

# So Say We All and Wrath-Bearing Tree Collaborate!

In collaboration with [So Say We All](#)'s Veterans Writing Division, founder [Justin Hudnall](#) and *The Wrath-Bearing Tree*'s Andria Williams had the privilege of serving 21 veterans, active-duty servicemembers, and veteran family members over 2023 by providing four masterclasses followed by an intensive creative writing workshop.

We would like to thank our masterclass teachers, [Abby Murray](#), [Halle Shilling](#), [Peter Molin](#), and [Andria Williams](#) for their inspired presentations on the aspects of craft; all of our wonderful participants; and California Humanities for supporting veterans in the arts.

*So Say We All* and *The Wrath-Bearing Tree* are proud to showcase a portion of our cohort below. We look forward to reading much more from them in the coming years.

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### **Connie Kinsey: “The Letters”**

In the old gray shoe box with the tattered red lid is four years’ worth of letters. Most of them are addressed to my mother, but some are addressed to me. Many are written on onionskin and sealed in the familiar FPO airmail envelopes brightly colored red, white and blue. They crinkle and crackle when you touch them. My dad wrote these letters during his four tours of Vietnam—the first in 1966 and the final one in 1972.

Those years he was away were hard on us all, but of course he took the brunt of it. He left everything behind. We missed him.

He missed everything.

Those letters have been around the world, carted from base to base, and stored in one closet or another since the 1960s. I have not read all of them yet. I have not read most of them.

My mother gave me the letters with a warning. To use her words, there are some *pornographic parts*. I imagine there might be. He was a young man away from the woman that almost sixty years later he would refer to as the love of his life.

That's not the reason I can't bring myself to read them. I think I'm prepared to see my dad as a fully human male with a healthy sex drive. That might have been difficult when I was a teenager, but in all of those letters he is younger than I am now. Much younger. The men he led much younger yet.

What I'm not prepared for are the spaces between the words - the things he doesn't write about - the booby traps, the snipers, the dead bodies, the leeches, the cold c-rations straight from the can. At least, I don't think he wrote about them. But I don't know. Not yet.

I know of these abominations because I hang out in Vietnam veterans' groups on Facebook. I never post. I just read. It's research. The guys know I'm lurking there - I asked permission. I want to know what my dad, what they, went through, but I also don't want to know. It's like watching a horror movie while peeking through fingers.

My father, Captain Conrad L. Kinsey, always said the Marine Corps took him as a poor boy and turned him into an officer and a gentleman. I'm quite sure there was nothing gentlemanly about Vietnam. But he survived when so many didn't.

I adored my father. Most folks did. He was the officer and gentleman he wanted to be since seeing his first Marine in dress blues as a poor 9-year-old boy in Michigan. He had fulfilled a dream and took his oath seriously.

My dad was a commanding officer who lost thirteen of his men

in a horrific battle on May 10, 1968, at Ngok Tavak near Chu Lai. It was Mother's Day. They weren't able to retrieve the bodies. That battle haunted him. Gave him nightmares. Landed him in a psychiatric ward decades later.

A group of the survivors formed and held reunions every five years in Branson, Missouri. My father finally attended when a group of forensic anthropologists went to Vietnam and retrieved the bodies of his men. Until they came home, he just couldn't go.

After his death, I was invited to attend what turned out to be the last reunion. It was held six months after his funeral.

I ended up drinking too much with a group of men who thought my father a fine gentleman and referred to him as their best commanding officer ever. I cried a lot, but I laughed a lot too. I have a photograph of four of us – me and three older men, though not older by all that much, our arms around one another's shoulders, broad smiles on our faces.

They were able to say to me what they'd never said to their commanding officer. I was able to ask them questions I'd never been able to ask my dad.

We bonded that night. I'm still in touch with some of them.

It was an important weekend in my life and my grief. Talking to those men helped me heal from my dad's death. It had seemed as if the whole world just went on when mine was collapsing. But those men that night – they remembered, and we remembered the man, the Marine, Captain Conrad L. Kinsey had been.

He's been gone seven years now. His death was sudden and unexpected though his wounds never healed. He had severe post-traumatic stress disorder. His experiences branded his heart, brain, and body. Vietnam, Ngok Tavak and the thirteen who didn't come home, especially, affected every experience he would have until the Sunday evening we found him dead.

I'm writing a book of my experiences and his during the Vietnam war. I was young and having an idyllic childhood in Hawaii and then moody teen years in North Carolina. He was doing four tours in hell. Incorporating his letters into this book is important. I must read them.

I must.

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### **Author's note:**

*The 50th anniversary of the official end of that terrible terrible war is coming up soon – May 7, 2025. It will be three days short of the 57th anniversary of the battle that broke my father.*

*It's time for me to begin. I can handle my dad's sexuality, but I am not sure I can handle the unwritten words that became his post-traumatic stress disorder.*

*I once had someone dear to me and eight years older say, "Vietnam was not a factor in my life." He said it as if tired of hearing my stories, tired of hearing my dad's stories, bored by us both. I was stunned. He was the right age to serve but had a lucky draft number. What privilege to have lived through such an era without it leaving a mark. How insolent and insular.*

*Vietnam was a heavy load for my family – my father so much more than the rest of us, but we were scarred too. I cry when I open that box of letters. I will cry when I read the letters. I hope to smile too. To hear his voice as I read. But the unknown of what's in that box haunts me and I'm afraid to begin.*

*But...Semper fi, Daddy, Semper fi. You rest in peace now.*

– Connie Kinsey



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### **George Warchol, "Service in the Middle"**

Some inspire movies and books,  
and others wind up in the news.  
But for defenders with wrenches or keyboards in racks,  
publicity wrecks our Service in Quietude.

And somewhere between the snipers and spies  
are the middling faithful and true.  
But no one tells stories about the comms guys,  
they're complex and they're boring too.

Such as "Italy Went Dark" and the "Smurf Attack"  
And "The Air Traffic Control System in Afghanistan is Down  
Again" too.

But the clever fixes among cables, and packets, and stacks...  
They're cool! But they would not interest you.

They say "All gave some, and some gave all"  
and that's true In Arms, sisters, and brothers.  
But the defining phrase for answering the call, is  
"Less than some; More than others"

Shep'rding the Team and The Job carried out,  
that's full time, and full effort, and much of what Service to  
Nation is all about.

But the pow'rs demand our grind and our continual waiting  
hurry,

"Waste yourself in OUR Way of Attainment! Or Be FOREVER  
Unworthy!"

"Climb the ladder, collect and achieve,  
Stripes and baubles and slash up the sleeve!"

"Fill the reports with heroic deeds!"

"Promote!" "Promote!" MAKE them believe!

And like promotes like and after evil doth enter,  
the Teeth of the Grinder do harden and render  
Honesty's kernel as powder in blender,  
seeking to crush and to force The Surrender.

But instead, I'm finding my place in creative belong,  
buoyed among words and not stripes.  
And I'm finding my voice in verse and in song,  
and in my choices towards effort, and living, and life.

And coming to terms with all that's gone past,  
I at last come to seek My Own Peace.  
My Terms. My Service. My Sorrows. My Joys.  
My ways to meet my own Needs.

I've done things you can not,  
and you've done things I could never.  
But the greatest of treasures, of gifts to be caught,  
Is finding ourselves...and keeping ourselves together.

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## **George Warchol, "Give and Get"**

Give it up.  
Give it up and get going.  
Let it go,  
and get on your way.

Listen up  
and teach yourself freedom.  
Write down your story,  
you've got so much to say.

Lift your head.  
Don't abandon yourself.  
Find your starting ground,  
and don't you retreat.  
Just hang on.  
I promise I'll be there,  
I'll catch you.  
Just try to stay on your feet.

Put it down.  
It's too much to carry.  
Talk it out.

Don't bury it deep.  
Begin to trust  
and be  
just  
a little less wary.  
Let us help you begin to see.

To see something different  
from all that you've known.  
To perceive there is more  
than your bearing alone.

See that we,



that we want you with us.

You have done so much good.

You are worthy of trust.

Just get up.

Get up and get going.

Begin to move.

Please, just shuffle your feet.

There's still light ahead.

And there's still movement showing.

And there's still a good chance

for some kind of peace.

Everyone suffers.

But not all the time.

Not forever. Not always...

But always for some of the time.

And If redemption be needed,

then know that suffering need not be without value.

Grind the growth from it.

Squeeze it for purpose.

If nothing else,

it shapes us for something more.

Perhaps to fit us for more acts of tomorrow.

From the middle I can only tell you of what *I* see.

But from in front of it,

I can look back,

and tell something,

of what it means

against the background

of former,

forged ideas,

and

old,

cold,

hard,  
sharpened facts.

Get in front of it.  
We must put this behind.  
Get in front of it.  
We must stop wasting time.  
Get in front of it.  
We are not going alone.  
Get in front of it,  
and tell it to push you home.

*You can watch George's beautiful reading of his work [here](#).*

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### **Mariah Smith – No One Left Behind**

“Every man is guilty of all the good he did not do.” –  
Voltaire

I'd already been awake for a day and half when the bombs went off. Physically, I was in a hotel room in the Willard

Intercontinental in Washington DC, but mentally, I was outside the gates of the Kabul International Airport, in the crush of scared and desperate people, trying to guide a number of Afghan families through the mob that surrounded it. My friend Dee, an Afghan American, who I had served with in Khost Province in 2007, was doing the same for her cousins and aunts and uncles. She was the one who texted me first, the instant after the explosion at the airport gate, and moments later the pictures started flooding in. The images were live-streamed into my brain, becoming indelible memories, through the phone screen my eyes had been glued to since August 15th 2021, the day the Taliban entered the city. The pictures showed people running holding their children, covered in dirt and soot from the blast, torn and bloodied clothing littering the streets. A thousand dropped and crushed water bottles. Dee called me on WhatsApp a few minutes later as we tried to get accountability of the Afghans we had been communicating with. In the end all we could do was cry wordlessly together at the futility and the anger we felt.

Hanging up the phone, I closed my eyes in exhaustion for a few minutes and let the despair wash over me. There had been very little sleep the past 9 days. The King sized bed in the quiet hotel room threatened to swallow me. The same hotel room where I had put on a dress and good earrings the previous day, pinned my hair up, and walked into a meeting where I asked for, and received \$250,000 from Boeing's veterans group to help fund our evacuation efforts. Until a week ago, I had never done any fundraising before and now we were asking for six figures at a time. Instead of sleeping I got up, walked into the marble bathroom, brushed my teeth, splashed water on my tear streaked face, put on a ball cap to cover my unwashed hair and went downstairs to the conference room where the others were. There was more work to be done.

The first interpreter I ever worked with was named Joseph, or that was the name he used when he was with our unit. He joined

our platoon of MPs a few days into the Iraq War in March of 2003. He recalled being a teenager when Saddam invaded Kuwait in 1990/1991 and the US kicked off Desert Storm. When the US returned again 12 years later, he immediately volunteered to help. One night, all of us lieutenants were called to the bombed out building on Tallil Air Base that we were using as a temporary command post to meet our interpreters. The first one wouldn't shake my hand, informing me of his religious restrictions against touching women. I was the only female officer in the company. Joseph stepped forward and shook my hand warmly, his kind smile and direct eye contact dispelling the embarrassment and irritation I had felt the moment before. War was new to all of us at that time. We were excited – we felt like we were going on a big adventure. None of us knew it would dominate and sometimes consume the next almost 20 years of our lives.

I don't know what we would have done without Joseph. It wasn't just that he could speak the language and we couldn't. He showed a group of inexperienced Soldiers what a war is like for the people whose home is where it is being fought. What was at stake. What to do when you encounter children on the battlefield, the elderly, the injured citizens. All the realities none of us had lived before but would live many times over in the years to come.

In the years that followed there were more deployments including three tours to Afghanistan. And right around the time I was done with the Army, America had decided it was long past done with Afghanistan, we started negotiating with the Taliban and set a timeline to leave. I will never forget the sadness on General Miller's face in one of the last televised interviews of units pulling out. He sat on a concrete perimeter barrier and talked to the reporter, no inflection in his voice, only fatigue, perhaps hiding the regret and disagreement he felt with the decision. One of the younger Soldiers who was interviewed said she hadn't even been born

yet when the Towers fell on 9/11.

Downstairs in the conference room of the Willard, 18 years after that first meeting with an interpreter, I was trying to make things right. A dozen other grim, exhausted people, most of them fellow veterans, sat in a horseshoe formation of tables behind laptops. Many were from other non-profits like ours, No One Left Behind. The tables were littered with Redbulls and spitters. Messages continued to pour in from people who were working inside the airport grounds, those on the streets where the bombs went off, and other veterans from all over the country trying to find and help their interpreters. A congressional committee staffer who was also an Army 82nd Airborne veteran like me, texted: "Hey – are you hearing that the Kabul airport is shutting down? The gates are all being closed and nobody else is being allowed in?"

We had been talking and sharing information all week. Those of us in that conference room had a direct connection to US troops on the ground inside the airport. I had just heard that the Marines were bulldozing shut the gate that had been bombed, welding them closed behind earthworks. After the bombs, no one else was getting in.

"Yep, it's true." I confirmed.

"WTF?! Blinken and Hicks told Senators this afternoon on their call that ops would continue at least until the 31st."

"We are struggling to even get American Citizens on the airfield right now." I told him about the earthen berms being erected to block access to the airport, all while American citizens waved their passports and Afghan interpreters desperately waved their visa paperwork outside the razor wire. "Everything I have seen is indicating we are done evacuating. They lied." I set my phone down, disgusted at the way we were leaving our allies. Not even the Senate Intelligence Committee was getting straight answers.

A few hours later I watched in furious disbelief as the President addressed the country from the Oval office, a row of American flags behind him. He praised the bravery of the orderly withdrawal and reiterated the rightness of ending the War in Afghanistan. The group of us volunteers stood in front of the TV with our arms crossed, numbly watching the canned and false message being peddled. It was a pathetic attempt to try and spin the gigantic cluster fuck we had watched unfold over the past ten days into something resembling a strategic plan. I couldn't believe anyone would buy his empty statements. Did they even care about the scale of suffering that was happening on the ground in Afghanistan? The senior leaders at the State Department sure didn't seem to. As the US prepared to abandon the embassy in Kabul some US employees in the visa office burnt all of the Afghan passports and documents they had custody of. These were the golden tickets for the Afghans who had earned a Special Immigrant Visa to the US through their work with the American military or government. Although the burning was 'standard procedure' for preparing to abandon an embassy, in this case to the enemy, this action further sealed the fate of those who were so close to making it out yet still trapped.

Someone switched off the TV, and we walked to Old Ebbits Grill, a Washington DC institution. We ordered some much-needed alcohol. One of the other volunteers arrived a few minutes after the first wave of us, spotted my Old Fashioned on the table, asked if he could taste it, and knocked it back in one swallow, cherry and all, before his ass even landed in his chair. The table shrieked with hysteria tainted laughter. We were all a little unhinged from the horror of the past several days.

For almost two years, I've tried to think of a coherent way to talk about those two weeks in August 2021 and the months that followed. It was both the worst thing I've ever witnessed and some of the most moving work I've ever been a part of.

In April and May of 2023 No One Left Behind was contacted by a team from Japanese public TV. They wanted to do a story on our organization along with the Afghan women who had been part of the female tactical platoon (FTPs, they were called in short). This consumed my life for a month but ended up being very cathartic. One of the themes of their show was moral injury among veterans. "The Japanese people do not have the experience with this. The generation that fought in WWII never spoke of it and there have not been conflicts since. We also do not want them to forget what is happening to the Afghan people." At the time of this writing I am still waiting for the documentary to be released. I don't know what angle they will take the story. Although I came to trust the production team, both women close in age to me, I have to recognize that they are from a different country and I don't know how they will paint the United States and our involvement in Afghanistan. I still hold a security clearance for work, and I held this in my mind every time they interviewed me. Although I was mostly open with them, I was not able to fully share the depth of the doubt and anger I was feeling at my own country's clumsy and sometimes arrogant involvement in a 20 year war that we lost. It was hard to even put it in writing for this essay. In a way it feels like treason.

"Tell us the story of the skinny, scared woman again." The Japanese camera woman zoomed her lens towards me. They must have asked me half a dozen times, referring to a story I had told them about searching Afghan women on a compound that Special Forces raided along with our ANA partners. My job was to search the women on the compound and this particular young woman was likely in her 20s as I was. As I searched her for weapons, in her own home, that I had invaded I was struck by how malnourished and frail she felt under my hands. Although I was gentle, I stood behind her with my boot between her two sandled feet and felt the fragility and lightness of her body, ashamed of my own camouflaged and armored presence restricting her movement and how easily I could have hurt her if that had



been my intent.

I think they liked this story because it drew a stark contrast between the American soldiers and the Afghan people whose country they were occupying. But that was the opposite of the Afghans in the military and government we had worked with. We were working collectively for a better future. And then that was snatched away from all of us. I say snatched, but it was years of poor strategy, a rotational plan that didn't work, a lack of focus, and a misunderstanding of the durability of the Taliban. When we lost and were cut off from our friends in the most chaotic, traumatizing way possible, all we wanted was to be able to be with our friends again and help them live safely. It wasn't about the differences, it was about our common humanity.

"Tell us about your PAIN and the GUILT" the camerawoman and interviewer would say. Emphasis on these sad words. Each interview led to a request for another, often revisiting the same topic 6 or 8 times. They wanted to hear more about my deployments in Afghanistan, hoping for a good shoot 'em up story I regretted and I think they were a little disappointed in the relative calmness of my deployments. Although they wanted the Japanese people to know the Afghans stuck under Taliban rule were still suffering, with few options, we didn't talk much about the withdrawal itself.

I met Efat when we interviewed her for the Japanese public TV show. She had been a female police woman, a job she loved. Now she was trapped at home. During our interview she cried helplessly and the feeling of watching a strong woman in such despair was gut wrenching. How do you help someone keep hope alive in these circumstances? I felt very helpless and grateful for the friends that have been able to leave. What does Efat have to look forward to? She was the one who made me confront, most clearly the reality for women left there. When I interviewed her, her surroundings looked like a mud walled compound with little furniture inside and a small assortment

of basic kitchen implements. She told us they had sold a majority of their possessions in order to live. She was dressed in a loose black robe with a black scarf ready to wind over her hair if she stepped outside. The way she sobbed softly tore at my heart. There was nothing I could do or say to help or that made anything better in any way. How terrible to be trapped so completely in your own country, after having lived a different life of relative freedom as a young adult.

No One Left Behind continues to evacuate people out of Afghanistan, mainly through funding their travel to Pakistan while they wait to finish processing at the US embassy in Pakistan. We set a goal to help 1000 leave in 2023 and we met that goal on 30th of June. We set a new goal of 2000 and we made that goal also in late October. There are still so many people trying to help, but it will really take a change in US and international policy to allow everyone who needs to leave Afghanistan to make it to safety. The overwhelming need makes our efforts feel like a drop in the bucket.

It was almost nine months after the evacuation when Latifa and her family arrived at Dulles airport in May of 2022. They had been waiting in Iceland for the past 4 months while their US visa was finished. Latifa was the primary applicant, which was less common for the woman to be the primary applicant, less than 10% . After having NOLB consume my life for almost a year, and to be overwhelmed by the amount of people reaching out that we couldn't yet help evacuate, I realized it became important for me to help one person, one family, and to see what the experience was actually like for a new family arriving. This felt like it was as much for my redemption and well-being as it was for theirs. They came to live with me, making progress in starting their new lives though they still feel the wounds of the country they left and the life they lost that is now no longer possible in their native land.

The night after I left the Williard back in August of 2021, the night after the last US plane left the airfield in

Afghanistan, I was at a black tie event in Virginia horse country where I live now. It felt surreal, rich horse people in the most beautiful part of Virginia and that night I felt very removed from it, like a disoriented witness. I was still fully immersed in the violence and tragedy of what I had seen. I felt like I had been deployed, even though I hadn't left DC. At one point I started to tear up, overwhelmed, and my date walked me out to the large balcony where we watched the guests dancing, brightly lit through the plate glass windows, while we were shadowed in the summer night, the music from inside competing with the sounds of frogs and crickets. Teenage girls in their homecoming and prom dresses, jumped about joyfully on the dance floor in small groups or with their parents. The stark contrast between their safety and inhibition and what girls their own age had just gone through and what their lives in Afghanistan would be like now.

This is the story I wish I wasn't telling. I wish our war had ended differently. After investing all that time and lost lives and lives forever changed, our country's leaders had us walk away in the most humiliating way possible and leave our friends behind in a near hopeless situation. However, our work with No One Left Behind continues. While we are still helping people depart Afghanistan on the Special Immigrant Visa program we are also very focused on helping them restart their lives here in America. And this is where my faith in my fellow citizens remains strong. The kindness and generosity by regular people we have seen extended to these newly arrived Afghan refugees is incredible to witness. Restarting a life and a career in a new country is exceptionally challenging and so many Americans have stepped up to help in a thousand different ways. For a period of time after the withdrawal I was hyper focused on the horror and unfairness of what had happened to so many Afghans and how it affected the veteran community. But now my focus has shifted more to the good we are able to be part of.



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**Reinetta Vaneendenberg – A.O.R.**

Letter from Hotel California 1 epistolary

The Hall of Valor 3 prose

Vet Killed by Granby ST Hit/Run 4 newspaper reportage

Obituaries 5 newspaper reportage

Collateral Damages of A.O.R. Ambiguities 6 scratch-out poem

Crossing Granby Street 8 poem encased by fragments

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28/8/2017 Hotel California haha (same as before)

Dear Liz,

A volunteer is typing this for me since my hands are bandaged.

His name is Jonathan and he's here allot getting new legs and his gut fixed. Sometimes we play backgammon like you and I did that year in the sandbox. I move pieces with my good finger.

It was great talking to you last night. I've been thinking about you allot today. You—in a good place now, with a room of your own at the veteran house. It's ok to accept the room and the food and the clothes. You're a vet and all that is for vets. Not everyone can be lucky like me and spend a year at Hotel John Hopkins in lovely Baltimore.

Last night when we talked you were mad again about the AOR crap but we couldn't do anything. It's over and done with and over and done. Listen hear, you and I aren't responsible for the 10,000 dead from 9/11 and its wars, so you need to let that go.

Take those five fuckin "Xs" off your fuckin hat. Sailors don't count our kills or anyone else's. Shake your red hair free. We did the best we could with the crappy equipment and leadership. Like Nam, man: who's the enemy? Our interpreter, Fahad? A kid? A fruit vendor? Congress sucks! How can they tell us who's a threat? When we can or can't shoot? They're a million miles away. In fuckin DC.

I must a got all stirred up after our call because I had that same dream again last night, the one with you standing in your battle dress, head down and walking, not watching where you're going and I'm yelling "Liz! Look out! LIZ!" But you keep walking. I keep yelling. I wake up sweating, crying. You always had rotten situational awareness. I guess that's why we made it as battle buddies.

We had good war-fighting skills. The rules of engagement said

when we could shoot. The area of responsibility—the lines for bullets, bodies and bags were clearly drawn on maps, directives, messages for Afghanistan, Iraq. I don't know why we were sent where we oughtn't to of been. Boundaries are boundaries.

You're right it was a set up because there was no way we could have guessed that little girl had a bomb in her dolly basket.

Have you heard about the lieutenant? Someone came by saying the Navy was not promoting her because of the explosion. I don't think it was her fault that we went where we weren't 'supposed to and her being in the navy not the army. I agree with you that w

I don't think it was her fault that we went where we weren't 'supposed to be' and her being in the navy not the army. I agree with you that we were setup because Fahad didn't go with us and he always wanted to be with us everywhere.

The sandbox is a strange place for sailors. Don't you think so? How can our Navy not promote a young officer who is eating the same crap we had to and live like we had to and the Elephants keep changing the AOR and ROE? At least she didn't get hurt. She got home in one piece to her wife and kids.

Jonathan's nice, a handsome dude. Maybe you could have coffee with him when you visit. I know you come from blue blood but not all guys are like those Our families are so fucked up. Mine tries but they don't understand, even my dad who did Vietnam. They returned to disdain and us as heroes but are forgotten a month after returning anyway. None of it is anyone's responsibility. Hope you get this litter at your new

address before our next call.

The docs say I'm doing ok and can see you whenever you come up from Norfolk. I'm sorry for the mix up last time. I had the dates wrong. And here you rode the bus all day. Sorry.

Time is jumbled between surgeries and meds. You know what I mean—you have allot of meds to. I was in OR for reconstructing surgery the day you came. I don't see much that they can do—nine fingers got blown off and all the operations won't bring them back—but those doctors go figure they always have an idea how to make a bad thing better. Next operation is to make the whole in my gut better.

The only good things in my life are you and Jonathan as friends. The rest is crap. Look forward to your weekly call. Same time same station.

So, now I really have to go because Jonathan has to go to PT. Remember when that meant physical training, a chance to burn off some steam? Now it's pain and torture. I asked him to sign this for me so you'd know it was really from me but he laughed.

Just believe it's from me,  
your battle buddy,  
Mary

*The Hall of Valor  
lists all  
6906*

*U.S. military who have died during the Global War on Terror in Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation New Dawn.*

*This Hall of Valor is a searchable database by name, operation, month and year. It can also sort by death date, oldest to newest or newest to oldest.*

Viewed 3DEC2017: thefallen.militarytimes.com

VET KILLED BY GRANBY ST. HIT/RUN  
NORFOLK

Dispatch reported an anonymous call 2:12 p.m.,  
28 August 2017, about a hit-and-run at Granby Street and Thole  
Street

intersection in the Suburban Acres area of Norfolk. The caller  
said a

person was hit by a compact brown car. An emergency crew was  
on

scene within 4 minutes of the call, followed by an ambulance 3  
minutes later.

There were no identifying documents found on the victim. She  
was  
pronounced DOA at DePaul Hospital.

Police found no witnesses.

The victim has been identified as Elizabeth C. Stanton, 37, a  
U.S.

Navy veteran. Burial services pending.

Anyone with information about this accident is asked to call  
Norfolk Police Investigations.

obituaries

Elizabeth C. Stanton

NORFOLK – 37, Funeral

service: 8 a.m. Monday, on

Sept. 11, 2017, Virginia State

Veterans Cemetery, Suffolk.

**Collateral Damages of A.O.R. Ambiguities**



Area of Responsibility inside outside  
the enemy outside inside  
ordersdogtagsdufflebagI.D.cellphonesmokes  
Iraq on the Way Back  
Domino Theory  
burqa door-to-door  
An improvised explosive device I.E.D.  
is a hidden bomb Blows up patrol  
convoy missing body parts Balad  
Bagram Air Base Afghanistan  
we don't know where the leg is Politicians  
make up rules of engagement R.O.E.  
tasty fish eggs grow into the child as I.E.D. who will lead us  
hightechhighbodycount out-foxed  
push meds push to keep/up with them  
Ramstein Air Force Base Germany  
VA Hospital amputations prosthetics thumb  
Hand Calf Legs Charles C. Carter Center for Mortuary  
Affairs, Dover Air Force Base, Delaware  
Warmonger body armor/MadeinChina/budget hearings  
re-take, re-deploy, re-calibrate  
Fall of Berlin,Hanoi,Fallujah.  
HailMaryFullofGrace  
It has been 16 years

Senator, Is the 22-Veterans-Per-Day Suicide Rate Data  
Reliable?

*Do you have stats for correlation with  
Homelessness? Alcoholism? Drug abuse?  
VA Failure rates? CPTSD? TBI ?*

See: the Latin cida, killer

S u i cide me

Fr a t ri cide us

G e n o cide them

CNN reports an increased rate of blue-on-blue violence as  
military kill their own

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She charged the crosswalk as if rushing the landing zone,  
right arm propelled red pony-tailed floppy head.  
Hot wash rose from swampy beach traffic.  
I saw her as a unit, an interruption across my line of sight.  
The uniform of a street person, I presumed, with time to  
look during the long light. I turned up the AC.  
Flicked the auto-lock.  
Black wool beret, with five white Xs pinned on it.  
Hawaiian shirt, glaring blue, green, yellow  
Camouflage pants, too big or her now too small.  
Black mocs like clown shoes, pale heels peeking out,  
as if her feet had lost the mass for boots.  
She was closing on the sidewalk, focused on the mark—  
When the light turned, I shifted the Vette into first  
just as horns blasted.

*Reinetta Van explores identity and historical perspective issues in hybrid forms. Her work has appeared in The War Horse and anthologies Sisters in Arms: Lessons We've Learned and Things We Carry Still: Poems and Micro-Stories About Military Gear. Van ([captainvanusnavy@gmail.com](mailto:captainvanusnavy@gmail.com)) scribbled A.O.R.'s first draft June 12, 2017, and hopes to express someday why this piece sticks in her craw. You can hear her read from her work [here](#).*



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**Tom Keating – REMF**

Richie handed me a bandolier.

"Another fucking waste of twelve hours," he said. The green cloth pockets each held a magazine filled with eighteen rounds for the M16 battle rifle slung on my shoulder. It was almost 1800 hours, and we were going on perimeter guard duty till 0600 hrs. the next morning. Ninety-eight degrees, and our jungle fatigues were soaked with sweat.

We loaded up the truck in the company area for perimeter guard duty, which we were assigned to do every couple of weeks. Twelve hours sitting in a hot, wet, smelly sandbagged bunker on our sector of the Army base perimeter. Twelve hours of boredom.

"I'd rather be typing the fucking monthly fuel consumption report," I replied. "This sucks, again."

"Can it, you two, and get on the truck," yelled Sergeant Hollis, the sergeant of the guard for this shift.

The twelve of us climbed on the open truck, wearing helmets and heavy, sweaty flak vests, our rifles slung on our shoulders. The truck drove out to the perimeter along the dirt road behind the tall, barbed-war fence of our base. Two small Vietnamese villages were just four hundred meters from the fence, and the locals who lived there would come into the main gate each day, get checked by MPs, and then go to work on our base as cooks, laundry workers, and housemaids.

The combat troops called us REMFs, rear echelon motherfuckers; support troops that made the war possible with our typing, driving, computer programming and other work skills needed in a modern Army. We do the paperwork that feeds the war with everything from body bags to bullets. Our base and living quarters the grunts (infantry) call luxury. We had beds, daily hot chow, plenty of water and in some cases, air-conditioned offices.

Most of the soldiers assigned to this logistics base were trained to be Army administrative types. Some, like me, who

were trained for infantry, were assigned as clerks or typists when we arrived. The Army marches on paper. I knew I lucked out with this assignment, instead of being in combat.

Every couple of weeks we were pulled from our offices, trucks and repair shops and thrown together for bunker guard duty, strangers to each other. The truck arrived at our bunker's situated on large earthen berms on the perimeter near one of the gates into our base. The truck stopped, and Sergeant Hollis got out, walked to the rear, and said,

"Kearney, Philips, Richie and Denton, you four here, in bunker number one."

We hopped off the truck. Someone handed us our weapons, flares, ammunition for the M60 machine gun, extra canteens, and a box of C-rations. Richie carried two rolls of toilet paper. The truck drove down to the next bunker. We waited while Philips picked up a stone and threw it into our bunker.

"Hope ole snaky aint in there today."

Cobras loved our bunkers; they provided shade for the cold-blooded reptiles, who also enjoy the rats that live there, too. We threw stones in the bunker to let Snaky know we're coming in. Sure enough, he slithered out, an eight-foot-long cobra. The snake turned and retreated into the brush near the barbed wire. Philips threw in another rock and waited. Nothing. We carefully entered the bunker, our home for the next twelve hours. There were no bushes or tall grass around our bunker. Defoliant sprayed every week made sure of that.

I set the machine gun on its bipod, positioned it out the center bunker port. We took off our helmets and flak vests, and settled in. The heat and stink inside the bunker was unbearable. Richie and Denton went outside behind the bunker to smoke some weed. Philips and I took the guard position, looking out at the villages.

Philips said he was a truck mechanic for the 350th TC (Transportation Company). A short, stocky fellow, he speaks with a hillbilly accent. "Kearney, where you from?"

Before I could reply Richie came back in. Richie was tall and lanky. He shoved his glasses up higher on his large nose and announced, "Put on your gear, the sergeant is coming to check, and he's got the ELL-TEE with him."

We put on our helmets, shirts and vests and waited. Sergeant Hollis called us together outside the bunker. Lieutenant Nack, the officer of the guard this shift, stood behind the sergeant. Nack's tailored fatigue was dark with sweat. Hollis was an experienced soldier who had fought in Korea. He gave us our instructions.

"Okay, you guys know the drill. Two on two off, two hours. Kearney, I want you on the machine gun. Richie, check the commo line. You are Reno 4. Do it now."

Richie picked up the field phone handset, pressed the key and said, "Bravo One, Reno 4 commo check." Richie put the receiver down. "We're good to go, Sergeant."

Sergeant Hollis replied, "Okay. Do that at least once an hour. Me and the lieutenant will do another check later tonight and bring more water. Anything else, Lieutenant?"

Nack stepped forward. He wore the custom fit new model body armor jacket that zipped up the front. "Stay alert, men. Keep your eyes open tonight, Intel says we are sure to get hit by Charlie." He stepped back. Nack worked in the finance office, probably hadn't fired a weapon since Basic Training or whatever reserve officers went through. They turned and got back in the Jeep and left.

Philips asked as he took off his gear, "Kearney, you think the EL-TEE was just bullshitting about an attack?"

"I don't know," I replied, "It is the big Chinese New Year festival, I would expect them all to be celebrating, not fighting." We settled in, looking for movement in front of us.

Denton and Richie relieved us two hours later. The sun was almost gone, so Phillips and I went outside, where it was cool, the air fresh. Trucks and Jeeps kept coming and going out of the gate near our bunker. Phillips used the piss tube alongside the bunker, and I sipped warm water from my canteen. Just then the field phone chirped. Richie picked it up.

"Reno 4." His eyes got large, and he looked over at me.

"Roger, yellow alert. Reno 4."

Yellow alert meant some shit was going down. We hustled back into the bunker. I drew back the cocking lever of the M 60 and put my shoulder against the stock. I looked out the port. Richie and Denton picked up their rifles. Denton looked confused. He didn't know what to do with the rifle. I looked over and said,

"Denton, put the magazine into the rifle, then pull the charging handle. Put your selector switch off safety to fire. Richie, give him a hand." These guys were clerks and typists, not infantry. Finally, their rifles were locked and loaded. We waited. I saw the gate being closed; Vietnamese workers on the post being hustled out of the gate as it closed. A Military Police Jeep pulled up to the gate, with an M60 machine gun mounted and manned. Damn!

"We have to check the claymores to be sure the wires are okay. Who wants to go with me?" Phillips nodded his head. "Okay. Denton and Richie, eyes front. If you see anything move, shoot it. We'll be right back."

The two of us exited the bunker and found the claymore wires leading from the bunker. We followed along in the fading light all the way to the mines which were thirty feet in front of

the bunker. Everything looked okay, the wires attached to the blasting caps, positioned "FRONT TOWARD ENEMY." We ran back to the bunker. I heard a rumble, like thunder. The phone chirped again. Richie answered,

"Understand. Red alert. Reno 4." Richie hung up and relayed the news. "The VC are attacking Bien Hoa Air Base, and we may be next! Holy Shit!" We were jacked up with adrenaline and fear. The booms were louder, closer. The stutters of a machine gun could be heard. The field phone chirped again. I picked it up.

"Reno 4," I said into the handset.

"Reno 4, stand by. Victor Charlie spotted in the village 400 meters your front. TAC air on the way. Get low in your bunker."

"Reno 4."

"Get down," I shouted, "TAC Air!" Everyone crouched down below the sandbag wall of the bunker. We heard the roar of an F4 Phantom jet, and two large explosions. The F4 Phantom roared away. I cautiously looked over the sandbag port. The villages were gone, just smoke and fire. Nothing was moving in front of us. I looked over to the gate, the MP Jeep was gone, replaced by an Armored Personnel Carrier (APC). Before I could process this, we heard more firing and some small explosions, grenades most likely. Then it got quiet. The firing stopped. Nothing moved. The phone chirped again. I picked it up.

"Reno 4."

"Reno 4, stand down from Red alert. Alert status now yellow. alert status yellow." The sergeant arrived shortly after we relaxed. ELL-TEE wasn't with him. I told him our situation.

"Sergeant, we went on red alert," I looked at my watch, "60 minutes ago, just got word to stand down to yellow. TAC Air



blew up the villages to our front. All weapons locked and loaded.”

“Okay, Kearney. Stay alert. This may go on all night.” Hollis drove over to the next bunker.

I turned to the guys. “Let’s get back to the guard schedule: two on two off, two hours. Stay alert. If you think you are gonna fall asleep, move around, take deep breaths. Me and Philips will take the first watch.”

Philips and I looked out the bunker towards the destroyed village. Damn! the jet just blew it away! There were people there earlier. I hope they got out before the bombs. Jesus! No movement at all. We could hear the chatter of machine gun fire and explosions far down the perimeter on our left. The APC roared away towards the fighting. We were alone in the darkness.

“Kearney, I’m scared.” Said Philips.

“Me, too,” I replied. The lights at the gate cast some in front of our bunker. Richie and Denton were napping outside. The sounds of battle diminished. We started to relax. After forty minutes I was fighting the urge to close my eyes and sleep when Philips whispered to me.

“Kearney, I see somebody moving!”

“Where?” I jerked alert.

“Over to the left, see it?”

I slowly turned left, and yes; someone was slowly crawling towards bunker two on our left. A sapper! I turned to my right and saw someone else crawling towards us. Two sappers! They got through the wire somehow and were about forty feet away.

“Philips, ” I whispered, “you fire right, I fire left. Go!”

I fired my M16 four times at the guy. Bunker 2 must have seen the sapper too and fired their M60 machine gun. The red tracer rounds bounced off the ground in front of the crawlers. The sapper on the right got up on his knees to fire a B40 rocket at our bunker, just as Philips hit him. He fell back, and the rocket went sailing over our position and exploded behind us. Denton and Richie were now wide awake.

"Jee-sus! You got them," shouted Denton.

"Keep looking," I said. "There may be more." My heart was pumping fast. My vision had sharpened. I scanned in front and on both sides, even looked behind us. But there wasn't anyone else.

My infantry training told me to go out and check the bodies. I ran, crouched, to the first body. He was deformed by the rounds he took from me and the M60 from bunker two. His right arm was missing. Picked up his rifle and slung it on my shoulder. I checked him for papers, found some.

The B40 rocket guy was twenty feet away. Philips' shot had blown his head apart. I wanted to throw up, but I held it in. I picked up his launcher and the rockets he carried. No papers on him. I ran in a crouch back to the bunker. I threw up outside the bunker entrance, then went in and picked up the phone.

"Bravo One, Reno 4."

"Reno 4."

"Weapons fired. Two enemy Kilos. No Whiskeys, (Army code for dead and wounded), two weapons recovered."

"Roger, Reno 4. Continue alert." We could hear some explosions and rapid firing along the perimeter, but it was quiet near us. Philips looked at me, his eyes were wet.

"I shot deer and squirrels back home," he said. "But these

were men! Jesus! I don't want to do that again, Kearney."

"I know," I said. "It is fucking awful, but they were going to kill you and me and Denton an' Richie. We didn't have a choice."

"Shit," said Denton, "I wanna get outta this fucking bunker and this fucking country."

"Shut the fuck up, Denton, you just got here," said Richie. "You aint going anywhere for a year. Kearney's right, it was us or them."

Philips went outside, still upset. Denton and Richie took over the guard. I stayed in the bunker. I was suddenly hungry, feeling lightheaded as the adrenaline left me. I could not relax, though.

Time passed, and we heard no more shooting. When the sun came up, smoke was rising from the village. The two enemy bodies were still there in front of our bunkers, flies feasting on them. We heard no battle noise, just a few random rifle shots somewhere down the line. Sergeant Hollis and Lieutenant Nack were coming down the access road in the jeep. Hollis stopped the Jeep, and I went out to meet him and Nack. I nodded at Nack. No saluting officers near the wire.

Sergeant Hollis said, "Situation, Kearney."

"Sergeant, all quiet. No further attack on this section since 2300 hrs. Two dead sappers out front, I policed their weapons and some papers taken from their bodies." I pointed at the two weapons and the papers tucked in the corner.

Nack looked startled. He scowled at me, "Specialist, who told you to take the weapons and papers?" Hollis rolled his eyes, very slightly.

"Sir," I said, "that's SOP, disarm the enemy dead and check for any intel. They told us that at Fort Jackson."

"Oh, you were infantry," he snarled.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, You should have left the weapons there and notified me." He wanted credit for the weapons capture. It would look good on his record, and maybe a medal. He took a small note pad from his breast pocket and a pen.

"I need your name and your unit and commanding officer."

"Sir, Specialist 4th Class Kearney, I am an administrative aide to General Stark at headquarters supply, fuel division." Nack looked surprised. That brought him up. He didn't want to fuck with one of the general's boys. He put the notepad back in his pocket.

"Okay. Sergeant, take charge of the weapons and documents, and contact the engineers to remove the bodies."

"Yes sir." He went into the bunker and retrieved the weapons. "Kearney, I'll make sure you get credit for the captured weapons." Nack threw an angry look at the Sergeant as Hollis put them in the back of the Jeep and climbed behind the wheel.

"Thanks, Sergeant," I replied.

"Good job, men. Your relief is on its way." The Lieutenant said as he hopped back in the Jeep. Hollis drove away as the field phone chirped. I picked it up.

"Reno 4, Alert status Yellow." I turned to the guys, who were tired, dirty, and still jacked up on adrenaline.

"Alert Yellow, we can relax." Then we heard the truck coming to bring us our relief. It was 07:00hrs. I took off my flak vest and sucked my canteen dry. Phillips had recovered somewhat and smiled at me. I could hardly wait to get back to those fucking fuel consumption reports.

*Tom Keating is a Vietnam Veteran who kept a journal during the war in Vietnam, which enabled him to publish his memoir, Yesterday's Soldier: A Passage from Prayer to the Vietnam War. He has also published in The Veteran, the Military Writers Society of America's Dispatches, The Vietnam Memorial 40th Anniversary Tribute, 0-Dark-Thirty from the Veterans Writing Project, the Microlit Almanac from Birch Bark Editing, and The Wrath-Bearing Tree. He lives west of Boston with his wife Kathleen. You can hear him read from his work [here](#).*



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### **Nancy Stroer – What Do You Expect?**

The Rooster's nose was his most salient feature, curved and sharp as he strutted and preened in front of formation. It was an act, but the Rooster snapped his barnyard into submission without apology.

He told me, "Ma'am, I need you to take all the females to the clinic."

There'd been a rash of pregnancies in the barracks. Okay, maybe two in as many months, but this was the Rooster nipping his birds into line.

"It's like we're running agot-damn brothel on the female floor," he said after he'd dismissed the soldiers. Other company leaders remarked, variously:

"These females got to learn how to keep their legs closed."

"Put males and females together and what do you expect?"

What did I expect? I expected to get along as a woman in a man's world. I knew how things worked and I expected I'd do fine with that, having grown up with three brothers, playing sports, all of this occurring in the broader context of a world run by men. I didn't think about any of this in so many words back then. I didn't know that I was a Guys' Girl, a term my young adult daughters use now with a curl in the corner of their mouths.

Back in the olden days of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (unless it's super-juicy), the NCOs were ranting the same old litany to a sexual but sex-free god, repeated in NCO meetings and formations and ad hoc conversations near the filing cabinets. Sex was a given, a right, for some, and a loaded weapon for others. Male soldiers wanted to have sex, were going to have sex. The women had to expect to receive that attention whether they wanted it or not. And they should expect it, but not want it. If they wanted it, they must appear not to; otherwise they'd get a reputation in the Barracks Bicycle. Those were the expectations.

No one expected birth control talks for the male soldiers. Two of the guys were walking around, looking kind of sheepish at times, kind of proud at others. There was much slapping of shoulders and good-natured cussing.

I processed information differently in those days. I was so young, still surfacing from the dreamworld of adolescence to find myself drowning in the patriarchy, except I thought I was swimming just fine. The only other female officer to process it was pregnant herself but married and therefore did not

count on the Tally of Concern. Maybe her PT game was a little weak, but she managed to get her hair done. She was decorative but ran the supply warehouse with confidence and competence. She was a Black woman, with a team of mostly non-white soldiers. Her operation was a bit intimidating to me, and maybe secretly to the Rooster, too, because his beak was out of her business. And sure, the commander was a woman but she was an androgynous little elf and we left her alone because to engage with her in conversation was to invite a deluge of unwanted information about her irritable bowel syndrome.

There was righteous sex (guys going to the Red Light district), and sex that was out of control (women daring to have sex in their barracks rooms). The NCOs moralized about the need for guys to get laid and the impact of single women getting pregnant on The Mission. Everyone laughed at the idea of the unsexy having sex. I recognized the double and triple standards, but still bought all the tangled lines.

Maybe these young female soldiers *don't* know about birth control, I thought. They couldn't all be the dirtbags the sergeants said they were, just getting pregnant to get out of the barracks and straight to the head of the line for military housing and priority spots at the child development center. Maybe they were just waking up as humans, too.

Imagine my surprise, then, to find the women gathered in the clinic lobby not looking contrite or curious but sullen and angry. I didn't quite get their mood. "Don't you want to be in charge of when you get pregnant?" I asked them. Surely they'd joined up to be all they could be. Capricious childbearing would shoot their career trajectories out of the sky.

Standing next to me, Johnson swung her swollen belly to face me. She was small and quiet. Curls framed her brown face. "Cute" is a diminutive way to describe her, but she was diminutive. She was objectively cute. I didn't know her, since she worked in the supply warehouse where women made up about a

quarter of the workforce, in contrast to my operation across the parking lot with the mechanics, where the air was heavy with secondhand smoke, AC/DC, the ping of wrenches and tool boxes across concrete floors. All the women watched each other, though, and my general impression of the ones in the supply warehouse was that they were as quietly competent as the pregnant female officer who ran their show. They were organized, and a little disparaging of the men who worked there because they clowned around too much. A bit dismissive of me as too rough and ready. Too accommodating of the Rooster and his ilk. Maybe they found us too white, and therefore suspect. This insight is a late add. I'm sure I didn't think too much of the racial dynamics at play in those days but my memories are fully colorized now.

So cute little Johnson rounded on me and said through clenched teeth, "I'll have as many children as I got-damn well want," and I had no response. It was an astounding, revelatory moment. Of course she was right. Of course she was outraged at the Rooster's overreach. A woman of any marital status can have as many children as she got-damn wants. A Black woman might justifiably feel more ferocious about this than anyone. Johnson's withering stare – those soft cheeks pulled into a parentheses of disdain – was an emotional heart round.

In a flash I melted into a puddle of shame, remembering how my father made me return a pair of cargo pants when I was fifteen because they were "too revealing." The second pair was so baggy I had to take them in at the waist which, in my newly self-conscious opinion, made my butt look even bigger. This was the first time I'd been told explicitly to hide my assets. I did not wear my new cargo pants and, among other things, I stopped volunteering to go to the board in health class, no longer wishing to show my work. Or anything else.

Might as well disappear my whole body, starve it into its preadolescent shape. Or maybe to eat and drink to keep up with the boys. Or go on whack diets to have something to talk about



with the girls. Or to do all the sports and sweat and swear and carry the mortar plate on ruck marches and be considered just another one of the guys.

Didn't matter. I wasn't one of them. The male soldiers still vied to run behind me in formation. Let me hitch myself to that ride, they'd say.

They left me notes under my car wiper blades and lewd sculptures on my desk. They backed me into the corners of quiet offices. They turned up at my house at odd hours. It was easiest to laugh them off, to call them the assholes they were, to put them all in their proper places, and keep my business to myself.

I had expected Army men to misunderstand me. My religious father with his Master of Fine Arts, who had enlisted as a medic in the days of the draft so he could control his fate, told me as much when I was insisting that I'd be able to control my fate, too. "It's different now," I said, "and I'll be an officer." But there are lots of ways to kill a person without firing a shot and on my very first day in my very first unit, my very first platoon sergeant took one look at my left hand and said, "We got to get you married, ma'am. An unmarried officer is going to cause trouble." I hadn't expected a welcome like that at all.

And here was Johnson with her soft round cheeks and her rounder belly, unashamed of the truth of the matter: that even she, this actual cherub of a woman, had had sex and now she was having a got damn baby and she didn't give a flying fuck what I or Rooster or anyone thought about her marital status or any of her choices. Johnson's comment was a two-by-four up the side of my head, and it woke me all the way up, right there, even though I still didn't know what to do with the information.

I've heard many white veterans say that they got to know, and

become friends with, people of color for the first time when they were in the military. But did we really get to know each other? Did we just laugh with them at company picnics or did we allow ourselves to be slugged, as I was by Johnson's verbal pugil stick, into the bleacher seats? It was a risk for her to say what she said to me, and a gift. I can only think that she was so angry she couldn't keep her thoughts to herself. Which at the time made me stop caring what the men thought, and to crave insight into what the Black women, the enlisted women, the queer women – all the ones operating outside of the narrow parameters of an acceptable life for a female soldier – were thinking behind their shuttered mouths. When someone rounds you on the convulsive truth, it's hard to hear but it is a gift, and Johnson taught me to grab with both hands.

*Nancy Stroer grew up in a very big family in a very small house in Athens, Georgia. She holds degrees from Cornell and Boston University, and served in the beer-soaked trenches of post-Cold War Germany. Her work has appeared in Stars and Stripes, Soldiers magazine, Hallaren Lit Mag, The Wrath-Bearing Tree, and Things We Carry Still, an anthology of military writing from Middle West Press. Her debut novel, Playing Army, is forthcoming from Koehler Books in 2024. She reads from her work [here](#).*



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It was such an honor and a pleasure to work with these talented writers. Thank you for supporting So Say We All and The Wrath-Bearing Tree.

*Founded in 2009, So Say We All is a 501c3 literary and performing arts non-profit organization whose mission is to create opportunities for individuals to tell their stories, and tell them better, through three core priorities: publishing, performance, and education.*

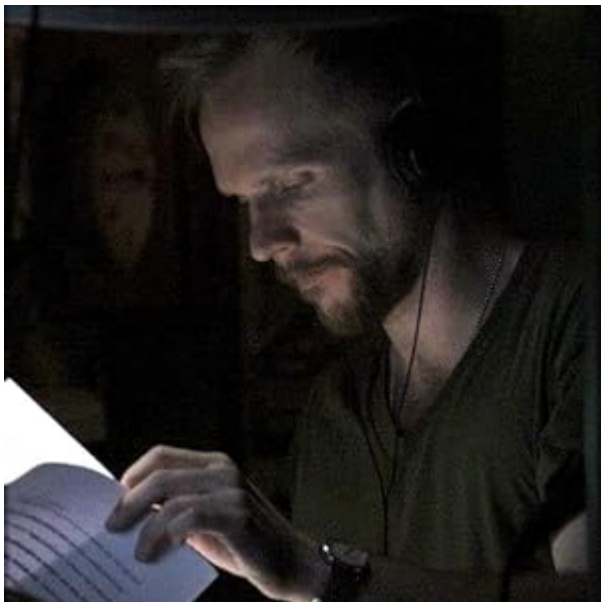
*In addition to the programs made available to the public, SSWA offers education outreach programs specifically targeting communities who have been talked about disproportionately more than heard from in mainstream media. Creative writing and storytelling courses are offered in partnership with social service organizations such as The Braille Institute, Veteran Writers Group – San Diego, PEN USA, Southern California American Indian Resource Center (SCAIR), the homeless*

*residents of Father Joe's Village and Toussaint Academy, San Diego Public and County Library branches, and more.*

*The biggest hurdle for someone with a story that needs to be told is knowing where to begin. So Say We All's purpose is to answer that need, to be a resource that listens to all facets of its community regardless of the volume at which they speak.*

—

**Justin Hudnall** received his BFA in playwriting from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. He currently serves as the co-founder and Executive Director of So Say We All, a San Diego-based literary arts and education non-profit. In a prior career, he served with the United Nations in South Sudan as an emergency response officer. He is a recipient of the San Diego Foundation's Creative Catalyst Fellowship and Rising Arts Leader award, SD Citybeat's "Best Person" award of 2016, and is an alumni of the Vermont Studio Center. He produces and hosts the PRX public radio series, *Incoming*.



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# Peter Molin's "Strike Through the Mask!": The Great Contemporary War-Writing Quiz

30 questions; let's see who knows their stuff. Answers below.

27-30 Correct: Expert

23-26: Sharpshooter

19-22: Marksman

Less than 19: Bolo

Ready, go!

1. "The war tried to kill us in the spring." This is the opening line to what 2012 novel by an Army veteran about two buddies deployed to Iraq?

2. "We shot dogs." This is the opening line to what 2014 short-story by a former Marine?

3. The author of the 2011 short-story collection *You Know When the Men Are Gone* is \_\_\_\_\_.

4. In 2012, this novel about an Army Iraq veterans attending a Dallas Cowboys football game was a finalist for the National Book Award.

5. Match the author with the title of his or her story in the 2013 short-story anthology *Fire and Forget*:

Jacob Siegal

"The Train

Brian Van Reet

"Big Two-Hearted Hunting Creek"

Mariette Kalinowski "Smile, There are IEDs Everywhere"

6. What are the names of the Iraq Army veteran and Afghanistan Navy veteran who started the NYC non-profit war-writing organization Words After War?

7. This 2012 novel set in Afghanistan drew inspiration from the Greek classic "Antigone."

8. Match the title and author name of these GWOT war novels written by civilian women:

Roxana Robinson *We All Come Home*

Helen Benedict *Carthage*

Joyce Carol Oates *Sand Queen*

Katey Schultz *Be Safe I Love You*

Cara Hoffman *Sparta*

9. Name the titles of the two graphic novels written by Maximillian Uriarte, one set in Iraq and the other in Afghanistan.

10. This novel by Marine veteran Elliot Ackerman takes its title from a phrase used to describe American casualties suffered at the hand of their Afghanistan allied partners.

11. Match the author and title of these novels written in the early years of the GWOT veteran-writing boom:

Benjamin Buchholz *The Sandbox*

David Zimmerman *Last One In*

Nicholas Kulish *One Hundred and One Nights*

12. Match the names and titles of these novels and short-story collections written by male civilian authors:

Luke Mogelson	<i>A Big Enough Lie</i>
Eric Bennett	<i>These Heroic, Happy Dead</i>
Jonathan Chopra	<i>The Good Lieutenant</i>
Aaron Gwyn	<i>Veteran Crisis Hotline</i>
Whitney Terrell	<i>Wynne's War</i>

13. The name of Marine veteran Atticus Lish's novel about a former Marine adrift in New York City is \_\_\_\_.

14. Match the names of the Iraqi authors with their works:

Sinan Antoon	<i>The Corpse Exhibition</i>
Hassan Blasim	<i>Frankenstein in Baghdad</i>
Ahmed Saadawi	<i>The Corpse Washer</i>

15. Match the name of the war-writing collective/seminar/journal and its founder:

The Wrath-Bearing Tree	Lovella Calica
Veterans Writing Project	Adrian Bonenberger
Voices from War	Travis Martin
Military Experience and the Arts	Kara Krauze
Warrior Writers	Ron Capps

16. Which military academy sponsored the War, Literature, and the Arts conferences in 2011 and 2018?

17. In what branch did vet-writers Brian Castner, Jesse Goolsby, Eric Chandler, and J.A. Moad serve?

18. In what year did Phil Klay's short-story collection *Redeployment* win the National Book Award?

19. This Navy veteran's short story "Kattekoppen" first appeared in *The New Yorker* in 2013 and then in the author's short-story collection *Bring Out the Dog* in 2018.

20. The proprietors of MilSpeak Foundation and Middle West Press are \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_, respectively.

21. The title of this poem by Brian Turner was later used as the title for an Academy Award-winning movie. What is the title?

22. What are the names of the memoirs written by the following veterans:

Brian Turner \_\_\_\_\_

Benjamin Busch \_\_\_\_\_

Ron Capps \_\_\_\_\_

Kayla Williams \_\_\_\_\_

23. Match the author with a volume of poetry they have written:

Colin Halloran *Sand Opera*

Hugh Martin *Lines Composed During a Lull in the Fighting*

Kevin Powers *The Stick Soldiers*

Phillip Metres *Shortly Thereafter*

24. Match the author with a volume of poetry they have written:

Lisa Stice *The Iraqi Nights*

Jehanne Dubrow *Clamor*

Elyse Fenton. *Stateside*



Dunya Mikhail

*Forces*

25. The Army veteran author of the novels *Fobbit* and *Brave Deeds* is \_\_\_\_\_.

26. The two novels set in Afghanistan written by Pakistani-British author Nadeem Aslam are \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

27. “The Trauma Hero” is a concept associated with which Army veteran writer? \_\_\_\_\_

28. What are the names of the war-writers portrayed in this photo accompanying a 2014 *Vanity Fair* article titled “The Words of War”?



(*Vanity Fair* photograph by Jonas Karlsson)

29. What are the names of the authors featured in this 2015 Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) panel?



30. What are the names of these war-writing luminaries, taken at a reading at The Strand Bookstore in NYC in 2014?:



BONUS (2 points): Benjamin Busch wrote the introductions to one of the following anthologies and Ron Capps wrote the other. Match the author with the anthology:

*Retire the Colors*

*Incoming*

Answers:

1: Kevin Powers, *The Yellow Birds*

2: Phil Klay, "Redeployment"

3: Siobhan Fallon

4: Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*

5: Jacob Siegal: "Smile, IEDs Are Everywhere." Brian Van Reet: "Big Two-Hearted Hunting Creek." Mariette Kalinowski: "The Train"

6: Matt Gallagher and Brandon Willetts, respectively

7: Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya's *The Watch*

8: Roxana Robinson: *Sparta*. Helen Benedict: *Sand Queen*. Joyce Carol Oates: *Carthage*. Katey Schultz: *We All Come Home*. Cara Hoffman: *Be Safe I Love You*

9: *The White Donkey* (Iraq), *Battle Born: Lapis Lazuli* (Afghanistan)

10: *Green on Blue*

11: Benjamin Buchholz, *One Hundred and One Nights*; David Zimmerman, *The Sandbox*; Nicholas Kulish, *One Hundred and One Nights*

12: Luke Mogelson, *These Heroic, Happy Dead*; Eric Bennett, *A Big Enough Lie*. Jonathan Chopra, *Veteran Crisis Hotline*; Aaron Gwyn, *Wynne's War*; Whitney Terrell, *The Good Lieutenant*

13: *Preparation for the Next Life*

14: Sinan Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*; Hassan Blasim, *The Corpse Exhibition*; Ahmed Saadawi, *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

15: The Wrath-Bearing Tree: Adrian Bonenberger; Veterans Writing Project: Ron Capps; Voices from War: Kara Krauze; Military Experience and the Arts; Travis Martin; Warrior Writers: Lovella Calica

16: The United States Air Force Academy

17: United States Air Force

18: 2014

19: Will Mackin

20: Tracy Crow and Randy Brown (Charlie Sherpa)

21: Brian Turner's *The Hurt Locker*

22: Brian Turner, *My Life as a Foreign Country*; Benjamin Busch, *Dust to Dust*; Ron Capps, *Seriously Not All Right*; Kayla Williams, *Loved My Weapon More Than You (or, Plenty of Time When We Get Home)*

23: Colin Halloran, *Shortly Thereafter*; Hugh Martin, *The Stick Soldiers*; Kevin Powers, *Lines Composed During a Lull in the Fighting*; Philip Metres, *Sand Opera*

24: Lisa Stice, *Forces*; Jehanne Dubrow, *Stateside*; Elyse Fenton, *Clamor*; Dunya Mikhail, *The Iraqi Nights*

25: David Abrams

26: *The Wasted Vigil* and *The Blind Man's Garden*

27: Roy Scranton

28: Left to right: Maurice Decaul, Phil Klay, Elliot Ackerman, Kevin Powers, Brandon Willetts, Matt Gallagher

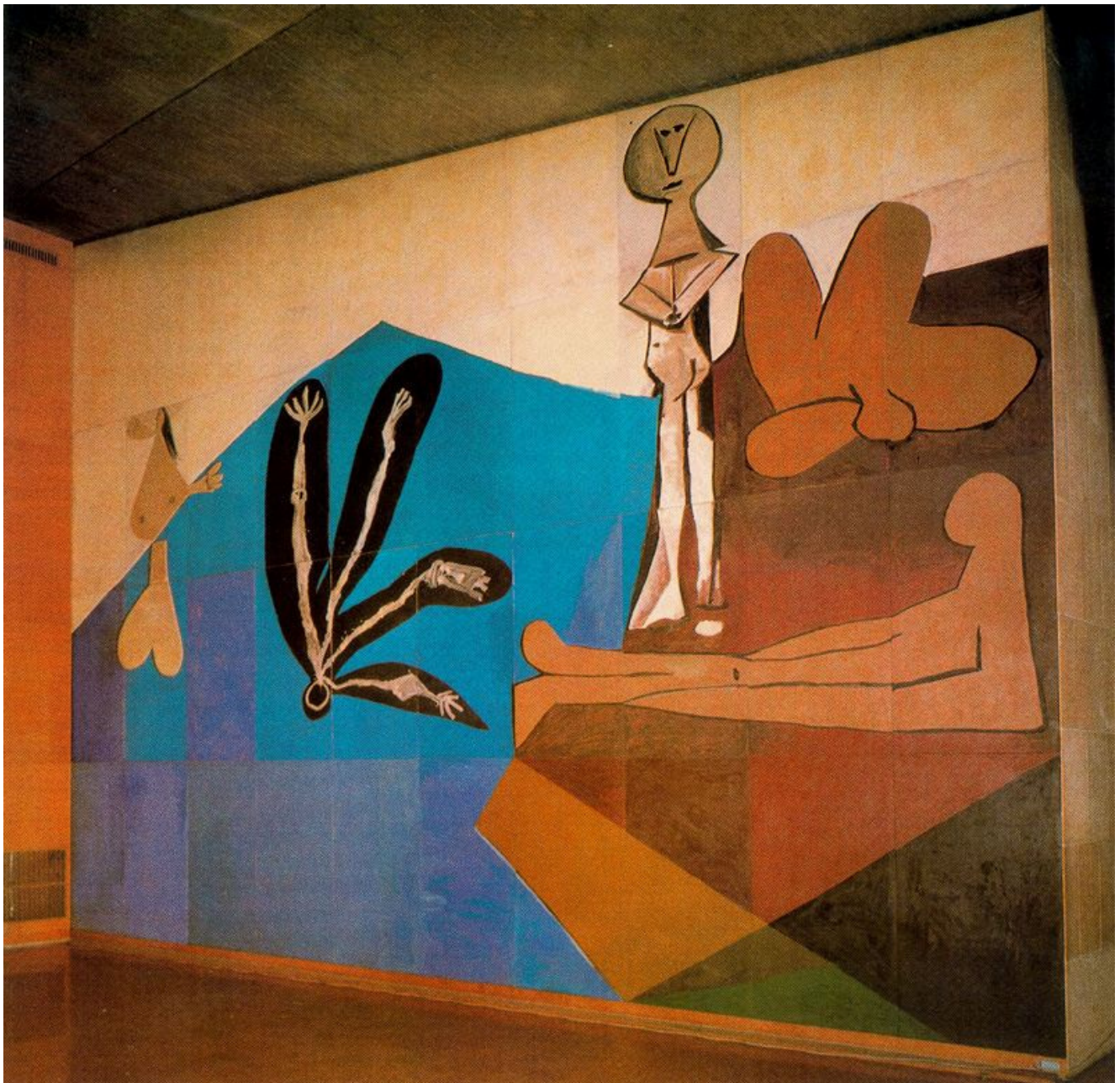
29: Left to right: Brian Turner, Katey Shultz, Siobhan Fallon, Benjamin Busch, Phil Klay

30: Left to right: Adrian Bonenberger, Roxana Robinson, David Abrams, Matt Gallagher

BONUS: *Retire the Colors*: Ron Capps; *Standing Down*: Benjamin Busch

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# New Nonfiction from Ciel Downing: “Burn Baby Burn”



“Fire in the belly!” “Be all you can be!” “Get fired up!” Slogans to incite, ignite, excite and encourage living on the edge—the thrill of defying death on the pages of peril. “Fire in the hole!” The acrid tang of sulfur and gun powder odor,

the tympanic thrum in my ears. "Drive on!" "Hoorah!" Be honorable—I wanted that. "God! Duty! Country!" Be a part of something greater than yourself; ask what you can do for your country. "Lockdown, lockdown—fires take your position!" Words seared into my adrenalin. The Pavlovian response to leap from the warm comfort of my bed to draping myself with combat gear, bare feet to boots, racing to a foxhole.

Each time my Sgt. copped a quick feel, each time I screamed "Cover me!" the soft and good and kind parts of me fragmented and fell away making me sharper, more linear, more chiseled. Each leer and lip lock, each lock and load inventoried in perpetuity in my brain—tiny registers of offense, stacking up sandbags of resistance, numbness, defenses inside me precariously high—get ready, keep vigilant—always on the alert. Balance, balance—those sandbags teeter and threaten to topple unceasingly.

"Ruck up!" (time to move out). "Tits up!" (dead person ahead). "All one big Charlie Foxtrot," (cluster fuck). Sing along with the cadence, "We're gonna rape, kill, pillage and burn!" and the stack gets higher, sleep gets leaner, readiness gets sharper and the air gets thinner. Tight rope walking on concertina wire. It's all about being one of the boys, only I'm not. It's all about embracing the aggression and dismissing the vile, only I don't and I can't. It's going all in...only I don't belong "in."

Silverfish in shower drains, rats and rodents running rampant in streets where school children play crawling on warheads, where raw sewage seeps into rice fields. It's hookworms in the topsoil, cockroaches in the quarters, abandoned Amerasians, beggars, parasites and prostitutes—too much to keep up with. Jackhammering at my privilege, burrowing into my core, nicking away tiny shards of me. Increasing the pounding percussion in my ears, behind my eyes, throughout my head. Grinding my teeth unconsciously, knowing the expectations roll like an unstoppable boulder: higher, faster, smarter, more than,

stronger, better, first place, tight group until yeah, that edge is now a razor; my nerves electric current, my heart in a chronic race with my respiration. The alert sirens and flashing lights of gray matter pinwheeling wildly, working their way into a tornado-like funnel of frantic preparedness. Ever vigilant, ever ready, every day, every second.

“So get fired up Kid—get that fire in the belly!” with a yuk yuk solid slap on the back. Aspirations of the American Way. But more of me keeps dying. Splintering off, bleeding out, disfiguring like a Picasso. Bits of me swept up and away like smoke off a moth’s wing; dust motes of shoulds and oughts with nowhere to go. A wail chafes my throat, “God! Help me!” But god is a hologram bubble here; visible one second, then evaporates and is gone. What would there be to help anyway? All that fire leaves—is ash.

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## **New Fiction by R.L. Peterson: “Rules of Dying”**



Every work day morning at 8 o'clock sharp, me, Juan, Marcus, and Willard stand at attention with hands over our hearts while the national anthem plays on the loud speaker at Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery, San Diego, California. While the music plays, resident supervisor, Captain C. T. Wallace, in his Navy Reserve uniform, runs the flag up the pole, ties off the rope, salutes, and goes into his office.

I'm Mike. I ride herd on the crew renovating gravesites here at this place of rest for American vets. It ain't easy work. I speak un poco Espanol, and my crew is mostly Mexican. My rule is when they conversate with each other they can talk Swahili for all I care, but they have to speak English to me.

These guys work hard in full sun most every day, at prevailing wage. I really have three crews, the one working today, the one that leaves every two, three months, and one in training. Something that intrigues almost everyone is the ashes of cremated vets. Yesterday, the whole crew gathered around so I knew something was up.



Marcus said, "Look at this, Boss. Someone forgot to put a body back where it came from." He handed me an pickle jar filled with what I quickly saw was ground up charcoal and crushed pasta shells. That's not what cremains look like, but I kept quiet.

"How can we get this back where it belongs? There's no name on it?"

"Hell, that's no problem." I fished out a piece of broken pasta and popped it my mouth. "We'll just eat it. No one will ever know."

The crew burst out laughing. Marcos grins. "You're un bastardo inteligente." With this bunch, one minute I'm a mean-ass drill instructor, the next a friend.

Every morning, after the Anthem, a gray Kia Rio drives past. The driver, a young blonde wearing a blue pants suit, low-heeled black shoes, and a white blouse, opens the car's trunk, grabs a green and white folding chair, a yellow umbrella, and a flower, and carries these like birthday presents to her usual spot near the rose bushes.

She sets up her chair, opens the umbrella, then goes to the columbarium, where ashes of cremated bodies are kept, unlocks a niche door, takes out an urn, about the size of a half-gallon of milk-remains of the person she's mourning-holds it a minute, puts it back, stretches to remove yesterday's white geranium from its holder, replaces it with the new flower and goes to her chair.

Often, on the blue San Diego bay below like an art gallery painting, a submarine, or aircraft carrier glides out to sea, past the Point Loma light house, with sea gulls circling and the sun turning the ocean silver and gold.

The young woman fits her i-Phone buds into her ears, opens a book, and reads, wetting her finger with a pink tongue to turn

a page. She's still there at noon when we come up to eat lunch in the shade of the coral tree.

Juan says, "She's here every day, for who? Husband? Brother?" He waves a tattooed hand in the air. "Every fuckin' day, rain, or shine."

Willard asks, "How do ya know ever day? Ya work weekends?"

Juan says, "I bet if the park's open, she's here. A husband probably. Not likely her daddy. She needs a man. Like me."

Juan was paroled from Donovan State Pen last January. His first few days he was edgy as hell when the *Star-Spangled Banner* played. "Part of our job is respect for the deceased," I said. That seemed to work. He's first on the truck every morning and follows directions. That's all I can ask from any worker.

Marcus asks, "Think the lady plays music on her phone?"

Marcus and Juan are kin, second cousins, I think, or maybe they married sisters. Anyway, they ride together in Marcus' Ford Bronco and eat the same thing at lunch. Marcus is broad as sliding door, has a shaggy grey moustache and wears the same green pants and long-sleeve blue shirt every day.

Willard says, "Classy girl like her? Probably religious shit."

He's tall with long blonde hair. Always has a red and blue wool beanie pulled low over his blue eyes. He sits on the ground in the shade of the truck to eat lunch and has more 'tats than an NBA player. He's done no hard time if his application is correct.

Marcus says, "Classy? You mean assy? She wants something hard. *Carne dulce*. I'm her man."

I ignore this and spray paint the grass orange where we're to dig.

\*

One noon, we've finished our tortas. Marcus grabs the weed whacker we use to barber the grass around markers, lopes across the road and begins to edge the sidewalk next to the blonde woman's chair. *What the hell!*

I run up. Her blue eyes go big, her face white.

"Pardon us, Ma'am. My man's trimming grass that maintenance missed."

"Yeah," Marcus says, "Make it perfect. For you." His eyes scorch her from jeans to tennis shoes..

Her voice sweet as a phoebe's call, but a bit shrill, she says. "How nice."

\*

Back at the truck, me and Marcus have a go. "Dude," I say. "What the hell?"

"Wanted her to see a real man."

"That was pretty stupid."

"Oh, yeah? She was all smiles. Liked it."

"Really? Truth is, you scared her shitless. Pull that trick again, I'll write you up."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. Count on it."

*"Un hombre tiene que hacer lo que un hombre tiene que hacer?"*

"Not on my watch, hombre."

At two o'clock every day, the blonde stows her gear and drives off in her gray Kia, going slow as a hearse.

\*

Soil contracts at night and expands by day. Rain and irrigation water wash away dirt leaving ruts and holes. Gophers and rats dig tunnels. All this causes head stones to tilt or fall over. Sometimes, a casket splits open, showing rags and brass buttons, bones grey as gun powder, some no longer than a chicken leg.

Often, we have to renovate a whole section. We spread caskets and markers on the grass, name side up so we know what goes where when we're ready to close the graves. When this happens, cemetery visitors swarm like yellow jackets around us, push past our yellow tape, take selfies next to the caskets, kick clods into the trenches, pepper us with questions. "Whatcha doing?"

I answer, "Heroes deserve a beautiful and peaceful resting place. We're repairing their graves."

"Every casket has a body?"

"Absolutely. We're careful to see each grave is correctly marked." That's the company spiel. It's a lie. Stones mark where a body used to be, but tree roots squeeze caskets, they disintegrate and flesh rots. When we work, we dig the markers out by hand before the backhoe rips a trench, then we lower a metal box into the ground and pour in reinforced concrete. When the cement is dry enough you can't write your name in it, we re-set the headstone, a man on each side, careful not to leave any footprints, and sink the marker five inches deep, tamp sand and pea gravel around it and replant the sod. That sucker will stand straight as a soldier for years.

It takes sweat and know-how to cut away stubble with a sharp shooter and pry out weeds with a rough-neck bar or square up a trench with a spade, but it gives me time to think. I screwed things up with booze so bad that eight years ago, as part of my rehab, the VA sent me to culinary school. I had

custody of my kids then. I got a job at a restaurant, doing food prep, but the pay was so lousy, I couldn't pay my rent, much less keep two growing boys and a young lady in clothes, so I hired on here. Me and the kid's momma have joint custody. I make \$12.38 an hour, \$18.56 overtime, with an extra twenty-five a week for being crew supervisor. I try to save a little each time the eagle shits so I can open a restaurant someday. Weekends. Reservations-only seating.

I trim the grass around a stone with the weed whipper while my crew digs on a new section. Saturday night Cinda's coming for dinner. If she can find a sitter. She lives in that double-wide across the street and two trailers down at Clariton Estates Mobile Home Park. She has full, red lips, tons of dark curls and dancing eyes. When she smiles, my throat goes tight.

I'll start with an *amuse-bouche*, say a celery-infused beef puree. For the primo, Bibb lettuce and endive, with a little arugula and radicchio for bitterness, tossed with quinoa and mushrooms, topped off with honey-roasted walnuts and organic plum tomatoes and a nice lemon garlic dressing.

What secondo will she want? Fish or chicken? I'll drop by her trailer tonight after her kids are down, say 8:30 or so, and ask her. If fish, it'll be sea bass grilled in lemon butter and almond paste. If chicken, I'll wrap it in foil and smother it under charcoal with parsley, onions, and green peppers.

The dulce? Double chocolate cake. I'll bake it Friday, after work.

This week, my mind wonders from Cinda and Saturday night's plans. *The blonde in the beach chair by the columbarium? Who's she thinking about?*

\*

Willard and Marcus are having a lover's spat. They team up on most projects. If Marcus made a sharp turn, Willard would

break his nose.

"What 'ya mean, rules for dying? Silliest thing I ever heard." Williard tosses his shovel away and picks up a hoe.

Marcus says, "There's five of 'em, man. When my nephew was offed, the social worker told us about 'em." He grabs a hoe, too.

Williard doesn't go for this. "*Tonterias.*"

"No bullshit. She named 'em. One by one." Marcus turns to me. "Tell him, Boss."

"You mean the stages of grief? Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance?" Marcus nods. Surprised I guess. I learned these when my AA sponsor's Dad died last year. He made certain he touched every base, but other sober drunks told me you'll live with those five mind states forever.

"Yeah. That's what I meant."

Willard still has doubts. "When my Old Man took out that eucalyptus with his motorcycle, we knew he was dead. There was nothing to deny. Tore his bike all to shit. Him, too." His face is red, and not just from work. This is the most I've ever heard him talk.

I nod. "Ever play over and over in your head how you could have kept the accident from happening? Feel sad when you think about it?"

"Everybody does, right? That's normal, ain't it."

"I think Marcus' point is our mind goes through various stages when someone close to us kicks off. Thinking how you could have changed things? That's bargaining. Feeling shitty. That's depression."

Willard slices a lizard in half with his shovel. "Hell, I

don't drive the street where he bought it anymore. Ain't that the shits?" He shakes his head as if to change the memory..

Juan says, "What *staget*, how you say, stage, is our Little Darlin' goin' through?"

"The blonde? Beats me."

"Is there a dickin' stage? That's what she needs. A good *jugando*."

\*

A week or so later we're waiting for the backhoe to trench a site. Marcus says, "Boss, I dropped my gloves at lunch. I'll go get 'em."

"Like hell you will. The other crew sees you, they'll say you're diddling around, and I'll have paper work to complete for weeks. I get the big bucks. I'll go."

Marcus clenches and un-clenches his fist.

I ignore this. "Double check our measurements before the 'hoe starts, okay? I won't be long."

Me and the crew eat lunch across from the columbarium because the benches there are in the shade, the rest rooms clean and easy to get to. I go to where Marcus sat. No gloves. Where they on the ground and someone tossed 'em in the trash? Negative. I stoop to look under the bench.

A girl's voice interrupts. "Looking for these?"

It's the blonde in the Kia. She's not blonde any more. Her hair is pink and blue. She different somehow. She waves Marcus' gloves.

"That wild-eyed guy. The grass trimmer. He dropped 'em. I was taking 'em to Lost and Found. You're the boss, right?"

I nod. "Thanks."

The small gold necklace around her throat says Misty.

"Misty, you're here every day. What do you read?"

"Stuff Tate liked." She holds up a book. "This is *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*." She smiles. "I finished Harry Potter. The whole series." She waves her red and gold phone. "I'm getting damn good at Grand Theft Auto, too."

"I'm impressed. Tate was your husband?"

Her face pales. "Yeah. He was Army. An IED exploded near him in Afghanistan. They shipped his body home. I never saw it. We were married one year, eight months and four days. At his funeral, as a testimony to his service, I vowed to visit his grave 609 days straight." She smiles. "Seventy-three more to go. You familiar with the Five Stages of Grief?"

The second time in two days this has come up. "Some. Why?"

She takes off her sun glasses. Big blue eyes. "I'm past denial but I'm still angry. If I could, I'd kill every fucking politician in D.C." Black streaks run down her cheeks. "My support group says we never fully recover, just learn to survive." She tries to smile through the tears.

"Got a job. Waitress at a bowling alley café. To pass the time. Part of survival my group says." She smiles. "I'm nuts, I guess. I talk with my dead husband. And he answers." A half smile. "He says it's okay to date. But I can't. Not yet." She puts a finger to her lips. "Quiet, Misty. Tate says these grounds are sacred. Respect the dead. Don't talk so much." She smiles. "You agree?"

I nod.

She turns and walks to her chair, without looking back. A small blonde woman living a tortured life.



\*

I'm Navy, myself. The only one in my crew who served, but my bunch turns over so often, next week I might have four. I was stationed at Subic Bay in the Philippines for 2 years. Me and this Filipino girl, Baby Ruth, shacked up. I fell in love. Not with her, but the sex. I was raised Southern Baptist, taught to love Jesus more than life. My first liberty I had a Manhattan. After that, there was little room for Jesus. An old salt said church is good place to find women. I went with him. Met Baby Ruth. She was short and pretty, with skin the color of coffee with cream. Sex came natural to her. When my tour ended I felt guilty leaving her there. Stateside, my pastor said I could send for her. I did. We got married. She was a real Jesus freak. I was mostly just confused. I didn't love her, but loved our sex. I hated our kids, but loved being a dad. Booze and nose candy made everything better.

Four years later, two squalling kids running around, my wife preaching Jesus to me, my head splitting, hands shaking, desperate as a convict on death row, I'd swear every morning I'd had my last drink. One night wasted on booze and drugs, I wrecked my truck on the 805. It took the doctors at the Veteran's Affairs hospital 42 days to put me back together again. I joined AA. Three years later I got straight. Lost my job as a heavy equipment mechanic and tried small engine repairs but the drugs made my hands shake and the detail work gave me a head ache. The VA said they'd send me to culinary school. They did. I finished a 3-month course.

I visit AA rooms most weekends. Last night, the speaker talked about the 3rd Step, where you make a decision to turn your will and your life over to God. Six years ago, I told my sponsor I'd like to do that. He asked, "If two bull frogs sit on a lily pad and one of them decides to jump, how many bull frogs are on the lily pad?"

"One," I answered.

“No, dummy. Two. Decidin’ to jump ain’t the same as jumpin’.”

So, I jumped. Did all the fuckin’ steps. The whole nine yards. That’s why I’m sober today.

\*

Getting ready for Cinda’s visit tonight, I clean the kitchen, wash my DAV Thrift Shop dishware, shine both settings of silverware, spread a red and yellow beach towel on the table and put Martinelli’s in the frig. I’ll buy a cake since I didn’t bake last night. I clean the bathroom and change sheets. Mrs. Chase from the single-wide next door- I call her Mrs. Scuttlebutt-bangs on my door.

“Isn’t it romantic? Cinda’s husband brought her the prettiest bouquet. Spend the night. He wants them to try and make a go of their marriage again.”

Suddenly I’m tired, really tired. It’ll be chicken for lunch this week.

\*

Sunday morning. I wake up empty. *Haven’t seen Misty or her Kia this week. What gives?*” I slam a Nine Inch Nails CD into my truck’s player, grab a 5-Hour Energy and drive to Fort Rosecrans.

*What the fuck? Willard’s beat up pickup’s in the parking lot. Why?* Not what I expected. Misty’s next to the roses as usual. Williard’s headed toward her. I run across the grass toward him.

He sees me. “Stay out of this, Boss!”

“Where ya goin’?”

“Juan says she wants a man. That’s me.”

I feel his body heat. The smell of bourbon. Sweat. He needs a

shave. His beanie hides blood shot eyes.

"You can't just grab her."

"You didn't say shit when Marcus bragged what he'd like to do to her."

"No, but I should have. Think it through, man. Don't do something today you'll regret tomorrow." Talking Program to adrunK is a waste of time, I know. *Get 'em when they're sober. And shaky, the Big Book says.*

Willard's breathing hard. Sweat glues his shirt to his back.

"I could take ya," he says, squaring up in front of me, fists doubled.

"I know." He's one tall dude.

I'm breathing fast. I don't want to fight. "Walk away, my friend, and it's over."

He sways like a weeds in the wind. "Fuck you."

He steps toward me. I don't move. "We gonna fight?"

"If we have to."

"What if I walk?"

"That's the smart thing."

"You gonna fire me?"

"I have to. Don't come in Monday. HR will send what you're owed."

"Fuck." He doubles his fists again. "I could beat the shit out of you."

"I know. All that would prove is you're tough. You're a smart guy. Go sleep it off. You'll be glad you did tomorrow."

He glares at me, takes a deep breath, turns, and weaves off toward his pickup.

\*

“That looked pretty intense.”

It’s Misty.

“Nah. Work stuff. No big deal.” I force a smile. “Didn’t see you this last week. Where you been?”

“I won’t be here as often as before.” It’s her turn to force a smile. “I met someone. It’s not serious, but my support group says it’s time I moved on. I’ll try.” The smile works this time.

I nod. “ I understand.” Maybe it’s time I move on, too.

Misty sticks out her hand. “Thanks for being my friend.”

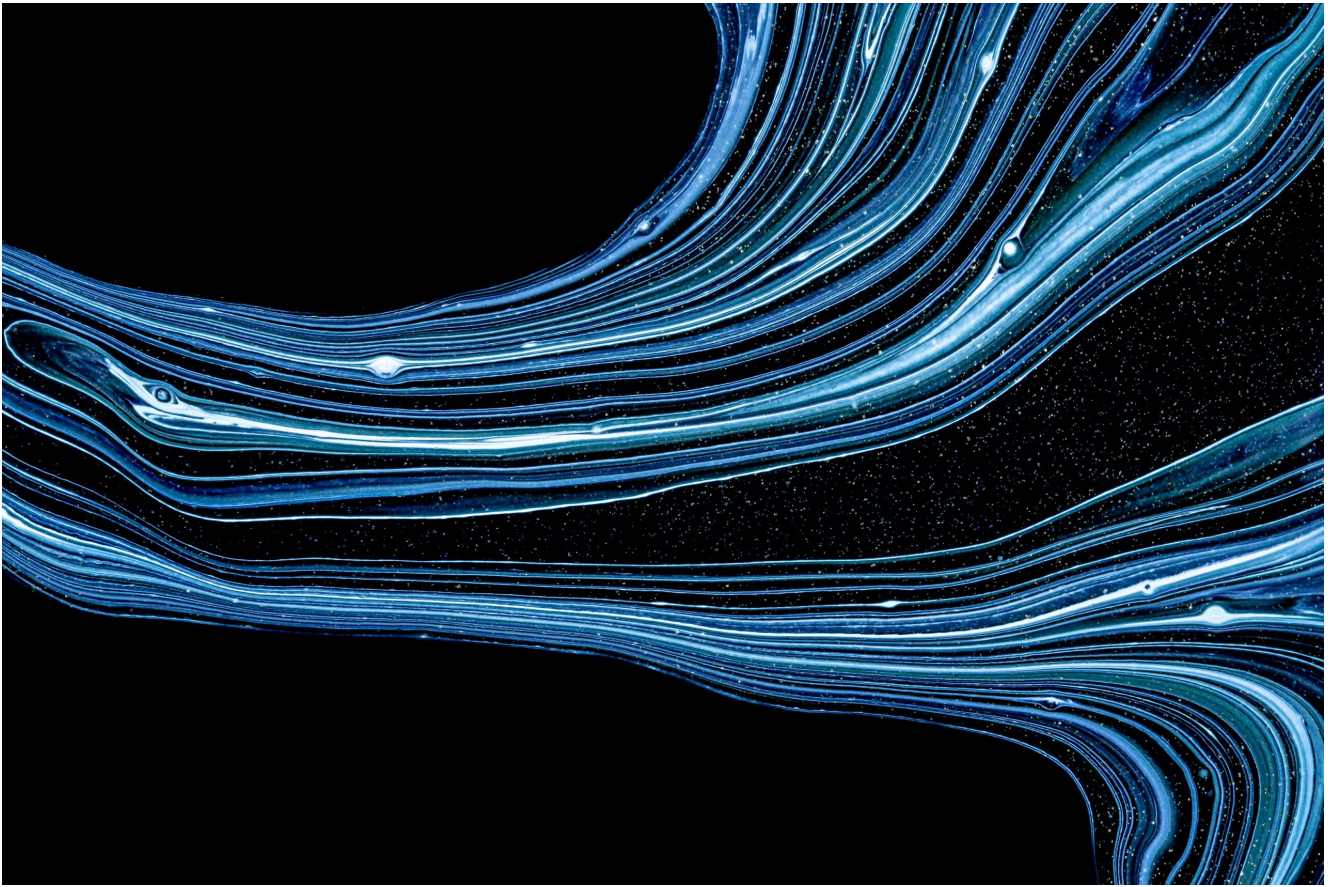
“My pleasure, ma’am.” I come to attention and salute. She laughs and walks toward her car, ready to meet life on life’s terms.

Monday morning after the Anthem, a black Nissan drives slowly by and parks. A man in a dark suit takes two chairs from the trunk and carries them to a fresh-dug grave under a tarp. He goes back to the car and escorts a small lady wearing a black hijab to the chairs. They sit.

On the San Diego bay below, sea gulls circle and the sun turns the ocean silver and gold, like an art gallery painting. An aircraft carrier glides past Point Loma Light House, going off to war.

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# New Fiction by Nancy Ford Dugan: "Flow"



So, Abe, the pleasant guy who buzzes you in every week at the bubbled-roof tennis facility, takes your thick wad of cash (he appreciates exact change) and makes the usual small talk: weather, recent professional tennis matches, how he's doing fixing up the fixer-upper he just bought in Queens, etc.

Lately, you've also been discussing updates on when the tennis club is scheduled to permanently close. The date keeps shifting, but it's imminent.

He'll lose his job. You'll lose your precious hour of weekly tennis.

Today, you notice for the first time a large swelling at Abe's neck. Behind the plexiglass, you suppress a gasp and try not to gawk. You glimpse. It's protruding like an Adam's apple,

but halfway down his neck and on the side.

Is it new? Is it painful?

Should you tell him?

Is he blithely unaware?

Or is he fully aware and ignoring it?

Or is he aware and already undergoing medical treatment to deal with it, to keep it from growing, to keep it from consuming all of his neck and possibly his friendly, dark-eyebrowed face and even his shaved head?

Your long-time tennis partner would know what to do, and whether you should bring it up with Abe. She was raised down south and has impeccable manners.

But she's in Egypt for a climate change conference and to see the pyramids. Or so she says. You imagine she is a perfect spy or a radical activist. She is tiny, nondescript, unassuming, and so soft-spoken no one has a clue what she is saying. She is traveling despite all the warnings and articulated dangers associated with travel for someone her age during what is hoped to be a waning phase of the pandemic.

If you wait for your tennis partner to return (in a few weeks) to consult on how to handle Abe's situation, it may be too late for Abe. And it will be solely on you if Abe dies before her return from her high-risk trip because you neglected to mention the large swelling attacking his neck.

Abe is functioning fine. He's busy juggling multiple phone lines, multiple demands for coveted weekend court time. Not knowing what to do, you wave at him through the plexiglass, he smiles back, and you wander to your court, fully masked for action.

You and your tennis partner have been playing with face masks

on for several months now; they fog up eyeglasses, pinch behind ears, cut visual perspective horizontally and vertically, and muffle attempts at conversation. On the other hand, there is the possibility that wearing masks while exerting and running could improve lung capacity.

After ten minutes on the court with the young local pro, you are huffing and exhausted. So much for lung capacity. Fifty more minutes to go. During the expensive lesson, you want to make every costly minute count. But you are distracted. You hit the ball wide or long or inaccurately into the sloping net.

Is the distraction due to concerns about your partner's long, potentially dangerous trip? The amount of extra money you have to pay for a lesson while she's away?

Or is it all due to thoughts of Abe's neck growth? To wondering if it will intensify or expand to the size of a yellow tennis ball, while you are selfishly hitting one instead of helping him? What will Abe's neck look like when your lesson is over?

Will the growth turn yellow? Will that mean it is full of pus?

Why aren't you racing off the court to beg Abe for the love of God to go immediately to an urgent care center (there's one only a few blocks away) to address his neck issue?

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You are unaccustomed to the steady onslaught of briskly and accurately placed balls the pro provides. He plucks the balls nonstop from a jam-packed grocery cart and smacks them at you.

You are accustomed to a sluggish weekly pace with your tennis partner, filled with rambling delays between points as she collects loose balls and places them in odd arrangements at the back of the court. You imagine she is plotting to

overthrow a government on a continent oceans away, beyond this smooth, immovable, and bright blue deco surface. You impatiently pace, wait, and sometimes perform jumping jacks until she is finally ready to successfully hit her serve with the intensity of ten thousand suns. Or she hits it directly into the net.

From his side of the court, the agile-legged pro speaks liltily about flow. "Where is your flow?" he asks. "Don't rush your shots. Get your arm back early. Get it! I like that one. Pivot! Run up to the net. Keep your wrist steady."

You have heard these commands, especially about wrist and flow, nearly every time you take a lesson when your tennis partner is unavailable and your back-up options (a sturdy friend from college, a hard-hitting former work colleague) don't pan out.

Your wrist is the size of a pencil, so what's a woman to do? It doesn't wobble on return of serve since you have time to prepare. But impromptu, at the net, it dips. Some might say it collapses. You start mumbling your "Grip!" mantra to yourself under your multiple masks. It helps you focus and slightly improves the wrist flailing.

As for flow, some days you have it and some days you don't. But honestly, how can you flow when a young man's neck might now be the size of a Buick while you, a masked idiot, gambol all over your side of the court and contend with an unreliable wrist?

You associate the word "flow" with menstruation, something you have not had to worry about for quite some time. Years ago, at a Long Island party where everyone discussed furniture, you were introduced to a much older, wizened man. Over the course of your very brief conversation, he chose for some reason to confide in you that he only dated women who still "flowed."

At the time, you silently wondered:



- Who invited this guy to the party and why? And who uses the word flow in this manner, much less in party patter with a stranger?
- How does he screen for flow status upfront, before dating anyone? Does he require a doctor's note? Does he check out bathroom cabinets? Does he ask women directly? Do they punch him in the nose as he deserves and as the woebegone look of his nose implies?
- Has he incorrectly assumed you no longer flowed, or God forbid that you were interested in dating him?
- You have a gorgeous and smart friend, a mother of twins, who went through early menopause in her thirties. If he had met her "post-flow" would this presumed Viagra user find her lacking? Chopped liver?

Now you wonder why couldn't that guy have a tennis ball affixed to the side of his creased neck instead of poor, young Abe? Abe, who hasn't even finished fixing up his house.

In fury, you use your two-handed backhand to nail a deep, perfect shot down the line past your lilting-voiced pro. He's unable to return it. He smiles broadly at you and says, "Nice!"

Flow or no flow, for a moment, you've still got it. And it feels so good to hit something.

Maybe Abe just needs some drainage.

Maybe your tennis partner will return safely and virus-free from Egypt.

Maybe the tennis club will stay open.

All unlikely.

But, maybe, and it's a long shot, a very long shot, maybe you will learn *finally* to go with the flow.

But, then again, why start now?

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# **New Poetry by Ben White: “Cleaning the M60 – 39 Years and January 26, 1984”**

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# **New Poetry by Kat Raido: “Blood Goggles”**

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