

O-Dark-Thirty  
A Literary Journal

Summer 2014  
Volume 2 Number 4

On the cover: *War and Nature: Filipinos Throw Food*,  
photocollage on silk by Scottie Kersta-Wilson.

Scottie Kersta-Wilson's family members have fought in wars from the American Revolution to Afghanistan. Her grandfather survived the Bataan Death March and a three-year incarceration in Cabanatuan during his service in the Army; her father, an Army officer, was killed during his second tour in Vietnam. Ms. Kersta-Wilson received her MFA in photography and computer imaging at the University of Illinois in Chicago. Her imagery centers primarily on Vietnam and the Philippines, and she works on silk fabric, a medium which embodies the history and beauty of Asia.

Ms. Kersta-Wilson created the cover photocollage using an image loaned by artist Ben Steele and a photograph of the Bataan Death March. The photo was most likely taken by the Japanese for propaganda purposes, and depicts the attempts of courageous Filipinos to share food and water with soldiers who are carrying their dead comrades toward burial.

# Table of Contents

## Non-fiction

This War Can't Be All Bad <i>Sylvia Bowersox</i>	11
Fighting the Battle for Identity, One Tattoo at a Time <i>Joseph Miller</i>	17
The Lead Weight <i>Greg White</i>	25

## Fiction

Now is the Worst Moment <i>Michelle Bartz</i>	39
Down at the Lake <i>Carmelinda Blagg</i>	41
Air Show <i>Robert Morgan Fisher</i>	57
The Pit Sword Room <i>Jeffery Hess</i>	67
Hadrian's Wall <i>Michael Lund</i>	83
Fear <i>David Tanis</i>	95

## Poetry

Tear Catching <i>Holly Thomas</i>	103
-----------------------------------	-----

## Interview

A Conversation with Robert Bausch <i>Jim Mathews</i>	107
--	-----

## Special Section

Interlude on a FOB <i>M. Philpott</i>	119
Three Poems <i>Farzana Marie</i>	123
Excerpt from the Sand Box: A Cautionary Tale <i>Ricardo Pereyda</i>	127
Three Poems <i>Thomas Bryan</i>	133

## O-Dark-Thirty Staff

**Ron Capps** *Editor*

**Janis Albuquerque** *Designer*

**Jerri Bell** *Managing Editor*

**Dario DiBattista** *Non-Fiction Editor*

**Fred Foote** *Poetry Editor*

**Kate Hoit** *Multimedia Editor (web)*

**Jim Mathews** *Fiction Editor*

ISSN: 2325-3002 (Print)

ISSN: 2325-3010 (Online)

## Editor's Note

**Y**ou may notice that this edition of *O-Dark-Thirty* is a little larger than some of our others. We've included a special section that includes writing produced at a wilderness writing workshop we held with our friends at The Wilderness Society. The workshop took place in March in the Dragoon Mountains of Arizona, not far from Fort Huachuca and Davis-Monthan Air Force Base. We hope to do more workshops with TWS. So watch our website ([veteranswriting.org](http://veteranswriting.org)) for updates to our teaching calendar, and please consider attending one of our seminars or workshops.

This is also the last edition for which I'll serve as the editor. I'm turning the journal over to Jerri Bell and Jim Mathews. Jerri has been (and will remain) the managing editor of our online presence and Jim has been (and will remain) our fiction editor. They're jointly taking on the added responsibility of putting together the quarterly print version of *O-Dark-Thirty* beginning with our next edition, Volume 3 Number 1 in November. So you'll see some changes in the future, and they're all for the best.

*Ron Capps*

Non-fiction.

## This War Can't Be All Bad

By Sylvia Bowersox

**T**his war can't be all bad. We sing karaoke on Mondays and Wednesdays and sit by the pool behind Saddam's Presidential Palace after work and smoke cigarettes. By midnight we are watching others smoke cigarettes and drink and jump off the high dive naked. Jokes that any teenage boy would roll his eyes at explain the meter-wide butt-shaped flattening of the sandbags behind your buddy's trailer. It's another episode of "Operation Green Card Get Me Out of Here Sex," and today the happy contestant was the Kurdish woman who works in his office. By dawn KBR, that American multinational corporation providing support services to our war, is doing our laundry and by day we go to meetings where the Iraqi employees cry with fear over the sentence of death imposed on them by the insurgents for the crime of working for us here at the Embassy.

This war can't be all bad. We get visited by senators, representatives, and university professors who arrive by night to write books, collect hazard pay, and earn their sand cred. We acknowledge their positions and provide thank you notes for the well-meaning

people in their districts who send us collections of the worst books and magazines ever published. We get mail from the trailer behind the palace and buy paintings from the PX whose creators rarely sign their work. We buy rugs made by children imported from somewhere else and purchase Saddam Hussein watches at the Hajji Mart from the smiling man in the washed out dishdasha until the whole thing was blown up by that suicide bomber on the same day that other suicide bomber blew up the Green Zone Café and all the people in it. We always get our hair done in the palace by three liberated Iraqi women in tight jeans and a KBR Employee from San Diego. We play piano and guitar for parties and eat Chinese food at the "Bad Chinese Food" restaurant until it was closed because of the chickens hanging in the toilets and that guy who got hepatitis. Nobody notices the massage place above the kitchen but everybody knows that there are no happy endings there. And yesterday afternoon the general's translator told us over lunch that the young female translator who helped us in Mosul was shot dead outside the gate on her way home from work.

This war can't be all bad. We get good food, except for that week when the delivery trucks were delayed by too much death, that week we ate MREs and multi-use potato dishes. Now we get yummy food; we get mint chip ice cream and avocado salads and made to order omelets and lattes by our Pakistani cooks, and catered parties with martinis at noon and beer and wine and music under the awning and pizza in the parking lot and steak and crab on Thursdays. We only have to hide under our tables and desks when rockets land in the courtyard.

We get to hang out of windows celebrating football and soccer and gossip about who is doing what to whom and how. We go on dates at the Blue Star Café and talk to friends a million miles away on our cell phones and have screaming debates about fixing the

country. We watch the Academy Awards and the Grammys and the Daily Show and we get up early to watch the election and stay up late to watch the game and I got cake on my birthday and flowers when I sang, and I always haggled over prices with the black clad ladies minding the bathrooms and everyone always politely listens when an old Iraqi man tells us he is afraid for his life. Two weeks later someone asks me if I have seen him.

This war can't be all bad. I got here by showing up at my Army Reserve center in California in time to jump aboard the Baghdad bus with my unit and here I am, a thirty something Army broadcast journalist with an M16 on my back and a Sony Video camera in my hands doing television stories for the American Forces Network and the Pentagon Channel. I live in a trailer behind the palace, take a Blackhawk to work and get to hang out with reporters from the Western and Iraqi media. Members of our group operate cameras at press conferences with Coalition Provisional Authority spokesman Dan Senor and military spokesman for the Coalition Forces General Mark Kimmert, and when we were under a credible kidnapping threat we got to walk around the office with our M16s loaded.

This war can't be all bad. We watch DVDs on huge TVs and roll over and go back to sleep during alerts. We get to eat at the outpost restaurants in the Green Zone and laugh at that guy in the gorilla suit and buy toys and jewelry from the locals and feel good about ourselves for spreading shoes and pencils and candy and democracy and by sending emails and keeping blogs and taking pictures. Sometimes, one of us, in a fervor of hopeful, democratic consumerism, jumps the fortified fence to go shopping in the Monsour district. And sometimes the shopper even comes back and sometimes that shopper even shows me pictures of their field trip and feeds me sweets from the shops. And the music at the Embassy

memorial services is always beautiful and the deceased always looks so happy in the memorial pamphlet picture.

This war can't be all bad. Because of it, all of our resumès look great and will find us high-paying jobs back home and everyone here thanks me personally for giving them their freedom and everyone at home thanks me for my service and I get to mourn in silence. We get to drive cars and pick up journalists at checkpoint three and every American wants a pet Iraqi and every Iraqi wants a pet American and it is not even strange anymore when you know someone who has been killed, kidnapped, or kidnapped and killed.

This war can't be all bad. The pundits should know that God is taken care of here. We have church on Sunday, synagogue on Friday, prayer groups on Tuesday, witness services on Wednesday, a Muslim prayer rug lives behind a screen in the chapel under the ninety-nine names of Allah. Buddhists meditate alone and the Wiccan stays indoors on Saturdays with her boyfriend. Someone said to someone in the bomb shelter next to the parking lot during an attack that Mormons do their best work in war zones, and I believe it. The fun of it all is that we all get to boss the Iraqis around and feel important by telling them what we are going to do for them and what is good for them and we never have to take no for an answer and we always assure our diplomats that we have Iraqi buy-in and our diplomats always assure their secretaries that they have Iraqi buy-in and their Secretaries always assure the President that they have Iraqi buy-in and the President always assures the American People that we have Iraqi buy-in and the American People don't care. And the Iraqi who works in your office and thanks you personally for granting him his freedom from Saddam Hussein plants IEDs on the roadways by moonlight while the movie theater downstairs plays *Oceans Eleven* six times a week and *Breaker Morant* twice and later in the Big Office someone important takes notes for the eventual PowerPoint presentation as a man pleads for us to do

something about the Christian genocide and mentions in passing that there are only 85 Jews left in the country.

This war can't be all bad. Big men growing weapons from their armpits give us protection when we go on missions in the Red Zone and we get to feel like celebrities in large white SUVs as these hunks and their guns open our doors and scan sectors while we gather phrases for government documents from obsequious Iraqi officials who become glorious resistance fighters after we go home. On our days off we play volleyball and horseshoes and Marco Polo and on the 4th of July we eat too much and feel good about ourselves, sing in the chorus and tape together empty water bottles for the "Empty Water Bottles Taped Together" raft race. We also hide in the basement or under our beds or not at all during rocket attacks on those days. We can't be the ones to die, not on those days.

This war can't be all bad. The President's plan for success in Iraq is working and we don't even need to know what that plan is this week and Zal once stopped me in the hallway to tell me he saw me perform last night in the Baghdad Idol semi-finals and what a talented singer he thought I was and I shook hands with Colin Powell, Condi Rice, John McCain, Senator Barry Obama, Senator John Kerry, Governor Jeb Bush, a beauty queen, Geraldo Rivera, an actor who used to play Superman on TV and some folks with earnest smiles that I had never heard of. I also exercised in the same gym and ran on the same dusty track behind the palace with Dave Petraeus and waited in line to see President Bush when he came to Baghdad and the soldiers assigned to AFN, who had to clean the blood off of Kimberly Dozier's cameras, didn't know who she was.

We all had cameras and took pictures of people around the palace and Iraqis around the rubble and ordered clothes from Gap.com and condoms from Drugstore.com and DVDs and yoga mats from Amazon.com and partied at the British Embassy, enjoyed Pizza Night at the Italian Embassy, danced with the Ukrainian Ambassador and

laughed at the Iraqi women who wore all the makeup ever made all at the same time all the time, and men who thought we were in Washington and wore dark grey and black wool suits and went to redundant meetings and car bombs went off in the middle of Iraqis waiting in crowds to get in to see us and the pictures of dead Americans hanging from a bridge frightened little children alone at night watching television.

This war can't be all bad. Once you've been there you'll be back again, and again, and again, and again, and again, and then Iraq will live in your dreams and be the most exciting horrible thing to ever take over your life and then you will have the right to declare with a clear conscience and a steady mind and the moral sense born out of 9/11, and YouTube video clips, and statements from the Dixie Chicks, and Sean Penn and Ted Nugent's guitar and Cindy Sheehan's campground and the Occupy Movement's rants, and Obama's mother and my mother and your mother and all mothers, whether or not, all and all, with all things considered, in the conflict between good and evil, lock, stock and barrel, under the eyes of the Global War on Terror, the mind of God, Osama Bin Laden's ghost and the sinking economy, this war can't be all bad.

*Sylvia Bowersox served her first tour in Iraq in 2003-04 as a U.S. Army broadcast journalist attached to the 101st Airborne Division in Mosul. Her assignments took her around the country, but much of her time was spent in Baghdad, at Coalition Provisional Authority headquarters, which serves as the background for much of her work. She returned to Iraq for two more tours as a "3161" press officer assigned to the U.S. Embassy Baghdad public affairs office, and later to the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR). Sylvia received her B.A. in English Literature from San Francisco State University, and is currently completing a Masters degree program in Creative Writing at California State University, Chico where she lives with her veteran husband and her Black Labrador service dog, Timothy.*

# Fighting the Battle for Identity, One Tattoo at a Time

By Joseph Miller

A rocket propelled grenade flies towards me and grows in size with every millisecond. My left eye remains fixed upon the imposing missile while my right eye gazes through a reflexive aim point and I squeeze phosphorous tracer rounds into a man. He slumps and falls to the ground. The grenade explodes behind me while I continue firing, unsuccessfully hitting his peers. This short event might have truly occupied five seconds of my lifespan but it, like no other, defines my very existence. It resonates and replays in my mind. I dream of the man's family waiting for a father who will never return. I see the missile streaking towards me and I wonder what kind of monster I am, that I can stay so calm, precise, and capable of killing another man (one who probably shot a missile at me to feed his family) regardless of adversity.

Sometimes I have moments of perfect clarity regarding my experience in war. If you know me you recognize that I have tattoos on my forearms. I often still cite my own contrived narrative as to why

I got them in the first place. Come on, we all do this: we conceal the real reason for doing something to people in our lives that aren't close to us. However, after a while, we tell the standard line so much that we forget the actual truth. In this case I can remember clearly. I have three tattoos. The first is God's breath above a double-edged sword on my inner forearm. The other two are the words Grace (right) and Perseverance (left) on the outside of each forearm.

On the fourteenth of January 2004 I took a man's life in Mosul, Iraq. There was nothing unethical about what I did. He was firing a rocket-propelled grenade at me at the precise moment when my internalized terrain analysis brought my attention to his location. I am simply a better shot. Of course I am. I went to a senior military college, I am an Army Ranger, and I was a platoon leader in the 82nd Airborne. Marksmanship was second nature, because we trained constantly on reflexive marksmanship. His rocket whizzed by my head and my tracers ripped into his abdomen, but failed to hit any of his companions when they dragged him away.

I don't know that I have ever forgiven myself for this event. And for what it is worth, I will never truly believe that that my cause or abilities were superior to his, or that his choice to fight wasn't as subject to his material existence as my own. But this does not explain my tattoos. During the Infantry Officers' Basic Course I can remember praying to God that I never miss a shot because I could not bear the thought of letting one of my teammates down. I was frightened that I might make mistakes and that I would lose soldiers because of them. I had a simple solution to this problem: Every time before I left on a mission I would say a prayer asking God to take my life before he took any of my men's. Now this was by no means a suicidal death wish. Fully believing in the power of prayer, I did everything I could do to make sure none of us got killed. Somehow, none of us were killed. I survived through a continuous process of

learning, commitment to my soldiers, faith, and grace. Once, twice, and a third time I went to war without losing a single soldier. All in the most dangerous service possible. This is all I ever wanted to accomplish. Seriously— who cares about anything else?

But I couldn't sleep and I lay awake at night thinking about the children who didn't have fathers because my men or I killed them. Living in Iraq again and again and again made it impossible to believe stereotypes. The teachings of evangelical Christian fundamentalists during my youth urged me to hate homosexuals and Muslims. But when you watch a lesbian crying because she did everything she could to save a fellow soldier's life, and you fight on the side of Muslim allies, it becomes impossible to discount their equality. The more I interacted with even the most hard-line terrorists, the more pity I felt for them. Days before I killed the unnamed RPG gunner, some of his companions, or perhaps he himself, fired into a crowd of children leaving the school because they knew we would render aid rather than pursuing them effectively.

Hatred is conditioned, and I learned it too. If it weren't for college, I would have likely remained a fundamentalist myself. I felt profound pity for men taught to hate at such extreme levels. Children would never believe in such ways. I felt so much sorrow for my own courage under fire and asked God to take control of my right hand and never let it take another life unless it was in accordance with His will. So that is why I placed God's breath to represent scripture and grace in the hopes that my arm, the hand that I delivered death with, would somehow be governed by a will and power greater than myself. That somehow, in the awful mess of war, I could come home and look myself in the mirror.

Though my God's breath tattoo represented my desire to never take an innocent life, I could no longer tolerate church. After becoming so conscientious about taking a man's life, I saw a suicide

bomber attack a crowd of civilians and it shook the very fiber of my being. I remember leaving men on the ground to die because they had no chance of survival, and after seeing this expression of barbarism explained away as expression of faith I could no longer stomach religious services.

I had seen and experienced what it was like to watch an innocent man's life end, and I was afraid that I could never forgive myself if I ever took an innocent life. I could no longer endure church services but I wanted to express my values in a way that would constantly remind me who I was. I started by expressing the hope that I would never taken an innocent life by tattooing a double-edged sword and the words "God's breath" on my firing arm. I could affect what I could affect, but I desired divine intervention every time I used my weapon. I had a great desire to never be the agent of the horrible things I saw after the suicide bombing.

There was something really freeing about that experience, and it made it easier to grasp who I was. Both the realities of having Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and the way that war changed my perspective on faith made it harder for me to hold onto myself. Both the precedence of war challenging ideals and PTSD making it difficult for individuals to grasp who they were before can serve as assaults on identity, so tattoos can become powerful reminders when the world that we know falls apart. I recognized the utility of wearing my values on my sleeve, so when I was having trouble remembering them, I permanently placed them on my body.

I recognized that with grace and the spirit of perseverance, any storm could be weathered. There was a simple solution. I tattooed the words on my forearms so I knew that my greatest resource was myself. The left forearm would be perseverance, because the first rule in a knife fight is that if you are going to get cut, get cut in the left forearm. Grace reinforced my desire for divine help on my

firing arm. I deployed again, and it was the worst year of my life. I had serious PTSD and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), but I was an officer and men's lives depended on my performance.

I went back to war as a mortar platoon leader and Iraqi Army adviser. I spent the first month in an aviation command center serving with an infantry platoon in case a helicopter was shot down. The staff officers and soldiers played videos of helicopter gunship attacks every night and cheered every time their weapons caused the devastation. I had created the same carnage with my rifle and witnessed a suicide bomber's aftermath on the crowd of civilians. Yet these human beings were celebrating violence as if they were playing a fucking video game. I was so angry with those people who had no grasp on what they were actually witnessing; they could not possess an understanding of the sounds and smells and it made me sick. Every year at that time I get sick. I throw up; I am dizzy, I have difficulty breathing, I feel like I have a fever. One year I was scarlet pink, and every time I go to the doctor there is no explanation. Somatization is the explanation. I had never done anything wrong. I was so torn by all the death and destruction, and there were people in rooms full of screens cheering for suffering as if they were watching a football game.

One of the best soldiers from my previous platoon died while I was in that Air Tactical Command Center. I did not even go to his memorial because I could not live with myself if my new platoon was called for a mission and I lost someone again. I blamed myself. When I was his platoon leader, I prayed every day that if God was going to take someone's life, then he should take mine. I prayed, and God might have taken me. It was my fault. I let my old platoon down by getting promoted and moving up.

I was promoted again and I was put in an Iraqi Army unit. Another soldier from a previous platoon died. I felt nothing. I had

no appetite, no desire to sleep, just anger. It was the Surge: every day another image of a brutally executed body or the image of the burned hulk of an armored vehicle was on my screen. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis died that year. I put myself in the front on every movement so the IED would kill me and I would not have to live with myself if someone else died. But by this point I was too good. I never gave the enemy the right target, and I survived. My body did at least.

I was broken and worn down, but I had my values on my sleeves. My attitude was terrible, but my performance never waned. I could perform my job, but everything was painful. I left the Army bitter and alone. I began blaming myself and thinking that it was my fault that I had succumbed to an invisible wound. I began to believe that I was letting soldiers down in Afghanistan. I should've been better by then—right? No one would ever concede that I even had any problems because I was articulate and I was in shape. No visible wounds.

I began to really despise myself and believe that it was my fault. I was weak, or cowardly, or immoral. Three tours in Iraq as an Infantry Platoon Leader and Iraqi Army Operations Officer was not enough service. I was letting my country and soldiers down. I was training Cadets, but no matter how well I did—I won the top instructor award—I was not doing enough. I was on the line fighting, keeping soldiers alive, bringing drinkable water to villagers, safeguarding civilians. I could do more, I thought. It was my fault that I was no longer fighting. Even at my worst, I kept men alive. Sure, a lot of my soldiers died—but never when I was there. I could be saving lives still, but there was something wrong with me. I worked in ROTC despite my serious PTSD. Teaching cadets what I had learned in combat every day was too much. All I wanted to do was kill myself, but those cadets needed me. My health got worse

and worse and worse, and I did nothing because I could not bear the thought of letting the next class down. Nothing I did was enough.

But this was bullshit. Sure, the feelings were strong and survivor's guilt is unshakable, but the logic was absurd. I had done everything I could and fought as hard as I could (and longer than most in my situation). An Army officer who fought on the line for 20 months before company command is more than rare. An ROTC instructor who wins the top instructor position despite serious medical issues has done all he can. Even now, I am a historian working to challenge the notion that PTSD is a recent phenomenon in human history, by exploring the lives of veterans of the War of 1812, and I often feel like I am not doing enough because I am not on the line anymore. This is a fruitful endeavor and I am still serving soldiers and my country. But you have to step outside of your emotions and look at what you contribute on paper. In writing.

Just like when my world first collapsed, I had to accept that this was not my fault and that in a lot of ways I am better. I was beginning to become open, unashamed, and even in ways proud to struggle after my service in Iraq. I had read Hemingway: "The world breaks everyone, and afterwards, many are strong at the broken places." Though I did not yet feel strong, I again decided to fight for that idea—to place it on my body as a commitment to myself and to my identity. I also wanted to use Hemingway because in the end, he lost his battle with mental illness and took his own life. I wanted to be reminded that even in a victorious idea, we who have had our identity challenged by the crucible of war have to fight every day to preserve ourselves in spirit and in body.

There is nothing wrong with any of us who struggles to come home. Tolkien's famous "Not all who wander are lost" is such a fitting metaphor for the long road home. I often feel like the first few years at home are that way until you realize that PTSD is a never-ending

battle to preserve our identities, and I would challenge others by stating that the fight is worth it. If you have this conflict, you are not alone. This is not a new problem, you are not weaker, and the world needs people who have been broken by trauma. Tattoos are so culturally ubiquitous in our generation, but they can be a kind of cognitive therapy—an idea that you choose to embrace, even when you don't initially feel it, one that can change patterns of behavior and eventually our emotions. We can spend time with our therapists, but our greatest resource is ourselves.

In the end, I was just a dumb kid trying to keep his men alive when I took another man's life. He was trying to kill me, pure and simple. If someone came to my house right now and tried to harm my wife, he wouldn't have a snowball's chance in hell. I have killed another man, and I pray I never do again. My conscience is much more developed than that of many of my contemporaries, but I can manage all the sorrow and empathy that has come from my fighting in Iraq. I can say that I never killed a civilian, nor did any of my subordinates. In the end, all my anguish may be because in the fight I never yielded my humanity. Though I have hated, I no longer hate. And though I rarely feel it, I always know the simple joy of hope for a better tomorrow.

*Joseph Miller is a doctoral student in history at the University of Maine. He also serves as the managing editor at the Veterans' PTSD Project and for the Writing for PTSD—a Soldier's Perspective blog. He served as a heavy weapons platoon leader, mortar platoon leader and Iraqi Army Adviser for 20 months of combat in Iraq.*

## The Lead Weight

By Greg White

May 25, 1979

**P**earing out of the bus, we must have looked like baby mice on searching the sky for hawks. It was about 3:00 A.M., and I couldn't tell if the base was asleep or deserted. As the bus engine rolled past row after row of identical rectangular buildings, street lamps shot light through the windows and hit me with flashes of the past twenty-four hours.

"Unfit for recruit training," the doctor had said.

I stared at him. He didn't look up at me. I'd hesitated when he instructed me to remove my shirt and trousers. On the outside, I looked small and weak. Inside, my confidence matched.

"I hope you have a sense of humor," I'd joked.

The doctor's face had remained stethoscope-cold. "And your trousers," he reminded me. "Step on the scales."

*He sees hundreds of guys. I'm nothing special,* I'd thought.

I knew I was painfully thin. My entire life was one stretched-out avoidance of gym class. My friends called me "Cambodia Legs". Being skinny was my kryptonite. It was a visible manifestation that

I was weak and feminine. I didn't want to be built like me; I wanted to be big and strong and therefore—I thought—manly.

He jotted a note on my chart, checked the scales again, and made another note. "Get dressed," he said. Before I had my shirt buttoned, he'd stamped and closed my chart. "I'm sorry. You're three pounds underweight. If anything happened to you during training, I'd lose my license."

Three pounds. He wouldn't sign a waiver.

I walked numbly back to the lobby, where my best friend Dale and our recruiting officer, Sergeant Jack Evans, were waiting. The expression on my face told them I had been rejected.

"Follow me," Evans said as he walked out of the building. He threw Dale and me in the back seat of his Ford. He drove away, fast. I had no idea where this guy—a man I'd just met—was taking us. I pushed back against the seat as he took hard turns.

I'd sidestepped one obstacle with Evans earlier that day. When Dale and I walked in to enlist, Evans impressed me. He worked a gleaming smile from a square jaw; he had hopped off one of the posters that lined the walls—I was meeting the model for *The Few, the Proud, the Marines*.

Dale and I enlisted on the Buddy System. We stayed together—guaranteed—as long as neither of us broke the law and we kept up with the challenges of boot camp.

Evans pulled out the contract. Dale and I looked over at each other and smiled as Evans asked my full name, my parents' names, my general state of health, and if I participated in any homosexual activities.

"No."

I was stunned. I answered the last question with what I prayed was the same banal tone I had used when answering the question about my mother's maiden name. I'd breezed into this man's office

thinking that I was doing him a favor and that he was going to be thrilled I had agreed to join his club.

“Have you had homosexual thoughts?”

“No.”

I was having one right then.

My mind raced, but I kept my eyes locked in front of me. I sensed Dale beside me. He had always known I was gay. He didn't hold it against me any more than I held his being straight against him. It's a free country. A country we loved and were willing to defend. If I didn't admit to being gay, was there any way that the government could find out? In 1979, out was not in.

I had lied on the paperwork and to Sergeant Evans's face. I had lied to America.

**A**fter a quick but disorienting ride, Evans stopped his car in front of a hardware store. He barely parked. He walked straight to the plumbing aisle and grabbed a heavy industrial U joint—a section of metal pipe shaped like a giant piece of elbow macaroni—then made a beeline to the hammer aisle, where he snatched a sledgehammer off the wall. He put the pipe on the floor and hammered it until it was relatively flat.

Evans picked up the pipe, and ordered me into the restroom with a wink. He told me to lower my trousers and my underwear. I stood still, stiffly looking past Evans. I needed my reaction to reflect that in no way did I think this was a sexual encounter. And I didn't. I had limited dating experience, plus I was fresh from signing the papers pledging my allegiance to the military's zero tolerance for gay behavior. Evans didn't speak. He placed the lead pipe against my pelvis and taped the pipe to my skin. I flinched from the cold metal, and wished I hadn't. For once in my life I was thankful not to be hairy.

Mission accomplished, Evans slapped me on the butt. I had just seen my first Marine in action.

We rushed back to the processing center. Evans practically threw me straight into the doctor's office.

A thumping heart and shaking legs made it harder to walk with the lead pipe taped to my pubic bone. Undressed, I was now a skinny kid with an amazingly large bulge in my tighty-whities. I'd lied, and now I was cheating to get in to the Marines.

The doctor looked at me, trying to determine how I had gained the necessary weight in just an hour. I prayed his eyes didn't linger on my telltale crotch. He closed his lips tight and hastily signed my chart.

There wasn't time to celebrate and, technically, nothing to celebrate—I'd done what was necessary to accomplish my goal.

I laid my hand on a Bible, and Evans swore Dale and me into the United States Marine Corps. I promised to uphold the Constitution and defend my country. I stared ahead at the photograph of President Carter on the wall. I didn't yet know that the President was also the Commander in Chief of the military. I hadn't yet been forced to march in the rain, repeating the chain of command as my boots sloshed in a muddy puddle.

With a soft, drawn-out squeal, the bus stopped at the feet of three uniformed men standing dead still in the middle of the road. On board, you could have heard a zit pop.

The door flew open and all three men stormed onto the bus.

“Get off of the bus! Get off my motherfucking bus! Get off this goddamn bus, you faggots, and find a pair of yellow footprints and stand on 'em!”

The other boys, including Dale, scrambled into the aisle to escape, as if the bus were about to blow up. It was chaos. The

uniformed men were stalking up and down the middle of the bus, pinballing into all the other boys with the same noise and flash as a game on full tilt. I kept my seat. I wasn't used to being talked to like this, especially at such volume.

“Get off the motherfucking bus, retards! Find a pair of footprints—they're on the fucking ground next to your balls!” Herebefore, the only uniformed Marine I had dealt with was Sergeant Evans—kind, handsome, and what I figured was typical. In just a few seconds, these Marines revealed Evans as a slick salesman who had created an impression of “normal” that in no way matched the current situation.

As the last few boys made it off, one Marine came charging back and stopped at my seat. His contorted face popped down near mine.

“Why the fuck are you sitting here? What the fuck is wrong with you that you think you don't have to get off this goddamn bus?”

In my head I responded, *Because I don't care for the way you are talking to me.*

I felt his mouth on my ear.

“Get off this motherfucking bus!”

I jumped up and scrambled past him and off the bus at the speed normally reserved for cartoon characters fleeing a nest of angry bees.

I passed Dale, who shot me a wide-eyed *What the hell are you doing?*

No one—I mean no one—had said anything that led me to expect that I was going to be met rudely. While I wasn't naïve enough to think I'd be greeted with a gift basket and a map to the base's spa area, I do believe in good first impressions. The hostile running around and yelling made it difficult to think anything except *What have I done?*

That remained the foremost question in my mind for the next thirteen weeks. What had I done?

We were ordered to peel off row by row and march into a building about twenty feet away. One of the Marines yelled a ridiculous, “Taking too fucking long, you stupid recruits!”

Ah, I was a recruit. I had just gotten lumped in with those guys I had paid no attention to on the bus. Now my shoulders knocked into theirs as we were herded into the building.

I had been looking through rose-colored glasses, and things were about to get very green.

We spilled directly from the dark night into a large, brightly lit classroom. The current swept me down one of several long, orderly rows of desks. In the surge of bodies, I managed to stick to Dale and scoot into a desk behind him.

“Motherfuckers want to stroll into my Marine Corps? That’ll fucking change when you meet your DIs!”

These Marines drained the swagger out of each and every one of us in less than thirty seconds.

I didn’t dare look anywhere but at the back of Dale’s familiar head. He might not have been to Marine boot camp before, but he had spent one year at the Air Force Academy.

When he called me after our freshman year of college, I lay on the sofa twisting the phone cord as I brought him up to speed on my slow year at a junior college in Dallas.

“I’m leaving the Academy,” Dale said.

“What?” I said. It didn’t make sense; he had been named top cadet.

His vision had gotten too bad for him to fly. He was joining the Marines instead. His entire summer—thirteen weeks—would be spent at Parris Island in boot camp.

I sat up. I liked boots. I loved the idea of summer camp. I told him I’d go with him.

He thought I was joking but still built a case against the idea.

“You’ve never run a mile.”

“You don’t know the first thing about the military.”

“They’ll eat you alive.”

The best argument of all went unspoken: *You’re gay.*

Dale was right. I knew nothing about the military. My life had not prepared me for any serious commitment, much less one that could end with physical injury, mental breakdown, or dishonorable discharge for homosexuality.

*Maybe this is a great way for me to jumpstart a much-needed physical fitness program, I quipped to myself. Get an awesome tan, sharpen my archery skills, maybe end up with one of those hand-laced wallets . . .*

The joking slammed to a halt when those bus brakes squealed. Now the Marines patrolling the aisles reminded me of hungry sharks—always moving, never resting, the look of death in their cold eyes.

“Quit eyeballing me, recruit. Don’t fucking breathe.”

Staring at the back of Dale’s head eased the stress I felt. He was the one constant in my life. When we met on the first day of ninth grade in New Orleans, I’d been to eleven schools in six cities. I could walk into a burning building, sit down and open a book, then pass a test on whatever page I landed on.

Dale’s dad was a career Marine. Their frequent moves seemed legit. Mine sounded sketchy. I longed for the family stability he had.

I was at that school one year before we moved again. When I say we moved, I don’t mean my whole family. My mother wanted a PhD and the best program was in Utah. I wasn’t in the meetings—perhaps there were charts and graphs with statistics to support the choices—but the plan was for her to take two boys with her and leave two behind in New Orleans.

I was one of the children not taken. A child not taken—that’s difficult.

Dale and I worked hard to stay close. I went to five more schools. I managed to graduate high school when I was sixteen. Without help or advice or probably adequate postage, I applied to Harvard. And just Harvard. I didn't get in. I imagine the baffled admissions clerk opening my application and turning the page over and over, trying to make sense of the chicken-scratch-filled form.

I had made nothing happen college-wise, so I headed to Dallas, where my mother had moved after finishing her doctoral work. I got a part-time job and enrolled in a local college. By the time I turned eighteen, I didn't feel connected to any one place or loyal to anyone. Except Dale.

My decision to meet him in New Orleans to join the Marine Corps wasn't difficult. I knew no one at home, belonged to nothing, and wanted to belong to something.

"On your feet, recruits!"

A Parris Island Marine's command could compel you from a coma. We all jumped, hitting our knees against our desks and bumping into each other in the aisles.

The Marines ordered us into a single-file line. I wanted to peek out and ahead, but the Marines seemed to be everywhere at once.

I heard buzzing. We inched up a bit, and I risked a glance out. This was it: the legendary head-shaving. About to happen to me.

Just after I had signed my enlistment contract in Sergeant Evans's office, he had played a videotape. I watched large groups of young men marching in unison. The camera zoomed down a line of boys outside a barbershop and then cut to one kid sitting in the barber's chair, smiling into the camera. The barber grabbed the boy's head and roughly tilted it forward. He ran electric clippers over the boy's scalp, leaving nothing but the boy's sheepish grin. To my relief, we moved on to another scene, where the boys were now in camouflage uniforms, carrying rifles and running through the woods, up and over nets made of rope.

My success in convincing Sergeant Evans that I wasn't gay had felt like a victory. Meeting him, seeing the Marines on the posters—it all made me want to be one of those guys.

As I moved closer and closer, boys filed by, their heads looking like fields cropped down to stubble. A couple of them rubbed their bald heads, their new badge of honor, excited to kick-start their military career.

I loved my hair. I rocked huge 70's feathered wings of hair that folded over my tiny egg head like the protective wings of a mother bird.

I wanted to run my hands through it to say goodbye, but I dared not move. I got close enough to the door to see three civilian men presiding over their barber chairs.

“Cover any moles on your head with your fingers, and I'll mow around 'em,” the shearer told us.

Dale turned back and our bugged eyes shared the same silent scream—we had no idea if we had any moles. The disgusting thought of growths on my head was overtaken by the mental image of blood spurting from shaved-off bumps.

My turn came. The Marine at the door pointed to a chair before the current occupant had even finished. I grabbed the chair's red vinyl armrest for support, but hesitated before twisting my body into the seat—it was covered with the hair of other people. The barber placed his hand on my shoulder and pawed me into place. The cold steel clippers hit the nape of my neck and he pushed the clippers across my head, ending with a flourish off my forehead. I wanted to look up in the mirror, but the barber held my head down firmly. The buzzing muffled when the clippers hit thick, intact hair, then resumed full volume as the hair fell away. I watched my prized hair fall to the ground and join the pile left by countless others.

In the same few moments it took to buzz my hair from my head, the barber erased any doubt that I'd truly joined the Marines.

I felt naked and vulnerable as I walked down the brightly lit hallway back to the classroom, where I slipped behind my desk. Soon, Dale walked down the row towards me. He looked hilarious with his stark white scalp and tan face. We knew not to talk, but I wanted to laugh.

Dale boldly turned around. He grinned, reached up, and rubbed my buzzed head. I rubbed his. With my other hand, I rubbed my own head for comparison. Dale did the same. Four hands, two heads. The stubble on my head felt soft and thin. His felt rough and prickly, like my G.I. Joe's velvety head.

Suddenly a Marine was screaming, razor-close to our faces.

“What the fuck are you two doing? Why are you rubbing his head, faggot?”

We yanked our hands away. I'd been called a faggot before, but never while actually touching another boy. The Marine's glare, focused solely on me, felt like a prison floodlight. Gay was a crime in here; I had to remember.

He ordered us both to stand up and follow him. This was it. I was being kicked out for being gay, and I'd cost Dale his chance to be a Marine.

He threw us out a door into an alley and pointed at some dented, crusty old garbage cans and a pile of gnarly scrub brushes.

“You faggots want to get nasty with each other, then you can scrub the fuck out of these shitcans.”

After experiencing it, I can think of nothing more gross than reaching deep inside a huge can to touch—much less clean up—someone else's gooey filth. Dale kept his head down as he scrubbed, letting me know that this was not a great start to boot camp. A whiff of anything negative could become a stench you carried around for the rest of the summer.

A single streetlight spotlighted our shameful activities.

“I’m sorry,” I humbly said.

“Don’t talk to me. Don’t look at me.” He jammed his whole arm in the can.

I was horrified that I might have compromised him. I reached into the can as if searching for redemption. I focused on trying to dislodge the sludge seemingly melded into the sides. Chunks of carrot and bits of turkey at the bottom told me I was handling some guy’s vomit with my bare hands. It was getting under my fingernails. I scooted chunks of dark, congealed, sticky slime up the sides of the can. I choked back disgusted gags in case Dale might construe them as a feeble attempt to talk.

Dale was and is my hero. I couldn’t let him down. He made the tough decision to become a Marine. I vowed to join him.

And I did not think that through.

It didn’t occur to me that being in the military would make me uncomfortable. I didn’t predict that it wouldn’t be just my feet that would feel raw and painful, that I was voluntarily exposing myself as a target for hatred.

We never discussed that I was about to put my sexuality secret on a very public and potentially violent playing field.

I couldn’t walk out. This wasn’t a job anyone could quit. I had signed a contract for six years that could only be broken by the government if it decided I was unfit. Most importantly, I couldn’t disappoint Dale.

No matter how unique I felt up to that point in my life, right there in that alley and from there on out, I lowered my head. That helped keep my mouth shut.

I had started to realize that boot camp was going to be hard work. But I was still a ways from recognizing that I would technically be working harder than anyone else in my platoon: I would have to do everything they did, but also mask my secret.

I came in a weak, broken bird, wanting to be an eagle. The Marine Corps emblem dangled in my face, not daring me to snatch it, but challenging me to earn it.

I entered boot camp in 1979—fifteen years before Don't Ask, Don't Tell—feeling less masculine than everyone else, and burdened by the secret of being gay. Midway through the thirteen weeks of boot camp, the struggle to survive and become a Marine trumped my fear of exposure, though it remained on my mind daily. I learned that everyone came in with some feeling of being different. I served with young men who had been pre-judged for the color of their skin, for their weight, for their poverty.

The battle for acceptance is waged on many fronts.

*Greg White, a former sergeant, served six years in the U.S. Marine Corps and completed Officer Candidate School over the course of two summers after boot camp. A regular contributor to The Huffington Post and The Good Men Project, he has a long history in film and television production. His writing credits include HBO's Dream On, Norman Lear's The Powers That Be and 704 Hauser, Fox's Life With Louie, Sony's animated series Jumanji, and Disney's Social Studies. In front of the camera, he has portrayed a doctor on Another World and appeared in The Young and the Restless. "The Lead Pipe" is an excerpt from his memoir The Pink Marine, for which he is currently seeking representation.*

Fiction.

## Now Is the Worst Moment

By Michelle Bartz

**W**hen I wake up in the morning and look over, you're not there. But that's okay . . . you just got up before me. You're downstairs. You've made coffee, maybe put some muffins in the oven. You're in your robe, sitting in your blue chair. You're reading the paper, watching the morning news.

When I wake up in the morning and look over, you're not there. You're never going to be there. When I think I hear movement downstairs, it's not you. It will never be you.

That's what those men in the green uniforms came to tell me that afternoon. They came to tell me very simply and very plainly that you will never be there. You will never be in all the places I expect you to be.

I think back to the moment you walked away. I knew I'd see you again. That wasn't the worst moment.

I think back to the moment you died. A feeling of you came to say goodbye. I didn't understand what it meant. That wasn't the worst moment.

I think back to the moment I opened the door. I didn't believe them. That wasn't the worst moment.

I think back to the moment at the airfield; watching your flag-draped casket carried off the plane. It could have been a movie. It didn't feel real. That wasn't the worst moment.

I think back to your funeral, the day your body was lowered into the ground. I was still in shock. That wasn't the worst moment.

I think now about memories and moments and places with you. I understand now they will never be again. I understand now when you walked away it was the last time I'd ever see you. I understand now your goodbye was forever. I understand now the cruel truth spoken by those men in uniform. I understand now this isn't a movie. This is real. I understand now your body and your being are really gone.

Now is this second. Now is forever moving forward. Now is never in the past. Now is always with me. Now never fades away. Now is right now. Now is the worst moment.

*Michelle Bartz resides with her son in Bellingham, Washington. After spending nearly 20 years as a military wife, she became a war widow when her US Army husband was killed in a suicide bombing attack in Kabul, Afghanistan. She holds an MSA from Central Michigan University and currently serves as a director of the Josh Fueston Memorial Foundation, which works to promote awareness of military Post-Traumatic Stress. She is also a Service to the Armed Forces caseworker for American Red Cross.*

## Down at the Lake

By Carmelinda Blagg

The drive to the lake was longer than she remembered—almost three hours. But the further from town Cheryl got, the better she felt. The afternoon light made long shadows along the narrow interstate, reminding her of the lengthy summer days to come. It was 2006, the first full year of grief behind her. They were halfway through June. School was out.

“I wish grandpa was coming with us,” her son Kyle said, folding his skinny legs against the dashboard. He lifted out a tiny white earphone to speak, and she could just make out the scratchy rhythms of some rock song coming from his iPod. She glimpsed Sylvie, her three-year-old, in the rearview mirror, strapped in her car seat and chewing an oatmeal cookie.

Grandpa Nelson had gone from bad to worse since Dave’s death in Iraq last year. A few months ago, he moved out of his house where he’d lived alone since Ellen’s death. Emptied every room out and didn’t take one thing with him when he went to live with his sister Connie.

“Goddamn war, goddamn country,” he’d mutter, every time Iraq was mentioned on TV or the radio. Dave had been his only

child. It was Grandpa Nelson who'd given her and Dave money to build the cabin by the lake so he and Kyle and Dave would have a place to fish.

"You know grandpa's not well. When he gets better we'll bring him."

Kyle pulled on his seatbelt. "It just doesn't seem right, you know, going without him, that's all I mean."

"I know." She touched his arm. "He just needs some time to get better."

Kyle peered vacantly out his window.

"You want to come with me next weekend to Aunt Connie's to see him?"

He shifted his long legs, stretching them, still looking out the window. "Sure. Okay." She could hardly hear his voice.

She had held Grandpa Nelson's face in her hands that last Sunday in his house, stroking a thick patch of whiskers. He hadn't bathed or shaved in days. He just stared at her with his sagging, bloodshot eyes, shaking his head; his voice so feeble when she said she'd help him clean up, that it would make him feel better: "Won't either," he said. "It'll just make me feel like someone else had to shave me." His hand was closed around her wrist when he said this.

She gripped the wheel—the road a slender thread running through the rural landscape, past waves of pines and old oaks and roadside produce kiosks where people sold their homegrown corn, tomatoes and peaches.

It was dusk when she turned off the main interstate and onto the narrow gravel road that led to the cabin. What a welcome sight to it was to see, flanked by tall pines and evergreens, the gleaming lake stretched out behind it. The tulips she'd planted several springs ago in the front lay collapsed, yellow and red petals like ragged, wind beaten pinwheels. A couple of rusted aluminum lawn chairs lay

folded near the steps that led up to the screened-in porch. She dug in her purse for the keys as she looked at Sylvie who was asleep, a shine of drool on her chin. Her cheeks flushed pink. She nudged Kyle.

“Help your sister out of the car.”

He rubbed his eyes and yawned, unbuckling his seatbelt.

She climbed the stairs to the screened porch. The dense trees surrounding the cabin cloaked everything in a deep, cool shade. She saw the wicker rockers in the same place she and Dave had chosen to put them, side by side, facing the path that led down to the lake.

She slipped the key into the rusted brass knob. The door was stuck. She gave it a decent kick and it wobbled open. A rectangle of fading sunlight slanted across the dusty floors. The braided rugs were where they'd left them, rolled and tucked against the walls; the blue kitchen table, the maple cabinets held a strange, vacant familiarity.

They unloaded the car. She had bought cold cuts, bread, fruit and cookies, eggs and cereal. She packed a flashlight, matches, candles, light bulbs, bottles of water, storybooks and coloring books for Sylvie. Kyle had brought his fishing gear.

She reached for her bottle of J&B she'd wrapped in a towel and put in her canvas tote before stashing it under the driver's seat. She set it down next to one of the wicker rockers.

She swept the cabin, unrolled the rugs and shook the dust from them. She spread a yellow tablecloth on the kitchen table. She felt the size of her body within the shelter of the cabin as she cranked open the casement windows to let the air in; how she and Dave had moved beneath the blankets here, discovering a new peacefulness, before war had eaten into their lives like acid.

She struck a match, enjoying the stark sulfuric smell, the burst of white flame, in her cupped hands as she knelt and lit the pilot light inside the stove. Sylvie was running from room to room,

excited by the new surroundings. Kyle dragged their bags upstairs. He located the circuit breaker panel at the back of the bathroom closet and switched on the breakers. The cabin lit up. She put away groceries as Sylvie danced in a circle around her. The pump that brought water from the outside well hummed and chugged just as it should when Kyle flushed the toilet upstairs and when she filled the kettle with water.

In the evening dusk, the lake and trees, receding into shadows, looked hushed and beautiful.

They dined on ham sandwiches and gooey chocolate cookies, drank lemonade. She cut an apple into bite-size pieces for Sylvie who crunched on them with her new teeth, laughing.

She looked at Kyle. "If it hadn't been for you, we'd be eating in the dark."

He shrugged, picking at a corner of his sandwich with his fingers. "No big deal," he said. "Anyway, we got candles. That would have been cool."

"We can do that," she said. "Maybe tomorrow evening."

He nodded, drumming his fingers on his chair seat.

"You okay?"

He lifted a pickle from his plate, sticking a finger through it.

"Kyle."

He dropped the pickle back on his plate. "I guess." He shrugged again. "I don't know. It still feels weird, you know, coming here. Trying to do things like before."

He grew quiet again. In August he would turn fourteen. Lately, it seemed, the natural kindness he always had, especially as a young boy, was becoming half-hidden away within things she could no longer see. When Dave was home after his first tour, Kyle followed him around, holding his basketball, asking if he'd shoot hoops with him. Dave tried. But that damned desert and the smells

of death were like black curtains in his mind that shut off everything else from him. Kyle was just a boy. He didn't understand.

When it was time for bed, Sylvie clung to her so she read to her from one of the storybooks until she fell asleep. Kyle went around the cabin closing and securing the windows upstairs and downstairs with a fevered diligence she'd not seen in him before.

Afterwards, with the children in bed, she put a Louis Armstrong CD on the portable boom box she'd brought along, the volume down low, as she drank scotch from a paper cup, closing her eyes against the gathering darkness, the tenuous shelter of the screened porch. She waited for the moon to rise, weaving its soft light between the clouds. The cool night air stirred around her legs.

She heard the cabin door open. Kyle stepped partway onto the dark porch, behind her.

"Mom? What're doing out here?"

Carefully, furtively she nudged the scotch bottle with her foot around to the front of her chair, tucked the paper cup at her side.

"Just watching the moon."

She could feel him standing there. She kept her back to him.

"You coming to bed soon?"

"Soon, yes. I just want to stay here for a little while."

"Okay."

"Goodnight honey."

"Night mom. Don't forget to lock up."

"Of course."

She could feel the shadow of his figure linger a few more seconds, then she heard the door shut and click.

Crickets chirped in the fresh veil of nightfall. She curled her body in the chair, its wicker threads creaking beneath her, and closed her hand around the paper cup. She brought it to her lips and drank it down. It was warm and strong, like a tight flame inside her.

She filled the cup again, swallowing hard. She looked over at the other rocker, vacant and still, moonlight pooling in its empty seat. She reached out and gave it a nudge until it started rocking and then she set her own rocker in motion alongside it.

Closer to the lake, frogs thrummed out their midnight yearnings.

“**A**re you sure? Is there anything left of him? Is there anything left to see, to know that it’s really him?” This is what she’d said to the officers who had come last April to tell her Dave was dead. She wanted her words to eclipse their certainty, to make a lie of all those documents they carried with them. She hung on to her words like someone gripping the rails of a sinking ship.

She had just gotten dressed for work, had just put on lipstick and was trying to slip some socks on Sylvie’s feet when she heard the crunch of gravel in the driveway. From her bedroom window she saw two officers emerging from a dark sedan and her empty stomach lurched. The notification officer led the way, smoothing and straightening his jacket as he walked to the door.

They get things wrong, she remembered thinking. She even saw herself saying to them they had the wrong house. The muscles in the backs of her legs tightened as she waited for the sound of the doorbell. She smoothed her skirt with wet palms. Sylvie had somehow slipped away as she stood, waiting, unable to move.

The notification officer was clutching a sheaf of papers and kept repeating how sorry he was. The other soldier stood quietly beside him, his hands folded in front of him. A roadside bomb, he said. Her husband’s convoy had driven over it. He tried to choose his words carefully, stepping around them as if they were a bomb too. The protocol in his script seemed to fail him. He held the papers like broken pieces of glass.

“I’m real sorry. It’s the worst thing, to have to be here and tell you this.”

The words came out of him, words beyond any script—and she felt them as if he'd taken her hand in his. A balancing act, that's what this was. They were all like stick figures trying to hold up a falling sky.

They asked her if she wanted to sit down and she shook her head. It ran all through her. There wasn't anything left of him. The edges of her hands were numb and tingling and the feeling traveled all the way to her elbows. Suddenly, she felt something wrap around her leg and the soldier knelt, held out his hand and whispered.

“Hey there little one. What's your name?”

She touched the crown of Sylvie's blonde hair then picked her up and held her close. The house was quiet, save for the hum of the refrigerator and the ticking of the dining room clock. The soldier rose and stepped backwards, clearing his throat. The world froze inside her. A fly buzzed, hurling itself against the screen door. Sylvie moaned.

Sunlight flooded the living room but her skin felt like ice. She closed her eyes, warm tears like blood from a cut streaming as she held onto Sylvie. Kyle had caught the bus for school fifteen minutes ago. He would be on his way to his first period class.

The room began to spin. She moved quickly, feeling sick in waves. She rushed to Sylvie's playpen and put her down before responding to the nausea that brought her to her knees in front of the toilet. The things Dave had said shot through her; how it was easier being in Iraq where people were dying than being back at home; how impossible it was to sleep in a quiet house. She balled her body against the cold porcelain of the toilet and threw up. She gripped the slippery white surface, trying to keep her body upright.

“Ma'am? Mrs. Lingstrom? You okay?” It was the notification officer's voice from the other side of the bathroom door.

She opened her eyes, her cheek against the toilet seat. She found her hands, got to her feet, doused her face with cold water, realizing that there was a stain of lipstick on her palm. From the next room,

Sylvie wailed. The sound—as small and thin as it was—found its way up through each vertebra of her spine and spread through all of her body.

She opened her eyes. Her skin was cold and clammy. Her whole body ached. She'd fallen asleep in the rocker. The sky was tinged with an orange light, but the air still held the chill of nighttime. She swung her legs down to the floor and stood. Her neck felt as if it were tied in knots. She saw the empty paper cup on the floor, felt the awful stale dryness of her mouth.

It was quiet, the children still asleep. She unlatched the screen door and walked down the steps into the dimly lit morning yawning, spreading her arms and stretching her body. Then she went inside, filled the kettle with water and set it to boil on the stove and afterwards, as her tea steeped, she washed her hands at the kitchen sink and splashed cold water on her face and ran her wet fingers through her dark, shoulder-length hair. She took an aspirin for the pain in her neck. Then she grabbed her mug of tea, slipped on her sandals, and walked the slim muddy path, through a shelter of pines that led to the lake, past the duck blind used by hunters in the fall, brown pine needles crunching beneath her feet. She sat on the ground in a clearing where she could see the surface of the lake, smooth and still, a mirror holding the sky.

She was tired. She'd crossed over, into another country whose language she could hardly speak. She no longer said things to people like how fine the day was or what kind of winter it would be—none of the polite and normal things people say to one another when they are buying beans or screwdrivers or milk. She had none of that left in her.

Last night, sitting in the rocker in the dark, something broke open, spilling out in this place she loved: a vagrant loneliness. She could taste it on her tongue, could feel it beneath her skin.

She blew on her tea and sipped. Morning clouds shifted their patterns and parted, fingers of soft light burning through them. She often had nightmares where she was seized with an urgency to run, yet when she tried to move her legs, they were like sandbags, all her movements like someone slogging through quicksand. Sometimes she could run, but then she'd trip on something, or reach the edge of a precipice, just one step away from falling into a bottomless void. Her body would jerk, and she'd open her eyes, as if catching herself just in time from falling, her heart racing.

His last week home before he left on his second tour, she had tried persuading Dave to talk to a counselor. At bedtime, he would reach for her in the strained darkness and then he would be gone. Once, she found him in the kitchen at three in the morning, holding the muzzle of his handgun against his cheek. She'd taken it gently out of his hand, touching his hair and whispering to him like someone trying to talk a man down from a high ledge, struggling against the trembling of her muscles. He had looked at her as if he didn't know who she was.

Grandpa Nelson hadn't liked it when, afterwards, she took Dave's two shotguns and asked him to keep them. She didn't want guns in the house anymore.

Sunlight. It felt warm trailing down through the trees, onto her shoulders. She stood, brushed herself off, drank some more of her tea and started back up the trail to the cabin. A quick shower, then breakfast. Maybe they'd go for catfish at Stoogie's this evening, and then later have ice cream by candlelight. Kyle would like it and Sylvie would no doubt go for Stoogie's hushpuppies, especially with her new teeth. She'd clean up the straggled tulips; maybe they'd play gin rummy later. She felt the regular, thrumming rhythm of her heart as she walked; a kind of rising, fragile hope that always came to her whenever she thought of her children. When she got to the

cabin, she saw Kyle on the front steps, his fishing rod across his lap, unwinding a length of fishing line.

He didn't look up as she came closer, but remained absorbed until she stood a few yards away from him, smiling and waving.

"Hey there, you. Want some breakfast?"

Circles of silver filament danced in the air. He looked up and waved back. A slight smile spread across his face. She caught the shape of his face, what she read as a kind of muted disapproval.

"Where've you been?" he said.

"I went down to the lake. I wanted to see it early in the morning. You can hear the birds."

He drew out a length of line, snipped it with the little scissors from his father's pocket knife and wound it tight, then he stood, placing his fishing rod beside him.

"Sylvie woke up crying," he said. "I gave her some milk and an animal cracker and one of her stuffed animals."

She shaded her eyes against the sun. "It's not a familiar place to her," she said. "Last time we came, she was just a baby. Remember?"

He didn't answer. He toed a length of shoestring on his sneakers.

"Where'd you sleep?" he said. "Your bed didn't look slept in."

She set her cup down on the bottom step. She didn't like the tone in his voice.

"I fell asleep in the rocker," she said, rubbing the back of her neck, smiling. "Got a good knotty crick in my neck to show for it."

He thrust a hand in his pocket, nodding. The way he stood there, the way the light found his face for a flickering few seconds, he looked like Dave.

"Maybe you shouldn't have brought along that scotch," he said.

She felt a light shock run through her at the sound of these words; of her own son talking to her this way. This was followed by a rising anger.

“You told grandpa he shouldn’t have the bourbon,” he said. “You took his bourbon away.”

She started slowly up the steps until she stood in front of him. She had never raised a hand in anger at Kyle, but now she struggled against that instinct, surprised that it came to her so easily.

“Having a drink in the evening isn’t the same as having three glasses of bourbon at breakfast. And grandpa would tell you the same thing.”

He looked at her, then cast his glance away, nervously tapping a finger against his fishing rod. The screen door creaked and Sylvie emerged.

“Mommy I’m hungry,” she cried. “What’s for breakfast?” She trundled forward, touched her brother’s fishing rod, looking up at him, her eyes squinting against the sun. “Are you going to catch a fish for breakfast?”

After breakfast, Kyle went fishing and she cleared and washed the dishes and put them away and then she sat at the blue wooden kitchen table with Sylvie. They spread out her crayons and she got her favorite coloring book of birds. Sylvie took a red crayon and started coloring a cardinal, her hand and wrist moving in wild, uncontained motions.

“Cardinow,” she said.

“Cardinal,” said Cheryl.

Gently, she placed her hand over Sylvie’s. “Don’t let your color go over this line.” She ran a fingernail along the drawn outline of the bird. Sylvie squirmed and nodded.

“Don’t rush. Take it more slowly.” She whispered this and Sylvie smiled at her, gently touching the crayon to the pointed crown of the bird’s head, then she put a finger to her lips. “Shhh...”

Cheryl laughed, nodding and rolling her eyes.

A woodpecker poked and throttled the trunk of a dying tree,

the sound an anxious, percussive hammering. She ran her hand along the surface of the blue table. Kyle had hardly said a word all through breakfast. She chose not to say anything else to him. The fact that he was partly right was, of course, what hurt the most. In the evenings before bedtime, a glass of scotch had become her succor, but she wasn't ready to say to him that she no longer cared why; that it was the only way sleep could claim her for a few hours. And it stung that her justification had come at the expense of deeming Grandpa Nelson as the one who had the problem. It hurt too that he had looked at her and then looked away, as if he no longer trusted her.

Sylvie stopped coloring and was running her small hand over the surface of the table, like her mother. Cheryl touched a hand to her nose, and Sylvie raised a finger and touched her mother's nose.

Late morning stretched toward noontime as she knelt among the spent tulips, collecting the scattered petals, the yellowed stems and leaves. She wiped the rusted lawn chairs and opened them and shook out the damp pillows on the wicker furniture. She saw the bottle of scotch, still where she'd left it last night. She picked it up. Okay, she thought. Tonight she would try sleeping without it. There wasn't much left anyway, so she took it outside, leaned over the front porch railing and emptied it out onto the muddy ground.

She put fresh sheets on her bed, then went to Kyle's room. His bed was partly made. She straightened and smoothed the quilt, fluffed the pillows. On the little table next to his bed, propped against the lamp, was a photograph. She picked it up. A group of soldiers stood in a flat, wide expanse of bleached desert, all of them holding rifles. There was Dave, center front, kneeling, clasping his. She ran a finger across the photo, tracing an outline over the shape of his body. When they brought her Dave's duffel bag, Kyle had taken it and put it beneath his bed.

She shut her eyes and saw Kyle's funeral face—still a boy's face—mute as rain washed stone, his clean hair neatly parted and

combed. She put the picture back as she had found it and left the room, closing the door behind her.

She washed her hands at the kitchen sink. Sylvie hummed as she continued coloring, her small body pressed against the edge of the table. She was like something from another dream, making of the birds spread before her on the flat, pale pages of her coloring book all the greens and pinks and deep violets she could muster from her box, fighting with her clenched fist to stay within the lines.

Twirling his finger against the imaginary chamber holding one bullet, Dave once told her a soldier's life was a kind of Russian roulette. He had imagined one bullet; she had imagined his body disappearing in a whirl of hot dust in a forsaken desert full of sand flies and scorpions; stinging air the color of fire and smoke. He told her about the eyes of children. How you couldn't forget them. How you couldn't trust them. They came out of nowhere; gaunt urchins tearing out thin wires of red, blue, yellow, orange from burned out generators, radios, abandoned TVs, all to be spliced and refitted into something explosive, something made out of the boldness of their innocence.

It was almost time for lunch. She took out bread and lunchmeat and made sandwiches and a fresh pitcher of lemonade. She sliced strawberries and sprinkled sugar over them as Sylvie, perched on a stool next to her, watched, murmuring yum, yum. She popped a strawberry in Sylvie's mouth and the little girl sucked on it like a piece of candy. Kyle was not yet back so she put the food in the refrigerator to keep and gathered Sylvie in her arms. She yawned and laid her head on Cheryl's shoulder.

"Let's go find your brother," she said. "And then we'll have lunch."

They set out on the path to the lake, Sylvie clutching her hand, their feet grazing random patches of fragrant sweet woodruff. Bright rods of sunlight shot through the thin branches of trees. Shadows

were deep and cool. Beyond gravel and dry, muddy dirt, dark emerald patches of grass shot up now and then.

She reached the part of the path where it sloped down and squeezed Sylvie's wrist. They passed the tall scrub pines, then the duck blind would be next; the duck blind where she thought she heard voices, thought she glimpsed among the thick leaves two figures. It was not duck season, so it was probably kids from other cabins out playing.

They reached the rim of the lake. Kyle's fishing rod lay against a tree, his yellow rain jacket on the ground. He was nowhere around. A familiar cold dread shot through her.

She peered anxiously through the trees, around the lake. Just as quickly, it came to her and she turned, starting back up the path until she could see again the duck blind where the tip of a shotgun gleamed through its opening, pointing up to the sky.

"Kyle!" she cried. The gun moved and she heard the shuffling of leaves.

"Kyle!" Sylvie cried.

The two figures emerged, Kyle leading the way, gripping the shotgun in his right hand. Another boy followed behind, tall and lean like Kyle, reddish blond hair in tangles, dark eyes.

Kyle stopped and stood. He gripped the body of the gun with both hands.

"Hey Mom," he said. His voice sounded polite, distant. "This is Luke. He was showing me his duck hunting gun. His father just got it for him."

"Hey," said Luke, waving.

She looked at Kyle, at the way he held the shotgun against his chest. She felt a light wave of nausea, as if her heart and stomach were falling out of her and that she needed to find her next breath and hold onto it.

She returned Luke's greeting with a wave, but didn't smile. For a second, she thought she wouldn't find her voice but then she managed to speak.

"Please come back now, Kyle. It's time for lunch."

He looked at her and nodded, his face partly hidden by a shadow of leaves. He passed the shotgun back to Luke, said something to him and Luke nodded, took the gun and disappeared through the trees.

He walked toward her, looking down at the ground. "I gotta get my stuff," he said. "I'll catch up with you."

She tried to see his face, tried to read what was there in his face, but she couldn't. Her hands were shaking. She put her arms around Sylvie and drew her closer. Sylvie asked about the gun and why Kyle had to give it back. She whispered for her to be quiet, then turned to Kyle.

"We'll wait for you," she said.

Sylvie clasped her hands together. "Hurry up, Kyle!" She broke away from her mother and ran, waving her arms, toward her brother. "We're having strawberries!"

The sun, high and warm in the sky, wove its splintered light through the trees.

*Carmelinda Blagg writes short fiction and several of her stories have revolved around issues of war and loss. Her work has appeared in a number of online and print journals, including the anthology Best of the Web and she is also a past recipient of an Individual Artist Award from the Maryland State Arts Council. Her parents served during World War II; three brothers served in Vietnam and a fourth brother is presently a USAF base commander with the 374th Operations Group, 374th Airlift Wing, Yokota Air Base, Japan.*

## Air Show

By Robert Morgan Fisher

**M**y wife and I are separated. She's a real estate agent and I write TV shows, when we're not on strike or canceled. I really want to take my boys to an air show. It seems like an important rite of passage. I want to see their faces when the Blue Angels or Thunderbirds do a treetop-level fly-by. I want to see them jump when an F-14 Tomcat does a simulated strafe. Want them to feel that frisson of adrenalized fear in their bellies. I've been waiting several years for the air show to come back. When I was a kid, my father was stationed up the coast. We lived off-base. There was an air show every year back then. It wasn't the best place we ever lived—those aren't really happy memories. But they're the ones that haunt me more than any other, for some reason. Those years marked me. I'm not sure why.

Emily is skeptical. To her, nothing could be more jingoistic than an air show. She pictures nuclear weapons on parade, bombers overhead, goose-stepping automatons, fascist salutes.

“Shane, these things are just propaganda at taxpayer's expense.”

“They're going to have the time of their lives.”

“Whatever.”

The morning of the air show, I'm up with the sun. When we separated last January, I moved into the Oakwood Apartments, where they must pump chloroform through the central air because all I want to do when I'm there is sleep. But today it's different. Today there's an air show with our names written across the sky. My Prius pulls up to our old house and I give the horn a tiny honk.

There wasn't any adultery. Emily just asked me to leave one day. I surprised both of us by saying "Sure!" and was gone by nightfall. The boys hate staying with me at the Oakwood Apartments, so I do stuff with them on weeknights and weekends. I'm losing them, I can feel it. I'm hoping the air show will dazzle them back to daddy.

I honk again, more insistent. I see our neighbors have not cleared the brush around their hillside homes, like they were supposed to. I cleared ours myself two weekends ago to save money (I'm in between writing assignments right now). I told Emily: "There's gonna be a fire and it's gonna start about two miles away and some Santa Ana wind is going to send it here within forty seconds and those idiots are going to lose everything." I said this like a Marine gunny sergeant. My father was a Navy driver—but has a healthy respect for the Corps. I wonder if Marines have their own precision flying team, like the Navy or Air Force. They could be called The Flying Jarheads.

Slate and Severin make a sullen appearance in the doorway. Behind them, Emily, arms folded across her chest. I can't avert my eyes. I wonder if she's seeing anybody. The boys' heads are almost completely shaved. They look like gangbangers in training. As they approach the car, I roll down the window.

"What happened?"

"Head lice—another fun aspect of parenting you've been spared."

I scratch my own head self-consciously.

“Don’t worry. It’s gone, for now,” She says, as Slate and Sev climb in back and buckle up. “I had to do ten loads of laundry.”

“Did you *have* to shave the heads?”

“Well, Shane—what was I supposed to do? Yes, they said that was the best cure.”

I look at them, serious.

“You guys ready for gang tats?”

I’m pretty sure shaving the heads was unnecessary, that Emily went overboard to make a point. “I like it,” I say. “You look like Marines.”

I put on special music I brought along: “Danger Zone” by Kenny Loggins. I pretend the Prius is a jet taking evasive maneuvers as I zig-zag across several empty lanes.

“Stop it!” screams Slate.

I crank the volume, put on Ray-Bans.

“TURN ... IT ... DOWN!” Sev yells.

I comply.

“Sorry.”

Just beyond Calabasas, the hills explode into a spectacular shade of shamrock green. It’s spring: wild oats, needle grass and mustard engorged by winter rainfall. They’ll hold moisture for a mere month before going brown overnight.

“Look at that view, guys!”

I roll down the window. I can already smell a coastal breeze.

“ROLL IT UP!” Slate yells.

“Sorry.”

“What is an air show, anyway?” says Severin.

“They blow *air* and they *show* you,” says Slate, “Right, Dad?”

“Funny.”

“And some of the air is clear, and some is stinky—”

“That’s enough, Slate,” I say.

“It blows.”

“It’s, you know, jets and planes and stuff doing these incredible tricks in the air,” I explain. “Hence the name ‘air show.’ It’s gonna be epic. Didn’t Mom tell you?”

“All she told me was that I had to go,” says Slate.

“Sorry.” I’m not really sorry.

We pass the Thousand Oaks off ramp. When I was a kid, I wondered what happened to all the oaks. Had there really ever been a thousand?

“You know, I used to live out here when I was your age.”

“We *know*,” says Slate.

Then I remember something I’m pretty sure I never shared with them.

“One time, there was an air show—they used to have ‘em every year—and my father and I were driving around one Saturday morning running errands, you know, like we do sometimes, and this jet from the air show ejected a dummy right over town.” This gets their attention.

“Whaddya mean, a ‘dummy’?” says Slate.

“It’s too dangerous to eject a real man. You only do that in an emergency.”

“Like when you get shot down?” says Severin.

“Exactly. It was supposed to eject over the air show but as the jet was, you know, circling back to the base to do that, the pilot accidentally ejected the dummy out over our town.”

“What happened?” Severin says, rooting a recalcitrant booger in his left nare.

“Grandpa and I jumped into the car and tore out after the parachute. Actually, there were two parachutes: one for the dummy and one for the ejection seat.”

“What happened then?” says Slate.

“The dummy landed in a field by the high school. I guarded

the dummy while my father went and got the seat. Then we took it back out to the base.”

Severin asks, “Was the dummy dead?”

“All dummies are dead, you idiot,” says Slate.

“Hey,” I snap. “Come on, Slate.”

Slate sulks. I haven’t really thought about that odd experience for years. I don’t think any of my friends in TV have a story like that. It was surreal, the way the dummy looked. And the way my father, always a little tightly-wound, morphed into this focused, no-nonsense commando. I remember we returned the dummy to the base and, inexplicably, nobody seemed to care.

“How about I show you guys where the dummy landed?”

The field hasn’t changed much, which is surprising. There’s the high school. So much of the town has been eaten up by developers. This farmer must be the lone holdout.

“Grandpa left me here with the dummy and drove down the road to retrieve the ejection seat which landed about a mile away by the tennis courts,” I say. “There were these people playing doubles who didn’t even notice the parachute come down.”

I remember some older kids tried to wrest the dummy away from me, while my father was off retrieving the ejection seat. It was traumatic. I cried. Dad was annoyed.

It feels appropriate to call my father right then and tell him what we’re up to. The line is busy. He and my mother do not believe in call-waiting or installing another phone line.

“You guys want to see the house I grew up in?” I say, as if there were just one house instead of eight. “The air show doesn’t start for another hour.”

“Sure,” says Severin.

“Slate, you okay with that?”

“I don’t care.”

We head to the old neighborhood, via streets I recognize and some I don't.

"My first slow dance was with a girl in that garage."

"You danced in a garage?"

"Birthday party. I was your age, Slate."

That ancient song, "Fire and Rain": flying machines in pieces on the ground.

"For years, these streets were an open field that I'd walk through to get to school . . . and here, right there, that was my house." We pull over. My old house has been remodeled beyond recognition. I can't even look at it.

Ten minutes later we're crossing the coastal plain, miles of freshly-fertilized farmland. Security at military bases these days is beyond ridiculous. Not even having two kids along eases the paranoia. The guards make me pop the trunk, get out of the car.

We enter the base, park. As we take our seats in the bleachers, I realize that in my excitement, I forgot to bring sunscreen or any kind of head protection. We're all going to get cooked. I dial up my skin-cancerous father. The phone rings through, Mom answers.

"Hey Mom, guess where we are?"

"I don't know."

"The air show. Is Dad there?"

"No, he's out. You say you're where?"

"The air show, same one we used to go to back in the day."

"Oh, how is it?"

"I've got Slate and Sev here—" I put the phone on speaker and get them to say hi to Grandma.

"Hi Grandma."

"Hi boys."

"Have Dad call me, okay?"

"Okay."

I make a run to the concession stand to buy ice cream and bottled water for the boys. I get two beers and a couple of brats for me. I pound one beer for good measure right there at the concession stand. I didn't have any breakfast, so it goes right to my head. I watch a couple of sailors wheel out a pair of ancient loudspeakers. I swear these were the same speakers they used years ago. They're completely blown and make a fast-food drive-thru intercom sound like hi-fidelity. On top of that, the announcer's talking over a cheesy music bed, further distorting his words. It's all fragments: . . . *vertical roll!* . . . *freedom!* . . . *fighting men and women!* . . .

Air shows start out slow and small, with a view to the past: remote-controlled model planes, prop fighters, parachute teams. There will be a gradual, day-long build to the Air Force Thunderbirds. After a miserable hour out in the hot sun, they finally bring on an actual jet. I watch an F-22 Raptor execute a flawless max performance takeoff and vertical climb replete with awesome vapor cone. The boys won't even look, hands pressed to their ears.

"IT'S TOO LOUD!" screams Sev.

"Sorry!" I shout. Other people, mostly conservative-looking old-timers, stare at us. I check the program: at this rate the Thunderbirds aren't going to appear for another four hours. I decide we need to do a walk-around, visit the other attractions.

"We just want to go home!" Slate moans. You'd think *he* was the one that started the day with two beers. We walk over to the Stealth Fighter, an ominous black wing. I explain to the boys, while the hosting officer stands there unsmiling, in green flight suit and mirrored sunglasses, that for years the Stealth Fighter was like a myth, never seen by the public. They only flew it at night, out in the desert. "Now it's pretty common to see them, right?" I say to the hosting officer—his cue to jump in and enlighten us with cool factoids.

He murmurs, “That’s right.” He looks like he wishes he were anywhere but here.

We push past the midway and I buy them more ice cream. There’s the usual carnival crap: Tilt-a-World, merry-go-round, ring-toss. A half-hour and close to a hundred dollars later, they’re still whining about going home. But now I’m pissed off and insist that we detour over to the couple of dozen airplanes on display. I know that most of them are actually open to the public, meaning kids can climb up into the cockpit, sit in the gunner’s turret. You’d think a couple of young boys would be thrilled at the prospect, but Slate and Sev are beyond done. Every step is a hardship. They’re bickering, sassing and sniveling. All the while, aircraft keep passing overhead, buzzing the crowd: F-14 Tomcats, B-25 Mitchells—even an A-1 Skyraider.

“Look, guys! Grandpa’s first plane!”

“Big deal,” says Slate.

“Let’s go home!” Sev’s actually crying.

At that moment an F-16 executes a simulated bombing run about a half-mile away. It’s definitely at the Shock and Awe end of the loudness scale and Sev starts screaming with heartfelt melodrama.

“Okay,” I say. “That’s it. You guys win, we’re going home.”

“Yay,” says Slate, as Severin continues to blubber. I take a moment to lift up my youngest son and give him a reassuring hug. I produce a handkerchief and blow Sev’s nose, then set him down as the F-16 buzzes the crowd and loudly kicks its afterburner, furthering Sev’s misery.

We are not staying for the Thunderbirds—which are still a couple of hours away. Whatever illusions I entertained about the fun that might have been had with my sons has been burned off the map like Dresden.

That’s when we stumble upon The Indigo Ops Cerberus Armored Personnel Carrier.

There is no line to see the Cerberus. Instead of a hosting officer, our docent on this tour is obviously an Indigo Ops executive, who cheerfully rattles off stats.

“Manufactured and designed by Indigo Ops USA, the Cerberus' armor is designed to defeat .50 caliber rounds as well as IEDs,” he volunteers. “The Cerberus APC is constructed of AR500 Steel. It incorporates angled walls and a v-hull chassis to deflect the blast waves produced by explosives!”

He bends down to Slate and Sev's level. They've lost the will to complain and listen with glazed eyes, hypnotized by the exec's enthusiasm.

“The Cerberus has a Fiber-Tek reinforced armor belly and lowers with a fully-enclosed drive-train. The windows are armored and it has a ring mount roof turret with a 12.7 millimeter machine gun. Would ya like to take her for a spin and shoot the bad guys?”

Putting aside for the moment my concerns about private, unregulated contractors; putting aside my need to explain to the boys what an “IED” is and how we've become a nation of amputee vets—putting aside all that, I am grateful that someone has at last been able to rouse something like grudging enthusiasm from Slate and Sev. We climb the rungs to the hatch and follow the Indigo Ops man inside. I tune everything out and settle into an extraordinarily comfortable leather chair. The boys slap buttons and make concussive shooting sounds. The beer and brats have finally caught up with me—I close my eyes.

I consider the inherent danger of an air show: peripheral blossom of light; fixed-wing aircraft cartwheeling end-over-end; wall of flame. I fight the urge to dial my father or Emily to let them know we're safely stowed inside the belly of the beast. This has to be the most comfortable chair I have ever known. After several minutes of pretend war, Slate and Sev shake my arm, say they're

done. They want to go home. I pretend to doze. They start whining. The Indigo Ops man exits through the hatch. “Come on, Dad,” the boys plead. “Wake up!” Through the slit of my eyes behind Ray-Bans I watch them sulk. They climb up and out. Through bullet-proof glass, I watch them yank the man’s sleeve. They point at me. He ignores them in favor of two blonde teenage girls. Sev starts crying and Slate punches him in the shoulder.

When I open my eyes, considerable time has passed. Sev and Slate are gone. The beers I had with breakfast throb in the back of my brain and in my bladder. There’s a toilet compartment I could use, but I don’t feel like voiding the poison just yet. I will, in all likelihood, never return to this place. I came back out of nostalgia, curiosity, a desire for closure. Up until now, an increasing sense of discomfort is the only sensation I’ve experienced today that feels familiar. A faint voice calls from above, telling me I can’t stay here.

*Robert Morgan Fisher’s father was a naval aviator who served in the Cuban Missile Crisis, Vietnam and eventually the Pentagon. Being the son of a warrior has informed and influenced nearly all of Robert’s writing to some degree. Robert holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Antioch and his fiction has appeared in many publications, including The Huffington Post, Psychopomp, Golden Walkman Magazine, The Spry Literary Journal and 34th Parallel. He often writes companion songs to his short stories. Both his music and fiction have won many awards. Robert also voices audiobooks.*

## The Pit Sword Room

By Jeffery Hess

**P**ercussive clangs of the ship's alarm reverberated off of every metal surface. Cates dropped his wrench and covered his ears. He stood in the bowels of USS COLOSSUS covering his ears. It was like having a garbage can over his head while somebody pounded it with a five-pound sledgehammer. He yelled, "Fuck you and your drill." His voice carried up through the hatch toward the loudspeaker mounted in the overhead. Beneath his feet was the ship's hull under which the ocean raced. He was in the middle of calibrating the ship's speed indicating sensors. All seven feet of the pit sword were retracted into the ship so he could get to its boot with the sensors. It looked like a vertical, stainless steel airplane wing. This device was designed to stab through a water-tight valve built into the ship's hull and into the ocean as the ship steamed in deep water. If the ship were thought of as a huge bathtub, this valve was the plug. The only difference was the way the water flowed. One loose lug on the valve flange could conceivably flood the entire ship.

*Clang. Clang. Clang.*

The pit sword room was nothing more than a water-tight cube. His elbows rubbed against the flaking metal around him, leaving rust stains on skin made pale by a long winter in Norfolk. His back pressed into a bulkhead, his hip into a beam. It was just after morning chow on the third day at sea. Cates wiped sweat from his temples on his damp t-shirt and looked up through the open hatch. He had fifteen minutes of work left. If he left, he'd have to come back down to the lowest recesses of the ship and start all over.

*Clang. Clang. Clang.*

He breathed in a mouthful of air that tasted like rusted iron mixed with the shit-on-a-shingle he'd eaten earlier. He leaned a palm on the raised pit sword as he waited for the alarm to stop and to hear, "Belay my last." Or, "This is a drill! This is a drill!" over the 1MC announcing system, but there was only a narrow shaft of light above him.

The heat in the pit sword room was moist. His face, arms, and back were sweat-slick. His socks and pants were soaked to the shin from water that had shot up through the valve as he'd raised pit sword fifteen minutes earlier. Now, this water sloshed around the valve basin and in the uneven parts of the rusting deck. It looked like the metal was bleeding.

*Clang. Clang. Clang.*

Standard operating procedure dictated that he leave the pit sword room and report to his battle station. But Cates knew how insistent the Captain was about having "his full complement of knowledge" at all times. Ship's speed being part of that.

Lowering the pit sword now would require a further delay in reporting to his battle station and then having to come back to this shithole after securing from GQ to repeat the whole damn process. He had no patience for doing twice the work. Backtracking. "This is fucking bullshit," he said, tossing his multi-meter leads into the valve basin. "Fuck, fuck. Fuck!"

He wiped more sweat from his forehead with the stretched sleeve of his wet shirt. All the while, *Clang. Clang. Clang.*

“All right, goddamnit,” he yelled, and then picked up the heavy lug wrench from the special bulkhead holster welded near the crank handle. With a few mighty tugs of this lug wrench, Cates loosened the valve just enough to create space for the pit sword to penetrate. Then, he stood, extended his arms, gripped the handle, rocked his torso forward from the balls of his feet and leaned into the handle. The mechanism gave way with moisture-stiffened protest as the gears cranked, performed their task. Successive cranks grew easier and in a moment, the pit sword was fully extended. Only an additional inch of water had trickled in around the loosened flange bolts in the process.

*Clang. Clang. Clang.*

With no announcement having been made, Cates realized something was wrong. Otherwise, an announcement would’ve been made with instructions. But there was nothing, except the alarm. His throat constricted and his heartbeat throbbed in his ears. This was no drill. He felt as if his intestines were a swab being wrung out. The excitement made him move faster. As the ocean rushed beneath the hull and the alarm clanged, he torqued each brass bolt quickly. He then dropped the lug wrench and left it with all his other tools in the valve basin and then climbed the ladder. After securing the access hatch behind him, he ran up ladders, taking the treads two at a time, the chains rattling beneath his sweaty hands as he sprinted aft to his battle station in Repair Locker Three.

**T**he air was thick as Navy coffee the day COLOSSUS had pulled out of her homeport of Norfolk. Through a gray mist, throngs of women and children had stood on the pier and along the jagged rocks of the jetty. People huddled in groups while others stood on

their own, but hardly an inch of concrete was visible beneath their feet. Some cheered and waved signs. Others held babies and cried. As the ship cast off to begin a six-month transatlantic deployment, those left behind acted as if their lives depended on some sailor in dress blues seeing them from their positions manning the rail.

Cates' Sea and Anchor station was on the bridge, at the ready to change a light bulb if it blew on the rudder order indicating panel or if there were any malfunctions with the WSN-5 navigation unit. It wasn't glamorous, but he liked access to fresh air and watching the horizon getting farther away. After a cursory check of his equipment, Cates stood out on the fly bridge along the rail, near the signal shack

A good five stories below him, Gabby stood on the pier. She was looking up at Cates. She had an aversion to bright light and wore sunglasses all the time. This, as well as her limp, was the result of a drunk driver knocking her off her bicycle about four years ago. She used a cane to conceal the stiff leg. During the winter, she used an aluminum crutch she'd picked up at the Walgreens in the mall. She shouldn't have known where to find Cates, but there she was, waving and sobbing, not caring who saw. Unstable Gabby. Mad Gabby. Impossible to take his eyes off of her. Cates fell in love with her all over again.

Whenever he was with her, at a table in a bar or on the beach, he was just a guy sitting with a hot chick. She had this way of smiling over her sunglasses that was natural and effortless. Anytime she got up to pee, the mahogany cane appeared. She always gripped the anatomic handle and mindlessly throttled it as if she were riding off on a Harley.

Cates leaned his forearms on the top rail, his elbows out wide.

The chief signalman came out of the signal shack just then. "Great day to be heading out to sea, Cates." The chief's face was round and red. His doughnut holder hid his belt and strained the

buttons on his khaki shirt. He said, “You bet your ass. Every day is a fine fucking day to be hitting the high seas.”

Cates continued staring at Gabby as he half-listened.

“I said, ‘You know?’” the chief said.

Cates pushed off his elbows and stood up tall, facing the chief. “Exactly,” he said.

The chief looked toward the crowd on the pier and then sideways at Cates.

Gabby should have throttled her cane and left, but as the mooring lines splashed into the harbor, she lifted the black frames of her sunglasses and dabbed a tissue under each eye.

“Underway,” called the boatswain’s voice over the 1MC.

The Chief returned to the signal shack for his routine duties, but Cates took another moment at the rail.

At the last possible moment, Cates raised a hand slightly to wave. He wanted Gabby to see the erection hiding beneath the denim of his dungarees and to know that he’d missed her ever since he’d broken it off with her. Part of him had wanted to jump overboard and swim back to her so they could be alone together for days on end.

Cates was covered in sweat when he reached Repair Locker Three. His heart was hammering in rhythm with the percussive alarm that might never stop. The air in the passageway felt cold and still despite a dozen guys busying themselves with the work of uncoiling hoses to fight fire or siphon flood water. The hair on the back of Cates’ neck rose and his sphincter tightened, but that only made him feel alert. Agile. He was calm, as if he had Freon in his veins.

“What do you suppose is going on?” his buddy, Kephart, said, breathless, half in and half out of his Nomex coveralls. Kephart was a stocky farm boy, not at all bright except when it came to fixing communications equipment and playing cribbage. Kephart was some sort of savant at the game they played after a full day of work

together. Kephart came from West Virginia, but spoke in a quiet voice devoid of any accent, as if he had been schooled by monks. His skin had the leather coloring of being out in the sun too long in summer and out in the cold too long in winter. He and Cates were opposites in size and complexion, but they were both twenty-two years old.

“Probably some bullshit drill,” Cates said. His heart raced with the knowledge that it was anything but a drill; however, there was no use in freaking out Kephart. “This is probably just some cluster fuck.” After five years in the Cold War Navy, Cates wanted to come under fire, he wanted the decks awash with blood. He’d been hoping the ship would fire missiles and blow some shit up. The closest they ever got was sitting off the coast of Lebanon for forty-nine days with all weapons armed and active. He was envious of the guys on the Iowa and the Stark and even of the crew aboard frigates that received medals for pulling Cubans off rafts near the coast of Florida. He didn’t care what it was, he wanted some action.

“On the double,” Master Chief Holland’s voice bellowed from behind them. “Where the fuck have you been, Cates?” The command master chief, a salty old guy with twenty-eight years in the canoe club, was the repair locker leader. He spoke with an accent Cates placed between Georgia and Arkansas. The master chief had snaggle-teeth and slicked back hair. He drank tar black coffee, but looked tired all the time. He said, “It’s about time you joined the fucking party. Suit up. We might be getting some action on this fine day.”

Cates pulled his Nomex coveralls from their hook in the repair locker and said, “Don’t tease me, Master Chief.”

**A**s he grabbed his helmet and Oxygen Breathing Apparatus from the Repair Locker, a row of OBA canisters stared at him from their rack, each with a copper foil seal that resembled a Cyclops eye. In

that instant, he grabbed two. He came from a firefighting family and got involved in Damage Control the day he arrived aboard his first ship. He couldn't trust anyone else to save his ass more than himself.

After holstering one in his OBA, he jammed the other into a beam in the left corner of the Repair Locker. He couldn't risk some panicking boot camp pansy sucking up the last bit of clean air in helpless fear while he could be in the hell spot battling flames.

"Help me out, would you, Cates," Kephart said, holding the back of his Nomex coveralls in one hand and his OBA in the other. He wobbled back and forth as he spoke.

For the past couple days, the Atlantic air lacked the chill they'd left behind in Norfolk, but the skies were cloudy and the sea chopped almost to the hull number. By now, most of them had their sea legs, but Kephart was slow and stupid on his feet, like one of the new foals he talked about on his family's farm back in West Virginia.

Cates stuffed Kephart's ham of an arm into the gaping sleeve, wedging his torso into the Nomex suit. "If you'd ease up on the biscuits and desserts at chow this wouldn't be so fucking difficult," Cates said, securing the straps of Kephart's OBA.

"That's the least of my problem," Kephart said. "You know the way Gabby feeds me."

Gabby and Kephart had been married for all of a year when Cates met had met them. To that point in his life, Cates never approached women wearing a ring, but this one was different. She was into him. They had heat and she never hesitated. He would have been a fool to deny himself. If it wasn't him, it would be somebody else. So he maintained a year-long affair with Gabby that grew out of companionship at Kephart's insistence. The Kepharts rented an apartment in the bad part of Tidewater and Kephart didn't like her being there alone. "Come on, man. She doesn't know anybody here. I want to know she's safe when I've got duty," he'd said. So on every fourth day

when Kephart was sequestered to the ship for duty, Cates filled in. That first time, Cates took her to a movie and then crashed on their couch. The second time he'd stayed over, she woke him up by standing at the edge of the couch, naked except for her sunglasses.

In the beginning stages it was so easy. She was hot and he was lonely. In those early days, he didn't know if Kephart knew, but he found it hard to believe that anyone could be that oblivious. Then he got to know Kephart better.

**I**n the passageway, shipmates ran in and out of watertight hatches in various stages of donned equipment, the ship rocked in vibration and then rolled them all to the starboard side. Most of the gear was secured in the repair locker, but a dozen sailors in the passageway slammed into the bulkhead with force enough to dent their ribs, Cates among them.

"We've been hit," the Master Chief said, holding the frame of the watertight door in the Repair Locker. Though Cates wanted to believe him, no "brace for shock" command had been issued from the bridge. Cates thought then of the Stark: they had taken an Exocet missile out of the blue.

They braced for a second blast. Gripping an angle iron for support, Cates imagined a missile tearing into the ship. Perhaps the bridge crew was incinerated from a direct hit before they could warn the others aboard. Perhaps the boatswain was crisp at the helm and the captain ripped in half, or launched over the side by the blast.

Word finally came over the 1MC. "Fire, Fire, Fire. Class Bravo fire in Engine Room Two."

**T**he thick Nomex firefighting suit he'd donned swallowed him like a straitjacket. It made him sweat more which added to the wetness of his boots, socks and pant legs. Standing there, hugging

his oxygen breathing apparatus like the baby Jesus, ready to fight fire when given the order.

“I don’t want no fire on board,” Kephart said.

“Tough shit, Kep. It’s here.”

“No.”

“You smell that burning fuel? Whatever’s on fire is burning a lot of it.”

In front of the engine room hatch, heat radiated over Cates’ neck and face. His body clad, in Nomex, felt nothing.

“If anything happens to me, promise me you’ll take care of Gabby,” Kephart’s muffled voice said, the OBA mask creasing into the doughy flesh of his obscured face.

“Nothing’s going to happen,” Cates said, tightening the back straps of Kephart’s OBA.

“I got it from here,” Kephart said. “Go do what you got to do.”

Heat radiated from the fire below. Cates’ Nomex suit was now a Dutch oven, cooking him with heat produced from within and without. Cooking there in the passageway outside Repair Locker Three.

At that moment, the Master Chief said, “Remember that conflagration footage y’all saw as new recruits? That nasty motherfucker aboard FORRESTAL a number of years ago as planes exploded on the flight deck?”

No one said a word.

Cates remembered guys being burned alive.

“Well, tie a knot in your tampon strings, ladies, because this thing we got here ain’t nearly as severe.”

All thirty sailors within earshot laughed in response, presumably from the relief. Sweat rolled the length of Cates’ spine, beneath the waistband of his boxer shorts and into his ass crack. He wanted to unzip and swab out the moisture with one of his insulated gloves resting in the bowl of his upturned firefighting helmet, but there was no way to get past the Nomex suit and OBA straps, or the Master

Chief who was now telling a story about how he refused his teenage daughter braces because there was no way he'd "put that kind of money in her teeth just so some guy could come along and rake his dick across them."

They all laughed and waited.

For ten minutes, they stood snuggled up against the bulkhead in the passageway. It got quiet. All they heard was a cough here and there or Hanson at the other end spitting Skoal into a Pepsi can. The Master Chief said, "Put on your damn mask, Hansen."

Cates had only 184 days and a wake up left on his enlistment, and it looked like he'd be taking his honorable discharge without having seen any action.

In his post-Navy, landlubber days then, he'd live amongst the warm beaches and cabbage palms of southwest Florida. His buddies back home were going to college near the beach and he planned to join them. He was looking forward to morning classes, afternoons on the beach and tending bar at night. "Hurry," his buddy, Eddie, had written in his last letter. "You wouldn't believe the tail down here." He also mentioned wet t-shirt contests and nickel beer nights. Cates had already arranged admission into business school at that beachside college back home. He thought he'd have no war stories to tell in business meetings when he got to the corporate world, but at least his travels would impress the chicks back home and he definitely wanted a crack at them and those nickel beers.

Outside the aft engine room, Cates held his uncharged fire hose and waited. The smell of twenty men sweating buckets in their Nomex suits crept around him like the smoke on the other side of the watertight door.

Kephart lumbered down the narrow passageway. He turned the wrench on the first fire main valve, and heaved the heavy iron

as if it were a toy. Cates felt his hose charge until it was heavy in his hands. How could Kephart not know that Cates had slept in his bed, shared his wife, drunk his coffee, stared at his “me wall” of plaques and certificates outside the kitchen on those mornings before returning to the ship, to relieve him of his duty there as well?

To break it off, Cates had invented a girlfriend who attended Old Dominion University. And as far as Kephart had known, she was five feet ten and blonde with legs up to her throat. Cates had told Kephart that she was none too big on the idea of him staying with another woman, married or not. “You know how insecure these young chicks are.”

“Say no more,” Kephart had said, and they’d never spoken of it again. Whenever the notion of getting together or double dating had come up, Cates brushed it off with excuses of his girl having “Mid-terms.” Or “Finals.” Or “That time of the month.” Kephart never asked questions.

**I**t was a Bravo fire in Engine Room Two. Cates confirmed this with the Master Chief who added, “The Chief Engineer cut off the fuel supply and the sparkys got the power secured. Now get down there.”

With a trickle of water falling from the closed nozzle in his hands and landing on the toe of his steel-toe boot, Cates felt his feet chafing from the wetness of his socks from the water in the Pit Sword Room. He pushed the discomfort out of his mind and hefted the brass nozzle to the side and lit off his OBA.

“You ready, Cates?”

“Let’s rock, Master Chief.”

As Hernandez undogged the engine room’s watertight hatch, a body tumbled out and sprawled limp and lifeless on the deck. This is it, Cates thought. This is the real deal. He recognized the spider web tattoos on the fallen shipmate’s elbows, but couldn’t recall his

name. Instead, he activated the nozzle, spraying a fan of water as he stepped over this unidentified man and advanced into the space. The charred remains of another engine man clung to the ladder as if still trying to escape. Cates climbed over him, as did his hose team.

In the ineffectual glow of helmet lamps and the orange blaze of flames, Cates saw the bodies of other dead enginemen scattered about the compartment. Reinforced-steel bulkheads had buckled from the blast. The portside bulkhead was concave and filled with an expanding cloud of dense smoke. Engine parts were scattered like shrapnel. Cates heard, as though from a great distance, the shouts of his hose team behind him yelling up the ladder for more slack in the hose. Water pounded forth from the nozzle he gripped in his hands. The taste of enamel filled his mouth as he gritted his teeth and charged forward amongst the burnt bodies with t-shirts melted to their flesh. Their once capable bodies now resting on heat-warped deck grates and charred ladders. He opened the nozzle all the way and sprayed side to side and up and down as he advanced the hose team deeper into the space. Black smoke enveloped them. In front of him was the blue and orange glow of fire. Cates wasn't even sure if Thompson was still behind him, but there was slack enough in the hose to maneuver.

Cates advanced, spraying water until the fire was completely extinguished and he was lost in a cloud of white smoke void of orange and blue flames. In a voice so hoarse he didn't recognize it coming out of his mouth, he called back, "Engine Room Number Two is secure." This message was relayed to the top of the ladder.

The next step in his training required appointing himself firewatch as numbers two, four and six hosemen rotated out. He thought about that hidden canister in the repair locker and rested the ten-pound brass nozzle on his knee. His face mask was partially fogged, but he was still getting good air inside his OBA. His heart pounded from the exertion and from adrenaline and from the fact that he'd finally done what he'd been trained to do.

A month after he'd broken it off with her, Cates had seen Gabby in the commissary, at the rear end of the bread aisle. He'd felt a flutter then, unlike any he'd had before, but tamped it out before it had a chance to make him call out to her. He then wished he could get by without being seen and avoid any badgering he might take for breaking it off with her.

She hadn't seen him yet. She was busy chatting up a hook-nosed deck ape from one of the mine sweepers. Neither had rings on their fingers. He walked toward her as she ended the conversation with the guy who pushed his cart in the opposite direction. Gabby's cane was resting parallel to her shopping cart's handle.

"Hey there, Cates," she said, stopping an inch from his left foot. She picked up a loaf of multigrain and pretended to read the nutrition panel. Angry as he was, he wanted more than anything to play it cool.

She dropped the bread. He didn't lunge to pick it up for her. He stood there and watched her. She looked at the bread and then slowly up at him, but she never made a move for it. She adjusted her orange-tinted sunglasses and looked back to the bread and then tossed her hair back, and she looked at Cates again, over the rims of her sunglasses. He'd heard rumors that Gabby was getting around to all the ships on base. Poor Kephart never found it odd that his wife knew so many guys from so many ships or wondered why "they" had so many friends.

Cates emerged from the engine room soaked through to his underwear with sweat and seawater from the Pit Sword Room, but he was surprisingly energized. He removed his mask and swallowed a clean breath and hollered, "Yeah!" He held up his hands for various high-fives until he saw Doc and Baby Doc attending to a corpse, and obviously waiting to assess the others.

There were fewer guys than there were supposed to be. “Where’s Master Chief?” he said. “Where’s Kephart?”

Hernandez spoke up first, “Flooding team got sent forward. There’s a report of water coming in the Pick Sore room.”

“The Pit Sword room?” Cates said.

“Yeah. What is that, anyway?”

Cates ran forward, past the mess decks, and down the first series of ladders. He slipped on the second and slid down feet first, crushing himself beneath the weight of his OBA.

Two decks down, he saw the Master Chief in the vestibule below him, one deck above the pit sword room. “What’s going on?” Cates hollered.

The Master Chief looked up from the vestibule and said, “Flooding alarm in the Pit Sword Room. Kephart went down to check the valve. We’re waiting. It’s been a while.”

Cates took another step down the ladder. “You let him go down there?”

“It’s his equipment. He’ll fix it.”

Cates gripped the chain beneath his fingers. “He’s too big. He’ll never find the wrench,” Cates said, doffing his OBA. “I have to go down there.”

“Ain’t enough room for two men down there.”

“There’s no time to debate it, Master Chief.”

Cates stripped off his Nomex coveralls and yelled, “Open the hatch.”

“Don’t fuck around down there. Secure the leak and get Kephart out. You hear?”

“Aye, Master Chief,” Cates said.

The hatch closed over Cates’s head as he held onto the ladder leading into the Pit Sword Room. Dark water oozed up to Cates’ neck as he abandoned the last ladder rung. He inhaled, his ribs

aching. The taste of wet iron air filled him, made him heavier so he could sink down. Kephart was submerged in a ball to the right of the valve.

The rust-and salt-stained water was as opaque as the smoke-filled engine room had been. Kephart didn't move as Cates groped around the valve basin to find the lug wrench.

Cates surfaced and tugged at the ladder. He hollered for them to get Kephart out of there, but the hatch was closed above him. This was standard operating procedure. If the Pit Sword Room flooded, it was better to isolate it than risk flooding the entire ship.

After another breath and submerging himself again, Cates slid into position and went about his task of obtaining the wrench. He couldn't reach all the way around the valve at first because Kephart's boot was in the way, but he groped until he found the big wrench where he'd left it.

With the wrench fixed on one of the hex nuts, Cates shoved the heavy metal handle, hoping to squeeze it down at least another turn, but the bolt turned easily and the wrench slammed into Kephart's leg. Kephart made no move. Cates repeated the maneuver, determined to secure the bolt he'd failed to secure earlier. He repeated this nine more times until he was pushing the wrench with every ounce of his body weight.

He then sprang from the bottom and took a deep breath. He beat the hatch with the wrench. In that moment, he wished he knew Morse code. He would bang out her name. Gabby. Gabriella. Gabriella Kephart, again and again if he had to, to make his shipmates hear and know. The sound would carry through the ship and through the hull into the water where whales and sonar techs on Russian subs could hear. "G" was "Golf" which was "dash, dash, dot," he knew that. "A" was "dot, dash," but beyond that he had no recall for the rest of the letters he'd need.

The wrench fell from his hand. He dove to retrieve it and rechecked the valve's bolts in a series of attempted turns. The metal haft of the tool slugged into Kephart's soft, motionless leg.

Cates again climbed the ladder and rapped randomly on the hatch with the wrench and he persisted until the hatch finally opened, flooding his eyes with bright light. "Kephart needs help. Get him out of here," Cates said through temporary blindness. "We need a corpsman, ASAP."

Instead of waiting, the Master Chief sent a couple of guys down with a line to secure around Kephart's torso and pull him up.

"Get Kephart out of there," Cates said to the first guy, Schaffer. "I think he's hurt bad."

It took seven of them to pull Kephart out of the Pit Sword Room.

Cates sat on the deck atop the ladder trading the smoke and water in his lungs for air. The Master Chief cradled Kephart's head in the vestibule. A corpsman leaned over with a swollen arm in his hands, checking for a pulse he'd never find. The three of them forming a bloodless pietà.

*Jeffery Hess served six years in the U.S. Navy aboard the fleet's oldest and then newest ships before going on to earn degrees in English and Creative Writing. He is the editor of the award-winning anthology Home of the Brave: Stories in Uniform (Press 53) and his writing has appeared in numerous print and online publications. He lives in Florida, where he's completing a novel and leading a creative writing workshop for military veterans.*

## Hadrian's Wall

By Michael Lund

“You’re two out of three, now,” Grant said as they boarded the bus leaving Stonehenge.

“Well, you did promise,” replied Cleo. “Now take me to Hadrian’s Wall.”

When he’d proposed she and the children come with him for his month-long research trip to England, Cleo had said yes . . . if she could visit Down House (Charles Darwin’s home), Stonehenge, and Hadrian’s Wall.

“I can see why you’d like the first two, but why Hadrian’s Wall?”

Cleo taught biology, so touring the home of the man whose work separated myth from science concerning human origin was an obvious choice. She would even follow Darwin’s “sandwalk,” the path he built through the grounds so that he could exercise and think without interruption.

“I’m not sure exactly,” Cleo answered. “I read a story in National Geographic about it, and it just seemed interesting.”

Grant had no trouble understanding why she wanted to tour Stonehenge either, the ancient calendar made of stone. He wanted to

see it, too, as a monument on the other side of the line between history and prehistory. It was also the site of one of his favorite novels, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. In fact, part of his reading this summer would be in *The Graphic*, the magazine that serialized a version of Thomas Hardy's classic before it appeared in book form.

Cleo explained, "The Romans came that far north, you know, then built Hadrian's Wall. Depending on which side you listen to: either they decided that would be the farthestmost border of their empire, or the wild tribesmen of the region blocked their advance."

Grant didn't have much desire to seek out such reminders of past conflicts, maybe because memories of his experiences in Vietnam were recurring more frequently as he approached middle age. "I don't know," he said, "now that the Berlin Wall is gone, I'd rather celebrate the places where people have connected rather than divided. But," he added giving her a kiss on the cheek, "if you want to see Hadrian's Wall, I'll get you there."

At the end of the trip, he would claim he had succeeded, but it was possible he had let himself be fooled. In his most honest moments, Grant even wondered if he had deliberately taken a wrong path in order to avoid confrontation with the world's past . . . and his own. Perhaps what he did on that excursion had something to do with what happened to his friend twenty years earlier in a boat on the South China Sea.

## II.

Cleo had been the guide for the family excursions in England, reading the brochures, studying maps, collecting train schedules. Grant had to spend time each weekday at the British Museum, researching nineteenth-century periodicals in an effort to define what separated middle-class writing from high culture literature.

(He was beginning to think there was no such absolute demarcation.) Cleo, Marian, and Jack used those hours to take in museums (the Tate), shop for mementoes (Harrods), and see the sights (London Bridge).

The three weekends of their month-long stay were devoted to Cleo's conditions for travel, though she connected the last to two days in Scotland. Her plan was to take a fast train to Newcastle, local trains to and from the Wall, and another express on to Edinburgh the same day. The plan was perfect, the execution less so.

"Have you explained where we're going today?" Grant asked once they were settled on the train. They had seats facing each other with a table between parents and children. He planned to teach the kids how to play chess while Cleo studied the guidebook.

"Many years ago, hundreds really," she began, setting her book down on the table and making sure she had Marian and Jack's attention. "The Roman empire spread across most of Europe, the Middle East, even parts of Africa." Marian was thirteen, so this made sense to her. At ten (not having crossed over even to adolescent thought, his sister claimed), Jack understood the basic geography, but history generally didn't register.

Grant added, "The known world."

"The Pax Romana—peace of Rome—spread through England, or at least the southern part of the island. But north of a certain point, the people, fierce war-like tribes, wouldn't yield to foreign rule. And the Emperor decided it wasn't worth the cost of subduing them. So, he built a wall across the country east to west to protect his towns and cities, keeping the 'barbarians' on the other side."

"Like the Great Wall of China," noted Marian.

"Exactly."

Jack asked, "The Wall's still there?"

"Parts of it are, and it's nearly 2,000 years old. So we're going to see the ruins. And we'll learn about history."

‘Right now,’ said Grant, “let me tell you about the white and black: the king and queen, pawns, knights, and bishops on opposite sides of the board.”

And as they played, or learned to play, Cleo reviewed the maps. They would change trains in Newcastle-on-Tyne, take about 45 minutes to get up to Hexham, ride a bus out to the site, and have over an hour to look around. They would be in the area before noon, plenty of time to get back for a fast train, which departed at 4:00. They'd made reservations at a B & B in Edinburgh. Dusk separated day from night slowly and belatedly this time of the summer and this far north, so they'd be settled in well before it was dark.

What she didn't count on was friendly advice from a fellow passenger, presumably a local, on the train from Newcastle. That exchange altered their itinerary.

### III.

Grant had played a lot of chess on his tour in Southeast Asia. He'd tried to teach Larry Price the simpler game of checkers, but his friend couldn't remember all the rules and kept blundering into traps. Larry's denseness was legendary, but his good nature protected him from direct affront. It did not protect him from shrapnel.

Grant remembered the dare his fellow Coastie, Jenson, loved to make. "Go ahead and light a cigarette on deck," he would say to any newbie. "We're too far from shore for the NVA to pick you off. And it drives them crazy to see us out here."

"I don't smoke," Larry said to Jenson. He was the only man who didn't. But Grant knew that, if he did, Seaman Price, the most trusting soul he'd ever met, would light up right then.

These men were among the few Coast Guard units deployed to Southeast Asia, providing security in ports and patrolling shallow waters like the Cua Viet River, less than a mile from the DMZ. Ninety-nine percent of their duty was routine, if not boring.

Their 82-foot boat occasionally drew enemy fire from the shore; the North did want to protect their infiltration routes into the South. They were outgunned, of course, as Navy artillery from bigger ships would be called in for support, as well as Air Force fighters. So far in their one-year deployment, no one in Grant's outfit had received a scratch.

None of these men had foreseen duty overseas, despite the fact that their enlistment papers stipulated that it was always a possibility. When they'd signed up, it seemed a great way to avoid Vietnam. After what happened, they wondered if they might have been safer volunteering for the Marines.

#### IV.

"You can get out at Hexham, sure," the middle-aged woman on the train to Carlisle told the Perry family. "But if it's a bit of an adventure you'd be wanting—off the beaten path, you see—take the Bardon's Mill stop. A nice walk through the fields, that is. And you won't be surrounded by tourists."

"How long will it take?" Cleo asked. "We're on a tight schedule."

"Less than an hour from the station. My advice? See the countryside."

So, wanting to avoid being taken for typical Americans abroad—using their money to ride with fellow countrymen in air-conditioned comfort to all the famous places—they decided to hike the path out of Bardon's Mill. According to their fellow traveler, it would actually save time overall, as the buses from the railroad station to the museums, she claimed, were not always on schedule.

Over the years they came to feel they'd made the right decision, if for the wrong reasons, because they learned more than the facts of history on this expedition. But at the time, as they hiked through woods, across sheep fields, and over rocky hills, they began to feel that they'd been duped.

“That lady is telling her friends at the pub right now how gullible Americans are,” Cleo complained, as she demonstrated to the children how to use the stile to get over the fence. “It’s as good as a gate from this field to that.” To Grant, she whispered, “We might as well be snipe hunting.”

“Courage, my sweet. I promised you’d see Hadrian’s Wall, and I’m sure we’re getting close.” He’d estimated they could walk a mile in less than half an hour. So the hike shouldn’t take more than 45 minutes. They liked to camp in the Ozarks near Lake Wappapello, and the children were used to day-long hikes in moderate terrain.

“I don’t know. Remember what the old guy in the village said.” Coming from the tiny railway station, they’d passed a man in overalls working in his garden. Cleo asked him where they could find the path to Hadrian’s Wall.

He leaned on his hoe and nodded north. “Th’ say it’s down off Station Road, quarter mile or so. I b’lieve there’s a sign off the road.”

“Oh. And how long is the path? We want to hike out, take a look, come back for the afternoon train down to Edinburgh.”

“Well, can’t rightly say about that. Lived here all my life, but never been to see that wall.” He winked and turned back to his row of cabbages. “I presume it’ll be there if I ever take an interest.”

As they continued on Station Road, Grant explained, “It’s just like us. We’ve lived most of our lives in Cape Girardeau, but until people came to visit, we never thought about going to see the old Jefferson School.”

“Right,” Cleo huffed. “That was all your cousins from Boston, thinking they were crossing the Mason-Dixon line and entering the Deep South. They worried that they’d be run out of town if our neighbors learned they were Yankees.”

She and Grant had been offended by the superior attitude of their visitors from the North—as if Boston didn’t have its race problems!

While public schools were segregated in Cape—Jefferson School for whites, Cobb for blacks—after 1954 the community complied with the Supreme Court decision. The original school for blacks, John S. Cobb School, had burned in 1953. White students were moved out of Jefferson to Mary Greene, and blacks into Jefferson until 1955, when *Brown vs. Topeka* removed the last of official racial barriers.

Cobb School, the most telling sign of segregation, was no longer standing, but Jefferson—which had gone from white only to black only to integrated—survived for more than a decade until new buildings were needed for an expanding population. Jefferson became an apartment building, and a historical marker was erected at the site. When he saw it, one of the visiting cousins called it an "apartheid" building.

"Are you sure we're on the right path?" Marian asked, looking ahead. They were crossing a pasture bordered by woods. And while the ground was worn, suggesting a trail, they had seen no markers since they left Station Road. There they had read it was roughly two kilometers to a point where you could see the Wall.

"We've come about the right distance, I think," said Grant, checking his watch. "Let's get up on the top of the next rise, where we'll have a view of what lies ahead."

Marian reminded him, "They're called 'downs,' Dad." Earlier Cleo had interrupted their chess lesson to explain this reversal of American usage.

From the 'down' they looked into a broad valley and saw a road snaking out to a building of some sort with a substantial parking lot. Grant concluded that it was the museum you could reach from Hexham and that the cars and vans in the lot had brought in the tourists. So, the wall had to be right there. And they could see "there."

"Still, let's go for ten minutes more," he suggested. "Maybe we'll come on a section of the ruins."

At the bottom of the down they stepped out of woods and surveyed the next rise. Several hundred yards ahead and above them were large rocks jutting up against the sky. Were they looking at remnants of Hadrian's Wall? Cleo seemed eager to accept what she saw as turrets, milecastles, or wing walls, parts of the ancient structure. Grant worried that she was trying not to sound disappointed, so he argued that they were indeed standing on one side of a glacis and looking over to a berm parallel to the Wall.

Whatever was there, they knew they were running out of time and decided to retrace their steps to Barton's Mill, if not at the pace of a forced march, at least at a sustained speed. Back home they would come to tell others they had definitely seen Hadrian's Wall, either up close where they stood at the edge of the wood or by the museum from afar on the down.

## V.

"Where is the DMZ?" Larry Price asked near the end of his tour. He was staring at the shoreline as if there would be some sort of marker—a flag, perhaps, or even a larger red line like the one you could see on a map of the two Vietnams.

"It follows the 17th Parallel," explained Jenson. Pointing, he added, "Don't you see it?"

Larry trusted everyone, followed orders literally, believed each person he met would be his best friend. Grant found this oddly refreshing and liked to listen to Larry's tales of life back on the West Virginia farm where he'd grown up.

"What's the 17th Parallel? I don't see that either."

Grant tried to help. "That's an imaginary marker, Larry, like the Equator. The Equator runs around the circumference of the earth dividing the Northern Hemisphere from the Southern. And the DMZ is a ten-kilometer wide strip separating North from South Vietnam."

Larry squinted, one eye closed. "Something that big, you ought to be able to spot it. I can't see it."

Jenson asked, "You remember sixth grade social studies, don't you, Larry? We all made a relief map of the world, with the Equator running straight across. You did pass sixth grade, didn't you?"

Everyone wondered how Larry had passed the entrance examinations for the Coast Guard, especially at a time when there was considerable competition for enlistment. The CO let slip once that Price had an uncle in the Missouri legislature, who may have been able to pull strings. Grant, whose family had no political pull, took that as an unpleasant reminder that America remained divided into privileged and unprivileged classes.

Grant pointed. "See where the tree line fades. That's the Ben Hai River. It's in the middle of the DMZ."

Larry squinted. "I see that. But I don't see any DMZ. There ought to be a sign or something. Everybody's always talking about it, but it seems to me it's something somebody just made up and we pretend it's out there."

Grant, who had finished his Master's in British literature by that time, decided it would be no use giving a lecture on the French Indochina War, the Viet Minh in the north versus the French and their puppet government in the south. The terms of the Geneva Conference ending that conflict barred all military from entering the Demilitarized Zone and presumably insuring a status quo. America was still trying to preserve the artificial division of Vietnamese people into two nations.

Grant concluded, "Larry, don't you worry about it. The CO knows where it is, and he'll tell us what to do about it."

## VI.

The Perrys were back in the village with an hour to spare. But the pace of their walk and the afternoon heat had made them thirsty. They stopped outside a pub, and Cleo went in to see if they had soft drinks or lemonade. Grant didn't remind her that in the last

century respectable women who entered pubs might be taken for prostitutes. Worried that she would be angry he'd hadn't gotten her closer to the Wall, he didn't want also to remind her of the gender divide in Darwin's time.

She came out after a few minutes, followed by the bartender, who carried four bottles and glasses on a tray. His size, the white apron, the hearty cheer were what they might have expected from a pub owner.

"This man is being so nice," explained Cleo. "Children aren't allowed inside, so he's letting us sit out here on these benches with our drinks."

"That's very hospitable," said Grant. "Thank you. We've been on a hot hike through the woods."

"I understand, out to see the Wall. That's about all that brings folks to our place these days. But most go on to Hexham, take the tour bus."

"Someone on the train said it would be more interesting this way. And the countryside is beautiful."

"We like it here. Most tourists who come through don't pay much attention to our little village today, just want to learn about ancient history."

Grant studied him a minute. "Let me make a guess: you've never seen the Wall, have you?" The big man smiled and shook his head "Too busy living."

Jack piped up, "They told me it was famous, but all I saw were some big rocks on a hill."

The pub owner chuckled. "Let me explain something to you good folks. Look off the road down about 300 meters. See that grey stone building there, with the chickens in the yard, a milk cow on the other side?"

"Sure. Two stories, big doors on the first floor."

"Right. That building is one thousand years old at least. Built

with the rock found around here, put together by hand one stone at a time, made to last in a harsh climate. Winter's rough up this way—strong winds, snow, long cold nights. What they'd do in those days is bring the animals in on the ground floor after sunset. Their bodies provided heat for the family upstairs.”

Cleo studied the building. “That makes great sense. Saves fuel and protects the livestock from predators. Might be a bit smelly, but you can get used to that.”

“That's right—all creatures in one domicile. The people were also protecting themselves from anyone who might want to get in that they didn't want in. The animals would alert you, and you had the upper ground. Those walls are over a foot thick.”

“So, not exactly a fort, but a safe house.”

“Right again.” He gave an approving nod. “Now, if you go ten miles up north—other side of the Wall, you see—you'll find buildings just like this, built way back then, too. The people who live in them are just like us. Why, I've got cousins up by Whiteside who use a building that matches the one you see here.”

“Ah,” Cleo said thoughtfully. “In another words, your cousins and neighbors are not wild men who paint their faces and go on rampages across the land, as opposed to civilized Romans who wear togas and debate public policy with utmost politeness.”

He laughed a third time. Looking at the children's empty bottles, he asked, “More drinks?”

Grant checked the time. “No, thanks. We want to make sure we're on the train. What's the total here?”

“There's no charge, friends. Welcome to Northumberland.”

## VII.

Lawrence Price was killed by “friendly fire.” The U.S. Air Force saw lights off the coast near the DMZ, couldn't get a radio

response, opened up with what they thought were warning shots at an enemy ship. Jenson was offering his cigarette to Larry, holding it out at arm's length, when an exploding fragment went neatly through the other man's eye.

The crew scrambled to stations, frantic radio transmissions went out, the planes returned to their carrier. The ship suffered damage to the hull, another Coastie was slightly wounded, a third sprained an ankle racing to his post. There was a long investigation, everyone provided testimony, the matter was closed: A failure of communication, the cost of war.

Grant had been playing cards below, a long-term chess match with the cartographer. Later he looked at his friend stretched out in sickbay before being bagged. Price's remaining eye was open, as if still searching for the DMZ.

*Michael Lund, a native of Rolla, Missouri, now lives and writes in Virginia. He served in Vietnam as a US Army correspondent in 1970-71, and is the author of At Home and Away, a novel series that chronicles an American family during times of peace and war from 1915 to 2015.*

## Fear

By David Tanis

**H**e had told no one about his fear. He was ashamed of it. The very thought tended to paralyze his actions. He knew of no other way but to face it head on. It had to be done.

The noise was one of a constant, even, drone. It had a somnolent effect, he realized, as he began to succumb to the overwhelming drowsiness. He smiled as he recalled his Shakespearean Literature class at the university. “To sleep. Perchance to dream... Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or, to take up arms against a sea of troubles, and, by opposing, end them.” He was still smiling as he drifted off to sleep thinking of how pertinent the famous soliloquy was.

He awoke with a start, the droning constant, loud, the repetitive noise of four reciprocal engines. He looked to his left. Twenty-three soldiers, all fast asleep, except for one. The grizzled old first sergeant was awake, alert, watching, evaluating him. He looked at his watch, a plastic olive drab Timex with a simple woven band, olive drab, too, the color of camouflage.

He wiped the sleep from his eyes. The sergeant stood and a few of the men started to stir. One awoke and watched the

sergeant warily. The sergeant checked his watch and looked toward the front of the plane. The crew chief was standing at the entrance to the cockpit. He nodded at the sergeant who then walked to the door at the rear left side of the plane.

“Stand up!” he bellowed in his stentorian voice, the raspy sound of a practiced drill sergeant. The sergeant opened the door of the plane and instead of the calming, steady drone of the engines the sound became a loud, dangerous noise as the outside air rushed by at one hundred and thirty knots. All at once there was a burst of activity in the plane as the sleeping men woke and stood in a state of utter confusion. Within a few seconds the lethargic effects of the stress-induced sleep was replaced with an acute alertness, as adrenaline fueled each man. All eyes were on the first sergeant as they awaited their orders, orders which they knew by heart, and deep within them, feared.

“Check your equipment,” he yelled. Each man turned to the front of the plane and checked the parachute of the man in front of him, ensuring that everything appeared in order, running their hands over the parachute pack as they had been trained to do, checking the straps to ensure they were tight and there was no line or strap crossing something it wasn’t supposed to be crossing. They checked to insure the break-away cord was securely tied and that it was of the type of simple cotton string they expected. The last man in line had his parachute checked by the first sergeant, who then turned to have his own chute checked by that man. After a few seconds each of the men had insured the parachute equipment of the man in front of him was as it was supposed to be and tapped the man whose parachute they had checked.

The men were silent. Despite their bravado, their feigned toughness, they were united in a common emotion, fear. Although he had gone through this routine several hundred times and showed

no sign of the paralyzing emotion himself, the sergeant too, was afraid. Not only because he was the jumpmaster and responsible for this band of ragtag soldiers, he had examined this emotion in himself the first dozen times he had done this, and found that it was natural. There was nothing wrong with him for harboring this fear. He looked in the eyes of the men nearest him and saw the same fear, an abject emotion unassuaged by experience. He did not smile. He was satisfied. Many of them little more than boys, were about to become men.

“Hook up!” the sergeant shouted. The command was clear, loud, yet it was barely audible above the deafening rushing noise outside. Each man took the hook attached to the yellow static line from the parachute of the man in front of him and securely snapped the hook onto the cable. One half inch thick the cable ran along the length of the interior of the plane, six and a half feet from the floor. The men waited tensely, all eyes on the sergeant, who had both hands on the sides of the open door as he leaned out, looking, searching for the drop zone.

After a few very long minutes, he seemed satisfied and brought his upper torso back into the plane. He looked at the men and they were all now fully alert, ready, watching him as if he held their fates in his hands, which he did. He stepped back, and ordered, “Shuffle to the door.”

In a strange, orchestrated ballet each man shuffled in the direction of the open door, unthinking, almost as if they were automata. The open door beckoned dangerously, a portal to the perilous unknown. The shuffle ensured that no man would cross his feet, dangerously tripping and falling. It was a time-tested routine, and it worked.

The first man stood in the open door, his hands gripping the sides, white knuckled, sweat forming despite the cold. He was first

in the door because he was senior in rank. He was a green second lieutenant, but he was still an officer. It was his job to lead these men, his duty, the heavy responsibility that went along with his rank. It was what he had signed up for. He looked to the right at the light near the side of the door. It was red, reassuringly red. The sergeant watched the lieutenant carefully, appraising him silently.

He was afraid, almost paralyzed by the fear. He looked at the others in the stick waiting their turn, their eyes riveted on him, an almost pleading expression uniformly marking their faces. He decided he would commit suicide rather than show his cowardice and admit his fear. He would jump. Come what may, he would jump.

Suddenly the light was green. The sergeant tapped the lieutenant's rear and shouted, "Go! Go!" Without thinking the lieutenant leapt into the air, as far from the comfort and safety of the plane as he could. He was falling, falling. There was a slight jerk as the static line was extended and began to pull the chute from its bed, folded snugly in its wrapping, strapped to the lieutenant's back. The lieutenant had not previously given the parachute riggers much thought but it suddenly crossed his mind that he had placed all his trust in the skill, in the training, of just one unknown rigger, and his faith, his life for that matter, that the rigger would do his job correctly.

He felt another jerk as the static line, attached to the break-away cord, pulled the chute completely out of the pack. His weight had caused the eighty-pound test cord to break and he no longer had any connection to the plane. He looked up. The elongated parachute was flapping in the ether above him, desperately trying to grab some air as if it had an actual life. Bodies hurtled one by one after him, following his lead, each body momentarily trailed by an undeployed, olive drab parachute. A bunch of yellow static lines trailed along the side of the plane futilely waiving in the air. The plane receded into the distance, becoming smaller and smaller, and

more irrelevant. The lieutenant experienced a wave of panic as he looked longingly after the plane, his security disappearing with it. Suddenly the chute caught the air it had so desperately sought, and deployed, stopping his free fall with a bone jarring jerk.

The noise of the plane, once unsettlingly loud, quickly dissipated into nothingness. Silence. Again he checked to make sure the parachute was deployed. It was, and it had the same reassuring effect as a mother's embrace. The silence and the reassurance of the deployed parachute caused him to experience a peacefulness such as he had never felt before. The fear was gone, the noise was gone, there was nothing, no emotion, just peace.

He looked around at the young men who had followed his lead. They were all there, all twenty-three of them, dangling lazily in the air from their properly functioning parachutes. The sun shined warmly on his face, the comfortable feeling lulling him into a sense of security. The chute rustled softly as he descended. It was like being in the womb, but outside. He was free, and yet, he was safe and secure. Suddenly, he loved his parachute.

He looked down to see where he might be landing. He had started at twelve hundred and fifty feet, he knew. But now he could clearly make out things on the ground, a bush, a tuft of sedge. The ground was rapidly coming toward him.

At fifty feet a wave of panic overcame him and the agonizing fear returned. This time the fear was powerful, daunting, excruciating. The ground was coming at him like a speeding train. The feeling of peace evaporated and was replaced by sheer, utter panic.

The ground, the ground. Now it was just ten feet from him. He grabbed his risers as he hit the ground, rolling. Thighs, butt, shoulders, as he twisted in a controlled, panic driven roll, doing exactly as he had been trained to do. Hundreds of times he had jumped off the four foot ledge practicing his parachute landing

falls in the sawdust pit in jump school at Fort Benning, until he had gotten it right. And he had gotten it right this time, the time that counted.

Automatically he popped his quick release, the round metal mechanism on his chest that freed the parachute from its tethers. He stood and hurriedly gathered the fluttering remains of the silken chute into his arms. Absolutely exhilarated, he jammed the folded chute into his gray canvas parachute bag and headed for the nearest soldier. He was a very young private, the blond fuzz still on his face where a man's whiskers should be. They talked excitedly, babbling, simultaneously recounting to each other their own rendition of their unique parachute experience.

The common emotion, that paralyzing feeling of fear, was gone. They had faced their worst demons head on. Each man, in a single instant, had faced fear and had won. Truly, they were men now.

*After jump school, David Tanis served in the 7th, 11th, and 6th Special Forces Groups and amassed a total of 30 jumps. In Vietnam he was assigned to the 196th Light Infantry Brigade, part of the Americal Division, where he served as S-2 and infantry company commander. While commanding a task force of two infantry companies in combat with a large unit of the 2nd NVA Division in I Corps in South Vietnam, he was severely wounded by a mortar round and lost both legs. He then went to graduate school and law school, and served as a prosecutor, trial attorney and District Court Judge in a career of over 30 years. President Reagan appointed him to serve as Chairman of the North Carolina Vietnam Veterans Leadership Program, and North Carolina Governor James Martin appointed him Chairman of the Governor's Advocacy Council for Persons with Disabilities. His publications include Just Add Water, a humorous novel involving a drug conspiracy, and a short story, "The Redemption of Hamish O'Halloran," published in the NC State Bar Journal. He has been married for nearly half a century and has two children and two grandchildren.*

Poetry.

## Tear Catching

Holly Thomas

When he sleeps,  
I catch his tears  
A splash in my hand  
A memory hidden in my palm  
I wipe away the pain  
Without him knowing  
But it finds him the next night

*After watching friends and family members deploy in 2003, Holly Thomas began to write what she observed as they each came back from war. Originally from central Illinois, she currently resides in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, where she continues to write poetry and creative nonfiction.*

Interview.

## A Conversation with Robert Bausch

**R**obert Bausch was born in Georgia, at the end of World War II, and was raised in the Washington, D.C. area. He was later educated at George Mason University, earning a BA, an MA, and an MFA. In the mid-1960s, he joined the U.S. Air Force where he taught survival tactics.

In addition to a short story collection, *The White Rooster and Other Stories*, Bausch has published several acclaimed novels, including *On the Way Home* (1982), *The Lives of Riley Chance* (1984), and *Almighty Me* (1991), which was later made into the film "Bruce Almighty". In 2001, he published *A Hole in the Earth*, which was praised as a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year and was inspired by his father, Robert Carl Bausch, a successful Washington businessman and decorated World War II veteran. *A Hole in the Earth* was followed by *The Gypsy Man* in 2002 and *Out of Season* in 2005.

His most recent novel, *Far As the Eye Can See*, will be published by Bloomsbury Press this coming November. You can find him at [www.robertbausch.org](http://www.robertbausch.org).

*O-Dark-Thirty* fiction editor Jim Mathews recently spoke

with Bausch about his experiences serving in the military and how those experiences influenced his life and his work.

***O Dark Thirty: When and how did your writing journey begin?***

***Robert Bausch:*** I actually wrote my first novel when I was in the eighth grade. I never published it. It was 484 legal pad pages long and I worked on it every day. It was written in long hand and even had illustrations because I liked to draw back then. I guess I always knew I was going to be a writer because it always seemed easy for me to say more honestly what I felt if I wrote it down than if I said it out loud, especially to an adult. So that was my start and I've been doing it ever since.

***ODT: Did reading play a role in your early instincts to write?***

***RB:*** Well, the reason I started writing that novel wasn't that I was inspired by any one thing but more from a love of history. I mean, I read voraciously as a kid. And I really got interested in history and read everything by Henry Steele Commager, James Lee Burke, Bruce Catton, Shelby Foote, as well as Douglas Southall Freeman's work. So my history teacher said to me, "you know so much about this, you should write about it." This was 1959 and the Civil War Centennial was coming up. So there I was, 14 years old and my history teacher was telling me to write what I knew so much about. So my first novel was a Civil War novel.

***ODT: So did your appreciation of military history inspire you to join up?***

***RB:*** No, what inspired me to join was that Vietnam was heating up

and I was about to be drafted. My dad, who served in World War II in the infantry and won two Bronze Stars and a Purple Heart—he'd done a lot and knew a lot—and he told me, "you don't want to go in the infantry. Stay out of the infantry." So I joined the Air Force. And I had the satisfaction of having my father write to me after I'd enlisted and say, Hey they just showed up at the front door looking for you because you weren't there on draft day. So somehow [the Army] didn't get the message that I had enlisted in the Air Force. I was in the Air Force for three years, four months, and 25 days.

***ODT: How did you take to the new way of life?***

***RB:*** Well I thought I was going to be a helicopter pilot. That's what they told me when I signed up. I joined with my twin brother, Richard, and they had a thing called the "buddy system" and that meant you could go through basic training together which, in its own way, was probably not a good thing because all we did was sit around and be homesick. And neither one of us started doing well in the military until they put us in different barracks where we couldn't complain to each other.

***ODT: So how did your time in the military change you—if at all?***

***RB:*** My military experience was a kind of schooling in a way. At the time, I was as miserable and hated it as much as anything on earth. And those years took an eternity. The basic gauge was, "over two years." So I would see guys and say, "Wow-that guy's over two. I can't wait to be over two." Which would mean I'm on the downside of this shit. But the truth is, I met the best friend of my life in the military. He's still my best friend—I still talk to him four times a month. He lives in Chicago and we've been friends now for over fifty years.

**ODT:** *Why did you decide to get out?*

**RB:** I tell everyone that they asked me to leave—which, in a way, they did. It was 1969. The Vietnam War had gotten as bad as it was going to get and they had enough troops and they decided they were going to cut back starting in 1969—and they had this opt-out program. And my commander immediately recommended me, my twin brother, and my friend Dennis for this program. My commander told us we were “unadaptable and undisciplined,” which was true. I had spent time in the brig as a prisoner and in the brig as a guard so I got to walk both sides of that. But the day I found out it was my last day and I had signed the last form, I was walking down the hall with my twin brother and my friend, and I just stopped. I looked at them and they looked at me and I realized: Damn . . . this is the end of an era in my life. This is the end of something magnificent in a way. I was born here. Who I am had been determined by these last three years, four months, and 25 days and suddenly it’s over. All that time I had been hoping for it to be over and now it was.

**ODT:** *You’ve dealt with plenty of serious themes in your fiction and yet you always manage to work in humor, sometimes dark humor. How important do you think it is for writers to incorporate humor into otherwise serious or somber fictional dilemmas?*

**RB:** I’ve always believed that the best thing a writer can hear is when a reader comes to him and says, your work was powerful. Then I know I must have made them cry or laugh. And if I haven’t done both, then I just don’t think I’ve done my job as a writer. I mean, when you think about it, the world is funny. In fact, it’s pretty bizarre. In the military, we spent most of our time laughing. There

was this guy we hated. His name was Sgt. Dennison. He was one of those guys where everything had to be just right. Every morning he would take his troops out of the barracks. I was already an instructor then, but he would roust his guys at 6am and march them off to chow. My friend Dennis was a trumpet player in a band, and when Dennison got the guys all formed up outside ready to march to chow, my friend would play the National Anthem out the window on his trumpet. And Dennison would stop, turn the troops to face the barracks and they'd all salute. And when my friend was done, Dennison would call the squad to attention and get ready to march them off. And my friend would start playing the national anthem again. Some mornings like that I laughed so hard I lost my appetite. So yes, humor is crucial in fiction and the military is a great place to find it.

***ODT: Some of the work we're seeing from servicemen and women in the Veterans Writing Project is amazing – some of it quite raw but also full of potential. What would your advice be for some of these writers who would want to carry that forward, especially if all they currently have is desire?***

***RB:*** The most important thing a beginning writer can do—and I tell this to all my students, especially those who have a real story to tell—is very simple. Type. And as much as you can while you're typing, tell the truth. You should not be thinking about artistry. You should not be thinking about form. You should not be thinking about any kind of correctness or neatness or structure or anything else. Just type. And make yourself do a little typing every day. Don't think too hard about it. There's been times that I've turned the computer screen off. Because if I'm typing and I find myself looking up at the screen and hitting that backspace or holding down the delete key or

using the mouse, I'm not writing anymore. I'm editing. And that's a big mistake. So I just turn the screen off, get my fingers on the home keys and just do what I'm supposed to be doing, which is producing a manuscript. If I can't see it, then I can't judge it and end up taking up time to edit shit I may not ever need. When I first started out, I made so many changes in the first few chapters of a book and those same first few chapters didn't even end up in the book. So why am I doing all that extra work? So my advice is to just type.

***ODT: Sounds simple enough.***

***RB:*** Yes, but the other thing I would suggest is that you can't count on the reader feeling what you feel. You have to earn it. It may have been traumatic for you, what you are describing, but just using the words isn't going to get it there. You have to earn whatever it is you gain in the way of the reader's response to what you're writing. You can't assume that because you write "My partner got his leg blown off" that the reader is going to feel exactly the same as you did when you saw that happen. You have to earn that.

***ODT: And how do you do that?***

***RB:*** You do that by giving them information about the character. Then the reader will care, it will be interesting. So many students—and so many other writers too—make the mistake that your narrator or character has to be likeable. That is a frightening idea. You need to create good characters and the way you do that is not to create characters the reader likes, but characters that the reader will be interested in.

***ODT: So creating sympathy for a character shouldn't be the ultimate goal?***

**RB:** No, sympathy in that sense comes from empathy, not pathos. It comes from empathy. It isn't pathetic, it's empathetic. And that's a different thing. I use an example frequently that is this: My wife and I were leaving work one day and we turned off campus and there was an ambulance and beside it was a wrecked motorcycle that looked like a flower somebody crushed and there's this kid on a gurney. And my wife said, "Pull over, I think that's Mark." Mark was one of her students. Now, she didn't have any particular affection for him, but she's taught him, she's read his work, she's talked to him about his life. So she knows him. And so she's telling me to pull over and I start trying to find a place to pull over and park so she can get out and see how Mark is, at least. But then, as we slowly passed the gurney while I looked for a place to pull over, she said, "Oh, that's not Mark." Okay, so now if we pull over, it's ghoulish. I mean, we don't know that guy. And so now we have to drive on. Decorum calls for us to move on because we don't know him. And that's when it struck me that this is what every fiction writer depends on. Give the reader enough to know Mark and the reader will pull over. And care. They don't have to have affection for him. They don't even have to think Mark's a good guy. They just have to know him. The more they know about him, the more they'll care about what happens to him. So our objective as writers is to give readers characters that they gradually feel like they know. And that's not too hard. Flannery O'Connor did that in one sentence [in the first line of her short story, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find"]: "The grandmother didn't want to go to Florida."

**ODT:** *So are you looking forward to what's coming out of today's military experiences in terms of new literature?*

**RB:** Absolutely. In a way, the military has informed almost everything I do. I mean, any time you have a crowd of human beings who

are all supposed to have the same goal, you're going to get great experiences. The truth is that all American literature—going all the way back to Washington Irving—is essentially about the individual trying to work out his freedom and individuality in the face of a culture that disapproves of him and doesn't want him to do that. This is not so true in Europe or other cultures. So it's the conflict of the individual against the state. And there's no greater subject for a military writer than that. Because that's what every single human being who's gone into the military, volunteered or drafted or whatever, has to face. The first thing they do is shave everybody's head and make you all sit together naked in a room. Nothing will bring you together any quicker than that. So it's trying to work out how to maintain—in the face of the necessity of discipline and the following of orders—a hold on your individuality. Conflict like that is really where all great fiction lives. And there's no better place to get the experience to write like that than in the military.

###

Special Section.

Here we're pleased to present writing created by  
veterans and family members in a workshop  
we conducted in conjunction with our friends  
at The Wilderness Society in the  
Dragoon Mountains of Arizona in March 2014.

## Interlude on a FOB

by M. Philpott

**B**eech plopped down the bucket with a slosh next to the step of his container unit, home for months now. It was good to sit down. Richardson sat in a camp chair a few feet away, smoking a Miami listlessly.

“Heard you go blown up today,” he said.

“Yeah,” Beech replied. Double-stacked AT mine.”

“Shit.” Richardson took a drag.

Beech draped the body armor across his knees and grabbed the scrub brush from the bucket.

“You hear from that chick?” he asked Richardson.

“Yeah, dude. Finally got a chance to get to a computer last night when we rolled back in.” He smiled. “It’s on, dude.”

Beech tipped a little of the bucket water over the body armor to rinse the rust-colored suds away. “Taking her anywhere special when you get back?” He started scrubbing again.

Richardson rolled the cigarette in his fingers until the remaining tobacco fell out. “Nah,” he said, grinning and shoving the butt into his pocket. “I don’t think I have to.”

“Nice.” Beech had to push harder on the brush now. Quick

footsteps in the gravel came around the corner of the hooch. “Beech, you seen Ish? I’m rolling out in thirty and I need a terp.”

“No, Sarn’t.” Beech dumped the remainder of the bucket over the IBA and held it up to the platoon sergeant. The name tape read Ishmael. “He was in the suicide seat in the PL’s truck. Nothin’ left.”

The platoon sergeant began to say something, but only got his mouth half open before he closed it again. His eyes looked into nowhere for a heartbeat. “That sucks,” he said.

The platoon sergeant’s footsteps were just as quick as they had been before, as he went to find another interpreter.

“Shit, dude,” said Richardson, lighting up another one.

**B**eech dropped the body armor off with the staff sergeant who managed the terps so it could be passed on to Ish’s replacement. With his M4 slung behind him, he started the walk to internet café. A warm breeze was kicking up little clouds of dust on the road. It was early fall, which meant that the temperature wasn’t actually too bad. The nights were actually damn pleasant as long as you were in the confines of the base. That is, as long as the wind was blowing toward the oil refinery.

A few thin clouds glowed pink. It was like God had painted a picture up where everyone could see.

Beech looked up at the sky. “You’re real funny, you know that? It’s like you don’t even know what’s happening down here.” The clouds just hung there, not moving but slowly deepening their hue to red. “That’s better.”

A Polaris ATV flew past him, kicking up more dust. Beech saw the backs of the commander’s and first sergeant’s heads. Probably heading up to the evening briefing at battalion to suck off the colonel or something.

He passed the aid station where some tired-looking medics

sat on cots outside the doors. A very deep, selfish part of him was jealous that battalion medics never left the wire. Another, larger part of him knew that if anyone deserved to be a fobbit, it was those guys.

Finally, he reached the MWR tent. He signed in and checked the box next to “Phone.” He laid his weapon underneath a chair and dialed a number and then a pin.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Mom.”

“Honey! How are things?”

“Same old, same old.”

*M. Philpott served for seven years as a captain in the U.S. Army and did so proudly with the 82nd Airborne Division during two deployments to Iraq. He now lives in the greater New York City area and is working to hone his fiction writing skills while balancing a career in financial services.*

Three Poems  
by Farzana Marie

Gethsemane on Congress Street

*For F. Lucero*

Here, inside adobe columns,  
in the company of sculptures chiseled from an oath,  
I still hear freeway noise.

Beyond the mesquite blossom-lavished supper table:  
a suspended figure, brow crumpled like a discarded poem  
beneath a tumbleweed-crown.

A man in jeans rides his bike into the garden  
kisses the feet warped forward,  
offers his lunch hour  
at the nearby tomb of wavering candles  
where the same form rests.  
The first day of the week has not come.

For that wounded soldier who promised art  
in exchange for life,  
who gathered his thoughts  
and those useful scraps  
beneath Congress Street Bridge,  
who shaped sans training  
these faces, these fingers

each day was a resurrection.

## Morning Breath

I love your morning breath,  
sweet lichen-stubbed cliff,  
love waking to you waiting to press  
your cheek against mine.

Among your clan named  
for men whose dragon-muskets breathed  
fire and fumes  
I find calm,  
fueled to clear a trail  
to somewhere the clouded landscape  
opens, somewhere the ocotillo dips  
its turbulent tongue onto the scroll of sky,

somewhere safe and wild to pile  
the re-collected rocks I thought  
dispersed.

## Just Then

The places that know us better  
than humans  
miss us sometimes.

They were never happier than when  
they held us,  
Betelgeuse and bottle-brush,  
warm and skin, moss and stone,  
and the definiteness  
of no other time—  
just then.

*Farzana Marie served in the U.S. Air Force for six years, including two years in Afghanistan. She is the author of the nonfiction book Hearts for Sale! A Buyer's Guide to Winning in Afghanistan (2013) and poetry chapbook Letters to War and Lethe (Finishing Line Press, 2014). Farzana studies Persian Literature at the University of Arizona and serves as president of the nonprofit Civil Vision International ([www.civilvision.org](http://www.civilvision.org)).*

Excerpt from *The Sand Box:*  
A Cautionary Tale

By Ricardo Pereyda

"Carver, you want anything from the PX?" Berg asked as he hustled out of the vehicle.

"Nah, man, I'm good," I shout back at him. "Just hurry your ass up. I don't want to be waiting on you if we get a call."

"Roger that, no sightseeing. I'll be right out," he says as he double times it into the Post Exchange.

"Wonder where the fuck we'll end up today?" Rodriguez blurts out as he prepares a fresh pack of smokes against the palm of his hand. "I got a feeling we're about to pull the winning ticket and find ourselves in a shit storm."

"What makes you say that?" I asked him.

"Come on man, really? Murphy's Law—look it up. Anything that can go wrong, will go wrong."

"Yeah, so what's your point?" I have little to no patience for Rodriguez when he starts in on this type of rant. As if the mental strain of combat weren't enough, for good measure, I get the world according to Rodriguez.

“What’s my point? Have you heard a fucking word I’ve said?” The veins begin to pop out on his forehead; this is looking to be a good one. “My point, young Luke, is that we just started running our own missions a couple weeks ago, had our first fire fight yesterday, we’re facing a mounting insurgency within this bullshit triangle. Mark my words, this ride’s about to get weird—the proverbial shit is about to hit the fan,” he concludes in typical Rodriguez fashion. He’s not really saying shit, but at the same time he’s making sense in his own special way.

“I got it. We’re not in Kansas anymore,” I half mumble, not really paying attention. Does no good to argue when he gets in these moods. The best thing to do is acknowledge him and quickly change the subject.

“Ugly One-alpha, this is Cowboy, over. Ugly one-alpha, this is Cowboy,” came the call as our radio crackled to life.

“Cowboy, Ugly One-Alpha. Go ahead,” came the cool response of our squad leader, Staff Sergeant Felix.

“We have a bird down outside of BIAP, 32 Alpha. Proceed to Tampa and cordon off the area until recovery assets arrive.” Main Supply Route Tampa, otherwise known as Highway One, runs from the north of Iraq straight through to the south. It is the main vein for supply convoys and is absolutely critical to mission success in Iraq.

“Roger, good copy. Show us en route.” While he continues getting the pertinent information from the TOC, the rest of us tighten up for the mission.

“Rally up! We need to beat feet to Tampa,” came the order.

“Lock and load. Make sure y’all are on your toes. Shit’s pretty heavy out there. Expect contact.”

Just then Berg runs up.

“Hurry the fuck up Berg, get your shit ready in the turret, we’re rolling out!” I bark.

“Roger that! I’m good-to-go.”

So goes life in a combat zone. One minute we're sitting around on our vehicles bullshitting and the next minute we're gearing up to head into the shit with adrenaline pumping full speed through our veins.

The high that comes along with that rush beats the shit out of the best cocaine money could buy. It is impossible to explain to the uninitiated—the feeling you get when heading outside the wire preparing to get into a gun fight.

As the Quick Reaction Force our job is to essentially act as a combat SWAT team. It is our duty to rush to the scene and secure the area in order to protect the troops and friendlies in harm's way. Approaching the wire, we can already see plumes of thick black smoke emanating from a number of locations. I get the sinking feeling we are about to head full bore into a bad situation. Radio traffic is going non-stop at this point with various assets communicating the situation on the ground back to the TOC.

When we received the call, we were near Route Irish, also known as Airport Road or just Route One—we need to get to Gate Seven. Good ol' Murphy strikes first. Gate Seven is on the complete opposite side of the base. It leads right out to MSR Tampa, our destination. We roll through base at a relatively high speed while still maintaining awareness of our surroundings, being cautious not to get into an accident before we even reach the gate.

“Carver, keep a sharp eye out for IED's once we get outside the wire. Intel says these fuckers have been busy out there and have detonated multiple today.”

“I'm on it. Whatever the fuck happened to Mission Accomplished? Looks like things are just starting to pop around here.” In the month that we have been running missions our rules of engagement have already changed twice. Given the current state of things, another change is on the horizon. Now we have people shooting helicopters out of the sky and detonating explosives. Awesome.

“Never mind that. It’s time to earn our keep,” Rodriguez shouted to Berg and me.

“Berg, I want you to use the MK-19. Alpha and Charlie are going to be rocking the 50’s. If we get into some close quarter shit, I want you to switch to the SAW.”

“Roger, Sarge.”

Berg had already adjusted and was in positive control of the automatic grenade launcher. Our platforms have eagle mounts installed on the turret allowing the gunners to switch between two crew served weapon systems at the drop of a dime. Our vehicle is sporting a MK-19 automatic 40mm grenade launcher and an M249 Squad Automatic Weapon which fires standard 5.56 rounds.

Each of us carries an M9 pistol. I have an M4 rifle, as does Rodriguez. He also has an M203 attachment, enabling him to pop off single 40mm grenade rounds from his rifle. There’s a shotgun in the backseat for breaching doors and clearing houses and an AT4 rocket launcher when "Fuck you" just isn’t good enough. The other two vehicles in our squad are packing the same firepower, the only difference being they are equipped with M2A1 .50 caliber machine guns instead of a MK-19. In addition to these skull-fucking machines, we have aerial and ground support on call to cover our asses when the shit gets too deep.

As we roll out of the gate—around here we call it the wire—we switch our weapon systems from safety and go red. Here we go again, time to roll the dice. We go racing out of the gate at a good clip, past convoys who have been held up due to the conditions outside. The roads have gone black, meaning only essential personnel and assets are allowed out. Winding through the narrow road leading to MSR Tampa, the gunners take their positions and orient themselves to the terrain.

Out of nowhere Rodriguez starts to sing Poison’s “Every Rose Has Its Thorns.” It is something that has become a ritual, evidently.

Every single one of us has our own quirky routine and superstitions. Surprisingly, big bad Rodriguez prefers to get all sentimental and shit. Who knew? I, on the other hand, work myself up into something just short of rage. Eager to get to our guys in distress. Berg, for his part, is stone silent. He completely zones out, like he's some kind of Buddhist zen master or something—it really is impressive to see such a young person in total control of their emotions when everything around them is so chaotic.

We are in a staggered formation as we turn right onto the highway, heading in the direction of Abu Ghraib and Fallujah. Right into the center of the snake pit. The lead vehicle is up ahead of us in the middle lane of the three lane stretch of road covering 11-3. My truck is lined up to the left covering 11-7, and the trail is on the right covering 7-3. Everyone is in no-bullshit mode.

“Call it when you see it, gents,” called the squad leader.

Rodriguez keyed the handheld and radioed back, “Good copy.” Followed immediately by Charlie's team leader.

The highway is pockmarked from IED's, mortars, and artillery rounds exploding. Bits of shrapnel and chunks of asphalt litter the ground, while the smoke from the fires casts an eerie reddish black haze in the sky. Welcome to Hell. We can spot where there had already been firefights from the brass glistening in the sun. From Gate Seven to the crash site, it is about 13 miles. We've already knocked out four of those, leaving nine more white-knuckle miles. Jesus, it feels like everything is moving in slow motion.

*Born and raised in Tucson, Arizona, Ricardo Pereyda is a fiction writer who served in Iraq as an MP during Operation Iraqi Freedom II. He is a University of Arizona alumnus who volunteers his time working with their VETS program, assisting veterans making the transition from service member to civilian.*

Three Poems  
by Thomas Bryan

Leaf

Green with white veins showing through,  
Grasping upon a branch you grew.  
Dancing in the wind you wave,  
Sun warms you throughout the day.  
The night cools you as time to rest,  
A new season comes upon, as your colors seem to change,  
for the best.  
Your grip in life, slowly unfolds,  
Your color green changes, to a brown then to gold.  
Veins slowly harden then begin to shut down,  
The wind blows softly as you hold above the ground.  
Now time will soon bring you apart,  
A gust of wind gently pulls you from the branch, that is  
your heart.  
Uncertain comfort settles you on the breeze,  
Gliding slowly you expect what is coming with ease.  
Lightly flowing through the air,  
Softly you land and settle in, you then disappear.  
Covered by others that grew next to you,  
Once you were green with white veins showing through.

## Two Loves

With the fallen sun and the rising moon, clouds of dark,  
head my way, with a thunderous boom.

Rain in the distance sky, wind howls as it blows by.

My new found love is by my side, with her here I am filled,  
with a tremendous pride.

With Mother Nature all around to see, all I can ponder is  
my love and me.

Beautiful colors of red, orange, blue and Grey, none of what  
nature is trying to do, can lure me away.

Thoughts of my new love run ramped though out my mind,  
to leave and abandon them would not be kind.

Mother Nature can rumble, shake and strike but I could  
never leave, what gives me might.

Mother Nature tries to lead me away with the beauty  
I know but sees that with my new love, I will go.

Mother Nature you have always been true but my new Love  
comes before you.

This love is my foundation that will last, I will see you again  
mother as time will pass.

Two great loves come before me, the beauty of my new love;  
I fall down upon my knee.

So Mother Nature, I will see you again soon and I will bring  
my love and kiss her, under your full moon

## Mountain Air

The smell of rich green pine  
Helps me clear my troubled mind.  
The lush meadows of blossoming flowers  
Takes my breath away with its magical powers.  
The cool air is seen through my breath  
Mist rises through the trees and valley depth.  
The clear mirror mountain lakes  
As you walk there cold water it gives you the shakes.  
The steep and rugged trail  
When I concur it shows me I cannot fail.  
The Mountain View to the valley floor  
I can only hope for what might be in store.  
The wildlife like the Canadian goose  
I see also the tough alert Moose.  
The breath that fills my lungs with mountain air  
Grabs a hold to whisk my troubles away without a care

*Thomas Bryan is a former Marine who served in Africa, Central America and Southwest Asia. He and his dogs explore the Rocky Mountains, where Thomas draws his inspiration to write poetry.*

*We thank the  
University Writing Program of  
The George Washington University  
for its support of both the  
Veterans Writing Project and the  
publication of O-Dark-Thirty.*

*We thank American Records Theater Company  
and its CEO, KJ Sanchez,  
for their support of the  
Veterans Writing Project and O-Dark-Thirty.  
Please visit [www.amrec.us](http://www.amrec.us) to learn more.*

## Acknowledgements

*O-Dark-Thirty is supported by the Boeing Company  
and the National Endowment for the Arts,  
which have partnered to support arts outreach  
to military communities since 2004.  
Previously, Boeing supported the NEA's  
Operation Homecoming,  
a creative writing program for  
U.S. troops and their families.*

**O-Dark-Thirty receives significant  
underwriting support from**

*Larry and Diana Brown*

*Ron Koshes*

*Allysa Kropp*

*Paul and Dayna Brown Majorowitz*

*Duane Morse*

*Rudy M. and Harry S. Moskowitz*

*K J Sanchez*

**Our supporters include**

*Douglas D'Elia*

*David Finkel*

*The Georgetown University English Department*

*T G Hardy*

*Paul Kozac*

*Catherine Norman*

*Audrey Roberts*

*Jane Zimmerman*

Production support provided by

**military|marketing|solutions**llc  
strategic creativity for the military market.™

- ADVERTISING & MARKETING
- GRAPHIC & WEB DESIGN
- IDENTITY & BRANDING
- PRESENTATION MATERIALS
- PUBLICATION DESIGN
- PUBLIC AFFAIRS
- SPECIAL EVENTS
- SPONSORSHIP
- TRADESHOWS

woman|service-disabled|veteran-owned

militarymarketingsolutions@gmail.com  
COMING SOON: militarymarketingsolutions.us