

# 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.

\*\*\*



\*\*\*

### **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.

\*

### **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



\*\*\*

### **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.

\*

## **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](#).*

\*



\*\*\*

### **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.



\*\*\*

## **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

+++++

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

Dear Liz,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

address before our next call.

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

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

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

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

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

*The Hall of Valor  
lists all  
6906*

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

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

Viewed 3DEC2017: thefallen.militarytimes.com

VET KILLED BY GRANBY ST. HIT/RUN  
NORFOLK

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

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

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

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

There were no identifying documents found on the victim. She  
was

pronounced DOA at DePaul Hospital.

Police found no witnesses.

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

Navy veteran. Burial services pending.

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

obituaries

Elizabeth C. Stanton

NORFOLK – 37, Funeral

service: 8 a.m. Monday, on

Sept. 11, 2017, Virginia State

Veterans Cemetery, Suffolk.

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



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

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

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

See: the Latin cida, killer

S u i cide me

Fr a t ri cide us

G e n o cide them

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

By the book By the book  
6 Bythebook  
6 Bythebookbythebook t hebookCP  
9 By book T  
0 ook S  
2 ok D  
nobook  
Allah M.C.  
Mission Co  
Com  
Comp

black body bagsbagbags

Black  
Hawk

W  
a  
r

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](#).*



\*\*\*

**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](#).*



\*\*\*

### **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](#).*



\*\*\*

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.*

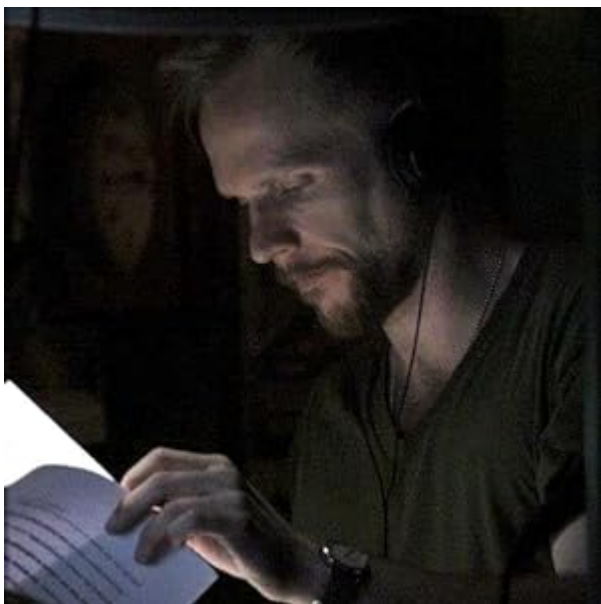
*In addition to the programs made available to the public, SSWA offers education outreach programs specifically targeting communities who have been talked about disproportionately more than heard from in mainstream media. Creative writing and storytelling courses are offered in partnership with social 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*.



---

# New Fiction from Nancy Stroer: "Move Out"

I drum the steering wheel of the rental car with the flats of my palms. It's the opening riff of a song by Yaz. It takes three notes, four—that blossoming into a fanfare of electronic horns, and I'm a teenager in the 80s driving these same roads in Ingrid's crap Toyota, bellowing along.

"Don't make a sound, move out," I serenade the interior of the rental car. I stop. No one moves out without some battle-rattle, no matter how much duct tape they've applied to their loose parts. With soldiers, who the uninitiated think of as following orders without hesitation, news of moving out is often accompanied by a fair amount of bitching and moaning. It's human nature to resist change, even good change. Inevitable change.

I picture myself as a nineteenth century woman, children clinging to my long skirts. My husband has just returned from the saloon where he's swapped lukewarm beers with a prospector recently returned from California. "We're goin' West," my husband announces, gold dust sparkling in his eyes.

"Men!" I grunt to the womenfolk over our respective washtubs later. "Are not the rational sex!" Even as the other women snort in agreement, though, I am picturing *myself* astride a horse, leading a wagon train, encountering endless prairies, mountain vistas, cultures unknown. I'd be sweaty, sure. I'd be worrying about the kids' educations and about snakes camouflaged against their basking rocks. Nonetheless, I allow myself a frisson of excitement.

Had it been common in nineteenth century white America—or anywhere, anytime, really—for the woman to be the one who badgered her husband to pick up and go? To keep moving,

moving? This was true for me, so it must have been true for others.

What happened to those people—women or men—when they finally ran out of road?

When, after years of maneuvering around the planet, the road finally ended or worse—they landed back where they started, like I had? I'd tried to stay ahead of this day. If I moved far enough, fast enough, I thought I could outrun it. For thirty years my husband and I had always managed to wrangle one more job overseas—but not this time, and probably never again. My husband jokes about the heel marks I gouged into the floor of Heathrow Airport as he dragged me across it for the last time.

Rental cars are like modern day covered wagons, I tell myself as I drive. I love the snug, Little House on the Prairie feel of them—pristine, reliable. Chock-full of everything you need. Adventure awaits! But the built-in sat nav on this one is getting on my nerves. I learned how to navigate the old-fashioned way, in the Army. By wandering, map in hand. Boots on the ground. Even when I was a teenager, we picked unfamiliar roads and drove wherever they took us. There was nothing for teenagers to do but drive, nothing to look at but kudzu pulling down power lines and old porches. But that habit of open-ended exploration has stood me in good stead over the years. Nowadays people are at the mercy of cars and phones and satellites that tell them what to do, where to go, what to listen to. In the olden days we drove endlessly, listening to music. We prided ourselves on discovering new music and mixed cassette tapes ourselves, glued to WUOG if you were trying to bag the latest indie band, or to 96 Rock in Atlanta, waiting for that pregnant pause between DJ prattle and the beginning of our favorite songs so we could pounce on the record button. There are hundreds of channels on this radio, or whatever you call it, feeding me nothing but the songs it thinks I want to hear. Delayed gratification, always a scarce commodity in

America, this land of plenty, is a complete goner.

When I realize I'm enjoying song after song with never a moment of dissonance, I search for the off button. I find it, eventually, on the steering wheel. This car is taking me backwards, not forwards. Its fancy time machine runs in reverse and that is not where I want to go.

I know cars, for crying out loud. I was a maintenance officer. But in England I live-lived! Shit!—two blocks from the doctors' office, two blocks the other way to the dentist. The kids walked out the back gate to their schools, joining the mass migration of other children, parents and grandparents and strollers, dogs on leashes, boyfriends and girlfriends tethered to each other, tethered to their devices, but walking—to the supermarket, to cafes and restaurants and pubs. To church if I wanted to, which I didn't. But I could.

I walked in Turkey. I walked and rode my bike in Germany. In Japan I rode my bike to work, frogs leaping like synchronized swimmers into the rice paddies as my front wheel shushed them out of the way. People in suits sweeping in front of their businesses as a team—everyone clearing a gentle path for the day to follow.

But here people get in their cars to drive two blocks. They have to—there aren't any sidewalks, no bike paths, no walking trails. They roll their windows up to keep the climate inside their cars perfectly adjusted to their exacting specifications. Never a bug or a bead of sweat allowed. No careful curl blown by the wind. All safe and certain, which is nice but also the gateway to complacency.

“You couldn't just stay in England?” My extended family is happy to have me back on American soil but they know me. They worry about me. They have this westward ho idea of me, that all the world is mine and I can go where I want and do what I want for as long as I want. They don't know the complexity of

visas and immigration, or that it might not be moral to think of other countries as unconquered territory. When I try to explain that exploration opens minds, their kind faces remind me that experiences are always filtered through default settings—settings that usually have to be adjusted back at the factory. I do not want to be reminded of this. I am even more perplexed than they are, and also angry, that I could not just stay in England.

Unfortunately, I also like my husband. The wagon train wouldn't be the same without him singing nonsense songs to pass the time and cooking up a mess of beans at the end of the day. We've spent hours with the real estate agent this week but now he's back at the generic hotel, drinking a beer that's trying too hard to be something it's not—beer with grapefruit essence? what the hell?—and watching home and garden shows while I look at more houses. He doesn't argue that I should just pick one perfectly fine house and be happy. He knows me, too. He knows I need to go see one more, then one more after that, and as many more as I need until I'm utterly exhausted.

*What if God was one of us?* asks a road sign.

*Sanctuary of Jesus Christ of Jefferson Road, two miles.*

*Fresh Peaches!*

Fresh peaches and sanctuary at the same roadside stand? I'm cross-eyed from the monotony of three house models per curated subdivision, carved out of the unspoiled open areas of my youth. Kute kountry kitchens opening onto family rooms. Family rooms opening onto treated redwood decks, overlooking other redwood decks. Every mile unfurling a growing dread that I will never find a home to return to in this state of my birth.

*The Day of the Lord is coming! Are you ready?*

*Hell is hotter than summer in Georgia!*



*Best Price for Firewood!* One by one, the signs mark the approach of either outcome—pull over, or don't pull over and suffer the consequences. I've just looked at the last house on my list and have nowhere else to go, so I pull over.

The rest stop isn't more than a collection of sheds and gravel but I know it from the free-standing marquee that announces, *Prepare thy chariot and get thee down*. Mine's the only chariot pulling in. I don't want church, even if it's the only unique thing, the only structure I find with any character, for miles. At their core, all world religions are the same, and pretty good. In practice I find them suffocating. Controlling in unique ways. On the other hand, a real Georgia peach straight from the orchard is not something you can get just anywhere. A pure, good thing. I get myself down from my chariot and head for the produce stall, squinting against the sun. Besides the peaches there are tomatoes, cantaloupe and sweet corn, a dollar an ear. Jars of preserves and honey and piccalilli for considerably more than a dollar. I want all of it but they only take cash. That, at least, is like Europe and Asia. I open my wallet as the sleepy teenager weighs out some peaches and I ask, "Which one's the church?"



He points to the largest shed, which has a cross over the doorway, a couple of two-by-fours nailed at right angles. In England, a cathedral soars—soared—over our town. It squatted on medieval haunches over a crypt from Anglo-Saxon times. The windows glowed as darkness fell, as the organ and the choir celebrated Evensong. On Friday afternoons in Ankara the men left me in their shops—utterly alone and surrounded by carpets and ceramics and gold—and went to wash their feet as the muezzins called them to prayer. Next to our house in Misawa, the old farmers, themselves bent at right angles from a lifetime of planting rice, kept company with the millet gods at the tiny kibi jinja tucked into the woods. I never had the slightest urge to join any of them, but none of these neighborhood protectors were faking it. Their actions were authentic to them.

My eyes take a second to transition from blazing sun into the dim of the shed and when they do I see a man sitting on a metal folding chair at the end of the room, otherwise empty except for a stack of other folding chairs, and a kiddie pool in the corner. A shaft of sunlight comes through a gap in the roof and beams directly onto his bowed head.

I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do—clap to awaken the gods? Bless myself with water from the pool? But he looks up just then and says, "You ought to wash those peaches first. The fuzz can be unpleasant."

"Yes, sir," I say. I wonder how he knows what's in the paper sack. "Is there a hose somewhere?"

He nods towards the pool. "You can use the baptismal font."

"Business a little slow during the week, I guess." It feels strange but also sanctifying, washing peaches in a blue plastic oval with cartoon mermaids swimming on the bottom. The comedian Eddy Izzard has a bit where she compares the Church of England to fundamentalist religions. "Cake—or death?!" the

church ladies threaten, while forcing a cup of tea on people after Sunday services. Cake or death. Cake or death. Is this glorified shed for real, or just an idea it has about itself as so much of America seems to be? I want to feel it in my heart but will run at the first sign that I've been lured there by peaches, only to be ambushed by proselytizers. Georgia is full of realness, and also full of traps. This has never changed.

My husband and I have seen the bylaws of Homeowners' Associations this week, page after page of requirements for what can and cannot be planted in your own front yard. I picture the garbage cans along a German street on pickup morning, each precisely aligned with the others. Japanese rock gardens; bonsai trees tightly bound by tradition. All enforcements of ideas, all of which made me claustrophobic. In contrast: the kapıcı of our apartment building in Ankara mowed straight across the rose bushes with an electric hedge trimmer, laughing and joking with the kapıcıs from other buildings up and down the street, as they first maimed and then watered their own rose bushes from garden hoses, splashing water on the leaves with no care whatsoever that they'd be scorched in the relentless sun. Was that the inşallah approach to gardening or just carelessness?

How does a person find a true place in this joint? And by joint I mean the entire planet. There are so many rules, some of them good but never all of them in the same place at the same time. And oh, how I'd cried at the sight of those orderly ranks of garbage cans every week, even as they irritated the shit out of me, as the day of our departure from Germany approached. I wanted to get out of the car and shove them all off the perpendicular, mess them up. I'd gone to Germany as a young soldier; I left as a young married woman. So much had changed during those eight years, so it wasn't that I couldn't handle change. I could. I was black belt qualified at rolling with the changes. And Germans drove me crazy with their

incessant pressure to conform. They were interested in Americans, at least, bless their scarred, soul-searching hearts, but because I looked like a stereotypical German, I guess, they wanted to bind me with all the Regeln, spoken and unspoken. In Japan and Turkey there was no chance of being mistaken for a native, and therefore, we could fuck up with more or less impunity but would never fit in. There were different rules for foreigners. In England, we might have looked like we belonged but it was made clear to us, in large ways and small and non-stop even after fifteen years of hearing the question, "How long will you be here?" that the asker wanted to know when the door would finally be hitting us on the asses on the way out. Whether they should bother to speak to us at all after the end of the conversation.

Americans, the nomadic (colonial) types, the military types (come to conquer or occupy) were the best I'd ever met at forging tight personal bonds—that were then raggedly severed as they rotated to their next duty stations. No one ever said a definitive goodbye. They said, *maybe next time!* Except next time, if there was one, was a whole 'nother thing. I had left too many pieces of my heart in too many places now. I should keep moving forever, like a shark, or I should never have left. I never felt at home in a place until I was just about to leave it.

"Business is always good," the man says from his folding chair sedile. As some people age their appearances morph into the universal. Men and women begin to resemble each other. This man was probably a light-skinned Black guy, but he could have been white. The kid outside at the produce stand is definitely a Black kid. Black farmers are a thing out here in the Georgia countryside, unlike in Germany or England. And these days Asian people, and people from Central and South America, pop up everywhere, with properly slurry, twangy Southern accents. This has always been the case, but has actually improved in my absence. "Not many make time for the Lord on a work day, but

you can learn a lot, sitting here in the quiet.”

“Um,” I say, feeling self-conscious. I love to find a treasure at an unplanned destination. Are Black and white Georgians more comfortable with each other now, or less? I wonder if I can speak honestly with him about what I’m thinking. Whether my rambling confessions would be welcome, or an intrusion on his more than likely hard-earned solitude.

“You’d always be welcome here.” His eyes are honest but gentle. He is looking at me.

Tears spring to my eyes like they did at the Immigration desk in the Atlanta airport. A woman, golden-skinned, dark-eyed, stocky and stern and not to be joked around with, stamped my passport with gusto and looked me dead in the eyes as she handed it back. “Welcome home,” she said, welcoming me to a club she felt certain of. As if she didn’t know how uncertain I felt. She couldn’t know that no one ever says that to me anywhere else.

I shake the excess water from two of the peaches onto the concrete slab of the floor although I don’t like to be sloppy in public. I saw an American guy at the Tokugawa shrine in Nik-ko, utterly disregarding the procedures for washing first one hand, then the other. He’d taken hold of the dipper with his unclean meat hooks; rinsed his mouth and then spit back into the communal trough. The memory still jerks me awake at night. “Would you like a peach?” I ask the old man.

“Don’t mind if I do,” he says. I’m not fooled by how picturesque he is. It’s not like I’ll be doing my weekly grocery shopping with the disinterested teen outside. An eight dollar jar of piccalilli is a bijou idea *I* have about living in Georgia again. No, I’ll be driving to Publix with everyone else in the...public. And I won’t be hanging out with this guy on his rusting chair, hanging on every reminiscence of his Alice Walker-type childhood. I’ll be eating a ham sandwich at

my desk for lunch, just like I've done in every country I've ever lived in except Turkey. Pork products were a little hard to come by there.

I go to the car to finish my peach. Maybe the old guy was fine with swirling the peaches in holy water but I can't bring myself to wash my hands in it. I've got wet wipes in my purse, still on the passenger seat. Car unlocked. No one will rob you out here, but that has been true everywhere we've lived. Or maybe I'm utterly unaware that my guardian angel comes dressed in the Kevlar of privilege.

My phone rings. "Where are you?" Behind my husband I hear the hum of the hotel air conditioner and I shiver. I hate air conditioning. It's hotter in Georgia than almost anywhere but I am always cold here.

"Eating a peach," I say. "I don't know what else to do."

"The little strings will get stuck in your teeth." He's a Midwesterner, which is why he is so charmed by Georgia. It's one of the reasons he's so charmed by me.

"Already there," I say, sucking on my incisors. I'll have to floss later. "It's a metaphor."

"Huh?" My husband, tolerant but bemused as always, is not so secretly looking forward to hanging up the harnesses after so many decades on the trail. He can't wait to mow grass according to the height requirements set forth by the Homeowners Association. He'll bring brownies to the doorsteps (or more likely, some charred thing off the grill) and commiserate about the people with too many gnomes in their yard. He doesn't actually care about the gnomes or the height of the grass, but he is and always has been completely cool with the inevitable.

"You fight everything," he says. It's true. It's a character flaw, or a malabsorption of Army nutrients. I'm the pioneer

who leads with her chin. “Just come back to the hotel.”

“Not yet,” I say. I sit in the hot car, one foot grounded on the gravel parking lot, the other hovering over the gas pedal. The brake. I don’t want any more peaches and eventually I get too hot. I throw the pit on the ground and close the car door for the return trip to the charmless hotel – so I can drink a craft beer that’s trying a little too hard, and swim in the rectangular chlorine pool.

---

## **New Fiction from J.G.P. MacAdam: “A Sleeping Peace”**

*Author’s note: I arrived at this story after reading an article in Rolling Stone called ‘Highway to Hell: A Trip Down Afghanistan’s Deadliest Road’ and I thought, what if what’s happening in Afghanistan ended up happening here, in America? Would Americans finally “get it” then?*

\*

Sometimes the weariness in my bones was so bad it took near everything I had just to get out of bed in the morning. Captain Hernandez tapped on the front door at 0400. I was already packed and dressed. I slipped my nose out of Zachary’s doorway. His bedsheets were tousled and I wanted to tuck him back in, but I didn’t want to risk waking him. Let him sleep. I slid his door shut and turned the knob. Matt was waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs, as he was every Monday morning. He handed me a thermos of Klickitat Dark Roast.



photo: Andria Williams

“Thanks.”

“Text me every hour on the hour.” He hugged me close.  
“Please.”

His beard was just the right length, not too scratchy. “Go back to sleep. Try to grab another hour or two before Zachary wakes up.”

“I’ll try,” he whispered in my ear and squeezed me closer.

Captain Hernandez tapped on the door again.

“Gotta go. Remember to ask Teacher Julie about Zachary’s—”

“I’ll remember.”

“And you’ve got another doctor’s appointment this—”

“I’ve got the home front covered, Charlie-Echo.”

“Okay.”



We kissed. Matt made sure I had my briefcase, bulletproof vest and everything else, then opened the door. The damp predawn air blew in with the sound of idling engines and Captain Hernandez's voice. "Morning, ma'am."

"Morning, Captain. Latest intel?" I knew Matt liked hearing the Captain's briefings. It was practically every other week that Matt was trying yet another prescription for his anxiety. None worked.

"Contractors for ODOT took an ambush on Saturday, trying to patch up that one crater near mile marker 270. No casualties. The hole's still there, though."

"Any IED's?" Matt stepped onto the threshold.

"Four, sir. EOD's taken care of them though."

"Maybe you guys mix up your route a little bit? Take one of the bridges across the river, or several, crossing back and forth."

Shaking my head: "I'm already leaving at the crack of dawn as it is. We'll take eighty-four all the way out."

Captain Hernandez agreed. Matt shifted uncomfortably; he didn't like being reminded that in a very real way he didn't know what the hell he was talking about. The Captain knew when to take his leave. "Clock's ticking, ma'am." He tapped his watch and stepped his combat boots down the front steps.

I glanced back at Matt, hoping he wouldn't but knowing he would.

"I don't see why you can't just deviate your route a little. These National Guard guys don't know their ass from a hole in the--"

"Matt, honey, please. I gotta go."

“Why’s the Governor making you do this? Plenty of other County Executives don’t have to travel out to the sticks. In Baker, in Grant, in Malheur, in any of the eastern counties there’s not even any county government left to speak of.”

“You know why. There needs to be a government presence in Umatilla. It’s the bridge. It’s the dam. It’s the interstate.”

“I don’t want to lose my wife to some goddamned—” I saw how much it took him to swallow his worries down. He couldn’t help himself; he always grew so anxious right at the last minute. “I’m sorry, you gotta go.”

“I’ll see you Friday.”

Matt nodded and sighed. “We’ll be here.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too. Zaniyah?”

“Yeah?”

“Text me, please.”

Emails were already rolling in on my phone. Captain Hernandez was waiting, holding the armored door to my SUV open for me. “I’ll text you when we make it past the Hood River base.”

\*

My phone scrolled with endless memos. Everything Umatilla County—population 43,696 and dropping—from road maintenance to school renovations. Reviewing and e-signing as much as I could in the back of my de facto mobile office, a hulk of an SUV outfitted with bulletproof windows and steel-plated undercarriage.

We picked up Muri, my counterpart in Wasco County, before taking I-5 to the I-84 interchange. Our order of movement was lead Humvee with a gunner and a .50 cal in the turret, my SUV,

a second Humvee, followed by Muri's SUV, then a rear Humvee. We hit the interchange at a smooth 70 mph maintaining a strict 20-meter interval between vehicles.

I yawned and glimpsed the shadow of someone standing under an overpass. They were holding their phone to their face and tracking our convoy with it.

"D'you see that one, Captain?"

"I did, ma'am." He commanded the convoy from the passenger seat. "Third lookout this morning."

"They know we're coming."

"They always do."

I suppressed another yawn and tried not to think about it, bending to my memos again, sipping my Klickitat Dark. Portland swirled by my window. Even at this hour the streetcars were running, bicycle lanes filling up, another day in the life of a great American city no doubt suffering its fair share of contested neighborhoods, crime, refugee-packed stadiums and smoke-filled summers where the air itself became an enemy to defend against. But the insurgency held little sway here. Portland, Salem, the coast and anything within artillery distance of the I-5 corridor was *safe* insofar as the National Guard continued to pour manpower and materials into defending it. As for any territory east of the Cascades, however, the same could not be said.

The first couple hours of our trip sped by, the lead truck passing smoothly around the handful of semis still making runs into contested territory, the whole convoy flowing apace. The question, the one question that always gnawed its way into my brain every Sunday evening, before even waking Monday morning, before saying goodbye, hit me, once again. Why not turn back? It was the sight of the first military outpost atop Tooth Rock that brought the question on. The Tooth Rock outpost was, for

me, the western entry point to the Columbia Gorge, the Cascades, thickly forested, magical, wet with ferns and moss, riven with canyons and waterfalls, a fairy tale place of my youth, a place to camp, to hike, to explore. But it wasn't that way anymore. Now, I saw only violence. The way the Columbia River had once upon a time blown a mile-wide hole through the mountains. The way the land was torn apart and uplifted, itself a testament to the hundreds of thousands of years of earthquakes and eruptions from the resident volcanoes at present asleep under their cones of ice.

Tooth Rock disappeared around another upthrust of rock. A spattering of headlights on the westbound lane, some people still commuting into Portland. Why not turn back? Herrera, the County Executive for Gilliam County, was not in the convoy. He called in sick, as usual. The Hood River CE, Jules, slept in a bunker in the base there. Sherman County's CE was a no-show, probably nursing a hangover, the stress of the job driving her to drink her way out and drink her way back every week, or so I heard. The only other county besides my own along I-84 was Morrow County. That was Henderson's territory, or had been. He boasted of being born and bred in Morrow County, knew the people and the hills like the back of his hand. He once said to me, "Zaniyah, just be yourself. Don't be the Governor's lackey. Don't be the authoritarian dictating curfews and martial law. Don't be the savior. Just be yourself, the girl from Umatilla. You're from Umatilla, right? That's why the Governor appointed you, wasn't it?" He was right and he was dead. Insurgents ran a Corolla rigged with fertilizer and a suicide bomber straight into his SUV as he was leaving the compound down in Heppner, the county seat.

"We should have choppers."

"What's that, ma'am?"

"Nothing, Captain. Just thinking aloud."

Choppers were too scarce and expensive to fuel. The winds in the Gorge too treacherous for most aircraft, the weather too unpredictable.

The Bonneville Dam slid into view, its turbines and buttresses stretching across three separate islands. It was soon followed by the white-trussed expanse of the Bridge of the Gods which seemed to hover midair under a blaze of spotlights. A checkpoint searched vehicles before allowing them to cross. Why not turn back? Even this lake of a river fell dam-to-dam down to Portland and out to the Pacific. To travel east was to go against gravity. "I'm appointing you all to be my eyes and ears on the ground," said the Governor. "The mayors and county commissions elected locally, well, they're not what I would call cooperative all of the time, especially in the eastern counties." My phone vibrated with a new email from the Mayor of the City of Umatilla. His email was mostly a rant interspersed with all-caps saying that I did not have the authority to direct road maintenance, though they were state funds and the State Legislature explicitly directed CE's to monitor all state expenditures. I did not have the authority to make the curfew start earlier and end later. I did not have the authority to ration medical supplies or food aid. Mayor Pete even brought out the big guns, the telltale codewords and innuendo of popular insurgent threads, the language of which was now near ubiquitous across much of eastern Oregon. "It's only because of the Governor's MILITARY DICTATORSHIP via stationing TROOPS in our backyard that YOU even survive your little trips out here!" Was that a threat? What else could it be, in times like these? "Where are you anyways?" he wrote. "Why aren't you in the office yet?" I replied with only an "En route. - Z." and pictured his face reddening at the screen. Why keep going? Why fight for people who did not want you to fight for them?

The interstate slithered its way between the dark river and darker upthrusts of rock. Exits were blocked off and closed.

Corporal Barnes, ever the silent driver, clicked on the windshield wipers as the air congealed into a mist of rain. A prominent slab of rock jutted out over the right side of the road and when our headlights passed across it, I saw the message, we all did, could read those white letters spray-painted across the wet black of the rock plain as day. We Will Never Stop, We Will Never Tire, We Will Fight Until Our Blood Runs Dry.

No one said anything, hearing only my own voice in the back of my head repeating a question.

\*

“What’s that, sir?” Corporal Barnes pointed up ahead.

The sky was still black but for a rimming of cobalt. In the mountains across the river, in Washington state, the subtlest red sparks arced back and forth like a mini meteor shower. “Tracers,” said Captain Hernandez. “One of our own out of Hood River.”

We saw the glow of Forward Operating Base Hood River before we saw the base. The jade trusses of the bridge, too, popped out of the dawn, its floodlit reflection shimmering across the water. FOB Hood River sat on what was once a waterfront park. It was the operational and logistical hub of the entire Mid-Columbia region. The main employer, too. Our convoy slowed as traffic thickened and then crawled and then stopped altogether, the line to get on-base overflowing onto the interstate.

Captain Hernandez yawned.

“Get much sleep, Captain?”

“No, ma’am. The baby woke up two, three times before I got up to leave. Hungry little guy. Tell me, when do they start sleeping through the night?”

“It takes a while,” I said, “but they eventually do.”

The town of Hood River sloped uphill on our right, broad yellow windows capturing the view, though more and more of those houselights never switched on anymore. Whoever had the means moved east. Ever since Town Hall was pipe-bombed people just didn't feel safe anymore. That happened despite the nearness of such a massive base with its five-meter-high Hesco walls and thousand-or-so troops and reams of concertina wire and guard towers bristling with machine guns. Begged the question: how much did all this military might actually protect anybody? Still, I'd be returning to FOB Hood River before sundown to spend the night on a cot in a tent. I never expected I'd be sleeping four out of every seven nights inside of a bunker, but whose career ever goes according to plan? The cooks in the chow hall made omelets for everyone pulling midnight duty and for the rest of us who couldn't sleep.

“There they are,” said Corporal Barnes. I was about to text Matt but stopped to stare out at the platoon of Humvees limping their way across the bridge. One had a cockeyed wheel and half its bumper blown off. Even from where we were on the interstate you could see the spiderwebs in their windshields, the smoke stains across their hoods.

\*

Terraces of rock stepped into the clouds. White threads of rain-born torrents wound off their green flanks and spilled onto the broken and tumbled basalt below. We rolled at a steady 55 mph. The trip always felt a little less perilous once the sun broke and I could watch the sides of the Gorge panning by, at least for a while. We sped through The Dalles, with its orange-trussed bridge and hydroelectric dam. Muri and one Humvee peeled off, taking the second-to-last exit. I texted Muri a good morning because I knew he'd be just waking up. He replied with a good luck.

I resumed my work: sewer repairs, budget shortfalls, a new zoning ordinance to prohibit illegal squatting. Another email from Mayor Pete discussing an upcoming committee vote to move the county seat back to Pendleton, an hour further east down I-84. Out of the question. A teleconference with the Governor, tedious logistics details for air drops to the Yakama and Umatilla Indian Reservations, their militias still holding their own, even regaining territory previously stolen by the insurgents who wanted access to salmon fishing hotspots. Then came another spray-painted rock outcropping. The Government Does Nothing For Us. Absolutely Nothing. Why could we not hire someone to cover those up?

“These cams have all been spray-painted,” said Captain Hernandez. The entirety of the interstate was under surveillance, except when the insurgents managed to jerry rig one of those drones you could buy at Walmart and rig it with a can of spray paint and a funny robotic finger to depress the nozzle. “They’ll be out till next week, at a minimum.”

Beyond The Dalles traffic virtually disappeared. We passed the half-sunken remains of the Union Pacific train that had derailed last year, waves lapping at the sides of empty boxcars. Trains could use only the Washington side of the river now. But for how much longer? The Trunk Rail Bridge slid into view next. Its middle section was missing, it had been blown apart and sunken into the river, only twisted fingers of steel reaching through the air like two rheumatic hands straining to grasp one another again. I was still half-listening to the Governor in the teleconference. “—strong intel that the infrastructure through the Columbia Gorge remains a top target. We must—” but I already knew what he was going to say. The carcasses of vehicles, both civilian and military, began to propagate across the shoulders of the highway like roadkill, just pushed off to the side, no time to get a wrecker out here to remove them. We groped our way around the blast crater leftover from a recent IED, then



another crater, and another, then a few more hastily filled-in ones. "We must remain committed," said the Governor. "We must keep moving, keep pressuring the enemy even if they're people we grew up with, even if they're family."

The lead truck slowed and maneuvered around something like the tenth blast crater in a row. Corporal Barnes followed in its tracks. We regained a 45 mph speed and kept moving.

\*

"Why're we stopping?" The windshield filled with brake lights, more than you'd expect on a seemingly empty highway.

"Don't know, ma'am." We came to a dead stop. "I can't see beyond those semis up ahead." Captain Hernandez touched his hand to the mike on his throat. "Alright, TC's dismount, drivers and gunners remain in your trucks. Let's go see what's going on." The Captain got out. Three other soldiers linked up with him, everyone kitted in their helmets and vests. They locked and loaded before disappearing into the mingled glares of the sunrise and the red taillights up ahead. It was just Corporal Barnes and me. I slipped my own vest on though it didn't fit well and the plates were heavy and the velcro scratched my neck. Other vehicles—civilian cars and trucks—began piling in behind us. Locking us in. Trapping us.

It all started coming back to me, flooding in like a waking dream. It had been over a year since the attack on my life but an attack of another kind made it real again, made it now. Those woods were these woods. Thickets of gangly black oaks. Cloaking the multiple ravines the enemy used to ingress and egress. The insurgents knew that if they simply kept shooting at one portion of bulletproof glass at some point it was sure to fail. They prevailed. One bullet made it through, exploding stuffing out of my seat, missing my head by mere inches. Then the enemy broke contact, the sound of their four-wheelers fleeing into the hills. The bark of our .50 cal's as they

returned fire. Captain Hernandez shouting into two hand mikes at once. Me, just lying on the floor, touching my trembling fingertips to the side of my head, my temple, my ear, my hair—just to make sure it was all still there.

I realized I was doing controlled breathing like when I was in labor with Zachary, twenty hours in that hospital bed, Matt counting my contractions for me. I counted the seconds, minutes, until Captain Hernandez returned.

“Shit.”

“Ma’am?” said Corporal Barnes.

“Nothing, nothing.” I had only forgotten to text Matt. Texting him now. I’m alright, we made it past HR. Smooth sailing so—

“Another crater,” said Captain Hernandez, huffing back into his seat, slightly wet from the rain. He slammed his door shut, locked it. “Big one. Both lanes. Same one as last week. Contractors still haven’t filled it in yet.”

“They’re tired of getting shot at.”

The Captain ejected a bullet, catching it out of the air. “I would be, too. In the meantime both lanes are squeezing onto the shoulder to get through.”

“State patrol up there?”

Captain Hernandez only chuckled and shook his head.

“Figures.”

“It unfortunately does, ma’am.”

We waited, everyone’s mufflers chugging in place. Captain Hernandez peered up the cliffs looming over our righthand windows. He radioed Hood River. “Hot Rocks, this is Charlie-Echo-Six, over.” Garble in his earbud. “Requesting a UAV flyover on the high ground to my south, break. Our position is

whiskey-mike-niner-four..."

I tried not to count the seconds ticking by on phone. Other vehicles were inching forward. Why were we still stopped? Not moving at all? I could smell myself I was sweating so bad, forcing myself to breathe in my nose, out my mouth, closing my eyes, unsure how much longer I could continue skating along the edge like this until—"Wake the fuck up."

The Captain slapped the back of Corporal Barnes's helmet.

Barnes snapped his head up. "Huh?"

"We're moving."

"Sorry, sir."

It took a minute but we finally made it past the blast crater, its hole so deep and wide we could have fit our entire SUV inside of it. Then we were moving again and all I wanted was to take the next exit, turn around and beeline it back home. I wanted to be there for my husband, for my son. So what if these people wanted to deny election results? So what if they wanted to set up their own shadow governments and threaten, coerce, kidnap or kill their own elected officials? So what if they wanted to build shooting ranges and IED-making academies out in the pathless hinterlands? What difference was fighting them year after year after year ever going to make? Even once we arrived in Umatilla, I wouldn't be allowed out of the SUV. Our convoy would roll straight into the Municipal Compound, behind the blast barriers, and there I'd sit, stuck, working what I could until nightfall, unable to so much as steal a glance out of my office's sandbagged windows. I couldn't walk the streets, couldn't talk to people, and the people knew it. All they ever saw of me was my tinted silhouette as the convoy drove by. God knows it wouldn't have mattered. Even if I could meet them where they were, still there'd be that wall of suspicion, that resentment in their eyes. I knew it, heard it nonstop growing up, that bile, that bitterness, that anti-

government propaganda tinged with racism, the whitewashing of history, the so-called patriotism of "real" Americans, and so long as the supply of guns remained unchallenged, so long as the schools suffered in these blighted depopulated areas where an eighth-grader in Portland on average possessed a higher math and reading competency than any high school graduate in Umatilla, so long as there remained an endless supply of disaffected white boys willing to shoot up a shopping center or plant a bomb in the road or runoff and join the rest of "the boys" to stick it to the government treading all over their rights, this war, this insurgency, was never going to end. But it had to, it had to end, the hate at some point had to stop. Because I couldn't stop. The convoy couldn't stop. Even as the interstate raised and the Gorge ended and a clear blue sky beckoned and the land smoothed into familiar expanses of tumbleweed and rabbitbrush, dry empty capacious lands, the dual bridges out of Umatilla sliding into view, I let myself hope. I let myself drift, reminding myself of why I could never turn back. Because just above the bridges, beyond the McNary Lock and Dam, maybe another hour's drive along the river, there was a spot where the sounds of traffic died away, where there was just the wind on the water, in the grass, and the feel of the rounded rocks under your galoshes as you stood ankle-deep in the blue, where my father had taken me when I was young and we had thrown our lines in and waited, waited for what felt like decades, till a fish nibbled and finally snagged upon the hook. I was going to take Zachary to that place, whether it be next year or two years or ten years from now, he needed to know that place, a country, a land where things weren't violent or contested but resounding in its quietude, abiding in its own mysterious slumber, that waited for us if we'd only waken to hear its singing soul once again, a song of sleeping peace.

---

# New Flash Fiction from Mary Doyle: "Triple X"

It's zero-three hundred and I'm yanked out of a sleep so deep I wake thrashing and fighting like a marlin at the end of a hook. It takes me a minute to figure out why. Then the sounds of raw, unrestrained sex slap me further awake.

The anger flashes immediately but I try to reign it in, to give it a minute to dissipate. I'm in such shocked disbelief at what I'm hearing, the offending noise so wrong, I'm hoping someone will come to their senses and the problem will correct itself.

When that doesn't happen I toss and turn. The volume is disastrously high. It bounces around the tents, reverberating throughout this end of the camp. I begin to think they're doing it on purpose.

I lay there, my fury building. Should I?

"Oh my god," a woman a couple of cots down from me mumbles, turns over, slamming a pillow over her head.

That's it. I have no choice. I'm the senior non-commissioned officer in my tent. It's my duty.

I shove my bare feet into my boots, throw on my grey hoodie with the four big letters spelling Army on the front. I stomp over to the tent next door and pound on the flimsy excuse for a door before storming in uninvited, strafing them with my senior-leader glare.



“Turn that shit down. NOW!”

They turn to face me. They are shirtless, in shorts, sweatpants, t-shirts and flip flops. All of them wear the shock of interruption. One dives and fumbles for the remote.

*Oh yeah. Oh baby. Harder, harder,* and the rhythmic slap of naked skin on skin weakens. The seams of the sharp night air, ripped open by the echoes of the graphic sounds, slip back together across the camp.

They are Scouts, just returned from patrol. Defiant, young boy-men who glower through ancient eyes. They hate me right now, but too bad. They are soldiers. They respond to my authority even though I’m not wearing any rank and my bed hair probably looks horrific.

I take a second to look at each of them, memorizing their faces. Three are huddled over a poncho spread out on the floor, a disassembled SAW laid out where they were cleaning the complicated weapon, piece by piece. Two others are leaning over a bucket, scrub brushes in one hand, their other arms shoved almost elbow deep into mud covered boots. Another one is standing in front of a small mirror hanging from a nail on a post, his bald head covered in shaving cream, a plastic razor in his hand.

Not one of them is sitting in front of the small TV in the corner with the built in VCR.

They follow the lead of the man I assume is their sergeant. Those that aren't already, stand slowly, arms folding behind their backs, going to parade rest, further proof of their submission to my will.

I'm working to keep the anger in my voice now. Exhaustion, physical and emotional, feels like a cartoon anvil on a rope hanging above us, the rope fraying, all of us in danger of being crushed by it. I have no idea what they have done, what they have seen this day.

"I live next door. There are ten women in that tent," I say. The gruff rebuke sounds genuine to my ears, if a bit forced.

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Keep it down now."

"Yes, Sergeant."

I turn my back on them and walk out. My boots feel like bricks as I kick them off and climb back into my rack, deflated. The mumbled '*thank yous*' that drift to me through the anonymous dark don't lessen the buzzing in my head.

The clock glows zero three twenty. Behind my heavy lids I see them staring at me. Young men flattened by fatigue, with eyes as rusted as the spent casings they've left behind in their work.

A guilt dagger in my gut makes me want to curl into a ball, but the metal sides of my cot won't allow it. I throb with unleashed emotion. Grief? Regret? I don't know. Whatever it is, it tastes sour.

---

# Representation: An interview with new literary agent Tracy Crow



*Tracy Crow, with her corgi puppy, Hope. The puppy is the newest furry member of the household, but hope is always something Crow looks for in the writing she represents. Two years ago, Tracy Crow, an author, former Marine, invited me to be a part of the MilSpeak Foundation ON POINT Women Warriors Writing Workshops she took around the country,*



offering a free weekend of writing instruction to women veterans and veteran family members. The workshops, in Tampa and Charlotte, were creatively inspiring and a hell of a lot of fun, not only for those who attended but for the cadre of instructors she'd pulled together. I'll never forget being a part of that team.

At every venue we met scores of women writers, many of whom had already met Tracy in one capacity or another. They'd either attended a previous workshop, had hired her for her book doctoring skills, or had served with her in uniform. And at each location she added more people to the list of writers she offered to coach, inviting them to join online workshop groups or to send her their manuscript for one-on-one review. She seemed tireless.

The workshops were for writers who'd never taken any serious writing instruction as well as writers who had already been published a number of times. For Crow, it seemed a desire to be creative and to improve your skills was the only requirement for her attention.

Crow has often helped writers with finished manuscripts find homes for them. She'd also applied her skillful pen to help guide a manuscript from unsellable to sought after. Eventually, she realized she'd been on a pathway that led to one thing—officially becoming an advocate for writers and their work. Tracy has now opened the doors to Tracy Crow Literary Agency, LLC and is now representing more than a dozen authors. I wanted to talk to her about that.

While I spoke to Tracy over the phone, she apologized for the hullabaloo her furry friends were making in the background. Since they are often the subjects of her social media posts, I already knew there were any number of things a black lab, a yellow lab, a beagle-anatolian shepherd, and a corgi puppy can get into when their mom's back is turned. Most of the time, I couldn't actually hear them through the connection, but

*evidently, as soon as we started to converse, they had all decided it was time to gnaw on their bone chews. I can only imagine what that sounded like.*

*How many books have you helped bring to the market?*

I can tell you that just prior to my making a decision to become an agent, I had helped place four books in eighteen months. And that was when I really started thinking seriously about it. But what helped me make the decision, was when [an author] I was working with asked me if I'd feel comfortable opening the door for her for a particular publisher. Just prior to that, a different author's book had come out and I realized that something in this book had been left out. I felt, at the time, that it wasn't for me to say anything and I figured the publisher would catch it, but they didn't and that left me feeling responsible. The writer didn't have an agent, but I'd turned her over to the publisher, assuming they would take care [of the missing piece] but they didn't. The bottom line is, when [the new author] asked me to help her with a publisher, I told her I was at the stage where I really felt guilty if I wasn't able to walk a writer through the entire process. If I'm not an agent, I can't represent the writers the way they deserve.

I did end up helping [the author] get her book in front of [the publisher], giving her instructions to call me with any questions because it can be a complicated process. So now, her book is with them and in their publishing pipeline. A few months later, I realized I was ready. So I formed the LLC and I haven't looked back.

*Are you mostly getting submissions from word-of-mouth or are you on Agentquery.com or any of the other agent solicitation sites?*

I'm on Publishers Marketplace, but I'm getting as many manuscripts as I can comfortably handle. When you've gone

through an MFA program and all of your MFA writing friends realize they have an agent among them, things can go a little crazy. They all start sending you their manuscripts and they all start referring their friends. And these are all excellent writers. I mean, really, really good writers. So it's not like I have to go digging and searching as a lot of new agents might have to do. A lot of good work is coming my way. Of course I follow the latest trends, but I don't really need to go searching for manuscripts. In fact I have to be very selective. I'm boutique. It's just me. So far. And there are only so many hours in a day, only so much I can read at a time. And I have this thing—that is, if I say I'm going to read your work, that doesn't mean you're going to hear from me in six months. You're going to hear from me within 10 days. Ten days to two weeks at the most. That's a pipeline I need to keep moving. I can only read so many, and handle all of the other work I do during the day, like sending out pitches to publishers, doing research to find the right strategy and the right fit with publishing houses and certain editors and their preferences with what I have as clients.

I also have a number of clients in various stages. I have some who are finished and their work has been pitched and their manuscripts are being read by the large houses. I have several who are finishing first drafts, but because they have already written or published heavily elsewhere and I know their work and their quality, I have agreed to sign them for their new book.

Then I have one young man, who is only 22, brilliant, came to me as a referral but the work needs a lot of editing. But because the concept for this six-book series is so brilliant, I couldn't say no. I told him that this is going to be a six-month-long, intensive, MFA-level instruction and revision effort, and if he was up for that, then I would sign him. So this is intensive for both of us. Every day I have a couple of hours of editing and instruction for him. But the concept [for

his series] is so brilliant. I was pleased that he had gotten 455 pages to this point, but we just have to up the diction, up the level of quality of the storytelling. The story is all there.

So I have all of these different clients in various stages. It's like having a bunch of plates spinning at different speeds, and you've got to keep each one spinning at the right speed for that particular client. It's a little crazy.

*You're not just representing writers, teaching writing, you are doing developmental editing as well. You can't get much more full service than that.*

Yes. It used to be that I would charge for developmental editing. I can't charge for that anymore since forming the literary agency, and that was a big part of my financial income that I had to give away in order to do the agent thing. From an ethical standard, as an agent, I can't charge someone for any sort of reading or editing. I either agree to represent you and take the work as it is and we work on it from there or we don't. Anything else is unethical. There's a lot of developmental editing projects I've had to walk away from because I knew the writer wanted to be my client at some point, but I couldn't do both.

I've told others to go through an additional rewrite, and bring it to me and if we're that much further along, then I can do it. It's just this one, young 22-year-old that I've agreed to go this heavy with.

*What kind of work are you most attracted to?*



The kind of work that I would have the easiest success in placing would be military writers, or writers with military stories, because that's what I know the best and that's where I have the most contacts, and the community for support and all of that. But I have clients who are writing science fiction or fantasy that I'm excited about. I have clients that are writing upmarket women's fiction. I have a romance novelist and a cozy mystery writer.

The only things that I'm not interested in representing are crime or anything horror related, or anything that's too violent.

Recently I had to turn away the cleanest manuscript I've ever seen in my writing life by a very, very famous writer because there was so much gratuitous stuff that I knew I couldn't advocate for it.. Then the next day, I'm saying yes to this young kid whose quality of writing is not there but the story is brilliant, and I want to help prepare him and get his work ready for the world. Some decisions are pretty easy and simple to make, but most of them are hard. Anytime I have to say no, it gets me in the gut because I've been on that end and I know what that feels like.

Of course, I'm receiving no's all day. I'm sending pitches all

day to editors and hearing ... 'you know that's great but it's not quite close enough to what we want for a romance,' or 'It's on the fence,' or 'If it was only this,' or 'If it was only that.' I'm getting rejections all day, which just means I have to switch up my pitch or find a new way to approach it. And that's usually what it takes, just the right moment of timing.

It's like when I was selling real estate (in the 1990s). It feels a little like finding that perfect buyer for that perfect home. When it happens, it's a no brainer and the buyer says 'of course it's this house'. Connecting a manuscript with the right editor and publisher feels a little like that.

*What kind of things would a writer do that would cause you to reject the manuscript?*

A lot of writers, especially if they're new, will completely ignore what you've put out there as instruction for how you wish to be contacted. I understand it, because I've been at every stage of this. I understand how hard it can be, so I'm very forgiving and I don't automatically reject anyone ... unless they describe the work as a crime thriller ... because I'm not subjecting myself to that. I'm not into hard crime and horror.

Aside from that, it's the writing. I had to turn away a fellow grad school friend because the manuscript was fairly well written but the story didn't hold together. I know that in order for me to help that writer get the manuscript to a level that I could represent it would require a lot of work from me. So when I'm looking at a manuscript, I have to ask myself, how much do I love this work? How much of myself am I willing to give to it?

I'm beginning to understand why so many people are getting rejections. If the work isn't slam dunk there, agents don't have the time or they don't have the skill to give the work

the developmental edit it needs.

*I should mention that Tracy is a former assistant professor of creative writing and journalism and has years of experience guiding authors to greatness. She told me a story about one writer whose work was under consideration with an editor she knew. The editor told her he'd read the manuscript but was going to reject it because he felt something was missing. When Tracy read the work, she said the problem looked obvious to her. She consulted with the writer and made a few thematic suggestions. The writer made the changes, and now the book is in the publishing pipeline. She went on to say this:*

How many agents have the time or the developmental chops to make something like that happen? I understand now why so many writers are receiving rejection after rejection. No. No. No. No., and they have no idea how to fix something that could be great work. Agents and editors simply don't have the time, or a teaching background in most cases, so the writer never hears from them about what is missing.

And this is what I thought I could gift to my clients. If I see really solid promise in the writing, the language, the way the writer makes connections, the way the writer develops characters on the page, if they're indelible to me, if they speak to me—yet certain holes are obvious—then I'm going to give it everything I've got. If the writer demonstrates the ability to take it to the next level, then I'm open to it. Most agents would not have the time or energy for that.

*When did you officially start as an agent?*

I formed the LLC at the end of May. Since then the manuscripts have come in, I have had all this reading to do and I had to decide who would be my first clients. The first few weeks were just reading, reading, reading. I started pitching around early August, so we're just really in the first weeks of this. We have gotten really close already. There was a lot of

talking and back and forth, and I thought we would be getting an offer from one, but it turned out to not be the right fit. I feel really good about this manuscript and it's being considered at several other houses right now.

All of this takes time. And editors will take weeks to read something, then they send it to others to read, then it goes to marketing and they have all of these discussions before they ever contact me. So even though we started pitching in August, we're just beginning to hear back from editors and publishers.

*What about marketing? When you look at the manuscript, you look for good writing, good character development, but are you looking at marketability in terms of how much money the book could make? There's a lot of literary work that is wonderful, but will never make any money. How much does that impact your decision?*

There are publishers who will entertain books like that and I would go there first with a certain type of manuscript. I don't really think in terms of market because it's so slippery and I'm not following exact trends. I'm looking for the best story, the one that's going to stick with me. If I can remember the details and the characters, then I know there will be other readers who will feel the same thing. If it's the kind of book that would make a good book club discussion, then I feel that a number, at least a handful of publishers might be interested in it. So it's just a matter of finding the right one. The perfect buyer for the perfect home.

I know it's always frustrating for a writer when they find out that the marketing department was involved in the reject. They think, how am I going to compete with that? I just think that every book will find its way into the world. I know it may sound really woo woo—I tell my clients, if you're going to play with me, you're going to have to understand the woo woo parts—I tell them, if this is all about money for you, you're



going to be disappointed. If this is about getting your work into the right vehicle to get it into the world, I'm your agent. We're going to find a vehicle that makes sense for your work. We also have to allow for the mystery of it. We can't force it. The only thing I can force is to make sure I'm working every day for these writers. I can only ensure I'm opening as many doors and making as many opportunities for these writers as I can, since I'm the gatekeeper—the only way they're going to get to these publishers.

*This is a background kind of question but, I was just wondering. Why did you join the Marine Corps?*

Well, I actually wanted to join the Air Force, because I thought I'd look better in blue. They had military police and police dogs, and I wanted to get involved with that. But I found out there was a six-month waiting period. I didn't have the patience for that. So then I went down the hall and talked to the Navy recruiter. Same thing. Six-month waiting period. Then I went to talk to the Army recruiters and they also had a six-month waiting period. I was actually walking out of the building when the Marine recruiter stopped me and said, "You've checked out everybody else all morning. Aren't you even going to ask me any questions?"

Remember, this is 1977, I'd never had a single family member in the military. I looked at this recruiter and said, "You have women in the Marine Corps?" And he said, "Come on in here. Let me show you a film." Three weeks later I'm at Parris Island.

*How long were you in the Marines?*

Ten years.



*Tracy Crow, center, with attendees of an On Point writing workshop.*

*Back to the agent stuff. Do you think you're close to placing something now?*

I feel like I'm getting so much good feedback from my romance writer's book. It's the military version of The Ya Ya Sisterhood. It's really intriguing, it's really good, and it's written by the first woman JAG (Judge Advocate General) officer to go into combat and it was down in Panama. It's her first book. I met her in one of my workshops we held in Tampa. She's been workshopping with me for a year. When she finished the book, she came to me.

I do these free workshops every month ... four pro-bono workshops every month with these different women veterans groups including military spouses. So, she'd been working on this book for a year and she asked if I would look at it in terms of something I might want to represent. I told her I absolutely want to represent this.

She's also writing a cozy mystery ... it's not bloody ... it's not violent and it also has some amazing redeeming qualities in terms of the storyline that I'm always looking for. I like it

when the story demonstrates a higher purpose. What's the point? Are we just adding to the noise out there, or are we enhancing something?

But this author is really in her lane with the cozy mysteries and I expect she will write one a year and will eventually sign a multiple-book contract with someone.

I'm close with several books, but I know that my authors are counting the days and anticipating my weekly emails.

I do something that I don't think any other agents are doing. When I've had agents, I could go months without ever hearing from anybody. So, I send every one of my clients a Thursday weekly update. They're going to hear from me every Thursday. They're going to know what pitches went out and who we heard back from. Now, if I have an editor that is showing interest, I'm not going to make them wait until Thursday for that. Every one of my clients will be getting their Thursday updates.

*That's unheard of!*

I know. It's not fun when you don't have a bunch of good news. It's not fun when you have rejections to report but at least they know. Those who have had agents before, they're blown away by the level of access and weekly check-ins. Now, the clients that have never had an agent, they don't have anything to compare it to, so they're just ...'Thanks for the update!'

I know what they're feeling. Every time they check their email. Is there going to be something? I know that feeling. But at the same time I want them to have access and know they have an agent who is working for them every day and every week and they're not just a client. They matter to me.

You also have to prepare them because sometimes this process can be slow, and other times it feels like it happens overnight. Editors move, they change publishing houses, and then all of a sudden that editor who I knew there who had to

say no, can suddenly say yes to something over here. You just have to wait and you have to have faith in your work and faith in one another and give it that time to find its right, perfect vehicle into the world.

*It sounds like this is exactly what Tracy Crow should be doing right now. Is that how it feels?*

Since I got my MFA in 2005, I've had at least a dozen friends say that I really should be an agent. My husband would ask me why I wasn't an agent. I have to tell you this feels really good, to feel like I'm the champion of these writers and I can go around telling people, 'You've got to read this.' It feels so good to cheerlead and to champion on behalf of writers who maybe would have been rejected maybe dozens and dozens of times because the market is so flooded with stuff. It's joyful. It really is.

*Is there anything you wish I'd asked that I haven't asked you?*

I'm really impressed with what I'm reading today, as opposed to what I was reading in 2005. Back in 2005, when I would read that writers were getting rejected, it was like they wanted to jump off a bridge or something. Now, what I'm reading is that writers are like ... Next? They may not know why they were rejected but they're not giving up. They have stories to tell and I'm seeing a difference in attitude. It's almost like writers today, and I'm sure I'm generalizing too much, writers almost have this attitude now, that they're going to write regardless. And maybe it's because of the freedom the self-publishing pathway has opened up and offered. It's almost like they will try the traditional way but the traditional way is not going to be the final gatekeeper. And I love that. I applaud that. I want to encourage that. I tell all my writers, look, we may be going this route, but let's not get so hung up on this that we miss other possibilities. Stay open to however it unfolds. I just admire how many people know they are good writers. They know they have stories to tell. I just admire

the attitude of writers today, which is ... 'I'm gonna go write another book.' That the most important thing is being creative and allowing that creative opportunity, and not allowing people like agents or editors to steal your joy from that.

*I'm wondering if the discipline you're seeing and this determination is because your clients have some kind of military connection. Do you think it's because of that, that they are so determined?*

*At this point, the dogs went berserk. There was barking, the sound of nails sliding across the floor and a brief bit of chaos. Tracy was shooin' them out of the room, telling me to hold on because she really wanted to answer that question. When she came back, I didn't have to remind her what the question was. She jumped right in.*

What I'm seeing in various chatroom groups, various Facebook groups, there's a level of frustration at times, yes. But I'm noticing that people are saying, 'I'm still writing, I'm still going,' and these people aren't military. It's just a major change. I have friends who stopped writing after their first rejection. They haven't written since 2005. Now, it's almost like I'm seeing a different attitude that what is more important is the creativity. And they're saying, what if things fall apart and nobody ever gives them this validation they think they need to continue their work ... and I've been there, I've needed that validation too. They still know they have a self-publishing pathway that is gaining in esteem if the work is good.

[Self-publishing is] no longer considered so negative. In 2011, I published my first book that way and was scared to death my academic creative writing colleagues would discover that I had, and I would lose my job. I just think the self-publishing avenue has taken a little bit of the pressure off because they know there's still a way they can do it. They know they can still reach readers and still find their own

market. I love it!

*It's clear that Tracy loves the work. You can see the amount of heart she gives when she's with writers in her workshops or any writer gatherings. People flock to her and appreciate the energy, joy, and support she gives. This agent thing is the right path for her.*

*Tracy says if you'd like to query her, send her a synopsis of your work. She'll give it a read and if she feels like it's something she can advocate for, she will ask for the manuscript. She said she's reading queries and manuscripts from writers all the time. Contact her at [Tracy@TracyCrow.com](mailto:Tracy@TracyCrow.com) and include QUERY in the subject line.*



**Tracy Crow** is host and producer of the podcast, *Accept Your Gifts: The 22-Minute Podcast for Inspiring Your Most Creative Life*, a twice-weekly program with listeners in 12 countries.

She is also the founder of Tracy Crow Literary Agency, LLC, and the president and CEO of MilSpeak Foundation, Inc., a 501 (c) 3 organization dedicated toward supporting the creative endeavors of military servicemembers, veterans, and their families.

Tracy is the author/editor of six books to include the novella, *Cooper's Hawk: The Remembering*; the popular history, *It's My Country Too: Women's Military Stories from the American Revolution to Afghanistan* with co-author Jerri Bell; the award-winning memoir, *Eyes Right: Confessions from a Woman Marine*; the military conspiracy thriller, *An Unlawful Order*, under her pen name, Carver Greene; the true story collection, *Red, White, & True: Stories from Veterans and Families, WWII to Present*; and the breakthrough writing text, *On Point: A*

*Guide to Writing the Military Story*, in which Tracy combines her skills and experience as a former Marine Corps officer, award-winning military journalist, author, editor, and assistant professor of creative writing and journalism. Tracy's short stories and essays have also appeared in a number of literary journals and anthologies.

She has a B.A. in creative writing from Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida, and an MFA in creative writing from Queens University of Charlotte in North Carolina. She and her husband, Mark Weidemaier, an MLB lifer, live on ten storybook acres in central North Carolina with their four dogs – Cash, Fenway, Hadley, and Hope.

### **The interviewer- M. L. Doyle**



M.L. Doyle calls on her years of serving as an Army Reservist to write about women in combat boots. Mary is the author of *The Peacekeeper's Photograph*, *The Sapper's Plot* and *The General's Ambition* in her Master Sergeant Harper mystery series. She has also penned *The Bonding Spell* and *The Bonding Blade*, in a planned three-book Desert Goddess urban fantasy series. *Limited Partnerships*, is her four-novella erotic romance series.

She co-authored the memoirs of two brave soldiers to ensure their stories keep their proper place in history. The memoir, *I'm Still Standing: From Captured Soldier to Free Citizen, My Journey Home* (Touchstone, 2010) with Spec. (Ret) Shoshana Johnson, an African-American POW of the Iraq War, was finalist in the NAACP Image Award. She also co-authored with Brig. Gen (Ret.) Julia Cleckley the story of her rise through Army ranks from humble beginnings despite great personal tragedy. *A Promise Fulfilled, My Life as a Wife and Mother, Soldier and General Officer* was published in 2015.

Mary's essays, reviews and interviews have appeared in The War Horse, The Goodman project, and 0-Dark Thirty. She is part of the fiction editorial panel of The Wrath-Bearing Tree.