

At 8:00 in the morning, I'm enjoying an ordinary breakfast outside on the front porch: a bowl of muesli, hot coffee. I slip the dog a biscuit and watch the mist roll through the olive grove, preparing the way for the day's sunshine. Except for a distant neighbor's tractor, all is quiet.

Seventy-five years ago at this time of day, bombs began to fall on my father. Torpedoes began to hit his ship. Bull-horned orders blared. Sailors, just off-shift, began to swarm over decks to their battle stations. The U.S.S. Oklahoma, struck in the first minutes of the attack on Pearl Harbor, began to list. Young men began to die. My father was twenty-two.

When I was twenty-two, I flew off to Strasbourg, France, on a graduate fellowship in literature. My father, same age, faced his first combat, and for the next three years, without a single home leave, he saw action in all the major battles of World War II's Pacific theatre.

Now, on this calm morning in rural Spain, where my husband and I have, we think, come to live out our days, I see anew how young my father was when the war began. I wonder if the Pearl Harbor attack was his first experience of death. I wonder how he went on, battle after battle, and what he felt when the bombs finally fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I wonder if he thought, these bombs are more terrible than those that struck us in 1941. Or if he thought, all bombs are terrible. If he grieved that day in August when the war ended but the suffering, unspeakable, continued. See action. Pacific theatre. The euphemisms of war. My father and the other millions of sailors, airmen, and soldiers who fought in World War II did more than "see action"; they witnessed carnage, they trembled with fear, they followed adrenaline rushes into bravery. They killed other human beings, for God's sake, having learned that killing others was often the only way to avoid being killed oneself, and, in my father's case, the only way of protecting his ship and the men it carried.

See action? Lights, camera, action! Curtain up – we're in the theatre! Spell it the British way, with an "-re," not an "-er," and it becomes even less real. Orthography ascribing distance, matching the newsreel images of smiling, busy faces as men file past the camera on their way to the unknown. "It's not a theatre, it's a goddamn war," I imagine my young father saying. "People we can't find want to torpedo our ship, and I haven't seen my family in a year, two years, now three years. All I can do is my job, up there in Fire Control. I try to do my job, and not wonder too much about whether I'll make it. Lots of people don't. Lots of people I was on the Oklahoma with, they got killed. I didn't. Maybe I keep doing my job for their sake, or maybe because it's the only way I can think of I'll ever get home."

Service, there's another euphemism. My father served in the Navy, served in the war. At the end of his life, a hospice nurse, well-intentioned, asked if he'd served in the military. He affirmed that he had been in the Navy. "Thank you for your service," she said. I could see him thinking, "That was a long time ago." Not quite rolling his eyes. Seeing, as I did, that her thank-you was rote and sincere at the same time. Weeks later, as cancer continued to weaken my father's body – the body that had carried him through the war, through losing a son, through nursing his wife in her final illness – weeks later, the same woman asked him, "Did you enjoy your time in the service?" "Enjoy?" he repeated, incredulous. "Hell, no, I can't say I *enjoyed* it." His eyes focused on a distant memory: a dead friend, a battle, the taste of pea soup amid the

gunfire at Guadalcanal, his hammock's sharp scent. "Really?" asked the nurse. She was surprised, confused, expecting a different answer.

And yet, I've seen photos of him and a friend at Waikiki Beach, laughing, holding bottles of beer, marveling at the unaccustomed November sunshine.

More euphemisms: Engage the enemy. Lose a friend. Win.

I finish my breakfast and feed the cats. Two black and white toms have adopted us. They look so much like my father's cats that we named one of them Francis, his middle name, which he claimed to hate. In the Navy, everyone called him Bill, though his birth-certificate name was Walter. His father and grandfather were both William. I don't know where the Francis came from, and there are not many people left to ask. Our biological family now consists of my sister, me, my niece and her two children, and half a dozen cousins around my age. Together, if we talked more often, we might be able to assemble answers to a few more questions about the past.

In the time it takes me, seventy-five years after the bombing, to get ready to drive to town, chaos had enveloped Honolulu. The Oklahoma had turned on its side. My father had crawled up the nearly vertical deck and jumped off its side into a flaming ocean. A rescue boat pulled him aboard just as he hit the water – a double blessing, since he couldn't swim. I picture the scene after the attack as I drive through olive groves, themselves home to a war whose nominal victor died in my lifetime. Pine forests top the Catalunyan hills, planted, I've learned, on Franco's orders to hide Republican graves.

I'm going to our village this morning to meet John for coffee. John is a seventy-eight-year-old retired classics professor from England. He leads our poetry circle: seven British women, and me, who meet monthly to discuss poems we've selected according to a theme of John's choosing. Today, we're just having coffee. John's vision is weak and he has trouble walking. Widowed, he has moved out of his large home with its view of the Mediterranean, exchanging it for the drab block of an assisted living facility. The women of the poetry circle take him out sometimes, for lunch or a drink or just some fresh air. I meet with him twice a month to read to him. He's especially fond of Homer.

Today, John is wearing a canvas vest with multiple pockets, a checkered shirt, a pair of jeans, and a cardigan. Before we leave his room, he asks what time it is. I look at my phone's clock and smile: 11:11, I tell him. That was our family's favorite time. When we went to bed at night, we'd take one last look at the clock and more likely than not it would say 11:11. Uncannily often, 11:11 was the answer to the question "What time is it?' 11:11 makes me think of my father and I feel warm, as if he's just paid me a visit.

At our last poetry session, our theme was "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we shall die." Mortality, I suppose, has been on John's mind lately. The theme produced a wide range of poems, from Victorian poorhouse ballads to Horace. John quoted from the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam:

> "Ah, make the most of what we yet may spend,
> Before we too into the dust descend."

I own my father's copy of the *Rubaiyat*. It's small in format, no more than six inches long and four wide, its black leather cover stamped in gold. Inside, on a frontispiece printed with a watery blue inkwash, my father had written in his careful, angular script:

W. F. Henry
Honolulu, H. 1941

I alight on a new puzzle. Did he read Khayyam's one hundred and one quatrains before or after the attack? If before, at twenty-two, how was he affected by the poem's insistent message? If afterwards, how did witnessing Pearl Harbor's destruction change how he might have read those verses? And if my father bought and read this little volume before December 7, why is the book in such pristine condition? I own a scrapbook full of artifacts from that time. Some items were brought up from the Oklahoma after she sank: waterlogged newsletters, menus, and certificates that had been rescued from his footlocker. Letters, too, that must have arrived after the bombing, given how well preserved they are. But this book mystifies me. It might have been a gift from his Aunt Gertrude, an early Christmas present. Or maybe it was sent to him for his birthday the previous August. He could have received it, inscribed it, read it, and sent it home for safekeeping. I don't know how many personal objects sailors were allowed to keep on a battleship, even in peacetime. I do know that he treasured the book until the end of his life, reading it often, always knowing its exact place on the bookshelf.

Regardless of when he first received the *Rubaiyat*, I am certain the centuries-old poem from a long-dead poet helped my father mend his shattered self. Whether delivered from Aunt Gertrude or spotted in a Honolulu bookstore, it arrived just when he needed it. Would he have bought it for himself? I wonder now when local Honolulu stores opened for business again after the bombing. Open shops imply normal life, which in December 1941 had all but vanished from the island of Oahu – indeed, from much of the world. Still, I can imagine my father dressed in a fresh uniform, stopping before a window, browsing along a dusty shelf, reaching for the tiny volume. I see him opening it to a quatrain urging him to seize the day in case the next day brought his death. Or to Khayyam's most famous citation:

"A book of verses underneath the bough
a jug of wine, a loaf of bread, and thou
Beside me in the wilderness."

These words must have set him dreaming of picnics with my mother, Jean, memories that could have comforted him, or conversely, increased his anguish. I have photos of them both at maybe eighteen, already sweethearts, each reaching up to caress the horse whose gentle face dominates the portraits. In the background, a Kansas pasture's grassy hills. The war had begun in Europe by then. My father had not yet enlisted.

At the start of the war in the Pacific, my mother was just out of college and living in Denver. Marriage would have to wait until 1944, when her sailor was allowed his first home leave since Honolulu. My mother had her own stories of the Pearl Harbor bombing and its long aftermath, many of which I am able to tell. Some, like how it felt to have my father wake screaming beside her in the night, decades after armistice, I cannot.

John and I finish our coffee. Today, December 7, he has talked of opera, his first marriage, his desire to see temples along the Nile. I try to listen to John and encourage him to share his memories and hopes. But I cannot *not* think of my father. He is twenty-two. Four-hundred twenty-nine of his shipmates are dead. He is safe for now. He walks the streets, in shock. He has no one to give him orders. His ship is at the bottom of the harbor. He needs food, clothes, comfort. An idea of what comes next.

*

A friend emailed me an article about the U.S. Navy's recent decision to repatriate the remains of sailors killed at Pearl Harbor. It was about a man whose remains were identified through DNA testing and sent back to his home town of Whitewater, Kansas, for burial. The article said that the young man, Lewis Wagoner, died after climbing the deck, stepping over the railing, and leaping into the flaming, oil-covered water far below. He couldn't swim, witnesses said, and he quickly drowned. I imagine my father at the railing with the doomed sailor. It could have happened, after all; they were both from Kansas, serving aboard the same ship. Acquaintances, possibly friends. Maybe, desperate, they would have encouraged each other to jump. Encourage in the sense of: impart courage. I imagine them reaching for each other's hands, then going over, through the air and into the flames. Like pairs of people who barely knew each other on 9-11, who held hands and leapt into an ash-filled void when the twin towers went down. As my father was being pulled into the boat that saved his life, he might have seen the other young Kansan sink beneath the surface. Men were dying all around him. Did Lewis Wagoner stand out? Did my father think, seeing him die, if he did see him die: "How is it that I'm still alive?"

Now, Wagoner's bones are buried in the dry flint hills of southeastern Kansas. My father's ashes are scattered on our Missouri farm. Wagoner died 73 years before my father did, and was buried two years after. Math that makes no sense.

*

Days – peaceful ones, at least -- tend to follow an ordinary pattern. Waking, coffee, tasks. I go to the shops in the village, note the color of the ocean, have lunch with a friend. I drive a car to my home; I open the door with a key. Evening rituals: a drink, a walk, a kiss. My husband has made a *tagine* of green peas. We eat it together, with fresh homemade bread heated on the wood stove. Our bed, upstairs, is covered with warm blankets.

I consider my obsessive need to know what my father was doing, thinking, feeling, seeing at every stage of December 7, 1941. Of course this is impossible. I can never know any such details besides what I've heard all my life and what research might yield about the events of the day. I've seen on-line, for example, the U.S.S. Oklahoma captain's report of the battle. It totals the grim numbers of dead and unaccounted for, and it praises the men who defended their ship. It tells a story, but not all of it. The rest, I will need to imagine.

And yet I sense in myself a twin compulsion to report my own December 7, to match ordinary events in the here and now with extraordinary ones from back then. Not to feel guilty or superior, nor to deepen my own sense of loss, but to see both days with more clarity. To know my young father. To bring him home.

<u>FICTION</u>

Morgan Crooks

Morgan Crooks grew up in the Finger Lakes of NY, a beautiful part of the country carved into being by indifferent glaciers. He lives now with his wife outside of Boston, teaching ancient history. Find him online @raponikoff on Twitter and on his personal website: ancientlogic.blogspot.com. About "The Ferry Back" he writes, "This is one of my shortest and most painful stories. While this is meant as fiction, the situation draws its conflict from personal experience: a war never truly ends, not within one lifetime or many."

The Ferry Back
Morgan Crooks

It is the only thing I bring of Dad's, the only thing I can bring. Everything else is too dangerous for college or brings me too much grief. But this small white circle of cloth is different.

It is about the size of a half dollar, bearing a simple blue boat in front of a waterfall. I was proud of it once, sure it meant something to him. Then I showed it to my grandfather.

He took it from my hand, inspected it for a long moment, his face crinkled with some dry, kindling fury.

That night was Thanksgiving, the first time in many years we had gone to my paternal grandparents' for the evening rather than my maternal side. The crowd was smaller, the food cooked by one person rather than several. I dug into cranberries as Dad stood to help ladle gravy onto each pale slice of meat. He gestured for Grandfather's plate, tipping the spoon forward to let all that runny brown stuff spill out when he looked up at Dad and said, "No one's forgot."

"Excuse me?"

Grandmother shot her husband a look. "Oh, you let him be."

"I've let him be. I've let him be his entire goddamn life. I'm not going to hold my peace one more night."

Color came to Dad's face. "Say what you're going to say."

"You're a coward. A piece of fabric isn't going to change that. I don't break bread with cowards."

He got up with his dry turkey and ate his dinner in the living room, watching his beloved Orangemen.

Dad didn't say another word the entire dinner and fumed during the car ride home. Before I went to bed, he sat me next to his desk.

"I want it back."

He eyes did not shift from mine. I fished it out of my pocket and gave it over.

"You disappointed me."

My eyes burned in shame. "I didn't know what it meant."

"I bought this when I reached the other side of the border. I was there three weeks before I came back. I changed my mind and enlisted. I couldn't live with what he would think. But he already had his mind made up. You see that, don't you?"

Later when mom asked him to leave, I found it in a box he left behind. Now I take it out and imagine him on that lonely ferry across the Niagara. I wonder which action was braver, crossing for this patch or wearing it on the way back.

E.M. Paulsen

E.M. Paulsen lives and teaches in Austin, TX. She grew up on the Monterey coast of California, a setting that influences much of her work, including the novel-in-stories she is currently revising. Most recently, she lived in Roanoke, Virginia, where she completed her MFA in Creative Writing at Hollins University. This story was inspired by Roanoke and the Blue Ridge Mountains. She chose not to name the protagonist in order to emphasize that his story is not just his, and not just the story of soldiers returning home, but the story of anyone who has had the disorienting experience of returning to a place they knew well when they themselves have changed.

Homecoming
E.M. Paulsen

The laundromat looks crowded, which is surprising for a Wednesday afternoon. The boy in uniform stands outside the glass door, sees himself in it, and squares his shoulders. He shifts the weight of the duffel slung across him, swings wide the door and steps through it. Despite the crust of snow covering the mountains, the laundromat has a steamy jungle heat. As he enters, he ducks his head and removes his cap. He expects to feel eyes on him, but no one is paying attention. Clustered around the washers in the center of the room is what appears to be an extended family, four women of varying ages and a number of small children. One little boy is perched atop a washer, while around and around the washers his siblings—or maybe cousins—chase each other, shrieking and chattering in another language.

From the far corner of the laundromat, away from the foreign family, wafts the stinging scent of cigarette smoke. An enormous woman is slumped in a white plastic chair, a large black dog and a baby sprawled on the floor beside her. He tries not to stare, tries not to think about how she's smoking, how she has her dog, no less, in a place where people clean their clothes. He wonders if six months ago he even would have noticed or cared. He's home on leave for the holiday, but he's also spent the morning doing recruitment down at the high school. Hard to believe he was there himself just last spring.

The boy in uniform sets his duffel on top of an empty washer, begins feeding it rumpled uniforms. He digs in his pockets for coins, stirring up lint. He pushes them into the slot one by one, waiting for the clink of metal on metal that tells him the coin has reached the belly of the machine and hasn't gotten stuck. After he starts the washer, he lowers himself into one of the plastic chairs lined up along the front window. The legs of the chair shift beneath him as it struggles to accommodate his weight. He sits still, hands folded in his lap, sharply aware of the large body he has yet to feel at home in.

It feels strange to him to come in here and not see anyone he knows. These must be people come down from even higher in the mountains to do their washing. He wonders what language the family is speaking. Russian, maybe? Despite their chatter and noise, and the fact that they're right in front of him, his gaze drifts back to the corner of the room. The woman is ignoring her baby, staring into the middle distance, a pair of glasses resting at the end of her nose. His own nose itches, looking at her. She has long, thin hair the color of dust, and her sides spill over the edges of the chair like thick drips of candle wax. The baby is gripping a chair, standing on wobbly legs. It is barefoot, wearing only a blue tee shirt that hangs almost to its knees. It tugs on its mother's leg. Slowly, from some bag hidden to him by her girth, she removes a chocolate chip cookie and offers it to the baby. When it raises its arms to reach for the cookie, the tee shirt reveals a sagging diaper.

The boy in uniform realizes he shouldn't be staring, even if they haven't noticed him. He lowers his eyes to the floor. The linoleum has a deep, ragged crack running across it, as if the earth split just here. Through the clear round door of the washing machine, he watches his clothes spin in frothy circles. Every now and then, he catches a glimpse of grey camo, but mostly it's just bright clean white. The color of the snow. He could have taken his laundry home. His mother would have been glad to do it for him, but she has his four siblings to care for, and his sister says his mother's still sick. Her cough now sometimes brings up blood, but still she smokes half a pack a day. In her letters, his mother tells him a hero, that she's proud of him for

getting out of here. His mother's never even been out of these mountains. She's lived her whole life here. To her, town is this crumbling strip mall with the laundromat, the diner, the barbershop, the wide, low-slung church across the street that each Sunday holds all the people she knows. He wishes he could tell her about this one weekend, the first weekend they were on leave, when they drove three hours to Virginia Beach. He'd like to tell her about how the sand felt, how soft and unstable it was, how when you took a step it felt like the earth was shifting beneath you. He wishes he could tell her about the morning they got up early to run on the beach, how the sun came up over the water like a runny egg, and the color of the water changed from pearly grey to brilliant blue. He wishes he could tell her about this place they went at night, where he ate crab for the first time, cracked the shell himself and let the sweet juice drip out of his mouth. The band was playing jazz, the gold horns gleaming in the dim light. He wishes he could tell her how there's more color on the coast than she can imagine. But she'd just worry. She'd be afraid of the things she's never seen.

Two of the Russian kids have gotten one of the laundry carts and loaded two of the others into it. They push the cart in circles around the rows of washers, laughing and shouting wildly. The smallest child, the one perched atop the washers, scrambles back and forth, following their progress, his knees drumming on the metal washer lids. The women are paying no attention to them. They're holding onto opposite corners of large greyish sheets, coming together to fold them. They're immersed in their own loud conversation. The kids in the cart hurtle around the washers again. This time one of the girls is standing up in the cart. When he sees the cart headed for the crack in the floor, the boy in uniform half-rises to his feet. He's about to fling an arm out, sure the girl will tumble from the cart. But somehow she doesn't fall. The cart lurches over the crack, and the little girl screams a little and crouches back down in the basket. From across the room, the black dog barks once.

He falls back into his seat. The plastic legs sway under his weight. He feels a prickling at the back of his neck, a delayed feeling of fear. He was certain the girl was going to fall and crack her skull on the dirty linoleum. Why aren't the mothers paying attention? But he knows the answer. The women are tired; they're using what is likely their one day off to do all the laundry. They have too many kids to keep track of. The older kids are supposed to be looking after the younger ones, and if one of the younger ones ends up with a bloody nose or a broken arm, it will be the oldest child's fault.

His laundry has stopped, puddled clean and wet at the bottom of the washer. He gets a cart, dodging the Russian kids. He fills it with his clean clothes and trundles it over to a dryer, starts his stuff spinning again. On his way back to his seat, he waits for the Russian family to pass him on their way out the door. All of them, even the smallest, are laden with armfuls of clothes.

"Take care," one of the women says, startling him, on her way out the door.

With the Russians gone, the laundromat is quiet, except for the clunking and whirring of the machines. There's nothing to do but wait. He glances at the corner where the mother is leaning back in her chair, eyes closed. The baby is bent over, tugging on one of the dog's ears. The boy in uniform lets his eyelids drift shut. He thinks about going home, about how his mother will press him gladly against her soft, sick body, how she will breathe into his ear with her failing lungs. He thinks about lying at night in his old narrow bed, his eyes tracing the cracks on the ceiling, listening to her cough, listening to her insist in the morning that she's fine, she's fine, that it's just the cold, you know how it is this time of year.

He thinks about if—when. His sisters are seventeen, fifteen, thirteen. His brother, the youngest, is only ten. His sister will be eighteen soon enough. Maybe he can rent a little house for them near the base. Maybe even on the base. Would they let him do that, let him live with them there, in a little house, the way the married men do with their families? He can't come back here, and they won't be able to stay here without him, in their damp house with the floors that slope down with the mountain.

He feels something against his leg. His body jolts and he opens his eyes. The baby from the corner clings to his pants, holding up half a cookie. The baby's eyes are fever-bright blue, and there are two slick trails of snot running from its nostrils to its upper lip. The baby is smiling at him, revealing an uneven row of pebbly grey teeth. He tries to smile back, but his smile is a clammy one, with no warmth.

"No thanks," he says, resisting the urge to shake the baby's tight grasp on his leg. "That's for you."

"Hank," calls the baby's mother. "Let the soldier be. Come share your cookie with Dog."

"No! Not for Dog!" the baby cries, waving the cookie in his fist. He turns and stumbles back toward his mother.

The boy in uniform sees it right before it happens. The baby's bare foot caught in that crack just as he jams a piece of cookie into his mouth. The baby falls. The boy stiffens, anticipating the cracking of bone against linoleum. Miraculously, the baby lands on his hands and knees, not flat on his face. The moment after he lands, there's silence. No gasping breath, no rising wail. Just a stuttering hiss of air as he tries to breathe, the cookie stuck in his throat.

The boy in uniform's eyes meet the mother's across the room. For a moment they are both still, each waiting for the other to act. Then the mother rises and rushes to her fallen child, her fat bobbling as she runs. The old dog rises stiffly to his feet and follows her, wagging his tail stupidly.

"He's chokin!" she cries. "Hank!"

The mother grabs her son by one flailing arm and raises him to her chest. The baby makes sputtering noises, spurts of air struggling up and down from his panicked lungs. The baby's face is an ashy color, his cheeks darkening to a purplish-brown as he searches for air.

"What do we do?" the mother cries, looking at the boy in uniform. But he is still as a drift of snow. His feet have become part of the floor, part of the mountain itself.

The mother begins shaking the baby, up and down, up and down. All the boy can do is stare. Suddenly, she stops. She raises her hand and hits her son square on the back, with a surprisingly deep thump. A glistening chunk of cookie flies from the baby's mouth. He gasps and starts coughing, which quickly turns to wailing.

"Oh-Jesus-thank-God-Hank!" the mother exclaims, pressing the baby to her chest, almost obscuring him with the drapey folds of skin hanging from her arms. She, too, starts to cry, slow tears that drift down her sagging cheeks. She murmurs to her child, and gradually his crying quiets. They've forgotten about the boy in uniform, trapped in his chair by the weight of his own body.

Suddenly, he lurches to his feet. He strides over to the dryer. He yanks it open, the clothes still spinning. He shoves the damp uniforms into the duffel. When it is full, he hurries past the woman, the baby, the dog. He can feel their eyes on him, and he slouches his shoulders. He opens the glass door and steps out into the cold air, crunches across the parking lot. It isn't until he reaches the bus stop that he realizes he's shivering. The mountains hunch before him, black and wet with bone-white patches of snow.

Katja L. Kaine

Katja L Kaine lives in Yorkshire, England where she develops novel writing software and writes novels and short stories. You can read her short fiction, essays and rants at www.katjalkaine.com as well as various print and online publications. Of "Abra's Price", Kaine says, "I wrote this story as a pressure valve to release some of the heartbreak and frustration I felt at true events that took place at the height of the refugee crisis and the depressing attitudes that seemed to pervade the narrative."

Abra's Price
Katja L. Kaine

Once I was not the person I am.

I had little. I was poor. But I was not unhappy. The days were hot and dusty, the food simple but good. I had a tin roof to sleep under and a school with brick walls.

English was my favourite. The language, the people, the tea. The whole 'kit and caboodle' I would say and my friends would giggle at the funny sounds.

Abra the English, that is what they called me.

I brought a pencil and old newspapers to the movies – that was really just an old TV on a table in a shack - and I would write down all the words I didn't know so I could learn them later. I got a reputation as the one who could translate the movie for you. If there was a lot of talking, people would look at me, and I would tell them what was said. Or sometimes I would think of something even better.

I always wanted to move to England, even before the trouble started.

The Harbingers come. They say we are either with them or against them. If we are against them, we die.

Many, many people leave my country. We travel like a river that has burst its banks. They are not happy about this, these countries who are our neighbours. They say we are dangerous, that we will cause trouble, hurt people. We try to tell them we are here because we do *not* want to hurt people. If we wanted to hurt people we would stay at home.

But they do not listen. Or they do not care. I do not know if it is one thing or the other thing. I do not know if it matters.

So we move on. We become nomads, a people with no home.

The next place we stop to rest, they want to put us in camps. Perhaps you think this is a fine idea, and we should be grateful for somewhere safe to live. Let me tell you about these camps.

You have a tent with a broken zip, so you can never close it. You cannot keep out the cold, and you have only a certain number of blankets, so you must pile your clothes on your children to keep them warm at night. You cannot keep out the bugs. Have you ever woken up in the morning and picked insects from the skin of your children? The insects will crawl all over you all the night. You have no privacy. You share a one-room tent with your husband and children, and inches away on each side are more tents with more families. You feel too covered in filth. You cannot have a conversation. You cannot even talk to someone in a private way. And because of the cold and the bugs and the dust and the dirt you can never clean, no matter how hard you scrub, your children get sick. So you must carry them across the camp to the medicine tents, where you must wait for the whole day, or half the day if you are lucky. And when you see the doctor, they say, yes. I know what medicine your child needs. But we have none of it left. I am sorry. You must go home now. So you take your sick child back to your cold, filthy tent. There is nothing you can do to help them.

Living in a refugee camp is like having to die very slowly.

If it does not kill you in your body, it takes you the other way as your mind rots inside your skull and you don't care if you live or die. Then it is better to stay at home and die quickly.

I did not want to go to the camps. We had to keep moving. Travel further away.

This is the time I start praying to God.

There are no trains, no buses going to other countries. Not for us. Everybody knows this. The other countries close their doors. They say you cannot come in.

So when you look into the eyes of your children, look into their faces and know that they bring to you more joy than anything else in this world, know you would do anything to keep them safe, you know you have to pay the man with the black mask. You have to pay him everything you have, and then you can go on his boat in the dark.

So we pay. Every last coin we have, for five tickets. Me, my husband, my three children. My oldest is six, my youngest not even two years old. Too young for such danger. Children should cry because they do not want to go to bed. Because their stomachs hurt because they ate too much honeycake. Not because they are sick and cold from night chills and starving from having nothing but damp biscuits to eat for days.

I lost friends on these boats before. Three of them. One of my friends had an infant only six months old. My friend could swim, but she was trying to save her husband, who could not, and her child. The waves, and the dark, it was too much.

So yes, I am not stupid. I know it is dangerous. But it is dangerous for maybe one, maybe two hours. At home it is dangerous all the time. Until you are dead.

Death is in every direction.

The boat is worse than your nightmare. So many people crush in so you cannot move without standing on someone's foot. Screaming, vomiting, children crying and covering their eyes. If you are in the middle you can't breathe. If you are at the edges you might get pushed out. If you complain the men in charge beat you. Not everybody makes it, but by the grace of God and thanks to my prayers, my family places our feet on the mud of Europe.

In my country the world consumes the people, but in this place people consume the world.

Europe is supermarkets with rows of colourfully packaged processed food with abundance, water piped to your home, cars that are clean inside and out and never rattle, trains that shoot like arrows. Cheap coffee in expensive cardboards cups with your name written on. Ice cream, soft seats, songbirds, plastic bins with wheels.

But this is not our Europe.

Our Europe is metal barriers and heavy armoured policemen in long black masks. It is white people looking at us with nothing, and clutching their riches closer to their chests. People spitting at us, or simply looking away.

More camps.

Parents collapse from exhaustion, their children crawl into the street, scraping up crumbs from the tarmac, cracking their teeth on the crumbs of concrete they pick by accident. Screeching in the purest of innocent agonies as blood-pinked saliva trickles from the corners of their mouths and shards of tooth cut their lips.

And what about my beloved England? It is further away from me than ever. Not only in steps across land, but its heart and mind, I learn very quickly. England does not love me.

They ask me to translate the newspapers, my new community. They see the big photographs of themselves with tears and pleading and outstretched arms and the big black letters so thick on the thin paper above them.

I tell them I do not understand the words. How can I tell them? They believe that people with so much would be happy to share a little. To offer sanctuary, as their kind God said they should. To be our saviours.

How can I tell them that these saviours call them parasites? That they say we swarmed, thinking only of what we could get for free, of how we could steal what was rightfully theirs. We want only things the earth gives for free. Food. Water. To sleep at night without the worry that someone might put a machete to your throat. Or that they will cut your children in half, or riddle the mattress of their cot with bullets.

Will you go to bed without fear tonight? If yes, you are lucky.

My children pile on top of my husband in the tent. I look at my family and they look already dead to me, and then I know. They will die in front of my eyes. Every last one. And I will be helpless to stop it.

I walk among the heaps of half-alive bodies lining the tent streets, needing to go somewhere to breathe. Needing to find space, find escape. But there is none.

Only bodies, crushed. The layered, dirt streaked sweat of weeks of travel. The blood of barely-survived attacks from inside the body and outside. The exhalations of fear and desperation. No way forward and no way back. No way in, no way out.

Discarded newspapers haunt and taunt me like fluttering wraiths, their words, their pictures, their messages washing the brains of the rich, clean people. Telling them to be afraid. My English is my curse. I do not wish to understand the words that surrounded us. I become ashamed of my nickname. I am glad there is nobody left to remember it.

I watch the crowds come to gawk at us through the bars. Tell us to go home.

There is one different. A little child with her mother, too young to read. She holds a toy rabbit, with long floppy ears and buttons for eyes. Her own eyes are wide and round to see humans such as us. She cocks her head and asks her mother a question. The young mother's eyes fill with tears and she nods.

The little girl pushes the rabbit through the wire fence, crushing its soft head for a moment, and calls to a boy about her age on our side. The boy looks up, at first not understanding. Then he comes to take the rabbit. He clutches it to his chest and the little girl smiles. The mother takes a picture with her phone.

The papers tumble by. The girl and her mother turn away to go home.

I stand, dizzy, like God has just whispered in my ear.

I am not helpless. I can save them.

After I know my choice I weep for days. My husband does not ask what is wrong. He looks around. My children do not ask what is wrong either. They are too tired. Too old.

When I have cried all the water from my body and all that is left is stone, I take my youngest daughter to the water's edge. Little more than a baby.

"We must give them a vision," I whisper to her.

I hold her against my chest, hugging her so tightly she squeaks. I find some more tears, from somewhere.

Then I wade into the water and lower her in. I hold her down.

Then I let her go.

The next day there is a new picture printed on the papers.

Those people who looked away now stand up. Those that stayed silent now shout. Those who shut their doors pound on the doors of the powerful.

The dam opened a crack.

The floods forced through.

A picture was enough.

VISUAL ARTS

Interview with the Artist: Laura BenAmots

Artwork from Battle Portraits (2012)
Photography by Walt Palmer

Jenny Miller, *Collateral*

The Battle Portraits collection has been out for about five years now. During that time, what has been the most unexpected result of this project?

Laura BenAmots, *Battle Portraits*

There are so many satisfying responses to the work. The community dialogue between veterans, artists, community members and activists has been very powerful, but I think the most unexpected experiences have emerged from very personal one-on-one responses by veterans. There is a painting titled *Witness*. It was being exhibited and at the opening a large marine veteran came up to me and said, "Are you the artist for that painting?" (yes) He then touched my arm, his eyes filled with tears, and said: "You got it."

During one of the exhibits I happened to be in the gallery when a female veteran came to see the show. She had never been to an art show before and took the bus across town to see the show after reading about the work in the paper. I introduced myself to her and she told me she was a survivor of sexual assault by members of her own unit and struggles deeply with PTSD as a result. A young man struggling with depression stopped me as I was installing the painting *Poet Warrior* and said he felt like that was a portrait of him gathering the courage to write and say what he felt. There are many more examples I could share.

The power of using my art to help give voice to the struggles of others has deeply affected me. I was changed by those who participated in the project and by the very impactful of experience of approaching a potentially volatile subject with a focus on shared humanity and empathy.

Miller

There are some in the writing field who say, if you haven't fought in a war, you can't and/or shouldn't write about it—that you'll never be able to get to the heart of what war really is and does to soldiers. I've heard the same thing said to painters, and other artists. Has anyone ever questioned your authority to paint *Battle Portraits*?

BenAmots

That is an excellent question. No one has ever questioned me about that and I think there are several reasons: I grew up in a nation at war and a part of my personal story is knowledge that war affects every family and individual; I believe that the paintings are truly testaments to those who have shared their stories with me. Those individuals trusted me and felt that their story was honored.... that the paintings have integrity.

Finally, these paintings are about our shared humanity. Yes, the paintings specifically feature those directly impacted by military service, but there is a universal truth that we are all dealing with things that are difficult to process. The works do not have a self-righteous political agenda but rather a societal perspective and as such, veterans are comfortable with the mission of *Battle Portraits*.

Miller

While *Battle Portraits* is about war, the experience of the female veteran who suffers from PTSD from sexual assault shows that war can take on many different meanings to different people. We are all fighting a war of some kind. Have you heard from people who may not be war veterans, but can still relate to your paintings on a very personal level?

BenAmots

Absolutely. We do not all need to have the same experience to share human emotions and empathy.

Miller

Artists are usually their own worst critics. Do you suffer from this as well? Are there times when you look at this collection and wish you could fix this or change that? Are you able to silence that inner critic?

BenAmots

YES! I have often said that being an artist is so crazy because on one hand we actually believe that we have things to express that others are interested in, while on the other, we experience waves and cycles of self doubt that can be quite immobilizing. I just say to myself, "just do the work, think later."

Miller

Have you worked with the military community since this project? Do you have plans to work in this community again?

BenAmots

Yes, I am at the forefront of faculty trainings and college programs aimed at strengthening Student Success for our Service-member population at Pikes Peak Community College, where 25% of our student population has a connection to the military.

Miller

What are you working on now?

BenAmots

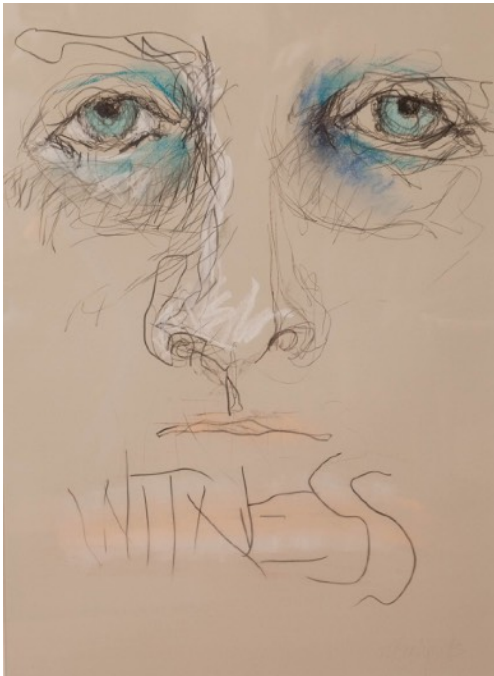
Stream of Consciousness: a convergence opened in September 2017 at Kreuser Gallery in Colorado Springs. It is inspired by our connection to the earth, sacredness of the past, bones, burials, water and hope. In addition, I have an Artist Studio Residency at The Machine Shop November through January where I will continue to create work inspired by these same subjects.

Miller

Is there a message you would want to tell the readers of *Collateral*? To other artists?

BenAmots

Some mistakenly see art as frivolous or extra-curricular, see artists as flighty. We, as artists, do not flinch away from the uncomfortable, we do not have the luxury of turning our gaze from what must be seen. It was a great privilege to have all these veterans entrust their stories to me. I am humbled and inspired. But most of all I feel invigorated by the knowledge that the work has served to build bridges and create dialogue between many diverse populations with divergent perspectives.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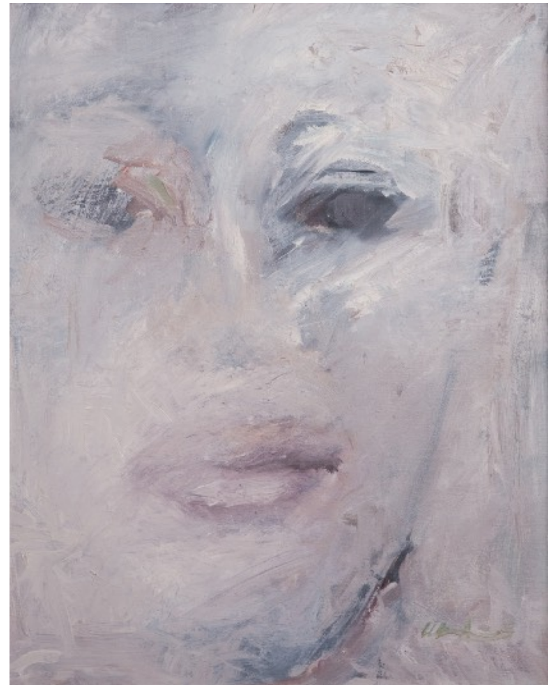

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