

# COLLATERAL

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# POETRY

**This War Shall Not Leave Us\***  
Manash Firaq Bhattacharjee

*From Aleppo to Afghanistan*

This war shall not leave us,  
It will chase us from city to city,  
From country to country,  
It will chase us till we're exhausted,  
Till we are ready to die,  
This war will follow us, like the un-faithful  
Out to destroy god, it will follow us  
Like a faithful hound, sniff out  
Children's blood, tear out the song  
In their throat, erase the words  
They spelled wrong; all wars  
Love children, all wars are a revenge  
Against childhood, this war will stalk our  
Shadows, it will give us time  
To gather our wounds,  
Stitch our sorrows, and when we are  
Almost sane, once again  
Prey to crumbs of  
A new hope, war, old friend,  
Will come for us and turn  
The future of our memory  
Into a tweet

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“This poem does not have a date. It is written across time. Time that is more broken than continuous. Like our experience of the little wars that are happening across the globe. I call them little wars as they are limited to regions. But wars are wars, and lives are lives. You can measure destruction, you can number death, but you can't measure, or number, grief. War is a macabre game adults play with children, because war is blind to hope. No poem of war will stop war. It can only connect the world's grief.” —Manash Firaq Bhattacharjee

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**Manash Firaq Bhattacharjee** is a poet, writer, and political science scholar. He is the author of *The Town Slowly Empties: On Life and Culture during Lockdown* (Headpress, Copper Coin, 2021). His poems have appeared in *World Literature Today*, *Rattle*, *The London Magazine*, *New Welsh Review*, *Mudlark*, *Acumen*, *Hobart*, *Glass: A Review of Poetry* and other publications. His first collection of poetry, *Ghalib's Tomb and Other Poems* (2013), was published by London Magazine Editions. His articles have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Guernica*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *3AM Magazine* etc.

**\*Pushcart Prize Nominee**

My pocketknife is named  
Control.

It was made from a piece of steel  
Left in my heart  
By my father.

It is my everything:  
A weapon  
A tool  
A comfort

I cut everyone with it.

---

“My father taught me to be in control and always have a pocketknife. Decades later I realized these things were one and the same, and they caused people more harm than good.”

**Pass the Torch**  
Aramis Calderon

In war there is always fire.  
The command to shoot, open fire.  
When we get shot, we receive fire.  
To stop shooting, cease fire.

If we shoot the wrong target, check fire.  
We clear life in jungles with fire.  
For steel rain, we call for fire.

In cities, we set tires on fire.  
In deserts, we set fields of oil on fire.  
In the sea, we set ships with men on fire.

Until our end, we carry fire.

---

“This is an observation of mine about our use of fire in military language and actual warfare.” —Aramis Calderon

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**Aramis Calderon** is a Marine veteran with a pen. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Tampa. His current area of operations is Tampa Bay, Florida, where every week he meets with fellow veteran writers in the DD-214 Writers’ Workshop.

*“we dig a grave in the breezes”*  
—Paul Celan ‘Death Fugue’

My parents were stunned into a blank stare  
by the numbers. Grandfather mumbled them  
instead of prayers, but for me, the numbers  
have the same significance as the burning  
of Carthage. It was. It is what got us here.  
Sorrow has little to do with numbers. No one  
comprehends what is outside senses and reason—  
millions of state-approved, orderly executed murders.

What hurts still, is looking at pictures—  
the sensual curve of Aunt Sarah’s shoulders,  
the sly seductive pose Cousin Paul takes  
in all his photos, Uncle Adam’s fastidiously  
manicured long hands, little Margaret’s silk dress  
and shy smile - a family portrait. Pictures never  
intended to become historical documents  
or to survive as symbols of pain in anyone's memory.

The cousins my kids never had. The multiple ties  
of a family with treasures and apple pie recipes  
handed down from mother to daughter. All of it  
burned, lost. What hurts is grieving for the lives  
I’ve never been part of, for the stories silenced  
before they could tell their first tales. Like a lunatic,  
I longingly want to remember what never took place.

What I have instead are monuments, statistics,  
documentaries. What I have instead are cemeteries  
where the horizon is the only point of reference  
among graves, graves to lay stones on. And I wonder  
where could I lay a stone for those whose burial ground  
is the smoke and the soot of their own flesh and blood?

And the absence of that stone hurts again.

---

“I grew up after the Holocaust and during the Cold War. The destruction the wars brought to all of us is one of the themes recurring in my writings. As the inheritor of that tormented past, I am trying to explore through poetry the lament and the wisdom left behind by that history.” —Ana Doina

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**Ana Doina** is a Romanian born American writer living in New Jersey. Due to political pressures and social restrictions, she left Romania during the Ceausescu regime. Her poems and essays have been published in various literary magazines, anthologies, textbooks, and online publications. Two of her poems were nominated for the Pushcart Prize in 2002 and 2004. One of her poems was awarded an honorable mention in the Anna Davidson Rosenberg Awards for Poems on the Jewish Experience contest in 2007.



a culture of war, whatever that means

Tatiana Dolgushina

I feel there is inside of  
me the entire history  
of a Soviet century, all of its people  
either living or,

all of its words, sounds, echoes,  
have stacked themselves into a bundle  
and been placed  
inside the hardest spot,

the spot inside the child, within me

how can war be inside children  
how small do I have to reach  
for it to stop being?

how far does I have to go  
to lose understanding, words,  
echoes  
of a world that holds me

that is not found anymore.

at night in my mind, I whisper  
to myself phrases in Russian  
that I hear sometimes, on tv, or

by the Russian lady in the town  
who calls me 'rabbit'  
as one would if one were  
from that world, and I absorb her  
other-worldliness like mine, one

that is no longer exists, her sad eyes  
penetrate the air, she switches to  
'English' to hide that other existence

but I insist, I pretend I don't understand

when she speaks it, so her sad eyes  
return to me, and I see in themselves  
a mirrored reflection, a myself  
a child in a war, standing  
a two children heard by nobody,

---

our soviet kitchen was small  
Tatiana Dolgushina

a man was sitting next to the window  
swirling a metal spoon in the tea cup  
making a loudly sharp noise.

my mother burst out at him: will you  
stop!  
he replied: how do I stop  
mixing my sugar, and she said: figure it  
out.

I had my own cup of tea and  
I swirled my sugar in circles silently,  
trying the laws of physics of my  
four year old reality,  
and I said: this  
is how, my small hands gripping  
the metal spoon, trying to evade  
another scene.

in a room where the air  
is so dry there is never mold  
on the windows, where the snow  
breaks the glass with its sharp  
teeth.

the man kept on smiling  
at the request, as if no more a  
ridiculous thing could be asked  
of him, as if the whole thing, us  
in that kitchen, was absurd,

what with the walls  
listening in, the government telling  
us of what reality is, hiding  
documents from abroad,  
taking us  
if we didn't listen,  
like it has others

my mother's continuous outbursts,  
her anger, was like a joy  
to find, to find

that one is still living.

---

“These poems are reflections on the violent effects of a dissolving country on a child, the creation of a refugee, and the life-long displacement that losing your home culture creates. The linguistic fluidity of the writing is a necessary expression for the writer who had to grow up learning 3 languages as she moved from country to country after the collapse of the Soviet Union, as a parallel to the chronic confusion she experienced.” —Tatiana Dolgushina

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**Tatiana Dolgushina** was born in Soviet Russia and grew up in South America. Her poetry has been published in *Hobart*, *CALYX*, *TAB*, *The Write Launch*, *The Lindenwood Review*, and *Red Booth Review*. She holds graduate degrees in both biology and poetry. Her multilingual and immigrant identity are central to her work.

## The Screaming Eagle's Daughter Laments

Kate Falvey

There are children born with your name  
that you left too soon to know.

There are children you knew but did not know  
because how could you, swiftd from your

D-Day jump into some sales job and the arms of  
a sweetie of a sinless wife who baked you pound cakes,

pressed your hankies, and stilled your nerves  
imperfectly with unfamiliar loyalty and love?

Understanding took more time than we had  
together, you hustling your charm out the kitchen door

each night, trailing a forcefield of need and  
jittery intentions like the haze of a lost cause.

There were always the thrums of the be-good-to-your-  
mother ritual kisses brisked on the tousle of heads

paused before the lamb chops or meat loaf you couldn't  
share, your eventual job tending bar meaning you slept

all day and worked all night so missed the orange crayon  
on the wall, the sauce-and-stew-pot forts clanging,

the shards of paste snipped from troubled hair, the  
pipe cleaner faces twisted into scatty puppet shows.

I played dolls with your medals and pins,  
sorting stars and purple hearts into burnished or

faceted families, laying baby wings into a cardboard  
cradle, blanketed with a screaming eagle patch.

The eagle rightly scared me with its snapping beak  
and snaky tongue, head severed from its flight.

I didn't know then why its fierceness looked forlorn,  
or why a scruffy kind of pride seemed fissured in its

dreadful, distant, agitated seeing, why its roughness  
seemed if not a sham, then at least an unconvincing

camouflage for something it kept close and wouldn't  
share. I always wondered what it was looking at or for

and why it couldn't lift its death-defying wings  
and brave the earnest impact of the ordinary air.

---

**Me and Your Shadows**  
Kate Falvey

I.

I don't think you were my hero  
or if I had a notion of what that even meant.

You made magic, vanished a stuffed dog with bells  
in its ears and two sloe-eyed raggy purple tabbies

from your blue pajama lap to the far away  
window side of our Queens living room.

You must have sung all those old familiar tunes  
or how would I know them all?

There is a snapshot of me in an oversized striped  
jacket, holding on a straw boater as I dance

on the big red brocade couch. I was surely  
singing *Me and My Shadow*, imitating your

suave soft-shoe and Irish tenor croon. I doubt  
the hat and jacket meant you sang barbershop

with some guys from the bar but who knows what  
you got up to when not in your brown easy chair

with me patting your unshaven morning chin saying  
rough, Daddy, rough, and you saying you weren't

sleeping, sweetheart, but just resting your eyes.

II.

So when your drinking crashed into  
a neighbor's car and the local newspaper  
I was enlisted to fix the broken headlights

in our home, trust totaled,  
seemingly beyond repair,  
no road forward showing.

Desperation called me to active duty,  
when I was too young to effectively serve,  
though brash with indignation and

rudimentary resolve. We sat at the early  
evening kitchen table, coffee on the marbled  
formica, awkward with shared shame.

You never talked about your exploits  
in the war. A few iconic stories explained  
your medals and your youth: ducking to

pick up a puppy in a field under fire,  
bullets whacking the air above your crouch;  
plaster from a farmhouse blasted into your eyes,

your eyelashes plucked to minimize infection;  
swimming a boat across a river;  
your lung collapsing;

landing in the brig and only losing  
your little rank —something about decking  
a bully officer, something about

being a grudging acting sergeant  
after that; the clickers not clicking  
after landing in Normandy; saving someone.

The theme was always luck,  
not heroizing thrills. You quashed the notion  
of any kind of bravery but before I was myself

well beyond eighteen, I couldn't know how shaky  
eighteen is, how green, how staggeringly young.  
So when I gently broached your terrifying drinking

you surprised me into stories of your war, the old  
faithfuls, to be sure, the ones I knew, but more  
of your confusions, questions, terrors, ghosts

than I'd ever known before. Snow deeper than  
whatever boots were had in the Ardennes, the pine  
and birch howling spikes of bitter winter

as you trudged and huddled and pushed  
into frigid compliance, blood steaming  
in a landscape of blasted skulls and limbs.

I held your hand as you talked into the safety  
of the coming dark, in the sunny kitchen  
you sipped your sweetened morning coffee in,

with the daughter you were sure would be  
a victor in whatever fields she fought in,  
whiskey coursing through memory like

the saddest river in the saddest song  
pulsing in a jagged throat which struggles  
to swig blasts of unforgiving air.

III.

Here's my definition of an Irishman:  
You have a fear of heights and you  
volunteer to jump out of planes.

*Under enemy fire* was the clincher to this,  
my standard joke, a sort of punchline  
to underscore the crazy.

My lanky father, skittish on the high dive at  
the Lake George public beach. I was burdened  
and exposed in my pre-teen flirt of ruffled dotted

two-piece, on the last low-rent family get-away  
I'd ever deign to join. He startled me by swaying,  
quipping about the long way down then leaping –

pounding gamely into the cold drum of the lake.  
I still can feel the spikes of the mortified splash  
when I quake in free-fall

with pent bravado  
and try to flout my own  
relentless and ignoble fears.

---

“I played with my father’s purple hearts and bronze stars as a child, enjoying the snap of the box lids, the textures of metal and cloth. There was nothing puffed up about my father. He never boasted of exploits or heroism. If anything, valor was minimized and talk about what happened in his war was virtually nonexistent. Bits and pieces were revealed through the years, and I supplemented with research about the campaigns he participated in as a member of the 101st Airborne Division, 506th



parachute regiment, Company B. Of course, the tentacles of the trauma—not much acknowledged with WWII vets—were omnipresent and insidious.” —Kate Falvey

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**Kate Falvey's** work has been widely published in an eclectic array of journals and anthologies, a full-length collection, *The Language of Little Girls* (David Robert Books), and in two chapbooks, *What the Sea Washes Up* (Dancing Girl Press) and *Morning Constitutional in Sunbat and Bolero* (Green Fuse Poetic Arts). She co-founded and edited the *2 Bridges Review*, published through City Tech (City University of New York) where she teaches, and is an associate editor for the *Bellevue Literary Review*.

**War, Dream\***  
Milica Mijatović

If you're quiet enough, you  
can almost hear nothing,  
the kind of nothing that scares  
you into thinking you've gone  
deaf, except you haven't  
because your sister is screaming,  
except she isn't even born yet,  
and neither are you, but you're  
definitely here, your tears  
are bodies falling  
only two clicks away,  
you're here, and you're running  
toward what looks like a finish  
line, except here finishes  
don't exist, and even though  
you know whom you're running  
from, you turn around to look  
one last time at your burning  
home, except it isn't your home,  
it isn't even your war,  
but you are here, and you grip  
your chest because something  
in there aches, but your sister  
is screaming somewhere  
in the distance, so you have no  
time to grieve, not while the alarms  
are sounding, not while the troops  
are marching, not while your people  
are watching, except no one  
is here but you

---

“War, Dream’ is about a recurring dream I’ve had since childhood. I come from a war torn place, and I wasn’t even born until after the war had officially ended. I was only two when the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia happened in 1999. So in a lot of ways, I feel I’ve inherited war. This poem attempts to explore the complexities, the consequences, and the presence of war in my life.” —Milica Mijatović

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**I'm looking for you**  
Milica Mijatović

even today    under blankets    in hands    on branches  
                 sometimes I go to the store    and chase you    between shelves  
hoping you'll recognize me    hoping you'll    come home  
                 but actually    what's left    isn't a home    isn't even    a wall  
and I want to tell    you    to stay    right where you are  
                 because here    in this city    on this street    honey often goes bad  
maybe there's    something still    in the air    buzzing  
                 waiting    maybe it's really    something    in us  
the living    the almost dead    that leaves us    gasping  
                 for anything    but the future    leaves me    looking  
for your ghost    among wreckage    in jars    full of honey

---

“Back home, there’s this house across the street that was ruined during the war and abandoned. It’s been that way for a few decades now, and no one knows whose house it is, not anymore. ‘I’m looking for you’ is a poem about loss and rubble and absence. It’s a poem about an aftermath, about dealing with said loss and rubble and absence.” —Milica Mijatović

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**Milica Mijatović** is a Serbian poet and translator. Born in Brčko, Bosnia and Hercegovina, she relocated to the United States where she earned a BA in Creative Writing and English Literature from Capital University. She received her MFA in Creative Writing from Boston University and is a recipient of a Robert Pinsky Global Fellowship in Poetry. Her poetry appears or is forthcoming in *The Louisville Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Consequence*, *Santa Clara Review*, *Barely South Review*, *Rattle*, and elsewhere.

**\*Pushcart Prize Nominee**

**Vultures**  
Adnan Adam Onart

Just to get started,  
I place a boy, face powdered in dust,  
in front of a dilapidated building  
walls covered with graffiti in Arabic  
so that he relieves himself peacefully  
pushing forward his abdomen  
swollen from hunger.

Not very far away from him,  
but in a separate stanza,

I lay three headless corpses  
next to their severed heads  
with terrified eyes gouged out  
in a town square completely deserted.  
I am the bearded one in the flock; the other two are of the bald kind.

First dives  
the one, who made his fortune  
selling oil in the blackmarket.

Then the other,  
an expert in money laundering  
to purchase tanks, humvees,  
heavy machinery with a nifty 40% kick-back.

I soar – two big circles.

This is going to be a fantastic poem,  
I buzz with rapaciousness,  
before entrusting myself  
to what you call “gravity.”

---

“‘Vultures’ was triggered by the civil war that has been taking place in Syria, and many forms of profiteering it generated in that geography. But the poem tries to highlight the paradox: even writing a poem about war is a form of making a profit from it.” —Adnan Adam Onart

**Water Cooler**

*Let's just nuke them*, he says  
—a software engineer with an advanced degree  
from California Institute of Technology,  
*let's erase Baghdad from the face of the earth*  
tapping his bony fingers  
on the water cooler  
as if it were the head of a bomb.  
The whole group laughs.

A nine-year-old replies  
—in a demonstration in Istanbul,  
talking to TV reporters  
sober as if the future of the Iraqi nation  
depended on him:  
*War kills children.*  
He points to a picture he holds:  
a group of boys and girls  
playing hide-and-seek  
among the ruins  
of some demolished buildings.  
These kids are my brothers and sisters.  
I don't want them to die.  
Despite all kinds of noises  
—men shouting slogans,  
cars honking,  
police banging their clubs  
on their Plexiglas shields—  
a terrible silence surrounds him.  
Nobody laughs.

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“These two poems were written in reaction to the events surrounding two recent wars in the Middle East. ‘Water Cooler’ was written in association with the invasion of Iraq and the protests it generated around the world.” —Adnan Adam Onart

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**Adnan Adam Onart** lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His work has appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Colere Magazine*, *Red Wheel Barron*, *The Massachusetts Review*, among others. His first poetry

collection, *The Passport You Asked For*, has been published by The Aeolos Press, together with Kenneth Rosen's *Cyprus' Bad Period*. He was awarded an honorable mention in the 2007 New England Poetry Club Erika Mumford Award. He is one of the winners of the 2011 Nazim Hikmet Poetry Competition. *International Poetry Review* published a translation he made together with Victor Howes from Edip Cansever, a Turkish contemporary poet.

Statement in support of claim of death. The downloadable pdf is available for your headaches. Related forms include suicidal ideation and learning how to cope with cutting. If you are not enrolled in a current divorce proceeding, you can go directly to the waiting room. Mental health services include waiting and more paperwork. When you are doing the paperwork, you can work in breaks of waiting and while you are waiting, you will be able to stare at other vets who are also waiting. The waiting rooms will be bland, but have strong hints of passed traumas if you look closely or smell weakly or think unclearly or touch anything.

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“I wrote this poem after being confronted by a statistic that veterans have a suicide rate 50% higher than those who did not serve in the military.” —Ron Riecki

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**Ron Riecki's** books include *My Ancestors are Reindeer Herders and I Am Melting in Extinction* (Apprentice House Press), *Posttraumatic* (Hoot 'n' Waddle), and *U.P.* (Ghost Road Press).

## The Poem Writes Itself

Ayşe Tekşen

The poem writes itself,  
but I'm the one who creates  
the dangling spots of heartaches,  
the coughing pits  
of billions of bleak units,  
the time  
of timeless injuries,  
the scare  
of scarecrows,  
the adversity  
of four-dimensional falls.

The poem writes itself,  
but I'm the one who tickles  
the world's unworldliness,  
our chaos,  
the structure  
of smiling stars,  
the surprise  
of the sun's prize,  
the rivers  
of unaccustomed youth,  
the skin  
of unpeeled bones.

I am to kill the Phoenix's nest  
to make it fly  
when unborn,  
when dormant  
and still ignorant  
of the voiceless voice of the dazed,  
the sleep of stones,  
the water on ocean deep deserts.

I may sign every poem,  
but the poem writes itself.

---

“Human truth. What is its definition? It is ever decipherable? If it is, then, through what will it be deciphered? Through pain? Some suffering? And if so, where are they from? Where does violence reside? Against the time's current, the man always swims in his own paradox toward that unholy place where the poems write themselves,



where the creator juxtaposes with his own creation, and where the poet is only one of the many faces the creator wears.” —Ayşe Tekşen

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**Ayşe Tekşen** lives in Ankara, Turkey. Her work has been included in *Gravel*, *After the Pause*, *The Write Launch*, *Ut Poetry*, *The Fiction Pool*, *What Rough Beast*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Sesbat*, *Neologism Poetry Journal*, *Anapest*, *Red Weather*, *Ohio Edit*, *SWWIM Every Day*, *The Paragon Journal*, *Arcturus*, *Constellations*, *The Same*, *The Mystic Blue Review*, *Jaffat El Aqlam*, *Brickplight*, *Willow*, *Fearsome Critters*, *Susan*, *The Broke Bohemian*, *The Remembered Arts Journal*, *Terror House Magazine*, *Shoe Music Press*, *Havik: Las Positas College Anthology*, *Deep Overstock*, *Lavender Review*, *Voice of Evş*, *The Courtship of Winds*, *Mojave Heart Review*, *Foliage Oak Literary Magazine*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *Rigorous*, *Rabid Oak*, *The Thieving Magpie*, *Headway Quarterly*, *The Roadrunner Review*, *Helen Literary Magazine*, *The Ilanot Review*, *Pensive*, and *The Hamilton Stone Review*. Her work has also appeared or is forthcoming in *Room* and *The Manifest-Station*.

**The Guinea Hog**  
Nancy White

Companionable. Curious.  
They come home in the fall  
for their own butchering.

Smaller than your other hogs  
but crosses are never  
such good company.

I've bred them with big hogs.  
The meat's good but can't get  
that nice personality.

Feels bad when they're so  
pleased to see me in September,  
trotting out of the woods.

I'm glad to see them too, long as  
I don't think about it. Not  
the best money but the best hog.

---

“Killing enters this poem too, and again I’m contrasting it with innocence or a natural state of sociability, in this case, that of the hogs. The raising and butchering of livestock that homesteaders and small-scale farmers practice is both more humane and more challenging. How can we kill animals we know? Are we more or less complicit in cruelty and violence if it happens in an impersonal way, off-stage, and we just buy the burgers and fry them up without thinking much about it? In this poem I tried to capture the farmer’s fondness and also his matter-of-fact approach to killing these hogs. I hope the poem comes across as appreciative, sad, with a tinge of uneasiness. Part of what’s sad is the hogs’ trust and friendliness, but also, for me, their inability to communicate or to understand what is happening. They become a metaphor for all the trusting people who suffer at the hands of others, those who turn to their fellow human expecting acceptance and receiving quite another thing altogether.” —Nancy White

## How to Find Your Tongue

Nancy White

swallow smoke from a burning home  
say the name they were going to give  
you till you were born a girl  
make an ovarian overture perch

on a swing before the resulting  
crowd and sing if they throw  
roses cucumbers don't flinch  
go to the butcher and buy a long cow's tongue

examine it closely there on the counter  
until you feel you'll never be hungry again  
remember the smoke tasting bitter  
and how it loosened the hinge?

study the raised receptors like  
mushrooms like eyestalks the pink  
and gray the tendons and flanges  
ask your friends to join you

ask them to kiss you better  
ask the best to demonstrate  
say it's okay to show you on a lemon  
when they've all gone home

quietly eat the lemon don't  
be surprised to come up gasping feel  
the hole now in the middle of your head  
and just past that the tongue

---

“We are born with a natural drive to communicate and to express ourselves, but trauma can steep that need with fear, leading to silence. I often write about the struggle back to speech, and nothing embodies all the pleasure and strangeness of communication like the tongue itself. It makes a great metaphor because it does so much for us—eating, talking, kissing, and more—and is a funny-looking and even ugly part of the body to behold. In this poem, we're thinking about the role of the tongue in speaking but also thinking of it as something that does get eaten. The hidden violence in our meat-eating, the physical ugliness of the tongue, and the other imagery all evoke (I hope) the more brutal side of our struggle to find a way to win our voice back after violence or other trauma. I hope this poem also captures the triumph we experience when we do win back our voice.” —Nancy White

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**Nancy White** is the author of three poetry collections: *Sun, Moon, Salt* (winner of the Washington Prize), *Detour*, and *Ask Again Later*. Her poems have appeared in *Beloit Poetry Review*, *FIELD*, *New England Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Rhino*, and many others. She serves as editor-in-chief at *The Word Works* in Washington, D. C. and teaches at SUNY Adirondack in upstate NY.

**Mother Poem #9**  
Ellen June Wright

I hope when I hear of my mother's death  
I can wail *Hold on my child joy comes in the morning*  
words floating up from uncharted fathoms  
not overcome by what I lost, grateful for what I had.

I hope I can trumpet the news of mother's passing,  
glory in her life so man-complicated and so long,  
remember that a woman can start life with so little

and through steely strength, dumb perseverance,  
ignorant of what it means to surrender,  
and a mustard-seed-like faith survive and even  
overcome, never becoming a failed statistic.

I hope I'm filled with joy at the thought of life lived  
by a woman who never intended to be a Titan  
but simply slipped into the shoes and wore them.

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“My mother was born in 1925, so she is just a few years away from being 100. I'll be grief stricken when she's gone, if I outlive her, but I hope I'll also remember what a gift it was to have her live so long. Not many people get to have a life that spans close to a century. I am grateful for each and every day of her triumphant life.”  
—Ellen June Wright

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**Ellen June Wright** is a poet based in Hackensack, New Jersey. She was born in England of West Indian parents and immigrated to the United States as a child. She attended school in NJ and taught high school language arts for three decades. She has worked as a consulting teacher on the guides for three PBS poetry series called *Poetry Haven*, *Fooling with Words*, and the *Language of Life*. Her poetry has most recently been published in *River Mouth Review*, *Santa Fe Writers Project*, *New York Quarterly*, *The Elevation Review*, *The Caribbean Writer* and, is forthcoming in, *Obsidian: Literature & Arts in the African Diaspora*. Her work was selected as *The Missouri Review's* Poem of the Week and was featured in the article, *Exceptional Prose Poetry From Around the Web: June 2021*. She was a finalist in the *Gulf Stream* 2020 summer poetry contest and is a founding member of *Poets of Color* virtual poetry workshop in New Jersey. She studies writing at the Hudson Valley Writers Center in Sleepy Hollow, New York. Ellen can be found on Twitter @EllenJuneWrites.

# CREATIVE NONFICTION

The wooden rowboat was soft gray with rusted oar locks. It held two plank seats: a long one in the stern and a shorter one in the middle. There was also a small, flat triangle of wood at the tip of the bow. At three-and-a-half years old, I could squish my body under that triangle, if we were out on the water and it started to rain, only it never rained, especially not that mid-July week when we took our camp on Long-Sought-For Pond. It was always sunny, with airy mornings, comfortable afternoons, and music-filled nights.

By music, I mean a campfire and my father's harmonica.

Fishing was serious business for my father, and for the chain of fathers before him. In Canada, they made a poor living on cod and eel but when those fisheries crashed, they moved to Massachusetts and became cobblers. Why? I don't know. Everyone wears shoes, I suppose. Back then, you didn't buy a new pair, just fixed up the old. Still, they fished the ponds. Men fished and women cooked the catch.

No need to teach a girl how to fish.

"Can I go with you?" I surprised him one morning at sunrise, as he quietly laid his fishing gear in the gray rowboat.

"What are you doing up?" He was annoyed. "Get back to bed."

"Can't sleep. Please, can I go with you?"

He hesitated, then looked to the camp's screened porch, hoping my mother, sister, or aunt would fill the door frame and call me back. But they were asleep. I'd been out fishing with him before, but with a brother or two. He was teaching them how to fish.

Sometimes, I handled the worms. He was impressed that I wasn't squeamish about the night crawlers, especially after they'd been sliced in gooey halves. Maybe that's why he caved.

"All right. But get a coat."

It was my proudest moment.

Dad was tearing strips from an old t-shirt when I returned. He draped them over the side of the boat, then fished for a green-and-orange tin of sewing machine oil in his tackle box. He squirted long arcs of oil onto the t-shirt ribbons, then tied those ribbons with flat knots around the oars before placing them in the oar locks.

"Don't want to wake up the fishes," he said. "Not yet, anyway."

We pushed off from shore. The boat unstuck itself with a soft *whoosh*. Dad rowed with noiseless strokes, until the cabin we'd left by the shore looked like a plastic house on a model railroad siding.

When we reached the middle, he turned away from the rising sun and headed towards the shadow-listed and reedy outlet of the lake. He called it the foot of the pond. There were fewer camps and more flying bugs. The reeds grew tall and bore spikes of purple flowers. The shallows held cattails and lily pads. It owned its own kind of quiet. He paused in the rowing to lower the brim of his cap.

For a long time, I was confused about rowboats: how they moved away from where the rower was looking. Everything seemed backwards. There was a kind of trust involved that I was too young to understand. Did dad steer the boat through my eyes? I didn't know how it worked. In case my eyes were needed, I looked straight ahead. The sun felt warm on my back. Swirls of water passed from my father's dip-and-pull strokes to me, like links in a chain. I trailed my hand in the chains.

"Watch out they don't bite you," he said. He meant the fishes.

"I'd like that," I said.

"You wouldn't like it if Mr. Pickerel nibbled your fingers. He's got teeth."

So we were after pickerel! Dad had caught bass, perch, eel, and horned pout that July, but hadn't yet caught a pickerel. He'd fished the sand bars on the opposite shore, the pods of glacial boulders at the head of the lake, and the fishing line-dripping tunnels under the spruces. I'd watch as he set out on his pickerel hunts—tiny human in a miniature boat—rowing himself smaller. I'd run down to the sandy beach to keep him in sight, afraid he'd disappear and nothing would remain, not even the swirl of an oar.

But here we were in the boat. If my father melted into the foot-of-the-pond's dragonfly and sewing needle-filled world, I would too. We'd both disappear.

He raised the oars.

He laid them wet on the keel.

The boat drifted, then stopped.

There were pale pink flowers that smelled like vanilla.

A buzz-hum surrounded us, like a dentist's drill in another room.

The tackle box opened.

A lure was placed on the line.

Dad chose the shiny silver one that looked like a hammered dime and said, "Hand me a bobber."

I gave him a red and white globe.

The boat tilted and lurched, almost spitting us out when we shifted seats.



Dad cast the line into a narrow channel with a slight current and no weeds.

I sat on the triangle seat in the bow.

“No worms?” I asked him.

“No worms,” he said.

That was our conversation for an hour, two hours, forever.

I am still there.

\*

Thoreau famously wrote about winter pickerel fishing in *Walden*: “Early in the morning, while all things are crisp with frost, men come with fishing-reels and slender lunch, and let down their fine lines through the snowy field to take pickerel and perch.” Walden Pond and Long-Sought-For Pond are Great Ponds. That doesn’t mean that they’re as huge as Lake Winnepesaukee. A Great Pond is a legal construct under English common law, defined as an inland body of water greater than ten acres in size, and held in trust by the state for the public to enjoy. You can’t run a chain-link fence around a Great Pond or block the people from boating or fishing. Well, some do, but that’s a different essay.

Essay means “to try.” Each essay tries to make sense of a difficult something by piecing together ideas and images that explore and craft out the meaning of an experience. Sometimes, it’s a crooked path. You follow it.

Chain pickerel has a golden body, with a dark green chain-like pattern on its flanks. Thoreau in his *Journal* wrote about its stunning beauty. He remarked on the unusual black tear drop that falls from its eye to its outshot jaw. He noted how the cheek and the gill are completely covered with scales. He admired the pickerel’s cunning ability to remain as still as a stick in the strongest of currents, waiting for the unwary minnow or passing frog. He once cut a pickerel open and found it had swallowed another smaller pickerel, the undigested tail of its younger kin fresh in its mouth. He’d thus caught two pickerels on one hook.

Anglers know pickerel are an aggressive fish and put up a nice fight. Their favorite haunts are weed beds, logs, brush, boulders, and the edges of sand bars or drop-offs, particularly in mid-summer. *The Illustrated Manual of Massachusetts Freshwater Fishes* suggests the red and white spoon—commonly known as a daredevil—is deadly on pickerel. According to the *Manual*, anglers for pickerel should “Drift fish the weedy shorelines or edges of other cover, casting this lure right up to the edge, or wherever possible, into the cover.”

The Massachusetts state record for chain pickerel is 9 pounds, 5 ounces, caught in Laurel Lake in the town of Lee in 1954 by a Mrs. James Martin.

That July morning, I knew none of this. I only knew that I loved my father, my father was fishing for pickerel, and I was on board.

\*

How many times did dad cast the lure? I didn't count. Did he cast it overhand or from the side? Always from the side. Did it catch in the weeds? Never. Did he break for a cigarette? Yes, but he sat on the plank seat by the transom and held the smoking cigarette out over the water when he wasn't puffing. I worried he might fall in. He spit in the water. Dad was big on spitting. I didn't know why.

I sat on the triangle seat, a hand on each gunwale for balance. The boat rocked whenever dad cast the spinner. He sighed. He spit. He spit. He sighed. My stomach growled. People in the few nearby cabins began to wake up and fry bacon, and it smelled delicious. It could have been that I looked in their direction and stretched out my neck to see what kind of breakfasts were happening. But I didn't whine.

Still, a dad can tell when their child is hungry.

"Guess I ran out of luck today," he said and sounded sad. I didn't know what to say but said something anyway.

"Can we row the long way back?" I loved to mosey along and follow the shore. Often, I'd find treasure: cast-off bobbers and floating popsicle sticks. Also, how often did I get dad to myself?

"You're not hungry and in a hurry to get home?"

"No."

"Okay, if you want to," he said. Then we switched seats and started to pull away from the pickerel reeds and the dragonflies. Dad rigged his fishing pole so the line would trail out behind us. I was to watch the bobber and say if it looked like a fish had struck. Dad guessed we might catch a guppy or a sunfish on our way home.

We had barely begun.

"Oh-oh, Dad. I think the line is caught on the weeds."

"Well, jiggle it a little."

I lifted the rod out of its holder and raised the bobber and lure straight out the water, but there were no stringy weeds on the hook.

"That looks fine," he said. "Now, dip it back in."

Just then, something flew up and lunged at the lure. It struck and quickly plunged back into the lake, caught up on the hook. It yanked the pole and me with it. Instantly, dad grabbed my jacket. A part of the gray boat hit my forehead. Dad held on to me and I held on to the rod. The oars crashed into the water. I wasn't thinking, "I caught a fish." I was thinking, "If I drop dad's pole in the lake, he'll kill me!"

So I held on.

I can't say exactly how we landed the pickerel, but we did. I got a gash on my forehead, the tackle box tackle spilled everywhere, and dad's cigarettes floated to kingdom come, like so many miniature logs.

The oars were retrieved.

Dad dipped his handkerchief into the lake and pressed it to my forehead.

The fish got unhooked and was very pretty and undamaged.

Dad scooped a metal bucket into the lake and set the pickerel in it.

We rowed not the long way around but directly back to camp.

Dad whistled and repeated under his breath "You son-of-a-gun."

He meant me.

\*

Baxley McQuaig Jr. holds the world record for chain pickerel, a 9-pound, 6-ounce fish caught in 1961 in Homerville, Georgia.<sup>1</sup> A single ounce larger than Mrs. Martin's, which itself was not without controversy. Seems Mrs. Martin had been ice fishing and her pickerel was caught with a tip-up jig. Did that satisfy the rules? This was taken under advisement by the Fishing Contest Editor for *Field and Stream*. Also, Mrs. Martin first said the pickerel had come out of Pontoosuc Lake, a fib apparently. Later, she admitted that the record catch came from Laurel Lake, but she was afraid the entire pickerel fishing universe would descend on Laurel and fish it out, so she fibbed.<sup>2</sup>

Fishing and fibbing go together like that.

\*

If I said the family welcomed us back with hip-hip-hoorays, I'd be lying. As always, walking into the camp kitchen was like entering a train station and I was the small luggage: a make-up bag, or a clutch purse, left on the ticket counter and hardly missed until one reached for a lipstick to refresh one's lips. Gone. Where? Oh, well.

Breakfast smells billowed out the flung open windows like fluttering muslin. Aunts, uncles, cousins, friends of friends, and strangers congregated. There were no chairs. The table was pushed to a wall, the whole of it covered with bowls of boiled eggs and plates of cooked bacon, two kinds: crispy burnt ones and barely cooked ones with hanging shreds of chewy fat. Boxes of cereal, all sizes, all types, lined the wall like books in a library. Four or five open boxes of Hostess donuts teetered at the edge of the table. The white powdered ones were always first to go, the plain donuts remained.

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<sup>1</sup>Georgia Department of Natural Resources, State Record Freshwater Fish, <https://georgiawildlife.com/fishing/recordprogram> (accessed 6/17/21).

<sup>2</sup> Controversy Surrounded the World Record Pickerel, Ice Fishing News, Feb. 2, 2020.

<http://www.berkshireoutdoorsman.com/2020/02/02/controversy-surrounded-the-world-record-pickerel/> (accessed 6/17/21).

I grabbed a plain donut.

Dad had placed the pickerel in its metal bucket in a shallow corner of the beach, under a spruce tree that offered both shade and raindrops of resin.

Although the bucket was metal, it was printed on the outside to look like wood. But it didn't look much like wood and it was white on the inside. The lake water was clear. Something beautiful and golden swam in the bucket. It swam around and around in a circle. No one noticed the golden pickerel in the fake wood bucket under the spruce tree, or me, feeding it bits of my donut. The screen door of the camp porch creaked and opened, creaked and slammed shut. Kids gathered swimming stuff. Soon the beach would be filled with beach balls and inner tubes.

“Wait half an hour!” Aunt Annabelle called from the porch.

That was so you'd digest your food. You couldn't drown if you waited a half hour before you went swimming. But if you went into the lake, say above your waist, before the full half hour had passed, you would immediately be seized with leg cramps or an underwater monster would drag you under and in any case you would certainly drown. Everyone waited the half hour. During this time, the young ones would sit with their beach shovels and dig. Older kids fiddled with snorkeling gear.

I watched my pickerel. He, with his black teardrop, watched me.

\*

Long-Sought-For Pond. My father pronounced it: Lon-soffer Pond. We did too. We didn't know the words.

“It's almost July, Dad. When are we going to Lon-soffer?”

As a city firefighter, he got one week of paid vacation a year, which was so unusual at the time that the local paper did announcements. Lowell Fire Department. Annual Vacation List. The following firefighters will be on paid leave for their annual vacation, July 12 through 18: Engine 7, Charles April.

When he made Lieutenant, he got two weeks.

By then, we'd stopped going to Lon-soffer and begun tent camping. I have no memories of rowboat fishing while tent camping. Only rain, flooded tents, my mother swearing, and once, having to pee in the night, unzipping the tent and meeting a skunk.

We missed the Lon-soffer vacations.

“What do you remember about fishing with dad from the rowboat at Lon-soffer?” I asked my younger brother Chuck recently.

“Fishing? Not a thing.”

“Dad took you fishing all the time,” I insisted.

“You’re dreaming. I’ll tell you what I remember about dad and that rowboat. When I was like maybe three he threw me overboard and said it was time I learned how to swim.”

“No.”

“Yes. And I sunk like a stone.”

“But you’re here.”

“No thanks to Charlie.”

\*

In the fake wood bucket, my pickerel was not as long as dad’s eels. He was not short and stocky like the sunfish. He did not have big stingers that poked up from his snout and out from his jaw like horned pout—they swam so mad and brooding. The eels wouldn’t swim; instead, they’d sink and curl themselves up like licorice twirls. Sunfish were silly and flopped around, very dramatic-like, even though they were in a nice bit of water.

My chain pickerel darted and paced. He measured the prison. He planned an escape. The teardrop under his eye pointed backwards. The donut bits floated.

The half hour having passed, everyone jumped in the lake.

My pickerel was thirsty, I decided. He needed more water. Big idea: kick off my flip-flops and use them to scoop water and ladle it into the pail. Well, that turned into a splashy mess. Another idea: use my flip-flops to generate a tidal wave and force the pond water into the bucket. Yup, another splashy mess.

Funny, I didn’t think of simply using my cupped hands.

My pickerel stopped moving—not dead, more like sleeping. His fins swayed softly, back and forth, like weeping willow leaves in a breeze. His mouth yawned and I saw his back-facing teeth. For shade, I laid spruce boughs over the bucket.

I’d never had a pet. Mom was afraid of dogs. Dad had an odd relationship with cats—don’t know how to explain, except we sometimes had cats, but they’d always disappear.

The point of catching a pickerel was to eat it, right? I believe we ate all of the fish that my dad caught. But how do you eat eels? Horned pout? Yick. The pickerel was my first pet, because I loved him. If I loved him, I was not going to eat him. Nor would anyone else. I’d have to set him free.

I looked around. Everyone was busy with other things. I moved the spruce boughs away and placed the flip-flops on my hands like a pair of mittens. I reached in. My pickerel woke with a darting surprise and swam mad in a circle.

I said, “I’m trying to help you, not hurt you!”

He didn’t recognize my hands.

Still, another fail. Here was my last big idea: dig the sand away on one side, so the bucket would sink and pond water flood in and lift my pickerel to safety. I got to work. I dug the sand with my hands and pulled the diggings away with my flip-flops.

I’d finally found a use for them.

The bucket tilted.

Some pond water went in.

But the pickerel stayed in the pail.

I dug deeper.

The bucket sank deeper.

But the pickerel stayed.

I made splashing sounds and urged him: come on pretty pickerel.

Don’t you want to leave?

Don’t you want to go back to the reeds and not be eaten?

I pushed at the bucket with my feet. Stupid fake wooden bucket. I banged on its sides and threw a tantrum—I’d only had a half a donut to eat all day, a plain one at that. The bucket ended up half-in, half-out of the lake and tilted, like some cheap pirate ship in an aquarium.

Was my pickerel gone? Did he leave? No. I looked and saw green chains on a golden body. He’d backed himself into a corner of the bucket—if a bucket has corners—and looked: confused? scared?

I gave up.

When something’s meant to be, it’s meant to be. That was my lesson.

Also this: my father, no matter how long I stare or follow him to the beach, was going to row himself smaller and eventually disappear.

When I think of how I’d like to leave this world—when my time comes—for death to approach me in a welcoming way, it is at the foot of Long-Sought-For Pond, in the belonging of pickerel weeds, my father rows the gray boat, and the pickerel catches me.

“I feel there’s not a lot going on, it’s all character development,” a reader of mine once wrote on one of my essays. I know, I know. I struggle to finish the seam. In this essay, the Singer sewing machine tin at the beginning is giving me trouble. I don’t understand its significance of my memory of dad and the torn t-shirts.

Flat knot.

Also called a water knot.

My father tied this knot many times.

He tied it when fishing.

He tied it when quieting the creaky oars.

He tied it when he made a body harness to lower himself down to the bridge jumpers he was called on to rescue when he tied it to save them, to lift them up from the jagged rocks of the Merrimack River.

Engine 7. Lowell Fire Department. Please respond.

\*

*keer-keer*

*keer-keer-keer*

*keer-keer*

Having given up on saving my pickerel, I’d fallen asleep and woke to blue jays squabbling in the spruce tree.

The sun was dim like a dish cloth draped on a bulb.

There was a smell of rain, but far away and not near. Someone else’s rain.

I looked and the bucket was gone.

Near the camp, dad had started the campfire. Everyone had collected: brothers, sisters, cousins, Aunt Annabelle, all sitting on lawn chairs, threading marshmallows on sticks.

I saw a cast iron pan and ran to my father’s side.

“Is that for the pickerel?”

“Funny thing,” he said, poking the fire. “While you were sleeping, someone—I don’t know who or how—shifted that pail and it was half underwater. But when I looked, wouldn’t you know it, that son-of-a-gun fish was still there.”

Dad spit into the fire.

“But the minute I lifted the pail, that fish jumped and you’d think it was a flying fish the way he sailed away.”

“So my pickerel’s gone?”

“Never was here.”

\*

On Saipan, after the shooting was over, there was no surrender. The remaining Japanese soldiers and women and children threw themselves off Marpi Point.

My father arrived at the end, mid-July. His first action. New dungarees. Second Marines. A patrol boat off the Point. He was handed a gun. Ordered to shoot. Shoot the mothers before they throw in a child. Kill to save. He was never the same.

Dad never talked about the war. After he passed, my three brothers each told me that was the one story he shared with them.

Was that why he rowed at sunrise? Not for the pickerel, but for the darning needles to sew his eyes shut. To stop seeing Marpi Point?

Alcohol helped, for a while.

Drowning cats in brown paper bags helped, for a while.

Starving, because his esophagus was so narrowed and scarred he couldn’t swallow even his own spit, and a doctor would force it open with a sequence of metal tubes—that also helped, for a while.

I remember different camps in different years. The screen door of each creaked and opened, creaked and slammed shut. The last camp was at the head of the lake. By then, he’d stopped fishing. He rowed alone. I’d watch him push off from shore and head the rowboat to the pickerel weeds and darning needles. He rowed towards the outlet.

I couldn’t free the pickerel.

Couldn’t help my father.

Essays like this feel like I’m trying to drown a cat.

Only it never does drown.

Chain. Pickerel.

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“Chain Pickerel’ is, on its surface, a fishing story, but speaks more to the undiagnosed PTSD and survivor’s guilt that my father suffered from. This trauma transferred in odd and unpredictable ways to the family unit. Like many veterans of his generation, he shared little about the war, but rowed to another shore. In this essay, I accompany him.” —Susan April

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**Susan April** has published essays in *The Lowell Review*, *A Tether to this World: Stories and Poems About Recovery*, and *When Home is Not Safe*, among other places. She earned her MFA from Norwich University (Vermont College). Born in Massachusetts, she now lives in Maryland. Her father, a Marine Corps Veteran of World War II, saw action at Saipan, Iwo Jima, Tinian, and Okinawa.

**\*Pushcart Prize Nominee**

It started when I asked Gabe, my training partner, to snag some ecstasy. If you knew me—then or now—you’d know drugs were not, are not, my culture. I strap my seatbelt in the garage, even before starting my car. Before taking medication, I read the warnings. All of them.

Rules keep me out of trouble. Rules keep me out of pain.

I had heard how open people felt on E, free and relieved. By this time, my PTSD presented, mainly through nightmares and door-locking and avoiding the news. I could no longer rinse my bad dreams away; instead, they consumed me.

Maybe E can help me, I thought. Help me return to an earlier version of myself. A return to my childhood: erase the bad, embrace the good. Or perhaps a return to a feeling, one of youth. One of innocence. Like a self-induced past life regression. Regardless, I didn’t bother researching the potential consequences, maybe in an effort to fool myself.

\*

Gabe and I met around 1999, when I felt on top of my game. I unknowingly soared through life, oblivious how far off course I’d traveled.

“E is for kids. At 26, I’m considered old. You’re over 30, nearly a hag,” he smiled. “No offense.”

On this day, we sat in the aerobics studio in an Idaho Gold’s Gym, taking a break from our four-hours-a-day training regime. We’d qualified for Nationals in SportAerobics, a sport on the rise as an event for gymnastics at the Olympic level. Think floor dance infused with acrobatics.

“I don’t look my age. I blend,” I told him, spreading my legs into a wide V, laying my chest on the ground in the center.

“You don’t act your age. That has nothing to do with looks.” Gabe stretched his legs, tucking his heels and pushing his toes until they touched the ground. His curved arch would’ve made any ballerina jealous. His gold-kissed skin contrasted his bleached hair and reminded me of a satin wave lapping the beach.

“I’m hot. I’m toned. I look ten years younger,” I said.

“You have ten percent body fat. And you come across like a cop.”

“It’s pathetic that you train with a girl who beats you at everything.”

“Not in the looks department.”

“Who cares how pretty you are if someone can beat you?”

“You gotta be on ‘roids. You’re stronger than me and half my size.”

True. I was tougher than Gabe.

“You’re far more a diva than me,” I said, and then, “Maybe you could get us into a rave?” I said *rave* in a familiar way.

\*

Later, I smoothed my spandex black skirt over my narrow hips and tugged on a tank. I opted out of hose. *This looks young.* I slipped into stilettos, then tied on tennis shoes instead. I poured a glass of wine, brought it to my lips, took a sip. *Probably shouldn’t mix drugs with alcohol.* I set it aside, leaned into the mirror. My eyes crinkled, too lived-in.

\*

Downtown Boise and Gabe approached a waif-like girl, her hair in uneven pig tails. Her socks, stretched above her knees, clashed against her pumps. Her brown eyes took up most of her face. Gabe whispered to her. They hugged. She departed.

“Who was that? Does she know about the rave?” I asked Gabe.

He grabbed my shoulders, turned me to face him, brows furrowed.

“This is probably the stupidest thing you’ve ever done. You don’t even snort dope. You think you want a hit of the love drug. Is this some way to heal your childhood?”

I shook my head. Looking back now, I can see how I wanted to escape my loneliness, my history. The way I wanted to feel special. Feel good. Feel.

“Okay. The rave is in that warehouse,” he pointed. “They’re screening, and we look...ancient. And suspicious.” I stood with my arms crossing my chest. I probably tapped my foot.

“Stop,” Gabe said. “Stop looking so damn old. Twirl your hair. Be cutesy. Like this,” and he demonstrated. I tried to imitate him and then I puked. Just a little. I wiped my mouth.

“I’m okay,” I said.

“Gawd.” He grabbed my arm. “The girl said we need to go around.”

We approached the back door and Pig Tails waved us inside. Gabe handed her money. Once in, glow sticks and fluorescent lipstick sparkled through darkness. I inhaled mildew and breath mints and an odor resembling the taste of rotten eggs. I wanted to scrape my tongue, remove the stench. I could hear Pig Tails more than I could see her walking beside me, her heels clicking the cement floor. As my eyes adjusted, bodies moved everywhere—vertical outlines swaying to some rhythm, almost in unison. The music vibrated, wiry and loud. Someone had written on the walls in illuminated paint, *Simply Disappear*. Pig Tails and Gabe and I found our way to an open space along the wall. Pig Tails placed her back against it, slid, legs flopping from under her as she landed.

I inched myself down next to her.

“Can we get some E?” I asked.

Her eyes widened, if possible, then she turned and crawled, hands and knees, into the blackness.

“Silly girl,” Gabe said.

“I know. Why’d she bolt like that?”

“Not her. You,” he nudged me. “She slipped me E outside. That’s why I gave her money.”

I felt like an idiot. Gabe handed me a little pill.

I nodded. *This is fine.*

I coached myself. *Once I ingest this, I’ll feel better. I might even like myself.*

The tablet glimmered a shade of lilac under flashing beams. I swallowed quickly so I couldn’t change my mind. I closed my eyes, waiting for the drug to take effect.

*What if a cop shows?*

*What if this isn’t E?*

*Maybe it’s a vitamin.*

If I was caught, I’d say that I thought someone gave me aspirin.

*Maybe I can find the bathroom, force myself to vomit before the drug kicks in, get it out of me before it’s too late.*

I remembered reading on a bottle of bleach to NOT INDUCE VOMITTING. Apparently bringing the substance back up was more harmful than keeping it inside.

I tasted bile.

Then, sound. Music. Beats pulsing like electricity, pushing through the room. Pushing through me. When Gabe talked, he had to yell. I was unsure if a few minutes had passed or an hour. After what felt like a long time, I could no longer hear him.

And then I lost him.

I stood and bumped into the other shadows, most of them barely dressed. Most of them half my age. I hadn’t noticed—the angular jaw lines, the high-curved brows, the full lips. Everyone seemed beautiful now. The air held taste and it was clean. Cleaner than water. I kissed someone, and it felt like kissing for the first time. I couldn’t tell if I tongued a boy or a girl, I only knew that I didn’t want to stop. I danced, no, I bobbed, and I felt part of something bigger. Then I noticed Pig Tails, leaning

over a bar stool, her shorts off and lace panties drooping from her hips. I sat on the stool next to her, gently lifted her face. Her tears spilled into my palm and I cried with her, though I wasn't sure why.

I slid from the stool onto the concrete and lay, splaying my body as if I were a snow angel. Wetness of god-knows-what puddled beneath me and I wondered if I soiled myself. I tried to press my head into the floor. Pig Tails joined me, and we grasped hands. Two snow angels, side by side, as the glow-in-the-dark necklaces on those moving shadows melted into one light and then separated into fireflies and I imagined this was how fireflies saw one another. How they saw the world. Mouths outlined in fluorescent gloss moved in slow motion, singing to the indistinguishable sounds that was once music, like someone somewhere began orchestrating a scene from *Fantasia* and I was now the floor.

I was only the floor.

*At least I'm stable.*

And in my stillness, I forgot there was a floor. Forgot there was a me. There were only walls beckoning me. Begging me to disappear. And I wondered what else the walls wanted to tell me. I imagined their stories of parties and boys and girls. Of boys taking girls. Then I remembered. I remembered the walls in my childhood room. The room I shared with my adopted sister, Tina. The stories within those walls. Pale blue like a time somewhere before sunrise, they almost dripped with tears.

*Did you notice your sister's sacrifice?* they asked.

*You won't understand her sacrifice now, not at your young age. You will later cry for her. Cry for her loss. Cry for her protection of you.*

Maybe this was why I cried with Pig Tails.

I remembered.

My sister was my wall.

\*

Do you remember  
the early years  
when I pushed my bed  
between yours  
and our bedroom door,

between Daddy and you,  
night after night?  
I was ten, maybe eleven.  
He'd take me first,

while you laid  
quiet in your twin,  
listening to me  
beg, *Please stop.*  
You'd still be next,

though I believed him  
less angry if I bore  
the brunt of his brutality.  
Once he left, I'd pry  
your fingers from your

blanket, pull our beds  
together, both of us still  
smelling of Old Spice  
and his spoiled-milk-  
breath. I curled you

like a mother would,  
smoothing wet bangs  
from your face. I did  
it for you, Beckala. You  
were only five and I knew  
our hearts, our bodies,  
were irreparable.

\*

Do you remember  
when I first became  
your big sister,  
a ward straight  
from the state,  
my body pocked  
with cigarette burns

and you asked why  
someone thought  
me an ashtray?

I first noticed  
your missing front  
tooth and the way  
your body, small,  
fragile, trembled

when I hugged  
you. I'd whisper,

*You can squeeze  
back, and you did.*

I thought you'd  
never let go.

\*

You once asked  
about Mother Mary.  
I didn't know  
how to explain

“virgin.” Every word  
too large, too  
grown for your  
young heart.  
Vagina.  
Penetration.  
Rape.  
Penis.

And I knew each  
would lead to more  
questions. I kissed  
your forehead, replied,  
*an unloved woman.*

Your brows crinkled,  
heavy in consideration.  
*That's me, right?*  
You asked, *Unloved?*

*No. Ob no.*

My face tightened  
as I spilled,  
*I love you, Beckala*  
and I wanted,  
but couldn't, tell you—  
not then, not now—  
*Neither of us  
are virgins.  
Not anymore.*

\*

Do you remember

when I filled the bath-  
tub cup with luke-  
warm water and washed  
your white-washed hair?  
You said my caramel-  
strands reminded you  
of silk toffee. I'd shield  
your eyes with the edge  
of my hand? It seemed  
we lived on the edge  
of it all, in those simple

lone moments, the only  
moments I could protect  
you, cover your eyes,  
keep you safe  
from the sting of soap.

\*

Remember how we hid  
in Mother's walk-in,  
air swollen with stale  
moth balls and sweet  
lemon oil? We became

something else, someone  
else, in that quiet land  
of little girls pretending.  
Mother's shoes, toes facing  
forward, lined along-  
side each other  
like soldiers prepped

for war. Fake leather.  
Embossed patterns  
of synthetic snakeskin.  
Baby-breath sky  
blue. Yellow so creamy  
it reminded me of butter.  
Crimson dimmed black  
in the creases, like

violent bruising.  
We both felt bad  
for those shoes.  
Beckala, you'd choose  
flamingo pink, slipping



in your tiny feet,

filling only half.  
We stood at attention  
and jutted our hips  
just like grown-ups.

\*

In our after time,  
I'd wrap you, Sweet Baby  
Sister, curve you  
in my arms, wait 'til  
your heart slowed  
and your eyes slid low.

Then I'd sing.  
You'd tell me  
my breath reminded  
you of buttered corn  
and I'd pray my essence  
stay and linger with you.

\*

I leaned close to Pig Tails. I wanted to protect her, like Tina tried to protect me. And, like my sister, it was too late. Pig Tails stood, turned, left.

I made my way to the dance floor and began to move, like a dancer, choreography alive in my body. I kicked my leg above my head, grabbed my ankle, maintained a vertical split. I tried to rotate. I stumbled, crashing into those around me. A hand squeezed my shoulder.

"Take it easy, you're going to rip something," a man said. He was my height, stocky, his age undeterminable. He coaxed me from the floor and, after a moment, I realized that he was a bouncer.

"You might want a break. You're off balance, stoned, and about to take an eye out," he laughed.

"I'm a dancer. I'm really good," my words slurred.

"I'm sure you are, just not tonight."

"I'm ranked," I said.

"I bet you are."

"I can't find my friend. He's my ride. I lost him."

"A rave doesn't seem your type of thing—fit and everything," he said.

I knew I needed Gabe. I remembered that I'd left my phone at home. I didn't know Gabe's number. It was on speed dial. I needed to leave. I did. I slipped away and, guided by the green exit signs, found myself in the back streets of Boise.

I wandered onto 5<sup>th</sup> and Main and entered a lounge. A familiar guy, his name could have been Alex, waved my way. More than anything, I wanted to kiss him. I hugged him *Hi* and breathed in fresh-dryer scent off his shirt. I kissed him, wondering if his name was Alex.

"You okay?" he asked. I was glad he cared so much.

"I'm fine," I said. "I lost Gabe. I lost my purse. Shit! I have no way home."

"It's okay. Come on. I'll help you."

"I'm on E," I said, unsure why I was telling him. My body felt good. Better than ever, not even sore from training. His hand, warm and comfortable, held mine.

He led me to a back room which doubled as a closed-off restaurant. Streetlights streamed rays through half-shut blinds. Dust floated, spinning like ballerinas.

Alex sat in a booth and pushed the table a few inches. He pulled me to him, hiked my skirt to my waist, spread my thighs, and sat me on his lap. He tore my panties.

"Not a good idea," I said. "Please don't," but I kissed him anyway.

"It's okay."

"No." I didn't move his hands. I didn't shove him away. I kept kissing him because kissing felt wonderful. I wanted to kiss him. I just didn't want him to fuck me. *What is wrong with me? Maybe I secretly want him to fuck me?* I didn't feel frisky. I didn't feel anything. Then I didn't care. Just like that. It no longer mattered. At least he wanted me. I felt pretty. I felt young.

If you asked me now, I'd tell you that I had hoped I could go back, find a place in my timeline before I was damaged and pre-bandage my wounds. Step into my now-life padded from the fall-out of pain.

He barely penetrated when the lights flipped on and a man, probably the owner, told us to get out.

Alex bolted. I adjusted my clothes and walked away as if nothing had happened.

*Is it even rape if you don't fight back?*

I sat on the curb outside, cradling my face, feeling small.

A cab stopped. The driver leaned across the seat. He looked maybe sixty, bald, and speckled in age spots.

"Need a ride?" he asked.

“I lost my wallet. I can pay you once I’m home.”

We rode through the empty streets, trees spreading like ink blots against deep blue canvas, the sun peaking along the horizon. The cab’s tires spun across asphalt as I squished my face to the window. The cool glass distorted my view, like a kaleidoscope carrying a few colors—hazy green and deep purple—the patterns mismatched.

He parked at my condo.

“I’ll go get some cash,” I said, opening the door. He reached over the seat, grabbing my arm.

“Are you okay?”

What did the cabbie want? Sex? A blow job? *Why is everyone taking me like they can?*

“No problem. Give me a second. I’ll sit in front with you.” I knew I couldn’t go through with it. The guy was repulsive. I needed out. I bent near the floorboard and thrust my finger into my throat. It didn’t take much to bring up nothing. I gagged loudly, acting out vomiting, hoping to disgust him.

“Go on,” he sighed.

I opened the door and, somehow, sun filled the sky.

I carried my shoes. My panties were gone and I couldn’t find my key. I tried my bedroom window—the only accessible window—but it was locked. I hiked around the complex, mostly landscaped with sharp tiny rocks and evergreens. The stones punctured the soft belly of my arches. I closed my eyes, pretending I was a native firewalker or a tightrope acrobat.

*I am a professionally trained athlete.*

*My mind is a powerful tool.*

*If you think you can, you will*

I repeated this, perhaps out loud. I found a shovel on the ground near a Big Wheel, grabbed it, and wove my way back home. I walked, crossing my steps, laying my feet softly.

*I wish someone would come help me.*

Someone I knew.

Someone who wouldn’t take a piece of me.

I no longer wanted to be alone.

*This is not the way to be unalone.*

I swung the shovel over my shoulder, took a breath, and bashed it through my bedroom window as if to shatter every person who ever did me wrong. The first blow broke through sufficiently enough to unlatch it, but I didn't stop swinging. I couldn't. I hammered until shards of glass were the size of pebbles, and then began on the wooden frame, splintering it until I grew too tired to lift the shovel. I removed my skirt and lined the windowpane to avoid cutting myself. I hoisted through, stumbling onto my bed. I sat crisscrossed, naked from the waist down, examining my feet, the skin shredded in small places, the blood already drying.

*How will I dance on these feet tomorrow?*

I wondered if I'd tell Gabe what had happened. It's probably my fault that I lost him. I was certainly to blame for almost-sex with Alex. I knew my feet should hurt, but in that moment, I felt nothing.

No.

Oh no.

Not true.

In this moment I felt everything—my fallen arches from track, the bee sting on top of my foot, the drill hitting a root near my gum, my stepfather's fist crunching my face, the nostril-sting of "pretend" mustard gas during chem warfare training, the entry of my stepfather into my innocence, the ripping of me, the ripping of me, the ripping. My ripping.

I felt emptied of fuel in the middle of a fast flight.

I felt as though I'd crashed, smeared my entire being across miles.

I sat, cradling my torn feet, my torn-ness, spilling tears, shattering memories I'd long buried much like surprise-smashing that window and I began. I began pulling through an opening, a small cavity somewhere within, somewhere that allowed me to sit naked with myself, see my wounds, touch my scars, and feel.

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"I first penned "Unalone" in my attempt to resolve shame after I attended a rave. As a veteran, I was trained to follow the rules and, when I couldn't, I fell apart. My poetry and narratives reflect fractured relationships, especially the relationship with self, in the hope of discovering, or perhaps recovering, pieces of me. I hope to start conversations that create awareness and tolerance, informing in a new way, what it means to navigate life through a broken body and spirit." —Rebecca Evans

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**Rebecca Evans'** poems and essays have appeared in *The Rumpus*, *Entropy Literary Magazine*, *War, Literature & the Arts*, *The Limberlost Review*, *Tijeret Journal*, and *The Normal School*, to name a few. Her work has been included in several anthologies. She's also served on the editorial staff of *The Sierra Nevada Review*. With an MFA in creative nonfiction and another in poetry from Sierra Nevada University, she's completed her full-length poetry collection, *Tangled by Blood*, and is editing her essay

collection, *Body Language*, and memoir, *Navigation*. Evans served eight years in the United States Air Force and is a decorated Gulf War veteran. She's hosted and co-produced *Our Voice* and *Idaho Living* television shows, advocating personal stories, and now co-hosts a radio show, *Writer to Writer*. She currently mentors teens in the juvenile system and lives in Idaho with her three sons, Newfoundland, Chiweenie, and Calico Cat.

## Tracing the Image of Eve

Allison Palmer

Once, at the height of a strange morning, her scream tore open the air around me. It was something like the unfolding of a narrative; there she was, the image of primordial Eve in agonized splendor, a Native American woman of lithe stature, perhaps in her twenties, screaming at (and into) all four of us, as we leaned into the slope of a hillside strewn with leaves.

As officers of the park, we were obliged to investigate the scene of her unauthorized camp, a tent and some scattered belongings strewn at the bottom of an embankment, each item lodged unobtrusively under a tree. Interestingly, the blighted eucalyptus at the center of things was also an enigma, a being just as vulnerable and oddly situated as its tenant, the woman who identified herself as Eve. And with a surname not listed in any official database, she, and the site of her habitation, quickly became the subject of a mystery.

With the woman's invented persona in hand, we began the task of discovering her true identity (a feat we never managed to accomplish) and returning her to a lawful involvement with the land. As romantic as it seems to live outdoors, in a state of natural bliss, reality for city dwellers is a far different matter, urban land being quite dangerous in the hours of darkness. For this reason, we executed our duty with great care, knowing that our subject needed to be in a homeless shelter. But what was her opinion on the matter? This aspect of the story was more straightforward; after a bit of conversation, it became obvious that Eve was not entirely fit to determine her own best interests. But in the course of our encounter, something else emerged: another life, that of her child.

Again, it was something like a narrative unfolding before our eyes, each subsequent moment yielding more distressing details with deeper mysteries to explore. After giving birth, Eve had elected to forage on public land and seek shelter under trees, thus confronting us with a daunting social service issue, a complex set of questions relevant to individual rights, the stewardship of urban parks, and child safety. It was quite a strange puzzle. A two-month-old, alive and well in the care of her mother—at odds in a dangerous setting, a place filled with transient uncertainty, suffering and secret instances of violence—was not what we had expected to discover on an ordinary day.

Of course, aside from our surroundings, the midmorning crowds and tour buses, the trees and museum facades, nothing about the day was ordinary. With each passing moment, the situation managed to grow more complex, as we attempted to help two extremely vulnerable people survive unfavorable odds, a task the woman had accomplished quite well on her own, prior to our arrival. Even now, as I look back, Eve's strange survival talents astound me, a mystery somehow related to her ability to retain secrets. In the hours that followed, amid questions of how to care for mother and daughter, the difficult problem of names and legality resurfaced, and still refused to be resolved. With uncanny resilience, her secrets endured despite our best attempts to reveal them.

Much to our frustration, Eve's stated surname was unknown to official records. It had become an obstacle that countered all attempts to discover her true identity and status. Was she wanted for any crimes? Did she have a history of mental health challenges? Were there any hospital records pertaining to her daughter? We simply had no answers. It seemed as though she had been self-christened and declared the citizen of some principality beyond our influence. In point of fact, she had proudly declared herself to be a *sovereign citizen*, immune to the ways and means of

government agents, free to roam the land as she pleased—and so she was. There, on a hillside, believing that we had come to take her daughter, she screamed her indignation into the very fabric of the morning, and resisted every method we undertook to save her from herself. So powerful was her resistance, that it made me think back upon the image of primordial Eve, mother of the ages, a woman at liberty to roam creation and determine the fate of her children, rebellious to the male authority that ultimately falters and gives way in her presence. But what about the image of the woman we discovered, the soft contours of her form traced across shadows of the morning? Here, *The Unknown Masterpiece* by Honoré de Balzac comes to mind. As a piece often associated with the Book of Genesis, it fits well with our own story of Eve.

We move, now, from the idea of a written narrative, to the surface of a painting, the visual expression of Eve and her world. In Balzac's tale, Frenhofer, the old master, has produced his final work after ten years of labor, the delicate lines of a woman's foot, emerging from an eruption of color. In conflict with the perils and beauty of her environment, the woman is, nonetheless, moving forward into her own means of expression, slowly advancing upon the gaze of viewers, a creature held captive but captivating, as well, much as I imagine this Eve to be. And like the painted image, this Eve—our lady of the urban park—hovers somewhere in the midst of things, powerful in her powerless situation, the subject of endless questions, the one who holds and releases answers at her own discretion. Remarkably, although she must face the dangers of the urban night alone, and provide for her child by her wits, she always seems to evade the grasp of predator and authority figure alike. In her captivity, this Eve has found an undeniable form of freedom. And with this in mind, all that remains is for us to arrive at our depiction of this woman, perhaps taking Balzac's story as a point of departure. What might our own creation resemble, taking all the complexities of Eve into consideration?

To trace her image, with accuracy and fairness, is to think back upon the fragrance and sunlight of the morning in question, to recall the sound of Eve's bare feet gliding over fallen leaves, to see the face of her baby, and to feel the power of her scream tearing through me on that hillside.

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“I found it poignant that a woman, who had chosen to live on the margins of our city—along with her baby—had the name of our primordial mother. Her complexities and resolve deeply reflect the nature of urban park life in San Diego.”  
—Allison Palmer

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**Allison Palmer** is an urban park ranger, writer, and artist living in Southern California, with work appearing in *Nonconformist Magazine*, *The Templeman Review*, *Belle Ombre* and other publications. *Inroads: An Urban Park Anthology*, released in 2020, is the author's first book.

**Tinnitus**  
Ken Rodgers

For 50 years, tinnitus has inhabited me like an alter ego. Some days it swells the inside of my head. Cicada song, millions hymning. The roar of F-4 phantoms overhead. Sometimes subtle, like a whispered password; the creak of web gear in the thick mist. The hiss of a distant flare on a dark night.

When young, I squatted in a red mud trench for seventy days below the loud-mouthed barrels of 105 mm howitzers. Their snouts, when belching death at my enemies, wounded me; ten penny nails hammered into my head. I never knew when the guns would boom until they did, and then pain ricocheted, and still does.

Defense proved impossible. Not plugs. Not fingers jammed in the ears.

Just long, sharp nails. Loud, associated with the sallow faces of dead boys sprawled in the mud. The thrum of savagery running through the air, blood spurting from a severed limb, or spouting like little red wells erupting from the chest.

The tinnitus continues. Unrelenting. Like long-tongued guns. Like war.

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“‘Tinnitus’ reflects upon one of the numerous long term effects of combat.” —Ken  
Rodgers

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A veteran of the Marine Corps who survived the seventy-seven day Siege of Khe Sanh, **Ken Rodgers** writes poetry and prose from Boise, Idaho. His work has been published in a number of fine journals. Along with his wife Betty, Ken has made two documentary films about combat-related issues titled, *Bravo! Common Men*, *Uncommon Valor*, and *I Married the War*.



Avocado and mustard, also cream.

Your family often waited days for AT&T to set up the new phone service, having moved, once again, from one military station to the next. Sometimes, you could choose the color. Most often your mom insisted on white to match the military-issue walls, the military-issue range, the military-issue linoleum that squared every room into formation. The arrival of the phone rooted you to what would never feel like home, for you could now be reached. Even toward tiny islands that had been flung like beads across the Pacific, phone lines burrowed beneath the sea, tethering you to what had been left behind.

The grime that ringed the earpiece and mouthpiece and stained the rotary dial documented the length of each tour of duty. Sometimes not even long enough for dirt to find you.

When the phone rang, the whole body vibrated, yours and the phone's, electrified, the first by the knowledge that someone was reaching for you, the second by a bell, bronze (you once opened the shell to touch what seemed like a heart nestled amid a tangle of red and blue vessels), a bell that shivered inside the cover, shook like a dog fresh from water.

Because it was rare, that bell. Almost anyone who wanted to reach you would have to pay by the minute for their words (not unlike early letter writers who wrote in two directions on every page in careful consideration of the message's cost), so when the phone rang it heralded intimacy. The Lover spiraling toward the Beloved, the circle growing tighter up the line, until voice whispered into ear.

To pick up, you lifted the handset from its cradle, where moments before it had been sleeping, a deep sleep, for hours, if not days, and then, all of a sudden, bright clarion of bell that broke the tropical air. Handset to ear, to mouth, phone held close to your body, sometimes wrapping the long cord around you as you spun ever nearer to that which you could not touch but recognized upon answer. On the soap operas that bored you but were the only options on weekdays when school was out, the women removed their earrings before speaking. Nothing could get in the way of sealing ear to cup.

The bell rarely called for you. You were, after all, only seven or eight or twelve, but that didn't stop you from racing to the sound that chimed for not-you-but-close-enough.

"Sinor residence, Jennifer speaking."

And then, phone to belly as you called for your mother, handset pressed tight to body, sending the caller into the muffled sounds of digestion, the burbles and the creaks, or maybe handset to counter as you walked through the house and then out to the lanai, looking for your mother who was never simply sitting but instead watering, folding, sweeping, putting away groceries, polishing the brass that grew green in the cabinets, ironing your father's dress whites, pressing the same seam into the same polyester every other day for years. The phone remained on the counter, untended, and narrated for the Lover the shush of a day far away from where the Lover stood, cupping phone to ear, hand

wrapped around handset, in a midwestern kitchen abandoned by the sun, maybe your grandmother calling for her daughter. When will you come back?

The handset was heavy, the release to cradle, certain and satisfying. The phone now dormant once again, marking, in its refusal to ring, the distance you were from any sense of home, marking just how far you were from it all.

Except for the time in Virginia, when your father was stationed at the Pentagon, and your family had the choice of avocado or burnt orange or toast and selected white once again because the color felt familiar in a way the oaks surrounding the house did not. That night, at dinner, a storm rolled in. You and your brothers sat with your parents at a table that, by then, had traveled further than most Americans would in their entire lives. Outside, the winds blew savage; acorns and leaves riddled the air. Rain slashed against the picture window and thunder shook the glass. All at once, lightning struck the house and traveled through the phone lines—veins, hands reaching out—and exploded the phone that hung on the wall, sending the body to the floor, singeing the hole left behind. No one left the table to answer that call. Instead, the wind outside wailed a reply.

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“Deep in the pandemic, surrounded by suffering and loss, I found myself on a run one morning wanting to write about something simple and ordinary. I thought of the phone and the materiality of the phones from my childhood. They had a physicality and a weight that cell phones just don't have. The phone for a military family becomes one of the only constants, one of the only means for connection. I wanted to see what happened if I began with the heft of the phones from my past.”  
—Jennifer Sinor

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**Jennifer Sinor** is the author of several books of literarynonfiction, most recently *Sky Songs: Meditations on Loving a Broken World* (University of Nebraska Press). Her other books include *Letters Like the Day: On Reading Georgia O'Keeffe* (University of New Mexico Press) and the memoir *Ordinary Trauma* (University of Utah Press). The recipient of the Stipend in American Modernism as well as a nomination for the National Magazine Award, Jennifer teaches creative writing at Utah State University where she is a professor of English.

FICTION

**Dolan's Debrief**  
Mike McLaughlin

I met Dolan when I was six days sober. It was my second meeting and I was exhausted and half-suicidal and shivering in my chair like I'd just been hauled from the water. When my turn came to speak it wasn't my voice but a machine's and I said my name and said I was an alcoholic and if it was okay I would pass because I didn't know what else to do.

Dolan came up to me afterward and said he was now my sponsor. He said he was sixty-three years old and hadn't had a drink for the last fourteen. He had been there and done it and if I wanted to make it then I would call him. He demanded my number and I gave it mechanically, like you do when calling the bank and wading through the maze until reaching a living human. He scribbled his own number on a faded receipt from Sears then put it in my hand and said use it.

It wasn't a request.

\*

When you quit drinking there's no medal.

No drum rolls, no awards, no applause.

There are good wishes, of course. Handshakes and hugs and claps on the back. It's pro forma, though, because talk is cheap. Because when you finally quit you're the last living thing on earth. Climbing in the dark, desperate and alone. To fall would be so easy. Blowing out a candle easy. Breaking a soap bubble easy.

And last week I reached a year.

No booze at all.

Not a drop.

A full year.

I'd hit the mark.

I'd gone pro.

And nothing happened.

\*

The Eighty-Eight is a diner about ten minutes from my house, likewise from Dolan's, and we meet there twice a week. It's also a short walk from our Wednesday night meetings. This geography makes it easy for the student to approach the master. I said this once as a throwaway line, yet Dolan's response was thoughtful.

“Well, if you seek grand design to the universe, then seek no further.”

By then I had twenty-three days and little faith in anything. I remember the day because of the little notebook I had started carrying. Every morning I would start a page with the date then mark off the hours. The next morning I'd throw it away and start another.

A pointless exercise, I thought, when every damned minute was like a gray Tuesday in March and getting out of bed didn't seem worth the trouble.

Our gatherings rarely last an hour. Pat had been an Army correspondent and I was an EMT—still am—and neither of us likes sitting around for long.

His counsel remains absurdly simple.

“Did you drink five minutes ago?” he would ask.

“No,” I would answer.

“Gonna drink five minutes from now?”

“No.”

“Interesting.”

And that would pretty much do it.

Mostly we talked about family. About friends near, far or gone. About how the Sox or the Patriots were looking. About books we loved and movies we'd seen more than once. Things that kept us anchored. Things real.

As for divine intent, Dolan said our table was a circle within a circle, inscribed inside a triangle, with the school and our homes for corners.

“Master plan in action,” he added gravely.

Dolan always seems aware of the machinery behind the curtains. Of gears turning just out of sight. He'd be lethal at poker if he ever played.

“Here?” I asked dubiously.

The bench cushion I sat on was cracked in places, held together with plastic tape that didn't match the original green. The table's column was bent and needed napkins wedged under it to stop the wobbling. Our window facing the parking lot was still cracked after taking a hit from a crazed seagull years before.

“Here,” I repeated.

“Absolutely,” he declared. “Stonehenge has nothing on this.”

It was late and we had the place nearly to ourselves. The back room was already closed and the lights were off. In the kitchen a phone rang ceaselessly. From the tv in the bar came a gleeful pitch for hemorrhoid cream.

“Devious, isn’t it?”

\*

During my first days sober I would cringe at the ads. The ridiculous commercials and posters and neon signs promising it all. This beer is a magic party train. That whiskey puts you in a tux and gets you laid. Images cartoonish while I was drinking went supernova when I quit. Now they were malice personified, summoned to life for the sole purpose of destroying me. They were everywhere. Resisting them took titanic effort.

Then came the dreams. In them I was drinking again, but secretly—like I had always done—while pretending to be sober. I was good at it, after all.

It was agony. They were so absurdly *real* that on waking I was sure I had done it.

It was in the worst of them that my son figured it out.

He knew.

Getting ready for school, he knew. He wouldn’t look at me or say a word, just went on shoving things into his backpack.

My son. My only child. Not even a teenager yet. Sickened by a world that could give him such a failure for a father. Then he walked out, leaving the door open behind him.

Gone.

I fought it off.

I fought them all.

\*

As the months slipped away I began branching out. Getting to meetings around the city. Getting better at saying I was an alcoholic. Holding fast.

Dolan kept reminding me that the drink was a predator. Not only pernicious but patient.

I would never be free of it.

Ever.

I said I wished it was cancer instead.

You can defeat cancer – but this was being cancer.

Dolan said that was the point.

\*

And yet, little things began happening. They didn't seem like much at first, but slowly, they began to add up.

In EMS they offer overtime pay like you cannot believe. Now I was turning it down and spending more time at home. Doing things I had put off for years.

I started building model planes with my son.

I went and bought a hummingbird feeder because my wife kept saying she'd love to see them in the garden.

Then I detailed the car. Twice.

Then I painted the kitchen.

My family didn't know what to make of it but they never complained.

I slept better. I ate better, too—and while I didn't *quit* smoking, I started cutting back.

Dropping from a dozen cigarettes a day to eight, then seven. Then it was six, but even with gritted teeth I couldn't get to five.

Dolan told me to write the date on the next pack I bought. Then do the same with the next, adding the number of days I had made the previous one last. To keep doing, making each last a day longer.

Easy, I thought—like eating gravel was easy.

And at some point during it all, I realized I didn't *need* the drink anymore.

Now I was only afraid of it.

\*

I was six months gone and well into seven when Dolan recommended a speaker's meeting at a church in South Boston. I was grateful for this because it gets old, having to be on all the time. Reading passages aloud then saying how they apply to you. Talking about who you were and who you've wounded. Talking about who you want to be. At a speaker's meeting you can sit silently through it all. Showing up is enough.

When I arrived the church was packed, with every row filled and people lining the walls. I stood near the doors as a man in a blue cardigan opened the meeting. He asked for a moment of silence, then began his story. He was followed by a short woman, pale as milk and looking about thirteen. The closer was a painfully thin man who had just turned ninety.

They looked terrific. Standing tall. Good natured. Humorous and kind. Looking like they'd been that way their whole lives.

Then they spoke, and after a minute I grabbed a flyer and started writing.

Combined, they had been arrested seven times. Five were DUI's. Six hospital trips, all by ambulance. One of them had flatlined during the ride. Five tours in rehab, three of which were court-ordered. Three separations. Two restraining orders. Four divorces. Loss of custody of three children. Two cars wrecked. Two more and a house seized by banks and a total of twenty-seven months served at Walpole and Framingham.

And through the program they had recovered. Nowhere near perfect, but better.

And, all together, they had been sober for fifty-one years.

The applause was thunder.

The usual crowd gathered outside afterward. To talk and smoke and laugh. To look like parents during intermission at their kids' musical. To look ordinary.

I spoke with people and shook their hands. I learned their names and forgot them. A few invited me along for coffee but I begged off. Saying I had to be somewhere else. Giving a cheery wave when I'm faking that everything's fine.

I called home and my son answered and caught me up on his day. Then my wife came on and I said to her what I say every day now. That I loved her and that I was okay. That I was on my way home and did we need anything.

Milk, she said, if it wasn't too much trouble.

It could never be trouble, I said, and meant it.

\*

And then it was a year.

No trumpets sounded. No angels sang.

Why would they?

That night I headed to the Eighty-Eight to mark this non-accomplishment.



Dolan was already there, in the back this time where there's a better view of the harbor. He saw me and even though the crowd was thin he put up his hand. Holding it high and steady as if being sworn in, like an old fisherman ready to testify.

A joke.

Classic Pat.

He was wearing his army green jacket and some paint splattered jeans, plus an electrician's cap he picked up somewhere. A gift maybe. Now and then he'd lose one and someone would offer a replacement. The last time we met he had one from Texas A&M. I didn't ask.

He looks like Gary Cooper and Paul Newman spun together, but I've never seen him in formal gear. Not once, which I still can't figure. He could bring it off, easy. At heart, though, he's more like an officer from a Bill Mauldin cartoon. Not some asshole from headquarters but a line captain. A man who cleans his own rifle and is just as tired as his men but makes damned sure they eat before he does.

He looked fit as ever, despite autumn's shorter days and miserable weather. Not tan but toned enough to defy that eternal winter look. Like he had retired to the Bahamas but still came to town three or four times a week.

It was his relentless drive that did it. His refusal to play the part. Hellbent to stave off the decay that plagues too many men. That damned over-sixty syndrome as he calls it, when men get fatter and no longer care. When they piss away their days yelling at their televisions and bitching about their yards.

After Vietnam, Dolan spent the next forty years on the go. True, there were "the gray eras"—his play on words—but sober or drunk, he'd be damned if he spent the rest of his life just sitting around.

That night his scars showed clearer than usual. With his hair recently cut, the gray bristles couldn't hide the jagged lines climbing from his left eyebrow to his scalp. More red than white now, as they always get when the weather turns cold and damp.

When I was three months sober he told me how he'd earned them. A legacy of the service, he called it, and when he finished I wondered if my hair had gone gray as his.

"Jeep accident," he would otherwise say, in a tone to discourage whoever was fool enough to ask.

I sat down and studied his haircut.

"New girlfriend?" I asked.

"Nikki Minaj," he grumbled wearily.

I coughed violently then couldn't stop. Unconcerned, Dolan pushed his water glass toward me.

The night manager came over. We were loyal regulars and she knew our routine. We ate little and tipped too well and she would bring coffee then leave us alone. This time she stayed until I recovered. Then she shot a hard look at Dolan—himself the very picture of innocence—and moved on.

“So,” he said mildly, “The prodigal son arrives.”

“Hardly,” I gasped.

“And?”

Buying time, I dumped cream and sweetener in my coffee then stirred a while. As usual he frowned—you took it black or not at all—and as usual I ignored him.

Then I took out the flyer from the meeting in Southie. I carried it like a talisman after writing so much on it that Saint Francis had to wave to be seen. No names or dates, only events. It was getting frayed now, the folds starting to tear. I kept meaning to tape it and kept forgetting. Dolan studied it carefully, then handed it back.

“Frame it.”

“Kitchen?” I asked.

He shook his head.

“Bathroom. Read it when you take a dump.”

“Mixed messages,” I said, not coughing this time. “Shaving maybe?”

“Up to you.”

I shrugged.

“So,” he prodded. “How goes it?”

“The same, I guess.”

“You guess? You’ve got a year, damn it. You look like your puppy died.”

I shook my head.

“Still feels like pissing in the wind, you know?”

“I know.”

“Still don’t believe it.”

“You could say as much about breathing.”

“Spinning my wheels, forever.”

Raising his coffee, he sighed grimly.

“You’ll make it.”

“Christ—how?” I demanded.

Dolan looked out the window. The night was low overcast and there wasn’t much to see. Out by the airport a police boat was gliding along, blue strobes flashing lazily. A lone sentinel, patrolling the mist.

“Well,” he said, turning back, “Allow me to interrogate you. Call it good cop, bad cop.”

“What—you’re both?”

“Sure. Ready?”

I wasn’t.

He took a breath then fixed me with a hard look. It was only for a second but felt longer.

“Mac,” he began.

“Yes?”

“*Mac.*”

“*Yes, Pat—what?*”

“Is your life shit or isn’t it?”

“You mean—”

“Yes or no.”

“It’s—well—no. It’s not.”

“When your wife realized what a fuck-up you were, did she throw you out?”

“I don’t think—”

“Don’t think. Did she throw your dumb ass out of the house?”

“She didn’t.”

“Good. Yes or no—got it?”

“Got it.”

“Did she call the cops?”

“No.”

“Say she wanted a divorce?”

“Well—”

Dolan glared.

“No.”

“Did she call her mother?”

“Yes.”

“So your in-laws found out what an asshole you were?”

“Yes.”

“Are you an asshole now?”

When I didn't answer he put his cup down. Hard.

“No,” I said dully.

“But she didn't call a lawyer?”

“No.”

“Are you sleeping on the couch these days?”

“No.”

“Did you that night?”

“Yes.”

“Ever since?”

“Uh—maybe a couple times, yeah.”

“‘Maybe a couple?’”

“Yes,” I sighed.

“But not lately?”

“No.”

“So, she’s a kindly soul?”

“Yes, thank God.”

“At some point later, did she kiss you? Hug you?”

“Later on, yes. I—”

“Yes or no.”

“Yes.”

“How about sex? You back in the game?”

Of course, he would ask.

“Yes.”

“Any good?”

I didn’t answer.

“I’ll rephrase—during the act, does she sound disgusted?”

“No.”

“Tell you to hurry it up?”

“No.”

He changed course again.

“Are you sleeping all right?”

“Yes.”

“Is waking up like climbing out of your grave?”

“Not at all.”

“Do you bring her coffee every morning? The paper, that kind of thing?”

“Yes.”

“Were you hungover today?”

“No.”

“Yesterday?”

“No.”

“Tomorrow?”

“No,” I said instantly, not even thinking about it.

“Back then, did you get headaches? Pop a lot of Tylenol?”

“Yes.”

“Stomach give you hell? Need Roloids all the time?”

“Jesus—yes.”

“Need any of that shit now?”

“No.”

“Feel sharper at work?”

“Yes.”

“Do you love your son?”

I leaned hard into that one.

“*Yes.*”

He nodded, his approval genuine.

“Does your son hate you?”

“No—I—I don’t think so.”

“Do you love him?” he asked again.

“Goddamn it—*YES.*”

“Do you tell him?”

“Every day.”

“Does he say the same?”

“Sometimes. He’s eleven, so—”

“How about your wife? Love her?”

“Of course.”

“When you come home do you get a chilly reception?”

“No.”

“Feel like you got dumped at the morgue?”

“God, no.”

“So they’re glad you’re there?”

“Yes.”

He scratched the back of his neck a while, then resumed.

“Are dinners slow? Quiet?”

“No.”

“So, you actually talk?”

“Yes.”

“All glad to be together?”

“Yes.”

“When you woke up today did you *need* a drink?”

I stopped cold.

Dolan waited, expressionless.

“No,” I said at last.

“Do you *want* a drink?”

I shook my head slowly. It felt strange.

He raised his cup, drained it in one haul then set it aside.

“So, Mac—in total, would you say life’s pretty good?”

“I would.”

Eyes fixed on mine, he nodded again, but slowly. Very slowly, like a cop would do when your alibi may not be bullshit after all. It just might hold up.

“Interesting.”

I expected more but he just went on looking at me.

Then he started drumming his fingers on the table.

I was ready for it. The next question. Next riddle. Next field problem.

It never came.

Instead, he pulled out his cigarettes and shook the pack. From the sound I knew there was only one.

“Ah, shit.”

Sighing, he put it away.

Then he got up.

Reeling from it all, I moved to stand with him, but he stopped me.

“Gotta go,” he said, dropping a twenty on the table.

Then he shook my hand. His grip was firm as ever, but this time he held on for a while.

There should be more, I thought.

Hell, I had made it a *year*—hadn’t I?

But there wasn’t.

He just let go.

Then he left.

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“I wrote ‘Dolan’s Debrief’ to evaluate my progress after a full year sober. It is a work of ‘faction’ drawn from my experiences and those of countless veterans who prove



daily that *not* doing a thing is often the most powerful act of all.” —Mike  
McLaughlin

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**Mike McLaughlin** is a writer for Vietnam Veterans of America. His works have appeared in *The Wrath-Bearing Tree*, *The American Veteran*, *WWII History* and *American Heritage*. Not to be outdone, he has written three novels and dozens of short stories. He lives in Boston, MA with his family.

We stand in the center of waves upon waves of headstones. They go on forever. A wreath is propped up on each stone, left over from the holidays. Slip and I are the only ones alive in this sea of the dead. I consider throwing my arm around his broad shoulders, but we're both in our dress blues. I can tell he needs a hug. Instead, I reach over and fix the collar of his peacoat that flipped up in the wind. He bends his knees slightly so I can reach it more easily but otherwise, he doesn't acknowledge my touch.

We just buried his pal. A Marine killed when they were on tour together overseas. Slip gave the ceremonial flag to the Marine's mom, tightly folded into a thick woven right triangle and held between his immaculately white gloved hands. Afterward, I heard him whisper "Til Valhalla" to the coffin as the cemetery workers lowered it into the dark, hard dirt that held so many already.

I'd felt a wisp of desire to make fun of him. "Til Valhalla" was something he learned from his Marines, no doubt. And the idea that this Baptist from South Carolina who had Bible scriptures tattooed on his shoulder blade intoned a Norse blessing on a Texan Catholic who'd named his first and only son "Jesús" was a bit too much. But I'd clamped my mouth shut. Discretion being the better part of valor and all that.

Slip didn't cry when he handed over the flag, or even when the casket was lowered into the ground, but it looks like he wants to now. His amber-flecked brown eyes are glassy, but the wind whipping over the graves is like ice, a prelude to the cold gale of death, so it might just be that.

"Slip, you good?" I ask, wondering if I should have used his real name. Immediately following a burial doesn't feel like the right time to use a nickname born of a bout with an STD. But it's too late now and anyway, using his real name would feel even worse: distant, detached.

"Jamila broke up with me, Glue," he says, straightening to his full height.

The moment I'd earned that nickname couldn't be more different than the current one. We were practicing casualty carries with a 200-pound dummy, sweating through our NWUs under the huge San Antonio sun, when we'd finally gotten a break. I'd split my protein bar in half and shared it with Slip. One of those all-natural things made mostly of dates and chalk.

"What is this shit?" Slip had asked, after several minutes hard chewing. "It nearly glued my jaw shut."

"Give the rest back then! I'm hungry, asshole," I'd said, reaching for the gnawed brown piece he still held in his hand.

Slip had snatched it away, grinning with some of the bar wedged between his normally perfect white teeth. "It's kinda good actually. *Glue.*"

The memory of that smile doesn't keep me warm in this graveyard. I pull myself out of his space and away from his body heat reluctantly. Even with my heavy peacoat on over my jumper, I'm

freezing. I want to keep moving, suggest we go get a drink in a warm bar. I don't want to rush him either.

"She say why?"

"Something about different paths."

I grunt acknowledgement. Jamila's the type of girl that causes traffic accidents. Beside her, especially in uniform, I feel like a different gender of human being. Everything swings with intention when she moves, from her gaze to her hair. Grace, that's what it is. She's a nice gal, whip smart and studying International Affairs at Georgetown. But not the type you can really burp around.

To me, different paths sounds like some vague excuse for something bigger, like Slip being in the Navy, or the particular brand of friends that comes with that. Or it could be his inability to keep his toenails clean or all the money he spends on supplements. More likely, she might have been trying to tactfully negotiate her way out of a tough situation. I didn't know her too well, but I can guess she was afraid of the version of Slip that returned to her. And I can understand why. This distant cold statue of a man beside me is intimidating.

He holds his dixie cup cover to his head as the wind picks up but otherwise stands stock still, looking away from me.

"It's been off since I got back. But I can't tell if it was my fault or hers," he continues.

"How was it off?"

"At first, all we did was fuck and it was great. I told her about Lopey," he shrugged.

Lopez-Aguero. The Marine.

"And she was supportive, listened and you know, let me... cry," he quickly mumbles the word and then pushes on, "but after a while, it was like she got tired of hearing about it. She'd say she needed to go study or had to get some sleep. I know she works hard, and I probably talked about it too much. But then she told me I should go see someone."

"Therapy?"

"Yeah. But I can't do that. You know I'm up for this award and I put in a package for OCS, and I don't wanna fuck it up."

He looks at me directly for the first time that day. His forehead crumples like he's looking at me for answers, desperation woven into the light crinkles around his eyes. I don't know what to tell him.

The whole world seems to want to send the military to a shrink but getting it done is something entirely different. No one sees how it can sidetrack your career or turn your peers away from you. It's hard to escape the label, even thrown out as a joke in the smoke pit or after a long night of studying for the advancement exam. I should feel honored Slip is sharing it with me, trusting me with his honesty, but it feels like a burden I'm ill-equipped to carry.

“Shit, Slip, you can talk to me. *I’ll* be your therapist,” I find myself saying, trying to infuse some humor into our conversation to get us back on familiar ground.

“Well, Doc. Where’s your couch?” He gestures loosely out to the graves.

I cringe and turn away from him to look out across the field.

“Do you think for each one of these guys in the ground there is a brother who thinks he died for nothing?” Slip asks in a low voice that cuts through the ghostly wind.

The wintery air blasting my exposed face and hands is nowhere near as harsh as his question. Hearing his comments makes me uneasy. I swallow a couple of times to get the lump out of my throat.

Slip’s the guy that gets teary-eyed during the National Anthem. If he could carry a tune in a bucket, he’d volunteer to sing it at every possible venue in the world: NFL games, Presidential inaugurations, Veteran’s Day Parades, even NASCAR. I’ve heard him sing it in the shower while me and another buddy played Call of Duty in the other room. We laughed so hard we dropped the controllers. “You need a drink, dude,” I say, shoving him into motion with my numb hands. A drink might be the very last thing he needs but it’s the only thing I can think of. He shouldn’t be alone, I know that much and maybe if we relax a bit, he can get some perspective.

We make our way out of the cemetery. I’m trying not to think of each stride, each line of headstones all adding up to a tally that can’t be a real number. Slip doesn’t speak at all.

I find the nearest bar on my phone, just five minutes away. It’s a sports bar with decent draft options but more importantly, it’s warm and not too busy. The D.C. crowd is certainly more accustomed to seeing people in uniform but still, eyes turn to watch us as soon as Slip and I walk in. In identical movements, we whip our covers off with our right hands as we pass over the threshold. Usually we’d laugh about it, make a joke about brainwashing, but Slip doesn’t even look my way.

I head to the end of the bar, a little out of the way so we won’t draw much attention. The barman, a tatted-up guy with an oiled beard and studs in his ears, nods at me. He recognizes my control of the situation as Slip stares off into the middle distance. Usually, I’d give Slip shit for being dramatic but not today.

“Two Guinness. We’re getting a head start on our St. Patty’s Day drinking,” I say, hoping it makes Slip laugh or at least smile.

Neither Slip nor the barman’s face change. The barman just turns around to begin the slow pour at the tap. Slip fiddles with his phone. I’m losing my touch.

I set my cover on my knee under the bar and look over at his phone screen. It’s not a picture of Jamila that he’s looking at, it’s a picture of a group of Sailors and Marines. I can’t pick him out at this range but I’m guessing Lopey and Slip are in the cluster of dirty men.

“Hey, Slip, man, you’re gonna be okay.”

He grunts and slides his phone in his coat pocket.

“Tell me about Lopey,” I just go for it, my usual brash approach to problems.

“Fuck,” he mumbles, his chiseled jaw muscles working under his brown skin.

The barman sets coasters and two tall glasses of Guinness before us. I watch the foam settle, the darkness coalescing like a storm cloud. Before Slip gets his next words out, I want to chug the whole damn thing but even that wouldn't prepare me.

“One minute you're laughing about porn or something stupid, trying to pretend like you're not going to piss yourself, you're so scared. And the next, it's so loud, you can't hear anything and body parts are raining down from the sky.”

His heel taps a staccato against the rung of his bar stool. He swallows, eyes zeroed in on his beer as if he's talking to the brew and not me. For a moment, I'm worried about him crushing the pint glass in his hand. The smooth brown skin is pale with tension that radiates up his arm, through his entire wool-swathed body.

“Lopey had this epic Chesty Puller tat on his calf. That's how I knew the leg next to me was his. The hair was singed off, so it looked like one of those dummies we practiced on at Corps school.” He tips his Guinness back and his Adam's apple bobs as he drinks it almost halfway down.

“Fuck me,” I murmur, taking a big swig of my own beer.

“I go for my tourniquet, that's all they tell you to do, right? Get cover, return fire, throw tourniquets on any bleeders. But there wasn't enough leg left to wrap the thing around. I just crammed my hands in there but...”

He clears his throat and shakes his head. I teeter on confirming he followed the right procedure. I decide to keep my mouth shut.

“Excuse me, guys.”

A voice cuts across the bar at us and it takes me a moment to tear my eyes off Slip to see who'd spoken. Some man, not much older than us, wearing a blazer and scarf knotted tightly around his neck grins our way. I look up expectantly, annoyed and feeling Slip pull away.

“I just wanted to say thank you for your service,” he says, looking pleased with himself.

I stare at him. This certainly isn't the first time I've heard this. Usually, I shrug it off with something like “Thanks for your support” or another equally trite phrase. But today, all I want to do is smash my beer glass over this guy's head. Accessing some rarely used diplomatic part of my brain, I nod to acknowledge him and turn quickly back to Slip.

“You guys are in the Navy, right?” The asshat won't shut up. He's got this vibe like he's God's gift. I look at him again and nod again, trying to make it clear he should shove off.

“Are you Navy Seals? Well, there’s no way you’d be one,” he points at me and waves me off dismissively. “But *you* look like you could kill somebody,” he says this to Slip. I stand, take a step toward him.

“Hey man, we’re in the middle of something. Could you move along?” I say in the assertive but not aggressive voice that the military taught me to hone to perfection.

“Jeez, ease up. I just wanted to show my appreciation.” He holds up his hands in a dramatic way that I don’t appreciate at all. I feel my temper rising.

“We heard you and like I said, we’re in the middle of something, so step off.”

“What the hell? I am trying to be nice here. What’s with you?”

I hear him mutter something that sounds like “PTSD” under his breath as he signs the receipt and puts his credit card back in his wallet. I nearly launch myself over the bar at him but Slip gently squeezes my arm. Whipping my head back around, I lock eyes with him. His face broken, looking so damn handsome it’s painful, Slip shakes his head. Clenching my jaw, I sit. Thankfully, the bartender intervenes.

“Hey man, leave them alone. It’s been a long day.” How he knows that, I haven’t the faintest idea. Maybe he’s aware of the bar’s proximity to Arlington or it’s just a line he uses to deescalate situations. Either way, it works and the dirtbag struts away. It’s hard not to grab a coaster and flick it at the back of his head.

Slip releases my arm and drains his glass. “None of them understand. How can they?”

The bartender brings us another round of Guinness, which he says is on him. At first, I think he’s my new favorite person but upon reflection, I wonder if he’s not part of the problem too. Everyone wants to buy us drinks but what good are drunken, broken people to the world?

After that, we drink our beers in silence. Slip doesn’t continue his story and I lose the nerve to ask him. I pay our tab. He calls a ride and I ask him to text me when he gets home. He never does.

\*

I wake with a start early the next morning. Crashing over to the bedside table, my fingers scramble for my phone. No missed calls or texts from Slip. I call him, eyes still mostly shut but heart rate picking up. Nothing. Just his cheery voice on the voicemail message, which makes me queasy. I order a car, drag some clothes on, and whip my hair back into a ponytail. Before the driver even stops the car, I slide into the backseat and watch his body language change when I say, “I need you to hurry.”

The drive to Slip’s shouldn’t be more than ten minutes but it feels like days. Each time the driver fiddles with his phone to change the song playing or takes a sip from his water bottle, my fingers go pale gripping my knees. On the final turn before we get to Slip’s, he cautiously scans the intersection at the red light, and I have to stop myself from wrestling the steering wheel from him. Finally, the front of Slip’s building looms into view and I pull at the door handle frantically until the child safety

lock goes off. I know that guy is going to give me a one-star review, but I don't have the energy to soften my behavior. I hop out and sprint up the steps. Darting through the main door, I leap up the stairs to the second level and careen through his apartment door with my spare key.

“Slip!” I shout, not caring that it's six o'clock in the morning on a Saturday and the walls are thin. All I can think is that I didn't stay with him. I'll be the next sailor handing a folded flag to a mother who has no concept of what happened to her son. All she'll know is some invisible cloak of honor or sacrifice that lends no warmth to the frigid air of life without her child.

He's prone on the carpet in his Gryffindor pajama bottoms. His nieces gave him those. They had decided that he was a Gryffindor because he was brave.

“Slip!” More direction to my voice this time, but no response from him.

He's face down in a pool of puke. The smell is wretched; that acidic punch makes me want to heave up my own insides. I start breathing through my mouth as I note the empty bottle of Jameson and half empty bottle of Tito's. What a combination, I think, even as my mind is racing. I drop down beside him and jab my pointer finger and middle finger into the side of his neck. No heartbeat. Readjusting my position, I shift my fingers over his throat like the needle on a record player, looking for the right groove. His pulse jumps suddenly under my touch.

“Oh, thank God,” I croak, dropping my head momentarily to his side and feeling his warm skin against my forehead. “For fuck's sake, Slip.”

Tears start rolling down my cheeks, which pisses me off. To regain control, I dive into my training: listen for breathing, check for any indication that he fell, C-spine precautions as best I can when I roll him onto his back, check his airway again. Another wave of relief when I see his chest rise.

He grimaces a bit when I slap his face. “Slip, get up. Wake up, man.”

An eyelid pops. He moans and a giant relieved breath puffs out of my gut. It takes a while before he works his jaw, inhales sharply so his nostrils stretch, and a tension settles between his dark eyebrows. Like he remembers everything.

“Slip, what the hell, man? What were you thinking?” My voice quivers and I hasten to brush the tears away before Slip really comes around.

“Fuck,” he moans and begins to turn onto his side, to hide in the fetal position. But I pull him back.

“C'mon, get up. You're covered in puke. Let's get you to the shower.” I say in my best “Chief” voice. It feels wrong, used for so many jokes in our shared past, but it might get through to him.

I push my hands under his arms and start to lift.

“Glue?”

His eyes still aren't fully open.

“Who else would it be?”

Somehow, he rises to his feet. We get him into the bathroom, and I make a fuss about getting the water temperature right so he can drop his PJs. He steps into the shower and lets out a robust groan at the warm water with me standing on the other side of the mostly transparent, a bit moldy shower curtain. Bracing himself on the shower tiles, I see him drop his head and wonder if he’s embarrassed or if he regrets failing at drinking himself to death.

“Slip?”

He grunts in response, pulling himself upright and reaching to pour some soap onto a washcloth. While I fumble with the words, he slowly starts to lather his gleaming dark skin in bright white suds.

“Don’t ever fucking do that again,” I say, trying to hide the mortifying hiccup in my voice as steam fills the room.

He pauses in his circular scrubbing with his washcloth and looks through the shower curtain at me. “What? Drink to the foam?”

He’s trying to make a joke, referencing our favorite line of “Anchors, Aweigh” and I feel the bile rising in my throat.

“You know what I mean.”

“Don’t worry, I got all those people doing twenty-two pushups a day for me, I’m all good.” His voice is savage.

“I know things are shit right now but—”

“Do you know? Do you? Because females don’t see action so how would *you* know?” His tone is sharp and nasty, unlike him.

His comment cuts deep. It feels like as soon as he went downrange, there was a part of him I could no longer reach. I’ve been in country. I was the Corpsman waiting at the Role III, trying to put all those bloody pieces back together. But I can’t tell him about the Soldiers or Marines that carried their buddy’s severed arms or legs back to the hospital, only for me to inform them we couldn’t sew it back on. It was too burned, too damaged, it’d been too long. For Slip, it’s not anywhere close to what he knows. Nothing compares to outside the wire, according to everyone who had been outside the wire. Guess I can’t blame him. But it still pisses me off.

I reach down and flush the toilet. The water temperature drops so fast, I can feel a whoosh of cold air cut through the humidity as Slips screams. His arms cross protectively over his body, his groin, spine curling down to conserve his body heat.

“What the—”

“Slip, I know *you*, probably better than anyone. I know you’d never mix vodka and whiskey. I know you don’t drink alone; you just got those bottles for when you have people over. Those Gryffindor



PJs,” I gesture to the pool of scarlet fabric on the tile. “Maya and Malia gave you those. When you’re nervous you clench your jaw and have to piss every five minutes. And *I’m* the one with the key to your apartment, standing here yelling at you while your skivvies are on the floor and you’ve got nothing but soap on! So yes, I fucking know!”

He stares at me for a long time, shivering slightly. The water drives all the clouds of soap down his neck and chest before he turns the water off. Turning to snag a towel off the rack, I hand it to him, and he wraps it around his waist before stepping out.

“I’m sorry,” he says, humble in the misty air of the small bathroom.

“Me too. About Lopey, and everything.”

After a beat of just looking at each other, I turn to go to the kitchen. I get him some water and poke in his fridge to find he has a pack of sports drinks. Wrestling one out of the plastic collar, I take it and the water into the bedroom where I find Slip has put on a fresh pair of basketball shorts and a ratty Gamecocks t-shirt.

He gingerly crawls onto the bed that smells like the linens could do with a wash, but the overwhelming smell of the room is Slip, a bit his cologne, a bit the smell of his skin.

Handing him the cold sports drink, I sit next to him on the bed. He chugs all of it before placing the empty bottle on the nightstand and dropping back against the pillow.

“Don’t you dare clean up the other room while I’m asleep,” he says from beneath the heavily muscled arm that he’s thrown over his face. “It’s my mess. I’ll deal with it.”

He closes his eyes and I look down at him. Shifting his arm to the side with a grunt, now his face is on full display in the dim morning light. Even hungover, in desperate need of a saline drip, he looks beautiful. The smooth deep brown color of his skin reminds me of warm coffee. We’d lost so much sleep together, standing watch, studying, partying, working nights at the hospital, that the comfort and kick of coffee was a real, palpable thing. It was always our lifeline to making the day or the night or even just the next hour possible. The number of times I’d brought him a cup, or he carried one to me, I couldn’t even begin to guess. But we’d always stand together, clutching the cups like our lives depended on it and spare a smirk for each other even though it felt like every choice we’d made up until that point had led us to a pretty shitty place. But even a shitty place was bearable with him there beside me.

I wonder if I were the woman that could fall in love with him, could do anything besides throw an arm over his shoulders or wrestle him to the ground, could I do what Jamila could not and save him? The reel of potential spins over my mind’s eye: wearing a dress to dinner with him, getting naked with him and pressing our bodies together, holding him when he cries.

No, that’s not me.

I tentatively touch his bicep, the warmth under my fingers soothes this ragged worry that hasn’t yet receded since the night before. He reflexively folds his lower arm back to press his hand to mine.

“Don’t you worry, Glue. I’m here. I’m okay,” he mumbles, half-asleep.

If I were that woman, I wouldn’t be here next to him on the bed, having just pulled him out of his own vomit and all but showered him myself. I am not a girl, not in that sense. I am his brother. He might slip away from me into this dark, cold world but I’ll never stop trying to pull him back.

I sigh and go to do something about the stench in the living room.

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“‘Brothers in Arms’ was inspired simultaneously by the unity forged among those who serve and the division created by the defining experience of combat.” —Katie Trescott

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**Katie Trescott** works at a marketing firm and is a Corpsman in the Navy Reserve. She studied Creative Writing at Florida State University and served in the Peace Corps in Ukraine. She and her dog, Diggity, live in Augusta, Georgia. When she’s not working or writing, she enjoys camping and watching soccer.

Back aboard the USS Thomas Jefferson after seven and a half hours in the air, having refueled from a hover over the back of a frigate and seen nothing but water for most of the flight, Lieutenant Junior Grade Henry Bowman learned the names of the pilot and radar officer who had gone down. Lieutenant George “Spanky” Cruikshank and Lieutenant Commander Bill “Catfish” Bafford. Bowman knew both of them by sight from the wardroom. They’d stood in line together for late night sliders, though he couldn’t say he ever had a conversation with either of them. Bowman and his crew had searched until being called off, following an intricate pattern of expanding squares out from the point where one of the Air Wing’s F-14s had disappeared from the radar. Pfft. One minute it was there, burning along at a couple hundred knots, 3000 feet over the open sea, the next minute it was gone without a trace. At least without a trace on the radar scope. And, if they had searched in the right place, without a trace on the sea either. After the routine debriefing in the squadron ready room, The Air Wing Safety Office called Bowman and his crew in one by one to debrief them further on what they’d seen. The mishap investigation had already begun.

—What was your altitude when you first saw this thing?

—My crewman first saw it from 500 feet, asked me to go lower for another look. I didn’t even catch a glimpse of it until we were below 300.

—What did he say it looked like from 500 feet?

—He didn’t say. Said he had something. I think he said it might be a raft, but I’m not sure. You should ask him.

—We will. When you first saw it, what did you think it was?

—Wreckage, maybe. Something flat, piece of rudder or tail.

\*

They’d already been searching for three hours. In the middle of the Red Sea. Out of sight of land. Sky milky gray, undefined. Sun a blur, marginally brighter than the hazy overcast. Sea also gray, barely darker than the sky, long shallow swells. Crew bleary-eyed and tired. Bowman glanced down at the search pattern on his kneeboard, then checked the time on the eight-day clock on his instrument panel. Twenty-two seconds until his next turn.

The crew chief’s voice crackled over the radio.

—I’ve got something. About two o’clock, 300 yards, three o’clock, we’re past it. Four o’clock. Can you come back around? Go down a little lower?

—Coming right, keep talking. What’s it look like?

—I don't know. But there's something in the water. It doesn't look like a raft. But it's bigger than a man.

—Color?

—Brown, maybe.

—You still got it, Chief?

—Yes, sir.

—I'm descending to 300 feet. Where is it now?

—Five o'clock, coming around to four, three. About 200 yards. Passed it again. Still not sure what it is, sir. Looks flat, like a door. We need a closer look.

—Okay, coming around again. I'll bring us into the wind. Keep talking to me.

Bowman circled to the right again, coming into the wind, and brought the helicopter into a hover 40 feet above the waves. Light chop, swells about 3 to 5 feet. The water silver and gray as a dolphin's flanks.

—Still see it, Chief?

—Yes, sir. Two o'clock, 100 yards, the chief said. It's not a raft. I'm not sure what it is.

—I think I see it. Could it be wreckage?

—Can't tell from here.

—Okay, guide me in.

—Roger, sir. Easy forward, easy right.

—I've got it now. A piece of wood?

—Stop forward. Easy right. It's a door, sir.

—What?

—It's a door. Steady. A regular door, like from a house. Or maybe from a boat.

—Damn, Bowman said, getting a better look as it passed under the rotor wash. A fucking door.

Two panels, like for a closet, still some white or pale green paint on it in places, but mostly bare wood, floating right on the surface, rising and falling gently with the swells, now being battered by the artificial wind blown down by the rotor.

—All right, take down the coordinates, time 1602. Let's get back to our search pattern.

—Yes, sir, the chief said.

—Bummer, Bowman said. He pushed the nose forward and started his climb out.

\*

—You're sure now it wasn't aircraft wreckage, the officer in charge of the investigation asked.

—I told you it was a door. I don't remember noticing if there was any hardware attached, hinges, knob. I doubt it. I think I would have noticed. Ask the chief.

—Do you think the crew of the plane that went down could have seen it from 3,000 feet? Bowman hadn't thought of that. Had they seen it? Gone down for a closer look and ended up flying into the water?

—I don't think so, sir. My guy barely saw it from 500 feet at 60 knots. And he was looking. The Tomcat was at 3000 feet and doing what, 300 knots? I doubt they would have seen it.

\*

Later, lying in his rack, Bowman thought about that door in the sea. Once the chief told him it looked like a door, he had to see it for himself. They could have done a fly-by. It hadn't really been necessary to pull into a hover and go right over to it. But he couldn't resist. Could anybody? The chief never hesitated. Easy right, sir, he had said, as if they were going in to drop a swimmer, or lower the hoist to the deck of a frigate or a destroyer. A door....

A forbidden door. Who can resist a forbidden door. A door into the sea.

And if you could go through that door, somehow, open it like a trap door in a stage floor and pass through the surface of the ocean, where would it take you? Davy Jones' locker? A storybook undersea world where slow patrolling sharks passed silently among the skeletons of dead sailors manning the decks of wrecked ships? Would Spanky and Catfish be there, newly arrived, still in their flight gear as if they had just landed and were squeezing in line for sliders, drowned fishermen on either side? This was the Red Sea, famous for shipwrecks since ancient times, watery grave to thousands of mariners going back to the Phoenicians. And what about Pharaoh's army, swallowed up by these same waters after Moses led the Israelites across to begin their 40 years of desert wanderings?

Crossing into an underwater dream, Bowman found himself in this liquid world, swaying gently with the currents, magically able to breathe, moving in shafts of aqueous light among shades who drifted up to him as the shades in Hades drifted up to Odysseus to give him news of the dead and get news of the living. He felt himself drawn in, crossing shallow reefs into darker blue water, ultramarine, where the murmur of indistinct voices drew him on, urged him to go deeper, into the great rift, over 7,000 feet deep, where the tectonic plates of Africa and Arabia were slowly backing away from one another.

Suddenly whatever mechanism or magic had allowed him to breathe failed, as if by giving a scientific name to where he was he'd broken the spell. He was starving for air, swimming madly, but which way was the surface? Blue-black darkness in all directions. It must be night now. The shafts of light were gone. He couldn't tell up from down. His lungs ached, craving oxygen. He would drown if he didn't get to the surface. His chest convulsed, his mouth filled with salty water which he fought to keep out of his lungs, choking, flailing his arms and legs in pure panic.

He woke with a gasp, breath heaving, disoriented, ears aroar, to find himself in his rack, the curtain drawn, the ship rising and settling, his body pouring sweat and becoming lighter and heavier against the thin mattress, the incessant roar still surging in his ears. He tried to get control of his breath.

The number two cat above his head fired. The roar moved off, died away into the general heavy equipment assembly line noise of the aircraft carrier. He was beginning to breathe normally now. Out of the general confusion of noise he distinguished the metal on metal slide of the hydraulic shuttle being drawn back and clanking into place, the loud thunk of the Jet Blast Deflector lowering back into the deck. An F-14 had just been launched and another jet was maneuvering into position. He heard the JBD grind back into the up position behind it. Heard the engines shift into afterburner. Another F-14. They'd lost one plane with its crew just hours ago, but flight ops didn't stop.

Bowman looked at his wristwatch, its hands glowing in the curtained-off darkness. The Petty Officer of the Watch would be in any minute to wake him for his next flight. He lay on his back as the Tomcat roared off the deck only a few feet above his head. He focused on the gentle movement of the ship. This was home. This was his life. He had come back through the magic door into his real world, an aircraft carrier at sea.

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“Death and injury don't only come in combat. This story focuses on the kind of loss that can happen on a perfectly ordinary day, in training, in 'peacetime' operations and exercises, in the daily routines of military service.” —John Van Kirk

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**John Van Kirk** is the author of the novel *Song for Chance* (Red Hen Press). His short fiction has earned the O. Henry Prize and The Iowa Review Fiction Prize and has been published in a variety of magazines and literary journals. A Navy helicopter pilot in the 1980s, he now lives and writes in Kentucky.

VISUAL ARTS FEATURE



“Jacks” By Lora Beldon

**Interview with Lora Beldon**  
**Artist, curator, teacher, and business**  
**owner of the Military Kid Art Project**

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**Lora:**

I came from a creative family; my father is not only a career Marine but he’s also a writer, painter, and sculptor. My mother was very crafty and reinvented our home every time we PCS’d (Permanent Change of Station). She had an amazing eye. She didn’t paint often but if there was a painting that she couldn’t afford but wanted for our home she recreated it.

I grew up a military brat and moved often. When our family moved in the middle of the summer it was a challenge for a shy person [like me] to meet new friends. My mother would sign me up for special art classes or horseback riding lessons or tennis lessons or swimming lessons. This helped me acclimate to new areas and get to know children that enjoyed the same things I enjoyed.

The one constant in my life other than my immediate family was my grandparents on my mother’s side. They were dairy farmers in Frederick, Maryland. I was not only born there while my father was in Vietnam, I also spent many summers there. My grandparents were very supportive of my creativity; one story they love to retell is the day I decided to make a large drawing by hammering nails into the dirt floor in their garage. Every time they tell the story, everyone giggles and says they can’t believe how much time I spent hammering nails into the dirt to make a beautiful design.

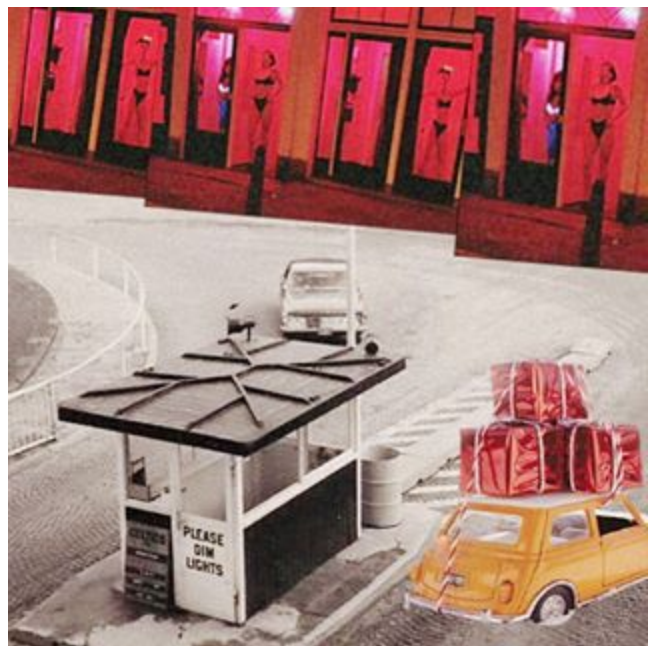
Growing up, I always had sketchbooks. In high school, I was into everything art. When I started applying to colleges, we lived just south of the Washington DC area in a place called Stafford County. Back then, the only option for a military kid was to apply for in-state tuition, and we were in Virginia. I wanted to go to an art school, so I applied to VCU (Virginia Commonwealth University). I never knew I was a military brat until I went to college. I wouldn’t say I started consciously studying military brats until about 25 years ago. My work combines studies of the South, studies of military families and military brat subculture, along with identity in general. I’ve also studied war-related Post Traumatic Stress as well as secondary Post Traumatic Stress in brats.



When people ask where I'm from, I say *everywhere and nowhere* just to be a little funny. Saying this leads to questions, then a longer conversation. I was born in Frederick, Maryland, but we quickly moved to San Pedro, California, and then back to Fredericksburg, Virginia, then to North Carolina and South Carolina, then to Hawaii. Hawaii is where my brother was born. Then we moved to Wisconsin, then back to Maryland, then to Virginia again. I've spent the most time in the South, particularly Virginia, which I've adopted as my home.

To say that I only lived in nine places as a kid would be misleading. It's not that simple. Within those nine PCS, my family made several smaller moves—to different houses, for example, and our family was not unique. Many military families move two to three times within each PCS. This can also mean changing schools two to three times within a short period of time.

The reason I'm telling you about these moves is that there was a lot of exploration and adventure in my childhood. A lot of exploring new cultures. I found myself becoming very item-oriented. I would see new things in new cities that identified new cultures. The uniqueness of new items always fascinated me. There is comfort in items that you see repeatedly; for example, for military families, seeing collections of spoons from across the country and different countries [is a comfort]. With that item or image nearby, there was an unspoken feeling or knowing that you had a lot in common with people. The steins on the mantelpiece for those that lived in Germany. The dolls and the kimonos from those that lived in Japan. I'm interested in culture, I'm interested in identity, I'm interested in the military brat subculture because that is a relatively new area of study. I consider myself an auto-ethnographic artist.



“Christmas Outside the Gates” by Lora Beldon

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### Collateral:

Among civilians, I've noticed that there's a sense of mystery (or obscurity) surrounding the realities of a military kid's life. For example, a lot of people know that military kids move often and that's disruptive to their social lives and schooling, but I've found that we don't often discuss the effects of military service and institutions on children. We don't think about what “disruption” or even “move” really look and feel like.

What kind of advantages do you think military kids have as they grow into young adults? I'm curious about this from all angles, whether you see them benefitting as artists, students, adventurers, leaders, etc. And the other side of the coin: what disadvantages do you think military kids must navigate?

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**Lora:**

That is true; we don't often discuss the impact of military service and institutions on children. We know, in general, that military kids move a lot and that's a little disruptive to their social lives and schooling. But the reality of it and the nuances are vast. Honestly, I could write chapter after chapter to answer this question.

A couple of months ago I googled *why military personnel are ordered to move so often*. Here's what I found out: the straightforward answer, the only answer given, was that this originally prevented service members from creating strong bonds with their peers. Why? Without creating connections, we don't feel so deeply when peers are killed. The military truly discourages families from staying anywhere longer than three years.

If you're studying military children, you must consider this, then ask: how does that reason affect military personnel? Then you must ask: how does that affect a military brat when their parents are experiencing such disconnection? Then, what is it doing to a child whose brain is still forming? A child's brain is forming without developing connections. When you talk to psychologists and psychiatrists, you realize that you have two very different experiences: an adult brain dealing with these situations or questions, and a child's brain dealing with these situations and questions.

Let me speak for myself and many of my peers, with whom I've had many conversations on this subject. As a person who grew up only having attachments with their immediate family (mother and brother)—and keep in mind that my family was under severe stress caused by war, alcoholism, separation from extended family, and a father who was gone half of my formative living—my brain was never taught to connect with others at a young age. I am a direct result of that. Do I make friends quickly? Yes. Do I move on quickly and easily? Yes. There are positives to this and negatives. Therapists will say I have a fear of intimacy; I say I have a fear of loss, so I protect myself from loss and create scenarios where I feel loss the least. My brain is hardwired to endure massive amounts of loss; this is my culture.

At the same time, I have almost no fear of the unknown. I have no problem throwing myself into the abyss and seeing what's inside. In fact, it's both a challenge and an adventure. Do I apologize for any of this? No. Again, this is what being a military brat is. This is what resilience is. This is what resilience looks like later in life.

What kind of advantages do military kids have as they grow into young adults? We often are overachievers. The resilient ones figure it out and are much better off. But entirely too many military brats struggle in their teens and on into adulthood. We must name the struggles to work on them. Most of the rhetoric available on brats is about generalized situations. But there are lots of "other" types of situations. Just to name one, I have met married military couples with children and both parents are deployed at the same time. That's not supposed to happen, but it does. Children sometimes go into foster care because of no extended family. The first attempt is to place the child in a military connected family, but that does not always happen.

And yet, as students, what better way to learn about the world than travel it? You're not just reading about history, you're living next to it or in it, you're walking through castles, you're walking along the

Berlin Wall, you're talking to East and West Germans, you're speaking three languages. You get a sense of the larger picture, how the entire world is connected, and how to interact within those worlds.

A lot of military brats who are adults now feel a part of everything but then, at the same time, a part of nothing—quite alone—not necessarily in a bad way. A lot of us feel at home only recently with the advent of Facebook, which facilitates adult brat groups. Here are groups of people that simply get how we feel without us having to explain it, and it is a challenge to explain feeling part of everything and nothing at the same time.



“Bus Stop” by Lora Beldon

I often don't even feel a part of my own family—my blood family, that is. My father is an adult military brat. We have a relationship and I would say that it is good now, but it was very strained for many years. He was not in the home while I was growing up; therefore, he never gave me brat advice. He also never thought about his military bratness. He was focused on being a Marine, the toughest of the tough.

On the other hand, my mother was a farmer's daughter. Upon marrying my father, she had no idea what to expect. Being a military wife or mother was a mystery. She most definitely did the best she could.

If you wanted to compare my upbringing to anyone else's, you could look at [third culture kids](#). What is it like when a child is raised by people who were born and raised in one culture, yet you're being raised while living in another culture? This is a huge area of study. Then combine that with the newest studies of peers being the biggest influences on children other than nature and nurture. We all want to identify. That is one of the biggest needs in human nature other than food, water, and safety. We all constantly look for ourselves in culture. I will use my family as example. My mother lived in one place until she married. The way she was raised, her culture, informed most of her decisions. My brat culture, on the other hand, informed most of my decisions. I made friends quickly, but not necessarily with the best people. I expedited friendships, instinctively knowing I may not be around long. That meant latching onto the first person that offered attention. My mother's words still ring in my ears, “Why do you put all your eggs in one basket?” I created a class on this subject; it is called the *Hundred Year Starship*. I wanted to create a fun art game that better helped people understand how place and time effected behavior. Teens from Henrico High School for the Arts took my class and I filmed it. Most in the class were not brats, but teachers reached out to me to help everyone else better understand their brat peers. If you listen to the final talk, you can hear how taking the nonbrats out of their comfort zones allowed for a better understanding of their military connected peers.

Some quick contemporary brat culture references...there's the old [Pat Conroy](#) (*Great Santini*) but then there's also recent examples like the [HBO series \*We Are Who We Are\*](#). I often use these as reference points or starting off points for work. I have a few Instagram accounts, too, where I put very quick ideas that eventually flesh out into much larger, more detailed mixed media pieces. I only post some of my harsher subject matter on Instagram. My work in galleries, museums, and on Facebook is more PG13. A lot of my work is considered for educational tools, and it has to be age appropriate.

As an artist I am certainly an amalgamation of everywhere I've been and lived. I work with subject matter that is rarely addressed or the study of which is in its infancy. I never would have guessed that as an adult, I'd be working with this subject matter, but I consider it my duty.

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**Collateral:**

Who is your art family?

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**Lora:**

I would say I have two separate art families. One is my artist & art teacher friends. They belong to galleries I belong to. These are the people that I spend the most time with. And then there's my military brat art friends and peers. These people are scattered all over. I talk to, work with, and consider [Donna Musil](#) of Brats Without Borders, a great friend. She lives in Colorado. She and I worked on an 8-year project together called [Unclassified: The Military Kid Art Show](#). Now, I'm working with Dr. Circe Olson Woessner of the [Museum of the American Military Family](#) in Tijeras, New Mexico. Interestingly, we've been working together over three years, and I would consider her a friend, but we've never physically met. She and I worked on [the anthology \*SHOUT!\*, which turned into \*SHOUT!\* the play](#).

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**Collateral:**

As an artist, how did you learn what material was "harsh" and what was "age appropriate"? I ask not only as an editor, but as a military spouse and scholar of war literature; I've had to learn where the divide between military and civilian cultures is by finding where comfort zones end, leaving the artist on the fringes, an outsider. Can you tell me about how you learned to know your work and those who view it?

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**Lora:**

I went to school for fine art, and for teaching art. I was taught what was age appropriate. When you work with the U.S. public school systems, you learn very quickly what is "age appropriate." When I start on a piece, though, I'm not consciously thinking, "this is for a certain age."

Harsh is a relative term. Some things are considered harsher by civilian schools and civilian teachers than they are by schools that serve predominantly military families. A good example is most civilian

schools will tell children they're not allowed to draw guns or any sort of war paraphernalia. But to a military child, this is really confusing; this imagery is life, everyday life. Not bad. Just mom or dad's job.

I did recently teach a workshop at a school that wanted Blue Ribbon status (they wanted to be on a national list that lets families know they are welcoming of military families), and they did allow me to teach art classes where we talked about visual subject matter not allowed to be drawn in public schools but seen and lived by most military brats—an example being large artillery trucks parading in the streets. The school did allow the teens to see this imagery and draw it if they wanted to. I had to get special permission and there was a lot of dialogue with the kids about comfort levels, and how it was okay to ask to move if you preferred not to look at someone's drawing of what they were visually processing. How if your neighbor changed seats it shouldn't be taken as someone not liking your drawing; it might have been subject matter that person didn't want to see or think about at that moment. Everyone process experiences differently.



“Pop Goes The Weasel” by Lora Beldon

And of course, anything sexualized or gender-related is still mostly taboo. Right now, I'm working with Circe on the play [SHOUT! It's an LGBTQ+ play](#), true stories about military families, and even though there are references to grade school-aged characters and high schoolers in the play, we still had to have the discussion about who could see the play, and who we would be marketing to. I had to take it to high schools and let them read the script, and it was funny that what I thought would have kept it out of a high school was not the conversations about sexuality or gender but the cuss words.

[The anthology SHOUT! Sharing Our Truth](#) (same name as the play, which evolved from some of the pieces in the anthology) includes stories and art, is rated R. In the book, I have a personal story and a few pieces of artwork. There are two images in the anthology that would probably not be welcome anywhere other than in a book for adults. One piece is called “Jacks” and the other is called “Christmas Outside the Gates”. Imagery in “Jacks” is of two little girls playing jacks; one sits on the edge of an armoire, and inside you see a stack of porn. “Christmas Outside the Gates” features call girls just outside the U.S. military base gates in Germany. These are things you notice as a military kid, a lot. But people can get very mad, seeing it in art.

I don't do very well with corporate galleries. It's funny, I've had corporate galleries call me and say that they want to hang my work, and they're only basing that offer on seeing one or two pieces. Then I send a body of work and they say, “oh we can't hang this on our walls.” To me, being truthful in my art is more important than anything else.

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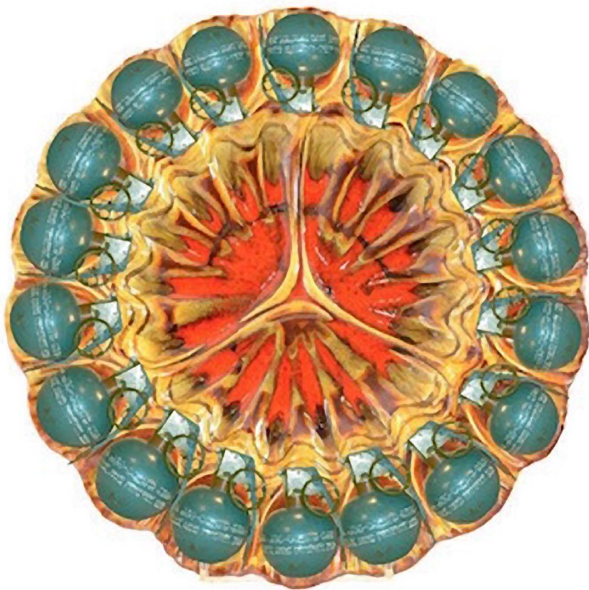
**Collateral:**

What about your deviled egg plate images? How did you make those?

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**Lora:**

I obsessively design and create. Because I am an artist and business owner, I have my phone on me always. My phone became my sketchbook. I don't think very hard when I sketch, I just do it. I grab objects from the internet and combine, and in my classrooms, I encourage students to make art from whatever is available around their home or neighborhood. One morning, a child showed me the work they created the night before at home. I asked if they created the work in Photoshop, and they said they used a free app called *PicsArt* (a scaled down version of Photoshop for your phone). I have been hooked ever since.



“Deviled Eggs 5” by Lora Beldon

The Deviled Egg series happened because I am attracted to egg plates. Each one is so unique. They are a part of my mother's upbringing on the farm. There was never a gathering without deviled eggs. Grenades are a perfect shape fit with the egg plate, and Dad often brought work home. I have handled a practice grenade before. Grenades also can be unique in color and style. I loved the dichotomy of the two objects, and of course placing them together creates an interesting dialogue.

The virtual cutting and pasting in the work is a relaxing repetitive process. The process lowers my heart rate. That is exactly what you need when you have been triggered into a Post Traumatic Stress moment. I have rewired my own brain to not disassociate.

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**Collateral:**

What kind of relationship do you think the military has with art (particularly art created by service members and their families)? Do you think that relationship is changing?

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**Lora:**

What a great question! My answer is multi-layered. I automatically think of a few places and organizations: military museums and creative programs supported financially by the military.

Yes, I do think the relationship is changing, but it's painstakingly slow.

My focus has always been the military brat. But to understand a brat, I had to study and follow the subculture. The military has always had field artists and the GI Bill; we have the WPA. We have many military museums that show art made by military personnel. I can only think of one that shows work by military spouses, partners, and military brats on a regular basis. (The only museum I know that includes the whole family is The Museum of the American Military Family and Learning Center, and they are not funded by the military.) I think families support their work themselves, independently. Some military-funded museums have traveling shows. These are fleeting, however.

The military has a long history with art. But do they show it? Not enough, in my opinion. The military is more than just war. It seems to me that independent curators outside of the military are putting together more in-depth shows that share the bigger picture.

Recently, [Tara Tappert of \*Arts and The Military\*](#), [Janis Albuquerque of \*O Dark Thirty Magazine\*](#), and I drove to New York City to The American Folk Art Museum to see [War and Pieced: The Annette Gero Collection of Quilts from Military Fabrics](#). There were quilts made mostly by British military personnel, but spouses and military brats were included. It was an amazing show! Well-rounded, I felt, because it showed how art can transform and heal the whole family in times of war. This show, of course, drew a vast audience.



“Deviled Eggs 2” by Lora Beldon

I feel the story of American military family members, spouses, and brats is shared in a very limited way (and mostly through academia). For example, the exhibit [The Arts and the Military: MOVING through MEMORIES of Service and Conflict at the Hylton Performing Arts Center on the Manassas Campus of George Mason University](#) is a collaboration with the Veterans and the Arts Initiative. This was a well-rounded show with a lecture included, but it was tucked away in the academic community. Then there was *Veterans in Society: Changing the Discourse* in 2013, and the Center for the Study of Rhetoric in Society at Virginia Tech I often go to these workshops, and they include family subject matter.

There are also art programs aimed at social/emotional health. That is what [Military Kid Art Project](#) falls under. The Military funds some art programs for the mental health of military personnel and families. Families can often attend for free or a minimal amount when they are with their service member. I think these programs are very important. But I think the military and partnered programming could do much better. I have yet to hear of an art program specifically for spouses of military. Other than [Military Kid Art Project](#) and [Brat Art Institute](#), I don't believe there is anything creative available with true military brat content. I am purposely leaving out all the programs that

receive money for military families that allow families to go and take free art classes but do not include wellness content like, say, a [Yellow Ribbon Program](#), or that have any permanency.

I would like to take this opportunity now to thank you for what you are doing and creating. *Collateral* is exactly the “well-rounded art” I have been talking about.

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**Collateral:**

Well, thanks. And I hear you. One of the reasons *Collateral* started was to amplify the voices of people indirectly impacted by military service and violent conflict; there are many venues interested in publishing/featuring the work of service members and veterans, but still very few with space, time, and resources dedicated to groups including families.

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**Lora:**

Has *Collateral* applied for grants given by the government to art in the military? Received any?

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**Collateral:**

*Collateral* has partnered with organizations receiving these, and we’ve received grants in the past, but they’ve always been either from academic institutions or local/state-funded arts organizations. We’re a small journal run by volunteer editors. Our mission includes supporting service members, veterans, families, *and* community members, and since Covid hit, our programming outside the journal has been on hold. For example, we used to offer writing workshops on and off post near Joint Base Lewis-McChord, and we facilitated poetry workshops in a detention center for undocumented youth, whose lives were upended by violent conflict in Central America and at the U.S.-Mexican border. We published [an anthology of their poems](#) during the pandemic, in lieu of workshops, and that was supported by the city of Tacoma.

That’s not to say we don’t plan to apply for support from military & government programs in the future.

I find that military families (and artists impacted by war, including refugees, immigrants, survivors, and activists) are usually expected to find support from organizations entirely separate from the military. Sometimes support is there, but many times, it isn’t. Military-connected artists aren’t always accepted or welcomed by civilian arts communities; they are still othered. It’s strange because it seems civilian organizations expect military-connected artists to be supported by the military, and the military expects the opposite, so we get caught in between, often unsupported by either, supported by ourselves.

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**Lora:**



What I see is that there are more people eager to support veterans who are artists and fewer people who want to support spouse artists (and fewer still who want to support military brat artists). The public still struggles to understand what a military brat is, and civilian organizations seem to be afraid of brat vernacular. As a brat who studies brats, I spend a lot of time educating people.

When asking for donations for our creative brat programs, we often hear military families say they already gave to a larger military family organization like the Wounded Warrior Project. What most non-artists don't realize is that most funding never filters down to children's programs that provide well rounded emotional support. From the beginning of the most recent wars, I was asked to be involved in helping create the children's portion of Yellow Ribbon Programs. I was asked to do the work pro bono, which I often did, to prove myself. Once I'd proved that my programming worked well, I asked for reimbursement of supplies and hourly payment of \$10 an hour. I was told no

money would be given by the organization but the families in attendance would be asked to donate personally in order for their child to attend creative, age specific, Yellow Ribbon programming.



"Deviled Eggs 6" by Lora Beldon

I soon found out that at least 60% of the families wanting to attend our art programs were on the poverty line. I realized I had to create, fund, and implement art programming for myself. Military Kid Art Project is programming created by adult military brats, taught by adult military brats who are not only professional artists but also professional teachers. (We also employ social workers, psychiatrists, and therapists when needed.) At the end of each program, we have a public art showing of the students' work. The sentence I hear the most is "I never knew my child felt that way or was thinking about that! Thank you."

I think what many adults forget is that when adults express themselves they have more experience and a larger vocabulary to describe what they are feeling. Children have an easier time drawing thoughts because visuals can encompass so much more. There are wonderful studies by [Harvard's Project Zero](#) and [writings by Howard Gardner](#) based on years of Blue Ribbon artwork from children. The point of his studies: children have much more to say culturally if we take the time to look, if we give them the safe space to say it.

I am reminded of the original group of my peers trying to obtain the first [Wikipedia page for military brats](#). The backlash and fighting between people stating brats are not a culture was surreal! As brats, we want to meet and talk to others that have had similar experiences and who understand our unusual lifestyle. Brats want to be acknowledged. I believe, and so do all the professionals I have spoken to in my field, that talking about all aspects of our culture helps to traverse the ups and downs better (as we see with veteran and spouse groups). But as [Mary Edwards Wertsch](#) once stated,

[“There is a reason why denial is so integral to military life. The possibility of war and death is so real and so close that to constantly feel its immanence would be unbearable.”](#) The questions that come to my mind are: why should a military brat coming of age during the current wars struggle as much as I did after the Vietnam war? And how can I help?

I honestly feel that Mary Edwards Wertsch, Donna Musil, Circe Woessner and I have all offered new information, and new information often scares people. Wertsch is the mother of it all, with her release of [Military Brats: Legacies of Childhood inside the Fortress](#). She was the first to define military brat categories in clear organization and with actual data. Musil created the first documentary on brats titled [Brats: Our Journey Home](#). Her film would have been accepted by an even larger audience if she had left out the discussion of rape.

*Military Kid Art Project*, with *Unclassified: The Military Kid Art Show*, brought together our brat history, sharing almost 75 years of brat artwork from across the globe. However, many people have decried what we show (the realness of guns, danger, alcoholism, etc). I’m proud of the work my peers and I have accomplished and how far it has gone, but just like *Collateral*, it isn’t making any money.

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### **Collateral:**

Do you come across military-connected artists who feel supported by either the civilian or military community, one more than the other? Do you come across military-connected artists who feel wholly supported or unsupported?

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### **Lora:**

Sure. Veteran artists that play it safe, veteran artists that paint war ships or planes, veteran artists that paint portraits and artists that make utilitarian objects are in museums and major magazines—I’ve met some who feel more supported by their own communities than others. Artists like [Carrie Waller](#), military spouse and watercolorist, is perhaps one of the best living watercolorists I am aware of. Carrie documents her military family’s travels through studies of objects like tea pots and cleaning supplies belonging to PCSing families. This is safe subject matter but is she in any military-funded museums? No, but she should be. Again, museums are telling a small portion of the whole story through limited points of view and limited voices. A lot of museums are struggling to add to history through new voices, as we see through the language of Black Lives Matter and the MeToo Movement.

The most famous military brat fine artist (has work in museums, is not a military-connected artist by my definition) is perhaps [Annie Leibovitz](#). Check out [Pilgrimage](#). The Smithsonian has a permanent collection of this body of work. The show speaks of her cultural heritage but does not mention being a military brat. Most brats do not consciously, concisely understand how much the culture informs their lives; either that, or they do not want to share that part of their life, as if it’s a dirty secret. If artists don’t understand and curators don’t understand, then how does it get remembered? We all know there are huge parts of history hidden. I could go on and on...

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**Collateral:**

You're right. There's so much to say. If you could tell me in just a few sentences how "consciously, concisely" the military culture informs all military brats and their work, how would you say it?

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**Lora:**

I would have to quote others who have said it better than I ever could. This is from the preface of [Mary Edwards Wertsch's \*Legacies of Childhood Inside the Fortress\*](#): "...other people had backgrounds, but I did not... They came from real places. I didn't. They knew their relatives. I didn't. They identified with a region of the country. I didn't... I had assumed I was some kind of generic nobody, a kid from nowhere and everywhere... Warrior society is characterized by a rigid authoritarian structure, frequently mirrored inside its families, extreme mobility; a great deal of father absence; isolation and alienation from the civilian community; an exceedingly strict class system; a very high incidence of alcoholism, which also suggests possibly high rates of family violence; a deeply felt sense of mission; and, not least, an atmosphere of constant preparation for war, with the accompanying implication for every family that on a moment's notice the father can be sent to war, perhaps never to be seen again."



"Deviled Eggs 3" by Lora Beldon

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**Collateral:**

What do you have coming up? How can viewers engage with your work in the near future? Any virtual events or openings or collaborations?

**Lora:**

Because [SHOUT! Sharing Our Truth \(the anthology\)](#) was so well received, the [Museum of the American Military Family](#) has commissioned me to start working on an LGBTQ+ Military Family Anthology, volume II. I have been collecting stories for over a year and am still open to more. Whomever may be reading this, please feel free to contact me about your personal story. This is open to all, including allies.

*SHOUT!* the play was just read on November 12, 2021, and it will be presented in a couple days at the [5th National Summit: Promoting Inclusivity Among Military Connected Healing Communities through the Arts](#), which takes place November 17-19, 2021, and will be hosted on ZoomGov.com.

*SHOUT!* will also be presented at the University of Rhode Island Providence campus, and it will be presented in a full performance next June in celebration of PRIDE Rhode Island and PRIDE FEST 2022. That will be free and open to the public, located at U of Rhode Island (Paff Auditorium, 80 Washington Street, Providence 02903) For more info, people can call 401-277-5206 or email [uri.artsandculture@gmail.com](mailto:uri.artsandculture@gmail.com).

[Brats Without Borders](#) is in the pre-planning stages of rereleasing our award-winning traveling show, [Unclassified: The Military Kid Art Show](#) online, as well as in a print format to allow smaller venues like schools to share.

You can find my personal work on my website, [www.lorabeldon.com](http://www.lorabeldon.com). I have three accounts on Instagram; one is my personal fine art under [@LKBeldon](#). Another is [@military\\_kid\\_art\\_project](#) where (along with [my Facebook page](#)) I post about upcoming art classes or camps for brats. I also run [@brat\\_pop](#), a visual pop-culture brat zine.



“Jacks” By Lora Beldon