

O-Dark-Thirty



Winter 2017

O-Dark-Thirty
A Literary Journal

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On the cover: *The Crossing*,
oil on paper,
by Jules George

Jules George was born in London in 1969.
He studied fine art and illustration at Winchester School of Art,
Staffordshire University and Edinburgh College of Art,
where he was awarded the Andrew Grant Bequest.

In February 2010 he visited Afghanistan, officially sanctioned and sponsored by the Ministry of Defence. He was primarily attached to the 2nd Battalion Yorkshire Regiment (Green Howards), who were based in Helmand Province during their deployment on Herrick 11.

Subsequently, he has made trips to sea with the Royal Navy, deploying to the Persian Gulf, Indian Ocean, Mediterranean, Falkland Islands, and Atlantic, on board the Type 23 frigate HMS *Argyll*, and Trafalgar class submarine, HMS *Tireless*.

He has exhibited widely. His latest exhibition, "Pipes & Drums," was shown at the Open Eye Gallery, Edinburgh, in September 2016, following his work as official artist in residence at the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo 2015.

In collaboration with the filmmaker and cameraman John Walker he has made two short films about his experiences on operations with the armed services: *In the Afternoon of Time* 2010-11, and *East-West, West-East* 2014.

His first book, *War Artists in Afghanistan: Beyond the Wire*, features the work of fellow artists Michael Fay, *O-Dark-Thirty* Art Editor; Matthew Cook, cover artist for *O-Dark-Thirty*, Spring 2016 issue; and other war artists.

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Editor's Note

Dario here. Your friendly neighborhood nonfiction editor, and one of the original members of the Veterans Writing Project and *O-Dark-Thirty*. As a veteran of the Marines, a corporal, in an organization run by veterans (most of whom were much, much more high-ranking than I ever was), it's funny how my natural default as a young NCO has shown up in the organization. I'm speaking about my normal predilection to stand by waiting for orders, and then doing everything implied and directed with an annoying amount of motivation and esprit de corps. I've waited. I've observed.

And five years later, I'm happy to report that our mission remains the same and is going strong. We continue to serve by sharing our knowledge on writing to veterans, service members, and their adult family members, by teaching as part of an art therapy program at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, and, maybe most importantly, by giving our students and other veterans and their family members a place to publish their work in this journal. We believe every veteran has a story to tell. And in a world where less than 1% of Americans have served in our current wars, those stories are necessary for bridging the gap between the military and civilian worlds.

I was out at a bar with a friend a few weeks ago. Some hipster dude was hitting on her. As a flabby, bearded man wearing an Orioles baseball cap, no doubt, he had me pegged for something I wasn't.

Annoyed by his uncouth advances—and to help my friend who was palpably uncomfortable—I tried to change the topic of conversation between all of us.

“Well, what do you want to talk about?” he asked in a snarky way. “Baseball?”

“How about my book, asshole?”

(I will mention, unintentionally shamelessly, I have also edited military stories in other publications than this.)

He looked stunned. “Your book!? What’s it about?”

“It’s a collection of stories about the aftermath of war.”

“Oh, so you write about PTSD and stuff?”

“No, bro.”

I lectured him on his ignorance. Is that all vets should write about? Is that what a typical civilian thinks about us? We’re more than that. We have much, much more to say. (Though, of course that’s an important topic, too.)

He apologized, and eventually wandered elsewhere, I think somewhat embarrassed.

I don’t mean to tell this story as a means of bragging about my book or my badassery in this moment; I mean to tell this as a reason for why we need veterans’ stories.

As my friend and fellow veteran writer Colin Halloran says about the military/civilian divide in this country, “How will they know unless we tell them?”

Thanks for reading and for all your support. Keep it up, please. Pass it along.

Semper Fi,

Dario “D-Boh” DiBattista

Non-fiction.

Wall of War

By Lee Anne Gallaway-Mitchell

Myths begin by addressing questions.

You, my son, are six years old, and you want to know about the beginning of time and where God was before all of that. I would much prefer having the sex talk. Your father takes this one on, but instead of addressing the beginning, he jumps straight to the end.

“You see, Gus? One day the sun will just swallow up the earth. It will expand, becoming larger and larger, just consuming everything in its path.”

You sob, “I don’t want the world to die!”

I hold you close. You do not want a cookie.

You mourn a destruction you and no one you know will ever see yet you are drawn to it, to violence. Your moods explosive, your anger, implosive, a force like the sun, a power that will one day destroy itself.

We found out you were a boy while your father, a US Air Force fighter pilot, was at war. After the ultrasound, I immediately

sent your father a picture of our dog wearing a blue bib with an airplane on it. Your father printed out the picture and taped it to the inside of his locker right next to a picture of me in my wedding dress.

While I carried you, I finished a dissertation on nineteenth-century women's writings on death and dying. In researching a chapter on Virginia Woolf, I stumbled across Freud's writings on World War I. He argued that noncombatants mourn war, that we experience disillusionment, because we suffer the illusion that we are better than we are. I read this essay late one night sitting at our kitchen table in Valdosta, Georgia. You kicked as I read and drank my tea. Your father flew in tight circles, low and slow over hostile lands.

“**W**ar doesn't exist anymore in our official vocabulary.”
—Philip H. Gordon, White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa, and Persian Gulf Region (2013-2015), quoted in *The New York Times* (5/15/2006)

You bang on a drum and shout to your sister, Cora, “War starting! Right on time!”

This is your game, but Cora is the warrior. She is younger than you, but more aggressive. You ask questions about war, about why they start. You wonder why we all cannot agree that land belongs to everyone.

Yet you play at war. You build a tank with pillows and a kid-sized rocking chair.

You make use of the thunder. I cannot tell if you are employing the thunder as the sounds of your weapon, or if the thunder is the enemy.

I just hate the gun noises coming from your mouth.

Your grandfather flew Huey helicopters in Vietnam. He tells the story of that one time an officer in another Huey had landed

and waved a couple of kids over, ages five and six, to talk. He let them inside the cockpit, but before he did that, he took off his gun belt and threw it over the seat. While they were talking, one of the kids grabbed the gun and shot the officer in the head.

I wonder if it was on purpose or an accident. These questions matter to me now, but answers are not easy to come by.

Me: What should we tell children about war?
Your father: War is when people fight over beliefs. It's that simple. War sucks. Killing people isn't fun. It's exhilarating, but it isn't fun. People who think it's fun are fucking psychotic.

You practiced at war on an air base in Korea. You were three. You still talk about the sounds of gunfire, how the windows shook from the force of simulated explosions. The air raid sirens woke you up frequently, the loud speaker intoning "Exercise! Exercise! Exercise! Alarm Blue, MOPP 4, Ground Attack!" like some apocalyptic lullaby. Men and women walked around in full chem gear that made them look alien. We pretended to outprocess through a ground attack and chemical one. We learned about the cycle of repatriation. You did not know that if we actually had to be evacuated, it would have been unlikely we would ever see your father again.

We had you and your sister fitted for gas masks. Your sister was an infant. An infant's gas mask is more gas suit, or gas onesie, than gas mask with a hole in the face where you can fit the nipple of a bottle. A child's gas mask comes with a backpack attachment. The instructions for both were written in Hebrew. I took the masks for mandatory inspection twice a year to insure the seals had not been broken. Your dad scoffed at the futility of the act. We all knew what would happen if our home, forty miles south of the DMZ, got attacked by chemical weapons.

“It is a doctrine of war to assume the enemy will not come, but rather to rely on one’s readiness to meet him; not to presume that he will not attack but rather to make oneself invincible.”

—Sun Tzu in *The Art of War*

I kept a go-bag of diapers, clothes, wipes, water, powdered milk, and cash anyway. I attended safety briefings as required and went through the drills of being evacuated just as your dad dress-rehearsed war. If we did get attacked, he told me, “Don’t you dare go to the gym. Go straight to the squadron. The basement is a sealed bunker.” He hoped he would have enough intel ahead of an attack to suggest calmly and gently to go visit relatives in Texas without giving anything away.

Me: What do you think a six-year-old needs to know about war?
Your father: Nothing. Only six-year-olds who are getting bombed need to know about it. And even then....

We have a wall of war. Its built-in bookshelves contain volumes of military history, combat psychology, and air defense strategy among many other martial topics. The empty bottom two shelves are shielded from view by the couch. This is your bunker, the place you go when you need quiet, when there’s a battle brewing in your own mind. You squeeze into the bare bottom shelf and escape from everything. But, even then, war looms in the shelves above you. I arranged these books by “conflict.” Your father never looks at them, and I don’t know why we keep them.

Lee Anne Gallaway-Mitchell is the spouse of a US Air Force reservist fighter pilot who was on active duty for twelve years. She is a writer and teacher living in Tucson, Arizona; her poetry and nonfiction have been published or are forthcoming in Chagrin River Review and Sun Star Review.

Alonzo

By Kacy Tellesen

A name is more than how a person, place, or thing is known. Names have power. Names carry the weight of the individual. All that you are is condensed into a few syllables. To some people, Carl carries the weight of abuse. To others, Carl represents pure love. Mary could be the succubus that stole your life or the saint that saved your soul. Names mean different things to different people. A name can be changed, and the person might be able to shed the weight of it. But the name always remains, and all who hear its utterance are forced to remember the good and the bad.

Of course, there is always the risk of being branded with a nickname. A name on top of a name. My older brother was the master of the demeaning nickname. He replaced Kacy with Fatty McFatshit but the name was too complicated to stick so it quickly vanished into the wood paneling of our double-wide trailer. Later he came up with the name Dually. Initially, I thought it sounded pretty badass. There were worse things than being named after a big truck. Once he saw my pride in the new name he informed me that "Dually" was meant to annotate my two distinct chins. After that

I hated the name, but it was simple enough to stick. My Mom called me Kacy, everyone else called me Dually. Still it wasn't so bad. I got taller and was only mildly chubby so the dual chins aspect was quickly forgotten. I threw myself into high school athletics hoping I could create more distance from Fatty McFatshit. It worked. I made all-state as an offensive and defensive lineman, it was okay to be a little chubby in that world. Still I wanted to run away from all of my names: Fatty McFatshit, Dually, and Kacy. I found my escape route when my history teacher told me of his time in The Marine Corps. He painted a world where names were earned with accomplishment. It sounded like a place where a person could make a name.

I quickly found out that your name was immediately reduced to your last name. There were no more Carls, Erics, or Jims. Kacy was nowhere to be found. There were only Smiths, Johnsons, Kowalaskis, Changs, Torreses, and a Tellessen.

Nobody used first names, and it was wonderful. Actually when you heard someone's first name, for the first time, there was a weird ring to it. You knew whom they were talking about, but it just sounded wrong. When I met Alonzo, I never bothered to ask his first name. I didn't think we needed them anymore.

Alonzo was just like the rest of us, young and invincible. Or maybe we were young and stupid enough to believe we were invincible. We had an unlikely friendship, he a senior Hispanic Marine with a deployment under his belt, and me a white ogreish boot Marine who had never been shot at before. When I first got to the squad, Alonzo eyed me with suspicion. Not only was I a boot, but a machine gunner. Riflemen, like Alonzo, have a fierce pride in their MOS (Military Occupational Specialty), and though I was an infantryman myself, weapons platoon men were always looked upon with vague suspicion. This was no different. I was the outsider.

Alonzo never really talked to me until we got shot at the first time. I think he wanted to know if this "Tellessen" was the real thing,

or another coward who had slipped through the cracks. I passed his test, though emotionally immature, I was no coward. After that first firefight we were as good as brothers. Not brothers in the sense of we knew each other's every secret, but brothers in the sense that we would die a thousand times for one another. There is something that isn't quite quantifiable that happens between people in combat. There is a kind of invisible chain that connects the two souls. As much as I hated and loved my flesh and blood brothers, I hated and loved my combat brothers.

About a week into this newfound brotherhood, Alonzo got orders to go to another squad. It was the shits. All of us hated it. We were all just starting to act like a squad together, and now we would have to get along without one of the only Marines in the squad that had any semblance of combat experience. But Alonzo, being the Marine that he was, just smiled and said, "It's all good." The next day I saw him driving a Humvee outside the wire.

Alonzo refused to change squad bays, and kept sleeping in our room. It was about the only thing in the whole situation that made us feel better. The brief moments we had together were nothing but jokes and bitching about how much worse the other guy had it.

The morning of November 20, 2006, my squad was to move out to a small patrol base. Alonzo had a few hours off and watched us get ready. He made a few jokes about sleeping in and taking the day off. As I was walking out the door, he asked, "Hey man, do you got smokes? I'm out."

I dug through my filthy pockets, moving my toothbrush and half-full bag of Swedish Fish to grab an unopened box of cancer sticks. They were Marlboros. I thought they made me look tougher. I threw him the pack. He smiled, but there was something behind it, some kind of apprehension, or sadness. He looked me in the eyes and slightly shook his head.

“Love you Kacy.”

I didn't know what to say. I didn't know he knew my first name. I just smiled awkwardly back at him and said, “Love you too, man.”

I didn't know his first name.

November 22, 2006 we were sitting around a small fire at a patrol base on the edge of the city, smoking cigarettes and eating what little junk food we could get our hands on. A porno mag was making its rounds, but I already had it memorized. The copy of *Cherry* magazine made its way to me. I flipped through the pages and picked out the girl that looked most like the guy sitting next to me. I nudged him in the shoulder and said, “Jesus man, I didn't know times were that tough back home. Your mom has resorted to spreading her butt cheeks in front of the camera for money.”

The large Marine next to me drew back a closed fist. I braced for impact, hopefully it was going to be in the arm and not the jaw. I closed my eyes and waited. The punch never came, but far away there was an explosion. The blast was muffled due to distance and the thick walls of the patrol base. All we had to do was look up though. We could see the black column of smoke that trailed up towards the heavens like an accusatory dark finger pointed at God.

We all ran to the highest point of the patrol base. The explosion was at the far side of the city. I knew it wasn't Alonzo. He couldn't die.

I ran back down to where the radio was and listened for radio traffic, something to tell which one of us was now gone. Through the static and the panicked voices I was able to piece together that a Humvee had run over a massive improvised explosive device. It took too long for them to read off the names of the boys that had been hit. I knew the first Marine, Warner was his name. Warner was dead. The second was Davenport. I never knew Warner other than knowing his face. But I knew Davenport. He was a shy kid. A kid with a huge

heart. A kid that I thought didn't belong here. Most of us fit the bill, we were stereotypical ruffians, but not Davenport. He had a legitimate gentle soul, he shouldn't have been behind a machine gun.

The next burst of static cryptically told of a wounded Marine. Severe leg trauma, a medevac had been called. It was Alonzo. The static from the radio turned to white noise. This wasn't how this was supposed to work. We were supposed to get into a few close calls so that we would have stories to tell when we were old men. We couldn't tell stories if we were dead. This wasn't how this was supposed to work. But if he lost a leg, he would still be alive. We could still sit on a porch one day and marvel at the badassess we once were.

The radio was silent as we all looked at each other. I looked around the room at faces of rage, sadness, and terror. Some were all three. I don't know what I looked like.

More static through the radio. Alonzo was dead. The black smoke still hung heavy in the sky, indifferent and undeniable. He was gone.

Sometimes when I'm feeling selfish I think he is the lucky one. He and all the rest who are gone. They don't have to hang around here and try and make sense of it. They got to die young and leave beautiful memories. None of them lived long enough to disappoint like the rest of us did. They'll never drink whiskey until they turn to mush, screaming into the night because they wish they had died instead of us. They'll never have to face the parents at the memorial, and feel like cowards because they can't hide the tears from running down their cheeks. They'll never wonder if they've lived a life worthy of their absence, or if it's all just meaningless.

I survived sniper fire, IEDs, mortar fire, and just about everything else the enemy can throw at a combat Marine. I've picked up human body parts in the street. I've done the trigger pulling when it needed to be done. None of these things have kept me awake

at night. They were all part of the job, and I accepted them wholly and completely. The only thing from those times that still whispers dark thoughts in the back of my mind is the guilt of survival. The guilt of knowing that they stood in my place so that I could watch my babies grow.

Survivor's guilt is the reality of what many call PTSD, and for years I thought that guilt would swallow me whole. I was weak. I didn't know how people could just go about their business like none of my friends died. I was angry. I was angry with my friends for leaving me behind to deal with all of this bullshit. Angry because I knew I could never articulate what it really means to fight for the man next to you. I wanted everyone around me to hurt like I hurt. Eventually I realized that I was being a pussy, the coward that Alonzo once feared me to be. Alonzo deserved better than to have died so that his brother could degenerate into the victim. I owed it to Alonzo, and the others, to get my shit together.

Twenty-two veterans commit suicide every day. That's twenty-two names. It's hard to say just how many different people that is. I'm guessing many of them just miss their best friends. They think that if they check out, they might get to go back to the days when things made sense. I understand this, and I would be lying if I said the thought had never crossed my mind. But the reality is that we owe a debt, and to default on that debt would be a dishonor to the ones we claim to miss so much. Self-pity is weakness and against all we had to go through to earn our names. I decided to deal with it on my own, much of that was through writing. Putting the bottle down helped too. It's not easy; it's not supposed to be easy. I'm not saying that if you're hurting you shouldn't seek help, but you're stronger than you think you are. Remember that you are stronger than you think you are.

I never knew Alonzo's first name until his memorial. He'll always be Alonzo in my memories, but to his mother and sister he

was Joshua C. Alonzo. I didn't know Joshua. If he was anything like me, Joshua was a far different man than Alonzo. I knew a different person than his mother and sister knew. But it's for Alonzo and Joshua that I try to make this life mean something. That I try to put purpose into this unexpected existence that I find myself in. Hopefully I can keep adding to my name, maybe pick up a couple different ones along the way. That Tellessen that stood with Alonzo is still hanging around, but I don't see him much. I like to think he evolved into something else, but I don't think we can ever really get rid of a name.

Kacy Tellessen lives in Spangle, Washington with his wife and two children. He is currently an undergraduate at EWU, pursuing an English degree with the creative writing option. He served as a machine gunner in the United States Marine Corps from 2005-2009. To keep the lights on, he started a BBQ catering company in 2013 and has been feeding people ever since.

Fiction.

Lady Champ

By Guinevere Rowell

When you are a girl, the gun range will provide your happiest memories. Your father wakes you up before six on Saturday mornings. You slip on wool pants and a sweatshirt and his Vietnam camouflage jacket; it is late fall and it may well snow while you are out. He's packed the car already; engine exhaust swirls in the wind above the gravel driveway. Neither of you eats breakfast. You rarely eat breakfast because you're sixteen. He rarely eats breakfast because he has cancer. But he hasn't yet lost the energy to go out with you to shoot sporting clays.

On the way to the range, he tells you again about the time his twin found a ten-dollar bill on the street in Brooklyn and waved it around, looking for the owner, until your father tackled him. You try to listen but you know all these stories. You want to talk about the future, but that's getting hard. The two of you used to never stop talking; for a while, you called him by his first name because it felt more like you were best friends.

He parks the car in a mucky grass lot before the gate to the range. In the trunk of his gold Saturn hatchback are your two shotguns in their hard plastic cases, eight white boxes of red-and-brass

shotgun shells, and the ammo belt-and-bags you both wear to trudge through the woods carrying your rounds, the weight against your thigh lightening as does the morning sky.

He drinks coffee with the other men in the trailer at the top of the fields while you wait for the 7:00 a.m. start. Through the dingy windows, you can see the short and long fields punctuated by berms: the pistol and rifle ranges. Beyond those, along the paths through the woods are the traps, the size of riding mowers, that fling clay projectiles from a metal arm for shotgun practice. The other men forget themselves as they talk their way through last week's rounds, swear, and then apologize to you. Your father, in his flannel shirt, shifts his still considerable weight.

This past summer they held a youth tournament and they gave you a trophy that says *Lady Champ*. You and your dad kept a running tally of your performance over those ten weeks, compared it to the boys'. Your scores were charted on printer paper on one wood-paneled wall of the trailer, and so you know damn well you won the whole thing even though the printout disappears before they give out awards. You and your dad check the math. You and your dad share a half gallon of cookie dough ice cream and talk about how fucked up that is before you agree to let it go. But you will always be the fucking champ, and that kid will always be the loser twice over, once on the range and once when he brought that trophy home.

Still, once you make it out of the trailer and into the frosted air, you love this place. The clays are orange pucks fired from big metal throwing arms. At each station, there's a single clay, then a repeat—one clay launched when you call for it, the second launched at the sound of your shot—and then a pair, two clays traveling together. Usually the clays are arced across the sky like a bird in flight, but sometimes, they're fired straight up in the air to represent the

dramatic flight of upset teal, and sometimes they're rolled along the ground bouncing like rabbits. Neither of you hunt. Although your father killed forty-two in Vietnam, he tells you that killing a deer would not be a good experience for either of you.

No, this is purely a mental game. Watch the other shooters—you take turns going first, losing the advantage—and pick the place in the sky where you expect to sight in on the bird. Press your shotgun deep into the pocket of your shoulder, your finger on the trigger when you call, “Trap!” The metal arm releases. The clay crosses your line of vision and you lead it with your shotgun, a length or two depending on how far you are from the trap, as you squeeze the trigger. The clay explodes. There's one station where the clays arc toward you, and you like to wait until the last minute to squeeze the trigger, the clay growing big, so that the shards shower around you, rattling in the leaves of the trees.

“Next time, tell them well I'd swear if I missed that mother-fucker myself,” your father instructs you afterward, in the car on the way home before you stop for pizza. Your hands smell like burnt gunpowder and cordite, and your shoulder oozes a thin trail of blood. You can't stop pulling the fabric of your t-shirt away from your shoulder, sure that the drying blood will glue it to your body. The recoil from a hundred rounds has pressed the buckle on your bra into a wound. You are grateful for the warmth of the pizza box on your lap and something to talk about. It doesn't matter that the bruise will spread to the size of a coaster, you are proud of your damaged skin.

There are lessons for you here, and not just the ones you are being told about how to fit into a man's world. You could notice that it's costing you something. But maybe it's better that you don't.

When your father crosses that invisible threshold from sick to dying, you still keep shooting, even though you have to drive that

familiar route to the range without him. You tell him about your scores, about the weather that morning, about the unpredictable trap that stutters out clays. When you, like your father, become a Marine, you will be a very good shot.

In the years that come, the bruise that is your father's death will fade from black to yellow to almost nothing at all. Other moments in the strange life you choose for yourself—from the crook of a man's elbow against your throat and the bloom of darkness that follows to the fellow lieutenant who forms elaborate fantasies about you for the entertainment of your male peers—will bleed deep bruises and then they will fade, too. You shot clays for the last time a few weeks before you wore a black dress and hung photos for your father's wake, and after that, you never went again. After a while, you'll stop missing it.

One day, you'll have to decide whether you'll teach your daughter to shoot the way your father taught you, the way he adjusted your hands and taught you to exhale at the same rate you squeeze the trigger. Whether you'll shake her awake in the dark of her room and coach her in how to navigate a world that doesn't want her there. Or whether you'll tell her, *maybe a different road*.

Guinevere Rowell was a Marine for eight years. Now she's an M.A. in Writing student at Johns Hopkins University. Her work has been previously published in District Lit.

Poetry.

Loyalty

Seabass

The dog will defend the home
Of a man who beats it
Who chains it to a pole
Who feeds it sparingly
Who looks upon it with disgust
The dog can sense the hatred of his owner
For whom he would fight to the death

*“Seabass” is a former Marine Corps infantry/Force
Reconnaissance officer with multiple combat tours.
He writes under his callsign.*

Changes Can Occur

Lisa Stice

Let us know
if you have questions or concerns.
We will be here

if you would like help with
past, present, or future
to build your happily-ever-after military life:

make an appointment now.
Paperwork required,
completed on time.

Only couples without complex problems
will be seen due to strict schedules.
We apologize for any inconvenience.

Thank you.

Lisa Stice received a BA in English literature from Mesa State College (now Colorado Mesa University) and an MFA in creative writing and literary arts from the University of Alaska Anchorage. She taught high school for ten years and is now a military wife who lives in North Carolina with her husband, daughter and dog. Her full-length poetry collection, Uniform, is forthcoming with Aldrich Press. You can find out more about her and her publications at lisastice.wordpress.com and facebook.com/LisaSticePoet.

Cocktails in Guantánamo

Jonathan Tennis

Walk down the halls of the detention centers
And you'll hear the troops talking
About cocktails.

Nice,

You think.

After work the GIs like to gather
And blow off steam having mixed drinks.

Mixed drinks on the beach

Doesn't sound that bad,

But cocktails here

Are not what you think.

The people in the cages

Lash out at their captors

With a mixture of

the smells of what's available,

Coppery blood,

Pungent-sticky semen,

Acrid urine,

Earthy feces.

Stirred in a cup,

Or in their hand,

Thrown at the person

On the other side of their cage.

No umbrellas in those drinks.

Jonathan Tennis served an enlistment in the United States Army, with a deployment to Iraq in support of OIF. He is a graduate of Eckerd College (BA) and Norwich University (MSIA). He resides in Tampa, Florida where he enjoys writing, reading, year-round sunshine, traveling, and biking. He is currently applying to Creative Writing programs to pursue a MFA.

Charlie Foxtrot

Charity Winters

It is late autumn and Ramadan.
Feral dogs and kids without shoes
scavenge the highway looking for food.
The convoy is halted due to a possible threat ahead.
There is a call in over the radio and there might be IEDs.
Gun Truck 1 reports animal carcasses lining the road.
Not one, two, but tree.

Navy, Air Force, Coasties, and Marines:
letters and numbers are not what's learned in school.
Instead of the ABCs
it's Alpha, Bravo, and Charlie –
“Niner” instead of nine because
of a couple wars with Germany.
Rodger is not a name but affirmation:

Received and understood.
Incoming is not the mail.
YO-YO is you're on your own.
Quarters is where you live and would rather be.
Contact is violent and not a mere touch.
The convoy is halted because Tracking is to follow
what may be tracking you.

The convoy is halted because they took a right
instead of a left since right is a direction.
And it should have been “Rodger”
but he was in the turret
when they started receiving bullets
from a high flat roof top where
clothes and fruit were hung to dry.

Contact left. Contact right.
“Adios mother fuckers”
the net heard him reply.
That should have been “Alpha Mike Foxtrot”
censured the inquisition
who came to question the survivors.
It is an ambush but now
from the friendlies’ side.

The convoy commander halted the story and breathed
“Charlie Foxtrot” and an analyst asks for the meaning of
what I keep repeating: Cluster fuck. Cluster fuck. Cluster fuck.

Charity Winters is a 2003 graduate of the United States Air Force Academy, three time Iraq War veteran, and freelance writer. Her work has appeared in Proceedings, Leatherneck, Scintilla, The Red Mud Review, The Report, and “Proud to Be: Writing by American Warriors” Volumes 2, 4, and 5. She is a graduate student at Austin Peay State University’s English program.

Interview.

A Conversation with
Matt Gallagher
by Jerri Bell

A lot of smart people have interviewed author Matt Gallagher, from Susan Page of NPR's *Diane Rehm Show* to General David Petraeus, so I was a little nervous calling him up for this interview. It turned into a pleasant hour-long conversation, which I'm looking forward to continuing over a beverage at the Association of Writers and Writing Programs Annual Conference in February.

Former U.S. Army captain Matt Gallagher is the author of the novel *Youngblood* and the Iraq memoir *Kaboom*. He also coedited and contributed to the short fiction collection *Fire & Forget: Short Stories from the Long War*. His work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *The Paris Review Daily* and *Playboy*. A graduate of Wake Forest University, Matt also holds an MFA in fiction from Columbia University. He lives with his wife in Brooklyn and works as a writing instructor at Words After War, a literary nonprofit devoted to bringing veterans and civilians together to study conflict literature.

O-Dark-Thirty: Tell me about your current work with Words after War, in New York.

Matt Gallagher: I taught writing workshops for them for two years, and right now I'm kind of on hiatus. They have a couple of other instructors who are doing a great job there. I still host the readings when I can, and I taught at their summer writing intensive up in Vermont last summer. It's a really great organization that I'm proud to be a part of. The workshops are half and half [military and civilian]. It does something unique [in] bridging the military-civilian divide. There's something inspiring about [what can happen] on a micro/community level in a writing workshop.

There are a lot of great veterans-only writing workshops out there, but the executive director of Words After War was aware of that and wanted to do something different. The results speak for themselves. It forces the veteran writers in the workshop to get out of the echo chamber, and start honing their work for a wider audience. Something I try to keep in mind, in my own writing and in teaching, is David Foster Wallace's great advice: *This isn't about expression, it's about communication.* That can be a really powerful thing for any writer.

For the civilian writers—they aren't there to be wallflowers or cultural anthropologists, even though sometimes they show up thinking that's how it's going to go. It's vital that they're engaged and confronted and encouraged to write about the big, heavy topics that we're all grappling with. Their perspective is just as important. I often start my workshops with Katherine Anne Porter's short story "Pale Horse, Pale Rider." In addition to being a great literary text, it's a story about people in Denver during World War One, but it's also about trench warfare happening half a world away. Katherine Anne Porter wasn't a soldier, she never served overseas; but

these topics and ideas—what was happening to her country—all that mattered to her. She wrote about trench warfare incredibly powerfully in that story. Sometimes a little distance from these topics can do a lot. Having civilian writers in the classroom can be just as beneficial for the veteran writers as for the civilians themselves, as we encourage them to write about these topics head-on.

ODT: I'm seeing the same thing in a women veterans' program I'm participating in at the Smithsonian, comparing the narratives of women who went overseas in World War One to narratives of women who deployed in OEF/OIF. We're experiencing similar military-civilian interaction and a lot of surprises for both sides at how much common ground we're finding as we go through the narratives and the artifacts in the museum.

And you're participating in a panel at AWP in February: "Workshopping War: The Challenges of War Writing in the Classroom," with Whitney Terrell, Jayne Anne Phillips, Teresa Fazio, and Anne Kniggendorf. What are the challenges of war writing in the classroom?

MG: There are the challenges of teaching writing in a classroom, which are manifold. I go back and forth still—how much of writing can be taught? I think it's incredibly helpful sometimes just to be in a room with like-minded souls, wrestling over these questions. As for war writing specifically—many times a self-selected group is going to show up. On one hand, that's a strength, because there will be a base level of knowledge almost always there. You can certainly re-teach Tim O'Brien, and there are a lot of reasons to [do that]. But particularly in a workshop like Words After War—it's an independent non-profit, and these people are showing up after their jobs—they've probably already read "The Things They Carried" at

least once. So there's a familiarity there. That's good. And Week One can start off at a brisker pace than I would with some of the college freshmen and sophomores I've taught elsewhere.

On the other hand, people with that knowledge sometimes come with very fixed notions, very fixed ideas. Almost always in my Words After War workshops, there are male veterans who have read a lot of Hemingway—maybe they weren't as well-read elsewhere. Some get hung up on—I remember reading a Tom Jones story, and this one student couldn't get over that Tom Jones had used the wrong weapons cleaning kit in a Vietnam story. On the one hand, I didn't want to discourage the student's interest, and clear passion for the weapons cleaning kit. On the other hand, it's a literary workshop. We're here to talk about some other things, not the particularities of the weapons cleaning kit. But it took a failure of my own—it took about seven or eight minutes longer than it should have to get off that topic and get back to the story.

That's maybe a playful example of something we've all seen in the classroom, which is a lot of turmoil from the past—perhaps directly experienced, perhaps what brought them to that classroom to begin with, maybe [because of] a family member, a close friend, whatever—but it's been interesting for me to realize just how personal these subjects of war and homecoming and conflict are for many of my students. And I just have an MFA. I don't have a psychology degree. In theory, it's all well and good to say we're only here to talk about the text, but in practice, it's more complicated than that. It's messier than that. Through a lot of trial and error, I've learned that it's usually best just to kind of let the group figure it out and take care of each other. In that way, it's not too dissimilar to a small military unit. Each situation's going to be different, and it's up to me as the instructor to be mindful of that and to stay flexible. And it's also up to that semester's group—they're going to have a different dynamic and a different cohesion than the previous semesters' groups.

ODT: *You have your MFA from Columbia. Were you an English major in college?*

MG: I was a history major and an English minor, because in all the wisdom of youth at twenty-one I didn't want to take one more Shakespeare class, which would have been required for the English major. I decided I'd read too much Shakespeare.

ODT: *What made you decide to go back and get the MFA?*

MG: I got out of the Army in 2009. My first book, *Kaboom*, was nonfiction that came out of a blog that I'd kept overseas. I was—and still am proud of—that book, but a lot of it was just circumstantial. The kind of writing that I'd grown up admiring and wanted to someday write tended to be fiction. After *Kaboom* came out in 2010 I realized that I was at a crossroads. I was still trying my hand at fiction, but it wasn't coming out right. I knew I needed to improve at it.

I've always been a classroom learner. I'd heard about MFAs, and said nasty things about MFAs, as writers will do. But I thought I'd give it a shot. I had a little bit of money saved up, I qualified for some veterans' scholarships here in New York State. I figured worst case, it was two years of focusing on writing and reading a lot of books that were worth reading. I went back in 2011 and finished up in 2013. It was an entirely positive experience. I think I benefited from it in a number of ways: not just in my fiction writing, but from immersing myself in literature and books in a way that I hadn't done before, even in college. I don't necessarily think it's something everybody would love doing, and it's certainly not something you need to do to be a writer. Writers come from all types of places and backgrounds. But for me personally, it was a good experience that I wouldn't trade for the world.

ODT: *You talk about doing a lot of reading during that period. Were you reading a lot of war literature in those two years?*

MG: A little bit. I took one war literature seminar, and that was fascinating, because most of the war literature I'd read tended to be much more contemporary: Iraq and Afghanistan, Vietnam era. Up there I was introduced to older texts that I'd heard of but never read—John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, some broader world war literature—*Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; Ishmael Beah's memoir about being a child soldier [*A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*] was incredibly powerful. Maybe I would have encountered that on my own, maybe not. I found that really helpful to get a broadening of perspectives, not just the young American soldier's vantage point.

That [viewpoint] has produced an incredible amount of literature over the years, and I think I was instinctively drawn to it for obvious reasons, but as a developing writer trying to work on his own novel, it was helpful to read about different perspectives and different conflicts. The greatest benefit of [the MFA program] was reading other things, studying other stuff—whether it was the Beats in New York or Katherine Anne Porter's novellas or Jane Austen, or being the only guy in a class talking about Virginia Woolf—that was not just helpful to me as a writer. It was helpful to me as a person trying to figure out his place in the world.

And as you know, as part of this contemporary war writing community we're all getting to know each other, and becoming friends, and over the past couple of years we've seen a boom in published work. Any time a friend came out with a book or something, I would of course read it.

ODT: *When Susan Page interviewed you for the Diane Rehm Show back in February 2016, after *Youngblood* was published, you talked*

a little bit about your relationship with Ernest Hemingway's work. And then you wrote about it for the Paris Review. What were you reading and what was influencing your work when you were writing Youngblood? I'm not seeing Hemingway in there.

MG: Maybe a little bit here and there. I read *Lawrence of Arabia* when I was in Iraq, in my second month there. That had a huge influence on me, at least in my thinking and my approach to being an Army officer. I imagine parts of that crept into the book.

When I was overseas we were winning, though, and *Youngblood* is very much a book about the fallout. I wasn't conscious of this when I was writing the book, but *Kaboom* was a way of making sense of our tour, the counterinsurgency and the Surge, and I think *Youngblood* was then, a few years later, me trying to make sense of the war as a whole. I've come to realize just how small a piece of the war as a whole [my deployment] was.

I read Jim Frederick's narrative nonfiction book *Black Hearts*, set in 2006, after I'd come back and moved to New York. That was a really powerful book for me. The towns seemed very familiar—the same part of Iraq, a similar cast of characters—but *Black Hearts* is a story where everything that could possibly go wrong does go wrong, and that had not been my tour or experience at all. In many ways in 2007 and 2008, everything was going right. That helped shake me out of my skull, which I think is important for any writer.

James Salter is a writer I admire very much, and I returned to *The Hunters* a few times just to get a sense of some of his passages about flying at night—I wanted to capture the Iraqi desert, obviously a different environment with that kind of precision, using language that tapped into all the senses to evoke the power of place.

I'd be remiss if I didn't mention Tim O'Brien. He had a huge influence on an entire generation. Like it or not, we all read him in

high school. Anybody who was about my age, whether they went into the military or not, our high school instructors were Vietnam era. What O'Brien does in those thirty pages of "The Things They Carried" and in his other works is monumental. That's something that I was seeking with *Youngblood*: how do you convey some things that are universal in a very specific way? That's a huge challenge, and something that O'Brien is masterful at.

The last book I'll mention is Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*. Something that Hemingway also does with Robert Jordan in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*—[he poses the question], What does it mean to try to find some small but still important matter of justness, of justice in a war that can't even pretend to be just anymore? I've dealt with that as an Iraq War veteran, and I think a lot of veterans of these wars confront it at some point or another. You're not going to find that even in some of the great World War Two classics. On a macro level, they knew why they had to be there, even the Yossarians and the Billy Pilgrims who would prefer not to be. The Vietnam literature is relatable to these questions, but it has a different take, particularly if it's written by a draftee, like O'Brien. They had to be there. For me, reading about the volunteers who went to the Spanish Civil War of their own volition, only to be caught up in a lost cause that was rife with corruption and political fracturedness and infighting—I found a lot of resolve in that, both as a soldier and as a writer. I'd read *Homage to Catalonia* for the first time back in college, and I returned to it as I was writing *Youngblood* just to see how a master like Orwell had done it.

ODT: One of the things I really enjoyed about Youngblood was the way that you worked in some history of Iraq and that you included significant Iraqi characters. I loved that you worked in the idea of storytelling and mythmaking over generations of foreign inter-

vention and occupation, and war—that intersection of history and literature—for Iraqis as well as for Americans. Did you have any concerns about cultural appropriation and authenticity, and if so, how did you work through those?

MG: Any writer worth their salt should approach their own work skeptically. As I was developing these characters, it was important to me to have these strong Iraqi characters who were more than filler, more than caricatures. I knew I needed to be skeptical of my own presentation of these characters. The work would benefit from that in the long run.

It's a first-person novel told from an American perspective; that was one way to approach that quandary—this is all Jack Porter's interpretation and experiences with these characters, suggesting an entirely different life. And through their actions and dialogue, suggesting a deeper interiority the same way I would with an American character that Jack was unfamiliar with. You do your research.

I read as much Iraqi literature as I could get my hands on: one book that was particularly helpful even though it was hard reading for me as an American veteran was *Voices from Iraq*, which is a Studs Terkel-type oral history. Journalist Mark Kukis. He interviewed a variety of Iraqi people and just let them tell their own stories. They were former Iraqi Army turned militia members, barber shop owners, Iraqi mothers who had lost husbands and sons to the war of occupation. [The book presented] a wide array of people and experiences and perspectives of the war, from the Iraqi perspective. I got the phrase "The Collapse" from that book. That one word suggests so much. As a human being and particularly as a veteran, [that book] forced me to confront my own memories and experiences in a way that it probably would have been healthier not to, frankly. But subconsciously, that helped the work and helped maybe the fullness of these characters.

The cultural appropriation question is an important one, a vital one, and is something that any writer needs to consider if they're writing about other cultures and societies. But the story would have been lesser without [the Iraqi characters], and my motivations for writing a 350-page novel about Iraq to begin with included very full, very vibrant Iraqis—they were a huge part of my experience over there. This war happened in their country. I'd rather try and fail with these characters than artistically cheat and work around it. The onus was on me to do the best damn job I could with these characters, this culture, and this society.

ODT: Have you had any feedback from any Iraqis on your novel?

MG: I got an e-mail from the son of Iraqi immigrants who said that he was really skeptical going into it because he saw that I was a white guy from my author photo. But he said that he came away appreciative. He's younger, maybe early to mid-twenties; he's considering joining the military, so he's been reading a lot of [contemporary war literature]. Some of the books didn't have any Iraqi characters at all, and others he found wanting. One criticism he had was that he thought that [my Iraqi characters] were too well-spoken in English. It was a really nice e-mail—any time somebody reads your book and takes the time to let you know how they interact with it, you appreciate it.

ODT: Youngblood contains some elements of what many would consider “genre” fiction—mystery, a love story. Sometimes when you bring that into a workshop you get some pushback. If you're writing a mystery into the structure of your novel, or if there's a focus on romance—that's one that a lot of women in workshops get critical feedback on. Did you get any critical feedback about those aspects of Youngblood?

MG: Yeah. [*Youngblood*] came out of my thesis at Columbia. Were there workshoppers in MFA-land who frowned on anything resembling a plot? Absolutely. I wrestled with it, but kept going back to the books that I was drawn to. Novels I enjoyed reading, the ones I learned something from, that challenged and shaped my world view. They had things happen. It wasn't just a lot of people sitting around a café talking about ideas. They were about people who were trying their best, and maybe still failing, and then hopefully trying to learn from that failure and going after [that thing] again. I wanted to write a book like that.

There's a place for books that are kind of focused on interiority, where there's not a lot of movement or interaction with the wider world, and that's fine. That just wasn't the kind of book I wanted to write. Thankfully, my workshop instructor up at Columbia, Victor LaValle, who has written a number of novels that incorporate different genre styles—mystery, supernatural, even literary fiction—reminded me that it's okay that things are happening in your book. You want people to read it. As much as any other writer, I like showing off with a good analogy or pithy turn of phrase, but it's hard enough to sit down and work on creating a document for a couple of hours a day and maybe if you're lucky you get a half a page or maybe a sentence.

[Victor reminded me that] if you're not remembering that spark, whatever it was inside of you that drove you to sit down with this idea to begin with - if you're losing that in the pursuit of being literary or trying to show off, that's going to show up and hurt the work. You're going to erode your own passion for it. After that talk with Victor, I let myself be free just to write the story that I'd envisioned messily in my head years before.

ODT: *After three years of a steady diet of war literature, some of the books I'm enjoying the most lately tend to be categorized as*

“genre” fiction. Vietnam War nurse Elizabeth Ann Scarborough’s novel The Healer’s War is as “literary” as any other war literature I’ve read, but instead of being categorized as “war literature” or “magical realism,” it’s often classified as “fantasy.” There’s no reason that so-called “genre fiction” can’t be well written, and even literary.

MG: These labels are such a strange thing. Even “war literature” as a label. Many of the best books in the Western canon—the *Iliad*—could be considered nothing more than war literature. All Katherine Anne Porter writes about is the West. Is she writing just “Western” literature? I don’t think so. Is it because she’s dead that [her work is] allowed to be considered part of the wider American literature now? Labels can be damaging to a young writer’s psyche, if nothing else. We talked about the “great” Vietnam books; I think the one many veterans read isn’t O’Brien, it’s Joe Haldeman’s *The Forever War*, or Robert Heinlein’s *Starship Troopers*—those are geeky science fiction, but they’re also allegories. Labeling is a very human thing to do, but it can be inhibiting for writers.

ODT: *You’ve said you don’t want to be pigeonholed as a “war writer.” So what’s next? Are you done writing about war? Do you have something in work?*

MG: A year ago, I would have said that I’m absolutely done, or ready to do something completely different just for the sake of doing something different. But I’ve realized that for better or worse, I spent a formative time of my youth in Iraq with the United States Army. So, whatever I write, even if it’s about gardening, that’s going to show up and be part of the text. That will be imbued in the writing.

I’m working on another novel. It’s a piece of dystopian literature about an America darker and more despondent than our own; it

touches upon some of these subjects—contemporary warfare, the relationship of veterans and civilians in a republic, terrorism—but it’s a homefront story, not an “over there” story. It’s an early draft; if I said more, it would probably just change.

ODT: *You told Susan Page [at NPR] that your advice for veterans who want to write their stories is that they shouldn’t be afraid to fail. And that “Talent’s great—but tenacity’s better.” But what else would you tell veterans who haven’t yet picked up the pen?*

MG: I would tell any aspiring writer, whatever their background: You need to read. Read anything and everything. Read to know what’s already out there, because you might find a kindred soul. And learn to read as a writer. That’s a turning point for anybody who’s trying to tell their story. You’re not just taking in a story; in many ways, you’re losing your reading innocence. You’re studying it, you’re critiquing it. You’re saying, *Oh, I really like the way this author presented this. Maybe this structure, this format, is something I could incorporate into my own work. It could also be just as helpful to realize, I don’t like this*, and to force yourself to figure out why you reacted so viscerally against this anecdote, or that voice.

ODT: *To go beyond “I wouldn’t like that painting in my living room.”*

MG: Exactly. I tell veterans I workshop who are just beginning—I’ve done this with my own work—it’s just a natural impulse. When you tell a story in a bar, it feels temporary. But there’s something about writing that makes the story feel very permanent. And early on, it’s a natural thing to present yourself and people close to you that you respect and value in a more positive light than they deserve, and an antagonist in a very nasty light.

This goes back to that reading advice: when you see that happen in a published work, it's very wooden, and obvious, and preachy—and nobody likes reading those kinds of stories. If you wouldn't like somebody presenting their story this way, and you've done that, how can you go back and flesh that out? Maybe that means being a little self-deprecating. Maybe if you hate that asshole colonel, give him a moment of shine, a little nuance and complexity. Learning how to read as a writer will ultimately benefit any writer, at whatever level or stage they're at with their own craft.

ODT: Thank you for your time.

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