

# 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 r i 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.*

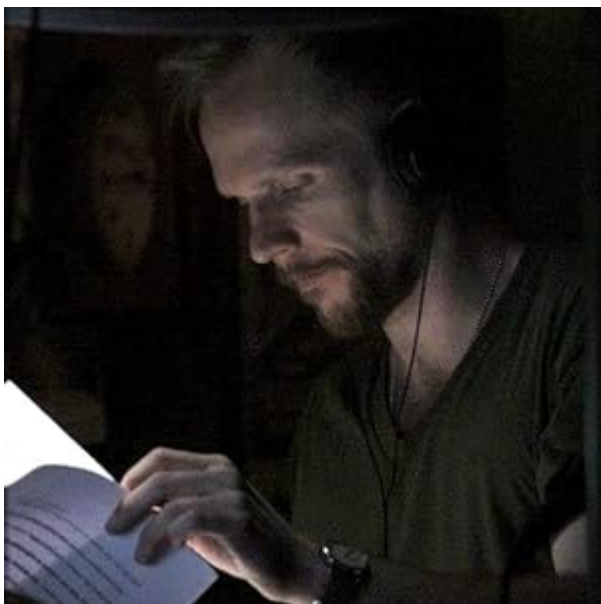
*In addition to the programs made available to the public, SSWA offers education outreach programs specifically targeting communities who have been talked about disproportionately more than heard from in mainstream media. Creative writing and storytelling courses are offered in partnership with social 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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# New Fiction from Hadeel Salameh: “Everything Will Be Okay”

## 1. Her Friend the Israeli

(Eli)

Mais got a phone call from her parents in the occupied territories of the West Bank. I don't know what they told her yet; she's been too shaken to tell me. All she told me is that I needed to book her a ticket to Palestine. She wants to go through Jordan, cross the border and reach Sarta that way. I tell her I'll come with her, and that we'll go through Ben Gurion, that it'll be quicker. She doesn't want to enter Israel.

She insisted she go alone, that it's not appropriate for her to bring a friend with her. I want to think she means it's inappropriate for her to bring her male friend to her parents', that if her family saw us together, they'd think we're an item, the thought of anyone thinking Mais and I could be together, that I'm not crazy to think we look good together, that it's not only me that can see it, is hopeful. But what I know what she means is it's not appropriate for her to bring an *Israeli* friend with her, although she won't admit this.

But I can't let her travel alone like this, feeling so distraught, so I insist I'll join her, say that I don't need to go with her to Sarta, that I'll visit my family in Tel Aviv while she's there. I want to be near in case she needs me. She didn't argue, and now we're waiting at a bus stop in downtown D.C to go to the airport, to Jordan.

I can feel the cold outside, making its way inside my bones.

It feels as though the raindrops pouring on my skin are sinking through the surface, freezing once they pass each layer of warm flesh. Just as the blood flow seems to slow down in between the narrow veins in my arms, she tells me why we're going. Her brother attempted suicide.

She starts to cry.

I never met her family, and don't know much about them, only that she hasn't seen them for years. I don't know why, if it's because of the distance, or for some other reason, but I never thought much about them. It didn't seem she did, either. But now her crying is uncontrollable. "I should have never left, Eli. I left them," she says between breaths and cries harder. I don't know what to do, or how to comfort her. I don't know the situation. I'm afraid to make things worse and people around us aren't sure if they should help me try and console her as I sit there, next to her on the bench, and listen. Others seem to decide to mind their business. They stand back and watch her cry, although some whisper. I don't know why she left, but I'm glad she did because I would have never known her if she stayed. I hate myself for this, knowing the pain she's in now for being here. I don't tell her she did the right thing by leaving, I don't know the situation and I'm afraid I'll say something to make it worse so instead, I stand by, too, and let her cry until the bus comes.

"I should have never left," I hear her say again, rocking gently. "I should have never left."

At the airport, Mais is calmer now, and I hold her, my Palestinian friend. I hug her tight and let her know I'm here, but she's cold and distant. When I let go, I feel she's glad I do. I even notice her shift in her seat a little, inching away from me. Did I do something? I think of everything that happened, if anything happened, and I can't think of anything.

She sighs. I notice her knee is shaking and, in my head, I

raise my fingertips higher and intertwine them through her charcoal hair, brush away the fallen strands from her moist lashes as she starts to cry again. But I'm not sure if she would let me. I should, at least, tell her to calm down, to take a deep breath before her crying starts to build again. None of it would do any good, anyway. Fixing Mais's hair wouldn't change the once milky complexion of her face from pale. It wouldn't sooth the dark circles under her eyelids, and it wouldn't stop the trembling of her knees. Maybe it would only push her away. The tiny voice inside my brain is screaming louder for me to do something to calm her crying. It's growing larger and maturing more with every second we wait for the line to board, leaving us waiting on the cold, metal bench, but it's too late, she stands up and starts to pace near the window of the terminal.

Outside the terminal window is endless pavement where the plane we will board will take off. It's empty and around it only a plain field. It's unlike our city, but it takes me back to a day I spent with Mais last fall, when we spent Friendsgiving together at her place, just the two of us. We feasted on the canned cranberry sauce that day because I burnt the turkey. The smoke alarm had gone off and we needed to open the window to clear the air. It was a disaster. But there was a moment, between all that smoke and the cold air coming in from outside, her laughter uncontrollable as she threw herself into my arms, "you had one job," she said between sweet giggles and chattered teeth. I felt the goosebumps on her arms as I held her. And I knew that with the cold she felt it, too, the warmth between us, for when the smoke cleared she stayed in my arms, looked up at me with lips slightly open, wet, and eyes locked on mine. She watched me lean in under the dull lighting. She didn't pull away until after my lips touched hers.

She closed the window shut behind her when she turned away and I stayed behind a while looking out, watched the leaves

continue to fall, one after another, listened to the bitter wind scratch at the glass.

I can tell when Mais's knees start to shake as she paces. It doesn't look good; her face is turned to the window and she occasionally looks up at the ceiling, tilts her head so that the tears don't fall. It's time to board so I stand in line, signal for her to come back. When she does, her eyelids are heavy and her cheeks are wet with tears, she doesn't face me. I ask her if she's feeling better and she looks at me as though she's disgusted.

"Am I feeling better?" she mocks me. "My brother could be dead, and you think I could feel better?"

I didn't mean anything by it, and I want to explain that but she gets heated and starts to hit me.

"Of course, you'd think that—"

She raises her voice. "I'm so stupid for thinking that you'd ever understand, to let you come with me. You'll be in Tel Aviv, on the beach, when I'm going home to—" she starts to cry hard. She's overreacting, people are looking at us.

"He could be dead and it's because of you, your people burn everything to the fucking ground!" She pushes me and cries and then pushes me again and people behind us start to talk. "I know it! You Israelis ruin everything, kill everyone!" she pushes me again and again. "You take everything from us and now he's lost even the will to live!" Her knees buckle and she falls to ground and wails until her breath is shortened.

The people behind us see her as a petite woman who falls to her knees with a larger man standing over her and assume the worst, I know it looks bad when I feel others step in to pull me away from her. I raise my hands when the security comes, step back. I look at Mais, wait for her to say something, to tell them that it's a misunderstanding, that I could never



hurt her.



When we board the plane, I give her space and even try to exchange seats with someone across from us, but Mais tells me it's okay, admits she overreacted.

Now that she's calm, I'll talk to her. "Yes, a lot," I say. Even though that's not what I want to say at all. I want to say, "don't worry about it," that everything will be okay.

Auburn green and swollen hazy eyes glance up at me apologetically and for a moment I'm looking at her through windows of despair. A bulging lump of disappointment builds in the back of my throat and I feel I need to throw up. I can't believe she blamed me. I don't know what happened to her brother, how could I know why he tried to kill himself? But the more I think of it I worse I feel. I know the situation, about the occupation and the *intifada*—it's chaotic over there, has been for years and nobody's known what to do about it—and that's enough to understand she feels worse than I do. But I think I just need some time to collect my thoughts.

I fall asleep and wake up to find Mais reading *Everything that Rises Must Converge*. I don't like how we left things, and I understand she's worried, understand she didn't mean what she said earlier before we got on the plane, but what if, deep down, she did mean it?

I can't help but wonder if that's how she really sees me, as her friend the Israeli? I'd much rather she see me as her friend, who happens to be Israeli. I'd much rather she just

let herself look at me long enough and see that I can be more than that.

I want to try again, tell her everything will be okay. But will it? She needs truth, answers and ways to get there and I know it might be true, that she won't get the answers she's looking for. All I can offer her now is my unbending stone of a shoulder to lay her head on and wish for more.

"Everything will be okay," I say a million times in my head. "When you reach, you'll see he's fine," I say. "It'll be okay," I say. But then I open my mouth to say just that and I don't say anything. The words inch out and I swallow them back.

## **2. Her Home the Occupied**

### **(Mais)**

Mais thinks back to a conversation she had with her mother five years ago, the summer before she left Sarta for America.

"Any ideas on what to cook tonight?" her mother had asked. Mais's uncles, aunts and cousins were coming for dinner.

"Anything works. Just try to cut down the coffee, okay? It's too much work keeping up with your caffeine." Mais laughed at how many times the visit would mean making tea and coffee.

Her mother laughed faintly, without much enthusiasm.

"As soon as our guests come, we offer them a cup of Turkish coffee as an appetizer, then there's dinner, and another cup follows that," Mais continued. "And then right after, I mean, before the dishes are even dried you guys are at cup two. And a few hours after that you will want another," Mais said. "I find it difficult to sleep at night just by watching you guys take all that caffeine in."

"We're Arabs," her mother said. "It's our water."

Mais smiled and there was quiet for a while.

"We'll miss you here."

"We still have all summer."

"It's going fast." Her mother seemed to take a moment to collect herself, "it's good that you're leaving," she said after a pause, "you'll have a beautiful life."

When the VISA was approved, Mais knew she'd miss Mejd the most. She liked being his older sister; it meant being looked up to, and that helped her with her work ethic. She wanted to make him proud, thought of ways to so that he could learn from her and find ways to study himself—no matter the circumstances that stood in the way. That was back when the *intifada* started, when people were uprising against the Israeli occupation and, as a result, schools and universities were closing. If it wasn't for the way Mejd looked up to her, Mais would have never worked so hard to get that scholarship she got so that she could leave and make something of herself abroad. She would have never made it out of there.

She knew she'd miss Mejd the most because she was hesitant to leave Palestine at all when she won the scholarship. With a ten-year gap between them, she worried for him more than most sisters worried about their brothers—she was the one that styled his hair on his first day of school, the person who helped with his homework and told him how to get other boys to stop bullying him. She was worried that he'd need her, and she wouldn't be around. More than that, she was worried she'd need him, and that it'd show, that she'd miss him so much he would know that she wasn't as strong as she seemed, that she was only strong because he looked up to her and needed her to be.

When she first came to America, she waited for the weekends to hear Mejd's stories. He told her everything—how he and his new friend, Hadi, climbed the top of Jabal Al-Shaykh and how he was excelling in school despite the village school's closure,

despite the checkpoints crossings to other schools closing constantly—how he had found ways to go to a school in Nablus with Hadi, whose father had a permit to work in Israel and so could use the Jewish-only freeways.

As the years passed, Mais became busier with college, and with the difference in time zones, her calls home minimized. Mais didn't mean for this to happen. She had meant to call more often, never meant for the phone calls to stop when they did, but it became harder to keep conversation when she did talk to her family the longer she stayed in America. Her mother told her of gossip among the village and her father only cared to know about her studies—he seemed happy as long as she was excelling, and Mejd became less eager to pick up the phone as he started his teenage years. He was growing up, she understood, didn't need her as much, and with everything going on around her, she couldn't herself keep up, balancing both grades and a social life. There wasn't much in common anymore and the phone calls naturally stopped altogether somewhere between graduation from University and the start of graduate school. She no longer knew if Mejd was still going to that school in Nablus, but she kept watching the news, knew that in Nablus things were better than in the villages around it, assumed there was no reason for things to have changed for him.

Now she thinks of home, remembers how badly things were when she left—reminds herself that it was why she had to go. She realizes, though, that she wouldn't have had the determination to get out if her brother didn't need her to find strength to carry on and study the way he did. And things change, of course everything does with time, even people, even Mejd. She wonders now why he stopped talking to her as much, what changes happened to him while she was away. If her brother didn't need her, she thinks to herself now, it would have been okay that she wasn't there.

When Mais had picked up the phone, she couldn't make out what

her mother was saying at first. It sounded like she had been crying, but Mais couldn't be sure—when she asked, her mother told her to let her finish, first. She started to talk about Mejd and Hadi, how a few months ago, they were approached by three Israeli settlers, who she said had probably come down from the settlement miles away on the hilltops. She told her how these settlers started fooling around at first, how they walked between the copse near Hadi's house, picking olives from the trees, throwing them at one another and laughing.

Mais asked her mother why she was saying all this—asked what it mattered now. Her mother sighed, told her to listen. That what she was calling to say wasn't easy, to let her say explain it to her.

She went on to tell Mais how the settlers then started to throw olives at Mejd and Hadi. The boys got scared, started to walk away, but the settlers called them cowards, told them to come back.

Mais felt her face turn hot as her mother told her this. "Please tell me nothing happened," she said.

Then there was silence.

"*Yama?*" Mais called for her mother, told her again to assure her.

"They killed Hadi, Mais," her mother said. "They took him, one tightly held the boy in his arms as the other two threw olives at him. Then they started throwing rocks."

"Your brother was brave, tried to fight them off. Picked up rocks and threw them at the settlers that were abusing Hadi. But then they charged after him. Thank God he survived."

Mais felt as though her heart would collapse; she couldn't understand what her mother was saying—she couldn't believe anyone would harm a boy like that, only a teenager. "Tell me

everything. What happened," Mais sobbed. "What did they do to Mejd?"

"They made him watch."

Mais hung up with her mother. Imagined her brother and his friend, imagined her little brother, with tears thick as oil running down his face, watching the settlers pierce sharp, heavy stones into his friend's skin, breaking bruises and burning blood with the dirt from the ground. She could not imagine what her brother must have experienced. She imagined that he and Hadi tried to be strong, that maybe his friend Hadi had tried to stay silent so the settlers wouldn't take joy in his pain.

Her mother had told her how it wasn't until a half hour after the incident that Hadi's father came home from work and found the boys nearby, Mejd screaming at his friend to stay awake. By the time they reached the hospital, he was dead.

Mejd survived, Hadi didn't. That sense of guilt seemed to stay with him. Her mother told her how, for months after Hadi's death, Mejd stayed home from school, as Hadi's father stayed home from work. She said Mejd got angry when she told him it was time to go back. How he told her he couldn't—that he didn't want to see Hadi's empty seat in class. He didn't want to ride back in silence with Hadi's father, wondering if his father wished he had died instead for not having done anything to save his son—and most of all, he couldn't look out the car window and see a hundred olive trees.

Mais's mother told her she had found Mejd's body hanging inches from his bedside, from a rope attached to the fan on his ceiling. He wasn't conscious. Her mother needed to cut the rope quickly so she could bring him down and breath into his lungs, but nobody was home to get her a knife, so she stood on his bed and grabbed the rope, pulled so hard the entire fan fell.

### 3. My Friend the Palestinian

(Eli)

I first met Mais three years ago, when I overheard her voice as she talked with a table of friends. A thick accent, with a sharpness in her words, something about the light way the l rolled off her tongue, sounded Israeli. Her voice caught my attention and when I looked back from the bar, I remember feeling electrified, like when the Tel Aviv sun burns the back of my neck after a cool swim. Her dark, curly hair draped down her shoulder was alluring in a way that made me nostalgic, and I couldn't look away. I looked at her and it felt like home.

I was foolish to approach her, too confident and sure of myself—not of myself, exactly, but of her—when she wasn't Israeli at all. When she turned out to be the farthest from it.

“Shalom,” I said. I must have looked so foolish to her, with a smile on my face. She didn't know my palms were sweaty, that I was hiding them behind my back and trying to wipe them off my trousers. If she knew, maybe she would have known it was an honest mistake.

But how could she have known? She heard the words and thought it was a joke, that I knew she was Palestinian and purposely wanted to insult her.

“Is this your idea of a peace talk?” she snapped at me and folded her arms.

I had no idea what she meant, what her problem was, and the allure of her made me pull a seat over and sit down. She looked at me in a disapproving way, like I was a narcissist or something. I could feel her green eyes, pierce through me. She saw me the way she thought I saw her, *other*, as the enemy.

“Can I get you a drink?” I offered, genuinely. I didn't know

she was Muslim, that she didn't drink. I still thought she was Jewish, and by the way she dressed, I didn't think she was religious to keep kosher.

She got up and left, without boxing her meal and forgetting her keys. Her friends all looked at me like I was an asshole and I realized my mistake when I saw the red and green cloth braided together with white and black, a small, Palestinian flag hanging from her keychain.

I still don't know how she talked to me after that.

I took the keys and ran after her, hoping I could explain I didn't mean to be a jackass. I found her searching in her purse outside, by the parking lot. She looked angry and frustrated, turning her purse inside out and not picking up items that fell out.

I knelt and picked up her stuff, offered her keys to her.

"I'm sorry," I said.

She yanked her keys from my hand. Rolled her eyes.

"I didn't know you were," I paused. "I thought you were like me—I mean, I thought you were Isr—Jewish. I'm sorry. I didn't know you were Palestinian."

Her arms folded again.

"Not that it matters that you are," I said. "I didn't mean—I'm sorry. Really, I'm sorry."

"No need to apologize. You're right," she said. "I'm not like you. I'm *nothing* like you—I would never pull a seat up to a table of people *already sitting there* and force my presence onto people who were just trying to eat their meal like they have been for the past hour."

She was uncalled for and unapologetically intimidating, and it



captivated me. I never met anyone so bold. It was the sexiest thing I've ever seen in a woman, and I needed to know her.

"Look. You're right—that was *your* table, and yes, you were already sitting there. I shouldn't have intruded. I just wanted to sit by you." I wanted to tell her how beautiful I thought she was, how I thought she was even more beautiful after knowing she was Palestinian. But I didn't tell her that. I knew I couldn't. I knew then there were boundaries between us—like a wall—and that all I could hope for is a friendship, one built on trust and understanding, that our worlds are too far divided to come together. I knew then I could never let her know how I felt when she looked at me, how desperate and weak it made me feel when she talked. That she was stronger than I was, that she had a hold over me, occupying my thoughts with her dark gaze, firing shots into my chest, paining me the more I looked into her eyes, seeing how pure her distrust was in me.

I knew that no matter what, I couldn't let her know how badly I wanted her, that what I really wanted was to tangle my fingers in her hair and pull at it, bite her lips and taste the sweet bitterness of her hate and devour her. That I wanted her like I never wanted anybody.

"We're in America; we don't have to talk about the Middle East," I said. "I just want to be your friend."

## **My Home the Occupied**

### **(Mais)**

Our plane from Dulles International Airport reaches Amman, Jordan, and it's time to part ways with Eli. As we get off the plane, he insists on holding my bags and wants to come with me to the King Hussein Border. It's nice of him to offer, I feel he's trying to be here for me, to show me that he's worried for me, and wants to make sure I reach safely. He cares, he's a good friend, and when I first heard the news of Mejd and

everything that had happened, I admit I needed someone to be with me. I think I still do, even now, but I don't think it can be him, no matter how badly I want him to be the one I need. He couldn't understand what I'm going through, maybe back when we were in D.C, between diverse crowds of ethnicity and thought, I could pretend he understood, but here, I think is where we say goodbye.

It's late and we're both tired. He insists I stay in Jordan until dawn, that he call me a taxi to a hotel, and, when the night is over, a taxi will be ready to take me to the border. He says that it would be safer for a woman to travel alone under the morning light, and I know he's right, and I'm anxious to go back, too anxious to get any rest, though. So we go to a coffee shop and wait out the night there, instead.

Eli orders me an American coffee, black, no sugar or cream, without needing to ask. He's good at things like this, pays attention to the details, knows what I like and what I need. It makes me feel like I've known him forever, the way he pays attention to me. When I first met him, I was so insulted at his approach. What an asshole, I thought, when he walked up to me and sat beside me and my friends. Just started talking like he owned the place. But that was before I go to know him; I soon realized he was just paying attention to the details then, too, but he had mixed up his details. In a way, it was charming—his awkwardness as he tried to explain himself, the eager way he took me out to coffee. He never once brought up Israel and Palestine, and I appreciated that. I never thought I could become friends with an Israeli, but something about him, the spark when our eyes met briefly, followed by the quickness in which he would look away, before I could smile at all, told me he was different than most men I had met. That he would look after me the way an older brother would want another male to treat his sister, that something in his mannerisms was familiar to me, that while he came from Israel, he couldn't have been Israeli at all, couldn't look at Arab

women the way the soldiers looked at me when I crossed checkpoints to go to my aunt and uncle's. As something of meat.

Maybe he was just careful, all those years, to not look at me for long so that I wouldn't mistake his glances for something of passion or intimacy. Maybe he could just never see me in that way, and avoided looking at me in any physical way at all, maybe as an Israeli he couldn't see any beauty in me because of what I am. In the back of my mind, I admit, I hoped he'd never notice the way I longed for him, the way I longed for him to look at me just a little longer and see me. The way I couldn't look at him at all, too afraid he'd see the way I want to be seen by him. Maybe that's why we've stayed friends for all this time—I wanted him to see me, and he wanted a challenge, to see me, without having to look at all.

We smoke shisha and drink coffee. I try to calm my nerves. I don't think of home, not in this moment. I think of Eli, how he'll be in the same country as me, but a different state entirely. How we'll be so close, but there will be a thick wall between us, checkpoints and security zones that stretch miles and miles between us. When he booked my ticket, he had booked two two-way tickets, assumed I would come back with him at the end of the week. He needs to come back for work, but I don't know if it'll be that easy for me. I told him I didn't know how much time I'd need, how much time Mejd would need to recover. I changed it to a one-way ticket.

He sips his coffee and asks if I'm sure I don't want him to meet me on the other side of the border. I almost laugh at how naïve he is to think we'll reach at the same time. Doesn't he know that Israelis will go on buses far before the Palestinians board? I think he's joking, or he wants to show me he's willing to wait for hours. Either way, I tell him that this is something I need to do alone. He nods and looks away.

When we finish our coffee and dawn creeps in, he orders a cab

and helps the driver put my bags in the car once it reaches. He opens the door for me and then leans in and kisses me on the forehead, tells me to let him know if I need anything, anything at all. He says he'll miss me.

"Aren't you coming in?" I say.

He doesn't answer, and I think maybe I've hurt him by saying I need to do this alone. I want to reach out and grab his arm, tell him that I didn't mean it, but instead I watch him stand by the curb and force a smile at me.

I roll down the window and look hard into his eyes. The morning sun is angled right at his face, but his eyes are open wide, unsquinting as he looks directly at me. In that moment he is looking right at me, and I think he sees me. "I'll miss you, too" I say.

At the border, Jordanians and Israelis search me and look through my purse, my permit to leave and enter the West Bank is stamped, I pay, and I stand in line countless times.

On the bus, I fall asleep and wake up to go on another bus, where first I'm searched again. I sit and look out the window for hours until the bus starts to move, flies hovering around my underarms.

When I reach the Israeli soldiers search my body and look over my documents, and then I go to look for my bags. I find them and go out to find a taxi.

When the taxi drops me off in Sarta, I walk on the main road to my parent's house. My family doesn't know I'm coming, I didn't tell my mother when we talked, couldn't say anything as I listened to her blow her nose between words.

I knock on the door and when my mother opens it and sees me, she hugs me hard, cries into my hair and I feel her tears tickle down my spine. It's a cold feeling even though her

tears are warm. She then wraps her arms around me, holds onto me tightly, and I know she's holding me now to make up for all the times she couldn't the past five years.

I want to stay in her arms, feel her hold me, but I pull back, unsure why. Then, I see the way she looks at me, concerned and afraid, as though she cannot believe I made it home, as though it doesn't make sense to her that I came back. She must feel like it, maybe my guilt shows though, somehow, she knows I don't feel right being back after all these years. Even she must know I should have been here all along. But I wasn't; I was in America, getting a career of my own, putting myself first at the cost of her and her husband and her son. What kind of daughter does that make me?

I don't cry, but she brings her hand to my face and wipes at the dryness around my eyes. I hate myself, I should be crying, even she knows it. I'm sad and terrified but I don't allow it to show. My heart has become hard abroad, it has coped with distance and divided me from even my own self. This I know now as I feel her warm fingers wipe away my invisible tears, perhaps trying to see some heart in me. Trying to see me as her daughter.

Yet, she is crying, sad, and looks happy at the same time. She is happy to see me, even though she probably doesn't recognize me as the daughter she remembers. I reach for her tears, wipe them from her face so she knows I'm still in there, somewhere, that I'm back, I'm home, and I'm trying.

I then kiss her cheek and tell her I need to see Mejd. She nods, takes my bags inside as I walk over to his room. Mejd is sleeping when I go inside. I sit on his bed and look at him as he sleeps, look at his round eyes, the small hairs forming on his chin and the faint bruises on his neck.

My hand jumps to his and holds it, feels it cold and alone, and as though my own coldness inside me spreads onto his skin

and jolts inside him, he wakes up at my touch. I feel him tremble as he starts to cry, as if he cannot believe I came back to see him. He sits up as to hug me and my body moves in to hug him back without warning.

My mouth is moving, my words are forming, tell him to lie back down, to rest, and my hands are working, adjusting another pillow for him to lean against. I don't know how he sees me and isn't upset, after all he went through, without me, perhaps through it all thinking I had forgotten about him.

I don't know what I can say now that would change what happened to him—days and weeks and months before—when I didn't bother to call him to say anything. But then, I think back to hours before this moment, I remember when our mother called, how horrible it was to feel the fear in her voice, how desperately I wanted to say something to make her feel better, but couldn't, and so, I left her to cry on her own. And then, karma, as though God was telling me I deserved nothing more than the coldness I give, when at the terminal, hours passed sitting on the bench and waiting in line, I thought I would never make it back home. That if I did reach, it would be too late, because Mejd would have hurt himself again in the meantime. How desperately I wished someone would have told me things would be okay, even if it was a lie, how it would have felt good, at least for a moment, to hear that I wasn't feeling the pain alone—that someone else was with me, understood that the pain was too much for me to comprehend, knew that a lie might be right to take my mind off everything terrible that had happened. But nobody told me things were going to be okay, because I didn't deserve to hear it. I didn't deserve that beautiful lie, I only ever gave ugly ones to the people I love, ugly lies of silence, when inside I knew they wanted more—needed more. Maybe all this time Eli really did see me for what I am.

“I know things are bad now, but someday, maybe not anytime soon, but someday,” I start to say, but stop. I can't seem to

finish what I want to say, what Mejd deserves to hear, that everything will be okay.

Instead, I say, “You’ll remember a good time you had with Hadi.” I tell him to remember that, that Hadi loved him, that we all do, and that he would want him to live.

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## **New Poetry by WBT Editors**

This special September Poetry & Fiction issue brings you poetry by WBT Editors Adrian Bonenberger, Drew Pham, and Matthew J. Hefti.



Photo Credit: [philmofresh](#)

## Poetry by Matthew J. Hefti

### Poet,

Why do you speak of beauty?

Why do you invest

in currency that pays no dividends,

in one drop of dew on a thirsty blade of green grass?

Why do you search for sweet simile,

like a myopic infant rooting for her mother's breast?

Why pine for the radiant jasper of the New Jerusalem

in one perfect metaphor?

Why agonize over an alliteration that accompanies

the princely prancing of your perfect pet,

or the comrades, cots, cannons, and killings

you can't seem to forget?

Why do you expend the energy

of the world's strongest man, chained and bridled,

pulling a rusty green Volkswagen van with his teeth

just to capture one singular image?

Why do you abdicate the embrace of the sun

and the caress of the wind

to seek pleasure in the squeaky office chair,

the cracked coffee mug, and the sticky backspace key?



Why do you carelessly drop  
the dingy cotton bathrobe of your self  
to leave your own wounded soul on the white page naked,  
obscene, hairy, and a little overweight?

Poet,  
Why do you sate yourself with words  
while the world falls apart around you?

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## Poetry by Adrian Bonenberger

### The Dogs

Four soldiers stand atop a fort's broad walls,  
grandsons of an itinerated lot,  
alert for local mischief, native grief,  
the hostile truth beneath provincial eyes,  
they watch, Hellenic marble statues all,  
aloof, scanning the hills around, flex backs,  
gulp coffee, water, soda, more-chew bread,  
defeat the empty seconds one by one,  
with puffs on Pakistani cigarettes.

An enterprising soldier yells and marks—  
*The Afghan dogs are out! Amid the shit!*  
the fort's high pile of refuse teems with dogs,  
they've risen unexpected from the dross,  
ten mottled muzzles nestle, snap, and gnarl,

ayip and growling, which to scarf the most,  
their hoary feral stomachs brook no pause,  
as heavy, reeking discharge spurs them on.

One man can stop the plunder, one look-out:  
the sergeant bounces out to shoot them off  
astride a monstrous four-wheeled greenish toy,  
and punctures every canine, clatters full  
each heaving hairy breast with hotted lead,  
then roars the iron steed back through the gates,  
his purpose-full demeanor purpose-slakes.

Below, the sergeant by his noble mare  
reminds the picket of its evening task:  
*Don't let them take us unaware again,  
to eat our trash, our shit, it's just not right,  
therefore you must keep circumspect, all night,  
to triumph in this brutal, dry campaign.*  
to underline his will, the sergeant points  
at each young soldier in their trembling turn.

But as the sergeant's kingly finger falls,  
the ablest soldier lifts his voice anew:  
*The Afghan dogs are back, let loose the cry!  
They've come again, in greater numbers yet,  
a host of mutts now twice the normal size!*  
This new band feasts on the dead dogs' hot guts,  
barking and howling blissfully anew,  
paw-deep in dysentery's awful stench,  
they tear and bolt the corpses of their kin.

The sergeant's iron steed has frozen stiff,  
appalled at the uncivilized repast,  
it coughs and stutters, mocks the sergeant's hand,  
while loud, ecstatic crunching echoes near.  
*Fire, the sergeant yells, don't stand there, shoot!*  
*these hellish curs cannot be let to root*  
*among their fallen mates, the dead to loot!*

Two of the guards align the fort's defense:  
machine guns drum and spit their lethal pills,  
entail the feasters, shred their wolfish snouts,  
flake howls of pleasure into howls of pain,  
remorseless hammered argument unchecked,  
until the routed lot, ableed, retreats.

The sergeant eyes his men, now, sees their stock,  
*too little ammunition, says his gut*  
*to guard this place from any more attacks.*  
No time to state this knowledge, for, a shout  
compels his vision to another place:

*The Afghan dogs again! Now from the East*  
*and North they lope, hundreds of feral curs*  
*a bolder pack, unlike we've seen before!*

Light dew bedecks the sergeant's upper lip,  
he bids it leave, as more slides down his brow,  
the shuddered knee he firms, puts fist in mouth  
then climbs atop the wall, aims at a face:  
*make each shot count, he calls, and flames the dark.*

Dauntless the dogs press on, now used to death,  
they've seen their comrades slain and know the why,  
ignore the feculence and blood beside,  
united in their newfound quest: the fort.

Rifles, machine guns stutter out their waltz,  
then one by one fall quiet, bullets spent,  
a rug of twitching paws and fur-filled forms  
becoat the fort's encircling, emptied glebe,  
their numbers thinned, the pack drives on despite.

As growls and barks the solid gateway near,  
a lusty vengeful wave prepares its swell,  
high-howled crescendo jars the stolid walls,  
beats fear beneath the helmets lined above.  
One soldier turns, *what feud have they with we?*  
*Surely this cannot be because our crap*  
*is of such value to the savage tongue—*  
*how could what we reck little, they think great,*  
*and fling their precious lives away for dung?*

The sergeant claps the soldier's nervous arm,  
draws out that old device they'd boggled with:  
the bayonet, tool of a bygone age,  
salvation to the military eye.  
*Like Patton, George and Chamberlain before,*  
*we've but to show these strays our steel, once tamed*  
*by brave display, they'll trouble us no more.*

With that he knifes the rifle's edgeless front,  
urges the four young soldiers follow suit,

so armed by five crude spears the team descends,  
the sergeant's thrice-swept clout compels their haste,  
beyond the iron gate to stand athwart.

Outside the fort's immense protective shell,  
those great chthonic wire-basket stacks,  
a gibbous moon now lights the dusty sea,  
non-Euclidean shade titanic grows ,  
strikes mute the men, a vast nocturnal blank:  
the cunning foe has vanished in the night,  
and spurned the group's aspiring gameful blades.

No dogs patrol the garbage hole, munch trash,  
lap crud-incrusted metal bowls behind;  
none harvest corpses of their fallen mates,  
nor swarm the fort in hundreds, hunt for blood,  
The desert's bare of life beyond the five.

*Well lads, that's done* the cheerless sergeant sighs,  
deflated by the mission's sudden lack,  
*we should feel happy, for, we've won,* he says,  
then slumps, slouches back to the peaceful post,  
til safe, they wait within the pebbled pen.

*They won't soon bother us again, I think,*  
one soldier claims, *we showed them mongrels good*  
then jumps—a booming, mournful howl erupts,  
and farther in the higher hills is joined  
by all the weary province, near and else.

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# Poetry by Drew Pham

## War is a Place

(after Yehuda Amichai)

What did I learn about Americans  
Once, only glimpsed on TV screens  
in blue jeans  
The first ones I saw came out of the air  
spilled onto the earth by mechanical dragonflies  
They wore clothes the colors of earth and leaves  
They bore every possession on their chests and backs  
Like traveling peddlers selling nothing  
but a presaged defeat  
trailing each man like a wavering pennant  
And they took homes  
And took fathers  
Though he arranged my marriage to a stranger  
I did not wish that he disappeared in the night

What else did I learn. To smile always  
A smile could buy a clicking pen or sweets  
If it might save my brothers from my father's fate  
I smiled  
In refugee camps a smile meant  
a quart more of cooking oil  
traded for a clamshell of rouge  
There too, Americans  
Faces like night or the moon  
Eyes hypnotized by a screen, fingers on

keys Smiles can end with visas, plane tickets

Above all I learned in America, war is a place  
Terrible, always, but also somewhere else  
Not here, but across a sea  
I saw the ocean for the first time in New York  
Once, I thought the mountains were great  
Now I know they are meager rocks  
compared to walls of water and salt  
Now I see America  
Why they found us  
Why they seared the earth  
Why they took my fathers  
Took me  
One day Americans will take my son  
he will go over the ocean, just a blue field  
And to him the mountains will be immense and  
endless

---

## Poetry by Matthew J. Hefti

### What Poetry Is

When I was a prep-school student,  
I translated, "Gallia est omnis divisa in partest tres"  
from the dead  
ancient language.  
But I didn't care how they plundered and divided Gaul,  
so I scratched evidence of my presence  
into the cheap clapboard desk.  
Its underside was covered in chewed bubble gum;

its top side was covered in names,  
and that was poetry.

I moved on to university  
and read Keats and Wordsworth and Shakespeare and Longfellow  
and more *dead*  
ancient language  
in musty, highlighted, used textbooks.  
But that too was dreadful,  
so I scratched my feelings  
all over college-ruled notebooks with black and white  
spotted covers,  
and I sometimes spilled beer on the pages,  
and that was poetry.

I read and I dreamed and I read,  
but soon everything I wrote bore a certain resemblance  
to all the *dead*  
ancient language.  
So I stopped writing,  
all except the occasional haiku in magic marker  
on the forehead of my passed out, red-headed roommate.  
I melted into the velour flower sofa  
and watched a whisper of smoke at the end of a pipe  
climb up to heaven like a prayer  
or a whimper,  
and that was poetry.

Somewhere and sometime after that, life happened,  
and wars happened,  
and we dropped blood onto sand,  
and that was poetry.

I traveled around the world countless times (eight to be  
exact),



and I visited countless countries (twenty-three to be exact),  
and I lost countless friends (twelve to be exact).  
I woke up in starts in cramped economy seats,  
always with a dry uvula and a chin covered in drool.  
Each cattle-car airplane was the same  
no matter which exotic desert we flew from,  
and it was impossible to rest.  
So I'd scratch the names  
of the dead  
on frequent flier ticket stubs,  
and this was poetry.

Then for years I just tended the lawn  
and plugged ear buds into my head  
and turned the music up way too loud  
to bury my own thoughts  
and the dead  
as I made perfect passes along the front of my perfect  
stateside house,  
alternating directions each week to make the green really  
pop  
the way the carpet pops after a fresh vacuuming,  
stopping only to drink more beer and admire the straightness  
of the lines.  
And that was poetry.

It wasn't long before I caught a fever,  
and the music wasn't loud enough to bury anything,  
let alone the dead,  
so I bought notebooks with black and white spotted covers,  
and I let them pile up on my shelves  
until the tilted stacks nearly collapsed.  
But there was potential in those blank pages  
and I could feel it,  
and that was poetry.

Now I light the same nag champa incense every night because I  
once read an article  
that said to create you must create a Pavlovian response in  
your writing  
environment.

I light the incense and sit with a chewed up ball point pen  
in hand  
and I scratch a bunch of drivel into the notebooks;  
i.e., the college ruled notebooks with black and white  
spotted covers,  
and I sometimes write something that somehow  
buries all the dead,  
and that is poetry.

---

**New Poetry by J.J. Starr**



## Concerning whether or not I am a horse

I strap torso & press arms

to diaphragm with breath

deep the distressed

voice of mistress

mumbles wishes

amid plum trees

& white headlight

bum-rushes the alleyway—

Am I a horse

kicking at its leathers?

How many full rides & how should I count?

Thought made in moonlight appearing

cogent, succinct behind glass

what makes a full ride?

Pulling hard & pulling harder, making iron  
break soil, dancing in dirt, hooves  
wet, mane draping the strength of a neck—

Am I

if no bit made better a turning  
head? No harm but tightened  
hips? & if my breast hardened by use?  
My rump sheened in sunlight

Am I a horse?

Many hands have made my length  
& I've never been bought.

Many hands have made  
my length. Many hands.

---

## **God Between Us & All Harm**

Lighted hallway, delighted guest,  
the television the  
lens of it, lends itself to you.  
Trump again, brackish, weighted  
eyes dilated, throat-moaning

“The beauty of me is that I'm very rich.”

Beleaguered, who can even remember a face  
these days? My grandfather used to say things  
like you can drown in a teacup of water

if you fall right. He was gladly on his way out.

Sometimes I see his point:

LSU live tiger-mascot dies of cancer at age eleven  
his empty cage strewn with flowers, paper cards  
a student says, “nobody else had a live tiger.”

company shares tumble by 8%  
top of the news feed  
taking so much light  
I’ve forgotten there’s war in Ukraine •

Afghanistan • Iraq • Nigeria • Cameroon • Niger •  
Chad • Syria • Turkey • Somalia • Kenya • Ethiopia •  
Libya • Yemen • Saudi Arabia • Egypt • India • Iran •  
Myanmar • Thailand • Israel • Palestine • Philippines •  
Colombia • Armenia • Azerbaijan • China • Bangladesh •  
DRC • Algeria • Tunisia • Burundi • Russia • Mali •  
Angola • Peru • Lebanon • Mozambique •

where &

& where else?

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## **L asks what I think of the song**

Listening with ears pricked upon  
to Young Thug’s Wyclef Jean  
I cannot be sure where I meet it

when he says let me put it  
& I think of course not—but then  
fingering the hem of my skirt

do I reject his desire to squirt

his cum on my face slick as a ghost  
because I'm honestly or dishonestly

deposed? I want my skin touched—  
perhaps it's how he asks,  
telling me to deny my desire to bask

In the wet filth & become  
part perversion myself. Because it was me  
that morning who told

my beloved to do it & yes, I did want  
kneeling deep in the tub looking up  
all my skin like a socket, drooling mouth

blossomed, filled like a pocket.  
L said to me, You don't think  
about the implication, the intention.

I said, I don't think  
of the gesture as blind contravention  
or anything more than body & mess

upon mess in the deluge of sex. I confessed  
I want to be seen as a canvass.  
She said, I don't want to be mean,

with the swat of her hand, but  
he's no Jackson Pollack.

**Photo Credit: [Cesar Ojeda](#)**