



Cover artwork: Mary Ellen Sanger



**ENGLISH**  
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY



**WRITING CENTER**  
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

CHARLIE MIKE

A CSU English Department publication

# CHARLIE MIKE

SPRING 2020

SPRING 2020



**Welcome, readers,** to the first edition of *Charlie Mike*, a CSU Veterans Writing Workshop publication. The name of this journal comes from the phonetic-alphabet pronunciation of C-M, military-speak for Continue Mission. In a sense, that is what we are doing with this publication. Amplifying the voices of military-affiliated folks in the Fort Collins community. Providing a creative outlet for individuals who may still be feeling the effects of the military today. In this journal, we are bound by the commonality of service, though each individual experience is surely varied. Some of us are veterans, others family members or dependents. But we all have borne the burden of time in uniform, directly or indirectly. This is an opportunity to share our insights, our feelings, perhaps our hidden fears, with the world. Thank you for reading.



## Acknowledgments

Thank you Professors Sue Doe and Lisa Langstraat for launching this important and timely project. A big thanks, too, to the CSU English Department and Writing Center for allocating resources and creating the academic infrastructure to make this journal possible.

A resounding thanks to our donors, without whom no one would be reading this beautiful work:

- The American Legion Auxiliary Unit 1879, publishers of *Serve: Revisiting a Century of American Legion Auxiliary Cookbooks*, a hard-cover, coffee-table cookbook that honors a legacy, inspires conversation, and supports wellness programs for veterans.  
[www.ALAservcookbook.com](http://www.ALAservcookbook.com)
- Dr. Heather Richmond of Shen Nong Herbs & Acupuncture, a member of the VA Health Community Care Team. She runs a veteran-friendly office in Louisville, CO and supports those who have served. [www.shennongcare.com](http://www.shennongcare.com)
- Joey Diaz, a tennis teaching pro, both USPTA- and wheelchair-instructor-certified. Based out of Loveland, CO.  
[joevelocitydiaz@gmail.com](mailto:joevelocitydiaz@gmail.com)

A huge thanks to Laura Mahal for her tireless copyediting, and Mary Ellen Sanger for her stunning artwork and design. This journal owes its aesthetic sensibilities to both of these ladies. And thanks to SpeakOut!, under the guidance of Professor Tobi Jacobi, for serving as a model for the Veterans Writing Workshop. Finally, many thanks to Ann Diaz for her unwavering support in seeing this project through to completion.



## Table of Contents

*I Am Here*  
Janice Schilling  
**1**

*Coming Home*  
Stephen Vallée  
**3**

*Totaled*  
Manton Chambers  
**7**

*Yes, Noah*  
Ross Atkinson  
**8**

*Flyer Liar*  
Ryan Lanham  
**9**

*Hurry Up and Wait*  
Lori Feig-Sandoval  
**12**

*To the Kid Who Got Shot in the Eye*  
Marshall Spring  
**15**

*What Do I Want to Do with My Life*  
Paul Gessler  
**16**

*Into the Night*  
Laura Mahal  
**18**

*Still Life With Mass Graves*  
Kathleen Willard  
**26**

*Ghosts*  
Paul Gessler  
**27**

*Ripple Effect*  
Mary Scott  
**30**

*Communications Blackout*  
Ross Atkinson  
**31**

*Drink King*  
Ryan Lanham  
**34**

*A Good Old-Fashioned War Story*  
Ryan Bird  
**36**

*Lessons of Military Service*  
Paul Gessler  
**42**

*One Day Outside Pleiku*  
Stephen Vallée  
**44**

*Going Home*  
Janice Schilling  
**49**

*Surgical Strike*  
Kathleen Willard  
**51**

*Veteran: Confessions of an Identity Crisis*

Ryan Lanham

**52**

*The Day Monsters Climbed Out of My Forearm*

Laura Mahal

**55**

*A Rite of Passage*

Ross Atkinson

**57**

*The Vet*

Milt Mays

**58**

*Conformity*

Paul Gessler

**60**

*Uniformity*

Lori Feig-Sandoval

**62**

*Fear*

Paul Gessler

**65**

*In the Firelight*

Stephen Vallée

**66**

*Flag Fiend*

Ryan Lanham

**71**

*Memory and Muscle*

Ross Atkinson

**72**

*Their Letters*  
Kathleen Willard  
**73**

*Loving Failure*  
Marshall Spring  
**75**

*War and Sweetness*  
Laura Mahal  
**76**

*My Time in Afghanistan*  
Ross Atkinson  
**78**

*Music to End Wars*  
Lori Feig-Sandoval  
**80**

*Roses and Cookies*  
Milt Mays  
**84**

*War and the Senses*  
Stephen Vallée  
**87**

*On Viewing The First Photograph of the Atom Bomb, Trinity Test Site  
July 16<sup>th</sup> 1945 5:25:45 AM at the New Mexico Museum of Art*  
Kathleen Willard  
**91**

*A Day for Goodbyes: A Brief Journey from Tragedy to Triumph*  
James P. Blok  
**93**

*Attic Hat*  
Mary Scott  
**125**

*Almost*  
Ryan Lanham  
**127**

*Dear Robert James Near*  
Ross Atkinson  
**132**

*Bad Day*  
Janice Schilling  
**136**

*What Does War Do to Veterans?*  
Stephen Vallée  
**138**

*While in Venice the War*  
Kathleen Willard  
**142**

*Label: Veteran*  
Ross Atkinson  
**143**

*Trapped: Those Who Don't Want to Leave,  
but Find It Hard to Stay*  
Mary Scott  
**144**

*Trigger, Pause, Response*  
Lori Feig-Sandoval  
**146**

*Joseph Stern: Wager of Peace*  
Paul Gessler  
**149**

*Why Serve, Why Fight and Why Die*  
Stephen Vallée  
**153**

*Tiger Breath*  
Janice Schilling  
**157**

*Gravity*  
Ryan Lanham  
**159**

*Waiting*  
Mary Scott  
**160**

*Notes Towards a Libretto*  
Kathleen Willard  
**161**

*Afghanistan Internet Heist*  
Ross Atkinson  
**163**

*The Dream*  
Milt Mays  
**169**

Writer Biographies  
**175**





## *I Am Here*

Janice Schilling

I am here. Yes, I am here, trying to wake up and sort through my warp-speed brain chatter. I am swallowed by fear and guilt. For me, numb with no feelings is familiar and safe. I am standing, overwhelmed, looking at that wall of names. Breathless and afraid, I slump to the grass. The terror of knowing that far too many of those names on this wall occupied the same time and space with me. This is strangling. In the Nam, I saw only their dead bodies. No names. I want to scream to everyone, parents, wives, children, who are taking their still and somber journey, that I promise their loved ones never died alone. Those boy-soldiers who arrived from the field, impending death near, were placed behind a curtain where someone, a corpsman, clerk, or nurse stayed with them, holding their hand until the last breath. To this day I cherish the memories of those peaceful moments. For them the war was over. They were unaware that someday they would be a name on that wall.

I am here. I've had many opportunities to visit that wall. Many said it would be a place for healing my personal pain from this war. It could be a place to release the trapped memories of the year that changed my life forever. I am here now desperately searching for an angel of protection, shelter and security, but all I feel is the angel of death. A wall of morbidity and mortality.

I am here. As intrusive thoughts keep invading my deep need for healing, I remain low to the ground, paralyzed. I desperately want to tell their ghosts how sorry I am and that I too was young and inexperienced. Would their ghosts be forgiving when I whisper through my tears that I promise I did my best?

I am here. Feel the fear and do it anyway. I repeated these words quietly to myself in a mantra-like rhythm. Feel the fear and do it anyway. My breathlessness eventually subsides and breathing becomes even and non-labored, I begin to feel more alive. Exhausted and weak, I stand up and take one, two, three steps forward toward names etched in the column of the year they died. Years 1969 and 1970 are at the apex, which seems miles away. Steps four, five, six are much easier. Steps forward feel more empowering and steady. Arriving to years 1969 and 1970, looking up through my tears, I sense a gentle cool breeze and angelic sounds. A melody of voices saying we are not angry. They are soft sounds, firm yet calming and reassuring. I surrender to the melody to soothe me and guide me so that I can touch this granite structure, so strong and powerful. It is the place keeper for their names. Then, as if on cue, the sun's intense glare on the wall provides reflections and bright dancing prisms. It feels like being baptized with molecules of love, emotional energy and peace.

I am still here. Perhaps an hour, maybe more passes. The sun beginning to set. I sense the need to walk away now with the angels of peace and serenity by my side. In the present, I continue to struggle with my emotional war. I know healing is a process, but this journey is my beginning.

Welcome home, Janice.

# *Coming Home*

Stephen Vallée

Early in the day on June 1, 1968, I was called to see my ward sergeant, Ted. He wanted to make sure all the I's were dotted and all the T's were crossed on my orders for leaving Viet Nam. I was finally getting out of Pleiku. After a breakfast of Canadian Club whiskey, Ted poured me into a jeep for the Pleiku airbase and a flight to the "Repple Depple" at Cam Rahn Bay. "Repple Depple," by the way, is what we called the Replacement Depot.

Once there, my orders were again checked and cross-referenced to the flight manifest. Not a glitch to be found. I was assigned to a flight and primed to go home. After being assigned a billet for my overnight stay before boarding and a decent meal at the base mess, I spent the evening getting my class A uniform set with the ribbons, my fruit salad, in the right order and all my brass adjusted to the proper angle. For the trip home, I was going to be one Strak trooper, or to put it another way, I was going to be presentable.

The next morning, after a shower and coffee, I boarded the freedom bird, a Northwest Orient Airlines 707. Within a few minutes we were airborne and thrilled to hear the pilot announce that we had cleared Vietnamese airspace and we were headed home.

With just one stop in Tokyo to change crew and another stop in Anchorage to go through quarantine, the flight to McChord Air Force Base was uneventful. Our first surprise awaited us when we got off the plane. "Gentlemen, it is my sad duty to inform you that Robert Kennedy was shot and killed this morning," said the NCO in charge of getting us out of the airbase and on to Sea-Tac International Airport. Welcome home.

With no difficulty, I got a seat on an Eastern Airlines flight to Boston with stops in Chicago and Hartford. This flight was more

comfortable than the other and two stewardesses tended to fuss a bit over me. This I was to discover was virtually the last demonstration of kindness for quite a while.

Landing in Boston and retrieving my luggage was not a problem. Getting the shuttle to the Trailways bus terminal was also quite easy and uneventful. While buying my ticket at the bus terminal, the agent looked at my duffel bag and my flight bag and asked where I was coming from. I said that I was coming home from Viet Nam. He said, “So fucking what?”

The bus ride from Boston to Gardner was not very long but seemed a lot shorter than the ride from Gardner to the induction center a few years before. Arriving at the bus depot in Gardner, I felt a bit hungry, so I decided to go to the Colonial Hotel, where I had worked only a few short years before, and grab a bite in the coffee shop. Crossing the street, I went in and asked the desk clerk if I could leave my gear at the desk while I got some breakfast. One might have thought I had asked to hide the loot from the Brinks robbery. He hemmed and hawed until my cousin, Helen, came to the desk and hugged me until my stuffing almost fell out. She pushed my duffel and flight bag behind the desk and cussed out the clerk in French. A rough translation might be “Don’t you recognize Steve? He worked here for a couple of years. Of course, he can stow his stuff here.” With that Helen dragged me into the coffee shop and proceeded to get me a very good breakfast.

After eating I called my father and asked him to pick me up at the hotel. I would be waiting outside. While standing at the curb, I heard a driver yell, “Welcome home, sucker.” Within a few more minutes, the beat cop stopped and demanded to know what I was doing there. I answered that I was waiting for a ride. He then said that he was going to walk around the block, and I had best not be there when he returned

or he would run me in because I was most likely carrying something illegal.

By the time he returned, I was getting into my father's car. He told me to stop, spread my legs and put my hands on the roof of the car. My father looked at him and asked, "Stan, what in the name of hell do you think you are doing? This is my son and he just got back from the war." Right about then, he recognized my father and mumbled something before walking off. This was my first morning home after twenty months of war.

There were family gatherings that were supposed to be of the "welcome home to the conquering hero" variety. Almost, but not quite. Nearly all my uncles were veterans of WWII. Instead of listening to me talk out what I had done, all of them, my father included, decided that it was a better idea to trade war stories. So instead of me talking about an attack on Camp Holloway and those casualties, the push through the Ia Drang Valley and the NVA assaults on the Pleijerang outposts, I heard about Anzio, Sicily, North Africa and Okinawa. The others were just talking over me. I felt as if what I did had no significance.

Three of my aunts were also veterans. One, a Marine, asked if I had any dried VC ears. She told me that some Marines collected dried Japanese ears during the Pacific campaigns, and I should have some souvenirs too. She further told me that the Marines she knew had no qualms about killing women because they didn't value life like we did and asked if I had killed any. I was beginning to wonder why I had come back.

The hardest blow came when I was speaking to one of my mother's friends, a gracious older lady I had met before enlisting. She spoke of us killing women and children when we could find no Viet Cong or NVA

soldiers. She said that she did not think that appropriate at all. When I tried to tell her that I had never seen anything like what she described, she shushed me and said I was to never try to cover up for what we did and if I chose to persist in denying what she knew to be true, I was no longer welcome in her home.

These were a few incidents that happened when I returned to this country, my homeland. I felt like a stranger, an outsider, unwelcomed and unwanted. All I could do to survive with my family was to keep quiet and refuse to discuss my experiences, my thoughts, my feelings, my fears. Shutting down became a habit and keeping my thoughts, feelings and fears to myself became second nature. Soon, not only military experiences stayed quiet and secret, but everything else did as well. I could no longer share what I felt with anyone at all.

Finally, after about twelve years, I met with other some veterans who had similar stories and experiences. Together, we could talk and share and unburden ourselves and know that we were not alone, were not monsters, and were not deficient human beings. Instead we learned that we had been mistreated and ill-used, and it was time for us to demand of others and ourselves to, at long last, heal and again become whole and healthy.

## *Totaled*

Manton Chambers

Number of times I've wrecked a car: 1. Number of flutes I own: 7; know how to play: 2. Number of bands I've seen live: 5; enjoyed: 1. Number of girlfriends: 1. Number of hours married: 105,120. Number of children: 0. Number of college-level math classes: 1. Number of times I've drunk and drove: 47. Number of funerals I've attended: 4. Number of months outside the US: 46. Number of fidget toys in my coffee table drawer: 6. Number of close friends: 5. Number of times I've punched a wall: 5; regretted it afterwards: 5. Number of bicycles in my backyard: 1. Number of cars I've bought: 5; new: 3; used: 2. Number of miles on my Chevy Spark: 91,457. Number of times anxiety took over: 23. Number of days I missed school as a kid: 1,460. Number of paranoid mothers: 1. Number of siblings: 3. Number of orchids in my window: 14. Number of days spent in Baghdad: 790. Number of discharged ammunitions: 5.56 NATO: 0; M31 GMLRS rockets: 31; 155mm cannon: 86; 105mm cannon: 12; 120mm mortar: 162. Number of pilots I've cleared to shoot at people: 7. Number of disabilities recognized by the VA: 5. Number of years in therapy: 4. Number of human beings I've killed: 20; actively trying to kill me: 0; trying to kill others: 18; mother: 1; her daughter: 1. Number of US Dollars paid to the father: 5,000. Number of US Dollars for a single GMLRS rocket: 110,255. Number of elements in a call-for-fire: 6; subsequent corrections: 11. Number of times I've jumped out of a moving car: 2.

## *Yes, Noah*

Ross Atkinson

“Yes, Noah, I went to Afghanistan.”

There is a tenacious quality to the curiosity of a fourteen-year-old boy.

“Did you carry a gun?”

“Yes, Noah, I carried a weapon.”

The same question always presents itself.

“Did you kill anyone?”

It reminds me of firing a weapon without ear protection. The noise, harsh and abating. The distinct blast. The relentless and lingering ringing.

“No, Noah, not that I know.”

“So you didn’t kill anyone?”

We become so accustomed to the deadened sounds from behind the foam filter fixed in our ears. We forget that without that filter, the sound is painfully familiar, an audible reminder of our actions.

“But you fired your gun at someone though, right?”

I can’t help but wonder, are these the unfiltered thoughts that lie behind every, “Thank you for your service?” Does every civilian want to pull the trigger?

“Yes, Noah, I fired my weapon.”

Do they know the truth of the blast?

Are they aware of the lingering ring?

## *Flyer Liar*

Ryan Lanham

*Bomb.* Can't say it. Everyone knows that. The reality of a post-9/11 world. A tired trope in comedy sketches. But I do say it. And I say it in the one place we all know is a definite no-no.

Aboard a plane.

Here's the rub: I'm talking about the military. About our training, battle drills and how to react during an ambush. I'm also heavily drunk and chatting up the girl next to me. Trying to impress her with talk of danger.

But the plan backfires. Or misfires. It's a late-night flight and when the lights go down in the cabin a few readers toggle overhead lamps. Mostly it goes dark. I flag the stewardess for another vodka shooter. I'm on two-week vacation from the army. It's our last block leave before deployment. Also been a year since I've been with a woman. One of my longer dry spells.

Desperation is a stinky cologne, so they say, and I'm laying it all on this gal. Looking back, I can't imagine she was into me. Just shy of thirty. Balding. Mid-stomach pudge of a boozehound. Private in the United States military. My guess is she was early twenties. Happened to draw the unlucky seat. Happened to be flying to the same hometown. Happened to be awake and listening to talk of a roadside bomb when the lady in front of us loses her shit. Flips her fucking wig.

"Shut the fuck up!" she screams. "Just shut the fuck up!"

I see her bouncing in the chair. I feel the anger rising off her scalp. It starts to dawn on me that her behavior, her words, are somehow tied to me, to what I'm saying. I try to recall what I was just talking

about, but it's like chasing a fading dream. I know it's military-related but particulars escape me.

A woman in plain clothes materializes out of thin air. Appears next to me, leans in and hisses, "If you don't want to be arrested right here, right now, then you better go to sleep."

I don't know much, but I know she means business. There's weight to her words. To her presence. Scarier than most drill sergeants.

A question bubbles up in my brain. I start to form the words in my mouth, nearly give them flight with tongue.

"Uh-uh," she says, so close I can feel her hot breath. "You go to sleep *right now*."

I feel a tremor of terror. A sting of panic. Usually, these I-fucked-up-big-time moments come in the morning. After the hangover haze has lifted. But I feel it now, in the heat of drunkenness.

I comply, lean back, and in a minute I'm asleep.

When the plane lands and passengers deboard, I'm detained in the cabin. The mystery woman identifies herself as a US Air Marshal, a federal law enforcement agent who travels undercover to ensure the safety of cabin and crew. And she looks utterly fed up with my shit.

"You know why I'm detaining you?"

"Because I was drunk and loud."

"No," she says, crossing her arms. "Because you said *bomb*."

It hits me. The severity of the situation. I suddenly get it.

So I do what I do in the face of authority. I lie.

"Sorry ma'am," I start. "Just returned from Iraq. Been drinking too much."

Her face softens a bit.

"You a veteran, then?"

“No ma’am. Active duty. Going home to see my family, first time since the war.” It’s a brazen lie. I haven’t deployed yet. Almost feels too easy. “Got to talking to the girl next to me and told her about IEDs. Was a roadside bomb that killed my team.”

There it is. A gift-wrapped, vacuum-sealed, stamp-of-approval excuse. The gold standard in Yellow Ribbon America. Troubled war hero back from duty. Heavily boozed. Broken and unaware of his surroundings. Unable to wipe *bomb* from his memory. Certainly not his vocabulary.

“Well, son,” she says. “I know you boys have it tough over there. Still, can’t be saying *bomb* like that on a plane.”

“Yes, ma’am. You’re right. Can’t do that nowadays.”

She lets out a long sigh, deflated. Takes a motherly tone with the rest of the scolding.

We nearly hug as I step off the plane.

## *Hurry Up and Wait*

Lori Feig-Sandoval

I heard “Hurry up and wait” a lot as an Air Force brat. I suppose that it is a military maxim because a soldier must be prepared, sometimes in less than no time, and yet not be anxious for action. Get ready now, for forthcoming unknown orders, and stay put. Many Eastern teachings emphasize being serene in the midst of change: Be the mountain standing unmoved by the storms swirling around it; the universe unfolds as it does. Disruptions which seem even tragic often have their own logic, borne out over time . . . their own silver lining *yins* to unsettling *yangs*. The world involves both energies, daily: swirling and stillness, hurrying and waiting.

“If you can keep your head, when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you; if you can trust yourself when all men doubt you, but make allowance for their doubting too; if you can wait, and not be tired by waiting . . .” These are the first lines to my favorite poem, “If,” by Rudyard Kipling. I say that poem from memory a few mornings a week, during my mini-yoga routine when I try to balance in Tree Pose, one foot up and pressed against the opposite leg, the other foot grounded, working to keep me from wobbling. Some days I am steady; other days, inexplicably, I am not.

Kipling’s poetic directives make it easier, to my mind, to find a core calm in this chaotic world, mostly by specifying actions and examples that cultivate character, the kind you’d want in a catastrophe. Kipling seems a sage, and a bit of a Taoist; his wisdom rings true for any generation. Years ago, I required our then-teenaged son to memorize “If.”

Kipling’s words on waiting are the opposite of action; they say to wait, and to not tire of waiting. At times we must let go of timelines

and adapt. Just wait, and see. No use struggling against reality, against perceived “obstacles” which are, in fact, happening.

Just wait as a nature photographer waits for a fleeting shot, for the geyser to erupt, or for the eagle to turn its beak toward the light; or wait as patient and still as a predator awaiting its prey; or wait as the photographer in the darkroom must wait for the chemical reaction to create the image. Nothing to do, except wait.

Pop and rock music have their own anthems to waiting, the oldest I know being: “You Can’t Hurry Love,” “. . . no you just have to wait . . . you gotta just give it time, no matter how long it takes.” Based on a gospel tune’s lyrics, the song was recorded in the 1960s by Motown stars, The Supremes, for whom it was a hit, and was rerecorded in the 1980s by Phil Collins, whose version also went to number one on the charts. It’s certainly a catchy tune, but also, its lyrics are apparently perennially relevant. Guns N’ Roses, not famous for Peace N’ Quiet, sing serenely that we ought to “. . . take it slow and it’ll work out fine; all we need is a little patience,” in their song . . . (wait for it) . . . “Patience.” Not that the patience to wait is easy, as Tom Petty acknowledged in “The Waiting,” in which he sings “the waiting is the hardest part . . . you take it on faith and you take it to the heart.” So, in love, and indeed in life, the heart must be patient.

I have less patience than I’d like. I am, however, becoming more skilled at catching my impatience and pausing, and breathing deep, whenever waiting makes me anxious. Recently on a hurried evening bike ride, one on which I was close to being late for a class, I had stopped at a red traffic light, waiting for it to change, watching the cars drive by . . . more cars, more time, more tardy . . . more heartbeats per minute . . . and then I realized I was clenching the handlebar with the hand which wasn’t repeatedly pushing the pedestrian button to halt traffic.

I relaxed my grip, put both feet on the ground, and told myself, breathe deep, and check out the scene: low slants of golden sunlight filtering through leafy evergreens; college kids laughing as they walk; the day's deepening, dusky colors at close of a balmy day. When I rode on, I was "at ease," grateful for the beauty; and, I was on time.

So whenever I can remember, I reframe "Hurry up and wait." Now it means, "Hasten to a state of presence; embrace waiting as a chance to pay attention to the moment." I notice that in counteracting antsiness with mindful stillness, I acquire a particular equanimity (ok, maybe only until next time . . .). I have learned that I can wait, and not be tired (or annoyed, or anxious) by waiting. I can wait, and also be at ease.

*To the Kid Who Got Shot in the Eye*

Marshall Spring

I don't know who shot you in the eye.

I don't know how old you are, but I know you are too young  
to be here.

I don't know why you shot at me, but I know you never will again.

I don't know what you could have been, but I know you won't.

I don't know why you thought it was a good idea to shoot at group of  
US Marines but it wasn't.

I don't know how angry or sad or deluded you must have been  
but I know I wish you hadn't.

## *What Do I Want to Do with My Life*

Paul Gessler

Here I am in a college classroom, auditing a veterans creative writing class. But what needs to be expressed is my story as it is being revealed to me in my “retirement” years. I can look out and see the students walking the walkway. How many of them are lost?

There were many times I’ve felt lost. Even on a pilgrimage with a defined path, people get lost. But I feel welcome in this workshop, even though writing poetry, a letter to the editor, or an op-ed piece is what I prefer to do. I’m here with my veteran brethren and sisters. There is a sense of urgency to write a narrative, yet I feel a certain anxiety being absent of my comfortable sacred space; a place for the monk to contemplate their existence. That’s my safe place. It is somewhat terrifying, doing these assignments. But I’ve learned from my contemplative pilgrims, our stories are sacred and vitally needed—that to sit back and contemplate and speculate would be a selfish act.

Not that I was lost, but I am beginning to fully come home, from a trauma point of view, after forty years in the wilderness. I was lost when I got out of the Air Force. I had become a conscientious objector to the military mission and what it stood for, but I was lost and needing direction. I was lost, but I left it up to a higher spiritual power for direction. After settling in Fort Collins and having been given counsel by a real life metaphysician, I embarked on a path of self-reliance through writing poetry. I was 1800 miles away from family, but I trusted this new place. I was a transplant yet not really alone. I was free and on my own. My whole life was now in front of me.

What do I want to do with my life?

Turns out that looking back at this juncture of life, it was to become a True American. To become a spiritual pilgrim and a poet, like my father, only it would be one step and one story at a time.

## *Into the Night*

Laura Mahal

At halftime, their school was down 3-45. What was the point in staying? Life was ripe with other options. Three sixteen-year-old boys and one girl, wearing sashes of Homecoming court, these kids were as close to royalty as one could find in the democratic United States. Where popularity is a factor, but even philosophy-loving Transcendentalists could make the cut.

Pizza beckoned, and the group of four piled into the girl's car, abandoning the marching band who piped and drummed songs of abiding loyalty.

Laughing, they rolled down windows and let in the Colorado fall. A crisp thirty-five degrees, sunset orange skies, the kind of weather that makes one feel like storming a castle or summiting a mountain is nothing but a thing.

When all that remained of their shared meal was a greasy slab of aluminum, covered in cheese-splotched wax paper, the train whistle sounded.

Long and low, pitched to carry across the intersections of Old Town, the whistle repeated. A pigeon's coo at night . . . ceaseless for a time, meant to get under one's skin and draw attention to the metallic hurl. Night-drawn, the lights pierced through the pizza parlor for ten, fifteen seconds. And two of the three boys were off.

Running, hollering, "Watch us!" as they leapt aboard an open car. Soccer players, athletic and balanced. The same two soccer players, performers in the auditorium for parents, staff, and students alike. Showing off for their friends.

“Don’t be stupid. Jump off!”

But the train sped on, into the north, into the darkness.

Into the wind and the cold of a Western winter’s night.

\*\*\*

The girl raced to her car, started the engine. “Get in! Track them!”

The sole boy who had managed his id, his not-yet-finalized mental pathways—he got to work. Fingers flashing, like the quick clicks of magnetic rotation moving trains forward, he looked up techniques.

How to get off a train without dying.

*Don’t ride the rails, if you value your life.*

*Fines start at \$1,000. Jail time up to thirty days.*

*Vortex generated by the rails sucks in vagrants, who tumble to their deaths.*

He started fresh.

How to safely jump off a train.

*Factor in speeds. Get a running start. Avoid bridges and trestles.*

*Avoid alcohol and drugs, which depress reflexes and impair judgment.*

Okay, he could work with this.

“Cheyenne. They must be on their way to Cheyenne,” she said as she GPSed a route.

She had to head east to go north.

Mulberry to I-25. Speed limit, seventy-five.

She went ninety.

\*\*\*

“My phone’s at 18%. [Boy Two]’s is out of battery.”

Though the journey was smooth, Boy One’s voice shook. The train hummed, a plucked guitar string, but the speed was shocking.

Telephone poles were wagging fingers. *Stupid boys. Reckless boys.* Lights were a thing of memory. It was so dark that the looming poles were the only identifiable markers. If antelope were grazing, they were unconcerned with the boys' fate.

"Can you see a sign that says the name of the railroad? Is there a number you can call?"

"Can't see anything."

"Are there any places up ahead where you think you might jump?"

"No. We went through a town, but when I reached my leg toward the ground, the rocks tore off the top of my shoe. We never slowed down."

"What are you holding on to?"

A pause.

"Some metal ropes. And each other." That delivered in a tone of defeat.

A couple of boys, who a short while ago were watching a Homecoming game, walking across the football field as the loudspeaker warbled their names, representatives of their junior class. An honor, public praise. Which necessitated dressing up, looking good.

No coats. No hats. No gloves.

Earlier in the day, they were fighting over the implicit worth of *Into the Wild*. Was Chris McCandless a hero or a fool? Metaphorical discussions. Alaska and 1992 were far away, long ago. These were Snapchat and TikTok teens. Yeah, maybe living alone in a bus had its appeal. Boy One was co-president of the Philosophy Club. Life was possibility. Grab it and live.

"Get off the phone. Save your battery. I'm trying to figure out what you should do."

The boy, the one in the car with heated seats, racing toward the Colorado/Wyoming state line, took a deep breath.

“You might want to call your parents.”

\*\*\*

Mom was unreasonably antsy. Her son was to be home by midnight. It was 11:55 p.m.

She was prepared to lecture him when he strolled in, late. Always asking for an extension to any pre-agreed curfew.

When her phone buzzed, she ignored it. She was listening to an audiobook about Dorothea Lange—a documentary photographer who made her name by capturing images of migrant workers in the Great Depression, some of whom jumped the rails in search of work.

Desperate people. Desperate times.

*Damn him. I'm listening to my book.*

Mom was an ex-MP. In the thirty years she'd been out of the Army, she'd never managed to find the off switch for guard duty. Insomnia would kill her one day, if her kids didn't first. No matter how many times they told her to go bed, they'd be fine, she could not sleep until everyone was under the same roof. They called it her obsession.

Ten minutes later, her husband strode into the room where she was cuddling the cat, pretending she was not a parent with responsibilities to shape and nurture a teenage boy.

“[Girl's] mother just called. Our son is on a train, headed for Cheyenne.”

Mom's feet snapped to the floor, throwing the screeching cat onto the carpet, claws and tail covered by a blanket that slipped from Mom's hands.

“On a train?”

The audiobook kept playing. Earbuds forgotten, streaming something about bulls hired to climb aboard boxcars, big burly men who would beat up any hobos who thought a free ride or a warm shelter might be allowed them . . .

They rushed downstairs, neither of them thinking straight. Every terrible scenario scrolling across their mental television screen. Logic was far away, frozen out by a cold garage floor, a search for shoes, the quest for a wallet and keys.

Mom's car was full of stuff, the detritus of a busy and carefree life. Her passenger seat was piled with her briefcase and books.

So they took Dad's car.

They had to stop for gas.

\*\*\*

"Son, where are you now?"

Silence.

"I don't know."

"What is your battery level?"

"Four percent."

Mom sobbed. She tried to keep quiet. Bluetooth would give her away.

Never could she know her son was wracked with shivers, identical to hers.

But he was in forty-five mile per hour winds. Clinging to an icy and rough metal rope. Knowing he and his friend needed to jump before they froze to death or lost their grip and fell on the rails.

Holding tight to Boy Two, who couldn't reach either of his parents.

"I love you, Dad and Mom. I'm sorry."

Her tears flung out, to the dashboard, to the night.

“You can do this, Son. Hang on. We’re on our way.”

*Don’t jump, she prayed. Wait for us. We’ll find a way to save you.*

\*\*\*

“We’ve got to jump under the lights. It’s our only chance.”

Cheyenne surrounded them, but not the historic section with the wide streets and the preserved buildings. They were in rough-cut country. A car dealership. Shady businesses with neon lights, letters missing, so “Shogun’s Inn” flashed “Sin.”

The trestle approached, with feet to spare, before an unknown drop into nothingness.

“Together?” asked Boy Two.

Letting go of the metal lifeline that had sustained them for more than ninety frigid minutes, the rope reluctant to release them—they ran on a diagonal, as the boy in the car had advised on their final call. His words reverberating in their numb ears.

*You’ve got to leap out, far enough to escape the suction. Sprint like your life depends on it. Like triple jump; like you’re hurdling.*

*Don’t hesitate. You can’t miss.*

They had heard the “Good luck” he did not say, before the screen went blank, cracked from the cold and from Boy One’s fierce grip.

Their feet struck gravel.

Sliding, their ankles embedded deep, pivoting 135 degrees. The geometry of precision. Academic knowledge that helped not a lot with life.

Real life. Not a McCandless journey, but this night, which ran long and dark.

Their feet rotated and scraped, gravel reaching their calf muscles, which twisted and strained. The sucking beast, more powerful

than sixteen-year-olds, yawning its maw of metal. Equally eager to cross the trestle and make its way north, to the Dakotas, to Montana, to the Northern Lights of oil fields and wealth and the ticking economy of untapped natural gas.

The train moved past.

The boys stayed, 135 degrees from facing Sin.

Their feet warm from impact. From a blanket of slurry, dust and trash and bird droppings.

Broken ankles—maybe wrists. Scratched hands, bloody scratched hands they hadn't even realized were thrust forward, glued to imaginary dots on a replicated Twister game, their bodies one upon another in awkward angles. Not something safe to do in Wyoming, maybe, because the implications could be deadly.

Yet for a moment, they were liberated, laughing.

Ecstatic with the ruthless joy of survival.

*Into the Wild*, *Into the Dark Night*, seemed a perfectly logical adventure.

This was, after all, an adventure, right?

Because they had lived.

No way to reach their friends. No way to reach their parents.

They could sort that out later.

\*\*\*

*I killed my kid*, Mom thought, as she and her husband rushed up the highway. *Failed to save him, because I was asleep at the switch.*

She set aside her mothering heart and donned an imaginary Army Service Uniform, preparing to comfort a girl and boy who should have been out partying after the Homecoming game, instead of driving across state lines and facing the permanent loss of their two friends.

She planned what she would say to the girl's parents, who were on their way to meet them in Cheyenne. What could she possibly tell Boy Two's parents, who still thought their kid was safe and sound—never knew of the freezing journey north—their son's last quest? It was her duty to break the news.

The whistle of a train cut the night in two.

Mom would never sleep again.

## *Still Life With Mass Graves*

Kathleen Willard

When all is said and done  
and the dictator mounts the podium  
in a brief blur of victory, the earth works  
overtime absorbing the grief,  
the faint whimpering of the dead,  
rattles the branches  
of winter trees.

The evergreens wrapped in the tinfoil  
of snow, their brittle branches  
bends palming the ground  
taking its pulse  
as gossip of killing fields  
is finally made truth.

How can I construct a life?  
Each morning: snow, brittle branches,  
the mouths of the dead  
floating to the edge of the earth's crust,  
open, anguished, unable to utter  
anything.

## *Ghosts*

Paul Gessler

I had just gotten off a graveyard shift, ironically, and was driving back to the barracks. It was 7:30 in the morning. There was a four-way stop. There was a car with two airmen stopped in the oncoming lane. There was no other car coming in at 9 o'clock or 3 o'clock. When I passed the vehicle with the two airmen, they seemed stiff and like mannequins, pale and lifeless. This bothered me. I passed it off as a sleep-deprived hallucination.

It didn't come clear until years later when dealing with my own military trauma. Our communication squadron had lost two of our members after they were killed by a drunk driver off base. One of them was in my team of communication repairmen. We didn't talk about it. It's a part of American life. You can get killed as easily on the road as in a foreign country doing your duty. Those two mannequins in the car were ghosts.

They were my team members.

We didn't grieve them. We needed to grieve them. This understanding all came about in the last seven years since turning 60 and meeting a man in the nursing home by the name of Doc. Doc had Parkinson's disease. I was playing piano during Sunday lunch at the facility and would visit with Doc and his loyal physicist friend, Jerry. Doc had served in the Army in the 50s. He had gotten a good job and loved going for rides on his motorcycle.

Doc crashed his motorcycle and nearly lost his life. In his near-death experience, as he described it, he saw the light and thereafter had the new ability to read people's auras, and counsel and recommend

dietary protocols in his healing-psychic work with people. In addition to healing by reading auras, Doc could see ghosts. Doc would laugh unabashedly when asked if he saw ghosts in the nursing home.

“It’s my karma. I’m telling them all the time to go to the light. At least one every day.” It was true. All the nurses and CNAs would love to come in and take care of Doc, because Doc would take care of them in some soulful, spiritual way. His favorite request was to pull his arms. That’s how much Doc wanted to hold on to life. He wanted to feel that connection.

When I had told Doc about my starting a Veterans For Peace Chapter, he was genuinely interested. I had shared my experience with Doc about the ghost airmen. He concurred with my image of the ghosts being white and like paintings or mannequins. When I was six years old, I was exploring my great-grandmother’s house. Her surviving daughter, my great-aunt Helen, lived there all alone. As I walked into what was a vacant room, I was startled to see two older women in their nightgowns, white and lifeless, in the room. This scared the dickens out of me, and I made a fast trip down the back staircase and outside to play.

Doc confirmed that we have a greater propensity to see ghosts when in our innocent years. Doc helped me reaffirm a belief in the real nature of the psychic world. These ghost appearances were significant on my spiritual journey. Like PTS, the ghost appeared, and it seemed like something wrong with me at first. Then I sought the deeper message and reason for it happening.

The lessons I’ve learned from these ghosts have changed over the years. It’s a form of honoring those who went before. We all deserve to be mourned and grieved. When the ghosts of my mother’s ancestors manifested, it was the spiritual world demonstrating to me poignantly

of its existence. The ghosts of America's collective past will keep appearing till we properly and fully grieve and move forward. It is an essential element of honoring those who went before.

Thank you, Veterans.

## *Ripple Effect*

Mary Scott

He sits at supper, fork in hand.  
Quiet but at attention—a remnant of military days.

He is in but outside of it all: his son, his wife, his daughter—  
all of us chewing, laughing, interrupting.

My eyes flash to his—suddenly an observer I don't want to be.  
Something captures me, something shining in one eye: a glint of light,  
igniting hope that he's aware, that he's still here.

No, no, it's water; water falling, sliding slowing down an unmoving  
face, cheeks soft, lips parted, about to say “. . . stop; stop these  
thoughts; soothe my heart.”  
He's disappearing. I don't want him to go. And I don't understand.

But silence is no friend of clarity, so I keep watch:  
watching the water slipping and landing—soft “tch”s on a cold plate  
beside untouched potatoes and overcooked beans,  
unnoticed except by the dog at his feet.

Then hesitantly, then quickly, more falls and I am cringing . . .  
watching him frozen but now visible to those who can no longer  
ignore the leaking faucet: a family who steal their hearts away to save  
themselves, his pride and me.

Me, so young, who loved him—his gentle smile and his pain—now  
without him.  
Left with the ripples that still move within me,  
creating the sway and balance of life.

###

## *Communications Blackout*

Ross Atkinson

To ensure the military can keep control over information regarding a service member's death, everyone in the deceased service member's company goes on a communications blackout immediately following the event. This is to ensure the military can inform the next of kin before Facebook can. I got to learn about this protocol firsthand when my good friend Robert Near took his own life on January 7, 2011. We had traveled together through the crucible of military training, followed one another to our first duty station in Ft. Huachuca, Arizona, and had been in Afghanistan for nine months and six days when he decided to smoke his last three cigarettes, place the cold steel barrel of his M16 in his mouth and pull the trigger. Despite the communications blackout, my platoon leader, a young West Point graduate who will almost certainly be running the DOD eventually, decided to travel to the little remote base I was on in Northern Afghanistan. He informed my section sergeant, another amazing leader from Newport News, Virginia, who then informed me, rather bluntly, of Robert's untimely death.

“PFC Near is dead,” he said.

“Wow, that sucks,” was my response.

I would like to say that my first thoughts following the news were of grief or remorse, but that would be a lie. And it would be a lie I told often to save myself the trouble of explaining the truth. I lied for a long time about those first thoughts and feelings because they confused and disgusted me. In that moment, when my platoon leader and section sergeant informed me that one of two people to follow me through my military career from basic training to Afghanistan had taken his own life, I felt indifference. It was not disbelief or an unwillingness to accept

what I had been told, like I hear many people feel in moments like this one. What I felt was a cold indifference to my good friend's death, a friend so close that my platoon leader and section sergeant were willing to break the rules of a communication blackout to inform me, a private in the U.S. Army, of his passing. I felt nothing. Looking back, I think that for too long I had been living in a war-torn world that precipitated a need for indifference, and I was a good upstanding citizen of this world.

Hooah.

It was not until I started receiving condolences from other soldiers, and, eventually, Robert's own sister, that I began to realize how close we really were—a weird and distant realization at the time. It felt like a life once lived that no longer belonged to the person I had become. I started to feel wrong.

But it was not until I was afforded an opportunity to call my mother when I realized how wrong I felt. I lied over the phone to my own mother. I described to her a pain I did not harbor and a sorrow that never found its way to my heart. She echoed my false pain with her very real pain, which was harder to endure than hearing about Robert's death. She told me a story of Robert from over a year before, when he came to my hometown of Las Vegas to have Thanksgiving dinner with my family. He could not afford a flight to Washington State to see his own, so I invited him to mine. This was a story I had forgotten about a friend I couldn't afford to remember, and a story that pulled my humanity off the shelf where it had rested, undisturbed, for over ten months.

I did not know what to do with myself when my lie of pain and sorrow suddenly became a reality I had to face. I needed to understand how I felt. I needed to reconstruct myself, and I did not know how. That is when I found writing. I turned to the pen and the page both for solace

and because viewing my own thoughts on a page created a scaffold for my true feelings. Many of those pages would be unreadable to anyone but myself; they are blotched and scratched with grief and anger, and they are scribbled in almost incomprehensible prose damaged by long dried tears. I felt something. That something hurt, and sometimes it seemed unbearable, but I knew what I felt was truly me, not just the citizen of the terrible world I was now part of.

I continued to document my experiences through the final months of that long year, and I took the time to go back and reflect on any part of that time where I still felt unsure or confused about who I was. When I enlisted in the military, I had nothing going for me. I was barely a high school graduate, boasting an impressive 1.9 GPA and a truancy list a page long. Now, I am a first-year doctoral student and a licensed secondary education teacher. I know my service left me with scars, some visible and some not, but every one of those scars helped build the passionate student, educator, and researcher I am today, and I have come to realize that I like that person—something I could not have said before that horribly enlightening year. Something I could not have said before I found my humanity again, before I lost an amazing friend, before I found writing, and before I realized that in order to make sense of a terrible, destructive situation, I had to make sense of my own intrinsic feelings.

I have thought much about my time in Afghanistan and about the role Robert's death played in shaping the person I have become, and I sometimes feel guilty. I feel guilty that his passing helped me find my passion for writing and educating. I feel guilty that I lost myself, and in the process, lost him. I feel guilty about all the emails he sent me from the other side of Afghanistan that I was too busy to respond to. The only reprieve I have from this guilt is that now I can remember the friend he truly was.

## *Drink King*

Ryan Lanham

We arrive back in New York in late December. Santa bringing home his troops. A bunch of little elves in digi-camo. Big black guns and shiny gold bullets. Toy soldiers. Little kid dreams come to life.

A massive crowd waits in an airport reception hall with tri-color flags to welcome home their heroes.

We step off the plane, air full of cheers and confetti. An energy of cult-like adoration for those in uniform.

The boisterous crowd pushes in. We smush together like metalheads in a mosh pit. The blob presses forward. Hands extend overhead holding beers. Offering me the poison I tried to leave behind when I joined the war machine. Somehow thought a deployment death dance would set my alcoholic mind straight.

I turn the first one down. A Budweiser. King of Beers. Red and white label on sweating bottle. Cool, crisp, refreshing. Gold crown atop the all-American logo.

I push forward. Try to sneak away. But everywhere I turn, more hands.

Hey hero, have a beer. A shot. A cold one. Knock back a few. You've earned it. Proud of what you did over there.

Oh yeah. Are you? What do you know about what I did over there?

Do you know about the kids we killed? The money we paid the parents? Do you know about the drugs, the late-night binges? Bet you can't guess what's in my ass right now.

Your what?

Yeah, you heard that right. I've smuggled a baggie of knockoff Indian-made Xanax in my *culo*. Can't wait to find a shitter to take it out. Never thought I'd be a mule in the drug game, but here we are. Tell you what, give me the goddamn beer.

First sip is so good. So delicious. Presses all the right circuits in the brain. Gone in two gulps.

How about another? You've got another don't you. Keep 'em coming. One ain't gonna do it. Not tonight boys. Not tomorrow either. That first domino's just toppled and there ain't no stopping what's about to come. Unleash the beast. Isn't that what they say?

Well the beast is here folks. It's me. It's us. It's you. No disengaging from the war machine. We're all gears, all cogs, all fodder for the fight. Bow down to the Yellow Ribbon god and give up your firstborn. Hell, give up your secondborn. Your sons, your daughters. There ain't no sating the machine. It feeds, needs to feed. Must feed to stay alive.

Bloodweiser. King of Fears. Goes down easy every time.

Now where's the goddamn latrine.

## *A Good Old-Fashioned War Story*

Ryan Bird

You want to hear a war story, eh? Ok, I've got a few of those I can share. It was October in northern Afghanistan. The rocks looked as vacant and bland as they always do, nothing to see here. We were holed up in a small forward operating base (FOB) in Panjshir, Afghanistan. Attached to an Air Force Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). Most of our job entailed going to a small village about five miles north and teaching the Afghan National Police (ANP) the basics of military combatives, so you know, they can be more American and such.

We geared up and rolled out at 1330 on a Thursday. The Air Force had their hands on these sweet up-armored Toyota SUVs: gloss black in a three vehicle convoy. Felt presidential as fuck. And it was a hell of a lot more comfy than our usual broke dick Humvees. Anyway, we are driving down, for the most part, single-track but paved curvy road through the mountains. Nothing seems different than any other week. Same run-down shacks on the side of the road. Children shadow stepping between huts and rubbish. Those sheep with the extra flap of wool over their ass staring blankly with their foolish-looking rectangle eyes as we pass. Trash frequently piled alongside the road and just as frequently wafting across it. All that training of how to spot IEDs goes out the window in practice. Literally everything looks like it wants to blow the fuck up at any second.

Pairs of old frail hajjis with peppered gray beards, under tarp canopies drinking chai and smoking knock-off Korean cigarettes, stare as we pass. The way they turn their heads and never break eye contact, even behind black tinted windows, always drove me nuts for some

reason. Must be the American in me. My battle buddy, Rend, sits next to me bitching about how he lost half a pack of cigarettes last time because he “just fucking forgot to take them outta my pocket, dude,” before he rolled with one of the “bullshit ANP boys.” Sergeant Smith rides TC (truck commander; passenger seat), and our squad shitbag, McFlorence, mans the helm. He always smells. We all do after being out in the field for weeks without showers but this guy, this guy never showers. His stocks in B.O. are high and deodorant, low. Brutish personified. I could go on, but you get the point.

As we reach the first suburb to the main village, we have about two miles of open mountain road left to traverse. About a mile out of the suburb it begins. I’m looking off to the right trying to admire the sheer cliffside of the mountain as I hear the whistle, the sound of Allah himself trying to “shhhhhush” you out of existence with an RPG, the deafening boom following closely behind. It landed between the first and second truck, disabling the latter.

Go time, baby.

We dismount, setting up defensive postures to assess what kind of threat we are going against. More often than not, it’s a hit-and-run by a couple of kids just trying to make a few bucks from the Taliban. This time was different. Almost as soon as we dismount, the cracks of small arms fire rain down on the road and trucks like someone threw a brick of firecrackers out. I hear McFlorence scream, “I’m hit! I’m hit! Motherfuckers got my leg!” Rend grabs the back of his collar and drags him to my side of the truck as I spray a whole mag from my M4 for some covering fire. I look down as I reload. It appears to be a flesh wound, calf. He’ll be fine, just needs some gauze stuffed in there. Bullets continue to hail. I pop up to see how the other trucks are doing. All

accounted for over the radio as return fire commences into the void of rocks and rubble. No visible enemies, just a sporadic viewing of muzzle flashes in and out of the rocks. Whizzing, cracks and pops constantly as I yell at Rend to stop patching up McFlorence and start firing back.

With blood-soaked hands, he grabs his rifle and posts up to the rear of the truck and covers our rear flank. Sgt. Smith radios back to the FOB to give an account of the situation and to call the Quick Reaction Team (QRT) for backup. He gets hit. Took a slug to the shoulder as he slid down the wheel well of the truck. He yelled his curses and grabbed his shoulder. I duck down and check him out. Flesh wound again. He yells to me to “keep fucking firing!” as I snap my head back to my sights and start plinking off rounds. The noise again of Allah’s deadly shush—SHHHHHHUSH—another RPG, this time missing flying directly over my head and hitting the cliff behind me.

I can’t hear shit.

It’s that Saving Private Ryan kind of deafness and ringing. Shit sucks ass. I see mouths moving but don’t know what the fuck is going on. I empty another mag and as I crouch down to reload, my hearing recovers halfway, but is accompanied by the mind-numbing ringing. Through the chaos, I hear Sgt. Smith call for indirect fire support, repeating the coordinates of the enemy. These motherfuckers are in for a surprise now.

Sgt. rolls into the prone position behind the right front tire and starts laying the hate with one hand on his rifle and the other clutching his shoulder. Rend sweeps around to the left rear of the truck. The main focus of the threat is coming directly from the 11 o’clock position from our vehicle. McFlorence manages to get to his feet and is returns fire as well, all the while screaming all the racist slurs imaginable. I pop back

up to continue firing as well when I see him. A visible human being, an enemy, scrambling from one rock to another downhill towards our position. I lined him up, the red dot of my sights on his chest.

Pull.

Fire.

He goes down.

That's it. That's all it is, and now there's one less human on the other side.

A faint whistle with the volume gaining ground, this one more of a high-pitched whistle followed by a massive boom and a vibration in my chest that I'll never forget. Go to an electronic dance music concert and stand chest touching a subwoofer and you might get close to the sensation. The mortars are coming in. 120mm's of High Explosive, fuck your day up, saving our ass, beauty. One after another, the whistle and coinciding BOOM hit. We cheer, scream our victory hymns and continue unloading onto the mountain side. QRT shows up and we pack up the second squad, thermite the disabled truck and head back to the FOB. And that was battle. Thirty minutes of chaos and pain that will last in my brain until I die.

*Except it won't.*

*This never happened.*

This is just one of the stories I tell people when they find out I'm a veteran, a bit of truth and a lot of fiction. When they ask me did you kill anyone? How many bodies did I tag? What was it like kicking doors? When I say "No I was communications" the reaction is always the same: disapproval, dismissal, the immediate change of subjects as if I was never actually enlisted. I would come up with these stories so I can get back to my beer with friendly revelry. No further judgment or

dismissal as long as I've shot people. When I first got out in 2012, this would happen with all of my old friends and family—I felt ashamed. I felt ashamed that I hadn't killed anyone. I felt ashamed that I had failed as a soldier by not going in and disrupting the lives of some family half a world away. I had dishonored the uniform and title of being a veteran.

So I started lying.

I started creating stories of valor and destruction to validate my four years of sacrifice and transformation into a soldier. As a young man, validation was crucial for success for my reintegration into society. The stories helped, but not me. They only added more weight onto my shoulders and further postponed any attempt to redirect the societal views of a soldier's stigma for the instant gratification of belonging. I understand I may be in the minority in how I chose to handle these situations in the moment, and I understand that these actions are not ideal, but I also know I'm not the only veteran who has felt these pressures or who has made such erroneous claims.

Now, it has almost been a decade since my time in Afghanistan and the lies have taken their toll on my mental health. The weight of the lies has started to outweigh the shame of not being a "True Soldier." Instead I lay in an even deeper pit, emptied by preconceptions of what I should be, and dug deeper by my fabricated theater to accommodate those false assumptions. Even with most of these interactions being harmless on the surface. Either at a bar with strangers or a quip in a group chat. Those that I am intimately involved with know the truth; it's dealing with the public's eye that is exhausting. I'm tired of digging deeper.

Never ask a veteran if they've killed anyone. Never even try to sway a conversation that could even lead to that. The isolation and

separation from reintegrating back into the public feels like being trapped in a bubble. It gives the impression that I'm not the same as you. If a vet wants to talk about that subject, it should be brought up fully on their own terms. No matter the outcome of the question, the feeling will be the same. They'll either feel ashamed for what they have done, or for what they haven't. Never ask a veteran if they have killed someone.

## *Lessons of Military Service*

Paul Gessler

My experience of being in the military was a quick lesson in following instructions. It was a job. My war was the Cold War. The quest for nuclear supremacy. What was that? It was Mutually Assured Destruction or MAD. So, in a sense, it was like a suicide mission. I still am tainted by the experience, but the teamwork and camaraderie made it feel meaningful.

I joined the Air Force because I wanted to avoid combat or any situation where I was going to be put in a kill-or-to-be-killed situation. I was a conscientious objector to killing, yet felt a need to serve my country. And this actually played out a couple of times within my first eighteen months of service. The second time it wasn't as humiliating. When I arrived at Warren Air Force base, I was temporarily assigned to an ICBM communication support flight. The equipment I was trained to repair had not been installed in the communication center on base, so they assigned us elsewhere within the Communication Squadron.

My supervisor was a Navaho/Ute Indian who had been a code talker during World War II. Sergeant Skerl stayed in the military and switched over to the Air Force when it was instituted as a branch in 1947. All of the recent trainees on our equipment were temporarily assigned to ICBM duty. Master Sergeant Skerl paternalistically referred to me as Gessler the Kraut. Another of the new airmen, a Mennonite from Indiana who was more acutely aware of this duty, decided he wanted out of the military. He filed for Conscientious Objector status and was granted his wish and discharged within days. I had the opportunity to do likewise, but I didn't recognize my conscientious objector self. I was having an American experience. I dug the idea that African Americans,

42

Hispanics, and women of the Air Force were all on the same team and treated as equals, mostly. There certainly was equal opportunity. I was reassigned back to base communications. After attending meetings run by the other mostly Caucasian NCOs, it became obvious to me that many of these bread-and-butter NCOs had chips on their shoulders. I would have made the Air Force a career if I could serve under someone like Sergeant Skerl. I was too much of a conscientious objector for that to happen.

We had plenty of fun, however, in our off duty time; intra squadron softball and flag football made for all-American fun. We all learned to play pool fairly well. But it all soured one day when Frank Reilly came into the recreation / pool room. Frank had just arrived from a tour of duty in Viet Nam. We were missile support. Very few of us had been to Vietnam. “You guys have it decent here,” he kept repeating. The war had changed him. You could tell. It felt like we decent guys were spared the horror and hell of the war that Frank Reilly experienced. Frank really meant that we had easy duty. It gradually became a job. I realized that I could serve my country in a non-militaristic way. That’s when I started looking forward to getting out.

The experience I sought in the military has been fulfilled in working against war and militarism these forty-six years. It has been a long, winding trail. Now, it doesn’t seem as long, but my conscientious objection to militarism and war is something necessary for complete healing. I would like to teach and implement a plan for all veterans to have the opportunity to aid veterans in their transition from active duty through a Reverse Boot Camp. Conscientious Objector status can be a catalyst for that to happen.

## *One Day Outside Pleiku*

Stephen Vallée

I was based in the army hospital north of Pleiku in South Viet Nam. My job was psychiatric tech and assistant ward master. There were very few really severe psychiatric conditions admitted to the hospital. Most would manifest later on when the soldiers rotated back home. Because my workload was lighter than those of many others, it became my job to sit with severely wounded soldiers for whom nothing could be done and stay with them while they died.

Before the Army I had been in a seminary and thought of myself as fairly well informed in religious matters. Had it not been for disillusionment with some hypocritical behaviors that I had witnessed, I probably would have stayed. More than a few seminarians and priests would frequently deride others while engaging in identical activities. Yet despite all that, my sense of religious destiny was overwhelming. Between the knowledge of theology and an apocalyptic attitude, I was still ready to save everyone.

To the east of the hospital was an engineering battalion with a small infirmary for minor injuries and some illnesses. On this particular day, a truck struck a land mine and lost its rear end, its load of pipes and the soldiers riding on it. The injuries were mostly contusions and dislocations, one broken leg and one soldier severely broken. The pipes had landed on him and had shattered his upper chest, shoulders, neck and part of his skull. Their medical staff sent him to the hospital because his injuries were far too severe for their abilities and equipment. Our surgical staff saw that there was way too much damage and had me come down to the emergency room for the deathwatch. The nursing

supervisor administered some morphine and left two syringes for me to add if I felt it was needed. We left him on a gurney and put up a screen so that no one could see what was happening. I pulled in a chair and sat down next to the gurney to wait for the inevitable.

His name was Larry. I will not mention the family name. The first thing I noticed was that he was still conscious. How in the name of Sweet Fanny Adams could that be with all the damage he had suffered? By all rights he should be dead already. Oh well, it was my job to be with him, so here I was. He looked at me through blackened eyes and said, "Hi." I said, "Hi," back. What else do you say to someone who is in the process of dying, "Have a nice trip?"

I asked if he was in any pain. He said he was not; he could not feel anything. I told him to let me know if anything started to hurt and I could make it stop. I pointed to the IV bag and showed him the syringe with more morphine. He moved his lips a little as if he wanted to smile. Then he asked me my name and I told him it was Steve. "Steve, am I going to die?" he asked. I had no idea what to tell him. My job was to keep him comfortable and calm. What should I say? "Yeah, you're a goner" or "No, our doctors can fix you right up, good as new." Mentally, I was running through my entire catalog of seminary platitudes to be the hero for this guy, but what the hell did I know.

"Larry, I don't know. You have been hurt very badly and our doctors don't think they can fix you up. I am here to make sure you are not in pain. I wish I could answer you with absolute truth, but I just don't know."

He moved his lips again in what I think might have been a small smile and said, "It's ok. I'm scared. I've never done this before. Will you stay with me? I just don't know what to do." He squeezed my hand and

did not let go. I didn't try to take it back from him.

Now what should I do; what should I say? All the high-minded thoughts about life and death, sin and punishment, resurrection and eternity that flooded my mind in that brief instant meant a whole lot of nothing. They were fine for theoretical, theological, bullshit sessions late at night over some sort of fortified beverage, but Larry still had a pulse. I felt all my knowledge was useless, and I did not want to lie to him.

Larry closed his eyes and seemed to drift off to sleep. I wished he would just sleep and never wake up again. Who did I think I was to be able to help him? What did I know about anything? When he opened his eyes again, he seemed not able to focus. He spoke quietly and was calling me "Carol." Damn, he must have thought that I was his girlfriend. Now what do I do? Once again, he called me "Carol" and asked if I still loved him. How do I answer that one? I said "Yes, Larry. I still do." He moved his lips a bit and it looked like some sort of smile. His eyes closed and he drifted off again.

After about five minutes he opened his eyes and said, "Steve, did I say anything dumb?" I told him, "No." He said he thought his girl was here and he didn't want her to see him like this. I asked him about Carol, and he said that he loved her and wanted to go home to see her. When I asked about his family, he said his father was dead and his mother would be alone without him. A tear formed in the corner of his eye. "Oh shit," I thought, "I'm supposed to keep him comfortable, not make him upset." He asked if I would write to his mother if he didn't make it and tell her that he was not scared. I agreed, thinking I would be too scared to write anything like that.

Larry had been behind the curtain for about thirty minutes before

he said that his shoulder was beginning to hurt. I grabbed a syringe and pumped the morphine into the IV bag. He started breathing a bit easier after a minute or so. Then he closed his eyes and was very quiet. In two or three minutes he never felt any pain again. I called the duty nurse and she confirmed that he was dead, but we needed a medical officer to say the word and at 1650 hours on 30 August 1967, Larry officially died. We prepared his body and brought him to the hospital morgue until the team from graves registration could pick up the remains.

The duty nurse came over to me and said she had heard a bit from the other side of the curtain and that I had done fine, as well as any other man she had ever overheard. My thought was a big whoop. I had eased a man into his grave when he should have been making out with Carol. Hell, he just had peach fuzz on his cheeks.

I went over to my hooch and grabbed a bottle of cheap booze. What was with all this salvation stuff? It might make for good sermons on a nice springtime Sunday morning in quiet, manicured Anytown, USA, but not here where I could smell the stink of death, hear men scream in pain and see broken young men for many of whom life had not even begun. What really started to make my gut squirm was the damned blathering about noble this or great that. Hell, I never saw a noble amputation or a great mess of person blown apart by a grenade or artillery. All I saw were men just like me, all of us kids who had just been shaving for two or three years, and we were all scared, tired, hurt and bewildered. What had any of us done to merit the injuries we were experiencing? Had we committed some incredible evil? Were we richly deserving of the anguish? Or could it be that we were just a few eggs in some geopolitical omelet and our lives, pains and deaths were of little consequence? All I knew was that something was wrong and

our lives were not toys for some unseen political or economic power. Probably the most painful thought was that we were being deceived and used. Right then I felt the need to distrust authority, to become a skeptic, although I did not use that word for some years. At that moment, I swore that I would no longer believe lofty drivel without some very substantial evidence. I felt I had been conned by people who made ethereal claims but had never offered any substantial proof.

Right about then I was called to the company HQ. When I arrived the company commander, Captain Mathews, told me that the XO, Major Sterling, wanted me to be commended for the way I had cared for Larry. Captain Mathews added his compliments as well, saying that he could never do what I did. Maybe not, but perhaps he did not feel as I did that none of my brothers deserved to die alone. There were two deaths that day. Larry died and so did my innocence.

## *Going Home*

Janice Schilling

It was March 1970, and it was my day to Di Di Mau—*get the fuck out*. I was going home. My friends sent me off with both cheers and tears. The C130 took me to Cam Ranh Bay, where I boarded the Freedom Bird. I was nervous, excited and sad.

Our plane was full of happy campers for sure. We sang 60's songs and shared pictures of family and friends. When the pilot announced that we should be landing soon and that the Freedom Bird would be completing its mission, the cheers quieted down and the aircraft became noiseless and muffled.

I sat quietly and wondered where was my overwhelming joy and relief? Questions about what was next, plus fatigue, gave way to uneasiness, anxiety and fear. These feelings were not what I had expected. I wondered how one reintegrates at home, because a year is a long time in a war zone. This was unsettling.

We landed in Seattle in the dark, and after deplaning, we were sent in many different directions. I had an escort to walk me to my quarters, and suddenly I had a sense of *aha*. I was in the USA and in two days I would be a civilian. I finally felt good.

En route, my escort told me to please keep walking at a fast clip. He said to look straight ahead and do not look outside the chain fence. I was now uncomfortable. There was a welcoming committee of sorts screaming nasty comments, hateful words, horrible accusations. And then I felt the spit.

A new culture had emerged while I was in Viet Nam, and these protestors did not care for us. But why?

I arrived in my room confused and very emotional. I lay on the

bed without answers and cried myself to sleep.

The next day I was officially a civilian. I could not get my homecoming out of my mind. I thought I had left enemies in the war. I thought wrong.

That day was the first day of many in years to come that I would not speak about the war. I stayed silent and could not cry. When memories of the war came to consciousness, I buried them in my numbing space, where it was safe from the pain.

## *Surgical Strike*

Kathleen Willard

Unnatural craters broil and a family bundles some things  
into a blanket and walks away.

Ideology skips and severs  
as gutters flood  
with blood and a mother's disbelief  
sits between her dying child and dogma.

No one cries uncle as incendiary devices  
lock on their targets, another aurora borealis whirls,  
another surgical strike.

In Istanbul, Margaret's hands palsy  
when she recommends the Archeological Museum  
with its artifacts from Troy  
while her husband evacuates students  
and taxies to the border.

Someone tallies the number of scuds lobbed, the death toll  
and in the next room, tinny promises rage.

Satellites high in the stratosphere like peeping toms  
locate the next target.

Look, there I am on the screen  
I am on my way to work stopping for coffee.

## *Veteran: Confessions of an Identity Crisis*

Ryan Lanham

*Anti-military.* That's how I always saw myself growing up. Pops was in the Air Force, along with his father. I felt the sting of authority from a young age. Plus, Pops was a preacher. Dogma and decree dominated our little family.

So naturally I rebelled. Hard. Sex before marriage. Drinking during school. Drugs, and, yes, even some rock 'n roll.

Black sheep bonanza.

Pops always said I needed discipline. Thought the military would help. When recruiters began calling the house my senior year in high school, I liked to fuck with them a bit.

“Young man, have you thought about joining the Army?”

“Absolutely, sir. Always wanted to be a soldier. Can you guys help me quit heroin first?”

*Click.*

The phone calls petered out. I enrolled in college that first year after high school, but a blooming alcohol addiction sidelined any life progression. So sank in quicksand for the next ten years.

When I joined the army at twenty-seven, it wasn't out of any patriotic duty to the nation. This was 2007. Most of the pretexts for our military occupation had already unraveled under public scrutiny. Hell, I didn't even buy the official 9/11 narrative.

But I still joined. Out of self-preservation. Knew I'd die of an overdose or enlarged heart if I kept up the deadbeat lifestyle.

Does this make me a mercenary?

A person who says, *what's in it for me?*

Not, *why are we there?*

Perhaps. And perhaps that part of the identity crisis post-service.

Do I want people thanking me for my time in uniform? Highlighting my hypocrisy?

Do I look in the mirror in the morning and think, *it's cool, bro, pulled a few triggers for the Bush dynasty. Don't worry about the karma.*

For the first several years after my enlistment, I shied away from any affiliation with the military. In fact, I tried to take my own life twice within that first year. Sure, I had a growing drug and alcohol addiction, but I also had a new set of issues as war memories etched deep grooves in my mind.

Once sober, I began to examine more closely our ostensible reasons for military maneuvers and campaigns. Our reasons for war.

And guess what I found?

(Spoiler alert): money, power, greed, corruption. And a host of other hegemonic factors for pervasive American militarism.

Even saying this sounds so obvious. But still we sign up, we deploy, we kill, we maim, we die.

Or TBI. Or PTSD. Suicide.

No wonder we're offing ourselves in record numbers nowadays. We see through the charade.

So it was with great reluctance that I began writing about the war. That I began telling others that I am a veteran. That I carry great guilt for the acts perpetrated in war.

But by accepting this identity and forgiving those acts is how we grow. Heal. Evolve.

I may not wave the flag and say amen after the National Anthem, but I'll confess that I served. And I'll band with my fellow brothers and

sisters that donned a uniform in a time of all-volunteer war.

And I may not be able to prevent other young, impoverished, strung-out, tired recruits from joining an unjust war, but I can certainly extend a hand when they return. Offer a shoulder to lean on. Someone to cry to as they process their pain.

Someone to look them in the eyes and say *I feel you, friend.*

*I too am a veteran.*

## *The Day Monsters Climbed Out of My Forearm*

Laura Mahal

The surgeon slices a neat red line  
from wrist to elbow  
Continental Divide  
mountains of flesh rise, east and west,  
blood pouring to Atlantic and Pacific.

I am calm  
but the surgeon drops the knife.  
I hear the clatter, because monsters are silent.  
Claws long. Tail jagged. Teeth yellow. Eyes red.

It is not like that.  
The monsters are children.  
The monsters are soldiers.

The monsters are me,  
a younger self. Smiling,  
twentysomething, fearless. Squad automatic  
weapon balanced in my hands.

My forearms strong, ripped  
from push-ups, planks,  
four-hour ruck marches.

My memories like used furniture  
covered with sheets  
in abandoned aristocratic houses.

But now the monsters  
have dropped from the table,

landed lightly by the scalpel,  
rappelling warriors,  
stealthy and nimble.

The surgeon screams,  
his training inadequate  
I reach for his hand with my  
wide-open arm.

*It's okay, I say.*  
*Leave the wound open.*  
*In case they come back.*

Pulsing, and thumping, a cadence  
of monsters marching in formation  
I bleed. They sing.

## *A Rite of Passage*

Ross Atkinson

Turning twenty-one as a United States citizen is a rite of passage. It is a unique holiday ornamented by copious amounts of drinking and general debauchery. Turning twenty-one in Afghanistan as a United States citizen, however, is supposed to be none of those things. Military orders replace holiday traditions overseas, and the military is clear on their deployment drinking policy: don't do it. I expected to watch my birthday come and go. I expected to be sober, sitting in my plywood shack of an office, drinking what we called at the time "Hajji Coke," which I would say tasted a little less refined than American Coke. But I digress. There I sat, the evening of my twenty-first, alone in my room watching *One Tree Hill* or *The O.C.* or some other popular angsty high school drama—by February, ten months into our deployment, we had run out of everything else—and a knock came at the door, followed by a "Bonsoir! Ello? Ross?" Standing in my doorway was my good buddy Phillipe, a French soldier who had a similar job to me who had made the trek from across the base to my particle board office, carrying two cases of delicious lager and a few bottles of French red wine. *My savior!* I thought. Turns out, Phillipe had heard stories of turning twenty-one in the States, knew it was an important rite of passage, and decided to ensure I had the opportunity to partake, and partake I did. That night marked the fifth and last night I ever puked in Afghanistan. And the first that I enjoyed.

*The Vet*  
Milt Mays

He lives by himself, even in crowds;  
sometimes can't go out at all—  
the sounds of a car or an electric razor  
make his mind flinch, his thoughts stall.

“You've made great progress,” everyone boasts.  
But he knows it still waits,  
*Alive.*  
The monster in his closet can open the door  
*Anytime.*

Was there a time before war's night,  
when happiness flew inside him,  
when he could look at his hands and feel pride?  
Is there an inkling of a man who could  
mold wood?

Cabinetmaker's hands, heart of an artist,  
sculpted her a box of music,  
she opened and danced the tune of flutes  
before the war pissed acid on his mind,  
twisting his hands into snakes  
that chased her away.

*Washing won't clean  
the blood.  
Must wear gloves even in summer  
nineteen pair,  
nineteen, nineteen,  
NINETEEN FRIENDS!  
Cover it, don't look.  
Stains run too deep.*

*Don't feel.  
Ride Harleys, not cars—  
wide open, not inside.  
The speed, the danger,  
the next curve, the shift down  
occupy time.*

Like gloves on his mind, meds  
cover the madness,  
making him “functional,”  
stupid, and dull.

Today he stopped them all and  
felt life again—  
The Harley, the wind, the road, faster until  
the fall, then

*Nothing.  
At last.*

## *Conformity*

Paul Gessler

I didn't conform very well to military life. In fact, I was and still am a conscientious objector to military life and militarism. Militarism thrives on conformity. The reason I don't conform to militarism is that there is a better way to resolve human and geopolitical problems rather through force and violence, in my opinion. Though the pressure to conform is innate, I remain your classic conscientious objector on the nonconformity spectrum.

There's a need to control in all humans, especially men, but you could make a case for women holding that title. Ironically, I've heard it said that the only place a man is really in control is on the dance floor. Even then, you do have to conform to rules of safe boundaries and of dance floor etiquette.

The truth is we all need to conform, and it is rooted in our need to be accepted as social beings. We've all succumbed to the pressure of regiment as well as the unwritten rules and written laws of our civilized society.

I think it is more important to think outside the box of conformity. The one right all veterans have earned, in my opinion is the right to be a conscientious objector. However, you cannot expect any majority to conform to being a conscientious objector. Like Parsifal, a knight in King Arthur's court, who wanted so much to conform and be like all of his brother knights at the Round Table, Parsifal found out he was truly a nonconformist, because he asked the existential question: Isn't there a better way than all this conformity? Specifically, barbarism and war.

On the other hand, perhaps King Arthur was calling on his

knights to conform to the rule of law and be civilized as the Roman Empire was falling apart around them. That's why legend has it that Parsifal was the greatest knight in King Arthur's court. Because he was able to convince all the other knights of the Round Table that they could fight the good fight without having to violate and destroy your opponent. He surrendered to the higher power, the greater good. And that conscientious objector can be the best way to deal with a knight's or warrior's trauma and the moral injury associated with war.

“Think outside the box” is a modern-day Parsifal-inspired nonconformist maxim. Otherwise, we'll all be conformists for an endless war machine that will bury us.

## *Uniformity*

Lori Feig-Sandoval

Uniformity has never been my “strong suit,” nor uniforms. (No pun intended: “suit” / uniforms.) My Catholic school didn’t require uniforms, but it did enforce a uniform number of maximum inches from the floor which all girls’ dresses had to be, measured when the wearer was kneeling. Interesting that we had to be on our knees . . . a posture of prayer and of penitence.

Whenever our principal, the short and pleasantly ample Sister Gloriosa (halo hovering), entered our fifth grade classroom, we well-trained students collectively rose at our desks to dutifully singsong in unison (uniformity again), “Good afterNOON, Sister Gloriosa,” all of us standing still as she then panned the room. Her observant gaze was usually brief before she’d say (halo aglow, and sunny smile), “How lovely you are, class. Be seated.” But she might instead take a yardstick from its corner. This was both to point to any suspected dress code deviants, and to tap tap tap its end on the floor in front of each indicted student, so that we would know, as any circus performer would, that this taptaptap meant to step forward and drop to the knees, no talking.

The time that I was selected (which I imagine felt similar to how a Selective Service lottery winner might feel), all eyes stared at me. She measured my dress, winced, and then gave me the sign: her free hands palm up, extended forward, and then rising slightly from her chubby waist level—as if elevating the dead. I got back on my feet—and boy, did my knees really hurt. Not so much though as my pride, as I had worn the shortest dress in my closet that day, the one my mom had said needed to be donated because I had outgrown it. Hence Sister Gloriosa’s

humiliating proclamation to the class that morning, that my dress was “. . . not in keeping with the code . . . and this is so disappointing, class, since this young lady is *otherwise* an exemplary student . . .”

My cheeks were surely as red as that tomato-colored jumper that I loved, the one with the green and red plaid blouse, and apple-shaped applique of matching fabric on the front of said jumper, the jumper which I immediately had to remove from my closet when I went home with my damning note of nonconformity.

My Air Force officer dad’s uniforms, however, were probably a source of pride for him. They signified success. He often told suppertime stories of his trials and perseverance as he had worked his way up to college from the poverty of no plumbing, no expectation of high school completion, and no English until first grade. His parents mostly spoke Spanish at home in northern New Mexico, where many generations of his ancestors, such as the Apache, Zuni, and many Pueblo peoples, had lived as farmers and weavers since well before the late 1500s, when the Spaniards, his other ancestors, arrived and began to intermarry with the original natives. He was a New Mexican, who, with dark skin and thick Spanish accent, was often mistaken for a foreigner, a Mexican, perhaps a wetback. He had, against all odds (and against his own parents’ disinterest—or their ignorance of the value to a Hispanic kid of a college education), landed at a university with merit scholarships, work-study, and several part-time jobs. This was, he will hasten to say, before that affirmative action thing.

The most memorable, and, in hindsight, his most significant job, was a summer gig at the Corps of Engineers, located at Kirtland Air Force base in Albuquerque, NM. Through his office window, he had a view to the incoming planes and the flight crews as they disembarked.

They climbed from the cockpit wearing sunglasses, flight suits with insignia glinting in the sun, boots, and, he seems to recall something of an ascot on a few; they all adjusted their Air Force caps and strode across the tarmac . . . confidence and competence incarnate. Certainly these crews were the most impressive role models he'd seen in his small-town life. He decided right there to apply for a commission if he graduated; which, indeed, he did, not many months after I was born.

How assuring the Air Force must have been for one from dirt floors at home: a lifelong career which would enable him to provide for his ready-made little family . . . not one he exactly planned. Maybe it was less intimidating than having to create a resume, knock on doors of engineering firms, and interview. Instead, just study some more, pass officer training, and boom, you're on the team, entitled to the status and the uniform.

His 25-year-career was stressful in the extreme; hardly was it the glory (or its illusion) that those uniforms had conveyed. It wasn't all bad, but neither was it glorious; being a bombardier was a demanding life in which he got used to being in dangerous situations, to being stereotyped by ethnicity, and to being chewed out at the commander's whim . . . as well as to being well traveled, well paid, and well compensated in retirement.

Nor was Sister Gloriosa all bad. Before my dad was transferred yet again to another base where I would attend another school, Sister Gloriosa taught me to play piano, to sing, "Let There Be Peace On Earth," and to keep my dresses a comfortable length for playing tetherball without showing my underwear. I liked her sunny, abundant smiles. But not her yardstick.

## *Fear*

Paul Gessler

Frozen in fear.  
First and last. After the palooza  
you feel helpless.  
Fear. We all qualify as combat vets.  
No civil war here boys and girls.  
America is facing its first fear.  
That it could be facing its last fear.  
That it has been a fraud.  
First and last.  
Original sin of slavery. Fear.  
The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.  
Roosevelt knew something about ptsd.  
Something you could not have expected.  
Even when you have faced what you perceive as  
warranted fear and irrational fear.

Stage fright.  
Conformity

Pulling the trigger of that last weapon of empathy.  
Martial arts: breaking a bone.  
Breaking a bad habit.  
Breaking ground on a new poem.  
First and last.  
Full circle. Master of your own fate  
if you can meet all your fears,  
first and last  
and all those  
grieving fears anxiously, in between  
playing to your visions of hope,  
You'll be home a hero . . .  
confusion and fear  
melted away with love

## *In the Firelight*

Stephen Vallée

The fire danced and gyrated in front of the rustic reflector made from rocks and dirt that directed any warmth into a lean-to where three stone-faced men sat in silence. On the back wall of the lean-to, shadows undulated in a rhythmic pattern that suggested a choreographed recital of mute gyrations. Not a sound broke the night's silence other than the occasional hiss and spit from slightly damp wood in the fire. Each man sat alone in his thoughts but with the acute knowledge of the others' thoughts, sensations, dreads, terrors and fears. All three entertained demons that lived and flourished in their heads and sapped strength, vitality and ambition from their lives.

At one time these three were voluble, amiable high school boys, chasing girls, roughhousing with each other and giving vent to optimism for a life of fun, purpose and adventure. After registering for the draft, to avoid being separated, they had enlisted in the Army together under a program that suggested they could stay with each other during their terms of service. As a trio they went to Fort Dix for basic training, Fort Polk for advanced training, and then to Fort Devens for their assignments. So far everything had been a snap, a big game, a lark. Promotions came, duties evolved and soon they were together physically, but were separated by differing ranks, assignments and duties. One soon applied for a transfer to a different company, then the others followed suit. In short order, they were at different posts, in different divisions but working at similar specialties, all in the arena of combat arms.

Their paths, although divergent, maintained a similarity: all went into combat and all were injured. One sustained a head wound and was evacuated to a general hospital in a different allied nation. Another

earned his Purple Heart by grace of a land mine that killed a fellow soldier and severely maimed him. The next thing he knew, he was in the U.S. Army hospital at Fort Devens, close to his home. The third, however, was not physically wounded, but killed and killed and killed even more. Those he killed finally came to be people, not just mere targets as he had been trained. Their humanity began to haunt him. His wound was in his mind and in his heart. From the outside, his wound was invisible, but his agony devoured him. It was not until he was seen shooting dead enemy bodies over and over and over that anyone suspected anything to be seriously amiss. A psychiatric examination resulted in his evacuation to a therapeutic facility at Valley Forge General Hospital.

The first man underwent surgery for his injury and was stabilized physically. His injury had removed some of his brain and rendered him no longer capable of military function. The prognosis for his condition was not overly optimistic. He would survive physically, but his mental state would be questionable. There was very little known about how he would function. He was given a medical discharge and sent to the VA hospital nearest his home of record for rehabilitation.

The second man regained consciousness three weeks after the mine explosion. His body had been treated, the shrapnel wounds had been given proper attention, a lot of tissue and some organs had been removed or resected, but the shock of the explosion had severely affected his brain. The neurologists expressed their concern over the severity of the concussion and suggested long-term therapy for him. He, also, was discharged from active military service and soon was a patient at the same VA hospital in Northfield, Massachusetts where his friend was being treated.

The third man, however, found himself in a locked ward in the psychiatric pavilion at Valley Forge General Hospital. It took several

weeks of intense therapy to get him to be calm and quiet. The staff was ever watchful for signs of irritation, irascibility, agitation and anxiety. Violence had changed him, had virtually altered his DNA and had become part of his persona. He had taken his training very well, and had become one who was extremely well versed in the litany of violence. Now it was time to re-humanize him, to prepare him to return to life without a violent response to every stimulus and to address the overwhelming and gnawing guilt that was slowly and relentlessly devouring him. His time at Valley Forge soon ended and he, too, was transferred to the VA facility closest to his home, the hospital in Northfield.

The three, although in the same hospital, did not see each other for quite some time. One was in rehabilitation for severe brain trauma, another in a different rehab ward for acute concussive injury, and the third for intense psychiatric attention. Their care took both time and energy from each of them, the therapeutic staff, and their own families. The most critical element was the financial aspect. Funding from the Department of Defense was limited; their injuries were permanent.

After about eight months, they had each recuperated to a point where home visits were permitted and encouraged. The idea was that getting back into someplace very familiar might jog something in the subconscious and help with the rehabilitation. Visits soon became overnight stays and then morphed into moving back home and becoming outpatients. Yet rehabilitation was not complete. Each carried residual wounds deep in the subconscious that would live as long as they did. The outpatient care was more maintenance than complete recovery. It was less expensive this way according to the business officers, although some said that getting out of the hospital would speed their recovery. Recovery was a questionable prospect; mere survival was more the case.

Coming back to the old hometown was different. Old friends were so much younger now; sounds were more jarring and no one seemed to give a damn about anyone else. They passed a lot of time with each other and were somewhat agitated when out of touch. In a very short while, they wangled a small house on the east side of the town and set up housekeeping, three bachelors, three permanently disabled veterans. There were no real close neighbors, the nearest about a half-mile away. They pooled their disability checks and were able to survive with small odd jobs and good management assistance from their VA social workers.

There were some difficulties from external sources, as well as from their internal demons. Some of the townsfolk, those who were younger and more prosperous, complained loudly about their disability payments. “Why should we support you? What have you done for us lately? We didn’t ask you to go get shot up. You’re just welfare bums living off our tax money and you should be ashamed. You’re just junkies, hooked on the drugs you’re getting that we pay for. Get a job and take care of yourselves.” The internal demons were worse. External voices were silenced sometimes; the demons were forever present, however, forever taunting, forever devouring what was left of their essences.

Each man knew his friends and their stories; each man knew his friends’ fears and each knew well and could appreciate his friends’ pain. Their youthful bond had been friendship from exuberance. Now their commonality was shared agony. Words were needless; one glance could express their similarity and their shared, fraternal torment. All they had were each other. Parents could love, but not understand. Old friends could speak and be sociable, but could not relate. These three could live each other’s lives. All they asked was distance and respect. To escape

from the insistent, jangling interruptions by telephone they constructed a rustic, makeshift lean-to in back of their small house, and that is where they could share their pains, their recollections and their silence, along with the undulating, mute gyrations of fire-cast shadows. And so, the fire danced and gyrated in front of the rustic reflector . . .

## *Flag Fiend*

Ryan Lanham

Stripes of red. Like blood of a lamb over doorway. Except we're not seeking protection. We're the angel of death sweeping over the land. Haunting the skies, the shadows. We're the grim reaper come to call. The card pullers. Ghost elicitors. Soul stealers.

Stripes of white. Strips of feigned innocence. Of the pure. Pure bullshit. Whitelight illusion. A matrix of lies.

50 stars in your blue sky. A swarm of drones in the heavens. Dancing, twinkling, calculating, killing.

Raise the flag, raise your hand, extend a finger, pull a trigger.

Bow down to Old Glory.

Old Gory.

## *Memory and Muscle*

Ross Atkinson

Muscle memory is an interesting phenomenon. It is generally spoken about as a consequence of learning some other, larger skill. For instance, the four fingers on my left hand remember the feel of my violin: the smooth neck, taut strings, and hollow weight. Likewise, those four fingers remember every subtle placement, every C flat and G sharp, and every instance of vibrato in Hungarian Dance No. 5.

Muscle memory is an interesting phenomenon. It is generally spoken about as a consequence of learning some other, larger skill. For instance, the four fingers on my left hand remember the feel of my molly gear: the coarse texture of military equipment, the hook and loop fastener—or Velcro as civilians call it—and the heavy weight. Likewise, those fingers remember the exact location and movement necessary to remove a thirty-round magazine from my molly gear. They remember the feel of the slick metal sliding from the synthetic fabric. They remember the motion of removing the spent mag by holding it in between the palm of the hand, below the pinky and thumb. They remember the motion of opening the hook and loop fastener, the motion of grasping the heavy, fully loaded magazine, pressed between my fingers, thumb, and the spent mag—comfortable, easy. They remember loading the fresh mag, metal on metal followed by a satisfying click. The final series of actions from the right hand: a smack to the forward assist.

## *Their Letters*

Kathleen Willard

He wrote to her from an obscure country in Asia  
    she wrote back of my frilly dress for Easter  
of traveling up the Mekong in sampans, advisor to armies  
    and of sorrow and assassination, the empty saddle on the  
black horse, the entourage

The blue envelopes from APO San Francisco bringing assurances  
    she waited in Georgia drinking cocktails  
that he was recently alive and thinking of their children  
    among military wives marking time with rounds of  
bridge, other diversions—

He tells of his first night in Saigon, a bomb exploding a fuel depot, the fire  
    and sometimes she described pill box hats, the white gloves  
flooding his quarters, an instant inferno  
    she wore to Mass or our eating okra and peach pie at  
Morrison's Cafeteria.

Someone shouting run, the city charring  
    while she watches their children practicing backstroke  
he runs nude into the dark streets, seconds in front of the flames  
    and can their daughter and two sons take horseback  
riding lessons,  
could they afford it.

Yes, purchase the jodhpurs, thank you for Dad's Brag Book,  
    mentioning geography she cannot imagine,

he marches deeper into the jungle, up the Mekong, training citizens to  
    be soldiers,

jots down troop movements in a small notepad  
and she waits much too long for his next letter.     Dearest Jim,

This week I took the children to the Chattoahoochie Country Fair.

We walked the midway in the evening eating cotton candy.

Your daughter much too eager to see the freaks on display  
inside the canvas tents.

This week there were cakewalks at Halloween parties.

This week our children dressed in riding clothes cantering  
and clinging to their ponies.

This week a school bomb drill and math homework.

This he is reading while he salts leeches that cling to his calves killing  
them, and dries his boots soaked by swamp water.

This he is reading before sleep as the monsoon begins its weeping, the  
frog croaking amplifies.

This he is reading as he puts on his flak jacket, blackens his face.

This he is reading after he cleans his rifle, visits the priest, posts  
another letter.

Love to you and the children,  
Jim.

## *Loving Failure*

Marshall Spring

October 3rd. Today was a day marked by failures and the reason why I have learned to love to fail. I failed to do anything athletic today because I prioritized interacting with humans. My first meeting went long, so I was late to my second. I had to cut my second meeting short so I could be at my third. This is where it really went to shit. The meeting was with a city councilman and involved the city's support of a subsidized housing development. I work with one of the residents. He was also at the meeting and was there as an example of success. He took it as an opportunity to air his grievances with the city, PD, and the very development we were discussing. After the meeting I encountered a female in the parking lot. She was crying. She had fresh scratches on her face. She was clearly in emotional distress. She wouldn't talk to me, but she gave me permission to sit with her. So I sat with her. She didn't want to talk so I did. I told her about why I moved to Colorado and what I like about it. I told her about my friend who shot himself and why I wish he hadn't. I told her about my chickens and all of their names and about the owl attack they survived. After a while she stopped crying. She didn't say much, and she left. In all of these things I had failures. Failures that I accept because they wouldn't have happened if I wasn't trying. So I love my failures because I would not succeed without them.

## *War and Sweetness*

Laura Mahal

Her chocolate bar is wrapped in burlap,  
sharp yet alkaline,  
perpetually for sale,  
but no one buys.

Stashes in a rucksack  
calories fuel night raids  
hand hard candies to kids  
to shush-shush the lies.

Peel the wrapper  
complex layers of war and sweetness,  
battle to win you  
to chance a bite.

She's gilded chocolate, tannins and texture,  
rainbow velvet that tangles your tongue.  
She was Willy Wonka's golden ticket,  
till she was sent to the front to fight.

Theobromine is poison to dogs  
speeds up their hearts  
is toxic, can kill  
like a roadside bomb, like an M16

When you love the children  
you love the street dogs  
you offer them treats  
to hear them sing

Her warrior heart is wrapped in burlap,  
rough and tumble,

like puppies in a litter  
yelping, yelping, can you hear her cries?

Army-issued chocolate  
Bitter and moldy  
perpetually on sale,  
but no one buys.

## *My Time in Afghanistan*

Ross Atkinson

My time in Afghanistan helped me grow as an individual, and my military travels placed me in spaces and positions I had never inhabited before. In Afghanistan, I existed as a symbol tied to my nationality. My Americanism was a cage that I could not escape, and what that cage held was different depending on who was looking inside, but regardless of what they saw, it was never me—it was what my Americanism meant to them. It was what my uniform represented in their eyes, predetermined by the actions of others who wore it.

I learned what loss means, what death means, and how to grieve. I expanded my cultural awareness through my interactions with individuals from various nations around the world, and I took part in discourses that identified our cultural differences while also broadening our understanding of what it means to be human, to share food, to share ideas, to share words—some more familiar than others. I learned what it means to sacrifice my individuality at an altar of national identity. An alteration that precludes *Other's* preconceived notions of what it means to be a soldier, to be an American soldier, to be an American soldier on another's land, to be an American soldier on their land, like the one who killed their brother, son, or father. I struggled with whether these images of me, painted by the pain and sorrow of war, were correct. I know now though that it really doesn't matter because the feelings of those affected by war are true, correctness aside.

I walked in shoes that were uncomfortable for me to wear, shoes that uprooted many of the structures and systems that I believed were essential to the reality I knew to be true, and through these experiences,

I grew. I sprouted new leaves that changed how the sun hit me, how I perceived the world around me, what I absorbed and what I released—how I interact with and react to the perceptions of others. It was a long and painful year, filled with accomplishments, awards, and experiences that I will never have again: the death of a friend, the sound of a mortar hitting the earth, and the screams of human and animal alike, some ending in a palpable and infinite silence. These experiences are mine to reflect on, to grow through, and to live with, and they are also experiences that shape who I am, the ways I interact with others, and the ways I choose to continue existing.

## *Music to End Wars*

Lori Feig-Sandoval

*Bum Ba-dum, Bump Bump Ba Dum. Bum Ba-Dum Bump Bump Ba Dum. WHY do you build me up (build me up!) Buttercup, baby, just to let me down?*

No matter what I am doing, whenever I hear the *Bum Ba-dum* drumbeat preceding that plaintive question in the opening chorus to, “Build Me Up Buttercup,” I am immediately plopped, dancing, right into the little living room of our family’s house on Gingerbread Road in Alexandria, Louisiana in 1969, the year that my dad was stationed in Thailand, navigating bombing missions in B-52s over Viet Nam’s Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Given our hindsight knowledge of the Johnson administration, who knows where else my dad and his crewmates, and so many other military teams, were bombing. Did we ever know why? Though my dad would later change his views on the rightness of the Viet Nam conflict, at that time he was a soldier whose job was always to acquiesce to authority, perhaps subscribing to Tennyson’s “Light Brigade” sort of mentality . . . “Ours not to reason why, ours but to do and die . . .”

So, my mom raised my sister and me for a long dozen months without family nearby, though she had friends whose military men were also gone. It must have been as scary and stressful a time for her as for him, in different ways. But “Buttercup” was our oasis.

My mom, six-year-old sister, and I, at age eleven, would play that 45 record over and over, bopping next to one another in a repetitive pattern of semi-choreographed steps popular at the time, which moved us around the perimeter of the living room in a square, each

of us improvising to avoid chairs and the coffee table as we kept that infectious, upbeat rhythm, if not perfect form.

In an era that included the assassinations of two Kennedy brothers and of Martin Luther King, Jr.; violent clashes at the Democratic National Convention; the Chicago Eight Conspiracy trial; the Kennedy-Koepchne Chappaquiddick tragedy; 250,000 anti-war protesters in Washington DC; and, closer to home, Hurricane Camille, not to mention my sixth-grade, pre-adolescent angst—those Buttercup moments of giggles and hip jiggles touched off the best family laugh-fests I can recall in that whole hard year. While the boob tube's *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In* could keep us chuckling for an hour, there weren't otherwise lots of laugh-fests. And neither was our family whole.

Despite that background, I still smile when I hear "Buttercup." It is an excuse to stop what I'm doing and dance. And that, in turn, often reminds me of my parents dancing the jitterbug. They were terrific together, and I always stopped playing with my cousins at weddings to watch their swoops and skills at tandem twirls. So, oddly, "Build Me Up Buttercup," which I associate with the Viet Nam War, then takes me, via the jitterbug, to another military effort, World War II, and the Big Band sounds of the earliest 1940s, especially Glen Miller's classic, "In the Mood." I love that song too. We must have had a copy of "In the Mood," it feels so familiar.

Though I am sometimes a sucker for sappy songs, or ones depicting heroics, and I do get goosebumps hearing the only song that I know to be specifically written about the Viet Nam conflict, I never think of the "The Ballad of the Green Berets" when I think of the year my father was at war. With a military drum cadence all through it, and bugles in the middle, "Beret" relates one soldier's pride in being part

of the highly select Green Berets. But when the lyrics tell of one of these elite “who has died for those oppressed,” it takes me right out of my right-brained, nonverbal appreciation of the music, out of the song altogether, and into my analytical “left-brain,” wondering to myself, “really . . . how often is it true that soldiers ‘die for the oppressed?’” I dunno . . . a topic for another day.

A song my mom liked in 1969, and which has been covered in the 2000s by arena rockers The Killers and by indie band Cake, is the Kenny Rogers version of a Mel Tillis tune, “Ruby Don’t take Your Love to Town,” based on a true tale of a WWII veteran who was confined to a wheelchair and whose war bride left him, apparently for his angry outbursts, mental health problems, and his drinking.

I am taken in by its opening solo drumbeat setting up a kind of suspense, and then the story that unfolds so visually, “You’ve painted up your lips and rolled and curled your tinted hair . . .” Not to mention the poignancy in Rogers’ voice, especially in his repeated, raspy request, “Don’t take your love to town,” eventually followed by the final jolting notion that if he could get out of his chair, the heartbroken vet would shoot her. “Ruby’s” lyrics finish, sans music, with that signature spoken plea, “For God’s sake turn around” . . . and then the same heart pounding drumbeat that opened . . . Such imagery, urgency, and desperation that song conveys. Since it was popular while my dad was gone, all the song’s emotions feel more personal: the futility and hurt and heartbreak and havoc that war wreaks.

When my dad returned from his tour of duty in 1970, he said that two songs had made him homesick. He didn’t usually listen to pop or rock, but I guess when one is estranged from family in a strange place, tastes change. One song was, “Hey Jude,” the Beatles ballad about pain

and trying to refrain from sadness; it is on the soundtrack to one of my favorite anti-war movies about Viet Nam, *Coming Home*, whose main male character is in a wheelchair as a result of serving in Viet Nam. With its slow-tempoed melody and wistful lyrics, and all those “*nah, nah, nah, -nah-nah-nahs*” I can see how “Hey Jude” could jerk a few tears if one were homesick. The other song my dad mentioned was the Beach Boys’ “Sloop John B,” featuring heartrending harmonies, some a cappella; a melancholy minor chord; and the lines, “*Well I feel so broke up, I want to go home.*”

I feel “broke up” too when I think of the ages and eons of pain and waste wrought by war. Somehow for me, that “broke up” line pierces the heart of the matter—of how fractured many military veterans and families are, after one experiences war. Wars relentlessly rent entire cultures, for ostensibly noble reasons. Fractured families, and fractured soldiers, are the longer lasting of most any of war’s aims and effects. Such fallout seems, though, to the military and to society, to be but inevitable collateral damage. Are we better beings for waging war while rendering people and places so broken? Is it worth what we reap?

I admire an Iraq veteran-turned-author, Paul Chappell, a West Point graduate and former Army captain whose life mission and full-time job as Peace Leadership Director of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation is to *end war*. That’s ambitious. But he truly believes that if we educate people about universal basic human needs, and how war fails to meet them, then gradually we can evolve to promote peaceful resolutions by what he calls a “peaceful revolution.” Maybe I do too; maybe. Which takes me to an uncharacteristically raucous Beatles tune I could use right now.

You say you want a revolution . . .

## *Roses and Cookies*

Milt Mays

There were so many war movies on. He kept the TV off and sat in the shade on his back patio. Still cool out. He could just see Camelback Mountain between the neighbor's palm tree and house. He glanced at his garden and drank another beer. Started at five a.m., right after watering the roses. Mary and the kids knew to stay away. They'd wanted him to go shopping with them. But, no. Couldn't risk it. A chopper might fly over or he'd see something on the TV in the mall . . .

"Just leave me alone today," he'd told them. Just today. Tomorrow he'd probably be okay. A little hungover, but probably okay.

The doorbell rang. Son of a bitch, he thought.

Oh well, maybe it would be Girl Scout cookies. Did they even sell them now? He couldn't remember. Didn't matter. Could never have enough Do-si-dos or Tagalongs. Besides, he'd pretty much counted every knot in every fence slat.

"Get your fat ass up," he muttered. "Gotta deadhead some roses."

He tossed the can into the morning mound, halfway filling the five-gallon paint bucket by the grill. The red-white-and-blue can clanged into the others. He leaned forward in the patio chair over his damn gut, winced at the pain in his groin, then clambered to his feet. Stumbled once, almost falling into the sliding glass door. That wouldn't be the worst way to go, really. Might cut his head clean off. Quick. No more Veterans Day bullshit.

He took a step toward the roses, leaned over and sniffed. God, that was sweet. He turned, slid the door open and lumbered through the house to the front door. Peeked around it through the side window.

A group of kids. Not just one. Could be lots of cookies. Have to take a little extra insulin, but you had to live—he thought about the surgery he'd endured a month ago for the prostate cancer, and the fragrance of his roses—damn straight.

He opened the door and looked down at the kids, most around nine or ten, a few in their teens with zits and braces glinting in the November sun. Early yet. Be gettin' hot in a few hours and they won't be goin' door to door no matter what they're sellin'. Arizona sun'd scald you. Better than snow, though. Any day of the week.

“Yeah?” he said.

A redheaded boy who looked a little familiar stepped forward. “Mr. Jackson, we wanted to wish you a happy Veterans Day.”

Nice kid, usually. Should know his name. He started to close the door.

Another voice piped up, “We heard you were in Vietnam. My grandpa said that was a real shitter coming back.”

That stopped him. He smiled. Had one of those kids really said “shitter”?

“Yeah, it was,” he said. “What'd your grandad do in Nam?” He peered around to find the speaker. One gangly girl about thirteen smiled with a full set of braces. Her mahogany skin shone flawless with black hair in pigtails held out with pink barrettes. She reminded him of one of the kids in the village they'd set fire to 11 November 1968. He closed his eyes, felt dizzy and his knees crumpled. Not now, he thought. He sat down right in the middle of those kids.

“You okay, Mr. Jackson?” It was that same redheaded boy. What the hell's his name?

“No.” Then it came to him. “Tommy.”

“Can I get you some water?”

“I’ll be okay. Just a little too much . . . uh . . . too many cookies. You kids run along, now.”

The pigtailed girl stepped forward with a potted plant in her hand. “I’m Maria. My grandma said you liked roses. She said you had the most beautiful rose garden in your backyard. This is a present from her and Grandpa. It’s called Mister Lincoln.”

He knew the variety: a hybrid tea rose with big, red, full double blossoms. All American award in ’65—two years before the start of the shit storm. He smiled and took the plant. Two dark red buds and a healthy plant. He started to say thanks, but a glob of yesterday’s years stuck in his throat. Tears clouded his vision and he wiped his cheeks.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Jackson,” Maria said. “Grandpa said you liked Abraham Lincoln. We wanted to make you happy not sad.”

He cleared his throat and managed to croak, “You did. I love the rose.” He wiped his cheeks again. “Tears of joy.” He looked into her dark eyes. “Maria’s a good name.”

She smiled so wide he could see every rubber band on her braces. Her eyes watered. “Oh, thanks.”

He took a deep breath, twisted around and got to a knee to stand. The groin scar pulled sharply, and he lost his grip on the rose, but caught it and clutched it to his chest. A thorn bit his arms. He smiled.

Tommy and Maria and two other kids helped him to his feet. He cradled the rose with both hands.

“Thanks,” he said and started to go inside, then turned around. “Hey, you kids like Girl Scout cookies?”

## *War and the Senses*

Stephen Vallée

For many men and women in combat, there is an overload to the experience that more than boggles the mind. It also overwhelms the senses, those pathways that bring external experiences into each man's or woman's core of being, into the crux of each one's humanity. War does have a sight, a sound, a smell, a touch and a taste. Combat is visceral, gut-wrenching and enduring. It never leaves the warrior.

Vision takes in the sights of combat. As a man or woman might traverse an arena of conflict, that individual will develop and maintain a visual sense that is on an extreme alert for any signs of potential danger. Every flutter of a leaf, each moving blade of grass, even the tiniest abnormality can signal the presence of an enemy, one who would inflict harm. The intensity with which a soldier must see the entire world in his immediate sphere is more than most people can imagine, but which is only normal and natural for the warrior. Lazy or relaxed vision can result in walking into an ambush or falling into some sort of booby trap. The flashes from the muzzles of enemy small arms command instantaneous response and an immediate return of fire in order to survive. Failure to maintain one's vision to an acumen of a razor's edge may bring about one's demise or an injury that is nearly tantamount to a fatality. The eye of an avian predator is needed for a warrior's survival.

War is loud. From the thunder of artillery to the sharp crack of a rifle, from the whoosh of a flamethrower to the whump of a mine, from the scream of a rocket to the thud of a dud, war is a panoply of sound. Even more than the noises from ordnance, there are sounds from the machines. A truck engine whining as it is overworked, the clanking of a tank as it moves from one site to another, and the sound of a jeep

bouncing from one rutted track to another as it travels along. Aircraft provide their sounds as well. A jet engine has its own peculiar timbre as it flies low over your position to drop napalm on an enemy who is facing you. Helicopters have their thrumming and thumping sounds as their rotors whirl to carry each load as their tasks demand.

Whistles, sirens and even metal clanging on metal produce alarm sounds to warn and alert all in earshot of a danger, either actual or potential. Human sounds are never far away, from the sounds of men and women at work doing their tasks, to the sounds of those same men and women joking while in a brief respite. The choral of voices make themselves known. When circumstances demand full attention to duty, human sounds reveal themselves in shouted orders, curses, warnings and the like. Yet there are other sounds emanating from human throats that are never far away. Roars of rage, cries of anguish, screams of agony, howls of pain and sobs of loss affix their tonalities to the symphony of orchestrated mayhem called war.

The sense of smell is also an enlisted observer. Odors emanate from everywhere. The terrain will release smells of decaying vegetation, rotting corpses, both animal and human, as well as more subtle aromas such as the bodily odors of the fighters. Catching the scent of a hidden enemy can be the one factor that permits survival. Emanating from an apparently innocent hole in the ground, the smell of rations and foodstuffs may signal the presence of an enemy. The scent of cordite from spent ordnance, a stench of burnt flesh, the stink of splattered fecal waste from blasted bodies and the metallic aroma of fresh blood all contribute their characteristics to this mélange of redolence in war.

A soldier can also feel combat. There is a definite ability to touch what is there. Maybe not so much in a physical sense, but one can always

feel the tension and the fear. All warriors dance on a knife blade's edge, emotionally and physically. Staying alert and prepared for any and all eventualities is the price of survival. Allowing one's self to slack off can be fatal. Feeling the tension and understanding that feeling exacerbates the soldier's yearning for survival. Doing all one can to stay alert is what one must do to insure the possibility and probability of survival.

One also feels fear. Living in an arena where combative foes are ubiquitous, fear is a constant companion as well as a necessary ally. In order to maintain a watchful and alert posture, fear is a needed attribute. There are some who bluster and blather about being the nightmare for the enemy, and they are often the ones who will become cocky, careless and eventually will not survive. Fear need not be mindless terror, but more of a healthy respect for the foe because any soldier must realize that the enemy is, in the same vein, a competent soldier who is also looking to survive. Feeling this respect is a pathway to survival.

As well as emotional sensing, there is the feel of the shoulder straps on the rucksack, the aid bag or the sling of a weapon. Further, there is the feeling of sweat running down one's back while patrolling a section of jungle. In another area, there may be numbing cold so intense that it renders feet as solid, almost inert, blocks. The same feelings that one experiences in any climactic condition are present in a war zone, but customarily render the experience more arduous than pleasant. Theaters of war are not well known for their pleasant conditions.

Taste is never absent from the battlefield. One will always experience the dryness of one's own mouth and the acrid flavor of one's own excitement. The metallic tang of blood is very common, even if one does not ingest the fluid. The aroma of blood, ubiquitous on a battlefield, translates into the metallic flavor that all soldiers experience during a

fight. When the bullets fly no more and a respite is in progress, the cool refreshment of water from a canteen provides another sample for the tongue. Yet, during this entire experience, the taste of one's own fear is never far from the forefront of any sensory episode.

Whenever any man or woman enters the arena of combat, whether willingly or by coercion, the instinctive human is present with all attributes, physical and emotional, in full array. Sensory incidents color and flavor the entire experience and render episodes as eternally memorable in the mind, in the heart, in the body because of the five senses, the five pathways, the five thoroughfares into each and every one of us.

***On Viewing The First Photograph of the Atom Bomb,  
Trinity Test Site July 16<sup>th</sup> 1945 5:25:45 AM  
at the New Mexico Museum of Art***

Kathleen Willard

Today I saw the first photograph of the atom bomb,  
enlarged, wallpapered on an entire wall of the art museum surrounded  
by divisions. Each art movement forward was a kind of violence, an  
advancement, the swift dismissal of the past, the word classical  
an indictment, as the round forms for forearms,  
thighs, the full moon of our faces have been flattened  
our until the bodies disappear all together.  
The pursuit of the new imagines the world  
is nonrepresentational and we are all a series  
of color fields.  
Each painting is only conquest.

But the black and white photograph is the most beautiful  
thing in the museum. More compelling than Clovis  
points, arrowheads flicked into shape  
fourteen thousand years ago killers of mastodons  
or retablos and altars of saints, objects  
of pure devotion and instigators of rosaries.  
Point zero twenty-five seconds, the atom bomb  
opens up like a parachute, a thin silk skin shimmers  
a transparent jellyfish floating in the negative sea hovers over  
the desert promising the end of war and for a moment  
almost beautiful, almost benevolent. A rumble froths  
near the Earth's surface into a skirt of ruffles  
for a less than a split second luminous.  
It is all about conquest, the moment before,  
the moment after  
as in this oil painting of a missionary preaches to the Mayan king

and behind his back a phalanx of conquistadors  
available for persuasion if the new voice  
of god goes unheeded.

Now I learn about the birth of modernity,  
the movement towards abstraction  
which overtakes the artwork in a sort  
of manifest destiny, something I learned  
in fifth grade as a positive force.

We live in uneasy peace now as the atomic  
bomb and invasive plants from Europe  
coexist. Everywhere on Earth ice is melting  
and many lock their doors

of suburban homes lullabied by their arsenals  
as dictators across the globe long to split atoms  
and hurl our nightmare back into our face.

I have forgotten most objects some curator museumed  
and deemed worthy of an afternoon's regard  
still on my mind only black and white and the loss of all innocence.  
None of these impulses will matter no paint smeared,  
no reed woven, no clay fired could survive the blast.

***A Day for Goodbyes:***  
***A Brief Journey from Tragedy to Triumph***

James P. Blok

*This story is dedicated to Ronita Yvette Blok, a gentle soul, who was my beloved wife for ten years. Ronita was a skilled master gardener, devoted natural herbalist, authentic medicine woman, talented Reiki practitioner, mysterious crystal healer, self-described “hedge witch” and devotee of indigenous spirituality. But most of all, she was a Wild Child of Gaia.*

**Chapter One – The Tragedies**

What was Ronita thinking? How did she feel? Did she hesitate even once before loading the gun and pulling the trigger? Those are among the thousands of questions I’ve asked myself since that horrific night. But the answers about those final 30 or 40 minutes of Ronita’s life are forever beyond my grasp, having been swept into oblivion in that one desperate, explosive moment, described so inadequately as suicide. Never knowing the answers may be my punishment, handed down by the Furies or some other unknown agent of justice. Maybe not. Either way, I will always regret having left Ronita alone in the house that night, no matter how briefly.

My rational self understands that I wasn’t responsible for Ronita’s death. Years of interlocking tragedies conspired to kill Ronita before her time. In 2007, she came to me broken and haunted by decades of abuse as a child and young adult. There were also years of drug and alcohol abuse, self-medication for undiagnosed mental and physical illnesses. Then, there were the endless family tragedies. The death of her youngest and most beloved child, Alex, at age fourteen nearly destroyed Ronita. In her last few years, Ronita discovered a grotesque truth. Her youngest daughter, Grace, had been sexually abused for many years by Ronita’s

oldest daughter, Shelly, and her boyfriend, Alex Thomas. Ronita also suffered from lifelong bipolar disorder, which wasn't diagnosed and treated professionally until after we were married. Then, there was the young outpatient psychiatrist, who according to Ronita, said she was "misdiagnosed" and could reduce the dosage of her bipolar medication. Ronita chose to follow that lethal advice despite my strong objections. That deadly treatment error was compounded after Ronita's first suicide attempt and last psychiatric hospitalization. An inpatient psychiatrist discharged her prematurely from the safety of the locked hospital ward to home. I had spent the ten years of our marriage doing everything I could to ensure constant access to professional care and help with restoring Ronita's fractured life. But rationality often does not get to have the last word. For two years after Ronita's lethal, second suicide attempt, my thoughts never stopped whispering, "You weren't there. She died alone."

All I can ever truly know is what happened the day Ronita was discharged prematurely and sent home by the hospital staff to die. We arrived home just before noon. Our dogs hadn't seen Ronita in two weeks. When she opened the door and stepped inside, Hunter and Precious froze in place for a moment and then went wild. They ran circuits in the living room, stopping only to jump up and down, begging to be the first to be picked up and cuddled. Ronita solved the problem by sitting on the floor and letting the dogs swarm over her. After they were satisfied that Mama was truly home, Hunter and Precious settled down. But they refused to leave Ronita's side, as if afraid doing so might result in another sudden disappearance.

About half an hour after arriving home, Ronita quietly slipped out the back door and into her private garden wonderland, with Hunter

and Precious close behind. I went into the kitchen and peeked out the small window above the sink. I didn't want Ronita to think I was monitoring her every move. But I was still apprehensive about what could happen now that she was no longer under full-time observation on a safe, locked psychiatric ward. I could see the dogs frantically sniffing around, in search of the perfect patch of grass for peeing. Ronita walked to the far end of the backyard and was standing by the decorative fence I'd built surrounding her most prized flower garden. In her absence, it had gone unattended except for the occasional watering I'd done. A few weeds had sprouted, disturbing the garden's usual elegance.

As I watched, Ronita stepped through the arbor gate and found a place to sit. Ronita lovingly ran her fingers through the soil she had created last spring. It was her own secret recipe of dirt, sphagnum moss, cow manure and a dash of gardener's love. Finally, Ronita began extracting the weeds, careful to include their roots. Gardening had always been Ronita's special refuge and sanctuary, beginning in her childhood. It appeared that today would be no different. I stood by the window several more minutes before stepping back with a deep sigh. I was running on empty, exhausted in body, mind and spirit. With Ronita settled into her own special world and me having nothing more to give I fell into bed and escaped into my own sanctuary of unconsciousness.

When I woke up hours later, dusk had overtaken the daylight. I called out to Ronita but heard nothing. I sat up and hesitated on the edge of the bed. Fear and apprehension flooded my brain. I wondered what I might find after sleeping so many hours. I needed to see Ronita to know she was all right. I thought surely she must have come inside by now. I checked the kitchen, bathroom, living room and even looked in Ronita's office, her special sanctuary downstairs. But I found nothing.

Increasingly apprehensive, I bounded back up the stairs to the kitchen and glanced out the window. There she was, still sitting in the same spot, surrounded by her flower children. But now, Ronita was covered in dirt, as if she had laid down and hugged Mother Earth. A small pile of weeds was stacked by her feet. Ronita appeared so calm and happy. She was smiling and singing to herself as the dogs slept nearby. I breathed a deep sigh of relief and decided not to disturb Ronita in her floral nirvana.

I began to question my prior assessment of everything. Maybe I'd been wrong. It certainly wouldn't be the first time. I began to think, maybe staying longer in the hospital wasn't what Ronita needed. It was beginning to seem possible that returning home was the "best medicine" after all. Being with the dogs and nurturing her beloved gardens certainly hadn't caused any harm. In fact, it all appeared to have worked wonders for Ronita. Sadly, that turned out to be little more than wishful thinking, if not self-delusion on my part. I should have known better. I should have trusted my professional education and years of experience as a clinical psychologist in the Army.

For someone who is bipolar, like Ronita, a daily medication regimen is essential for emotional stability. It's a lifelong commitment. Recovery from being off those medications for a long time and relapsing into psychotic delusions, as well as violent and suicidal behavior, requires more than just a week of inpatient psychiatric treatment. Ronita had only been back on her regimen of medication a few days in the psychiatric hospital. Yes, during those few days, Ronita seemed to change from a brutish Mr. Hyde into Miss Congeniality. But that certainly didn't mean she was fully recovered or beyond a significant risk of another suicide attempt. Sadly, the inpatient psychiatrist and ward staff chose not to explore beyond Ronita's superficial transformation on the ward. I had

tried to explain to the discharge coordinator that this was still a time of great danger for Ronita. The period when a patient is just beginning to re-stabilize and feel better can be one of the most dangerous phases of recovery.

And so it was.

As dusk drifted into night, Ronita finally came inside. I heard her singing in the shower, after which she put on clean clothes and joined me in the living room. I'd been drifting in and out of awareness in my recliner in front of the TV. Precious followed Ronita to the love seat and flopped down against her leg. Hunter jumped on my lap, planted his front paws squarely on my chest and began washing my face with his tongue. It felt like a tiny strip of damp sandpaper. Laughing, I grabbed Hunter and stuffed him into the crevasse between my leg and the recliner arm. He loved to hunker down in tight places, which seemed to make him feel calm. I added a few minutes of head scratching, which closed Hunter's eyes.

Ronita picked up her cell phone and said, "I'd better catch up on the emails." She began scrolling through the many emails that had piled up during her hospitalization. I decided to do the same to delete the myriad junk emails that always seem to choke my inbox. I looked all around the house but couldn't find my cell phone. I asked Ronita to call my cell to help me find it but heard nothing. Frustrated, I blurted out, "Damn, the battery must be dead!" I didn't feel like mounting a full-blown search and rescue operation. So I slid into my recliner and directed my fading attention back to the TV. Beyond the TV's background noise, the house was quiet, as Hunter and Precious slept. I thought, "In a few minutes, I'll suggest going out for dinner. Maybe Chinese or Thai, whatever Ronita wants." But there weren't going to

be a few more minutes for suggestions, dinner or sanity. Mania and psychotic delusions were about to overwhelm everything.

The quiet was shattered by Ronita screaming several times, “You gave my gardening job to Victory!” I jumped up from my recliner and the dogs both fled the room. Ronita held up her cell phone and yelled, “You gave away my gardening job!” An elderly garden club acquaintance had previously hired Ronita to help clean up her gardens. Unaware that Ronita was in the hospital, the woman had emailed a request for more help. Ronita’s friend, Victory, who had been staying with us, temporarily needed work. So, I used Ronita’s cell phone to reply, suggesting that Victory could fill in while Ronita was in the hospital. I called Victory, who had already moved out, and told her about the job. I never knew if anything ever came of it. The emails inflamed Ronita’s paranoia and became new evidence, in her mind, of yet another perceived “betrayal” by me. I tried to say, “I was only trying to help your friend.” But Ronita was enraged and on her feet. She threw herself at me, fists flailing. I backed up until I hit the living room wall. Ronita lunged forward again, still swinging and yelling a string of obscenities and delusional allegations. “You took her side, you gave her my job!” I covered my face and deflected several strong blows. I was shaking as I turned and pulled open the front door in an effort to escape the attack. I ran into the front yard. But Ronita followed and grabbed my t-shirt. She tore most of the shirt off my back as I pulled away. I turned and yelled, “I can’t do this anymore!”

Ronita stopped suddenly and stood in silence, clutching the remnants of my shirt. The manic storm passed almost as suddenly as it had begun. Ronita’s head sank as she turned and walked back inside the house. I followed and saw her slumped over on the love seat by the

front window. I remained standing for a moment at a safe distance. Still trembling, but now overwhelmed with the understanding of a fellow bipolar, I stepped forward, sat down, and raised Ronita's chin. After a moment, she opened her eyes and looked directly into mine. I spoke, almost pleading, "Ronita, we both need help." She shook her head yes. I continued, "I need you to be safe in the hospital a while longer." But she didn't respond. I put my arms around Ronita for the first time since we had arrived home. We held each other until I stopped trembling. I stood up, stepped back and told Ronita I needed a few minutes alone to think. Ronita said that she needed that same thing. With that, Ronita headed down to her office. I picked up my car keys, walked out and drove off, not knowing I'd never again see Ronita alive.

I had no idea where I was going. I drove aimlessly down Eisenhower Boulevard. Everyone else was passing me, no doubt irritated by my sticking to the speed limit. I drifted past Lake Loveland and saw The Village Inn. I pulled into the parking lot, intending to have a cup of coffee and maybe some warm cherry pie with vanilla ice cream, a favorite comfort food. I looked at the posted store hours and checked the time on the Jeep's dashboard. Damn, only fifteen minutes until closing. I sat in the car a few more minutes and thought, "I can't put off talking with Ronita about going back into the hospital." As I drove home, I decided not to park the car at home. I didn't want Ronita losing control and possibly trying to drive off to avoid going back to the hospital. I was pleased with my plan and congratulated myself as I parked a few blocks away from the house. I walked through the darkness, practicing what I'd say to Ronita.

The lights were on in the living room when I opened the front door, but the house was dead silent. I called Ronita's name but got no

reply. Not even the dogs made their usual appearance at the front door. It all seemed strange, so I headed toward the bedroom. Maybe Ronita was there, sleeping with Hunter and Precious. After my first few steps toward the bedroom, the silence was broken by my cell phone's telltale ring. It was coming from the garage. I recognized the sound of my alarm reminding me to take my bedtime medications. I remembered that earlier I hadn't been able to find my cell phone. But there was no question, that was my cell phone alarm. How the hell did my cell phone get into the garage?

My phone stopped ringing, but I decided to retrieve it before going to the bedroom to wake up Ronita. I pulled open the heavy door into the garage and hopped down the two short steps. Our two large trash containers had been moved from their normal location and were blocking my way into the garage. I looked to the left to make my way around the containers and froze in silence at what I saw. On the floor was my 38 caliber, 5-shot revolver. But that couldn't be. It was locked in the gun box in my dresser, where it had sat unused for several years. And I was the only one who knew where the key was hidden. But there it was, my gun. I thought, "Oh my god, did Ronita intend to shoot me?" I bent down and grabbed the gun in a moment of panic. As I did, I saw Ronita's foot. I inched forward, still confused and afraid. There was Ronita's leg, her body, then her head, all covered in blood and surrounded by a glistening halo of dark red. I leaned closer and stared in disbelief. Ronita's forehead was torn open and her mouth filled with blood. She wasn't breathing. I fell back and dropped the gun. "Oh my god, Ronita is dead."

But how? I was only gone for 30 or 40 minutes. Somehow, Ronita had gotten my gun and shot herself. How? She didn't know

where to find the gun box key. I dropped to the floor and sat, stunned and sobbing. What should I do? What can I do? I thought that I should call the police. But I didn't have my cell phone and we had given up our landline years before. What can I do? I know, I'll ask the neighbors to call the police. I tried to stand up but couldn't. I got on my hands and knees and crawled back into the house. There, I used the couch to pull myself up and stumbled into the front yard. The aspen trees helped keep me standing on my way to Tom's and Vaughna's front door. I rang the bell and stepped back. A moment later, the porch light came on and Tom cracked open the door. I tried to say, "Ronita's dead." But the words were barely audible. Tom looked confused. I repeated, "Ronita's dead, she shot herself." He threw open the door, shocked by my words. "Ronita is dead. Will you please call the police?" Vaughna, who had joined Tom at the front door, went to call the police. Tom stepped outside and invited me to sit on their front porch to wait. But I made my way back home and sat on my porch. I kept asking myself, "How? Why?" Questions with no answers.

A single police officer arrived, questioned me briefly and went into the house. That began what was to become a nearly two-year investigation to determine what seemed transparently obvious to me. It was also all well-documented. Ronita stopped using her medications and suffered a serious and predictable recurrence of manic episodes and paranoid delusions. With no warning, she attempted suicide with a massive drug overdose, while I was in Nebraska for a two-day Indian powwow. She was hospitalized, barely survived and had to be involuntarily committed to the safety of a locked psychiatric facility. Ronita was prematurely discharged from the psychiatric hospital, something I had strongly opposed. Once at home, she suffered another

violent manic episode with paranoid delusions within twelve hours of her release. In my absence, Ronita found a more lethal way to end her suffering. She shot herself in the head. I had discovered Ronita, already dead, and had my neighbor call the police. It was a tragic story of horrifically linked events but the simple truth.

The police investigation did determine how Ronita accessed my old revolver. She took the locked gun box and ammunition from my dresser and went to the garage. There, she beat the box with a hammer until it broke open. Ronita loaded the gun, as I had taught her years earlier, sat down behind the trash containers and ended her own life. Had the revolver been a more complicated semiautomatic handgun, I doubt Ronita would have been capable of loading the clip, properly inserting it, chambering a round and releasing the safety. But it wasn't a semiautomatic. I always favored a simpler, more reliable revolver. It's true. Small, seemingly insignificant decisions early in life can unexpectedly determine the path a life will follow, as well as where and how it will end. Fate and destiny. I don't believe in such things. But Ronita did.

After months of forensic investigation, interviewing numerous people in my neighborhood, and hours of interviewing me at home and in the Loveland Police Headquarters, Detective Lintz concluded, "Jim, you didn't kill your wife." But Ronita's family in Arkansas saw things differently and behaved accordingly. Ronita's surviving son, Will, Jr., and youngest daughter, Grace, showed up at the funeral home unannounced and unwelcome. At first, I didn't want to see or talk with them. As far as I was concerned, Ronita's parents, siblings, children, first husband and assorted in-laws had all spent over forty years abusing Ronita. They also harassed her with Christian dogma, which was no

longer a part of Ronita's spiritual life. In my mind, they had all played a central role in causing Ronita's life of suffering. We had escaped to Colorado to be away from all of them. In my heart, they were at least indirectly complicit in Ronita's suicide. I felt they had no place in Colorado following Ronita's death.

In any case, I knew they would oppose my plans to follow Ronita's last wishes, as clearly expressed in her Last Will and Testament. Ronita didn't want her body to be embalmed and put on display. She also did not want a traditional funeral, especially a Christian one. Ronita did want to be cremated and have her ashes scattered in her beloved Rocky Mountains. She had asked to have an offering of food to the ancestors and some native drumming precede the scattering of her ashes. Ronita had taken it into her own hands to end her life. But she still needed me to send her to her final rest in the manner she chose. I saw no reason to subject myself to an argument over what I had already decided to do. I may have failed Ronita in many ways during her life, but I was not going to fail in this.

But the two friends who had given me a ride to the funeral home encouraged me to at least sit down with and listen to what Will and Grace had to say. I was shaking and on the verge of tears, but I finally gave in and agreed.

The funeral director provided a small private room for the meeting. I washed my face, composed myself, and sat down in the far corner of the room. When they entered, Grace tried to lean over to put her arms around me. Still trembling, I held up my hand, trying to protect myself and stay calm. They sat across from me in silence. I finally asked, "Why have you come?" Will began by saying that they wanted to take Ronita's body back to Arkansas for a Christian funeral and burial in the

family plot. I replied quietly. That was not what Ronita wanted and there was no way I was going to violate her wishes or subject her remains to any such abuse. Will looked angry but didn't say any more. Grace spoke up regarding what I suspected was the real agenda. She said they wanted some of Ronita's things to take back with them to Arkansas. She started rattling off a long list, but I again held up my hand.

Grace stopped for a moment, before mentioning a specific diamond ring of Ronita's. She added, "I know Momma wanted me to have it." I knew it. The vultures were circling. They weren't in Colorado to mourn their mother. Will and Grace had come to present a façade of crocodile tears and feigned grief. They were in Colorado to pick Ronita's bones clean. Will and Grace were after as much loot as possible. That agenda was typical of Ronita's children. "What's in it for me" had always been their *modus operandi*. I'd had more than enough. I stood up and said, "This is not the time or the place for any of this. Please just go back to Arkansas." I walked out of the room and the funeral home as quickly as I could to avoid exploding. As soon as I was outside, I let loose a wild and prolonged scream. The tears came again and I could barely see. But I kept on walking, muttering to myself. Mostly, I was angry with myself. Why had I been stupid enough to talk with them? I knew exactly what kind of people they are. I brought Ronita to Colorado to keep her safe from their abuse. Now, in a moment of weakness, I had again subjected myself to that same grotesque abuse.

Never again!

Three days later, the funeral director called and told me Ronita's ashes were ready to be picked up. I drove to the funeral home to get Ronita's ashes and to apologize to the funeral director about what had happened there three days before. When I tried to apologize, he was kind

and reassured me, in a funeral director's whisper, I need not worry. He took a velvet bag from his desk and removed a black plastic box. When making the final arrangements, I had declined the much more expensive urn, because I planned to scatter the ashes as soon as possible on Flat Top Mountain in Rocky Mountain National Park. He put his hand on my shoulder and advised me I could still opt for the urn I had previously declined. There was also a "beautiful mahogany box" if I preferred. He said it would be easy to transfer Ronita's ashes because they were in a sealed plastic bag inside the plastic box. I politely declined the urn and the mahogany box. The plastic box was free. Then I put Ronita back in her velvet bag, thanked the funeral director for all his help, and left.

Ronita and I drove home, where I placed her in the crystal display alcove above the fireplace. I reassured Ronita that I still planned to carry out her exact wishes. I said that I'd take her ceremonial drum, a food offering for the ancestors, and her ashes to the summit of Flat Top Mountain as soon as I was a bit more rested. Several days passed, but I never felt quite rested enough to face the arduous trek up Flat Top Mountain. I convinced myself to rest a while longer and wait for just the right day. A few weeks passed by, but each new day was never "just the right day." I managed to find some tiny detail about each day that disqualified it as The Day. Too cloudy. Probably not warm enough at 12,000 feet. It was too late in the day to complete the roundtrip up and down Flat Top Mountain. The excuses were endless. But eventually, I was forced to admit to my conscious self that I was simply procrastinating. But why?

I had begun individual counseling and even joined a grief group at the Loveland VA Clinic after Ronita's death. It was helping me a lot. With that support, I was better able to sort through my chaotic feelings.

In addition, I was becoming less angry and more patient with myself about the persistent depression, tears, and those times when I'd simply withdraw into my man cave. I was getting stronger and better able to fend off the continuing harassment from Ronita's family. I was even able to ignore the family's accusations to Detective Lintz that I may have "murdered" Ronita. In any case, I knew that he already thought they were all crazy, and I had nothing to do with Ronita's death. He was convinced it was a suicide.

But it remained a mystery to me and my individual therapist and grief group leader, Chaplain Don, why it was so difficult for me to let go of Ronita's ashes and scatter them in the mountains. I finally decided to just accept the reality that, for some reason, I wasn't ready to let go of Ronita's ashes and move forward. After all, they were the last concrete evidence I had of her presence in what was supposed to have been our retirement home. I always thought of it as the home they'd have to carry me out of, feetfirst. Eventually, I moved Ronita from the alcove above the fireplace in the living room to the top shelf in our walk-in closet. It was an indignity for which I apologized nearly every time I entered the closet and saw the velvet bag. Eventually, with one final apology, I moved Ronita to the bottom shelf and out of sight. Scattering her ashes would just have to wait until I was ready and able to deal with it. I knew Ronita would understand. At least I told myself she would. Finally, winter arrived, and the deep snow made it impossible to reach, let alone climb Flat Top Mountain. I was off the hook, at least until the spring thaw.

## **Chapter Two – The Right Day**

Over two years had passed since Ronita was prematurely released from Mountain Crest Psychiatric Hospital and killed herself within twelve hours of arriving home. It was an old story now. Sometimes it still felt like yesterday. But the nightmare that had taken Ronita's life and left those of us who genuinely loved her struggling for answers was fading. The mistakes, pain, and tears mostly stayed in the background and the darkness held less sway over my daily life. I had recovered to the point where I no longer needed regularly scheduled grief counseling to face the future. My work with Chaplain Don and the group had given me the strength I needed to turn away from the horrors of those last few weeks and Ronita's death. Now, when I thought of Ronita, I was able to call on my memories of the happiness, love and passion we shared for our ten years together. I had finally reached that level of acceptance that Chaplain Don had talked about in the grief group. He promised that acceptance was achievable. Some group members had been "working on it" for a year or two without making any clear progress. At the time, few of us could imagine it for ourselves. But we all trusted and respected Chaplain Don. So, we tried our best to believe and kept working. Now, here I was, feeling as if I had finally been able to accept Ronita's death. My heart and rational self both agreed with each other on this matter, not a common occurrence.

Somehow, none of the nearly 800 days since Ronita's death had managed to be "just the right day" for scattering her ashes and offering final goodbyes. But this one particular day, which I'd left vacant for no apparent reason, was different. It simply wouldn't be ignored. This day reached out and grabbed my shoulder, leaned in close and whispered over and over again, "It's time." And it was true; it was time to act. The

most difficult days were behind me. Truth be told, although poor Ronita was still suffering from my indecision and waiting in the walk-in closet, I had already started to build a new life.

While still in grief counseling, I resolved never to get married again. I had survived two divorces. Then, there were the premature deaths of Cindy and Ronita. Four times seemed more than enough. My high school sweetheart and first love, Sandra, spent thirteen years married to me. Five years into our marriage, we had our daughter, Allyson. When she was eighteen months old, I was pulled out of graduate school and called to active Army duty. After six months of basic officer training, I, along with Sandra and Allyson, were sent to West Berlin, Germany. It was still an occupied city and surrounded by The Wall, one hundred and ten miles inside communist East Germany. When Allyson was about three, Sandra became bored with being an isolated Army wife and started a master's degree program, which I had recommended. She met a lesbian professor who also happened to be a sexual predator. During their briefly secret affair, Sandra decided she was bisexual, if not a lesbian, and wanted an open marriage. A few months of marriage counseling changed nothing. That was not what I had signed up for. I got my first divorce. It made sense.

My second wife, Cindy, with whom I got reacquainted at our twentieth high school reunion, died of heart failure caused by a congenital heart condition. Her last year was spent in and out of critical cardiac care units, while waiting on a heart/lung transplant list. We had only five short but wonderful years together.

Then there was Janet, my unfortunate rebound marriage after Cindy died. All during our marriage, Janet carried on the same affair that she had started behind the back of her first and second husbands. She

also secretly spent tens of thousands of dollars on her son who endlessly depended on his mother for financial support well into his adulthood. Oh well, we all make mistakes and Janet was a big one.

Finally, there was Ronita, a victim of years of childhood and young adulthood emotional abuse, lethal decisions by two psychiatrists, and her eventual choice of suicide. Enough! It was time for me to try living alone. I still had my dogs, Hunter and Precious. I resolved to take care of them and turn my attention to writing and political activism, two of my passions. It made sense.

But then something entirely new popped into my life from halfway around the world and stopped me in my tracks. While living a comfortable, if not very exciting, bachelor life with my dogs, I received an unassuming four-word email message. I didn't know it then, but that message was from Zoubida Mamouni, a twenty-four-year-old Moroccan woman who was living a quiet life with her parents in Sidi Taibi. She was someone who was exceedingly curious about the world and what lies beyond the borders of her homeland. The message simply read, "Hello, want to talk?"

At first, I ignored the message and was more than a little wary. For a long time following Ronita's death, I abandoned the internet. But when I got back online, I made a huge mistake. At the urging of friends, I used a dating website called Plenty-of-Fish to meet women my own age for casual lunch and dinner dates—nothing serious. That did help me begin to get out and reconnect with people. But apparently, signing up with POF exposed my email address to being sold and splashed across the internet. I began receiving unsolicited messages from many women, some of whom lived overseas. I discovered the hard way, many women from outside America used fake pictures and identities to attract

attention. Once contacted, they'd share their true identities, describe their abject poverty in gruesome detail and ask for money, marriage, or both. That was nothing I wanted to be dragged into. Hence, my wariness.

The simplicity of Zoubida's message and its lack of the usual hints about money or marriage intrigued me. Also, I'd be lying if I denied noticing Zoubida was beautiful. After several days of wavering back and forth, I broke down and answered Zoubida's message. I sent an equally brief email, "Let's talk." That first contact led to several weeks of increasingly frequent and lengthy conversations. Zoubida was curious about America and my life there. I was equally curious about Zoubida, her family, and Morocco. Our longer conversations became cumbersome, given that I'm a lousy typist. Zoubida suggested using WhatsApp, a live video chat program. The live video chats allowed me to confirm that Zoubida spoke English reasonably well and the first picture I saw of her had been genuine and current. Zoubida only had a high school education but had gone on to study English at the American Language Center in Kenitra, Morocco. She was well informed and able to carry on intelligent conversations about world events, especially in the Middle East.

There didn't seem to be a single ounce of guile in Zoubida. She spoke calmly and confidently about everything. She answered my questions at length, with little or no hesitation. We both ended up sharing a great deal about our lives. I talked about my marriages, my jobs and travels and, of course, Ronita's recent death. Zoubida shared about growing up with five sisters and two brothers in an Islamic country. One sister and brother had died young, apparently not an uncommon thing in Africa. Zoubida was clearly a devout Muslim but didn't seem upset or concerned about my atheism. I was painfully aware of the vast

difference in our ages. Zoubida seemed amused by my concerns. She explained that the Prophet Mohammed had old and very young wives. It was not unusual in Morocco for young women to be with an older man. While normal in Morocco and apparently for Zoubida, the age difference still felt exceedingly odd to me.

It had only been a matter of months since Ronita's death. So I also felt a bit guilty about my growing interest in Zoubida. I made an appointment with Chaplain Don to discuss Zoubida and ask his advice. After I spent thirty minutes nervously looking at my feet and explaining everything, Chaplain Don simply smiled. He leaned forward, touched my shoulder and looked me squarely in the eyes. Chaplain Don spoke calmly, but with the conviction of a man who had heard it all many times before. He explained that grieving never followed a neat and orderly schedule. It was different for each person. My meeting someone new and opening my heart to the possibility of regaining happiness and love in my life was not being disloyal to Ronita or her memory. He added that my finding peace and being happy again was what Ronita would have wanted because she loved me. That was all I needed to hear.

Within weeks, I decided to fly to Morocco and meet Zoubida and her family face-to-face. It was time to discover what was real and what was just an aging man's fantasies. I flew to Morocco in November 2019, which was a welcome shock for Zoubida. She and an entourage of family greeted me at the Casablanca airport. Zoubida, being a Muslim woman, meant that she and I spent all three weeks of my first visit to Morocco in the company of Aunt Toumia, a jolly, rotund family matriarch, or with an alternating group of parents, siblings, cousins, aunts, and uncles. But there wasn't a single moment of suspicion or confrontation the entire time. Wherever we went, I was greeted with smiles, handshakes, or hugs

and frequently received the traditional two to four kisses on alternating cheeks. I was utterly enchanted by the experience and quickly fell head over heels in love with Zoubida and all her family. She and her brother, Abdo, were the only English speakers. They served as my trusted interpreters. But the most important things were communicated with those hugs, smiles, and welcoming gestures.

After I recovered from my jet lag, much of that initial visit was spent on a whirlwind tour of Morocco in a car I rented with Abdo's help. We visited several large cities: Rabat, Casablanca, Marrakesh, Jadida, and Agadir, as well as several smaller fishing ports along the Atlantic coast. I was always given the most comfortable seat in the front next to Abdo, who drove. Zoubida and several family members would squeeze into the back seat and spent much of the time on the road singing along with lively Arabic songs on the radio or laughing about things I was totally unable to decipher.

Near the end of the three weeks, I proposed to Zoubida and she accepted. I was still only allowed to kiss Zoubida on the cheek or forehead in public. We became formally engaged in an elaborate Moroccan betrothal ceremony attended by fifty or sixty family members. During the ceremony, we were seated on an elevated white love seat. Zoubida and I wore traditional Moroccan clothes and fed each other the traditional figs and milk, which symbolized our commitment to each other. We also exchanged rings, hers a diamond and gold ring and mine a simple silver ring paid for by Zoubida. At that moment, in the eyes of everyone present, we were betrothed and destined to marry. In my heart, I knew we already were.

Several months later, I returned to Morocco with all the U.S. documentation required by the Moroccan government: a certified birth

certificate, proof of adequate income to support Zoubida, and much more. It took us four weeks to have all my documents reviewed, stamped and approved at several Moroccan government offices. Then we submitted everything to the Moroccan family court for final judicial and religious approval. Some of the documents had been rubber-stamped in bright colors by so many Moroccan officials, they were nearly impossible to read. In the fifth and final week of my second trip to Morocco, Zoubida and I were finally married. It was a simple, almost anticlimactic civil affair that centered around our signing a marriage contract in the office of a lawyer appointed by the court. The contract established a bride-price of one thousand dollars and included a clause in which I agreed to become a Muslim. A foreign, non-Muslim man is not allowed to marry a Muslim woman in Morocco. I considered that pledge to be an essential, but harmless, white lie. Zoubida and I both knew I'd probably remain an atheist. That still didn't appear to bother her. Zoubida's parents and siblings could see that I did not go to the mosque or pray five times a day. They respected my choices and never pressed me to behave as a devout Muslim. But some things are better left unsaid.

Soon after our marriage and a whirlwind, three-day honeymoon in Tangier, I had to return to Colorado. Once there, I began shedding many of the artifacts of my unhappy years in Arkansas, as well as my ten wonderful years of marriage to Ronita. I gave her clothes to Goodwill and offered her jewelry to several of her closest friends. I traded the two-wheel drive Jeep I brought from Arkansas for a new all-wheel-drive Subaru Outback. I justified the ridiculous expense by telling myself the two-wheel drive Jeep had been unsafe during my first few winters of Colorado's deep snow and ice. It made sense, sort of. I also sold Ronita's and my home in Loveland. The house, surrounded by Ronita's

many gardens, held too many painful memories, not the least of which was her suicide in the garage. And frankly, I wanted a new home for me and Zoubida; something she could decorate in her own Moroccan style. It made sense too, sort of.

My new life was already in progress, when every detail of this fated day reached out and beckoned me to the mountains. The burnished copper sun smiled at me with an unmistakable sincerity. The languid clouds hung silently in the pale turquoise sky, as if not wanting to disturb the morning's serenity. The summer temperature had paused its ascent, lingering at a level that wouldn't offend any reasonable person's comfort. It all came together and called out, "This is it, Jim—are you ready?" I was.

This was the day I was meant to journey into the mountains and fulfill Ronita's most fervent wish—being reunited with Mother Earth and the Sioux ancestors in the welcoming arms of her beloved Rockies. I had already made sure Ronita was cremated as soon as possible and protected from a Christian funeral and people staring at her body. Ronita always said people just "gawked and gossiped" at funerals. Additionally, I had discouraged a caravan of her relatives showing up from Arkansas and skulking about for whatever they could slip into their pockets. The letters Ronita wrote to each family member during her last psychiatric hospitalization were profane, brief, and quite explicit. In them, she disowned everyone in Arkansas but her youngest daughter, Grace, and vowed never to return to the South.

Ronita had long before rejected her parents' Christian beliefs in favor of a more natural understanding of the universe. She was greatly influenced by the values, beliefs, and ceremonies of the Lakota Indians. In that tradition, Ronita often referred to herself as a "medicine

woman” and grew a wide variety of herbs, using them to make “natural medicines,” which she used along with essential oils, Reiki massage, and her crystals to “heal” herself and others, including me. Consequently, Ronita wanted to have her ashes quietly scattered from a mountaintop after some native drumming and an offering to the Lakota ancestors. The Rocky Mountains had become Ronita’s sacred, natural cathedral and I intended to ensure she could spend eternity there. Now was the day to end Ronita’s long, undignified wait in the walk-in closet and deliver her into the beauty of the perpetually snowcapped mountains, where she could be with Mother Earth and rest with the Lakota ancestors.

### **Chapter Three – The Plan**

I had a plan. Nothing new. It was the same plan I had devised over two years before. I would drive up the Big Thompson River Canyon to Rocky Mountain National Park. Once there, I’d make my way to the trailhead at Bear Lake and climb to the summit of Flat Top Mountain with Ronita’s ashes, her ceremonial elk-hide drum, and some buffalo jerky. I didn’t anticipate any difficulties. After all, I had climbed Flat Top Mountain twice before. Once in the 1980s and again in 2015. At the summit, I would make a small offering of the buffalo jerky to the ancestors and beat a simple rhythm on Ronita’s elk-hide drum. I would reassure Ronita that I was no longer hurt or angry about her suicide and had come to accept her decision to depart this life. I’d ask Ronita’s forgiveness for not having been with her at the end. Finally, I’d call on the eternal wind, Mariah, to carry Ronita’s ashes out and across her beloved Rocky Mountains. It was a simple plan, a good plan, one that would finally draw my life with Ronita to a simple conclusion. Then I’d be able to turn my undivided attention back to creating a new life with Zoubida.

It was time to go, no more delays. With absolute confidence, I slid across the worn leather of my favorite rocking chair. It tipped forward, ready to eject me, as it always had. But rather than finding myself up and on my way, I sank back. I was held down by some unrecognizable force. An unexpected torrent of feelings flooded my brain and kept me shackled to the rocker. Again, I tried to get up, but couldn't. I had no choice but to sit there and try to figure out what was holding me back. In a few minutes, the proverbial light bulb lit up. While my plan was simple, it was also impossible. Deep down inside, I knew my 70-year-old legs and lungs weren't going to be able to carry me, Ronita's ashes and her drum to the summit of Flat Top Mountain. What the hell was I thinking? It had been years since I last climbed Flat Top all the way to its summit. My right hip and left knee replacements alone would probably stop me before I reached the tree line, let alone the summit. Even worse, a recent bone density test made a new problematic reality exceedingly clear. Arthritis had eaten away what had always been my good left hip. It was now nearly as weak as my right hip had been when Dr. Nguyen sawed off the head of my right femur and inserted a metal joint. "Damn it!" Was I not going to be able to keep this last promise to Ronita? Would I fail again?

After several minutes of self-doubt and recriminations for daring to have grown older, it hit me. The summit of Flat Top Mountain is just a little above 12,000 feet elevation. If I forgot about Flat Top Mountain and drove the Subaru up Ridge Road to the Alpine Summit Lodge, I'd be at nearly 12,000 feet of elevation. Then, I'd only have to climb the roughly 150 or so steps to reach the highest point above the Lodge and roadway before it turned down toward Grand Lake. I'd been to the Alpine Summit Lodge several times before and remembered a

small sign at the top of the hill which read, “12,005 Feet Elevation.” It wouldn’t be the summit of Flat Top Mountain, but I would be darn close to the same elevation. In addition, the tourist season was over. I might even be alone at the 12,005 feet level. Voila, problem solved!

#### **Chapter Four – Our Last Ride Together**

The fall weather was perfect, and I felt great. My new plan was a good alternate. I’d be able to keep my promise to Ronita and scatter her ashes high in the Rockies without the risk of breaking down and being stranded on an unforgiving mountainside. I grabbed a jacket, knowing the temperature at 12,000+ feet would be significantly cooler than in town. I strapped Ronita, her velvet bag of ashes, into the passenger seat and put her ceremonial drum in the back. The buffalo jerky was already tucked away in my pocket. Everything was ready. Even my heart and brain were now cooperating. I slid into the driver’s seat of my trusty all-wheel-drive Subaru, buckled up and headed for Estes Park.

As I drove out of Loveland, the long, flat stretches of Eisenhower Boulevard gave way to the rising and more primitive turns in the foothills. It was a familiar path, one that Ronita and I had traveled many times together. In a way, it seemed like just another one of our afternoon adventures in the Rockies. This same drive up Thompson River Canyon to Estes Park and into Rocky Mountain National Park had been our go-to getaway when we craved some sunshine, fresh air and quiet, far from civilization. We always enjoyed the aspens, mountain lakes, earthy aromas, and, if we were lucky, the call of a lovesick bull elk. Ronita and I had always been able to let go of what had seemed so important at home and recharge our spirits in the gentle majesty of the rugged mountains.

But the comfort of those memories was abruptly broken as I turned the final corner and faced the immense stone walls that serve as the Castle Gates of Thompson River Canyon. Those looming walls opened wide and swallowed me and the Subaru whole. I knew I could no longer daydream my way along and had to focus on the blind corners and hairpin turns that lurked ahead. Along with refocusing and returning to the present came a sad thought. This would be Ronita's and my last trip together, into the Rockies or anywhere.

I settled into the slow, steady pace demanded by the canyon roadway, which was loosely interwoven with the Big Thompson River. As I negotiated each curve, I was able to catch glimpses of the river below. I smiled and laughed because there wasn't much river to see. So much water gets sucked out of the Big Thompson and diverted on its way down the mountain that the word, "Big" hardly seemed applicable. A more accurate moniker at this point would be the Trickling Thompson. But somehow an anemic shadow of a river made a fitting companion for me at that moment. I identified with it. It reminded me of what it felt like nearly two years earlier, when finding Ronita dead by her own hand had sucked all the breath and most of the life out of me. Sinking under a wave of grief and choking back a flood of unexpected tears, I felt myself losing control. I swerved to the side of the road and slammed on my brakes. "Damn it, what's wrong with me?" I had to stay clear if I was going to make it to Estes Park, let alone up Ridge Road. Tears or not, I wasn't going to back down now. I was going to do this.

It was then that I looked up and saw them. They were just standing there, Mr. Pain and Ms. Sadness. I thought, "No way, not again!" I rolled down the window and yelled, "I thought I got rid of you two in Chaplain Don's office!" They didn't say a word or move a

muscle. After a few minutes of mutual silence, I gave in first and opened the car door. "O.K., but this is the last time and I don't want to hear a word from either of you." They had just showed up, unwelcome visitors in the garage, when I discovered Ronita's lifeless body two years before. Now, here they were again. On top of that, they'd pulled the same damn stunt, sucking the air from my lungs and leaving me gasping in tears. Even though I'd let them in the car, I was adamant this time. They had to ride in the back seat. Ronita and I wanted the front to ourselves.

It took another thirty minutes to clear the top of the canyon. I made the final turn, where the rock walls parted on the hilltop overlooking Estes Park. We slipped down the hill through a welcoming committee of now mostly vacant motels and restaurants. Even though Pain and Sadness had kept quiet in the back seat and not bothered either me or Ronita, I'd had enough. I pulled over and into the McDonald's parking lot. I parked the car and took a couple of deep breaths. Looking in the rearview mirror, I said, "I'm going in for two cheeseburgers. When I get back, I want you two gone." With no further comment, I hopped out and went inside. When I returned, Ronita was alone in the Subaru. I smiled, proud of my assertiveness, and slid into the driver's seat. They finally understood; I was no longer vulnerable to their tricks or torment. In any case, I was sure they had many others to visit, as I was certainly not the only one to have ever loved and lost.

Being in Estes Park was a welcome, but brief, diversion from the melancholic drive up the canyon. There was little traffic, as the fall off-season had begun and the thousands of daily summer visitors had long ago abandoned the compact business district. So it only took a few minutes to drive through town and out again. I drove through Beaver Meadows and rolled past the few cars in line to pay for their

park passes. I did a California Stop at the automated gate into Rocky Mountain National Park and swiped my Senior Pass on the way by. As I drove past the turnoff to Bear Lake, I reassured myself that Alpine Summit was over 12,000 feet up and Ronita would surely understand my not trying to climb Flat Top Mountain to scatter her ashes. At least, I hoped so.

Ridge Road turned skyward and began carrying me and the Subaru up the steep, narrow mountain inclines. I slowly negotiated each switchback turn and every stretch of road that had no guardrail between me and what my acrophobic brain considered certain death on the valley floor below. I feared extreme heights, even as a kid. Anything over six feet off the ground could make me dizzy and afraid. My six decades of never actually falling to a gruesome death didn't make any difference; I was tense. But with Ronita unable to take the wheel on this trip, I faced the fear and drove on. There was one silver lining, at least in my mind, to that harrowing experience. I felt a bit heroic by facing my fear of heights on Ridge Road. That made my alternative plan of driving to Alpine Summit Lodge rather than climbing Flat Top Mountain to scatter Ronita's ashes much more palatable. In a small way, I felt like Ronita's knight in shining armor, one last time.

I crested the last rise and there it was, Alpine Summit Lodge. I could see its American and Colorado flags snapping crisply in the wind. Good! There was plenty of strong, mountain wind to carry Ronita's ashes far off into the Rockies. I pulled into the parking lot and found a space as far from the other cars as possible. A part deep inside of me wanted the ceremonial drumming and scattering of Ronita's ashes to be a private affair, just me and her. And I had not sought permission to scatter Ronita's ashes in the national park. Probably a big "no-no."

When I was a kid in Maryland, my father, Paul R. Blok, was a junior funeral director, just across the border in Washington D.C. In those days, Dad brought home countless boxes of unclaimed human ashes. He said they were good for enriching the soil in his begonia beds. But I also knew that over the years the laws had changed. State legislatures and the federal government passed more restrictive laws and regulations about handling human remains. I also knew that cremation reduced the human body to a simple carbon residue in a bath in flames of up to 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit. Human ashes aren't toxic, just messy. So, yes, I'd probably be breaking park rules and a law or two. But at least I wouldn't be putting anyone else at risk. If I was discreet, I could keep my promise to Ronita and lock the door behind Mr. Pain and Ms. Sadness, the unwelcome, but persistent pair I had dropped off at McDonald's.

## **Chapter Five – My Minor Triumph**

I unhooked Ronita's seat belt and placed her ashes in my old, beat-up backpack, very plain and suitably discreet. The only indication that something out of the ordinary was about to happen was the black carrying case hanging at my side. It held Ronita's ceremonial elk-hide drum and a leather-head drumstick. But even that seemed ordinary compared to the big and brightly colored tote bags carried by typical tourists in National Parks. So, I loaded up and set off toward the bottom of the stairs leading to the top of Alpine Summit. Looking up from the first stair, I could see there were only a few people at the top. Nearly perfect. With a little patience, maybe I'd have the privacy I sought.

Two teenagers went racing up the stairs, just in front of me. Inspired by their energy, I bounded up the first ten or fifteen steps. Bad idea. The thin mountain air and my old body quickly conspired to

rudely remind me that I wasn't 20 years old or even 50 for that matter. I stopped, moved to the side and leaned on my hiking staff, while waiting for my lungs to re-inflate and my legs to stop shaking. I tried to appear nonchalant, apparently without much success. A young boy stopped and asked if I was O.K. Not yet capable of speaking, I tried to fake it with a big smile and nod of my head. He ran off, up the stairs after his parents. When I could finally breathe, my moment of humiliation gave way to laughter, as I reassured myself that at least I wasn't still facing puberty like that poor kid. It was time to continue up the stairs, but at a more reasonable pace. Moving slower also allowed me to take in the sights and enjoy the sunshine over the cadre of mountain peaks, all standing at attention, no doubt to honor Ronita.

As I reached the top step, a quick survey found only five or six people waiting to take selfies with the 12,005 feet elevation sign. Another small sign asked visitors to stay on the path and off the fragile alpine tundra. So even a few people gave the impression of a larger crowd on the narrow path. But I was in no hurry. At 71, patience is usually a plentiful commodity. Near the end of the path I saw a few butt-high stones. I chose the flattest one and sat to wait for the crowd to dissipate. After about thirty minutes, all I had accomplished was to see departing tourists replaced with new arrivals. What I thought would be an excess of patience began to wear thin. I decided to go ahead with the ceremonial portion of my saying goodbye to Ronita. I took the buffalo jerky from my pocket and selected the three best-looking pieces. Even though I didn't share Ronita's indigenous, native beliefs, I lowered my head and said, "I make this offering of 'tatanka wasna' (buffalo meat) to the ancestors and ask that they bless Ronita on her journey beyond this life with 'wakan tanka' (The Great Spirit)." With a wry smile, I leaned

over and placed the buffalo jerky behind my rock seat on the Alpine tundra. I hoped it wouldn't be disturbed except by a hungry ancestor or the few small creatures that inhabited that altitude. I quietly uttered, "Bon Appetit, little ones."

At that point, I unzipped the plain black case holding Ronita's elk-hide drum and drumstick. I gently removed them and placed the case on the ground. I sat back down on my rock and began softly drumming a rhythm I'd heard Ronita drum many times during the drum circles we had enjoyed attending together. Having exhausted my limited repertoire of Lakota words, I closed my eyes and drummed in silence. My thoughts began to drift with the drumbeats. My face felt warm in the afternoon sun despite the crisp, cool wind that carried the sound of the drumming skyward. I became oblivious to the presence of others on the summit and allowed my hands to select a stronger, faster drumbeat. Soon, it was almost as if someone else was beating the drum. I was an observer, outside myself.

I have no idea how long the drumming continued before my hands tired and decided to slow to a stop. When the drumming ended, my eyes opened, and I was once again aware of what was happening around me. I could see there were still several people on the summit with me, but they were absorbed in their own activities. I put the drum back in its case and began waiting for the summit to clear so I could complete my mission by scattering Ronita's ashes in the mountain winds. A few more minutes passed before the far end of the path by the elevation sign emptied. That appeared to be the best opportunity I'd have. I slipped the sealed plastic bag of ashes from my backpack and stepped to the end of the path. With my back to everyone, I cut a small hole in the bag and slowly poured the ashes out. The strong mountain wind welcomed

Ronita and swept the pale gray cloud of ashes skyward. I watched as the ashen cloud faded and swirled out of my view. Ronita was finally with the ancestors, resting in her vast Rocky Mountain Cathedral.

Our journey together was over. I had kept my word and brought Ronita home to the one place she wanted to spend eternity. I whispered a final goodbye as I picked up my things. I turned and took that first, irrevocable step away from the past and into the future. That moment was my minor triumph. Now I would truly be able to focus on my journey with Zoubida through the last few years of my own life. When I reached the bottom of the stairs, which thankfully, had been much less formidable on the way down, I turned to walk to the Subaru for the long ride home. I felt a warm and gentle gust of wind swirl around me. It caught me off guard and caused me to hesitate briefly. I lowered my head and thought, warm and gentle winds aren't unusual at 12,000 feet, especially this late in the year. I lifted my head, shook it two or three times and continued to the car. I slipped behind the wheel, turned on the radio and drove home without giving that warm and gentle breeze another thought. But now, looking back, I like to think it was Ronita, wishing me every happiness and sending me on my way. Makes sense!

## *Attic Hat*

Mary Scott

Small, spindly legs climb big stairs: a daily ritual.

Up, up the dark and wide brown steps, a lack of light encouraging ominous darkness, encasing the child with yellow shorts and pink top.

Up, up as if it was a first time, but with 100 climbs behind her.

This! This amazing and dark attic with many rooms, hiding very special secrets, suitcases, and remnants of success.

Purpose propels her to the long floorboards at last, lighted by little boxy windows she always liked. This time, she ignores the looming bookcase stuffed with *National Geographic* from before her birth, thousands of colored pages offering up scenes she'd devour like special candies.

Eyes on the prize, she spots her treasure: a black chest made of cheap wood and steel, housing precious gems stashed by a Lieutenant Commander drinking Scotch two floors below.

She lifts the lid; small squeaks from hinges break the silence. She's hungry; hungry to see—no feel—something new . . . but so familiar with all within. Stretching, lifting higher, watching a slight bend in a weak frame. Fearful but mindful: a break will expose her and take it all away.

Eyes dance over the insides, viewed countless times but never this way: Japanese sword asking to be unsheathed, white dress-pants and shirt begging freedom from their folds, and the “untouchable hat” demanding to be filled.

That hat! So big, black and white but slightly yellowed, gold and black bands around the massive surface, an inside so large and empty her mind could not comprehend real use or meaning.

But that hat was *dignity*, a word she didn't know then . . . She wanted to have it, to be it, to fill it, to move it through her hands, run her fingers over the soft top, brighten the bold eagle and shield, and dust the plastic brim to reflect all that the dim light above could offer.

She dared not. It was his—she knew that. And just its presence here comforted her some . . . knowing but not knowing there had been an important past, and that somehow he was drinking it all away, downstairs, in his sanctuary and hell: their home.

## *Almost*

Ryan Lanham

Fucking chaos. The woman on her knees is screaming, crying out to god in her native tongue. Duke's M-4 is pressed so hard against her forehead that a little red ring, an inflamed Cheerio, reveals itself when her chest heaves. My rifle is aimed at her husband's face. There's hate in his eyes. A roiling rage I've never known. Duke is yelling for him to tell us who did it. Our interpreter spews translations. Duke starts a countdown. *Tell us who did it or I'll blow your wife's fucking brains out right here.* There's a steady stream of military chatter on my shoulder radio. Back on the road black smoke billows from where the bomb exploded under the rear of our truck. Shreds of sand-colored metal litter the landscape. The smell of burning rubber fills the air. It looks like a scene from a post-apocalyptic movie: an impossibly large machine from the future taken down by poor adobe-dwelling rebels.

Mad Max Afghan Fury.

But this isn't a movie. I can't fast-forward to see if Duke pulls the trigger or not. We've never been in this situation before.

A month ago the first IED exploded under my truck. I was seated below the gunner near the rear. The blast was deafening. Time grew still. I watched as the innards of our metal beast lurched skyward. The black bands we used to strap down equipment inside the truck stretched with the force of the explosion. If one snapped, whatever it held down would become a projectile—ammo cans, MREs, radios. I felt the familiar warmth of adrenaline in my spine and moved into action. We drilled incessantly for these moments, and my first duty was to pull down the gunner in case of injury or secondary attack or vehicle roll over. I reached up, grabbed his legs, and pulled. Maybe it was too late. Maybe

I was too slow. He was medevaced to Germany and then back home to the States for recovery.

When he returned to theater months later we gave him shit for his Purple Heart. I wonder if secretly we were jealous. There's something heroic about being wounded in war. There were many nights that tour when I laid in my bunk, listening to the deafening thump of helicopters outside our tent, hoping I'd hit the big one. I was practical. My deathwish had parameters. I didn't want to be maimed or seriously injured. But if a bomb took my life in an explosion, in a split second, then I was ready. The thought of returning to a mediocre existence was more than I could bear. At the time, I didn't have the tools to stay sober, and going back to life at the bottom of a vodka bottle was scarier than any injury I could sustain in combat. During those nights I prayed for the final blast. A hero's death. My parents would weep over a closed casket while a team of immaculately dressed soldiers performs a twenty-one gun salute. A lone bugler playing Taps as a folded flag is handed to my mother. God bless you, ma'am. God bless his service.

I could do without that last bit. I'd long since removed god from the equation in our war of acquisition. There is no good or evil. There is only self-interest. It's the basest of human impulse. Greed. Maliciousness. Contempt. We want land and mineral rights and oil. We want defense contracts and transnational corporate alliances. We want economies and peoples and freedoms. We want. We want. We want.

It's an insatiable thirst for more that propels us in this foreign land. We dress our youth in uniform and offer increasingly attractive incentives to bolster enlistment numbers. Fodder for the war machine. Free college! Free health benefits! Military discounts! Veteran's savings! Thank you for your service. Thank you. Thanks.

But I'm not this jaded yet. I'm just worried about returning home and drinking myself into oblivion. An IED kiss of death sounds preferable, but the man with the remote control detonates the bomb under my truck a second too late. The main force of the blast misses center, blowing off the back end. A foot to my left. Guess it wasn't my lucky day.

Or maybe it was.

Today's IED is pressure-plate detonated. The pressure of a tire rolling over the bomb engages the detonation mechanism, and when the pressure is released—the tire rolling off—it explodes. These bombs are usually buried in a shallow hole in the road, hidden from view. It was the fifth vehicle in our convoy of eight that set it off today. A bit ironic, since today's mission is to find a well-known IED maker in the region, a main supplier to Kabul and other auxiliary Taliban operations. Seems a matter of sheer luck that my truck, the first truck, didn't trigger the blast. Would've been a cozy hole in the earth back in Texas to rest my bones. Or fragments of bones.

"We've got a runner," says our team member over the radio. "Moving past a tree line to our five o'clock." Duke looks at me. That's our cue. We have to catch this fucker. He lets the woman go and motions for the interpreter to follow us as we run through a poppy field back toward the road.

I'm relieved. It's one of those moments that could have defined a lifetime.

A few months after we get back from Afghanistan, the army will send me to a military rehab facility in Denton, Texas after nearly drinking myself to death. Most of the guys there will be loaded to the gills on benzos. Suppose to help with PTSD. Klonopin. Trazodone.

Ambien for sleep. I'll be trapped in there on Memorial Day when big sheets of paper canvas are taped to the walls, and soldiers and marines are asked to write the names of their fallen comrades. A makeshift memorial with torn edges and hastily taped corners that make the sheets of paper bubble in the middle. Some of the guys scribble a name or two in colored Sharpie. But some guys write whole lists of names. Entire squads killed in IED blasts. Half a platoon taken out in an ambush.

The mood in the unit goes black. Men—barely more than boys, most of them—start yelling for the docs. *Where's our meds?* Nurses scramble to their stations and hand out little pills like Halloween candy. In an hour the scene looks like something from a horror movie. The men look like zombies shuffling down the hall. Others sit motionless on the couch. Drool drips from the corners of their mouths. A TV is the only sound in this sterile, white-walled cage. Occasionally a zombie will moan, some rising scene from war bubbling up in his muddled brain.

Our wall of death will remain plastered up for a week. Pills at the ready.

One night my roommate will tell me a story. His squad was on convoy in Afghanistan when one of their trucks hit an IED. The blast killed the driver and front passenger. My roommate described the terror he felt when he looked at the mangled vehicle. The driver was his best friend. His confidant. The person with whom he'd developed the strongest ties, both in war and back at home. They were like brothers. He recalled running up to the vehicle and seeing his friend's head exploded against the window. Blood and brain and bone in a soupy mixture on the glass.

Eyes on triggerman, yelled his teammate.

*Where?!* my roommate screamed.

Twenty meters off the road a man was scrambling down a tree. My roommate started toward him at a run. He saw the man toss something in a bush as he fled on foot. Even with forty pounds of gear my roommate caught up to him. Adrenaline coursed through his veins. Hate flooded his mind. He shoved the man in the dirt. *Where are the others?!* The man cowered at his feet. *Where the fuck are they?!*

He pulled the man to his knees and put the barrel of his M-4 in the man's mouth. *I'm gonna ask again. Who are you here with?*

Two other soldiers from his squad approached cautiously.

Hey, Sergeant, they said. We didn't see anybody else.

The man's eyes were wild. His teeth chattered against the barrel.

*Last chance. Where are they?*

The man gestured nervously. Panicked. He didn't speak English. Wouldn't have mattered anyway. My roommate pulled the gun from his mouth, flipped it to burst, and shot a series of rounds straight into the air, then shoved it back in. The barrel was hot from the muzzle blast. The man's eyes grew wilder. *Where are they?* No response. My roommate pulled out and shot overhead. Again. And again. He emptied a full magazine inches from the man's face, and when the barrel was nearly glowing red from the heat, he stuck it in the man's mouth. His tongue sizzled, melting to the barrel. My roommate racked another magazine, pushed the muzzle against the back of the man's throat, and pulled the trigger.

At night, when the other zombies are snoring in their sterile rooms with white walls and white sheets, he'll revisit the murder scene in his sleep and start to scream.

Could have been Duke that day. Or me. Could have been our story. Our screams.

## ***Dear Robert James Near***

Ross Atkinson

Dear PFC Robert James Near,

Two months and twenty-seven days from now marks a decade. It has been ten years since our fateful foray into enemy territory, since our flight into Ireland, then Kyrgyzstan, then Afghanistan. Kandahar was the location the Army saw fit to send you. *Kandahar was the location.*

For the first few years after I returned from that war-torn landscape, an anachronism, I thought of you every day. I would consider what it would be like to have you over after I bought my first home, after our unit moved to El Paso, after I separated from the service. Would I still call you my friend? Would we have argued? Would we have stopped speaking like so many others? The silence could never be as deafening as it is now.

The years to follow pulled my thoughts further from you, but I still thought of you on your birthday every year, and I still thought of you on *that day*, January 7. I thought of you in Arizona, walking down the desolate road on the west side of Ft. Huachuca on our first night there. I thought of how fearful I felt because you had asked that I bring you some ecstasy from Las Vegas because you had always wanted to try it. I thought of you *rolling* down the road, eyes in every direction, holding a teddy bear. I thought you were stupid for taking the ecstasy during the work week as I was sure you would get caught in a drug test, and I let you know it. But you just said, "They won't drug test us in the first week!" And of course, you were right, you arrogant bastard.

I thought of the day we left the States to experience, what was for me,

a full year in Afghanistan. It was a little less for you. A full year away from home for me, forever more for you.

I thought of you during my undergraduate degree while I was having panic attacks simply walking onto campus. I thought of you when I ran into the library, grabbed a random book off the shelf and sat through an entire class period shaking, sweating, pretending to read. I stole that book accidentally, however, I kept it purposefully as a reminder of when my time in the service came back to bite me, when I fought the label of PTSD, when I got a DUI, when I wondered if maybe, just maybe, you made the right choice in Kandahar on *that day*, January 7.

I thought of you when I traveled with Brittany, Meagan, and Keith to Washington State to meet your grandmother. We were a merry band of wandering souls who gave no prior notice of our arrival, but your grandmother gladly opened the door to us upon saying your name. She remembered you as vibrantly as anyone ever could, and she told me wonderful stories of you as a child. She described you as a “tornado” that ripped up her beautiful home near the cherry orchard, but her tone was nostalgic not displeased. She told me many more stories while we sat and played nickels all afternoon. One of those stories recounted the day she was informed about your departure. Your grandmother was quick to tell me that she “did not care for the military men who came to her house” on your behalf, because you no longer could. Those men told your grandmother a lie, “In the line of duty,” they said, and I didn’t have the heart to correct their claim. None of us would tell her the truth that day. We couldn’t be the next lot of “military men who came to her house” to deliver bad news. She eventually found out through a local newspaper a year or so later, and for that I am sorry.

It took me six years to forget you on your birthday. It took me seven years to forget you on *that day*, January 7. It's been nearly ten years since the Sergeant who told you he wouldn't let you go home on R&R regretted his decision—or at least I fucking hope he did. What kind of person attempts to deny leave to a soldier who has been in a war zone for nine consecutive months? It has been ten years since I received that last email from you, since I read it, since I did not respond. It has been only moments since I last regretted that decision.

It has been ten years since you smoked your last three cigarettes, rested the cold steel barrel of that Army-issued M16 in your mouth and pulled the trigger, decorating the wall of your room.

You've missed so much, you asshole: I met someone. We have been together for over two years now. I think she got me, brotha—I am hooked for good. I'll save you a spot at the wedding. Also, I graduated from that university with the library that helped me cope with my anxiety. Apparently, they somehow saw fit to give me a teaching credential. Afterward, I moved to Colorado and got another degree—I know right? And you wouldn't believe it if I told you, I was even accepted into a Ph.D. program—somehow, someway, that idiot who dropped out of traditional high school and joined the Army at 19 is on track to be Dr. Atkinson. Of course, my head is underwater, but breathing is overrated anyway, and similar to the military, this is an environment where I thrive.

I have never seen so clearly.

I wonder what you would be doing at this moment. What would you be doing with blood in your veins, with air in your lungs, and with thoughts in your head, sans bullet?

Ten years since I missed your memorial because I was still deployed.

Ten years since I missed your funeral because I was still deployed.

Ten years since you made a decision that changed everything.

A lot happens in a decade.

I wonder if we would still be friends.

## *Bad Day*

Janice Schilling

Not all of my days were high energy and exhausting. This day so far was really chill, and we were loving it. My corpsman had a bag of cookies from home. Taking a bite, he sheepishly mouthed *mmm*. I told him that he was being a little shit. His response was a smirky smile, so I decided to change my approach. With pitiful eyes I began speaking in my whiny, girly voice. “You know, sharing time is a happy time, and sharing would make your mom so proud.”

“Oh OK, OK,” he said, and gave me a peanut butter homemade cookie. I returned the *mmm* with a smile. How could I not love this guy?

Soon the Medevac radio broke in with an ETA of five minutes. On board was an NVA officer with minor wounds. There were always two MPs in our casualty receiving area. I noticed their posture change hearing the radio transmission. They seemed excited about this “fucking gook” they were about to guard. I was absent of excitement but very curious about what a fucking gook looked like. I do admit to feeling a bit uneasy because I would be the one touching and examining his naked body.

Feeling no need to do anything different during my clinical assessment, I began. He was a patient. I did however begin to feel a very eerie energetic field emitting from him. His steely eyes following every move. Although unsettling, I was determined to remain professional.

To the reader, I ask if you would visualize my next 15 seconds in slow motion. I was starting an IV in his right forearm when I was suddenly pushed away from him. I watched the MPs subdue him and aggressively shake his left hand until he dropped a shank. Dear God, he wanted to stab me.

I stayed in a trance-like state until I could gain my composure. My feelings and emotions were filled with conflict and ambivalence. I watched my uniformed guardian angels use physical force and honestly I felt delighted to see him suffer. I was stripped of any compassion. I clearly understood now, he was the enemy. But what was happening to me? I am not wired, nor is it my nature to have such strong, almost violent feelings toward any person. I had great difficulty reconciling that in 15 seconds, I was an enemy. I continued to sit still and then lovingly accepted a cookie and began sobbing.

The rest of the day was pretty uneventful. On my way back to my room, I decided to go into our makeshift chapel. It was guaranteed to be quiet and peaceful. After some time, and in reflection of this day, this war became clearer to me in a deeply personal and emotional way. Intellectually I knew nothing politically or historically about this war. Many years later I realized that was a blessing.

In the many days and months to follow, I would continue honoring our mission of conserving the fighting strength, washing my hair in the monsoon rains, and singing “we gotta get out of this place.” And try as they may, no one will ever convince me that war at any price is necessary for peace. Simply stated but deeply felt, that is just bullshit.

## *What Does War Do to Veterans?*

Stephen Vallée

This question is needed if one is to understand what a veteran might experience on a daily basis. However, this is also an impossible question to answer. Veterans come in different sizes, shapes and hair colors. Each veteran, whether male or female, is different and has a unique story. Some generalizations can be made, but not all vets will fit neatly in these little boxes. I will take from many people and make a composite that will cover as many bases as possible.

Many veterans are emotionally strained. Consider yourself living at high alert for a year or more, fully confident that your destruction can come from any quarter at any time. Everything you know and have can be removed in an instant and you can do nothing about it. Sure, you may have a rifle, a sandbagged bunker, a knife or a grenade, but what if death comes at you from somewhere you cannot see: a sniper, a land mine, an ally or a booby trap? You become highly alert to everything and extremely sensitive to everything out of the ordinary. Yet, what in a combat environment is ordinary?

At home, with your parents and friends, no one was trying to kill or maim you. Yes, there were schoolyard bullies, but there was a limit. They probably didn't attack you when you were in bed or having dinner with friends. Places of escape existed, even if they were the movies or a game, a television program or a corner café.

Now consider coming out of that extended emotional peak. How do you relax? What mechanisms present themselves to provide you a place to rest your racing emotions? With enough practice, particularly in a war zone, it is said that the jaws of death become like an easy chair.

That is all well and good if a person intends to live only in the war zone, but for sane people, who would want to? Ask yourselves if human beings are emotionally equipped to live at a state of peak readiness to instantly react to even the slightest stimulus. So how does one calm down and adjust from living on a knife-edge to mundane domesticity? Ask a veteran and see how a vet adjusts. Many don't; most just cope. Coping with the pain and recollections of the emotional pitch has common factors. There are nightmares, flashbacks, edginess episodes and periods of rage when the psychological bottle is uncorked. As the genie escapes from a warrior's subconscious, it brings terrors, depressions, survivor guilt and self-recriminations, all of which are frequently self-medicated with quantities of alcohol or drugs. This is symptomatic of PTSD.

Think about the destruction in a war, in a free-fire zone where anything that moves is fair game. How much has a veteran seen? Consider local families broken apart by fire and explosives from every side. It is not important who does it; the damage is done and someone has to fix it. What if that damage is to a mother and the child is left alone? Would anyone care to tell that child why the mother is injured or dead? How about if the damage is done to the child? How does one explain the nobility of the cause to the mother? Now, think of your reaction if that damage is done to your friend and you have no time for grief.

Many veterans have been through situations where they lost one or more friends and had no time to react to the death and could not grieve. There simply was no time; the mission came first. After the mission, one's own survival was important and grief could come later if at all. Most war veterans learned how to stuff their grief down and turn off their emotions. The trouble with turning off the emotions is that human beings do not come equipped with a selector switch. Turn off one

feeling and the others go with it. Restarting emotional reactions is not an easy task. There is always the fear that the pain and grief will come out and take over. Many vets are afraid that they will start crying and never stop. Therefore, the cork stays in the bottle. Before condemning a veteran for being noncommittal or distant, ask if there is anything so painful that he or she just does not dare re-experience it?

When anyone is an active participant in mortal combat, the survival instinct is, so to speak, on steroids. A combatant will do anything and everything to survive, rules of war notwithstanding. Soldiers are trained to ignore emotions like fear and to do their jobs despite being so scared they shake like dried leaves. There are innumerable instances of soldiers charging positions to save their friends, jumping on grenades and other heroic acts. However, what about killing a woman or a child? Men are conditioned to protect. In military training the role of protector is emphasized. Just how far does that role go?

As children, we are taught that killing is wrong. War is all about killing. We are required to go against all of our early conditioning to kill and injure as many as possible and the more we kill, the more we are praised. This does cause a conflict in many soldiers and some never really resolve it. "Thou shalt not kill." What happens when we must kill?

Little boys are told that they are not to hit girls. We hear the phrase, "Pick on someone your own size." There is a demand for fairness. So, what is a soldier to do when the enemy shooting at him is a woman, a girl or a child? The survival instinct takes over and a good soldier will neutralize that enemy. Ideally, the best way is to capture the opponent and take them alive. Sometimes that may work out, but not very often. In our society, men who beat up women are reviled. How do

we look upon men who shoot and kill them? How do those men look upon themselves?

In some native societies, returning warriors were subjects of a ritual for cleansing and forgiving themselves. The entire tribe knew what they might have done and what they had to do for the tribe's survival. The society forgave and celebrated the warriors and allowed them to come to terms with what they had to do. Where is that help in today's world? Is the help just too expensive? Many veterans have problems with guilt. While what they did might not fit into a criminal statute where they were, it still might be criminal in their own minds and they may inflict punishment upon themselves for years, even up to the point of believing they have no right to live any longer. Some warriors feel guilt merely because they survived and their friend did not. These may try to make things right by not surviving and killing themselves by suicide or by slowly removing themselves from the society by becoming homeless or being sent to prison.

Some warriors and veterans are fragile, very fragile. Many may think of themselves as tough and rugged, but in reality, all are very human and in need of human compassion. Probably the most ignored reality about veterans is that they did what they did because of their concern for the rest of the society and the citizens paid them to do it. The veterans were hired as your agents and you paid them. Now finish the job and care for them.

## *While in Venice the War*

Kathleen Willard

A click. A car bomb detonates  
in the streets of Baghdad again  
and three silk flags unfurl  
obscure the facade of the fairy tale Byzantium basilica

its marble angels cat walk on the roof  
guardians of stolen relics of saints.  
Three flags raised half-mast as sails  
of a brigantine hungry for the wind  
and cry for one Italian soldier,  
a boy who lost his life “in the line of duty”  
and the whole country mourns  
and memorizes his name.

Here in Venice transfixed by the beautiful men,  
the alchemy of sand and heat cooling  
into the colors of the Adriatic,  
the puncture in the war horse’s  
armored helmet, the battalion of pikes  
and rapiers behind thick glass curated  
beneath Tintoretto’s *Peace, Grace and Minerva Banishing Mars*,  
three goddesses bully the god of war  
(in truth, a coward)  
into the blue distance.

I wonder where the reliquary rests  
stumbling over the uneven  
mosaic floor of a sinking sanctuary  
and light a candle  
for my long dead father,  
a soldier who returned from a different war  
as if, any soldier ever really returns.

***Label: Veteran***

Ross Atkinson

Explicit Criteria: service in the armed forces of the United States of America, completion of training, and a discharge other than dishonorable.

Implicit Criteria: ability to bullshit, handle shit, take shit, eat shit, fix shit, shoot shit, shit quick, and, on occasion, blow shit up.

Explicit Assumptions Upon Meeting: punctual, courteous, chivalric, tough, motivated, mission-oriented.

Implicit Assumptions Upon Meeting: post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, killer, broken, dangerous, deadly, hero.

Said Explicitly Upon Meeting: Thank you for your service. What was it like over there? Did you kill anyone? Did you see any combat? I appreciate what you did.

Feelings Upon Meeting: pity, appreciation, fear, unknown.

*Trapped: Those Who Don't Want to Leave  
but Find it Hard to Stay*

Mary Scott

Looking directly at each of us in our small circle of veterans and family members, veteran Ryan Lanham delivers his first creative writing prompt of the evening.

One word lands on all ears: “Trapped,” followed by a 15-minute sprint as we cobble together whatever interpretation the adjective sparks in us. It doesn’t take long for “trapped” to evoke memories of challenges endured by three veteran friends I’ve had the honor to know: two living, and a third who took his life in February.

Putting pen to paper, I conclude with the piece below, intended to honor the inner conflict that lives in many who possess a strong will to live their life, but combat an intermittent desire to leave it. Whether overwhelming grief, perceived “wrong” doing, a sense of futility that the mission and those lost were in vain, or other invisible casualties of war and life, this limbo (not always wanting to be here) can be exceptionally painful.

Drawing on facts and feelings these individuals have expressed, I’ve chosen to protect their privacy by turning three similar stories into one:

He’s been living with it a while: like a separate being, outside of him but pushing in—a malformed, whiny mass whispering: “Get out . . . go now.”

He never wanted to leave his life; he stuck it out for years: fighting, proving, hiding, doing the right thing, sustaining. But it wasn’t enough, ’specially not for him.

Drunk dad didn’t want him, not any of them. “This is my house, get out.” A no-win message for the boy and his brother, father launching

them like rockets across the room to see who could bust up his crappy drywall best . . . biggest hole the “winner.” The boy didn’t want to leave, but sometimes he sure didn’t want to stay.

“Do your job or get out,” the NCO later said to the boy turned man, now a soldier. Same message, different day. And that split-second decision to take out potential combatants running at their Armored Personnel Carrier. So he did his job, did it well: cleaned the vehicle, solo, put his men back in, and drove on. Yeah, suck it up or get out.

He’s got his own house now—job, family, a “Honey Do” list, and probably a “Honey Don’t.” He works hard, plays hard, loves his wife, kids, mom, volunteers his time, and fights his demons.

He sure doesn’t want to leave, but sometimes it’s hard to stay: loving the present but shackled to the past; craving peace in his mind as some of his friends wish for death, and a sister who’s already there. Like so many, trapped between what feels so right and what remains so wrong.

Now, perhaps as the most powerful memorial, he’s made the choice to live his life each day in the name of those who no longer can.

Although this story speaks to the experiences of three veterans (and likely others), it is dedicated with permission to Retired SSG. Moffett, Joshua C. He’s alive and well, but never forgets his fellow service members or the many he’s loved and lost—too many.

Despite a sharp sense of humor, Moffett’s more somber words remind me that honoring whatever breaks our hearts helps us make better sense of what we’ve lost and who we’ve lost . . . that those experiences and people matter greatly, and remain a vital part of the fabric of our lives. ~

## *Trigger, Pause, Response*

Lori Feig-Sandoval

At that instant when the heart rate accelerates, the stomach knots itself, and knee-jerk retorts fly from the mind to the throat . . . I try to ask . . . is there a way to wait, to breathe . . . deep . . . a few times . . . *before* replying? “Practice the pause,” counselors tell struggling couples. “Practice patience,” preaches Thich Nhat Hanh in his quiet, non-preachy way. Practice open-heartedness, my Zen teachers tell me, in order to allow for differing views without judging. Can we learn to staunch those familiar streams of reflexive defensiveness that rush to the tongue? They are our primal reactions rooted in needing to be right.

What if we train in just being? Just be; just be human. Just feel, but don’t talk . . . kind of like the quote I bought to keep in my kitchen: Lord keep your arm around my shoulder . . . and your hand over my mouth. It is so hard to refrain from commenting on whether we agree with each other. We could just allow each other to be. That reminds me of some lines from Persian poet Rumi: Out beyond ideas of rightdoing and wrongdoing, there is a field. I will meet you there.

“People are gonna be who they are,” my friend’s grandmother used to say whenever someone had hurt my friend’s feelings. “We gotta accept that first; then we see what to do about it.” I took from that, finally one day, in my early thirties, the understanding that I have to be ok with the notion that others are not here to meet my expectations. Duh.

It dawned on me that *any* disappointment, sadness, anger, annoyance, or other discomfort was because life was not going just as I (you, anyone) wanted it to. Which means I am wanting complete control

of the world! I don't want loved ones to be distant, or to die before I think they ought to; I want my studying or preparation to always result in the good grades or great job that I think that I deserve; I want the parent / significant other / friend / boss to always treat me *as I want to be treated*; I want the motorist not to cut me off, because I think that it's rude and that *I would never ever do that*.

We think we know how we would act if we were in another's shoes. But, duh again . . . we don't know; we can't ever know the entirety of another's experiences and genetic makeup, which are what dictate every response in life. Impossible.

Anytime we are mad about some perceived conflict, it is because we want for others to behave *how I would*. *I am the bar by which all others are to be measured*. Wow, Queen Me. Of course annoyance, anger, hurt at whatever happens, are natural and often immediate, but the longer-term anxiety, or hostility, which I may defensively display, is my tantrum thrown at control thwarted.

So, if we yearn for world peace, or just inner peace, or maybe only outwardly evident equanimity, we . . . pause. We hold sacred that time between trigger and response. We learn to just be with whichever feelings arise. Just be. Emotions ebb and flow, forever. Ebb and flow; ebb and flow; so, embrace, pause, and let go.

In this time of COVID-19, I am now practicing patience a new way: actually slowing the pace of daily activities. I have to frequently wash my hands for twenty seconds, which is two rounds of Happy Birthday; I hum that, and I look at my hands, massaging each finger up and down its length, every aspect of every digit, including, at the end, scrubbing under nails with a brush. I also try to remember to stretch my legs a bit too: I rise to my toes slowly, hold, return to flat feet, arise, hold,

return; repeat as I massage the hands.

I have to spend the requisite time washing anyway; slowing the motions, and stretching the body, is more patient, more caring of these hands and feet that do so much for me all day. I apply hand lotion, a small dab, slowly, after every wash. Measured movements, I believe, instill the habit of going slow.

Thus I am cultivating patience, which, with some luck, and discipline, will pervade my whole outlook. The military pervaded our household, as I grew up with an officer father who demanded discipline; in his view, discipline, not talent, separated the successful from the quitters. We could discuss whether we are all born with identical abilities to muster equal measures of discipline, but that is a topic for another time. For today, I am delighting in this new discipline of washing my hands slowly and reminding myself to sometimes . . . just . . . be . . . present in this moment . . . the one that is beyond right and wrong.

## *Joseph Stern: Wager of Peace*

Paul Gessler

My first encounter with Joe was at a protest vigil back in the early 1980s. He came up and handed me a 4 by 6 inch piece of paper. On the paper was not a manifesto or clichéd adage Like Bread not bombs, but a thoughtful political cartoon Joe had copied from *The New Yorker*.

“What do you think of that?” he would ask.

Joe was always putting people on the defensive. He wanted an intelligent engagement with people on war, peace, military spending and the moral imperative of working towards peace.

Joe had served in the Army during WWII and, being an American of Jewish descent, had volunteered to be on a team to assassinate Adolph Hitler.

“We have plenty of volunteers, soldier. You will go where you are needed.”

Taking advantage of the new GI Bill following WWII, Joe finished his education in Chemical Engineering, but I knew him as a retired Assistant District Attorney of New York City, who had moved out west in the mid-1970s with his two children, named Eleanor and Franklin. Along with his wife, Katherine, who had family in Nebraska. I had met Joe a year after Katherine had died of cancer. She was a psychiatric nurse and I can imagine how she kept Joe feeling loved. Joe was still grieving Katherine’s loss hard when I met him.

Joe was as much a refugee from New York City as he was a refugee of WWII, the Holocaust, as any 20th-century human being. He was another secular rabbi in the true sense of the word, a teacher and mentor. He was a fierce blessing because he was nearly always demonstrating waging peace. Joe, a professed disciple of Gandhi.

And like Gandhi the lawyer, who was not a professed pacifist, but a bodhisattva, doing his human best to walk the talk of pacifism, would put you on the witness stand: “So, do you agree with the statement that you need to be a pacifist to be an effective peacemaker?”

“I didn’t have that strong an opinion on the cartoon, Joe, but I appreciate the irony.”

Joe was my Jewish godfather. He acted as if America needed a left wing as much as an airplane needs one—wholeheartedly. And in the process Joe crossed some boundaries in the conservative Midwest of America. “Is America the land that God had promised the patriarch Abraham over three thousand years ago in war-ravaged Mesopotamia?” would be something Joe would ask people.

We all have a right to be here. There is room in America for all refugees of war and oppression, as we all had trauma of belonging and being accepted here in America in some unique way. Uncle Joe shared a birthday with Nelson Mandela, same year in fact. He was my adopted father in many respects, and like my father was carrying a burden inside from his service during WWII and wore it on his being.

I met Joe just prior to going on A Walk To Moscow. I didn’t quite make it to Moscow but learned a history lesson on the nature of the Nuclear Arms race, greed, and concept of nuclear supremacy, Cold War dynamics and the Military-industrial complex. Joe seemed to be on a mission and enjoyed engaging his adopted community that way. He was preparing me for going on the walk and he wanted to stress upon me the necessity of being a pacifist to fully get the message of peace out to the world. Unfortunately, Joe’s post-traumatic stress got in the way and channeled the inner critical harsh father. I went on the pilgrimage to escape a wounded bully.

Yet I can remember renting a room in Joe's house upon my return after the walk. Joe would have the radio on, listening to Christian overnight radio broadcasts biblically making a case for American Indians being one of the lost tribes of Israel. I would hear Joe wake in the night from nightmares he would have that still haunted him. He was on a pilgrimage.

But coming into the present moment and looking back, Joe was a role model for waging peace. He had blessed me with his suffering and pain and our connection is through post-traumatic stress, writing and waging peace, which all are sacred. Joe's letter-writing to the editor was distinct. He would craft an opinion and have a sarcastic question or some ironic comment to juxtapose his point.

I actually was Joe's secretary in writing many of those letters to the editor. He derived much pleasure by asking me to reread one of his letters back to him so he could get the "flavor of it."

While at his peak of activity in the 1980s as the Nuclear Freeze movement was able to help shepherd Strategic Arms limitations negotiations, Joe married a second woman, Laura. Laura was rebounding from a previous marriage. It didn't last. Joe met Hanna, a robust fine younger Seventh-day Adventist woman who helped keep Joe alive longer through a healthier diet. Hanna shepherded Joe into becoming a Christian. Joe was effective in going to lengths to reach out to right-wing Americans in the name of peace. That's what Joe demonstrated the best. The gold standard is walking the talk and finding that common ground where you didn't think it existed. And by doing so, Joe was blessed. I think Joe surrendered to the idea that Jesus was a Jewish carpenter who got tortured for his beliefs and for being a threat to Imperial Rome's power.

Jesus was an idealist who had spiritual gifts. Joe was an idealist who bore a spiritual gift that led him to always search for happiness. And as Abraham was promised by his God, the one spiritual gift Joe was most adept at was his conscience. At its core value Joe was a peace activist who worked for justice, with the hope that this land we know as America is indeed the land sought by those descendants of Abraham of Ur and modern-day Jewish and Abrahamic believers of today.

Joe's impact was mythical in as much as Joe seemed to be a fictional character like many Greek gods and goddesses. Joe was a mythical character in his own right because he had to be. I believe he came to realize his faith was waging peace. He was more like Abraham. There was a place for him to tend his flock. He was persecuted for his belief. Joe effectively planted his claim to being an American. Unlike professing believers, Joe came to understand what it means to be forgiven his trespasses and still be respected for how one lives.

It is a liberation and a path to redemption when you are accountable. In that process we are redeemed because it is through our suffering we are taught. We share a stigma that we are all wounded men, belonging to the eternal principal that all men are brothers. And we can take it to the next level here in America by practicing and doing good deeds and saving lives and life itself. The Shaman-Mitzvah path. That has always been the heroic path of humanity for these times, Americans especially of European descent.

## *Why Serve, Why Fight and Why Die*

Stephen Vallée

Over a half million combatants on both sides died during the war in Viet Nam. The number of noncombatants killed was well over a million. The total number of human beings killed during the Iraq war approached 461,000. Deaths in the Afghanistan war are still being tallied and most likely it will be many years before the final number is known, if ever it will be, but current estimates are at over ten thousand.

One question that consistently sounds is “Why?” Why did all these people have to be killed? For what reason were they eliminated from their existence? What wrongs did they commit? For what purpose did destruction and termination visit them to snuff the lights from their eyes?

One reason that frequently sounds is simply “Profit.”

There was not one inch of United States territory threatened by any actions of the North Vietnamese. Not one resident of Minneapolis or Fargo was in danger because of the activities of Ho Chi Minh. The residents of the small town of Ashburnham, Massachusetts were in no mortal peril from Saddam Hussein. It is quite doubtful that the rural denizens of Ottumwa, Iowa were quivering with terror and dread because of the activities of any Afghan Potentate. However, military contractors and suppliers, as well as armament manufacturers, aircraft and vehicle manufacturers and builders of myriad other items required for the execution and maintenance of a war did have an insatiable need for more and more profits to satisfy the unappeasable avarice of their investors.

Other than nonprofit human service organizations, business exists to generate profit. There may be goods and services generated and provided, but profit is the primary motive. Profit is required to reward

investors who provide the capital for the business to survive and grow. However, sometimes the race for profit may overshadow any ethics in the means of production and generation.

A worker who assembles desks, cabinets or fire trucks uses many machined parts in the form of screws, washers, nuts, bolts and other fasteners. These items may be dropped, lost or misplaced with some regularity. Because of the minimal cost, losing a screw or washer is not a great tragedy and the item is easily replaced. All these items are calculated as part of the cost of building an item or doing business. The cost of an individual washer is just too minimal to generate any concern. In a similar vein, it is not unknown for a corporation to shut down a manufacturing facility in the United States and move the production to a different facility in another country in order to save on worker salaries and benefits as a means of increasing profit. The lives of the civilian workers and their dependents are not considered sufficiently important when balanced with corporate profit and bloated CEO salaries and benefit packages. The workers and their families are valued the same as so many machined parts.

There is an old saying that suggests it is necessary to break a few eggs in order to make an omelet. The problem is that the bodies and lives of soldiers, Marines, sailors and airmen are the eggs that need to be broken in order to generate the omelet of profit for investors and war profiteers. If, indeed, Minneapolis and Fargo were in no danger from the Vietnamese, for what other reason than profit for warfare suppliers were more than fifty-eight thousand eggs broken, fifty-eight thousand lives wasted, fifty-eight thousand men and women sacrificed? Are Army Brigades and Marine Battalions nothing more than mere conglomerates of replaceable machined parts to be misused, abused and thrown away?

Is it not accurate to consider the activity of warfare to be the deliberate waste of human life by the many for the gain by a few? Could those who deliberately choose to profit from the death, pain and destruction of so many not be looked upon as sociopathic? Do they hold the lives of those maimed or killed to be vital for their profit and their vested interests, or could it be that the human beings destroyed by warfare activities are just another cost of doing business?

In 1935, Major General Smedley Butler, USMC (ret.) wrote a small book titled *War Is a Racket*, in which he recounts his time as a Marine during the many wars in Central America, China and the Philippines. All that was threatened was the level of profit for several fruit companies and banks. The only reason for these wars was profit. Just as in the days of Major General Butler, that which is threatened is the amount of profit for those extremely wealthy industrialists and capitalists who demand personal profit from every enterprise. Whether the enterprise be related to petroleum, minerals, banking, bananas, sugarcane or coconuts, the demand for profits entails the loss of life or limb for both American and foreign military and indigenous populations.

Is it not high time to recognize the war profiteers for the financial vampires they are and to condemn their activities of sucking the lifeblood from countless soldiers, Marines, airmen, sailors and civilians for the one purpose of stuffing the profiteers' own pockets? In his farewell address, General MacArthur used the words, "Duty, Honor, Country" to describe the motivation he learned as a cadet at West Point. Apparently, we have arrived at a point where the warmonger's motivations are contained in the words, "Selfishness, Cupidity and Greed." Are we now able to arrive at the point of simply saying "No!" to those who would consider young men and women as just replaceable machined items with no

purpose other than mere profit-generation? Have we at last reached a position where our noble words and sentiments can finally overthrow the pettiness and self-absorption of those who would reap profit from the rape of war? Have we finally had enough of being sacrificial lambs used by war profiteers and wasted at the altar of profit to the ravenous deity of insatiable avarice? It is definitely time to refuse the demands of the bloody, gnarled hands of insatiable greed and deny those hands the lives and limbs of any more sacrificial human beings. Let the suppliers of the tools of war, at long last, finally learn how to be the creators and artificers of the tools of peace and let them learn it without further delay.

## *Tiger Breath*

Janice Schilling

This night shift was particularly surreal. At 0230 we received a radio transmission from the chuckling Medevac crew. “You’re not going to believe this one.” The ETA was five minutes and the expectant had a large skull wound from a tiger attack. Wow. That is a new one. They said he was alert and oriented and talking continuously.

The 18-year-old soldier arrived with a large area of skin on his head detached from his skull. The wound was pretty impressive. We needed to know the history of this unfortunate, yet lucky incident, and Mr. Chatterbox was all excited to tell us.

He began. “I was on perimeter duty when this tiger attacked me from behind, and then that SOB tore a piece of my head off.” His slow, sweet voice kept us all entertained. A Biloxi, Mississippi accent and morphine so damn endearing, even Nurse Ratched would crumble.

I was intrigued, so I asked him about the tiger. He said, “You know, nurse, I hit that SOB in the balls with the butt of my rifle, and then I shot him a few times. That dead tiger was like a dream, yet real.” Soon the reality of the last few minutes made me wired and laugh uncontrollably. “Believe it or not,” he said, “I thanked that ugly tiger. And screamed, I will be leaving this shithole place soon.”

While we continued with our tedious care, our guy kept telling us the SOB had the worst breath ever. I chose to believe him because his wound was fairly gag-worthy. With every stitch he sang “beautiful, beautiful brown eyes.” My ego thought it was about me. But the song was actually about his gal, Clair. His head stitched back together, he asked if we could buy him breakfast. He was hungry.

Two days later our guy came by the unit to thank us with the best hugs ever. This beautiful young man was going home. Mission accomplished.

## *Gravity*

Ryan Lanham

Run. Run away. He was running away when I caught him. I—my bullets—caught him. Up to him. Into him. Lodged in his back.

Left of spine. An upward strafe. Toward heart, home.

How many steps with me in him?

How many feet between us—my heart, his—my life, his—when they drag him back, on his back, slide him in the truck, beneath my feet, beneath my gunner platform?

My hands still shaking. Sweat rolls down my cheek. A tear, salty. Emotionless. Pools on chin. Holds there. Sways bulbous. Then slips, falls—

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven.

Me on him. In him.

Seven feet I peer down into darkness. Shadows. Black in my heart, seeping in.

It beats steady now. Fat on blood, adrenaline.

No holes pulsating red ooze.

No red shirt, red pants, red socks, red shoes, red legs, red arms, red back, red face.

No grimace or Quran. No moans or prayer beads. No Allah tonight.

Just the click of karmic debt, a handcuff locking souls.

Tug of my new black moon.

*Waiting*  
Mary Scott

She sits. She rises. Fidgets with her wedding ring,  
sits again . . .  
weighted with a nervous energy, now heavy,  
the gray light of another day fading softly to black  
with her hope.

He sits. He rises. Kicks sand under worn boots,  
checks his weapon, sits again . . .  
Amped with a nervous energy that he contains and  
refines into concrete and comforting data points,  
strategic locations and go-times.  
He rises again, moves out into the field, sits,  
and waits again.

Later, she sits. Spins her ring. The doorbell chimes.  
She rises. They enter, uniformed, hats in hand.  
She sits. She watches the faces void of expression.  
But she knows . . . and waits, again, as the darkness descends.

####

## *Notes Towards a Libretto*

Kathleen Willard

*(fig.1)*

And then the last breath, and the next crescendo.  
One can barely discern the rebellion.

Clocks overhear, the lilies begin.  
Rhetoric calligraphy commences, the arousal and the crows.

Now, the celebrity of weapons opens the overture of tanks.  
The faint trees migrate. Stage left, though an opera

the noise overshadows slim rents in our hearts,  
the dirges oversee dowagers, children of dust. Stones hum.

The vesper of whispers in meadows retaliate begin  
to leave and take widows, walls and the dead.

Constellations of the next rigor mortis launch  
while outside a body count of hands parades.

*(fig.2)*

Commence the weapons and the stones hum left.  
The dust begins rebellions.  
The faint opera of calligraphy and crows leave

the dead overshadowing  
slim rents in arousal and rhetoric.  
Breath, and the next noise is our hearts.

One barely discerns dirges from the overture of rigor mortis  
and outside the next tank parade.

And then, the crescendo and the last trees migrate.  
Stage and launch the dowager's children and roll  
the body count, the constellations of clocks,  
the whisper in meadows.

Now, the celebrity of widows, the walls and lilies overhear.

*(fig.3)*

A parade of hands rolls through an opera of tanks.  
Noise overshadows children, slim walls and the dead commences.  
Widows, dowagers of dust, hum uprising the stones.

Stage left, now the celebrity of noise opens  
rents in our hearts. Breath, and the next weapons migrate,  
the next rigor mortis.

Clocks overhear dirges from faint trees.  
The leave-taking and meadows of organs  
retaliate their declarations. A letter posted home. A launch.

One can barely discern the rebellion of the skies,  
the overture of lilies begins outside constellations  
of rhetoric, the body count calligraphy.

Crescendo and a vesper of whispers,  
arousal and the crows oversee.

## *Afghanistan Internet Heist*

Ross Atkinson

0220 hours was our rendezvous time. Location: outside the MWR, or “Morale, Welfare, and Recreation” center. I remember thinking, if our plan works, that place will certainly earn its name. We timed our plan perfectly, so even the guards on shift were less likely to spot us. We figured that 20 minutes into a two-hour long shift would be the perfect time, as we knew the guards had just settled in, got comfortable in their towers, and were looking outward toward the enemy—little did they know the heist of a lifetime was going to take place right underneath their locked and loaded, vigilant gaze. They were scanning the empty fields of crops that stretched to the base of the local town, meaning they weren’t looking down. The night prior to our rendezvous, a select few soldiers on my team had rigged a contractor’s connex so it wouldn’t lock properly—a well-placed stick and a little duct tape was all it took to set ourselves up with much-needed gear.

Once we ensured the connex was prepped for our 0220-hour arrival, I set up alibis with the French soldiers stationed on our base: “We were playing Counter-Strike with you, if anyone asks,” I said. “Oui, tu jouais le Counterstrike avec moi, mon ami.” We knew our alibi would be believable, as long as we were not spotted. And we also knew anyone willing to search for the truth wouldn’t ask too many questions through a frustrating language barrier.

The next step was all up to me. The point of interest was the MWR, which, on our base consisted of about twenty computers with Skype and Microsoft Explorer. For many, it is an access point to home—a link to family. My goal was to hack into the MWR’s switch, which is a device used to send internet out over cat5 ethernet cable, and to secure

only partially filtered internet access in the communications office where we worked. Toward this end, I managed to spoof my computer's MAC address to match the computers in the MWR. Once I did that, I changed my IP address to match it to the MWR's IP pool. And, simple as that, we were in. We now had a port that would provide us lightly filtered internet and around the clock Skype access; now we just needed a means of connecting that port to a device.

The final step was where our plan kicked off. We had to work together to run a cable from the MWR to our team's plywood shack—colloquially known as our office—about a hundred or so meters (a football field) away from the MWR. And we were ready. Our time was selected with intention to avoid the gaze of the guards; our equipment would come from the civilian contractor's connex—a shovel to bury the cable; our alibi was taken care of thanks to our French friends—thank you monsieur; and our hacked router was ready and willing to spit out free, marginally filtered internet at our whim.

Our mission was a go.

At 0200-hours I looked over to my partners in crime, resting patiently in the plywood box where we slept, and I quietly and enthusiastically whispered, "Let's roll."

We stealthily made our way over to the rendezvous point and continued to the contractor's connex. It was open. Part one complete—kind of. We definitely forgot one very important item needed inside a connex on a blackout base: a flashlight.

It only took a second for us to realize that there was no way to find the shovel we needed. There was, however, an alternative option staring us in the face—a snow shovel, front and center. My buddy, Shell, spotted it first. He looked at me he said, "Fuck it, just take that goddamn snow shovel and let's get the fuck outta here."

Our other teammate, Wharton, responded, “We can’t use a snow shovel, dumbass, it’s like digging through rock out there. That thing is fucking plastic.”

“We’re going to have to,” I said. “If we go back to our bunks to search for a flashlight, we risk waking someone up, and then we’d really be fucked. Just grab the snow shovel.”

Even though none of us imagined the snow shovel would be efficient at digging through the rock to bury our cable, it worked even worse than we could have imagined. But we were young and motivated by the endless hours of Skyping with family, accessing Facebook, and enjoying the myriad other affordances of using only lightly filtered internet, so we kept going.

We used the snow shovel. We used our gloved and ungloved hands. And we used the knowledge that shortly we could speak with our loved ones in the privacy of our office, instead of next to 20 other soldiers, as motivation to keep digging.

The trench was shallower than it should’ve been. Only a foot deep at its deepest. “It should be at least another six inches,” Wharton lamented. And we all knew he was right, but there wasn’t enough time to both dig deep and long. An hour passed. And another. And another. People were starting to wake up. Guard shifts were rotating.

I grabbed the snow shovel we . . . ahem, “borrowed.” And, in the dawn light, placed its muddy, shredded carcass back in the civilian contractor’s connex. I never told my teammates that the actual shovel was only a foot or so away from where the now splintering snow shovel found its resting place, buried under a tarp, mocking me with its sturdy metal scoop. Telling them wouldn’t make anything better, I thought, as I locked the connex up, making my way back to our “office” where the final efforts to hide the cable were taking place.

Now, in front of our “office” was the Military Intelligence office, where a few soldiers worked on what I imagine were important things. My team chose to run the cable from the dirt, up and over their office, which was just a metal connex, into ours through a little hole in the roof. And for the first time all night, we all entered our office and took a seat, basking in our accomplishment: the single green cable hanging from the ceiling, dripping with the power of the internet. It was ours.

We were beat from the hours of grueling work, shoveling and digging with our imperfect tools. Our hands were bloody, our foreheads dripping with sweat, and our bodies were covered in the dirt of a foreign country none of us wanted to be in, but, despite our condition, in that moment, we were content.

Our contentment spanned weeks as everyone on our team had the pleasure of enjoying MWR internet while working, and our covert operation was deemed an unmitigated success by all parties willingly involved. However, we forgot one thing about life in the Army: when someone has a shiny toy, it is Army regulation to shit all over it.

The plan, the execution, the successful use of slightly filtered internet was all perfect, until the ranking American soldier on our base, a full-bird colonel with the voice of Sean Connery, tripped over some exposed wire coming from the MWR. He traced the wire, digging it up as he went along, from the little exit hole in the side of the building straight to the Military Intelligence office. We heard the Colonel yelling at them through our plywood wall, “Shhooo, shee here soldier!? What is this cable for?!” We then heard the Military Intelligence soldiers denying any knowledge of the cable. The next sound we heard was the Colonel’s footsteps on our stairs, followed abruptly by his booming Connery-esque voice laying into us.

Somehow we convinced the Colonel that the cable had been there previously and we were simply “monitoring” the MWR internet for malicious uses—or at least he let us believe we convinced him well enough that he only requested we remove our glorious cable.

Our shiny toy was gone. We initially assumed bad luck. Who could’ve guessed the Colonel would trip over our cable? We lamented that we should have buried it deeper and that we should have been more prepared to dig properly. Later we found out, however, we were compromised by a jealous Air Force communications sergeant—the only other person on the base who could’ve known that cable was different than the rest. The only other person on the base who would’ve unburied a distinct section of a random cable running the opposite direction of all the others. We found out it wasn’t just bad luck our cable was found when the Air Force Sergeant was ratted out by, ironically enough, the contractors we “borrowed” our snow shovel from. They told us they saw him kicking the dirt away in various “high traffic” sections of the ground that covered our cable.

We paid the contractors back by dropping them an extra line from our own stacks, meaning they could now connect another computer to our non-secure internet—not MWR internet, mind you, but internet in Afghanistan, nonetheless.

We also paid back that Air Force sergeant. Call it petty, but we figured if he saw fit to interfere with our internet access, we saw fit to interfere with his. Since the Air Force team ran their communications office off of our communications equipment, we figured throttling their connection speed a little would free up more internet for the contractors’ new line, so that’s what we did. We made sure the Sergeant had enough speed to work, but not quite enough to comfortably browse. And when

he stopped by our office to complain about his internet connection, we told him that we were also experiencing problems with our own internet connection and that we, “unfortunately, didn’t think either party would be satisfied anytime soon.” Shiny toy, meet Army shit.

## *The Dream*

Milt Mays

Things are jumbled, but it seems I am back from summer vacation and must get ready for my first formation in Service Dress Blue. Formation requires a perfect uniform: freshly laundered and pressed, a hat shaped to fit my head, scrubbed and bleached bright white with a buffed black bill, black leather shoes spit-shined for hours to a mirrored surface. But most of all, you had to be on time. I was just arriving to Bancroft Hall, the midshipmen's granite and cement, historic and traditional dormitory. I first had to chase that woman. But why was she here? I saw her enter a distant door on the third story across a courtyard. It was time to fly. So, I centered my will and mustered the feeling and flew across the courtyard and landed outside her door.

I was in my captain's uniform, SDB, in the rank I had retired. I entered the door. It was a company area, bustling with midshipmen running through the blue-green hallways, and hurrying down stairwells. Everyone had to get to formation. The officer of the deck, a midshipman first class lieutenant who was left at the desk that marked the company area, asked me, "Can I help you, sir?" Here I was, a young captain in the U.S. Navy, twenty years out from being a midshipman, and someone this midshipman would look up to and fear, yet I was anxious.

All I knew was I was late for the ensuing formation, said, "No," and exited back out the door.

The companies were forming up in the bricked courtyard, worn smooth by a hundred plus years of shoes hurrying and marching. Announcements over the 1MC echoed out, telling all that there was five minutes until attention and muster. I ran, all but forbidden for any officer, panicked, trying to find where my room in Bancroft Hall was so

I could change and be in formation. But none of the buildings looked familiar. I knew I was not going to make it.

I woke up. My pillow was wet with sweat.

I exited the world I had entered in the last hour of sleep, though I had really entered it almost forty-five years ago. It was a recurrent dream, perhaps in times of stress. Like in about two weeks I would be ending a career I'd started forty-five years ago. I guess my brain was trying to get its ethereal arms wrapped around the concept. So, writing this, I will try to help. Maybe tomorrow I will sleep more peacefully.

It all started with money. America is that place. I thought very little about the fact that money was the reason. But now I know better. I have seen what having money does, and what not having it does. I was, and probably still am, an idealist. Money should not be the reason we do things. It should not be the reason we live the way we do. But, I am ashamed to say, it is.

You must have money to go to college. Or be very smart, or be very athletic, and get a scholarship. I wasn't a genius, but had excellent grades, not a pro-prospect athlete, but excelled in several sports, which all contributed to my appointment to the Naval Academy. To those in the service, that is an honor. Even to many outside the service, it is an honor. Now, having grown more cynical (wiser?), I have the distinct concern it was a form of indentured servitude invented by the powerful wealthy so some of the very brightest (dumbest?) would be shunted into the armed forces to protect the 99%, but more importantly, the 1% of the 1% who were the power that ran the U.S.A., and, in many respects, the world.

Yes, we all know that, but let's get back. My father did not have enough money for me to go to a good college, maybe not even enough for a bad college, despite the fact that his entire life had been devoted to

a skinflint existence so he could save the glorious thing we call money. So a scholarship was what I needed. He must have stumbled upon a way he thought would be a guarantee for me. All I had to do was be smart, be athletic, have a rounded leadership experience in high school, and get one of those aforementioned powerful controllers, i.e. politicians, to give me an appointment to a service academy. It sounded great: all I had to do to fulfill the requirements of this scholarship was survive rigors, then pay back five years of time to service in the Navy. Hence, the indentured servitude concept.

Though, of course, this was like no other indentured servants. We had wonderful accommodations, the best food, and some of the best instructors in the world. It's only . . . well, now, when I look back, I realize if I would have taken another scholarship to a civilian college, I would have been free of any payback at the end. Yet, I also realize how false that is. College scholarships don't pay for everything. And then, if I got into medical school, I would have a large debt of money. If I got into and went to medical school after the Academy, I would owe five years for undergrad, then seven years on top for medical school. Money, or time in service? That was the question. Or was it?

There was the debt to my father. After a lifetime of struggle—fatherless, mother an addict who had him running moonshine, eventually orphaned and raised by grandparents, pushing hard to get through college, a master's degree, and into jobs that gave him a reasonable salary to afford a family, eventually disabled from blindness, a lifelong struggle with vision that kept him from serving his country as all young men desired in 1945—he had nurtured me, and placed me on a path that would not require the hardship he had endured. He had done what he thought was right. He had done his best. He had always wanted to serve

his country, even memorized the vision chart, but was found out and due to his bad eyes could not get in. I was his chance.

So I entered a world of the armed forces, a world my very core objected to—I wanted to be a doctor, help not destroy. But this new world I also respected and loved for its sacrifice, comradery, and idealistic values. We were the best and the brightest, as the trite phrase goes, and had a common goal: to serve the United States of America, protect its people from all harm, foreign and domestic, and to do it with honesty and fairness while maintaining respect for color and creed.

Then I gained experience—mistakes, poor choices, reality checks—which gave me wisdom, right? I did become a doctor, not a warrior. I helped those who gave their minds, their bodies, and sometimes their souls, to war. These “experiences” of watching lives destroyed led me to despise the very reason for the Naval Academy’s existence: educating the best and brightest to fight in wars. I wish war would just disappear, but I learned that humans, as they exist today, will always have war. There will always be a powerful bully we must fight somewhere. And every human always wants more. In the good old USA, that means more money. More money eventually leads to so much that you don’t need more. What you need then is more power. Needing power over others leads to war. And I am sure that war will eventually destroy humanity . . . No, it has already done that. It will eventually destroy the human race.

Yep, that does it. Now I will sleep so much better, knowing that getting to that formation in time will change nothing. This is what happens when an idealist thinks too much.

Actually, getting to all those formations allowed me to live a great life, experience many superb adventures, and have a wonderful

family and friends. The biggest lesson I've learned was to love those around you. It is the only way to keep you sane and to maybe, possibly, eventually, end war.

It's another dream I have.



## *Writer Biographies*

**Ross M. Atkinson** is a U.S. Army veteran from Las Vegas, Nevada who served as a tactical communications specialist from 2009 to 2012, deploying to Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom from 2010-2011 with the 86th Expeditionary Signal Battalion. Currently, Ross is pursuing his Ph.D. at Colorado State University in the College of Health and Human Sciences, performing research into veteran reintegration and asset-based pedagogies for student-veterans. With concerns or questions about Ross' research or writing, feel free to contact him at: [Ross.Atkinson@colostate.edu](mailto:Ross.Atkinson@colostate.edu).

**James P. (Jim) Blok** is a 71-year-old, retired U.S. Army major and clinical psychologist, who is twice a widower. He now spends most of his time as a political, peace and environmental activist, as well as writing nonfiction. Currently, Jim divides his time between one home in Northern Colorado and another in Sidi Taibi, Morocco with his wife, Zoubida Mamouni, who hopes to immigrate to America soon.

**Lori Feig-Sandoval** grew up as an Air Force brat. She lived 35 in Atlanta and now loves living in Fort Collins, CO, where she enjoys the arts; bicycling; conversation; KRFC radio; local foods and shops; photography; reading; vegan living since 1986; walking daily; writing and editing; and endlessly curating her "ETERNAL Favorites" iTunes playlist (over 200 tunes) for folks to enjoy after she fades into the next "scene."

**Paul Gessler** is a poet and writer who has been practicing his craft since 1976. He served as a communications technician in the United States Air Force from 1970-1973. Paul is a member of Veterans For Peace and volunteers as a Veteran Advocate in Larimer County, Colorado. [www.paulgesslerpoet.com](http://www.paulgesslerpoet.com)

**Ryan Lanham** is a second-year grad student in the MFA program at CSU. He writes creative nonfiction—mostly memoir—and volunteers with outreach organizations in the Fort Collins community. He also speaks in hushed tones about secretly enjoying “things that suck.”

**Laura Mahal** splits her time between writing and copyediting. Her work appears in various literary magazines and anthologies, to include *Fish, Dove Tales, Still Coming Home, Sunrise Summits, Veterans Voices, Across the Margin, Flash! A Celebration of Short Fiction*, and *The Road She’s Traveled*. Laura is a two-time winner of the Hecla Award for Speculative Fiction and served in the U.S. Army in the late 80s and early 90s.

**Milt Mays** grew up in Colorado, graduated from the Naval Academy and Creighton Medical School, and spent a career as a Navy Family Physician and ER doctor. He had tours with the Marines, a Navy Security Group in Scotland, Director of the Family Medicine Residency in Pensacola, Florida, and after retirement worked primary care and ER for the Veterans Hospital in Cheyenne, Wyoming. He’s published suspense fiction novels, literary short stories and one humorous illustrated poetry book. <https://miltmays.com>

**Janice Schilling** was an army nurse who served at the 67th Evacuation Hospital in Qui Nhon South Vietnam in 1969-1970. She is currently retired after 51 years as a nurse in a variety of clinical settings.

**Mary Scott** is the adopted daughter of a former US Navy veteran. A long-time health and wellness professional, Mary enjoys working in-depth with veterans and their families, providing private consultation, retreats and team trainings. Mary Scott, MSW, *Pivotal Impact*: [PivotalImpactPrograms.com](http://PivotalImpactPrograms.com) (formerly Heart Scars 6).

**Marshall Spring** graduated high school in June 2001. Immediately following the September 11th attacks, he joined the US Marine Corps. He served as an explosive detection dog handler while deployed to Ramadi, Iraq.

**Stephen Vallée** is a veteran of the war in Vietnam. He served for twenty months at the 71st Evac Hospital north of Pleiku City. Retired now from a career in adult education, he continues to write essays, fiction and poetry, and enjoys life with his wife of 38 years.

**Kathleen Willard** grew up in a military family and her poems reflect her experiences as her family was uprooted and displaced on a yearly basis. Her father, Lt. Col. James Gordon Donahue, a West Point graduate, was deployed twice to Viet Nam in 1963 and 1970. Her poetry has appeared in many literary journals, and her chapbook, *Cirque & Sky*, won the Fledge Chapbook Award from Middle Creek Publishing & Audio.

