

Wild Delights: Patrick Hicks Interviews Brian Turner

BRIAN TURNER

the
wild delight
of
wild things



Patrick Hicks: Brian Turner earned an MFA from the University of Oregon and taught English in South Korea for a year before he joined the United States Army. He served in Bosnia-Herzegovina with the 10th Mountain Division and, when he was

deployed to Iraq, he became an infantry team leader with the 3rd Stryker Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division. His first collection of poetry, *Here, Bullet*, won the Beatrice Hawley Award, the Pen Center USA "Best in the West Award", and it was a *New York Times* Editor's Choice Selection. His second collection, *Phantom Noise*, received equally strong attention and it was shortlisted for the coveted T.S. Eliot Prize in England. His memoir, *My Life as a Foreign Country*, has been praised for both its clear-eyed perception of what it means to go to war, as well as its narrative structure, which is fragmented vignettes that examine the many wars that America has been involved in. Turner nudges us to think about the long after-burn of war and how one generation influences the next.

His work has been published in *The New York Times*, *National Geographic*, *Poetry Daily*, *The Georgia Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review* and many others. He received an NEA Literature Fellowship, the Amy Lowell Traveling Fellowship, a US-Japan Friendship Commission Fellowship, the Poets' Prize, and a Fellowship from the Lannan Foundation. Turner gives readings all over the world and he has made appearances on NPR, the BBC, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, PBS, and RTÉ in Ireland. When not writing or touring, he is a faculty member in the MFA Program at the University of Nevada Reno at Lake Tahoe. Although soft spoken and humble, his readings at book festivals and universities are deeply thoughtful and moving explorations about literature, global politics, and our responsibilities to each other.

Turner has three new collections coming out with Alice James Books, and we sat down to talk about the first in the series: *The Wild Delight of Wild Things*.

Patrick Hicks: Let's start with the title, which comes from a line of poetry that your wife, Ilyse Kusnetz, wrote. In fact, the very first poem in *The Wild Delight of Wild Things* isn't your work, it's hers. It's as if we have to read through her work in order to get at your own. And perhaps not

surprisingly, she infuses the entire collection. She passed away of cancer in 2016 and, as I read this new collection, it felt like a restoring of her presence or an act of determined memory to be in conversation with her. Could you talk about Ilyse's place in this collection and how she continues to influence you?

Brian Turner: Our home in Orlando, Florida, has a small entryway that leads to the living room. I've never told anyone this, but whenever I'm about to leave the house and whenever I return home, there's a very brief ritual I do that reminds me of Ilyse. It's one of the many ways I try to be alive with her in my life. To be present. To be in the presence of. To be in conversation with. And I think this practice mirrors, in some ways, the construction of this book—as her voice both begins and ends the meditation.

It's also a chance for me to share her voice with others, which is a way of saying it's a chance for more people to fall in love with her. And on that note—I dare anyone to read that first poem of hers and not fall at least a little bit in love with her.

PH: One of the first poems in *The Wild Delight of Wild Things* is "The Immortals." It's about jellyfish that seem to resurrect themselves from the dead and become young again. It's a denial of death, and it's rooted in nature. You write, "They have learned to reinvent themselves in defiance/ of the body's undoing. They rise from their own deaths./ They rise from the bottom of the sea." For a poet who has been lauded, rightfully so, for your work about the Iraq War, there are many references about nature woven throughout *Wild Delight*. Was it liberating to focus on things other than the Iraq War? In many ways, this collection feels like it comes from Brian, and not from Sergeant Turner.

BT: You know, this is something I've thought about quite a bit—not only for myself, but it's a dynamic that I recognize

in many writers and artists. When I lead writing workshops for veterans, for example, I often mention that my intention isn't to simply give them writing tools and meditative approaches that might help them to explore and navigate their experiences while in uniform. I tell them that my larger hope is to offer tools that might help them to write their way into the rest of their lives.

And here I am, doing that very thing. You know? Becoming Brian, more and more with each passing day.

PH: "The Salton Sea" starts off with a rumination of the crew of Enola Gay practicing bombing runs as they drop huge barrels of concrete onto a target that would eventually become Hiroshima. And then the poem switches to the Cold War. You mention how twenty-four million gallons of jet fuel spilled "into the water that Albuquerque rests on." Ilyse grew up in Albuquerque and died of cancer. It's entirely possible, as you write, that she is "one of many unrecorded deaths on the home front." In the poem, you talk about a reluctance for some people to think that she could have been a victim of the Cold War. Could you talk about what prompted this poem?

BT: This poem is watermarked with so many conversations Ilyse and I had after her diagnosis. And the anger welling up near the end—that's her anger, blended with my own. There's research involved in this poem, too, sure, but the basic argument and the emotional structure of the poem were drafted by her one conversation at a time with me as its first audience.

If we take a bird's-eye-view of this... I've long been fascinated by the boundaries drawn between what some call the home-front and what we might think of as a conflict zone. There's a kind of psychic disconnect there, I think. While it's a very practical and seemingly logical thing to associate conflict zones with places where pain and trauma and death and violence occur, it does a disservice to the complexity of

experience when we untether the home-front from the battlefield.

It's similar to the experience of looking at an oak tree—how easy it is sometimes to forget that the root structure below can grow as much as three times larger than the canopy above.

PH: Maybe we could stay on this line of thinking for a moment. In the poem immediately following "The Salton Sea" you write about Cuvier's Beaked Whales beaching themselves—and dying—due to the "acoustic blasts of active sonar" in submarines. Just as the military inadvertently poisoned the water of Albuquerque, the Navy is doing collateral damage to whales. In both poems, you question the long-term hidden effects of war. Do you notice such things, perhaps, due to your experiences as a soldier? You have spoken at book festivals about the grave and lasting harm that has been caused to children caught in war.

BT: It's impossible for me to know whether I might have written this poem if I'd never worn the uniform. But I'm moved and troubled by these losses when I hear of them. Collateral damage. I recently visited the battlefield in Vicksburg, Mississippi, and walked some of the Union lines. As I considered the landscape, I searched for stands of red cedar and live oaks. I was looking for survivors—for ancient trees with stories to tell. Eastern red cedar, for example, can live up to 900 years. And I wondered if some still held minie balls or grapeshot within them, or if trees sometimes weep bullets the way the human body can sometimes weep shards of glass or metal fragments long after an initial injury.

PH: In "The Jurassic Coast" you have a lengthy stanza that lists off the animals that will likely go extinct before the century is out. I have to admit, I hadn't heard of many of them, which is precisely the point I think you're trying to make. What are we inadvertently killing? Why don't we care? You end the poem with a powerful stanza about the last

passenger pigeon, named Martha, who died at the Cincinnati Zoo in 1914. Just as you celebrate the wild delight of wild things in this collection, there is also an undercurrent of lament and despair.

BT: I wonder sometimes if the vast scale of it all is simply too overwhelming for the mind to grasp. I know that's true for me. While this book holds an intimate conversation with Ilyse at its center, that conversation is mirrored, in some ways, with a meditation on climate change and what it means to live in the Anthropocene. Elegy is at the heart of this, I'm sure. A way of praising and lamenting and grieving and offering comfort all at once. My hope is that it's clear-eyed in its compassion.

PH: Very much so. And even though I just mentioned an undercurrent of despair running through this collection a few seconds ago, it is equally true there is profound awe and fascination for the world around you. Some of these poems span lengths of geological time that our minds simply cannot fathom. It's clear that a great deal of research went into these poems. Can you talk about your research process and how you threaded that information into these poems?

BT: Long before this book truly discovered its form, I began an earlier version as a kind of challenge: I would write 100 brief lyric essays on nature, and in each piece, I would learn something about the world and I'd also in some way be in conversation with Ilyse and our relationship. It didn't work as a book, though—and that was a hard thing to accept at first. I had to sit with that fact for some time before rolling up my sleeves and weighing what was necessary and what had not earned its place on the page.

One of the beautiful things I learned in this entire process is that scientists and researchers are incredibly kind and helpful and clear and generous. Only once or twice did I not receive a response to a query. The opposite was true of the

vast majority of folks I reached out to for their expertise. I have a standing invitation now, for example, to visit cave sites in India and to see first-hand the cupules I've written about in "The Auditorium Cave." And I can't wait to go!

PH: One of the most powerful poems in this collection is "Ashes, Ashes." You start by saying "California is on fire" and then mention how trees and plants have been turned into particulate that rides the air as ash. You also bring our attention to the longest burning fire anywhere on Earth—an underground coal seam in Australia that has been raging for some 6,000 years. The third part of this poem focuses on your father's body being broken down by the intense flames of a crematoria oven, and you write about it in great detail. Lastly, there is the haunting image of you cradling Ilyse's ashes the night you brought her urn home. Could you talk about the writing process for this poem? How long did it take to write "Ashes, Ashes"? It's one of your longest poems in the collection, and I sense that it took a while to piece together.

BT: "Ashes, Ashes" took several years to write, though the bulk of the writing was done in three phases. The first half of the poem was written after my father's death, in 2015, and Ilyse was still alive. We didn't talk about Marshall's death. It was something I pushed down inside of myself emotionally. And yet, I wrote this meditation during the autumn after his death. Ilyse read everything I wrote and this meditation was no exception—as she was its first editor. And so, in a sense, we talked about this grief through the page as she suggested edits and choices in language, but the conversation stayed there and I didn't talk about his loss outside of that.

What I couldn't see then—or had blocked from my own imagination—was that this meditation would later include the second half that you mention. A version was published in *The Georgia Review* (Fall 2017), and that was later scaled down into the much more streamlined version that's here in the

book.

I'm continually reminded that there are things I want to write, and there are things I need to write. It's a rare thing for a poem to contain both of these things at once.

PH: A difficult question, and I want to ask it delicately. In "The End of the World" you write, "I wanted the ruin. I'd be lying if I said otherwise./ I wanted the hurricane to destroy what was left of my life./ [...] if that hurricane simply crushed me to death/ and then splintered the home around me into an unspeakable/ puzzle of what was once our favorite place on Earth—so be it." Ilyse passed way in 2016 and you have also lost your best friend, Brian Voight, as well as your step-father, Marshall. Grief has been your companion for a long time now. How have music and words sustained you?

BT: Now that some time has passed—it's been almost seven years—I can see a bit more clearly. I can see that writing helped me to find my way forward. I had a lot of anger for quite some time, and it's been difficult for the body to metabolize that and then slough it away. Part of what helped was the research I did into the natural world. In some ways that attention to the details of this amazing planet helped me to fall in love with it once more. And yes, I had fallen out of love with it. When I realized that art offered some ways back into memory, and into conversations with the dead I love—that began a series of creative meditations both on the page and with sound that have sustained me to this day. Ilyse and Brian both died far too young. Both were artists that had so much to give to this world, to all of us. Part of my work now, as an artist, and as a human being, is to find ways to collaborate with them so that others might have a chance to meet those I love.

I've found that the sorrow that lives within the body remains, at least for now, with a kind of ebb and flow to it. It's something I'm learning to live with. We each grieve in our own

way, and the signature of love and loss is unique to the heart that carries it.

A friend in Colorado has shared with me some of the trees up in the mountains that are a part of his life. Lightning trees, as he calls them. You can trace the smooth skin of the trunk where lightning has discharged through the tree with such intensity that the bark has been blown off. They are mapped with scars from the ground to the sky. They are survivors. They radiate a quiet wisdom. And I can't explain what it is or how it happens, but when I place my palms on the trunks of those trees, a sense of calm washes through me, something timeless and transcendent, and I open my eyes, and I breathe, and then I walk back into the days of my life.

PH: There is a definite, and yet subtle, soundscape to this collection. Waves appear in many of the poems. So do birds, clouds, fire, and the fall of rain. You've done something unique for this collection because you have literally created a soundscape that can be accessed by a QR code. Once a reader finishes *The Wild Delight of Wild Things* you invite them to listen to a thirty-minute song called "Clouds," which in many ways is an auditory meditation on the entire collection as a whole. I can hear the sounds that hold these poems together and there is also film of clouds taken at 30,000 feet. I'm not aware of seeing—or hearing—anything quite like this before. Could you talk about how the idea, and the song, came together?

BT: I didn't realize I was creating this when I began it. In Chennai, I sat under a sacred tree and recorded the birds above. I then had the honor of speaking with over 100 students of traditional dance and song in a nearby classroom—and so I asked if they might follow my lead and sing a wave-like meditative pattern with me, which I recorded on a hand-held recorder that I often carry with me. Likewise, while living in Ireland as the inaugural John Montague International Poetry Fellow for the city of Cork, in 2018, I was lucky enough to

have a full choir bussed in from an outlying town to record in a gorgeous chapel. The waves themselves were recorded late one night on Anna Marie Island as Ilyse and I sat on the beach to watch the Perseids rain down.

And so, this meditation in sound arose organically as I began to learn how to live in the word after. Now that it's done, I hope that "Clouds" might help the reader to process their own thoughts and feelings and experiences once they're finished with the book. But in a larger sense, I hope this meditation stands on its own—and that it might prove meaningful and helpful for others in ways that I can only imagine.

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[*The Wild Delight of Wild Things*](#) will be published by Alice James Books in August 2023. To hear a sample from "Clouds," [click here.](#)

New Poetry by Amalie Flynn: "Strip"

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New Poetry by Abena Ntoso:

“Dear Melissa”

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New Poetry by Luis-Lopez Maldonado: “Virus Como Chocolate” and “Pancho Villa, Cesar Chavez y Luis Lopez Madonado”

New poetry by Luis-Lopez Maldonado: “Virus Como Chocolate” and
“Pancho Villa, Cesar Chavez y Luis Lopez-Maldonado”

New Poetry by Sofia Tiapkina: “To Forget or Not Maybe,” “Grasping the Sky,” and “Airless Embrace”



THE SILENT SKY / *image by Amalie Flynn*

to forget or not maybe

to forget or not maybe
to fight for memory or not
i'm here i'm she
lying on my back underneath me
blue cherries of bruises ten backs
all pierced by bullets all riddled
no one seems to cry here this defenseless death is unshared
with any and all
i look around at people all around still people these old
trees outside what a spring so wildly
blooms and dies with a scream
i rise from my knees or maybe just
think that i rise i was a teacher
what remains of the school now
walls shrubs suckle blood from the soil

i taught them to never
kill people and now
i'm face to face
with the killers of children hands and face changed the maples
turned perfectly crimson too soon
broke my
spine and soul i would tell them if i still taught never kill
anyone
i rise from my knees call out to god
god i accept everything i
understand the end of life
i accept it i am desecrated
why do you punish me
with this life
after death

Grasping the Sky

Inside us: a piece of
sky, blue and rusty,
smelling of winter and
gunpowder.
Who will see us as we crawl, chasing
the shadows of the clouds?
She reanimates the land.

The bombs, and bullets, and bodies took
its breath away and send it straight into cardiac arrest.
The scars of war are on her palms and tongue,
but she keeps going because without the land,
her heart will stop, too.

Land—земля—zemlia: a greenplace, a birthgiver, our bread.
She puts her hands around it and tries to close off
the wounds of horror and destruction and
deathdeathdeathdeath

that the inhumans opened with their hungry teeth.
Sometimes, when the blood stops rushing through her ears
or between her fingers,
she hears the echo of “brotherly nations,” “local
misunderstanding,”
“child actors.”
The land moans under the weight of
countless bones.

We carry no
prophecies under our skin.

The silent sky
floods our mouths.
Who will hear us climb up
the lifeless mushrooms?

He rebuilds the house.
A new foundation in place of his ancestors'
home built with tears. The missile took
the walls, but the kitchen table is still
standing in the middle.

House—будинок—budynok: a warm place, a safehold, our nest.
He drinks tea at the kitchen table.
One year anniversary,
he feels the explosions
reverberating through his ribs.
His daughter would have turned three.
His wife would have put a pot of
lilacs by her crib.
He drinks tea at the kitchen table of a murdered house.
It's hot and bitter, and for a minute, he forgets
a new future of new houses with
no one inside.

Everything we wanted
was in the sound

of the sky without
the stench of corpses.
Who will remember us if
the task ahead will take a generation?

They reconstruct their homeland.
Too many questions, too little time: where
do they fit between now and then;
how do they embezzle millions yet fight corruption
as never before; what are dignity and justice and fairness
if the debris of a shelled hospital hide
the broken pieces of mothers and newborns.

Homeland—Батьківщина—Bat'kivschna: a free place, a seeing
glass, our hope.

They won't live to see it without blood and tears
soaking its black ground. How do they repair machine-gunned
hearts?

How do they rebuild a cracked-open sky?
They reconstruct their homeland as the bombs
try to bring them to their knees. Too many
questions, too little time. But the question,
"Will we live?" is not one of them.

Millions of hands breaking the chains
shout the answer louder than
air raid sirens.

Inside us: a whisper
of summer, when sunflowers
grow from the ash.

Who will catch the birds
pecking out a path between
the sky and wheat fields?

No one. Our wings hold the glory of freedom.

airless embrace

i miss you like i miss the sky
cold so painfully blue
angels must have
dripped blueberry juice
from the clouds
i want to tether myself
to the sky-whispers
embrace them bury my
face into their warmth
but it doesn't make you here
i stalk the shore scooping
up birds beaks
black with blood
you used your skirt
to wipe off the
red from their feathers
why did you
let go
the earth drinks soot
i'm thirsty for
the sound of
your smile
under the winter sun
on the shore
i pick the nightingales
curl my toes to find
the damper sand
the soft homes of crabs below
i hold the memory
of your hair
between my fingers
i miss you
until i fly out of
the soil's arms
and the sky
catches me
in its thousand

blue hands

New Poetry by Carol Everett Adams: “Rabbit Trails”



THE TEXAS DUST / *image by Amalie Flynn*

RABBIT TRAILS

in the Texas dust. We're flat in the dirt

so we can poke around down there with a long stick,
while above us bullets fly and children

hold up their honor roll certificate shields.

You say blankets are the answer,

and backpacks and better officers and armed teachers

and doors that shut like Vegas vaults to keep your money safe,
keep your money safer than my child.

I forgot what we were talking about.

New Poetry by Jehanne Dubrow: “Poem for the Reader Who Said My Poems Were Sentimental and Should Engage in a More Complex Moral Reckoning with U.S. Military Actions”; “Epic War Poem”; “Tyrian Purple,” and “Some Final Notes On Odysseus”

When the goddess cries out,
her voice is a mountain against
the fighting. But the old soldier
keeps running—war like weather
in his ears, a summer storm,
in his pulse the tossing waves.

New Poem by Sandra Newton: “Naught”



PIROUETTE OF WORDS / *image by Amalie Flynn*

NAUGHT

There is naught to be done for it:
We are over
As the ocean is over its attraction
And is now crawling
Back from the shore,
Having fucked it thoroughly.

We are done
Like steak on a grill,
Sizzling and aromatic,
Waiting to be devoured.

We are finished
As a wood floor sanded to undeniable
Smoothness and shine,
A surface of beauty concealing
The pitted underbelly of it all.

Or like promising to explain to others
What happened to us.
Over, done, finished,
Is all we need to say
Or want

While the gifted interpreter
Turns a pirouette of words
And keeps you safe
With her basket of naughts.

New Poetry by Sharon Kennedy- Nolle: "Soundings"



SOUNDINGS

Things,
your black b-ball shoes,
loose-laced, open-tongued,
curse one corner;
your books, benched, titles turned down;
your trophy array, glitterings speechify

–steering far from the sirenic
roar of your closed room–

The tulips drip,
yellows slackening,
some randomly red-lined
with a quirky genetic scrawl,
into a drinking glass
you left ...

Listen, all I can do
is endure for a word
in edgewise.

However I heave and haul,
the lines come back hooked empty.

So fuck it,
boots, shoes, shirts, books
Throw them all in
the hole in me,
landfill in
free fall
spiking off
the split bark of winter trees
down fire-escaped stories

through the uneasy laps of whitecaps,
to thud some sandy bottom
where you came to tossed rest.

Such depths, no fathoming?

New Poetry by Lisa Stice: “Our Folklore”



FIND MYSELF LOST / *image by
Amalie Flynn*

Our Folklore

Long ago, you were molten rock, and I—

well, I spoke the language of bears.

But now that I have been out of the forest for so long, all the words and grammar escape

me, and I often find myself lost. And you—well, you are often mistaken for a statue

in this solid state. No more rumblings and agitations. We are both quiet these days.

**New Nonfiction by Bettina
Rolyn: “Why Did the Chicken
Cross the Road?”**



I have come to do a writing residency at the *Museum of Loss and Renewal* in Molise, southern Italy, in a remote mountain village to escape the distractions of Berlin. Just as every writer does when they go off for a residency, in this case, with the added burden of Covid having prevented me from escaping myself for eleven months straight. I had been fighting the need to flee from myself for years, yet Covid closed my usual escape route outwards and made me turn inwards. And towards depression. It wasn't just the desire for Mediterranean sun but the name of this residency that got my attention: Loss and renewal. I am working on a memoir about my three-and-a-half-year stint in the US Army as an enlisted soldier during the early years of the American wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but it was not proceeding smoothly. For over two years, I reread my journals, wrote up notes and insights in fits and starts, fought back various pains, and despite writing fifty-thousand words, it wasn't moving forward after the bleak winter of lockdowns and isolation. I decided

to focus on one chapter during my trip to southern Italy.

I arrive at the *Museum of Loss and Renewal* on a hot afternoon in July and after getting settled in my room, the curators show me around the little town. In the morning, I awake to the sound of tractors passing in the street below, the neighbor's chickens clucking, and roosters crowing as the village comes to life.

There have been periods of my life where every day, I consider my own death. *Should I stay, or should I go now?* Suicide is on my mind a lot. I can't remember the first time I thought about killing myself, but I was surprised to discover in my "self-research" that already as an angst-ridden teenager, I had written about it in my journals.

Watching the cult classic *Harold and Maude* as a teenager, I was less interested in the age gap between the titular characters and more in Maude's status as a Holocaust survivor and Harold's fixation on death by suicide. I spent several years in high school consuming every story and image I could get my hands on about the Nazi era. Photos of dead bodies, emaciated prisoners, piles of teeth, glasses, and shoes—it all fascinated me.

The iconic movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, traditionally aired on TV every Christmas, was also part of my childhood. The pivotal scene, of course, is where James Stewart's character wants to kill himself by jumping off a bridge because of the impending financial ruin of his community bank until his guardian angel intervenes. This is what crisis looks like: suicide as a solution to our problems arises naturally in the human mind. Despite the taboo on discussing it and for its potential contagiousness, I'd like to think that I came up with the idea all on my own sometime around the age of nine or ten when I began contemplating my existence. You cannot contemplate life without death; being without non-being.

The curators of the residency have a well-stocked library and leave the novel *The Original of Laura (Dying is Fun)* by Vladimir Nabokov out on the table, somehow reading my mind. The book of notes for a work-in-progress was posthumously published by the author's son Dmitri, who wrote the introduction. Nabokov—who likes the em-dash as much as I do—always held a curious fascination. He also spent fifteen years writing in Berlin and lived a life of displacement; the loss of his homeland and the themes of sex and death echo in his work. In this story, the main character is an obese cuckold scholar who resorts to the pleasurable erasure of himself, a process that occurs in his imagination but fictionally appears real. *“The process of dying by auto dissolution afforded the greatest ecstasy known to man.”* By the end of the book, he claims, *“By now I have died up to my naval some fifty times in less than three years and my fifty resurrections have shown that no damage is done to the organs involved when breaking in time out of the trance.”*

I have suffered uncountable imaginary deaths. Sometimes by my own hand, other times in perfectly acceptable, nay, even understandable ways. Cancer is a top contender—even as loved ones die for real around me from the disease. There isn't a pain, bump, ache, odor, or other bodily irregularity or phenomenon that I don't suspect of being cancer at some point.

Although my ten-year-old self wasn't familiar with French philosophy, later, when I read that Albert Camus says in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, that the most fundamental question of philosophy is whether to commit suicide, I thought, “Well, duh.” Camus concludes that the most urgent of questions is the meaning of life because whatever higher purpose we ascribe to our lives will determine whether we will live (not kill ourselves) or even die willingly (in war) for that meaning.

In college, I took a seminar called "Theories of the Good Life," where we read, among other texts, Victor Frankl's famous book about finding meaning in life. He wrote it after surviving the Nazi death camps. He was already working on suicide prevention amongst students in Vienna before he was sent to Auschwitz, where his new wife and family were murdered. Later, he developed "logotherapy" and "existential analysis" wherein he identified three main ways of finding meaning in life: making a difference in the world, having particular experiences, or adopting particular attitudes. A helpful attitude may be, "The universe is fundamentally good." Or, "Every human being brings something unique to the world." I was down with that.

In the military, which I'd joined at the age of twenty-five seeking to "make a difference," I hoped to deploy and was prepared to die honorably, heroically even. I fantasized about stepping on a landmine in Afghanistan. I would welcome either death or to at least be rid of my right leg, which had been giving me so much pain during my enlistment. But because of the leg and back troubles, I instead was medically discharged.

With each episode of depression and crisis—when my suicidal ideation usually appears—I'm surprised at what challenges tear apart my ability to withstand the strain of existing in this human body, one that comes with so many pains and issues. One common denominator is that I have a tunnel vision of self-absorption and a warped sense of my place in the world. A combination of "I don't matter" and, "I am the center of this universe of pain." The first such experience as an adult happened while I was in the pressure-cooker of army basic training. I had been under the special "tutelage" of a female drill sergeant who informed me that I was a piece-of-shit soldier one too many times. I snapped and believed her. I wanted to die. I considered how best to do so, and settled on our rifle marksmanship training, when we were given live

ammunition. But I also wanted to take her out with me. There was even a moment when she crouched behind me on the firing line, ostensibly to help me make it through the test with a malfunctioning rifle and I could have turned around and shot her. I did not. Perhaps it was that spark of anger at her and the army for putting us both in this situation that got me through the ordeal with no-one the wiser about what had transpired in my head. By now, I have envisioned my own death in a million ways. Preferably an accident, but that's a fine line to walk. I used a lot of energy imagining my demise, and here Nabokov's description of Philip's exercise in *Laura* is apt: "*Learning to use the vigor of the body for the purpose of its own deletion, standing vitality on its head.*"

According to the various spiritual and religious beliefs toward suicide, it is considered either a sin, self-defeating, or ineffective. In the view of the world and afterlife that I was raised with, I knew suicide was frowned upon. It does not solve a problem; instead, it takes away the ability to solve it, ridding our souls of our body—which we need to live out this incarnation on earth. Later I learned the line, "Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem."

In much of the literature I have read about near-death experiences, when people return to earth and report on what they learned in their "preview" of the afterlife, the stories are similar. They say that souls who die by suicide are often tortured while stuck in between heaven and earth in a sort of purgatory. They are unable to comfort those left behind nor move on to higher spiritual realms—for how long differs based on theology. Now, that's a bummer. This belief that our souls are eternal (and reincarnate) and the attitude that there's no quick fix to end it all kept me alive for a long time, but it did not prevent me from turning to such thoughts when in crisis. I have come to view the siren call of release from earthly chains now more as an indicator of how bad my

situation has become. It's time to make necessary adjustments—even major ones that make other people unhappy, and also cause me to lose face. I must cancel plans, disenroll from school, seek help from professionals.

In 2012, I volunteered on a crisis and suicide hotline. I was contemplating a career change from linguist in the defense industry to therapist in the helping professions and wanted to get a taste for the job. Before being let loose on the lines, we trained in the Carl Rogers method of unconditional positive regard and learned that the fundamental goal of the hotline was to preserve life. One policy was that as hotline listeners—that's what we were called—we would not accompany people while they killed themselves. We were trained to intervene, by—in the most extreme cases—calling 9/11 and sending the authorities to the caller's house while we had them on the phone. This only happened once or twice during my tenure.

Figuring out how to answer people's concerns and know what to say was anxiety-inducing. I sweated through one hundred logged hours of answering the phones in a dank hospital basement in suburban Virginia, though the amount of time I spent on actual calls was probably only one-third of that. Those thirty hours were enlightening. Hunched over in a booth, organs on high alert as I strained to hear my way into the pain of another soul, I learned how a suicidal crisis goes in waves or cycles. The trick is to remove the means to implement the urge and ride out the wave to safety.

During my hotline training, I also learned that in the US, more people kill themselves with guns than die in car accidents or homicides and I changed my views entirely on the second amendment. I learned compassion but also just how frustrating people who are in need can be. I was having a good year in many ways and ended by making a major decision to go

to Europe to theological seminary and not study counseling. But a year or two later, amid a toxic relationship-induced crisis, I learned that it's difficult to do the trick of de-escalating on oneself, or rather, only possible to a point.

In late 2016, after deciding to take a year break from pursuing ordination into the priesthood after three years of seminary, I was searching for something to do for a year and processing a breakup. I decided to finally visit Spain for a week and check that off my bucket list, and on the descent into Madrid, we hit turbulence. It was the worst I'd experienced in all my years of flying. As the plane shook back and forth, up and down, and people cried out—I was perfectly calm and ready to die. I have done everything I came here to do, I thought as my stomach jumped up to my throat. I have traveled the world and followed my major impulses (to serve in the military and go to seminary). If this plane crashes, I won't have any regrets. And it was true, but it was also because I had ended a life chapter but wasn't yet 'out of the woods' to even see that I had been in a wood, much less a dark one. It took another year of wandering and contemplating the truth that although I had religion, as the expression goes, the more theology I got, the less I wanted to be a priest. A year of suicidal depression followed, and I realized I wouldn't go back to be ordained anytime soon.

In his esoteric lessons held in Berlin in February, 1913, the Austrian philosopher and mystic Rudolf Steiner said that God is real and active where we see the destructive powers of nature; in autumn storms, in all shattering and disintegrating of things. I sat and watched the seasons pass outside my window and existed, being crushed by the manifestation of the divine. Slowly, once I let go of the idea of needing to do something meaningful in a foreordained, meditative, and godly way, moments of happiness returned.

When describing the difference between the “normal” everyday life versus the “esoteric” and supersensible one that can be accessed through meditation, Steiner issues a warning: “Exoteric life takes place in the world of cognition. We know something because we confront an object, look at it and make mental images of it. This changes the moment we meditate.” In advising the seeker of spiritual wisdom through meditation, Steiner cautions that “We shouldn’t immediately make ideas about what approaches us in this world [of supersensible reality]. We should just open ourselves, listen and feel what wants to stream into our soul.” In my case, however, I am not a very regular practitioner of meditation except for three years of attempting to know ‘higher worlds’ in seminary training. I already sense my mind’s existence astride the boundary of the exoteric and esoteric, between mental cognition and psychic reality. One in which often-unwilled thoughts of my own death are what stream into my soul, taking up an inordinate amount of “space.” When I opened the door further to this supersensible world, disorientation, depression, and death awaited. One evening last year, my ear began to hurt, and I thought immediately, “Oh, it must be some terrible disease and I will soon die.” I see signs in hypochondria. I read into my symptoms the hope that the journey is almost over. The plane is about to crash.

Steiner continues: “We must preserve absolute equanimity with respect to spiritual experiences, just as we should remain calm in everyday life with respect to all events, ideas, etc. so that we don’t get excited or upset.” Great tip, Rudolf. When not describing the intangible world, Steiner does offer some practical advice for how to practice such equanimity, and it involves disciplining our soul’s capacities for thinking, feeling, and willing. This much I have learned is true—there are ways to mitigate the inner emotional turbulence; but I have also learned to sense when I am in danger of being dragged down by an external situation, one that inevitably involves other humans. Why did the frog cross the road? ...

Because it was stapled to the chicken.

Sitting in my room in the village overlooking the Mainarde Mountains of Molise, I look down at my swollen fingers, the instrument of my intended work and they look foreign to me. No, not quite, they resemble my mother's leathery hands which are slightly swollen from arthritis and seventy-five years of work, but mine are now also covered in an angry rash of hives. The left hand has red bumps full of liquid bubbling up from my swollen flesh like poison ivy burns. Slowly bursting from the pressure after a few days, my body's juices ooze out of my finger like maples being tapped for their syrup. The itching on my hands and legs is maddening, coming in waves, triggered by even a slight mountain breeze upon my skin. Even many weeks later, the itching returns like the echoes of a bad dream. The first day I arrived at the residency, I must have encountered the cause of this reaction, but I have no recollection of what it might have been.

I have been in this situation before. In 2013, once I abandoned my career in the US defense industry and decided to attend seminary in southern Germany. First, I stopped by the eastern Mediterranean following an invitation to visit some pastors from my church who were holding an inter-religious peace camp in the hills of Galilee. After one night sleeping underneath the pine trees with the youngsters, I awoke with what I thought were mosquito bites all over my hands, feet, and face. When they quickly turned into these oozing, itching sores, I saw the Kibbutz doctor who told me about the pine processionary moth. I was the only afflicted party in our group. This miraculous creature of the genus "Thaumetopoea," species "pityocampa" has microscopic urticating hairs in its caterpillar stage, which cause harmful reactions in humans and other mammals. The internet tells me that "The species is notable for the behavior of its caterpillars, which overwinter in tent-like nests high in pine trees, and which proceed

through the woods in nose-to-tail columns, protected by their severely irritating hairs.”

Although the name pityocampa comes from “pine and larva,” the word pity seems most appropriate to me now. Pity-evoking is the only word for a skin rash. It’s hard to hide and catches the eye. You can’t help but be moved by either disgust or pity, in the best case. I am so full of self-pity it is literally oozing out of me. Did the pity come from feeling unattractive due to these angry hives swelling my limbs, or was it always there and just now coming to expression?

There are certainly many things that I am angry about but do not say. There are truths I want to shout out to the world that are unsightly and unpleasant about what I have done and experienced in my life. I am trying to write them in the form of a memoir, but I’m blocked. In the meantime, my skin will reveal it as literal and metaphoric markers and warnings. These are expressions of my attitude towards the world I’ve encountered.

One morning on the mountain, I read the introduction to *The Original of Laura*. In it, Dimitri describes how his father’s downward spiral to death started with falling in the Swiss mountains while pursuing his hobby of lepidoptery, the study of butterflies. In the cooling late afternoon of that same day, I found myself walking up the hill to the last house in the village on the left, where I had intended to visit Clara, an elderly woman recently widowed earlier in the year. She said to stop by anytime and meant it, but once I finally got myself up the single road, past the village’s old houses, to ring at her door, she wasn’t home. Later she told me she was picking out her husband’s gravestone. I followed the road upwards on its rough-hewn sun-bleached cobblestones, which ran parallel to one of the many stone walls that crisscrossed the mountainside.

During World War II, the Americans came through here on their way north from Sicily, having beaten back the fascists in bloody battles throughout southern Italy. They fought the Germans here in the Gustave Line, which practically runs right through the village, in the winter of 1943/44. They even built a road still named after "the Americans" to access the remote mountains of Molise in the slimmest part of Italy's boot. The curators tell me about a Scotsman who fought against the Germans in southern Italy but upon returning home met an Italian from this village, and so returned to Italy for good. He stayed on the hill for the rest of his ninety-two years. That's one way to deal with the aftermath of war.

Along the white stony path, I found myself chasing butterflies to capture them with my iPhone camera, far from civilization, and contemplating the purchase of a house in this village that I had just left. There are many empty houses in the towns of the region. Many of the children of families who'd lived here for generations having long since moved to the big cities of Europe, though some continue to return to build more energy efficient houses or move to lower altitudes, where the winters are milder. The house I looked at came with a plot of land, upon which fig trees already grew. The idea of having an orchard and chickens providing fresh eggs daily and growing my own food in the garden captured my imagination.

If I wandered off the path here, I had been warned there might be shells, unexploded ordinance, and other nasty surprises like scorpions and wild boars awaiting me. I had seen the boars already, hurtling through the underbrush uprooting everything in their path—hard to miss—but also the seemingly invisible moths and caterpillars which caused me grief. As I wrote and searched through my journals—trying to put them in some meaningful order in my memoir—plumbing the depths of my memory, I found undiscovered ordinances of thoughts and feelings, a seemingly endless supply of trauma and suicidal ideations that I had confided to my journals but otherwise

hidden from those around me, and even myself for so many years. I had been mentally living a life on the edge for decades, where thoughts of suicide would lie waiting behind every bush, stone, boulder, or obstacle in my path. Whenever I was challenged and felt like I had no more choices out of a bad situation, I had thoughts of ending it all. And now I was stumbling upon them in my journals and wondering how I'd even made it this far without hurling myself off some cliff.

The rugged beauty of this landscape appeals to me because it is not just pretty, or quaint, or touristy, but real. Molise is beautiful in its wildness. It wasn't always quite so wild. It has been worked, yet it is a work in progress as the re-wilding of this region takes over. My hosts explained how over the past fifty years, nature has been slowly reclaiming these hills and hiding the many stone walls and paths that had been cleared over generations for small plots of land to be cultivated. In the photos of the area at the WinterLine War Museum in the nearby town of Venafro, the landscape looks vastly different. There is history here, but there is still potential amongst the rocky terrain and partly deserted villages. People like me are coming here in search of something quieter and safer, like the curators of the Museum who created such a residency for artistic reflection. Some things look better with the passage of time; others just appear different.

I imagine a life where I live in the house that I saw for sale in the village. I have chickens in the yard and a garden, and I harvest figs. If I had chickens—whose lives I would worry about preserving—and a plot of land to care for would the incessant thoughts of my own mortality fade? Keeping busy certainly is one way of keeping the hounds of existential angst fed and quieted for a while.

I wrote a children's story about chickens once. I wrote it

mostly in my head and like Nabokov, whose characters in *Laura* never get fully fleshed out, my chickens never saw the light of day on a page. They were inspired by real ones my sister kept in Pittsburgh for a few years. Her young children loved to chase them around the small backyard. Every night the hens went into their plastic coop, but one night, as my sister later relayed, several of them managed to flee into the uppermost branches of a tree in their yard. She had to chase them around in the dark for what seemed like an eternity, so intent they were upon staying in danger.

In my story, these imaginary hens escape their coop and have an adventure in the big city. The story began thus: Miffy, Laurel, and Hilary lived in the small backyard of a big house in a big city. Their coop was opened every day, and they had free range in the yard to search for tasty bugs and juicy caterpillars. They often flew up and roosted on the boughs of the big pine tree next to the house—especially when they got tired of being chased and hugged by their small human friends. From the tree branch, they could see into the big house. From high up, they could see over the fence into the neighbor's yard. They could also hear the shouts, whoops, cries, laughs, and bits of conversations about life out there in the big city. One day, Miffy—she was always the one starting such debates—said to Laurel and Hilary: “What do you suppose it's like out in the big city?” And so off they went, out into the wilds of urban America, encountering curious raccoons, venomous vipers, pensive pigeons, and friendly foxes who share with them how to stay alive in the big, scary, cityscape. Eventually, they return home, safe and sound.

Is it too obvious to say this story is an allegory? That I long to return to the heavenly coop is a simplification. I am not a mere chicken. I yearn for a sense of meaning in my life. Having pursued it in various external titles, roles, and institutions for years, I am on my own now.

There are many ways to deal with suicidal thoughts; the stigma attached to seeking help for mental health issues is thankfully disappearing. I also know from other friends and acquaintances, not just myself or suicidal exes, that while so many of us remain depressed, we are not alone in our suffering. We often need other humans to assist us with getting through the worst of the wave of crisis. Other times, we are being called to connect with our purpose. The Quaker theologian Parker Palmer writes about his depression in *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*—the title itself giving away the key to healing—and connects our ability to hear and thus speak the truth of our selves with maintaining our mental health.

My dad used to tell jokes around the dinner table. Here's one I remember: A man goes to a psychiatrist and explains that he thinks he is chicken feed. They work together for months until finally, the man comes to understand that he is not chicken feed. Just as he's saying goodbye, he says, "Wait, Doc, I have one last question. I know that I'm not chicken feed. You know that I'm not chicken feed, but what about the chickens?"

When do we label ourselves something like "suicidal"? Once you tell someone that you've had thoughts of suicide, they never look at you the same way again. After my formative experience in the military where I was constantly overworked, muscle fatigued, sleep-deprived, harassed, and pushed over the threshold into suicidal ideation (all without deploying!), I learned to be wary of having everything taken from me or "giving my all." It still happens that things become too much, but I remain protective of my internal and external resources, most importantly my soul resources. I try to avoid situations where I might be stuck in a situation that I do not desire; I always have an escape route. My life depends upon it.

Rudolf Steiner also said, in the same lecture given in Berlin almost 100 years ago, quite helpfully that the Gods protect those unprepared for what lies on the other side of the

threshold of the visible world by giving us pleasure and enjoyment in creative activity in the physical world. So here I stay, on the haptic side of the line of consciousness and immateriality: writing, eating, and when possible, making merry. Besides writing out the truths of my life and turning hives into literary hay, I've learned to let the imaginary chickens save my life. Creatively sending the hens out on adventures or calling them home to roost again. Just getting to the other side can be enough. This is an attitude that Victor Frankl would endorse.

**New Poetry from Tanya Tuzeo:
“My Brother, the Marine;” “My
Brother’s Shoebox;” and “My
Brother’s Grenade”**



WAR HAS DONE / *image by Amalie Flynn*

my brother, the Marine

the recruiters come weeks earlier than agreed—
arrive in alloy, aluminum with authority,
military vehicle blocks our driveway
announcing to the neighborhood
they've come for a boy here
who will have to go—
though he sits at the top step
and cries

i follow them,
strange convoy to Staten Island's hotel
where all the boys are corralled—
farmed for war, becoming weapons
of mass destruction

when before they picked apples
at family trips upstate

a hotel lobby—last stop before using lasers
to blow off golden domes,
silence muezzins in the crush
of ancient wage and plaster—
Hussein's old siberian tiger left thirsty,
watches other zoo animals
being eaten by the faithful—
just like a video game

i clamp onto my brother
beg him not to go, we could run away
he didn't have to do this—
recruiters quickly camouflage me,
am dragged outside—my brother lost
did not say goodbye
or even look at me.

my brother's shoebox

the room across the hall is inhabited again,
home now from another tour
like sightseeing from a grand canal
where buildings are art
and storied sculptures animate street corners—
my brother returns a veteran.

i want to remember who this person is,
or at least, find out what war has done.

he leaves with friends to drink—
that is still the same,
later tonight
he might howl at our parent's window
or jump on my bed until the sheets froth,

uncaring and rabid.

but i don't wait for him to come home
and begin searching the room
that is his again.

it is simple to find
where people hide things—
a shoebox under his bed
that wasn't there all these years
furrowed by sand
and almost glowing.

i open to find drugstore prints,
rolls of film casually dropped
for a high school student to develop—
silver halide crystals take the shape
of shattered skulls
goats strung and slit
a school made of clay
blasted in the kiln of munitions
"KILL ZONE" painted across its foundation—
each 4×6 emulsion a souvenir
of these mad travels,
kept to reminisce and admire.

my brother's grenade

my brother's room in our family vacation home
has embossed wallpaper, indigo or violet
depending on the light that filters through the mountains—
and his grenade in the closet.

i saw it looking for extra blankets,
thought it was an animal resting in eiderdown
kept by my mother in one of her tempers
but it didn't move

and so
i picked it up.

inhumanity held beneath iron's screaming core—
a pleasant weight,
like the egg i threw across the street
detonating onto the head of boy
who said i kissed him but i didn't,
is it like that for my brother?—
fisted mementos of thrill?

seasoned by cedar sachets,
neatly quilted metal shimmered as i turned it
forbidden gem, his holy relic—
i placed it back in the closet and began making dinner,
said nothing.

the slender pin preserves this household
where our family gathers
unknowing a bomb is kept here—
my brother roasts a marshmallow
until it catches fire, turns black,
plunges into mouth.

New Poetry from D.A. Gray: “Our Backyard Apocalypse”

We set small bowls of sugar water
on the garden's edge. Bees were scarce
since the freeze which had almost finished
what the pesticides had started. Still,
some survived.

New Fiction from John P. Palmer: “Lasting Impacts”

Johnny felt the oak floor tilt sharply below him. He had no idea what was happening or why, and he was frightened.

The tilt was steep, so steep that he felt himself sliding, then falling. He wanted to cry, but he was so terrified that he couldn't make a sound. Suddenly he fell right off the floor and landed on the next oak floor right below the one he was falling from.

As he was landing on it, that floor tilted in the opposite direction, and he began sliding again, uncontrollably in that direction.

He fell again, to another floor, and that floor tilted back. His fear intensified. Finally he was able to cry out, but the see-saw tilting and sliding wouldn't stop! Worse, the room began to spin, and Johnny was totally disoriented. The falling and sliding and spinning sensations were new to him; he wasn't hurt, but he was more terrified than he had ever been. He couldn't stop crying.



As he slid downward from level to level across the tilting, sloping floors, Johnny looked up and saw his father laughing, and that frightened him even more. This man was his father; he wasn't supposed to be a man who made floors tilt and who made Johnny fall from one tilted floor to another. But there he was: Johnny was falling from sloped floor to sloped floor, and his dad was laughing while Johnny was crying.

*

The memory of this trauma haunted Johnny for years. When he was a toddler, he woke up after having nightmares that his crib was tilting and he was sliding back and forth on it.

When he was six years old, Johnny woke up at 4AM from a completely different nightmare. In this one, his dad was grinning at him. That was all – it was just a grin, but in his dream Johnny saw it as menacing, and he couldn't get back to sleep. It rekindled the old nightmares from his infancy.

When his mother woke up, she saw his bedroom light on. "Johnny," she asked, "Why do you have your bedroom light on, and what are you doing up so early? What happened?"

Johnny knew his mom loved his dad, and so he didn't feel free to say anything. He knew she would pooh-pooh the nightmare. After some hesitation, he mumbled, "I had a nightmare."

"What happened?" she asked again.

Johnny wouldn't tell her.

*

Johnny's dad died at the age of 43; John was only 15.

John missed his dad, but not a whole lot. They had never been close. His dad was a respected man in the community, and he did many of the usual fatherly things with John, but there was always a barrier between them. John had always been a little

afraid of him. John didn't think about the nightmares of his infancy or childhood very often, if at all, but they had affected him.

One day shortly after John turned thirty, he spent an entire day closeted in his office at work. He didn't answer knocks on the door, he wouldn't answer the telephone, and he didn't go to lunch with his co-workers. He just sat at his desk all day, talking with his dad, trying to imagine a day-long visit and conversation. It wasn't until then that he realized his dad had grown up the middle boy in his own family, not particularly well-loved and maybe even half-rejected by the rest of his family. Only then did he begin to understand that his dad was shy about showing emotions and had never learned how to give or show love to his son. And John realized, finally, that his dad had loved him deeply but didn't know how to do it. He felt at peace with his dad.

At least he thought he did.

Many years later, his older sister and he were talking among some friends when she mentioned that alcohol had been banned from their house as they were growing up. She and John laughed about the religious conservatives in their neighborhood, but his sister added, "No, there was another reason. Dad had some men over one night and they all got drunk. Mother threatened to leave him and said he was never allowed to have alcohol in the house again."

That night John understood. And felt sad. And missed his dad... again.

He understood that during that drunken party, his dad had been tossing him in the air and laughing with his drunken friends. John's nightmare of sliding on tilting, sloping floors wasn't a nightmare at all; it had been real. Up and down, up and down, and around and around. The world really had been spinning and falling away from him.

John tried to talk to his dad again that night. He tried to forgive his dad, "I know it wasn't malicious, Dad. I know."

And he wept silently.

New Poetry by Scott Hughes: "Still"



THE FAULT LINES / *image by Amalie Flynn*

STILL

I never thought of you
as a hopeless romantic; this was news to me.
Are you still meditating? Meditate
on this:

You can take the Mulholland Highway across
the ridges of two counties
and stay high a long time.

We parked there once in your subcompact
in love and unconfined.

From the afternoon shade of a scrub oak
I remember the ridge route home,
the silhouettes of Point Dume and your profile
in the afterglow.

Since then I have been a jack of all trades
and a master of nothing:

unremarkable, unsubstantial, undignified;
unresolved, unremembered, unconceivable;
unqualified, unpublished, unreadable.

I looked for you in the county beach campgrounds
where you went with surfers from your high school.

I looked for you in all the places I heard you were in love.

I looked for you where rumors sent me.

I looked for you in the hills of Northridge
where we walked around the fault lines.

I looked for you among the barstools
from Venice to Ventura.

I looked for you in old Beach Boys songs.

I looked for you in stacks of photographs.

I looked for you in the bottom of a glass.

I looked for you stranded after a concert.

I looked for you at the Spahn Ranch.

I looked for you in the bittersweet words in books.

I looked for you in unsold manuscripts.

I looked for you in the margins of old college notes.

I looked for you in every woman who looked at me.

I looked for you in dharma talks.
I looked for you in shrines.
I looked for you in my next life.

I don't think my karma is right.

Forty years on the hard roads of two counties
and I am
still.

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



FALLS ON NIGHT / *image by Amalie Flynn*

EACH NIGHT MY MOTHER DIES AGAIN

Each night the phone rings—

Your mother has passed.

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

Each night she is the mother who makes waffles,

batter bubbling from the sides of the iron, the mother

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

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

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

Each night she refills Dr. Zucker's prescriptions

for diet pills and valium. Each night she waters her

rosebushes

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

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

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

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

New Poetry by Stephen Massimilla: “Wounded”



CAPILLARIES OF ROOTS / image by Amalie Flynn

WOUNDED

-to Laura

Bleating thing without wool

Thunder without sound

Ghost of wooded peaks, of constricted arterial waters

There is a dog inside the heart, voice bursting

Interminable silence, blown-open iris

Over organs buried deeper in the earth

where capillaries of roots still bleed orange dust

Leave me be, hot tongue of fireflies,

cracked pharynx of ice

Do not ask me to slip

down among green nerves of water-weed

where the flesh of the sky

is unmoving and fruitless

The moon still hovers in its surgeon's coat

But do not try to satisfy the dead

who hold on with claws like desperate fevers

Leave my sutured skull of empty ivory forever

But pity me; put an end to this much hurt

I am love, I tell you

and all the quick wings accumulating

as restlessly as the breaths

that were once inside

these wheel-crushed, wind-scattered leaves

New Poetry from Gail Nielsen: “Something Like Nightfall”



BLACK LACE TREES / *image by Amalie Flynn*

SOMETHING LIKE NIGHTFALL

something, like night falls
slow, as if
nothing in the world has ever moved
but distant hope descending, still ablaze
days soften to wonder

what else leaves
silhouettes these black lace trees
fades from me

it is you from my life
steadily, quietly
as celestial movement

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



THAT PARTICULAR REGION / *image by*
Amalie Flynn

REHAB DAY 1

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

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

thinking him sober,

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

and *I* was sober—

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

while he drank water with our chicken piccata?

My first thought after drop-off was rebellion

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

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

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

Then I felt a kind of shame

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

to unleash my desire for want

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

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

REHAB DAY 4

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

and my dad says with unintended harshness that he takes back

as soon as the truth hits the mouth of his phone: *You don't have to tell me that*

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

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

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

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

between funeral and stay-at-home, he was well-booked—every day

somebody stopped by with a crumb cake. Baked goods multiplied

on his countertop: cookies mutated into blondies into muffins into baskets

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

hard to materialize in the livingness of abundance and
relative youth

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

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

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

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

twenty-four days from right now.

REHAB DAY 9

of course the doctor finds a cyst

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

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

REHAB DAY 11

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

REHAB DAY 19

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

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

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

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

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

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

breast vines weighted
by clusters of rotting berries, overripe

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

and roadways toward demise
and this marble eye from god

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

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

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

New Poetry by Carol Graser: "Parkinson's Triolet" and "Summer Isolation"



THE WIDENING FAULT / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Parkinson's Triolet

I cup the base of your skull, catch
precious cells spilling out like salt
that seasons your limbs, your unholy lurches
I cup the drumbeat of us, mis catch

the rhythm, drop plates with a crash
You feed pills into the widening fault
My palm on the back of your head catches
our precarious marriage, heavy with salt

Summer Isolation

I paint the porch with strokes of blue
diamond. By sunset, it's a veranda
of green and you have fallen asleep
at the shore of a lake that glaciers through
your dreams. You wake with stones in your
teeth and ice melting under your skin
You arrive home with feet delighted
by the verdancy at our entrance. We
dig holes in the ground, nests for roots
the width of thread. You shake ancient
drops of water off your bones. When
a ruby-throated hummingbird
zips past
we see it

New Nonfiction from Jon Imparato: "You Had Me at Afghanistan"

"I was lying in a burned-out basement with the full moon in my eyes. I was hoping for replacement when the sun burst through the sky. There was a band playing in my head and I felt like

getting high. I was thinking about what a friend had said. I was hoping it was a lie. Thinking about what a friend had said, I was hoping it was a lie.” –Neil Young

k.d. lang’s voice carries the Neil Young lyrics on a mellifluous ride; notes keep swirling up as I crash to the ground. I’m clutching a wet dishcloth as if it were a rope, thinking about what a friend had said, and I was hoping it was a lie. I’m staring at the fringe tangled on my terracotta-colored sarong and my beaded anklet. I grab the heavy sweater I am wearing over my tank top to cover my face as I sob. My skin is the darkest it has ever been from traveling in five Asian countries during their summer. Being thrust into cold, rainy weather frightens me. I want to be back in oppressive heat. I am thinking about what a friend had said, I was hoping it was a lie. I have heard those lyrics my whole adult life, but now it means something entirely different. It means the unspeakable.

*

I am a radical on sabbatical. I have been working as the Artistic Director of the Lily Tomlin/Jane Wagner Cultural Arts Center for ten years. When I asked my boss for sabbatical, I was shocked when he said yes. I’m taking three months off from my job. I started out in Thailand, then Cambodia, Laos, Hanoi. (Or, as I like to call it, HanNoise. It is a city without a moment of silence, a never-ending cacophony of traffic, people, and blaring intrusions of sound.) My final destination is Bali. I have learned on this trip that most of the travel agents have never left the town or village they live in. But for some reason I think I can trust this father-daughter team. The daughter insists I call her Baby, and she calls me Mr. Delicious.

When I arrived in Bali, one of the first things I was told was that my name, Jon, meant “delicious” in Balinese. I had just come from Cambodia, where I gave a piece of my heart to a man

whose long name I had a hard time pronouncing. At one point he was joking and said, "Just call me Delicious and I'll call you Mr. Delicious because that is what we are to each other...delicious." We had a brief four-day affair, a travel affair; they are so transitory and carefree, no one expects anything except the momentary pleasures.

A young girl at the travel agency loves that my name means delicious, and she thinks this is hilarious. When I tell her it also means toilet in English, I then become Delicious Toilet.

"I think you like me, Mr. Delicious, I think you do." "I like you fine, Baby; I will like you even more if you can get me onto a remote island." Baby keeps flirting with me and asking me if I like her. She is oblivious to the fact that I am gay, and her flirting seems just to be on autopilot. Her flirting is learned; nothing about it is organic. Baby's father is watching his daughter flirt. He is in on the game; all he wants is for Baby to make the sale. We are all in on the game; everyone is trying to get what they want. Nonetheless I find myself charmed by Baby. All I want is a quiet island where I can write and stare at water while I do a slow brain drain. Both Baby and her father have assured me that I will be on a quiet, peaceful island, with a bungalow on the ocean.

I want to be face-to-face with the ocean. I want a wave confrontation. I take an hour boat ride and arrive on an island across from Lombok, Gili Trankang, right next to Bali. This is an island with seven hundred people, no cars, no motorbikes, and no police. This is not a lush resort but a Rasta party island. Visitors are met at the dock by tuk-tuk carriages pulled by very sad horses. There is poverty here, you just can't escape it. The power goes out several times a day, hot water is never guaranteed, and most bungalows have saltwater showers, very strange to the skin. Imagine someone has spilled a margarita on you and rinsed you off. My bungalow is attached to an open café with a bar painted a bright red-

orange, sunshine yellow, and a deep green. The stage faces the most beautiful turquoise, sea-green ocean. Yet trash is piled up on sandbanks. You must turn your head toward the beauty, and there is plenty of it.



I am hanging out, having lunch with the reggae band and staff. They are quick to tell me that I will do very well on this island because it is filled with beautiful women. I nonchalantly say that I am gay and hope there are also lots of beautiful men. Suddenly I can feel the chill, as if a hurricane's gust of wind suddenly changed direction. Some of them are cool, but many of them are not. I quickly learn that most of the people on the island are Muslim. I have been in the accepting bliss of Buddhists and Hindus, so for the first time I need to keep a low profile about being gay. In all these travels, this is the first time that I have encountered

any homophobia. The Rasta world is full of wonderful male affection—everyone calls you his brother, yet there is a homophobic and sexist element to the Rasta world that can't be ignored. It is ever-present and inescapable.

Of course, it takes hours for my room to be ready. Ganja is king here; everyone is stoned and moves at a snail's pace from the herb and the heat. They have two speeds: slow and stop. I get in the water, and I have arrived! This is the ocean I have longed for: crystal clear, warm in a way that requires no adjusting to the temperature, the color is spectacular, and it feels like flower petals on my skin. I have arrived...yet I am not happy. I miss my New York friend Roberta something awful. She longs for water like this too.

We have always shared the ocean in a deep way; when we met, we found as many ways as we could to spend time at the ocean, and I want her here with me. I want to be stupid and silly with her, laugh and splash. The ocean floor is filled with mounds of pure white coral; you can scoop it up with your hands and have little pieces of coral rain down on you. Roberta would freak. The absence of my friend is stinging. I scoop up empty water and pour it over my head as I cry, my sobbing face plunged into the ocean and staring at the coral floor. I remember that I always take a while to get my footing on my first day in a new country. I'm thrilled to get an email from a friend I met in Cambodia, named Mags. Mags is seventy-two. She has short-cropped, maroon-purplish hair. Her hair spikes up like an eighties rock star. She wears long, flowing dresses with wild prints and tons of large jewelry from her travels. She is from Queensland, Australia. She moved to Phnom Penh, in Cambodia. Mags checked into the gay hotel where I was staying. She convinced the hotel owner to let her live there. The only woman in a gay hotel where she holds court. We exchange our lives over scotch by the pool, and instantly we feel great love for each other. Everyone calls her Mum. Her daughter, Morag, will be arriving in three days. I can't wait

for them to arrive on this magical island. This lifts my spirits and just knowing I will soon have some friends on the island is a comfort.

*

I am at a place called Sama Sama. It means "same-same" but also signifies that we are all just a little bit different, but everyone is the same and welcomed. The Rasta band is really good, and there is a huge dancing-drinking-smoking scene going on. They play mostly Bob Marley covers. They tell me it is the happiest music on earth. Yet I am in my room, I am not happy. I am trying to read or do some writing, but the sound of the band is deafening. I'm mad at the happiest music, mad at Baby and her dad for sending me here, mad at feeling like an outcast, mad at the world. I finally give in and say to myself, "Get out of this bungalow and just embrace this bizarre scene."

I'd made friends with one of the bartenders, named Zen, that afternoon and he seemed cool. I sit down at the bar and drink my scotch with all this Rasta joy bouncing and swirling around me. I am certain I am the only gay man on the island and feel like I don't belong, like an island unto myself.

Suddenly, one of the most beautiful men I have ever laid my eyes on sits next to me. He is straight, no question about it. He is trying to get the bartender's attention. I shout, "Hey, Zen, can you get my buddy a drink?"

The beautiful man says, "Thanks for the hook-up." I learn he is from Canada. The best people I have met on my journey who aren't native are Canadians. They are open and sturdy. I will refer to my friend as Huck for reasons I will explain later. We start talking and within a few minutes the conversation is off and running. Our ideas, opinions, and insights are crashing in on us like the waves a few feet away. This guy is smart, insightful, and profound, and we are in deep,

exchanging who we are with each other. We talk politics for a good part of the conversation: He can't stand Bush; Sarah Palin is an unquestionable joke—his views are so liberal. I tell him I often feel like I am what is left of the left, an old Lily Tomlin joke. He laughs and says he feels my pain. About an hour into the conversation, he hits a curveball in my direction that almost knocks me off my seat. He tells me he is a soldier on leave from Afghanistan, and he goes back to war in a few days.

Traveling around Southeast Asia, you can talk to people for the longest time and, unlike in America, they don't ask you what you do. Your work doesn't define you. I would never have thought this beautiful, sensitive man was a soldier. That information seems so incongruous to the man I am talking to. I am so thrown and confused by this news. I turn and say, "Okay, let's break this sucker down." Like an archaeologist, I keep digging. Who is this guy?

Our conversation goes deep and wide, fast, and furious. It moves with speed and intention but always with grace. We close the bar; he is now even more fascinating to me. It is 4:00 a.m. and I assume I am off to bed. Huck turns to me and says, "Here is how I see it. We are not done with this conversation, and I am not done with you. Let's go get some weed and smoke a joint on the beach and talk until sunup." I tell him I am so there.

As we walk on the dark dirt road, following the sad horses' hoofprints, Huck says, "Where do you think we can score some weed?"

I point to an old man in his eighties with a Marley Rules T-shirt selling bottles of scotch, cigarettes, and Pringles. "I guarantee you he is our best bet."

Huck turns and says, "Come on, little buddy."

"Huck, I feel like Gilligan on *Gilligan's Island*. Why are you

calling me that?"

"Oh, it's too late, that's who you are. I like calling you that."

Scoring takes all of five minutes. Huck returns with this sneaky smile on his face. "I not only got you enough weed for the week that you're on this island, but I also got you papers and a lighter."

I turn to him and say, "If you are trying to get down my pants, you had me at Afghanistan."

Mind you, at this point I have not smoked weed for eight weeks, and this is the first time on my trip I even feel like getting high. We sit by an ocean lit by beach lamps that keep the waves sea-green while the ocean further down is a deep blue-black.

Huck and I continue to share our lives, and I learn that he had an epiphany in Afghanistan that has transformed him. After 9/11 he felt a deep need to fight against the Taliban. Canada never went into Iraq nor would he. But fighting the Taliban was something he felt he had to do. "Little buddy, this is the way I see it. I'm young, strong, and capable. If not me, then who? I don't know how else to say this, but I had to go; it is my destiny. Believe me," he said, "it is that complicated and that simple." I don't know if I agree with him. All I know is that I want him to be safe.

Now he sees how wrong the war is. Huck explains that we are fighting a losing battle. We will never build the army this country needs. He has developed a deep affection for some of the Afghanistan children, and he no longer thinks it is right to kill anyone. He is hoping for a replacement assignment where he could leave combat and become a search-and-rescue expert for the Canadian Army. Every now and then I just burst out, "God, you are beautiful!" He lowers his head, blushes, and says thanks. In return he says, "God, you are great."

He knows I'm not coming on to him; it's clearly beyond that. Yet my appreciation for his unquestionable beauty must be proclaimed from time to time. He proclaims how great I am in return, and we laugh.

Neither one of us had known this island existed, and we have no idea how we ended up here. It was never on either of our trajectories. Our conversation just glides from one thought to another. I will show him L.A., and he will show me Canada. We talk about books, his girlfriends, my boyfriends, the demise of the Bush administration, the hope of Obama, saving lives, and living them.

While we talk the night into day, the full moon stares us down, right in my eyes. It is a bluish-gray moon that looks as if a prop person hung it between two island trees. The sky begins to turn ever so slightly into its morning yellow as the moon seems to be replaced instantly by the sun. We both have the reggae band playing in our heads. Mine is tossing around over and over a reggae version of "Leaving on a Jet Plane." Huck's is "No Woman No Cry." We joke that we will have the Sama Sama reggae band playing in our heads for weeks. As we say good night, he tells me he will be getting an enormous tattoo tomorrow and asks me if I would stop by the tattoo shack with the huge orange hammock on the porch.

*

Lying in bed, I had been feeling sorry for myself. I have just spent five days at a gay villa, and I am longing to be around my gay brothers. I feel resentful of the homophobia I know is coming at me from many of the straight men. The last person I ever thought would rescue me from that state of mind is a straight Canadian soldier.

I stay up trying to write a short story about the encounter of Huck and Jon. In the morning I finally go to bed at 9:00 a.m. because my encounter with Huck has my mind reeling.

*

I race over to the tattoo shack around noon. My feet can't get me there fast enough. I want to be with Huck and yet am baffled by the intense urgency I feel. It has been gray and cloudy morning, but as I pick up my pace, the sun bursts through the sky shouting and waving hello, and I can't wait to let the water feel me again.

At the tattoo shack there is a guy with the longest dreads I have ever seen dangling through a hammock, as if long, black snakes were sweeping the old wooden floor as the hammock sways back and forth. The tattoo artist is older and seems as relaxed as a human can get. Some obscure Tracy Chapman song is playing on a radio. Huck must have told the guy in the hammock that a friend was stopping by because he just points his finger to the back room. Huck is lying on the bed in just his swim trunks. He tells me he is getting really scared because this is going to take about four hours and it's going to hurt. He is clearly freaked. The design is huge and will be on his left side, a place where people rarely get them. The tattoo artist tells him to be patient and to expect a lot of pain. In twenty-three years, he has never given anyone a tattoo of that size in that area. "It is all bone," he keeps muttering and shaking his head. "It is all bone."

I grab Huck's leg and say, "Okay, Huck, here's the deal. Do you really want this tattoo? If you do, I will hang out and keep you company. I am a really good nurse."

He nods yes, then mutters, "Stay, please." I become the tattoo nurse. I run back to my bungalow and get him some pills that will help him sleep. I make sure he drinks a lot of water, buy him Pringles (they are everywhere). I buy a fifth of scotch, tell him funny stories, put cold towels on his forehead, and basically make sure he is okay, documenting the ordeal with my camera.

The tattoo is of a devil-looking serpent coming out of the ocean. This image gives me chills. As the serpent with its sword rises, a huge splash of water hits the air. The other half is some sort of angel figure carrying a torch of glowing light. He told me it was his personal reckoning of the good and evil inside himself. The never-ending reminder to himself...that he chose to kill. He is utterly motionless. The tattoo artist is amazed, as I am, at Huck's perfect stillness during four hours of intense pain. I think to myself, this is a soldier's story. He understands all too well what a false move can mean. He knows how to be a statue or risk being killed.

*

Later, over lunch, I interview him for a short story I plan to write about him. I ask him for examples from combat when he had to be that still or it could cost him his life. He tells me not long ago he was searching a burned-out basement for weapons. He heard footsteps above and hit the basement floor. As he was lying there, he knew that if anyone heard him, he would be dead. It was a soldier's strength. The determination I witnessed during those four hours while he was getting his tattoo was staggering. I learned once again that the will of the human spirit is indomitable.

The tattoo shack has a back room behind the tattooing room with a mattress on the floor. The room rents out for ten dollars a night. Huck is turned on his side, eyes closed; the drugs are working. The tattoo artist was taking a break to eat his lunch. The door opens and a beautiful, young, blonde woman who reminds me of Scarlett Johansson walks in, says her name is Daliana, and she wants to rent the back room. Then she looks at Huck, looks at me, and whispers, "He is so hot." I laugh and agree. She tells me she is from Canada, and I tell her, "Don't rent that room, you can do better." Huck turns and says, "Canada, where?" Canadians love meeting other Canadians. I tell Daliana to meet us later at Sama Sama to party.

The moment she leaves I can see Huck is having a really hard time keeping it together. The tattoo artist says, "Get ready for round two," with this ominous tone in his voice. Huck's body isn't moving, but his face tells me he is in severe pain. He turns to me and says, "You are a lifesaver. Do you realize you are saving my life? Do you get that, little buddy?"

I say, "Huck, saving lives, come on. That is what we talked about last night. Isn't that what this new friendship is all about? You went into the war to kill and had your epiphany that you are here to save lives. Now you have to stop calling me little buddy; it is way too Gilligan on this island." He shakes his head no. He flashes me that look that says don't make me laugh; it hurts. I tell him about John *Irving's A Prayer for Owen Meany*. It's one of my favorite books, and I have reread it on this journey. I explain that it is a book about the Vietnam War, God, the act of killing, and destiny. I think it's an important book for him to read. I know it will speak to him.

He told me the night before that he thinks one of the reasons we've met is so I can help him read novels again. I will send him off with this book and hope it has a deep effect on him.

*

I am at a café on the dock with Huck and Daliana, who has become another amazing friend from good old Canada. She has also spent time with Huck. I've played matchmaker and set them up for the night. They share their own moments of exchanging their lives. We can hear the boat coming into the dock, dropping off new guests. About fifty people are walking down to the main sandy road. I hear someone yell my name. It's Mags wearing the brightest orange dress. It looks like the sun is walking towards us, giving new meaning to the word sundress. To her right side is her beautiful daughter Morag. People always tell you their kids are beautiful, but Morag had a casual effortless beauty. Everyone introduces themselves and

they join us for a cold drink. Huck only has about ten minutes until he has to get on that boat, the boat that would begin his journey back to war. Daliana and I are both heartbroken to see our soldier off. As he gets up to leave, I hug him, kiss him on the cheek, and tell him how special he is and that he is the best, most unexpected surprise on my journey.

I am crying. Hard. My dad is a Korean War vet and had to live through the horrors of that war. Several bullets pierced various parts of his body while parachuting into combat. The first five years of my life were spent in and out of VA hospitals in Brooklyn, New York. My ex-lover, James, was in Vietnam and has had to deal with the horrors of exposure to Agent Orange. I have a lifetime of connections to vets. It suddenly occurs to me that I have never met anyone serving in this current war.

I start to worry about Huck's safety and think, Okay, gods, you have played with me enough, and it has been great fun, but now PLEASE turn your eyes to my friend. Play with him and keep him safe. If he comes out of this, he could do so much good.

Even thinking the word "if" scares me. Yet his bags are packed and he's ready to go...and I can't control what I can't control. I can only say to my friends on this island: Don't say a prayer for Owen Meany; say a prayer for my new friend Huck. I tell Huck I want to write about him on my travel blog, but I need to make sure he is cool with what I write. I show him the first entry, and he blushes and said, "It's all good; just change my name." It's the weed. He asks me not to use his name and I tell him I will respect that. I say I am going to call him Huck because I just read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* for the first time. He looks puzzled and asks why. I tell him that Huck was a character who initially can't see his compassion for Jim, the runaway slave, as a man, as a human being. But on that raft, he sees him as a man with a full life, finds out he has a wife and kids, and instead of getting him killed, he saves his life. The epiphanies seemed to

coincide.

*

I'm back in Los Angeles, and after three months away I could be walking on the moon. The cold weather hurts, the wet rain has no heat in it, and I am a stranger in a strange land—my own.

I can't sleep so I roam and putter around my home like a visitor getting acquainted with his new surroundings—a sixth country. Lorraine, my oldest and dearest friend since I was fourteen, has come to see me. She is a tough, smart, gorgeous Italian woman. She has the biggest eyes, brown, almond shaped, and everyone even strangers remark about them. I regale her with stories about the magic that happened. I go on and on about Huck and tell her she will die when she meets him. We are watching the Super Bowl and screaming about one of the most magnificent touchdowns in football history.

My cell phone rings. When I check the message, it is Daliana, there are five messages. She tells me that she needs to talk to me and not to mind her voice, as she has a cold. I tell Lorraine that it was not a “cold” voice but a crying voice. I mutter, “Lo, I'm scared; Lo, I'm scared.” I frantically check my email. She has sent a message saying to call her anytime, and she needs to talk to me.

We shared our love for Huck like two schoolgirls; this must be about him. Lorraine tells me to go into the living room and call Daliana.

When she picks up the phone, I yell “tell me he is okay. Tell me he has no legs. I don't care if he can't see, just tell me his brain is intact, tell me he is alive!”

She cries hard. The death cry, the hard, searing cry of sudden loss.

I say, “You got the information wrong somehow. It's a lie!”

Through her deep sobs she keeps saying, “He is gone, our friend is gone.”

I fall to the floor and feel grief and political rage collide head on. Like two boxers smashing each other’s brains out, each blow numbing the other.

My friend was killed by a roadside bomb. The term almost sounds friendly, “roadside” seems so harmless. I am thinking about what a friend had said: *I was hoping it was a lie.*

I have heard those lyrics my whole adult life, but now it means something entirely different. It means Huck, it means Sean.

New Poetry by Naomi Ruth Lowinsky: “In And Out Of Time,” “In The Wake Of Our Lady Of The Double-Edged Axe The Notorious RBG,” “Prepping For Apocalypse,” “Sideswiped,” and “The Queen Of Souls”



THE ALWAYS HOVERING / *image by Amalie Flynn*
IN AND OUT OF TIME

In the fire-eaten land
in the smoke-drenched air

I dream

Crystal Lake

square raft afloat
at the center

I in my clodhopper shoes
in the patchwork circle skirt
I made myself
in my hippie days

have jumped in the lake
to show
my solidarity

with forest
mountains
ancestors

with glittering Crystal Lake
I swam as a girl
whose raft was sanctuary

from Father's far-flung furies
from head-smacked howling brothers
from tongue-lashed weeping Mother

This simple handmade craft
of wood of nails
floats me out of time

holds me
in the great blue round
of lake of sky

the green surround
of pines
where the always hovering

Old Ones
who knew me then
who dream me now

give me the words
to write myself back
 into time

in my waterlogged
clodhopper shoes
 my patchwork skirt

back to the fire-eaten land
back to the smoke-drenched air

 my handmade craft

 my raft

**IN THE WAKE OF OUR LADY OF THE DOUBLE-EDGED AXE
THE NOTORIOUS RBG**

(Erev Rosh Hashana in the year 5781)

The shofar wails

She's gone

from her body gone

from her seat on the court gone

*from her grip on what's equal what's just
gone*

from her fierce resolve

to keep breathing

until January 20th 2021

Everything hung on her small frail frame

What will we do without her?

Once I forgot I was real

a daughter of earth and sky

forgot what the angel

had told me at birth

Once I had holes in my tongue

from biting it
had blood on my hands
from broken glass
on the top of that wall
There was no escape

Throttled by custom by law
I spat my teeth on the road
My fire was used to burn me up
My body did not belong to me
a vessel for lust for seed

But you our soft-spoken battle-ax
our mother who was a falcon
had the cunning the courage the ken
to seize the keys to the castle
the plantation the prison
to deliver us
from gender's cages
the shackles of race
from those scoundrels in power
who steal from the poor
and ransack the earth

The shofar wails

*She's become one
of the Holy Ones
No longer can everything hang
on her small frail frame*

*Too much for one body to bear
It's your fight now*

Bless us O falcon-headed soul
of the notorious RBG
Our Lady of soaring sight
of focused attack
Our messenger

between the worlds

Sit on our shoulders

Hunt in our dreams

for the courage the cunning the keys

the double-edged axe

we'll need

to end the mad king's reign

and rouse your spirit in us

all over this land

PREPPING FOR APOCALYPSE

for Alicia

requires the pursuit

of toilet paper avocados gluten-free bread

He needs blueberries with his yogurt

You need mushrooms with your eggs

Both of you stuck in lockdown

So surrender

Hang yourself upside down

Be the bat who sees in the dark Smell

the terror cruelty carnage Hear

the echoes of the ancestors

Pandemic is pandemonium

the world turned into a charnel house

The sinister rider on his pale horse

has rolled us all up in The End of Days

like a medieval map ringed with dragons

A Revelation is at hand The sun

gone black The moon

a bloody show Guadalupe wanders

the woods haunted by who

She once was

Our Lady of the Serpent Skirt Apocalyptic
woman crowned with stars in the fierce grip
of birth Will She bear us
a savior? Will She bear us
a demon shatterer of worlds? How will we know
 the difference?

SIDESWIPE

Sweet Lola my Barcelona Red hybrid chariot
you who transported me from sixty something
to the middle of my seventies through Obama's two terms
Michelle's organic gardens the color spectrum
of her splendid gowns you carried me
when we were all blindsided
by the 2016 election fed me NPR news
the Russian hack job on America
the wannabe Pharaoh throwing tantrums
on Twitter while the traffic roiled around us

even as you approached a hundred thousand miles
you stayed stalwart kept me safe in your calm interior
as you switched from gas to battery and back
making our small gesture toward saving the planet
you who delivered me into our garage protected
from rain from wind from the ash that devoured the
mountain

Dan coming out to help with the groceries

There were groceries for Passover in your trunk Lola
flame raisins dried apricots dates almonds
for the Sephardic charoset which symbolizes the mortar
it is said we Jews used to build the pyramids
when we were slaves in Egypt But who knew
when I made that left turn a big black Beamer
would hurtle toward you Lola we almost

made it before it hit you in the right rear
I thought it was just a fender bender
They'd fix you up at the body shop
like the surgeon fixed my hip

But the man in the Beamer leapt out shouting
It's all your fault!
I can still hear him shouting
while his kind quiet
wife
asks for my registration

What's that? I think
my mind in fragments

Later I'll gather the flame raisins
dates apricots and almonds pulse them
into small bits in the Cuisinart knowing one needs
to break things up to make that rich sweet

Middle Eastern paste charoset
that's meant to bind us together
when vessels shatter

Later the total loss claims man will pronounce you
totaled You Lola
who had the *saichel* to feed your own battery I'm still
reaching
for your slow-down lever grasping thin air forgetting
I'm driving a clunky Chevy rental
on my way to retrieve the layers of umbrellas shopping
bags
shoes in case of earthquakes maps we no longer use
flashlights whose batteries likely died in all those
years
before you started losing oil
before the black Beamer sideswiped you
before the man began to shout

before the total loss man
pronounced you worth more dead dismembered
for spare parts instead of resurrected one last time
at the body shop the buff young woman
commiserates with me helps me carry
the detritus of our years together
to the clunky Chevy

It's Easter week and Passover
We remember the ones who've passed on
We light candles for my children's father
Dan's children's mother my mother
the bedlam that erupted in her wake
O my separated kin will you ever join us again?

We name the plagues Old Pharaoh flings at us
as we gather our *mishpocheh* on the way to freedom
We name what plagues our own shattered times
Stolen Elections
Separated Children
Hatred of Strangers
Greed
School Shootings Sanctuary Shootings Police
Shootings Street Shootings
Homelessness
Climate Chaos
Species Extinction
Family Feuds

The youngest one adds
People who cannot forgive

Pass the charoset

THE QUEEN OF SOULS

*O Lady, Lady of the changing shapes,
help me remember...*

–Judy Grahn

Some souls are shy They hide out behind the shutters
of your eyes
Some souls are soggy like the earth after rain like a
woman after a good cry
Some souls get born to sass the universe listen to them
snicker

in the back of the class

Some souls can never be satisfied Give them three wishes
they want five
They eat your heart out send your spirit packing You
forget
who brought you here You question your every breath

your spirit guides your mother's milk

Some souls have rocks in their shoes drag you down
to the bottom of the slough where earthworms squirm
and you are sunk spat out for what terrible deed
in what former life?

Some souls insist on dance Some need poems Some will
make you
map out a whole world of characters who'll take over
your inner chambers Won't stop talking until you write
them down

Some souls keep singing even in the eye of the storm even
at the bottom
of the pit where the Queen of Souls She who harrows
your bones knows
even black holes even dead trees grow mushrooms host
baby birds and snakes

Some souls live in sandcastles
until a wave knocks them down

The child forgets what she built

Some souls have feathers and claws

Some souls can shed their skin

Some souls become jaguars in your sleep

Some souls surf atmospheric rivers wrangle tornadoes

ride nightmares glide and glitter

amidst rays of the sun in the redwood grove

Some souls are old and lonely Can't remember

the last body

they were in

They hover in the rafters watch the infinity loop

of lovers impatient for that last passion cry

for the deft dive of sperm into egg hungry to leap

into new life

Some souls remember themselves as tears as pearls

on the throat of the Queen of Souls

When your time comes She'll weigh

your heart your balance of feather and claw

Maybe She'll give you a glimpse

of your soul's flight wings aflame

on the

way to your stars

New Fiction from Jon

Imparato: “You Had Me at Afghanistan”

“I was lying in a burned-out basement with the full moon in my eyes. I was hoping for replacement when the sun burst through the sky. There was a band playing in my head and I felt like getting high. I was thinking about what a friend had said. I was hoping it was a lie. Thinking about what a friend had said, I was hoping it was a lie.” –Neil Young

k.d. lang’s voice carries the Neil Young lyrics on a mellifluous ride; notes keep swirling up as I crash to the ground. I’m clutching a wet dishcloth as if it were a rope, thinking about what a friend had said, and I was hoping it was a lie. I’m staring at the fringe tangled on my terracotta-colored sarong and my beaded anklet. I grab the heavy sweater I am wearing over my tank top to cover my face as I sob. My skin is the darkest it has ever been from traveling in five Asian countries during their summer. Being thrust into cold, rainy weather frightens me. I want to be back in oppressive heat. I am thinking about what a friend had said, I was hoping it was a lie. I have heard those lyrics my whole adult life, but now it means something entirely different. It means the unspeakable.

*

I am a radical on sabbatical. I have been working as the Artistic Director of the Lily Tomlin/Jane Wagner Cultural Arts Center for ten years. When I asked my boss for sabbatical, I was shocked when he said yes. I’m taking three months off from my job. I started out in Thailand, then Cambodia, Laos, Hanoi. (Or, as I like to call it, HanNoise. It is a city without a moment of silence, a never-ending cacophony of traffic, people, and blaring intrusions of sound.) My final destination is Bali. I have learned on this trip that most of the travel

agents have never left the town or village they live in. But for some reason I think I can trust this father-daughter team. The daughter insists I call her Baby, and she calls me Mr. Delicious.

When I arrived in Bali, one of the first things I was told was that my name, Jon, meant "delicious" in Balinese. I had just come from Cambodia, where I gave a piece of my heart to a man whose long name I had a hard time pronouncing. At one point he was joking and said, "Just call me Delicious and I'll call you Mr. Delicious because that is what we are to each other...delicious." We had a brief four-day affair, a travel affair; they are so transitory and carefree, no one expects anything except the momentary pleasures.

A young girl at the travel agency loves that my name means delicious, and she thinks this is hilarious. When I tell her it also means toilet in English, I then become Delicious Toilet.

"I think you like me, Mr. Delicious, I think you do." "I like you fine, Baby; I will like you even more if you can get me onto a remote island." Baby keeps flirting with me and asking me if I like her. She is oblivious to the fact that I am gay, and her flirting seems just to be on autopilot. Her flirting is learned; nothing about it is organic. Baby's father is watching his daughter flirt. He is in on the game; all he wants is for Baby to make the sale. We are all in on the game; everyone is trying to get what they want. Nonetheless I find myself charmed by Baby. All I want is a quiet island where I can write and stare at water while I do a slow brain drain. Both Baby and her father have assured me that I will be on a quiet, peaceful island, with a bungalow on the ocean.

I want to be face-to-face with the ocean. I want a wave confrontation. I take an hour boat ride and arrive on an island across from Lombok, Gili Trankang, right next to Bali. This is an island with seven hundred people, no cars, no

motorbikes, and no police. This is not a lush resort but a Rasta party island. Visitors are met at the dock by tuk-tuk carriages pulled by very sad horses. There is poverty here, you just can't escape it. The power goes out several times a day, hot water is never guaranteed, and most bungalows have saltwater showers, very strange to the skin. Imagine someone has spilled a margarita on you and rinsed you off. My bungalow is attached to an open café with a bar painted a bright red-orange, sunshine yellow, and a deep green. The stage faces the most beautiful turquoise, sea-green ocean. Yet trash is piled up on sandbanks. You must turn your head toward the beauty, and there is plenty of it.



I am hanging out, having lunch with the reggae band and staff. They are quick to tell me that I will do very well on this island because it is filled with beautiful women. I

nonchalantly say that I am gay and hope there are also lots of beautiful men. Suddenly I can feel the chill, as if a hurricane's gust of wind suddenly changed direction. Some of them are cool, but many of them are not. I quickly learn that most of the people on the island are Muslim. I have been in the accepting bliss of Buddhists and Hindus, so for the first time I need to keep a low profile about being gay. In all these travels, this is the first time that I have encountered any homophobia. The Rasta world is full of wonderful male affection—everyone calls you his brother, yet there is a homophobic and sexist element to the Rasta world that can't be ignored. It is ever-present and inescapable.

Of course, it takes hours for my room to be ready. Ganja is king here; everyone is stoned and moves at a snail's pace from the herb and the heat. They have two speeds: slow and stop. I get in the water, and I have arrived! This is the ocean I have longed for: crystal clear, warm in a way that requires no adjusting to the temperature, the color is spectacular, and it feels like flower petals on my skin. I have arrived...yet I am not happy. I miss my New York friend Roberta something awful. She longs for water like this too.

We have always shared the ocean in a deep way; when we met, we found as many ways as we could to spend time at the ocean, and I want her here with me. I want to be stupid and silly with her, laugh and splash. The ocean floor is filled with mounds of pure white coral; you can scoop it up with your hands and have little pieces of coral rain down on you. Roberta would freak. The absence of my friend is stinging. I scoop up empty water and pour it over my head as I cry, my sobbing face plunged into the ocean and staring at the coral floor. I remember that I always take a while to get my footing on my first day in a new country. I'm thrilled to get an email from a friend I met in Cambodia, named Mags. Mags is seventy-two. She has short-cropped, maroon-purplish hair. Her hair spikes up like an eighties rock star. She wears long, flowing dresses

with wild prints and tons of large jewelry from her travels. She is from Queensland, Australia. She moved to Phnom Penh, in Cambodia. Mags checked into the gay hotel where I was staying. She convinced the hotel owner to let her live there. The only woman in a gay hotel where she holds court. We exchange our lives over scotch by the pool, and instantly we feel great love for each other. Everyone calls her Mum. Her daughter, Morag, will be arriving in three days. I can't wait for them to arrive on this magical island. This lifts my spirits and just knowing I will soon have some friends on the island is a comfort.

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I am at a place called Sama Sama. It means "same-same" but also signifies that we are all just a little bit different, but everyone is the same and welcomed. The Rasta band is really good, and there is a huge dancing-drinking-smoking scene going on. They play mostly Bob Marley covers. They tell me it is the happiest music on earth. Yet I am in my room, I am not happy. I am trying to read or do some writing, but the sound of the band is deafening. I'm mad at the happiest music, mad at Baby and her dad for sending me here, mad at feeling like an outcast, mad at the world. I finally give in and say to myself, "Get out of this bungalow and just embrace this bizarre scene."

I'd made friends with one of the bartenders, named Zen, that afternoon and he seemed cool. I sit down at the bar and drink my scotch with all this Rasta joy bouncing and swirling around me. I am certain I am the only gay man on the island and feel like I don't belong, like an island unto myself.

Suddenly, one of the most beautiful men I have ever laid my eyes on sits next to me. He is straight, no question about it. He is trying to get the bartender's attention. I shout, "Hey, Zen, can you get my buddy a drink?"

The beautiful man says, "Thanks for the hook-up." I learn he is from Canada. The best people I have met on my journey who aren't native are Canadians. They are open and sturdy. I will refer to my friend as Huck for reasons I will explain later. We start talking and within a few minutes the conversation is off and running. Our ideas, opinions, and insights are crashing in on us like the waves a few feet away. This guy is smart, insightful, and profound, and we are in deep, exchanging who we are with each other. We talk politics for a good part of the conversation: He can't stand Bush; Sarah Palin is an unquestionable joke—his views are so liberal. I tell him I often feel like I am what is left of the left, an old Lily Tomlin joke. He laughs and says he feels my pain. About an hour into the conversation, he hits a curveball in my direction that almost knocks me off my seat. He tells me he is a soldier on leave from Afghanistan, and he goes back to war in a few days.

Traveling around Southeast Asia, you can talk to people for the longest time and, unlike in America, they don't ask you what you do. Your work doesn't define you. I would never have thought this beautiful, sensitive man was a soldier. That information seems so incongruous to the man I am talking to. I am so thrown and confused by this news. I turn and say, "Okay, let's break this sucker down." Like an archaeologist, I keep digging. Who is this guy?

Our conversation goes deep and wide, fast, and furious. It moves with speed and intention but always with grace. We close the bar; he is now even more fascinating to me. It is 4:00 a.m. and I assume I am off to bed. Huck turns to me and says, "Here is how I see it. We are not done with this conversation, and I am not done with you. Let's go get some weed and smoke a joint on the beach and talk until sunup." I tell him I am so there.

As we walk on the dark dirt road, following the sad horses' hoofprints, Huck says, "Where do you think we can score some

weed?"

I point to an old man in his eighties with a Marley Rules T-shirt selling bottles of scotch, cigarettes, and Pringles. "I guarantee you he is our best bet."

Huck turns and says, "Come on, little buddy."

"Huck, I feel like Gilligan on *Gilligan's Island*. Why are you calling me that?"

"Oh, it's too late, that's who you are. I like calling you that."

Scoring takes all of five minutes. Huck returns with this sneaky smile on his face. "I not only got you enough weed for the week that you're on this island, but I also got you papers and a lighter."

I turn to him and say, "If you are trying to get down my pants, you had me at Afghanistan."

Mind you, at this point I have not smoked weed for eight weeks, and this is the first time on my trip I even feel like getting high. We sit by an ocean lit by beach lamps that keep the waves sea-green while the ocean further down is a deep blue-black.

Huck and I continue to share our lives, and I learn that he had an epiphany in Afghanistan that has transformed him. After 9/11 he felt a deep need to fight against the Taliban. Canada never went into Iraq nor would he. But fighting the Taliban was something he felt he had to do. "Little buddy, this is the way I see it. I'm young, strong, and capable. If not me, then who? I don't know how else to say this, but I had to go; it is my destiny. Believe me," he said, "it is that complicated and that simple." I don't know if I agree with him. All I know is that I want him to be safe.

Now he sees how wrong the war is. Huck explains that we are

fighting a losing battle. We will never build the army this country needs. He has developed a deep affection for some of the Afghanistan children, and he no longer thinks it is right to kill anyone. He is hoping for a replacement assignment where he could leave combat and become a search-and-rescue expert for the Canadian Army. Every now and then I just burst out, "God, you are beautiful!" He lowers his head, blushes, and says thanks. In return he says, "God, you are great."

He knows I'm not coming on to him; it's clearly beyond that. Yet my appreciation for his unquestionable beauty must be proclaimed from time to time. He proclaims how great I am in return, and we laugh.

Neither one of us had known this island existed, and we have no idea how we ended up here. It was never on either of our trajectories. Our conversation just glides from one thought to another. I will show him L.A., and he will show me Canada. We talk about books, his girlfriends, my boyfriends, the demise of the Bush administration, the hope of Obama, saving lives, and living them.

While we talk the night into day, the full moon stares us down, right in my eyes. It is a bluish-gray moon that looks as if a prop person hung it between two island trees. The sky begins to turn ever so slightly into its morning yellow as the moon seems to be replaced instantly by the sun. We both have the reggae band playing in our heads. Mine is tossing around over and over a reggae version of "Leaving on a Jet Plane." Huck's is "No Woman No Cry." We joke that we will have the Sama Sama reggae band playing in our heads for weeks. As we say good night, he tells me he will be getting an enormous tattoo tomorrow and asks me if I would stop by the tattoo shack with the huge orange hammock on the porch.

*

Lying in bed, I had been feeling sorry for myself. I have just

spent five days at a gay villa, and I am longing to be around my gay brothers. I feel resentful of the homophobia I know is coming at me from many of the straight men. The last person I ever thought would rescue me from that state of mind is a straight Canadian soldier.

I stay up trying to write a short story about the encounter of Huck and Jon. In the morning I finally go to bed at 9:00 a.m. because my encounter with Huck has my mind reeling.

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I race over to the tattoo shack around noon. My feet can't get me there fast enough. I want to be with Huck and yet am baffled by the intense urgency I feel. It has been gray and cloudy morning, but as I pick up my pace, the sun bursts through the sky shouting and waving hello, and I can't wait to let the water feel me again.

At the tattoo shack there is a guy with the longest dreads I have ever seen dangling through a hammock, as if long, black snakes were sweeping the old wooden floor as the hammock sways back and forth. The tattoo artist is older and seems as relaxed as a human can get. Some obscure Tracy Chapman song is playing on a radio. Huck must have told the guy in the hammock that a friend was stopping by because he just points his finger to the back room. Huck is lying on the bed in just his swim trunks. He tells me he is getting really scared because this is going to take about four hours and it's going to hurt. He is clearly freaked. The design is huge and will be on his left side, a place where people rarely get them. The tattoo artist tells him to be patient and to expect a lot of pain. In twenty-three years, he has never given anyone a tattoo of that size in that area. "It is all bone," he keeps muttering and shaking his head. "It is all bone."

I grab Huck's leg and say, "Okay, Huck, here's the deal. Do you really want this tattoo? If you do, I will hang out and

keep you company. I am a really good nurse.”

He nods yes, then mutters, “Stay, please.” I become the tattoo nurse. I run back to my bungalow and get him some pills that will help him sleep. I make sure he drinks a lot of water, buy him Pringles (they are everywhere). I buy a fifth of scotch, tell him funny stories, put cold towels on his forehead, and basically make sure he is okay, documenting the ordeal with my camera.

The tattoo is of a devil-looking serpent coming out of the ocean. This image gives me chills. As the serpent with its sword rises, a huge splash of water hits the air. The other half is some sort of angel figure carrying a torch of glowing light. He told me it was his personal reckoning of the good and evil inside himself. The never-ending reminder to himself...that he chose to kill. He is utterly motionless. The tattoo artist is amazed, as I am, at Huck’s perfect stillness during four hours of intense pain. I think to myself, this is a soldier’s story. He understands all too well what a false move can mean. He knows how to be a statue or risk being killed.

*

Later, over lunch, I interview him for a short story I plan to write about him. I ask him for examples from combat when he had to be that still or it could cost him his life. He tells me not long ago he was searching a burned-out basement for weapons. He heard footsteps above and hit the basement floor. As he was lying there, he knew that if anyone heard him, he would be dead. It was a soldier’s strength. The determination I witnessed during those four hours while he was getting his tattoo was staggering. I learned once again that the will of the human spirit is indomitable.

The tattoo shack has a back room behind the tattooing room with a mattress on the floor. The room rents out for ten

dollars a night. Huck is turned on his side, eyes closed; the drugs are working. The tattoo artist was taking a break to eat his lunch. The door opens and a beautiful, young, blonde woman who reminds me of Scarlett Johansson walks in, says her name is Daliana, and she wants to rent the back room. Then she looks at Huck, looks at me, and whispers, "He is so hot." I laugh and agree. She tells me she is from Canada, and I tell her, "Don't rent that room, you can do better." Huck turns and says, "Canada, where?" Canadians love meeting other Canadians. I tell Daliana to meet us later at Sama Sama to party.

The moment she leaves I can see Huck is having a really hard time keeping it together. The tattoo artist says, "Get ready for round two," with this ominous tone in his voice. Huck's body isn't moving, but his face tells me he is in severe pain. He turns to me and says, "You are a lifesaver. Do you realize you are saving my life? Do you get that, little buddy?"

I say, "Huck, saving lives, come on. That is what we talked about last night. Isn't that what this new friendship is all about? You went into the war to kill and had your epiphany that you are here to save lives. Now you have to stop calling me little buddy; it is way too Gilligan on this island." He shakes his head no. He flashes me that look that says don't make me laugh; it hurts. I tell him about John *Irving's A Prayer for Owen Meany*. It's one of my favorite books, and I have reread it on this journey. I explain that it is a book about the Vietnam War, God, the act of killing, and destiny. I think it's an important book for him to read. I know it will speak to him.

He told me the night before that he thinks one of the reasons we've met is so I can help him read novels again. I will send him off with this book and hope it has a deep effect on him.

*

I am at a café on the dock with Huck and Daliana, who has

become another amazing friend from good old Canada. She has also spent time with Huck. I've played matchmaker and set them up for the night. They share their own moments of exchanging their lives. We can hear the boat coming into the dock, dropping off new guests. About fifty people are walking down to the main sandy road. I hear someone yell my name. It's Mags wearing the brightest orange dress. It looks like the sun is walking towards us, giving new meaning to the word sundress. To her right side is her beautiful daughter Morag. People always tell you their kids are beautiful, but Morag had a casual effortless beauty. Everyone introduces themselves and they join us for a cold drink. Huck only has about ten minutes until he has to get on that boat, the boat that would begin his journey back to war. Daliana and I are both heartbroken to see our soldier off. As he gets up to leave, I hug him, kiss him on the cheek, and tell him how special he is and that he is the best, most unexpected surprise on my journey.

I am crying. Hard. My dad is a Korean War vet and had to live through the horrors of that war. Several bullets pierced various parts of his body while parachuting into combat. The first five years of my life were spent in and out of VA hospitals in Brooklyn, New York. My ex-lover, James, was in Vietnam and has had to deal with the horrors of exposure to Agent Orange. I have a lifetime of connections to vets. It suddenly occurs to me that I have never met anyone serving in this current war.

I start to worry about Huck's safety and think, Okay, gods, you have played with me enough, and it has been great fun, but now PLEASE turn your eyes to my friend. Play with him and keep him safe. If he comes out of this, he could do so much good.

Even thinking the word "if" scares me. Yet his bags are packed and he's ready to go...and I can't control what I can't control. I can only say to my friends on this island: Don't say a prayer for Owen Meany; say a prayer for my new friend Huck. I tell Huck I want to write about him on my travel blog, but I

need to make sure he is cool with what I write. I show him the first entry, and he blushes and said, "It's all good; just change my name." It's the weed. He asks me not to use his name and I tell him I will respect that. I say I am going to call him Huck because I just read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* for the first time. He looks puzzled and asks why. I tell him that Huck was a character who initially can't see his compassion for Jim, the runaway slave, as a man, as a human being. But on that raft, he sees him as a man with a full life, finds out he has a wife and kids, and instead of getting him killed, he saves his life. The epiphanies seemed to coincide.

*

I'm back in Los Angeles, and after three months away I could be walking on the moon. The cold weather hurts, the wet rain has no heat in it, and I am a stranger in a strange land—my own.

I can't sleep so I roam and putter around my home like a visitor getting acquainted with his new surroundings—a sixth country. Lorraine, my oldest and dearest friend since I was fourteen, has come to see me. She is a tough, smart, gorgeous Italian woman. She has the biggest eyes, brown, almond shaped, and everyone even strangers remark about them. I regale her with stories about the magic that happened. I go on and on about Huck and tell her she will die when she meets him. We are watching the Super Bowl and screaming about one of the most magnificent touchdowns in football history.

My cell phone rings. When I check the message, it is Daliana, there are five messages. She tells me that she needs to talk to me and not to mind her voice, as she has a cold. I tell Lorraine that it was not a "cold" voice but a crying voice. I mutter, "Lo, I'm scared; Lo, I'm scared." I frantically check my email. She has sent a message saying to call her anytime, and she needs to talk to me.

We shared our love for Huck like two schoolgirls; this must be about him. Lorraine tells me to go into the living room and call Daliana.

When she picks up the phone, I yell “tell me he is okay. Tell me he has no legs. I don’t care if he can’t see, just tell me his brain is intact, tell me he is alive!”

She cries hard. The death cry, the hard, searing cry of sudden loss.

I say, “You got the information wrong somehow. It’s a lie!”

Through her deep sobs she keeps saying, “He is gone, our friend is gone.”

I fall to the floor and feel grief and political rage collide head on. Like two boxers smashing each other’s brains out, each blow numbing the other.

My friend was killed by a roadside bomb. The term almost sounds friendly, “roadside” seems so harmless. I am thinking about what a friend had said: *I was hoping it was a lie.*

I have heard those lyrics my whole adult life, but now it means something entirely different. It means Huck, it means Sean.

New Fiction from Moe Hashemi: “Javid”

We buried Javid on a gloomy Friday morning in late December, shortly before Ali was gassed on the battlefield. All the guys from the eleventh grade attended the funeral, most of the teachers too.

Later that day at the mosque, Javid's dad, a well-groomed, bearded, middle-aged man who sold rosaries and prayer stones to pilgrims, stood at the podium with an Abrahamic disposition and gave a speech about how proud he felt as a father to offer a martyr to God and to the Supreme Leader of the Revolution and how much Javid cared about both.

*

I had known Javid ever since the second grade. I still remember our first conversation when he approached me timidly and asked why my old eraser was so unusually white and clean.

"My baby sister grabs it whenever I'm not looking and she licks it clean."

"Wow!" he said and walked off pensively looking at his dirty eraser.

The next day he came to class with his eraser all nice and clean:

"Look what my baby sister did to my eraser!"

He didn't have a baby sister. I could picture him licking his eraser for hours.

*

No matter how hard Javid tried to blend in, he stood out like a bad stitch in a Persian rug. He was too scrawny for his age and always wore a buzz cut and clothes that were either too small for him or too large. One year, he became the butt of jokes when he showed up to school in early September in ugly blue winter rubber boots with conspicuous large white dots. The boots were a bit too big for him and made loud farting noises with every step he took. He pulled his pant legs as far down as he could to cover the boots and walked like a geisha to diminish the noise, but this just made him look even more awkward.

*

Javid was an easy target for bullies. They called him Oliver Twist, played pranks on him, locked him in the school bathroom, hounded him on his way home and pummelled him hard. But, the bruises he received from the bullies were nothing compared to the ones he brought from home; he never complained or talked about his bruises. He seemed to be able to take all insults and injuries with a rueful smile and move on.

*

His undoing though was his unfeigned innocence. Mr. Nezami, aka "Mr. Psycho," was our disgruntled science teacher. He was a vicious, paranoid man in his early forties who thought the world was after him, so he went after his students.

"Javid! Read out the passage! Page 45, Plants."

Javid opened his book and started reading.

"Although plants can respond to certain stimuli such as light by turning towards it or by opening their petals and leaves, they do not have nerves or any equivalent system to feel or respond to stimuli such as pain."

At this point Javid fell silent and looked kind of lost.

"Why did you stop? Go on," snapped Mr. Psycho.

"Sir! Does this mean that if people kick trees and break off their branches, the trees don't cry inside?"



The whole class burst into laughter at this; Mr. Psycho strode menacingly toward Javid.

“Are you mocking me, kid?”

He twisted Javid’s arm and pulled him off the bench, then slapped him hard a couple of times on the back of his shaved head, and kicked him out of the classroom.

*

Once we got into comic books, Javid found a passion. He didn’t own any comics, but he managed to borrow some from the few friends that he had. At first, he became infatuated with Captain America and drew the superhero’s pictures on all his notebook covers, but Captain America lost some of his glory once Javid became acquainted with Rambo.

*

In those days, the Iran-Iraq war was at a stalemate. The two sides had lost lots of manpower and they were desperate for recruits. Iran’s Revolutionary Guards would visit high schools

and show action movies like *First Blood*, tell tales of valour and glory on the battlefield, and then try to sign up as many kids as they could. As long as you were fifteen or older, all you needed to join was a consent letter from your father or your legal guardian.

*

Ali, who was the oldest kid in our class, as he had failed and repeated a grade, was the first to sign up. His older brother had joined the Basij paramilitary militia before him and had been dispatched to the battlefield, so Ali's father was reluctant to let his second child join. Ali forged his dad's signature, and then taught Javid how to do it as well. Ali was hoping to go to seminary school after graduation and he was a true believer in martyrdom and going to paradise. Javid, on the other hand, signed up for the love of guns. He wanted to get a big machine gun and kick ass like John Rambo. Perhaps, he fantasized about taking all that pent up rage inside him and blasting it at enemy soldiers.

*

I visited Ali at the hospital a few months after Javid's funeral. He had been poisoned with mustard gas during the Battle of Faw Peninsula. He had hideous blisters all over his body, was blinded in both eyes and had irreversible lung damage. There was a breathing tube taped to his nose. He asked about school. I told him about our classmates and the pranks we played on teachers. I also told him how Mr. Psycho had ended up dislocating a kid's elbow, and had been fired; he had eventually locked himself in a hotel room, swallowed all his meds and died.

"Lucky bastard! I wish I could go that easy," He wheezed.

"You'll be fine," I lied and tried to change the subject, *"Tell me about Javid."*

"We took our intensive training course together. Javid had a real talent for marksmanship. He finished at the top of our class. The night before we were sent to the front, he was so excited that he couldn't sleep." Ali burst into a fit of coughing. He continued talking after a long pause, "We were taken to the front in a military truck. Javid was among the first to get off. An Iraqi sniper was waiting in ambush and started shooting at us right away. Javid took a bullet in the chest and was gone, just like that! He took the blow and moved on to paradise. That's the way I'd imagined I'd go."

He paused again, breathless, his sightless eyes staring up at invisible entities beyond the ceiling.

"In a way, I also feel sorry for him," Ali murmured, *"after all, he didn't get to fire a single bullet at the enemy."*

*

Ali died the next June after a hard battle with cancer right around the time we were graduating from high school. He was buried in the same plot of the cemetery as Javid, among the throngs of other fallen soldiers.

I visited both their graves one last time before I was drafted. I placed a small picture of Rambo on Javid's grave and one of a blind angel on Ali's. I left the cemetery wondering what others would put on my grave.

New Fiction from Ken Galbreath: "Checkpoint"

In high school, I was invisible—acne and braces, last year's

wardrobe. I didn't have close friends. My grades weren't going to win me any scholarships. The football coach offered me the equipment manager's position after tryouts.

In the ninth grade, 9/11 happened. In tenth grade, I watched the Air Force drop daisy cutters on Tora Bora. In my junior year, I watched the Marines level Fallujah. There were yellow ribbon magnets on every car and American flags on every porch. The military was a way to be somebody.

So after I graduated, I ran to the recruiter's office; shaved my head before I even shipped out. Some guys hated basic training. Not me. I couldn't wait to get home in my dress uniform and strut through town, to show all those people who had looked over me or looked through me instead of looking at me. I'd be impossible to miss with a chest full of ribbons and medals.

I finished basic and shipped to Fort Bragg. My unit deployed to Iraq three weeks later, just in time for me to get some. But our area of operations was only peace and the endless desert. Nobody had died in almost a year. No Americans.

My platoon drove around Iraq in humvees, pointing our guns at the horizon, hoping to draw fire. We escorted supply convoys. We transported detainees. We set up checkpoints.

The recruiter never said shit about supply convoys. And he definitely didn't mention sitting at a checkpoint, in a hundred and fifty degrees, in body armor, in a truck in the desert, just sitting. That lying prick told me about kicking in doors, calling in airstrikes, airborne infiltrations. Never checkpoints.

But, no shit, there we were.

When we arrived, the lieutenant radioed in our coordinates. Sergeant Schwartz and the other team leaders arranged orange cones and stretched out large, spiral coils of barbed wire

creating a temporary barrier. Two soldiers positioned signs at either end of the checkpoint. In Arabic and English, they read, "Caution. Stop Here. U.S. Forces Checkpoint Ahead. Wait for Instructions. Deadly Force Authorized. Caution." My job was to stand in the turret and man the .50 caliber machine gun, to provide security while the other guys set up.

Sergeant Schwartz pulled the heavy door shut as he got back into the truck.

"And now we wait," he said.

Scwhartz took a pinch of snuff and tucked it in his bottom lip. He passed the can to Carpenter, the driver. I heard them spitting into empty bottles. Out past the barrel of the .50, the dirt road shimmered like water. Two hours went by, then three. Farmers' trucks kicked up dust as they drove from one rural village to the next.



Ramadi, Iraq (Feb. 20, 2005). U.S. Navy photo by Photographer's Mate 1st Class Shane T. McCoy.

So far, we had searched two vehicles and had found nothing.

"Hey Sergeant Schwartz," I called down from the turret. "Is it always like this?"

"Like what?"

"This..." I said, "boring."

"The last deployment wasn't," he said. "We were up near Baghdad. Urban environment."

"What's the craziest thing you ever found?"

"No shit," he said. "This one time, we stopped a car full of midget hajjis."

Schwartz told us that Bobby Barrow, one of the other team's sergeants, had halted four lanes of traffic so he could take pictures. This was back when he and Schwartz were still privates. While Bobby was getting his picture taken, the search team found a wooden box full of Iraqi money hidden under a spare tire. So Bobby and Schwartz had to zip tie all these tiny little hands together while the lieutenant radioed headquarters. Turns out, all the money had Saddam's face on it, so they let the driver keep it. Before they left, one of the Iraqis tried to get Barrow to marry his daughter and take her home to America.

"Bobby told him, I can't take no hajji girl home to my mama!" Schwartz finished, laughing.

A truck approached.

"Punisher 7," I called it in. "This is Punisher 4. Vehicle approaching from the south. Over."

"Roger. Over." The bored reply.

A door clunked open and the truck rocked as Sergeant Schwartz stepped out. I heard the team leaders from the other trucks

doing the same. Out at the furthest clump of orange cones, the white pickup truck slowed, as if the driver was reading the sign. I stood in the gun turret and held my hands and arms straight out in front of me like a traffic cop, but he kept driving, rolling past the sign.

The team leaders, standing in the road beside my truck, raised their long guns and pulled the butt stocks tight into their shoulders.

I fired a signal flare, a warning. The flaming red ball arced past his windshield.

Still, the pickup didn't stop; it accelerated toward the barbed wire, our position.

"Light him up!" Sergeant Schwartz nodded at me.

I aimed. I fired three rounds.

The pickup lurched and jerked and skidded to a halt. The passenger's side sagged off the dirt road into an irrigation ditch. A door screeched open, and three female figures scrambled out, screaming and crying. The search team corralled them. Someone shouted, "Clear!"

There was nothing in the truck.

And then Doc sprinted up and pulled the driver out. She laid him on his back in the road, cut his pants apart, and stuffed handfuls of gauze into the gaping wound in his groin. And then she gave up. I heard the call for a body bag on the radio.

I clambered up out of the turret, pulled my headset off, and ignored Carpenter's questions about what I was doing, his warnings that I would be in trouble for leaving. I marched down the road, around the serpentine of barbed wire to where the truck had stopped.

One round had passed through the windshield of the truck high

on the passenger's side, a cloudy spider web centered around a clean hole. Another hole in the grill, driver's side. Fluids leaked from under the truck, oil and antifreeze. Blood soaked the driver's seat, dripped out the door and puddled in the sand to form tiny lakes.

I caught glimpses of the driver, with all of the people crowded around: the platoon sergeant, the medic, the team leaders, too busy talking about the details of "the report" to notice his wispy moustache. They didn't see the zits that dotted his face, because they were talking about proper escalation of force. They didn't notice me either, standing outside of their huddle.

Two young girls wailed on the side of the road. Their mother, or grandmother, was ancient and dry. The lieutenant asked the interpreter why they didn't stop at the sign, and the interpreter turned to the woman and said something in Arabic.

Her voice was papyrus. She held her hands out in front of her and patted her breast with her hand.

"She says they didn't know what to do," the interpreter said.

"Did they not read the sign?" the lieutenant asked.

"She says there is no school here," said Nasir.

The old woman patted her chest again and again.

"There's no school here," the lieutenant said, almost to himself. And then, not so quietly, "JESUS! FUCK!"

Heads turned to look at him, including the platoon sergeant's. I stood in the middle of the road. His eyes flicked to the empty turret 40 meters away.

"What are you worried about that for?" He jerked his head back over his shoulder. "You're supposed to be worried about your fucking sector of fire, dumbass." He shoved and pulled me to

the truck and ordered me back up into the turret.

I watched my sector while the platoon packed up road cones and signs. They loaded everything into the trucks.

The platoon sergeant and interpreter spoke to the old woman, telling her how to file a claim. They gave her a piece of paper with the information printed on it. Before they left, Schwartz kneeled and offered the girls a package of M&Ms. The smaller girl burst into tears and clung to the woman's *burqa*.

As they walked away, the old woman stopped and rasped at me, "*Asif.*"

"I don't speak your language," I told her. "I don't understand."

"She says she is sorry," Nasir said.

*

On the ride back to base, Schwartz kept telling me not to worry. We did everything by the book.

"You'll have to write a statement when we get back. Probably answer some questions, but just tell the truth," he said. "We did it all by the book."

It was annoying, the way he kept repeating himself.

I finished my tour of duty. The army gave me a medal. Later, they gave me my discharge papers. I grew out my hair and enrolled at a state university.

I didn't strut around town in my dress uniform.

*

Two years later, Carpenter's email arrived. It was short.

"Hey G," he wrote. "I don't know if you heard, but Schwartz

died. Wanted you to know. Hope you're doing good."

The first email came a week after I left the army. Donahue died. Suicide attack in Baghdad. Last year it was Bethea. IED on some road in Afghanistan. He had gotten married the month before. Now Schwartz.

At the bottom of Carpenter's email, there was a link to an obituary. "Staff Sergeant Michael A. Schwartzberger, age 32, died on..."

I hadn't talked to Schwartz, or practically anyone from the unit, since I left the army, but I felt like there ought to be more than just some dates and a list of people he left behind.

I read his name over and over. Schwartzberger. The name tape on his uniform had the tiniest little letters so that they would all fit. We had just called him Schwartz.

I emailed my professors and left that morning.

*

The honor guard stood off to the side with their rifles. Some hairless kid in a baggy dress jacket held a bugle.

Standing behind the crowd, I searched the backs of heads for familiar faces. Bobby Barrow was conspicuous, his shoulders as broad as ever. He was the only person in a dress uniform who wasn't part of the honor guard. Carpenter would be here somewhere.

The chaplain stood next to the coffin rambling through generic scripture— *The righteous perish and no one takes it to heart. The devout are taken away, and no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil*— I wanted to shout him down. I wanted to tell Schwartz's *real* story.

Schwartz was 20 when he joined the Army.

His grandfather and his father worked in Youngstown, but Schwartz was born the year after the steel industry moved to China. There was no future at the plant.

The Volunteer Fire Department didn't offer a pension. No benefits package either. Fourteen dollars an hour might have been enough for him and Melissa, just the two of them, but then the baby came.

Schwartz was an all-American kid: athlete, honors student, Eagle Scout. The recruiters had hounded him right after high school. Then, he had tucked their cards into his wallet and nodded and smiled. When things got tight, he dug through the drawer in the kitchen where old wallet clutter was archived with dead batteries and receipts of questionable importance.

Melissa's belly was seven-months-fat when the recruiter came to pick up Schwartz for basic training. She sobbed on the porch while Schwartz rode away.

"Don't worry," the recruiter told him in the car. "You'll be gone for a couple of months, and then you'll move her and the kid down to Fort Bragg, and you'll see her every night. Except for a training exercise every now and then."

After basic training, he moved Melissa and Emily to Fort Bragg. He spent every night with them, except for the occasional training exercise.

After 9/11, the exercises came more often. The nights he spent at home, he lay awake, straining to sleep. He never explained it explicitly, but I understood. Some part of him needed to record the sound of his wife's soft snores or the smell of her hair. He needed to absorb the blank hiss of the baby monitor.

On a tiny base in Khost Province, he earned an Army Commendation Medal and corporal's stripes. He kept a picture of his daughter in his helmet. He wrote letters home every week. The letters never mentioned rockets or mortars or any

kind of trouble. He told Melissa about his promotion. He wrote how much he missed her.

They had been in Afghanistan for six months and already there were murmurs about Iraq.

He received another medal and another promotion in Baghdad. He wrote letters. He kept a copy of his wife's sonogram along with the pictures tucked in his helmet. The unit arranged it so that he could make a phone call home on the day that Ashley was born.

These are the stories he told us while we were overseas together—his third deployment, my first and only.

*

Schwartz's unit was still in Afghanistan. The honor guard had been scraped together from the fuckups left at Fort Bragg. The rifle detail and the bugler were privates, fresh out of basic training or discipline cases. The detail's leader was a fat, dumpy sergeant first class. All of the able bodies, and minds, were in Afghanistan.

The chaplain finished the service. The fat sergeant stepped up to the casket and raised his right arm in a slow salute. I watched to see who would jump at the first volley of shots. As the last volley's echo rolled through the cemetery, the bugler started to play "Taps."

It wasn't even a real bugle. There were so many funerals, and so few trained buglers, that the army had to use fakes. The digital bugles played a perfect rendition every time, but anyone who ever played a brass instrument would be able to look at the kid in the baggy jacket and tell he wasn't playing. He didn't even know how to hold the fucking thing.

The fat sergeant handed the folded flag to Schwartz's mom.

Some of the attendees walked back to their cars. Others waited

to pay their respects to Schwartz's parents, still seated, looking as if they'd be guarding his grave forever.

*

Bobby, Carpenter, and I met at a bar near my hotel.

Neither of them knew how Schwartz had died. Bobby said Schwartz's unit had deployed eight or nine months ago, but like the rest of us, he'd lost track of Schwartz after leaving Fort Bragg. Carpenter hadn't really talked to anyone since he'd been kicked out—cocaine.

Schwartz's honor guard walked into the bar a little after sundown. They were in civilian clothes, but I recognized the fat sergeant who had handed the flag to Schwartz's parents. Bobby asked about my hair: "So, when your girlfriend is pegging you, does she pull your hair? You know? And, do you have to put it back in a bun when you're licking her balls..."

I nodded toward the door, distracting him.

"Hey bartender," he yelled. "Get these boys some drinks!"

We sat at a table and told stories about Schwartz. Bobby had known him far longer than me; Carpenter too, so I let them do the talking. I was drunk. I smiled and nodded in the right places, chimed in with exclamations when I was expected to.

We kept waiting for the fat sergeant and the honor guard to open up. They were happy to drink on Bobby's tab, but they stayed quiet, like we were still at the funeral. They seemed surprised by the way we described him. It was like they had never even met Schwartz.

We wanted to hear their stories about him, but what we really wanted was to know how he died. The obituary had said nothing, not even *where* he died. And it wasn't like he was a spy, out doing something classified. He was in the fucking field artillery.

The jukebox died. Bobby was content to give it a rest. There was a lull in storytime.

“Tell ‘em about that kid you smoked at that checkpoint,” Carpenter said.

My stomach dropped. I focused on the beads of condensation running down a bottle of beer, but all I could see was that dusty, old woman. I could hear her voice, her rusty tongue dragging across the roof of her mouth. *Asif*.

She says she is sorry.

I struggled away from the memory and looked up, hoping for an interruption, an earthquake, a meteor strike, anything not to have to relive it.

The men from Schwartz’s honor guard stared at me hungrily, waiting for blood. Bobby wouldn’t meet my gaze. He understood that this was necessary. If I shared my story of bloodshed, then they would tell us what happened to Schwartz.

Blood calls for blood.

“So,” I said, “this kid, who it turned out couldn’t read, blew through a sign at our checkpoint, and I thought I was doing the right thing, but it turned out—.”

“Dude!” Carpenter interrupted me. “Tell it *right*, man!” He turned to the fat sergeant and the rifle detail. “So no shit, there we were, in the middle of this fucking dirt road ...”

He told it all.

When Carpenter finished, the fat sergeant raised his bottle towards me, and then everyone at the table did the same. I waggled my bottle side to side. The label lay in shreds on the table.

“Sorry boys,” I said. “I’m empty.”

“Get me one too!” Carpenter called as I walked away from the table.

The parking lot was dark and cool. I pondered getting in my car and driving back to Asheville. The keys were in my hand.

Raised voices and breaking glass forced me to do an about face.

Inside, Bobby stood in front of his overturned chair, red-faced, cursing down at the fat sergeant. “You don’t fucking know. You weren’t there, you tubby shit!”

And now the fat man jerked to his feet knocking his chair to the ground too. “Listen, sergeant.” He pointed his sausage fingers in Bobby’s face. “You need to tone it down. I don’t know who it is that you guys knew, but it wasn’t the guy that I knew. Schwartz was a fucking shit bag and a drunk. That’s why they left him in the rear.”

“What?” Bobby’s arms sagged.

When a unit deployed, they left people back in the States to take care of admin stuff— bitch work. They called it rear detachment. It was for broke-dicks, whiners, fuckups. Schwartz wasn’t any of those things. This was a mistake.

“They. Left. Him. In The. Rear,” the fat sergeant repeated, accentuating every word. “Schwartz got a DUI, and then he got busted for being drunk on duty. His ex took his daughters and got a *restraining order*. He was about to get busted down to sergeant.”

“Liar!” Bobby said. Angry tears brimmed from his blue eyes.

“That morning, when he didn’t show up to P.T. formation, no one blinked, because, like I said, Schwartz was a fuckup. When he missed 0900 formation too, we sent a couple guys to his quarters.”

Bobby made harsh cawing sounds and the tears spilled over.

The fat sergeant continued. "When they knocked, no one answered, but they knew something was wrong. So, they broke in. They found him in the garage, in his truck with the engine running."

Bobby crumpled into a chair. Until now, I'd never seen him look deflated.

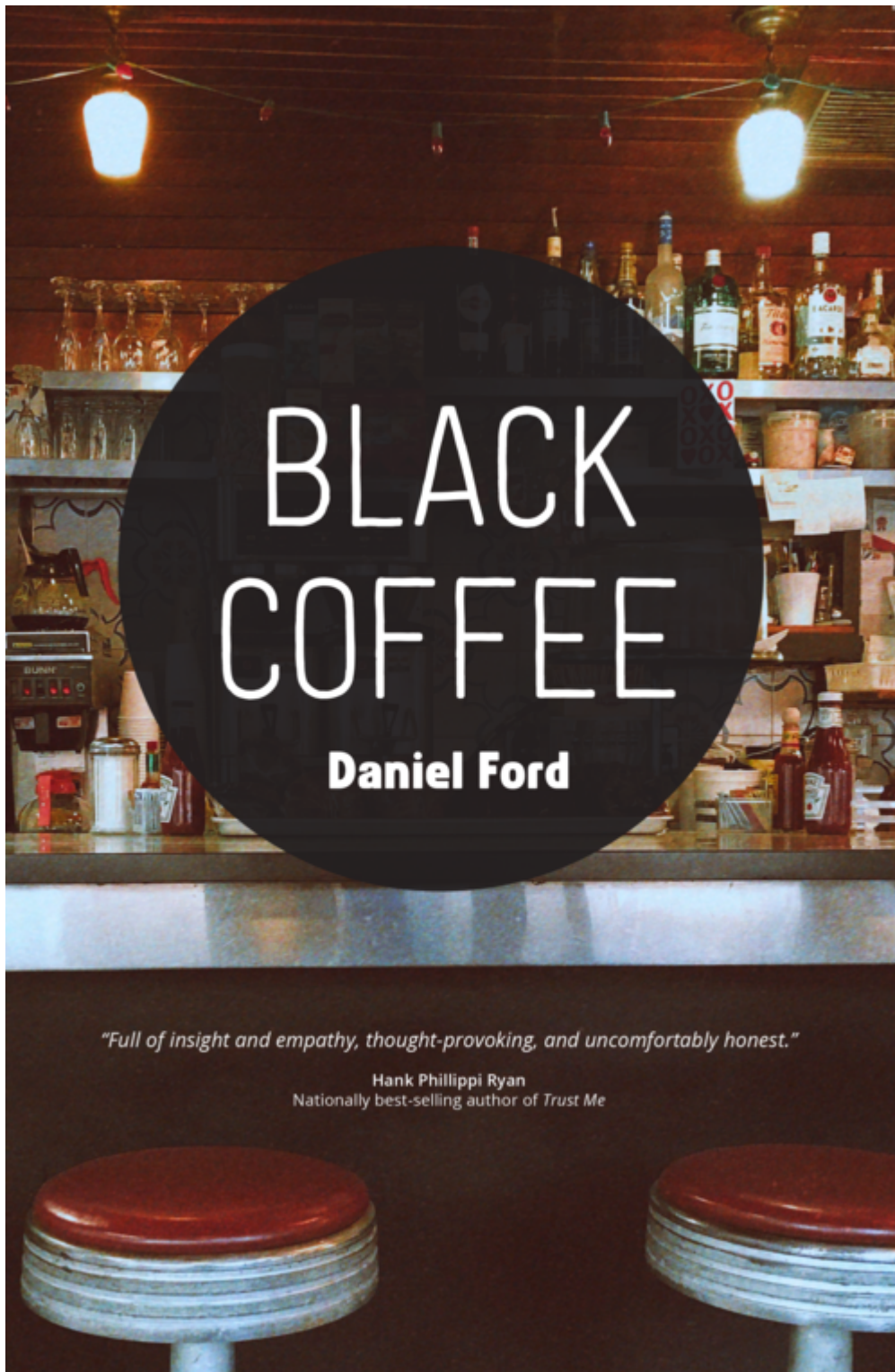
"Did he leave a note?" I asked.

"Sort of," the fat sergeant said. "That's how the guys knew something was wrong when they went to Schwartz' place. He wrote *Sorry* in giant, spray paint letters across the garage door."

Asif.

New Fiction from Daniel Ford: BLACK COFFEE

Excerpted from the collection [Black Coffee](#) by Daniel Ford, September Sky Press, June 2019.



"Are we ever going to leave this bed?"

"God, I hope not."

"We have to at least attempt to do something today."

"I'd argue that we've done plenty already."

"I mean real things."

"That all seemed pretty real to me. Seriously, what could you possibly want to do out there when you could keep making love to me in here?"

"You're insatiable. Aren't you hungry? I'm hungry."

"One of us can go get food and the other could stay here and hold down the love fort."

"Don't say 'love fort' ever again."

"Roger that."

"Trying to get used to the lingo already? Can you believe the draft went that high?"

"With our luck, yes."

"The news says things are improving, but now we need more muscle over there?"

"I'll give you a full briefing when I get back."

"I prefer you give it to me right now."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Ugh. 'Ma'am' doesn't sound good on me."

"Everything sounds good on you."

"He bedded the girl and is still in hot pursuit. You're not going to use those lines on other women over there are you?"

"Come on, give me some credit. I'd never reuse old material."

"Bastard."

"We're not going anywhere, so get back under the covers."

"Fine, but only because I'm chilly."

"Pretty sure all my heat is gravitating to one place at the moment."

"Well, I'll just have to go where the heat is, I guess. Consider this your incentive to come home."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Now I'm using teeth."

*

Mike's fifth therapy session didn't go well.

He didn't mind talking about things, which made his panic attacks even more arbitrary. If he were anyone else, every session would feature a breakthrough. For him, it was chatting with a therapist who seemed just as disappointed that they hadn't found anything close to a root cause.

Damn my parents for being loving and supportive, Mike thought. *Would have been easy to pin all this on an abusive mother or absent father.*

"Are the attacks happening more or less frequently?" Ernest asked.

"Same amount. More powerful."

"Takes time."

"I've been back a while."

This room reminded Mike of most of the accommodations over there—federally mandated gray walls and IKEA-like furniture built by the lowest bidder. Ernest didn't have a beard, which unnerved him a little bit. The guy could probably go a month or two without shaving.

How much knowledge and life experience could he actually have without the ability to grow facial hair? Mike thought.

Ernest paused his questioning to write a few more illegible lines in his notebook. He did a lot of writing during these sessions, which also caused Mike anxiety. His pen movements were swift, especially when he was crossing out full paragraphs. Mike was impressed that someone could think out loud and on the page simultaneously—even if that person was wrong most of the time.

“Do you feel like killing anyone during these episodes?”

“No. Feels more like high school heartbreak.”

“Did someone break your heart in high school?”

“Of course. Feels like we’re fishing here.”

“We are. Could you possibly have anything else to reveal?”

“I was an altar boy as a kid.”

“Did you get molested?”

“No.”

“Too bad. You’d be rich.”

Mike had told him about the killing. The fear, the sweating, the loneliness, the firefights, the bullets he took, the blood, her death, the crying. The ability to open up about it all only provided more questions.

Ernest rubbed his cheek where his therapist beard should have been.

“Can you still get it up?” he asked.

“You’re pretty old. Can you get it up?”

“Nothing wrong with your sense of humor. So you didn’t think of any fresh ideas?”

“It’s pretty random.”

"Like the duck?"

"Like the duck."

"Thinking about her doesn't necessarily trigger an episode then?"

"If it did, I'd be in an asylum by now."

"You think about the good and the bad?"

"Everything. I cry about it. I have a drink. I usually don't have to flee the premises or check myself into the emergency room."

"You don't remember going?"

"Not until I regained consciousness. Woke up to a pretty hot nurse. Wish I hadn't soiled myself when I walked in."

"What were you doing before?"

"Can't remember. In line for a movie maybe? I vaguely remember a woman screaming into a phone."

"How many of your buddies died over there?"

"We lost guys too fast. I didn't have time to make friends. I can't picture faces. I only have snippets of a couple of guys. How he was shot. What info was on his dog tags. A hometown or two."

"Ever feel guilty you survived?"

More old territory, Mike thought. Spinning in circles.

"Yeah, but I've always had bad luck. I guess I was saving up all my good luck to make it back. Living and carrying on seemed the best way to honor those guys who didn't make it. Certainly better than being angry all the time."

"Damn."

“What?”

“You’re well-adjusted.”

“I know. Pisses me off, too.”

New Poetry from Abby E. Murray

Gwen Stefani Knows How to Get Everything I Want

It takes a misdelivered *Cosmo*
to finally understand what I want
and how to get it. Gwen Stefani
tells the truth on page 89.
We believe in Gwen because
her apron of chainlink stars
sparkles over a black bustier;
star-spangled bondage, says an editor.
She slouches, holds the heel
of her right white Louboutin
in one hand as if to say Congress
respects my body, as if to say
rifles aren’t worth shooting.
This is what I want and Gwen
is here to deliver. When she slips
into a red sport coat and jeans
she comes in loud and clear:
grant proposals that write themselves,
cartons of baby formula
sold from unlocked shelves at CVS,

eight days of rain over California.
Because Gwen knows how to get
everything I want, she can afford
to be an optimist. Pharrell is rad,
her mom is rad, the whole world
is rad. I agree, Gwen, I do!
And I'd be giddy too in that baby blue
jacket, its faux-bullet spikes screaming
peace talks and pacifism,
bubblegum fingernails that tell me
soldiers who drop my writing class
are only on vacation. She pulls
her Union Jack sunglasses down
with one finger. This means Ruth Stone
never died but went into hiding,
it means the grocery store lobsters
have escaped, it means I can refinance.
Gwen steps into a pair of fishnets
as if to say the 2nd Infantry Division
won't return to Iraq, as if to say minke whales
are singing on the Japanese coast.

Notification

This is how I imagine it.

A black Durango follows me to work,
then home, tracks me to King Soopers
where I buy peppermint tea and milk.

It idles in the parking lot,
the driver obscured by clouds
of bitter exhaust. I know it is a man
by his shoulders, his grinding jaw.

I know he has drawn the short stick.

He tracks me home and waits
until the faint clicking of our luck
slows and stops. He steps outside
on a current of aftershave
and starched polyester,
pulls another man in uniform
from the backseat: he will stay
to help me make arrangements.

They use the handrail on the wooden porch.
They expect to be wounded.

Happy Birthday, Army

I'm wearing lace this time,
gold trim over a black slip because
Happy Birthday, Army.
I offer you these blisters
in my black leather stilettos
with mock-lace cut-outs.
Tom says it's a short ceremony,
we'll be done by nine
but he tells the sitter eleven
and I wedge a book into my purse.
In seeing nothing I've read too much:
the empty-bellied howitzer
kicked up in the corner of the ballroom
points me toward the cash bar,
casts a shadow over the cream
in my Kahlua and turns the milk grey.
I drink it. I order a second
before the emcee tells the men
to seat their ladies.

Uniforms droop by the exits
on velvet hangers, gas masks

sag on wooden dowels.

Quick, boys! Post the colors!

The lights drop and the general
mounts the stage in a shimmer
of green and yellow spotlights,
tells us to enjoy ourselves for once—
but first these messages:

thank you to our guest speaker,
the anchor from ESPN,

thank you to our sponsors,

thank you to the sergeant major

here to recite “Old Glory”

in the center of the room:

I am arrogant.

I am proud.

I bow to no one.

I am worshipped.

We are dumbstruck,

his recitation flung toward us

like an axe through paper.

Tom finds him later

and pays for his beer.



Johann Wilhelm Preyer, "Still Life with Champagne Flute," 1859, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, MD.

The chandeliers are champagne,
crystal brims sloshing with bubbles.
Someone's wife wins a kayak

and just when I think
a lieutenant nearby will surely jump
from his table to shake
a bag of limbs from his eye sockets,
a truckload of body parts
grey with longing for the soul,
a woman's voice whispers
from beneath the howitzer,
the rented microphone
on fire with song:
happy birrrrthday, dear arrrrmy
a la Marilyn Monroe,
and we are all a bunch of JFKs
in our lace and heels
and cummerbunds and cords,
watching a five-tiered cake
piped in black and gold buttercream
being pulled between our tables
by a silver robot
and shrug into the silk of knowing
we could end all this
with the flick of a finger
if we wanted.

Majors' Mafia

They want us to call ourselves
the *Majors' Mafia* and by They
I mean We because the Majors
are our husbands and they say
very little about what is discussed
during cocktail hour
at the Commander's house
as if our words sound friendly
but are muffled by a closed door
and the Wives giggle as if to say

we are not exactly *thugs*
as if to say they would *never!*
and a knot of words loosens
at the bottom of my throat
like a paper lantern released
as if to say *get out*, as if to say
I am on fire, and I have a problem
with the gang metaphor
but also the possessive *Majors'*—
that bitch of an apostrophe
at the end of my husband's rank
like I am, we are, owned
the way farmers own turkeys
and we are just as articulate,
just as grand, just as preoccupied,
because farmers are in the business
of keeping turkeys alive until they aren't,
farmers don't keep turkeys warm
because turkeys have rights
and these women can't possibly
be standing in a half circle
around a stack of spangled cupcakes
generating ideas like these,
like names, like possessives,
like we aren't making ourselves
more palatable by forming a flock
and nibbling sweet things,
and the sugar stars in the frosting
remind me how one can trick
a headstrong bird into eating
by leaving shiny marbles in its dish,
like the bird will think *marbles!*
I love marbles! then forget to fast,
and these women can't possibly
be women, they must be birds,
they sound like a lullaby
when they say we need a group name

because we need a Facebook page
in order to *express solidarity*
and they say solidarity is a survival skill
for all Army Wives,
and the paper lanterns are rising
again up my neck toward the brain stem
and my spine is burning
and I'm thinking about the tomahawks
and sabers and rifles and hunting knives
on the walls here in this lovely home
and I'm thinking survival
is a bread that I can't eat here,
and I ask them to excuse me
for a moment so I can check
my face in the bathroom mirror
where I find a sugar star wedged
in my teeth and I'm thinking
I could use an ax to fix that.

When Tom Asks Me to Call the Incoming Major's Wife and Welcome Her to the Battalion

Hi is this Becky this is Abby Murray my husband
(different last name) is the S-3
in the battalion where your husband is being sent I
don't know what S stands for or
why 3 anyway Tom's leaving this position and your
husband will replace him soon
you sound nice anyway welcome do you
know if there's something I'm
supposed to say or help you with Tom just said
welcome her and I guess I have
I don't know what does it mean to feel welcome
as a woman I really can't say
every week I feel more at home in a compact mirror I
think I was asked to call you

because we are both women my dog doesn't even speak
when I tell her to but
she does bark a lot she likes to speak on her terms
anyway the
battalion mascot is a buffalo so people are really into
buffalos here buffalo hats
sweaters earrings umbrellas leggings there's a big dead
buffalo in the entryway to
battalion headquarters it was donated by a museum in
Alaska the taxidermist
even glazed his nose to make it appear wet like he
was snuffling the prairie just
seconds before a glass case sprang up around him and BAM he
had a few minutes to breathe
his last bits of air while the herd backed away my
daughter loves the buffalo but is
concerned about his lack of oxygen he's not the only
symbol of death in that hallway
there are rifles and sabers as well I'm sorry
I hope you like it here the
winters are mild and there's cedar everywhere it smells
good on the coast Tom
says you're from Texas that's nice I was in
Texas once it was Texasy
I should warn you your husband might ask you to do strange
things for reasons he can't
articulate like calling women because you are a
woman and we should all be welcomed
to the jobs we don't have if there's anything you need
 try Google or maybe call
someone who knows your voice I'm sure you'll be great
 you sound happy



Philippe de Champaigne, "Still Life with a Skull," 1671, Musee de Tesse, Le Mans, France.

"Notification" was originally published in Ragazine.

"Happy Birthday Army," "Gwen Stefani Knows How to Get Everything I Want," and "Notification" appear in [Hail and Farewell](#). Hail and Farewell was [winner of the 2019 Perugia Press prize](#).

"Majors' Mafia" and "When Tom Asks Me to Call the Incoming Major's Wife and Welcome Her to the Battalion" are previously unpublished.

New Poetry from Frank Blake



Poet Frank Blake during his Army service.

We came home

And had nothing to do and nowhere to go and too much freedom
and money and space and women and cars and booze.

No more mission

Like a marathon runner collapsed at the end of a race and
across the finish line and not really sure how to stop running
or what to do next.



We missed each other

These other humans didn't get it and had never been in that place where it was not fun but we had fun anyway because we had the love of combat brothers

We were bored

Because no matter what, nothing we would do in a week back home was even close to being the team with unlimited government funding using state of the art weapon technology

And none of us yearn for combat

But we do wish we could go back to a time where our actions mattered and our friends were nearby and we all had a great goddamn adventure ahead of us.

And now we know

That "in our youth our hearts were touched with fire" and that everything that comes next will probably suck in comparison

because life needs us to be paying cable bills and walking dogs

And it's hard

To find meaning in things of little consequence when we learned so early on that the world is big and scary and violent and can be filled with acts of valor and sacrifice and hate and love.

So our only option

Is to live such a great and full life of found meaning in meaningless tasks as to make the sacrifices of those who didn't come home and don't get to walk the dog all worth it.

So we try

To draw as much life out of life and to execute a new mission of a great and purposeful existence

Because not all of us can

Because some didn't make it back.

Tracer

There is one round among many
Painted with that iridescent color of night time illumination
Designed to mark the path
Of bullets flight in jet black fear fueled midnight battles

Zips towards the enemy
A laser of lead and anger

Ricochet path betrayed by a bright glow

The rule is

That for every one you see

There are many more you don't

Just like the veterans suffering back home years later
We can see one every so often
Glowing in pain

Tracing the path of alcohol fueled rage and family splits and
no jobs and hard times fitting in

But we all know
For the one we see
There are lots more



Descent

On the escalator at the airport

I saw a young man headed down as I was moving up

He wore that same familiar ripstop nylon rucksack that I knew
all too well

It had patches from his units and friends and adventures

It had the same contents as mine

He carried in it lots of sadness for the friends he had lost

And guilt that he had made it back

And fear for what to do next

And memories of things he should not have done

And dreams of little girls dying

And lessons about leadership

And instincts to make his bed

And tears from current day family strife

And resumes to find new jobs

And drinks for when times get hard

And pills from the doctors

But it wasn't his rucksack that made me know he was a combat
veteran

It was the knowing dead look in his eyes that gazed right past
me and through me at the same time in that one brief moment
where our missions intersected.

Fiction from Sara Nović: After the Attack

Well, nothing at first, not right after. In those initial moments panic is still optional.

At the grocery store, the one across from your building on Frederick Douglass, or farther up on Ft. Washington near your boyfriend's place, depending—a shrill, unfamiliar tone piercing the Muzak. It startles awake a sudden bond between you and other shoppers, people with whom you'd so far avoided eye contact, mumbling a continuous apology for bumping into one another. Now there is camaraderie in the unison groping of pockets, the rifling for phones among purses and reusable totes.

Across the river on Atlantic Avenue, in the urgent care waiting room, you and the receptionist both jump. The emergency alert system, this is not only a test.

Or on your couch at home, your phone dead from the night before, you receive no alert. You won't see the special report ticker tape because you are watching Netflix. At the moment, it doesn't much matter. At first, there are only unconfirmed reports.

It can, as it has before, happen at any time, and therein is the bulk of its power. But city mornings offer certain opportunities—more people on the street, on subways, concentrated in office buildings. People running late, or still bleary-eyed, unseeing, unsaying. See 9/11, 8:46 AM; see Oklahoma City, 9:02 AM.

The West Fourth Street station is bombed in the morning. In your Columbus Circle office tower, a splay of technological gadgets laid out before you on the conference table sound unanimous alarms. The first alert does not contain the word

“attack”; it only says “explosion.” So you and your colleagues ignore it. Because the meeting is about to start.



Because New York is a big city, and old, and badly-kempt. Because, though you have watched your share of terror unfold live and on screens, it is still possible that this is not that. Possible is all you need, and in New York possibilities are myriad—gas line break, signal malfunction, flood, or trash fire. You’ve read the posters; the MTA boasts hundreds every year.

Nothing more will happen for a while. You get in line to pay for your groceries.

The receptionist will turn on the television just as you are ushered to the exam room, and you’ll scroll through Twitter in your paper gown, seeking a hashtag.

Or you’ll lie on your couch with your feet atop the armrest and let your eyes glaze hard against the electro-glow,

allowing one episode to flow into the next. It is, after all, your day off.

When, that morning, about halfway through the meeting you remember it is a Tuesday, you pull your phone beneath the table and text your wife. She would've passed through West Fourth on her way to class. *U ok? Saw the alert*, you write, then put the phone back on the table, designating half an eye to the task of monitoring the indicator light that might signal her response. A moment later you see the graphic designer making a similar move. The meeting facilitator, who flew in from LA, does not notice.

The second alert changes things. It goes off mid-walk-up, echoing through the stairwell, and you abandon your grocery bags on the kitchen floor and turn on the television. There has been another explosion; cops are in pursuit of a suspect; there is speculation about his race and religion.

You shiver in your paper gown while your doctor, a Pakistani man from Jackson Heights, wishes for the attacker's whiteness, laments the hate crimes his neighborhood will be in for otherwise. Why, when there is an attack, must they always suffer twice? As he talks you reach for your phone to text your roommate.

Or you fall asleep there on the couch before the computer, waking only when Netflix stops its auto-play, seeking validation that you are, in fact, still here.

After the second alert, you step out of the meeting to call her. She doesn't answer. It doesn't even ring. Maybe, you think, she has made it to class and is mid-lecture. Maybe she is stuck underground, train traffic bottled up beneath you. Maybe, you think, New York should get its shit together and get some goddamn phone service in the subway like every other city in the goddamn world. Some Russian oligarch is probably dragging his feet, trying to figure out how to wring more

money from it first. Fuckers, you think, aware that in your glass skyscraper on the Circle, many have thought the same of you. You call her again—no dice. You see Adrian—your partner on the project—in the hallway. He is on the phone, and you nod at each other as you pass.

An inactive group text once made to plan a reunion dinner (failed due to irreconcilable schedules), is reanimated as friends check-in. Quickly, most everyone says they are fine—stay safe—and you wait for the stragglers to respond.

You ball up the paper gown and jab at your phone with one hand, pull your clothes on in brusque, awkward bursts with the other. You hop on one leg as you yank at the backs of your shoes. You hear from your roommate, or you still haven't heard from your roommate.

You finally plug in your phone and the missed calls from your mother, seven in total, are how you find out something is wrong. You try to piece together the story from her news jumble. No, you rarely go to the place where it happened, but this is cold comfort, and you do not attempt to detail the reality of city living for her. You wake up your computer while you listen to her relief set in. Of course you take the subway, everyone does, but you're home now. You remember a guy you'd had a crush on at your last job and wonder if he is okay, then if it is creepy to seek him out online and ask. You refresh Facebook to see if he surfaces.

The attacker's manifesto has surfaced, though what it says doesn't matter much. Whatever the angle it serves as fuel for someone else's vitriol. Already the feeds have been coopted by trolls of diverse hatreds, practically gleeful in how the dead people are indisputable proof of their political stances, casualty numbers collected and laid out as evidence like a good hand of poker. As if in defiance, the body count fluctuates all afternoon. NBC volleys between 30 and 33 while CNN holds steady at "dozens." A reporter reads snippets from

the document, lines they have also turned into an infographic, to be shared and repeated in and out of context in the weeks to come.

Around the table, you and your colleagues are each engaged in your own ceaseless scroll, searching for a live newsfeed online. But the streams are jammed, or they are an erratic, pixelated froth—frozen in one moment, blurred and jerky the next, altogether unwatchable. Adrian drags a TV cart into the conference room, the kind the gym teacher used to pull out of the closet when it was time for the Sex Ed videos. Aptly, someone has drawn a penis in the dust on the screen. Once the TV is on you can no longer see it, but while the news flashes grainy Chopper 7 footage of fire belching up the subway stairwell, you still wish someone had wiped it off. You send another text as you watch the FDNY charge the flames. The hose water does not look like water; it looks solid, a length of rope lowered into the chasm, its impact on the flames inconsequential.

You want to go home, but with the subway down and traffic gridlocked, you are told to remain in a safe place as the police sweep the city for IEDs. Despite being forced to stay in the office, you are wholly unproductive. The guy from LA, trying to be kind, passes in and out of the room intermittently. At a borrowed desk he calls his home office, where the day is still new and unmarred.

The feeling when her message comes through: relief pushing up your chest with such force it is almost nauseating. Like eating something so sweet it burns your tongue, makes your stomach jump.

I'm good. stuck on train for a while. class canceled so headed home. love u.

You yelp when you read it, a weird, strangled sound, and you aren't even embarrassed. "She's okay," you announce. And they

are happy for you.

Politicians from all over the country call in to news shows to offer thoughts&prayers, having less to do with either endeavor than with being on record as having said the phrase.

You are out of the way and grateful to be so, way uptown in a place no one has yet thought to blow up.

You leave the doctor's office and try to decipher the map of bus routes that might get you back to your place.

Or, when you hang up with your mother, you remember you were supposed to meet a date tonight. You text him to ask whether you are still on.

You cut out at 4:30, a rarity for you, but you weren't getting anything done anyway, and you want to see your wife. You try to call, but it goes to voicemail. You're grateful you had some contact, you feel lucky. On your way, you notice the receptionist has been crying, but you don't stop to ask. Outside it is Sesame Street weather, such sharp contrast to the smoke screened footage of downtown, it feels as if it had all happened much farther away. Your phone rings but you don't recognize the number, so you ignore it and contemplate the nerve of telemarketers these days. You walk home, thirty blocks, and think it really is a nice commute on foot, that you should do it more often.

The doorman greets you, searches your face and, finding no distress, looks reassured.

"Good to see you, sir."

"You, too. All okay in your family?"

"Yes sir. And the missus?"

"She's fine. She's upstairs, actually."

He gives you a look that suggests he is trying figure out what he might say next. You register the question in your arched eyebrows.

“It’s just—I’ve been here all day, sir. The other doorman couldn’t make it in, because of the trains.”

And you remember him bidding you goodbye early that morning. You excuse yourself and get in the lift and rush to your door, though you know before you open it—she isn’t there. You call and call on the landline but it goes straight to voicemail like the battery is dead. A while passes before you remember the unknown caller.

You never hear the whole message. You hang up as soon as you realize it is the police, call the number back. They are uncharacteristically polite as they cast you around the circuit board.

Finally, an officer says your name, your wife’s. Apologizes. Asks if you could come down to make an ID.

“There must be a mistake,” you say. “I heard from her after the attack. She said she was okay.”

“You spoke with her?”

“She texted.”

“Sir, we’d still appreciate if you came down.” He gives you directions to Washington Square Park as if you are an alien, and in that moment you feel like one.

You call your boyfriend and tell him to come over for dinner, you have been grocery shopping today and can make a nice stir fry; you can catch up on that show you’ve DVR’d.

You get a phone call from your roommate sounding groggy, saying yes, he is fine, but they’re taking him to the hospital—somewhere nearby, maybe Brooklyn Heights. Or you hear

nothing and lament your morning quarrel over toast crumbs, or hear nothing and invent grand schematics for his escape from peril—perhaps he is still deep underground, inching along the wall of the tunnel, making his way home.

Or you flat iron your hair and put on extra mascara and things go back to normal. You feel guilty about it or you don't. You take a cab in a wide arc around the affected blocks and look away when you see caution tape. You arrive at the restaurant right on time.

You take a cab, get out after ten minutes, feeling sick, remind yourself that nothing is for certain. You run twenty blocks buoyed by that hope, hail another cab. At the scene it is not yet night, the NYPD's neatly ordered mobile generator streetlamps muted by a fuchsia sunset so striking it makes you want to punch something. The police have cordoned off the park, one corner swathed with tarps where the EMTs swarm. You know this is where you are supposed to go before anyone tells you; the policeman at the gate who checks your ID confirms.

In the makeshift tent: ferric scent of blood and antiseptic-as-cologne. A policewoman leads you down the row to a stretcher tagged with your last name. On the ground beneath it is your wife's purse.

"I don't understand. She messaged," you say when the cop pulls back the sheet.

"It's possible the message was sent with a delay, after extraction," she says. "As they're brought above ground and reconnect to the grid—the phones—it's been causing some confusion."

You stare at the cop as if she is speaking another language. She expresses her condolences, tells you to take your time and then return to the front table for the paperwork.

Beneath the sheet you take her hand, except she doesn't feel

like your wife anymore—fingers cool and taut—so you settle for stroking her hair, soot and shrapnel flecked through like glitter. You cry until you think your ribs might crack; you sign your forms and push your way out of the tent into the twilight. You stand there on the grass, holding your wife's purse and wondering what the point of that goddamn arch is anyway, wondering what the hell you are supposed to do next. Once, when you were fourteen, you and your best friend skipped school and got high in this park, but you have never been as dazed as you are now, generator stars boring through your eyes and into your skull, no hope of an exit wound.

"After the Attack" originally appeared in BOMB, June 16, 2017.