

New Poetry by Kathleen Hellen: “People Boats” and “Pretending There Is A Garden In The Spring, Paradise In Time”

New Poetry by Kathleen Hellen: “People Boats” and “Pretending There Is Garden In The Spring, Paradise In Time”

New Poetry by David Dixon: “Last Night, I Dreamed of the Korengal”; “Look at This Thing We’ve Made”; and “War Poetry”

New Poems by David Dixon: “Last Night, I Dreamed of the Korengal;” “Look at This Thing We’ve Made;” and “War Poetry”

New Poetry by Cheney Crow: “The Grey Phone”

New poem by Cheney Crow: “The Grey Phone”

New Poetry by Almyr Bump: “Plowing Water”

New poem by Almyr Bump: “Plowing Water”

New Poetry by J.S. Alexander: “Sabat”

New Poem by J.S. Alexander: “Sabat (Loyalty)”

New Poetry by Ben White: “Cleaning the M60 – 39 Years

and January 26, 1984”

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

New Poetry by Amalie Flynn: “Strip”

New Poem by Amalie Flynn: “Strip”

New Fiction from Andria Williams: “The Attachment Division”

1. The Bureau for the Mitigation of Human Anxiety

They were the survivors, they should have been happy, they should have been fucking thrilled (the President accidentally blurted that on a hot mic few years back, everyone quoted it until it was not even that funny anymore, but that’s what she’d said, throwing up her hands: “I don’t get it. They should all be fucking thrilled”), but three decades of daily existential dread had taken its toll. The evidence was everywhere: fish in the rivers poisoned not by dioxin runoff now, but by Prozac, Zoloft, marijuana, ketamine. There were

drugs in the groundwater and the creeks and the corn. Birds were constantly getting high, flying into windshields, Lyfts, barbeque grills, outdoor umbrellas, the sides of port-a-potties. The different types of thunks their bodies made, depending on the material they struck, were the subject of late-night talk show jokes.

As for humans, the pills weren't enough, the online therapy, in-person therapy, shock therapy, exposure therapy, clown therapy, none of it. The suicide rate hit twenty percent.

It was Dr. Anton Gorgias—still alive, now, at one hundred eight, and very active on Twitter—who initially proposed, and eventually headed, the Bureau for the Mitigation of Human Anxiety. The leaders of fifty-six nations came together to declare a worldwide mental-health crisis. Ironic, really, because the climate problem had been mostly solved (the U.S. being third-to-last to sign on to the Disaster Accords, just before Saudi Arabia and Equatorial Guinea. Thank God we even did, Steph sometimes marveled. She was twenty-seven; people just ten or twenty years older than she was would often tell her she was lucky to have missed the very first years of the Wars; she'd think, yes, it had all been a real joy, thank you). Nothing could be reversed, but they could buy themselves some time, maybe even a few hundred years. That was in Sweden—of course it was Sweden—and so Minnesota was the first U.S. state to grab the ball and run with it, copying its spiritual motherland with only a smidge less efficiency.

Twelve states had Bureaus now, with more in the queue. But those states all looked to Minnesota, where the successes were measurable: suicide down by seven to nine points, depending on the study; people rating their daily satisfaction at a respectable 6 out of 10. It had once been two. Remember that, Stephanie's local director had told them in training. We brought it up to six. It used to be two.

Using combinations of genomic scanning, lifestyle analysis,

and psychological evaluation, people could pinpoint their main source of anxiety and apply for its corresponding relief branch. The only hitch, at this point, was that each person could apply to only one branch. It was a budget and personnel thing, Steph explained when asked; the Bureau had its limits like anything else. People did not like being told they had to choose, but their complaints made Steph feel a little defensive. What more could people ask of a government agency? "At least we allow you to be informed," she'd pointed out to her parents, her sister, Alex, anyone who took issue. She was cribbing from the Bureau's original slogan, "It's the Most Informed Decision You'll Ever Make."

"Yeah," quipped Alex, in the recent last days before their breakup, when he claimed Steph was getting too sensitive, too cranky, too obsessively hung up on the death of her dad. "We should all be fucking thrilled."

People complained about other aspects, too: registration was a bitch, the waiting period took at least two years and there was mandatory yearlong counseling, but, again—the numbers didn't lie. "It Used to Be Two" was now printed on the sides of bus stops, above the seats on the light rail.

*

2. Never Laugh in the Presence of the Pre-Deceased

Steph worked for a small subset of Mortality Informance called the Attachment Division. The Attachment Division was tailored to people with anxiety caused by the prospect of loss: that their significant other might pass away before they did. This was what kept them up at night, what woke them with gasping nightmares. They wanted to know that they would die first, because the opposite horrified them. They could choose to be informed—if indeed they would be first to go—either six months or three months before their partner.

True, plenty of people registered for the program as newlyweds

and then rescinded their applications a few years later, submitted them elsewhere. But Stephanie still liked this niche, this branch of the Bureau, for its slightly less self-involved feel, its unabashed sentimentality, the gamble its applicants were willing to make for love. A person had to put aside a bit of their pride to work for the Attachment Division. It was not considered one of the sexy branches. It was the Bureau's equivalent of an oversized, well-worn cardigan sweater.

I am a Mortality Informant, my work is an honor and a responsibility, it is not sad. Each day I do my job with compassion and, above all, professionalism. I am on time, clean, and comforting, but never resort to intimacy. I remember that a sympathetic nod goes a long way. I do not judge or discriminate based on a Pre-Mortal's appearance, race, creed, economic status, or any other factor. I will never contact a Pre-Mortal on my caseload outside of work for any reason. I remember always that I, too, will die.

She recalled her classmate Devin, the first day of training, raising his hand and asking how the Attachment Division defined "intimacy." Steph tried to get his attention, jabbing her finger silently at its definition on page four of their brand-new handbooks to spare him the embarrassment of asking something obvious, but he asked anyway. It turned out that "intimacy," for a Mortality Informant, encompassed almost everything, other than 1) helping someone if they collapsed, and 2) the required shoulder squeeze upon first releasing information. They'd practiced The Shoulder Squeeze in the same Estudiante A/Estudiante B setup she remembered from high school Spanish, reaching out a straightened arm, aiming for "the meat of the shoulder." "One, two," the instructor had called, briskly clapping her hands. "One, two. Fingers should already be prepared to release on the two."

"You could probably squeeze a little harder," said Devin, diligent in his constructive criticism. "But that could just

be me. I like a lot of pressure.” They practiced with classmates taller, shorter, and the same heights as themselves.

*

3. Nils Gunderson, Neighbor

Steph settled onto a green metal bench across the street from the address she'd been given, swiped her phone, and logged into her Bureau account to access the file, waiting as it loaded. A long page of text came up. Mortality Informants like herself were required to read their cases' backgrounds first, before viewing the image, to help prevent involuntary first impressions (which, it turned out, were unpreventable).



She jiggled her foot as she scanned, her flat shoes slapping lightly against her heel. Even a year and a half into the job, she was always nervous, right before. She'd been assigned to tell whoever came up on her screen –as professionally as she could, and because this was what they had requested, they had signed up for the program themselves – that in three months they would be dead.

The top line read, in bold, NAME: NILS GUNDERSON.

“Shit,” she muttered. It wasn't that this name made anything worse, necessarily, but that it represented, to Steph, something particular. A man named “Nils Gunderson” would be what she thought of as one of the Old Minnesotans. A lot of them had moved out of the Cities the last few decades, but she

– perhaps because she was not one, or only partially one (on her mom’s side), her late father having been relocated to Minnesota from Thailand as one of thousands of the state’s climate refugees – had a soft spot for the ones who’d braved the rapid change and stayed, the folks who loved their city and weren’t freaked out by the people from all over the world who’d come, out of necessity, and often reluctantly, to live in it. She scrolled down: Nils Gunderson was forty-four years old, married to Claire, worked a desk job for the utilities company. Mother, Edna, still alive; father, Gary, dead of a heart attack at fifty. Four sisters, alive also. An adopted brother from Ghana, interesting. Thirteen cousins around the state. A large family, the traditional sort that believed in upward mobility, that had reproduced with diligence, steadily, starting in Sweden or wherever five generations back, and then came here and just kept it up, moving through the world as if it all made sense, as if the world were bound to incrementally improve simply because they believed or had been told it would, naming their children things like Nils Gunderson. (Although it was worth noting that Nils Gunderson, himself, did not have children.)

She tapped “Open Photo.” But when she saw his face she gave a small jump, not because of anything alarming about the image itself, but because, surprisingly, she recognized him. He was the man who walked his cat past her apartment every night. He was someone she, casually but genuinely, liked.

The Bureau tried to prevent matching caseworkers with anyone they knew. Each time a name came in it was scanned against the lists Steph had provided: her mom and brother, extended family, ex-boyfriend Alex (newest name on her list), former bosses. But she hadn’t known this man’s name, and couldn’t list him. And so while it hadn’t happened until now, here she was, confronted with the face of a familiar person. Her phone buzzed with the drone update: he was ten minutes out, headed home from work now.

*

So now she knew that the man who walked his cat past her apartment in the evenings had three months left to live. It would have been a sad piece of information even if she did not have to deliver it herself.

“Walking the cat” was an energetic phrase for her neighbor’s nightly routine. He and the cat strolled, really, in no hurry, stopping often, Nils Gunderson smoking, following the gray tabby which wore a red halter and leash. Stephanie had seen him just the night before, in fact, as she’d hip-nudged shut the door of her car, a cloth bag of groceries in each arm. He was shy and polite, middle-aged, always slightly rumpled-looking, dressed in the way of a person who was not entirely proud of his body and embarrassed to have to select clothing for it. He wore, usually, an oversized gray t-shirt with the writing worn to nothing, baggy cargo shorts; his white legs slabbed into sandals that were themselves slabs. He had a way of answering her “hello” with a head motion that was both a nod and a duck, replying “How’s it going” so quietly she could hardly hear him—as if he were almost-silently, in a disappearing voice, reading the disappearing words on his shirt— then glancing fondly down at his halter-wearing cat as if glad for the distraction of it. He didn’t carry a phone, which was unusual. Maybe along with the cat and the cigarette that would have been too much. The cat’s name was Thor. Stephanie knew because she’d hear him try to chuck it up like a horse sometimes, a click of his tongue and a little jiggle of the leash: “Let’s go, Thor.”

Thor, who matched his owner with a slight chubbiness, did not go. Thor moved along the sidewalk with excruciating distraction, sniffing every crack in the pavement as he came to it as if solving a delicate mystery, inspecting each tuft of grass or weedkiller-warning flag (“No, no,” the man said with gentle concern, tugging it away, though he must have realized the flag was a joke, pesticides had been banned for

two decades). It must take a world's worth of patience to walk that cat three blocks, Stephanie thought. Or maybe this was the only opportunity the man had to smoke, and he was relieved not to hurry. Smoking was illegal indoors now, even in your own home, and you needed a license— one pack a week, but of course people still got cigarettes other places.

She hadn't, all this time, known Nils's name. But because she saw him almost daily she also saw him on the worst day of her life: the evening, six months before, when she'd gotten the phone call, at work, that her father had died. Frantic, numb, she'd only just texted Alex to tell him, and she pulled up in front of the apartment and couldn't park her car. The space was too small. In and out and in and out she tried, yanking the wheel, blind with tears, and the man with the cat, walking by, seeing her struggle, paused to direct her into the space. She remembered him in her rearview mirror, wagging his fingers encouragingly, holding up his hand, *Good, Stop*. His supportive, pleased thumbs-up when she finally got the car passably straight. And then she whirled out of the car and rushed toward her apartment, toward the blurry form of Alex who had come out to take her in his arms with the gorgeous, genuine sympathy of some kind of knight — Alex had held her and cried; he had loved her father, too — and she'd almost collided with the man-with-the-cat, who noticed, suddenly, her stricken, tear-streaked face, and said, quietly: *Oh*.

Just "oh." With a slight step back, and so much empathy in his voice, sorrow at having misjudged the apparent triumph of their situation. There was an apology in the *oh*, and she had felt bad later that she hadn't been able to reply, to say something stupid like No worries or even just thank him; she'd jogged forward in her haze of grief, her heart still revving helplessly, her stomach sick, while the man quietly tugged the cat's leash and walked away.

In winter, of course, she saw Nils and his cat far less. The cat would not have wanted to stroll in a driving January rain.

But after she got back from her dad's funeral, and started to readjust to life, slowly, and notice the things she had noticed before, she liked spotting them. There was something endearing about the pair, the cat's refusal to move quickly or in a straight line, the man's attendant humility, his lack of embarrassment (in a neighborhood of joggers, spandexed cyclists, Crossfitters) at being an unathletic forty-something male out walking a cat.

Of course, the smoking, the lack of fitness might have contributed to Nils Gunderson's situation. Because there he was, looking back at her out of his profile photo with an almost hopeful expression, as if he were waiting for her to speak so he could politely respond. She'd never had the opportunity to study him the way she now could, in the picture: gray-blue eyes, a slightly hooked nose, the gentle roll of a whiskered double chin cradled by what looked like the collar of a flannel shirt, a fisherman-style sweater over that. She flicked to her badge screen and held it loosely on her lap, closed her eyes a moment, preparing herself with the first line of the creed on a loop in her mind, because it was the most soothing to her. *I am a Mortality Informant, my work is an honor and a responsibility, it is not sad. I am a Mortality Informant, my work is an honor and a responsibility, it is not*— Her phone buzzed and she opened her eyes, glanced down, saw the newest drone update that he was two miles away, expected home in four minutes. He was driving a gray Honda Civic, and would be alone. *Please activate recording device, the message concluded, and Good Luck.*

The capitalized "Good Luck" always struck her as slightly odd, as if she were about to blast into space. But, glancing back down at Nils Gunderson on her phone screen, imagining him coming home to his wife—Claire, she read, was a librarian, Jesus; *it is not sad*—and his cat, she did feel a sudden drop in her stomach that could have been described as gravitational, or maybe it was just the gravity and density of

the information she held, about to pass through poor Nils's unshielded, unprepared rib cage like molecules of uranium, changing him almost as much as his real death would. His death, according to her notes, would occur on September 8th, three months from today.

She pressed her recording button ("for quality control") and took a deep breath. She would be compassionate and professional and punctual and clean and non-intimate. It was the best she could do.

*

That morning, not for the first time, she had typed a resignation letter, then deleted it. She'd just had to tell a nineteen-year-old that her fiancée would die of a sudden, aggressive leukemia; that an 80-year old woman would lose her husband of 57 years. (Parents were exempted from the program until their children were at least 18, or else the whole world would have gone into chaos.)

"We're not all suited to the job," her friend Erica had said over the phone. "You know all the lifers are on drugs." Erica had quit the main Mortality Informance branch (not the Attachment Division) after eight years; now she had her Master of Fine Arts in creative writing and worked for a chocolate company, writing inspirational quotes for the inner foil wrappers. "Everything is for the best!" she'd write. "Kathy N., Lincoln, NE." Or, "Don't forget to giggle! – Lisa P., Detroit, MI." One night Steph and a very tipsy Erica had amused themselves by brainstorming the least inspirational quotes they could come up with. "Imagine opening your chocolate to find: 'Shut up.' – Jenny, Topeka, KS," Erica had laughed, wiping her eyes. "Or: 'Yes, it's probably infected.' – Marsha, Portland, ME."

"There are jobs out there," Erica had promised her, "that are so easy, you could cry. You don't have to make life so hard on

yourself.”

And here was his car now.

*

Nils Gunderson parallel-parked, smoothly, a quarter of a block away, fumbled with something in the passenger seat for a long time—a backpack, Stephanie saw as he stepped from the car, hoisting it over one shoulder—and finally made his way in her direction up the sidewalk. He was slightly duck-footed; maybe this was more pronounced in his work khakis and brown shoes. There were light creases of sweat across the top of each khakied thigh.

Stephanie stood, patted her dark bun, smoothed her skirt, gathered her small shoulder bag and phone. She wore a butter-yellow shirt because she thought it a comforting color. The skirt, pale brown and A-line, was “sexy as a paper bag,” Alex had said: joking, she knew, but screw him anyway, she wasn’t supposed to look sexy at her job. He acted as if she should go out the door in a black leather miniskirt and stilettos, like some dominatrix angel of death.

Halfway across the street she was interrupted by a group of college-age kids, sprinting, shouting a breathless “Move!” and waving her out of the way. She knew what they were doing, playing a new game everyone was obsessed with, where they scanned their locations into their phones at surprise moments, and then their friends had ten minutes to get there and catch them. She heard people talking about it everywhere she went. They’d win virtual cash which they spent on an imaginary planet that they’d build, meticulously, from the first atom up. People spent months on their planets and were devastated when they lost; a guy had been shot over it in Brainerd the week before, and the game itself was causing traffic problems, accidental hit-and-runs, a lady’s small dog had been clipped right off the end of its leash by a speeding Segway. Steph

jumped back as the three men plowed forward, one, at least, calling "Sorry" over his shoulder. "Hope your imaginary planet is awesome," she snipped. Alex had been getting into this game; sometimes his phone went off at three a.m. and he'd dash out the door almost desperately. He had started to sleep fully dressed, even wearing his shoes. If she slowed him down by talking as he made for the door, he'd get crabby, in this weird, saccharine tone where she could tell he was trying to moderate his voice because he knew it was, at heart, an absurd thing to get irritable over. He was aware of that at least. So she'd started pretending to stay asleep. Then, once he left, she'd toss and turn angrily, obscurely resentful of this idiotic game. She was glad all that was over now, Alex and his dumb game, even though he had named his planet after her, which was sweet. And last night she'd been tossing and turning anyway, but because he *wasn't* there, and she'd ended up fishing his basketball sweatshirt with the cutoff sleeves out of the back of her closet and wearing it to sleep—sweet Jesus. Was there no middle ground?

She had to catch up to Nils Gunderson. He was almost at the front door. "Mr. Gunderson," she called, trotting the last few steps in her flat, unsexy shoes. He turned, a quizzical smile crossing his face—not one of recognition, in the first instant, but because she was a small, non-threatening female person calling after him—and then growing slightly more puzzled as he placed her.

"Mr. Gunderson, may I speak to you for a moment?"

"I — sure," he said. "Wait. You — you live a few blocks that way." He pointed.

"I do. Please come over here, if you would." She gestured to the grassy strip alongside his building, wishing there were a bench closer by. It was good to have a place where people could sit down, but she didn't want to lead him all the way back across the street.

He followed her a few steps, as she asked him to verify his name, address, date of birth. He answered so trustingly, his grayish-blue eyes patient, politely curious, that she could hardly stand to see (as she flashed her badge) the dim knowledge gathering around their edges and then intensifying. She told him, in the plain language she'd practiced hundreds of times, that she was a Mortality Informant, reminding him gently that he had signed up for this program, had requested notification three months before his death, that he would pass away long before his wife, and that was why an Informant had been sent. No, she could not tell him when his wife would die, but it was far into the future. He paled before her eyes, she could see it happen, his mortality crashing in on him like the YMCA wave pool he'd later tell her he'd loved as a child, arms outstretched, staggering backwards, chlorine, briefly, in his nose and throat—the exhilaration of having cheated death, which he was not cheating now. Steph placed one hand on his thick shoulder and gave it a squeeze, one, two. She was prepared for him to cry, to ask why so soon, so young, even his dad had made it to fifty; to tell her in shock to go away, fuck her, fuck the program, he wished he'd never heard of it: some people got very upset. They wanted this information in the abstract, but not the real, or they didn't want the moment of receiving it. Several mortality informants had been punched or kicked. Devin had once been chased three blocks. Now they had an emergency button on their phones that could call for backup.

But he surprised her. "Thank God," he said, his voice choked, overwhelmed. "Oh, thank God, thank God."

*

It was close to eleven p.m. when she heard him. Windows cracked, crickets singing through the warm St. Paul night, and then suddenly a wail from street-level that sounded agonized, almost otherworldly. Somehow Steph suspected it was him even before she went to peek. From her second-story brick apartment

she saw Nils Gunderson's large figure hunched on the bench below, the cat sniffing thoughtfully at a crushed cup.

I will never contact a Pre-Mortal on my caseload outside of work for any reason.

The wail was followed by distinct, repetitive sobs; someone cycling down the street glanced over, pedaled on.

I remember always that I, too, will die.

"Fuck," she muttered. She yanked off Alex's old basketball sweatshirt with the cutoff sleeves and threw it onto the couch. Strode out the door and down the wooden stairs in her baggy, checked pajama pants and ribbed tank top.

When she stood next to him, he looked up, his face swollen, tear-streaked, awful.

"You can't do this," she said, crossing her arms over her chest, self-conscious of her braless state. "I'm not supposed to talk to you."

"I'm not doing anything," he said. "I come to this bench every night." She glared at him and he added, automatically, "I'm sorry."

For a moment they both stood, staring at the black, puddled street. There'd been a late afternoon rain. Four young men raced by on bikes, whooping, phones in their hands, the thin tires splitting the puddles in two like bird-wings.

"That is the dumbest game," Nils Gunderson said, and before she could stop herself Stephanie let out a dry chuckle. He looked at her gratefully. Tapped his shirt pocket. "Smoke?"

She hesitated. The first week of training they'd had to swear off cigarettes, alcohol, weed, opiates, anything that might dull or heighten their sensitivity to other people. The database bounced them from liquor stores and dispensaries.

Their mornings began with fifteen minutes of guided meditation on their phones, setting their intentions for the day. Their intentions, it turned out, were always to be compassionate, professional, punctual, clean, and non-intimate. Meditation annoyed her. She recalled Alex coming out of the shower one morning, a towel around his waist, and spotting her meditating (she'd cracked one eye just a sliver when she heard the door); grinning, tackling her, teasing her until she turned the phone face-down and just let it drone on. That had been a fun morning.

Nils held out a cigarette.

"Yes, please," she said.

He scooted over and she sat down beside him. He lit her cigarette. The nicotine wrapped her brain in the most welcome hug, tight, tighter, like a snail in a shell. God, now she craved a drink.

Nils talked. He was worried about his wife. The librarian, Claire. "She'll be so lonely," he said.

"When you signed up for this program," Steph said, rallying her work-voice though she felt worn out, "there was an unselfishness to your act. Remember that."

"Okay," he said. "That makes me feel better. Talk about that a little more. I mean, if you don't mind."

Steph took a drag, exhaled. If she could just smoke all the time her job would be a lot easier. "We'll have a team of grief counselors, a doctor, and after-care staff at your home within minutes of your passing. Claire won't be left alone until her family can get there. The best thing you can do when you feel it happening is to quietly go lie down. It's less upsetting for everyone." Steph looked at him, his bleak expression heavying his face. She could see him imagining his own, undignified death, gurgling facedown in a cereal bowl,

slumped in the shower while water coursed over his beached form. She repeated, "Remember that, just go to the bedroom and lie down."

"She has a sister in Sheboygan," Nils began.

"We know. We have it all on file."

"Will you be one of the people there with her?" He'd suddenly developed the ability to cry silently and abundantly, like a beautiful woman in a film. Tears ran down his cheeks. He picked at his bitten thumbnails, weeping.

Steph shook her head. "It's a separate team. My job was only to inform you."

"I won't be able to sleep tonight."

"I can put in a request for something to help you sleep, but only for the next few nights. We don't want you sleeping away the last three months of your life. Try to enjoy yourself, Nils. Go on a vacation. Sit outside. Re-watch your favorite movies, go to restaurants." She thought of her friend Erica and her chocolate-wrapper slogans. "Remember to giggle. Watch the sunrise. Have a lot of sex." That was not from a chocolate wrapper; that was what happened when she winged it. She should never wing it. "If you can. I mean, maybe not tonight. Give it a week or so."

He glanced at her, tear-streaked. "Have sex with Claire, you mean."

"Well, of course. That's what I meant."

"Just checking. I don't know what kind of advice you guys give. You're all so smug," he added after a moment, but in a sad voice, almost to himself, and it would turn out this was as insulting as he got.

"We're really not," Steph said.

"Should I tell her?"

"I can't make that decision for you."

They sat for a while; Steph accepted another cigarette. The cat rubbed against her pajama pants, his back arched, tail upright and quivering. She reached down to pet him. His fur was slick and soft as a seal's.

"That one time I helped you park," Nils began.

Steph looked at him.

"You were crying," he said. "I felt terrible. I didn't even notice until after you got out of the car."

"It's not your fault. I mean, I was in a car. You probably couldn't see my face clearly. You were being nice by helping me out."

"I just remember giving you this really stupid thumbs-up, and I was still holding it when you almost ran into me. Just grinning with my thumbs up, like a fucking idiot."

"It was a really tight parking spot."

"What were you crying about?"

Now her own eyes were stinging. "My dad," she said after a minute. "I'd just found out he died."

"Oh." There it was again, Nils Gunderson's *oh*. Steph's vision swarmed. Nils said, "I'm really sorry to hear that."

"Yeah," said Steph, an edge of bitterness to her voice. "Car accident. Can't really be prepared for something like that."

"He wasn't in – in the program? Like I am?"

She smiled bleakly. "He didn't believe in it."

Nils nodded, looked out at the street again. "I'm wondering if

it was a mistake. For me, I mean.”

Steph hesitated. “Everything always works out for the best,” she said, and then stopped. “No, that’s bullshit. It’s total bullshit. Sometimes things just don’t work out at all. Sometimes people die and it’s just fucking sad.” His mouth dropped slightly and she sped up: “But I don’t think that’s the case with you and Claire. I mean, that any part of this is bullshit. I think – I think you’ve had a wonderful life together and you’ve done right by her. And that signing up for this program was the right thing to do.” She rallied: “It was the most informed decision you could have made. I believe that. I do, Nils.”

“Thank you.” He wiped his face on both arms. Droplets glittered on the hair. “That was really nice of you to say. Will you meet me here tomorrow night?”

She tossed her cigarette onto the pavement – also illegal, she didn’t care right now – and Nils ground it out with his shoe. “I can’t,” she said.

As she got up, scuffing back toward her apartment in flip-flops, he called: “What department did you sign up for, anyway? For yourself?”

She was honest: “I didn’t sign up for any.”

*

4. The Confession

But he was back out by the bench the next evening, a large, forlorn form in the dark, this time standing and looking directly up at her building. He was holding something in his hands. Steph waited him out, tried to do the crossword puzzle in the Strib, made a cup of tea, dumped it in the sink. If this kept up, she would certainly lose her job before she could make any decisions herself about it. “Jesus fuck,” she

said finally, flip-flopping downstairs.

He immediately apologized in a voice so hoarse she could barely hear him. "I'm sorry, but I need your help. I made something. I was wondering if you would listen to it for me, tell me if it's okay." He added ominously, "It's the most important thing I've ever made." He thrust the package toward her. It was wrapped in newspaper and he had triangled the corners, taped them. If he'd had a bow he probably would have put one on. "What are you *wearing*?" he blurted. "Do you play basketball?"

Steph's cheeks flared as she fingered the edge of the sweatshirt, which went down to her knees. "Oh. It was my boyfriend's. Ex-boyfriend's. I shouldn't be – I shouldn't be wearing it."

Nils's eyes widened, wet. "Did he die?"

"God, no. It's not like I – *make* people die," Steph said, and then she started to laugh, an odd, cathartic laugh, one hand over her eyes. She realized she hadn't laughed all day. She wheezed until she half-bent over, holding her waist with the other arm. The thought of herself as some cursed being, walking around while people dropped away like playing cards – it was too much. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she said, waving her hand, getting control of herself. She was not supposed to laugh in the presence of the pre-deceased.

But he was chuckling, too, tears blinking on the edges of his eyelids. He was laughing simply because she was laughing, out of some empathetic impulse. For a split second she wanted to hug him. She could probably get away with a shoulder squeeze. Lord knew she was royally fucking this up already. Instead she pinched her nose, took a deep breath, looked down at the item as he handed it to her. "What is it?" she asked.

"It's just – things I wanted to tell Claire. Things I want her to know about me. I feel like, after all this time, she should

know everything about me. Before we're parted forever."

"Maybe not forever," Steph tried, regretting it the moment it came out.

He brightened. "You think so?" Whispered: "Do they teach you something in school the rest of us don't know?"

"No," Steph said. "I'm sorry. Why are you asking me for advice on your – your recording? I'm not, like, a writer or artist or anything."

"But you're honest. I can tell. And I want you to be honest with me, tell me if you think it's any good. Promise me you'll listen to it," he said.

"There's a chance people shouldn't know everything about somebody else," she cautioned.

He shook his head. It was the most emphatic thing she'd seen him do. "That's not true," he said, nearly defiant. "This is me and Claire we're talking about here."

*

Back upstairs, she tugged open the newspaper to reveal a memory stick tucked up against a pack of Marlboro Reds. She smiled in spite of herself, cracked the window.

The file was enormous. He had talked for twelve hours straight: indoors, perhaps while Claire was at work; outside, voices in the background, cars swishing past. Initially, he was quite poetic. He must have been a reader, Steph thought, to marry a librarian.

He talked with a low urgency, but slowly, clearly, his voice growing drier by the hour. Steph, sitting with a notepad and pen, initially tried to jot helpful notes.

"My first memory," Nils was saying, his voice strong at this

point, "is of my own foot. I must have been six or seven months old. I remember looking at it in my crib, grabbing it, marveling. I think I found my foot beautiful. The toes were lined up in descending order like small pearls, the nails pink as areolas."

Steph frowned. "Shifting point of view," she scribbled. "A baby wouldn't be able to make these comparisons." Then she crossed it out. "Which foot?" she wrote. She crossed that out, too.

Nils roamed on, through his toddler years, a dog bite, falling off a tall piece of playground equipment, the disappointment of the local pool shutting down for water conservation (Steph didn't even remember public pools – a startling idea, to have your body in the same water as a bunch of strangers'), accidentally wetting his pants in first grade, his first memorable, puzzling erection a year or so later, and how his mom had spanked him afterward. He didn't think the two were related, but he couldn't be sure. "Maybe more positive memories," Steph suggested.

"Dad used to tell me I was a quitter," Nils was saying, two hours later. "I quit four jobs in high school. I quit the football team because half the guys were assholes. I quit lunchtime Spanish club. There are forty-six books in our house I've never read, Claire. Forty-six. You've read all of them. I didn't make it to Grandma Clark's funeral. I'm a failure in so many ways. I feel like I've never stuck with anything except you, Claire. You're the only thing worth sticking by."

Steph noted the time and wrote, "Sweet."

"And Thor," Nils amended. "I've stuck by Thor." He went on a brief tangent of memories about the cat, charming particularities of its behavior. "Good!" wrote Steph. Smiley-face.

"But," the recording went on, "I'm still ashamed. If I'm being

really honest, Claire, I'm ashamed. Because I've had so many secret thoughts in my head. Do you ever wish we could know each other's thoughts, Claire? What would happen to the world if we could all be inside each other's heads?"

Steph yawned, a cigarette dangling from her left hand. It was the middle of the night but she couldn't seem to stop listening. Outside, crickets sang.

"The thing is, Claire," Nils went on, "you're so good. I've realized I'm not as good and I wish I could find a way to make it up to you. I know you don't sit there at the library checking out every guy who walks in but I look at girls all the time. I mean like all kinds of girls and women. I can't help it. Teenage girls, older women. I can't help but notice their bodies in their clothes. Sometimes I think about them later. And I know that's so hypocritical because I'm no Ricardo Lee myself [an action-movie star]. I've never even taken very good care of my feet. I should have made my feet look better for you. I should have lost weight for you, Claire. Sometimes I thought about it but I could only stick to a diet for, like, three hours. I have no self-control."

"Don't be so hard on yourself," Steph wrote.

"Sometimes, when we'd make love, Claire, I'd picture someone else. Rhonda Jones [a prominent Black actress]. Remember that movie where she had sex with Ricardo Lee? I would think about that a lot when we'd make love. Just the way her breasts bounced. I would picture them and it would help me, you know, get there." Steph felt her nose crinkle. "And sometimes I would picture your sister. Not Marla: Kate. When we went on that beach vacation to Ocean City I felt terrible because that was some of the best sex of our lives and I was picturing Kate in her orange bikini most of the time. You were always so self-conscious about your small chest but it never really bothered me. The only thing I really should have been feeling, every day with you, was gratitude. You know?" Nils was crying

now and Steph, at a loss, had turned to doodling swirls in the margins of her notepad. "That's the part that just kills me. Why did I waste any of you, Claire? You're precious to me. The only thing I ever should have felt was gratitude."

Steph clicked on the screen: there were still five hours remaining. She closed the computer. It was nearly time for her to go to work. She was going to be a mess. She had only four cigarettes left and she felt too sick even for coffee. She turned the shower as hot as she could, briefly pondered her own smallish breasts, washed her hair three times to get the smoke out, braided it down her back, changed into fresh clothes, and drove to work.

*

5. Feedback

Nils waited two evenings, respectfully, before returning to the bench. "I didn't want to rush you," he said. He was composed, even a little eager, but slightly puffy through the face. He had freshly showered and shaved and was wearing a polo shirt, and the overall impression was that he had been sort of scraped, steamed, and stuffed. It made him look both less tired and more so at the same time. "I'm trying to look better for Claire," he explained. "I even brushed Thor." The cat did look sleek.

"Have you told her yet?" Steph asked.

"No. I'm waiting a little longer."

"That must be hard," she said, as if it were the only hard thing about the situation. When his eyes began to water she changed the subject. "Your recording," she said.

He brightened. "What did you think? I decided to call it The Confession. Because that's what it is. The truest thing I've ever told anyone."

“Yeah,” said Steph. “I think—I think you should definitely not give it to Claire.”

Nils’s face changed utterly with confusion. “What?”

“It’s just – I think you want to leave her with the best possible memories of you. With – with this,” she said, indicating his hair, his shirt. “These are the last memories of you she’s going to have for her entire life. I think you want them to be positive, you know?”

“But it’s the truth,” he said.

Steph made a small irritated sound. “Lots of things are the truth,” she said. “Think about Claire—”

“All I ever think about is Claire.”

“Apparently not,” said Steph, and then apologized. “You shouldn’t give someone a confession they can’t respond to. It’s – unethical. She’d be stuck with just your words here, and who knows exactly how she’d interpret them? Which ones she’d focus on? What if she doesn’t hear all the times you’re telling her you love her, and just thinks endlessly about the other stuff? Why do you need to confess, anyway? I hate to break it to you, but nothing on this recording is that bad. It’s just – it’s just kind of inappropriate. You know?”

“But it’s the truth.”

“Yes, you keep saying that, but this is your marriage and your life, Nils. Do you really want it to be some kind of social experiment, or do you want it to be warm and loving and meaningful? Don’t shoot yourself in the foot here. You want – you want Claire to feel like she made a good decision with her own life,” Steph blurted helplessly. “That she made the best possible decision.”

Nils stood quietly a moment, seeming to shrink slightly into himself. “And you think she didn’t,” he said.

Steph felt a wash of shame. "That's not what I meant to say."

"No, I understand," he said, not accusingly, but as if reeling with the thought. He spoke slowly, almost as if in wonder. "When I expressed my truth, it became clear to you that I was not Claire's best decision."

How many ways, Steph wondered, am I going to be forced to hurt this man? "I think giving her this recording is not the best decision," she said. "I think *you* were probably a great decision."

He nodded to himself, his eyes brimming again. "Well, thank you for listening to it," he said. "And for your time. I know I took a lot of your time and energy. I feel bad about that. I took a lot of your emotional energy."

"Don't feel bad," said Steph, exhausted.

"It was really helpful to talk to you," Nils said. He began to shuffle down the street, looking defeated. Thor, gleaming like a tiny streetlight, followed. Then Thor stopped, and Nils stood two feet from Steph making encouraging kissy sounds, and the cat started up again. And then stopped. And then started, and then stopped. Nils tried to gaze up at a tree. I am going to actually die right now, Steph thought.

But she wasn't. Or, at least she didn't think she was.

*

6. The Game

For the next few weeks, Steph was careful not to encounter Nils. She grocery-shopped on Saturday mornings, instead of after work, and she did not go outside during his walking hours. It helped that there were weeks of heavy rain, shining in intermittent sunlight, the gutters constantly steaming as if they breathed. It was not ideal weather for Thor to stroll in.

When her termination notice came, she was not surprised. She wondered, briefly, if Nils might have reported her, but her supervisor produced drone images: she and Nils smoking on the bench. There had been a brief investigation, agents sent to Nils's apartment. Loyally, unaware of the photos, Nils claimed that Steph had refused to speak to him outside of work and never had; Steph smirked at his sporadic attachment to truth. Her supervisor, noting her smirk, reminded her that there was nothing funny about being a Mortality Informant, and that was why it was necessary that she now seek another career.

"Maybe there's sometimes something funny about it," Steph said.

Her supervisor told her to pack up her desk.

*

September 8th nagged at Steph on her wall calendar; her eye flicked to it again and again. When the morning came, hot and bright, she found herself unable to sit still. She circled want ads in the paper – low-paying jobs working with the disabled, or small children – and finally went for a run. She passed Nils's street but could discern nothing out of the ordinary; cars lined both sides, as always, and there didn't seem to be any more or less than usual. She found herself running faster and faster, the steamy air filling her lungs, her heart pounding frantically and ecstatically until it seemed to fill her whole chest and body and vision and mind. She reached a bench at a park half a mile away and bent over, gripping its metal back, nearly hyperventilating. Her mind was filled with an enormous, pulsing red. It bloomed and bloomed as if trying to push her eyeballs out. Steph dropped to her knees. The ground was muddy and gritty beneath them, pungent, slightly cool. The tiny rocks in it hurt. She tried to spit on the ground, but hit her own thigh.

"Miss?" an unfamiliar male voice asked. "Are you alright?"

She looked up.

“Are you part of The Game?” he asked. “Are you looking for John?”

It took her a moment to parse this. “No,” she said. “I’m not. I was just jogging. Just a little out of shape.” She added, with manufactured effort to pass the nausea, “Good luck with your Game!”

She wasn’t really out of shape, but the man took her word for it and politely moved on. Besides, he was looking for John. When Steph’s vision had cleared, she walked slowly toward home, hand on her cramping ribcage, small spots still dancing around the corner of her eyes. Just go lie down, Nils, she thought, as if she could send him a message with her mind. Just go lie down.

When she got home, she staggered, exhausted, into her tiny bedroom, laid on her back the bed, and balled her fists into her eyes. She was soaked with sweat, small pebbles spattering her knees like buckshot. She no longer had access to her work files, of course, but she imagined the notification that would have popped up: CASE CLOSED. Her chest tightened again and she rolled onto her side, reaching back to yank hard on her ponytail, a habit she had in moments of grief. It was almost enough to shock her out of any emotion, that pull, hard and fast.

She must have fallen asleep, because when she opened her eyes again the sunlight was slanted, descending. She sat up, clammy, rubbed the pebbles from her knees. Wiped her eyes. She would find a new job, buy groceries, call her mom. When she stood, she let out a small sigh, which sounded like *oh*.

New Poetry by Michal Rubin: “I Speak Not Your Language” and “Omar Abdalmajeed As’ad of Jijlya”

I, born from the womb of
my mother’s remembrances
wrapped in the cocoon
of her story[...]

New Poetry by Rochelle Jewell Shapiro: “Each Night My Mother Dies Again”



FALLS ON NIGHT / *image by Amalie Flynn*

EACH NIGHT MY MOTHER DIES AGAIN

Each night the phone rings—

Your mother has passed.

Each night I expect to be relieved, but night falls on night.

Each night she is the mother who makes waffles,

batter bubbling from the sides of the iron, the mother

who squeezes fresh orange juice, and serves soft-boiled eggs

in enchanted egg cups. Each night I squint into her face

as she carries me over the ocean waves, her arms my raft.

Each night she refills Dr. Zucker's prescriptions

for diet pills and valium. Each night she waters her

rosebushes

with Dewar's. Each night I see her hands shake,

her brows twitch. Each night she adds ground glass to the chopped liver, rubbing alcohol to the chopped herring. Each night she puts a chicken straight on the lit burner without a pot. Each 2:00 a.m., Mrs. Finch from 6G phones—*Sorry to say your mother is naked in the hallway again.*

Each night my mother is strapped into her railed bed at Pilgrim State, curled into a fetal position, her hands fisted like claws.

Each night she calls to me from her plain pine coffin, calls me by the name she gave me, the name she hasn't forgotten.

New Fiction from Brian Barry Turner: “Death Takes a Temporary Duty Assignment”

Death had narrowed his search of potential candidates down to two soldiers, both with high kill counts. Qualified applicants were always military men assigned to the line. Death had been a knight under Robert the Pious. His predecessor had been a Centurion under Augustus. Snipers, artillerymen, and pilots were ineligible, too much separation from the butchery. Intimacy and closeness were necessary for a harvester of souls.

Blackburn and Rojas. Each man had seen the whites of enemy eyes before pulling the trigger. Death had brushed shoulders with each of them, literally and figuratively.

Death sat beside his laptop computer, his bony finger pressing

SEND on the last of his 555,000 emails: intercessions, near death experiences, and miracles forwarded to him by God. "Finally," he said as he rose and grabbed his scythe, "I'm all caught up."

Death had been granted a two-hour Temporary Duty Assignment to pick a successor. Having completed his thousand-year tour of duty, he had extended for three more years to clear up a client backlog. The twentieth century had been a busy time for the Grim Reaper, perhaps the busiest in history. With the invention of the cell phone and internet, the incumbent Death received a constant barrage of text messages and emails which—considering his birth 400 years before the printing press—he managed adroitly.



As a spirit operating outside the bounds of space and time, Death's job granted him near omnipresence: only a fraction of a second later he was standing within a concertina-lined forward operated base in Northern Iraq. He checked his watch—1300 hours.

Invisible to the Living, Death strode through Task Force

Warrior's Tactical Operating Center, spotting Sergeant Major Muerte haranguing a long-haired private. "Sergeant Major," he said to himself as he stepped into Muerte's body, "I hope you don't mind me possessing your soul for a tick."

The private reeled as Muerte's Aztec hue shifted to a bloodless pallor and his face, previously the picture of health, deflated. Staring through opaque eyes, Muerte—now Death—snapped his fingers, and his scythe instantly appeared in his pale hand.

The private straightened up, eyes trained on the razor-sharp scythe. "No need for that," he said, backing out of the TOC, "I'll cut my hair, Sergeant Major."

Scythe in hand, Death, now Muerte, walked around Warrior Base, finally locating Charlie Company's first sergeant. He had little time to dawdle.

"I need to speak with Sergeants Blackburn and Rojas, First Sergeant."

Staring at the large Scythe, the square-jawed first sergeant hesitated. "What about, Sergeant Major?"

"A promotion."

"A promotion? To what?"

"The Angel of Death."

"Oh..." he said, exhaling in relief. "I thought I was getting transferred."

Located in a derelict guard house, Muerte's office was the epitome of military austerity—desk, two chairs and a laptop computer, the antithesis of Death's Victorian-era quarters. Muerte set his Scythe against a bullet-riddled wall and took a seat behind his computer. He logged onto his email and sighed at the 300,000 unread messages in his inbox. He downloaded

Blackburn's file.

Just as Muerte was about to call in his first candidate, the report of a mortar round rocked his office. With less than ninety minutes to conduct his interviews, he couldn't afford any distractions. Within an instant he was outside Warrior Base's perimeter standing beside a truck occupied by three insurgents and a mortar.

Upon seeing the now manifested scythe-wielding, eight-foot tall skeleton draped in a black robe, the insurgents' faces froze in silent screams. "Do you mind?" he said in perfect Arabic. "I'm conducting interviews."

"Malak al-Maut![\[1\]](#) Malak al-Maut!" yelled the driver as he stomped on the gas, covering Death's robe in a brume of powdered dust.

Transposing himself back into Muerte's body, he checked his watch. 77 minutes. Barely over an hour left to select a candidate for a thousand-year tenure of abject grief and hopelessness. He'd kill for more time.

Sergeant First Class Blackburn stood in his doorway as Muerte reviewed his file, "You asked for me, Sergeant Major?"

"Take a seat, Blackburn."

Standing a portly 5' 2", Blackburn's stature was exacerbated by his unusually long arms which necessitated his wearing gloves to protect his dragging knuckles. Blackburn took a seat across from Muerte and reached for a pack of cigarettes.

"Mind if I smoke?"

"Be my guest," said Muerte, "Can I bum a square off you?"

Blackburn offered Muerte a cigarette from his sausage-shaped fingers. Muerte took a deep drag, relishing the tobacco, tar, and carbon monoxide as it entered his lungs. Cigarettes and

Death. Death and cigarettes—like ham and cheese to the Living.

Muerte gazed at his laptop. “It says here you killed 22 insurgents.”

“23, Sergeant Major.”

“No, Sergeant, 22. One was shot by friendly fire.”

“Oh...”

Muerte leaned back in his seat and took a deep drag, sizing up Blackburn’s homuncular appearance. “What does that mean to you, to kill 22 men?”

“Are you with JAG?”

“No, I’m not with JAG.”

Blackburn’s eyes darted around the room. “I don’t know if I should answer that.”

“Anything you say here stays in this room.”

Blackburn leaned across the desk. “I’m the Angel of Death,” he whispered.

“Say again?”

“I’m the Angel of Death.”

“*You’re* the Angel of Death?”

“Yes, Sergeant Major.”

Muerte was taken aback by Blackburn’s hubris. Boasting was bad form even among the Living.

“That’s awfully presumptuous, isn’t it?”

“Presumptuous?”

“Can you answer two million emails in a single day?”

“No, Sergeant Major.”

“Can you answer three million phone calls a day?”

“No, Sergeant Major.”

“How about travel? Can you be in a million places at once?”

“No, Sergeant Major.”

Muerte stood. “Thank you, Sergeant. I’ve heard enough.”

Blackburn offered a handshake, but Death politely refused. He hadn’t come to collect Blackburn, only to interview him.

Muerte returned to his chair and checked his in-box. 700,000 unread emails. Never a moment’s rest. Death gave the Rojas file a quick look. Just as he was about to call him in he heard a truck turn sharply into Warrior Base’s entrance. He rolled his eyes, “Here we go again.”

Materializing beside a pick-up packed with explosives, Death killed the engine. He had dominion over the Living *and* all forms of technological devices, including internal combustion engines. Few were aware of this.

The suicide bomber sat motionless in the driver’s seat, horrified by the cloaked figure towering over the hood of his truck. Death walked to the driver’s side and tapped his bony finger on the glass. The suicide bomber rolled down his window.

“Kinda busy right now,” Death said in Arabic. “You mind coming back later?”

The suicide bomber nodded and put the truck in reverse.

Death returned to Muerte’s body. 1,200,000 unread emails in his inbox. He’d give his soul for a personal assistant. He checked his watch—30 minutes. He was out of time.

“Next!”

Sergeant First Class Rojas entered Muerte’s office. Five-foot ten with a rail thin physique, Rojas looked like he’d be ground to powder by a sandstorm. His freckled face was capped by a thatch of red hair. Death smiled at his surname. *Rojas*.

“You summoned me, Sergeant Major?”

Muerte motioned for Rojas to take a seat. He stared at his laptop, then turned to Rojas. “25 insurgents. It says here you killed 25 insurgents.”

Rojas sat silently, running his hand over his ginger brush cut.

“How does that make you feel, to kill 25 men? “

“Are you with JAG?”

“I’m not with JAG,” Muerte said. “Why does everyone keep asking me that?”

“It’s a loaded question. If I said I felt nothing I’d be a sociopath. If I said I enjoyed it, I’d be psychotic.”

Muerte chuckled. “You Living, always putting labels on your own agency.”

“Living?”

“I’m not here to diagnose you.”

“Honestly?” said Rojas as he straightened up. “Part of me felt good to kill those men.”

“Good?’

“Yes. They were trying to kill me, but I killed them first. I suppose it’s primal.”

Muerte leaned back in his seat, “Please elaborate.”

“It felt good, but I don’t get any joy out of taking another man’s life. I simply did what had to be done.”

“And that is?”

“Bring my men home. Those men I killed, they have families, but so do the soldiers in my platoon.”

“So, in a way,” Muerte said, closing his laptop, “you view death as simply a consequence of your chosen profession.”

“Yes, Sergeant Major. And I take that profession very seriously.”

Muerte ruminated on his words, sizing up the freckly-faced, red haired non-commissioned officer. There was no doubt about it. He’d found his replacement.

“Congratulations,” Death said as he rose and offered a handshake. “You’ve got the job.”

Rojas stared at Muerte’s pale fingers. “Job?” Rojas asked as he rose and offered his hand in return.

“Yes, a job,” supplemented Muerte. “But I must warn you, the workload will kill you.”

[\[1\]](#) Angel of Death

**New Poetry by Doris Ferleger:
“Praying at the Temple of
Forgiveness,” “Internal
Wind,” Driving Down Old Eros
Highway,” and “Summer Says”**



TURNING EVERYTHING AROUND / *image*
by Amalie Flynn

Praying at the Temple of Forgiveness
for Zea Joy, in memoriam

Last Monday you threw yourself,

your body, dressed in red chemise,
in front of a train.

It was your insatiable hunger
for a more tenderhearted world,
your husband said at Shiva.

Now no one will get to see
what you saw from inside
your snow globe where you lived,

shaking and shaking,
breaking into shards
of ungrieved grief, unanswered need.

I will remember
how tirelessly, with your son,
you worked to help him turn

sounds—coming through the implant
behind his ear—into speech,
speech into understanding.

Everyone will remember
how you skipped across the dance floor,
waving pastel and magenta scarves,

and prayed to angels.
O, dear Zea, your human bones
thin as the bones of a sparrow—

the way you could fold
your body to fit anywhere.
Rest now. You have succeeded.

INTERNAL WIND

When you died, our son

became *my son*; I watch
through your eyes

and mine how he lifts
his whole body into
a long accent à droite,

arms taut, wrists impossibly
rotated back, fingers and toes
also pointed back

to all the hours, years
of practice in turning
everything around.

~

Over the hollow
you left, our son stretches
his fingers across

frets and strings
in C minor,
Bach's Etudes

the way you taught,
the way you closed
your eyes, nodded, satisfied—

our son will remember.

~

Remember how
he watched you deep-
breathe into yoga postures?

Now his own focused flow
heals what Western doctors call
tics, quiets what Eastern doctors call

internal wind. Listen
how our son calls
to his yoga students

what he learned
at your knee: *Effort*
brings the rain—

of grace.

~

When our son and I argue,
I feel homeless, divided,
until I remember how you

and I took turns massaging
his neck that ached from its day's
staccato singing—

~

Sometimes I can see his tics
as flawless, meticulous,
a body expressing itself

with perfect diction.

DRIVING DOWN OLD EROS HIGHWAY

Me, in my Q50 with its hot flashes and warning beeps,
heading toward Sweet Desire, New Jersey, where my love,

soon 70, will woo me with mango, melt the mushy pulp
in my mouth—or perhaps he naps.

You, CeeCee, painting the walls pink in the tiny house in
Pullman,
recently moved in with your old college flame, coming so

easily

against his new ceramic hip, just the friction of it. You say your pelvis never quite fit with anyone else, including your soon-to-be-

ex-husband of 30 years. Me, with a G-spot suddenly. A rainbow of chaos tunneling through me when his fingers find it and flutter.

And long live the reckless tongue. The old-fashioned clit-kind of climax. Like a young planet rising. Oh, how old and greedy I am

for that whole-body wave and chill and quiver and release. You, purposely avoiding that whole-body wave of shiver,

as it reminds you of your ex's dogged insistences.

For your 60th, your daughter gifted you with a mini vibrator

on a rubber ring for your index finger. A *sex-thimble*, you joke.

Sex over 60 seems unseemly to talk about, CeeCee,

but it seems more ungrateful to say nothing at all.

You and I speak of what our mothers couldn't give us.

Daily I pray at the temple of Venus.

SUMMER SAYS

Pay attention to
your heat, your survival—
the tree rooted in your garden

is a sequined vernacular, a cashmere sweater.
Because nothing matters in the end
but comfort and the bending light.

Summer says, I will be the room you die in.
You will dream, neither of regret,
nor in the language you were born into.

A stranger will comb your existential threads.
You had thought, for instance, humans
were gerunds or harps bent

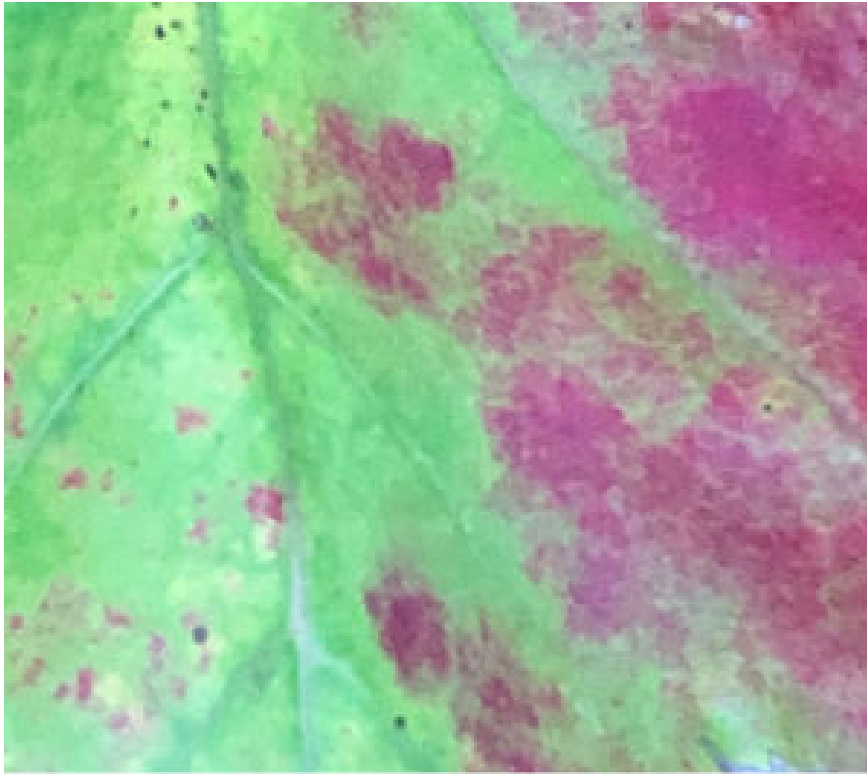
on playing in a diner that serves
black coffee and hard donuts.
You ask, *What is the past?*

What is it all for?
Summer says, The wound of being
untaught. Says, hungry.

Says, the cypress is a hospice,
says, falter, falter, falter,
bloom bloom bloom—too soon

a pall will keep you company.

New Poetry by Michael Carson: “Politics”

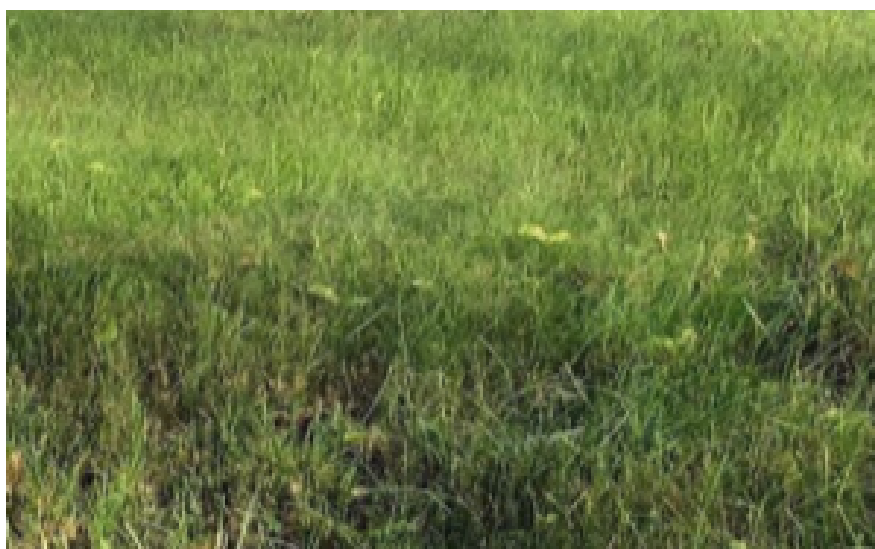


BLAME OUR BRUISES / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Politics

Every 20 years or so boys dress up
And kill each other for fun.
It's the way of the wrack of the world
The wind of our imagination and our love.
To blame our costumes for our beauty
Is like to blame our bruises for our blood.
The chime is what drives us, what ticks
Our tock forward to the next spree.
The foreshortened humiliation,
The immaculate imprecation,
Is neither what we fear or what we covet.
Man is. Rats are. Take what you can
While the day is rough
Move lengthwise into the past
And blame god for never enough.

New Poetry by Kevin Norwood: “Rabbits in Autumn”



THE LUSHEST GRASS / *image by Amalie Flynn*

RABBITS IN AUTUMN

Who will find our bones in a thousand years,
bleached and brittle under the unyielding sun,
scattered in dried grasses by feral dogs or vultures?

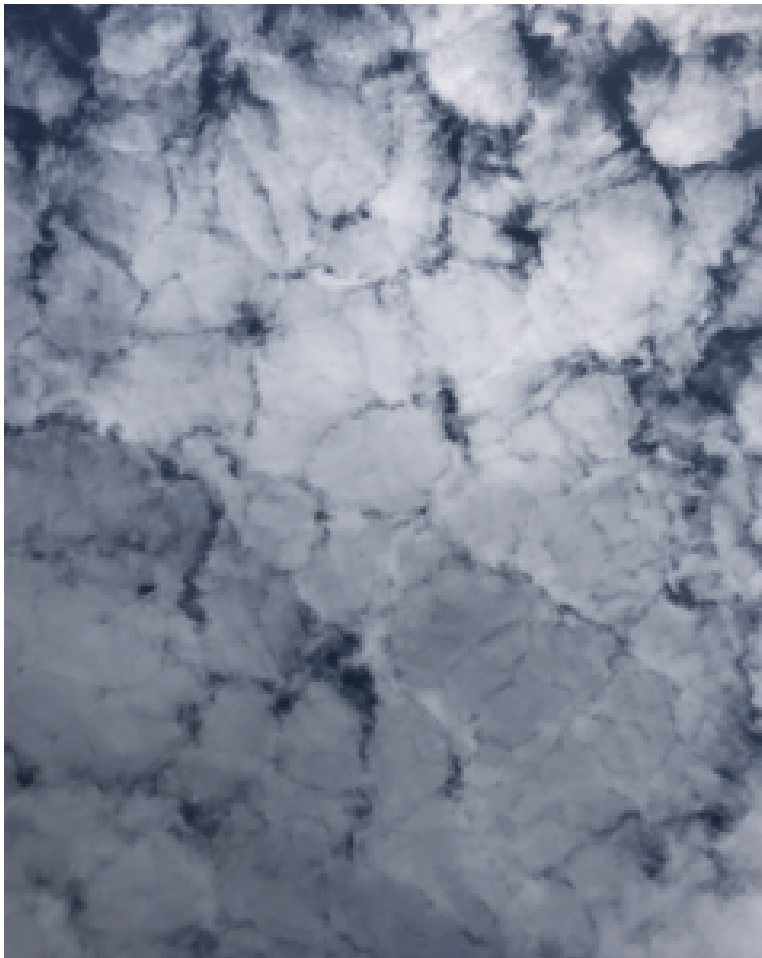
Who will hold such curiosities, not knowing
that we stopped here to kiss and murmur
that our love would outlast the moon and stars?

Who will hold our bones, never to imagine
that under the same sun, we once made love
on the lushest grass, under a sapphire sky?

In autumn, the fox lies in wait, hearing rustling
in the tall grass. Having eaten, the fox moves on.
There are no questions of why, or how, or when.

Smoke rises acrid in the air; the sun sets earlier
each day; the grapes shrivel on the vine. Time
is the fox; we are the rabbits. Please, hold me.

**New Poetry by Joddy Murray:
“Aphrodite Urania,” “Chronos
After Castrating His Father,”
“Grandpa Uranus, Rainmaker,”
and “Uranus’ Genital Blood”**



WOMB OF FOAM / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Aphrodite Urania

From a womb of foam I
came to be a woman, heavenly
gestated from Father, who also brought
weather, seasons. He is a castrate
and timeless, the bluest of planets.
As a warrior, my courage
is to stand by my brother while his
hunger weakens him, devouring
days, years – his children. My
courage is to persevere while
the sand under the waves carve
portraits of Mother – her power
quietly stronger than anything else,
ungrounded, unfathomable.

Chronos, After Castrating His Father

The sickle Mom gave me was super sharp, so all I had to do
was, like, sneak up on the old
man – who always ignores my AWESOMENESS anyway and has so many
fucking kids like
he's the king of the freakin' universe – get underneath that
nasty tunic he wears (with the
blood and guts of all the meals he eats but doesn't need to
eat cuz he's a God and all), and
from behind simply grab 'em, slice, and run like hell. Why did
I think this would be a good
idea? Just because I hate the man, and the way he treats
Mother is shit. But it was easier
than I thought. He didn't follow, just shrunk down to the
ground where his ball blood was
splattered and I could tell as I ran that there would be

giants and furies and monsters
born out of that blood. I hoped the sea would bury his
testicles as I tossed them as far as I
could, standing on a cliff, sure that all would be better now
and my time here would calm.

Grandpa Uranus, Rainmaker

My grandfather no longer visits
with his blue capes that cover everything –
his foamy genitals an island for
Aphrodite. My name, Urania,
is his and my sky is his, the
sodden breezes still spray
my eyes so I look up. Don't bother
charting the skies. Astronomy
is family. Look for me when you
are angry, I'll kiss your temple
and promise you your future
and pray to my grandpa, the
father of giants and furies and
all that I turn from in my shadows.

Uranus' Genital Blood

When my son cut off my testicles
and threw them to the sea, I thought
about those cherries I left for you
in a porcelain bowl by our bed.
His reason, Gaia? You, my darling.
So I'll sire no more children, darken
the skies no more, abate the thunderstorms,
give the bloodied sickle away
and make some Phaeacians as I do.
Time himself, Chronos, betrayed me

and I've set a growing hunger in him.

What beauty could come of this
or the sea? Beauty itself?

**New Poetry by Emily Hyland:
"Rehab Day 1," "Rehab Day 4,"
"Rehab Day 9," "Rehab Day
11," and "Rehab Day 19"**



THAT PARTICULAR REGION / *image by Amalie Flynn*

REHAB DAY 1

He hadn't told me, hadn't stopped drinking
drank beer in the hallway near recycling

where people bring garbage and broken-down boxes
he guzzled, and I was here on the other side of the door

thinking him sober,

reversing redness and the inflammation
from an otherwise young and healthy liver

and *I* was sober—

how would it help for me to sip a glass of wine

while he drank water with our chicken piccata?

My first thought after drop-off was rebellion

to pull the cork from a long glass throat
and pour full garnet into stemware

I wanted that right again. In my home
the right again

to not finish a bottle and know
it will still be there in the morning

Then I felt a kind of shame

I checked him into a rehab facility
and all I could think of was wine

to unleash my desire for want

drove hours home like a Christmas-morning kid
thrashing through ribbons and crinkled paper

so soon as it was in sight
enrapt and hungry for vice.

REHAB DAY 4

He's been in rehab four days now, four days without hands on
my body

how indulgent that every day I've had hands plying my nerves
into delight

delight like the tickle and lick of sharing a bed with the
same person

and when I finally call my dad, my dad who I'd been avoiding
telling

I tell him how lonely it was to arrive back home after leaving
him there

with nurses in their face shields, yellow gowns, and their
masks

and the globe eyes of his counselor, who stood just back on
the sidewalk

and my dad says with unintended harshness that he takes back
as soon as the truth hits the mouth of his phone: *You don't
have to tell me that*

at least he's coming back and I imagine him there alone,
barefoot

in shorts with a solid color shirt, some sort of mauve,
doodling spirals

and checker-box patterns at the kitchen table on a yellow
legal pad

in felt-tipped pen while he talks to me, and I remember how in
the month

between funeral and stay-at-home, he was well-booked—every day
somebody stopped by with a crumb cake. Baked goods multiplied
on his countertop: cookies mutated into blondies into muffins
into baskets

filled mostly with crinkle paper with pears and crackers atop
and underneath

the suffocation of plastic tied with ribbons. We worked in
shifts

so he would not be alone, alone where he watched her for
months and months

and months and months, he danced with her bald in her walker.
Oh, how

she resisted that walker until she fell over! How there was a
friend each day

on the calendar for lunch, how we took turns staying the night
frying two eggs with toast in the morning—he always ate
breakfast—

the plate hearkening back to the diner in Waldwick. How he
does not have a return.

My call—a child seeking solace from a parent who only
understands

in the way the child will only know as real in some future

hard to materialize in the livingness of abundance and
relative youth

how he too was young once with a wife who had long hair she
permed

curly and he would tug on her locks under their blankets. When
I say *future*

I see Jim again, clear-eyed with warm hands playing my rib
cage,

The National on in the car as we drive up 95 to some version
of our life

twenty-four days from right now.

REHAB DAY 9

of course the doctor finds a cyst

on my left breast uphill from sternum
rolling around like a glass marble
of course this is the first day he calls
of course I cannot tell him this news
washed from normal humdrum stress
he swims in progress
and my secret would not serve him
any more than it serves my own
malicious asshole cells
dense like perennials since puberty
of that particular region
of course I cannot even examine
the terrain of my own human lumps
with one arm raised like a branch
fingers ambling around suspicion
every time I've been terrified
I'll find what mom found
and it all feels like oatmeal anyhow
and he's helpless from there anyhow
to distract from my cycle of peering
into imagined crystal balls and storylines
seeing only the worst, seeing coffins—

if he does not know he cannot worry
and I cannot put that upon him now
make him worry for me
while he does so well in there

REHAB DAY 11

It's time to take the IUD out.
This is what I think about today, my body
doesn't want this preventer centered anymore.

I remember the day it went in:
man-doctor's hand inserting copper
I winced. He said *I know, I know*

generic bedside assuaging
irked my nerves I sharpened back
No, no, you actually don't.

And mom came along for support
all frail in her bird limbs, climbed broken
into a chair next to me at the outpatient place

and pain got to the point I needed her hand
to squeeze like citrus pulp out of my grip
as something external opened me up—

I want to be opened from the inside instead
dragged ragged in the riptide of giving birth—
I realized I'd break her frame of softening digits

and knuckles of chemo bones if I juiced
so I unfelt her skin and took hold of my gown
wrung into wrinkles and sweated holes

it's only a sheen of thin paper anyway...

When he comes back, he will come back
to some levels of absence—and so in turn
open space comes back in, to come in
like syrup into my hungry self.

REHAB DAY 19

His absence heightens hers
so this is how I communicate with mom

I feel each breast one by one smushed
between a plastic pane and its baseboard
goosebumps prickle against machine sounds

in a room alone with the rumbling
inherited path toward lobular cancer

where will my tissue light up a mammogram
like a late-summer campfire sparkler?
Today the ultrasound is a shock

The technician skates a roller over my mound
and I see with clarity a round black orb

She talks to me lump to lump
on the same table she undid her robe years ago
except her skin puckered like a citrus punch

breast vines weighted
by clusters of rotting berries, overripe

mine are bright on the doctor's screen
netted fibers the rind of a cantaloupe's dry skin
I see roadways toward lactation

and roadways toward demise
and this marble eye from god

like an omen is benign
has come out as a reminder
of how to spend my days.

* *Variation on second line borrowed from Barthes's Mourning Diary*

**Last line borrowed from Anne Dillard quote, "How we spend our days is how we spend our lives"*

New Poetry from Kevin Honold: "Elegy for the Emperor Frederick II"



HERE AND GONE / *image by Amalie Flynn*

i.
view from Emigrant, Death Valley

The snowy Amargosas kneel
beside the salt flats stained
with the blue shadows of clouds and the fading
paths of walking rain.

The bitter dust comes back to life.
Dervishes of gypsum and borax
spin across the basin, divine conjurations here and gone,
celestial legerdemain.

The winds entice them, no prayers detain them.
Beloved of heaven but a moment,
then drown themselves
in salt and distance.

ii.

Mesquite Flats

They say the dunes of the basin
pace a vast circle on the desert floor, inch
by inch, a millennial march about the perimeter
of their colossal stone corral until they arrive
back where they began.

Not a grain of sand, they say, escapes this valley,
but each is buried in its turn a thousand years
until disinterred by a chosen wind
that carries the grain to the next dune,
there to be buried once again.

Centuries pass

in this manner: a wild leap then a long
long wait, an elemental orbit
to nowhere—not at all like us or
maybe not.

iii.

Your Majesty had so many questions.
Where is Purgatory, where the Pit?
Below ground? above the clouds?

What strange things to ask when the very
seas and mountains were counted
among the treasures of state!

iv.

Certain winds prevent departure,
wrote a Jin poet during the difficult
months after the Mongols sacked Kaifeng, observing
how breezes compose
abandonment in dead leaves and in memories

of friends no longer with us.
But little troubled was the old master
in his cups, seated on a stool
beside the door to his mountain hut, knowing
 the costly scent of haw blossoms
 will vanish at a touch of breeze.

Such grace in the face
of hardship and change
is rare, and always has been.

v.

traces of old wildfires in the Panamints

The tangled cries of unseen coyotes echo from hillsides
arrayed with the black skeletons
of junipers torched by the fires
that crossed these hills
ten years ago.

 A howling so
joyously unreal, a purling

bright as the waters of Shilohs,
Hiddekels, Pisons,
and many other streams
I'll never walk beside.

vi.

That the intellect would expire
of inanition except it find nourishment
in the world of things, was current wisdom in Frederick's day.
The mysteries of faith were for slaves to proclaim, and so

he called Christ and Moses
arch-deceivers.

Ill-advised citizens who disdained the imperial corvées
inevitably emerged from their beleaguered
towns with their swords hanging from their necks
in token of submission. Anyhow,
he hanged them in the royal forests where
they ripened, split, and fell
like fruit in its proper season.

Stupor mundi he called himself, Wonder of the World,
no longer with us.
Truly, not all his ships, not all the slaves,
not convoys of painted
oxcarts creaking with treasure, nor all the blood
and all the pain will be forgotten
till the last jewel is pawned
for the last war.

vii.

death of Frederick

At the limits of knowledge stand the sentinel
oaks of curiosity and desire, and there he paused,
dispirited and syphilitic.

The contention that those who possess
great power are more terrified
of death than common folk

is probably true. With his own hand he drew the white cowl
over his brow, took the bread of Christ on his tongue
and died on the feast of Saint Lucia.

A period of silence lasting seven nights
was periodically broken, the chronicles say,
by the mournful cries of gibbons trapped in narrow silver
cages in the imperial menagerie.

To this day, Frederick's
Science of Hunting with Birds remains
the final word on falconry.

viii.

The great wheel of stars
turns above the Chloride Cliffs,
shedding peace and ancient light.

The stars are pinholes in the night's
blue brocade, so the royal stargazers affirmed,
through which the ethereal fire
or the Holy Spirit burns.

In the high pastures, the Herdboy leads the moon by a rope
up and over the Providence Mountains.
The stars—so many silver bells
each of which I must
dust and name before I sleep—

keep company with honest
Orion, who hath no place
to lay his head, who rests
a bony jewel-encrusted
hand upon a crook,
lamenting his meager
flock through the wee hours.

Suicide, the Soldier's Bane



Here's how it happens: you get a text. Or you see a cryptic post about the importance of friendship and "reaching out" on Facebook. Or an email. Then, the phone call comes.

"Hey man. Don't know if you heard, but Jack Smith died."

And you already know what that really means. Gun, drug overdose, poison, car exhaust. One of the many ways to undo or interrupt a fragile system.

Last year I totaled up the number of people I knew, personally, who had committed suicide—people I'd met and hung out with, something more than a quick "hello." The number was seven. I knew of three people, personally, who took

their lives when I was a boy or a young man; two boys killed themselves in my orbit when I was in my teens, and a high school classmate and lacrosse teammate took his life sometime after college, perhaps in my mid-twenties.

Since that time, at least four soldiers with whom I served or whom I knew, personally, took their own lives.

Not surprisingly, the event that precipitated this introspection was the suicide of a captain whom I'd covered while reporting on [NATO maneuvers in Romania for Foreign Policy](#).

He was the eighth person I knew, personally, to kill himself. When we'd met, he was acting as the S3 of an armor battalion as a senior captain (something I'd only ever seen done by higher-ranking officers), and he was highly respected by peers, subordinates, and superiors. I heard that he had a wife and kids back home, in the United States. He'd sat down on train tracks and waited.

But eight doesn't tell the full story, because those were just the people to whom I had a direct connection, who decided to send themselves West for reasons only they know. One Sunday in March, after climbing into bed, I scanned Facebook a final time (always a mistake) and saw people that I served with discussing the suicide of someone with whom I'd served, a soldier I didn't remember. And *that* experience—the experience of seeing other veterans process

the untimely death of a friend or loved one that I'd met in passing, someone with whom I'd stood in military formation, suicide by one degree of separation—is something I've processed more times than I can remember. Fifteen? Twenty? Thirty? It happens, I'd say, around once every two or three months. Making that calculation conservatively, at once every three months, for the eight years I've been out of the military, produces the number 32.

That doesn't count the soldier who shot himself rather than return to prison, or the soldier who got so blinding drunk one night that when he decided to drive home, he forgot to buckle his seatbelt, and ended himself in a wreck of metal and glass. They're two of the eight.

It *does* include the brother of a soldier who died in Afghanistan, himself a veteran, who died of "soul sickness," according to the obituary—and many others whose families and communities would prefer not to characterize the death as suicide, though it is. It *does* include a soldier who hung himself when I was on active duty with the Army. They're two of the estimated 32.

The [most recent statistics](#) from the Department of Veterans Affairs says that the problem of veteran suicide is bad and getting worse. A [story](#) from *The Military Times* from September of 2018 headlined "VA: Suicide rate for younger veterans increased by more than

10 percent" did a good job of quantifying the problem:

In 2016, the most recent data available, the suicide rate for veterans

was 1.5 times greater than for Americans who never served in the military.

About 20 veterans a day across the country take their own lives, and veterans

accounted for 14 percent of all adult suicide deaths in the U.S. in 2016, even

though only 8 percent of the country's population has served in the military.

Numerical terms, though, are abstract. You read "twenty a day" and think,

maybe, *that can't be right or it's horrible, or what about the context or those*

poor veterans or any of the other socially conscientious things a person

might think when confronted with an impersonal tragedy, and it's still too far,

too distant.

In the coming months and years, as the remaining soldiers and sergeants and

officers I know transition out into their civilian lives, 32 will increase to

33, and then 34, and so on into the uncertain future. At some point—not too far

off from now—I'll have lost more comrades to suicide than we lost to the

Taliban. The count will continue its irresistible climb.

Suicide is on my mind not only because of the actions of those around me,

but because it is something I have considered in the past.

It crosses my mind occasionally, the vigor of its allure weaker than before, now more an echo of a masochistic urge that is dismissed as quickly as it arises. But I used to think about it often. I became accustomed to thinking about death. I fantasized about dying in battle (gloriously) or by accident (absurdly), and that fantasy conquered and remains in a compartment of my heart. Each time my heart contracts, pushing blood through my veins, that compartment whispers—"what if this were all to stop?" Over time, the thought became habit.

It took a lot to break me of that habit. I had to learn not to covet some brief control over the terms of my demise. PTSD therapy at the West Haven Veterans Affairs helped, and finding my wife, and friendships, and work.

But then, many of those soldiers who ended their lives had wives or husbands, too; they had friends, and children, and jobs. Their Facebook pages were active. They shared their happy memories of comradeship in times of war—of exhilaration, and love, and respect. They were not so different. Their hearts, too, must have asked, "what if?"

That's what makes it all so maddening. Sometimes a person's suicide seems rational—a response to hardship, or the accumulated result of smaller bad choices and regrets. When one hears about a promising life gone to drugs and

debt, nobody thinks “how could that have happened” (and everyone’s grateful when it doesn’t), and similarly, something about the experience of being in the military lends itself to this type of sensible suicide. Then, sometimes, it makes no sense at all, from a rational perspective, or from the emotional side. There is simply no accounting for it.

And the lack of an explanation for *why* this is happening means we don’t have a good sense of what to do to reduce or resolve suicide. Perhaps we ought to better fund national institutions and publicize hotlines, so those desperate people who find themselves at bottom due to drugs, or alcohol, or gambling, or bad choices can, in spite of it all, find respite—a bed to sleep in, a job to pay the bills. Currently, \$8.38 billion goes to VA Mental Health services and programs, while there is \$186 million dedicated to Veteran Suicide Prevention and Outreach programs; one can only imagine how grim things would look were this number cut, though it’s difficult to imagine things improving substantially were the number much larger. A scandal that unfolded last year about [money unspent](#) implies that greater efficiency could contribute to the mental health of veterans. But on a certain level this isn’t about money, it’s about despair and solitude, the lack of company. The rich and professionally successful, too, commit suicide.

Meanwhile, if one views the government with skepticism, and thinks that a person's tax dollars ought to go to charities instead, we can prioritize the expansion of regional and local charities to accomplish the same task. This runs into the same problem as expanding the VA, which is to say, the problem of throwing money at a problem human empathy is best equipped to handle.

On that note, on a human level, we can be more available to the veterans in our lives—not responsively, not reactively, but assertively, checking in with them, calling, writing occasionally to see how they are doing. But this is the dearest solution of all: anyone who has wrestled with depression themselves or in a friend or family member understands that there simply isn't time enough to think positively for another human who's gripped by despair; our own lives are consumed with the requirements of job, and filial piety, and the duties of the father, and mother, and husband, and wife. Living our own lives well guards us against dark impulses, but as every new parent knows, it can be utterly exhausting to live two lives for even an hour, let alone every waking hour.

A too-obvious fix of not going into war so casually any more, such as was the case with Iraq and Afghanistan and could be the case in Venezuela or North Korea, is rarely discussed with any degree of seriousness,

though it ought to
be.

Adopting all four of these measures will still not solve the problem of veterans committing suicide. They will help, and because they will help, we ought to do them, but veterans will continue taking their own lives. We can't save everyone.

This leads to a more troubling thought. If there are people who cannot be rescued by individual action—who cannot be saved by even the most technologically advanced and intrusive state—who are not saved neither by religion, nor by secular charities—what then? We are left with a group of honorable people who wanted to serve their country, often during times of war, who subsequently commit themselves to self-slaughter. A group of people who are, in one regard, the type of sons and daughters we'd like, and on the other hand, shameful cautionary tales.

Ancient Rome and contemporary Japan viewed suicide as, potentially, an honorable act. There have been other non-Christian societies whose mythology or narratives contain room for people who no longer wanted to live; paths of last resort, obviously, but dignified exits to the next world. If we have confidence that the life we have created here on earth is more attractive to people than death (and that, surely, ought to be the most primitive, basic

idea animating a developed society), surely there ought to be an acceptable place for those folks who can no longer abide here.

Look, we'd all like to help, according to our ability and bandwidth. But the fact is, when it comes to trauma, the damage to veterans is already done. Many combat veterans or those victimized by bullies or sexual assault were lost years ago, and the bill, as they say, is just late coming due. Some of those veterans could probably be saved by aggressive professional and personal intervention, but let's be honest: that's not going to happen.

Instead, it's only a matter of time before the next suicide, which will add itself to the others that came before. And we'll all be left sitting in our chairs with the terrible news ringing in our ears, wondering: what happened to Jack?

That young soldier, jumping down off the front hood, his dusty armor slapping after a long patrol, or seated by a campfire, laughing, full with the power and confidence of their youth? What happened in the intervening years, what caused them to make that choice, in that moment? Could *I* ever do that? What if...?