COLLATERAL

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Jason Arment, "How They Lived" and "Fade Away"

Jason Arment served in Operation Iraqi Freedom as a Machine Gunner in the USMC. His memoir about his time in Iraq, *Musalaheen*, is now available from *University of Hell Press*. "How They Live" was written in remembrance of Iraqi interpreters, especially Owen, who were left in Iraq and subsequently purged by ISIS. "Fade Away" is about never finding relief, and turning to fatalism to stay us through the nights.

How They Lived

Jason Arment

No one ever asks me
how they lived
Rather, it is always
“What was it like to kill?”

I wonder:
what is it like
to think the only death
is physical?

They were resilient
under our boot heel,
they did not waiver, nor
did their prophets abandon hope

Stalwart, a bulwark
& though our brief cleansings
will never truly know them
sometimes I remember a friend

sitting on his haunches
outside his shop,
Owen telling me
of his impending marriage

She was beautiful
of this I am certain
& had we not sundered
what he longed for

a life, a home
family & friends
a country
something to believe in

he would've been happy
a hard-fought day won
and nothing in the world
left to stop him

Fade Away
Jason Arment

I go to my people
for help—
maybe this is foolish
considering

the pills
can only do
so much
& cannot undo

the bottle
dope
or
bullets

too often
desperation leaches
into our
spirit

L. Burton Brender, "Retirement"

L. Burton Brender is an active duty US Army armor officer stationed at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington. Most published as a military essayist, his nonfiction has been featured on *The Strategy Bridge*, *Small Wars Journal*, the *Tacoma News Tribune*, the Indian magazine *Salute*, *Foreign Policy*, *Armor*, and the *DISAM Journal*. His poetry has previously been published in *Military Review* and his long-form poem, "Field Stripping the M4 Rifle", won the 2018 Yakima Coffeehouse Poet competition. Along with C. Rodney Pattan, he is the coauthor of *In Cadence*, a book of poetry from two Army officers that *Foreword Reviews* described as a "thoughtful, dynamic collection of poetry." His latest work, *Cashmere*, is a pictorial history of his central Washington hometown forthcoming in 2019 from Arcadia Publishing. He is a member of the Olympia Writers Group, the Military Writers Guild, and Write on the River, and the leader of the Joint Base Lewis-McChord Agora.

Retirement
L. Burton Brender

i accept the death
of that part of me
who thought it
was all of me,

growing into
smallness i give away
the power to argue
how great i am

and instead find
under cover of award
and faded accolade
the reason

i worked hard
when i went unsung
and was happier
for it

Randy Brown, “tell me how this ends”

Randy Brown embedded with his former Iowa Army National Guard unit as a civilian journalist in Afghanistan, May-June 2011. A 20-year veteran with a previous overseas deployment, he subsequently authored the poetry collection *Welcome to FOB Haiku: War Poems from Inside the Wire* (Middle West Press, 2015). Many of his recent poems, including this one, involve interrogating war and conflict as a parent of young teenagers. The phrase "tell me how this ends" was popularized as a 2003 quote by then-U.S. Army Maj. Gen. David Patreaus regarding the Iraq War. As "Charlie Sherpa," Brown blogs about citizen-soldier culture at www.redbullrising.com, and about military-themed writing at www.aimingcircle.com.

tell me how this ends
Randy Brown

what happens when your war
is old enough to vote?

what happens when your war
is old enough to enlist?

what happens when your war
is old enough to leave home?

Yvonne, "Freedom of Choice" and "Star Harbor"

The first poetry editor of two pioneer feminist magazines, *Aphra* and *Ms.*, the poet Yvonne writes fiction under her full name Yvonne Chism-Peace. She has received several awards, including two National Endowment for the Arts fellowships for her *Iwilla* trilogy poems. Some anthologies featuring her poetry are *161 One-Minute Monologues from Literature* (Smith and Kraus), *This Sporting Life* (Milkweed), *Catholic Girls* (Plume/Penguin), *Pushcart Press Anthology* and the ground-breaking feminist *We Become New* (Bantam). Current work-in-progress is a verse memoir of the 'Fifties, poems of which appear in the 2018 *Quiet Diamonds* (Orchard Street) and forthcoming issues of The WAIF Project and Bosque Press. Of the selected works published in *Collateral*, Yvonne writes, "Competing with the almighty western, World War II and the Korean War formed the film mythology of my childhood and adolescence. The Vietnam War was real, but all my drafted kinsmen came back and picked up the day-to-day struggles again…just like their more taciturn fathers and grandfathers."

Freedom of Choice
Yvonne

Young renters in their private civil war,
My parents mixed no cool jazz with the next door
Couple's mortgage blues. I didn't play with their son
Long before his flea bite dog steered us clear
Across to the brick wall on our way out or in.

Next door south, two sisters coached sidewalk fun,
Wilson School style, but I never had time to master
Black girl double Dutch. My talent: best rope-turner!
Just nine, I learned Spin the Bottle mere weeks before
We moved. Through other thin walls, how long after
Did I imagine their feet and their laughter?

At Mass Mother kept in touch with the lone
White woman wed to a tan Korean
War vet with two kids at the dead-end
Lumberyard. Daddy never took him for
A beer or football buddy. "He beat her."
Did Mother snort? Brothers to the bone.
No matter what the color.

Star Harbor
Yvonne

Not quite Mary's little lambs,
We shuffled in a straight wobbly line
(Some tip-toed, some dragged their feet)
Along the sad open casket—"Did somebody trip?"
"No. She goofed and tried to genuflect!"
We paused to fumble the sign of the cross
Or mumble a shame-faced prayer
And remember not to stare
Or worse—shut our dumb-struck eyes
From the gray face of our classmate's dad
Laid out in his Navy white
So still and stiff and young.

For some time after, we were awed
In schoolyard whispers and in our thoughts.
For some time after, we let her win.
Even our kind fourth-grade nun would bend
And listen longer for the right answer. A rare
Pigtail girl like me but stamped with a mile-long
Polish name. That mourning day a small sliver
Of her mom, herself a pale thin smudge
Smothered in black, yet bone upright
In a tight anonymous room.
Such bright flowers of sorrow!
How brave our classmate seemed!

Out of the blue, one day she came back
Unremarkable to us as before:
Nothing to do with the absurd—
From day one we had been warned
He had fallen not at war but in ice cold peace;
Nothing to do with a daughter's heart,
Drip by drip moored in dry dock
While her father sailed away—not forever—
On the great ship, Resurrection.
Touched, we children could not feel
Too long her loss. The Real Presence…
Bread on the water. SOS to Star Harbor.

Holly Day, "The Call"

Holly Day's poetry has recently appeared in *The Cape Rock, New Ohio Review*, and *Gargoyle*. Her newest poetry collections are *A Perfect Day for Semaphore* (Finishing Line Press), *In This Place, She Is Her Own* (Vegetarian Alcoholic Press), *A Wall to Protect Your Eyes* (Pski's Porch Publishing), *I'm in a Place Where Reason Went Missing* (Main Street Rag Publishing), and *The Yellow Dot of a Daisy* (Alien Buddha Press). About "The Call" Day writes, "I don't know exactly when I wrote this poem, but I do know it was in response to hearing people complain one moment that poets weren't writing poetry about important things anymore, and the next moment, it seemed the same people were complaining that art and poetry in general was becoming too angry and political."

The Call

Holly Day

The word goes out
it's okay to write about war again
in fact it's expected
with people in charge asking
Why haven't the poets
been writing about this?
Isn't this what they're here for?
Dutifully, we pick up pens
to scratch verses
about bombs and destruction
and civil unrest
apathy and starvation
the deaths of small children
until all the pages are filled
with pictures of the dead
until all the pages are filled
with the stories of the dead
pages and pages
that may never be read

James Deitz, "Misfire 2008"

James Deitz is a veteran, who served in the military for five years, with two deployments in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, and taught English in Korea for four years. He has enjoyed reading and writing poetry since high school. However, after his first war experience, writing became a sense of therapy and a necessary way of expressing emotions—redirecting trauma into art. Of "Misfire 2008" he writes, "This poem reflects my darkest time. I'm lucky and thankful for the misfire." His debut book, *Still Seeing a Dead Soldier*, is available now. He can be found at ptsdpoet.com.

Misfire 2008
James Deitz

A bomb explodes. I serve the tennis ball to my brother
again at 15 to 15. In the distance an IED explodes again.
A short young man double clicked his car remote. The car
horn blares out. The IED ignites. Ignore it. I rush to
the right, barely getting to the corner, return my brother's
forehand with a backhand. I hit it hard. He returns it.
I can't get to his forehand this time, it skips cross
court for a winner. That car horn ringing out again. Two mortars
land. And again. I try to serve at 15 to 30. Why the hell
does that guy keep locking his car? I fault. An RPG hits
the locker room next to our court. That bastard locked his
car again. Double fault. I slam my racket to the ground.
It bounces a few feet away. I shoot over to it, pick it up and
slam it again. Steve stares at me, walks closer. He isn't pissed.
He knows something is different. *James. Brother, it's okay.*
He tries to console me. He knows more than the game is wrong.
More than an OCD stranger with a remote bomb. But my brother
doesn't know what to say. And I don't remember what he says.
That night. Not sure the time. There were no voices in my
head. There were a few echoes. I looked at my Glock.
That black trigger. Never too far away. It was under a poetry
book, *Here Bullet*. I grabbed it. It felt light, the cover sticking
to my skin. This thing I'm used to carrying. It felt like I was
back in Iraq with my brothers. Cocked the handle, chambering
the Gap 45 bullet. I lifted the Glock to my head. Lowered it a little.
Pressed it to my temple. I pulled the trigger. Nothing
happened. It should've ended. Everything should've
ended. There in the barrel, bronze metal still in the dark
chamber. Ready to fire. Nothing happened. Not a god
damn thing. I hunched lower in my couch. I stared
at the gun. I don't remember how long I sat there. My head
in my hands. *Here, Bullet* next to me. Glock 45
laying on top of the book. I don't remember if I cried.

Thad DeVassie, “Field Trip to the Mall”

Thad DeVassie’s poems and prose poems/flash fiction have appeared in *New York Quarterly*, *Sentence: A Journal of Prose Poetics*, *North American Review*, *Poetry East*, *West Branch*, *NANO Fiction*, *PANK Magazine, FLASH: International Short Story Magazine* and *Sycamore Review* among others. A lifelong Ohioan, he runs RATCHET, a brand and messaging studio in Columbus and is the co-founder of JOY VENTURE, a storytelling platform and podcast featuring entrepreneurs who are discovering, developing and spreading their joy with the world. About “Field Trip to the Mall,” DeVassie writes, “My interest in documentary film-making provided the framework for this piece: *Be present but don't get in the way. Allow time for the scenes unfold. Listen. Discover the story instead of forcing one*.”

Field Trip to the Mall
Thad DeVassie

From this distance Lincoln appears to be slouching
in his chair, as if defeated at what he must cast his eyes
upon with each new sunrise. Snaking monuments

of war that these children, newly released from classrooms,
trudge alongside with paper and lead in hand, searching
for surnames perfectly etched. Some hold their tongues

as told while others see their faces captured in slabs
of granite. Like miniature mothers and small bands
of brothers, they mutely reflect the generations past.

They carry on quietly with interlocked hands toward
the National Gallery of Art, across a stretch of grass
reserved for a future shrine of conflict, many marching

in unison with a soldier's sure footing, while others
are dragged away protesting, looking over
their shoulders in despair.

Erica Goss, "My Grandfather's War Papers" and "To the Border Guard Who Found Aylan Kurdi"

Erica Goss served as Poet Laureate of Los Gatos, CA from 2013-2016. She is the author of *Night Court*, winner of the 2016 Lyrebird Award, *Wild Place* and *Vibrant Words: Ideas and Inspirations for Poets*. Recent work appears in *Lake Effect, Atticus Review, Contrary, Convergence, Spillway, Cider Press Review, Eclectica, The Tishman Review, Tinderbox, The Red Wheelbarrow,* and *Main Street Rag,* among others. She is editor of *Sticks & Stones*, a bi-monthly poetry newsletter. Please visit her at www.eriocagoss.com. Of these two poems, Goss writes, "I address the border guard who carried the dead boy so awkwardly and carefully, knowing the world was watching—and in "My Grandfather's War Papers" I trace my grandfather's journey from Leningrad to Paris, where he surrendered in 1945 to the Americans."

My Grandfather's War Papers

Erica Goss

It's all I have of you:
five sheets of paper,

ten fingerprints,
one signature swearing

that to the best of your
knowledge and belief,

the particulars given are true.
What would I say to you,

who corralled a bunch
of drunken Spaniards

on the ice outside Leningrad,
who knew the bitter relief

of surrender on a hot
August day in Paris?

In a photograph
your daughters squint

at the camera, smiles
stretched and eyes hollow.

I would tell you:
Opi, I understand.

Just like you
I would have

done anything
to save them.

To the Border Guard Who Found Aylan Kurdi
Erica Goss

The way you stood, I could tell it was not the first time
you'd plucked a child's body

from the warm Aegean shore.
Soft skull, soft body,

not sleeping, not awake. The Greek Islands fragmented
like parts of a body.

Arms stretched in front of you,
spine bent against the sorrow in your body,

you walked the beach while cameras
clicked at the floppy little body

in your rubber-gloved hands. The whole
world watched, as if one body,

your face as you looked away from the dangling
shoes. Unsure how to move your body,

the tiny heels kicking against you with every step,
you held on to the short history of his body.

Faith Esperanza Harron, “attack by stratagem”

Previously, Faith Esperanza Harron has worked as a reporter for *The Bismarck Tribune* and as a freelance writer for CollegeXpress online. Her work has been recognized by Creative Communications, the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, the North Dakota Newspaper Association, and others. She is also the daughter of a soldier-father and an ‘off-post commander’ mother. War has been a part of her life since her first memory, the Twin Towers falling on 9/11, and continues to be interwoven with her writing in various forms, from novels to poetry. She currently attends Stanford University, majoring in Mechanical Engineering with a minor in Russian. This poem is one of a series, each titled from the chapters of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*.

attack by stratagem
Faith Esperanza Harron

Find a productive way to be angry
A school counselor said this
She wanted to center my world or something
but what if I didn't want a centered world
just one that rocked like the chair
from Grandpa's workroom and one that spun like discus
in my seventh-grade eleven-year-old swinging arm
already bat-winged with chub?
The office smelled like honey
I remembered this at least
It had small ragged-winged butterflies
drawn by children on the walls
I would NOT make a butterfly
Maybe a bird with teeth
Find a productive way to be angry
Have I?
I would have said so
Ground hard on my fists but not hard enough
A shoulder cocked back like I'll throw a football and catch it out
of the spiraling air and my father'll have to come back
to see that winning catch
Because he has to he needs to I need him to
I want concrete ground laced with spikes of arsenic
and a speared pit to fall hands-first into
like the kind they trap tigers in
I could be a tiger
If I was a tiger
how I wish I was a tiger
strong enough to drag that Humvee, my father's
all the way back from front lines
Too many lines, too many miles away
Miles you could measure in lifetimes of walking
Ground is instead beneath me soft like bird feather
Looped strings of carpet pull apart in my fingers
Fingers that wouldn't fit into my father's gloves
Still
I flex my hand
More carpet shreds just like the like the letters
in the words in the sentences in the paragraphs
my father told me just before he left
It's a second leaving
Should be easier
I am older
It is not easier
My hands hurt like leaves when they fall to the ground

Sarah McCann, "We Filling Station"

Sarah McCann's poetry has been published in such journals as *The Bennington Review, The Matador Review, COG*, *The Spectacle, The South Dakota Review*, and *Hanging Loose*. A Fulbright Fellow, she has published translations from Modern Greek in such anthologies and journals as *Austerity Measures*, *Tripwire*, *Words Without Borders*, *Poetry International*, and *World Literature Today*. She also edited a collection of poetry by Robert Lax, *Tertium Quid*, and a book of her translations of the Greek poet Maria Laina is available from World Poetry Books. Of "We Filling Station" McCann writes, "[The poem] arose as many of my poems do, from uniting seemingly distant concerns. There was the immediate and brutal cold outside my window, cold which had killed some without means for heat. And there was the news of possibility of peace in the midst of far war, and I wondered what that idea of peace might mean."

We Filling Station
Sarah McCann

Two scientists decide they can make peace
in five minutes— to zero
the zoo of death in Israel,
where the taxidermist is highest paid.

I make peace with grappling
you in the raw glass of snow.
Icicles unfurling their flicker-tongues
in the sun, of the twigs, the benches, just left.

The cold is too cold to come outside.
The old couple next door has not taken
their hands off the heater in two days.
They watch their vine outside irretrievably die. Shrivel ash.

The dog fell down the stairs today.
In a tumbling, gripping grab
as when I hear my leg break
before it does, as the newspeople keep

talking till something happens.

When things seem slower, not
when they are, we call it peace.

The simmer even so we

understand it. Never mind the wild boil.

A man across the street freezes
and turns and his companion stops a few steps

beyond. He kneels beyond the wind and catches

a cigarette between his lips,

cradles space with his hands, finds
calm there, then strikes the match

in the midst. The peace, the not enough.

John Sibley Williams, “As It Is on Earth”, “Here We Stand” and “Drift”

John Sibley Williams is the author of *As One Fire Consumes Another* (Orison Poetry Prize, 2019), *Skin Memory* (Backwaters Prize, 2019), *Disinheritance*, and *Controlled Hallucinations*. An eleven-time Pushcart nominee, John is the winner of numerous awards, including the Philip Booth Award, American Literary Review Poetry Contest, Phyllis Smart-Young Prize, The 46er Prize, Nancy D. Hargrove Editors' Prize, Confrontation Poetry Prize, and Laux/Millar Prize. He serves as editor of *The Inflectionist Review* and works as a literary agent. Previous publishing credits include: *The Yale Review*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *Sycamore Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Saranac Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Third Coast*, and various anthologies. He lives in Portland, Oregon. About these three poems, Sibley Williams writes, “These are part of a book-length work exploring American culture from the various vantage points of war, difficult childhoods, our questionable history, and the societal grief that underscores our current state of the union.”

As It Is on Earth
John Sibley Williams

It's like that sometimes. A man bends
so completely he begins believing in
his own holiness. An empty house
kids are too scared to vandalize sees itself
in time as haunted. Even the moon
our dogs wail to each night as if in prayer
fears a response is expected. The war
my brother brought home & the home he
pined for in war converge in an unruly
absence. Is it finally fair to say like gods
we make images to pour ourselves into?
Like rivers, how they tend to move
farther from the source? What skin
remembers & the mind reimagines:
between them a truth serrated as light.

Here We Stand
John Sibley Williams

Pulleys and old ropes and held feet above the floor, lowering, so many crates cut to look less like men than pomegranates shipped in especially for this crowd of mourners to bite into while holding their free hands over their hearts. Blood orange rust lines the green truck ferrying a flag and my brother under the flag from one end of our lives to the other. If, under certain skies, our icons outlast us, let this be one of those heavens. Not the preached and prayed to, just a brief and hungering silence grown stronger in its breaking. What might be said, so much less than needing to say it. The father of our country is an angry god, gutting youth from the youthful, wood from the field for bodies given back to the field. Rifle clap. Contrails divide the sky. Many smokes must meet to twine enough rope for the dead to escape. And the darkness, all the light still caught in their mouths; we have no idea how to account for its song.

Drift
John Sibley Williams

Frail flurries of ash from backyard burnings blacken the falling snow. Where the body of a brother should be, a rotting fencepost. Bits of wire. The vacant flag of my country beats itself senseless against a wind that cannot seem to make up its mind. Whatever it lifts up from the earth or pulls down from the sky it throws in every direction. Shadows of half-naked trees halve our faces. What side am I meant to be on? It's true, the dead aren't going anywhere. But how far have we gone that absence seems normal? This splintered cedar kindles his uniform, blazes the night red upon red upon blue at its core. The moon fills with uglier moons. The stars are just fine, and maybe that's what really matters. Shuffling in the distant brush we pray is more boy than mule deer. Antlers catch the lessening light, like any bone.

Creative Nonfiction

Janet Gool, "Floor of Forgiveness"

Janet Gool grew up in Maryland but has lived her entire adult life in Israel. She and her husband Yochanan live in the Jerusalem suburb of Beit Shemesh, where they brought up their three children and now entertain grandchildren. For more than three decades, she worked as a psychiatric nurse, caring for Israelis from every possible ethnic and religious background, as well as the occasional tourist with Jerusalem Syndrome. She writes, "I've written since I was a little girl. About eight years ago I began studying creative writing with Judy Labenshon, primarily as a means of combating the burnout from my work. I have nothing to contribute to the debate about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. After forty years of living in the midst of it, I understand it less and less. But I wrote "Floors of Foundation" because it's important that people realize how nuanced this business is, how intertwined the lives of Jews and Arabs are, and how all of us go about living our lives here."

Floor of Forgiveness
Janet Gool

On the fourteenth of Tammuz, Yochanan decimated a half-wall that separated our living room from the kitchen. It had served as a barrier between the tidy living room and the havoc in the kitchen, grease spattered on the stove and a skillet soaking on the counter, bits of fish floating among the soapsuds. Our children had grown; tidiness ruled. We were ready for a change. The jackhammer sent concrete blocks tumbling to the floor, where they split into jagged fragments. The entire house trembled.

The seventeenth of Tammuz is a Jewish fast day, commemorating the Roman breach of the wall surrounding and protecting Jerusalem. The fast marks the beginning of three weeks of mourning, culminating in a second fast on the ninth of Av. The ninth of Av, the most tragic day in the Jewish calendar, marks the destruction of both the First and Second Temples. Jewish law forbids celebrations during this time. The *Shulchan Aruch*, the sixteenth-century compendium of Jewish law, expressly forbids building or renovating.

Yochanan ignored the date when he brought down the half wall. The tool rental company called him on the thirteenth of Tammuz to inform him that the jackhammer was available. That was enough for him. Yochanan's enthusiasm for building, for the manly business of handling power tools, led him to ignore the demands of the Jewish calendar. A neighbor asked me why my husband began the renovations just two days before the beginning of the Three Weeks. "Yochanan is a learned, observant Jew. What was he thinking?" I shrugged. In my experience, human behavior rarely rests on logic.

After tearing down the wall and returning the jackhammer, Yochanan appealed to his rabbi. Perhaps he could find a Talmudic loophole that would allow Yochanan to continue with the renovations during the Three Weeks.

"There are two circumstances that would permit you to do work on your house during this time," the rabbi answered. "First, if there was damage to the house that makes it dangerous to live there, or threatens the integrity of the structure, like a broken water pipe or faulty electric wiring."

"And the second?" asked Yochanan, sitting on the edge of his chair, hoping for a reprieve.

"If you have already paid the workmen and they already began working."

Our intended renovations did not meet either of these criteria, and Yochanan was forced to wait for three weeks before continuing his project. The spot where the former barrier had joined the living room wall remained unplastered and unpainted. Many observant Jewish families leave a section of an interior wall in their homes unpainted, in memory of the destruction of the Holy Temple. We had not done so when we moved into this house, eighteen years earlier. Now we had created a memorial to the Temple, almost by accident.

On the ninth of Av, we ate a mourner's meal of hard-boiled eggs and lentils, removed our leather shoes, and sat on the floor, lamenting the destruction of the Temples and all the tragedies that had ever befallen our people.

On the tenth of Av, Yochanan called a friend who is a general contractor. "Who are the best tile workers you know?" he asked. The friend recommended Abdallah and Tariq, from the nearby Palestinian town of Surif.

Yochanan often hired Arab workers for his building projects in our home. He grew up in Jerusalem, where he heard Arabic spoken. Later, as an Israeli soldier serving in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip, he learned to speak Arabic, and could even identify the speaker's dialect.

"He's a Bedouin. I can tell from his accent," Yochanan told me as a young man pumped gas into our car.

"They're Lebanese," he whispered, as a young couple, lugging suitcase, chattered their way down the aisle of a train travelling between Acco and Tel Aviv.

Yochanan's readiness to hire Arab workers was more than an opportunity to practice Arabic, however. For Yochanan, it offered the opportunity for contact with people who lived on the other side of the barriers, not in the artificial atmosphere of organized dialogue, but in the real world of men creating something with tools.

The Three Weeks ended, but Muslims were in the midst of Ramadan. Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim calendar, commemorates the revelation of the Koran to Muhammad. During this month, healthy adults fast from sunrise to sunset, and enjoy bountiful banquets at nighttime. The Muslim calendar, unlike the Hebrew one, does not contain a mechanism to anchor the lunar months to a particular season. Some years Ramadan falls in the winter, when days are short and cool and nights long, making the fast a relatively easy endeavor. During the summer of 2013, Ramadan ran parallel to the Hebrew month of Av, at the zenith of the hot Middle Eastern summer.

Hospitality in our home extends to workmen. Usually Yochanan fusses over them, plying them with cigarettes, cups of strong Turkish coffee served in small glasses and plates of cookies, or cold drinks offered with trays of fruit. If they labor in our house for a full day, workmen sit down to a hot meal.

Once Yochanan came home with two Chinese workers who had gone AWOL from a major construction project. Between the two of them, they knew a handful of words in Arabic, fewer in Hebrew, and none in English. Yochanan managed to describe the patio he hired them to build in the backyard. They set to work, industrious and exacting. Shortly before lunchtime, Yochanan put together a meal of stir-fried chicken, vegetables and rice. He even found two sets of chopsticks. The two Chinese men sat down at our table, and wordlessly finished their meal.

Now, during Ramadan, Yochanan could offer nothing to Tariq and Abdallah, our Palestinian workers. Despite the sweltering heat, which reached forty degrees Celsius, they were forbidden the relief of food and drink and the pleasure of a cigarette. They could not even wet their lips with a sip of water until nightfall.

Abdallah and Tariq worked on their knees, their foreheads almost touching the floor, as if in prayer. They cut the large grey tiles with a sharp disc, working with care, fitting the tiles around kitchen cabinets and attaching panels to the base of the walls. In the bathroom, they cut the tiles to fit around the base of the toilet and the drain. "You should watch them," Yochanan said to me, "It's a real art. Look how all the pieces fit exactly in place." Tariq nodded his head. He had heard Yochanan's words over the noise of the disc.

The house filled with dust. Grit clogged my nose and throat. Plastic sheeting covered everything: the tables, bookshelves and sofas. Chaos reigned, but the new floor shone through it all.

Yochanan and I chose these tiles because they would be easy to clean and not show dirt, yet still reflect the light. Now, as Abdallah and Tariq advanced from the kitchen into the living room, the floor took on the blue-gray hues of the Dead Sea.

Once they had completed the interior of the house, the men moved outdoors, to the paved courtyard that connects our house to the street. Here, no roof protected them from the burning sun. Yochanan dragged out the tarp that we used as a wall in our *sukkah*, and threw it over the pergola. This jerry-rigged *sukkah* provided a little shade for the fasting men. They sweated in the sweltering Middle East summer and continued working, cutting tiles and laying them in the courtyard of our house.

The men could not accept food or drink from Yochanan, but they could accept a ride home at the end of a workday. Surif lies about halfway between our home in Beit Shemesh and the Etzion bloc of settlements in the West Bank. Our married daughter lives with her family in the Etzion bloc. Yochanan and I decided we would drop Abdallah and Tariq at the entrance of Surif and then visit our daughter. The brief journey took us up through the Judean Hills until we reached the barrier

that separates Israel from the Palestinian Authority. Fifty cars were parked on the Palestinian side of the crossing.

"I have a car," the usually taciturn Abdallah told us, "but I don't have a permit to bring it into Israel. Sometimes I park it over there." He glanced at the double row of cars parked next to the roadblock. He continued, telling us that he had built his own house and a second one for his son. As we drew closer to Surif, Abdallah told us a story. During Operation Cast Lead in 2008, a Kassam rocket fired by Palestinians in Gaza landed in Surif. Fortunately, it fell in an open field and there was no damage to life or property. He wondered if the Hamas in Gaza knew that their missiles landed in Palestinian villages and laughed. Yochanan laughed also, an awkward laugh. His conversations with Tariq and Abdallah, or other Arab workmen, centered around building. Sometimes they bragged to one another about their children's accomplishments, or discussed the best method of curing olives. What good could from talking about politics, about the wars? Why talk about Surif? Why reinforce the barriers?

On the mornings that Abdallah and Tariq came to work for us in Beit Shemesh, they passed through this roadblock. Soldiers examined their papers, perhaps patted them down. Their cars remained on the Palestinian side of the barrier because it was too difficult to ensure that cars did not contain explosives or weapons. Once on the Israeli side, vans driven by Israeli Arabs picked up the workers and ferried them to Beit Shemesh. They arrived at our house, and with diligence and expertise, built a new floor.

Yochanan and I could not enter Surif. Red signs in Hebrew and English warned Israelis that they faced the danger of death by entering a Palestinian settlement. Yochanan stopped the car and let Tariq and Abdallah out at the entrance of the town. They thanked us for the ride and walked down a dirt path towards Surif. We continued to Etzion bloc.

Tariq and Abdallah returned the next day and finished paving the courtyard. It was the third week of Ramadan and they had finished their work. Yochanan paid them and they said goodbye.

A few days later, we scrubbed down the courtyard, which was full of dust and tiny pieces of discarded tile. When we finished cleaning, we discovered a nasty little puddle in one corner. Tariq and Abdallah and laid the tiles improperly, and the water drained into this corner instead of draining towards the street.

"Damn it," Yochanan fumed, "I should have held back some of their pay until I checked everything out. If this is what happens when we wash the courtyard, what will it look like after a rain?" Then he muttered, "I should never have hired people from Surif."

Surif, once a village, and now a city of some twenty thousand, has an ugly history with the people of Israel. The most infamous of these stories took place in 1948, during the Israeli War of Independence.

The Etzion bloc of settlements was first built in the nineteen forties, before the establishment of the State of Israel. During the War of Independence, the Arab League blockaded these settlements, leaving them without food, water or ammunition. A group of thirty-five Haganah soldiers set out from Beit Shemesh, carrying supplies for the residents of the bloc. They made their way up the Judean Hills, just as we had done a few days earlier in our car. When they reached Surif, the villagers fell upon the Haganah soldiers and murdered all thirty-five. Then they desecrated their bodies so badly they could not be identified. On May 13, 1948, the day before Israel declared independence, the Etzion bloc fell. Many of the residents were murdered and others taken prisoner to Jordan.

In 1996, forty-eight years after the massacre at Surif, an Israeli soldier named Sharon Edri stood outside the Tzrifin Hospital, hoping to hitch a ride back to his home Moshav Zanoach, adjacent to Beit Shemesh. He never arrived. Seven months later, his corpse was found near Surif, the victim of a kidnapping and murder by Hamad terrorists from Surif.

Kay Wilson, an Israeli tour guide, went hiking in the Judean Hills with her friend Kristine Luken on December 18, 2010. Not far from Beit Shemesh, two men attacked the women, tied them up and stabbed them. Kristine was murdered, and Kay left for dead. Despite numerous serious wounds, she managed to make her way to a car park and call for help. The murderers came from the infamous Surif.

Yochanan called Tariq several times, but he did not answer. One afternoon, about two weeks later, Abdallah and Tariq showed up unannounced.

Ramadan and Av had ended with the sighting of the new moon. Jews entered the month of Elul. During Elul, Yochanan wakes at four-thirty every morning to attend *Slichot* services in his synagogue. Elul is a month of forgiveness.

"I had a few calls from you," Tariq said to Yochanan. "Is there a problem?"

Yochanan poured a bucket of water in the courtyard and showed him where the puddle formed.

"That's no problem to fix," said Abdallah.

Tariq and Abdallah removed four tiles, made minute measures with the level, and then replaced the tiles. It took them about an hour and a half.

"Ramadan's over, right?" Yochanan asked the two men, knowing perfectly well that it was over and that Muslims had entered the month of Shawwal. He carried a tray with plates of nuts, fruits and cookies and three tiny cups of Turkish coffee out to the courtyard and sat with Abdallah and Tariq. The three men each took a sip of coffee. Then Abdallah removed a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, tapped the bottom, and withdrew three cigarettes. He gave one to Tariq, took a second for himself and after lighting the third, extended his hand and offered a cigarette to Yochanan. Yochanan had given up smoking decades ago. He accepted.

Catherine Elizabeth Puckett, "The Santa Fe"

Catherine Elizabeth Puckett is a fiction and nonfiction writer. She has published fiction in *Many Mountains Moving*, and nonfiction essays in magazines, newspapers, and literary journals. "Beauty and the Beast," her essay about women and eastern diamondback rattlesnakes, was published in the book *Trash Animals: How We Live with Nature's Filthy, Feral, Invasive, and Unwanted Species*. After spending most of her adult life as a "serial mover," she finally returned to North Florida and lives not far from the Santa Fe River. She writes, ""The Santa Fe' came about because I wanted to tell my story of the long-term effects of war, and how one doesn't have to be the one fighting in a war to be profoundly affected by it."

The Santa Fe
by Catherine Elizabeth Puckett

Ten years have passed and I still return to a river that runs through my eyes, my mind, my blood. I live some 1,500 miles away from that river, that time. I look out my windows and the trees are covered with heavy branch-breaking October snow. There are mountains to the west, treeless plains to the east.

The river, called the Santa Fe, flows through north Florida, the largest tributary of the legendary Suwannee. It is a subtropical blackwater river whose waters are stained the color of tea, and whose banks are lined with dogwoods, magnolias, cypress, and live oaks draped with Spanish moss like shawls over old ladies' shoulders.

The river has a history but doesn't speak of it in a language we can understand. Some of its history is known, some is unspeakable, and some is unknowable—lost through time and the disappearance of cultures. Its waters were drunk by animals known only by their fantasy-like fossils. Paleo-Indians took shelter by its springs in the water-scarce Florida of the Ice Ages. Once on its banks stood Timucuan Indians—tall people with tattoos, skirts made of Spanish moss and bits of fur—the men with their hair in high topknots, the women with it long and unbound. They sacrificed their firstborn sons, and they had faith. Just before spring arrived, they skinned the largest stag they could find, leaving the horns and head on the skin. Then they stuffed the stag's empty skin full of choice plants, and hung wreaths of the best fruit on the horns, neck, and over the stag's body. Singing and playing flutes, trumpets, and gourd rattles, they carried the stag to the largest tree they could find and mounted it there, with its head and body facing the morning sun. As the sun rose, they bowed their heads and offered prayers, asking that the earth be fruitful, that they be given foods as choice as the ones they had offered. After the ceremony, they saluted the sun and left, leaving the stag in the tree until the next ceremony, the next year, the next stag.

The Santa Fe, however, does a strange thing. It disappears. Not a trickle remains aboveground. For three miles the river—and it is of no small size—follows an underground, unseen path. The sun no longer shines on its surface, long-legged birds no longer seek fish in its hidden backwaters, and the others—musky otters and secretive beavers, sparkling red-bellied water snakes, and pearly apple snails—no longer find shelter in its waters.

It is hard to believe a river can disappear so suddenly. In 1817, General Andrew Jackson went to Florida to quell the Seminole Indians. These Indians, who had moved into Florida after European disease and warfare exterminated the Timucuans and other original Florida tribes, lived with runaway black slaves in villages along the rivers of north Florida, where General Jackson and the U.S. government didn't want them to be. Jackson sent a scout to map the lonesome rivers of Florida's north, but the scout reported back that the Santa Fe River disappeared. "Impossible," said Jackson. "A river can't disappear." But it does.

Not far from the place where the Santa Fe disappears, a group of Quakers sat near the river's bank in silence before I interviewed them for a newspaper story. They were waiting patiently for the light. Behind them, the river still flowed aboveground, its surface glittering with iridescent sparks. The light within, the light without. After the silence, the Quakers answered my questions, trying to tell me what they were waiting for. George Fox, the founder of Quakerism, once said, "I saw also that there was an ocean of darkness and death, but an infinite ocean of light and love, which flowed over the ocean of darkness and in that also I saw the infinite love of God; and I had great openings." I wrote down their words and later wrote an article about Quakers. But I didn't understand the light – and I didn't understand the darkness.

Not far from the place where the Santa Fe disappears, I shared a bottle of wine with my sister Kim and John, her boyfriend from high school, whom my family called "brother" and "son."

We were all in our early twenties then, and we sat in the fork of a live oak tree and talked of what John called "ghosties" and I called "devils." Childish words with sinister connotations. "Everyone has them," I told John earnestly. "Don't confront them all at once, they'll overwhelm you." John was seeing a psychiatrist, a ghost counselor.

Not far from the place where the Santa Fe disappears, that same year I camped on the river with an artist named Brian. Together we were trying to document a river, I with words, he with an artist's palette. Together we were trying to document love. He drew me with his fingertips, shadowed my moods with his charcoal. I saw my body as he saw it, an artist in love with curves and lines and texture and light. We stayed awake through that cold night, alert for the loud splashes of Suwannee sturgeon, a provider of caviar—a prehistoric relict of these Florida rivers.

We dreamed of getting the Suwannee and its tributaries protected. We had heard from a friend that the place where the Suwannee and the Santa Fe rivers met might be the spawning ground for sturgeon returning to their birthplace to deposit their own eggs – a romantic trysting place for fishes even. "Meet me at the mouth," oldtimers whispered to their lovers when they, too, were young.

We sat on the sandbar and watched darkness descend and lightness ascend as swarms of fireflies lit up the sky over the river, giving off precoded blinks that signaled the mating status and sex of each one. An owl called from across the river and Brian answered in an eerie approximation of a real owl voice. The owl called back and another one answered. Soon owls were calling from up and down the river, and we lay on the sand and listened to the concert. Oldtimers say an owl calling means illness—or death—will visit your family. And the Spanish moss-skirted Timucuans believed that when the owl sang, it was an omen of evil. But Brian already knew about death and evil; he was a Vietnam veteran with an unspeakable piece of his personal history. At night sometimes, I would startle him with a sudden move and he would jump awake.

Not far from the place where the Santa Fe disappears, several deaths occurred in my world in just eight months. During this time, I was drawn to the place where the river disappeared underground. I knew this had significance, but I had no faith; I could not discern it. The meaning was shadowy and wavering and sometimes not there at all. But I knew this: my river had had two names. Conquistador Hernando De Soto's men, dying from accidents, exhaustion, and wounds inflicted by the arrows of Indians, were uneasy when they reached the river in 1538, and called it the River of Discord. The other name of the river, the name it bears now, is Santa Fe—Holy Faith.

*

Kim and I were born on the same day, a year apart. The same doctor delivered us at the Naval Base in San Diego – we were the fourth and fifth children of my parents' six children, all of us born within seven years.

Though separated by a year, we thought of ourselves as twins. The fact that we weren't "really" twins annoyed us endlessly until we found a rhyme in some children's book somewhere that said such children are Dutch twins. I still don't know what that means, but it didn't matter then or now because there was a name we could attach to our bond, a name that was beyond sisters.

On our birthdays, during the years that we lived apart as adults, whichever one of us rose first would phone the other one, music blaring as loud as we could get away with (neighbors, lovers, children), the Beatle's song, "You say it's your birthday, it's my birthday, too, yeah." And we'd sing this to each other at the top of our lungs.

From the beginning, Kim and I were lost in the tribe of our large, chaotic family, clinging to each other on a raft of childhood, afloat and rudderless on the unpredictable ocean of family dynamics. We slept together every night, one of us crawling into the other's bed as soon as the lights were out. One of us would rub the other's back and usually tell a story. Or, on the story-less nights, we would write words on each other's back, words and sentences that the other one had to guess at.

Each word was followed by a wiping motion as one wipes away words on a blackboard. "You are a snot." "I love you." "You like David." "I do not. Yuck. Grosssss."

My father was the man who appeared and disappeared from our lives, out to sea for months at a time, sailing around the world while the turmoil escalated at home.

My father was one of ten children. Three siblings were dead by his twenty-fifth birthday. When he was eight, his gambling, fun-loving father died of a heart attack. Age 45. The same year his mother died of cancer. Age 45. "She was ready to meet her maker," the obituary read. His eldest sister died at age 21 (after a botched abortion, the locals whispered). To keep the brood together, an 18-year-old sister went to court; she raised the children on the family farm. Despite this adversity, my father was valedictorian. He hitchhiked across the United States (and throughout his life picked up an endless procession of hitchhikers), worked on Cannery Row, and received what he considered his chance to be something other than a Kansas farmer—a scholarship to jet fighter school. He was first a pilot, then a nuclear physicist trained by the Navy, and then, at last, a teacher. But what he wanted most of all was a fishing camp—and there, he said, he would tell stories, use his skill as a fisherman to bring in the fish: big ones, little ones, all kinds of fish.

When I was very young, my father was part of the Kiss of Death Flight Squadron, an elite group that flew jet fighters from the decks of Navy aircraft carriers. His squadron coffee mug scared me with its insignia: a skull with red lips flying away. He called his favorite plane Ol' Smoky and flew in its cockpit, the bombs hidden within. When he was home, we dressed in his fighter pilot's uniform, complete with the helmet and orange flight suit. But often he was gone, traveling with Ol' Smoky and the bombs, sending us exotic postcards and gifts from this port or that. Football-sized chocolate Easter eggs from Italy with fake pearl necklaces inside. Dolls from Greece, Spain, Cuba. China from China. A Japanese-embroidered nightgown for my mother—we thought she looked so glamorous then.

On the best days when he was home, he sometimes danced the Charleston with my graceful mother in the living room, he in his plaid shorts and knobby knees, she laughing in her nightgown.

But I remember him also as a man whose face reminded me of Lincoln's—long and sad, eyes haunted and haunting. A man who was flown in from overseas with a bleeding ulcer. Whose mouth was whitened around the corners from the medication he drank like alcohol.

He had sorrows that are not mine to know, some not mine to share, others I grew to know about well. Too many times I looked at him and hurt. Sometimes I take out a picture I took of him in 1979. He is sitting in a Captain's chair in our dining room, facing the sliding glass doors. His face is creased and worn, his head bent, his forehead resting on his hands. A cigarette burns unnoticed between his fingers. His sunken eyes are sad and rimmed with dark clouds. When I printed that picture I felt I had printed my father's death—I could see his skull pressing forward eagerly, like a shadow underneath his skin. I told a friend I thought my father might be dying.

*

I am at home wrapped in a blanket on the couch, drinking hot chocolate and listening to music. I ran tonight at the Ichetucknee and Santa Fe rivers. No one else is around. Fall is the river's most beautiful time. The breathtaking red of maples, the cypress rust, the orange of sweetgums, all overlooking the turquoise waters of the Ichetucknee and the clear brown of the Santa Fe. The air is cold. The radio forecaster predicts that Florida will have its first frost of the year tonight.

Yesterday was Thanksgiving. My father laughed at the tag football game we played. He asked me to come home a few days, enticing me with offers of popcorn and old movies. But I am busy with my own life. I put him off.

Then the phone rings. My mother, her voice panicked. "Come quickly, Cathy. Your father is dying."

She is sobbing, I think, though I don't know for sure. It may just be the words themselves. I rush from the house—never has the 40-mile trip seemed so long. The ambulance pulls away from

my parent's house just as I arrive. Its sirens are off, but I can see my mother and brother in the car behind the ambulance. Kim is on the sidewalk, and we stand in the darkness of a neighbor's yard across the street. We cannot make ourselves go into our parents' home yet. It is not the same, it will never be the same. We wait for the official notification, which comes from John, who is now more than halfway through medical school and already seeing patients.

John tells us that my mother had called him to the house and that he had done what he could, but it wasn't enough. He and medics had helplessly performed the medical rites to call back a departing spirit. Just tell us. He nods yes, your father, the man I think of as my father, is dead. "I couldn't save him," he cries. "His heart," he says helplessly. "I don't know enough yet." Kim screams and sinks to the ground, but I walk away from them—walk around and around the neighborhood I grew up in. I watch Venus, the planet my father called the star of love, shine in the bright winter sky. My father is dead.

The bombs, with decades-long triggers, had finally exploded in his body, in his blood. Leukemia (something he had kept hidden from his family) killing him slowly, a heart attack completing the job. Age 55. And my father, who had taught me about compassion, who had taught me about love, had failed to teach me about death.

John, Kim, and I find a measure of solace in taking charge. We sift through annuities, life insurance, and retirement benefits and discover that my mother has little money of her own. We walk through the oldest graveyard in town on a cool late November day and carefully decide where my father would want his ashes to be buried, his memory to be mourned. We cry as we sit with our backs resting against a towering loblolly pine in the cemetery. Then we pick up his belongings from the hospital. A half-pack of cigarettes, his green-striped pajamas that he carelessly pinned at his thin waist, his wedding ring.

In the funeral home, we listen to the black-haired man as he shows us one pretentious urn after another. We are amazed that the urns even have names. "Blessed One." "Beloved." We shake our heads no. Not this. Or this. "Anything plain?" we ask. He shows us a temporary urn, a simple one used by those who are going to scatter the ashes somewhere. We nod our heads yes.

We plan my father's funeral. The Navy hymnal, the Old Rugged Cross. We are learning the details of death.

The day of the funeral is bright, cool, and clear. Kim, John, and I drive to the graveyard in John's red 1964 Ford pickup truck that my father had liked so much. It feels odd without him in the front beside us, fishing poles loaded in back, behind the Bertha's mussels sticker, heading out to Cedar Key. The kitchen witch my mother gave John swings from the truck's rearview mirror. We smoke my father's last cigarettes, laugh nervously in the truck—we have never been to a funeral before. I spy my ex-husband in the crowd. The high school where my father taught after retiring from the Navy has closed down and students, friends, colleagues of my father, have arrived from around the country. Our house was often filled with these people, all talking to the man they called friend and teacher. And one of the things I hear the minister say is this: "The second notion I want to ask you to be aware of is much more difficult to hear. Max Puckett's death reminds us all that life is not fair. It is not now fair, has never been, nor will it ever be. Life can be good, sometimes great, but it is never fair."

*

I find release in the woods. I sit on a little bench hidden behind some trees at Oleno State Park on the Santa Fe River. Everywhere I look I'm reminded of death. Unclothed, colorless trees. Gray mist rising from the river.

From here, I can see the river sink and disappear underground. Like the River Styx, I think. But this river re-emerges from the earth once again, rested perhaps by its voyage through the dark underworld.

I have been wandering around, staying busy, retreating from friends and family, teaching at the university, doing research, seeking what can be found only in myself. But I have no faith—I have only grief.

Sun filters through winter trees. I gaze through fragile cypress curtains at this place where the river disappears underground and think that it is rather like death. I would have imagined death as a vortex. And I would have imagined that a river this size would swirl violently on its way below the earth, like the last water going down a drain. But it doesn't. It is simply here, then gone, quietly pirated away from its surface journey. They call this place the Sink. It is just a high-banked waterhole carpeted with tiny lime-green duckweed, and fringed by cypress and dogwoods with thick grape-like clusters of red berries. Gold morning sun shines on the palmettos, longleaf pines spin above me, and the Sink is frosted with tree leaves.

It is strange to walk the riverless path after the Sink, but I become used to it. The land becomes dry, longleaf pines and turkey oak sandylands where gopher tortoises, rattlesnakes, pine snakes, and other creatures live. Once I held my ear to the ground to see if I could hear the river flowing underneath me. But there was only silence, only the sounds of the world above ground.

*

My father had a plan. He was going to build a long ranch-style porch on our house. We, his six willing young assistants, handed him nails and levels and held heavy redwood beams until our faces were flushed. It was a long porch, redwood beams on the ceilings, long windows that spanned the tree sides not against the back of the house. But my father decided what the back porch really needed was a goldfish pond. He had noticed how his children were enchanted with the huge goldfish that swam in a large pond outside the local library.

We scouted the dump and found a large basement-style sink. Then we went to the creek and filled the back of the station wagon with boulders. We painted the tub aquamarine blue and sunk it in a corner of the porch. Then my father, with concrete, rocks, and pain, built a waterfall that streamed into the pond. The small mollies and goldfish quickly grew fat and long when released from the confines of their small aquarium into the pond. But one July Fourth, I climbed down from the porch roof where we were watching fireworks, and noticed the fish swimming erratically near the surface. My father hurried down. He scooped the fish out of the pond and put them in fresh water. They seemed about to die, so my father decided to try a fish's version of artificial respiration. We clustered around a bucket, each with a fish in our hands, and he showed us where to gently press behind the gills. "Squeeze," he said, and 12 hands squeezed. "Again," he said, and we squeezed again and again. The fish lived.

*

This morning I woke early after a fitful sleep—time had shifted, stretching out like a plain's endless horizon.

Three weeks have passed since my father's death. I always feel the need to escape. Today, I leave my house before any traces of light show in the sky, and head for Peacock Slough, a series of springs on the Suwannee. I want to see what may be the largest Florida maple stand in the state. I had wanted to take pictures of the magnificent blood-red fall colors of these maples, but only a few still have their leaves. Their colors have gone since the time my father died and now.

It is very cold. My brown Volkswagen lacks heat, and the vents refuse to close. My fingers are stiff and I am glad I've brought a Thermos of coffee as I sit on a limestone rock, sipping the hot coffee. No one else is here. It is too early for cave divers and too cold for swimmers.

The name Peacock Slough must come from the ever-present colors; even in December, they are spectacular. The deep aqua blue of the clear water, the vivid green of the water lettuce against the blue, the orange-brown of the cedar trees. Scarlet cardinals linger in the leaves of the cypress and a pileated woodpecker ladders up and down an oak tree. Red-headed woodpeckers fly by, and the water periodically stirs in widening circles as fish surface. Once I found an arrowhead here. How

did that person feel when he was here: had it been a hard year, the coldest of winters? Or was it spring, when life seems more possible?

Sandhill cranes fly overhead, offering their trembling call that echoes my loneliness. They are so graceful with their fluid flight, their long bodies extended, legs and necks outstretched, and their sad songs. A friend told me that I must allow myself to feel and accept pain. Through pain, he said, you learn what binds all people together. It's a hard lesson.

When I leave, I pass a red-tailed hawk sitting at the edge of the dirt road. I can still see its unblinking eyes.

*

We were a fishing family. When I was 20, my father bought a second-hand inboard-outboard boat, the kind he had wanted all his life but had not been able to afford. He had, with great joy, taught both my ex-husband and John to fish; John quickly seemed as skilled a fisherman as my father.

Before my father died, we often took the boat to Cedar Key, a small fishing village on the Gulf of Mexico. We baited Kim's hooks with fiddler crabs or shrimp; she couldn't stand the crunch of the crab and the squirm of the shrimp as the hook went through their bodies. There, on the gulf, we caught redfish and sunburns; drank the occasional beer, and poured lukewarm saltwater over ourselves on the still, not days of summer when not a current broke the mirrored smoothness of the water, the seeming smoothness of our days. We picnicked on islands with names like Rattlesnake Key, Seahorse Key, Dead Man's Island, watching for sharks and dolphins, laughing in excitement when I caught a fair-sized hammerhead shark. One day John hooked a stingray that seemed almost as long as the boat. Its wings were gray underneath the water, the color of death, its tiny eyes focused. We wondered if it felt pain. The boat moved as its strong butterfly wings flapped, trying to escape. John cut the line, and the ray swam away.

In the evening, we sometimes stopped at a local restaurant for dinner. Outside, the pelicans and gulls would swoop and snipe, and inside, the air conditioner blew cool on our sunburned skin. And my father would cross his long legs and light a cigarette, flicking its ashes in an oystershell ashtray, and say that when he retired, he wanted to open a fishing camp and write stories.

*

1971 in Florida and John and I are 16. We're two of three white people in the black history class at our north Florida high school. John has blond curls that cascade over his shoulders. He wears aviator glasses, torn jeans, and makes below-average grades with his above-average mind. We are both terribly frustrated by the Vietnam War and upset because we're not old enough to vote for McGovern. My sister Kim, one year younger, is infatuated with John.

During our senior year, John and I play chess together in the student government room. He's student body president and I'm a member of his cabinet. Our student government term would be different, we vowed. We arrange a bikeathon to benefit Vietnamese orphans. We sponsor occasional career and issue days—debates flew about the Vietnam War, nuclear weapons, marijuana, freedom, freedom, freedom. And John and Kim begin dating. John takes a physics class from my father and begins fishing with us as well, a sure sign of acceptance in my family.

I meet John's mother; she's petite and elegant, with a complicated air that could be disdainful and polite at the same time. She drinks tea from an eggshell-thin teacup—the teacup even has a saucer. Our family uses saucers for cat food. She's worried about John, the child born when she was well into her forties, the child whose physician father died when John was only a toddler. He seemed rebellious and he refused to consider her chosen path for him: a road that led to John the physician, the doctor like the father he had never known. Her other five children, all long grown, are well established: a research psychologist, a kidney specialist, an engineer, a teacher, and a graphic artist. John is different.

*

The chuck will's widow is singing, a bird that promises spring. Night lies cool around me, waiting for dawn.

I am sitting at the river when dawn arrives. The green of new growth faintly tinges a few trees – sunlight penetrates the thin tissues of this new growth and showers in fine sunbeads to the earth. A few buds are even beginning to open upon some of the more impatient trees. In the last few days, water orchids have unraveled their delicate white petals to the spring sun. A gaudily bedecked wood duck glides through the orchid patch. Two brown skinks and an anolis lizard bask, like me, on the sun-warmed wood of the dock.

All morning I have watched two hawks fly over the river, their cries echoing the lust that spring seems to incite in most creatures. They mate, and a kingfisher clatters by, stopping to rest on a limb of a just-budding red maple. Then he is quickly on his way again, skimming over the water, ready to leave Florida because spring is coming, spring is coming.

*

At 19 I was married to a German chef I had met while working as a table girl filling the buffet trays at a restaurant. He didn't speak English then, and I didn't speak German, so we carried German-English dictionaries around. He was dark-eyed, tall, handsome, and to me, he was worldly.

Kim, John, and I built a huge, elaborate sandcastle at the beach while my husband watched in amusement. I have a picture of that sandcastle, with Kim and John, then with a short halo of gold hair, laughing beside it as the tide came in.

Two years later I was a senior in college, working at a pharmacy typing prescription labels. My husband hadn't wanted me to go to college, didn't want to see me study or go to other students' houses to study. We lived in a trailer with his younger brother, then 15. Kim and John were living together, John majoring in zoology, Kim in psychology. Four days before Christmas, my husband disappeared for several days with another woman.

John and Kim took me away, to the ocean again. We walked on the beach and listened to the waves roll in, roll out, the sands shifting dizzily under the dark sky and our bare feet. For the first time in years, I tried on the old discarded coat of conventional Christianity to ease my pain, but I quickly knew it didn't fit. It never had. That fatherly bearded God of my Southern youth, the creeds and the minister who spoke for all of us, telling us what we had to believe. I let it alone.

I regained my name on the day of the divorce. My ex-husband sent me a dozen red roses with a note that said he wished I hadn't done this. He sent another dozen to his lover with a note for her (accidentally delivered to me) that said he was free at last.

Two years later, John's mother was diagnosed with stomach cancer. Her frail body wasted, her skin became as sallow and eggshell-thin as the china of her teacups. She whispered to John again and again that her dream was that he would finish medical school as he had promised. Her grapevine fingers grasped him in supplication. John, who, after high school had worked as a carpenter and finally decided to become a high school math teacher like my father, reluctantly returned to medical school in Tampa, some two hours away. When his mother died, John inherited what my family called "a lot of money."

My father, John's friend, his confidante, kept telling him, "For God's sake, John, only go to medical school if you want to. If you want to be a carpenter, be a carpenter. If you want to be a teacher, be a teacher. No one else can live your life." But John said he was going to try, he had promised to try. My father knew, I think, that John felt he had no other choice. Before becoming a teacher, my father had been a maker of bombs, a guardian of bombs deep in the bowels of ships, a tester of nuclear bombs in the deserts of Nevada. He had seen no other choice; he had to do this for his family, for the world. In the end, though, after he had retired from the Navy, after he was no longer the nuclear physicist with a briefcase handcuffed to his wrist, the pilot hosed down after flying through nuclear clouds released from test bombs in the desert, after he had returned to school and become a teacher, his choice helped kill him.

*

It is a warm, early spring day. White and pink rain lilies are scattered among still-winter leaves on the ground, hanging from limestone cliffs over the turquoise spring pool far below. Green lily pads fringe the water like lace on an old-fashioned dress. A green tree frog sleeps on a palmetto leaf over the water, looking like an Egyptian sculpture. Cypress trees unfurl a few green leaves from their gnarled limbs. They scent the air and my hand as I break a leaf apart. Swimming, gliding, I part water and leave winter behind.

When I get home, I find out John has disappeared. He's been gone two days. He didn't show up for classes at medical school. His truck is gone. My father's gun is gone.

I have been blinded by my own solitary way of grieving. I want to know where he is, let him take a number at my door. "I feel like a Tasmanian devil in a bird cage," he wrote Kim in a note. He knew a way to stop the pain, he said.

*

John knew the details of death. He sat in a lawn chair outside his red pickup truck in woods near the medical school. It was to be his first day back. He may have sat there for two days while we searched for him. Was he trying to decide or trying to get the courage? Then he took my father's rifle and shot himself, shot the pain clean away. He left us notes that I will never understand, notes that said he now knew about love and how it hurt, that our family, my father, had taught him what love was. He left his money to my mother and sister. "Blood money," we couldn't help thinking. Was he trying to take care of my mother? Two days later three roses arrive at my sister's door. A note, in John's handwriting, says, "Three roses for eight years. Love Always, John."

He could not save my father, he could not save himself, we could not save him.

I do not remember much about John's funeral. It seems I rode in the pickup truck, but probably not. I do know it was a nightmarish repeat of my father's funeral. Same cemetery. Sunny day. Towering loblolly pine. Even the same black-haired man from the funeral home. I do remember that Kim placed her three roses on the grave. John had asked to be buried next to my father. His tombstone read, "It isn't as easy as you think."

We had failed. We taught him a few things about love, but not about faith, not about death. We were just learning ourselves. We thought we would recover.

*

I was eight, nine, ten. I could not say nuclear physicist without lisping, but that's what my father was. A bomb designer. Each morning he left for work at the nuclear radiation lab he worked at in an old green 1950s car that five physicists had purchased for $8.00 each. The men jokingly referred to the car as "The Bomb." Each physicist had a small identification badge pinned to his shirt and on the badge was a small dot. If this dot changed color, it meant that the physicist had been exposed to too much radiation.

Once a week my father took me to get allergy shots at the Oakland Naval Base in California. Some of the Vietnam War soldiers who had lost legs and arms or suffered from other injuries as well were taken there to "recuperate." After the shots, my father and I waited on the long ramps outside the doctor's office, ramps I never wondered about as a child, but which I later realized were built for the wounded. Soldiers wheeled by, saluting my father in his Commander's uniform. He waved their salutes away and talked to them. They talked back. Some smiled. My father watched, grimly, as the ones who had no arms, no legs at all, were wheeled by on their stretchers.

At home, we played a game in our front yard with the neighborhood children, many of them military brats like ourselves. It was called Army dodge ball. If the ball hit you, say, in the arm, then your arm was blown off. If it hit you in the leg, your leg was blown off, and you had to dodge the ball with just one leg, just one arm. If both legs were blown off, you had to dodge the ball by rolling on the ground. You were dead if the ball hit you in the chest, the back, or the head. When the game was over, we got up off the ground and played something else. The gruesomeness of this game and

why we were playing it never struck us. Death was abstract, it touched other people, not us. But Brian, ten years older than me, was dodging shots in Vietnam.

*

John has been buried a few days. Brian is going to show me the Suwannee River estuary, the place where the Santa Fe's waters have joined those on their journey to the sea. I used to go fishing not far up the coast from here with my father, John, and Kim. But I do not know this estuary. Brian knows it well.

Evening approaches, and I am glad to be doing something that removes me from the turmoil of night. We sit in Brian's small johnboat, and he shows me secret passages to the salt marsh; passages lined with grasses so high that our boat is Lilliputian. The sun sets and a full moon rises, accompanied by a concert of stars. In this breezy evening, the water is a distorting mirror. We glide, shining for orange alligator eyes in misty-treed corridors of water. We listen for the scuffle of wild fierce hogs on the islands, the descendants of De Soto's placid pigs; these hogs are hunted now by spike-collared dogs as fierce as those De Soto pitted against "disobedient" Indian guides of 400 years ago. Brian's hair glints the same color as the moon as we tramp through a little island black with leafy trees, whispering the names of the frogs we hear singing their incantations.

Brian eases my losses, makes the nights bearable again. He knows, I eventually realize, how death can fill the nights. Our silences do not have to carry words; the silences themselves are sometimes words that need tending, a knowledge Quakers have long possessed. But Brian grows tangled in my desires, my dreams. I'm not sure I am ready to be so vulnerable again.

We begin to spend most of our free time at the estuary. We explore wild estuarine islands that were frequented by Indians long ago. We touch their pottery lying on the beach, step over the shell mounds, the evidence of feasts and meals they had hundreds of years before, and pluck the coonti plant from which they made flour. We walk through abandoned island houses, sit on their porches, rummage through their rooms, search for the evidence of their lives. Who are these people? Where did they go?

*

Brian's hand caresses my stomach. The late afternoon sun streams through the sheer curtains on my bedroom window. The fan hums and turns back and forth, back and forth, following his hand as it moves. The feelings that I have astound me, confuse me. My body is always reminding me that I am pregnant. The tiredness, the constantly tender and swelling breasts, the twinges and cramps in my uterus. Then there's the protective feelings, the knowledge of life growing in me.

Brian quietly goes in for some tests at the Veteran's Hospital. "What kind of tests?" I want to know.

"The Veteran's Hospital is testing soldiers who were exposed to Agent Orange. Some soldiers are suing the government," he says. "It seems I was right in the middle of the heaviest spraying zone," he adds.

But the hospital will not tell him anything definitive. Agent Orange is not to be blamed for a host of problems afflicting Vietnam veterans and their offspring. They tell Brian something else. His sperm are erratic, he tells me, some misshapen. Is it because of Agent Orange, a weapon that struck its victims long after the Vietnam War was over? Just as the bombs had detonated in my father's body decades later?

"What if the baby were deformed?" he asks me.

I do not have enough faith. I go to see about an abortion. I sit in a room with other young women, and we look at each other's bellies from lowered lids, trying to see if our bond shows. They tell us they will vacuum out the contents, the products of conception. Deliberately unemotional words, too unemotional. I want to run away from it all, but my body makes inexorable demands. The breasts ache, the belly begins to bulge.

The nurse offers me a tranquilizer as I wait my turn. It does not help; depression wraps around me like a cloak. When I finally lie on the table, I stare up at a picture of the sun rising over the ocean. Waves of cramps contract in my uterus as it dilates.

Afterward I lie in Kim's bed, and Brian sits by me, trying to offer comfort, but I am numb. I have gone in my mind like a crab in its hard shell. Comfort would hurt too much.

I hope that time will carry this grief away, but now it fills me until I think I can bear no more. I want to go to sleep and wake up months later somewhere in the sun, where springs flow coolly from the rocks, creating pools of blue, reflecting green shadows of trees.

*

August. Brian and I sit in his house in the woods, drinking scotch on the long glassed-in porch that reminds me of the one my father built so long ago. Green tree frogs catch moths on the long windows. A summer rain falls outside. Later, we slosh through the woods that Brian knows from childhood, through the opening in the trees to the ponds. Frogs sing, trying to attract mates. Spring peepers, little grass frogs, cricket frogs. Hearing them, walking so, I begin to cry, the rain serving as a watery veil. But Brian turns to me, and we look at each other, then bend into each other's arms, both of us crying.

A few days later, Brian takes me to the city dog pound. The dog days of August, I think. I am enchanted first by this one, then by that. A beige puppy scampers around its cage, catching the tail of its sibling, then darting off again as the dog turns to snap at him. I point to the puppy. "That one," I say.

We take the beige puppy home and give it some food, milk, and makeshift toys. He runs around in my small front yard, sniffing and snorting, until Brian says, "He sounds like he's been in a bottle of snuff." Hence, his new name: Snuffy.

We are determined to protect Snuffy from harm.

*

Fall is here again. Brian, Snuffy, and I visit the Suwannee River today. Cardinal flowers are covered with green sulfur butterflies, giving the small red-flowered plants the appearance of miniature Christmas trees. A small three-foot gator suns peacefully on a log with a large Suwannee cooter turtle.

And here, not far from the place where the Santa Fe disappears, blue springs burst forth from the deep earthiness of the woods near the river's bank, allowing water to pour into pools of translucent blue, which then, in turn, merge with the waters of the Santa Fe, to journey again to the ocean. Forever being reborn, rising from the earth, going back again. Tiny looking glasses into other worlds.

The water from this circular spring pours out through a long run filled with snowflake-flowered river grass. Water lettuce, which covers the far end of the spring, floats in a circular dance to the music of the water's currents. Blue herons and their smaller cousins, the green-backed herons, stride through the shallow water where the spring and the river meet, spearing frogs and other small creatures.

Brian takes the boat, as I swim out to the river via the spring run. I glide along on the swift currents, buoyant. When I dive underwater, it is as though I have disappeared behind blurry glass.

When I reach the river, I climb back in the boat, smiling at Brian, who is waiting patiently with Snuffy. Two women on the bank are packing up a day of fishing. Gar and mullet occasionally leap from the water and flop back into the river again, as though they, too, want to catch a glimpse of my world.

The night animals start creeping out from their beds. An alligator lies on shore, catching the last rays of the sun. Soon, he'll ease into the water and hunt for food. Owls that call from across the river are loudly answered from the other side.

A rope swing hangs over a high thick tree branch on a sandbar. Brian and I look at each other. "Let's do," he says. I nod yes. And it is great fun; I have not laughed so in such a long time. It hurts a bit to feel this kind of laughter again. Snuffy bolts in every direction, trying to catch us, or avoid us, as we swing his way. And in this moment I remember: somewhere, a river is resurfacing.

*

A year ago it began with my father's death. And then John and the promise of a child died too. Now I sit on a little bench hidden behind some trees. I can see the river sink from here and know it will rise again later. I have not seen the place where the river rises. It is enough to know that it does. Soon, the first fall kingfisher will flit quickly across the river.

*

Snuffy grows gray and limps with arthritis. I sit at my father's desk, now my desk, and Brian's picture looks back at me from a recent photograph he sent me. He is pulling in a sturgeon he netted in the river. He returns now and then to the river, floating his boat up and down in its waters, casting his nets.

I am married again and have children of my own. My face grows thinner, my nose a little beakier, my eyes a little more sunken. I grow more like my father in my features. Now I take my own children fishing. I teach them how to bait a hook, cast a line, catch a fish, for we are a fishing family.

I have found a spiritual home in returning to the Santa Fe. Some Sundays, I sit in a circle with friends, and I am bathed in the light, and I am sure, for a moment, that there cannot be an ending, that there is always just a returning, that somewhere there is a river forever running underground, and if I listen to the silence, I can finally hear it.

Fiction

John Petelle, "Guitar Marine"

John Petelle is a Desert Storm veteran of the Marine Corps. His varied career includes years spent as the editor of the Nebraska American Legion's state newspaper, computer instructor for an elementary school, and positions at numerous technology startup companies. He currently assists in the creation of machine learning algorithms, focused on healthcare technology. An experienced cook and avid gamer, John lives in Lincoln, Nebraska. He writes, "Guitar Marine Background Music is a powerful memory trigger for me, and I have many associations that music will bring back even after I have forgotten the original detail of an event. Sometimes, the catalyst is a particular song, and other times it is a situation. That was the case with Guitar Marine. I was driving through a residential neighborhood with my windows down, and there was a young man on a porch practicing with an acoustic guitar."

Guitar Marine
John Petelle

I met him in a barracks in Okinawa. Faltering notes escaping a brand-new guitar he was learning to play. I was a song by Metallica, but I don't remember which one. Only that he struggled with playing the chorus for hours, night after night. Evening after evening, right up till Taps, he practiced. What should have been a screaming guitar riff was endlessly butchered into scattered chords that could only be called music by an overly charitable, tone-deaf nun who loved to watch someone put their determination on display.

He finally mastered the song, a few days before I transferred. For those last few jam sessions, it was like living next door to a rock god, who deigned to bring the thunder of metal to the ears of a few lucky mortals.

I lost touch with him, as Marines do, but I remembered him. Afterward, whenever that song played on the radio, I remembered his transformation across the hall, the triumphant chorus that roared from his guitar.

David Gambino, “Server”

David Gambino served in the Air Force from 2006-2010 as an airborne intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) operator onboard various twin-prop aircraft in Iraq and Afghanistan. He continued this mission as a defense contractor for three more years after separating. When he returned home from his last deployment, he found work as a waiter while using the GI Bill to attend college. This story is inspired by that experience. It aims to illustrate the adjustment period a veteran faces when attempting to reintegrate. David is now a graduate teaching assistant at the University of Alabama in Huntsville where he writes fiction and creative nonfiction in his spare time.

Server
David Gambino

James served food instead of bombs now. Still, whenever he walked through the backdoor of the Bistro, he half-expected to see plywood walls and old faces. Mundy would sit behind the tall operations desk with his feet up and a plug of dip in his mouth, expectorating with some alacrity into an empty, Arabic-logoed Coke can. Above him were six large flat-screens, each showing a different video feed relayed via secure signal from respective aircraft. Most displayed one-story compounds with enclosed courtyards, dark figures pacing around aimlessly in and out of field-of-view or no figures at all, one or two tracked a moving vehicle, all were generally ignored by Mundy who had long ago lost interest in such spectacle or lack thereof. On a shelf to the right of the screen array and similarly ignored sat a green radio connected to a handset. Voices came from it occasionally, digitized and unclear, doubly unclear because Mundy kept the volume low so's not to disturb his entertainment (football or movie on a laptop below the screens), but most of the radio traffic wasn't directed at him anyway. On the rare occasion it was, he didn't hear it until the fourth or fifth call, when the voice was, by then and understandably, yelling.

"Morning," Adam said.

Opposite Mundy's command center was a small gathering area. A sliding glass fridge stood against the plywood wall, its contents mostly bottled water and Rip It energy drinks. Next to the fridge, a set of boxed shelves housed the pilots' night vision goggles. A colorless Rubbermaid table occupied the center of the space with five Herman Miller office chairs arranged at chaotic angles around it, one missing a wheel. Backpacks and flight bags littered the floor and leaned against the walls under whiteboards, the boards scribbled with various managerial notices and admonishments and the occasional humorous or lewd image. Half-empty water bottles everywhere. A microwave and coffee machine near the entrance, the smell of cheap coffee a constant. In the corner a public-use computer. Two small briefing rooms off the main area, each with a large LCD near the ceiling, plywood tables with print-out sheets of flight checklists and briefing items and weather checklists and survival checklists underneath a layer of glass or plastic. Usually weather information on the LCDs or latest surface-to-air threats. Crews set their elbows and coffee or dip cups on top of the checklists because the instructions were rote. The slightly muffled sound of aircraft taking off and taking off, always, the noise amplified when the door was opened.

"Good morning," James said. "Busy yesterday?"

"Steady enough," Adam said. The smell of the kitchen snapped time back into place. Sizzling meat and stale bleach water. Biscuits and bacon and coffee. Adam still slightly spectral, a lanky figure laboring over the flat top, particles of grease landing on the thick lenses of his large, prison-issue glasses. James had seen the same kind distributed by the military in basic training. Birth control goggles.

Sharon poked her head through the swinging door that separated the dining room and kitchen. "Four-top just walked in. You want it?"

"Alright."

James guessed the family of four just came from church. Three were well-dressed and sat like they were still in pews. The fourth was a small boy wearing a soccer jersey, and he bounced in his chair while drawing something with a crayon. James briefly imagined the boy's future sins: the lies, the bullying, the unprotected premarital sex and subsequent abortion, the drug use, the filial disrespect, the drinking and domestic violence, i.e. the gamut of potential male adolescent-to-early-adult behavior. Then James thought of the rest of them, the family, pictured the measure of their lives laid out in a series of sermons, the platitudes and the promise of a post-church eggs benedict

enough—just barely—to keep them hanging on to some idea of a better existence once they're dead. When he approached the table, he saw a T-rex devouring a cerulean Jesus.

"Okay. So two egg benedicts with bacon, one French toast, and one shrimp-and-grits. Anything else I can get for you?" James tried to smile (it was a grimace).

"Hey," Sharon whispered in the wait station. "My sister's coming by this afternoon. You need a refill today?" Sharon was the designated restaurant drug dealer. Everyone bought from her: front-of-house, back-of-house, the prison work-release guys, even the owner. James figured she made more money selling to the restaurant staff than she did actually working here. Her sister's supply system mostly depended on prescription drugs funneled from nursing homes. Products available for purchase consisted of various opioid painkillers (Percocet, Lortab, Vicodin, Oxycontin, etc.).

"Yeah. Vicodin. If she has it."

Sharon lowered her voice even further: "Don't go giving any to Adam this time. He's up for early parole from work-release. Overcrowding or something." James nodded. "Only reason I sell to you is because I know the VA isn't giving you the medicine you need. My own way of a thank-you-for-your-service."

"Order up," Adam said.

James arranged the dishes on a tray: "Hand me that rag real quick." He wiped a sloppy dollop of grits from the edge of one plate. *Presentation*, a voice echoed. *Attention to detail.*

The last time he ate grits was two years ago. Just chow-hall grits, not shrimp-and-grits, as tasteless and amorphic as the deployment itself. Outside the chow hall the air was stale and dry and dusty. The air of deserts and mountains, of a place that time forgot until its name was whispered in every home after one September and then forgotten again a while later except by the those who moved there to work for three or six or fifteen months. Molecules of jet-fuel mixed with the dust, the smell ever-present up and down Disney Boulevard and intensifying when James hooked a right and flashed a badge and strolled down the flight line, prop engines spinning up on the ramp, aircrews ready to go hunt, aircraft like birds of prey, some even with birds painted on their noses (one aircraft, a four-prop with artillery poking out its side, wore a grim reaper). James was extra vigilant should a pair of F-16s begin their tandem takeoff for, he had learned the hard way, the sound of afterburners during their vertical climb was a terrible thunder, sternum-vibrating and deafening. James walked like a cowboy ready to draw fingers for his ears. Even now, whenever some four-wheel-drive diesel monstrosity passes in olfactory proximity, he reflexively plugs his ears. The smells of that place were the only memories still tangible, the only evidence James had that the experience maybe wasn't a dream. The latrines. The no-flush urinals seemed not only no-flush but no-drain, and the concentrated smell of a thousand bladders' worth of piss could hit a passerby like a brick wall at fifty yards out, never-mind the smell of the shit. The shit was vacuumed up and hauled away each day by a local national in a tank truck. They smelled too—the locals—which James found vaguely ironic since he thought Muslims were supposed to clean themselves three times a day or something. But then he figured they probably didn't know their own putridness since they all smelled equally funky and canceled each other out. To the Americans, though, especially those who had never really experienced a different way of life with regard to hygiene, the odor was something profound, the revelation that human beings could smell like barnyard animals. He wondered if the Americans smelled like anything to the Afghans and, if so, what.

"How is everything?" James asked.

"Yummy!" The young boy said of his French toast. His head barely crested the table, child's bowl cut and wondering eyes, syrup dripping from his chin. He gripped his fork with a fist. His

mother, blonde and wearing a floral dress, leaned over quickly to wipe the syrup before it threatened the boy's outfit.

"Very good, thank you," the father said.

"More sweet tea?"

"Yes, please."

One time, after orchestrating a kinetic strike, James's aircraft stayed on station to watch the aftermath. With his video sensor, he watched several dark figures collect body parts and load them into the back of a Bongo truck. They drove to a nearby village and used a wheelbarrow to bring the remains into the courtyard of a walled compound. A woman flanked by two children emerged from the building and knelt next to the remains. Maybe he had been a good husband, James thought. Maybe they were all just pixels, really. James pushed play on an iPod attached to his headset and watched the Islamic wake with increasing disinterest. *Don't turn me home again, I just can't face myself alone again.*[1] The smallest of the two children grew restless and retreated to a corner of the compound and kicked a soccer ball against the wall.

"Kick some ass out there today?" Mundy asked after James had landed and returned to the operations center.

James shrugged.

When the brunch rush was over, James went out back to smoke. Adam was sitting on an upturned bucket, cigarette-hand on his knee, smoke crawling across a visage that looked beyond the brick walls of the alley.

"Light?" James asked.

Adam's eyes came back. He handed James a lighter. "Any tables left?"

"Just one. They already paid."

Adam nodded.

"How are things at the camp?"

"Bout the same as always, I guess."

"You up for early parole?"

"Hearing's next week."

"Well that's good news, isn't it?"

Adam shrugged. "I grew up on a ranch not far from here, you know. Raised cattle. I'd get up early every morning with dad and make the rounds, check on the herd. I loved it. I was too young to imagine the animals would become food someday. One morning we discovered a bull calf missing. We looked all day and all the next day. Fence wasn't broken. Then the neighbor—he ran a smaller operation, few acres and some cows—then he called us on the third day or so and said he found the calf on his property. He'd had a cow quarantined in a shed away from the others, suspected she had some bovine disease, was keeping her there 'til she could be inspected. When the vet had come and they opened the shed, wouldn't you know it, our calf was in there with her. Just like he was keeping the cow company or something. Nobody could explain how he'd got in there. Course, I was just a boy. I didn't understand why we couldn't bring the calf home." Adam took one last drag and flicked his butt down the alley. He looked out at the street and watched dead leaves scattered by the wind. "I don't know if there's a place for me anymore. Out here, I mean."

James exhaled. He fingered the oval shapes in his left pocket and watched the smoke climb and disappear in the graying sky. He imagined a speck there, in and out of the clouds, circling.

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[1] Springsteen, Bruce. "Thunder Road." *Born to Run*, Columbia Records, 1975.

Donna Maccherone, "Girl Discovers Fire"

Donna Maccherone holds a BA in English and an MA in Writing Studies from St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Her work has been published in *The Philadelphia Inquirer, Tiferet Journal, Kaatskill Life, Parent Co.* and *Brain, Child.* As a teacher, she finds exposing high school students to war literature frightening, enlightening, and necessary. "Girl Discovers Fire," which grew out of a montage of memory and imagination, is her first published work of fiction.

Girl Discovers Fire
Donna Maccherone

I remember all this. The backyard at dusk littered with Coke bottles and beer cans. A stray paper plate glowing white against the lush summer grass that looks almost black in the gloaming. Our bratty New York cousins have left. They're probably well up the Turnpike by now, and my little brothers Will and Timmy are sent inside to bed, thank god. The barbeque is pretty much over. But Lissa's friends, the older boys, are just settling in. The sun has gone down but the air is still thick. Nick Russo drags the Coleman cooler close to the picnic table, straddles one of the benches, and digs in. He rolls a beer down the table to Dave Sterline who reaches for it but misses, just as it plops to the ground.

"Shit, Sterline, you're coordinated," my brother Artie yells from across the yard. "I hope you're better with an M16."

"Christ, so do I," Dave says, "or my ass is fried."

They all laugh. I'm sitting off to the side, pretending to be uninterested. But these guys enthrall me. Even my brother Artie. He's only two years older than me but he takes Latin and advanced placement English, so he thinks he knows everything. Still, he's cool enough to hang with Lissa's friends, and I hang on every joke they crack, every swear word that rolls so easily off their tongues.

Artie hoses what's left of the still live coals piled inside the rusty grill. There is a satisfying hiss as smoke billows. A few sparks arc up and over the sides and sizzle to the ground.

At the top of the concrete steps, my sister Lissa swats at a moth and hollers over, "What's going on out here?" She is a silhouette against the light that sifts through the kitchen screen door behind her. Nobody answers. She comes towards us with a dented tin barrel of Charles Chips and a pack of Winstons. "Carol," she calls to me, as she approaches, *Seventeen Magazine* pretty, with her long straight hair and her denim cut-offs. "Who's in charge here?"

"Not me," I say, as though it matters. At thirteen I am skinny and flat-chested. Artie still calls me pipsqueak.

Lissa hops up onto the picnic table and perches on the end. She dangles the pack of cigarettes over Dave, who is slumped down on the bench. She hates that he smokes. She's going to nursing school in the fall. Our Aunt Roz, who was an army nurse in WWII, says Lissa is a natural born healer.

"These cause cancer. You know that don't you? Look, they write it on the package now. It's proven. They can kill you, eventually," Lissa tells Dave, as she holds tightly to the cigarettes.

"Yeah. Eventually. But Gooks might beat 'em to it."

Dave tilts his head back to look up at her. Lissa leans down and there is a little smile in the somber shadow of her face.

"Do. Not. Say. That." She punctuates each word with feigned punches. Then teasingly she holds the red and white box aloft: "Now you're not getting them."

He reaches an arm, ropey with muscle, above his head. In a snap he swipes the Winstons from Lissa's hand. Then he pulls her toward him and kisses her. How can he be going to Viet Nam? He doesn't look like somebody who should be carrying a gun. He has a soft voice. And his eyes are too dreamy. To me at least. And I guess to Lissa, too.

My parents didn't like Dave at first. Maybe because he had dropped out of college after one semester and worked at a gas station. And his hair was shaggy. But now they seem okay with him. For one thing, he cut his hair. And they say Lissa is mature. She has a good head on her shoulders. And least that's what they said last year, before Dave was classified 1-A. Then they worried that Dave and Lissa would get engaged. My father started kicking Dave out of the house early on school

nights. Lissa balked and said if Dave was sent to Viet Nam, maybe she'd never see him again. Dad said he was sorry. He said he respected Dave for answering the call of duty, but he wanted his daughter to do something with her smarts before she settled down.

Dave and Lissa are goofing around, drinking their beers and kissing. I'm trying not to watch. I start thinking about an article I read in *Reader's Digest* about a guy who had been a POW in North Viet Nam. After he was released and made it home, his mother wrote a story about him. Two things upset me. One was that the boy (that's how the mother referred to him: *my boy*) couldn't drink enough milk or eat enough chocolate cake since he got back to the States. She had to bake a cake every other day and she had to double her milk delivery order. I pictured him with a milk mustache.

The second thing was the description of a wound on his backside. He said the beatings he took in prison turned his rear end and the backs of his thighs and calves to raw hamburger. Still guards made him sit on a wooden stool for hours. Flies buzzed around him and he couldn't shoo them away because his hands and feet were tied. I couldn't get this out of my head, especially now that I knew someone who was going to the jungle. I hadn't even known it was jungle until I read the article.

Artie runs into the house. I suppose to set his record player against the upstairs bedroom window because after a few minutes Jim Morrison's voice tumbles down from the sky. When he comes back out into the yard, he hands Dave the album cover.

"The Doors. Outta sight, huh?"

Artie seems so old to me all of sudden. So serious.

"Cool," says Dave. "But dark, man."

"Like another Nietzsche," says Nick. "That's no fun." He burps and laughs. He doesn't even say excuse me.

I think, shit, who is Nietzsche? I'm dying to know but I don't ask.

Mark Wholivesbehindus jumps the fence. We never did know his real last name. Years later, after we had all grown up and moved away, after Artie died of AIDS and Lissa became a nurse and later a medical researcher, and long after Dave Sterline had not returned from Nam, the rest of us would get to talking about things (but never the war) and someone would say, "Remember that Mark kid from Glenside Avenue? What was his name?" And somebody else would say, "Oh, right, Mark Wholivesbehindus." And everyone (but not me) would laugh.

The boys play badminton in the dark, slamming at the shuttlecock with unwarranted force and calling each other sissy and faggot when they miss, or they flip their wrists in mock girlishness. A few hours pass, the cooler is empty, and Nick needs to go home. Dave makes a move to drive him, but Lissa won't hear it.

"I'll take him," she says with authority. She kisses Dave again. "Carol, watch this guy for me, will you?"

"Davey, buddy," says Nick, "I guess this is *sayonara*."

He thrusts an arm in Dave's direction, a signal to shake hands.

Dave doesn't move, just reaches his arm up overhead, waves and says, "No, man, I'll see ya before I go."

"Oh yeah, almost forgot. We intend to give you a hell of a send off."

Nick drops his arm to his side and stands there looking at us until Lissa honks the horn a bunch of times and he runs off.

Dave comes over and sits in the lawn chair next to me. "Hey, Carol."

"Hey, Dave."

And then he sort of sings: *Oh, Carol…*

"You know that song?

"No," I squeak.

"No?" His voice is low and I can't tell if he's mocking me.

He whispers, "It's Chuck Berry. But the Stones do a far out job with it."

He throws back what's left of his beer.

"So, when are you going to Viet Nam?" I steady my voice and paw at a patch of dirt with my bare feet. For the first time I notice that he is growing a mustache. I sense my face reddening. I'm glad it's dark out.

"Ah, not for a while. Have to train first. I leave for basic in three weeks."

Suddenly it is so quiet. The music has stopped. From over by the badminton net Mark, who is half over the fence, tells Artie to go up and flip the record. He says he'll be right back. Artie disappears into the house.

"Are you scared?"

"Of what? Going to Nam?"

"Uh, yeaaah." I try to sound sarcastic but I think to myself, *don't be such an idiot, Carol.* "Nah, not really. Gotta do what I gotta do."

He pulls out a cigarette and, arching an eyebrow, tilts the pack in my direction. *I can't believe he is offering me a cigarette,* I scream in my head. "Hmm, no thanks," I say.

"Oh, right, your sister would kill me if she caught me giving you a smoke."

He puts one between his lips, strikes a match, and cups his hands around it. "You know what we should all really be scared of?" He blows out the first stream of smoke.

"What?" I say.

But I am thinking, *No, I don't want to know because I already know about raw hamburger meat behinds and that's enough.*

"The bomb," he says.

"The bomb?"

"Yeah, man, the big one." He strokes his almost mustache with one hand and taps ashes into the empty beer can with the other. He seems to be talking to someone else, though we are the only ones there in the backyard. He stares across the table. "We have one and the Soviets have one. And it is all so fucking precarious."

Precarious. Weird, I think, that he should say precarious. It was one of last year's vocabulary words. *Uncertain, unstable, dependent on chance or the will or whim of another.* Memorized to the letter, the definition automatically flashes through my mind.

"Do you know?" He leans back on his elbows and stares up at the dark sky. "Do you know that Johnson has a phone, a red phone on his desk in the oval office. He can pick it up at any time and end it all. Khrushchev—no, wait, I think it's Brezhnev now. He's got one too. Just one guy can blow up the world. One guy, all by himself. Boom." Without warning, he jerks his arm back and throws the beer can across the yard. It clangs against the abandoned grill. "The whole fucking world," he shouts.

He must be drunk. I hope he is. I hope he's talking out his ass, as my father would say. But somehow I know that Dave knows exactly what he is talking about. My freckled legs, poking out of my seersucker shorts, are gooseflesh and begin to shake. I try to smooth the pink and green plaid that has completely lost the charm it had for me when I got dressed that morning.

"That's the big one. That motherfucker'll unleash a firestorm like nothin' else. Then the mushroom cloud."

I try to follow what he's telling me. I see in my mind the picture of the earth from the cover of my geography book—as it bursts into flames. How could I not know about this? I've been watching the news and reading stuff. Suddenly it dawns on me that I *do* know about The Bomb, because now I'm remembering something on television a while ago. It was a commercial, I think. There was an explosion and then a mushroom cloud. A little girl picking the petals off a daisy but before she gets to the last one, the whole screen blows up. I even remember that my mother looked up from her ironing and gasped. Then she snapped off the TV and told us to go to bed.

Everything around me begins to spin. I slip my hands under my trembling legs, pulling away from the plastic webbing of the lawn chair I am stuck to. I feel queasy. I tell myself it is the cigarette smoke swirling around me, or the smell of stale beer, or the hotdog I ate hours before. But it's none of these. It is the mushroom cloud and the little girl picking daisies and the boy with hamburger meat for a backside sitting on a stool in a prison in Hanoi surrounded by flies.

*

In August my parents rent a house down the shore. We're all supposed to go, but at the last minute, they let Lissa stay home to see Dave before he leaves for Fort Dix. My father objects at first, but then gives in, as long as Lissa stays with our grandparents. Even Artie stays home with a friend because they both got jobs caddying at the Woodcrest Country Club.

The rest of us go to the beach everyday. My parents have gin and tonics on the back patio every evening. We play Monopoly and Scrabble for hours one rainy day. How can they just keep going on as if everything is the same, I think. Nothing is the same. I can't stop thinking about all of it. The War. The Bomb. Dave Sterline. There are days when I hardly eat or sleep, when I want to tell someone but I can't. I use most of my spending money to call Lissa every night from a pay phone at the end of the boardwalk. Just to see how she is. Just to hear her voice. But I never reach her.

Our last night in Wildwood I am sitting out on the sleeping porch reading when a breeze off the ocean blows through, rattling the metal Venetian blinds, but to my ears it's rifle fire or the chop of helicopter blades, sounds that have been coming from the CBS Evening News night after night. I do the dishes really fast these days so I can watch Walter Cronkite with my father. Before the broadcast finishes my father usually walks away mumbling something about that son-of-a-bitch McNamara. I want him to tell me what he means but I'm too scared to ask. By the time I get up the nerve to broach the subject, my mother is yelling at me. I've left soap scum and grease in the sink. I must come back to the kitchen and finish my chores.

I look over at my two little brothers asleep on their cots: their cheeks and noses sunburned, their blond hair turned to hay by too much salt water. Will is on his side, curled up like a comma, his knees to his chest. Timmy dangles a leg over the side, his toes not quite reaching the sandy floor.

The seductive rhythm of the wicker rocker betrays my effort to stay alert and I start to doze off. In the ether of near sleep, I see my brothers carrying M16s through a jungle somewhere. They can't see where they are going because heavy camouflaged helmets fall forward on their small heads and cover their eyes. They are walking in circles and in my dark reverie I call out to them to stop right where they are. What are they doing in this place? I shout. I tell them I have come to take them home, but they don't seem to hear me. Just before I open my eyes, there it is again, the world on fire.

Visual Arts

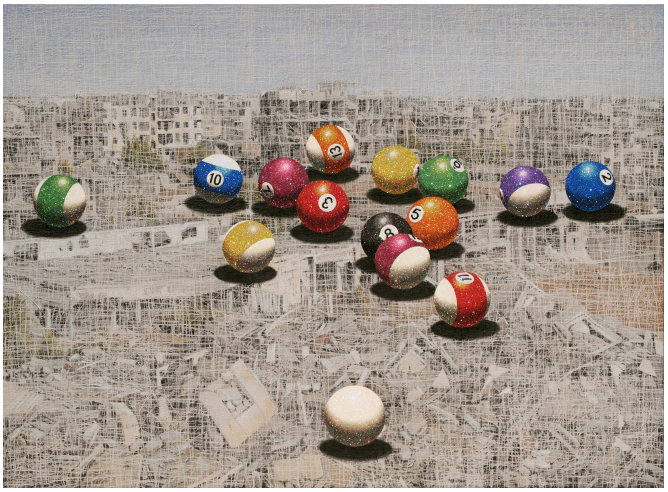
Reza Baharvand's work has been previously featured on his personal Instagram and Facebook pages, as well as the following venues:

Mah Art Gallery
Saatchi Art
Celeste
ZH Magazine
Tandis Mag
Khabar Online
Canvas Magazine
Mark Hachem Gallery Paris
Fadi Alfred Basbus

Collateral: Tell us a little about yourself. How were you introduced to visual arts?

Reza Baharvand: I was born in 1976 in Iran. In 1978, the revolution occurred and when I was four the war started. My childhood passed over those years, full of fear and anxiety. After the war, the situation improved slightly. I entered Isfahan University of Technology in physics but abandoned it halfway. I had been interested in painting since I was a kid, and after a while I went to Isfahan University of Art to study painting. I continued it up to masters at Tehran University of Art. Since graduation, I have had many exhibitions in Iran and other countries.

At first I painted in abstract style, but about five years ago I realized it was not satisfying to me, so I changed my way. Hearing and watching news about war and violence in the Middle East and permanent military threats against my country deeply influenced me, and I couldn't ignore it in my artworks. So I started to work on war as the subject.

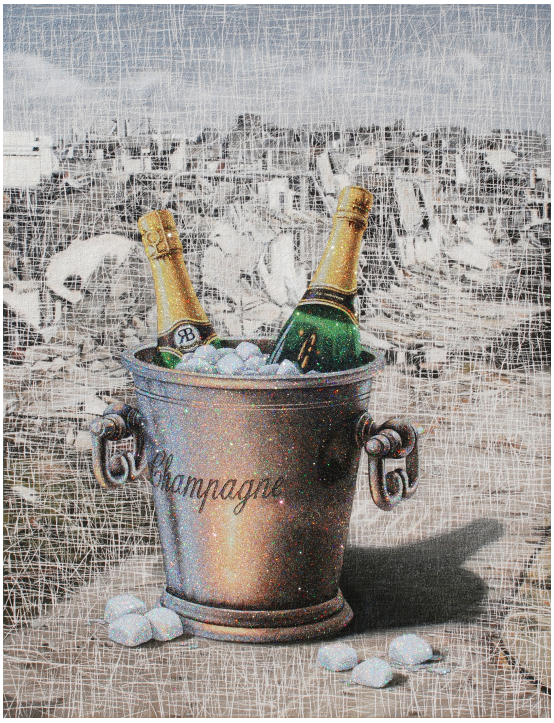


C: I believe we are all impacted by war, though it is easier for some to turn away from or ignore it. What is your experience with people around the world interacting with your work and its message?

RB: Every day, many people around the world see a lot of pictures and videos of war on TV or other media. Many people prefer to avoid that and a large number of them who may be impressed by these images and even sympathize with the victims at the moment, usually forget what they have seen just after a few minutes.

The fact is that the news channels have strongly reduced the enormity of war images by broadcasting them repeatedly. It has turned humans to indifference. I have tried to draw people's attention to this issue.

The "Still Life" series consist of two layers. In the foreground there are shiny and captivating icons of daily life that most audiences are attracted to in the first look.



But the final reactions depend on how they interact with backgrounds, which are defaced images of war. Some viewers react negatively to them because they don't want to see war. But some try to figure out the relevance between layers and discover the meaning.

I just try to make questions with my works, not answers. It's important for me to encourage people to think about what they have seen, even if they reach different results.

C: You have experience as an arts instructor. What has it been like to work with students also impacted by war?

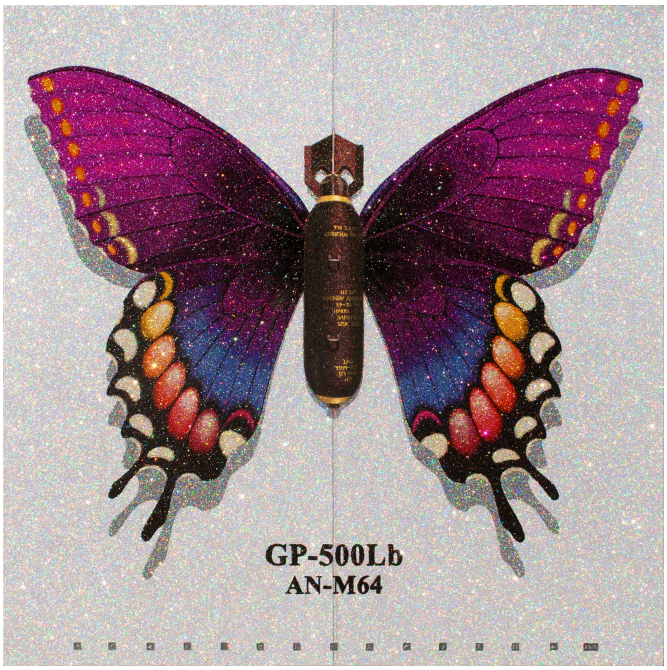
RB: I teach at the University of Art and my students haven't directly experienced war themselves. The war ended before they were born. They never can understand the reality of that. For most of them, war is the same as the images on TV. As a teacher, I've never wanted to persuade students to accept my ideas. I just try to instruct them not to be indifferent about what is happening.

C: What advice do you have for artists who are just beginning their craft?

RB: In my opinion, an artist should be conscious of the events happening where they live. Anything that is generally misplaced by the public can inspire an artist. On the other hand, it is really important for beginners to improve their knowledge and skills as much as possible. I believe artists who do most of their work themselves can create more impressive pieces.

C: Has war limited or restricted your artistic pursuits? What is its impact on your process?

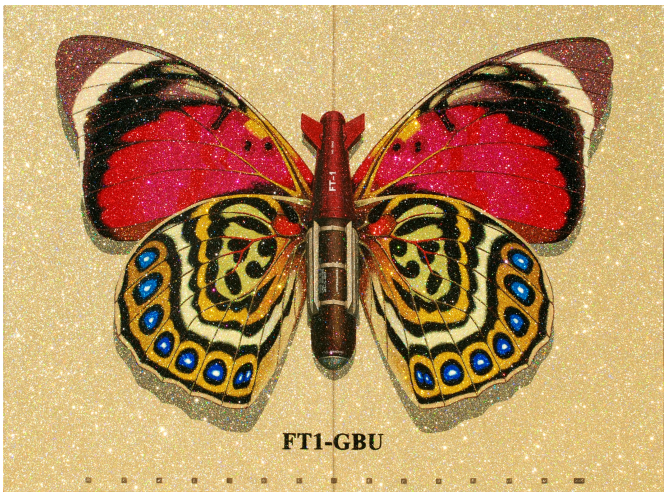
RB: If you mean war as the subject, I should say that seeing images of recent wars in the Middle East strongly influences me and brings back memories of when I was child and we were at war with Iraq (1980-1988). Sometimes I think working with war as the subject is also kind of mental treatment for me. I really don't know how long this period will continue. Maybe as far as I can carry it.



C: Your work is on display in Tehran, is that correct? How has it been received?

RB: The "Still Life" series was displayed in

Tehran last year. There was a wide range of reactions. Talking about war to the people who have experienced it for 8 years and live in a country that is constantly threatened by war is not easy, but most of the audiences sympathized with my works and agreed with me about how we neglect what is happening.

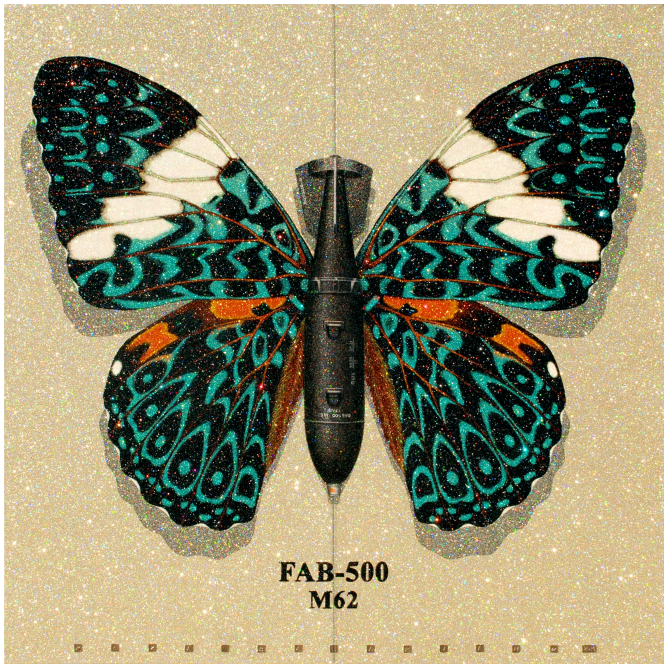


In my exhibition there were also visitors who preferred not to face the signs of war. Unfortunately this is what many people think —that art is an object to decorate their houses. They usually look for works that don't have any bitter or unpleasant meaning.

C: How do you see your work in conversation with other artists drawing attention to the brutality as well as human elements of war?

RB: Many artists around the world have paid attention to war, some of them directly and some indirectly. I prefer the second one and in my way. I believe artists should not explain everything clearly in their work. Of course it should not be so dumb as to mislead the audience. The work should attract audiences in the first facing, then make them think about what they are watching.

It is important for me to make questions in the minds of visitors of my works. The audience may understand parts of my purpose or not. Sometimes they detect true issues that I hadn't thought about myself, like the relationship between life and death or the upstarts who get rich after war. When it happens, I realize that I have done my work right.



C: Do you have a favorite piece, one that you're connected with more than others?

RB: All pieces in this series are related and meant to be together. So, none of them are superior to the rest. I like all of them.

C: Which artists or genres have inspired you or influenced your work?

RB: I know a lot of artists around the world and I like a wide range of artworks. But when I'm working I try to forget all of them. However, it may happen unconsciously.

C: Can you tell us a little about your process?

RB: At first, I find an image of war, usually recent wars in the Middle East, from TV or the Internet. It is important for me to paint war images completely, in detail, to emphasize that the images are existing in reality. I paint it realistically in large size, then scratch and destroy it. I scratch them in order to show how we ignore the truth. In the foreground, there are objects painted in glitter. They are objects from everyday life, but they are shiny and deceptive. The main issue is in the background.