

COLLATERAL

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IN THIS ISSUE

POETRY

Paul David Adkins
Aaron Brown
Yuan Changming
Jenifer Browne Lawrence
Peter Mladinic
Ron Riecki
John Solensten

CREATIVE NONFICTION

David Chrisinger
Mariana Grohowski: An Interview with Victor Villanueva
Savannah Kater
Jeanine Pfeiffer
Mandy Tirrell

FICTION

Jerri Bell
Clayton Bradshaw

VISUAL ARTS FEATURE

Interview with Roman Baca & Exit 12 Dance Company

POETRY

Paul David Adkins

*We Were Not Tired
Thief*

Paul David Adkins lives in New York. In 2018, Lit Riot published his collection *Dispatches from the FOB*. Journal publications include *Pleiades*, *River Styx*, *Rattle*, *Diode*, *Baltimore Review*, *Crab Creek* and *Whiskey Island*. He has received five Pushcart nominations and two finalist nominations from the Central NY Book Awards. The poetry in *Collateral* pertains to a sense of disillusionment the author felt after touring Iraq three times and Afghanistan once. As they say in Quebec, “Je me souviens.”

We Were Not Tired

Paul David Adkins

or what one would call
exhausted,
waiting for the choppers,

but unhinged
from sleep, disjointed.

We spent our waking hours
sleepwalking.

I wove my way to work,
saluting by reflex.

I read there was a type of tired
resembling hunger. No matter
how much sleep, you wake
more sleepy than before.

I slept on rocks and rucksacks,
cased in my armor,
my rifle resting across my chest,
stiff as a biblical staff.

I dreamed of sleep,
of fresh-made beds,
of cool cots arranged in rows
within a darkened tent.
I dreamed
of sleeping bags unrolled,
canoed and clean.

As the fevered rotors closed on us,
I stirred instead
at gnats drawn to rivulets of sweat,
that confluence of a delta
on my forehead, cheeks.

It took a sergeant kicking
the soles of my boots
to wake me.

Each blow shook me
like an ax head striking
the base of a pine tree,
then that slow tipping
of the trunk,
its thick branches rushing

to clear the surrounding canopy.

And the nearby birds snapped
like bedsheets in the hands
of a woman
who draped them on a taut line,

pinning them in the sun
of the still morning.

Thief

Paul David Adkins

I am victimized every time
a senator lauds our service.
His account fattens
like a pig before Christmas.

He claimed 4H during Vietnam.
He went to college.
His work was important.
I know

he is that ram
that tore the fence
to tup my ewe
and know I pegged him dead

to rights, jimmying
my gas cap one night
with a screwdriver,
plumbing the tank with a hose.

His loafer soles
trample the peonies
beneath my bathroom window.
His prints smudge the glass.

His palms squeegee the steam.
When I emerge, he's breathless.
He slinks, a sated cat.
He bawls like a tilted doll at soldiers' funerals.

He's the snooping landlord
armed with a key,
the cop who walks the drunk girl
home, and enters.

A thief,

he swipes my laptop,
leaves behind a dust-less, laptop-shaped
rectangle on the desk,
a tangle of cords and a dead mouse.

On the dining table,
his tapered turds curl,
sloughed as bouquet petals.

Aaron Brown

Abecedarian
In a parallel universe

Aaron Brown is the author of the poetry collection *Acacia Road*, winner of the 2016 Gerald Cable Book Award (Silverfish Review Press). He has been published in *World Literature Today*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Waxwing*, *Cimarron Review*, and *Transition*, among others. Brown grew up in Chad and now lives in Kansas, where he is a professor of writing at Sterling College. He holds an MFA from the University of Maryland. On his two poems in *Collateral*, Brown writes, "I've challenged myself in my newer work to navigate dislocation that is not just geographical but spiritual, and to add formal characteristics to my poetry that mirror the breakdown of narrative and memory." You can read more about Aaron at www.aaronbrownwriter.com.

Abecedarian

Aaron Brown

You were [a]live [b]efore the [c]rush
of [d]eath—the door through which you
[e]ntered your whole [f]amily [g]one
from this living land. [H]ear the sound
[i]n the absence of sound. The [j]ust
disappeared silence of footsteps quic[k]ening
[l]ike a child's run. [M]ake your way
through the tiled halls, the [n]uminous shadows
at the end, [o]pen the door you find, [p]eeling
back this door of a [q]uiet [r]oom, with nothing in it
but a chair for you to [s]it. [T]rust the smooth s[u]rface
of the [w]ood e[x]actly how [y]ou remembered it—
memory so strong you are haunted more than ama[z]ed.

In a parallel universe

Aaron Brown

you never left / your friends
never died / your ears never heard
the gunshot never fired / the smoke
never rose / your C-130 never winged
its way out / you never lived months
waiting to return / in a parallel universe

you stayed / went to university
in the capital / found a job drilling
wells into the earth / searched out
water in the earth's heart / the danger
to your parallel universe not war
but boredom / perhaps
you saved your francs / to build
a brick house out of town / brought
your love to live there / perhaps
you married in the sands / perhaps
your skin changed into the baked
dust color / in a parallel universe

you never know the art
of losing / the loss of loving /
never know when to stop
digging a never-ending well / a well
that never seeps moisture
but is brittle and dry all the way down

after Julie Moore

Yuan Changming

Sonnet in Split Infinitives

Yuan Changming published monographs on translation before leaving China. With a Canadian PhD in English, Yuan currently edits *Poetry Pacific* with Allen Yuan in Vancouver; credits include ten Pushcart nominations, the 2018 Naji Naaman's Literary (Honour) Prize, Best of the Best Canadian Poetry, BestNewPoemsOnline and nearly 1500 others worldwide. "Sonnet in Split Infinitives" is a classical literary form that can be taken as a symbol of war as a 'classical form' of human existence. Within this highly traditional form, everything, including both language and life itself, has become a cleft 'in-finitive' or fragment, be it an adverbial of purpose or result, as it is often used in a sentence, something always to be avoided in a normal (or peaceful) situation, something that can never be completed during wartime.

Sonnet in Split Infinitives

Yuan Changming

To really stay far apart from each other
Within the same inner space. To almost
Completely have gone to the far end
To not spill darkness over the horizon

Of mind. To in this manner treat
Their loved ones. To heavily knock before
Struggling to enter the backdoor of God's heart
To totally ignore the rules & conventions

To boldly go when no women
Have gone before. To nobly
Maintain a low profile
With tyrannical pride

To surely & steadily go along. To deeply
Drive 1 into 0. To ever *yang* with *yin*.

Jenifer Browne Lawrence

Caliber
Expectant

Jenifer Browne Lawrence is the author of *Grayling* (Perugia Press, 2015) and *One Hundred Steps from Shore* (Blue Begonia Press, 2006). Awards include the Perugia Press Prize, the Orlando Poetry Prize, and the James Hearst Poetry Prize. Her work appears in *Bracken*, *Cincinnati Review*, *The Coachella Review*, *Los Angeles Review*, *Narrative*, *North American Review*, and elsewhere. Jenifer edits the Seattle-based journal, *Crab Creek Review*. Of the work published in *Collateral*, she writes, “My family has a long history of military service dating back to World War I, and continuing through many wars and conflicts since then. These poems are part of a manuscript-in-progress exploring the effects of war on intimate relationships.”

Caliber

Jenifer Lawrence

I want to pretend
the hole in the plaster
is not from a bullet—

the ricochet missed
and our newborn slept
through the noise—

or at least not a bullet from your .38
not your hand shouting
down the barrel

not your fingers
hiding the new
opening in your body

refusing to let
the bad blood

Expectant

Jenifer Lawrence

I spoke to the long-armed lawman once, but what could he say except *go home*. I a lightning-struck child in my 20s and you a door gunner from Arkansas with a list of splinters that marred your heart entire. We were joined by our separate terrors. We were like that porcupine glued to the pavement by a tire tread. Alive for the moment. Nowhere to go.

Peter Mladinic

Da Nang 1967
His Viet Nam Tour

Peter Mladinic lives in Hobbs, New Mexico. He received an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Arkansas in 1985. His poems have been published in numerous literary magazines such as *American Literary Review*, *Puerto del Sol*, *MSS*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Poetry East*, *Riverrun*, *The Evening Street Review* and *Common Ground*. He is the author of a chapbook, *At the Blue Earth Gallery*, and two full-length books of poetry, *Lost in Lea: Southeast New Mexico Poems* and *Dressed for Winter*. He teaches English at New Mexico Junior College in Hobbs.

“His Viet Nam Tour” is in Mladinic’s second book of poems, *Dressed for Winter*, while “Da Nang 1967” is more recent. Mladinic writes, “I was stationed in Da Nang in Vietnam from August 1967 through August 1968. Both poems come from that experience. I worked as a security guard for the U.S. so I was either stationary for long periods, or mobile in jeep patrol, and had much time to observe people, places, and things in Da Nang.”

Da Nang 1967

Peter Mladinic

The dresses they wore,
long silk affairs
in residential streets
shaded by trees,
as if snatched from sky
to earth, blues and greens
yellows and golds
silken rainbows
with backdrops of white
where in daylight and dusk
you wouldn't know war
was going on,
the long dresses of girls
and women in doorways
of houses, shops,
silken rainbows on the path
along the river.
I took her hand
as she stepped from the barge,
her dress of orange rose
with the wind to reveal
a backdrop of snow
in this city where
snow never fell.

His Viet Nam Tour

Peter Mladinic

Ask him the names of GI's he knew
Ask him to put a face to a name
Ask about barbed wire
Black chevrons sewn on green
Gold chevrons pinned on collars
Seiko watches, mosquito nets
Monsoon rains, the Stars and Stripes
Lists of dead and missing
Did you fire your 45, your M 16?
Did you wound anyone,
kill any Viet Cong?
Ask about bug repellent, red
and blue borders of white envelopes
Balconies and jeeps, the beaded curtains
his hand parted going in and out of a shadowed room.
Did you fall in love? Did you
like Da Nang, between midnight and dawn
sitting in a bunker with your feet on a ledge
listening to Marvin Gaye?
Did you think, *what's going on*
in Ohio and Wisconsin?
Draft card burnings, tear gas protests
Did you think they hated what you
were doing, making war not love?
Did you watch a priest burn?
Did you pray in a temple?
Ask him his name
And the number on his dog tags

Ron Riecki

Poem for Those Who Have No Real Comprehension of PTSD I
Poem for Those Who Have No Real Comprehension of PTSD III
Poem for Those Who Have No Real Comprehension of PTSD IIIII Exist

Ron Riecki's books include *And Here: 100 Years of Upper Peninsula Writing, 1917-2017* (Michigan State University Press), *Here: Women Writing on Michigan's Upper Peninsula* (Independent Publisher Book Award), *The Way North: Collected Upper Peninsula New Works* (Michigan Notable Book), and *U.P.: a novel*. Upcoming books in 2019: *Posttraumatic: a memoir—essays & flash non-fiction on the military, prison, iggy pop, the devil, & writing* (Hoot 'n' Waddle), *Undocumented: Great Lakes Poets Laureate on Social Justice* (Michigan State University Press, with Andrea Scarpino), and *The Many Lives of The Evil Dead: Essays on the Cult Film Franchise* (McFarland, with Jeff Sartain).

Poem for Those Who Have No Real Comprehension of PTSD I

Ron Riecki

The military, as we know, reduces
everything to a few letters and
numbers, abbreviations and
statistics and when I look at the
statistics in the waiting room,

waiting to find out their latest
medical statistics, I realize that
the statistics are humans, that
stats breathe, that stats have
a pulse, or, at least these ones

do, as the dead are also stats,
have a breath of sorts, in me-
mory, the hyphens of death,
the hyphens of memory, how
we connect the stat with the

heart, the stat with the tomb-
stone, the way that 22 of us
kill ourselves every day
and this beauty of 22, how
it repeats, how the statistic

is repeated, as if repetition
means anything, as if all
the pushups in boot camp
will save us from strange
lung cancers where the doc

says, "I haven't seen this
one before." And he says
one, a number that reminds
me of *none*, how it's hidden
inside, swallows, the 0 as

a hole that we dove into,
hid, had our youths drain
away doing things like
painting the underside
of stairs and staring at

stars while B-52s started
their engines in the back-
ground, soon to change
the ground from even
to odd, soon to tear into

the earth, and our hearts'
statistics come back—They
scream to us in the waiting
room, screaming out a number:
22. 22. 22. 22! 22!

Poem for Those Who Have No Real Comprehension of PTSD I I I

Ron Riecki

Ten people died when I was in the service.
Ten people died and I'm nervous writing this,
nervous that you will not count the two

suicides, that they will be erased, that you will
only want to know the eight, and three
of them were civilians, so then it is only five

and one of them was killed during training
and do we count him? Can we count at all?
What do we count? How do we count?

Who counts? I can count. I can count
to a trillion. I'm sorry, but I can and
the three killed in the helicopter on fire

doesn't count because we can't look at it,
the red too bright, the flames too hot,
the war too fatherless, the night too dark,

the wind too still, the memory too haunted,
the food too dry, the milk too non-existent,
the ocean too long, the search-and-rescue

too distant, and there is one body left
and it comes down, falls from the building,
and do we hear it? Do we choose to?

Poem for Those Who Have No Real Comprehension of PTSD I I I I *Exist*

Ron Riecki

I forget the names of the dead
sometimes and then make myself
look them up to remember the dead,

all of the dead that I know as if
their names are ghosts, as if even
the three words of what we pretended

made them who they were could just
fade in and out of the mind with the ease
of a wave, the turn of a page, and

it's the opposite of their deaths, how
there is no violence (deceptively)
to the opening of a notebook or

to a simple google search where it
recounts the who, the what, the where,
the how, and the why completely ignored.

John Solensten

Gold Star Mother on Our Street, 1944

John Solensten has published novels, short fiction, plays, and many poems. “Gold Star Mother On Our Street, 1944” is based on his experience growing up in a small Minnesota town during WWII, seeing gold stars in many windows.

Gold Star Mother on Our Street, 1944

John Solensten

That face—a stone, a flint in eye—
briefly posed (again)
at the window
where the gold star tapestry
(with its border
red as boy blood)
hangs,
I thought
in passing by her house
she might spark, ignite
that tapestry, that curtain, the window
with her anger, her grief
as she touched it,
as she looked out on the street and the town
each morning
demanding, demanding
something back.

CREATIVE / NONFICTION

David Chrisinger

Everything Had Changed, And Nothing Was Different

David Chrisinger is the Director of the Writing Program at the University of Chicago's Harris School of Public Policy. He is the author of PUBLIC POLICY WRITING THAT MATTERS, a guide for anyone interested in writing to influence change in public policy. In addition to his work in policy, David also teaches writing seminars to veterans and their family members to help them tell their stories of service and sacrifice. In 2016, he edited a collection of essays written by student veterans titled SEE ME FOR WHO I AM that is helping close the gap between veterans and their civilian counterparts. He is currently writing a book on how to write about traumatic experiences that will be published by Johns Hopkins University Press in 2020.

Everything Had Changed, and Nothing Was Different

By David Chrisinger

I threw Brett a going-away party at my mother's house the night before he left for boot camp. It was a month or so after we graduated from high school. Summer of 2005. My mother was out of town visiting her old college friends, so my friends and I had the house to ourselves. While most everyone who came sat on the yellow-orange leather furniture in the living room drinking crappy beer or on the rusted deck chairs outside the back door smoking menthol cigarettes, Brett and I crawled out my bedroom window onto the roof of the front porch. The night was cool and dry, which was unusual for Northern Wisconsin in June. For a couple hours we sat there, sipping warm cans of Miller Lite he had stolen from his old man, our legs dangling off the edge of the roof with nothing underneath them.

I didn't really know what to talk about with Brett. He was leaving for war—every Marine's gotta fight, he told me—and I was going to college to play football and study the history of modern Europe. There wasn't much to say, except that I was going to miss him and I hoped he'd come home in one piece.

He says he still remembers Whitney's face when he told her he was enlisting. They were leaning up against Brett's black Ford Ranger in the parking lot of Hardee's. He just blurted it out. No discussion. No consultation. No lead up. Whitney felt hurt and dismayed. She thought their relationship meant more to Brett than it seemed to that day. She was also scared. Not about him being gone. It was more that he might not ever return, or that he might not return himself.

Brett didn't have the grades or the money for college, and there was also this sense of meaninglessness he felt he had to do something about. When I asked Brett why he had enlisted, he told me shooting rifles and blowing stuff up sounded cool and he didn't know what else to do with his life. He told me he got the idea after he saw a commercial on TV where a strapping young Marine dashes through the snow and slays a lava monster on the rim of a volcano.

To mollify Whitney and his rightfully concerned, Brett agreed to avoid the infantry. He wanted to become a police officer after he got out anyway, so he decided to become a Presidential Guard. Then during boot camp, he made friends with a few Marines who were on their way to becoming Fleet Antiterrorism Security Team members (FAST for short, though Brett told me that FAST really stood for "Fake Ass SEAL Team"). He was captivated by the promise of travel and adventure.

"The problem," Brett told me after he left the service, "is that no one considers FAST guys to be 'real Marines.' We're not in the shit in Iraq and Afghanistan."

Then one night in 2007, Brett and his friends were drinking in the barracks at Virginia Beach and an officer came into his room looking for combat replacements to go to Iraq. He wouldn't be doing what he had been trained to do in FAST, but at least he could say he had been there—that he'd actually done something. Without hesitation, Brett volunteered. The rest of those in the room declined. "I know it's dumb, but looking back I was so proud of myself," Brett told me. "I showed I had the biggest balls in the room."

*

It was a surprise to me when my wife and I received an invitation to Brett and Whitney's wedding in the late summer of 2009. I was living in Chicago, attending graduate school, and since he'd left for

boot camp, Brett and I had seen each other only a handful of times—usually when he was home on leave between deployments. Each time we ran into one another, it felt like we had drifted further and further apart.

At the reception, in between the chicken dance and “Cotton Eye Joe,” I found Brett leaning against a post in the corner of the reception area. He asked me about graduate school as he scanned the dancing crowd. We locked eyes for a moment after I asked about Afghanistan. After I returned my RSVP, Whitney told me in an email that Brett would be deploying a couple weeks after the wedding. He looked down at the Solo cup of beer he’d been sipping; it seemed like he was sick of people asking about it. After a moment, he told me he’d gotten hooked up with a great gig. Probably wouldn’t see much action, he said. I smiled and nodded. He and I had both changed so much since that night on the roof. I wanted to know more about his deployment, but I couldn’t find the right words. I didn’t want him to think I was some kind of voyeur or just another uninformed civilian.

Almost a year and a half after the wedding, my wife and I were living in Washington, D.C., expecting our first child. I had finished my master’s program the year Brett was in Afghanistan, and he and I hadn’t seen each other since he’d left for that deployment. Sitting on the floor of my bedroom just after midnight one evening in February, unable to sleep, I flipped open my laptop and logged on to Facebook. Brett was logged on too, so I sent him a message and asked how he was doing. He began typing. “Not that good, man,” he wrote. “I think I’m kinda fucked up.”

A wave of panic built in my stomach. Don’t write anything stupid, I thought. I took a deep breath. Seconds passed. It felt like forever. His typing bubble reappeared. He was really struggling, he wrote. He had frequent panic attacks. He couldn’t shake whatever was going on. He was drinking too much and missed being with his guys. Whitney, he said, didn’t get it.

Several months later, I flew back home to Wisconsin and told Brett I’d stop in to see him while I was around. The night we met for beers at a restaurant near his home, he wore a dark T-shirt, jeans, and a white baseball cap with a curved brim, which he’d pulled down low over his eyes. His hair was cropped close to his head, a stark contrast to the scraggly black beard that covered his rough and angular chin. His eyes were puffy and tired, and even after he settled into his seat at the table, his shoulders stayed pulled up, almost to his ears.

Just like that night on Facebook, we didn’t waste time with small talk. He tried not to think too much about Afghanistan, he said, but most of the time he couldn’t help it. The day he would never forget, he said, was January 9th, 2010, the day a 23-year-old Marine and an embedded journalist were killed—six other Marines were seriously wounded—when their armored vehicle was nearly cut in half and tossed 35 feet in the air by 200 hundred pounds of explosives buried in the road near Nawa, in southern Afghanistan.

Brett’s memories of his convoy being attacked and the distressed cries that rose from the mound of mangled bodies in the back of the armored vehicle would skip in his mind over more sanguine memories like a broken record. While he talked, he mostly looked at the tall can of Miller Lite he was practically strangling with his calloused hands. Occasionally he’d whip his head around to check what was going on behind him.

In the middle of detailing the worst days of his life, Brett would pause and look up at me to see how I was reacting. I made a point not to look away. Even though our lives had diverged after high school, Brett was still my friend. I needed him to know that, but I struggled, again, to find the right words. Whenever he looked at me, I locked eyes with him, surrendering to the indescribable telepathy that had taken hold of us. There was no need to speak. It was his turn to talk and my turn

to listen. It was my hope that he would see through my silence that there was nothing he could say to make me think less of him.

*

The enormity of Brett's grief and his overpowering sense of loss were simply too much for him to process at first, let alone share with Whitney. Instead, he acted angry, abrupt. He didn't understand why, and he felt there wasn't much he could do about it. He was living in a strange world where the rules and conditions were quite different from those he had grown accustomed to in the Marine Corps. Once the anger subsided, depression would set in.

After five years in the Marine Corps, seemingly going somewhere, Brett came home for good and found himself on the outside, going nowhere in particular. He missed the Corps' cloistered universe of regimental life, where he knew he had a place. The instant he took off his uniform for the last time, that status vanished. Even though he had a job and was going to school, he felt out of place and unimportant. His own perception that he was somehow insignificant, coupled with the trauma he had experienced, was what hurt the most—and what caused the most despair.

For months, Whitney felt like it was her responsibility to not only understand what Brett had been through, but also to make things better for him. In a sense, she felt that she needed to grieve for Brett. She came to realize eventually that while she could love and support him, Brett needed to want to better himself. He needed to make changes and find a new sense of purpose. "It was really, really difficult," Whitney told me, "because there were times when I didn't want to be by his side, when he treated me poorly, when I actually packed my bags and drove three hours to my parents' house in the middle of the night because I couldn't stand to be around him for another second."

"I saw Brett in his darkest moments," she continued. "I have never felt so helpless for such a long period of time. Trying to piece my marriage back together and help my husband get back on his feet—while trying to heal myself—was more difficult than anything we experienced during Brett's combat deployments."

For the next couple of weeks after I returned to DC, Brett and I talked on the phone almost daily. I was worried about him. Talking seemed to help, but it was hard to make the time, and there were topics I felt too nervous to ask him about. We started emailing regularly instead. Brett wrote to me about the battle for Marjah, and I had to admit in my reply email that I'd never heard of Marjah. I could tell my ignorance was hard for him to understand. Thankfully, he didn't give up on me. Instead, he wrote me more stories. He was trying to teach me. At the same time, I was reading everything on Afghanistan and Iraq that I could get my hands on. Whenever I had a question about something I was reading, I'd shoot an email to Brett.

After months of emailing back and forth, I curated Brett's stories into a semi-coherent Word doc by copying and pasting each of Brett's stories and organizing them into a timeline from when he left home to when he and I reconnected on Facebook. What had once been fragments of thought was now a mosaic. I forget how many thousands of words Brett had written, though I do remember after he read my email, he sent me a message that led me to believe he was just as shocked as I was. I wish I could have seen his face when he opened the document; he had written more for me than he had ever written on anything else. He had told his stories, wrapped his arms around them in a way that made them coherent and meaningful. I believe it was this process of writing and explaining and teaching me that was making a difference for Brett.

*

The first time a story I had written about Brett was published, I felt as if I had discovered my own kind of milestone. I had made an impression on myself, and I liked that feeling. It was something I had never felt before, and whatever it was that happened inside me when I wrote like that, I wanted to feel it again and again.

By that point in my life, I had written dozens of college papers and an honors thesis, as well as a master's thesis. A paper I wrote about the T-4 euthanasia program in Nazi Germany was awarded \$350 by a national historical honor society. As a professional communicator for the federal government, I had also written or helped write dozens of research reports and testimonies for the U.S. Congress. None of that writing, however, was for me. What I wrote about Brett was. Writing about him and what he had confided in me was the only way I knew how to make sense of the incredible toll keeping silent about trauma takes on those who never find a way to communicate what they survived.

When Brett recounted his stories to me—and granted me permission to write about him—he handed me a sort of power I didn't know I would crave. There was power over the story of course, but there was also power over the reader. I could use words and descriptions and metaphors to make someone feel something. As soon as I learned that first piece was accepted and going to be published, I had this sneaking suspicion, this feeling that great and enviable things were going to start happening to me. I was going to write a book about Brett, I thought. I was going to find an agent who would sell that book for tens of thousands of dollars to a big New York City publisher, and I was going to spend months traveling the country, speaking to veterans and their families and anyone who has ever cared about those who serve our country. I was going to save people.

My piece was published first thing in the morning a couple of weeks before Veterans Day. The first few reader comments were positive and affirming. My friends and family were sharing the piece on social media, and before too long, several people—some of them complete strangers—sent me private messages commending me for the help I had given Brett. I saved his life, some of them said. The day after my piece was published, my mother ran into Brett's mom at the grocery store in the town where Brett and I grew up, and with tears in her eyes, Brett's mom hugged and squeezed my mother for well over a minute. "Your son saved my son," she said.

A few days later, I clicked the link on my piece and scrolled down to the bottom where the reader comments were stacking up like dinner plates. I skimmed through the words of affirmation as I sipped hot coffee out of a handmade mug in my home office, just down the hall from where my wife was frying eggs for breakfast.

"Go back to jerking off to Full Metal Jacket," one anonymous commenter wrote, "and leave us combat vets the fuck alone!"

I could hardly believe it. What was this guy talking about? Surely not me. I set down my coffee and leaned in closer to my laptop, my hot heart pounding inside my chest as I read the rest of his rant. "Just a bunch of shitty broken vet porn," he continued, "with a bullshit ending."

I scrolled back up to the end of my piece. "If it's one thing Brett has learned," I wrote, "it's that talking about your trauma can help—as long as you can find someone you trust and who helps you to take a fresh look at your experiences. While you may not be able find complete and final truths (none of us can, really), you can create meaning out of your painful experiences by creating a coherent narrative that explains them. That is what Brett has done, and it has made all the difference."

That was all true. I hadn't written anything I wouldn't write again.

*

Hi Dave, I don't know if you heard but Brett was in a bad car accident last night. He will be ok, but there are a lot of things involved & he may not have his job. I am worried about depression & PTSD & potentially, what path he could choose. He is in Aspirus at Wausau. Thanks so much! He considers you a wonderful friend & listens to you.

I hadn't heard.

How long will he be in the hospital?

ICU room 1839

What happened? Was he drunk or something?

Yes, but not sure on the other details. He is lucky to be alive.

I have to go to Chicago tonight anyway. I'll pack and head up there

Concussion broken ribs & banged up.

Thanks so much!

If they move him, let me know. I'll head up in 15-20 min

Will do!! You are a lifesaver!

Just got word from Whitney they are moving to a new room

Was he suicidal or anything? What other stuff is going on?

Not yet, but extremely emotional about his job. I don't know all of details but I suspect he & Whit are having a rough time & work is all consuming

Do you know how they know he was drunk?

Blood draw at hospital.

Was he working at the time?

No, although he said he was meeting an informant at a bar. He had his personal vehicle

I just talked with a lawyer friend who is a combat vet. He said department policies will dictate what happens to his career.

Thanks, Dave! I appreciate that! I just keep praying since I don't know what else to do!

He's the most resilient person I know

Yes, that's what gives me hope! And he has wonderful friends!

No other cars involved?

No

That's good.

He missed a corner & head on into a tree

As I sped along the interstate to the hospital, I couldn't make sense of what Brett's mother had told me. There was no way Brett could be suicidal. He had everything he said he wanted. He had a loving and faithful wife who stood by him through the most difficult and harrowing times of his life. He had the job—an undercover drug agent for a county sheriff's office—he'd been working so hard to land since leaving the Marine Corps. And he was good at it, too. In the first nine months of that year, he told me, Brett had racked up more drug arrests than any other officer in the department combined. He had purpose. He had meaning. People with purpose and meaning don't wish for death.

*

"They said his head went through the driver's side window," Whitney told me before I entered Brett's room. She was holding her hand over her cell phone, trying to mute our short conversation. Her face was puffy and pink from crying and going the night without sleep, and her straw-colored hair was pulled back into a bun. She was wearing a shawl with sleeves that made her look like she was wrapped in a blanket. She returned her phone to her ear and told whoever was on the other line that she would have to call them back. Then she hugged me tight; her face against my chest left a small tear stain on my dark blue flannel shirt.

"You should see the other guy," Brett joked as I approached the right side of his bed. His face was hard to look at. His cheeks were puffy, and the left side of his face was pocky and smeared with dried blood, which made it difficult to tell how badly he was cut. From his cheekbone to his hairline, it looked like he had taken shrapnel from a grenade explosion. He wore a gray medical gown. The paramedics had to cut his clothes off in the back of the ambulance. He chuckled and then winced in pain as I gently put my left hand on top of his. Machines all around him beeped and whirled.

Brett told me he had five broken ribs and a concussion. His right middle finger had also been dislocated and popped back into place, and his left shoulder—the one he busted up in high school—was still out of its socket and causing him serious pain every time he wiggled or tried to get more comfortable.

I asked what happened even though I had already been told most of the details.

"I have no idea, man," Brett said. "Honestly." He shook his head and looked down at his feet. He was tired.

"He was up for almost two days straight working," Whitney chimed in. I hadn't noticed that she'd come back into the room. "He came home Sunday morning, tried to sleep and couldn't, so he went into town to run errands. Then one of his informants said he wanted to meet up, so Brett went to the bar to meet him."

"I had two beers with the guy," Brett said. He paused and took a labored breath. "And then I told him I had to leave. Got in the car. Don't remember anything else. I woke up here this morning."

“The state trooper said it looked like he missed a curve, went down into the ditch and then hit a tree. The car is totaled,” Whitney said.

“Were you drunk?” I asked.

“I don’t know what the blood test will say,” Brett replied. He had downed a few drinks, yes, but that normally wasn’t enough to put him go over the limit, Whitney said. “But then again, he also hadn’t been sleeping or eating, so who knows what that amount of liquor did to him?”

*

Brett and I spent the rest of that evening watching reruns of *American Pickers* on the small flat screen television that hung on the wall directly in front of his bed. We were done talking about the accident; there didn’t seem to be anything more that needed to be said. Outside the room, just within earshot, I could hear Brett’s wife and her mother, as well as Brett’s sister-in-law, talking over plans of what to do next. I tried to tune them out and focus on the television, but they were talking louder than I think they realized. It was almost as if they wanted Brett and me to hear what they were plotting.

Just as one episode was ending and another beginning, they came back into the room. Whitney stood on the opposite side of the bed as me, and his sister-in-law stood at the foot, blocking Brett’s view of the television. I clicked off the set as Whitney’s mom sat down in a chair near the door. She clutched her purse to her chest as Brett’s sister-in-law began relaying the plan.

“We talked with Josh,” she said. Josh is Brett’s older brother, a cop turned detective turned arson investigator for the state. “He says you need to tell your department about your PTSD. He says you need to tell them that you were self-medicating and that you’re burned out.”

Brett stared back at her blankly. Whitney grasped his left hand, careful not to disturb the IV ports.

“He says if you claim PTSD, the department has to treat this accident as a medical issue. If you don’t tell them, it will be a disciplinary issue and you’ll probably lose your job.”

*

For months after Brett’s accident a part of me, a very vocal part, thought what that anonymous commenter wrote must have been correct after all. Perhaps I really had shoehorned in a convenient ending to Brett’s story. Perhaps it really *was* bullshit. Or at the very least, it had been too soon to tell what the end of Brett’s story would be. By writing what I did, however, by wishing and hoping it were true, perhaps I jinxed Brett. Perhaps it was because he was supposed to be “fixed”—and because everyone treated him like he was fixed and because everyone treated me like I had fixed him—that he didn’t tell me he was struggling in the weeks leading up to his accident.

I’ve struggled for two years to tell this story; I’ve lost track of how many times I’ve typed it up then deleted all I’ve written. For the longest time, I couldn’t figure out how to end it. I would come to a certain point, and there would be no place for the story to go next. Except perhaps to explore the sadness of wanting things not to be the way they indisputably were.

There are two things I know to be true. First, when Brett confided in me that he was struggling, I didn’t ignore him or wish him luck or pretend what he was experiencing wasn’t as bad as he said it was. I did the only thing I could think of—I got him to write. By getting him to explain what he had

seen and done, I helped him reframe his experiences. Instead of focusing endlessly on what he could have done differently, Brett began to see just how much he had grown because of what he had survived. And it worked, or so it seemed, for a little while anyway. Brett really did get better. And so did I. By helping Brett navigate his transition, I found my life's work.

I never intended that to happen, and it certainly wasn't my goal, but one thing led to another, and soon I was teaching the first-of-its-kind veteran reintegration course at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and publishing an edited collection of my students' stories of war and coming home. After the book was published, I crisscrossed the country for a few years, presenting at conferences and training university faculty on best practices and talking about the virtues of storytelling as a tool to help curb the appalling number of military veterans who die here inside our communities by their own hands every day. It was through these efforts that I connected with The War Horse News, which hired me on as the Director of Writing Seminars. Since the spring of 2017, I have continued to teach personal essay writing to military veterans and their families, and just like with Brett, what I teach helps. It empowers those who feel powerless. It brings hope to the hopeless and structure to those who feel unmoored. But writing is not a cure. It cannot prevent someone from experiencing bad days or from falling into despair. All it can do is help in the process of making sense of pain, of turning tragedy into triumph.

Brett and his wife bought a house in our hometown. They have a beautiful baby girl they named Josey and are considering getting pregnant again soon. Brett left law enforcement behind and now works as a machine operator at a paper mill with my father and brother. He says he loves the feeling of punching in, doing his work, punching out, and not worrying about his work until he punches back in the next day. In the months after his accident, Brett also labored tirelessly to renovate an old horse barn into one of the premier wedding venues in Northern Wisconsin that he and Whitney now operate. Instead of locking up drug addicts, he fixes and builds.

In the end, I wonder if it is a mistake to dwell on all that has been lost. I wonder if it is better instead to think about all that Brett has given me—and what I have given him. Brett is not fixed. None of us are or ever will be. In many ways, feeling totally healed is just beyond Brett's grasp. Though perhaps he is closer than he ever was before.

Mariana (Mare) Grohowski

Interview with Victor Villanueva

Mariana (Mare) Grohowski, PhD is an independent scholar and chief editor of the *Journal of Veterans Studies*. She previously taught college writing, but now works in marketing and public relations on Lake Superior's shore. She runs marathons and pets dogs to combat depression.

Interview with Victor Villanueva

Mariana (Mare) Grohowski

Victor Villanueva, who identifies as Puerto Rican, is Regents Professor and Edward R. Meyer Distinguished Professor of Liberal Arts at Washington State University. He is a military veteran of both the Vietnam and Korean wars, having served in the Army from 1968-1975. He used his GI Bill to receive his PhD in English with an emphasis in rhetoric and writing from the University of Washington in 1986. He is author, editor, or co-editor of eight books and nearly fifty academic articles or chapters in books on power, racism, and language. His book *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*, won the 1993 David H. Russel Award for Distinguished Research in the Teaching of English, and has become a canonical text in English, rhetoric, and writing studies disciplines. *Bootstraps*, Villanueva's first book, is the only text in which he discusses his military experience. His brief and abstract account of his military experience may be moot to some, but to this student of rhetoric and aspiring veterans studies scholar, those passages elicited questions and a venue for dialogue.

Introduction

In *On Writing Well*, William Zinsser advises an interviewer to select a “subject...who touches some corner of the reader's life.”¹ A scan of his discipline of rhetoric and composition (English) journals reveals a longstanding interest in the work and life of Victor Villanueva. Indeed, scholars, most of whom are his former students, have interviewed Villanueva revealing the ways in which his ideas and efforts have had an influence on the academic field of rhetoric and composition studies. Those interviews address the “how” of Villanueva's success as an academic and the “what” of his efforts and foci in teaching and scholarship.^{2 3 4}

With multiple interviews with Villanueva already published, readers may be concerned about the need and relevancy for another—a valid concern and one I have myself. What differentiates the interview I conducted with Villanueva in spring 2015 is my asking about the limited (e.g., two or three paragraphs) commentary he provides in his award-winning academic work *Bootstraps*⁵ regarding his military service.

1. William Zinsser, “Writing About People: The Interview,” in *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2006), 104.

2. Brian Baille, Collette Caton, & Rachel Shapiro, “Reflections on Racism and Immigration: An Interview with Victor Villanueva.” *Reflections: A Journal of Community-Engaged Writing and Rhetoric* 8, 2 (2009): 197-208.

3. Donna Evans, “Some of it is Serendipity: An Interview with Victor Villanueva.” *Writing on the Edge* 24, 1 (2013): 4-16.

4. Ellen M. Gil-Gomez, “For Rhetoric, The Text is the World in Which We Find Ourselves’: A Conversation with Victor Villanueva.” *Composition Forum* 25 (2012): n.p., <https://compositionforum.com/issue/25/victor-villanueva-interview.php>.

5. Victor Villanueva, *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1993.

Prior to speaking with him, I had interpreted his work as employing a rhetorical use of silence⁶ in regard to his military experiences in Vietnam and Korea. My intention in interviewing him was to parse out how his military service and war-time deployments changed him. Part of the reason Villanueva has not revealed more about his military experiences in his published scholarship is—as he explains in the interview below—the focus of his scholarship, structural racism, is informed by what he experienced while serving in the military.

Racism, imperialism, and colonization. As he explains, all were important issues to his father. Listening to his father speak about these issues had a lasting impact on him. What his father discussed was made manifest while Villanueva was serving in Korea—a result of his military service. Lessons he learned and experiences he gained as a direct result of his military experience shaped his focus and expertise in rhetorics of race and racism.

Mariana Grohowski (MG): In *Bootstraps* you reveal the following information about your military-service:

1. You were drafted into the United States Army in 1968 at 19.5 years old.⁷
2. You served 7 years in active duty.⁸
3. You discharged from the military in 1976?⁹
4. You deployed to Vietnam¹⁰ and South Korea.¹¹
5. You spent 12 months in Vietnam.¹²
6. Your father served in the U.S. Army.¹³
7. You had the rank of Sergeant in the Army.¹⁴
8. The GI Bill helped you to pursue higher education.¹⁵ But what are the (exact) dates of your service?

Victor Villanueva (VV): 27 April 1968–1 December 1975.

MG: The dates of your deployments in Vietnam and South Korea?

6. Roger Thompson “Recognizing Silence: Composition, Writing, and the Ethical Space for War,” in *Generation Vet: Composition, Student Veterans, and the Post-9/11 University*, ed. Sue Doe and Lisa Langstraat (Boulder, CO: Utah State University Press, 2014), 199-215.

7. Villanueva, 43.

8. Villanueva, xi, 51.

9. Villanueva, 67.

10. Villanueva, 43.

11. Villanueva, 62.

12. Villanueva, 49.

13. Villanueva, xiii.

14. Villanueva, 66.

15. Villanueva, 67.

VV: Republic of Vietnam (RVN): 28 September 1968 – 26 October 1968; Republic of Korea (ROK): 13 September 1971–12 September 1972.

MG: The dates of your father’s service? If your father deployed?

VV: Oh, heck, I don’t really know, but he was in from 1942 to 1946 (the term was “duration of the war plus six months”). He only served in Puerto Rico and the Panama Canal Zone (as was the case in the segregated military of the time, since he was a Puerto Rican from the Island; stateside Puerto Ricans were assigned to Black units and deployed with them).

MG: Your military occupational specialty or specialties (MOS/MOSs)?

VV: 70A, 11B, 71H [[Personnel Specialist](#)] And I was SSG, E6. I left RVN a Spec 5 [Specialist, Enlisted 5), got promoted to Staff Sergeant in California, during the years in between RVN and ROK (though I don’t remember when, maybe 1970).

MG: In *Bootstraps* you describe your time in Vietnam as “unreal no matter how real,”¹⁶ as “war as absurd,”¹⁷ and your deployment in Korea as “a theater of the absurd.”¹⁸ Can you explain these descriptions further? How, if at all, has your perception of warfare and/or war-torn countries as “absurd” influenced your willingness to write or talk about your military experiences more than you do (which is only in *Bootstraps* and only in a few, vague paragraphs)?

VV: In college, I became fascinated by the Theatre of the Absurd—a French experimental genre (as in *Waiting for Godot*), the term coined by Camus, characterized by “The Myth of Sisyphus,” and played out in his novel *The Plague*. You know from reading my scholarship¹⁹ that I’m more drawn to materialist philosophies (like Gramsci) and even Liberation Theology (which, I have argued, is where Freire fits), but I was also taken by existentialism—that there ain’t no rhyme nor reason (except the meaning one imposes on the unreal reality). The Theatre of the Absurd (of course, I used the American spelling of theater), becomes a philosophical allusion to the sheer lack of rationality of war and military occupation (and the whole configuration of irrationalities of life—colonialism, racism, heterosexism, sexism, etc., etc., etc.).

To answer the question directly: I’d rather try to make sense of the rhetorics that embody the ideologies and political economies that provide the impetus for sending folks off to die in situations where the immediate threat is abstract (as opposed to, say, a home invasion; an invading force of any type). Why Iraq after 9/11, for example? The threat is abstract, but the consequences in terms of lives transported across an ocean very real. The absurdity is grander than any single instance of war. You see, Mariana, I grew up hearing of my parents’ homeland as a colony, of a 1917 decision to give Puerto Ricans citizenship, two months—two months—before the passing of the Selective Service Act of 1917 and the immediate draft of 18,000 Puerto Ricans for WWI, of my father in WWII, relegated to a segregated unit, his DD214 declaring his race as WPR: White Puerto Rican. And then

16. Villanueva, 43.

17. Villanueva, 62.

18. Villanueva, 63.

19. Victor Villanueva, “I Am Two Parts”: Collective Subjectivity and the Leader of Academics and the Othered.” *College English* 79, 2 (2017): 482-494.

there were the wars in the streets where I grew up, even though I was “the lame,” the sickly smart kid that the tougher kids protected. I mean, what the hell is all this about?

Each war is an instance of something larger to me, something larger that I need to wrap my head around. My military experience just gave a single concrete set of examples to the absurdity of empire. I never decided *not* to write about my military experiences; I decided it was less important than writing about what gives rise to state-sponsored inhumanity and its effects (since I believe racism is a byproduct of colonialism and sexism, and heterosexism a byproduct of a particular political economy).

MG: Beyond what you’ve written about your military experiences in *Bootstraps*, have you written or commented publicly about your military experiences elsewhere? If so, where? If not, are you planning to write or speak about your military experiences in the future? If not, why not?

VV: Three kinds of rhetoric: epideictic, forensic, deliberative. To speak of my war experiences is to be immersed in the forensic. I need to continue into the deliberative. I’m much more concerned with colonialism and racism and their ties to political economies in a world system. I tell my kids about those days now. I’m willing to discuss it with you because you asked, but it just isn’t my central concern.

MG: In what ways did your military service change you? Were your deployments—or was a specific deployment—integral in facilitating a shift in your identity or perspective? If so, how?

VV: This one’s tough, because it’s so huge. I went from adolescence to manhood in the military (not “being all that I can be” or “boys2men.” It was just my age—19-26; adulthood starts somewhere in the mid to late 20s, I can tell you, having raised five kids who are all adults now). Everything kind of changed. In Korea and in Sharpe Army Depot (where my buddies—one, Stanford University’s first Black Student Union president, and another, a Black Panther draftee—spoke to me as an intelligent being about race politics), I could actually believe in the possibility of college.

I saw the news being manipulated (saw myself in the news while I was on R&R [rest and relaxation] and my parents were witness; now the news tells you when it’s file footage). I learned I could suppress emotions effectively (at least I used to think so—my alcohol consumption challenged that more than a little, though). So much. I was still very insecure, but I could believe in possibility, believe that I could rise to occasions. Man, so much changed in those seven years. And it wasn’t RVN [Republic of Vietnam] really that changed me. That was (I know I say this time and again) so bizarre that I was unaware of changes, except an increase in my faith (not that I’m much of a Catholic these days), but I stopped questioning my faith—I question the dogma, but not my faith. It was Korea that changed me in a million ways. It would take a lot of conversation to parse that out.

MG: Okay, so...?

VV: You want me to start? (laughs)

MG: Yes, please! (laughing)

VV: Gee, I’m not ready for that. I’m joking. (Laughs) Before I went to ROK [Republic of Korea], before I went to Korea, I was in Sharpe Army Depot, which was an interesting place. Its main function, it was a small personnel shop. Master Sergeant Sanchez, when I got my orders, called it ‘America’s best kept secret’ and I had no idea what that meant. I was assigned to Korea in April but my son was due in June I think, so I asked for an extension of my stay in the States before being

deployed and got it. It was 90 days after his birth, although I actually went [deployed] 30 days after his birth. He was born on the 13th of August and I went to Korea on the 22nd of September. Isn't that interesting in itself? Vietnam and Korea both were in September and both were 12-month tours, even though Vietnam was supposed to be 13. It had something to do with Nixon; he was faking the downsizing and all he did really was bring home the (I think) 9th infantry division's colors. And I was company clerk, this was Vietnam, and everybody who was 9th, I think it was 9th, I don't remember (couldn't have been 9th cuz 9th was when I was in Fort Louis or, yeah 'cuz I was...). Well, whatever division it was, everybody got reassigned to different divisions.

So one, there's the war that was never declared a war but it was declared to have been over and wasn't. Humongous lie and my complicity in that, even if it was unknowing, when I was in Vietnam... I used to do the paperwork as the Company Clerk [MOS 42L], re-assigning sole-surviving sons from one war to another and not even knowing I was doing it. They were reassigning men from Vietnam to the second infantry division in Korea. It was somebody with a really clear sense of malice that took those kids who were supposed to be free from war and sent them to the war that nobody knew was going on, that was America's best kept secret. Because of my job, I held a certain kind of resentment.

I mean, you're in the military, you know, you do what you're told and you know that some of it has moral issues attached to it, like killing people, but this one [job], it was just duplicitous. I didn't like it; it was mean. And it surely wasn't the spirit of the law. The spirit was that at least one child should have a chance to live and procreate and maintain a family line, and this was eliminating that chance or at least putting it at risk. These are the thoughts of a young man. I'm 22 or 23 years old but it messed my head up.

So in Korea what happens is, first I see this gigantic secret, a hot war that no one knows is going on, and then in 1972, [South Korean] President Park Chung Hee declares Martial Law²⁰ and nothing changed for the military...

Now here's the thing, why he declared Martial Law; the constitution for ROK [Republic of Korea] was modeled on the American Constitution (AC). The AC says that a president cannot be president for more than 10 years; two terms plus two is the max. Park had hit his 10 year mark so he declared Martial Law until the people voted for a change to the constitution that would allowed him a third term as president, do you hear the convolutions in this? And in doing that, first they had, of course, the right to bare weapons like the US, and so the first thing was to confiscate all personally owned weapons, and in that country everybody's weapons were registered. So, confiscate the weapons.

Then on top of what was—in those days their skyscrapers, I don't know, maybe 10 stories? On the top of those buildings were anti-aircraft guns permanently in place because they had a constant war going on with North Korea and implicitly with China.

So Park declares Martial Law, confiscates all weapons, brings tanks to sit on all bridges so no one can blow up a bridge. Has guns in placements that are on top of the buildings, uncovered, and pointing down towards the streets. We're seeing all of this, and the highways: ya know how we have this nice green strip to separate the traffic? Well theirs were removable, so any highway could become an airstrip if necessary. It was a country built on war. I don't know what it looks like now, 40 years later,

²⁰. The New York Times Archives, "South Korea Chief Orders Martial Law." (1972, Oct. 18), <https://www.nytimes.com/1972/10/18/archives/south-korea-chief-orders-martial-law-assembly-dissolved-and-all.html>

but at that time... Well that's outrageous enough, but the other thing was nothing changed: we weren't put on alert.

Nothing. Come and go as always. Come in and out of the compound any time we wanted, go in to Seoul and party, nothing changed. And here I was protecting democracy, which had just been essentially removed, and removed *in the name of democracy*. Removed so as to have a vote. I mean it was literally putting a gun to the head of citizenry to vote for a change in the Constitution. Well, not to put too fine a point on it, that really fucked me up. (laughs) Holy shit, what is going on here?

And then there was Mr. Yee. First, there was the very idea of Mr. Yee—that we had houseboys and the houseboys were older than us. And where I grew up, I knew what “boy” meant. So holy shit, the Koreans are boys, too. Houseboys.

The houseboys for \$5 a month, so today that'd be maybe twenty, for \$5 a month, they fixed our beds, they shined our boots and shoes, they shined our brass; if there was going to be an IG (Inspector General), they would walk through to see if we had our shit in order, so, foot lockers on display, everything on display in a particular way, your weapons on display ... so if there was going to be an IG [coming through] the houseboy did it. They would even, and this is where it got outrageous for me, they would even iron our underwear.

Since I would sit around and read, Mr. Yee would engage me in conversation. Mr. Yee was going to college, he had I don't know how many children, I think it was three children, but that's a memory that's forty years old now. But he had more than two. Going to college. Few children. He was far more educated than I was. And he started to talk to me about why I thought the U.S. Army was there. Of course, I said what I believed: we were there to protect democracy and it was what we were told, and told so many damn times we believed it. *It would be okay if it were true. It'd be worth it if it were true.*

The conversation went on for the rest of my time in Korea, at least once a week, sitting around talking to him. So, Mr. Yee is talking about imperialism and the like, and sounding a lot like my father. My father was very political and he would talk about—he didn't use these terms because he was uneducated—he got an eighth-grade education with the GI Bill and then he decided to go to a trade school (auto mechanic school) instead of actually go to high school—so he wasn't talking about imperialism and colonialism, but he was talking about imperialism and colonialism, and he was talking about racism. My mother would always poo poo him that he didn't know what he was talking about. She wouldn't use that language, but that was the implication, that he's making a big deal out of nothing. My father also was the one who introduced me to the idea of racism, cuz when you're in the midst of it you don't see it; it's just normal. So Mr. Yee is making me think of my father and then comes Park and really underscores what Yee is talking to me about.

All of that is happening at the same time and our purpose being there [in Korea] just didn't register. It didn't register in Vietnam either, but in Vietnam we just didn't believe it could be about ideology. I mean, and it was, it really was about communism. Really, we're gonna have people die over communism. It was about ideology. To me that's fucking unbelievable, but there it is. But in Korea, it was just old-fashioned imperialism. It didn't make any sense.

Korea was [my] awakening to the hypocrisy and the politics and the degree to which imperialism is alive and well, no matter how great the denial. And then my own work, the work I do [now] always connects—political economy, world systems meeting things like imperialism, colonialism, and racism—and those connections were made for me in Korea.

MG: I get that now.

VV: This is where I saw it. This is not theory for me, I have seen it.

MG: And so that was what you felt you needed to focus and hold on to in your career, rather than focusing on a small experience or shrouding it in military experience as other authors have? You wanted to focus on the heart of the issue?

VV: Yeah, on the systemic. And as far as horrors of war, I needed to stay the hell away, from that and in fact, I mean part of it. I don't know. It's hard to face what a person does. One of those things you learn in war is what the collective is capable of. Things you would never do. I see the riots, the race riots. I understand what happens. Once you get swept up in the collective mentality, and if it has some sort of connection to survival, you're gonna go with it. Ya know? In this case, in the city riots, I'm thinking of Baltimore right now, we saw Ferguson and the like; fuck, I get it. It's collective. You feel like you're at risk. I mean you're being shot. And I don't know if it's any different [than what I experienced in the military and wars].

But nevertheless, there's something about writing about war. First, there are others that have done it really beautifully, including the beautiful, I'm thinking of Conrad right now when I say "the horror, the horror."²¹ Making that switch to that movie *Apocalypse Now*, that was the next to last movie I saw, and *Full Metal Jacket*. *Full Metal Jacket* actually takes place in central islands in 4th Infantry Division, Phu Bai during the first Tet. I was in the 4th Infantry Division (first of the 8th Infantry, Delta Company), just south of Phu Bai (a grunt during the second Tet). I could not go through that again. And that's when I thought, this is not fun, I don't want to watch movies to hurt, I watch movies for fun, and that was it. I started to watch *Black Hawk Down* and I said, oh, this is just pure propaganda. I don't need this shit (laughs). So I never finished that one either... I haven't watched any of the war TV series and I don't read the war lit. So maybe here is the contradiction to everything above—ain't over it; won't deal with it, really.

So no, I couldn't focus on the war, but what makes for war—that matters to me. It's at least a conversation that ought to be happening, even if there's nothing we can do about it, really. All of it, it's all so damned absurd to me that I have a really hard time. I have to go to another level of abstraction. That's the answer to that.

It's just... I'll do it this way: all three sides of the rhetorical triangle need to be in place. There needs to be someone saying something to someone, there needs to be a pathetic appeal, there needs to be a rational appeal as well as the credibility of the speaker, and part of how I established that credibility, that *ethos*, was by always attaching some part of it to the autobiographical. But the problem for me about writing about war, is that it's pure *pathos*. I need to be able to move back a little bit and be part of *logos* as a part of it, that's all.

All of these rationalizations are these conversations with you. I mean, I haven't really thought about it...

MG: Because there's been more important things to focus on?

VV: Bigger. Maybe a bit more important, but here's another way to phrase it, because that sounds a little grandiose: I'm looking more towards causes than the particularities of experience. And this is

²¹. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*. (Project Gutenberg, 2006), <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/526/pg526.html>.

also a theoretical and philosophical point: all viewpoints are based on experiences, so what you heard today is what got me goin'. I mean, Korea is everything. Korea was everything. Vietnam was just Vietnam, just fucking weird. Bizarre. Can't believe any of that really happened. I do believe it happened, but it's kind of still unreal.

Korea, holy shit, I mean it was at a particular age too, waking up, coming into adulthood. Korea was a mindfuck. I came back from Korea and it didn't take long, it took about three years, Paula [my wife at the time] and me dissipated, I wasn't the man... We came together, I went to Korea, I came back different. All kinds of differences. All kinds of differences. So much shit I didn't care about anymore and so much new shit I cared about deeply. It was radical, and I couldn't explain that in a paragraph [in my book]²², so (laughs)...

MG: Well, thanks.

VV: I've said all of this before, I don't write about it but I've said it all before. Thank you for asking and helping me play this all out.

MG: My pleasure.

VV: Feels good.

Epilogue

I waited four years to make this always-intended-to-be public interview public. What began as a chance in a million idea/email in 2015, turned into multiple exchanges, two of which I'd call actual interviews, one of which happened over email, the other via Skype. I say chance in a million because I was not one of his students.²³ We didn't know each other.

I initially reached out to him over email during a conference we both attended in March 2015. He asked to meet in person for our initial encounter (to be followed by a "formal interview"). Most of our meeting occurred while in line for coffee. During our meeting, he laughed when I told him I would stop writing about veterans when we stopped having wars.

Nevertheless, the following week, I sent interview questions over email. He typed up all his responses and said he'd gladly Skype if I wanted an actual interview, which I did; mostly because his typed responses (actually) elicited elaboration.

Weeks after, in fits and starts, I began drafts of this interview to submit to journals. But I never got further than a few paragraphs. Then, on July 7, 2015, I sent him an email in which I called him out for rehashing some ideas—almost word-for-word—that he had published in his book *Bootstraps*. Looking back at this now, I can't believe I sent this email. I can't believe I hadn't just taken him at his (written) word (as written in *Bootstraps*). Instead, it took me interviewing him, re-reading his book, talking to him again, re-rereading portions of his book, to arrive at the realization that—as I wrote:

You *have* written about your military experience and have not been silent about it. Which leads me to a second interpretation: you found a new mission after the military; a mission

²². Victor Villanueva. *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1993.

²³. His published interviews (cited above) were all written by his former students.

that was inspired in part by your military experience. *Bootstraps* outlines your mission as a scholar and teacher, which has not wavered in its focus.

He responded by writing:

I guess one's truth remains one's truth. I never meant to rehash what was already written. I haven't re-read it in many years (maybe a decade, maybe longer). So I've forgotten some of what I wrote back then (21 years ago); and I've come to disagree with some of it (which is as it should be). But there *is* a silence, things I don't talk about but remember vividly (more so now, it seems).

Here's an anecdote, a recent one. A young friend/coworker and I have similar tastes in fun reading. She recommended a book: *The Orphan Master's Son*. It's a Pulitzer Prize winner. I tried and tried to like the book, to get into it. Just this Sunday, about half way through the novel, I decided I will never like the book and put it on the shelf, to be replaced by a mystery novel. *The Orphan Master's Son* takes place in—and in most senses is about—North Korea. I think that was too close to reality (and the depiction of North Korean propaganda, as if South Korea or the U.S. is above such things) to be fun. The stuff just sticks, you know? So—no, I didn't intend to rehash. It is what it is, I reckon. I really like what you say [about the new mission]. That really rings true to me. I think you're right. Thanks for giving it words. Really.

I haven't seen or written to Villanueva since that last email in July 2015. And still I struggle with our exchanges.

I didn't share this interview previously because I wasn't sure it was my right to do so. But the mission and scope of *Collateral* is precisely the niche I needed in order to share this interview. There's a fog of war that leaves lasting consequences, many of which are, at face value, inexplicable. But with probing, along with time, patience, persistence, and hope, we—military and civilian—make sense and grow. It is not an easy, comfortable, or predictable journey. But it is one hundred percent necessary.

I understand now, in 2019, that Villanueva has found a new mission after his military service. His mission has been to devote himself to the study of race in the academic field of rhetoric and composition. He has carved that knack for himself and generations of scholars to come. The singular focus of this new mission is something that many military service personnel find and seek. Former military personnel find a new mission—a new way to contribute to society and history, aside from their military contributions and sacrifices.²⁴

²⁴. Near the end of *Band of Brothers*, Stephen Ambrose quotes E. Company member Ed Tipper, commenting on his fellow members' Postwar Careers. Tipper wonders, Is it accidental that so many ex-paratroopers from E. company became *teachers*? Perhaps for some men, a period of violence and destruction at one time attracts them to look for something creative as a balance in another part of life (emphasis original, 306).

Savannah Kater is a New England native who currently resides in Port Orange, Florida. She received her Masters in English at Stetson University and is an MFA candidate in Poetry and Creative Writing in Stetson's new MFA of the Americas program with a specialization in war poetry. She has been working on a project that repurposes her father's Vietnam War journals into erasure poems, Instagram posts, multi-media art, chapbooks and even rotating interactive word walls. Recently, she has accepted a position as poetry reader and social media manager of Stetson's online literary magazine, *Obra Artifact*. Her goals are to interrupt every day space and timelines with reminders of war in a way that is simultaneously intrusive and inviting. Savannah's work is an attempt to start and participate in a necessary conversation about veteran's, war, and the repercussions of war on family and home life. Follow one of her current projects on Instagram @sixdegreesofmyfather.

“Dreamland” was curated by piecing together multiple stories and poems written throughout Kater’s MFA. It is a patchwork of poems intended to represent the multitude of soldiers’ voices that have appeared throughout her life. All of the voices become one voice. “It is all the same war.”

Dreamland

Savannah Kater

The world is upside down.
There are two people in grey tones on the postcard a soldier sent home.
As I turn them, they stand and fall. To the ground and to the sky. Leaves fall. Her hair falls.
They fall and rise together.
In the wind, they are propelled.
The world is upside down.

*

His face is missing. Hers is exposed. They are stable. Not in danger of falling.
As he holds her, her eyes are closed.
The world is not upside down. It is sideways.

*

Two weeks into their relationship, he pulls one of his medals off of the shelf and places it into her palm. Closes her fingers around it with his hand.
He shows her photographs of his father and his grandfather.
In the beginning, they all stood in front of signs, posed, smiled, snapped pictures.
Their wars were about pride and power, but in the end, they all went home and couldn't speak of what they'd seen.
He thinks: *one day I might tell her my stories.*
Pours her a glass of wine as they sit on the couch. She drinks with one hand, but never lets go of the medal.
For the rest of the night, her fingers rest in the ridges.

*

He tosses and turns next to her at night.
Dreams about the others.
Men stand with their fingers pressed into their ears. Some crouch. One points at the sky.
One yells, "Welcome to Fallujah, motherfucker."
A helicopter cuts the sky in half and sand storms blanket the air.
Everywhere, there is sand.

*

A bridge covers a small patch of water where children wade when their parents aren't looking. Poles lean in toward one another, arching, bowing wires across the street. The street, the guardrail, the river, the grass: everything is grey.
Rust and oil coat the water with sheen. The makeshift bridge lies across the shallow end and the wood rots. Children play in the rust, the oil and the wood.
Their parents don't even know they are missing.
There are tanks and planes buried like fossils.
An abandoned plane protrudes from the water.
Debris from a recent battle floats in and out.
Algae grows around the headrests where faces are supposed to be.
Where faces once were.

*

Out the window, he stares at the sign. “Welcome to Camp Fallujah, Iraq.” The letters are the color of his brother’s Iron-Man costume that he wore for Halloween. He watches other young men stand in front of the sign and snap pictures to send home.

*

At night, in the barracks, he researches the word *Fallujah*. Comes from the Syriac language. Means division, to be divided, to be separated. Means not in one place, not in the other. Means in the middle somewhere. To be the divider of places.

See also, *Pujah*. Comes from Hinduism. Means a ritual in honor of the Gods. Can be performed at home. He thinks: *division of home*. He thinks: *this will never be home*. Even when he returns home, it won’t be home. Thinks, *after the divorce, I’ll have two homes. Two gods to honor*.

See also, *Maharajah*. Sanskrit for “great king.” He thinks *God*. He thinks *father*. Thinks of the last name tattooed across his shoulders.

See also, *Maharane*. Sanskrit for “wife of great king.” He thinks *mother*. Thinks, *she is the reason for the divorce*.

*

In the beginning, each man dug a hole for the sign and pushed the posts in.
The beginning of the war was mostly exploration.
By the New Year, each Marine had seen the caskets they bury soldiers in.
That beginning was especially long winters that froze everything and pulled all of the moisture from the plants and their bones.
Then his beginning was seeing what his father saw.

*

He dreams about man-made hills that turn into mountains, turn into broken bones that pierce the horizon.
Trajectories are shot into the air and smoke runs like a river through the dirt.
They all press their fingers into their ears.
They all yell, “Welcome to Fallujah.”

*

In the moments where the explosions stop, a group of men holding assault rifles smile in front of the sign. Crouch down. Wait for the sand storms to die just enough to see their teeth glinting from sweat covered faces.
One flexes for a picture he sends to his wife.
One pretends he isn’t afraid.

*

The day they hoisted that sign into the sand, they declared ownership.
The letters were bright yellow and bright red, the colors of the marines.
In the beginning, they didn’t expect young marines to nickname it Dreamland. See also, *Baharia*. See also, *Camp Fallujah*.

*

One Marine tells him that sand is made of bone.
Tells him that there are some parts of the body that do not contain water.
That that is where the saying, “bone dry” comes from.
When the sand blows in his face, he tastes the bones.
Stands in the trenches during summer. Dreams about the need for water.
He writes home to his mother about the sand and the bones.

Writes about a sticker he saw on one man's helmet that says, "Live free or die."
He reads about a soldier in Vietnam that only wanted to be dry.
The soldier wrote that the best feeling in the world was taking off his wet socks. Didn't care
if his feet were prone to spiders or snakes. Or if giant rats crawled all over his toes.
All he wanted was to be dry. To hold his toes in the air and let the wetness evaporate.
All that soldier wanted was to be dry and all he wants is to find moisture in the air.
He thinks, *it is the same war.*

*

Eight years after Fallujah, he writes his thoughts on the stationery his mother gave him,
leaves it lying around the bedroom he shares with his girlfriend.
He wants to apologize to her and to his mother, but instead he writes his thoughts down,
tears them up, throws them on the ground.
Writes, "I've been having these dreams..."
Thinks, *I will never be home.*

*

He writes to his mother that he used to blame her for his parent's divorce, but knows now
that the world wasn't always upside down.
It was sideways.
He sends her a folded piece of paper with a hand-written serenity prayer on it.
Underneath it, he writes: "In the quiet moments, I feel like I'll never be home. Always there
instead."
Thinks, *I'm sorry.*

*

Each night, he tells me his dreams.
Says he remembers Enya playing as the sky was lit with explosions.
Then remembers "Mama I'm Coming Home" as the turret on the tank turned.

*

I remember the first time he sang "Hallelujah."
His voice loud over Leonard Cohen's.
The way he gripped my fingers as we half-slept.
I remember being so tired but not wanting to sleep.
The American flag on the wall looked like it was waving.
Remember being drunk, him turning the radio up too high, practically yelling to sing over it.
"Baby, I've been here before. I used to be alone before I knew you."

*

In my dreams, we are the people on the postcard. Propelled into the air. He presses into me.
I lean into him. White knuckles wrapped around anything I can find.
We are the two falling.

*

Sometimes, he sits alone on the balcony.
The radio sings "Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah."
Sings "Fallujah."
He hears the Iraqi children sing "Fallujah."

*

At night, we swing back and forth between fear and euphoria.

Between happiness and falling.
In my dreams, I am secured, but he is standing. Always pushing to see how I will react.
Always trying to see how wild he can be before I flinch.
Before I leave.

*

The sky will drop us if we stay suspended.
Eyes closed. White space. White air. White knuckles.
The world is upside down.
And the sign reads "Welcome to Camp Fallujah."

Jeanine Pfeiffer

Fill in the Blanks

An ethnoecologist focusing on biocultural diversity, Dr. Pfeiffer publishes meta-analyses in scientific journals, micro-documentaries, and books on conservation. Her award-winning essays have been nominated for Pushcart Prizes, and appear in *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Portland Review*, *Flyway: Journal of Writing & Environment*, *Hippocampus*, *Silver Needle Press*, *The Guardian*, *High Country News*, *Sky Island Journal*, *Langscape*, *Nowhere*, and elsewhere. Learn more at www.jeaninepfeiffer.com.

Fill in the Blanks

Jeanine Pfeiffer

I was frantic to recover the voices.

But first:

- (a) my belongings were scattered across a banged-up wooden desk;
- (b) uniformed men were regarding me with suspicion; and
- (c) there was only one exit.

The mood in the room—even before the Brooklyn accents emerged—vibrated with distrust. And I, the Dean’s List student returning from a church-sponsored trip, was the miscreant.

It was odd to see my possessions on display, odder still for them to be under investigation. My stomach lurched: hell bent on recovering my things, I hadn’t considered the possibility of an unfriendly reception. During my twenties, my persona tended towards teachers-pet-ness. Color-within-the-lines-ness. Please-like-me-ness. Faced with authority, I erred on the side of compliance: a tactical error, very seductive to bullies.

Smarting beneath three sets of eyes, I kept my face calm, my thoughts unspoken, while performing a quick mental inventory of the desktop, trying to intimate how I and my possessions could have shifted from “innocuous” to “incriminating.”

The Clues:

- Exhibit i: A young female collegiate who, shortly after arriving *by train* in Boston, suddenly *flew back* to New York City, spending outrageous sums to reach an out-of-the-way substation.
- Exhibit ii: An ugly waxed charcoal military-issue field bag containing an eclectic assortment of items that didn’t appear to add up to the cost of round-trip airplane and cab fare.
- Exhibits iii-vii: Wallet and passport (certainly these were innocent looking?), microcassettes (ditto?), an army belt (this could be questionable), a wooden button featuring Che Guevara (this could *really* mean trouble), and a few pieces of frayed cinnamon bark (uh-oh).

Each possession took on a new and slightly sinister meaning when examined through a stranger’s eyes. It felt worse than someone pawing through my underwear drawer. Undies, at least, were basically predictable, as even kinkier bits of lingerie were recognizable within the world of blue-collar men. *No Big Deal*.

This investigation was more intimate, due to emotional attachments spanning such a wide array of conflicting philosophies I could have qualified for multiple personality disorder. A pacifist who couldn’t stomach horror films yet owned army-issue gear? A war protestor with a Che Guevara icon? The display revealed the hypocrisy – no, the *incongruity* – of my possessions vis-à-vis my values. My stomach did a few more somersaults. Was I supposed to explain the inexplicable?

*

The night before, at an undisclosed location along the East Coast, a pounding rattled my private compartment, mimicking the wheels’ narcoleptic *da-dump-da-dump-da-dump* and yanked me out of a deep slumber. Opening the door, I blearily greeted a conductor who instructed me to gather my belongings. Time to move: we were all switching passenger cars as our train was reconfigured and attached to a new engine.

During the switch, I left a small travel bag in one of the sleeping compartment's nifty miniature storage cabinets, cleverly designed to latch flush into the metal walls. So nifty, so clever, that once their doors were shut, the cabinets became invisible. The oversight went unnoticed until I jolted awake hours later in Boston and automatically reached for a bag that was no longer present. As I absorbed my predicament, my psyche became a malfunctioning lab experiment cycling through differential states: hot (confusion), cold (denial), warm (understanding), freezing (dread), and finally boiling (panic). The more I contemplated the loss, the more I became convinced the most critical bits of my life were contained in the missing bag.

Still discombobulated, I disembarked in Boston's Back Bay Station, grabbed the rest of my luggage, and raced to the nearest customer service counter. Several frantic conversations later, I learned the train car containing my bag had returned to the outer boroughs of New York City. There was no question: I had to get there. With just enough pocket change to take the Green Line back to my university yet without any form of identification, I managed to finagle a cash advance, hotfoot it to Logan Airport, and board a flight to New York within less than three hours. (Airport security was more accommodating in the eighties.) From LaGuardia airport, a taxi brought me to an address scribbled on a piece of paper, a train yard overlooked by a nondescript building with grimy windows and the air of a place where ambitions curled up and died. I tried one door after another until a solidly built man in uniform materialized and barked down the hallway, "You Miss Pyfer?"—a query simultaneously intimidating and hilarious due to the butchering of my surname.

"Yes sir," I replied, choosing not to correct his pronunciation while following him to a side office where two more officials waited. Lowering myself into the proffered chair, I stared at my things, my stomach tightening and my fingers itching to sweep everything off the damn desk, strap the bag tightly to my side, and flee.

"You sure got here quick," the first uniform continued, as if that fact, all on its own, implied malfeasance.

A lengthy silence ensued while we continued to contemplate the desktop. I don't recall if I fidgeted. Probably not—I was too preoccupied while my investigators' perspectives percolated into my consciousness. The wallet didn't have that much money in it. The license and credit cards, OK, anyone would be eager to get those back, but the rest? There had to be some ulterior motive. Something the kid wasn't admitting. Just what was she doing in Central America? Was she one of those radical types? Must be that suspicious plant-looking stuff. Nothing else in the bag seemed to be worth the effort.

I chuckled silently over the cinnamon bark. Mercy. I doubted these guys would peg me as such a goody-two-shoes that I'd never touched anything resembling illegal drugs, despite countless opportunities growing up in hick-town Florida, and more recently during a semester abroad in Bogotá. This was serious, and I'd better behave if I wanted all my stuff back. Yet being mildly interrogated by Amtrak officials wasn't part of my pre-trip briefing. What was I supposed to do?

*

It was winter 1986. My train ride was the penultimate stage of a return journey from Managua via Miami, one of a dozen-plus Mennonites taking a novel sort of vacation. A vacation that inspires one, decades later, to hiss and spit at childish 'reality' and *Survivor* television shows. On our vacation,

as members of a Witness for Peace²⁵ (WfP) delegation, we deliberately placed ourselves smack in the middle of a civil war²⁶.

Our “tour” was something I worked toward for years, beginning with two photojournalism books titled *El Salvador* and *Nicaragua* I found in a local bookstore during my senior year at Lancaster Mennonite High School. Those books grew me up. Paging through unflinching imagery of the aftermath of successive military regimes and the ensuing resistance provided a thorough, shocking immersion in *real politik*. A bloody glimpse of what our neighbors did to each other.

The teenager who turned the first page was not the same teenager who lingered over the last. *I had no idea*, I thought repeatedly, the gritty images knocking the scales from my parochial-school eyes. *Why didn't I know about this? Worse, why aren't we stopping this?*

My people, the Mennonites, are über-pacifists. In the face of conflict, we are mandated to extend love, to forgive, to turn the other cheek. We avoid anything with even a *hint* of violence: boxing or wrestling, football or rugby, or any type of media fictionalizing harmful behavior. We eschew profanity and strong words. We shun lifting our voices in anger or thoughts bordering on quasi-pseudo-violence. We are lambs who go very, very far out of our way to stay meek and unblemished, quietly minding our own business, raising our children.

We were such innocents. A handful of us city folk (most Mennonites originate from farming communities) with experience protesting the Vietnam war or nuclear stockpiling or corporate investment in the South African apartheid regime were familiar with civil disobedience exercises—let your body go limp when the police start dragging you off – but travel to an area with an explicitly violent conflict was new.

In truth, *any* in-your-face violence, other than the routine slaughter of livestock, was new. Even those killings usually took place off-farm, the meat returned to the owners in neat, skinless, eye-less, hoof-less forms (unless we were pickling pigs' feet, in which case you leave the toenails on). Members of historic peace churches—Mennonite, Amish, Quaker, and Brethren-in-Christ—were non-combatants and conscientious objectors before either term was invented. Most of us had never dealt with abuse, rape, hold-ups, hijackings, military brutality, or torture, despite our religion's extensive history of martyrdom²⁷ in both the Old and New Worlds.

Our refusal to fight on American shores officially began with the Revolutionary War, a stance that ruined our 18th century popularity rating and set the tone for future waves of martyrdom. Not that

²⁵ Founded in 1983, “Witness for Peace (WFP) is a politically independent grassroots organization of people committed to nonviolence and led by faith and conscience. WFP supports peace, justice and sustainable economies in the Americas by changing U.S. policies and corporate practices that contribute to poverty and oppression in Latin America and the Caribbean. We stand with people seeking justice.” <http://www.witnessforpeace.org/>

²⁶ An ecumenical assembly of short- and long-term placements hailing primarily from the United States, our delegation joined thousands of Witness for Peace representatives travelling to war zones between 1983-1990, documenting atrocities committed by Sandinista or Contra. The vast majority of the offenses were committed by the Contra.

²⁷ Every Mennonite child grows up with the 1660 text *Martyr's Mirror* (alternate title: *The Bloody Theater*), an encyclopedic volume describing why and how Christians, especially Anabaptists (“re-baptizers” choosing adult, instead of infant, baptism), perished for their faith. The graphic text is still given as a wedding gift to newly married Amish, Old Order, and conservative Mennonites.

we cared about being popular—quite the opposite. “Be in the world but not of it²⁸” was the constant refrain as I grew up, the answer to every whining query, from “why can’t I wear makeup/halter-tops/short-shorts/bikinis?” to “why can’t I hit Debbie back?”

Then came the era of Latin American right-wing death squads and assassinations of priests and nuns and laypersons, provoking a theological conundrum. Our brothers and sisters in Christ were being murdered while doing God’s work amongst impoverished, beleaguered communities. We were prohibited from going on the offensive, but we had to do *something*. Following hundreds of impassioned Sunday School discussions in hardback church pews across Middle America pondering the biblical exhortation, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for another,”²⁹ we decided it was time to do exactly that.

In the 1980s, the tangle of guerilla and civil wars throughout Central America provided ample opportunity for stepping into harm’s way. Our more intrepid members joined “Christian Peacemaking Teams” to serve as nonviolent witnesses—actual human shields—for months at a time in war-torn regions, with their home congregations supporting them through offerings and prayer circles. Our all-Mennonite WFP trip to the epicenter of the Nicaraguan Contra War was another perfect fit for do-gooder/bleeding-heart types.

Our naïveté was evidenced during one heart-stopping incident during a pre-trip training. On the afternoon of day two, our instructors lined us up in short rows of folding chairs inside an empty meeting room to simulate a bus ride. A few minutes into our pretend journey, the lights flicked off and the trainers staged a mock attack: yelling, wearing facemasks, waving guns, and roughly shoving us around, separating us from one another.

To the trainers’ credit, this was typical of a rural Nicaraguan bus ride during the war. Despite relative safety in the capital city of Managua, Contra soldiers (resistors to the revolutionary Sandinista government) were constantly launching incursions throughout the countryside, including the areas on our proposed itinerary. Passenger buses were targets. Open-bed trucks were targets. *Anything moving* was a target. Tractors. Bicycles. Children.

During the training simulation we delegates turned into jello-filled non-action figures. We melted into putty, bleated like sheep. Useless. Although our trainers quickly pulled off their masks and revealed the guns to be plastic pistols shooting blanks, we couldn’t stop shaking during the post-simulation debriefing.

The Contra War ultimately claimed between 30,000 to 40,000 lives, mostly from the below-30 generation. The death toll was equivalent to wiping out the entire undergraduate population at Boston University, and Harvard and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. After the war ended, countless more deaths came from 27,000 land mines remaining in Nicaragua. The psychic deaths were immeasurable.

This was our chosen destination: a tiny, war-torn country in the pre-cellphone, pre-internet era, when it was impossible to Google-map the terrain to see where recent attacks had taken place or

²⁸ This statement refers to the Holy Bible, New Testament verse John 15:19, “If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.” It can also refer to Romans 12:2, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

²⁹ The Holy Bible, New Testament, John 15:13.

bridges had been blown up. We were about to go potlucking through the middle of an active shooting range.

*

As the first 100% dyed-in-the-wool Menno WfP group, we had a special mission to bring support to our kindred in a Mennonite community—an anomaly in a devoutly Catholic nation—residing in the village of La Esperanza (translation: “Hope”), on the other side of a Contra-besieged zone in Nueva Guinea, southeastern Nicaragua. We were farmers, nurses, educators, students, and white-collar professionals, visiting our counterparts in the countryside. Our average age was twenty-nine.

During our acclimatization in the WfP Managua headquarters, a modest one-story house with screened windows and doors, our group received the “Top Ten Things You Can Look Forward To,” reverse-incentive talk. First we reviewed handouts covering mosquitoes, chiggers, fleas (oil of pennyroyal recommended), tetanus, polio, tuberculosis, malaria (take Chloroquin), diarrhea, constipation, heat exhaustion, and general stress. Then the staff unrolled a map, traced our proposed route, and matter-of-factly repeated the statistics regarding our likelihood of being shot at, detained, kidnapped, or killed by the Contras, who specifically harassed international volunteers, reporters, and peace workers.³⁰

Might as well paint bulls-eyes on our foreheads. It was worse than reading the fine print on a no-fault insurance policy, or the list of side effects for a newly approved yet potentially lethal pharmaceutical. Our hosts emphasized that it was perfectly acceptable for us to decline the next stage. Newbies were given one final chance to raise our lily-white hands and say, “OK, we get it! Too gnarly! We’ll stay here and wait, crocheting afghans in weird color combinations, baking shoe-fly pies, and reciting obscure Bible verses.”

No one backed out. Meeting over, the WfP resident staff put us to work: repacking medical care kits and procuring field supplies. Presented with massive piles of devalued *córdobas*, which we recounted and crammed into brown paper bags while joking about never having seen such huge wads of cash, we walked out into city streets with very little traffic to the government commissariat where we bought bags of rice, beans, sugar, and salt to gift our host families in La Esperanza, so they wouldn’t starve while feeding us.

In the village, Anne, a Mennonite WfP staffer and I were assigned to a family of five: mom, dad, grade-school age daughters and son. The family took our sacks of food, thanked us, and placed them in the kitchen. Every day, the moment we sat down at the family’s table we were confronted

³⁰ WFP volunteer Richard Boren, 30, of Elkin, North Carolina, was kidnapped by the Contras in March 1988 from a farm cooperative in Mancotal where he traveled to document a recent kidnapping, torture, and murder. Boren and ten other Nicaraguans were force-marched by the “Larry McDonald Task Force of the FDN” (*Fuerza Democrática Nicaraguense*, the main Contra army) introducing themselves as “Regan’s [sic] freedom fighters.” After all Nicaraguans were freed or escaped except Victor Rodriguez, Boren negotiated with his captors, delaying his own release until Rodriguez was freed. A year earlier, on April 28, 1987, Ben Linder, 28, of Portland, Oregon, a mechanical engineer funded by Veterans for Peace was murdered by the Contra in Jinotega; my close friend Don MacLeay worked with Ben as an original member of the El Cua hydroelectric team and continued doing so after Ben’s death. The Ben Linder Café in Leon, Nicaragua, the Linder House Co-op at the University of Michigan, the 2008 documentary *American/Sandinista* (Jason Blalock, director) and Sting’s song “Fragile,” on the 1987 album *Nothing Like the Sun*, are all dedicated to Linder. The micro-hydroelectric plant Linder and others helped build still functions. The Association of Rural Development Workers-Ben Linder (ATDER-BL) continues to provide micro-hydro projects to rural communities (www.greenempowerment.org/about-us/ben-linder). See Ed Griffen-Nolan, 1991, *Witness for Peace: A Story of Resistance* (Westminster, John Knox Press) and Lee H. Hamilton and Daniel K. Inouye, 1995, *Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran/Contras Affair* (jointly published by the US House of Representatives and US Senate).

with acts of generosity that sent me over the edge: a few tiny tomatoes in a bowl, some slices of fried plantain, or a small bony fish.

My eyes (and mouth) watered. These gifts of hard-won food displayed on the roughly hewn wooden surface profoundly moved me. As a friend put it later, *I'm an American and my country is screwing them over and yet they are giving me more than they give themselves*. Initially I didn't touch the precious gifts, mindful of the household's limited resources. Eventually I wised up, stopped denying my hosts their dignity, and ate everything on offer: down to the last rice grain, running my finger around the plate to wipe it clean.

*

Our tour took place during the rainy season. Muck everywhere. We pushed our open-bed truck out of one mud hole, and then another, traveling deeper into the war. Our interviews intensified: we stopped more frequently to talk through the aftermath of recent incursions with families as we followed in the trail of Contras who targeted agricultural cooperatives, schools, and health care centers. We spoke with the survivors of attacks that assassinated civic and religious leaders, farm laborers, conservation workers, electricians, and agricultural technicians: ordinary people, trying to make life better for their communities.

Our door-to-door surveys were quite different from those typically performed. No clean white forms or crisp columns of straight-edged boxes. No filling in the blanks or multiple choice. Instead, we were documenting the messiest, grossest, bloodiest, most heinous experiences these people had ever lived through.

As a child, when my sister's best friend was killed by a neighborhood psycho, and her body dumped in one of the orange groves lining the sidewalk route the two girls walked to middle school, for years afterward my sister refused to go to bed without a nightlight blazing.

I mentally tried to multiply that feeling by hundreds of thousands of beating hearts.

I couldn't.

But that wasn't the worst of it: those guns had my name on them.

*

We conscientious Mennonites, and the other two hundred million Americans who allowed the carnage to continue through several presidential terms, were complicit in the violence bought by our tax dollars and our silence, while our government blocked international aid to Nicaragua, imposed an embargo, and disallowed accurate coverage in the U.S. press.

As a Witness-for-Peacer, there were times I felt I was pouring blood-sweat-tears into a sieve: our spanking new passports, our limited time in the country, our prayers, our reporting back, were incapable of raising the dead or stopping the insanity. The Contra were too well funded, our government's policies too well entrenched. Our government played with us, mocked us, did whatever the hell it wanted.

When Congress refused to approve military aid to the Contras in 1985, the Reagan administration orchestrated a secret arms deal with Iran and sent the proceeds to the Contras. The poster-child of this era, Officer Oliver North, lied to Congress when questioned about the simultaneous drug-

trafficking that accompanied arms shipments to the Contras³¹, was granted immunity for his testimony, carried on with his mistress-secretary, Fawn Hall, and held a document-shredding party. His felony sentence, later *reversed and dismissed*, involved a three-year suspended prison term, two years' probation, \$150,000 in fines, and 1,200 hours of community service.

Lady Justice stood blindfolded, middle finger upraised on her right hand, the left one amputated.

*

I did not experience a war littered with high-tension, shuddering explosions, like made-for-Hollywood bomb scenes. Instead, it was one of quiet destructions, those largely unseen and unreported. Shots fired across newly planted cornfields, early-morning ambushes in remote corners, people gone missing and never recovered. Our WFP sponsors aimed to bring this hidden war into the light: to literally go where no one else was willing to go: to listen, record, and transmit the horror back to the world. During our tour we spoke with dozens of people across hundreds of kilometers, word of the attacks traveling from mouth-to-mouth. What most remains with me are the voices; the ones slicing my life into distinct phases of knowledge.

Knowledge of Evil, 1.0: reading about atrocities in a book or newspaper or magazine.

Knowledge of Evil, 2.0: seeing the abandoned fields, the simple gravesites, the bloodstains on schoolhouse walls.

Knowledge of Evil, 3.0: listening to details in person, haltingly spoken by those left behind.

Post-Nicaragua, I became a modern-day Eve, having eaten of the fruit of the Tree of Good and Evil, the bitter seeds caught between my teeth. Evil was no longer a debatable concept. Now I knew Evil: the choices of Evil, the stink of Evil, the mind-blowing realities of Evil.

And.

At some point during our trip, I became a Tourist of Evil. After witnessing precisely what Witness for Peace intended for us to witness, I was soul-weary, processing the geopolitical realities that produced war zones with permeable borders. That I – *or anyone, for god's sake* – could travel into the middle of a war and then travel out of it, while other fine, decent people stayed and risked death: that was crazy-making.

I don't remember much of the Nicaraguan terrain, other than copious quantities of rust-colored clay coating the roadsides. Each time we had a break in our schedules I tried, unsuccessfully, to handwash the stains from my ankle-length skirts during laundry sessions on river rocks. Finally a sympathetic bystander reached out and took my skirt from me, whacked it repeatedly against the stone and scrubbed with practiced vigor until the material turned soft and bright. Handing it back to me with a smile, she waved away my thanks.

*

³¹ CIA Central America Task Force chief Alan Fiers lied to the House Intelligence Committee about a CIA-financed plane, shot down by the Sandinistas in 1986, carrying 10,000 pounds of ammunition and supplies to the Contras. He was later convicted. His boss, CIA deputy director of operations Clair George, had instructed him to lie. In 1992 George was also found guilty of making false statements to Congress.

At each interview site we sat with family members around wooden tables, coffee cups untouched. Our interviewees testified how their loved ones were killed, mutilated, or dismembered. Then these kind people described how they found, and buried, the bodies.

Our group sat still and quiet while I translated words in Spanish that, immediately after the syllables left my mouth, I desperately wanted to un-translate, to shove back into the pages of my dictionary. Words that never should have been associated with someone's daughter or son or spouse or sibling or cousin or parent or aunt or uncle or grandparent; words that should be outlawed from the human experience. Words provoking streams of tears down my cheeks while the speaker's eyes remained dry.

My penance was contained in the interviews, recorded on microcassettes. The cassettes were stored in my travel bag. Cassettes lost, then found, then strewn across a Brooklyn desktop.

*

One night the guys in our group hauled me over to the house of a local Sandinista *comandante* to serve as their translator while they relentlessly yet good-naturedly quizzed the young commander and debated politics. There was a bottle of rum, a bunch of limes. Another bottle. Possibly a third. My tongue grew thick and fuzzy, until my simultaneous translation mechanism was too impaired to function.

"Sorry guys," I announced. "We're done. I'm fumbling too much. My mouth is so worn out I can't wrap my lips around another sentence."

My tour-mates got up from the floor, stretched, and recovered their flashlights. I stayed seated. Regarding me with raised eyebrows, they said goodnight and trekked back to the dormitories.

Mr. Sandinista, with whom I exchanged looks but no spoken agreement, was fine-featured, well-muscled, intelligent, single, and hetero. He made room for me in his hammock. We talked some more, and eventually dozed off.

In the middle of what proved to be a quiet night, I awoke with the sudden realization of having chosen the riskiest spot in town if there were to be a Contra attack.

I mulled the thought over for a while. Closed my eyes. Slept.

*

The morning after, I set out to buy a newspaper. On my walk through the neighborhood, distant gunfire echoed faintly beyond the town's corrugated rooftops. It took several tries to find the doorway of a small *tienda* (store), its shelves largely empty, the room spare and otherwise unoccupied except for a petite, dangerously thin, elderly woman.

"*Todavía comemos* - We are still eating," she declared, her white hair primly captured in a braid. Her tone was defiant, her gaze unyielding as she rocked back and forth in her chair. Using her chin, she pointed at the latest Sandinista news bulletins lying on a stool near the door.

I took a copy, folded it beneath my arm. The woman accepted my fistful of banknotes. Her eyes remained on me, a question now, so I paused before I left.

"*Sí, lo veo*—yes, I see this," I answered gravely.

Lo veo—I see this.

I can do nothing but see this.

Mandy Tirrell

A Mother's Storm

Mandy Tirrell is a mother, high school English teacher, and wife. She lives in rural NH and can be found in her classroom or sitting by the lake with a journal balanced on her lap. Mandy is inspired by both the beautiful and challenging moments of her ordinary life. "A Mother's Storm" explores the uncertainty of motherhood as a mom embarks on a walk with her three young children. They get caught in the middle of the woods in a snowstorm. The uncertainty and fear are intensified by the recent deployment of the father and the constant shadow of the war he's fighting.

A Mother's Storm

Mandy Tirrell

I tried to keep bullets out of their conversations for as long as possible. But eventually they asked. Most children do. Does Dad have to shoot a gun? Does he have to kill people?

The truth is, I didn't even want to answer these questions for myself. So I didn't. Parents are good at diverting attention.

Every Tuesday we drove to Friendly's. We had the same waitress each week. I tried to tip her well because she was a single mom, and she told me her life was hard. I believed her. I took the kids to play dates, to their grandparents' houses, to the theater, to my gym, and reluctantly back home again, with just enough time for Seuss before bed. I took them away from their reality, which at the time, was a life without a dad. The uncertainty of our future became an obsession for me.

Sometimes I believed, with every ounce of rational thought, that our family would always be without a father. After all, Jeremiah was killed on the 51st day of deployment. An IED exploded and sent his truck tumbling off the side of a bridge. I should have sent his wife a card, but I didn't. Instead, I made dinner and planned my next diversion. We just needed some fresh air.

The next day, the cold chilled the bones of our ancient home. Even the walls shivered. Frost settled in the corners of the windows. We were only warm when we stood near the wood stove. Despite this, I bundled my children to go outside. I covered their bodies, leaving only their round cheeks and wide eyes peeking above their itchy scarves. It was New England bitter out there.

Reeghan tugged on my sleeve. "Mom, is Aidan going to cry? He always cries when we take walks." Cully smirked and rested her head against the wall.

"I won't cry," is all Aidan could muster from the depths of his scarf.

Brushing a wispy blonde piece of hair from Reeghan's face, I told her not to worry. "The snow's not so deep. We'll walk to the ruins and sled along the way."

The ruins, an old three-sided stone foundation, was my family's Terabithia. Just more than a mile down the road, off the haggard path of a logging trail, over an earthen bridge, this remnant of time stood. We only occasionally visited it. One mile is ten for children. My husband told them the infrequent visits helped preserve the magic.

It's funny how lying to children comes so naturally. It even feels right sometimes.

When we stepped outside, the wind caught the dusting of snow on the driveway and swirled it around. I tried to ignore the instant freeze inside my nose, to convince myself that the freezing air was fresher. We hadn't played outside for days. A warm sun, fresh air, and exercise—in the winter, New Englanders pack these things away like swimsuits and lawn chairs. Suddenly, breathing outside of our walls became necessary.

The walk to the start of the trail was short. We broke the dead winter silence with the scuffing of our Sorrels. Reeghan asked if there was snow where Daddy was. Cully scoffed, "There's no snow in the desert." Aidan continued to pick up dirty balls of crusted road ice and fling them into the woods. Each ball left an indelible impression in the fluff of fresh snow, vapid and weightless until

pressed to a will. I thought about how innocent their conversation was. Then I thought about weapons of mass destruction as I encouraged them to keep up.

There is something very ambiguous about a New England winter. The quiet is deafening. Blanketed in white, the world seems peaceful and impregnable, but the stark contrast of the naked, black and twisted trees, glorifies eerie in the most extreme way.

We made it to what I hoped would be a good spot to sled, but the snow was too deep. Cully clambered into the sled and sunk inches below, allowing snow to tumble in over the sides. She rocked back and forth, willing the sled to move. After several attempts to pack down the snow, I gave up and urged my children to keep moving.

Many times I wanted to turn around, as I watched Aidan struggling to pull his boots back out of the snow, as Reeghan's cheeks began to redden, as Cully kept looking back to count the distance. But smiles still graced their faces, mittens were still in place covering their tender wrists, and they continued to chatter like squirrels in a fall oak. Their voices painted the silence. Without walls to imprison worries, our steps were lighter and quicker.

We arrived at the bridge. From here, peering into the woods, we could see the snow-dusted stones of the ruins, the rocky remains of a life. Two fallen trees crisscrossed over the top of the structure. The branches swept to the ground like webbed curtains, delineating rooms inside the granite walls. "Let's go, Mom. Come on!" My children ambled their puffy bundled bodies through the trees, little splashes of color laboring in the stark snow.

The foundation was built into the earth on the back side, allowing weeks of melting and freezing to form frozen waterfalls down the inside of the walls. The kids took turns standing at the top of the foundation like kings and queens with their hands on their hips and faces staring down at each other. "Aid, Reegh, pretend I am the ruler and I tell you we have to go to the river." I paused, waiting to hear sibling protests, but none ensued.

A short distance away, a small icy brook flowed. Water coursed over rocks and fallen branches, churning under small deposits of crusted snow. During warmer months, the kids would stand on the bridge and throw leaves over one side then race to the other to watch their botanical sacrifice float by. As they tramped over to the brook, I suddenly felt a need to beat them there. Images of soggy dripping Sorrels flashed through my mind. "Wait up. If you get wet, we're in trouble."

They sat impatiently on a big rock, as snow flurries began to flutter around their heads. I looked to the sky through the overlapping bare branches, a fractured puzzle of darkening gray. Lately, I couldn't bring myself to turn on the news, pick up a newspaper, or peruse the internet. I captured my updates in filtered snippets. The weather never seemed to make the docket. Scolding myself for not checking before we left, I sounded the verbal alarm. "We have a little time to throw stuff into the brook, but it looks like it's going to storm." To erase the pouty faces that inevitably follow a time-to-leave notice, I looked around for something to toss into the brook. Whatever I could find, I launched. My tosses turned deliberate. Pine cones, rocks I had to pull from the ground, sticks, broken pine branches from above my head, they were missiles. I volleyed them. I heaved them high and far, not pausing to hear the splashdown. My children watched me. Their eyes tracked the objects leaving my hand. Cully, unsure, picked up a rock and plopped it into the brook. Suddenly, all four of us, in a frenzy, began to launch woodland waste and wreckage into the water. Our arms were catapults. Only pausing to scour the ground for more ammunition, and for an occasional triumphant yelp. We became automated. Search. Bend. Grasp. Lift. Aim. Launch. Repeat.

The floating flurries quickly turned to a wet spluttering kind of snow. Every now and then the wind picked up and whipped the tops of the trees back and forth. “Kiddos, we have to go. Now!” I like winter storms when tucked safely within the walls of our ancient house, wood stove crackling away, hot drinks in hand, and an occasional ping ping on the window reminding us our home is a shelter. But the thought of being caught in a squall with three young kids in tow made me panic. I pictured one of them getting too tired to footslog another step and planting their rear end in a snowbank. I envisioned tears freezing on cheeks, wails of protests, and deep utter despair. Promising them that we would come back, I herded them toward the bridge.

Aidan held my hand as we worked to get back out to the trail. I held my other hand out to Reeghan and let Cully lead the way. She set the pace, steady but slow. It felt like we were miles from home. The wind was no longer an exhale; it assaulted us. The snow had transformed into tiny ice pellets, sharp and stinging. Despite our winter gear, the icy rounds found their way into the spaces between our scarves and necks. Before long, it was difficult to see, as the wetness drove into our eyes. Again, I berated myself for not checking the weather.

We continued on, taking frequent breaks. The kids' eyelashes were frosted white and their faces shone red under streams of melting snow. Every time we stopped, I pulled my sweatshirt out from the bottom of my coat to wipe their eyes. A small white circle appeared at the bottom of Cully's left cheek and thoughts of frostbite seized me. I closely inspected Reeghan's cheeks, then Aidan's, wondering if a pale circle on red skin really is a sign of frostbite.

The kids walked on silently, head down, one foot in front of the other. We no longer held hands. They walked ahead of me, single file, even Aidan, his little body faltering and steadying, faltering and steadying.

I wanted one of them to ask me to carry them, to make their journey easier. That's all I wanted at that moment. I waited for tears, but none fell. A whimper, a whine, a lace to be tied, a nose to wipe, something. Anything for me to tend to would have made the walk home more tolerable for me; but they were sure and stoic, focusing only on their own small feet carrying them home. Without thinking, I began to chant *The Ants Go Marching*. Soon their voices rang out with mine, small but immutable, once again breaking the winter silence. In the distance, I could make out the dark silhouette of our mailbox, a marker for home.

F I C T I O N

Jerri Bell

Last Girl in the Bar

Jerri Bell is the Managing Editor for *O-Dark-Thirty*, the literary journal of the Veterans Writing Project. She retired from the Navy in 2008; her assignments included antisubmarine warfare in the Azores Islands, sea duty on USS Mount Whitney and HMS Sheffield, and attaché duty at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, Russia. Her fiction has been published in a variety of journals and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize; her nonfiction has been published in newspapers, including the *Washington Post* and the *Charleston Gazette-Mail*, in journals, and on blogs. She and former Marine Tracy Crow are the co-authors of *It's My Country Too: Women's Military Stories from the American Revolution to Afghanistan*. Of the story published in *Collateral*, Bell writes, “The “last girl in the bar” scam is common in port cities worldwide. During my embassy assignment in Russia, I went to the police station in the Black Sea port of Novorossiysk at three a.m. to retrieve two inebriated sailors from USS *LaSalle* who'd been detained for fighting and causing a public disturbance: they'd gone home with the last girls in the bar and been robbed at knifepoint of two hundred rubles—then worth about eight dollars. I wondered what the operation might look like from the viewpoint of one of the women involved.”

Last Girl in the Bar

Jerri Bell

When cold February rain swept in from the Black Sea to drench the port city of Varna, Mila pored over the postcard from her merchantman father and imagined herself in Florida: clean sugar-sand beaches and bright umbrellas, tanned men, a purse brimful of ink-scented, green dollar bills. She applied for a job as a summer guest worker at a Miami hotel chain, and in March they offered her a job. When the first stork of spring flew over, auspiciously white, her visa was approved. She decided it was time to tell her brother Anton that she'd be spending the summer in America. Even Sasho wouldn't miss her. He'd never taken her out for dinner, bought her flowers or perfume, or invited her to his apartment upstairs to meet his mother. He just stopped by periodically with a pocket full of premium German condoms when he knew Anton was out. She wouldn't miss the sex or the curly, dark hairs that he shed on her clean sheets. And she was done being the last girl in the bar.

She'd learned the routine quickly from Sasho and his cousin Radka, who would have been the last girl in the bar regardless. Radka dyed her hair a cheap, tarty red; her long face seemed frozen in a perpetually morose pout; her hips swayed like the pelvis of an emaciated milk cow. The bartender at the Black Sea Pearl, Sasho's distant cousin, watered the girls' drinks. Radka had an eye for young, inexperienced sailors who hadn't yet blown their entire paychecks—and a knack for spotting the telltale signs of a concealed knife or needle-sharp fid in a sock, a boot, under the edge of a jacket, or in a hidden pocket in the trousers. She also intuited just how much rakia to pour into a man to make him too drunk to argue about handing over his money, but not drunk enough to pass out altogether. In Radka's presence, sailors overlooked Mila's own flat dumpling of a nose, the beaky overlap of her two front teeth, her skinny, bird-like legs. All she had to do was dress up, sing her usual sets, sip a watery drink at the end, dance, flirt, and invite the men to continue the party at home.

Mila was slower to learn to tolerate physical discomfort and moral outrage. As Sasho had promised, the routine didn't involve prostitution. But he was deliberately slow to respond when Radka summoned him with a few taps on the pipe in the toilet, and seemed to take a perverse pleasure in Mila's distaste for sailors with hairy shoulders and groping hands. She longed for a job that allowed her some dignity and paid better than her part-time secretarial job. And she never got over her fear for Anton's safety if a mark decided to fight back.

Still, even an occasional hidden bruise or two and offended dignity were better than endless days of hunger and want. The transatlantic routes of the Greek shipping company Mila's father had signed on with after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and COMECON three years earlier kept him at sea for months at a time. In the first weeks of his absences, money seemed plentiful. Then Mila's tuition and rent on their small flat near the port would come due. Anton tried to close the gap with his entry-level salary from a shipping firm whose owner seldom paid him on time or in full; after her university classes, Mila typed invoices at the ship's chandlery owned by her father's friend Dragunov and sang in waterfront nightclubs. But no matter how she labored, economized, haggled, and mended, by their father's return they were eating rice with tomato sauce for dinner every night. Her cut of the last-girl take allowed her to buy sausage and occasionally a chicken. She'd been the last girl in the bar for six months when the taste of meat began to turn her stomach.

*

The air at the beach had warmed enough for just a sweater during the day, but she was glad to have her jacket as evening approached. A cold breeze fluttered the trailing ends of her multicolored scarf. The sun was setting behind the hills that ringed Varna to the west. Low, dark waves crested, crashed, and hissed foam at her feet. Glassware rattled and a few notes of music wafted from the bars and

clubs beginning to open for business along the seaside promenade, though the canopied beach beds were still stacked carelessly among the scraggly palms. Florida, she thought, would be warmer. The sun would set later.

She rooted through her handbag for her cigarettes, harsh Bulgarian tobacco despite the feminine design on the package. She preferred Newport menthols when she could afford them. She tucked the bag under her arm, cupped the end of the cigarette to shield it from the wind, and lit it. She exhaled some of her anxiety with the smoke.

“You shouldn’t smoke, Mila.” Anton had come up behind her. Startled, she stumbled over something half-buried in the sand. A dead bird. Another stork, this one black.

“Neither should you.”

He sighed, pulled out his own cigarette, and lit it from hers. “Papa wouldn’t approve.”

“He’s not here. And you’re my brother, not my father.”

“No. I just try to stand in for him when he’s gone.”

“Katia called me last week,” Mila said. She dropped her half-smoked cigarette and ground it into the sand with the toe of her shoe. “She and Marfa and Lidia and I are going to America as hotel guest workers this summer.”

Anton stopped walking and grabbed her arm. “You can’t do that.”

She shook him off. “It’s a good job. Maybe I’ll even get a chance to sing somewhere.”

“It can’t pay well.”

“They pay for our visas, fly us over and back, and pay us four dollars and fifty cents an hour. I’ll make twice as much in one week as you make in a month. Even Dragunov can’t compete.”

Anton whistled softly. But then he shook his head. “It’s not safe, Milka. They’ll make you dance naked in some sleazy nightclub. They’ll take your passports and make you work as prostitutes.” She sensed desperation underlying the affection in his use of the diminutive form of her name; both echoed in her reply.

“Thanks to you, Doncho, I’m already a thief. But I’m done. No more sailors. I won’t be the last girl in the bar anymore.”

“We don’t have a choice.”

“Because of the money? Or something else?”

Anton tossed away his cigarette, and Mila faced her brother in the fading light. Over his shoulder, in the resort area, streetlamps were slowly coming on like dim stars. His face seemed unusually pale and tired. A little worry line streaked between his brows. She reached up to smooth the frown away.

“Sasho asked for some of the confidential ships’ schedules. He’s in import-export, not shipping. I didn’t see any harm in giving him a little information.”

“But he’s smuggling.”

“How did you know that?”

“Stoyanov says he could tell right away.” Stoyanov was the elderly pensioner on the ground floor who served as the building's caretaker.

“It takes one to know one.”

“Stoyanov was a smuggler!”

Anton shrugged. “All kinds of contraband moves on ships, from cigarettes to arms. Everybody has something on the side, or takes a little here and there. Stoyanov, Dragunov, even Papa.”

“And Sasho?”

“Heroin from Turkey.”

Mila gasped. “Doncho, you have to stop.”

Anton shook his head. “He’ll tell my boss about the schedules. Look, I can get us out of this. But you have to help me one last time before you go. There’s an American ship coming in May. You should be happy for a chance to meet some American men before you go. Maybe you’ll get more out of them than you did out of fucking Sasho whenever he wanted a little easy pussy.” Stunned, Mila couldn’t reply. He’d known?

*

All the neighbors in their working-class block near the port had noticed when Sasho Chilikov and his invalid mother moved into the flat above Mila's that winter. Sasho, not yet thirty, often fingered a roll of *leva*, Turkish lira, and dollars twisted around a money clip in his trouser pocket. He claimed to be in the import-export business.

“Best avoid that one, Milka,” the neighbor Stoyanov said when he saw Mila watching Sasho head up the stairs. “If you call one wolf, you invite the pack.”

Mila hadn’t found Sasho handsome. A ruff of chest hair around the neckline of his monogrammed sport shirts hinted at hirsute nether regions that she preferred not even to imagine, and she saw only amusement and sly condescension in his dark eyes. But she’d noticed that he wore Italian wool suits with silk shirts on weekdays and pressed Levis with tasseled Gucci loafers on weekends. She invited him to the surprise dinner for Anton's twenty-first birthday anyway.

Mila had squirreled away a few *leva* here and there for months to buy things for a traditional birthday dinner. On the morning of the party she cut classes to shop, clean, and cook. She scrubbed the tile floors, swept the thin wool throw rugs, polished the brass knickknacks that her father had bought in Turkish ports, and tidied the small shelf of textbooks and novels. To make Anton's favorite dishes she meticulously followed recipes copied on yellowing slips of paper in her mother's tidy script: pork meatballs, fried fish, stuffed peppers. She crammed their small refrigerator with cold salads and *shopska*—marinated vegetables topped with salty sheep's-milk cheese—and three bottles of semi-sweet Russian champagne. She put on a form-fitting spring sweater and stretch jeans borrowed from a friend, set her hair with rollers, and applied makeup. Feeling competent, mature, womanly and

desirable, she put one of Anton's bootleg CDs in the player: a Swedish singer, Pandora. The music felt electric. Determined. Even a little dangerous. She bopped to the beat and sang along as she worked.

Sasho arrived at seven. He handed Anton a bag with two long-necked bottles of *rakia* inside and pressed five rare, expensive white roses into Mila's hands. "For the lady of the house." Mila took the roses and stepped back. Sasho closed in and kissed her on each cheek. She smelled expensive tobacco and heavy, musky cologne.

Sasho took her free hand. "Come," he said. In the dining room, he pressed a glass into her hand. "Champagne for the hostess! A toast! *Na zdrave*, Anton." He looked each of the dozen guests in the eye, properly, but his glance locked longest with Mila's. "And to the health of your beautiful sister."

A second glass of champagne followed, then two of *slivovka*, then Mila lost count. At one point she perched on Sasho's lap and felt his fingers toying with the hip pocket of her jeans. The flat seemed warmer and she decided to open another window. She made her way to her bedroom with precise steps.

She woke lying on her back on her bed. The flat had gone quiet and the room spun around her. Light from a street lamp washed over the concrete wall of the building opposite her window. A cold gust of wind lifted the coarsely woven orange curtain. A warm, heavy body suddenly loomed over her.

She shoved at the man. He didn't move.

"You have to go," she said.

"I have to stay." Sasho's voice was thick and his breathing heavy. His fingers fumbled under her sweater and he stabbed a soft spot on her inner thigh with his erection. "It feels good. See?"

It didn't feel good. She didn't see. She didn't want to see. She closed her eyes: less spin.

"Let me." He tugged at the waistband of her jeans.

She pushed again with no effect. *Let him. It would be easier.* She bit her lip until it drew blood, then allowed the whirling room to spin her away into black oblivion.

She didn't remember leaving the bed or straightening her clothes. She barely remembered Sasho telling Anton with false concern that she was unwell, that he had to see to his mother, that she needed Anton to help her outside for some air. She never forgot the sour, sticky taste of the plum-wine vomit that erupted from her throat into a bush in the courtyard, and the echoing stickiness in her pubic hair and on her thighs.

*

She swung her handbag, hard, and hit her brother in the side of the head. "We're done, Doncho. You bastard. You brought that man into our lives. You're no brother to me! Leave me. Get away from me!" She punched him in the shoulder as hard as she could, then again right on the breastbone.

Anton rocked back and sucked in breath, then grabbed her arms and pulled her close. “Mila, Mila. I’m sorry. Did he hurt you?”

“No, Doncho. No. It was just—easier.” She dashed hot tears away with the back of her hand. Anton sighed again. “Somehow he makes it seem easy at first, doesn’t he?”

*

Sasho and Anton strategized over the American port visit for weeks. Sasho insisted that American sailors on liberty carried wads of cash and no weapons, and couldn’t hold their liquor. Mila imagined how she might keep Sasho and Anton from robbing a handsome American sailor, thus redeeming herself for having participated in the “last girl” scheme. Somehow she’d be both sexy and strong, like Xena the Warrior Princess, heroine of the pirated television shows Anton brought home to play in the VCR their father had picked up on a port visit in Italy.

The ship, a frigate, tied up on a Saturday in May. By eleven that evening, Mila and Radka were at the Black Sea Pearl, cocktails in hand. Europop blared through the speakers. Mila tried not to fidget with the edge of her lacy black bra. It was a little too small, too tight; it cut into the top of her breast just above the neckline of her stretchy magenta top. One strappy stiletto had left a blister under her ankle and it ached. She felt invisible droplets of sweat breaking out under her nightclub makeup. She reached up and tightened the elastic around her ponytail.

American sailors, drawn to the bar by a sign advertising free Jell-O shots, stood out in their dress white uniforms and ribbons and patches. Empty chairs held their white hats, and overflowing ashtrays and half-empty glasses dotted their tables.

Radka indicated a group of serious drinkers with a negative shake of her head, and then gestured to a corner table near the back. Two sailors, very young. The blond had a prominent Adam’s apple and more than a trace of adolescent acne. A box of Newport menthols lay on the table in front of him. His buddy, whose ears stuck out like jug handles, took a drag on his cigarette and gestured for another beer.

“I get the blond one,” Mila murmured.

Radka looked at her sharply, then shrugged and went to the bar.

Mila caught the blond sailor’s eye and smiled. She’d heard that Americans always smiled. The sailor smiled back. Mila made sure he knew she was singing the last two songs in her repertoire for him. After she left the tiny stage, she slid into the seat beside him.

“Got a light?” She held a cigarette to her lips.

“Sure.” The sailor pulled out a cheap butane lighter and flicked it on.

Radka arrived with a bottle of bubbly and four glasses. “Champagne?” she offered.

“Sure thing,” said the buddy. “You speak English too?” Radka squeezed into the booth beside him, pressed her thigh against his.

“We are students at the university. I am Radka, and this is Mila.”

It was their usual story, but Mila felt an unexpected surge of irritation. Radka worked in a shipyard as a welder during the day. Mila took a long drag on her cigarette and swallowed the last of her wine.

“Where are you from?” Mila asked the blond sailor. His name was Mike.

“Florida,” he said. It seemed like an omen. His grin revealed large, white teeth that gleamed in the light reflected by the disco ball. Mila thought his overbite charming, and she noticed freckles on his face and arms. His biceps bulged and flexed when he set down his drink, and the blue-and-yellow edge of a tattoo peeked out from under his sleeve.

“Let’s dance,” she said, dropping her cigarette into the ashtray.

They danced through two songs, traded partners with Radka and Pete, then switched back for a ballad. Mike held Mila close. Her head dropped to his shoulder. The bar was nearly empty.

“We could go walk out on the beach,” she suggested.

“But Pete and your friend—”

“They do not need to come. There is a back door. Go to the men’s room. I’ll go to the ladies’. When you come out, go through the door on the right. It’s not locked. I’ll see you outside.”

“I should stay with my liberty buddy,” Mike said.

“It is just the beach,” Mila said. “We won’t go too far. I promise.”

*

Five minutes later, they scooted out of the bar’s back door, met in the alley between the bar and a currency exchange, and hurried down the steps from the promenade to the gray, moonlit sand. They walked along the water’s edge, fingers interlaced, until Mila steered Mike back toward the rows of palms between the water and the bustling promenade. “We can be more alone over there.” She gestured to a broken-down beach bed, two of its white nylon curtains sun-damaged and torn, that had been pulled behind a palm tree to await repairs.

“Wow,” he said. “Sure.”

They climbed onto the bed, which had a slippery vinyl cover and listed to the left. Mila pulled what was left of the curtains around them. “That’s better.”

Overhead, the Milky Way stretched across the sky, visible despite the lights of the city behind them. A breeze fluttered the edges of the curtains and rustled palm fronds. Waves splashed, down where the sand and water met. She hoped that Radka and Pete had not yet missed them.

Mike raised up on an elbow beside her. He smelled of good tobacco, some kind of spicy cologne, healthy male sweat. Her skin tingled.

“It’s beautiful out here,” he said. “But not as beautiful as you.”

They laughed, rolled back and forth, tugged at each other’s clothes, and fumbled with the snap on her jeans and the thirteen buttons – she counted them – on the flap of his trousers. He mumbled incoherently in her ear and touched her clumsily but gently, too awkward just to be drunk. So she

would be his first. A beautiful, experienced European woman, about to make love with a handsome American. She opened her eyes under his kiss and watched the stars wheeling overhead.

Afterwards, they shared one of his Newports. She traced her fingers over his chest. He pointed out the Milky Way; she told him that Bulgarians called it “Straw” and recounted the fairy tale in which a poor man who stole straw from his godfather’s house to feed his own oxen. When the godson refused to confess to the theft, the old man cursed the straw to burn so that no one could steal it again. “The straw burst into flames,” she said, “and it is still burning in the sky.”

“Mila? Is that you?” It was Radka, of course. Mila slid off the side of the bed away from Radka’s voice, straightened her top, and put a finger to her lips. Mike followed her. She grabbed his hand.

“Over here,” she replied. “We went out for some air.” They dodged behind one palm tree, and then another, and then Mila turned and strolled out into the open with Mike’s arm tucked through hers.

“We should go back to our flat,” Radka said. Her cross expression said that she knew exactly what Mila had been doing.

“Radka, I’d rather –”

Pete cut her off. “We been looking for you two for an hour. Mike, you’re supposed to stick with your liberty buddy. What if Shore Patrol had come this way and seen one of us without the other?”

Radka laughed a little too loudly. “But we have found them, haven’t we? And we’ll just go back to our flat for another little drink or two. Keep the party going, right, Mila?”

Mila, beaten, nodded. “Please come,” she said.

*

Mila stopped in the courtyard outside the apartment building. “Maybe you should go now,” she told the sailors, “before it’s too late. Don’t you have the, ah, curfew?”

Mike grinned, and for the first time Mila noticed the nicotine stains on his front teeth. “Naw, we don’t have to be back until o-six-hundred. We still got half the night.” He pulled Mila close and started kissing her neck. She batted at him, to no effect.

“Kiss me again, honey,” he mumbled into her hair. He planted his lips on hers.

The heavy front door of the apartment building opened. Radka unsheathed her knife but held it low, by her thigh. Mila pushed Mike away hard. The sailors looked in surprise at Sasho, large and dark except for the gleam of his own blade. Anton rubbed his right fist in his left palm.

“Who are those guys?” Mike asked.

“You will please to let Mila have your wallets now,” Radka said. “One at a time. Do not make any sudden moves.”

This was all wrong. They were never supposed to do this in the courtyard.

“You’re late,” Anton said to her. He didn’t take his eyes off the sailors.

Mila took the wallet from Mike's outstretched hand. "I am so sorry," she whispered. He didn't respond.

Mila took the sailors' driver's licenses and military identification out of the wallets and handed them back to Mike. "You will not want to lose these," she said. "It is trouble if you lose them, yes?" Mike put the cards into his pocket, and suddenly everything went wrong.

Pete grabbed the wrist of Sasho's knife hand and smashed his forearm. Mila could hear the crack of bone. Stunned, Sasho dropped the knife and sank to his knees. Mike pulled back an arm and hit Anton in the face so hard that he staggered, tripped over an exposed root, and fell to the cobblestones, hitting his head. Mila clapped her hand over her mouth—it was important never to make noise in the courtyard, never to draw the neighbors' attention—but she glimpsed a face at a ground-floor window. Stoyanov.

Pete kicked Sasho hard in the face with a move Mila thought might have been some kind of martial art. Sasho fell to the pavement, and even in the dim light Mila could see that his jaw was dislocated and probably broken. She gasped. Radka, who had hesitated to come to Sasho's defense, sheathed her knife and ran.

"Please," Mila said when Mike drew back a foot to kick Anton. "Please. He's my brother. He does not even have a knife. It is just the two of us."

"Come on," said Pete. "Let's get outta here before somebody calls the cops or the Shore Patrol."

"Sasho—the big one with the knife—he had a secret, he was—" she struggled for the unfamiliar word— "blackmailing my brother. This was all his plan."

"Come on," said Pete.

"Here is your money," Mila said. She held out the roll of bills. "Take it, please."

Mike slowly reached for the cash. He peeled off a five-dollar bill, held it up, and then let it flutter to the ground. "You can keep the change," he said. "You earned it down on the beach, you goddamned whore. Fuck this shit. Fuck the money. And fuck you, too."

The two sailors turned their backs and walked away.

Mila left the bill on the ground. She sat on the bench for a few minutes and watched Anton breathe. A trickle of blood ran from a cut on his cheek. Finally she got up, grabbed Sasho by the shirt collar, and tried to drag his still form into the alley. He showed no sign of coming to. His dead weight was too much for her, and the stiletto heels gave her no purchase on the cobblestones.

Stoyanov appeared beside her, his footfalls making nearly no sound. Muttering, he scooped up the bill and helped Mila drag Sasho out of the courtyard and over to the trash cans behind the corner store. They propped him against a wall that stank of piss and cheap wine vomit. Before they left, Mila drew back a foot and kicked Sasho as hard as she could in the groin with the pointed toe of her high-heeled shoe. His head slipped to the left, but he made no sound.

They returned to the courtyard and revived Anton enough to get him upstairs. Mila cleaned the cut on his scalp while he slumped over the table; Stoyanov put the *rakia* glasses in the sink and patted

Mila on the shoulder. After he helped her get Anton to bed, he said, “You will not be seeing Sasho again. I will call some old friends.”

“His mother—” Mila began.

“He never had an invalid mother,” Stoyanov said. “Or any other kind. And you don’t do this any more, either. Understand? Or I will talk to your father when he comes home.”

*

That very week, Stoyanov convinced Dragunov to give Mila more hours typing invoices in the deserted office on weekends. Later in the summer Anton was promoted to a new position and given a small raise. In September, Katia, Marfa, and Lidia returned from America wise to the guest-worker economy: their dreams of luxury and glamor in Miami Beach had been dashed on the rocky realities of receptionist jobs in a two-star hotel in a family-friendly Delaware beach town and shared accommodations in a shoddy hostel blocks from the ocean. America was clean, they said; the men almost always handsome; the families sunburned, well-fed, constantly smiling, and genuinely friendly. The shops and malls in larger towns like Rehoboth Beach sold everything one could ever want. But on minimum wage, after rent and groceries, even factory seconds of designer goods from the outlet mall had been beyond their means.

They returned to America the following summer, but Mila didn’t join them. She’d met Bruce, the representative of a British shipping insurer who did business with Dragunov. As a teenager he’d been a bass guitarist in a local punk band that had opened for The Clash in the summer of 1980; he took genuine pleasure in her singing. He danced with a surprisingly erotic pelvic shimmy. He brought her flowers every Friday when he was in town, and took her to dinner at the best restaurants in Varna and even in Sofia. Still a goalie in a recreational football league back in England, he could run rings around Anton and argue the merits of all the European and South American clubs with her father. Within a year she no longer noticed the eleven-year age difference or his thinning blond hair.

In the spring he flew her to Bristol to meet his grandmother, who had worked at British Aerospace and been a neighborhood fire warden during the Bristol Blitz. She served them tea in a tiny garden filled with roses and sweetpeas, and claimed to find Mila’s accent charming. Bruce brought out the BMW motorbike he’d hoped to take on a touring holiday in the Balkans before Yugoslavia disintegrated into civil war and insisted that she wear his helmet. He showed her the Gothic arches and neatly trimmed lawns of the excellent public school he’d attended, and they rode up into the Mendip Hills to share a picnic lunch on a damp, rocky outcrop overlooking the Chew Valley. They made love for the first time in an elegant posada on the Spanish Riviera. She decided by the end of that week that romance took many forms, and that tenderness, consideration, and enthusiasm in a lover more than compensated for a certain lack of creativity. When she finished university, she married Bruce, became a British citizen, and moved to Bristol.

Years later, when Bruce was at work and the children at the same superior public school their father had attended, Mila would sometimes sit by the parlor window, light a Newport 100, look out at the surly gray water of the Bristol Channel, and remember that she had once dreamed of the sparkling sapphire breakers of Miami Beach. But when Bruce suggested they plan a winter holiday with the children at Disneyland, Mila insisted that the Mediterranean resorts— Palma, Barcelona, Mykonos— were closer and cheaper. Healthier for the children.

In alternate summers, they would visit Anton and her father in Bulgaria. Anton had saved enough to buy a summer cottage in the forest above Golden Sands through hard work and careful dealings

with German contractors. In the off-years, Bruce and Mila rented a self-catering cottage near Weymouth for the month of August. Bruce would drive down on weekends, and Anton would bring his wife and daughters to England for two weeks.

At night she and Bruce would walk hand in hand on the beach while the children ran ahead and splashed in the surf. Sometimes Mila would gaze out beyond them, following the arch of the Milky Way up and over the inky Atlantic swells, west and south toward Florida.

Clayton Bradshaw

How to Grieve for Hyacinths

Clayton Bradshaw served in the US Army for eight years as an infantryman. He deployed with 3/2 SCR to Iraq from 2007 to 2008 and to Afghanistan from 2010 to 2011. He graduated from Sam Houston State University with a BA in English and currently participates in the MFA Creative Writing program at Texas State University. His work can be found in *The Deadly Writers Patrol*, *Second Hand Stories*, *War, Literature and the Arts*, and *r.kv.ry*. He is currently working on a novel, *Quietus*, which looks to create agency within the veteran narrative.

How to Grieve for Hyacinths

Clayton Bradshaw

Step 1. Go Online

You find out about the friend's death through social media. Usually Facebook, since these deaths come from old Army buddies, most of whom have never enjoyed much human interaction while sober. It is lucky that they have any online presence at all. The details remain about the same. The bullet bounces inside the skull, mimicking the ricochets of rounds inside mud-walled rooms. Sometimes, it's strands of paracord, crimson staining the green nylon where it cuts into the throat. Or, on occasion, little white pills can be found scattered across the wool carpet leading to a VA-prescribed bottle missing a cap.

Your frontal lobe blanks as the death creeps into your consciousness. To come back to reality, blink twice. Then, click to expand the post: This is terrible. He was such a good man. Check on your buddies. Talk to someone if you feel like killing yourself. Always the same. The comment section: What happened? When is the funeral? I'll make it down from such and such place.

Don't say anything. Just stare at the screen as each comment appears and wonder if you are even allowed to feel sadness in your gut. None of these people like you, talk to you. They abhor empathy, so why even bother feeling bad when one of them dies. To them, you are a traitor for throwing off your uniform and questioning why you ever wore it. You know this because they troll posts on Facebook and Twitter.

Close your laptop, sit on your bed, and pull on your shoes. Stop midway through tying the laces of the left shoes to sit up straight, your back as rigid as when you sat in the Stryker sandwiched between the Kevlar plates in your body armor. The deceased appears in a flash of memory on the other side of the room. Usually, he wears full battle armor with his helmet unstrapped while taking a break in the living room of an Iraqi mansion. On occasion, the ghost, this time in jeans and a t-shirt, drinks from a beer bottle in his hand. You feel a tear, sometimes two, warm your right cheek.

Finish tying your shoes. Your eyes seem a bit red as you pass by the mirror, so splash a little water on them to cool off. They only redden further, but you should at least make the attempt to look normal. Walk outside and sit in your truck for a moment, hands welded to the steering wheel. The blue infantry cord hangs from your rearview mirror and anchors you to some memory of the deceased. This outdated symbol is all you have in common with the dead. Perpetual loneliness serves as the toll for moving on with your life, away from the restricted thought patterns implanted by the Army.

Turn the key in the ignition and watch the round light attempt to permeate the shadows between the trees in front of you. Back up, then roll slowly down the street. As you turn left at the first stop sign, the oversized concrete barriers you have built behind your eyes burst as the tears detonate like five thousand pounds of homemade explosive. Allow the tears to fall from your cheek and stain your shirt as you pass through the intermittent lamplight on each street.

Step 2. Memorialize the Dead

Pull into the parking lot of the classiest drinking establishment you currently frequent. Ignore the greetings of everyone you know as you sit on a stool at the loneliest end of the bar. Don't worry about intruding on their good spirits. After all, you don't need their sympathy. Your friends shrug

and assume you are just having one of your grumpy moments. You know how to get over this. It happens once or twice a month. You have the routine down.

The bartender double-checks to see if you are drinking the same thing. A Shiner Bock, of course, but request two this round. The bartender asks who it is for, so respond that the beer is for an old friend whom will be stopping by this evening. When she returns with the beers, ask for an extra napkin. Pull out the pen you keep in your pocket, another old Army habit, and write the usual note on the napkin.

RIP _____

The Wolf is the strength of the Pack.

The Pack is the strength of the Wolf.

Ghostriders for Life.

‘Til Valhalla.

Place a coaster on the top corner of the napkin and the beer on the coaster. You know better than to place the beer on the napkin itself. It gets too soggy too quickly, and, as a result, the note does not make it to the end of the evening. Your tribute must be built to endure, or you risk failing the memory of all-night drinking sessions in Germany.

Take a shot. You don't normally drink liquor, so start with something weak. Drink your beer. Drink a shot with the next beer. Repeat this process as your shoulders slump closer and closer to the bar and your head leans into the crook of your elbow.

Wipe the tears before the bartender sees you. You still have a few hours until close, so sit up straight and open your eyes. Focus on the music. If a jukebox is around, play some Johnny Cash or Muddy Waters. Maybe some obscure song that the deceased always enjoyed as you rolled down the streets of Baghdad. He always had terrible taste. This applies to any buddy that has died.

The barback yells out Last Call. Close out your tab and leave a generous tip. Ask the bartender for a favor. The beer with the note is for a dead friend, you explain. No, don't cry. This happens all the time. She will agree to let you pour the beer onto the ground outside. Walk to the back of the bar, toast the deceased, and dump the beer onto the ground. Let the dirt soak up the alcohol. The dead must have their fill too. The ghosts request unceasing appeasement (quite frankly, it's annoying). Drive home. You know this part is a bad idea, but you have only ever been pulled over once in this process.

Step 3. Pay for the Memorial

Wake up. Wonder how you made it home. Check your phone to find a message from your boss asking if you are coming to work. Message her back to explain that a friend killed himself and you forgot to set your alarm. She feels the need apologize but asks you to hurry so she doesn't have to write you up. Your usual timeliness saves you here.

Rush to the shower. Nearly slip as you fumble with the soap. Sit on the toilet for fifteen minutes and ask yourself if you should say fuck it and not go in. Comb your hair half-assed because your hand is shaking, likely due to the nausea and slight headache. Dig through the hamper to find a shirt because

you never folded your laundry after pulling the clothes out of the dryer. Walk outside and remember that you hit a curb on the way home and the front driver's side tire is flat. Call a Lyft.

Walk into work. Your boss pretends to empathize with your loss. She asks you to let her know if you need more time off. Say no. You have been through this before. You just forgot to set your alarm. She asks you to not let it happen again. Nod your head. As she turns and walks away, narrow your eyes and consider quitting because you don't appreciate her fake smile or vague threats. You prefer to be surrounded by authentic people, but you can rarely find any these days.

Sift through your email for the hour and a half you have left in the workday. There are only one or two new ones for shipping confirmations from packaging suppliers, but you still have 997 older ones that you never delete. Plenty to pretend to look over. Check your phone for Facebook updates on the funeral that you know you will not attend. Same comments as always: The wife announces a funeral home in some obscure town. The funeral will be at 2:30 on a Saturday afternoon. Six of the nine who were planning on making it won't be able to get off work. The other three will try and make it for the service, but they will have to head back quickly.

Stash the phone in the desk drawer every time you hear your boss's footsteps. Clock out five minutes early and duck out before she sees you. Get a Lyft home and take a nap. The truck's tire can wait until tomorrow.

Step 4. Remember the Dead

You wake up to darkness inside your house. Place your fingers between two window blinds and open them to look outside. There will be more darkness. Pull up Netflix on your laptop and watch whichever funny TV show you are currently invested in. You laugh through three half-hour episodes, then find yourself bored in the middle of the fourth.

Look through your closet for your old dress uniform. Try it on and feel depressed; the years have not been kind to your waistline. The beret will still fit, at least. Stare at the rack of ribbons over the breast pocket. Remember the respect with which young privates once looked at you as they doubled over gasping after trying to keep up on a run. Take off the uniform. Curse your physique.

Pull out an old shoebox. Play with the mini Ka-Bar you carried to break open locked drawers in Baghdad. Peek inside small cases with shiny medals in them, medals that were awarded for little reason and less fanfare. All flash with no substance. Dangle your dog tags between your fingers before unraveling the strand of paracord. Close your eyes.

This is the piece you tied to a satellite dish on your house in Copperas Cove. Fresh out of the Army in a house with a new girlfriend and the child gate that once kept your son out of the kitchen, you flipped the couch onto its side and texted your mother goodbye. Over Skype, your ex-wife read the message you left for your son and called the Copperas Cove police from Germany. Red and blue lights flashed against the side of the ladder you were standing on as you tied the paracord to the satellite dish.

The paracord whispers your former rank and last name. It remembers the glory days, when the First Sergeant was priming you to be a Sergeant Major. When you hopped out of helicopters and led your machine gun teams into remote villages as Iraqis fired AK-47s over your head. When you silenced the firing of a sniper in an alleyway from the back of a Stryker. When you held your son as he greeted Big Bird at a USO show.

Shake your head, open your eyes, and snap out of it. Go to a cheaper bar. Drink and remember you can never be a soldier again. You have gotten too old, too broken, too educated.

Step 5. Forget

Do not roll onto your side while lying in your bed to face the old poster of your company from shortly before deploying to Iraq. You will be tempted to mark each one that has died, either in combat or in remembering combat. This will only cause the ghosts to haunt you further.

Do not roll over and face the other side of the bed where a picture of your son sits inside your diploma from college. You will only want to call his mother and ask to speak to him. She will remind you in German, then in English, that you are not allowed to speak to him. She will have him write a note saying that he does not want to speak to you because you could not afford to send a birthday present two years ago.

Do not get out of bed and check out Facebook. You will see more comments and memories of the deceased. It will frustrate you enough to start lashing out at political posts from other old buddies who refuse to abandon old habits.

Do not open the refrigerator and pour water in a glass to drink. You will end up completely sober, crying over memories of death and loss. Grab a beer instead. Pour whiskey in a glass to pair with it. Drink until you are numb.

Step 6. Recover

Wake up hungover. Make it to work on time. Finish out the day. Get a Lyft home. Drink a beer. Pass out.

Wake up hungover. Make it to work on time. Finish out the day. Get a Lyft home. Drink a beer. Pass out.

Wake up hungover. Make it to work on time. Finish out the day. Get a Lyft home. Drink a beer. Pass out.

Wake up hungover. Make it to work on time. Finish out the day. Get a Lyft home. Drink a beer. Read Hemingway. Pass out.

Wake up hungover. Make it to work on time. Finish out the day. Get a Lyft home. Replace the flat tire with the spare. Drink a beer. Read Tobias Wolff. Pass out.

Wake up hungover. Make it to work on time. Finish out the day. Drive to the tire shop. Replace the tire. Drive home. Drink a beer. Read Kurt Vonnegut. Pass out.

Wake up hungover. Make it to work on time. Finish out the day. Pass out.

Step 7. Repeat

You will find out about the friend's death through social media. Usually Facebook, since most of these deaths come from old Army buddies who have never enjoyed much human interaction. Any online presence becomes a marvelous oddity. The details remain about the same. The round bounces inside the skull like the ricochets of bullets following the walls inside round guard towers.

Sometimes, these men hang themselves from the satellite dish mounted to the roof of their house with a five-foot strand of paracord. The blood soaks into the nylon and turns the green thread dark. Family members find the more self-aware ones lying next to an empty pill bottle recently picked up from the VA pharmacy.

Your brain ceases to function for a moment. Blink twice to snap back to reality. Click to expand the post. Read the comments. They are always the same.

V I S U A L A R T

INTERVIEW WITH ROMAN BACA AND EXIT12 DANCE CO.

May 15, 2019

Exit12 is a contemporary dance company committed to creating and performing works of high cultural significance that inspire conversations about worldly differences and the lasting effects of violence and conflict on communities, families, and individuals. Through movement, we educate audiences about the reality of war, advocate diversity and mutual understanding through cultural exchange, and champion the humanity and dignity of all persons. —Exit12

We interviewed the founder and co-founder, Roman Baca and Lisa Fitzgerald respectively, along with a company dancer, Taylor Gordon, and a workshop attendee, Everett Cox.

INTERVIEW WITH ROMAN BACA - FOUNDER

Jenny L. Miller (JLM): What originally inspired your love of dance?

Roman Baca (RB): My family moved from Albuquerque, NM to Tacoma, WA when I was young. When I was in high school, we bought a house in Spanaway. I attended high school at Spanaway Lake High School where I was inspired to dance by a dear friend in high school. She was a ballerina and would tell me all about her dance classes and the things that would happen in the classes. I saw her perform at the local mall, where she danced on pointe, and she choreographed a dance in the school's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I was so enthralled with her stories and performances that I yearned to try dance. After high school I moved back to NM for college where I enrolled in jazz, hip hop, and ballet. I premiered on stage in a local musical production of "Seven Brides for Seven Brothers" and went on to dance in musicals, ballets, and dance shows. I enjoyed dancing a great deal, and eventually moved to the east coast to study classical ballet and dance professionally.

JLM: What led you to join the military?

RB: After dancing professionally for a few years, I constantly revisited the question, "is this the right career for me?" There were so many other questions surrounding it including "could I raise a family", "is this fulfilling", and "does this align with my personal value system." I felt an innate draw to do something bigger, that was part of a greater cause, and that combined service and purpose – I wanted to help people. I felt that the Marine Corps was a good way to answer all those questions, to give back, and to help others.

JLM: Many of us get stuck on step 1 of taking a dream and making it a reality. What was the process of getting Exit12 from your head to an actual dance company in New York City?

RB: The creation of Exit12 Dance Company is a continual process of reinvention. We started very small with a few dancers and performance dates at small showcases in NYC. A large part of our early funding was our own, with a few friends and family who believed in me, and in our work. We started as a fiscally sponsored organization and our sponsor held classes on grant writing, networking, arts administration – and I took almost every class. We grew with dancers that were connected and committed to our mission and community. Our repertoire broadened to include more voices that had something powerful to say about the military experience. Then we added the veteran movement workshops, that reinvigorated our delivery and our artistic output – and directly connected us to the community we serve. As we go along, the most challenging aspect is the

creation of a new work for stage. We made a commitment to honesty, integrity, and transparency, and we hold ourselves to it. When we start a new work, there is a considerable amount of research, studio time, and cleaning that needs to take place before the piece ever sees the stage. That investment pays off in the impact we are having in the sector. Our audiences connect with our work in interesting and powerful ways. I used to say that we were building a foundation that would someday be a nonprofit. We just received our 501(c)3 nonprofit status, and I can confidently say that we built the art, the curriculum, the foundation, and the people we need to make an impact in the world.

JLM: Why New York City?

RB: New York City is a leader in the arts. We chose NYC because we knew that it would push us to deliver high quality choreographic works, high quality dance, high quality workshops, and also connect us to a robust community. New York City has delivered. We have met, worked with, and partnered with some incredible individuals and organizations. The support we receive is important to our growth, and we all grow and prosper together. Some of the connections that we've made in New York City, through our work, have become our greatest supporters and friends. It makes the big scary city seem a little more like home when you have a community.



(Photo: Odyssey by Andy Hart

Taylor Gordon and Nahum Maclean in Andrew Harper's Odyssey, a work that examines the return of a military veteran like Odysseus to a modern day New York City.)

JLM: *Collateral* is a literary journal and we writers like to think that nothing is beyond words, but I'm also a visual artist so I know that, for some of us, some memories, some feelings, really are beyond words. What story has been the hardest one for you to translate into dance? Why was it so hard and were you able to tell it in a way that made you feel heard?

RB: I created Conflict(ed) in 2011 based on an interaction in Fallujah, Iraq, where I was serving as a fire-team leader and provisional Arabic linguist. On a combat patrol my squad stopped a car and proceeded to search it for explosives. I was tasked with approaching the vehicle and conducting the search with the driver. We were to get everyone out of the car and instruct the driver to open all the doors, the hood, and the trunk and show me there were no bombs. Upon noticing a young girl in the passenger seat, with a baby, and looking to her eyes – I felt the fear in her as she and her child were understandably scared with all of the Marines with guns around the car. I was left to follow orders and order her out of the car – her safety- with her baby, or conduct the search with her in the car and succumb to instinctual human empathy. How could we bring that to stage in a way that communicated the essence of what happened? How could we address larger questions and uncover the humanity that existed in both the local population and in the Marines? How could we address issues that still vex a lot of the veterans I've met and talked with? I approached it with the idea that we would put things in motion and see what happened, a nod to the unpredictability of combat

patrols among the locals. So, we started with the introduction of a local Iraqi woman, introducing herself through a dance. Then we introduce a Marine through a dance of their own. Then a quartet builds with two Iraqi locals and two Marines. They are struggling with having to communicate, interact, and survive. Then, we got stuck, choreographically, and we let the piece go. Where it ended up going was an artistic unveiling of sorts of the basic humanity that connects us all. We illustrate that by the dancers removing the clothing that identifies them and having to face one another human being to human being, trying to communicate without words.

JLM: Have any of your dancers also been veterans? If so, is there a difference in how they perform and interpret each piece? If not, are they always able to translate what story you want to tell?

RB: We have had veterans work with us, and individuals deeply connected with the veteran experience. A good example of that is a long-time member of the company, Taylor Gordon. Taylor started as a dancer interpreting these stories. One story she interpreted through dance was the story of a woman who arrives at the airport to meet her husband back from deployment. But her husband never gets off the plane. He was involved in an incident a few days before, and the word didn't reach her in time. During this scene we see Taylor's whole world unravel, as she waits and searches, and is eventually left all alone. When Taylor started, she pulled her inspiration from stories and life experience. Then, her brother enlisted in the Army, and these stories started becoming real for Taylor...and she is just one example of many.



JLM: Where did the name Exit12 come from?

RB: We started the company in NYC at Steps on Broadway, a local renowned dance studio where we rented space. In order to get to Steps, in a car, one would get off of Exit 12 off the FDR (Franklin D. Roosevelt East River Drive). It's a reminder of where and how we started.

JLM: What's next? Do you have any other big projects or dreams you want to make a reality beyond Exit12?

(Photo: Odyssey Atlas Shelly Marshal Schmidt Exit12 Dance Company in Andrew Harper's Odyssey.)

RB: For me, right now, Exit12 is my big project and dream. It encompasses so much of what I want to do, who I want to be, and the legacy I would like to leave. I would like to teach and mentor veterans, artists, and students to help them realize their artistic and educational goals. I would like to start a veteran's performing arts festival in NYC that runs annually, and brings veterans and veteran supporters from all over the world to showcase their plays, dances, music, and art. But the big goal is, I would like to make Exit12 and international organization that is working to change the world for the better. I would like to run more workshops and performances for more veterans and civilians in places including Iraq, The Republic of Georgia, Australia, Germany, France, and more countries that have deep wounds. Because together we heal, and together we can change the world.

INTERVIEW WITH LISA FITZGERALD -CO-FOUNDER

JLM: What led you to dance?

LF: When I was a child I was always dancing. I danced in my house, in my yard, in my room, anywhere I could. It drove my parents nuts. I was banned from dancing in the kitchen during dinner preparations for safety reasons and my mother's sanity. She saw this love of dance that I had and enrolled me in ballet lessons. I have loved it ever since.

JLM: What role did you have in co-creating Exit12?

LF: Roman and I were dating when he returned from Fallujah, Iraq. It was a turbulent time for both of us. I was navigating the first years of my ballet career and discovering that a traditional ballet company did not fulfill the humanitarian aspect of my personality. While I liked my work, I had this overwhelming need to feel like the work I was doing mattered. Professionally I felt a lot of uncertainty while personally I barely recognized the man who returned from war. The change in Roman — a carefree, outgoing individual to one who was angry and overly introspective — really bothered me. I wasn't sure our relationship would make it, but more importantly I wasn't sure if Roman would find his way to feeling whole again. We sat down for what we half-thought was one of those dreaded relationship talks, but instead I asked Roman what his dreams were. I hoped that the artist I knew was still somewhere beneath the surface. I asked, “if you could do anything in the world what would you do?” When he responded I'd start a dance company, I didn't even think about logistics. I said let's do it. I called up my best friend, also a ballet dancer, and the three of us rented a studio to start playing around with choreography. That was the beginning of Exit12.

JLM: Could you walk us through some of the logistics of starting a dance company from the ground up? Did a mission come first?

LF: Looking back, starting a dance company seems crazier now than it did then. We rented studio space on Sunday mornings and Roman would create movement phrases that we would rehearse. Our first performance was a benefit performance to raise money for ASL. They needed to fill out the performance so we performed our one piece with myself and our co-founder, Lara Tant, dancing. In the months that followed, other dancers joined and we started to expand our work. We continued to look for performance opportunities, taking part in festivals and submitting work to choreographic competitions. There wasn't a clear voice to the work, nor a mission. We were doing what every other small dance project was doing and surviving off of the energy of being an artist in NYC. It was entirely self-funded. We realized that if the company was going to have a future we needed to set ourselves apart. We needed a mission and a voice which we fortunately found within us, and our experiences.

JLM: Do you have a favorite moment working with Exit12 that stands out that you want to share?

LF: Our first Exit12 tour was in 2012 to perform at the Military Experience in the Arts held at Eastern Kentucky University. It was the first time that the majority of our audience was current or former military. After the performance a veteran came up to us with tears in her eyes. She told us that she kept a journal of her time in Iraq, but she hadn't opened it since getting out of the military. Seeing the performance, showing various aspects of service through dance, she was inspired to open her journal and start unpacking what she had experienced in Iraq. This was the first time I heard direct feedback about our work that inspired some sort of personal change. I thought this was a

beautiful testament to the power of art. As an artist I felt like our work mattered. Personally, I had found a way to connect dance to a cause that mattered to me, to find healing through art.

JLM: What's next? Do you have any other big projects or dreams you want to make a reality beyond Exit12?

LF: What's next? I would love to see Exit12 have a regular performance and workshop schedule throughout the USA. This would allow for us to serve our community with repeat engagements and hopefully create a meaningful impact in those communities. Further, I would love to see Exit12 perform and hold workshops internationally.

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INTERVIEW WITH ADRIENNE DE LA FUENTE-DANCER

JLM: What led you to dance?

AF: I took my first ballet class as a 5 year old and found the creative movement (what most ballet classes are for children) boring. I wasn't interested in dancing around like a butterfly or skipping in a circle. As a result, my mom took me out of the class, but when my sister started dancing more seriously several years later, I was mesmerized by the exercises at the barre. The discipline and the demand to be perfect drew me in. I loved the challenge and the structure. It wasn't until much later that I realized I loved the dance as well.

JLM: What drew you to EXIT12?

AF: Junior year of college, I studied abroad in Paris and Santiago, Chile and had far more time to dance. Dance allowed me to make deeper connections with the French and Chileans, despite with the language barrier, which led me to reflect more on the power of dance as a medium of communication across communities. When I came back to the U.S. for my senior year, I was looking for ANY dance job, and met with a childhood dance friend who had started working with Exit12. She invited me to rehearsal and told me that Exit12 was different. I was excited to find that this company would both let me dance and would intentionally use dance as a medium to connect the civilian, veteran, and dance cultures.

JLM: Has dancing with EXIT12 changed your ideas or perspectives of military service or war? If so, how?

AF: My ideas and perception of the military were mostly molded by my grandfather's service in WWII, movies about WWII and Vietnam, and films in history class. It wasn't until I started working with Exit12 and veterans that I started to see how much the military had been intricately woven into my family's and my own history. My father joined the reserves to avoid being drafted into the Vietnam War and then went active duty for many years, taking my parents to Germany, and then ultimately California, far away from all of our extended family, where I ultimately grew up. The military shaped my parents and my childhood. I would say that now that I interact with far more veterans and active and retired military, I have realized how, even though they might make up a small percentage of our population, their impact touches the vast majority of us.

JLM: How has working with veterans during the workshops affected you?

AF: Before going through my own trauma, the workshops helped me to better understand the struggles and stories of our veterans and how much they need to have a space to be heard and understood for their own healing. It motivated me to perform their stories with more care and intention and to find more opportunities to dance with them. After my own trauma, I have learned how much psychological stress is still carried in the body and how interconnected our bodies and minds truly are. I can see in myself and in them the ways that intentional movement can bring us emotional peace.

JM: Do you have a favorite moment working with EXIT12 that stands out that you want to share?

AF: Taylor's story was also one the most impactful moments I have experienced with Exit12, but to share another, to see the transformation of Everett Cox, who has worked with us multiple times and



is featured in *Exit12: Moved by War*, has been nothing short of incredible. He was the most reluctant workshop participant the first time we met him, but did humor us and go through the experience. In other interactions, he was always a little bit off to the side before or after official exercises. Most recently, however, in our last workshop, during the time that everyone practiced their choreography around several harsh gestures (cut, slash, stop, kick, etc), he went up to each person in the room and asked if he could give them a hug one by one, quietly giving us the peace that he so desperately wanted.

(Photo: Aggressed by Andy Hart

Adrienne de la Fuente in *Conflict(ed)* a work that examines the realities of negotiating the complexities of the combat zone, while being sensitive to the people that live there.)

INTERVIEW WITH TAYLOR GORDON - DANCER

JLM: What led you to dance?

TG: My family used to run a small dance studio in my hometown in Massachusetts, so I've been dancing since I could walk. I began training more seriously at Boston Ballet around age 7 and fell in love with the beauty and discipline of ballet. I just had to be onstage. I moved away from home to train at a ballet high school at age 15 and came to NYC at age 17 because I knew I wanted to make this my career. I've been lucky enough to be dancing professionally for the past 11 years, 9 of which have been with Exit12. I feel so fortunate to do what I love and in a meaningful way.

JLM: What drew you to EXIT12?

TG: I joined Exit12 before our repertoire was focused on the military experience. It was one of several small dance companies around NYC that was hiring dancers and I enjoyed the audition and first performance. A few years after that, my brother enlisted in the Army...and I knew my work with

Exit12 would take on a whole new meaning. Suddenly what we were performing was deeply personal to me, as I tried to relate to what my brother was going through in bootcamp, training, and later on two deployments. He watched part of one of our live-streamed performances from Afghanistan. I loved that I had a way to connect with parts of his experience that he didn't talk much about. Unfortunately, he took his own life in August 2016 a day before his contract was up with the Army. Now, Exit12 is my way of healing and trying to prevent other military families from going through the tragedy mine is working through.



(Photo: Shelly Marshall Schmidt)

Paige Grimard in *Agressed/This is War*, a work that examines a veteran's return home.)

JLM: Has dancing with EXIT12 changed your ideas or perspectives of military service or war? If so, how?

TG: Being in the studio with veterans and in close conversation has been truly eye opening. It's incredible to hear some of their stories of coming home from war and the hardships they've faced. I wish there was more we could do to help those returning from deployment, and I hope that our movement workshops bring some sense of hope through art.

JLM: How has working with veterans during the workshops affected you?

TG: Each time we finish a workshop I leave the studio with an intense admiration for the veterans who participate. They often come in hesitant, unsure of what kind of movement we'll be asking them to do or create. But every time there is a huge level of trust that evolves through the workshop and they often come through with heart-wrenchingly open and honest stories or movement. It makes me so artistically and emotionally fulfilled to create this work - more than any performance I've done in any huge or prestigious theater.

JLM: Do you have a favorite moment working with EXIT12 that stands out that you want to share?

TG: There are many...in a workshop we did in Washington DC a few years back, we had a woman who did the entire dance workshop from her wheelchair. She dove in despite her physical limitations. The advice she gave later was that we have to get THROUGH our trauma, not OVER it. That stuck with me as it was soon after my brother's passing and I felt that everyone in the room was getting THROUGH something together, through movement.

INTERVIEW WITH EVERETT COX - WORKSHOP ATTENDEE

Jenny Miller (JLM): What was the moment that led you to join the military? Would you make the same decision again?

Everett Cox (EC): There was a black and white portrait of my father in his Army Air Corps uniform in my family living room when I was growing up. He was in a fighter squadron that flew support in Europe in WWII. That portrait greatly influenced me in my decision. In an unconscious way, I may have always known I'd enlist. When I was thirteen, I got my father's combat helmet. I was supposed to keep it for two years and then hand it on to my middle, younger, brother. Then in two more years, he would hand it on to our youngest brother. They never got it. I kept it. It sits beside me now on my altar. That symbol meant and continues to mean a great deal to me. Lastly, I heard President Johnson on the radio reporting the "attack" by North Vietnamese gunboats on U.S. Navy destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin. I knew the communists needed to be stopped. I knew it was my duty to serve. That clinched the deal. Would I make the same decision again? Probably.

JLM: Why did you decide to take a workshop with EXIT12? Was there anything you needed to overcome before you did?

EC: I went to a veterans' retreat at Omega Institute with Claude AnShin Thomas in 2010. That was more than 40 years after I returned from Vietnam. For 40 years I had been almost completely silent about my military service and service in Vietnam. I broke that silence with AnShin. I told him I had two secrets from Vietnam. He offered to listen. What I remember most of that moment is that he did not condemn me. He said, "You are surrounded by vets here. I suggest you tell more vets your story." I did. No one condemned me. I started to cry and cried for years.

A month later, I was told about a symposium on PTSD and TBI for New York State social workers at a nearby college. Vets could attend free. Dr. Ed Tick of Soldiers Heart delivered the keynote address on PTSD. For the first time, I began to understand that I might have PTSD. A month later, I attended the writing workshop at the William F. Joiner Center for the Study of War and Social Consequences at UMass, Boston. I began to write about my military and war experience. While there, I learned about Warrior Writers and Combat Paper. Later that year, I would begin to regularly attend Warrior Writer workshops in NYC. I believe it was at one of those workshops that I met Roman. I also met Fay Simpson, founder of Impact Theatre. I would later join the Veteran Theatre Project.

When Roman invited vets to a dance workshop, I went. The reason I need to lay out the chronology of these events is that each one emboldened me to try the next. Each of these events gave me more strength and more courage. The opportunity to work with Roman came when I had enough positive and safe experiences to try something new. If I hadn't met him at Warrior Writers, if he had just shown up and said he was looking for dancers, I probably would not have tried it. I am a physically stiff guy. I've been a laborer my whole life and that means I have used my body as a tool and/or machine. I am usually slow to show emotion. I have also been very shy, quiet and introverted my whole life. I am certainly not a dancer. These various opportunities allowed me a chance to try something very different. When I am in new and unfamiliar situations I am even more stiff. To work with Roman, I had to overcome stiffness, shyness, and the anxiety of the new. Roman gently allowed that to happen.

JLM: Did it help you? What did you take with you from the experience?

EC: At some point, I began to refer to these experiences as "Survival Arts". It wasn't just trying something new, strange and different like the physical dance, it was social, being with vets and dancers. I was making new friends. It was certainly emotional. I'd cry on the bus on my way home after a workshop. I was experiencing different kinds of liberation. Memories that had been buried and suppressed arose and I could write about them. I knew I was changing and the changes were good. I was finding happiness in new and different places.

JLM: What do you think the world needs to know about veterans, military service or war? If you could tell the whole world, or even just your country, one thing, what would it be?

EC: When children are safe, they learn early that life is beautiful and even sacred. They learn to respect the lives of others. Military training teaches us to kill. Most civilians do not understand how violent that training is and needs to be. We screamed "Kill!" during bayonet and hand-to-hand combat training. We hurt each other. We beat each other up. That violence is a shock to our consciousness. The seeds of PTSD are planted in basic training. Military service is constant preparation for war or being at war. We are a violent people, a violent, warmongering nation. The United States was founded on violence, hatred, PTSD and alcohol. It's killing us.