

COLLATERAL

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Poetry

Deborah H. Doolittle, “Another Kind of Call and Response”

Deborah H. Doolittle has lived in lots of different places but now calls North Carolina home where she teaches at Coastal Carolina Community College. She is the author of *No Crazy Notions*, *That Echo*, and *Floribunda*. Over 400 of her poems have appeared in about 180 different literary journals, most recently in *Bear Creek Haiku*, *Blue Stem*, *Hawai'i Pacific Review*, *Poets Espresso Review*, *RavensPerch*, *Slant*, and *The Weekly Avocet*. She was a finalist in the Heart of Pamlico Poet Laureate Contest for eastern North Carolina and will soon be featured as a Poet of the Month. In her copious free time, she is training for the Marine Corps Half Marathon (and other road races), volunteering at Possumwood Acres Wildlife Sanctuary, and practicing yoga. She is married to a retired Marine and lives in downtown Jacksonville with her daughter, son-in-law, and three grandchildren as neighbors. Of the poem “Another Kind of Call and Response”, she writes, “The title refers to a type of bird call songbirds make, with one bird calling out and others responding. It seemed to me that the Marines calling out cadence were doing the same thing, and that, on another level, I, too, was responding.”

Another Kind of Call and Response
Deborah H. Doolittle

I am running in the park at dawn
with bird songs accompanying
my every step, the cardinals
in the hedges, the mocker from
atop that tree, and the jays crying
to each other in the distant pines,
when I hear coming to me from
across the New River, Marines
shouting out as they run, much like
these birds. One of them calls out
the cadence, one or two words
reduced to vowel sounds, and
the others respond with different
sounds. Together, they keep a rhythm
my feet make as I round the paved
walkways in the park. They could be
lined up, in formation, running
in skivvies or in boots with full
combat gear. They could be doing
early morning calisthenics,
jumping jacks and burpees, for all
I know. I cannot see them and
the words I hear are not very
clear. It's not like I've seen that scene
a million times before. A slight
exaggeration, I know.
Together, we pound that unforgiving
pavement at the start of each day.

Dylan Doyle-Burke, “The First Three Days After Your Wife Dies on Active Duty”

Dylan D. Debelis is a founding editor of Pelorus Press, publisher, poet, and performer based out of New York City. His day job is as a Unitarian Universalist Minister. Dylan has been published in a diversity of influential literary magazines and reviews, including *Prairie Schooner*, [TAB] *Literary Review*, and [apt] *Poetry Review*. His first full-length book of poetry entitled *The Garage? Just Torch It* is out now through Vine Leaves Press.

The First Three Days After Your Wife Dies on Active Duty
Dylan Doyle-Burke

Monday afternoon the toilet runs
out onto the tile
and your super calls a plumber
to reconfigure the pipes.

Tuesday morning the grocery store
is there just as before
but they have moved
where they stack the kidney beans
over one aisle.

Wednesday evening you spill grape juice
on the living room carpet
and retrieve the bleach
from underneath the sink.
The steady-flow cap falls off
and you pour too many islands
of lonely white splotches.

At midnight a nor'easter floods
the Hudson basin with snow.

The shiver of your shadow runs wild
when you realize
there is nothing more for you to fix,
and there is nowhere else for you to go.

Shane Griffin, "At the Recruiter's Office"

Shane Griffin is a graduate student at Iowa State University's Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing and Environment. He is an Iraq War veteran and works as a firefighter/paramedic in Des Moines, Iowa. His work has appeared in the *Baltimore Review*, *Heroes' Voices*, *Hippocampus Magazine*, *Sky Island Journal*, and the *Wapsipinicon Almanac*. "At the Recruiter's Office" is part of his thesis. Griffin writes, "It was inspired by recruits and recruits everywhere. Enlisting in the military is not only a proud time, but it is also confusing and intimidating and I wanted to capture that somehow."

At the Recruiter's Office
Shane Griffin

He said,
you will have honor, adventure, camaraderie.
We will give you everything:
clothes, beans, bullets, and Band-Aids.
You can have it all.
The world will be ours.

He asked,
are you a communist?
Are you a homosexual?
Are you white, black, Hispanic,
or Other? Do you need money for college?
Can you kill to have it all?
Are you insane?

He said,
You will stand on ground
and defend it or take it.
You will have orders and like it.
You will bleed red, white and blue.
We will teach you.
You will learn.

Are you tough?
Do you want to see what you're made of?
Are you a liberal?
Do you love America?
Can you carry our flag? And
if needed, die for us all?
Check yes or no.

He said,
if *that* happens
we will wrap a coffin around you,
shoot a salute into the air,
to rest eternal in her soil.
Your mother will live assured
that you did this for America.

She will have the flag
we draped over your body.
It will hang on her wall
next to family photos
in a frame wrapped in dark,
finished wood.

He said,
at last, your signature, please.

Kathleen Hellen, "In What Manner He Had Come Back To His Own Country"

Kathleen Hellen is the author of the award-winning collection *Umberto's Night* and two chapbooks, *The Girl Who Loved Mothra* and *Pentimento*. Her poems have appeared in *Barrow Street*, *Evergreen Review*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *North American Review*, *Poetry East*, *Witness*, and elsewhere. Hellen is a recipient of the Thomas Merton prize and prizes from the *H.O.W. Journal* and *Washington Square Review*. Her poems have been nominated for the Pushcart and Best of the Net prizes and featured on *Poetry Daily*.

In What Manner He Had Come Back To His Own Country
Kathleen Hellen

He seemed to crawl back from the jungle on
his knees, fatigued. Dosed
on methadone. He smoked
the baby in its crib,
stole his mother's tv set.

For months he dreamed
the bird on the medallion.
Two serpents twinned.
The "beau coup dinkey dao"
he didn't Charlie speak.

He'd swept the villages,
points on maps he after-mathed.
Presumed dead, 91.... 40,034 killed in action—

the fiction sticking to his skin
like napalm. He said he swallowed them.
A practice going back to tribes in South America.
Australia. The Wari of the Amazon.
The Korowai of Papua.

John Jeffire, “Seeing My Son Off to War”

John Jeffire was born in Detroit. In 2005, his novel *Motown Burning* was named Grand Prize Winner in the Mount Arrowsmith Novel Competition and in 2007 it won a Gold Medal for Regional Fiction in the Independent Publishing Awards. Speaking of *Motown Burning*, former chair of the Pulitzer Jury Philip F. O'Connor said, “It works. I don't often say that, but it has a drive and integrity that gives it credible life....I find a novel with heart.” In 2009, Andra Milacca included *Motown Burning* in her list of “Six Savory Novels Set in Detroit” along with works by Elmore Leonard, Joyce Carol Oates, and Jeffrey Eugenides. His first book of poetry, *Stone + Fist + Brick + Bone*, was nominated for a Michigan Notable Book Award in 2009. Former U.S. Poet Laureate Philip Levine called the book “a terrific one for our city.” His most recent book, *Shoveling Snow in a Snowstorm*, a poetry chapbook, was published by the Finishing Line Press in 2016. For more on the author and his work, visit writeondetroit.com.

Seeing My Son Off to War
John Jeffire

You're no writer, he tells me
the night before, well-rationed
with tequila and draft beer and
sandbox testosterone, and I say
nothing because I am as drunk
as he is and I don't want to argue
and I have no counter-attack
even if I did. This morning, his
last leave before deployment ends.
I doublepark in the dark outside
domestic departures, he pulls
his bag from the back seat,
a walled city between us.
Eyes meet and cover, dumb
hands pinned in pockets until
there is nothing left to see or
say or pretend we must say.
We shake hands. When I slap
his shoulder in male ritual,
I hear the nut-quake detonation,
see the lens of a correspondent's
camera flecked with blood,
smell the rubberized vinyl
guaranteed not to leak.
I want to warn young Telemachus
of Circe's bed, reveal the trick
to stringing the heirloom bow,
tell him to keep heads up for
a one-eyed, blind giant prick with
a bone to pick staggering the Tigris,
but last night Athena misplaced the moon
the more we reloaded our cups,
the bow snapped like a winter twig
and tossed at the feet of some fool
sewing his fields with salt.
The time for words is finished.
At the curb, he nods, we regroup, he
turns his back one last time to face
wars, wars, wars—those fought,
those to be waged, father and son
mapping the prophesied waters.

Toan Nguyen, "My Father's Garden"

Toan Nguyen is a Vietnamese American writer who typically writes short fiction. His father was a southern Vietnamese trooper in the Vietnam War and, after being thrown into a prison camp for seven years, the US Government graciously allowed his family, along with other POWs and their families, to migrate to the States as part of Operation Human. Of "My Father's Garden", Nguyen writes, "Ever since I was little I've watched my father work on his garden from the window of my room each summer. After learning more about my family's history and how intertwined it was with the Vietnam war, I began to admire the way he silently pushed forward and tended to his garden; I began to wonder if that was his way of taking care of himself as he never spoke much about himself or his experiences in the war."

My Father's Garden
Toan Nguyen

He pulls weeds and groans,
wipes sweat from his brow
and I wonder what goes through
his mind as he tends the garden.

He pulls his arm back with what force
he can muster, and the mower
coughs. He tries again
without speaking, as usual.

Does he think about his family's farmland
taken away by the communists?
Does he think about the bloody war
that stole his high school years?

Does he think about his brothers, dead,
and him the oldest living in his family?
Does he think about his seven years
in a prison camp after somebody won?

The mower roars, he is successful,
his back strains, he pushes the handle.
I never know what he is thinking.
I want to move forward like he does.

.chisaraokwu., “Creating News” and “The Wake”

.chisaraokwu. is a Nigerian American poet, writer & pediatrician. Her work has been published or featured in *Tinderbox Poetry Journal*, *Page & Spine*, the poetry anthology *Desolate Country* (39 West Press), *The New England Journal of Medicine*, *The Washington Post* online and others. The poems “Creating News” & “The Wake” are part of a larger collection of her poetry exploring memory's influence on identity and personal mythology in survivors (and their descendants) of the Nigerian Civil War (Biafra War). She is passionate about addressing religious, social and gender-based trauma through the arts and loves conversing in different languages. A proud Stanford alum, she splits her time between southern Italy and southern California.

Creating News (America, July 1968)
.chisaraokwu.

lead pages shot from magazines
slam into black bodies spilling red
faces & bodies, last
words: an irresistible delicacy
print for someone else's consumption
election's preamble

The Wake
.chisaraokwu.

A wake of generals feed
off the wages of dead soldiers;
contractors hover hungrily
over war-ravaged strips of land
to fill their bellies. At the wake,
while kneeling in prayer, they
will eat of burnt flesh
and concede
that the currency of war
is paper & blood.

Carla Sameth, "Un-enlisted"

Carla Sameth is a writer living in Pasadena. Her wife is a reservist with the US Coast Guard who had previously enlisted but had to leave during "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (DADT). This poem was written on the East Coast while her wife was deployed. Walking around together as "wife and wife" on base was a very different experience for her wife post-DADT.

Carla's work has appeared in several anthologies and other publications such as *The Nervous Breakdown*, *Brevity Blog*, *Brain*, *Child & Brain Teen Magazine*, *Mutha Magazine*, *Full Grown People*, *Angels Flight Literary West*, *Tikkun*, *Entropy*, *Pasadena Weekly*, and *La Bloga*. Her story, "Graduation Day at Addiction High", which ran in *Narratively*, was selected by *Longreads* for *Five Short Stories about Addiction*. Carla was selected as a fall 2016 PEN In The Community Teaching Artist, and teaches at the Los Angeles Writing Project (LAWP) at California State University Los Angeles (CSULA) and with Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU). She is a member of the Pasadena Rose Poets who present "poetry within reach and in unexpected places." Carla has an MFA in Creative Writing (Latin America) from Queens University. Previously she "brought home the oatmeal" as a single mom, running her PR firm, iMinds PR.

Un-enlisted
Carla Sameth

Loneliness is dropping your wife at the Coast Guard base realizing you are alone for the day and you fought your last 24 hours except those last six hours bodies puzzle pieced together, deep sleep, soft blue flannel sheets. One hand holds your breast, the other your butt, her touch comforts and possesses.

Loneliness is living temporarily in Connecticut and knowing you'll have to check for ticks on your own. Like before when you picked lice out of your hair and it was long, almost to your butt. You begged your hair stylist Angel to shave your head but she said *try kerosene my grandma used it in Puerto Rico, and didn't you want long hair for your wedding?*

Loneliness feels like fire ants beginning to cover your body, little by little then nothing but ants. The pit in your stomach growing sour realizing you might actually lose weight again. A massage therapist uses her healing powers and plays Enya, finds that lump on your back. Not a problem but you realize no one else would find it either. You are alone.

Loneliness is grey and frightening, empty trailers on the dirt lot where you live. Trees still Northeast winter bare. Big trash bin scrawled *BEER*. Somersaulting, Spring bounces in, sunshine, cherry tree colors. Blinding. Green. Red. Orange. Bucolic ponds privately owned. You have never been a military wife before. But you've been lonely.

Still you say: *I feel like I had an awesome day except when that priest was beating his dog.*

Creative Nonfiction

Terrell Fox, "Selections from *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*"

Terrell Fox is a graduate of the MFA creative writing program at the University of Washington Bothell. He is a former Marine who can't draw, paint, sing, dance, play music, take pictures, sculpt, or throw pottery, so he tries to write as his way of artistic expression. His work has previously been published in *Proximity Magazine*, *Ricky's Backyard*, *Holy Shit Journal*, and *Clamor*. He has upcoming work in *Black Candies: The Eighties* and *Incoming: Sex, Drugs, & Copenhagen*. He was recently selected to be a group leader for Planting The Oar, a literature-based veteran/civilian discussion group sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities. He can be reached on Twitter @FogButWithAnX.

I can't wait to get home and forget about all of this.

Cinco de Mayo

We flew from California to Japan for the first leg of our deployment to Afghanistan on the fifth of May. The Marine Corps opted to fly our small unit commercial, since it was somehow more cost-effective to send 21 Marines and all our gear on All Nippon Airways than it was to fly us there via military air.

We were dropped off at LAX with a mountain of olive drab seabags, desert tan duffels, black Pelican cases, and camouflage packs loaded up with personal items, uniforms, communications equipment, specialized gear, and all of our weapons. We had a dozen Pelican cases of rifles, pistols, bayonets, knives, grenade launchers, and machine guns. My boss tasked me with ensuring all our serialized weapons and gear made it through security and onto the plane while he made sure all the Marines made it to the gate on time. The attendant at the check-in kiosk had no idea what to do when the first Pelican case weighed in at over 200 pounds. She looked at the piles of identical cases behind me and then back to the Pelican case on the scale. She asked me what was in it. I told her it was full of guns and she called security.

The other Marines were at a small airport bar a few gates away, trying to drink the place dry. The LAX head of security was military savvy and, finally, after I explained each kind of weapon and its function ("That's an M249 Squad Automatic Weapon. It shoots lots of little bullets really fast." "Oh, Ok. And this?" "That's an M203 grenade launcher. It launches grenades."), he shook my hand, wished me luck, and told me I had about twenty minutes to get to my gate.

The bartender where the Marines had posted was frazzled and sweaty. My boss, drunk on the last of their tequila, patted me on the back and ordered me a shot of well rum with a salt and lemon chaser. They were, he said, out of almost everything else. The Marines celebrated Cinco de Mayo in style, getting shitfaced and scaring everyone else out of the bar.

I knocked back the shot, bit the lemon, skipped the salt, and started to give my boss a quick recap of the whole process, but the gate agent called our boarding info and the boss picked up our tab. Everyone, including the bartender, cheered. We tossed cash onto the bar for a tip and stumbled to the gate.

Our seating assignments scattered us around the aircraft, but I lucked out and sat next to one of my Marines. We prepared for the twelve-hour flight to Tokyo; some of us popped in headphones to rock pre-flight playlists, some tried to read, some wrestled with those tiny airplane pillows in an attempt to sleep the plane away. A few Marines perused *SkyMall* and loudly suggested new gear for us to order and have shipped overseas: the four-foot-tall concrete Sasquatch yard statue ("It's authentically styled!") or the radio-controlled Mylar great white shark blimp ("The blimp has a 40 foot range!"). One guy fired up the in-flight seat-back movie screen to binge watch episodes of *SpongeBob SquarePants*. We were finally quiet when a flight attendant got on the PA and announced they would be serving drinks in the main cabin and that all beverages were complimentary.

We went wild. We were the only ones on the plane headed to a combat zone.

Two hours into the flight the attendants announced there was no more beer on the plane. Three hours in, they announced the wine was gone. All beverage service was suspended at the five hour mark and two flight attendants came up to my friend Allen's seat and asked him with controlled

diplomatic politeness ("We are concerned.") if we would help them drag our friend Parker out of the lavatory because he had passed out in the aisle and was half in and half out of the bathroom with his pants partly off, splayed in a puddle of his own vomit. The next seven hours went by mostly without incident.

It was the second deployment for all of us, save one, and we were excited. We were going to war again, this time to Afghanistan. We had no idea what would happen there and didn't care.

Ended up waiting 3 hours before stepping off for who knows why. Route up was hot, flat, and dusty. Passed numerous walled compounds, scrap vehicles. Got into Marjeh & went over narrow dusty roads & canals. Lots of bamboo & moon dust. Children making the same 'feed me' hand gesture while throwing rocks at our vehicles and swimming / playing in the canals. Passed motorcycles, children, goats, oxen, old men napping on the ground in the sun, more bamboo, mud-walled compounds, deep canals with green water in them, old trash, angry young men. Saw a heartbreaking sunset.

The Cat Shelter

Things went to shit fast. I thought maybe we could figure it out but she told me she cried every night on her drive back from work because she was coming home to me and not him. I slept on the couch. She deployed in two months so my plan was to gut it out until she left. I had a few more weeks of my 30-day post-deployment leave and I just needed to get out of that apartment. I couldn't sit there anymore, waiting.

I drove around Denver aimlessly, hating the city I'd been forced to move to. It was bleak and cold.

I found a cat shelter close by so I went inside to see if they needed volunteers to help clean the cages, pet the kittens, or play with the strays.

The lady at the front desk said that they needed someone to help euthanize the leftover cats since they had a backlog. She asked if I could put down 15 to 20 cats a day for a week or so. I said no and left. The little bell jingled as the door shut behind me.

I sat in the truck. It was a long time before I could go home.

Fuck.

Donkey Cart Jet Ski

We got called one afternoon to run a presence patrol through a terrible section of Saddam City, up in the northeast corner of Baghdad. Saddam City, now known as Sadr City, was a slum. It was rank, poor, dirty, and mean. There were piles of garbage strewn around every street corner and the air had a filthy, smoky haze that clung to every surface, intensified by the heat. There were animal carcasses alive with maggots in the sewers. Feral dogs lurked in the alleyways till small, dusty children found them and chased them with sticks. It smelled like scorched plastic. I had to breathe through my mouth most of the time to keep from gagging.

Once, on an earlier patrol, a Marine stepped in a puddle of mysterious purple liquid and sank up to his knee in it. He had to throw his boot away and get a series of shots from medical. We never did determine what the puddle was or why it was so deep.

Our Amtrac was parked on the corner of an intersection by the looted remnants of an old bank. The local government broke down after the invasion and there was a lawless period of looting and mayhem that lasted for several weeks. Our orders were to stay out of the neighborhood conflicts as best we could, only intervening to prevent a rape or murder. We watched countless break-ins and beatings as the oppressed rose up against oppressor, or as the poor turned on the rich. For the most part, the Iraqis left us alone.

Sometimes old men walked by us barefoot, sandals in hand, and they squatted down in front of us and hit the road with a sandal and shouted, "No Saddam!" with every strike, then they looked up at us with toothless smiles, like they said the magic words to keep from getting shot.

Other times, younger men would escort small groups of women around, the women's faces concealed, and the men would give us a thumbs up and say, "Good Bush! Bush yes!" and they would hit the women if they looked directly at us.

We were standing around in a loose cordon, checking vehicles for anything suspicious, when one of the Marines in the track gave a shout for us to come look at something. We gathered around the track and I saw a donkey cart, cobbled together from scrap wood and bent metal, towing a brand-new, gleaming white jet-ski.

It was a pristine Bombardier jet-ski, the sit-down kind. White with deep royal purple seats and a purple and black handlebar set up. A young Iraqi man sat on the nose of the jet-ski, his bare feet dangling, cheerfully beating the donkey with a switch to get it to haul his looted jet-ski off to wherever he lived. He smiled and waved at us and gave us the obligatory thumbs up followed by a "Good Bush!" just in case.

We didn't know what to do so we let him go about his day with his looted jet-ski. We spent a few minutes convincing each other that we all saw the same thing and then the next hour or so trying to figure out what he was possibly going to do with it. The Tigris and Euphrates weren't that close and the Army's riverine forces would probably just blow him up if he took it out for a summer cruise, and that was assuming he could even get gas for it or figure out how to get it started.

I wish I had a picture of that tired, abused donkey pulling the smiling, shoeless man on an immaculate jet-ski in the middle of a land-locked slum.

I spent a lot of time trying to block out images from Iraq, but I like that one. I like to think about that happy man and his shiny new jet-ski.

I found out there was an article in The Early Bird about the anti-malarial pills (Mefloquin) we've been taking. It said it causes psychotic episodes, depression, and suicidal thoughts.

Therapy

I saw a therapist once, right after I got back. He asked me if I had any stressors in my life and I laughed until I cried. He leaned in, suddenly all professional and interested, and vivisected me with his questions. Why the tears? Where did those come from? What was I feeling? Why was I feeling that way? I tried to stop laughing so I could tell him.

My wife had an affair. I came home to an empty house. I only had a month to pack up my remaining stuff. She took the cats. She took the bed so I slept on the couch. I drank too much. Sometimes I had nightmares. Sometimes there was nothing. The trees were too green. Things were too bright and too loud. The air smelled weird. No one paid attention to where they were going or what was going on around them. I found a lump on my left testicle and went through extensive testing before the docs could determine that it wasn't cancer. I didn't tell anyone about it or about how scared I was. I had to move a thousand miles away from where I spent the last ten years. I didn't recognize any of the new celebrities on TV. The songs on the radio were unfamiliar. My family kept telling me I wasn't over there anymore.

He nodded. He steepled his fingers. He said, "Mm hmm."

Up at 0500 to some stupid phone call about nothing important from 2nd ANGLICO. Hard to go back to sleep. I had a dream I killed a guy with the spike end of a tomahawk. I think I killed more people too but can't remember. Hopefully this marks the return of my violent dreams. I have not felt like myself without them.

4th of July

The roads were dark and there was a thick grey haze obscuring most of the yellow from the streetlights. The houses were blacked out except for thin beams at the edges of the windows where drapes didn't quite cover the corners. The trees were a slightly different black from the night. Noisy bursts of firecrackers shot through the spaces between the houses. The muffled whumph of heavier explosives came from further on, out beyond the edges of the neighborhood.

The fireworks sounded like heavy machine gun fire, which I found peaceful. I could always fall asleep to the sound of distant outgoing .50 cal's, lulled by the guns chanting, "Die, motherfucker, die." It made me feel like all was right with the world because someone else's day was getting the high hard one. The explosions, the detonations—they were all familiar and comforting. They let me breathe.

I had my small backpack on. Beer and first aid equipment. I had the hood of my black sweatshirt pulled up but I was careful to keep it from covering my ears so it wouldn't interfere with my hearing. I walked down the right side of the street like I had so many times before.

I took smooth, quick steps. I scanned the rooflines and building corners for silhouettes. I kept my mouth slightly open to help me hear better. I hunched down a little in order to keep my head more obscured. I opened my eyes wide but I didn't fixate on any one thing in order to take advantage of my peripheral vision and night adaptation. I kept my eyes moving. I licked my lips and tasted cordite and sulfur.

I was surrounded by sounds and smells that reminded me I should be part of a group instead of walking alone on an empty street at night. They were sensory inputs bound to feelings of teamwork and camaraderie. I paused and realized I had no responsibilities to anyone except myself. No SitReps or PosReps. No checkpoints or targets or grid coordinates or subordinates or superiors or unit tracking or radio checks. I was by myself and everything around me was potentially hostile.

It was liberating.

I was free from my life: no bills, no family, no friends, no work, no school, no pets, no wife, no girlfriend, no past, no future. No hope.

No rifle.

It was terrifying.

My hands ached for it. My hands told my brain that there was something fundamentally wrong with them because they were empty and toothless. I flexed them repeatedly to try and get the sensation to go away. It didn't work.

I kept walking. There was nothing else I could do.

Joanna Manning, “Toy Soldier”

Joanna Manning is a graduate of Syracuse University and the Rainier Writing Workshop and has served as an Army Medical Service Corps officer in Heidelberg, Germany, and Fort Lewis, Washington. For the last several years she has worked as a freelance writer and adjunct composition instructor. Currently, she is at work on a collection of essays about origin stories. She blogs at www.jlmanning.com. About “Toy Soldier” she writes, “Invented war stories are nothing new, and as long as valor is used as a measure of a man's worth, these stories will continue. My father enlisted in the Marine Corps at the height of the Vietnam War with the hope of proving himself on the battlefield, but he never saw combat. Instead, he was injured early in his career and honorably discharged. He must have been crushed by this failure, and this war story likely emerged as a coping mechanism. This essay is my attempt to understand my feelings about my father specifically, but more generally, it's my attempt to understand the cultural influences that would have me *want* him to have committed these imagined atrocities.”

Toy Soldier
Joanna Manning

Sometimes I wish he *had* killed them, the Vietnamese woman and her son, the ones whose throats he slashed during the war. Sometimes I wish his tears were real. Or the dreams that make him cry out, as he shivers in his sweat-soaked sheets. *The helicopters*, he murmurs, *Dustoff coming to get us the bell out*. I wish he could be so honestly tortured.

I know the weight of what he carries, how heavy the memory of battles we failed to fight. I confronted him once about the stories, told him I knew the truth, that boot camp was all he knew of the Marine Corps. *You don't know anything*, he snapped. *There are things you just can't know*.

That much is true. There are many things I am unable to understand: how the brain can stitch a memory from desire, how delusion becomes fact in the replaying. In the rehearing, I consider the possibilities—my father the secret operative, the invisible war vet, honorable service conducted without reward.

Sometimes I wonder whose stories are real, which one of us has it right. The language between us has lost all meaning. Signifier, signified—it's all nonsense.

Like wishing he had killed them.

What can *I love you* mean to me, when that woman and her son—figments of my own imagination now—tend the rice paddies, giving thanks to their god for peace? What can *I love you* mean from the mouth of a stranger, speaking in a language I can only wish to understand?

Rena Priest, “The Treaty of Point Elliot: Classified”

Rena writes, “I made this erasure in 2015, but put it away after seeing a play addressing questions about promises made in The Treaty of Point Elliot. I felt the play portrayed Lummi leaders as weak and it made me think about how artistic statements take hold of hearts and minds. I had to ask what kind of statement would be made in, ‘erasing’ our treaty? Especially the way historically, a single native voice can be taken as speaking for the whole tribe if circumstances suit certain agendas. Knowing this makes me conscientious about writing anything that could be misinterpreted as ‘speaking for my people.’

“Also, in 2015, the Army Corp. of Engineers was doing an environmental review on a permit application for what would have been one of North America’s largest deep-water coal ports, shipping millions of tons of dirty energy to China and endangering our Salish Sea. The treaty was ultimately an important document taken into consideration in the denial of that permit.

“My ancestor, Chowitsoot, was one of the main signatories to the treaty, and when I was a child, my stepfather, who knows our history, said to me, ‘You need to know: Your ancestor signed the treaty, but not everyone wanted it. Some people thought we should’ve fought. Families hang onto things, and if anyone ever treats you backwards because of who you come from, just let it roll off you. We wouldn’t have our fishing rights or any of what we have today if it weren’t for the treaty.’

“I’ve sometimes wondered what would have happened if our leaders had resisted. In looking at the story of Chief Joseph, I have one possible answer. In 1877, (22 years after Point Elliot) the Nez Perce were forcibly removed from their homelands. On his deathbed, Chief Joseph’s father said, “You must stop your ears whenever you are asked to sign a treaty selling your home... My son, never forget my dying words. This country holds your father’s body. Never sell the bones of your father and your mother.”

“After which, Chief Joseph recounts: ‘I pressed my father’s hand and told him I would protect his grave with my life.’ He led a fighting retreat, which lasted 3 months, crossed 1,170 miles of terrain, and ended 40 miles from refuge offered by Chief Sitting Bull at the Canadian border. 150 Nez Perce died. It ended in winter. Little children froze to death. He is said to have died of a broken heart.

“One awful fact about Native history is that it’s so horrific a story that not many people really want to hear or tell it, so it goes untold, or at the very worst, told but unheard. We get the Columbus fairy tale instead, and white American children go on in their belief that they deserve and are entitled to what they have. They are told that Native Americans were a proud and beautiful people, but were vanquished or tamed at the frontiers.

“When I approach the subject of Native history, it stings like a wound reopened, and for days every little thing makes me feel like crying in a way that feels like grief for all of humanity, because the story of America’s dealings with Natives is the story of humanity’s failure in the terrible conquest that gave birth to this country. It’s the story of greed and the irrational fear that devours a mind—fear that nurtures the incorrect belief that by taking from another, one will have enough.

“My intention in erasing the treaty this way, was to use the omissions to let the atrocity of what was done stand out. I also, wanted to paint a better outcome for us, to make it the way it was before our land was ceded/taken—to omit what didn’t serve us the way the telling of white history has served

colonizers. I call it *The Treaty of Point Elliot: Classified*, because not only is real history somewhat hidden from the general public, *classified*, but it's also used to *class up* the person giving their version of a story—*his* story, made classy, classified.”

ARTICLE 1.

The said tribes and bands of Indians hereby cede, relinquish, and convey to the United States all their right, title, and interest in and to the lands and country occupied by them, bounded and described as follows:

[REDACTED]

thence
heretofore
thence
thence
thence and
and
thence and
and
thence
and heretofore ceded as aforesaid
and thence
and
and all the right, title, and interest
of [REDACTED]

ARTICLE 2.

There is, however, [REDACTED]

the creek emptying
the mouths emptying respectively
, and
tribes and
damage

ARTICLE 3.

There is also [REDACTED]

hereinafter
|
the
central agency
[REDACTED]

ARTICLE 4.

The said tribes and bands agree [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] it shall be lawful for them to reside upon any land
[REDACTED] upon any land [REDACTED]

ARTICLE 5.

The right of taking fish [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], and of erecting [REDACTED] houses [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] together with [REDACTED] hunting and gathering roots and berries on open
[REDACTED] lands. [REDACTED]

ARTICLE 6.

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] for [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] the use and benefit of [REDACTED] Indians, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

ARTICLE 7.

[REDACTED]
as he may deem fit, [REDACTED] at his
[REDACTED] discretion [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] any Indian, [REDACTED] in consequence of this
treaty, [REDACTED]

ARTICLE 8.

[REDACTED] shall not be taken [REDACTED]

ARTICLE 9.

[REDACTED] the Government of the United States,
[REDACTED] promise to be friendly | [REDACTED] they pledge themselves to commit no
depredations on the property | Should any one or more of them violate this pledge |
[REDACTED], the property taken shall be returned [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]. Nor will they make war [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] the said Indians
[REDACTED] shall prevail [REDACTED]
And the said tribes agree
[REDACTED] deliver them up [REDACTED]

ARTICLE 10.

[REDACTED] desirous [REDACTED] spirits,
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

ARTICLE 11.

The said tribes and bands [REDACTED] free [REDACTED] now [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] hereafter.

ARTICLE 12.

The said tribes and bands [REDACTED] agree [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
without consent of the [REDACTED] agent.

ARTICLE 13.

To enable the said Indians [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

ARTICLE 14.

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] to be free [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] and to provide [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] and also to provide [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

ARTICLE 15.

This treaty shall be obligatory [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Fiction

John Thompson, "Mountain, River, Sea"

John Thomson has worked in wildlife and land conservation for over 35 years, while also writing fiction. His novel for young readers, *A Small Boat at the Bottom of the Sea*, was published by Milkweed Editions, and his stories have appeared in literary journals, including *Terrain*, *The Raven's Perch*, *The Great American Literary Magazine*, and *Spitball*. He lives with his wife in Penn Valley, California, and not far from his two grown daughters.

“Mountain, River, Sea”
John Thompson

The month before he became a Marine, Duncan traveled alone through the Sierra Nevada Mountains and searched for a place where the fishing was good and no one would bother him. After two weeks, and on his way home, he found it. During his hardest times in Iraq, he promised himself he'd go back.

It was on the north fork of the Yuba River, nearly 600 miles from his home in San Diego and in California's "gold country." He'd come upon it by accident when he'd stopped at a turnout to piss. Standing there, peering through an opening in the trees, he noticed a jagged jeep trail traversing part of the canyon, descending to a protected terrace overlooking a reach of emerald green pools. He'd driven to the end of the trail and hiked with his fishing rod down a steep path to reach the water. Then he'd fished with a barbless lure and caught and released a wild rainbow trout with almost every cast. Before long, he began to feel the power of the place he'd found.

The longer he was there, the more content he became. So he'd pitched his tent in a sheltered clearing and stayed another two nights. In the midst of his toughest days in Fallujah, when he was the most afraid and began to doubt the war's purpose, he imagined himself alone in that same wild but peaceful and protected space. It gave him something to look forward to. It helped him survive.

*

After he made it home from Iraq, he told his family about the spot on the river, what it had meant to him, and how he planned to return there. They encouraged him to go. Just before he left, his mom warned him about hiking up and down the canyon, something she wouldn't have done if it weren't for the prosthesis Duncan now wore below his left knee. His father, too, had considered his disability. He'd let Duncan take the family's Ford F150 instead of Duncan's old Chevy. The Ford was an automatic. Duncan's truck was a stick shift. Using the clutch was still a test for his leg. "It's a heck of a long drive, Son," his dad had said.

He left his parents' home at three in the morning. They rose with him to say goodbye. He traveled fast and steady up Interstate 5, listening to his Tim McGraw CDs and talk radio. His mom had packed him a big lunch with several packs of the miniature Hostess powdered donuts he loved. They were always in the care packages she'd sent him.

He ate three packs of the donuts by the time he got to Highway 49 and started the drive up the narrow winding road to the place he'd found on the river. Before, he'd traveled west along the Yuba. But now he went east through the small towns of North San Juan and Downieville. It was almost three years since he'd been on this road. Little looked familiar. At first, he drove right past the turnout where he'd stopped to piss and discovered the emerald pools. He had to go back and forth on the highway a few times before he found the spot. When he did, he noticed someone else was there.

*

It was an older model Tacoma with a beat up camper shell. The truck had a bent fender. The rear bumper and almost the whole of the camper shell were plastered with bumper stickers.

Duncan climbed out of his truck. His thigh above his prosthesis was numb from the drive and he almost stumbled to one knee when he touched the ground. He shook life back into the leg and walked farther down the trail. Then he stopped to read some of the bumper stickers:

Jesus was a Liberal
Health Care for All
Flush Rush
Free Tibet
Grow Organic

He took a deep breath and stared down at the river. His disappointment was enraging, and he didn't know what to do. He could find another place on the Yuba, at least until whomever it was in the Tacoma moved on. But then, he thought, they were probably just down at the river and would be leaving soon. He decided to stay.

He looked at the bumper stickers again. This time he saw the one with the peace sign on it, and the words, *Back by Popular Demand*.

"Oh, great," Duncan muttered.

The last thing he wanted was to camp next to someone who hated the war he'd fought. He got back into this truck and pulled past the old Tacoma. Just after he turned off his motor, he heard a woman crying inside the camper.

"Shit," he said.

The crying stopped. Duncan stood next to his truck for a while and listened for the sobbing to come back, but it didn't. He thought again about leaving, but his heart was so set on returning to the spot that'd helped him get through the war. So he was willing to share it, at least for a while.

*

He set up his tent, his folding chair, and his small camp stove in what he thought was the same spot as before when he'd first found the emerald pools. Then he took off his prosthesis and leaned it against a pine tree and moved his chair into the shade.

He was tired. He reclined his chair and felt a cool breeze on his face. Soon he was asleep. He awoke in the dark and dug out a flashlight, pointed it in the direction of the Tacoma. It was still there. Worse yet, the beam of his light fell right upon the bumper sticker with the peace sign.

Then he heard the woman crying again. He saw a light come on inside the camper. It flickered, but then held steady. The crying ceased. Duncan was glad. He was beginning to worry about the woman, but he didn't feel like helping anybody.

It stayed quiet for the rest of the night. His thigh started to hurt again and he took five Ibuprofens. He heated a can of chili on his camp stove. He ate another pack of the powdered donuts. When he finished his meal, he climbed into his tent.

Sleep came almost instantly. After about an hour, he was awakened by the sound of footsteps outside.

“Hey, who’s out there?”

“It’s your neighbor,” said the woman. “I’m just taking a pee.”

“Okay,” he said. “No problem.”

She giggled.

“So, hey, you’re the person in the pickup with all the bumper stickers?”

The steps moved away from his tent and became fainter. Please answer, he was thinking.

“Yeah. That’s me.”

“Okay. No problem. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

*

Duncan had set his phone alarm for 5:30, but he got up before then. He was anxious to get down to the river to fish, and he wanted to see if the Tacoma was still there. It was.

At first light he made some strong instant coffee. The little camper door was open and the woman emerged. She exited by poking her naked legs into the air and keeping the door open with the big toe of her left foot, stretching and extending it like a ballet dancer. Then she slid out on her butt and hopped to the ground.

Duncan was in shorts. His prosthesis was in full view under the expanding morning light in the campground. He nervously scratched at it.

“So, hey, it’s you,” he said.

“Yeah. It’s me.”

She was close to his age, 24. She was small, with a cute round face, large brown eyes and long, sun-streaked auburn hair. She wore a man’s red-plaid wool shirt much too large for her. The sleeves extended over her knuckles to the tips of her fingers. She had on blue jean shorts and, like him, was in bare feet.

There was a moment of awkward silence. The young woman looked at Duncan’s prosthesis, then tilted her head to one side, as if she were trying to read something written on the side of it.

“So did I wake you up last night?” she said.

“No,” he lied. “I was already awake. Just thought you might be a bear or something.”

She approached him and offered her hand. He shook it. It was stronger than he thought it'd be

“I'm Kelly,” she said.

“I'm Duncan.”

“Hi, Duncan. Should we eat some breakfast?”

“What?”

“I said should we have some breakfast?”

“Yeah, I guess. No problem.”

He watched her climb back into her camper. She was a free spirit, he thought. What sort of woman would ask to have breakfast with a stranger wearing a prosthesis? He kept watching her and noticed the tightness of her jeans. He hadn't been with a woman since he'd been back from the war, but his desires hadn't diminished. Perhaps they had grown stronger. He put some spit on his fingers and used them to give some order to his hair. Kelly went in and out of her camper quickly. She came back with a green tea bag, a coffee mug, and a Cliff Bar.

“Is it all right if I use your stove and pot to heat some water?”

“Sure. No problem.”

He made himself some more of the instant coffee and pulled out another pack of the powdered donuts. She sat crossed legged on the ground and he sat in his chair.

“How can you eat those things?” she said.

“What?”

“Those hideous donuts?”

He shrugged, forcefully. “Because I like them,” he said.

It was so strange, he thought, how she hadn't asked him where'd he'd come from or why he was at the river, and how she seemed utterly unafraid of him. But then, of all things, she wanted to know why he ate the powdered donuts he'd loved so much since he was eight.

“So when did you get here?” he asked.

“Yesterday,” she said. She looked at him and giggled, just as she'd done in the middle of the night on her way to pee. “You've got a powdered sugar moustache right now,” she said.

Duncan quickly wiped it away.

“Where you from, Duncan?” she said.

He’d always been clumsy and shy around women, but it was worse now. He put a whole donut in his mouth as a way to give himself some time to think about how he was going to answer.

“San Diego,” he said after he swallowed.

“Cool,” she said. “Did you come up here to fish?”

“Yeah,” he said.

“Should we hike down to the water,” she said. “I need a swim.”

“Copy that,” he said.

“What?”

“Never mind.”

He watched Kelly climb back into the camper to put away her coffee cup and to get her hiking boots. She came out wearing her hair a little different, pulled back into a loose pony-tail. He liked it.

They put on their boots and she took out ahead of him on the trail. Just after they started, he realized he’d forgotten his fishing gear. Kelly waited at an overlook while he hurried back to get it.

When he returned, he saw her standing dangerously close to the edge of a rock precipice. He thought of the crying he’d heard coming from inside her camper. A disturbing worry overcame him. Was she crazy? Was she going to jump?

He hurried up to her. When she looked at him and smiled he knew it was all right.

“It’s too bad,” she said.

“What is?”

“That this river has been so messed up, with all the mining and dams and all that shit.”

She went on to tell him that the north fork of the river was the only one without a dam upstream, but that there were two big dams below, before the Yuba merged with the Feather River in the valley. He didn’t know any of this. All that had mattered to him was the beauty and solitude of the place he’d found, and how good the fishing had been. She told him there used to be great runs of Chinook salmon that reached deep into the lower Sierras before the dams went in, and before all the hydraulic mining filled the river with sediment. It used to be so simple, she told him. “It was just snow melting off the mountains and into the river and then flowing out to sea,” she said. “It was all just mountain, river, sea—until we screwed things up.”

“But it’s still nice,” he said, as they started down the trail again.

Kelly didn’t answer.

She was a strong hiker. He had trouble keeping up with her. When they reached the water’s edge, she leaped onto the boulder where he’d caught so many fish the first time he was here. She pulled off her boots and sat with her knees against her breasts while he rigged up his gear and then joined her there.

“You fish. I’ll swim,” she said.

“No problem,” he said.

She slid down the boulder and seemed to dance her way over the rocks and sand until she was about 100 feet downstream and at the edge of one of the deeper pools. Then she started to take her clothes off.

“No way,” Duncan whispered. Should he avert his eyes? She didn’t care, did she?

She was a free spirit.

She lived in the moment.

When she was completely naked, she saw him looking at her. Then she mocked him, playfully.

“No problem,” she yelled.

His first cast went into a willow, hopelessly tangling the lure. He cut the line and put on another one. Kelly splashed about. Occasionally she’d let out a euphoric howl. Duncan kept casting. Once he thought he had a strike. A small one, maybe.

He dropped his rod and reel and slid down the boulder and made his way downstream to Kelly. He wanted to go in with her, but it’d mean taking off his prosthesis, and revealing his stump.

“Woo hoo!” Kelly yelled.

She swam just out from him now. He watched her heels rise and break the water, and then descend in a perfect line. Again he thought of the ballet dancer.

He removed his shirt. At least his torso was still attractive, but he was as white as a sheet. He had a farmer’s tan.

Kelly’s face popped up. She was even cuter with wet hair. “Well. You coming?” she shouted. She dove again.

It was so foreign to him, to actually swim naked in a mountain river, to swim naked anywhere. But he began to loosen his belt, and fumbled with it. He watched Kelly swim upstream against the mild

current. Then he wondered if he could swim at all without the use of his left leg, or would he look ridiculous out there flailing about like a finless fish.

“Keep the leg and the underwear on,” he whispered to himself. His jeans were now down to his knees. “They said I could swim with it if I wanted.”

This is what the technician at Walter Reed had said just after she’d fitted him with the prosthesis, about a month after he’d gotten stateside from the hospital in Landstuhl, Germany, a time that remained a sort of dream to him. But, he remembered, the technician had also told him not to keep “his new leg” in the water too long, or it could be ruined. So, he had a choice now: a short swim with the thing still on—and in his underwear—or take everything off and do the best he could in the water.

“Hey, get your ass in here,” Kelly hollered. “It’s no problem,” she added, mocking him again. He liked it.

He took everything off and plunged in right away, making sure she didn’t have a chance to see him, at least for very long. But he knew she had, and now he didn’t care.

Kelly swam over to meet him. She used the heel of her hand to splash some water in his face. Then she dove again.

Swimming was more difficult than he thought it’d be; it seemed almost impossible to stay afloat, and he grew tired very fast. Kelly sensed this. She splashed him again.

“Okay, let’s head back now,” she said.

He was exhausted by the time the toes of his one foot touched the river sand. He scrambled like some wounded amphibian to the shallows, where he sat on his butt and watched Kelly wade to shore. She walked swiftly back to where she’d hung her clothes from the limb of a dead tree. She dressed, slowly.

Duncan took some time to get his wind back. He watched Kelly walk upriver to the boulder where he’d been fishing. On her way, she’d picked up his rod and reel. Once on top of the rock, she made a very good cast.

“No way,” he said.

He slid into a patch of sun and rested on his back and let the bright heat dry him off and soothe his muscles. He was still breathing heavily, and felt light-headed. He kept his clothes off and left his prosthesis unattached; it lay on the gravel next to him like a piece of driftwood. He didn’t care.

When he felt stronger and his head had cleared, Duncan lifted himself and saw his rod and reel lying on the boulder, but Kelly was gone.

“Hey! You over there?” he shouted. There was no answer. “Hey!”

He attached his prosthesis and dressed as fast as he could and hurried back to his fishing spot. “Hey, Kelly. Where’d you go?”

Then he saw her. She had climbed up a natural ladder of crags to a ledge overlooking one of the pools upstream. “Up here,” she said.

Again he worried she might jump. She was so high the fall would probably break her into pieces.

“What the hell?” he shouted.

She laughed. “Chill out. I’m good,” she yelled back.

Then Kelly slipped into the shadows of the rock. After a few moments Duncan heard her sliding and scrapping down the cliff.

“Damn,” he said, thinking she’d fallen.

But she hadn’t. She leaped down the last few feet and stood right in front of him.

“Woo hoo!” she said.

“You all right?”

“Copy that,” she said. “Let’s head back.”

He retrieved his fishing gear and followed her up the trail. Like before, she didn’t slow down for him. About half way back, he passed her and stayed out front for a while. But just before they reached the top, she came alongside him and they walked onto the campsite together.

“So I need to take off,” she said. “I’m working in an hour.”

“Where?”

“A food co-op in Grass Valley,” she said. “It’s called Briar Patch.”

She offered her hand. As he shook it she kissed him on the cheek.

“So, hey, it was just relationship stuff,” she said.

“What?”

“My crying. I’m sure you must have heard it. So when I cry, I really cry.”

He didn’t say anything. He watched her walk to her Tacoma and climb in. She sat in the cab and wrote something on a notepad, and then ripped off the paper and came back and handed it to him.

“My cell number and e-mail,” she said.

“Awesome,” he said.

Kelly walked back to her truck and waved to him before she drove off. Duncan listened to the rattle of the pickup’s old engine and frame as it ascended the hill to the highway.

*

That night he wouldn’t sleep, but he didn’t care. It was the first night since he’d gotten home that he hadn’t thought about Fallujah, and that day the grenade hit his Humvee and tore off his left leg and killed two of the Marines with him, and how so much about him had changed. Even with everything—the love of his family and friends, the support he got from other veterans, his counseling, being called a hero, being saluted and applauded by strangers—all of this hadn’t extinguished the harrowing memories. But here and now, just as he’d hoped for when he’d made the promise to himself to return to his special place on the river, he felt better about living and carrying on. At least for a while.

In the dark of very early morning, he put his head lamp on and got up and made some strong instant coffee. He ate his last pack of the Hostess powdered donuts. Then he sat in his folding chair and listened to the soft rumble of the river below, and waited for dawn.

At first light, he drank more coffee while he put together his fishing gear. Then he hiked back down to the river to his favorite fishing rock. It was cold. The tips of his fingers were numb. There was mist over the emerald pools. It seemed to shift and quaver with the tremble of the current. He sat on the rock and watched the mist disappear, thinking grandiosely of himself, as if he were the thing making it vanish, that his thoughts were the sun. And then he saw the sun itself, illuminating the higher peaks of the canyon. The expanding light was near where Kelly had stood and hollered down at him. Duncan felt good when he remembered this, and pictured her still there.

He sat on the rock and watched the light. He waited to fish until all the mist was gone off the water and the numbness and sting had left his fingers. Then he stood and threw out his line. On his second cast, he caught his first fish. It was a small but wild rainbow, full of bright colors and intact fins. It gave him a good fight. He kept the trout in the water. He held it as little as possible while he carefully extracted the hook from its lip and put it back into the river.

Visual Art

Interview with Jeffrey Stenbom

Collateral: Tell me a little about your background in the military and your experience with violent conflict.

Jeffrey Stenbom: [My unit] got back from Kosovo and the War in Iraq had begun. My unit was supposed to get deployed as part of the first invasion into Iraq in 2003, but we ended up going in the second year of the war. We flew to Kuwait and from Kuwait we drove up through the middle of Iraq, through Baghdad. We ended up at the FOB [Forward Operating Base] in Kamara, Iraq, which is the heart of the Sunni Triangle. That was the start of year two of the war, when all the really bad stuff started happening—the insurgency—it was just really horrible. The things I had to do on a daily basis, not just do, but see—it started playing with my mind.

I remember the first time I was shot at. I was like, *Did we just get shot at?* (laughs) I was a truck commander, so I had my own humvee and a crew, a driver, a gunner and a dismount with me. I went to my gunner and was like, *Did we just get shot at?* He said, *I think we did.* And I said, *Well, shoot back!*

C: When did the violence begin to take its toll?

JS: On July 8, 2004, I lost five friends on the same day. It was a difficult battle in Samara. My group was on quick reaction force that day, and we were the first ones to get to the scene where this huge battle had erupted. I'd lost friends already, but not that many on the same day. Two weeks after that my first son was born. He came early. I was going to have R&R when he was supposed to be born but babies come when babies come. The first week of R&R, I was in Germany with my ex, getting to see my son. The second week, my parents and sister planned to come visit. The day before they were to come, my sister committed suicide.

She was my only sibling. We were very close. It was my breaking point, everything I'd gone through. Having a kid is a wonderful thing but... Everything in Iraq. My sister. I was done.

The battle with the military came next. I was a model soldier, always did what I was asked to do, never asked for anything. I said, I can't do my job anymore. People's lives depend on me making decisions, and I can't. I said, I have to take care of myself. That's the responsible thing to do as a soldier—to say when you can't do something. My unit didn't care. They wanted me to shut up and go back down range and I'm like, I'm messed up, I can't do my job, I'm putting peoples' lives at risk because I can't do my job. It was a long battle with my unit.

Finally, I got out, after having to get congressional inquiries by my congressman, which pissed my unit off. When I got out I was in the same place I came from. I got out and I was in limbo, like, what the hell do I do now? This horrible thing happened to my family. I'm fighting PTSD. I'm super lost.

So I went back to school, to Normandale Community College. I took an English composition class and a class on fused glass. I didn't know what fused glass was. I thought it was glass blowing and

found out very quickly that it wasn't. I fell in love with it. It gave me drive, passion, focus—feelings I hadn't had for years. I finished up my two year degree but decided to stay there and get another two year degree, an Associates of Fine Art in studio art. I wasn't making artwork about my experiences in the Army but I was making art, and I could see how it was affecting me, making me feel better. It allowed me to take a break from all the BS, allowed me to get away. It was a distraction at first.

C: What did working with fused glass feel like?

JS: I was a happy person when I was doing it. The one thing I've talked to other veterans who are dealing with PTSD about—so, many of them turned to drugs or alcohol [after the war]. I feel fortunate that I never got into that type of rut. I found art. I was lucky. I was lucky to find the thing I needed, more than any type of medication. Art, specifically glass, was my medicine. That was huge. I had this void in me and art filled that void and allowed me to feel good again. Working with my hands has always been part of my life. I loved building LEGOs. I remember when I was back home after my sister passed away and before I got out, I was in Germany. Star Wars was out in the theaters and they were making Star Wars LEGOs and I remember going to a store in Germany and buying these little vehicles of Star Wars LEGOs. Creating was a distraction that took me away from my grief. It was nice, it was brief, it was just this necessary act of creating.

I remember when I was in Iraq all I cared about was getting home to my family. I said, I don't care what I do with the rest of my life. I don't care about money as long as I'm making just what I need. I said, all I care about is living my life to the fullest—not just for me or my family but for my friends who passed away. That's what I do on a daily basis.

C: How'd you get into teaching?

JS: When I was working on that second degree at Normandale, I started to recognize that [working with glass] was important. I was TAing and knew I wanted to teach—I could see what it was doing for me and I wanted to be able to help even one more person.

After I finished at Normandale, got that second degree, I decided to teach and continue with glass. I went to the University of Wisconsin River Falls, where I got my Bachelors of Fine Arts in Sculpture / Glass. I also got a second degree, a Bachelor's of Science in Art Education. I really wanted to study the science behind teaching. That was important to me. After that, I ended up going to Tulane University for my Masters of Fine Arts in glass and sculpture. I graduated about three years ago. I've been a professional artist ever since, which is pretty awesome to say. I get to do what I want on a daily basis.

C: Has your teaching background brought you to classrooms and groups of people that aren't so obviously connected to an established artistic community? What kinds of classrooms have you worked in?

JS: I've taught a lot of different ways, for different age groups, from kindergarten to seniors. They're all unique. But the best experiences I've had teaching are when I've worked with veterans. It's fascinating. I never make them share, but I always do. It builds trust. When I teach, I talk about my past, and part of that past means sharing my emotions—that's something most men don't do, won't do. But I express my feelings. It's how I deal with these problems I'll always have.

When I teach veterans, I'm usually the youngest one. A lot of people from Vietnam, some from Desert Storm, but the thing is, there's this link that's there. There's something about war, not even war, with people who served. There's this thing, they understand, they get the culture. They've been the most fun to work with and the most rewarding. I've very rarely had someone who hasn't shared or said they won't share anything. They share through their work, that's where they speak.

AM: What are they creating?

JS: I usually leave it open. I ask them to bring a half dozen small objects that we can press into glass but they can also add or subtract from the clay that's there to make their form. Then impress in plaster silica, and we take the clay out and put the glass in. I bring lots of things and let them use my objects regardless if it's veterans or not. A lot of veterans do come and borrow my stuff and I'm happy they do. A lot of times, they bring things that are personal to them. There's something special about that. To be able to put themselves out there, it's pretty damn awesome to see.

Teaching, to me, is as important as my artwork because I know what art can do for others. I've always had this thing in my head, that I wanted to teach college. In my field, it's difficult to find teaching positions, specifically in glass, and especially with the way higher ed is now, they're cutting budgets and a lot of that comes out of funding for art. When instructors retire or leave, [schools] don't fill those classes with instructors, they expect the instructors who are already there to pick up the slack so they don't have to hire anyone.

I taught at the University of Wisconsin River Falls right after I got out, but it wasn't a permanent thing. It was between my two years of grad school I went to Pilchuck glass school in Washington State and I took a class from Richard Whitley who, in my view, is one of the two best living glass kiln casters in the world. Richard, he saw my work. He saw my sister in my work, and the separation from my kids. I was communicating through art. He saw my work and he was like, I want to spend some time with you. He told me, You know, Jeffrey, academia is really, really difficult. It's not just difficult to teach—the politics are hard too. With your background you're more than qualified for a position, but you might want to look at teaching in a different capacity, working with veterans.

So I was teaching at the Bergstrom Mahler Glass Museum in Wisconsin, just a little show there. At the beginning of the show, in the opening weekend, I did a free workshop for veterans. A woman had come to see the exhibition and was amazed by my work. Her son was a police officer in Green Bay and she told him he needed to go see the exhibition.

He came down. He looked at [the exhibition] and immediately signed up for my class. One of the pieces I was working on is part of a series called "Constraint." It's a human brain made of glass, with chains wrapped around it and a lock that's worn and rusted. The guy took me aside and said, This piece is how I feel every day."

He had been called to a domestic dispute and the man in the house was irate, he came after him with a knife and stabbed him. He ended up having to shoot and kill the man. He was still dealing with the trauma. He had no art experience and he made this fabulous piece in my class: he pressed his badge into the clay, then he pulled the badge out, leaving the impression. Then he took a knife and pressed it into the badge and carved cracks in the clay. It was amazing, I took pictures. It just blew me away.

I thought, My work inspired this. Brings tears to my eyes, sorry (crying). What I mean is that [my work] is affecting other people, helping people—at the end of the day that's what it's about. My teaching and sharing has helped other people, veterans in particular, but people in general, to start having a conversation about art as more than just beauty. It's a way of communicating, of giving a voice to veterans who haven't spoken about this. If I hadn't started doing art we wouldn't be having this conversation because I didn't know how to talk about what I was going through. Art gave me my physical voice back.

The vast majority of people have no idea what it's like to be a veteran. Our freedoms, the sacrifices those people have made are taken for granted. It's such a small portion of our population that's serving or has served, and at the end of the day they're kind of forgotten about—especially after they've done their job, have served and are out. They should be seen.

A lot of people have told me they're glad I'm talking about mental illness, which is still riddled with stigma. In some ways it's aggravating because mental illness is a much bigger animal than just PTSD, and almost everyone, in some way, goes through trauma. If you cut your arm you would go to the doctor to get stitches. It's no different here, you've been torn up mentally and you should go see someone for help. I feel that I've been able to kind of break down some of those barriers between veterans and help.

AM: How do you see art functioning in American culture? Some see it as interpreting your past or witnessing. It sounds like your art has become a retrieval process—retrieving your ways of thinking and coping before trauma, retrieving your voice, retrieving relationships and the ability to confront difficulty. At least it seems that way to me.

JS: When I lived in Europe I saw how the arts were viewed differently there. Art is seen as part of the culture, part of the history, part of everyone. Here in the states it's not viewed that way and that's a shame. What I'm about to say is a gross generalization but it's kind of true for a lot of people: in America we imagine it's just hippies and liberals making the art for rich people to buy, which, to me, is completely untrue. That's only one stereotype about art in the U.S.

Art is more than beautiful things. A lot of artists are concerned with making beautiful things with little substance, which is frustrating because it perpetuates this idea about what art is and doesn't show art as an action that changes people. Glass blowing is cool, people make some beautiful things with it, but it can also be superficial. Art is a metaphor for life; it's this thickness, this depth of the person, there's something more on the inside of the mind. This is my life. I'm filling the void in my life with glass.

AM: What are you working on now?

JS: I'm currently trying to get my studio up and running in Wabasha, Minnesota. A year ago I was driving out to Portland [Oregon] to do a residency, a five-week residency at Bulls Eye Glass and that's where I made the wall of 7300 dog tags—it's the number of veterans who commit suicide each year. I've been doing residencies quite a bit since I've been out of grad school and it's been a good way for me to produce a ton of glass, then do the finishing stuff when I get back—the grinding and polishing and adding mixed media to it. I'm at the point now where I need to have my own studio. I don't mind using my house sometimes as a studio, but when the majority of my rooms have art stuff in them, things in progress everywhere, it starts consuming my personal space.

I decided when I came back from that residency in Maine that I had to make some serious decisions about what I was going to do, professionally. Last year I spent two months in the Pacific Northwest, in the Portland and Seattle areas. I spent the time driving out there thinking, Do I need to move to the Northwest? Do I need to stay here? What do I want to do? I decided, I love Minnesota. I can always travel to the Northwest, but I love it here.

My art is unique because of its connection to veterans and veterans' issues and military service, but the actual glass side of what I do—there's really no one doing anything like that around here. I'm always happy to come out to the Northwest, where it's this glass mecca, I swear. But I decided I needed to build my studio here. I've been working with contractors and I'm hoping by tomorrow they'll be completely done with the plumbing.

C: That's awesome.

JS: Yeah. Cool thing about Wabasha is, it has the National Eagle Center there, so it's bald eagles all over the place. It's right on the Mississippi River. It's an old, old town. The Chippewa River and the Mississippi meet there. Doesn't matter the temperature, the water is always moving, and that's the reason why all these bald eagles congregate there; it's a good place to fish and eat. My big hope is to start some type of residency program for veterans, or do some type of programming for veterans and hopefully incorporate the National Eagle Center. It's symbolic.

I'm excited about being able to use art to help other veterans. Art's my thing. It might be music for somebody. It could be lots of different things. I'd love to have a residency where veterans can come and create, get away from whatever they're going through or go deeper with it if they want. If they just want to experiment as a distraction, they can. The biggest thing with a program like this is finding the funding to do it. Art has done a lot for me. I've had a lot of really great artists who—whether they see it as mentoring or not—they've been mentors to me. I want to give back and pay it forward. So much of what we see every day is me, me, me and not enough seeing others.

There's so much more to life than survival. After feeling how fragile life is, after being in the situations I was in and...I can't even tell you how wonderful it is to do what I do, and know I've made a difference.

[For more of Jeffrey's work, visit his website: www.jeffreystenbom.com.]