

# New Fiction from Matt Jones: “The Fisherman”



“You coming to work, New Guy?” Sailor asks, and I snarl at my nickname. Dude gives me the creeps—somehow they stuffed a three-hundred-pound bear who never blinks into a uniform. When the plane landed in Kandahar last night a sergeant with bagpipe lungs paired us off. New blood was teamed with guys who’d been here for a while—I got saddled with Sailor. Ain’t no way some Navy goof is gonna push me around, even this missing-link motherfucker whose voice rumbles like grenade day on the range.

We leave the barracks and the Afghan sun kicks me square in the coin purse. Next thing I notice is the stink. Like when your little brother drops a deuce under your bed and, reaching for a sock, you grab it by mistake. “Hey Sailor,” I say, “Does

it always reek like this?"

"Yep." Deadpan. "Civilians wisely bury their shit to keep the stink at bay. Here in Kandahar we pool it in the poo pond. During hot days the shit heats up and particles attach to the dust. That's why you can taste it." Sailor leads me down the maze-like streets of the base, where twelve-foot concrete barriers offer a little shade. On top of each, coils of barbed wire scrawl like signatures. In fact, all I can see is concrete barriers and kill-wire, the world's largest rat maze. Not some lifeless anti-oasis: there are troops everywhere with assault rifles. I snicker at a dead bird getting torn apart by ants like a bitch.

He's right about the dust, goddamnit. Fucking everywhere. Within minutes of trudging through it, I could taste the poo pond and feel stones form in my nose. Next there's this wicked-loud sound from behind—European police sirens wailing or how the fuck should I know? Sailor grabs my shoulder with a beefy mitt and we're both face down in the ass-dust. "Rockets," he hisses. The alarm eases into a snobby British voice of God going, ROCKET ATTACK, ROCKET ATTACK. Holy fuck, man. I'm not going to say I'm scared or anything—last summer after Phase Three of infantry training (HUA) I got jumped by four bikers and broke their faces with a pool cue, fearless. Still, having someone shoot missiles at my ass made my palms a little sweaty, ya know? But then there's this huge W00F except the dog is loud as six dragons. Gravel rains all over us. Alright, fine—now I'm scared shitless. Meanwhile, Sailor has hauled me on top of the friendly Afghan cactus, whose hook-like barbs itch for human skin. "Wait another minute, and then we move to that bunker," Sailor rumbles, pointing with his never-blinking eyes to a concrete structure across the street.

"How am I gonna wank with my hands full of thorns?" Pretty sure I sounded tough despite my little squeak at the end. Sailor doesn't say shit anyway—we hustle toward the bunker. I've got that feeling another rocket's gonna burst before we

get there and fill my guts with shrapnel. WOOF WOOF WOOF go the dragons.

Sailor flops against the concrete. "We'll wait here until the siren sounds again, New Guy." I'm not a big fan of taking orders from some cumguzzler—Sailor doesn't give a fuck about my murder-gaze, and he seems to not get that I'm infantry, and Army, and therefore better. Sitting in the dirt, he rests his feet on the opposite wall and shuts his eyes. Sailor doesn't look scared, but man, he's about as tired as a Dad with forty-eight kids. I'm feeling safer since the bunker's got these thick-ass walls—we're talking three-foot-thick concrete. Almost underground except you can still see some sky through slits. Cloudless. Piercing. Blue.

Sailor catches my eye. "The Taliban pay locals to launch cheap rockets bought from the Russians. Fuck-all for accuracy, but as the base is big, there's a chance that someone will hit the death-lottery and blow up a mess hall." Dry laugh. "I don't even blame them. The locals, I mean. Someone offers you more money than you make in a year to fire a few rockets at foreign devils? I'd take that deal too." Sailor trails off and stares at that little patch of sky and the silence stretches. I'm thinking, fuck this guy.

"Sailor, you got a perverted way of looking at the Enemy. We're talking terrorists and suicide bombers, right? Osama Bin Ladens? Fanatics who want to make an orphanage for your kids? I'm supposed to feel bad for psychos just because they're poor? Listen, Navy, someone shoots a rocket at me they deserve to bleed out slow." Sailor snorts. He looks like he's gonna say something and maybe he'll confirm that I'm the shit or maybe I'll need to buttstroke the fucker, but that siren blares again and the British asshole is saying ALL CLEAR.

We pile from the bunker and start heading toward the mess. Sailor says, "When we get to work later I'll introduce you to a friend of mine. He's called the Fisherman." He stares

through me again. Oh great. This Fisherman sounds like another goddamn Navy guy, another silverback pillow-biter dreaming of ways to touch my junk.

The mess is colored with the same shit-paint as every other building. Sailor flourishes his ID to a raghead behind a counter. It's like other messes I've been in back in Canada except there's a hundred people here and no laughter. Sailor wanders to a depleted salad bar and scoops cucumbers. No wonder he's grumpy—no fucking protein. I order the meatloaf, like a man, from a wizened dude behind a counter. Gandalf arches an eyebrow suspiciously, arms himself with a plastic glove, and tenderly places the loaf on the plate like it might explode. Not gonna lie, I've eaten some humble loaves in my day but that one could have moonlighted as the lung from the cigarette package. In the Army you choke down some weird shit and keep it down. I sit with Sailor and hack the rubbery mass with my plastic knife until it breaks at the hilt and Sailor hands me a spare. Finally get a chunk to my mouth. Never French kissed a corpse before but now I don't need to: "Just add Tabasco," I say, smiling.

After the meal we trudge down a street with big fuck-off tanks and trucks driving past. Tanks look different back home. These ones have sharp angles on the bottom and the turrets are belted with rebar. Distracted from the bubbles frothing up from the poo pond, and imagining what a swim would feel like on my naked skin, I lose situational awareness and follow Sailor blindly. Not that I'd ever admit it to him. I gotta get me a map of this place, man. There's no fucking street signs or anything. I could get lost as balls and end up devoured by ants.

Pretty soon we reach a twenty-foot-tall gate with razor wire looping along the top. Sailor teaches me the door code and we enter the Canadian compound. I plug a nostril and fire a rock out of the other, and it ricochets off a second door with a separate combo. Inside, air conditioning. "Welcome to the

Operations Centre, New Guy.” Sailor gestures at the room as if he’s pulling the curtain off a shitty masterpiece.

But what a fucking dump, man! There’s a couple of long tables covered with computers and wires which have a dozen grim-eyed dudes plugging away. At the far end of the room two large screens have words scrolling down them. Facebook chat for murder. There’s also a big television showing the news. Everything’s made out of knotty plywood, the cheap shit, except the computers and a well-stained coffee pot. “Time to meet the Fisherman,” Sailor says, guiding me to one of the screens at the front. No one looks up. “One of the things we do here is use drones to fire missiles at people putting bombs in the road. We watch them through our many screens, and when we catch them in a hostile act, we strike.”

“That’s what I’m talking about!” I say. “No fucking hidin’ in a bunker for me—reach out and destroy the Enemy.” I’ve heard about these videos: drone porn. This righteousness has spread all over the internet—assholes getting blown to bits. Sailor nods to someone and the video starts to play.

The screen shimmers into place over a dusty dirt road, lined with little ditches cracked with crotch rot. There’s this towelhead on the road, wearing pyjamas. He’s maybe seventeen or eighteen years old. The screen is gritty and the resolution sucks balls. Still, no cars, no humans, not even a fucking sheep, and the asshole is digging, no matter the afternoon sun.

“You killed this prick, right?” I ask Sailor.

He looks at me and for a second he’s a big fuckoff owl and I’m a mouse. He says, “We’d been tracking The Fisherman for a while, trying to make sure he was actually planting a bomb instead of working on the *wadis*. But here you can see a spool of wire and he’s connecting the wire to something in the hole he’s dug. We had the drones on site.”

As I'm watching the towelhead working on his bomb, the screen lights up in this flash. "Take that, you fucking raghead!" I cackle. There's a big cloud of dust where the missile struck next to the dude. I'm surprised more people aren't cheering. Killing towelheads gives me righteous wood, you know?

I figured he'd be evaporated, pink mist—get the mop—but no. When the dust clears the towelhead is on his knees and his turban is bobbing up and down like he's praying. Wouldn't it be a shame if the raghead pulled through? Maybe the missile missed? As the drone circles, the camera angle changes. I start thinking maybe he's not praying after all. From the side, he looks like he's fishing for something. Like he's reeling in a bigass fish and he's working his balls off to get that sucker in the boat.

I'm still trying to figure out what's happening when Sailor says, "Praying and fishing, New Guy. Praying and fishing. My parents were born in Newfoundland in a little coastal village. Praying and fishing were all they had." I see that the Fisherman's not reeling in a fishing line at all. He's got his guts smashed open, man. He's got guts snaked out all over the fucking place. He's just trying to piece himself together, grabbing handfuls of intestines and cramming them back inside. I can't hear anything since we're watching through a drone but the Fisherman's got his mouth open in this noiseless scream. The meatloaf backflips in my stomach.

"New Guy, this is a Battle Damage Assessment, or BDA. We conduct a BDA after every strike to watch for a mob forming, to make sure the dropped weapons aren't reclaimed, and to make sure the dead are truly dead." The Fisherman writhes. He's attracted a big swarm of flies, glittering grey pixels, trying to lay eggs inside him. He's still cramming in his guts, but he's losing speed. There's so much fucking dirt and dust on his insides that there's no way he's gonna make it. "Normally when we strike and the victim is this injured we'd send a helicopter and get him to a hospital. But some zones are too

dangerous, protected by RPG.”

We watch in silence. The Fisherman is still going. He’s getting slower and weaker, but he’s hanging in there. I get this awful feeling. My chest is made of cloth and it’s tearing. Some fabric I didn’t know I had, ripping apart slowly. You don’t know you have it until it tears.

Fuck this, man. Just gotta find the numb place. Just gotta get warm and comfortable and numb. I look over at Sailor and his face is as hard and cold and lonely as a mountain. I guess after a year of this shit, there ain’t no fabric left. Just rubble.

I don’t want to admit watching a towelhead snuff it bothers me, but after fifteen minutes I blurt, “Alright, Sailor, thanks. I fucking get it. It’s awful, alright? How long are we gonna watch this guy die, you sick asshole?”

Sailor fixes me with a stare. “This isn’t a television program where you can just change the channel. You talked shit earlier about how the Enemy deserves to be killed, and how the Enemy doesn’t deserve our sympathy. Well here’s something you don’t learn in your training. The skin colour is different but the guts are the same, aren’t they?” Now that Sailor has mentioned the guts I’m taking a closer look and they do look grey and slimy, even through the drone feed. The Fisherman is still twitching and I’m begging, actually begging in my head, *Die, man. Just die already, alright?*

I’m sure he only has a few twitches left when Sailor goes on, “Lot of people back home will want to know what Afghanistan is all about but you can’t explain the Fisherman to anybody. You just carry him wherever you go.” And as Sailor says this a dozen human shapes scurry down the road—I’m sure they’re scorching in those burkas. As they come closer I pick up details, you know? Like a few are wringing the shit out of their hands, a few have baskets and they’re collecting parts.

One woman gets right next to the Fisherman and takes his hand and you can see her wailing wailing wailing. I think of my own mother back home and how she'd feel watching me die like this and that cloth in my chest tears from shoulder to waist.

Sailor's voice is soft. "When you strike, you don't just wound a person. You wound a whole community. Just because your job is to drop bombs on people doesn't mean you have to be a monster." He goes quiet and I see his eyes shut down and he's a mountain again.

Fuck this shit, man. Killing from an office? Killing with compassion? I didn't train for this—I trained to be a warrior. Give me a C7 rifle and send me out past the barbed wire. I wanna be in the shit, with the other killers. I wanna sleep on a big pile of dead Afghans at night...

Movement on the screen: the Fisherman is still alive. He's sprawled all over the grass with blood bubbles popping out. His lips are moving like he's whispering to his mother. I catch myself leaning towards the screen, trying to listen, hoping he'll say whatever he's gotta say and then he'll finally slump down dead.

But the Fisherman will live forever.

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





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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Wanted her to see a real man."

"That was pretty stupid."

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

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

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. Count on it."

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

"Not on my watch, hombre."

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

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

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

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

"Every casket has a body?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

break his nose.

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

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

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

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

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

"Yeah. That's what I meant."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The blonde? Beats me."

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

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

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

Marcus clenches and un-clenches his fist.

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

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

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

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

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



I nod. "Thanks."

The small gold necklace around her throat says Misty.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I nod.

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

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

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

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

"One," I answered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He sees me. “Stay out of this, Boss!”

“Where ya goin’?”

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

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

shave. His beanie hides blood shot eyes.

"You can't just grab her."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"If we have to."

"What if I walk?"

"That's the smart thing."

"You gonna fire me?"

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

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

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

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

\*

“That looked pretty intense.”

It’s Misty.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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# The Gift of Trey

A nuclear reactor is nothing more than a glorified water heater. Sailors as young as nineteen, kids, bombard uranium atoms with neutrons until the binding energy of the atom is no longer able to hold it together. When it finally rips at the seams, it throws energy: heat, kinetically agitated neutrons, which strike more atoms and keep the reaction going.

Inside the core, we've planted the enriched fuel in such a way that we can control the reaction, but new elements are created in the process, venomous isotopes which will outlive us for hundreds upon hundreds of generations. When time has wrought language obsolete, when it has split the cities from their foundations, the Frankenstein elements will still hurl packets of energy into the dark, so that they can rest once again. We entomb them someplace where no one can reach them, where time may work its healing. Monoliths, literal pillars of stone, adorned with skulls and lightning bolts are designed in a gracious effort to keep our future selves at bay. All this simply to heat water. We're kids with matches and an endless supply of gasoline.

\*

My watch team at the nuclear plant has been operating in rotating shifts for nearly seven months now, simulating what life beneath the sea shoved into a tin can submarine will be like. A place where the hours of the day have no bearing, where sunlight has no relevance, a place where sleep will be a luxury and stress a constant companion. I work noon to midnight one week, then daybreak to sundown the next, and then graveyard to noon the next in an ever-revolving, never-failing pattern of lost memory and fuzzy intentions. I stand watch in the engine room of a submarine, quite literally, on blocks located in the center of a forest in the middle of nowhere upstate in New York, far from everything and everyone I've

ever known. It took me a year and a half to finish the theoretical, classroom portion of my training in the swamps of South Carolina, and now I'm here to receive my working knowledge of the plant itself: the boiling, unsympathetic heart of the submarine where atoms slam together endlessly releasing their heat for us to capture.

I've been floating for weeks now. That's what it feels like—floating, like I'm inside a bubble where all my senses are subdued, where light and sound and taste and touch and smell all pass through some kind of foggy membrane. When I wake for the next shift, my room is very dark. The windows are covered over by aluminum foil and heavy blankets to seal out daylight. The steady drone of white noise from the television blocks all outside sounds.

There's a numbness which invades my every cell. This world I find myself in, a system of autonomic duty, lays waste to individual freedom of all kinds. My thoughts are not my thoughts. My deeds are not my own. My duty is another's.

When I finally pull myself from the bed, the alarm having screamed at me for twenty minutes, I make my way through the unadorned hallway and into the small bathroom I share with a couple other sailors. I stare at the young man in the mirror without turning on the light, the day streaming in through the window enough to cause me to wince. I look him over—large ears, dark brows nearly joined at the nose's bridge, sharpness of the cheek bones. I hardly recognize him.

\*

Between schools, I was granted leave. I went home to Mississippi for the first time since I joined up. My father hosted a barbeque, inviting his enormous Catholic family. My uncles were there, a few of my aunts, and a dozen or so cousins including Trey, a close friend as well as cousin, born on the same day I was, making us the same age. Trey had

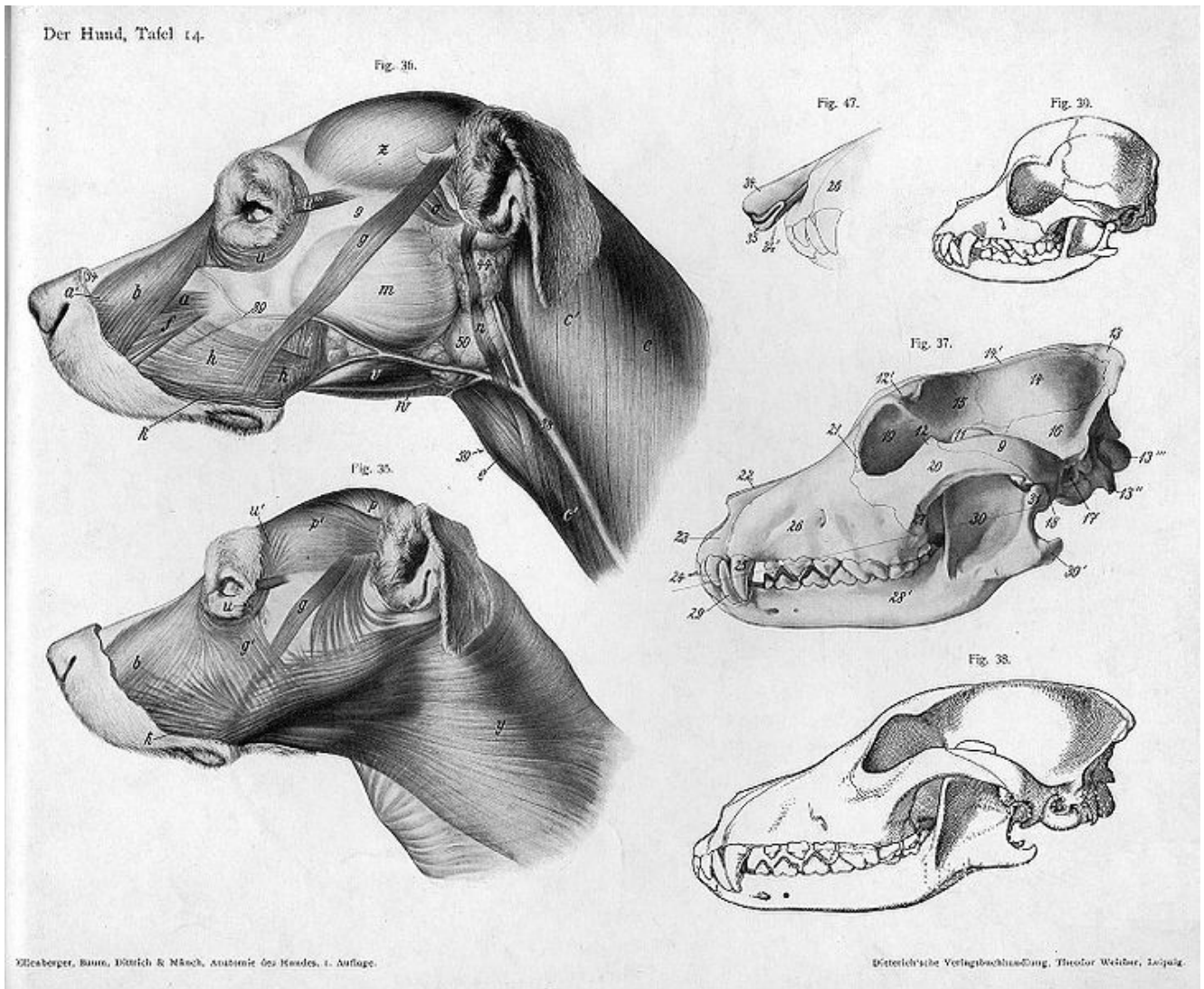
recently been discharged from the 187<sup>th</sup> Infantry, The Rakkasans. He'd been embedded with the first surge of troops into Afghanistan, then later Iraq for the ousting of Saddam. I hadn't seen him for a couple years and only heard faint hearsay of what he'd been doing with his new-found freedom.

Trey and I sat together on the porch swing at the back of the house overlooking forest running the opposite direction. His normally healthy face was drawn taut, dark rings around his eyes. He'd lost weight since I'd last seen him.

"How's things, Trey?"

"Ah man, you know, never been better," he said, smiling sarcastically, exhaling blue cigarette smoke between gritted teeth. He told me of his new place out in the country in Holly Springs, Mississippi. He bought a trailer on a few acres of land all to himself and his wife. Horses and chickens ran the place. He raised fighting cocks for money and for his own entertainment. He raised pit bulls as well. "I had to shoot one of my studs the other day," he told me. "He was growling and acting crazy with a neighbor boy, so I cut his head off and hung it in a tree on the property as a warning to the others." He fought the cocks on an Indian reservation near his home where the laws of Mississippi don't apply. Most of his sales of the cocks go to illegal Mexicans who carry over the tradition from their home country. "They love it, man. Can't get enough," he told me. "They've got me on all kinds of pills, you know," he continued. "I haven't been exactly stone sober since before I got out."





Hermann Dittich, 1889, from Handbuch der Anatomie der Tiere für Künstler (University of Wisconsin collections).

“Is that all you’re on?” I asked him. “The pharmaceuticals, I mean?”

He grinned. “I’ve been taking just about anything I can get my hands on—street pharmaceuticals, whatever,” he chuckled.

“It really is rough over there, isn’t it?” I said stupidly, thinking outloud.

He laughed. “Shit, man, that part was easy. Over there, I knew my job and I was good at it. I didn’t have to worry about bills or what I was going to make for dinner. The enemy was clear. He was the guy shooting at me and my brothers. I only had to focus on staying alive.

Over there all the bullshit is cut out. Life is just having to survive. The petty shit didn't matter like it does here. It's coming back here that's the hard part. Over here I gotta worry about being evicted if I don't pay the bills. Over here I gotta fit into this consuming, selfish society. No one knows what I did over there," he said, gazing out over the forest, "and they don't care. And now that I'm back it's hard to tell who the fucking enemies are. The bad guys here aren't shooting at me. Here they sit behind big desks in expensive suits at the bank when I try to get a loan or they stand there with their arms folded when I try explaining how I could just use a break. They blend in with everyone else. And the enemies over there are harder to recognize too, now that I'm removed from it. I gotta keep telling myself what we did over there—what I did over there—what we are still doing over there—is right. I can't live thinking what I did over there was a waste. I have to tell myself it was worth it all. I don't have a choice." Trey's hand began to tremble, but he noticed and tucked it into his jacket pocket before I could ask about it.

\*

Something inside of me shattered then, something which was already cracked. I never should have been a part of this, I told myself. It kills me to see someone I love in the shape he's in. Trey had been a gung-ho person his whole life. He was always wound tight. The reason he was in the military to begin with was because he was caught selling weed in high school and given the ultimatum between jail time and the Army. He chose the Army, but he doesn't deserve this, I remember telling myself, no one deserves this, to be used up and left out alone, utterly reeling from the fall. I can't be a part of something that does this to anyone no matter the side. I can't, I argued. Suddenly the war became concrete for me, the abstractions now solidified. A fog descended I haven't been able to shake since.

Returning to Ballston Spa and the Knoll's Atomic Power

Laboratory, I resolve to start the process of actually trying to get myself relieved from active duty with an honorable discharge. I set up a meeting with the yeoman regarding the application for receiving conscientious objector status, a designation placed upon some people due to their spiritual belief regarding the sacredness of human life, disallowing harm or death to another person. When the day comes, I find the yeoman to be a nice guy. He wears black-rimmed glasses and has large Sailor Jerry tattoos stitched along his arms: pinup girls wearing Navy uniforms and sailing ships flying banners, sea monsters and anchors. "I've never seen one of these go through, just so you know," he tells me outright, "but I'll try my best to help you along the way." He goes over the paperwork I'm to fill out to put the process in motion. He tells me I'll have to build a case for myself, much like an attorney, with corroborating evidence showing beyond a doubt that my belief against harming another human being for any reason is contradictory to my moral obligations. Normally in these situations the person trying to prove oneself can lean on letters and statements from spiritual leaders or fellow church members, but I don't have any spiritual leaders, and I haven't been to church in years so it's not an option available to me. The meeting only serves to reiterate how improbable this route will be. Instead of my hope being renewed, I feel as though my last option has disintegrated. The earth has crumbled beneath my feet where I fall five-hundred feet beneath the ocean's surface.

The next several weeks are spent with my black-polished boots hovering, floating above the steel-grated decks of my engine room, the whirring of the steam turbines, the hum of oil pumps, the clicking of meters counting off various plant pressures and temperatures acting as my soundtrack. Time churns on ahead of me, catching me in its slipstream just behind enough to be unable to catch up. I wake up, attend to my duties, drive home, and fall asleep without much of anything coming into actual contact with me. The memories of

the day glide straight through much like the unseen gamma radiation from the reactor itself.

\*

It's an unseasonably cold night in November and sleep won't come to me. Something forces me get dressed and leave the apartment, which I rarely do, makes me walk the streets of my little town. The cold doesn't faze me. My phone rings, but I don't pay it any mind. I can see myself from behind, as though I'm walking a few steps back. I watch myself, the silvery mist exiting my lips to wrap about my head before dissipating into the air. My phone rings again, the vibration of it carries through my thigh. I continue to follow me around the block, back to my building's door and up the two flights of stairs and into the bathroom where I can see myself shutting the door. The light is on, but I don't recall if I turned it on. My phone rings again. It's my father. I press the silent button and the vibration stops. Four missed calls, the screen reads. I can see my hand reach up to the shelf beside the mirror. I watch my fingers lift the straight razor my roommate uses to keep the nape of his neck clean. Without a sense of any feeling at all, I observe myself open the razor, placing its surgical edge against the bluish twists of veins within my wrist, and then I hear the vibration of the phone against the ceramic sink. I look down, this time inside myself, and see that it is again my father. Still holding the razor in my leading hand, I slowly pick up the phone after a few rings.

"Hello."

"Hey, Son..." my father's familiar voice trails off.

"Hey, Dad."

"It's Trey," he says.

Silence.

"Son?"

"Yeah, Dad?"

"Trey's shot himself."

"Is he-?"

"No, he's been airlifted to the hospital. They say he's gonna make it."

Silence.

"We're, uh, hoping you can make it down here. Seeing you would, well it would...I know it'd make him feel better."

\*

With four days off between my shifts, I get a plane ticket to Memphis, where my brother picks me up from the airport with a glowing smile and a hug lasting longer than I'm used to. After a night spent at my mother's, my brother drops me off at the entrance to the hospital where Trey's being treated. There, I speak to a nurse and she directs me to the ICU. Trey's father, Uncle Mark, sits on the floor against the wall smiling faintly as I walk to him. His face is sagging beneath the heaviness of sleepless nights. His eyes are blackened.

"How is he?"

"He's doing great after the shit he pulled," he says. "I should've told you, he'll be going into surgery here in a little while...he blew out part of his tongue. He's on a lot of morphine."

"Can he talk?"

"He tries to talk," he says. "He's been singing."

He leads me, in an exhausted shuffle, to Trey's room.

“He got really excited when I told him you were coming,” he tells me. He stays outside the door as I enter.

I find Trey sitting up in bed, legs stretched, smiling the best he can as I walk in.

“Hey Cuz,” he slurs, with upturned inflection.

“Hey...Trey. How are you, man?”

“I’m fucked up, isn’t it obvious?” he says, smiling through his eyes because his mouth won’t cooperate.

His speech comes out mushed and drunken, but I’m able to make out some of what he’s trying to say. His face is bloated and highlighted yellow with shadows of bluish-purple bruising. He wears a metal halo, a cylindrical cage around his face, screwed straight to his skull to prevent any movement of his neck. The force of the bullet broke his neck in two places. They haven’t been able to bathe him properly since he got here because of the risk involved with moving him so he uses a suction tube to clean himself: his saliva, snot, sweat, the thick oil excreting from his pores. His skin has a fluorescent sheen to it from the glaze of the stuff. My eyes follow the journey of his murky fluids through a transparent rubber tube from the vacuum he holds in his hand, through the air, collected finally inside a clear plastic jar filled with liquid the color of yellowed bile mounted above his head onto the white wall behind him. The sucking sound of the tube against his skin pierces worse than any dissonant tone.

He speaks in a garbled mess like a three-year-old trying to tell a story, so he asks me to hand over a white board lying on the stand next to the table. I uncap the marker and situate the board upon his lap. He has a difficult time holding the navy-blue marker and I have to reposition it between the fingers of his right hand more than once. The words are hard to make out as his handwriting is nearly as garbled as his speech. I have to reread the scribbled lines over and over

again before I'm able to decipher them.

"I've been rapping for the nurses," he writes right before launching into some ridiculous, incoherent freestyle about who knows what, as only the syllables and a specific rhythm are detectable. I'm laughing the whole time, more than I have in a long while. He's keeping rhythm by drumming along on the chrome bed railing. It's ridiculous. He writes how he's been hallucinating on the morphine he controls via pump with his left hand. He briefly describes surreal scenes of fantastical creatures and dream-world happenings. His brain tricks him sometimes into believing the halo is a chain-link fence his head is caught in. He writes of hearing the voices of the nurses gossiping and his mind blending it with his memory, building shitty soup operas he can't escape.

"devil playing with my trigger," he writes. "angels...scared. deserted me. dont understand. they're automated...dont know how it is to be gods experiment, guinea pigs with habit and conscience...grieve truth." He points to himself with the marker before writing, "still here."

One of the nurses comes to prep him for surgery, casually offering something to the effect of, "Don't worry, everything's going to be fine." She's telling him, "There's nothing to worry about." She's making an honest effort at resting his nerves, but a switch in his brain throws and he lights up. He pushes her with strength I wouldn't expect him capable of, and he starts frantically pulling at the IVs in his arm. I don't know what to do. I'm helpless. I stand frozen witnessing the scene as if I'm somewhere else watching it. He jerks the needles from his veins causing blood to run in trickles down his arms and onto the clean sheets before splattering abstract forms on the dustless white tiles below. Trey tears the electrical monitors from his chest, from his temples.

He's screaming and for the first time I'm able to make it out,

at least I imagine I can. "STOP! STOP! MY DOGS! MY DOGS! HE'S KILLING THEM! HE'S GOING TO FUCKING KILL THEM ALL!"

He's slinging blood around the room. He yells something about a horrific worm eating his roosters alive, struggling to explain to the staff the triggers aren't working on any of his guns, he's trying like hell to fight a war unfolding within his mind and all I can do is stand there, mouth open and wide-eyed watching the nurses freak out. The nurse who'd been shoved has picked herself from the floor and is now crying, her body limp and trembling against the wall. The doctor runs in with another nurse, yells for me to leave and from outside the room through the glass, my uncle and I watch as the doctor strains to pin Trey's upper body to the bed, shouting coarse commands for one nurse to "Hold the legs!" for the other to go get some medicine I've never heard of. The new nurse runs from the room returning a few moments later unwrapping a needle from its sterilized plastic, her face changing to iron as she plunges the needle into Trey's jugular, pushing the stopper down, injecting him with calm. She then inches away and watches, taking her place beside the first nurse still against the wall staring straight-faced and drained, the front of her uniform speckled crimson, Pollock-like, with blood. Almost immediately, Trey recedes. His breathing slows as his eyes collapse into shallow holes.

The surgery is rescheduled.

I walk down the hallway with Uncle Mark. "I'm the only one who can really figure out what he's saying," Uncle Mark says. "Just like when he was a toddler. From what I've been able to make out, he was playing Russian Roulette with this homeless kid who's been coming around his place. He told me this kid came over with the gun and was talking about wanting to kill himself so Trey says he decides he's gonna scare it out of him, said he told the guy they were going to play a game. He said he put two bullets in the gun, spun the chamber, put it to his temple and pulled the trigger, and when nothing



happened he handed it to the other guy but the guy was too scared so then he put it in his mouth and..." Uncle Mark demonstrates with his fingers, throwing his head back in an act he's probably been continually playing out in his head since it happened. He then turns and looks me straight in the eyes, his gaze commanding mine. "Trey said he knew he would save him, the kid." His eyes drop to the floor. "Here, I thought worrying about him dying stopped when he came back...I never imagined this."

\*

Upon my return to New York, I sit with my advisor, a Chief at the plant, and I tell him about what's happened with Trey and about my decision to apply for conscientious objector. He seems to care about what I'm saying, asking me straight away, "Have you had suicidal thoughts?"

"Uh...well..." I slip, having not expected the question. "I mean, I'd be lying if I said I haven't thought about it."

"I want to take you to the hospital so they can ask you some questions, just to see if everything is all right," he says grabbing his jacket. "Can we do that?"

I nod.

The next morning, as instructed, I see the base counselor, a pudgy, balding, middle-aged man named Joe Aschner, who grew up in the city; a civilian, thankfully. He sits behind a cluttered desk beside a bookshelf lined with psychology manuals. He gazes out through large, unfashionable glasses wrapped in a disheveled blue sweater vest, khakis, and worn brown loafers. He smiles when I enter. He introduces himself with a moist handshake as I sit across from him avoiding his eyes. He knows why I'm here and begins by asking general questions about my life: where I'm from, my age, my interests. "In your own words can you tell me why you are here?" he asks.

"I don't belong here," I tell him. "I made a mistake and now I'm finding it difficult to live with the decision."

He nods. Then he asks me if I read, and we begin to talk about books and authors. I tell him I've been reading Kierkegaard, how I understand what he means when he says in *Either/Or*, "I say of my sorrow what the Englishman says of his house: My sorrow is my castle." Joe puts down his notebook and tries to lighten my mood. He asks if I listen to music and I nod. He tells me how he loves jazz, especially the standards: Miles Davis, Charles Mingus, Charlie Parker and though I share his love of them, I don't feel like talking.

"Have you thought about medications to help?"

"I'm not gonna take the meds," I tell him.

He nods.

\*

Over the next few weeks, though the dream-states still hold sway over me, bringing with them a numbness I find hard to shake, and though the agoraphobia continues to try to coax me to remain beneath the familiar weight of my covers, I now hear the imagined words of Trey to the homeless kid echoing through my head. "You don't deserve death...You're just a fuckin' coward." The words help to ground me in some way, help me to place myself inside myself. My sessions with my counselor, Joe, begin to become the highlight of my week.

I start to feel again. Sadness mostly, but any feeling is welcomed at this point. And then, at the end of one of our sessions, Joe with uncharacteristic professionalism, seriously gazing into my eyes, tells me, "I have determined that due to conflicting with your moral beliefs, your involvement with the military is producing such stress upon you that it has affected your mental state to such a degree that it has placed your well-being in jeopardy. You are not fit for duty, which

places both you and those around you at risk. Since you refuse medication, the only course of action we have is let you go. It is necessary for your improvement. I am going to write a recommendation for you to see the Navy's head psychology department in Groton. I am going to recommend you be discharged as soon as possible. We will see if they agree." We share a smile.

\*

When the time comes, I drive several hours to Groton, I've been pacing back and forth wearing ruts in my mind. I'm panicking. My heart jumps along with my legs.

I sign in with the uniformed receptionist and she tells to take a seat in the waiting room. It's bland, nearly empty: no magazines to read, no inspirational posters to occupy my eyes. I'm alone in a race with my thoughts. After what feels like an hour or more a tall slender woman in a beige uniform addresses me, motioning for me to follow. She leads me to a computer at a lone cubicle in a room down the hall where I'm asked to sit down and complete a series of questions on the screen.

Would you like to be a florist? Yes or No.

Well it depends, I think to myself. Maybe.

Have you always loved your father? Yes or No.

Yes. I mean I've been pissed off with him, but yes.

Do you have a difficult time relating to others? Yes or No.

Well, sometimes...I don't think any more than what's normal.

Do you tend to choose jobs below your skill level? Yes or No.

Uh...I'm not sure. Always? I mean, I have, but...

There are hundreds of these questions, all asking me to tell the whole truth in a single word. It's impossible to do

honestly so I end up choosing conflicting answers to make them believe I've completely lost it. Afterward, the lady prints my results and takes them with us as we walk to the doctor's office. He sits in the far corner at a large wooden desk crowded with a computer and thick piles of white printer paper. The lighting is low and a dull brown washes the room. I sit in an uncomfortable chair as he takes my folder from the young officer before she turns to leave, pulling the door behind her. He reads silently for a few minutes then asks what I think has caused my "problem." I tell him in bare words I'm in the process of applying for conscientious objector status. He glances up from the folder to give me a quick glare before glancing back down. I stare at my shoes against the brown carpet as they lay paralyzed. "You want out of the Navy?" he asks bluntly.

"I don't think the Navy is what's best for me," I say.

"You're clearly not fit for duty," he says gruffly. "It doesn't take a doctor to see that."

I don't respond.

"Well," he says, as he takes his pen to a paper in my folder, "I'm going to recommend you be discharged administratively. The medical route would take too long." Then without looking up he tells me, "You can go now."

It's all I can do not to jump up and yell and scream and slap and kiss the old man's face and throw his piles of other people's problems and unreliable test results off the desk and into the air, dancing in circles as they fall. The news anchors me to the ground, the first real taste of certainty in months, the finest words I've ever heard, the voice of a mother waking a newborn from dark dreams.

\*

A couple months after returning home, I take the highway down

from Memphis to Holly Springs to visit Trey. The disassociation, the fogged trances I lived with for so long have dispersed. The darkness has lifted for the most part and I'm wading through possibility as a new acquaintance. Some days I just drive without destination. Some days I sit reading for hours in the park in midtown. Some days I do nothing but lie in bed, content with simply being my own once more. As I wheel the car onto the gravel drive, I stop at the gate where I'm met with aggressive barking and snarling from several pit bulls. My attempts at calming them accomplish nothing, but moments later I see the familiar swaggered gait of Trey making his way to me. "Okay, okay," he says, speaking lovingly to the dogs. "That's my good boys. That's my good boys," he praises them before looking toward me.

We sit on his porch steps in the golden light of the late afternoon sun, the clatter of the summer insects spilling out from the trees and thick underbrush as the heat lays upon our shoulders. Trey no longer wears the shining metal halo and he looks fully recovered but for the fact that he can't quite turn his head more than 45 degrees to the left. I sit on his right. "Just had a new litter of chicks hatch last week," he tells me, rubbing one of his dogs between the ears. "And the tomatoes are growing like crazy, man. So much to do," he says, "I can barely keep it together."

"Sounds like you're doing well."

He nods. "Neck hurts sometimes. But I'm okay."

"You ever see the kid anymore?" I ask him.

"I do," he says. "Got him working for me. Just too damn much to do on my own. Started when I was still in the halo. Showed up one day and asked what he could do, so I showed him how to tend to the garden, how to handle the horses. Ain't bad, but got lots left to learn. Still acts like a dumb kid most the time."

I watch as he fingers a tick stuck to his dog's ear. It's deeply embedded and the dog whimpers as Trey plucks it off. A thin ribbon of blood drips down the fur of his neck from the wound. Trey takes a lighter from his pocket and holds the flame to it between his fingers. I hear the parasite singe and then pop.

"Trey," I suddenly blurt out, "that kid didn't come over that night, did he?"

Trey tosses the spent body of the tick into the dirt before continuing to search for another on the dog's other ear.

I watch his fingers pass through the dog's fur as he smiles faintly, nodding.

I immediately turn away as my eyes fill with tears.

"Thank you, Trey," I tell him, the words falling from my mouth between breaths.

"Don't mention it, Cuz," he says, removing another tick from his dog. "Couldn't have you cuttin' out early on me, now could I?"

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## **Wrongful Appropriation of the Soul**

*In regard to cruelties committed in the name of a free society, some are guilty, while all are responsible.*

*Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel*

# One: Complicity

Every time I read another account of sexual assault in the armed forces—most recently, when I read Senator Martha McSally’s recent statement that she’d been raped by a senior officer, hadn’t reported the assault, and continues to support leaving the prosecution of sexual assault cases in the hands of military commanders—I think of the last thing that poet Audre Lorde ever said to me.

I said goodbye to Audre one night shortly before her son Jonathan and I reported to Naval Officer Candidate School in 1988. I didn’t know then that it would be our final conversation: the breast cancer she’d survived a decade earlier had metastasized in her liver, but homeopathic injections prescribed by a doctor in Switzerland had been keeping the tumors under control for four years. Audre was a warrior, and at that time she seemed invincible.

Still, she never wasted time or words. If she spoke, what she said mattered. One listened with respect, and remembered.

She put her hands on my shoulders and looked directly into my eyes: “Jerri,” she said, “don’t let the Navy steal your soul.”

In the decades that followed, I often wondered if I’d honored my promise or if the culture of sexual harassment and assault in the armed forces had stolen my soul. Like Senator McSally, who commissioned a few months before me, I was sexually

assaulted on active duty. Like her, I did not report the assault. And like her—like almost every military woman of our generation, if we're being honest—I was complicit in a culture that enabled systemic misogyny and abuse.

## Two: Assault

Unlike Senator McSally, I was not raped. My assailant was not senior to me. He was a foreign midshipman and I was a lieutenant, three paygrades senior to him.

The midshipman was a foot taller and at least fifty pounds heavier than me. He drank enough at a shipboard dining-in to imagine that I was interested and he was desirable. He followed me to my stateroom, pulled me inside, slid the pocket door shut, and grabbed me in a nonconsensual liplock. I waltzed him around until I could push the door open, and tossed him out so hard that he bounced off the steel bulkhead on the other side of the passageway.

I didn't report him. In the summer of 1994, the first women to be permanently assigned to American naval combatants had just been ordered to their ships. I didn't want my experience to be used as an argument that women didn't belong at sea. The midshipman, like many of the men who harass and assault military women, was technically proficient and behaved professionally when he was sober. His entire career lay ahead of him, and he had potential to contribute to the defense of his nation and



to our alliance.

Most importantly, I didn't want to tarnish the success of a joint mission with an important ally, or diminish my own contribution to it. Like all good military personnel, I prioritized mission accomplishment over personal inconvenience.

And by the time I was assaulted, I'd been groomed to accept abuse and to remain silent about it.

## **Three: Grooming**

Military culture grooms women in uniform for abuse like a perpetrator of domestic violence grooms a partner for victimization. Military women are too often isolated from each other, desensitized to sexual aggression, encouraged to accept abuse of power as the norm, rewarded for compliance, and then silenced if they dare to object. Commanders would consider those behaviors unacceptable and inexcusable if they occurred in any other criminal offense against another servicemember.

Military culture mixes rewards—camaraderie, a sense of belonging, the right to see oneself as successful and strong—with elements of abuse. The grooming process isn't linear. The techniques of desensitization vary, but they're familiar to anyone knowledgeable about domestic violence and sexual assault.

Grooming often begins in accession training.

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I met my first military sexual predator at Naval Officer Candidate School in Newport, Rhode Island. Our first eight weeks of training included a class in maneuvering board, a system of solving relative motion problems graphically and mathematically. The instructor, a chief boatswain's mate, made no secret of his contempt for women. We were of no use in his man's Navy; women's sole purpose was gratification of male sexual desire.

Another officer candidate, a prior enlisted woman who'd served as an operations specialist on an oiler, whispered to me in the passageway outside of the classroom that the best way to handle him was not to draw his attention. *Don't ever get caught alone in a classroom or deserted passageway with him*, she said. She didn't need to say *Don't bother reporting him*. He was still an instructor: one needed to know only that to read between the lines. I'd survived a violent sexual assault two years before I joined the Navy; I was so uncomfortable around that chief that I choked on the final maneuvering board exam and failed it.

The cadre brought me before a board to discuss whether I should repeat just the exam or the entire first eight weeks of training. I claimed that a relapse of bronchitis kept me up all night before the test, and showed them that I could

estimate a target  
angle—a basic maneuvering board skill— using the photo of a  
destroyer on the  
wall. They allowed me to retake the exam. A different  
instructor proctored it;  
I passed easily.

I assumed that  
the horny chief was an outlier. Some of the men in my class  
didn't exactly  
approve of my presence, but none of them behaved  
unprofessionally. Listening to  
women in the know and avoiding the occasional bad apple seemed  
to be reasonable  
strategies for sexual assault prevention—which I understood to  
be my individual,  
personal responsibility. I didn't realize how many bad apples  
were in the  
barrel; that a network of street-savvy, collegial women didn't  
exist everywhere  
in the Fleet; or that some men worked hard to prevent women  
from trusting each  
other and sharing information.

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Several months  
later, I attended the Intelligence Officer Basic Course in Dam  
Neck, Virginia.  
The only other woman in my class of twenty had a girly-girl  
name and an open,  
friendly smile. She spent Friday and Saturday nights at the  
officers' club at Naval  
Air Station Oceana, home to hundreds of Navy fighter pilots.

Our male  
classmates told me, *She's always talking  
about the pilots who take her out to dinner: where they go,*

*what they eat, and how much they spend on her. She's just in the Navy to find a husband. And if you pal around with her, people will think you're fucking every pilot at Oceana too. You're a professional, though, aren't you? You're one of the good ones.*

It didn't take long to figure out that sailors laud promiscuity among men and loathe it among women. I learned never to use the phrase "double standard" to describe this phenomenon; every man who heard it changed the subject to complain about gender differences in scoring on the physical fitness test.

I wanted the men I worked with to consider me one of the *good ones*, even if it meant being judgmental about another woman's love life, isolated from other women, and often lonely. I stayed cool and distant around the other woman in my class. She showed even less interest in getting acquainted. I wonder now what our classmates told her about me.

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In December 1989, I reported to my first duty station at the Antisubmarine Warfare Operations Center (ASWOC) at Lajes, a village on the island of Terceira in the Azores archipelago. I was one of two women naval officers in the command; both of us were young, junior in rank, and single. The command's mission, straight out of *The Hunt for Red October*, was to locate and track Soviet submarines transiting the central Atlantic using P-3C Orion aircraft.

In addition to serving as the station intelligence officer for two years, I was to earn qualifications to be responsible for the safety of the aircraft in flight, and to debrief the missions and report submarine contacts back to intelligence and antisubmarine warfare headquarters commands in Norfolk, Virginia, and Washington, DC. Although 10 USC § 6015 still prohibited women from flying combat aircraft in 1989, the P-3C community had accepted women in support roles for several years and was considered to be less aggressive and hostile toward women than the carrier aviation community.

The first person I met at the ASWOC was a Limited Duty Officer ensign, formerly a senior enlisted man. He shook my hand and asked, "Are you going to be like our last female intel officer, and sleep with the commanding officer of every squadron who comes through?"

By then I'd learned the value of a snappy comeback. I batted my eyelashes at him and simpered. "Why—I don't know! Do you think that's a good idea?" Then I turned away and walked past him as if he didn't exist.

Later he and some of the other watch officers introduced me to that day's duty air crew. "I'm Lieutenant N-.," said a grinning pilot. "the plane commander for Crew Six. Are

you like our intel officer? She only sleeps with O-4s and up.”

I shook my head and stomped my foot a couple of times like a Navy instructor who wants students to remember something important for an upcoming test.

“Gentlemen,” I said, “I am not out here to get laid. I’m out here to catch Soviet submarines. When’s the next mission?”

First assignments in the Navy are, as the saying goes, “like drinking from a fire hose.” I told myself that I had no energy for sneaking around and no time to be lonely. And since the men I worked with apparently had the right to police my relationships, I decided that dating and sex were out of the question altogether for the next two years. I earned my qualifications as fast as I could, stood my watches, and learned to write intelligence reports and personnel evaluations. I dated one man, an Air Force logistics officer, in the last few months of that assignment.

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One of the P-3C crews deployed to Bell's first duty station let her fly the plane for 15 minutes—with the mission commander in the copilot seat, and the vertical autopilot on. Said Bell, "I'd have stayed in that seat the whole mission, if they'd let me."

Women could fly

on P-3C missions as long as the crew wasn't expected to drop torpedoes on an

enemy submarine. My supervisor in Lajes, the operations officer, wanted me to

fly as often as I could. For my first flight, the detachment officer in charge assigned

me to ride with a crew that always read the same excerpt from a fifty-cent book of pornography aloud after they completed the preflight checklist. While the plane commander chanted a graphic sex scene, I tried not to think about the implications of being locked in a flying tin can for the next ten hours with a dozen men who'd just gotten themselves all hot and bothered. I refused to look down, and attempted to make eye contact with every member of the crew. Some wouldn't meet my gaze. Others squirmed and looked away.

One asked quietly afterwards if their reading had bothered me. I smiled and said, "The bodice-rippers I read are hotter than your crew's shitty porn."

I didn't complain. If women wanted respect, we had to act tough and never, ever spoil the guys' fun. The crew's porn ritual, just words, didn't hurt me. Acting tough and depriving bullies of their fun generated a lovely dopamine rush. I refused to think too hard about the effects of accepting bully behavior as the norm.

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On another day, a pilot invited me to the hangar to learn about the squadron duty officers' responsibilities. When I arrived, he and another lieutenant called me into the squadron duty office and told me to shut the door. On the back of the door, they'd hung a *Penthouse* centerfold of a naked blonde (I am also blonde) sitting in a spread-eagle split. My face was



exactly level with her crotch. I could count her short-and-curlies. Suppressed snickers confirmed that the placement had been deliberate.

Looking the poster up and down slowly, I considered the options. If I complained, every man in the command would label me a "bitch" and a "whiner." If I ignored the behavior it might stop—or the aviators might choose to escalate the harassment in hopes of getting a reaction. If I pretended that the prank was no big deal or made a joke of it, I might convince them to think twice about messing with me. I might even win their approval.

I turned to the smirking lieutenants, shrugged, and pointed my thumb over my shoulder in the direction of the poster's focal point. "I think she dyes *that*, too."

When I left, I waved cheerily at the centerfold. We had something in common, but for years I didn't want to think about what it might be. Many of the strategies women use to access and retain some of the power men try to exercise over us and over our bodies become maladaptive. Even damaging.

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When Bell commissioned, she had little idea that her career in the Navy would, at times, resemble a gauntlet of sexual advances by superiors, peers, and subordinates. In spite of this, she was able to maintain her faith in the United States, and confidence in her mission.

Over the

course of the two-year assignment to Lajes, three of my married colleagues

propositioned me. Each time I declined: *Flattered, but not interested.* They accepted the

rejections with grace; I had no problems continuing to work with them.

I never told anyone about the propositions. Certainly not the married colleagues' wives, who already suspected me of sleeping with their husbands—or trying to—just because we worked and traveled together.

In a “he said, she said” situation, either the men or their wives might accuse me of having invited the propositions, or accused me of sleeping with a married man—conduct “prejudicial to good order and discipline” and a violation of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. I told myself that I had too much self-respect to hook up with guys who cheated, and that I deserved better. I allowed myself to feel morally superior to my colleagues, and to pity their wives.

But I never learned to feel comfortable with the old Navy adage about detached service, *What goes on det, stays on det*. Officers are supposed to follow a code of honor and report violations of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Every time I lied by omission, I felt like I'd ripped off another piece of my integrity and flushed it down the shitter.

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For weeks before the summer antisubmarine warfare conference, held that year in Lajes, the only other single woman officer in the command (the administrative officer) and I endured repeated badgering from the executive officer and my supervisor, the operations officer, about who our “significant others” would be for the Saturday night dining-out event at a

local seafood restaurant. The executive officer wasn't satisfied when we told him we were going stag. Practically licking his lips at the picture of two young women paired with two hot-to-trot pilots, he ordered us both to bring significant others to the dinner.

At the Friday night reception, the admin officer and I cornered the two admirals attending the conference. We explained the situation, and asked them to be our dates for the dining-out. One had to depart for a family emergency, but we picked up the other from the VIP Quarters, stuffed him into the admin officer's little two-cylinder hatchback for the drive out to the town of Praia da Vitoria, and arrived at the restaurant a few minutes late.

We made a grand entrance on the admiral's arm and announced: "XO! OPSO! You ordered us to bring significant others to the dining-out. We're high achievers, so we brought the most *significant* other we could find. Will this one do, gentlemen?"

Everyone laughed but our supervisors, who turned bright red. They left our love lives alone after that.

The master's tools might not have brought down the master's house, but taking a whack with them from the inside and knocking down a little plaster afforded us the illusion of success.

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Bell's solo campsite on the summit of Serra da Santa Barbara, Azores, July 1990, looking north across the caldera. Her military experience was not unpleasant, but it was, by necessity, more solitary than that of her many male peers.

In the summer

of 1990, a married pilot deployed to Lajes heard that I planned to go camping

on Serra de Santa Bárbara, the crest of Terceira's largest extinct volcano. He

invited himself to go with me. He insisted that he would join me even after I

told him several times that he wasn't welcome.

I didn't complain,

but my fellow watch officers overheard him and offered to straighten him out if

he was scaring me.

I thanked them,

but told them I could handle it. *If the*

*pilot gets anywhere near the top of my volcano, I said, I'll just push him off the side of the mountain*

*and watch him die. With pleasure. I meant it literally.*

I went camping  
alone and kept watch on the one-lane road up the mountain  
until sunset. Not  
even a Navy pilot would risk the hairpin turns with no guard  
rails, the  
three-thousand-foot plunge to the sea. The pilot never showed.  
I slept  
fitfully.

I told my  
colleagues that I'd managed the situation and enjoyed the  
campout.

Not all  
empowerment stories are true. Mine wasn't. But I told it so  
many times that I  
began to believe it. *Fake it 'til you  
make it.*

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A naval flight officer, a lieutenant commander known for  
harassing women—especially enlisted women—returned to Lajes  
for a second deployment.

Both the watch  
officers and the enlisted sonar technicians assured the women  
in the command  
that they wouldn't leave any of us alone with him. The sonar  
techs wouldn't  
even go behind the sonar equipment racks if I sat at the  
debriefing table with the  
lieutenant commander.

During one  
mission debrief, he put his hand over mine and leered at me.  
Every enlisted man  
in the room stopped working to glare at him.

I didn't smile. His hand, I moved firmly off my body and out of my personal space. Then, with eye contact and a facial expression, I indicated that he'd better not do it again. He shrugged and grinned: *Can't blame a guy for trying*. I didn't report him.

The next day, the operations officer—the supervisor who'd teased me about bringing a “significant other” to the dining-out—called me into his office. The sailors had told him about the handsy lieutenant commander. He asked why I hadn't reported it. He'd already arranged for the squadron's commanding officer to put the lieutenant commander on the first flight back to Rota. He insisted that he would never tolerate sexual harassment.

I pretended to see no irony in his statement. I considered myself lucky to work with men who were pranksters and occasionally bullies instead of rapists. I wondered what would happen to the women at the antisubmarine warfare operations center in Rota, and what might already have happened to the women in the deployed squadron. I didn't wonder too long: they weren't in my chain of command.

I'd completed the qualification process for “handling it.”

## **Four: Silence**

In 1991, the same year I began congratulating myself for being tough enough to handle

military misogyny, Navy helicopter pilot Paula Coughlin reported sexual assault and misconduct at the naval aviation community's "Tailhook" professional conference. I admired her courage in speaking up, and saw her as a role model.

The Navy had one more lesson to teach.

In her essay "Cassandra Among the Creeps," Rebecca Solnit describes concentric rings of silence, through which women who dare to speak up against powerful men descend. Navy women watched Paula Coughlin descend, and we learned.

Almost immediately, most Navy men—even the Naval Investigative Service personnel charged with investigating the allegations—either dismissed Coughlin's story or attempted to discredit it.

Then they began to discredit Coughlin herself. The Navy grounded her and questioned her mental health. Suddenly, everybody knew somebody who'd known her: in ROTC at Old Dominion, at flight school, in the squadron, on the staff. They said she was brash, foul-mouthed, promiscuous (why else would she have gone to Tailhook in the first place?), and a shitty pilot. Claiming that she hadn't earned the honor of being an admiral's aide, those same men reasoned that the job had been given to her at better pilots' expense because the Navy was pushing to integrate more women into naval aviation. That was the first year I heard the term "political correctness."

Speaking up in Coughlin's defense was a one-way ticket down to the next level of silence: bullying and intimidation. *Are you one of those feminazis like Pat Schroeder? It takes a special kind of man to be a Navy pilot—what happened at Tailhook's just the culture in naval aviation. Do you think this*



*investigation will actually change anything? Coughlin's career is toast, whether or not she wins her case. And the witch hunt is ruining the careers of good aviators who cost the taxpayers thousands of dollars to train. Would you ruin a man's career over something like that? It's not like she was raped or anything.*

I disagreed.

*Aw, we thought you were one of the good ones, Lieutenant.*

Lesson learned: no woman would be awarded the Medal of Honor for jumping on the sexual assault grenade.

Coughlin resigned her commission in the Navy. I decided to stay, took another big gulp of the Kool-Aid, and jumped feet-first down to the bottom of the pit. The need for silence, I internalized as a personal survival strategy. I didn't speak up in support of Coughlin again. Women who challenged military bullies and predators risked criticism, ostracism, lower marks on performance evaluations, or trumped-up misconduct charges that could lead to discharge from the service—even dishonorable discharge. Few senior women were around to serve as role models or mentors; those who would discuss sexual harassment advised us to keep our heads down and pick our battles. We couldn't rely on women who agreed with us in private to stand with us in public. Men were even less likely to offer support.

In 2005, my graduate fiction advisor suggested that I write stories from the perspective of women in uniform. "Military women don't ever tell those stories," I replied. "That would just make things worse for every woman still serving." That had been my lived experience, and I believed every word when I said it. I didn't start writing about the Navy for almost another decade.

## Five: Barriers

Senator McSally needed years to decide to break her silence about her assault. Many of us do. If you'd asked me when I retired in 2008 if I'd been sexually assaulted on active duty, I'd have said no: I'd handled the incident with the handsy midshipman and moved on. Senator McSally may have thought she'd handled her sexual assault, too.

An admission of complicity in the culture that permits and encourages gender and sexual violence in the armed forces, and the realization that there is no contradiction in being both the victim of abuse and an enabler of it, can take much longer. Responsibility for sexual harassment and assault in the military rests squarely and solely on the shoulders of the perpetrators; staying silent to survive, or to remain employed, in no way equals consent to being assaulted. But men and women who served and are still serving bear the responsibility for tolerating and perpetuating an abusive culture that creates conditions in which sexual assault can occur more frequently, in which victims who come forward are routinely silenced, and in which those who courageously insist on being heard are denied justice.

Complicity costs us a fortune in integrity. Worse, when we fail to recognize and acknowledge the ways in which we individually enable toxicity in the culture, we pass some of the cost on to other victims. Military sexual trauma factors significantly in

depression for many veterans, female and male. It's a risk factor for substance abuse and homelessness. It's almost certainly implicated in the suicide rate of women veterans (250 times the national average for women). Complicity allows the culture of gender and sexual violence in the armed forces to appropriate our souls—or to steal them outright.

Audre Lorde wrote in her final book *A Burst of Light: And Other Essays*: "While we fortify ourselves with visions of the future, we must arm ourselves with accurate perceptions of the barriers between us and that future." Visions of an armed force in which gender and sexual violence is prevented to the extent possible, and properly addressed when it occurs, must begin with accurate perception. This begins with an understanding of how the culture of sexual harassment and sexual assault functions in the armed forces. It's a slippery slope that leads from inappropriate stressors in training, to the acceptance of gender-based harassment and sexual abuse as norms. Military leaders must also develop an accurate perception of how toleration of sexual harassment and assault, and silence about it, have for too long been the price of approval, acceptance, camaraderie, and privilege in the armed forces, especially for women.

Senator McSally's task force will need to develop accurate perceptions of the systemic barriers to reducing gender and sexual violence in the armed forces. Department of Defense leaders resistant to change and jealous of their authority, and conservative pundits with an antiquated understanding of strength and of sexual violence, will likely attempt to reward the task force for tolerance of the status quo and continued

complicity in the culture of harassment and assault. Members of the task force, and Senator McSally, must refuse to allow their integrity to become the price for approval, acceptance, camaraderie, and privilege. I wish Senator McSally and her task force all success in tackling the challenges of sexual harassment and assault in the armed forces, and welcome her, with sadness and regret, to the circle of those who have finally found the courage to break our silence.

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## **New Poetry by Antonio Addessi**

You'd caught  
the big one they said, you'd hooked a willow and

sank thigh deep into the muck. They hung up  
when I asked if they'd bring you home.  
It was late and I had my rollers in.