

O-Dark-Thirty
A Literary Journal
Special Edition

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Table of Contents

Non-fiction

A Young Woman <i>Bradford White</i>	11
Dog Tags to Death <i>Jay Snyder</i>	15
I Was There <i>Lisa Barber</i>	19
Remembering Our Veterans: Honoring the Legacy of All Who Served <i>Jacqueline Miler Byrd</i>	23
Yellow-Green Tennis Ball PTSD <i>Jason Davis</i>	29
Surface Fiction <i>Dane Zeller</i>	33

Poetry

Tranquility Improper <i>Doug Self</i>	39
Fat Footed <i>Doug Self</i>	41
In Flight at Five Stories (Part I) <i>Clarissa Burton</i>	45
When Jenny Comes Marching Home Again <i>Vicki Hudson</i>	46
Holiday at War <i>Kevin Basl</i>	48
Three Untitled Poems <i>John Scott Anthony</i>	49

Plays

Homecoming <i>Jim Mathews</i>	53
Shock and Awe <i>Steve Scuba</i>	65

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Editors' Note

This is a special edition of O-Dark-Thirty. All of the work you'll find here was created during a week-long, residential Veterans Writing and Filmmaking Seminar held in June 2013 on the Mount Vernon Campus of the George Washington University in Washington, DC.

The seminar was part of the Veterans Writing Initiative sponsored by GWU's University Writing Program, in partnership with the VWP. Forty veterans, service members, and military family members, from around the country, were brought to GWU to study the crafts of making short films, and writing fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and plays. Our writing instructors included Joseph Bathanti, poetry; Mark Farrington, fiction; Kelly Kennedy, non-fiction; and KJ Sanchez, playwriting.

You can view the short films that were produced by the seminar's filmmaking cohort, at:

<http://vimeopro.com/iwastherefilms/june-2013-gwu>

Thanks to our filmmaking instructors, led by Benjamin Patton, Director of the Patton Veterans Project, and including Christina Raia, Minos Papas, Sean Mannion, and Alex Arbogast.

This was the inaugural Veterans Writing and Filmmaking Seminar at GWU. We are grateful for the generosity of a number of private donors, which helped make it possible for us to pay all of the participants' expenses, so the experience was free of charge and, therefore, equally available to all veterans, service members, and military family members. For information about how to support the 2014 summer seminar, please contact us via email at: dmf@gwu.edu.

Ron Capps, Editor and Director, Veterans Writing Project

Derek Malone-France, Executive Director,
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Non-fiction.

A Young Woman

By Bradford White

A number of veterans had been invited to George Washington University's Summer Workshop for the purpose of learning how to translate terrors of the conscience into a variety of mediums. I was one of these fortunate vets, perhaps fortuitously chosen by some higher power out of pity for the abuse I had put my body through for so many years. I felt humbled by this opportunity to learn how to reconnect with the people at home waiting for an explanation from me about why I had chosen to turn away from rather than into their arms. I hoped this workshop would restart that rusty dynamo at the back my throat and begin turning the fears into syllables and the nightmares into words. I wanted to churn and grind them into just one sentence that could begin a story for their eyes, and if those eyes were still there through the last line then we could finally embrace—completing the cycle of empathy at last.

But this Workshop wasn't completely about me. The cycle goes both ways, and there were others with far more horrific experiences than my imagination could ever draft. In particular, I remember a young woman sitting alone with an untouched salad in front of her, and I wanted to provide some company. Turning to me when I sat

down, the young woman asked something that I didn't hear, because my attention had affixed itself to her eyes. Sagan wrote we were the stuff of stars, but there was no hint of that light in those dark eyes. Though she smiled briefly, it didn't seem authentic when placed within the context of a face that appeared unnaturally aged; as if hardened by the sight of her innocence mirrored across a wasteland of misery that was in no way her fault.

What would it take to relight those eyes? I thought. "Hey, are you even listening?" she asked sharply.

"Oh, I am," I lied, looking down at my food.

"So, you can see them?"

"I'm sorry. See what?"

"The demons."

"Demons?" I asked.

"Yeah, the demons waiting in the tree branches outside for our little exorcism here at the school to end, so they can come back home to our souls for dinner."

Yes, I knew where they were, but I'd had the years to get used to them. She, on the other hand, was too young for this. Her eyes, those unlit eyes, never left mine as she told me her story. After she left, I unexpectedly began to wonder what it might feel like to have miraculously survived a certain death only to then find myself looking past the executioner's pistol into a pair of eyes judging me no longer fit to live. It was in my attempt at empathy, my attempt at an explanation that I realized it wasn't a question of whether her eyes could be relit, but, rather, if those demons-in-waiting would ever allow a spark to come close enough to try.

Bradford White served as an Intelligence Analyst in the U.S. Air Force. This particular piece was written at and inspired by the Summer Film-making and Writing Workshops at the George Washington University.

DOG TAGS TO DEATH

By Jay Snyder

Everyone I knew who thought they were going to die in Vietnam, did! I didn't! Not that I thought I was immortal or bullet-proof or anything like that; I just never felt I was going to die.

The day we were nearly overrun, and I was wounded, dying never crossed my mind. (Truth is, I was too busy doing other things to even think of dying.) When the metal hit my back, like a hammer, I remember thinking "so that's what a Purple Heart feels like!" Right after that, as I tried to crawl toward the perimeter to add my firepower and help to repulse the attack, I couldn't help but think "Shit, all Second Lieutenants get hit in the back; don't they?"

Ironic somehow; hit in the back while shooting at the VC!

That battle was just over 47 years ago and what I saw, and smelled and felt that day—and the night before—when we reinforced B Company, 2/8 who had walked into that huge ambush, is as clear today, as it was, even 20 years ago, in my dreams.

No, I really never believed I would die.

I had even gone so far, some 3 months before this fight, to

actually stop wearing my dog tags. They were meant to identify you when you die, right? – with that little groove for your teeth – so Graves Registration will know where to ship the body bag, right?

Not going to be needed by me!

In my superstitious mind, wearing dog tags meant there was a possibility I would be killed: so I put one dog tag in a drawer back in base camp, the week before Christmas, and sent the other one to the coed who had been writing letters to me since September when I had arrived in-country. Those letters gradually became my lifeline to home and gave me even more reasons to live, not die!

Time and again, since I became dog tag free, I could have, or even should have died. During those months I learned the loud snapping sound of a bullet going by my ear-and how it felt (mostly relief) as well as the feeling of dirt hitting my face as a round impacted by my shoulder.

I experienced the freight train roar of the artillery rounds I called in to help break away from the L-shaped ambush, which I had foolishly walked in to when I took over point to make us move faster; in response to the wishes of higher command.

There was also the long pregnant moment we all experienced, as we dove for cover, after hearing the tell-tale plunk of a round dropped into a mortar tube and waiting for the explosion, at impact.

I even learned what a .50 caliber tracer round looks like as it goes over your head (something like a glowing beer can) or when it hits the wall of the Huey between the crew chief's head and my own, knocking us from the sky and into a rice paddy in Indian Country.

Yes, I could have, or should have been dead a dozen or more times! So, why did it have to be Shep, or Jack, or Father Joe, or Killer, or Booth or nearly every member of our mortar platoon that awful day in May.

I pray, almost every night, that it wasn't because I knew I wasn't going to die.

It wasn't, was it?

Was it?

Can anyone tell me it wasn't?

Anyone?

Jay Snyder was a rifle platoon leader with Charlie Company, 1/12 Airborne Infantry, 1st Cavalry Division and deployed to Vietnam by troop ship with the Division. After discharge from Valley Forge Military Hospital he became Public Relations Officer for the Golden Knights (the U.S. Army Parachute Team). He writes historical fiction based on his combat experiences. He was a professional tennis umpire, post-Vietnam and, after directing the national officiating program for the U.S. Tennis Association for three years, became the Director of the US Open until he retired.

I Was There

By Lisa Barber

February 2nd, 2012

It happened aboard a European budget airliner, a tiny 737 packed with more than 130 people. I had returned home from Afghanistan 51 days ago. The thrill of leading 130 people outside the wire on convoys as a female human resources officer rang through my soul. The desire to relive that adrenaline drove me insane. After 51 days, I let myself leave the house, and when I left, I went all out.

My airplane took off for the three and a half hour journey to Marrakech, Morocco, a trip I'd anticipated for more than nine months. Melissa, my best friend of over 18 years, joined me. Just as the seatbelt sign flicked off I started to feel sick. Not just sick, but nauseous, terrified, and claustrophobic. I swam in the smell of untamed body odor surrounded by dozens of Muslim headscarves. Overwhelmed by anxiety, I bolted halfway down the cabin to the bathroom. I could feel my heart pounding in my ears. My hands were clammy and gray.

"I'm sick," I said to the young, blonde, Eastern European flight attendant as I fumbled to open the bathroom door.

"I may not come out of here any time soon," I warned her, as I pushed the door closed with my back and slid to the floor. Seconds later I curled myself into a ball in the filthy one-foot by two-foot space. Overwhelmed by the smell of stale urine masked by cheap perfume, I raised the toilet seat, humiliated by the idea that other people may hear me vomit. I stared blindly at the ceiling, and played a game to distract myself.

"Name bands by alphabet," I thought to myself. "If I can just stop focusing on how sick I feel, maybe we'll land and I'll be okay."

"ABBA, Beatles, Collective Soul, Dead Kennedys, Earth Wind and Fire, Frank Sinatra, Grateful Dead..." all said aloud, hoping to quell my fears with my own voice. I failed.

I tried again, this time with girl singers. "Adele, Beyonce, Carly Simon, Diana Krall" trying to channel the power of their voices. I failed again.

The flight attendant gently tapped on the door every so often to make sure I was okay. After maybe two and a half hours, she brought me a tiny can of Pepsi, and in broken English explained "Sometimes it helps. Just try."

Deliberately savoring small sips of soda distracted me from my misery. I gathered the strength to stumble back to my seat, where my friend now expressed concern.

"I was worried about you," Melissa now professed, not even looking up from her magazine. Her words conveyed the same feeling of emptiness I'd felt staring into a stainless steel toilet bowl. She didn't understand.

We returned to Germany four days later, where I was greeted, coldly, by my now estranged ex-husband. He had flown home after a six-month deployment to Kandahar the day before. I was not at the airport to greet him.

"How many Vietnam vets does it take to change a light bulb?" he asked, his first words to me in weeks. He maintained an uncomfortable distance.

He paused, staring at me, wondering whether I was clever enough to answer. Dumbfounded, it was clear to me our marriage was over. I had no response.

"You wouldn't know," he said, "because you weren't there."

Lisa Barber is an eleven-year veteran of the U.S. Air Force where she served as a Human Resources Officer. Selected in 2011 to run convoys for the US Army in Kabul, Afghanistan, Lisa used her blog, Wanderlust Goes to War, to share her experiences with family and friends back home. Following a 2012 diagnosis of post traumatic stress disorder, Lisa was discharged from the military and is now a graduate student at Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business where she is studying international business.

Remembering Our Veterans: Honoring the Legacy of All Who Served

By Jacqueline Miller Byrd

My father never spoke much about the war. You will not find his name in the history books. William D. Miller is listed among the honor roll call of 1,000,000 unsung African-American heroes who served in World War II. The enlistment card he signed 6 June 1943 at Fort Myer, Virginia said he would, “Support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies foreign and domestic.”

Dad had to fight two wars: Jim Crow segregation laws and the enemy. Negroes were still being lynched in the South. They could not even ride on the front of the bus or eat at lunch counters. Employment, education and voting rights opportunities were unequal.

“Your father shed blood for this country when he served in a segregated army,” mother said. “He walked through the Colored Only signs at home and abroad.”

Rare history reflects that these unsung heroes significantly contributed to the war efforts in the midst of many who thought them “inferior.” These soldiers were uprooted to labor as infantry, grave-

diggers, truckers, cooks and medics. Through their love of America, loyalty and determination, some became officers and pilots. They crossed land and sea, laid wires and advanced the orders. Some took blasts to save shipmates, gave blood for comrades and unpacked weapons near bombs cascading from the sky.

The African American soldiers stood ready to serve although they were unwelcome in segregated officers clubs and divided posts. The unsung, often overqualified troops were assigned to quartermaster, trucking, ordinance, laundry and kitchen detail. They carried weapons, but were thought unfit for combat, even as they proved themselves worthy in campaigns.

Soldiers smelled death and died for this nation on foreign soil. Many were engineers and mathematicians, yet some were relegated to shovel snow, build construction sites, and to drain swamps and shorelines for docks and piers. Some of the college educated and specialty-trained soldiers were still thought of as only suitable for “service labor.” The Negro nurses were not accepted to assist some American soldiers, but rather assigned to care for prisoners of war. Others were assigned as bakers, cashiers, chauffeurs, or mess hall servers.

“When President Harry S. Truman signed Executive Order 9981 Desegregation of the Armed Forces of the United States, 26 July 1948,” my mother said, “it was long overdue.”

In the 1960’s when my father taught me the Pledge of Allegiance, he emphasized the words, “. . . and justice for all.” Each day, I am reminded of his service and sacrifice.

My mother keeps his Purple Heart medal on the étagère in the living room. When she showed me the navy blue box with gold embossed letters and handed me dad’s laminated Honorable Discharge card, there were tears in her eyes. She held his old, gold rugged cross with diamonds.

“I want you to make a copy,” she said. “Please have it enlarged

so that we can read all the details.” It was reproduced by 400 per cent on parchment paper.

The listing under the heading of Medals, Awards and Ribbons includes: The Purple Heart Medal, The European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Ribbon with Two Bronze Stars, Good Conduct Medal, World War II Victory Ribbon and American Theatre Ribbon.

“I don’t think he ever received them,” mom said. “I want you to request your father’s ribbons.” Her request and my research led me to the National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland. There I consulted with Eric, an outgoing, blue-eyed archivist and military history specialist.

“Most people don’t have the discharge papers,” he told me. “You can write to request the personnel files and medical records. We might have the Unit history.”

When I opened the box with my white-gloved hands, the 1940’s World War II files met me in the 21st century. I retrieved a folder marked Declassified S E C R E T.

“Daily Journal: 1 April 1945—Unit located at Kaiserlautern, Germany. Function of unit was to police, guard and place in shape for issuing from it captured German class 1 supplies.”

My task was begun.

* * *

Many people ask, “Why do you care so much about veterans?” They tell me, “You live a good life. Your father fought for freedom to live the American Dream. He attended his children’s graduations from Mt. Holyoke College, Yale University, the University of Maryland Law School, The University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, American University and The George Washington University.”

“Aren’t we living in post-racial America?” my sons ask. “Haven’t we come a long way?”

“The 44th President of the United States, Barack Obama,” my brother in-law says,” looks like your dad.”

Why bring up negative history?”

I contemplate my response. “The sacrifice and blood of one million unsung heroes is built into the quote etched in stone on the new \$182 million World War II Memorial on the National Mall.”

Our debt to the heroic men and valiant women in the service of our country can never be repaid. They have earned our undying gratitude. America will never forget their sacrifice

President Harry S. Truman

* * *

During the Second World War, unsung heroes, too, faced the enemy day and night. The troops hid in caves, and equipped trucks, but they could not go into an ice cream parlor. They laid smoke hazes but could not walk into a store. They fought others who thought themselves superior even as some fellow American soldiers thought the same about the Negro soldier.

These men and women endured abusive language, demotions, transfers and reassignments for speaking out against injustices. Some soldiers were deemed ready to ship to war, but were deemed not ready to fight. They fought in spite of obstacles. Many served with distinction and remain unrecognized.

“If we spoke up,” one veteran says, “we risked getting time, losing our pass or a stripe.”

Black troops had to learn how to fight the enemy, injustice and false accusations. Some Unit records, letters home and accounts in the Negro newspapers indicate that the unsung served proudly

with honor, valor and courage in the face of war and the challenges seen and unseen.

Jacqueline Miller Byrd is the proud daughter of a World War II U.S. Army veteran and Purple Heart medal recipient. She is a native Washingtonian and graduate of the D.C. Public Schools and The George Washington University. A forthcoming work, "Don't Forget the Army Nurses," was developed at a Veterans Writing Project playwriting workshop.

Yellow-Green Tennis Ball PTSD

By Jason Davis

A different kind of pain. That's my coping mechanism. Give me a yellow-green tennis ball, the kind I had when I was a kid. It should be scraggly and fuzzy and worn, with a cracked, rubbery core. And somewhere there, between the mock stitches, it should have once said Wilson or Penn or Dunlop, but probably Wilson, except that it maybe wasn't even yellow or green anymore because the dirty old street gutter water and the chalky white sun-scorched garage door morphed its color and texture one screaming fastball at a time. Over and over and over until my 12-year old arms grew weary, and faster and faster and harder I charged to unload a short-armed quick toss across the diamond, across my body, to hear the pop against the impenetrable wooden door.

PAHK!

PAHK!

PAHK!

PAHK!

PAHK!

And then PAHK, and PAHK and PAHK, PAHKPAHK PAHK-PAHKPAHK until I was sweating and swearing and crying beneath the Eucalyptus trees, my arm throbbing, and my calves stinging from the charge. I would pop the goddamned phlegm-colored ball or pass out trying. Then thirteen years later, in the courtyard of a Baghdad prison and surrounded by port-a-john's and concertina wire, there was a giant metal sign with words in English and Arabic. Huge metal sign, as big as a strike zone, and beneath my feet—all around me in the Murafa Yard—rocks. Several tons of rocks. Rocks that fit perfectly between the thumb and the first crease between my pointer and middle finger. Some rocks jagged as a lava stone, and others smooth and rounded, or oblong and flat, but none never too far from fitting between my fingers like seams of a baseball. It was a yard of rocks so deep, so plentiful, my combat boots sank with each noisy step. And each overnight, 12-hour shift beside the airstrip at Baghdad International Airport, that giant, metal sign with the warnings in English and Arabic clanked and panged and sparked from the blazing fastballs I unleashed upon it. Hundreds of fastballs each night, that sign would PING and TANG until the goddamned sign fell from the fence or I would pass out trying.

Right now, I don't have a yellow-green or phlegm-colored tennis ball. I don't have a wooden garage door, or a giant metal sign to hang from my fence. There are a few rocks, but by this point, or after I've had another drink, there won't be enough. I don't have the ammo I need to throw my arm out, to charge and to quick step and to unload from a high, three-quarter arm slot until my legs collapse or constrict, or until I'm simply out of breath.

And so the anger.

The kind of anger or depression that by tomorrow morning, it's still there. As are the charred, skin-pulled eye sockets of the corpses along the side of the Holy Road, or the rise and fall of the man's chest

as he lay motionless in the back of my humvee, me racing over center medians and through traffic to get him to the "Ameriki" hospital, or that time when Dex and Boom stumbled out of their bombed-out room with sticky blood trickling down their foreheads and necks. You could practically see the stars circling over them like in a Tom and Jerry cartoon, except that brothers aren't cartoons. It's an emotional association, I guess, the kind of feeling that doesn't stop feeling, and each new feeling is not just a memory of the old, but an addition, another carcass tossed atop the burnpit. And so I drink and think about the feel of the worn rubbery seams between my fingers, the chalky-dirt layer on the joints of my inner middle finger, the tingling and then the numbness in my arm, and then pain the next day. That pain, that muscle soreness worn again the next night but is overcome by fever and anger and satisfaction that with each throw, a tiny little globe-world of anger hurtles toward destruction—its own, or mine.

Jason Davis served for five years in the US Army's 101st Airborne, a stint that included two combat deployments to Iraq. After his military obligation, Jason used the Post-9/11 GI Bill and received a B.A. in Literary Journalism at the University of California at Irvine. He lives in Bethesda, Maryland with his wife and two kids.

Surface Fiction

By Dane Zeller

The elderly couple parked their silver Buick in front of our building. Through my office window I saw the gentleman exit the car and walk around to the passenger side. The woman, about his age, sat motionless until the door opened. She took his hand in hers, got out of the car, and walked with him hand-in-hand to the front door.

She did not need physical assistance, in my opinion, nor did he.

Their Buick was three or four years old, and their clothes were Macy's-, if not WalMart-bought. Their shoes were designed for walking, not climbing or jogging. The couple could have been anyone's grandparents.

I heard Sherry welcome the couple. They had come to pick out fiftieth wedding anniversary stationery, not business cards or letterhead. At my desk, I heard their chatter about the weather and how they would go about selecting invitations.

Curiosity came over me. I went into the front office to busy myself with some minutiae; I smiled and nodded at our customers. The man said good morning and called me 'sir'.

The older man called a younger man 'sir.' I missed that clue.

"Which color paper do you like, Paul?"

"Oh honey, you're the best at picking out color. You choose."

"I like the cream colored ones."

"That's the best one, I know that," Paul said.

"Look at these styles of type. Do you like this one?" she said.

"Oh yes, that's perfect."

"It's plain, and you can read it. Some of these are so flowery that you can't even read them."

"That's the right one, for sure."

The gentleman stood up and walked up to me with his hand extended. "Paul Johnson, and this is Emma, my wife of forty-nine years and ten months."

I shook his hand and asked, "and how many days?"

"Seventeen," he said, without pause for calculation.

While Emma reviewed the stationery, we talked about Buicks and weather and traffic. He mentioned the new shopping center across the street; I talked about progress in our city; he told about their friends who had lived there for fifty-eight years until the bulldozers came. I mentioned compensation; he wondered the value of a home where three children had been born and raised. We had a pleasant conversation, nothing far from chit-chat.

That afternoon a long-time customer called for a quote on business forms. I took down the details of the job.

"Oh, by the way, my great aunt and uncle will be coming in for their fiftieth wedding anniversary stationery."

"Paul and Emma?" I asked.

"Yes. What? They already came in?"

"This morning. What a pleasant couple."

"They're a hoot, aren't they? I guess you see why they've stayed together for fifty years."

He told me more about the couple. They lived in Kansas City, Kansas. They had two children. They thought once about moving to Arizona, but they chose in favor of snowstorms, tornadoes and grandchildren. My customer was obviously proud of his great aunt and uncle.

And then he said, "Paul landed on Omaha Beach."

I couldn't stop my pause.

Not that I knew how veterans of Normandy looked and acted, but I would think a veteran of D-Day would have a harder surface than the one I saw that morning. Surely he would be limping to some small extent, having taken shrapnel, or at least having twisted his leg on the long jump from the landing ship. Easily, there would be a scar on the hand he used to shake mine, or one on his face that deepened when he smiled. Maybe a weakness in his voice, having shouted to his falling comrades. I would think him to be a man concerned with important things, not the color of stationery.

I should have been prepared for the possibility. Paul and Emma came into our business to prepare for their fiftieth wedding anniversary almost to the day, the anniversary of D-Day. The invasion of Normandy was routinely remembered about this time of year. Indeed, people asked me about the Normandy invasion, as if my experience in Viet Nam gave me inside information. It did not. I could only tell them differences. World War II veterans joined battle to free a continent, we propped up dominoes. They saw the men and their guns above the beach. We could only hear the incoming. We attacked from miles away; they were face to face at a distance measured in yards.

And so, with this bit of time I spent with Paul and Emma, and a mention of Omaha Beach, I venture a deeper description of this couple.

Emma was Paul's childhood sweetheart whom he married after returning from the war. No doubt, they bought a house on the GI Bill, and raised a family. He probably worked forty years for a large

employer in his community, maybe General Motors. His pension would be sufficient. I don't know all this for sure, but I'll bet if you drove by their small house, you'd see an RV parked in the back. Just based on my knowledge of their generation, they traveled in the RV, probably to Texas in the winter.

My speculation ends here.

There is one thing I know for certain. I know it as surely as there are words on this paper. It is this: yesterday, or today, or maybe both, in his waking moments or in his dreams at night, far removed by time and distance, Paul Johnson has gone down to the beach.

This, I know.

Dane Zeller is a Vietnam combat veteran and a writer. He writes detective novels, short stories, short plays, and essays, all with a touch of humor. At the Summer Film-making and Writing Workshops at the George Washington University, Zeller faced his war experiences head on for the first time. He has just finished his second story about war. Zeller lives with his wife at their home in Westwood, Kansas.

Poetry.

Tranquility Improper

By Doug Self

desert tears never laid loam
sorrow never cried to begin
unwanted soul
haunted
transient beside my mother
internal millennia away
known populace at home
foreign
strange interpretation of family
enemy
please don't stand so near
unintentional twitch of fear
I the mystery
who returned home
You the uninformed
confused by my state
the nectar drunk frees me
bondage-of-self invited
pain stowed away

unknowingly swelling
death knows me well
loves me not
regardless
I long for her chill
our lustful display
serenades me into disgust
bottomless descent
acceptance here instant
none turned back
realm unseen
hope devoid to my delight
sonically removed from our world
bartered
the barterer
my faith for faux peace
the fool is no fool
leave me lie
in this chaise abyss
oblivious to you
I remain at ease
blessed loved ones
exist devoted to me
unaware a different man
stands next to them
beclouded within

Fat Footed

By Doug Self

Help! We are gonna die.

my sister, eight biological years
ahead of me, screamed to the neighbors out the
back driver side window. I, captain of the ship,
a box shaped silver late eighties Lincoln-Mercury that
welcomed all comers.

smiling while steering I trounced the gas and
noticed two hand
full of finger indentations forming on the dashboard.

hands that were attached to arms attached to my
Mother who was

bitchin at me to slow down. slow down I did, I mean,
a stop sign was only twenty feet away anyway. the
course of passage was only two city blocks and I
heard every word a child thinks they will never
hear

spew from their Mother's mouth. accompanied, of course,
by the adolescent laughs of my elder sister. almost
home,

right turn in to our asphalted drive...at thirty five miles an hour.

I jumped on the brake pedal carefully missing the garage door.

three heads shoved forward then back. two hands struck my head

accompanied by the vulgar sounds of the matriarch. and, of course,

laughter from the back row. quietly pissed off my Mom looked at me, my sister

looked at me then our Mom, and I stared at my Mom and innocently asked

So how did I do?

Douglas Self is a USMC active duty veteran, Operation Iraqi Freedom veteran, current Army reservist, and recovering alcoholic who heard the call to poetry sometime during the spring of 2012. Since then he has discovered the grace and humility of the craft and works each day to become more fluent in hopes of reaching others.

In Flight at Five Stories (PART I)

By Clarissa Burton

Scolding my five-year old daughter
for jumping out a walnut tree
awakened dormant memories
and emotions of exhilaration, anticipation,
fear

The things tomboys do
to prove they can live without boundaries
My motherly persona yearned to
return to that day
to discourage my 10-year-old self
from surrendering to peer-pressure

‘We’ve done something you can’t do’
Their immature voices teased from above
It was a hot and muggy,
summer Kansas City afternoon
She stood next a sea
of soiled mattresses
She ignored the distant mocking,
In a bow-legged, adolescent stride
wearing a cape fashioned from a pink, cotton sheet
She climbed the abandoned,
6th and Paseo Boulevard apartment building’s
cracked concrete stairs

I anxiously walked behind her
pleading in a whisper
Please rethink what you are about to do.
Determined to accomplish
her greatest feat to
outdo her nemeses-a band of 10 year old boys,
I leaned slightly over
her right shoulder and nagged
This isn't a great idea.
No acknowledgement

Her uncanny focus
First floor . . . second floor
third floor . . . fourth floor
If you do this, Mama will kill you!
I cautioned
For a moment she paused
as if she heard my distant warning
To my dismay, and
with eyes fixated on her destination
She resumed her mission

Reaching the fifth floor
the instigators anxiously waited
Laughing and teasing her
spewing chauvinistic taunts
"You're a girl. You're weak."
Their heckling stung
her psyche worse than bees

Ignoring the bullies
she rechecked the tightness

of the knot in her cape
“It’s time to fly,” she said.

Clarissa Burton served in the U.S. Navy from 1984 to 1990 as an Aviation Storekeeper (AK) and an Electrician’s Mate (EM). AKA Queen Of The Pen, Clarissa writes poetry, essays, short stories, and novels. She has published several books including Travel—A Poetry Compilation, Elijah’s Great Race, and The Black Family Tree: A Workbook and Facilitator’s Manual. Clarissa has a B.A. in Psychology from Ottawa University and an M.A. in Business from Webster University.

When Jenny Comes Marching Home Again

By Vicki Hudson

When Jenny comes marching home again
Hurrah, hurrah
We'll pay her no mind, she's not a vet
Hurrah, hurrah
Men will taunt, boys will jeer
Ladies they will turn in fear
She'll feel jilted
When Jenny comes marching home

Jenny stood the watch, she drove the route
Hurrah, hurrah
She carries scars just like Johnny
Hurrah, hurrah
Why is she the forgotten one?
Worse she's denied, looked down upon
Greater risk of suicide
When Jenny comes marching home

When Jenny comes marching home again
Hurrah, hurrah
Increased risk of homelessness
Hurrah, hurrah
A mother forlorn
No shelter, food, no job insight
She'll feel abandoned, lost, alone
When Jenny comes marching home

Jenny served with honor, sacrificed
Hurrah, hurrah
Abused, harassed, assaulted, raped
Hurrah, hurrah
Threatened to kill if she made a sound
Her battle buddy hunted her down
Disrespected and disregard
When Jenny comes marching home.

When Jenny comes marching home again
Hurrah, hurrah
Will she remain alone then?
Hurrah, hurrah
Will you be there, will you give a care?
Will you acknowledge she was there?
A laurel wreath for her warrior's heart
When Jenny comes marching home.

Vicki Hudson curates an author interview series on vicki-hudson.com A Mustang, she retired in 2012 after 33 years of active and reserve service in the Army. She coaches rugby and toddler wrangles in Hayward, California.

Holiday at War

By Kevin Basl

It's just another day because we complain about the rifle slings rubbing our shoulders raw and pink, barrels slapping against our legs, can't get laid. We wear the same sun-bleached camo, same boots with mildew leather scent. Haze from the burn pit still blankets the camp, makes us wheeze, spit phlegm, joke we've got the plague. One sad mortar sails in from across the Tigris—third morning in a row—gets the incoming alarm crying its fire station drone. Artillery rattles the sink as we brush our teeth (but don't worry: we're careful so we won't cut ourselves shaving). It's just another day when the chaplain says God is good and keeping His eye on Iraq, pauses his sermon for the Blackhawk tearing at the roof of our chapel shed (probably transporting some wounded or dead). And though there may be wreaths tied to the grills of Humvees, two hundred pounds of white cake in the dining tent, an online lover's package sent first class (apple juice bottles refilled with Jack), it's just another day. We'll call home and tell you we care.

Kevin Basl served two tours in Iraq with the Army as a mobile radar operator. He earned an MFA in fiction from Temple University, where he currently teaches in the first year writing program.

Three Untitled Poems

By John Scott Anthony

Walk headlong into the stiff winds
Lose a step to the harsh weather
Firmly plant yourself and edge forward
Once again ground is lost under foot

Turn tear riddled eyes away
Brunt the force with your back
Humble, thoughts of failure and learn
You must fall to appreciate success.

* * *

Enrich the future, care for tomorrow today.
Teach openly and directly-Now surpasses then.
Let life grow without fear of getting lost.
Were and will be meet and
Will be becomes used to BE and the cycle rolls on.

My cycle of life only has one gear,
And the gearshift on the cycle of life
Must be stuck in reverse for
As I ride the cycle of life,
It seems like someone keeps
Yanking my chain.

* * *

Heavy is the burden of feeling others woes.
Where does darkness escape?
Falling from the light it so aptly surrounds.
Claustrophobic, the light suffocates, before truly existing.
Running from before-to fast, to stop-to keep
From being swallowed by the after.

John Scott Anthony served 6 years in the USAF and 2 tours in Desert Shield/Storm. He currently works for the US Air Force Academy as a theatre technician and runs the Blue Bards theatre club for cadets.

Plays.

HOMECOMING

By C.Q. Tillery

SYNOPSIS

Angela Johnson, a poor black girl, comes of age in the deep South during the racial turbulence of the 1960's.

Angela's impoverished family was bound to the land for almost two centuries, first as slaves, then sharecroppers and finally dirt-poor farmers. Barely educated and unable to rise above simple subsistence, they lost hope of ever being free from a cycle of poverty. When Angela wins a full-ride college scholarship, her dreams and those of her grandmother are suddenly within reach. However, an unexpected turn of events, returns Angela to Poverty Point, Georgia and everything she hates about her racially divided community. Angela's journey to self-acceptance, self-respect and the self-determination takes many twists. During the process, her life is transformed as well as the lives of those around her as she escapes the last vestiges of slavery and servitude to find a place of acceptance and respect in her family and the still segregated community she calls home.

THEME

Self acceptance is a transforming process of finding our own truth, defining ourselves according to it and discovering our divine purpose.

CHARACTERS

ANGELA JACKSON

A young black girl caught between two seemingly impossible worlds. To choose a college education and the success of the white world would separate her from her grandmother, family and friends who could only enter that world through back doors of submission and service. To remain in Poverty Point doomed her to the life from which she was desperately running and her grandmother working overtime to help her escape.

EMMA BOONE JACKSON

Angela's maternal grandmother who raised her after her mother and father disappeared from Angela's life and into the sometimes murky world of civil rights activism. Emma Boone Jackson, a small wiry woman, is the granddaughter of a sharecropper and the great-granddaughter of a slave. A woman of few words and fewer displays of outward affection, Emma subscribed to a "no-frills" approach to life. Slightly stooped, her best years were spent with her back bent against a relentless summer sun, harvesting other people's dreams. In later years, she cleaned houses, took in laundry, changed soiled diapers, wiped old wrinkled butts when the owners could no longer wipe for themselves, sold vegetables and cooked, just to get by. Her granddaughter would have better.

FRANK HENRY

A moderately successful farmer and mostly self-taught man who sacrificed dreams of college to support his family after his Father's

death. Eventually he did well enough to send his two sisters to college, one of whom now seldom returns home and the other who has nothing to do with the family. Frank is separated from his family by the division between the Black North and Black South. This schism created by Black flight north often resulted in Northern family members refusing to return south and sometimes viewing their Southern family members as inferior and backward with little backbone. Mr. Henry found solace and comfort in his wife of more 40 years. However, he was widowed three years ago and now keeps company with Emma Jackson Boone, who refuses to give her heart fully to Mr. Frank or any man.

HEMCOMING, THE PLAY

SET

Grey early morning light filters through a single window above the kitchen sink. The window is framed by bright red, crisply starched gingham curtains. The rest of the set is designed in muted grey tones. A grey worn Formica table is at center stage with three indifferently matched chairs around it. A worn straw broom is propped against an off-white beaded panel wall. (Typical of most Southern shotgun homes) To the right of the broom is a framed photo of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Next to the photo is a 12-inch gold-tone cross with the crucified Christ upon it, opposite the cross is a calendar, three years out of date and offering "Season's Greetings." A dingy white icebox, its door closed tight with assistance from a bungee cord, sits to the left of the kitchen window. A large gas stove dominates the rest of the room. Near the screen door, a fly swatter hangs from a nail, a funeral home church fan is jammed in the space between the door frame and wall, just above it a small brown payment envelope for the 25 cent a week burial policy Emma struggles to keep current.

TIME & PLACE:

August of 1965, early Saturday morning in a rural southern town where seven or more generations of Jackson's have lived and died in poverty. Emma Jackson, a short wiry woman, with the strong forearms of a laborer, is rolling out biscuits on a sideboard. Plain in appearance and dress, she wears a cornflower blue duster or housecoat, with a kite's tail of safety pins dangling from the collar and has a pair of worn bedroom slides on her feet. Emma is preparing breakfast while humming to a Mahalia Jackson recording heard softly playing in the background when her 18-year-old granddaughter, Angela strides resolutely into the kitchen.

ANGELA

(With false bravado)

I'm not going.

(Emma Boone turns from the kitchen sink where she is washing dishes)

EMMA

Say what?

(She peers over horn rimmed glasses perched precariously on her nose and looks at Angela uncertain as to whether she heard correctly.)

ANGELA

I said I am not going to college *(this time with slightly more conviction)*

EMMA

What do you mean you're not going? Angela Jackson that's just crazy talk and I want you to ...

ANGELA

No, Mama, just hear me out. The timing's not right. I...

EMMA

(Emma's tone drops to one, which is softer and more conciliatory as she recognizes Angela, may be experiencing last minute jitters)
Baby, you just skeered. An dat's a 'right. If you skeered say you skeered.

ANGELA

(Visibly frustrated, throws her hands in the air)
Mama, I'm not scared, if you would just listen to...

EMMA

(Brushing the protest away)
To be 'spected, first time leaving home an...

ANGELA

MaMaaaa! (Angela Shouts)

EMMA

Girl, who you think you be shoutin' at. You must think you grown. *(Her tone softens)* Like I said, you just skeered an dat's aright too, but ya goin'. *(Emma pauses to weigh the effect of her softer tone on Angela. Seeing no change in her defiant demeanor, Emma changes tactics again).* I don't care what you say Angela Jackson; *(Emma returns to her work at the kitchen sink)* done worked too hard and sacrificed too much fo' you to stay here and do nothing.

ANGELA

I can work . . . I've helped you at Ms. Mary's sometimes. Helped served at parties.

EMMA

Dat was temporary, put a little money in yo' pocket an' give you a feel for work an all . . . not a career choice.

Just as sure my name Emma Boone Jackson, you goin'. (*Tone escalates*)

(*She turns to face Angela again, one hand on her hip and head bobbing in word for word emphasis*) And if you don't go to college you gonna have to go somewhere, cos this house ain't big enough for two grown behind women. So one of us gotta go and I can GAU-ran-TEE you Missy that it won't be me. (*Emma returns her focus to the sink*)

ANGELA

(*Softer almost reverent tone*) Mama, I didn't mean no harm or disrespect. And I appreciate everything you've done.

EMMA

(*Waves her words away and keeps working*)

ANGELA

But I can't leave you now. You have had two sick spells at work and Ms. Mary had to drive you home. (No response from Emma) Can't believe she left you at the railroad tracks cause she was afraid to cross over. (*Angela shakes her head in disgust*) Almost 30 years in her service and all the far she can take you when you sick is...

EMMA

Stay outta dat Angie, ain't no business yur'n. Miss Mary got her ways and we got us a good understanding. So dats dat.

ANGELA

(Continuing as if uninterrupted)

I can get a job in town to and help. *(Emma's back stiffens as if she's taken a blow)* Then you can take it easy for a while until you get your strength back.

EMMA

Got all the strength I need been getting 'er done all dese heh years wit not a lick of help from no one. Two faintin' spells cos I forgot to eat an take my 'scription don't make me no invalid.

ANGELA

Momma, just let me help for a few months. Then I can go Mama . . . I promise I'll go then. *(She speaks pleadingly to Emma's back and continues)* I can walk to Miss Pearlie Mae's and use her phone to call the college today. I'm sure they will hold my space if I tell them you sick. *(Angela pleads)*

EMMA

I bet you don't! *(Emma tosses over her shoulder while her hands remain busy at the sink)* Not Ms. Pearlie Mae's, not the phone call and not the job in town. Ya hear?

(Angela slumps down into a chair at the kitchen table with rusted legs that wobble beneath the weight of her disappointment.)

(Emma turns her back away from the sink and rests her weight against it, with feet crossed at the ankles, she wipes her hands with a kitchen towel and begins speaking slowly, softly—almost inaudibly)

EMMA

Angie, ever since any of us can r'ember our people been tied to dis heh land. I was born and raised right heh in Poverty Point. Like my mama and daddy afore me and their mama and daddy fo' dem, I worked the land. Mama strop 'd me to her breast when I wasn't able to work and she worked right on. Singing work songs and pickin'. When I was able, she put me down and I started picking. Picked mos my life. Spent de best years of my life harvesting other folk's dreams.

ANGELA

Mama...

(Emma raises a stern finger to silence Angela)

EMMA

An' when it wasn't pickin' time, It was planting time. We planted everything we ate, den sum. Taters, collards, cushaw, okra. My mama could fry up some mighty fine okra and tomaters, an' we planted goobers too. *(Emma's face softens at the memory of her mother's cooking)* Y'all young folks call 'em peanuts. We work all week from sun up to sun down and by the light of the moon when it was harvest time. On Sa'day and some Sundays after church, with de bedroom door closed so neighbors wouldn't know I was working on the Sabbath, I took in washing and ironing.

When I was too old to work da fields, I went to town and I got a job cleaning houses; I took in laundry when I could. *(Emma's face clouds)* I've changed dirty diaper, wiped wrinkled behind butts and got cursed for it cause I could and dey couldn't and dey hated me for dat. Hated needin' me, but not havin' power ovah me. Been slapped like a chile and had my behind and breasts grabbed

like a five dollar hoe. (*Angela's eyes widen*) Been raped and beaten and come home and fill da tin tub with scalding water, bathed, cooked dinner and went back da next day like nothing happen. (*Angela covers her mouth in horror and gasps*) I'd die first fo I send you. You will have bettah.

(*Tears roll down Angela's face. Emma motions for her to come to her*)

ANGELA

Mama, (*Angela begins but cannot finish as her bottom lip quivers and eyes brim with tears. Emma takes Angela in her arms. They cling to each other momentarily before Emma, holds Angela at arm's length, peering at her momentarily before speaking*)

EMMA

Stop that crying, girl. (*firmly but lovingly*) C-O-L-L-E-G-E, (*Emma said not missing a single syllable of this self-important word.*) S-C-H-O-L-A-R-S-H-I-P. Now what you got to cry about?

ANGELA

Mama, I don't want to leave you here by yourself. Who'll . . .

EMMA

Listen to me, Angela. Nothing here but pregnant hope and empty expectation. Dis is sumpin we only ever dreamed 'bout. Best be believin' we ain't be da only ones dreamin'. So, you better take this opportunity fo someone takes it fo you.

(*Angela continues softly weeping*)

EMMA

'Sides, you know Mr. Henry crazy bout us an ain't nothing he won't

do. He be like family. Go on, girl. Better things for you out there than what's waiting for you here. Stay here—what you got?

(Angela looks past her feet to the worn linoleum through which roughhewn floor boards are visible. Her argument lying in a crumbled heap before her)

(Sensing her weakening resolve, Emma turns Angela toward the window. Standing behind Angela, with her hands on her shoulders, she peers across the yard at an old tractor with three missing wheels, an old glider and a yard sign, rusty remains of better days. Nearby two laying hens cackled indignant at the futility of trying to scratch a meal from the red Georgia clay.)

EMMA

What's here, Angela—a chance to work in someone else's field or kitchen for the rest of your life. Have two or three babies with some no account man or maybe even with a good man whose good just ain't good enough. No, ma' am ...no *(she whispers)*, no *(and drops Angela's hands as she turns back toward her cooking)*

(Old screen door flies open. Enter Mr. Henry. He looks at Angela, still in her pajamas and shakes a playful finger in her direction.)

MR. HENRY

(Sensing tension)

Something wrong?

ANGELA

Mr. Henry, what you think about....

EMMA

*(Sharply, a warning tone in her voice,
while eyeing Henry and shaking her head.)*

Do not drag Mr. Henry into this.

MR. HENRY

(Slipping easily into the southern vernacular)

Girl, you still got curlers in yo hair and slippers on yo feet. How you going to college lookin' like who dun it and what fo, *(He laughs softly)*.

ANGELA

(looking at her Grandmother)

I'm ready Mr. Henry, may not be dressed...but I'm ready.

###

C.Q. Tillery, a retired Air Force officer, is a legislative analyst with the Department of Veteran Affairs. She was previously assigned to VA's Homeless Veterans Initiative Office and has also served as Director of Personal and Family Readiness at United States Central Command. In addition, Ms. Tillery authors cookbooks about Historic Black Colleges and Universities. Southern Homecoming Traditions, the fifth in a series, was an NAACP Image Award Finalist.

Shock and Awe

By Steve Scuba

ACT 1, SCENE 2

(Family Home in Clifton, NJ. Lights come up to silence for a beat or two. Suaad is sitting by herself on the couch. Master Sergeant Kelly is seated in an easy chair to her left. Rawan brings Suaad a glass of water and sits next to her. They are trying to make sense of what MSG Kelly is telling them. Both women are in an emotionally dazed state but become less so as the scene progresses.)

RAWAN

(Handing the glass of water to Suaad) My ump-tee. [Your water mom.]

SUAAD

Shuk-run annie. [Thank you my dear.]

RAWAN

Af-wan annie. [You're welcome my dear.]

(SUAAD takes a sip and places the glass on the coffee table. Pause.)

SUAAD

How long has it been again?

MSG KELLY

Thirty-six hours, ma'am.

SUAAD

(Talking more to herself)

A day and a half.

MSG KELLY

Yes ma'am.

SUAAD

Could she just be lost? I mean . . . is there any chance of it? The neighborhoods aren't like here. The houses all look the same . . . the streets go in every direction. It would be very easy to lose your bearing and get off track.

MSG KELLY

As I said, their convoy was ambushed as they headed toward their target. It was a densely populated street. Not a lot of room to maneuver.

RAWAN

What "target" were they headed to?

MSG KELLY

An elementary school.

RAWAN

They were targeting an elementary school?!

MSG KELLY

No, I'm sorry. I'm confusing you. Their destination was an elementary school. It's just . . . that's how the mission statement would describe it.

RAWAN

As a target?

MSG KELLY

Yes.

RAWAN

Why not just call it "an elementary school"?!

MSG KELLY

No, you're right. It's just the way the military does it. They were going to hand out school supplies to kids. That was their mission

(MSG KELLY looks at RAWAN and changes the word)

...their "task." It was an all-girls school.

SUAAD and RAWAN
(Speaking at the same time)

Al Ma-ressa.

MSG KELLY

What's that?

RAWAN

Al Ma-ressa—it's the school Sanaa is working with.

SUAAD

(Neutral) She's real proud of what she's been doing with those kids.

RAWAN

It's been one of the high points of her time over there.

MSG KELLY

Al Ma-ressa.

RAWAN

It means "The Knowledge." Sanaa said it was called Taj Al-Mah-Rek which was a famous battle during the Iraq-Iran War but after the fall of Saddam in 2003 the name was changed to inspire the female students to embrace education.

MSG KELLY

I see. *(Pause)* Well, her visit was gonna be a big deal. A non-governmental agency had donated the school supplies. Both the Army and the Iraqi Ministry of Education were going to have reps there. An ABC news crew was on the ground to cover the event.

SUAAD

Al-Hum-Du-Lil-Lah [Praise God]

RAWAN

(Timidly)

You said they tried to blow up her vehicle?

MSG KELLY

Right. It was an IED. They were in the fourth and last Humvee in the group and as they made a turn onto a narrow street, a bomb went off under the engine.

SUAAD

But my daughter and the other two weren't injured?

MSG KELLY

A number of women and children interviewed at the scene all said they saw your daughter and the driver of the Humvee exit the vehicle after the explosion. They said the gunner was thrown from the top of the vehicle onto the road and your daughter and the driver went to check on him. They were able to stand him up and he appeared all right.

SUAAD

Al-Hum-Du-Lil-Lah [Praise God]. Allah Kareem [God is generous].

RAWAN

(Timidly)

And this is where it spun out of control?

MSG KELLY

Right. Immediately after the explosion, someone in one of the other vehicles radioed it in. A couple of other soldiers from the front vehicles raced back to assist and then they started to receive enemy fire from shooters on the roof-tops above.

SUAAD

Was that the last time anyone saw her?

MSG KELLY

It gets real murky at this point. The dust literally hadn't settled from the explosion, which made it difficult to see. Locals were running in every direction possible. It was one of those crowded streets. There's a market two blocks away and apparently this street was a shortcut there. At this point, we got conflicting reports. Some of the locals say a large group of men quickly surrounded the three and overpowered them, dragging them away. Others say the three broke free from the mob and escaped down an alleyway.

(Pause)

(Speaking without a filter. The past incidence comes to the surface. He gets increasingly animated as he says this.)

You know, when you're in something like that, it's hard to know which end is up. *(Pause)* I remember being in a similar incident in Tikrit in '04. The vehicle I was riding in took an IED and blew the engine block right off! They said it landed on this guy's goat. Can you imagine? It flew 15 feet and landed on a damn goat! I got my ass out of the vehicle and my ears were ringing like crazy. I couldn't see through the dust. We started taking small arms fire only it was impossible to tell which direction it was coming from. There's nothing worse than being in a one-sided firefight! Up was down, down was up. My mind was all wobbly. I didn't know where I was. I coulda been back in Jersey on the Garden State Parkway or tailgating with my boys at Giant's stadium for all I knew. That was some shit! Some real messed up shit!

(Pause)

SUAAD

Who are you again?

MSG KELLY

Oh, let me reintroduce myself...I'm Master Sergeant Dwyane Kelly. I'm an Army Reserve Liaison. I was sent here by your daughter's rear detachment. That's the part of the unit that stays behind when the rest of the soldiers get deployed.

SUAAD

Oh.

MSG KELLY

I'll be working with you until your daughter is found and the situation is resolved. I'm here to support your family in any way that I can. And just so you know, right now, every unit in that battle space is looking for her and the other two missing soldiers. Reinforcements from around Baghdad have flooded that neighborhood and other suspected hotspots.

(Pause)

MSG KELLY

It happened in Ad-ha-mee-ah. Are you familiar with that neighborhood?

SUAAD

Yes.

MSG KELLY

We're turning that place upside down even as we speak. No stone left unturned.

SUAAD

It's one of the worst places in Baghdad now. (Pause) You know, when I was a university student, I used to pass by that neighborhood all the time.

MSG KELLY

Where did you go to college?

SUAAD

Al Moo-stan-si-rhee-ah University. Have you ever heard of it?

MSG KELLY

No ma'am.

SUAAD

It's one of the top schools in the country. Ten minutes from Ad-ha-mee-ah. I studied English there. Met Sanaa's father there. Never in wildest dreams did I ever think this day would come. Or that she would go missing. And of all places, there.

###

Steve Scuba is an Army nurse and an Iraq war veteran. He is currently deployed to Afghanistan

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