Collateral

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With thanks to our past supporters:

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Poetry

Diana Cole "Violets at Verdun, France WWI"

Diana Cole, a Pushcart Prize nominee, has had poems published in numerous journals, including *Poetry East*, Spillway, the *Tar River Review*, the *Cider Press Review*, the *Christian Century* and the *Main Street Rag*. Her chapbook, *Songs By Heart*, was published in 2018 by Iris Press. She is part of the editorial team for *The Crosswinds Poetry Journal* and is a member of Ocean State Poets, whose mission is to encourage the reading, writing, and sharing of poetry, and to create opportunities for others to find their own voices. The inspiration for this poem came from her trip to France in 2016 to retrace the footsteps of her grandfather, Major Edward B. Cole, a highly decorated hero, who died in the battle of Belleau Woods. During this trip, she visited PC Moscou, where he was encamped. In his letters home, he described the beauty of the violets that spring of 1918.

Violets at Verdun, France WWI
Diana Cole

> *The woods here are full of wild flowers, violets and many other pretty varieties. One could pick a bouquet for the table in a very few minutes.*
> Major Edward B. Cole

I stand in the very place
my grandfather watched them bloom.

Drawn up through dead leaves,
a constellation of violets
explodes every spring.
Not even the wounds the earth took,
the fox holes and mortar shells,
dugouts still visible, can stop
these flowers from retaking the ground.
The few hundred yards occupied
by one side and then the other.

The rootstock bore its own trench
as boots crushed each purple face.

Casey Cromwell

"The Night Before Dad Packs His Camo Bag and Flies 7,000 Miles Away"

Casey Cromwell is an MFA student and successful blogger at *Casey the College Celiac*. When she isn't writing about her Marine brat upbringing, living with two chronic illnesses or other adventures in her life, Casey enjoys long walks with a podcast, experimenting in the kitchen and reading all the mystery books she can get her hands on. This particular poem was inspired by her dad's deployment for Operation Iraqi Freedom and combines her love of narrative poems and surprising line breaks/form.

The Night Before Dad Packs His Camo Bag and Flies 7,000 Miles Away

Casey Cromwell

I place it in his palm carefully,
watching as callused fingers cover
the pebble of blue polished glass
in a blanket of scarred skin and veins.

Now you see it; now you don't.
Just like him. Tomorrow.

"It's to keep you safe," I say, biting
my lip to keep from crying. Twelve
months is a long time for a twelve-
year-old, and Iraq, a world away.

Yet I feel frozen in the heat of his hug
by thoughts that clamor, *Isthisit?Isthisit?*

Now is our last chance to share
a year's worth of goodbyes.
But the good luck charm is nothing
but cold glass. And my hand, already
empty.

Jack Giaour

"self-portrait"
"trans* man is discharged from the rosegarden"

Jack Giaour lives in Massachusetts. His poetry has been published in or is forthcoming from *Juked*, *Jelly Bucket*, and *Broken Plate*, among other journals. These poems were written in response to the trans military ban that took effect in April 2019. As a trans man, much of the author's work is concerned with the intersection between trans bodies and the cultures they are housed in. These poems are an expression of anger and frustration, but they are also an attempt to examine how trans (and especially trans male) bodies function in a culture that simultaneously values military prowess while actively marginalizing many of the populations to which its soldiers belong.

self-portrait
Jack Giaour

> *"Our military must be focused on decisive and overwhelming … victory and cannot be burdened with the tremendous medical costs and disruption that transgender in the military would entail."*
> *—Donald Trump*

surprise self
self-
protest with briefcase
with mug
with gun
with combat boots
with guilt
self-hiding with blood-
painted toes and dog tags
portrait with disruption
portrait as burden
portrait
last with price tags
self-portrait
with my rage
self-made
head with beard and adam's apple
self-portrait
voodoo

trans* man is discharged from the rosegarden
Jack Giaour

> *"Our military must be focused on decisive and overwhelming … victory and cannot be burdened with the tremendous medical costs and disruption that transgender in the military would entail." —Donald Trump*

here i funeral here i romance here i family here i friendship
here i worship here i serve here in the rosegarden my hair is full of thorns here in the rosegarden my throat my fingers my bones
are full of worms and full of holes
i wonder where the worms go when the ground is frozen
i wonder where i go when there's an angel at the gate
with my own sword burning in his hands
knowledge is a burden but it doesn't have to be
knowledge is disruption but it doesn't have to be
i have been here i have been here i have been here

living in the garden dying in the garden fucking in the garden loving in the garden hating in the garden and i have been eating the fruit the entire time
forbidden or not i have known my manhood and i have fought abroad for the garden
and now you want me out you crown me with your own thorns and complain my blood is a burden to clean
you demand my death and call the execution a disruption
i am a burden but i don't have to be
i am a disruption but i don't want to be
i have been here in the garden as long has you have
i have glutted myself on the fruit of the tree
i know myself i know my manhood
and leaving me in the desert
won't change that

Robin Gow

"Beam"
"The Gods of Dead Animals"

Robin Gow's poetry has recently been published in *POETRY*, the *Gateway Review*, and *tilde*. He is a graduate student at Adelphi University pursing an MFA in Creative Writing. He is the Editor at Large for *Village of Crickets*, Social Media Coordinator for *Oyster River Pages* and interns for *Porkbelly Press*. He is an out and proud bisexual transgender man passionate about LGBT issues. He loves poetry that lilts in and out of reality and his queerness is also the central axis of his work. About these poems, he writes, "I was thinking about how a body in space might witness violence on earth and feel powerless. There's a lot about body / absence of body and this is something I feel when considering the massive amounts of violence we witness at war that permeate all aspects of our life. There's an undertone of this kind of fracturing."

Beam
Robin Gow

I make an
"O" shape
of my mouth—
remembering a boy
who ate spaghetti
all wrong—
no twirled fork
just the strand
thrashing with sauce.
That's how
I eat strands of
light when they
try to reach another
galaxy—I tell
them they're part
of my family now.
There is a dinner
table that I have
to keep snapping
apart—at first it was
out of anger but
now I return to it
in the hopes it
will have more chairs.
In the hopes
that someone else
will show up and
make little table settings
for a family that
I might have broke
along with the table.
What better
metaphor for all this
than a table but that's
just the problem it's
not a metaphor—
the table really floats
out there no matter
how many times
I crumple its density.
I spit out beams
of light on the table
and pretend they're
my children—I tell

them that I love them
as long as they
don't run away
and as long as they
never leave the table.
Yes, I think there
was a boy and
he set the table
and light came in
the window and
sat at each of the seats
and he hated the light
and he hated the table
and he didn't
want there to be
any tables or any chairs
just a blank kitchen floor
a mouth in
the shape of an "O"
to swallow strands
of window.

The Gods of Dead Animals
Robin Gow

The worst part is

the book shelves keep falling

and, inside myself, I spend all day re-stacking them.

They have to be alphabetical. There was that

boy and he would distract himself from wanting

to dissolve by alphabetizing his books. I'm doing the same thing

only I don't have the choice to melt. I'm stuck here

with no body and all this energy.

It would be unwise

to say dying is a choice and maybe I only feel like that

because I'm young and full of too many book shelves.

I go alphabetical by title, not author. None of my books

have authors anyway. I start with A: *Absalom Absalom,*

Animal Farm, As I Lay Dying

a falcon wrote

two of those I think or at least

I might remember. The book shelf

is a cross at this point—hoisted up again

and again—don't get me wrong I'm not calling

myself a savior. I think I'm that guy who

carries the cross for Jesus a few minutes

only in this version of the story

Jesus pushes the book shelves over.

I don't know why I bother with

the Gods of dead animals.

If there is a God, they are the one who knocks

over the shelves.

I find knees to get down on.

I pick up the books but am too scared to try

and read them. What if I don't know words anymore?

What if I go to read and they words are torn apart

like everything else inside me.

If I could I would be gentler.

If I could I would work in a library and piece back together

old books with fractured spines.

Somedays I push the book shelves over myself

because then at least I have more control.

This shelf started with C: *Crime and Punishment,*

Catch: 22, Clockwork Orange

Stuart Gunter "Today You're Just Late, But Eventually You Will Betray Me"

Stuart Gunter is working toward a Master's Degree in Mental Health Counseling and lives in Schuyler, Virginia. He likes to paddle the Rockfish River and play drums in obscure rock bands. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Broad Street*, *Gravel*, *Into the Void*, *Streetlight*, and *The Madison Review*, among others. Something Anthony Bourdain said in an episode of *No Reservations* inspired the title of the poem, and the lingering effects of his father dying in a plane crash during a training exercise at Fort Bragg, North Carolina on March 10, 1981, inspired the poem.

Today You're Just Late, but Eventually You Will Betray Me
Stuart Gunter

In Memory of Anthony Bourdain

I walk up the stairs, under the watchful
gaze of my dead father: a portrait
of his teenage self: collared shirt, piercing
blue eyes. Before they emblazoned *Hun's*
Hammer on the fuselage of his F-105. He
didn't even know I would exist, and yet,
here he is, darkening his look
at me. Knowing my failures, seeming
to say, *What happened? You were*
a happy kid. I was. Now I am content,
but sad. I miss appointments. My marriage
is failing to an ominous degree. I procrastinate
in everything but art. He looks at me
as if to say, *Today, you're just late,*
but eventually you will betray me.

Lynn Houston "Becoming Icarus"

Lynn Marie Houston is a poet who also writes about mobile air traffic control towers. She writes free verse and XML code. Her books have gold stickers on them and can be purchased online or at The Palette & The Page in Elkton, Maryland. Her latest collection, forthcoming from Middle West Press in December 2019, explores the legacy of a childhood spent in the shadow of her father's service in Vietnam. "Becoming Icarus" is a poem about loss from the perspective of a woman who survives the death of her boyfriend in combat. The ending reminds readers that what unites us all—no matter our race or country of origin--is human suffering in response to violence and loss.

Becoming Icarus
Lynn Houston

Forget Penelope. No one says anything
about the girl that Icarus leaves
when he plummets from the height
of a giddy afternoon. No bride,
the girl shrinks amid a field of tall wheat,
nervously searches the sky the way small animals do.
She is young. She wants to have loved him
through a thousand lives.

She's at the first stage, praying
that there's been some terrible mistake.
But what is prayer if not whispers sent toward a world
that doesn't speak our language of desire?
Burnt feathers fall, the soft shrapnel of his machine.
The girl sees no other sign but this: the calm that comes
when one solves the singular mystery of how it ends.

Stage two, pleading. Why did he do it?
Storybooks cover the heroic escape.
Moral scripture tells the rest: how not to
become him, how to avoid human hubris.
An easy tale to tell from home, not as clear
from the battlefield. After all, he was a man
who did and said the stupid things of war.
And now he would never know how the stupid
smarten as they age, then suffer.

Dreams are no longer dreams for the girl
in the field with her fistfuls of feathered pillow.
She falls every night, becomes her loss, closer
on every imagined descent to the shaded ground.

No one tells her that in every field
in every country, someone stands
looking skyward, suffering.

Emma Johnson-Rivard "War Story"

Emma Johnson-Rivard received her Master's in Creative Writing from Hamline University. She currently lives in Minnesota with her dogs and far too many books. Her work has appeared in *Mistake House*, the *Nixes Mate Review*, and *Moon City Review*. Her chapbook, *The Witch's Cat And Her Fateful Murder Ballads*, was released in 2018 by the Esthetic Apostle. "War Story" was written in honor of her father, a former Navy lieutenant, and the stories he told about Hell Week and his time in Vietnam.

War Story
Emma Johnson-Rivard

I shot a gun once and thought, *all right.*
It was only an air rifle but you know
that was later.

Remember the war stories?
Dad never had those.
There were medal stories and hell stories that made you laugh.

Sorry, I lied.
There was one war story.

Wanna hear something funny?
People died when they went to piss.
You'd think it was a punch line but
they did.

Here's your war story.
Men dying with their pants down,
whoops. There you go.

Remember, your dad went jungle hopping at your age.

That was before.

You're that age now.
You'll never piss outside
except that you did, once. Camping.
Later, your friend tells you,
I got raped once.
Knew him. Liked him. First time didn't count.
Did you tell anyone?
No, but I'm telling you.

My dad had four kids but I'm the last daughter with your war stories,
wow. Remember when you drowned in a well? That never happened
but it could.

He told me once hell was a week but that was a lie,
that was a filthy goddamn lie, I know.
My father told me but I'm telling you:

Here's your war story.

Mateo Lara "Portrait of Sanctuary in Six Stanzas"

Mateo Lara is queer & latinx, originally from Bakersfield, California. He received his B.A. in English at CSU Bakersfield. He is currently working on his M.F.A. in Poetry at Randolph College in Lynchburg. He is an editor for RabidOak online literary journal. This piece was inspired by the importance of remembering violence against LGBTQ lives, to prevent it from happening again and to remind others of the fight for equality. We are all deserving of safety.

Portrait of Sanctuary in Six Stanzas

Mateo Lara

One: my dead friends have halos. no matter what the Christians say about their queer bodies—I burn scented candles in their memory, memory of candy and citrus, lemon bitter.

Two: infiltrate a dome of prayer, I bend the prayer off the hands and lick the sweat from my best friend's arm, he shivers in ecstasy or bewilderment, either way the crucifix around his neck remains, dangling, like every worry & threat.

Three: my friends did not get proper burials; I see them in my dreams. I stopped crying for them, I still cry for my grandpa, the fever of grief imbalanced.

Four: brown boy elects to be called by his white name he loses his tongue after his mother has his sister, he loses his image, he loses his identity, he loses and he loses and he loses.

Five: brown boy is not a boy, but society tossed him into a binary. boy fears to be anything but what society commanded, commandeers his growing up. anguish over the dead queer friends, after the violence, the violence in a church, the church of Christ, god hollow is thy name.

Six: we built new homes from ash and tears. we built homes from brick and fire. and glass and glitter and oil and blood. and semen and sweat. we glint like the gold in our mouths and between our teeth, in our veins, which is why they kill us, so we hide, we protect, in this new space. carve initials in the space. in the space. in the space.

Jonathan Andrew Pérez "A Scrub Hairstreak Butterfly"

Jonathan Andrew Pérez, Esq. has published poetry online and in print in *Prelude*, *The River Heron Review*, *Blood Tree Literature*, *The Write Launch*, *Meniscus Literary Journal*, *Rigorous*, *The Florida Review*, *Panoply Magazine*, *The Raw Art Review*, *Junto Magazine*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *Piltdown Review*, *Yes*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, *Mud Season Review*, *Meat for Tea: the Valley Review*, *Poached Hair*, *The Esthetic Apostle*, *The Tulane Review*, *Spectrum Journal*, *The Tiny Journal, Muse / A Journal*, *The Bookends Review*, *The Westchester Review*, *Metafore*, *Crack the Spine Quarterly*, *Silver Needle Press*, *Projector Magazine*, *Cape Cod Poetry Review*, *Rise Up Review*, *BARNHOUSE*, *The Chicago Quarterly Review*, *The Worcester Review*, *Abstract: Contemporary Expressions*, *Cathexis Northwest Press*, *Inklette*, *Rumblefish Quarterly*, *Hiram Poetry Review* and *Quiddity on NPR*. He has poetry forthcoming in *POETRY Magazine*.

Jonathan's debut chapbook, *Criminal Justice Pastoral* is to be published by Finishing Line Press in January 2020.

Jonathan was selected by Cave Canem in 2018 and 2019 for workshops with Cortney Lamar Charleston, and at the Virginia Quarterly with Jericho Brown.

He has a day job as a trial attorney.

A Scrub Hairstreak Butterfly
Jonathan Andrew Pérez

Scrub-Hairstreak: Styrymon Avalona

Under the Purple Verbena, they found Lamar Smith's body
beneath sludge and peepers. Guilt was the thing
missing that spring night; they said that on hilltops
one can find Hairstreaks nearby sinking their teeth into the early spring night.

Browner and more shorn, the roar
composed like a decision, or, an acquittal of a poor farmer,
his seeds of fire and fits, his soul—
in tunnels buried beneath, underground over which bromeliads bashed.

This is the time when hands are clasped,
this is the time, when hidden, our future is an
island of racism cast
as faith, color-blind, modernized.

This is the time the Deerweed and silver bird's-foot trefoil give a bona fide
conceit: injustice does not last, on the gray ground, it cracks through the surface like a gavel.

Tess Thiringer

"Real Marines"
"Today"

Tess Thiringer spent five years on active duty in the United States Marine Corps as a helicopter mechanic on Hueys and Cobras and continues to serve as a reservist. Currently, she is pursuing a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing from Pacific University. She lives in Portland, Oregon. These poems reflect the experience of being a female in the military and the way that loss ripples through and forever changes the lives of those back home.

Real Marines
Tess Thiringer

Halfway through deployment
heckling me in the p-way
about my sports bra flattened tits
and *honey, can't I just get a smile*
Gunny says *knock that shit off*
but holds the door open for me
I wipe my mechanic hands on my coveralls
grease packed in bleeding knuckles
scraped on cotter pins and wire clamps
burned fingertips and palms
In the mess line it's
this bitch thinks she's so entitled
thinks she deserves to be in the fast line
probably just sits in an office
and sucks dick all day
later they ask do I have a CAR, *no,*
do I wanna fuck, *no,*
ask my coworker if I'm always a bitch, *yes*
POG, winger, slut
Next day at work launching H-1s
watching the ocean slosh like a bathtub
tow and unfold
tow and refold

Today
Tess Thiringer

For Allison Scheel
Jonathan Lewis, 2/22/1984 – 9/2/2015

Today is the last day
you'll ever be younger
than your big brother.
The crows lifting off the field
have been saying his name,
it's in the sighing of the firs.
Maybe little boys
who never grow old
are just an old wives' tale,
everyone knows Peter Pan
is a crock.
A crash is never just a crash
anymore, always a memory—
the sound of the aircraft's belly
hitting the earth hits the bottom
of your stomach like a bass drum,
the sound of the rotors
tipping,
blades shattering the dirt.
You've remembered it so many times
it's become your own
fever dream.
Sometimes you leave a hand mirror
by your bed,
wait for him to follow you.
From the other side, you'll look back,
wonder if you are growing older or him younger.
One candle on your son's birthday cake
then two.
An uncle he'll never meet.
Today is just a day
but even on top of Bunsen Peak
you know,
at every finish line
you know,
every day
you know,
that this is a place
he can never reach.

Jordan Williams "Impulse"

Jordan Williams is an emerging poet who explores everyday life through metaphor and ambiguity. Her pieces examine the connection between people, manifest in togetherness or separation. "Impulse" was written as a way to express how deeply you can know a person even when you cannot begin to understand what they feel or carry. The not needing to say anything but picking up on all of the intricate details in a person's way of being. Jordan enjoys poetry that invites the reader on a journey that begins one place and ends somewhere else, especially emotionally. You can find her work at @onebirdpoetry.

Impulse
Jordan Williams

I know. You do not
have to say how it is
that your American boy
face is flack-shrouded
in its own equinox of doom

that there is not enough
ultra-violet or clover puff
or joy for the morning
bugle call heart thromp
to excavate body from bed

I know it like I know my tongue
produces the phoneme T
by trellising to the roof
of my mouth and tumbling
a mid-air cavity missile

I learned it the same silent way
I learned your movements
changed when the mercury
climbed and I discovered
you owned boat shoes

but also kept a sweet little
gun packed in a hollowed out
book like the United States
Army kept your sweet little
name in a hollowed out trench

just like the year I turned
twenty-seven I learned
to use my hips to carry
jugs of water and groceries
up two flights of stairs

and about giant kingfish
their slow journey to fresh water
the sudden instinct to circle
a rotation of obedience for days
until their bodies long for home.

Creative Nonfiction

Eric Chandler "Can't Outrun It"

Eric Chandler is the author of *Hugging This Rock: Poems of Earth & Sky, Love & War* (Middle West Press, 2017). His writing has appeared in *Northern Wilds, Grey Sparrow Journal, The Talking Stick, Sleet Magazine, O-Dark-Thirty, Line of Advance, The Deadly Writers Patrol,* and *Columbia Journal.* A U.S. Air Force veteran of the active duty and Minnesota Air National Guard, he flew 145 combat missions and over 3000 hours in the F-16. He's a member of Lake Superior Writers, the Outdoor Writers Association of America, and the Military Writers Guild. Eric is a husband, father, and pilot who cross-country skis as fast as he can in Duluth, Minnesota. In 2018, he wrote a haibun after every time he exercised, whether it was cross-country skiing, running, hiking, or paddling. He used prose combined with haiku as a journal entry, at home and on the road as an airline pilot.

Can't Outrun It
Eric Chandler

20180330
Houston treadmill yesterday
San Juan, Puerto Rico treadmill today
Run
2.5 miles each day

Looking out the window of the hotel at a Maxfield Parrish painting of clouds over the ocean north of Puerto Rico. Yesterday, I felt an overwhelming sense of loss because during my trips to the war, I didn't spend every spare minute taking notes. I took notes. I wrote emails. I wrote "stick-figure theater" letters to my kids. But I was pretty task saturated and didn't have the snot left at the end of the day to write. I should have. I worked out and read. I should've worked out and written. I could hear the birds outside in the springtime green trees outside the Houston Marriott, stuck in the middle of the airport like Tom Hanks.

But today, as I looked at the beach and the crashing waves over the video screen on the treadmill, I listened to Naomi Shihab Nye say that I didn't have to spend my whole life on a big project. I could write three sentences a day and that would be enough to start connecting things together. To start seeing things. So, I felt better. This strange attempt to write surrounding each day of running/skiing/etc. seems more worthwhile now. They say the best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago. And the next best time to plant one is right now.

I stood on the beach
wearing jeans and a t-shirt.
It's snowing at home.

20180606
Chicago treadmill
Run
3 miles

When I was at Camp Losano, the Air Force hooches at Kandahar Air Base in Afghanistan, I used to run in the gym pretty often. It was only a few steps away from our conex apartments. I'd go in there, get on a treadmill and go. Often I was still all fired up from go-pills so got a lot of good running in. No way in hell I was going to run outside at Kandahar. Probably get run over by an MRAP or a Toyota Hilux.

I'd run next to the roaring tube providing air-conditioned air. I'd think of Duluth and imagine I was running along the Superior Hiking Trail through Duluth, up high, looking over the lake.

Today, I was in Chicago, staring at a flat, opaque film of glass that separates the treadmill from the swimming pool. I thought about Duluth again. Maybe I'm just rationalizing the dreadmill run. But it can still be worthwhile. Who's to say what I imagine isn't as nice as the real thing? I run and imagine, even while listening to a podcast.

I can imagine
the trail, the lake, and the sun.
Who's to say what's real?

20180610
Toronto
Run
5.2 miles

I ran to Coronation Park. I was reminded, under the giant Canadian flag, that they were our allies during WWII. There was a memorial that said Canada had 11 million people. One million of them enlisted to help in the war.

I ran back past the dog park, along the bicycle path, beside the light rail line, by the Music Park. Under the giant CN phallus. As I passed the marina, there was a Canada goose floating in the water.

The waterfowl swims.
In Canada, they just call
this big bird a goose.

20181001
Kansas City
Run
3.4 miles

I haven't run in a long while. Hotel layover for the first time since early August and the habits of my hotel life takeover. At first I don't recognize the hotel. After I went running and went to the mezzanine restaurant for the ease, convenience, and airline discount, I recognized the bar as a place I went once before. Just as loud this time with a Chiefs game on the big screen. The run, through stop lights and lights of red hands. Up the steps to the World War One Memorial, dedicated in 1921 by Pershing and Foch. A tower, a museum underground, art of poppies at the entrance signifying the dead. Naturally the museum is closed on Mondays. I ran past another statue called The Hiker, memorializing those who fought in the Spanish American War in Cuba and the Philippines and the Boxer Rebellion. Another memorial that mentioned a tree, planted for the Marine war dead of World War Two. A lot of memorials, made after the wars ended, but not so far after that they felt like war was something that would go on forever. Remembering the dead and maybe thinking that war was over. Thinking it was a bug and not a feature.

The sphinx named "Future"
hides its face so it won't have
to see the next war.

Rebecca Evans "Crash"

Rebecca Evans is a writer with essays and poems published in *The Rumpus*, *War, Literature & the Arts, Entropy*, and *Fiction Southeast*, to name a few. She served eight years in the Air Force, including service in the Gulf War. With an MFA in creative nonfiction, Evans is now working on an MFA in poetry at Sierra Nevada College. She is currently editing a collection of essays titled *Body Language*, and has just completed her memoir, *Navigation*. "Crash" is an excerpt from this memoir, weaving past and future narrative with historical nonfiction following her time in the Persian Gulf War. Her work threads the fragility between war, death, and overcoming sexual trauma.

Crash
Rebecca Evans

I fell into the bath head first. I was around six, maybe seven. It doesn't sound like a feasible feat, but when you attempt to hang from the shower curtain rod upside down by your knees, something gives.

First the rod.

Then the forehead.

I ended up with a gaping hole.

Let me start again.

Let me start somewhere else.

*

The Primary Crash Phone at Base Operations worked like this:

Tower receives an emergency.

Tower rings out to important base personal across the Primary Crash Phone.

We are on that call.

The Primary Crash Phone is a red phone.

We pick up.

The line is recorded.

We sign off with our phonetic alphabet initials.

Mine, at one time, were RJ; Romeo Juliet, because I thought it romantic.

We disseminate the information over the Secondary Crash Phone.

This phone is black.

The two phones, mounted side by side, sit center on the front panel of the console.

We pull the checklist relating to the emergency.

We follow the checklist.

*

In our Cedar Lake home, I'd hung upside down from the shower rod, much like a gymnast, or maybe a monkey. I don't remember dangling for long, just the movement; grabbing the bar overhead with both hands, tilting my body backwards, draping one leg and pulling the other through, hooking my knees and then, a crashing sound. My own smashing. A wet *splat* into the tub. I found myself staring at the faucet, head in the tub, feet in the air, wondering what just happened.

*

I worked swing shift on Sept 17th, 1992, and in the middle of what felt typical, a loud explosion ripped through the building and our boss, Capt. Karis, burst from his office.

"What was that?" he asked.

Almost instantly, the Primary sounded.

Someone else on shift, I believe it was Janny, picked up. Not me.

The Primary's speaker quieted until the Fire Department and Hospital acknowledged they were "on." Tower said, "We have a downed aircraft."

Initially, I was confused.

Did someone just shoot down one of our jets?

Information moved slow and I don't remember the callsign, but I remember it was a 55th F111.

Cody's squadron. Was it Cody, my fiancé?

Relieved I didn't answer that call, I leaned for Tower's landline and answered *that* phone instead.

"We need to close the runway," they said.

"Affirmative," I replied.

We were trained to only respond.

"We'll begin diverting aircraft," they said.

"Affirmative," I replied and began tracking diversions, the locations our men landed.

Focus.

Follow the checklist.

Close the runway.

Log diversions.

It felt like I blinked, and hours had passed. Time does that. Speed. Yet our protocol retained continuity. The person handling the Primary wrote down the specifics, then echoed that information across the Secondary. This prevented communication breakdown. Everyone assumed a role and we worked like a well-oiled machine; disciplined, emotions in a box somewhere inside.

*

I rotated my body in the bath, knelt, felt warm trickling down my face and assumed it was bath water that leaked from the faucet.

*

1620. Our plane rammed into the end of our runway at 1620, though it was long past this when I glanced at the log, noting the tail number; #052. I couldn't remember if Cody was scheduled to fly. It didn't matter. Crew rotated in or out all the time.

I focused on not thinking anything personal, pushing Cody into a corner of my mind. I checked and rechecked our logs. I'm sure Tony or someone on shift banged away at the phone or RAFAN, everyone busy in their busy-work.

By now, we knew that the aircraft impacted yards short of the runway, bursting into flames. The pilot pulled up just enough to avoid a small populated village outside the base. Had the pilot made a left turn at the 09 end, he would have driven that jet into VA (Victor Alert), the location, rumor had it, of nuke-loaded aircraft, and the ending to this story would have been very different.

*

Tina, my adopted sister, only ten or eleven at the time, rushed into the bathroom, which meant I must have cried out or made a loud thump or bang, some sort of sound that summoned her. She grabbed the washcloth off the sink and pressed it to my forehead.

"Oh. There's so much blood," she said, too quiet.

"Blood?"

"What happened?"

"I fell in the tub." It wasn't quite a lie.

*

I later learned #052 hit runway lights on poles in the field, which were set as guidance beacons to safety, to the runway. Then the jet scraped over the road between Upper Heyford and Somerton, yards from the last houses, and ripped through the perimeter fence transforming into a flame-ball. It broke apart below the brow of the hill and the runway.

Later, we were debriefed and learned the crew realized there were problems as they approached the airfield over North Ashton. Someone confirmed, mainly for the public, that there were no weapons on board.

Tower had advised the crew to eject.

They refused.

*

Tina helped me to my feet, supporting me under my arms while I pressed that rag onto my head.

"You need to let me see it now," she told me.

"What do you mean?"

"I need to see your head now that we soaked up some of the blood."

I moved my hand, dropped the rag and a scream echoed in the bathroom.

"Oh no! It's a hole. A hole!" Tina shrieked.

Then a surge of pain, as if someone bashed a hammer between my eyes. The room dimmed.

*

Ejecting meant the aircraft would've impacted with catastrophic loss of life on the ground. Shortly before the accident, schoolchildren were dropped outside of the Barley Mow pub 300 yards away.

By the time the crew did eject, the capsule was too close to the ground, not enough time for chute deployment, or what is known as "self-righting" if the ejection happens in an other-than-straight-and-level position.

We were told one of the crew was found dead in the field, the other taken to the base medical center.

I looked up the crew's names.

Not Cody. I felt myself exhale. Unknowingly, I had been holding my breath.

Jerry Lindh.

Jerry was #052's pilot.

And my brain-box cracked open, remembering Jerry, morning after morning, in my aerobics class on base. He had carried a quiet presence at five a.m., his gym shorts baggy and his tee draping his shoulders. He arrived early. We chatted.

"You really should stay in and finish college," he advised.

"I'm close."

"Well, you'd make a great officer." He talked with his hands, animated, encouraging me.

We'd talk nutrition, religion, the next election, and of course, flying. Jerry, around 28, knew Cody, and both Cody and I were the same age, 26. The two of them, pilots assigned to the 55th Fighter Squadron, had flown missions together.

This was how I knew Jerry Lindh. He was my friend.

*

I must've blacked out because I don't remember the trip to the doctor, but I do recall him pulling skin together, pinching the gap in my head.

"It looks like a Y," he said.

"A Y?"

"Yes. Like the letter. Y for Yes," he said.

Y means Yucky.

Y means Yearning.

Y means Yarmulkes.

Y means Yield.

I had wanted a V for Victory.

*

I couldn't shut the personal away, and I wondered if Jerry landed in the field or at the hospital. I worked hard to place his face back into my mind-box.

Stop thinking about Jerry.

Stop seeing Jerry.

Do your damn job.

What was in his mind in those last moments?

Stop thinking.

In his head inside that speeding jet-on-fire?

Eject.

Stay with his jet.

Eject and live.

Stay and die.

My boss or maybe someone else, asked me if I wanted to drive out in Ops1 and see the scene.

I did.

I didn't.

I went anyway.

I didn't drive.

I couldn't.

I couldn't navigate a vehicle onto the airfield through my blur. The sky had turned to night by the time we drove to the site and the runway lights bled into the emergency vehicle flashes, spinning *red-blue-red-white*. The air stilled. No jets swarmed the flight pattern. No one yelled orders.

The aircraft had busted into three main parts with the majority of wreckage on base, strewn over several hundred yards. It looked like that jet spread itself across miles. I tasted bile. My teeth chattered.

"Stop," I said.

"We should keep our distance," I said.

I knew if we inched nearer I would lose it. I squeezed my hands together, rubbing them, moving something, anything, on my body. We sat in the truck overlooking a vessel that was no longer a vessel, a machine that once carried two lives, two souls, two good men.

I'm sure someone later told me that about the bloody handprint left on the windscreen of the escape pod. I thought about the crew, their final moment, pushing against that screen as an effort to get out. Or maybe the hand pressed there as a final act of laying to rest. I swear I held that image as if I saw it myself. Maybe I did. I can't remember. I wanted to return to my dorm with a bag of food and stuff my feelings back down, numb myself from the disaster, and then remain numb for as long as possible.

The chatter on the base the following day felt like gossip.

"I heard the pilot refused to listen to ATC," someone said.

"Pilots are so egotistical," someone else said.

"A big head got them killed," another replied.

"Shut the fuck up," I said. Who were they to understand split-second decisions? Who were they to judge minor shifts with wind and gravity pushing you out of the sky, plummeting to earth? What did they do for work anyway? What risk? Direct an aircraft safely from the belly of a tower?

Later, their story would be documented as two brave men, two heroes, and for that I was thankful. More accurate was the weather report that day; a strong NNE wind, a crosswind, and #052 practiced a no flap/no slat approach. This meant that they had avoided lift and drag devices on that airframe, which drives a flatter angle upon approach. That crosswind proved brutal and they drifted to the south of the runway centerline and, as they sped closer, the pilot made a choice to go around, to correct alignment. He most likely relayed this to tower. The black box would have confirmed.

When Jerry applied power to pull up and around the airfield, to re-approach, the nose of the aircraft would have risen and, to maintain his airspeed, he'd have to push that nose back down, towards earth. This feels counter-intuitive when flying close to the ground, which they were.

They didn't.

That one decision forced a reduction of air into the intakes and stalled the jet, there was no lift from the wings, no flaps, no slats.

They hit the ground.

That decision took seconds.

I'm not sure when I learned Jerry died, because I never knew if he was the body in the field or on the gurney, and I most likely hoped he was at the hospital and would somehow be all right. I quit teaching that early morning class shortly after and when my nightmares recurred, a new bloody hand extended through them, and I felt as if my traumas stored in my brain-boxes were merging stories in my heart.

*

If Cody had been affected by Jerry's death, he didn't mention it. A few days later, I asked, "Are you doing okay?"

"Of course," he said.

"I mean with Jerry," I said.

The muscles at the side of his face twitched and I could tell he was biting down, biting back words.

"It's another good guy you'll never see again. It feels pretty bad," he said, and I knew better than to tell him about the bloody handprint. I knew better than to try to understand.

*

I consider my Y-scar a badge of honor, despite offers for numerous "fixes" by plastic surgeons, especially when I appeared on television. During my reign as Mrs. Idaho in 2004, my official pageant pictures photoshopped it out, not by my request.

The sunk-in pinchedness makes me look as though I'm thinking, sorting through my brain-box. Sometimes, I look angry and I blame it on the Y. Blame it on my continuous crashing; emotionally, physically. Things crash. Too often. Too unexpectedly, leaving imprints, echo-memories of stories pulsing through you. Despite efforts to rewrite or erase or tuck experiences away, history stays with you, forever altering your course, your route.

B.A. Van Sise "Lost, in Translation"

B.A. Van Sise is an internationally-known photographer and the author of the visual poetry anthology *Children of Grass*. His visual work has previously appeared in the *New York Times*, *Village Voice*, *Washington Post* and *BuzzFeed*, as well as major museum exhibitions throughout the United States, including Ansel Adams' Center for Creative Photography, the Peabody Essex Museum, the Museum of Jewish Heritage, and the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery. His written work has appeared this year in *Poets & Writers*, the *Southampton Review*, *Eclectica*, and the *North American Review*.

Lost, in Translation
B.A. Van Sise

When I was in basic training, there was one all-important value instilled in each and every Coast Guard recruit, myself included: get loud.

At times, it did not feel like it was important *what* we were saying, so much as *how;* is it time to get up? Say it loudly. Do you want something clarified? Say so, loudly. Were you just caught walking across the forbidden grass as if that were, impossibly, the most direct way to get from one far corner of the lawn to the other? Please do, at your very earliest convenience, roughly ten million pushups, while explaining yourself. Loudly.

The rationale, you're told, is that life at sea is loud, life at potential battle stations is loud and, most importantly, life in an emergency is very, very loud. No life will ever be saved unless an eardrum is shattered into many tiny little bits in the process.

Nothing good, in our world, is quiet: Drowning. Strokes. Ninjas. Existential dread. The list goes on and on.

So you do what you have to do, and you do it exceptionally loudly: you attend mandated trainings and answer the questions loudly. You mop rain off the deck, back and forth, back and forth, but you do it loudly. When taking exams, you press that ink stink into the paper, and the desk, and into the very soul of the earth with a violent aplomb that means that, yes, you even write loudly.

My role in the Coast Guard is in public affairs; I take pictures, I write press releases, I lurk around Fleet Week reminding strangers that the Coast Guard is America's greatest military branch regardless of whether they've asked or, in fact, are even interested. On paper, I am also an operations-qualified translator. The training, which I've now done in six languages, is extensive—I can inspect a catamaran in my truly miserable French but, luckily for the seagoing Parisian aristocrats of this world, I've never had to.

Walking up Manhattan's Fifth Avenue on an idle Monday morning, my cell phone rang with a call from a Warrant Officer at an Atlantic-area Coast Guard Station. It seems that he'd seen my name on the list of ops-qualified translators and had decided to ping me for assistance. The connection was, in fact, stormy, but he told me that, after years and years sitting idle and uncontacted on the translators list—which I confess I'd forgotten all about—he'd need me to talk. Not only would he need me to talk, but he'd need me to get *loud*.

It seems that there was an ongoing operation involving an Italian flagged sailboat out of Sicily, off the east coast of the United States in extremely torrid weather. A 47-foot Coast Guard motor lifeboat was lumbering alongside it, and it turns out the sailboat's captain did not speak one word of English, only Italian—a language I know natively—and they needed somebody to translate.

I ducked into the very next store I passed, carelessly breezing past the guards at the door while holding a finger in one ear and keeping the phone pressed tightly against the other.

The warrant briefed me that the Italian sailor had been sitting in rolling surf in his tiny boat for most of a day. They'd thrown a life jacket at the guy—as in, the 47-footer literally pulled up alongside him and they threw a lifejacket onto his deck like it was the world's kindest molotov cocktail—and tried to raise him on the radio, which he had largely been refusing to answer. The boat was registered to a small town in Sicily, on that island's southern coast facing North Africa. Nobody, perhaps even the Italian, knew why he was there off an American beach—it is an almost impossible distance for a person to make their way across the Atlantic ocean in a sailboat that small unless one is holding on, daringly, to the back of some sort of real ship, a la Marty McFly on his skateboard in *Back to the Future*.

There were several complications at hand: I immediately informed the crew at the station that the Italian captain, based on his accent within the Italian language, was not natively Italian; in addition, he seemed to have somebody in the boat he was trying to avoid having the Coast Guard visualize, and he was waving off a rescue boat when he seemed to be, to even the most casual of land-lubbering observers, in desperate need of rescuing.

The amok Sicilian's radio wasn't transmitting well enough to get a signal anywhere, and the folks on the motor lifeboat needed to get him into conversation with me to suss out the situation, while I was standing in a store in Manhattan. So, the Coast Guard station's commanders had come up with, out of necessity, the shakiest Italian radio transmission since Marconi invented the very first.

The idea was this: in the middle of a raving gale in the middle of the Atlantic, they'd have the wandering Italian yell into his radio so that the guys in the Coast Guard vessel could hold *their* own stronger radio up next to it so that it would arrive at the Coast Guard Station, where it was being played off a speakerphone into somebody else's cell phone, which was then broadcasting to *my* cell phone.

He was hard to hear. And he didn't want anybody talking to him.

So, the warrant informed me, I needed to get loud.

I began screaming into my phone, back in Italian, at the sort of volume that shakes the windows, rattles the walls, the sort of pitch and volume that Ella Fitzgerald used to break champagne glasses, back in the day. Is it the military, or is it Memorex?

With the greatest amount of intimidating boot camp bearing I could muster, I shouted translations and commands in Italian into my cell phone, which was transmitting back to some other guy's cell phone, which was being held up against a radio, which was transmitting into the Atlantic, where the guys on the squalling Coast Guard lifeboat were holding it up against their radio in the middle of a storm, that this guy in his tiny sailboat from Sicily might hear the voice of some guy talking to some guy, talking to some guy, talking to some guy, screaming at him out of the ether, at the top of my lungs.

I told you that story to tell you this one: I spent a full half hour sounding off in my most warlike manner at a tempest-tossed foreign sailor, until I was hoarse, with the irretrievable Italian screaming at me in reply, begging that the Coast Guard might leave him a castaway. I screamed, he screamed, we all lost our minds and screamed at each other, and eventually the Coast Guard, at his request and demand, decided to leave him be. The matter was concluded, the Coast Guard station informed me,

and I was free to go on my way. I hung up the phone and put it back into my pocket, finally looking up, and around. Standing behind me, and encircling me, were a massive number of stunned and concerned customers, managers, and security guards.

For the last half hour, I'd been gung-ho screaming over five stacked phone connections at the top of my lungs trying to boss around an adrift, confused Italian. I'd not for one second looked at what store I'd never walked into and, lost in the moment, had never stopped to notice all the gaping strangers watching the scene I had been making, for all this time, while getting loud in the middle of an endless tide of panties, brassieres, and lingerie of all sizes, in the ladies' underwear section of Urban Outfitters.

James B. Wells "Preparation Room History"

Dr. James B. Wells is a Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice in the School of Justice Studies in the College of Justice & Safety at Eastern Kentucky University. A former U.S. Army military police reservist and correctional officer in a super-maximum security prison, he has an A.A., B.A. and M.S. in Criminal Justice, as well as a Ph.D. in Research, Measurement, and Statistics. In addition to having over forty peer-reviewed publications in areas related to adult corrections and juvenile justice, he has authored or co-authored multiple books and over 150 research reports for various local, state, and federal agencies. Twenty-five years after his father's death in a 1965 CIA Air America plane crash in Vietnam, Dr. Wells discovered over 400 letters his father wrote his mother over his U.S. Army and State Department career. As a result of learning the circumstances of his father's death, which were covered up and remain classified, Dr. Wells has been on a quest to discover the truth, and to write about it. He is currently writing a memoir while pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing at Eastern Kentucky University's Bluegrass Writing Studio.

Preparation Room History
(Air Force FORM 715 – Certificate of Actions Taken by Mortician)
James B. Wells

NAME OF DECEASED (Last-First-Middle)
Wells, Jack, J.

Addendum: My mother always wrote her name, "Mrs. Jack J. Wells." She never liked the "J" in my father's middle initial spelled out. She never could get the U.S. Mortuary Service to change the "Junior" on his tombstone to a "J." When my mother died and a new tombstone had to be made for her epitaph, I convinced the authorities to change my father's information from the "Junior" to the "J."

GRADE
Civilian

ORGANIZATION
USOM Public Safety Division, Agency for International Development

Addendum: Although my father was killed in Vietnam and received his second Combat Infantry Badge while a U.S. Army weapons advisor and counter-insurgency specialist there in 1962, his name will never be on the Vietnam Veterans Wall Memorial in Washington, DC. He died a civilian while working for the United States Operation Mission's Agency for International Development, so his name is on two State Department memorials. Neither is open to the public. Both require sufficient advance notice through the proper agency bureau, passage through a metal detector, and a personal escort.

DATE OF DEATH
27 Sep 1965

Addendum: My father was one of the first of many USAID casualties in the war. Reports indicate he died at 1515 hours on September 27, 1965. Fifty years later, on one of my six trips to the National Archives, I discovered that a page with the same date in the *Military Assistance Command Vietnam Region III Daily Journal* had been removed because it contained "Security Classified Information." After filing a Freedom of Information Act request, I eventually retained a copy of that missing page: Entry #32 reveals the classified military map coordinates of the crash location and that my father died at 1405, over an hour earlier than what reports showed.

Since Vietnam is exactly twelve hours ahead of U.S. EST, it was still September 27 when my mother learned that her husband was dead. She wasn't informed of his death by an Army Officer in his neatly pressed, Dress Green Class A uniform. Our priest wasn't there to comfort her.

Method of Notification to Next of Kin
Telephone call.

Addendum: My mother deserved better. As the spouse of an U.S. Army officer and a U.S. State Department employee, she too served her country. For years after his death, my siblings and I would wake in the middle of the night and hear her not crying, but wailing liked a wounded animal.

CAUSE OF DEATH
Injuries multiple extreme with 100% burns

Addendum: My father's death was quick. My mother's injuries were multiple, as well as extreme—100% of her heart broken, 100% of the single parenting duties for a nine, thirteen, and fifteen-year-old, 100% of her anguish due to not knowing the truth. She succumbed to these wounds slowly.

PREDISPOSING CAUSE
Unknown

Addendum: Somebody in the U.S. Government told my family, the Post-Dispatch Wire Service, as well as then Atlanta News Anchor Tom Brokaw, that my father was the sole passenger on a CIA Air America plane shot down by communist guerillas. Since beginning my archival and field research, I haven't found evidence to confirm that. In fact, after studying over 400 letters my father wrote home, and examining thousands of declassified documents and interviewing witnesses in both the U.S. and Vietnam, I now know that none of what we were told is true.

Final Determination
Fucking liars.

EMBALMING TREATMENT AND RESULTS (Describe briefly)
Injected hypodermically with strong solution of fluid. Remains packed in hardening compound.

Addendum:
Treatment
Slow, 20-year-intravenous drip of suffering for over 58,220 families.

Results
My Freedom of Information Act request for the crash investigation report: denied. My questions for the CIA: too sensitive for them to answer.

REMARKS

Remains received in a charred condition with approx 60% of the body tissue missing. Remains laid on a bed of cotton and hardening compound, wrapped in a plastic sheet, cotton sheet, and wool blanket.

Addendum: My mother gave me my father's wedding ring over forty years ago when I asked my wife to marry me. It wasn't dirt I scraped off the inside engraving. I scraped tiny bits of my father's burnt flesh, until it revealed:

Jack Because Betty

Remains consigned to: **A.C. Hemperly Funeral Home**
2905 Main Street
East Point Georgia

Addendum: The U.S. State Department's Office of Casualty Assistance, the U.S. Air Force Mortuary Affairs office, as well as the Dover Port Mortuary, all said they had no record of my father's case. On a whim I contacted the local funeral home that handled my father's remains. That same night, I got a phone call from the daughter-in-law of the original funeral home owner. She told me, "I was shocked when I turned the ledger page to your father's date of death. I was expecting to only find his typed name. For some strange reason my mother-in-law tucked all the documentation accompanying your father's remains there, including the actions taken by the mortician in Vietnam. That was unexpected and highly unusual. It's as if there was a reason why my mother-in-law put it there, over fifty years ago."

INSPECTION CHECK LIST	**YES**	**NO**
FACE SHAVED SMOOTHLY WITH NO RAZOR BURNS PRESENT		X
FINGERNAILS TRIMMED AND CLEANED.		X
INCISIONS, ABRASIONS, CONTUSIONS AND ULCERATIONS PROPERLY SEALED		X
MAGGOTS AND THEIR LARVAE TREATED AND DESTROYED	X	
ODORS AND THEIR SOURCES REMOVED		X
FACIAL FEATURES AND HANDS NORMAL IN APPEARANCE		X
COSMETICIZED FEATURES APPEAR NATURAL	DNA	
PROPER UNDERCLOTHING ON REMAINS		X
UNIFORM CLEAN, PRESSED AND PROPERLY FITTED		X
REMAINS IN POSITION OF COMFORT AND REPOSE		X
REMAINS MAY BE VIEWED AT DESTINATION		X

Addendum: When my father's body was returned to the U.S., the authorities wouldn't let anyone examine his remains. The State Department officials first told my 38-year-old mother there wasn't much to look at and that viewing his body wouldn't accomplish anything. My older siblings told me

they remember our mother pressing the State Department officials, explaining she was a former nurse, and could handle the viewing, no matter how gruesome. The authorities told her it was impossible; the government-issued, grey steel coffin had already been hermetically sealed.

For years after my father's death, I would dream about my father being alive in Southeast Asia, perhaps involved in some super clandestine operation, or maybe a prisoner secretly held somewhere. My brother had a recurring dream for decades about the day in 1963, when my father picked him up from school in our 1955 blue and white, highly-chromed Star Chief Pontiac convertible. My father had just returned from Vietnam the first time after a yearlong tour as a U.S. Army military advisor. My brother told me it'd been about four decades since he last had that dream, and he missed it terribly. My sister believed for years that my father would surprise all of us by walking through the front door of our home one day, after being gone for years on a top-secret mission.

As for me, I often wondered if he was a prisoner of war, secretly held in some jungle prisoner camp in Vietnam, Laos or Cambodia. I recall sitting in front of our television in the spring of 1973, hoping that one of the 591 POWs being released out of North Vietnam and walking down a plane gangway in Operation Homecoming would be my father. He never appeared.

TYPED NAME, GRADE AND BASE OF AIR FORCE REPRESENTATIVE
CARL J. WITZEL, MORTUARY OFFICER, OS-11, 33rd Tactical Group Mortuary, Tan Son Nhut A.F.B. Vietnam

Post Addendum: My father signed many of his letters with the simple closing:

Because

The closing my father used on many of his letters, as far back as the early 1940s, had a special meaning for him and my mother. "Because," written by Guy d'Hardelot and Edward Teschemacher, was my parent's favorite song from high school. Its single word communicates something deeper and more revealing than only love. It attempts to answer whatever questions either one of my parents had, no matter how emotional, how sensitive, how complex they might be.

My mother's side of the tombstone reads:

BETTY J
HIS WIFE
SEP 9 1927
JUN 27 2008

with an inscription:

JACK BECAUSE
BETTY

No explanation or reason is needed. Because.

Fiction

Tiffany Hawk "Don't Flinch"

Tiffany Hawk is an Air Force spouse living in Tucson. Her novel, *Love Me Anyway*, was published by St. Martin's Press, and her stories and essays have appeared in such places as *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *StoryQuarterly*, *National Geographic Traveler*, and on NPR's *All Things Considered*. Of the story published in Collateral, Hawk writes, "Although a surprise pregnancy is almost comically outside my own journey to conception, I can clearly remember feeling out of my depth as a brand new military spouse, all the fantasies and the fears. I also wanted to capture the complicated nature of relationships between mil spouses who, for better or worse, are each other's lifeline, even if they've just met."

Don't Flinch
Tiffany Hawk

On the day of the spouse's pre-deployment briefing, Sabena files into the squadron ready room, a politically correct term for a room that, according to her new husband, used to be a bar, back when every flight ended with a few cold ones and single women were bussed in from Oklahoma State on Friday nights.

Embroidered uniform patches cover one wall, along with pictures of the squadron over the decades, going all the way back to men in leather flight helmets and goggles. There are four clocks on the wall—one set for Bigelow, Oklahoma; one for Baghdad; one for Kandahar; and one labeled "somewhere" that is permanently set to five-o'clock.

Tastefully dressed young wives fill small paper plates with fruit and converse in acronyms she doesn't know. She'd barely spoken to anyone in the military before what was supposed to be a one-night stand with Major Brian Lawrence, on post-deployment leave when they met at a dive bar in Newport Beach. He was deliciously unrefined and refreshingly authentic. Nothing like the lawyers and MBAs she normally met.

In the heat of the moment, under the weight of Brian's strong soldier's body she had imagined a life away from the ad industry with its schmoozy meetings, sixteen-hour days, and out-of-reach promotions. She would be like those military wives on Lifetime TV, pining away for a hero husband with a baby strapped to her chest, the three of them finally reuniting with banners and confetti and so much love it would make other people weep with joy.

It all sounded so lovely in those rapturous few seconds right before the orgasm.

*

The spouses arrange their seats in a semicircle. A baby girl wearing a onesie that says "Daddy's Little Princess" gets passed around the circle. Sabena leaves her now-empty fruit plate on her lap to act as a no vacancy sign. She can't bear the idea of the other wives scolding her. *Hasn't anyone ever shown you how to hold a baby?*

She smiles at the woman next to her who picks at her fingers until the skin at the edge of her nail begins to bleed. Her nametag reads *Joy*.

Sabena asks her if her husband has ever deployed before.

She looks at Sabena like she's crazy. "Yeah. Five times."

"Of course. I'm new to all this."

"Are y'all newlyweds?" Joy's voice brightens and her Southern twang becomes more obvious.

"Very newlywed. We got married three weeks ago at the Bigelow Courthouse." In this town of 18,000 people, the courthouse doubles as the county jail, so as they waited in the lobby for their turn

with the judge, they were surrounded by sheriffs and lawyers and men in cheap business suits or orange jumpsuits.

They were impulsive to say the least, but at the time, the audacity of rushing into such weighty commitments with so little deliberation left them exhilarated, like star-crossed teenagers against the world.

Joy smiles and pushes her highlighted blonde hair behind her ears. "We did the same thing when he was based in Little Rock. That way if, God forbid, anything happens," she crosses herself, "you'll get the benefits."

It hadn't occurred to Sabena that by proposing, Brian may have been preparing for his own death.

*

A sturdy woman in a flight suit shuffles stacks of papers and then sets up a microphone at the front of the room.

Daddy's Little Princess is passed back to her mother, who nestles her to her chest. She strokes the baby girl who is so small and peaceful she looks as if she's still in the womb. Mom has bloodshot eyes, a vacant stare, and a mis-buttoned shirt.

Joy nods toward Sabena. "Whatever you do, just don't get pregnant."

"Too late," Sabena says a bit too loudly and with a smile that is a bit too forced.

"But I thought you said you just got marr—" Joy pauses, reels back in the judgmental tone, and adds, "Oh, sorry."

"Yeah, not exactly planned. We were going to get married anyway, though, and this just sped things up a little." She can't help the lie, even though she doesn't want to care about what other people think. Maybe with the right spin, she can convince herself this was a wise plan, not a rash response based purely on emotion and idealism.

"Well you look great. You're not showing at all. I was a cow from the minute sperm met egg."

Sabena hopes not to concern herself with weight gain or any other triviality. After too many years on the Orange County hamster wheel chasing career success and emotionally unavailable men, she was afraid this could be her last chance.

When she told him, they'd only been dating a few weeks. It was supposed to be movie night at her apartment. He was microwaving a bag of popcorn when she blurted it out. He froze, his hand glued to the handle as the microwave repeatedly beeped at him.

He hesitantly began to almost smile, as if he thought she was joking and he didn't want to get taken.

She convinced him she was dead serious and that yes, she was sure it was his.

The half smile was gone. "Wow," he said, running a hand over his short hair.

She waited for him to concoct a story about moving to China.

He paced, he stared, he looked like he was about to throw up. At some point, he mumbled something unintelligible, and when she asked him to repeat himself, he said, "I, uh, almost had a stroke because I was about to say I think we should get married."

"Married?"

Something shifted. He smiled. Then she did, too. The energy of the room changed. They looked at each other, and it almost felt like a real proposal. So much so that Brian took her hand, got down on one knee and said, "Sabena, will you marry me?"

With fantasies of being loved by an ass-kicking husband who could fix anything, she said yes with a conviction that surprised even her.

"This is fucking crazy," he said as he picked her up and spun her around.

*

The woman in the flight suit taps the microphone. "Test, test." She looks at the row of clocks. "We'll get started in just a moment. Can everybody hear me?"

A few of the wives appear wide-eyed and ready to take notes. The more seasoned spouses seem annoyed at having to attend a meeting about something they've been living with for years. Their slumped body language and obvious clock-watching seem to say, *yeah, yeah, yeah, this ain't my first rodeo.*

She wonders if they were this stoic the first time their husbands deployed. Maybe they were even a little excited at the start of the war when it was sold as a quick, easy opportunity for triumph.

Has this life been more than they bargained for?

Soon there will be eight thousand miles between her and Brian. He has entrusted to her a new home, his truck, his dog, his every possession. Hell, thanks to the power of attorney she needed to close the mortgage in his absence, he has put his entire life in her hands.

How will she prove that his faith in her is warranted?

"Oh, before I forget," says Joy as she hands Sabena a catalog. "I'm a Pampered Chef consultant. You'd be amazed how the right tools can transform your kitchen."

Sabena politely flips through the catalog, which is filled with specific pieces of equipment for just about every kitchen task one could imagine—a biscuit cutter, a corn and veggie brush, a pasta measurer, a decanter cleaner.

Sabena doesn't cook. She was raised by a single working mother who rarely made it home for dinner. Sabena survived on tossed salads and defrosted Lean Cuisine while Janet—a model before pregnancy destroyed her body—seemed to get by on air.

She has always admired her mother, who even without a college degree bootstrapped her way up to editor of Orange County's second biggest fashion magazine, but Lord how she fantasized about being raised by the kind of domestic goddess who savors catalogs full of kitchen gadgets.

The other day, when she struggled to make a decent batch of peanut butter cookies, Brian's favorite, Sabena called back to California and asked her mom for advice. Presumably she'd had to bake cookies for some school event or another when Sabena was a kid, though she didn't remember such an occasion.

"What do you know about cookies?" Sabena asked.

"Cookies?" her mother said. "I think you can delete them from some folder. I'm not sure. My assistant takes care of that. Maybe try Internet Options."

*

By feigning interest in Joy's catalog, Sabena has drawn attention to herself as fresh meat. The women around her pounce, handing her business cards for dietary supplements and essential oils and skin care. They all say some version of, "You wouldn't believe what it's done for me."

One woman launches into a spiel about "joining a fingernail revolution" with designer nail wraps. Not only can you choose from hundreds of colors and patterns, you can custom design your own by uploading a photo. "A lot of ladies like to use photos of their kids."

Sabena wonders if she will become the kind of woman who will put photos of her children on her fingernails.

"As long as we're talking about our businesses," says a redhead in a dress and cowboy boots as she whips out an enormous dildo, oversized in both length and girth. Although it's pastel purple, it is alarmingly life-like with slightly wrinkled skin, veins, a circumcised tip, and full-sized balls. Suddenly the whole room is choking in laughter.

Sabena decides that if there's anyone here she'll become mom friends with, it's this chick. With any luck they'll push their jogging strollers around the base football field freely talking about anything from religion to politics to sex, all of which are supposedly off-limits for mil spouses according to an online forum she's been studying. It's not an official rule, you can't risk alienating anyone when these people are all you've got.

At the front of the room, a pudgy middle-aged guy in camouflage turns red in the face. He takes a deep breath as if to psych himself up before clapping his hands together and saying, "Okay then. I guess I'll start." He introduces himself as an Intel officer and warns them not to post on social media, the modern equivalent a "loose lips sink ships" speech. He tells them about a cache of information the Army found after raiding a terrorist compound—Facebook profiles of an entire deployed unit's wives and many of their children, street addresses, phone numbers, school pick up and drop of instructions, even soccer schedules for the surrounding town.

When Brian proposed, she thought, how hard could this be? After all, she'd been single for most of her adult life.

She knew he would inevitably deploy again, but she hadn't expected him to go again so soon. "You just got back. How could you be going again? I thought there was some kind of requirement that you be home for awhile after a deployment," she said when he told her the news.

"There is if you're gone for 180 days."

"I didn't major in math, but that sounds like six months to me."

"Now you know why so many deployments are 179 days."

She blinked back tears and looked away, hoping it would appear she could take the news in stride.

"It'll go by quickly." His tone was not as optimistic as his words.

"So those TV shows where the dad comes home? He could be leaving again in a few weeks?"

He looked surprised that she was surprised.

*

Up next is a chaplain, also in standard military camouflage but with a cross sewn on the lapel over the words U.S. Air Force. His deeply creased brow suggests he has comforted troops through innumerable tragedies. He warns them about how difficult communication can be and how important it is to keep up their airmen's morale no matter what.

There is a surprising calm in the room. Sabena is intimidated by these mythical military wives with their ability to look refined and undaunted, despite so many of them having children they must care for all alone while hundreds, or even thousands, of miles away from family or friends.

These spouses are real women, steady women, women so strong they don't bat an eye when the chaplain talks about depression and suicide and how overwhelmed they will feel.

They don't even flinch when the casualty officer takes the podium to describe his job. "If the worst happens," he straightens his tie and clears his throat. "We will notify you in person. I'll come to your home with both a chaplain and a medic at my side."

Sabena hears that knock on the door, sees herself bouncing a screaming baby on her hip while something burns on the stove. There is only one thing she feels confident about—that, as in every battle scene in every war movie she's seen, she will be shouting for the medic.

Tanya Whiton "Marine Life of the British Indian Ocean Territory"

Writer and editor Tanya Whiton's fiction has recently been featured in *The Cincinnati Review*, *Al Pie de la Letra*, and *Fanzine*. In 2017 she won second prize in *Zoetrope: All Story's* Short Fiction Contest for "Marine Life of the B.I.O.T." (the prize did not include publication) and her epistolary story, "Atlantic Window in a New England Character" was recently selected as a finalist for the 2019 Tennessee Williams Contest. The former Associate Director of the Solstice MFA in Creative Writing Program, Tanya has taught creative writing for the Lesley Seminars, Stonecoast Writers' Conference, Maine Writers and Publishers Alliance, and the University of Southern Maine. Of "Marine Life of the B.I.O.T." she writes, "As a Navy brat, I was accustomed to upheaval and separation, but the mystery surrounding my father's year-long deployment to Diego Garcia—a remote island in the Indian Ocean—has haunted me since childhood. This story is an attempt to reckon with the impact of constant separation on military families, especially on the "dependents" who are left behind."

Marine Life of the British Indian Ocean Territory
Tanya Whiton

We've been in the new house for a season when the orders arrive. We have a room where nobody sits. We have couches upholstered with birds and flowers and a refinished basement with a bar and a dartboard. We have a dog named Aura, rescued from a hippie lady. The lady, my dad says, couldn't handle her, so now Aura belongs to us.

My dad is being sent away, Mom explains, to "turn himself around." One year, no wife, no kid. A deserted island in the middle of a far-away ocean. Like Gilligan, his island does not appear on maps.

We aren't supposed to talk about it. The island. It is called Diego Garcia, which sounds—to me—like the name of an explorer. In my imagination, a destroyer ship sheds its layers of reinforced steel, its stacks and guns. Sails billow in a Southeasterly wind.

"Hon, we really aren't supposed to talk about it."

"Okay," I say.

*

I do not want to wear a dress for the farewell. Explorers do not wear dresses. I want to wear my favorite pants—red and green plaid flares with a matching vest. A chase scene ensues, with yelling. The dog gets out and cavorts around the cul-de-sac.

Later, I stand solemnly on the tarmac in blue velveteen with an embroidered collar. I wave goodbye to the man in dress blues—a storm cloud dressed up as my father.

One month passes, then two. A drab Maryland winter. On Saturdays, Mom and I wear our pajamas all morning. I watch as many cartoons as I want. In the afternoon, she tells me to bundle up and go outside, so she can take a nap. I explore the shapes of our neighborhood. An oblong circle dotted with leafless trees. Two long rectangles of brown lawn between tidy fenced yards and a corn field. A bowl called "the green" where, when there was snow, we went sledding.

Aura chews the windowsills and poops on the carpet. She drags my Mom around the block. She leaps onto the furniture with a slobbery bone in her mouth. Aura also spends a lot of time outside, tied to the shed, looking in the windows at us.

Now that we have no one to entertain but ourselves, there is no Béarnaise sauce or mustard-coated rack of lamb. No weird cooking smells, no good china. We eat Kraft macaroni with sliced-up hot dogs and frozen peas. I am thrilled with our new non-routine. I make costumes out of Dad's clothes and clomp around the block introducing myself to the neighbors. I wrap a whole roll of toilet paper around my leg and pretend it is broken.

*

He's been gone 10 weeks when the first package arrives. It is twelve-by-twelve square, marked "FRAGILE" on all sides in caps. We sit at the glass-topped table by the kitchen window. Mom carefully cuts the tape away. We extract a cassette tape and wads of rough brown paper towels, revealing a large seashell. Banded with burnt orange stripes against a white background, its opening is stuffed with cotton wool.

I fetch the tape deck. Mom inserts the cassette.

We hear scratchy sounds, a metallic hum, and then Dad, talking.

"What you've got there is a chambered nautilus," he informs us. "*Nautilus pompilius*."

I turn the shell over in my hands, admiring the pearly interior.

Mom laughs. "I guess there's not a lot of shopping there."

He says something about hardship pay. Delays in the mail. Then he switches to his cocktail party voice. "You wouldn't believe the beaches. White sand for miles, shells everywhere."

I lean close to the tape player.

"They say there aren't any bugs here. What a load of BS! Cockroaches the size of my big toe and the damn things fly."

Mom reaches for the box again and feels around the inside.

"Stone fishes in the water, too. You have to be careful. They look just like rocks. Enough venom to kill an elephant."

"Sounds like a real wild kingdom." Mom lights a cigarette, pushes her dinner plate away.

I hold the shell up to my ear and listen to the distant surf. Signals breaking up into code.

*

Three months in, Mom gets a job as a secretary. She takes the dog to live on a farm. "It's a very nice farm," she tells me. "Aura will have a lot of room to run."

"Okay," I say.

On weekday mornings, she clicks around in heels while I get ready for school. We drive past the raw red clay where new single-family-home neighborhoods are being built. There are still a few old farmhouses, with long drives flanked by white oaks. Tired-looking cows flick their tails along the fences.

Holdouts, my dad calls them, the farmers who won't sell. Standing in the way of progress.

*

In May, when the trees are exploding with flowers, another package arrives. This one contains cowrie shells of all shapes and sizes—including one dad calls an *Ovula ovum*, an egg cowrie. It is pure white and smooth.

"This one is a false cowrie," he explains. "It's shaped like the others, but it's a different animal. When it's in the ocean, the snail covers the whole shell. You can't even see it."

"Fascinating," Mom says.

He clears his throat. There is a pause and then he starts talking again—about how he figured DG would be an opportunity to excel, meaning it would be FUBAR. Per usual, he'd been right about that, "So I told the CO that COMNAV is…"

Mom shakes her head and turns off the tape.

"Jesus, he's shooting off his mouth again. We'll get sent to Brownsville."

"Where's that?"

"The end of the earth."

"Does he know Aura went to live on a farm?"

"I haven't had a chance to tell him yet."

"What about when you were on the phone?"

"We had other things to discuss. Like how I shouldn't get too attached to my job. Apparently we can afford everything we need on his salary, so…"

"Can we get McDonald's?"

She sighs. "Sure."

Later, we watch an episode of the *Carol Burnett Show*, in which Carol economizes by making a dress out of curtains. This makes Mom hoot. I hoot with her.

*

It is summer. We make new friends.

I meet a girl at the playground whose dad is gone, too. She doesn't believe me when I tell her about the deserted island. I insist that she come over so she can see my shells. They are clustered on the coffee table in the fancy living room. I explain to her about the squid that builds the nautilus, how its tentacles will rip right off if you try to take something away from it. I show her a *Conus geographus*, the geographer cone, its pattern of white teeth outlined against tiger brown and orange.

"This is one of the most poisonous animals in the world."

"My dad is shacked up," she says.

I wait for further details.

"But at least he sends me toys."

Then we go to her house, where we push around a small shopping cart with a plastic carrot and pork chop in it. I shut her fingers in the door.

*

Mom's new friends also work in offices. They wear bow blouses and A-line skirts, drink Mateus rosé and smoke menthols. At a lady named Barbara's, they sit on cushions on the floor around a low table, listening to Carly Simon and Jefferson Starship. I push back and forth through a beaded door curtain and pet the cats. Outside, it is like our old neighborhood—patchy grass, round streetlamps on poles. All the buildings look the same, not like our new place, where each townhouse is just a little different.

*

After seven months, we've run out of room on the coffee table and new shells collect on the flower-and-bird covered couch. My favorite is the *Charonia tritonis*, Triton's trumpet, a conch the size of my head. Ringed with coffee and cream chevrons, it has a zebra lip and a bright coral aperture.

"On the island," Dad says, "they used it as an actual trumpet."

He's found an old plantation house going to seed in the jungle and an airplane wrecked by a typhoon.

I blow into the spire and the shell makes a hollow, groaning sound. I march slowly through the kitchen. Spirits cluster and follow in my wake.

"That's awful," Mom says. "Lay off it."

*

Eight months. Her eyes have been stung by bees, she wears a bathrobe all day.

"MARS shack was down again, sorry I couldn't get through. There's about two thousand Seabees here now. Every single one of 'em wants to get on the horn with Ma and Pa back in Arkansas to blab our national secrets. If they actually knew anything, they'd be a real hazard."

I pause the tape. "CBs?"

"No. Seabees—the guys who do construction for the Navy," Mom says.

"I thought he was there all by himself."

"No, he just makes it seem that way. It's him against the world. Maybe it's because he was adopted."

What this means, she clarifies, is that my grandparents are not really my grandparents, which doesn't mean that they don't love me or my Dad. In fact, they love him more, because they chose him.

I decide that she is not my mother. I am black-eyed with fury. No amount of pleading will persuade me.

*

By the end of November, the yellow spots in the backyard where Aura did her business are covered with snow.

"Your dad can't get leave to come home for Christmas."

I have a new prize. It is a perfect thing, pinkish white, with elegant raised ribs connecting each section to the next.

"*Epitonium scalare*," I announce. "The Precious Wentletrap."

"Did you hear what I said?"

"Yes."

"Do you have anything to say?"

I don't know how to explain that I prefer this other father, the recorded version. No car door slamming, no gin fizzing, no arguments that last all the way through dinner and well past my bedtime.

So instead, I ask a question: "Why don't you cook food anymore?"

She makes a sound. A little shriek.

*

I wake to the smell of onions in butter, the beginnings of an elaborate casserole we will eat for the next week. While it is in the oven, we stack a half a cord of wood. Mom wears one of Dad's shirts and what she calls "dungarees." I wear my parka. I hug one log at a time and bring it to her.

After that, I'm tired. I think she should take a nap, but she wants to bake things. Lemon squares, fudge, and peanut butter cookies with a Hershey's kiss in the middle, enough cookies for the entire neighborhood. Then it is time for sewing. We stay up late, pinning the two sides of felt animals together for ornaments. Cigarettes heap up in the ashtray.

*

In January, we receive our last package. This one contains what appears to be a small, spiny skeleton. It is a *Bolinus brandaris*, a purple dye murex.

I hold the bony comb of the shell in the air and—as if he can see me—Dad's voice shifts register. "This one is very rare. Very rare. I've counted the spines."

It is a warning. He can send weather our way. We shouldn't get any ideas. If we've been slack, slatternly, loose, or lax, he'll find out. You can bet he will.

*

We have to clean up our act! We have to start at the top and work our way to the bottom—windows, walls, carpets, floors. Everything had better be shipshape. Mom starches and irons uniforms, while I drag the vacuum around, pretending it is a dog.

Soon, everything is in order, except for the shells.

Mom has an idea. She drives us to the Sears & Roebuck. We buy a shelf made of brass and glass. We take the pictures off one wall in the sitting room. She assembles the shelf, Windexing each pane. Then, carefully, tenderly, she dusts off each shell and puts it on display.

She stands back to admire her handiwork.

"What do you think? Your dad will be so proud to see these!"

I retract inside myself. The sound of my held breath rumbles in my ears.

"Honey, come on now. These belong to your father, he collected them."

*

I picture a rain of white shards. The left-handed spiral of the rare *Turbinella pyrum*, the sacred chank, riven in two. The thorny spines of a *Spondylus regius,* snapped at the root. A glorious clatter of glass and shells, of breaking and shouting and then, just the common cowries, thick shelled and indestructible, bouncing onto the rug.

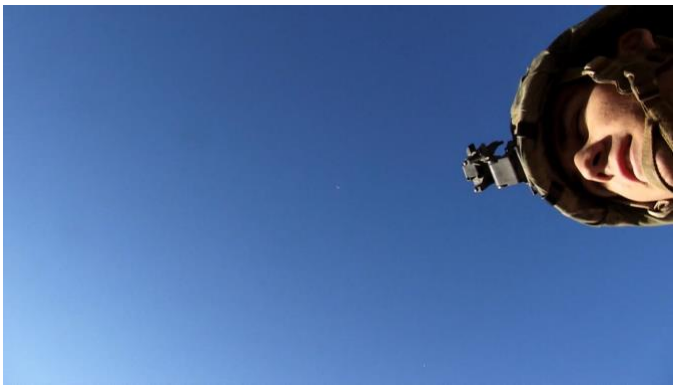
Because shells are only ghost houses. If you listen to them, they will lie about the sea.

Visual Art

INTERVIEW WITH MILES LAGOZE, MAKER OF *COMBAT OBSCURA*

Former Marine Combat Camera Miles Lagoze is a New York-based filmmaker and creator of *Combat Obscura*, the 2019 documentary that "looks nothing like the recruiting pitch being sold to American teenagers" (Columbia University). He sat down with Collateral to talk about the film, as well as the influence of movies on service members and the military / civilian divide.

Collateral (C): I think a lot of readers will come to *Collateral* either unfamiliar with what it means to create a film—to create a documentary, to collect images—or they might be unfamiliar with you personally. So could you tell us a little bit about who you are, and what you do?



Miles Lagoze (ML): Yeah. I enlisted out of high school in the Marines as a combat camera man. And movies had always kind of been a big part of my life growing up. And it was sort of an escape for me, an outlet. But it also influenced me in some ways to actually join the military. Because I was, I think, kind of enthralled by the idea of going to war and filming it, and sort of seeing something that I couldn't see anywhere else.

And the movies that [I] grew up with were heavily anti-war. They had kind of reverse effect on our whole generation, I think. I think it's because of, I mean besides the aesthetics of it, the cultural milieu, like in Vietnam movies, the rock and roll, the drugs, the chaos. But also this idea that war contains a kind of secret that can only be discovered by going there. And it's fucked up because these are really anti-war movies. They don't glorify war, they're heavily critical. They show the brutality. They show innocent people killed, raped, tortured, all this stuff, dehumanized.

C: What movies specifically did you grow up on?

ML: Well, *Platoon*, and *Full Metal Jacket*, *Apocalypse Now*. Those are the three big ones I think. I think if you asked most Marines, usually *Full Metal Jacket* kind of got to them.

C: It's familiar.

ML: Yeah. So I mean the big thing for *Full Metal Jacket* for me was the main character, who was a cameraman in the Marines. And I kind of saw that, and I was like, wow, I can get out of my parents' house right now. Not have to go to grad school or anything. Just go straight into the Marines. And they'll give me a camera, and I can film the war.

And I think another part of it was just an alienation. I didn't understand why people were kind of ignoring [the war]. I went to two liberal high schools. One in San Francisco, and one here in New York City. And kids didn't join the military. And it was almost like the war was kind of a joke. It was just something that stupid kids from the South went to, who actually believed in freedom and fighting

for America, were totally brainwashed and couldn't do anything better with their lives. It bothered me, as an angry adolescent kid, as it does when you're at that kind of transformative point in your life.

C: I agree. Yeah, I can relate to this. My rural high school was the one where people went to the military because there were no possibilities elsewhere.**ML:** Right. Yeah.

C: When did you enlist?

ML: 2008. I was 18. The summer out of high school when it's the hottest in South Carolina where the camp is.

C: Yeah. So that was fun?

ML: Yeah. That was fun. Instantly regretted it the minute I got there.

C: Why did you enlist? Did it have something to do with feeling bothered by ignorance, or bothered by people looking away from the war?

ML: Yeah, definitely. That was a big part of it. I also wanted to test myself. I mean, the stuff we grow up with, the cultural idea of war in America, is really strange. Because we're always at war, but it's always sort of for dubious reasons. And people acknowledge that it's sort of a dubious reasons. Yet we still hold the experience of war, and those who go to war in very high regard. And we sort of tend to, not glamorize it, but certainly it's glamorized—it's sort of reified.

So when you get back, and people, you tell them you're a veteran, they almost always say, 'I could never understand. There's just no way.' And even at screenings of the movie, people still say, 'Wow, we'll never know.' And I think that's kind of part of the problem: people have this idea of war as this concrete thing you go to that changes you forever, and no one can know what it's like to have been there. And ironically, I think this sets a challenge to mostly young men, but women too, at an impressionable age when it's like, oh, so you're telling me this is something that can only be understood by going, but I shouldn't go. Right? Like you shouldn't go. But at the same time, if you do, you're going to be special in a way.

C: Right.

ML: You're going to be one of the few.

C: Yeah. And by saying that you are never going to understand, that's a really firm way of putting the brakes on the conversation—

ML: Yeah, that too. That too.

C: ... as a whole. 'Well, I could never understand it. So therefore—'

ML: 'Don't tell me.'

C: Yeah. 'So don't tell me. And it's unpleasant and it hurts. So please just go away.'

ML: 'Thanks, but no thanks.'

C: Right. 'Thanks, but no thanks.' My husband definitely gets the *thank you for your service* line. And it's uncomfortable to watch. But I don't know if it's any more uncomfortable to watch the people who really rely on that gratitude, and really, really feel a sense of gratitude that might not actually be there.

ML: Yeah. And I mean, I don't speak for all veterans; there are different types who go in for different reasons. But I do think there is a cultural thing that is very specific to America about how we deal with war, and how we look at it.

C: That's actually one of the things that I noticed when I was doing my homework for this. One of the responses to *Combat Obscura* is 'this guy doesn't speak for me.' And my first thought was, of course he doesn't.

ML: Yeah. I never said I did.

C: It's not what documentaries are doing. And it's not really what art is doing. But as I read further into that, there have been some reactions to this work that have included some personal attacks on

you. And I wondered, as an editor publishing material that is also controversial by nature, how have you handled this, the reaction to *Combat Obscura*?

ML: The negative reactions?

C: Yeah, let's start there, and then I want to move on the other ones as well.

ML: I mean, it's tough because it's still fresh. It just came out last month. So I'm still kind of... at first I was really pissed off. And kind of, I've done a lot of interviews, and I just kind of watch them, and I think, 'I shouldn't have said…' or 'if I had said this differently, maybe they wouldn't…'. Because the most vocal people are usually negative. Or trolls on YouTube or Reddit. It's tough. I mean, especially when I've heard from guys in the actual battalion that I was in, who say 'this is an inaccurate depiction. This is going to make everyone look bad, and people don't need to see this. And you're a buddy fucker. You betrayed the trust of your fellow Marines.' And at the same time it's sort of, to me, it's ridiculous. One, because the movie doesn't claim to speak for every military person's experience. It's actually a very personal film. I'm in the film. It's from my perspective most of the time. You can hear me behind the camera. I'm interviewed in it. It's very personal.

But also, this idea that people shouldn't see things that are critical about the military is ridiculous. And it's so selfish when it's… it pisses me off when it's coming from veterans, because one of the things that bothers me the most about our generation's representations of war, especially in movies, is that they always paint the American soldiers as sort of victims in this conflict where they're overrun by savage Iraqis, or these savage people who outnumber them. And they're just kind of out there fighting for their fellow brothers, and blah, blah, blah.

And it's like, if we have all these false depictions, these kind of hero worshiping depictions, there's got to be something else too. I mean, you can't just have one type of voice, or one type of narrative.

And I get it that people, especially soldiers, are worried because people tend to see the uniform, and they apply it to everyone, its symbolic effect. They tend to see only the negative. People, depending on the political spectrum, people tend to focus on the negative, then people on the right tend to focus on the positive only. And we made a really conscious effort to be critical, but also to show different sides of the experience: the highs, the lows, the good, the bad, the ugly. And ultimately,

at the end of the day, I mean, it's an art film. Not to be like too much of a cliché, but it's not supposed to speak for you. It's supposed to speak to you, and you take away from it what you get out of it. Which is the best thing—it's gotten a wide range of responses. And I think that reflects the sort of ambiguous aspects of the film.

But I do get kind of frustrated when, especially the short interviews, the interviews that just [share] little clips like on Now This and stuff. They kind of take the most controversial stuff you say and don't really add any context to it. So I understand why some people are upset. And I tried my best to say everything that I could in all the interviews, and sometimes it sort of backfired.

I don't think the military's a kind of untouchable group. I think if anything it should be the most critically observed institution in our democracy because we're sending kids to go kill people, and to die. And when you have an institution like that, you should always look at it with a critical gaze. I mean, always a little skeptical. Like most countries, I think, look at their military that way. I'm not trying to demonize them, but I think our vision of the military needs to be a little more honest.

C: Well, in your experience, you enlisted, you went, you were part of this. I mean, I don't know how you can really say that you're demonizing them when, if anything, you're showing that you were complicit, that I'm complicit, that we're all complicit in this. But I have noticed that in the different write-ups I've seen about this—and I read articles about *Combat Obscura* before I watched it—were from military publications: *Stars and Stripes*, *Military Times*—and they kind of glamorize the headlines, saying 'this is the one the military doesn't want you to see!' And I think, okay, except the military is not going to publish anything they don't want you to see. So, no. But it did kind of set the film up to be this test of the military, a test of these traditions Americans have of hero worship, the concept of 'broken vets'—the stereotypes that we feel most comfortable with.

And when I watched the movie, it was different. I didn't feel like the soldiers were being demonized at all. You showed multiple sides. I mean, we saw a man dying, we saw the gauze falling off his head, and we saw people wondering why the fuck the helicopter wasn't landing. And we saw panic. So that makes sense.

But I wondered how much material was cut from this. Because I assume you had just tons of footage. And you worked with an editor, was it Eric Schuman?

ML: Mm-hmm.

C: And he's quoted saying that he arranged the footage to tell a thematic story about a deployment. And I wondered if there was such a thing, and if you could tell me a little about how much was cut, and whether some of the cut material is still on your mind.

ML: Yeah. To be honest, a lot of the cut stuff is because when you're out there filming, you're always trying to get the moment before the shooting starts. So it's not just cut to shooting. But you see the beginning of a firefight. Most of the time it's me filming them, walking around, waiting to get shot at. So I mean, that stuff's really boring.

A lot of other stuff, them just goofing around, the propaganda stuff that I would have to film, like we would drop food somewhere; I had to film that. Most of it really, it's only an hour and ten minutes. So we really include only the most interesting stuff. The kind of stuff that made you look, brought you into the moment, made you stay in that moment and the uncertainty of it. Those were the moments we wanted to use the most.

And then just making it coherent, a kind of flow was important. I'm always thinking like, 'oh, we should have used…' or 'this part should have been longer,' 'we should have heard them say this.' The movie never really felt over for me because I'm still dealing with it—dealing with the memories of it, and wanting to tell the best and most all-encompassing story that that I could.

And when I first set out making it, I was using conventional interviews with the guys. And when we stripped it of that, and just used the image, for me, it was better. Because the audience gets to decide. They get to glean the message from the thematic structure, without being told or explained to, the experience of war. Just kind of thrust into it.

C: Can you tell me more about the process of making a movie? I mean, I'm more familiar with the publishing industry than movie making. How long did it take to do this, and when did you decide you were doing it, and can you tell me a bit about that?

ML: Yeah. So, almost everyone has cameras out there, so they come back with footage on their hard drives that they tend to show their friends and families. Which is always an awkward experience because people have their own expectations of what war looks like, or what it should feel like, or what soldiers should be doing. Most of the stuff they get from movies. It's awkward because you're simultaneously trying to break down that mythology and live up to it. I know what I found when I first came back—I wanted to meet those expectations that people had. So I would only show them certain things. I would leave out other stuff that made the military look bad… because I still wasn't ready to acknowledge the fact that I might have been a part of something that was horribly wrong. That might have made things worse in that region. I wasn't really ready yet to go there.

I got out of the Marines in 2013. But a couple of years after I'd been out, I started going to college. I looked back at the footage, and it's almost like a filter was taken off, or a guise was stripped, the way I began to see it. Because I had that distance, not just from the memories, but from the guys who I was with. Because when you get out, you tend to kind of drift apart. And you always say, 'Oh, we're always going to be friends. We're always going to be brothers. We're always going to be together.' But it doesn't work out like that. Once you're out of that box, that military box, there's no way. You just, you live your life, you go on your different routes. And even sometimes you end up breaking friendships that you had. You end up losing friends, or you end up thinking differently, and you change. When you're that age—your brain hasn't even fully developed when you're 20 years old. So you get out, and you're an adult, finally. You're no longer a kid in this weird, hypermasculine institution. And so you start to see things very differently.

When that happened, I basically started working on [the movie] the whole time that I was in film school. For about three years, I was working on it. And it was very difficult. Started to become kind of numb to the stuff, and started to feel sort of hopeless about it until I brought in Eric. And he sort of pulled me out of it. And he made me realize things that I had kind of ignored. Things that I had normalized about the footage, or the experience. I'd be like, "Oh, it's just them killing a chicken. Who cares?" He's like, "No, this is interesting. This says something. It's stark. It reveals something that regular citizens don't see, and are going to be interested in." And so he helped me a lot.

C: It's almost like he gave you a space to really slow down, and witness what you'd seen.

ML: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah.

C: Wow.

ML: He deserves a huge amount of credit.

C: Yeah.

ML: Not just for the movie, but for my own sanity.

C: I feel like I'm constantly seeing people coming back from combat and keeping it all really quiet unless they're laughing about it or sharing it in a way that they think is most palatable. After watching *Combat Obscura*, I was talking with someone about how, as a civilian, we should properly care for this situation, and these experiences, and these people? Is there anything you can think of that, coming back from deployment, you wished that you'd seen, or wished that you'd had, that people might be able to provide now?

ML: I think honestly, I'm a movie guy, but I read a lot of books. And the books that have come out recently are really, really good, and really honest. A lot of them are coming from veteran writers like Matt Young, or Phil Klay, Roy Scranton. So that helps me a lot. But I don't know if people… it's sort of a niche audience that's actually interested or invested.

C: Right.

ML: And so for me, I kind of still want to be that one who's bringing that honesty that's in those books into film. I think we're at a point now where we're kind of ready to have an honest conversation. But when I first came back, we weren't. Because we were still kind of, even though it was 10 years, no, it was 12 years at that point, we weren't really ready to have those honest conversations.

C: And you feel like we are now?

ML: I feel like we're getting there for sure. But as far as like, what do we need to do? I don't have the answers for that. I think it starts to come down to recognizing everyday citizens' complicity in the wars. But when you tell them that, they say, well then, what do we need to do? And it's like, there's not much we really can do. Then they get pissed off and think you're a buzzkill or something. But there's power in recognizing things, and discussing them, and then registering them, and hopefully not making the same mistakes in the future.

C: Yeah. It sounds like maybe increasing our openness to having a conversation is perhaps all we can do. Being able to, or willing, to talk about it and write about it, make art about it.

We never did actually circle back to the more positive responses to the documentary. Just kind of went through the harder stuff. How has it felt to receive attention for this? Is it looking up, or how's that felt?

ML: I mean, the reviews that get it, or the people who get it, it's always really reassuring. Because I had a huge amount of doubt in even showing it. Wasn't really expecting to get that much attention from it. But yeah, when people get it, it always kind of makes you think, okay, maybe this is worth something.

C: Was the military's interest in it surprising to you?

ML: No. I mean, I knew that the Marine Corps was going to have a problem with it. And that's why it took so long for it to get out, to get released, because I had to deal with all the legal stuff. I was working with a First Amendment group at Columbia who sort of specializes in free speech from the government and the DOD in the digital age. And we weren't really sure what was going to happen because the Marine Corps wasn't really giving us a concrete answer. They were just kind of asking the same questions. 'Okay, what equipment did you use?' I even met with a Colonel who was in charge of

Hollywood films that work with the military. Because what people don't realize is a lot of Hollywood war films use the Pentagon and the military's equipment for their films. And in doing so, their scripts have to get approved. It's kind of crazy.

But I met the guy who was in charge of that for the Marine Corps specifically, like any movie that's made about the Marine Corps. And he was like, 'I just want to know what the narrative direction of this film is.' Because he saw an early cut of the film. It was even more schizophrenic. And yeah, trying to explain to them, this isn't a hit piece, it's not propaganda one way or the other. It's just one Marine's, or one unit's, experience from an inside perspective.

But they're not pursuing legal action. Partly because I think they do understand it. I think their response, which sort of reflects the negative reactions from fellow service members, is this 'it doesn't represent the whole military. It's just a few bad apples.' I find that to be a little ridiculous as well. This is a movie not about a few bad apples, it's about an institution too. I'm glad that they're not suing me or trying to arrest me.

C: Yeah, that's a plus.

ML: I think it would serve them better if they just kind of acknowledged that, yeah, this Marine Corps isn't a bunch of Boy Scouts. They're not diplomatic warriors, like they would wish to have them portrayed. They're kids. They're 18, 19-year-old kids who, a lot of times, in the infantry, wanted to go to war, and were put into an institution that gets them ready to do that in a very specific way. So it shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone. If that makes any sense.

C: No. No. It definitely makes sense.