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POETRY

Don't Tell Me

Karen Arnold

Old white guys,
some perfectly
acceptable minority
persons of power,
maybe a few women,

in a green marble room
where,
purportedly,

meeting will
deliberate, decide
the course for
Israel and Palestine

currently
blowing each other's
buildings and cities
to bits.

*My thirteen
year old daughter
proclaimed – often loudly
impatient,*

“This relates to me how?”

***I'm asking, amended,
her question – now***

Gentlemen, ladies,
safe – a bit old –
free of danger-torn sleep,
answer please

Your confab cites
Gaza – Israel – war
Synonyms:

loss

bloodshed, terror – but

words never spoken
bluntly in talks:
babies, old women
teenagers
young men or women

HOW?

how?

How?

I'm trying,
I want to

believe you, believe

posing –
serious looks –
such public attention

to wholesale dying
can stop lives
exploding –

will help,
will repair,
will somehow halt hate.

Instead,
I know:
children died,
sirens cut night,
old people wept,
day followed day
bereft a
fresh start.

Instead,
suffering
reigns
continents away.
You settle for
settling for
no peace – no
settling to
grief kept at bay.

You lean
into talking,
day after day
while
wailing and
wounding
engulf
what you say.

“Watching the news about an armed conflict once again involving Israel and Gaza the screen showed the United Nations and a correspondent explained that at a “meeting tomorrow” some UN members would convene a panel to consider the best way to deal with the outbreak. What flashed in front of me were current pictures of the war in Ukraine and older clips of violent confrontations in the Middle East. I wondered then, as now, about the urgency such comfortable people would feel thousands of miles from harm’s way. What could wait for tomorrow here was a

matter of life and death for the people on both sides thousands of miles away. The poem wrote itself with the voice of my young daughter providing the essential question even though she has a family of her own now.”

—Karen Arnold

Stops on **Karen Arnold**'s literary odyssey include: ten years as Poet-in-Residence at Montpelier Cultural Arts Center, Laurel, MD; creator and moderator of veterans' reading and discussion groups sponsored by Maryland Humanities, Baltimore libraries and cultural centers; teaching at universities in the US, Sweden, and Norway; and conducting creative writing workshops. Her poetry can be found in *Border Crossings* (1998), *Looking for Disappearance* (Finishing Line Press 2023), *Trajectory*, *Slant*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Gyroscope*, *Carmina*, *Connecticut Review*, *Evening Street Press*, *For Ukraine from Women of the World*, *Farmer-ish* and other independent journals. Midwest roots gave her open skies, light and space spawning love for Atlantic shores from close by Maryland and Delaware to Maine. Her house is full of driftwood and rocks!

Shadows and Guns

Sarwa Azeez

Again
winter is wrapping
its heavy skin
around our weak bones.

We skip school
and have snowball fights
all day long.
Then in the evening
our cousin builds a snowman
putting his brother's helmet
on icy head
gun
in frozen hands.

He was a real hero.
Cousin says with a sorrowful look
into the cold soldier's eyes.
We look up. Unsure
whether the tears are
from the cold
or from those stabbing memories.

The snowman stands there
strong
the entire time.
until one day we see
that there is only the shadow of a man
with a helmet and gun.

“Shadows and Guns’ stems from my childhood amidst the aftermath of the Gulf War, revealing a child’s perspective on post-conflict life, emphasizing the weight of trauma on our delicate shoulders and the ironies of the post-war era.” —Sarwa Azeez

Growing up in wartime Kurdistan, the flickering light of kerosene lantern did not reduce her passion for reading and writing. **Sarwa Azeez** is a Kurdish researcher, poet and translator. She is a Fulbright alumni, got her second masters in Creative Writing from Nebraska-Lincoln University. Her writing looks for the beauty in a war torn world. It also seeks to define identity and confront issues of equal gender representation and violence in male dominant communities.

Souvenirs

Sarah Colby

Looking for t-shirts
to bring home to your buddies,
we ride the hotel shuttle
to the mercado, step off
into marimba music
tinned from loudspeakers,
scents of salsa, chiles,
mariscos frescos con lima
drifting on the light
of garishly colored bulbs
looped in lopsided sways
over stalls where vendors
call a jumbled cacophony.

Inhaling sharply
you press your back to the wall,
pale in a chestnut-skinned sea,
eyes scanning below
your sweat-popped brow,
jaw muscle jumping,
weaponless hand twitching.

Venus de Milo Reading

Sarah Colby

As the hair at my nape
curls into ringlets
you love to kiss

I read the remnant
of your name fingered
on the fogged mirror,

imagine your hands,
desert-dusted parchment
thirsty for the glide

of rich aloe
you scribed in circles
across my skin,

wonder what war
is writing on you.

“I was recently asked why I insisted on writing war poems when the war is over. The question emphasized how, without headline-grabbing large scale US involvement in a combat zone, it is easy for military issues in this country to slip from awareness even though there are still deployments, still spouses, partners and families waiting and wondering, still after-effects that linger long and manifest unexpectedly, and still war in the world. Far too much war in the world.” —Sarah Colby

Sarah Colby is a military spouse and mother to a Navy son. Her experiences over more than 30 years motivate her desire to be a voice for the mostly untold stories of families and loved ones on the periphery of active military service. Sarah holds an MA in Art History and an MFA in Creative Writing from UNR Tahoe. She lives with her husband, a retired Army Chaplain, in San Antonio, Texas, where she mentors veteran/military writing groups and teaches writing in community-based programs.

Child Soldier

Leonore Hildebrandt

The ear is a snail, a spiral, an empty shell. When, after years, the boy is returned to his mother, he wears a small rock in each ear to lessen the torment. He does not fear the men of the pick-ups as much as the voices ringing inside. Hammer to anvil. Beyond, the world is bright, too bright to endure. The ear hollows far into a bony labyrinth. He does not want to remove them, the rocks. They are round and hard. They protect the doors and windows from shattering. In the camp, relatives greet him, wondering if he can hear their singing. They sacrifice a white goat. Tympanic rupture—the voices slosh back and forth. He covers his head. The man who brought him here points out improvements—after days of oblivion, the boy cringed at the sight of a gun. The ear is a drum, and three bones are beating, beating. He has returned—a small rock tumbling in the sorrow-river.

Choose Compassion

Leonore Hildebrandt

I know violence when I see it.
Suffering from nightmares,
I resolve to confront
my own fear and trauma.
My guide tells me things
I am happy to hear—
be kind to yourself,
give yourself some slack.
In one dream I glide freely
among trees and meadows.
In another I see my father
in the sepia of his WWII slides
pushing a wooden wheelbarrow
with two slumped figures—
the dead comrades. He's laboring
off the train onto a busy gate.
When I try to follow
the conductor waves me back in.
The doors slam.
Should I choose guilt?
Humanity is not "doomed"
by an "existential threat"—
there are too many of us.
Why this hyperbole?
Isn't it sad enough to lose
one third of the birds?
My guide says, you don't
have to draw a line in the sand.
Leave some wiggle room.

"I grew up in Germany as the daughter of a WWII soldier and subsequent POW in Russia. My family was silent about that part of our history. In 'Choose Compassion,' I found spaces—both real and imagined—for this troubling legacy to play out. 'Child Soldier' was triggered by my reading of the sacrificing of a goat, a detail which led me to a community's vulnerability and to the boy's listening inward."
—Leonore Hildebrandt

Leonore Hildebrandt is the author of *Where You Happen to Be*, *The Next Unknown*, and *The Work at Hand*. Her poems and translations have appeared in the *Cafe Review*, *Cerise Press*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Harpur Palate*, *Rhino*, and the *Sugar House Review*, among other journals. Originally from Germany, Leonore divides her time between Harrington, Maine, and Silver City, New Mexico.

Western Wall

James King

It was still wailing then.
I watched and listened:
the swaying,
the paper prayers,
pistols and payots,
sandals and shtreimels,
guards and gartels,
tank tops and tallit.

Some moss, a few trees
trying to grow their way
out of limestone crags,
straining for rays
off the gold reflection
of another god's smile.

“During a backpacking trip through Europe, the Middle East, and Asia in the late 70s and early 80s, I spent several months on a kibbutz just outside Jerusalem. I was fascinated by the beauty, contrasts, and constantly simmering tensions of the land and its peoples, all of which inspired ‘Western Wall.’”

James King's poetry has appeared in *The Dillyduon Review*, *The Thieving Magpie*, *OpenDoor Poetry Magazine*, *Oddville Press*, *Big City Lit*, *The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, *Crowstep Poetry Journal*, and other journals and anthologies. He is also the author of the award-winning novel, *Bill Warrington's Last Chance*. James is a graduate of the University of Notre Dame and has an MA in writing from Manhattanville College. He lives in Wilton, Connecticut, USA.

Modern Warfare

Ron. Lavalette

Someone else filed the reports
and someone else read them,
passed them on to someone else
who organized the surveillance
that generated the phone call
that aided another someone
to determine the coordinates,
launch and guide the drone, set it
to hover high above the village,
laser the tiny target's rooftop
so that the silently incoming missile
couldn't possibly miss.

All he did was pull the trigger.

“Despite the fact that acts of modern warfare have become increasingly technological and decreasingly face-to-face and hand-to-hand, the sad reality is that they remain horrific acts that require human participation and that leave deep scars. On both sides. Forever.” —Ron. Lavalette

Ron. Lavalette is a very widely published, award-winning writer living on the Canadian border in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom. His first chapbook, *Fallen Away* (Finishing Line Press), is now available at all standard outlets. More than 400 pieces of his poetry and short prose have been published in both print and pixel form in journals, reviews, and anthologies ranging alphabetically from *Able Muse* and the *Anthology of New England Poets* through the *World Haiku Review*. A reasonable sample of his published work can be viewed online at [EGGS OVER TOKYO](#).

The Last Hibakusha

Antony Owen

After Sueko

I see her bent from old age
the archipelago of her spine
aglow in zombified light of long dead stars.

This night she will obey her rituals
recalling her face in black puddles
how atomic rain turned the river mauve.

I see her fireball tattoos in cling film
mercurochrome fusing the keloids
a dragon slayer of shedding skin.

When the last Hibakusha dies
curled wick-like into her oils
I hope they bury her facing the stars.

“The last Hibakusha’ is inspired by testimonies of atomic bomb survivors I took in Hiroshima 2015 and over a decade of research.” —Antony Owen

Antony Owen is a peace activist from Coventry, UK and was one of the first peace education patrons for CND UK. His work spans nine collections of poetry and translations in several languages. His book *The Nagasaki Elder* was shortlisted for The Ted Hughes Award for new work in poetry. Broken Sleep Books will publish his New & Selected poems “Post Atomic Glossaries” in 2024.

Odysseus

Zara Raab

Standing on the dock to greet the ships,
a woman middle-aged avoids my gaze,
as if she hadn't known me almost all
her adult life. You others cannot know
as well as I her knack for talk, her clear
authority and eloquence. She has
survived domestic woes—plenty—and now
she simply carries on with work: debriefing
survivors of the war, and offering aid
and comfort to the wives and sons of soldiers
shot down, but I can see now that she's worn.
Once we would have met on that sun-bleached
terrace above the wharf as I began
to heal from long ordeals at sea, the wars,
and voyaging. She would have listened well,
with a soothing, tranquil love, were it
not that our fire had long since burned to ash.

“Odysseus’ is one of several poems in the voices of Odysseus and Penelope. It seeks to fathom one of the mysteries of love—how deeply intimate love can connect us; even after the fire has turned to ash, the source is ever present, if silent, in our lives. Over the centuries, how indebted Odysseus remains to Penelope, and she to him.”
—Zara Raab

Zara Raab's most recent book is a new, expanded edition of *Swimming the Eel*. Her poems and book reviews appear in various small magazines, including *The Hudson Review*, *Ibbetson Street*, *Verse Daily*, *New Verse News*, and *Stand (UK)*. With degrees from Mills College, the University of Michigan, and Lesley University, she is familiar from childhood with rural Northern California, and now lives north of Boston, where she's one of the Powow River Poets.

Sequence I: Post-Bellum Play

Siavash Saadlou

Sometimes I am a little boy—
a two-year-old, one, or
just born—perched on
your strong shoulders,
marveling at the world.

Together,
father and son,
we brave the war.
Together, we dash along
the wall in the living room.
I show you the way.
Your gun is loaded!
You're ready to take orders,
ready to play the good soldier.

But the enemy knows just
what to do, when to fire,
who to kill.
The enemy always
takes out the finest,
the liveliest, the youngest.
The enemy always denies me
your strong shoulders.

Sequence II: Grief

Siavash Saadlou

I am grappling with grief today.
Let me rephrase that. I am grappling
with *your* grief today. It's insane
to be grieving someone all your life—
or maybe not?

Emily Dickinson wrote of the “heft
of cathedral tunes.” But I am no
Emily Dickinson. I am Siavash—
Sea of Ash—and I want to write about
the heft of grief—the heft of *your* grief.

Isn't it funny that grief and gravity
share the same etymology?
Gravis, in Latin, means *heavy*.
Your gravity pulls me to itself,
and then I end up with your grief.

Some say the eight-year war claimed
half a million Iranian lives. Yours is
the only one I would kill for, if only
my hands could remain steady on the gun,
if only I could pull the trigger, I would—
but I am your son, and killing was never
our thing, or else you would be alive today,
writing polemics against the horrors of war
—poems about what it's like to be alive,
words that would have disarmed grief
for all the rest of us.

Sequence III: Crossed in Love

Siavash Saadlou

In a quarrel with a lover I attempt to explain
My strong reaction when she almost chokes on
A bite from some apple. Panic has set in—a
State of semantic paralysis, a vague longing
To make sense of my premature grief when
Her coughing wouldn't stop, when her eyes turn
Almost as red as the shiny apple she had been
Nibbling at seconds before.

How to tell her that it's not the fear of loss
Itself that's eating me up but the inability to
Stop it from happening? Stop the callous coughs—
Stop the tears from streaming down her winsome
Cheeks, stop the bite from messing with her tender
Voice, her tenuous windpipe—stop my father from
Leaving me for some war without returning, stop the
Shrapnel shells from hurtling at 300 feet per second,
Fulfilling his desire to die young, making it so that he
Can never again hold his three-month-old son to
Prepare him for moments such as this one.

“You don't understand,” I hear myself say
While she begins to laugh off the incident
That is now behind us. “You'll never get it.”
I hang my head down sulking like a child,
Feeling her eyes innocently following me
about the room.

“Just look at me,” she says. “Just look.”
Can you see me? Her eyes demand to know;
Don't you think it's possible for me to love you
Without ever comprehending all your wounds?

“My dad was killed on the very last day of the Iran-Iraq War which, metaphorically speaking, marked the beginning of *my* personal crusade—a battle against atrocity and hysteria, against tendentious reporting and mendacious propaganda, against devotional insanity and emotional inertia. Poetry afforded me the aesthetic means, as well as the authentic vernacular, to process the traumas of a war-tinged childhood.”
—Siavash Saadlou

Siavash Saadlou is a writer and literary translator whose short stories and essays have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. His poems have appeared in *Saint Katherine*

Review, *CIRQUE*, and *Porter House Review*, among many other journals. They have also been anthologized in *Odes to Our Undoing* (2022) and *Essential Voices: Poetry of Iran and Its Diaspora* (2021). Saadlou is the winner of the 2023 Constance Rooke Creative Nonfiction Prize and a recipient of the Cole Swensen Prize for Translation. He is currently working on his memoir, *Congratulations and Condolences*.

A Waiting Room in Kuwait

Danielle Sellers

For my ex-husband

On the terrazzo floor, a sea
of soldiers in desert fatigues
using their packs as pillows,
snoring or flipping through magazines,
waiting for a flight home
or back to war. All of them
wanting to be anywhere but there.

Sitting in a metal folding chair
at a bank of outdated computers,
he finds me on MySpace.
I was a grad student
just beginning to publish.
I've thought of you often, he wrote.
I hadn't thought of him in years.

But the library stacks were lonely,
and he was a safe 7,000 miles away.
What harm could there be
in giving him my number,
a home to call home to?
I'd seen the news. So many
everyones killed every day.

When he called, his voice was low,
deep, gentle, broken by static.
What harm could come?
Mine was only a minor territory,
Faulkner's Mississippi postage stamp,
and I was a warm body the Army
could send a kill letter to.

July Fourth, 2008

Danielle Sellers

For my ex-husband

Just over the Georgia border
you followed me and the baby
to a South Carolina Ramada Inn.

You entered with a promise
to never hit me again.
We made dinner plans

at a shack overlooking a swamp
that boasted live bluegrass
and the best fried gator tail

for miles. You were still angry
because I'd asked for a weekend
without your other daughter,

some time for our new family
to bond. I wanted to fuck
out in the open while the baby slept.

I wanted you to take me from behind,
which you never did, to bare
my breasts to the uncurtained

window, my bruised and anonymous
face pressed against the glass.
I wanted them to see.

Instead you told me I looked
like a pig with makeup on.
We went to dinner, watched

fireworks mirrored in still water.
I ordered the Fisherman's Delight.
I think you felt a little bad
watching me eat every single solitary bite.

Passing Time in Père Lachaise, 2006

Danielle Sellers

For Aaron

When my grandmother went the way
of all flesh, I flew to Paris on her dime,
where I received an email telling me
James, the quiet and brooding soldier
I was engaged to but didn't love,
had been ambushed and shot in Iraq,
his condition unknown. It seemed
fitting, somehow, to find the cemetery
where ages of love have gone to die,
to search for the grave of the man
whose nocturnes my heart
used to hear each time you kissed me.
*Oh Frédéric, why did you have to go
and write that opus, full of my grief
that never ends?* Decades later
I'm left with nothing but préludes:
slow, kind, terribly short,
and two lilac-smelling grad students,
their feet bare in wet grass
throwing a frisbee they found
back and forth, back and forth
as if they had nothing but time.

“These three poems appear in my recently finished third manuscript titled *The Book of Flames*. The poems continue a theme explored in my second book, *The Minor Territories* (Sundress Publications 2018), which expresses the difficult marriage the speaker had with an Army veteran of the Iraq war who came home changed, scarred, and often physically and verbally abusive. Leading up to and during the short life of this marriage, the speaker often found herself wistful for a former boyfriend whom she considers, even decades later, to be her true love.” —Danielle Sellers

Danielle Sellers is from Key West, FL. She has an MA from The Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University and an MFA from the University of Mississippi where she held the John Grisham Poetry Fellowship. Her poems have appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Subtropics*, *Smartish Pace*, *The Cimarron Review*, *Poet Lore*, and elsewhere. She is the author of two collections of poetry: *Bone Key Elegies* (Main Street Rag 2009) and *The Minor Territories* (Sundress Publications 2018). She teaches Literature and Creative Writing at Trinity Valley School in Fort Worth, Texas.

Learning a Language

J.C. Todd

The Lunas have fallen
in Chiapas, households
emptied before daybreak,
slaughtered in a cavern whose dark
could not hide their faces
from the torches of troops.
Not only those who bore
the name of Luna, but Cruz,
Hernandez, Garcia, Perez,
names like bright threads
tying off the ends of families.

Hearing them, all
fifty-one, infant to elder,
names whose cadence
is heel-tap and hand-clap,
I listen as my teacher said,
allowing the rhythm and sound
to change how I hear
so the shadow of my birth tongue
fades. *Luna*. In its light
I see their lives, their history
that, word by word, enters me.

“After hearing the litany of names of villagers murdered by paramilitaries in Chiapas, Mexico, I repeated them for days so they would not be disappeared. Thirty years ago, it was my first experience in bearing witness by saying the names. Since then I have written two books of poems addressing the traumas of oppression, *Beyond Repair* (Able Muse Press, 2021) and *The Damages of Morning* (Moonstone Books, 2018). For more background: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chiapas_conflict.” —J.C. Todd

J.C. Todd's recent work addresses war trauma and women: *Beyond Repair* (2021), the Able Muse Press Poetry Book Award special selection, and *The Damages of Morning* (Moonstone Press, 2018), finalist for the 2019 Eric Hoffer Micropress Award. Winner of the 2016 International Literary Award in poetry and highly commended in the 2022 National Competition of the Poetry Society of UK, she has held fellowships from the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, and Bemis Center and has published poems in *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Full Bleed*, *The Paris Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review* and other journals.

Peterson Space Force Base

B.A. Van Sise



We will be able, soon, to
make war among the stars.
Go to Mars, find people there,
and kill them. For now,
we can get to Denver,
mostly by the interstate, where
trucks full of kids being trained
to take over endless nothing
shuffle between sedans, campers,
a trucker on his fifth cup of
coffee today, all of them watching,
carefully, the road, and never
looking up at the sky.

photo by B.A. Van Sise

Training Center Cape May

B.A. Van Sise



photo by B.A. Van Sise

You need to push against the Earth;
A wider berth is not available
but you're still able to manage a few

in the small space between the bed
and the basin where you brush your teeth,
beneath which there is a comb that

the last person to sleep on your pillow
has left behind. Behind that,
there are a few blonde hairs and a tissue.

To feel it, you need to go almost to the floor,
a little more than most people do. An inch is enough
to show you've still got the stuff to pass

muster like the younger guys. You don't.
You grunt and heave and try to believe
that once this was easy, that

there was a time when, if you
pushed against the world,
the world did not push back.

B.A. Van Sise is an author and photographic artist focused on the intersection between language and the visual image. He is the author of two monographs: *Children of Grass: A Portrait of American Poetry* and *Invited to Life: Finding Hope After the Holocaust*. He has previously been featured in solo exhibitions at the Skirball Center, the Center for Creative Photography, the Center for Jewish History and the Museum of Jewish Heritage, and in the permanent collection of the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery. He is a New York State Council on the Arts Fellow, winner of a Leonian grant, a PX3 award-winner, a finalist for the Rattle Poetry Prize, and an IPPY gold medalist.

O Tannenbaum

Charles Weld

Near ninety, my Uncle Jack confessed one Christmas that he'd disliked snow on evergreens since age nineteen, when—U.S. Army infantry—he'd been a machine gunner at the Battle of the Bulge. The frozen Ardennes forest—night temperatures down to zero or below, miles of dark trees bent under snow—came back in holiday cards he opened at my cousins' house near Buffalo. Sharp-edged, he'd dismiss their sentiment, unwilling to indulge. Peace on earth—a crazy aspiration. Organized labor might give birth to something better than what we know—not fantasy. The Germans' machine gun cut people in half. Hitler's Buzz Saw, G.I.s named it. The Bulge they called the Children's Crusade—bitter wit, part of their winter outfit, like wool, cigarettes, and chocolate.

“O Tannenbaum’ is a poem that describes some of my uncle’s experience of WWII, as told to me during family visits when he was in his eighties. From my perspective visiting my cousins as a kid, he’d always seemed a little grouchy. As an elder, he was generous, kind and very open about his experience, during that last German offensive of December, 1944 and January, 1945. That he’d disliked snow on conifers ever since that fierce, winter battle (in which he was wounded) is straight from his mouth. And gave me the idea for the poem. Rest in peace, Uncle Jack.”

—Charles Weld

Charles Weld’s poems have been previously collected in two chapbooks, *Country I Would Settle In* (Pudding House, 2004) and *Who Cooks For You?* (Kattywompus Press, 2012). Kelsay Books published a collection, *Seringo*, in October 2023. A mental health counselor educated at Cornell and the University of Maine, he’s worked as an administrator for a non-profit agency that provides treatment services to youth and families. Mostly retired, he enjoys walking in the Adirondacks, step-grandparenthood, the deep roots of a long marriage, listening to children, the overlapping circles of blended and extended family, Quaker community, and the pace of life in the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Hidden History

MaxieJane Frazier

We saw them carve out their space with surgical precision and brute force. We were on the outside of the glass and metal school for men. They made uniforms and fitness standards. They were "Our Little Gang" without the dog. We stood to one side in our A-line skirts and beehives saying, "We wouldn't want that anyway," while we answered their phones or calculated equations elbow-to-elbow with them.

When they split atoms in a desert and again over human history, maybe then is when we said, "They need us." Maybe then we insisted, and Congress agreed until we were in the uniforms, too. We ran alongside them. We threw our hats into graduation air.

We, with our binary boobs jutted into their space. As we learned in our kitchens, pasta, when it's cooked to perfection, sticks if flung on a wall. So, we found our footholds, remade ourselves in their image, emerged into their world. They liked our pliability and set us against each other: divide and conquer. We were them, in skirts.

One day, in one of our spaces, like a bathroom where we sit to pee, we looked then locked carefully made-up eyes in the mirror. We saw each other's coded fierceness. We emerged into their world, now secret, sleeper agents, disguised as them, but becoming us. We picked up an object here, set it down there. Just a few more moves and we could shift their world, make it ours.

In the breath before the release, before the change, they gathered their forces and rolled in the tanks. Not just soldiers, but women and children too, were blown out of this life, history before our very eyes.

Then we cried out, "Isn't there another way?" But our high voices reverberated in their echo chamber, out of range, foreign and disregarded in our unintelligible tongue of peace.

"War and its trappings are inherently masculine, especially considering the absence of women from military ranks in the beginning. I believe women make our own best allies. In my 26-year military career, I eventually understood that "they" pitted women against each other as we fought for progression in "their" world. But wouldn't women joining forces using our fierce competitiveness in a space "they" don't have access to and demolishing "the way things have always been" be the *best* rebellion? My short piece, "Hidden History," thinks about how the beginning of such a movement of women in the military would likely only be torn apart by the violence of war. I'm still asking if there isn't a better way." —MaxieJane Frazier

MaxieJane Frazier is a writer, teacher, editor, and retired military veteran. Her work has appeared in *Scribes*MICRO*Fiction*, *Bending Genres*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *The Bath Flash Fiction* anthology, and other places. MaxieJane holds an MFA from Bennington Writing Seminars and co-founded Birch Bark Editing where she helps edit *MicroLit Almanac*.

Anderlecht

Barbara Krasner

I'm sitting in the back of a Mercedes taxi in Brussels. The driver doesn't speak English and I don't speak French. I hand him a piece of paper with place names and addresses that I culled from Albert Hepner's memoir, *Avrumele*. That's the diminutive form of his Yiddish name. I've known Albert for several years now. I was discussing Elie Wiesel's memoir *Night* with a student in the community college's adjunct office. Albert came over and said, "I was a hidden child in Belgium." I invited him to my class as a guest speaker. I bought his memoir. We started as colleagues and became friends.

Albert's family immigrated to Belgium after World War I from Warsaw. They were in the handbag business. They became part of the 95 percent of foreign-born Jews in Belgium and an immediate target under the occupation. By the time Nazi Germany invaded and occupied Belgium along with the other Low Countries and France in the spring of 1940, Al's father had died of natural causes. Al was six the following year when his cousin, Motl, a young doctor from Belarus and member of the Belgian resistance, put him in hiding. The places and addresses I have are the landmarks of his journey one cold, dark, November night when Albert slipped out of the church where Motl stashed him, and trekked back to his family's apartment because he wet his sheet.

Everything now depends on the driver's cell phone GPS and his ability to read my handwriting. We need to get to Anderlecht, one of the nineteen districts of Brussels. My plan is to retrace Albert's steps, albeit in a cab. It is over 90 degrees Fahrenheit on this Sunday afternoon in June and there is no way I'm going to hoof it.

I could have simply asked Albert what it was like to make this journey as a six-year-old. I could have asked him how he remembered the route. What it was like to cross the heavily trafficked rue de Fiennes with its tram tracks? What to do when he reached Place Conseil, Council Square, and its massive red brick and stone Anderlecht's Municipal Hall? How did he know to turn left off rue de Fiennes to rue Rossini and then two blocks to his home? When I emailed Albert to tell him I was making this side trip, he wrote, "I wish I were there so I could drive you to the old sites."

The driver pulls down a narrow street. Is it a street or a path? He says, "We are here. This is the church." I think, this can't be the right church, because the only name of the church I can see engraved in the stone is Kerk van Onse Lieve Vrouw. What trips me up is that Albert and the Internet refer to this 1856 neo-Gothic church as Église Notre-Dame Immaculée. But the taxi driver assures me this is the right church in Brussels' working-class Anderlecht district on rue de Meersman. I don't know French and I don't know Flemish, but these two names are equivalent.

Whether in French or Flemish, somewhere behind these wooden doors, is the basement dungeon as Albert called it in his memoir. There he slept in a cold room, on an iron cot with scratchy linens and blanket, and repeatedly wet the bed. He was one of several boys in hiding. Although blue eyed with curly blond hair, Albert's circumcision would give him away as a Jew.

Somewhere behind these wooden doors, Father Jan Bruylandts, in his long, black cassock, greeted his congregation, read his prepared sermon while perhaps thinking about the Jewish boys in the building. Maybe he could still feel Albert's hand in his, a hand hopeful, yet trembling and weary.

With the Mercedes engine idling and the meter running, I dare not venture into the church. Maybe I should have taken mass transit from city center to Anderlecht instead so I could take my time. But I know my physical limitations and how I don't do well with heat. I snap some photos and get back to the car. We take off. It is difficult to navigate from the back seat of the taxi and more difficult to read the small rectangular street signs affixed to the buildings. They become more visible once I pass them. The church straddles the two lanes of rue Dokter de Meersman, also known as Dokter de Meersmanstraat. We follow rue de la Clinique six long city blocks, past the once-thriving Orthodox synagogue built in the 1920s, to Place Conseil, Council Square, and its nineteenth-century massive red brick-and-stone Municipal Hall that also now houses the train station on the Brussels-South line. I know from Albert's memoir, he made a left here onto rue de Fiennes, a highly-trafficked thoroughfare with tram lines.

I am already in awe of Albert's midnight odyssey. We turn onto a beautiful, tree-lined boulevard, rue Bara, a street not mentioned in *Avrumele*. I yell out to the driver, "There's rue Rossini!" We have to make four successive rights to get back onto rue Bara and make the right on rue Rossini. I suppose the street signs are more helpful when walking or taking a horse-drawn hack. Anderlecht blossomed in the nineteenth century to the southwest of bustling Brussels. At one time, this district served as a hub for a Jewish community. Now, given the abundance of tandoori and halal establishments, the neighborhood has shifted demographically, as neighborhoods do.

Why didn't I think of asking Albert for his street address in Anderlecht? The memoir says Al walked two blocks from rue de Fiennes along rue Rossini to get to his apartment. But we've not come from rue de Fiennes, and so I don't know which is Al's block. All I can do is take photos of the buildings and imagine that his family's apartment building must have looked like this: A tall and narrow row house of three or four stories, some windows featuring wrought-iron balconies.

Albert told the story of how he brought his wet sheet to the apartment, where his mother turned him away. He stood here, where I am standing now, his face reddened by constant crying, waving his wet linen, pleading with his mama to give him a dry sheet. She didn't turn on the light. She motioned to him "Gehe vek," go away, a message he eventually understood. He sulked back to the church and crawled back into bed, no longer concerned that Father Jan might chastise him for wetting the bed again. His mother had done far worse. Had I not traveled here, not peeked through the door of Albert's past, I would not have been able to bear witness to the loss of a son's trust of his mother. He never forgave her, not even after decades of therapy.

Here in this Anderlecht district, Nazi sirens burst through the night down rue de la Clinique toward the church as Motl rushed Albert through yet another doorway on rue de Fiennes for safety in hiding. Someone, maybe the laundress, betrayed the priest.

I return to my hotel room in central Brussels. I email Albert and tell him of my adventure. "I don't know how you did it," I write. "You were only six." He brushes by my comment and instead focuses on my admiration of rue Bara. He responds, "You mentioned one of my favorite streets from after the war. 32 Rue Bara was where Borochoy Dror was, the Zionist organization I belonged to, and got to reaffirm my Yiddishkeit. The other wonderful memory of that street, is that right across the street, Cote D'Or, was the best chocolate factory in Europe. Every time I went to a *kvutza* meeting, we could imbibe the chocolate aroma. Another good way to be Jewish." In 1930, just a few years before Albert's birth, the company had some 350 employees in Anderlecht. The company was later sold to the Swiss.

In the email exchange, something else blossoms. It's been blossoming since I climbed into the Mercedes cab. There's no glass barrier between the front and back seats. Al and I now share a kind of intimacy. I am bearing witness, validating his experience. I am sitting now in the front seat with him. He's been driving me all along.

“I am so glad I had the opportunity to honor my friend's wartime experience by retracing the steps he took while in hiding in Nazi-occupied Belgium to ask his mother for help.” —Barbara Krasner

Barbara Krasner is a four-time Pushcart Prize nominee. Her literary work has appeared in *Consequence*, *Jewish Literary Journal*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Nimrod International*, and other journals. She holds an MFA from the Vermont College of Fine Arts and a PhD in Holocaust & Genocide Studies from Gratz College.

Disaster

Jennifer Eden Rogers

Seventh grade, almost thirteen and not in love. But definitely in like. I *like*-like Joe Martine, with his slicked-back, jet-black hair and understanding eyes. Joe and I are the only two in Mrs. Hardy's class doing advanced math this year. We huddle together doing our work and it's heaven, but a heaven where he always wears a ski jacket and an awkward perm makes my face look too big for my head. I wear my jacket all the time too. Solidarity.

Two hundred kilometers north of us, a car bomb explodes outside Headquarters at the Rhein-Main Air Base, kills two Americans, and wounds twenty more. Joe and I and all the other kids at school are Army brats and we're used to the ground shifting beneath us, keeping our balance while we navigate new hallways, cliques, cultures. We know we'll move in a year or two and start all over again. Here in West Germany, though, we're not just new—we're foreign.

Some Germans resent us and throw anti-American protests, but we go to school on an Army base, so we feel insulated, safe. Lately though, I'm less sure—terrorists bombed the Frankfurt airport the week before my grandmother visited last summer. My parents and I walked by the cordoned-off hole in the floor when we picked her up.

But the bombs in Paris this Fall and the December shootings at the Rome and Vienna airports are just far enough away to fade into the background. We don't really talk about it at school. And they tell us not to worry, we aren't at war. Plus, I have my own battles to fight—Joe doesn't like me back.

Our school is housed in a former German hospital, built for captured Allied soldiers. The fire alarm rings. Divided by grade, Kindergarten through 8th, we climb the steep hill across from the building, the hill where the Nazis executed less fortunate prisoners. We chatter, unsure if this is a drill. Then we sit. Sit looking down at our school, waiting. The little kids play duck-duck-goose. Whispers of bomb threats infiltrate our ranks. Teachers pace our lines. Lesson plans flap in the sharp February winds. Day after day after day. Every time, trucks arrive. Every time, guys wearing padded suits and Death Star helmets hop out with their dogs and sweep through the school. We sit. We watch. The spring-new grass on the hill flattens under our assault.

During Science we learn threat levels, "just in case," our parents say. They catch a high school kid calling in bomb threats. Everyone's relieved when he's shipped back to the States to stay with his grandparents until his father finishes this tour of duty.

But the threats keep coming. The fire alarm keeps ringing. We grow used to it. Most of us quit doing our schoolwork. We keep climbing the slope, following the same muddy path every time. We get bored. Joe pushes his best friend while they're joking around one day, and Eric falls down the hill, breaking his leg. Their friendship and Eric's promising soccer future die there.

In April, a bomb explodes on the dancefloor of the *La Belle* Discotheque, a West Berlin nightclub popular with U.S. soldiers. Hundreds are injured. Two of the three people killed are Americans.

Our first school dance, Joe asks Amy. So, I steal Amy's best friend, Beth. I agree to go steady with Richard Z., but he's round and blond and uninteresting, and I dump him two days later. The dance

goes okay. Our cafeteria is covered in streamers and the only slow song they play is Bryan Adams' "Heaven". Joe and Amy dance.

The United States responds to the nightclub bombing by conducting air raids on Tripoli and Benghazi. Reagan is hailed as a leader, and we all learn the limits of loyalty when the French refuse us airspace. The Libyans report we killed thirty-seven people and injured a bunch more. Word at school is we killed one of Qadhafi's kids, and he's vowed to kill one of us. Our parents assure us that's probably not true. We try not to think about it.

Mom makes me run for Student Council President and I give a speech to a gym full of everyone I know. It's exhilarating and I win. Beth and I switch placement tests for next year, I do both Language Arts tests and she does both Math tests, so we get all our classes together for eighth grade. I start a diary: "Only four more days 'til I'm a teenager!"

The next day no alarm sounds but the teachers line us up anyway. We know the drill: we climb, we sit, we watch. The trucks roll in. The guys get out with their dogs. But this time they're wearing billowing plastic suits that cover them head to toe and carrying machines that click with static. Today we are oddly still, seven hundred kids quiet enough to hear the birds chirping. Chernobyl drifts towards us. We just sit on this hill and wait.

Berlin is hazy by sunset. I have my sleepover anyway. Some girls can't come because we don't live on post, behind gates. I ask my mom how gates would protect us from radiation. She tells me people are afraid. I'm not sure I understand, but my friends start arriving and we thread jelly bracelets onto our arms like Madonna.

We wake up the next morning to urgent knocks on the door. There's a suspicious package in an unknown car parked just outside the apartment. My friends and I filter out to the playground and sit around in our Garfield pajamas with the rest of the neighborhood, waiting for the Military Police and the German bomb squad. Turns out, it was just a Hausfrau's laundry in a paper bag.

Later that day, after my friends have gone, I'm pretty sure I have radiation poisoning. But when I tell Mom, she gives me the catastrophic news—I'm a woman now.

"Military children grow up in unique and ever-changing circumstances—not as civilians, but not as soldiers either. This piece arose from my exploration of that middle ground." —Jennifer Eden Rogers

Jennifer Eden Rogers worked in the community mental health system for many years and currently writes content for mental health websites. She is working on *Do No Harm*, a memoir about growing up dealing with her mother's chronic health problems, both physical and psychological, and how that impacted the treatment of her own unusual seizure disorder. Through this lens, Jennifer explores the almost blanket authority granted to medical professionals and parents, particularly over girls/women, and how she eventually developed an "authority of self." She lives in northwest Arkansas with her husband and two wire-haired dachshunds. This is her first prose publication.

F I C T I O N

Dependents

J. Malcolm Garcia

Bibi Sarwari and Earl Taylor met at an airport coffee shop in San Diego in the humid summer morning. The rising heat of the day pierced the city. Ceiling fans spun slowly as the two embraced, Earl swallowing Bibi in his big arms, squeezing him against his chest. After a moment, Earl released him and they sat, grinning. Bibi ordered tea; Earl asked for house coffee. Earl had a three hour layover, so Bibi took some time off work to meet him.

How's it going, brother? Earl asked.

Good, good, Bibi said. So good to see you.

Likewise.

Likewise, Bibi repeated, and laughed. In Afghanistan, Earl always said "likewise." On patrols in Khost province when the Taliban attacked, Earl would drop to one knee, jerking Bibi down with him and firing rounds from his M4, screaming *likewise, motherfuckers!*

Bibi had arrived from Kabul six months earlier with his wife and four daughters. A Catholic Charities resettlement worker placed them in a two-bedroom apartment in South Park, a neighborhood not far from the airport. She called him Mr. Sarwari and never asked about his life in Afghanistan. She was not friendly, but she was not unfriendly. She was efficient. She helped him find a job working as a janitor at an athletic club. A month later, he made a down payment on a battered SUV with 175,000 miles from a used car dealer she knew. She gave him furniture from the donation room next to her office. Another room held trash bags filled with used clothing he and his family wore. This morning, he put on a red plaid shirt that hung off his shoulders and baggy blue jeans he rolled at the cuffs. He looked at his living room and the furniture in it, a couch and two armchairs, and wondered who had owned them and why had they donated them to Catholic Charities. He passed his case worker's office on his way to the airport and thought of stopping in to tell her he was meeting an American soldier he had worked with in Afghanistan as an interpreter. He's going to give me copies of my credentials, he would tell her. I earned them for my good work with American soldiers in the 503rd. My boss will see I'm not just a refugee. *That's nice*, he could hear her say. *That would be helpful to show your work experience and to have recommendations from Americans. Now, I don't have much time, what do you need?*

He *needed* his parents and in-laws he'd left behind in Kabul. He *needed* a bigger apartment, a job that would support his family, and a car that wasn't close to a breakdown. He *needed* to feel at home and many other things he knew she'd not define as needs. *I'm sorry you miss your family but I'm focused on you and you should be too*, she often said to him. She'd pause and he'd look at her and then past her, staring out her office window at an AMC theater across the street. The large red letters of the sign made him think of the Bollywood movies he'd watched in Kabul, and for a moment he was no longer in San Diego. Or he'd glance in the direction of the North Park Farmers Market and recall the bazaars in Share-e-Naw and how he had walked between vendor stalls with his wife.

The clipped words of his resettlement worker would bring him back. *Be grateful for what you have, Bibi*, she'd say. *Not every asylum seeker is so fortunate to have what I've gotten for you. I'm providing you with stepping stones. The rest is up to you.*

He thought of her stern look, the tone of her voice like that of a teacher to a naughty boy and how he could feel his heart pound with anger as he swallowed his humiliation and shrank before her, head down. Once he showed her his credentials, she'd understand. She'd appreciate who he had been and who he could be again. She'd be embarrassed by the way she'd treated him, talking to him like a child. With his credentials, he would find a good job and not need her.

*

A waitress put a cup of tea and a cup of coffee on a round tray and carried it to their table. She gave Earl the tea and Bibi the coffee. They said nothing but smiled at each other. After she left, they switched drinks.

Fucking tea, Earl said.

Fucking coffee, man, Bibi said.

They laughed.

How was your flight?

Good, Earl said. Nothing to write home about, but not bad.

May I see my credentials? I want to show them to my worker.

Earl glanced down at the table, raised his head, and looked past Bibi. Yeah, I received them as attachments on WhatsApp, Earl said.

I've been asking you for them. You said you'd send them.

I forgot.

Earl flapped his T-shirt against his chest. Bibi could tell there was something on Earl's mind. He was trying to decide how to say it or maybe he was trying to pick the right time to say it.

Is everything all right, Earl?

It's hot, he said, still flapping his shirt.

Did you print my credentials? Bibi asked.

Not yet. I told you I forgot.

You can forward them to my phone and I'll print them, Bibi said.

Earl took out his wallet and offered Bibi five \$20 bills.

Here, to make up for the hours you're losing at work to see me today.

No, no, my friend, it's OK.

Take it.

Earl extended his right hand, his thumb pressing down on the five twenties drooping from his fingers. He had been sending Bibi money ever since he arrived in San Diego. America was too expensive, he would complain to Earl over the phone. *Can't argue with you*, Earl would say. Bibi called him his big American brother but in many ways he was like his second resettlement worker, someone he turned to for help. They were friends, but Earl had all the advantages of an American. In Khost, Earl needed him, but here Bibi had nothing to offer.

Take it, Earl said again.

His insistence had an edge to it almost as if he was angry. Bibi made a face, took the money and shook Earl's hand and thanked him and promised to help him should he ever ask for it, but nothing he said relieved the sense that Earl would never need him.

*

Earl had been a reservist assigned to the 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment when he met Bibi at Forward Operating Base Salerno in Khost. Bibi worked security with him at the front gate, translating for carloads of destitute families requesting food and medical assistance. He taught Bibi how to play poker and Bibi showed him the Afghan card game, Teka. Bibi always allowed him to win. *You are a guest in my country*, he would explain, *I cannot take your money*.

This is hell, Earl thought when he landed in Khost. He had never experienced such heat. The land had the appearance of a brown wasteland speckled with scrub and in constant motion from sandstorms. He'd joined the reserves to pay for college, not to fight in Afghanistan. Shrapnel to the left hand sent him home to Chicago before the deployment was over. Gave him a chance to get his MBA. He wanted to start an employment agency for refugees in the U.S. *To help motherfuckers like you*, he told Bibi in an email. This morning, he was on his way to Phoenix for a three-day conference on start-ups. He'd reached out to Bibi when he bought his plane ticket.

My wife wanted to cook a big meal for you, Bibi said. Kabuli pulao, mantu, chicken beef kabobs.

Jesus, how much does she think I can eat?

Bibi laughed. Americans, he noticed, always swore using their God's name.

Another time, maybe, Earl said.

It would have been good for her. She is too sad. She misses her family. I'm sad too. My parents are in a refugee camp in Pakistan. Too many people in my old neighborhood in Kabul knew I worked for the Army. They were scared that someone might report them to the Taliban.

I'm sorry.

I try to send them money. My family thought I was a very important man translating for the Army. Here, I am struggling. I am just a refugee.

You're an asylum seeker.

What's the difference?

I don't know but I think being an asylum seeker is better.

We have an expression, Bibi said. Afghan men cry on the inside. Women cry on the outside.

It will get better, Earl said.

Inshallah, I hope so.

Inshallah. How's your apartment?

It's small. We have bunk beds for the children. In the living room, we have a big carpet and we eat on the floor in the Afghan way. On the wall, I will put my credentials and pictures of my parents and my wife's family. It will be our Afghan room, inshallah.

There's something I need to tell you, Earl said, strumming his fingers against the table.

Yes? Bibi said.

A man and a woman walked into the coffee shop and put their suitcases on the chairs of a table next to them. They placed an order and waited. They tapped text messages on their phones. When their drinks were served, they returned to the table. Cheers, the woman said, tapping the man's glass with her own. Watching them, Earl raised his glass to Bibi.

To better days, he said.

Inshallah, Bibi said. To better days.

Earl slugged down the rest of his coffee and took out his wallet.

That money I gave you was enough?

Yes, yes, of course, Bibi said.

It's no problem.

Bibi shook his head.

No, no, please, Earl.

Earl closed his wallet and put it back in his pocket.

What is it you wanted to tell me? Bibi said.

*

Bibi had earned seven hundred dollars a month as a translator, more than the Afghan government paid its own generals. He made twice that much at the athletic club but his salary was not enough to support his family. He started work at seven in the morning and stayed until three. Then he drove for Uber until eight when he took a dinner break to eat with his wife and children. At nine, he began picking up fares again. He used to go home at midnight, but by the time he ate a snack, brushed his teeth, washed his face, changed for bed, kissed his daughters good night while they slept, and did the same with his slumbering wife, asleep or passed out from anxiety meds—he never knew—it was time to get up and leave for the athletic club. To get more rest, he started sleeping in his SUV in the gym parking lot until his shift started.

Bibi had left Afghanistan just before the Taliban retook Kabul. He listened to news reports as the insurgents occupied nearby Nangarhār and Logar provinces. Neighbors warned him that Taliban fighters were already in Kabul seeking information on anyone who had worked for U.S. forces. He took his family to a friend's house and then left for another friend's house to keep ahead of anyone who might inform on him. He sent Earl a WhatsApp message with photos of his English language degree from Kabul University, certificates from The International Security Assistance Force and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Kabul, with whom he had also worked as a translator before he joined the 503rd. Additional photos showed his army ID badges and letters of commendation from the commanding officer. *These papers are very important to me*, Bibi told Earl when he sent him the photos. *This has been my work. It's my life.* I understand, Earl wrote back. Once he confirmed receipt of the images, Bibi deleted the photos from his phone and all messages to Earl. Then he burned his documents. If Taliban fighters found him and searched his belongings they would find nothing connecting him to the Americans.

The CO recommended Bibi for an expedited U.S. visa, and the American Embassy in Kabul granted the request. However, the visa would apply to his family only and not his parents or in-laws. Bibi didn't understand. *They're extended family*, Earl told him in an email. *What does that mean?* Bibi asked. *They're not part of your immediate family*, Earl replied. *But they're family*, Bibi insisted. *I'm sorry*, Earl said, *I don't make the rules.*

Bibi debated his next move. If he stayed in Kabul, he would never be able to leave the house and feel safe, and he would need to move repeatedly for the safety of his family. How would he support his family under such circumstances? He slept little. He prayed. He cursed. His neck and the veins in his temples pulsed with stress. His indecision drove him mad. Finally, he called Earl and told him he would accept the conditions of the visa. *You have to contact the embassy, not me*, Earl said. *I'm telling you because you are my friend and my heart is broken*, Bibi said. That night, he told his wife of his decision. *You cannot leave your parents and my family*, she said. *I'm sorry*, Bibi said, *but we have no other choice.* She walked into the kitchen and closed the door. He listened to her cry. He went outside and covered his face with his hands and shook as he struggled to hold back his own tears. He stood like that for some time, the cool evening ruffling his clothes, before he regained control and returned inside.

*

A woman's voice came over the airport public address system and reminded passengers not to leave their luggage with strangers and to report any suspicious behavior.

What is it you have to tell me? Bibi asked again.

Earl glanced at his watch.

Do you have to go? Bibi said.

No worries, Earl said. Listen, I was thinking. There's something called humanitarian parole. It allows people like your mom and dad and your wife's folks to come to the states for being under threat because of the work you did for the Army. Do you know about that?

No. How long does it take?

I don't know.

I spoke to an immigration lawyer but he wanted \$1,500 a day. This humanitarian parole, what does it cost?

I think it's like six hundred dollars for each person.

For each person!

Yeah, I know, it's a lot.

How can I pay for this?

I'll help you.

Please, Earl, Bibi said. You are helping too much.

*

In the gym parking lot, Bibi would notice other people who stayed overnight. They would sit in lawn chairs smoking cigarettes and talking. He would offer them water or fruit. They thanked him, spoke in low voices as if they did not want to disturb the quiet night and they stared out at the street or up at the sky and he would do the same, and they spoke as if they were back home in their yards in Texas, Arizona, Colorado, wherever they were from. Bibi told them he was from Afghanistan. He and his mother had stood outside their house when the Northern Alliance began its assault on Kabul about a month after 9/11. They watched the Taliban firing back, the sky lit up with anti-aircraft fire, a big flash followed by an explosion that pushed them to the ground. The Americans are here to help the mujahedeen, people shouted on the street. Everyone was happy, Bibi recalled, and a peaceful time followed.

He told them about studying English at Kabul University and becoming a translator for the Americans. His mother told him it was too dangerous and his father agreed. *I'm going*, he insisted. *You're a young man*, his father said, *but still a man. I'm telling you not to, but it is up to you.* On his first visit

home, his parents arranged his marriage to a neighbor's daughter. He had known her since they were children and did not love her, but his father was good friends with her father so he promised that he would learn to love her. After they married, he returned to Khost and did not go home again for six months. After twenty days, long enough to impregnate his wife, he flew back to Khost. His wife said nothing, but his mother wept and begged him not to go. He told her it was fine, no problem. He did not mention the firefights and how they frightened him because he did not have a gun to defend himself. He surprised his parents and his wife with money he had saved from his salary.

Every other night he and Earl left the base on patrols with a platoon of U.S. and Afghan National Army soldiers. He recalled the lines of armored vehicles and the American soldiers wearing headphones and listening to music so loud that Bibi could hear it. He watched them mouth the lyrics, faces scrunched, bodies rocking as if they were seized with convulsions. They would leave at 20:00 hours in pitch dark. The stars and moon spread a pale glaze over the desert and Bibi would think that those same stars flickered above his home in Kabul. The platoon would reach its destination at 03:00 and search villages.

We're here to help, Bibi would tell the village elders. They led him and the officers into a hut built with mud bricks and lined with carpets, kicked off their sandals and offered them tea. They sat in a circle and burqa clad women lit candles and left. They returned almost immediately with tea and a plate of cookies and raisins, then retreated into the shadows before vanishing. *These Americans are here to kill us*, the elders would tell Bibi after they poured the tea. They spoke calmly, confident their assertion was beyond dispute. Their faded prayer shawls slipped off their shoulders as they stroked white, tobacco-stained beards, the rigor of their lives revealed in impassive faces lined with age and fatigue. They raised their cups of tea to their mouths and waited for Bibi to translate. *No, we're here to build hospitals and schools*, Bibi insisted, speaking for the lieutenant in charge of the patrol, but the elders lifted their hands for him to be quiet. *You are no longer Afghan*, they told him.

One time, a Taliban fighter shot at them from behind a wall in the village of Spin Boldak. Shrapnel struck Earl in his left hand. Blood sprayed onto Bibi's shirt, and he fell to the ground convinced he had been shot. *Likewise, motherfuckers!* Earl screamed, firing his weapon. *I've been hit*, Bibi shouted. Earl dropped beside him and felt his chest and arms before he noticed his hand and wiped it clean. *Shit, man*, he said, *that's my goddamn blood*.

Bibi laughed at the memory.

Well, that's it, he said to the men and women seated around him in the parking lot. *That was my life. But now I am here because the Taliban came back and I could not stay, and now I have very little money and nothing in my apartment is mine.*

They nodded without comment and then a man started talking and became lost in the tale of his own derailed life. *I work at a warehouse*, he said, *but I don't make enough to pay rent. We're on Social Security*, a couple said, interrupting him. *Our landlord increased the rent and we had to leave. I had problems with my boyfriend*, a young woman joined in. As the night progressed some of the people drank and grew loud and argumentative. A man called Bibi a fucking Arab. He was so drunk Bibi barely understood him. *OK, OK*, Bibi said, and returned to his SUV.

What could he say to this crazy man? *I am Afghan, not Arab*. He knew a drunk would not understand the difference but he tried not to judge him. His wife took pills prescribed for her by a doctor at a

San Diego clinic to help her cope with the absence of her family, and Bibi had learned not to argue with her no matter how she provoked him under the influence of the pills. She stayed in bed except when she cooked their meals. Bibi told her she must stop taking the pills. *You sleep too much*, he said. She glared at him, walked into the bathroom, uncapped a plastic bottle, and shook out a small, round tablet. Dropping it in her mouth, she swallowed it without water, without taking her eyes off him.

I will never forgive you for bringing me here, she said putting the bottle back on the sink. *There will be no paradise for you.*

*

Earl stood to get another cup of coffee.

You sure you don't want another tea? He asked Bibi when he returned to their table.

No, thank you.

Earl sat. He looked at Bibi, glanced at the floor.

What? Bibi said.

I have to tell you something, Earl said.

He paused.

What? Bibi said again.

You know when you sent me the photos of your credentials?

Yes.

Well, you deleted them before I downloaded the attachments.

He showed Bibi his phone, tapped his contact link on WhatsApp and scrolled to his message: *Here are my certificates. This is my work. It's my life.* Below it Bibi saw the word *deleted* for each image he had sent.

What are you telling me? Bibi said.

I mean I don't have them. I didn't know I had to download them. I thought they'd stay on my phone like any other texted photo. But when you deleted them, they were deleted from my phone too. I wanted to tell you, but you had enough problems getting out of Afghanistan. I'm sorry.

I don't understand.

When you deleted them they were deleted from my phone too.

But you said—

I don't have them. They're gone.

Bibi looked down at the table. He saw himself in his apartment staring at the empty living room wall. His Afghanistan room! Such a fool he had been to think anything here could be like Afghanistan. He grabbed Earl's phone and threw it on the floor. Earl jerked back from the table and stood. The couple beside them stared wide-eyed, got up, and hurried away. A girl behind the cash register jumped, covered her mouth. Bibi felt everyone watching him. His head pounded. He closed his eyes, took deep breaths.

Bibi, Earl said. I didn't know.

Bibi dug into his pocket for the money Earl had given him. He wanted to throw the bills on the table and shout, Keep your money. I don't want it, but he didn't. He needed the money. He needed Earl. He wasn't angry with him. He wasn't angry with anyone. He was just angry. He wanted to leave, to run from here, but where? Home? He didn't have a home. At night, he dreamed of Kabul and then he woke up stiff-necked in his car.

He noticed the cashier talking to a security guard and pointing in his direction. He pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes. Shaking his head, he looked at the skylights above him, squinting against the unrelenting glare.

I'm sorry, he said, turning to Earl.

Likewise, Earl said.

Bibi stood. The security guard stopped at their table.

What's going on here? he asked.

Nothing, Earl told him. My friend received some bad news and just got a little upset.

The security guard looked at Bibi suspiciously. Bibi had seen that look before, in the eyes of Earl and the other American soldiers when Afghans approached the gates of FOB Salerno.

I do not want trouble. I only want my life, Bibi said, his voice drowned out by an announcement over the PA system.

What? the guard asked.

Then a sudden rush of travelers, all bound for destinations of their choosing, streamed past. Bibi felt the damp trails of tears on his cheeks as he faced the guard, unable to say more.

“The purpose of [‘Dependents’] is to show the challenges and heartbreak of those Afghans who fought on behalf of the U.S. and had to flee their country, and of the

unintentional betrayals that occurred between them and their American colleagues who tried to help them after the Biden withdrawal.” —J. Malcolm Garcia

J. Malcolm Garcia is the author of *Most Dangerous, Most Unmerciful: Stories From Afghanistan* and six other books. He wrote “Dependents” while he volunteered with Afghan refugees in San Diego. Many of them had worked as translators for U.S. forces.

Such a Lovely Season

Marc Levy

Teeming, pouring, relentless rain all weekend long. The downpour rattling windows, thudding on roof tops, pouring from gutter spouts, flash flooding streets. Until at last, the storm subsided, the merciful scent of petrichor filling the languid air.

“Or something like that,” Steven muttered to himself. “Something like that.”

He’d spent the long indoor days reading, sleeping, reading. Occasionally Steven wrote down his thoughts. Finally, the dark skies cleared, he washed, dressed, donned his favorite cap, jauntily walked out the foyer, locked the door, headed briskly down Smithson, past the strip mall and Taco Bell, to Joe Crawford’s Convenience and Novelty.

“Morning, Joe.”

Looking up from his paper, Crawford said, “Hi there.” The beefy, middle-aged man pushed down his spectacles, appraised Steven. Like clockwork, always a book under his arm—math, science, history. The man certainly read a lot—and each day bought one ticket. Just one.

“The new scratch-off,” said Steven, pointing to his selection in the clear plastic case beside the register.

Crawford folded his newspaper, placed it aside, separated the blue and white ticket from its orderly stack, waited for Steven to hand him two dollars.

“Thanks, Joe.” And Steven slipped the fanciful ticket into his pocket.

A regular customer. He never made small talk, never looked back.

As though blessing a supplicant, Crawford said, “Thank you.” He pushed his spectacles to the bridge of his nose, continued reading.

The fresh air and sunlight further lifted Steven’s spirits. At Smithson and Broad he turned left, stepped over a knee-high fence, found the narrow dirt path preferred by locals, caught sight of the empty beach, the white-tipped waves, the far horizon.

Deserted? Wonderful! He raised his right hand, pointed skyward, and whooped loudly, the brief echo immediately swallowed by the surf’s million grains of tumbling sand, the screech of startled gulls.

More good news: at the far end of the shoreline the Nautilus Café had re-opened its seasonal doors. He plodded forward, the dry sand scrunching underfoot, not yet burning hot. Every few yards, as if searching for signs of life, he knelt to pick up bits of twinkling sea glass. Blue. Brown. Green. He inspected each colorful shard, pocketing a few, tossing the others aside. Spotting a horseshoe crab, anticipating the awful stench, he held his breath until the dead thing lay far behind him.

From thirty yards he saw the boy step to the café door. He was taller now, had grown a full beard; colorful tattoos decorated his right arm from bicep to wrist.

“Good to see you,” said Steven.

“You too,” said the boy. “The usual?”

He remembered. His voice was deeper, thoughtful, self-assured.

The café was deserted. Too early for tourists.

“Yes. The usual.”

Removing his cap, he sat at his favorite table. Searched in his pocket for the scratch-off ticket. Settling in, he savored the café’s enduring black and red tiled floor, its wainscoted walls, the black and white photograph of the very first opening day, Steven in the second row, third from the left, a closed smile turning up one side of his face.

“Here you are,” said the boy. “Coffee, black, no sugar.”

“Excellent,” said Steven. “Thank you much.”

A fresh cup, a quiet room, a beautiful day. What more could one ask?

With a coin, Steven methodically scratched the colorful ticket. Match two numbers, win prize shown! As if more than money were at stake, he scraped the gaudy surface raw.

Meanwhile, the boy set to work. One chair after another, he flipped each onto a table, ran the mop beneath and around it, worked his way throughout the room. By the time he’d finished, the floor had dried, and he reversed the process, lifting each chair from its tabletop, tumbling it over, setting it down. With a moist rag he wiped the table bright and clean. Table. Chair. Table. Chair. Mop and swirl and mop again. The boy’s unbroken regularity of action, his rhythmic balletic sway—the whole of it accomplished without worry—Steven wondered: what thoughts are going through his young mind? What ideas or desires does he have? A girl he hoped to meet? A book he wished to buy and read? Or a down payment on... Oh, who could tell? Anything was possible on a day like today!

He inhaled the earthy vapor of his coffee. Such good, fresh, strong coffee. After the first few sips his mind began to pulse, his fingers drumming the tabletop as he watched the boy at his chore. All labor, Steven understood, boiled down to nothing but plain, hard, suffering work. You arrive one day young and fresh and quick to learn. Eager to do what needs to be done. But when the first bullets sing, when the whistling shells fall, when young men, suddenly sheathed in red, twist and writhe, how can you not be shocked into infinite clarity? From that day onward you must concentrate. You must not look back or up or down or you will go crazy. Got that, boy? Do you read me loud and clear? Do you roger that? Do we have a solid copy? Now write this down, son: it is better to laugh loud and fucking clear than succumb to the muck of drudgery.

Steven leaned forward. Inhaled once more the aromatic vapor from his cup. Sipped and sipped the inky brew. Purposefully crossed his arms, stared at the blue and white ticket. In the eye of his mind, once more the lieutenant asked him to count the corpses.

“Can’t do it, sir,” said Steven. “They’re all mixed up.” And he saw, in that ghastly broken pile, the awfulness of combat. Its obscene dexterity. *For what?* he wondered. *What?*

The lieutenant glared at him. “You got a problem, sergeant? You can’t follow orders?”

Swiftly, the young officer grabbed a naked foot, yanked with all his might. Instantly the enemy corpse—a man or boy he couldn’t tell—seemed to jump from the tangled heap, to wildly dance mid-air, rigid arms and right leg ghastly flapping, like sails in the wind.

“From now on,” hollered the gleeful lieutenant, clenching the left leg, snapped clean from the hip, “I will grab one leg, sergeant. You will grab the other. On my count, we’ll make a wish!”

At that, the exultant officer, the grinning platoon, exploded with laughter, and Steven laughed loudest of all.

Footsteps.

“More coffee, sir?” Then, on second glance, “Is everything all right?”

Steven looked straight into the youthful gaze, the sheer cliff of its civility, which blinked expectantly back at him. If only he could erase that time. If only part of it. Or should he write it down? Why not? Every last stinking word. To be read aloud each year by one hundred ardent students to their assembled ardent teachers. Wouldn’t that be something! Toss the whole bloody mess—patrol, jungle, ambush, monsoon—from his psyche. Rid himself of its awfulness. But at his age? Wife deceased, children married, his life’s joys neatly framed on the living room mantle. Why stir up trouble?

In his best restrained voice, “I’m good,” he said, and folded his hands prayer-like over the crumpled ticket. “I’m good.”

“I walk three miles every evening. The story came to me on one of those walks. I wanted to convey that whatever you did in war will always be with you. Always.”
—Marc Levy

Marc Levy’s writing has appeared in *Queen’s Quarterly*, *Litro*, *CounterPunch*, *Stone Canoe*, *Cutthroat* and elsewhere. It is forthcoming in *Panorama*. His war photography has appeared in *Rattapallax*, *Fiction International* and the Netflix series *The Umbrella Academy*. He served in Vietnam in 1970. His website is [Medic in the Green Time](#).

Finding Billy

Joseph Carlton Porter

1968.

We were five friends before we were four. Before the war. Before they sent Billy to Nam and shipped him home in a box. We were eighteen and nineteen. What did we know? We didn't know young men could die. It was our first war. We were Billy's best friends; we were his pallbearers.

We gathered on August 23rd, one year to the day of Billy's death. We met at noon at Houlihan's grocery, the same store we hung out at as boys. We pooled our money, bought a case of Carling Black Label beer, and got in Comet's car. We were on our way to pay tribute to our fallen friend.

Comet, who had been drafted into the army, was home from Fort Drum for a month before shipping out to Nam. He had a week left before his reporting date and, though we didn't know it, he would board a plane the next morning for Fort Lewis, Washington. Never saying goodbye.

Henry, who had tired of community college, had already taken his draft physical. We didn't know it, but he would wake up the next morning, kiss his mother goodbye, and take the bus downtown to the Marine Corps recruiting office. Three weeks later he'd be on a plane bound for Parris Island, South Carolina. Surfer and I, still safe in the cocoon of our college deferments, were home for the summer. I had taken a half-day off from my job at a building-supply company, and Surfer, who worked at his dad's dry-cleaning business, told him he wouldn't be in.

It was a hot hazy day. Humid. The four six-packs, encased in a shallow box, were on the back seat between Surfer and Henry, and as soon as we got in the car, we passed the cans around and popped them open.

From the store, we first drove to the flower garden in Onondaga Park, where Surfer, looking around, snapped off a dozen long-stemmed-orange day lilies and yellow daffodils, and tied the stems together with a rubber band.

We didn't say much on the way to St. Catherine's Cemetery—we mostly drank, but Surfer asked Comet what he was going to do with his car while he was in Nam.

“You want it? I won't need it. I might never drive it again.”

Comet's eyes were on the road—he was smiling. I glanced at the guys in back seat, suspicious, not believing it, each of us thinking the same thing: *bullshit, he'd never let anyone use his wheels. Not his grandfather's '48 Ford.* We should have known something was up.

Comet drove through the cemetery's entrance on Randall Road. He turned right and followed the curving road around, before he pulled onto the grass and turned the engine off. We were on the hilltop by the woods that bordered the cemetery. By then, we were on our second beer, so we took a few minutes to finish it.

We got out and started into a field of monuments, each of us thinking we knew where Billy's grave was. Almost at once though, after walking maybe 100 feet through spaced rows of headstones, and

not seeing it, we stopped to get our bearings. *Wait a minute. Is this where we brought Billy? Are we in the right section?* I read the names on the stones around me—*Kane, Kelly, Bradley, Fanella, Hackett, McMabon*—but I didn't see Billy's last name: *Flynn*.

The stones were upright family monuments, two and three feet high, all set in rows, all spaced equal distances apart. Not one of us had been back to visit the grave since the day we buried Billy, so we didn't know what his family's gravestone looked like.

We spread out. I walked down the grassy hill to the next section, almost sure Billy was set on sloping, not flat ground. I was surprised, though, by the cemetery's size—it was immense: acres and acres of gravesites with thousands of monuments, stretching to the west and north, downhill into a green wooded valley for as far as I could see.

I kept moving, reading each headstone, all the time expecting one of us to shout, *Here he is! Over here!* But nobody did. After a while though, when I hadn't found the stone, I hiked back up the hill to where Surfer stood—he appeared lost.

“Where is it?” I said.

Surfer shrugged. Comet and Henry, who were across the section, came over to where we were standing. “Where is it?” Comet said to Surfer.

“It's got to be around here somewhere.” The night before, Surfer had claimed he knew where it was, but now it was obvious: he didn't remember any more than we did.

“I think it's farther down,” I said, “on the side of the hill. I remember the military color guard standing above us on the rise.” I could still picture the seven soldiers in their dress uniforms, firing off the 21-gun salute.

Henry asked, “How are we going to find him with so many headstones?”

“You said you knew where it was,” Comet said.

“I thought I did,” Surfer said. “Why don't you know? You were here that day.”

We were all surprised, mystified—how could we not remember where Billy was buried? It had only been one year. I felt stupid. How could I have forgotten where the gleaming black hearse and line of cars had parked? Where we had carried the casket? Where the black swarm of mourners had stood and wept beside the earthen mound and heap of funeral-home flowers?

We spread out and combed in different sections, thinking we could cover more ground that way. The paved access road looped around each section, and each section, a few acres in size, was marked by a forest-green sign with a gold identifying number.

I went back to 76, the section I'd been in. I continued where I left off, moving across the slope, trying to read each stone so I didn't miss Billy's name. I passed pink and gray granite headstones; I passed two black marble headstones; I passed stones with decorative garlands; I passed a statue of

the Madonna holding the baby Jesus. I kept stopping to look around, hoping to see a landmark, something to wake my memory.

I vividly recalled walking beside the casket down the center aisle in St. Paul's Church; and after Mass, carrying the casket down the stone steps and sliding it into the hearse. I recalled riding in the black limousine, no longer sad, but feeling incredibly proud of Billy and honored to be his friend.

I kept moving, reading the names, but I thought: there has to be a better way. What do other people do when they don't know where a loved one is buried?

Further down the hill, a car was parked beside the road, and nearby, a well-dressed older couple stood staring down at a stone flush with the grass. They didn't appear to be praying, so I went over to them. They turned to me with solemn faces.

"I'm sorry to bother you," I said. "How would I find a friend buried in this cemetery?"

The wife looked at her husband. The bow-tied man wore a tan summer suit, white shirt, and old-fashioned brown two-tone shoes. "Have you tried the office?" he said.

"No, where's that?"

He pointed downhill. "By the main entrance off Genesee Street."

"Thank you very much. I'm sorry about your loved one."

The woman said, "It's our son. He was about your age."

It was then that I looked down and read the epitaph. Pvt John Howard, died: December 1, 1951.

"Truman never should have relieved MacArthur," the man said.

I didn't know what to say to that but felt I should say something: "You shouldn't be sad. Your son gave his life so we would all be free."

Embarrassed by my phony-sounding words, I was sure I made it worse because the woman began weeping and the man put his arm around her. "Now, now, Greta."

I walked up the hill, saying an *Our Father* for their son. I would wait until we found Billy's grave before I said a prayer for him. Now in College, I rarely prayed or went to Mass. I was a lousy Catholic, but I couldn't escape my faith: even now, coming here and not finding Billy, reminded me of the Third Day.

I didn't see my friends at first; they were back behind the car, taking a break.

"There's an office," I said. "They'll know where Billy's buried."

No one moved. "Come on," I said. "We can drive there."

“Relax, man,” Comet said. “Have a beer. Billy’s not going anywhere.”

We laughed. Henry handed me a beer, and I popped it open. It was warm. I sat down on the grass. After searching for two hours, I was sweaty and my damp t-shirt stuck to my back. Though hot, the sun had disappeared behind a white hazy sky.

We didn’t see many people in the cemetery, but from time to time, a car would drive in, so we kept our beer cans down and out of sight.

“Isn’t it against the law to drink in a cemetery?” Henry said.

“I don’t hear anyone complaining,” Surfer said.

It was funny: Hank holding a can of beer, suggesting we shouldn’t be drinking.

“I would have brought a cooler with ice,” Comet said, “if I knew this was going to take all day.”

“It’s strange,” Henry said. “I could’ve sworn I knew where we put Billy. So where is he?”

“It’s like the *Twilight Zone*,” Surfer said. “Billy loved the *Twilight Zone*.”

“It’s like Easter Sunday,” I said. “What happened when the two Marys and the wife of Zebedee went to the tomb?”

Comet smiled. “Billy wasn’t there.”

“They couldn’t find Him,” I said. “Mary of Magdala ran and got Peter and John. But they couldn’t find him either.”

Surfer grinned. “Where’s the angel, Mick? There was an angel, guarding the tomb.”

They were mocking me, grinning like idiots.

“Take his beer away,” Comet said. “He’s had enough.” Everybody laughed.

Henry was buff with muscled arms; he sat cross legged, plucking at the grass and tossing the blades of grass into the air. He mimicked FDR’s famous radio speech but changed the date: “August 23, 1967. A date that will live in infamy.”

Shirtless, Surfer wore baggy white shorts and battered dusty sneakers, no socks. He refused to cut his long blond hair despite his father’s threats. He cracked his knuckles. “We should be up at Sandy Pond. That’s where Billy would want to be if he’d made it home.”

Comet, who had flunked out of college and lost his basketball scholarship, still dressed the part: *Syracuse Nats* t-shirt and Converse sneakers. He lit another cigarette; he was smoking more now that he was in the army. I was worried about him going to Vietnam. I hadn’t been worried about Billy; then, I couldn’t imagine Billy being killed. Even in a war. That’s how naïve I was. Afterwards, I felt guilty

for not serving. Now with Comet going, I felt guilty and worried. There I was returning for fall term at Hamilton in a week.

“Comet, do you know where you’ll be in Nam?” Henry asked.

He shook his head. “They don’t tell you jack shit. I’ll know when I get there.”

“What are you going to do about Jackie?” Surfer said.

“What about her?” Comet said.

“You’ve got a bun in the oven.”

“Who told you that?”

“Everybody knows.”

“Fuck you! Mind your own business.”

Comet got another beer from the back seat. I wondered what he was thinking. I didn’t want him to go. It made me think of the sendoff party we had for Billy at the Westwood Inn the night before he left. Everyone was there having a great time, getting crocked, singing Rolling Stones songs (Billy loved the Stones), never thinking we wouldn’t see him again.

Billy had joined me at the bar. It was just the two of us standing there, and he said, “I’m scared, Mickey.” Those three words sent a chill through me. They still did. I didn’t know what to say to him, so I joked, made some lame remark, “Well, I’m scared for the Vietcong.” He smiled back, weakly. I never would have believed it if he hadn’t said it. Billy scared? He was a tough kid. He lifted weights and played football. He was a smart student and could have gone to college, but he dreamed of jumping out of planes. After his high school graduation, he bought a Yamaha motorcycle and drove it to Green, New York, where he learned how to skydive. He idolized the Special Forces, so no one was surprised when he went Airborne and was assigned to the 101st. That’s what got me. That’s what I always think about when I think about Billy: he was scared, knew he might die, but he went anyway. That’s why we were there. That’s why we had to find him.

Drinking the warm beer in the heat made me drowsy. I gulped the last swig from the can and stood up. “Let’s go,” I said. “We won’t find Billy sitting on our asses.”

We got back in the car and drove down the hill to the cemetery’s office, but by the time we got there, it was after 3:00 PM, and the office was closed.

“Now what are we going to do?” Henry said.

We drove back up the hill and parked beside the woods. Comet and Surfer searched sections 82 and 83; Henry and I searched the lower sections 94 and 100. We moved across the hill: Henry read the names in his row, I read the names in mine.

“This is a nice place,” Henry said. “I wouldn’t mind being buried here. It looks like they cut the grass every week. It’s got shade trees. It’s quiet. I wouldn’t mind it.”

“Hank, what do you remember about Billy’s burial?”

“All of us crowded around. Billy’s sisters crying. Father Morrisette reading from his prayer book.”

“All I can remember is the 21-gun salute,” I said.

“We could spend a week here looking and never find him,” Henry said.

“We’ll find him,” I said. I couldn’t bear the thought of giving up. Yet after searching for another hour, discouraged, we trudged back up the hill to see if Comet and Surfer had any luck.

They weren’t even looking.

They were back behind the car, finishing off the beer, getting blitzed. When Henry reached into the backseat to get each of us a beer, only two cans were left. “Hey, who stole our beers?” he said, as if it wasn’t obvious. Surfer and Comet tried to keep straight faces, but they burst out laughing. They had polished off their six-packs and helped themselves to ours. “You fucking assholes,” Henry said. He handed me the last beer. “How are we going to drink a toast to Billy if the beer is gone?”

“We should have gone to see Mr. Flynn,” I said. “He’d have drawn us a map.”

Comet lifted his head, smiled. “Billy would laugh his ass off if he could see us.”

“He can see us,” I said.

“He’s looking down at us right now,” Surfer said. “Hey, Saint Peter, look at those fucking dopes down there. Getting plastered in St. Catherine’s. They don’t know what the fuck they’re doing. What a bunch of fuckups!”

We all laughed.

“Too bad there’s no heaven,” Comet said. “Good thing there’s no hell either. When you’re dead, you’re dead. That’s it. Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.”

“Then why does it feel like Billy’s still alive?” Henry said.

“Because he is,” I said. “What we’re looking for is only his grave marker.”

“If we can’t find it,” Henry said, “if there’s no stone, that’s proof he’s not dead.”

“You’re bombed, Hank,” Comet said.

“I don’t think we want to find it,” Surfer said. “That way we don’t have to believe he’s dead. That way we can believe he’s coming back.”

“I am the resurrection and the life. Whosoever believeth in me shall never die.”

“You’re so brainwashed, Mick,” Comet said. “Too bad Billy didn’t believe that.”

“Billy believed,” Henry said. “He was in his uniform at eleven o’clock Mass the Sunday before he left. He wouldn’t have gone to Mass if he hadn’t believed.”

“You guys are drunk and out of your fucking gourds,” Comet said. “Billy’s not coming back. So get over it.”

“You get over it!” Surfer yelled out. “You fucking asshole!”

Comet laughed. “Are you crying, Surf?”

Surfer wiped his wet cheeks. “It’s all fucked up! This world is so fucked up! What the fuck are we even doing over there?”

“You shouldn’t drink,” Comet told Surfer. “You don’t know how to drink.”

“Eat me, asshole,” Surfer slurred and slumped over on the grass.

I walked into the woods to take a leak and, when I came out, the wind had picked up. The sky had gone from gray to slate blue. Thunder sounded in the distance.

“It’s going to rain,” I said. “Come on. We’ve got to keep looking.”

“The first thing we’ve got to do is stop drinking,” Henry said. “How are we going to find Billy if we’re drunk?” He drank down what was left in his beer can and belched.

“We have to find him,” I said. “We can’t give up.”

“Nobody’s giving up,” Comet said and took his last swallow of beer.

We helped Surfer into the car to sleep it off. We searched further down the hill in section 86 where we hadn’t yet combed. It started sprinkling, then raining harder, then the sky cracked open with a flash of lightning and a driving rain.

“This is nuts!” Henry yelled. Laughing, we made a mad dash uphill for the car. We were soaked by the time we reached it, our clothes soggy.

Surfer sat up in the front seat. “Find him?”

“Hell no!” Comet said, getting in behind the steering wheel.

Hank and I squeezed into the backseat. The rain rattled the roof. It had been so humid and muggy nobody complained when we got drenched. We cracked the windows and let the cool air stream in; the rain seemed to quiet us, sober us. Before long it lessened to a patter, then stopped. Ten minutes

later the sun appeared. Everything glistened, sparkled in the sunlight: the car's chrome, the glassy headstones across the road, even the wet grass.

We got out. "Look up there!" I said. "A rainbow." I felt a surge of delight; I felt like a kid again. Revived, I was no longer hot or tired or drunk.

"It's a good sign," I said. "Come on. Let's just finish that one section—who knows? Billy might be there."

We walked back down to section 86 where we'd been. The four of us formed a line as we moved across the sloping field of headstones.

By six o'clock, the clouds had cleared and the sky was blue. We walked back up the hill: weary, worn-out, and disappointed that we would have to come back another day. We got in the car, and Comet drove out. We were quiet, sorry we hadn't found Billy.

At the cemetery's entrance, Comet stopped at the stop sign. At that moment, a beige Volkswagen Bug was turning in, and, by chance, looking out my window, I glimpsed the girl driving. Something clicked. I sat up and touched Comet's shoulder.

"Hey, wait," I said. I looked back. The Volkswagen had already driven in.

"What, asshole?" Comet said.

"We've got to go back," I said. "I know where he is."

"What?"

"Follow that VW Bug that just drove in."

"You've got to be shitting me!"

"Five more minutes," I said. "That's all it'll take."

Comet swung the car around and drove back into the cemetery.

"Turn left," I said.

"Who was it, Mick?" Henry said.

"Who'd you see?" Surfer said.

We followed the VW Bug as it drove down the hill and cut across the slope. Comet drove up behind the car and stopped. We watched the girl get out and walk down between the monuments, holding a small bouquet of flowers. She was wearing a tangerine-colored summer dress and white flats—she looked pretty.

"Who is it?" Henry asked.

“It’s Mags,” Comet said.

“Who?”

Her name was Mary Magglio, but everyone called her Mags. She had been a cheerleader and on the student council. She was going into her third year at U. of Mass.

“Oh, yeah,” Surfer said, finally recognizing our classmate from St. Paul’s Academy. Billy, who had a crush on Mags, had taken her to our senior prom.

“See where she’s standing?” I said. “Billy’s there.”

We got out of the car and walked down the grassy hill. Surfer had his wilted day lilies and daffodils. Mags turned and I waved; she smiled back.

We circled around the family’s granite monument to see his name: William A. Flynn, Jr. There, happy and relieved, we stared down in awe. Comet, the nonbeliever, was the first to fall to his knees, if not to pray, then to honor the life of a young man who had died for his country. We found him. We found our friend. We found Billy.

“‘Finding Billy’ is the first story in my short story collection *Home from War*. All the stories in the collection deal with war veterans and their loved ones, who’ve been impact by war in some significant way. It’s about the trauma and psychic residue veterans bring home with them as they move, hopefully, toward some form of enlightenment and peace of mind.” —Joseph Carlton Porter

Joseph Carlton Porter was born in Syracuse, New York, the son of a civil engineer and a registered nurse. He attended Catholic school in Syracuse. After graduating from John Carroll University, he enlisted in the army and served for three years. He is a Vietnam veteran. A former newspaper reporter and English adjunct, Porter holds an MFA from the University of Iowa.

Songbird

Yuhan Tang

The year I learnt to look back when I heard *Suizi*—those two crisp syllables coming out of someone's mouth, I was two. My response was always the same, a smile that showed the rows of my front teeth.

The year Grandma died, I became very quiet and withdrawn, finding it harder to smile. Sometimes, neighbors would peek through our windows to get a view of Dad; to see just how he talked to himself for hours at a time. Then they would realize that Dad was talking to me, repeatedly yelling my name, begging me to drink my milk, to eat the eggs, to go outside for a while.

The first time I talked to Wei Zhiyuan was just after Grandma passed away. He was the son of our old concierge, who had retired and brought him in from the countryside. Zhiyuan was not like his father at all. He never stood in the middle of the yard to yell: "Qiu Zhen's on the phone!" or "Qiu Zhen sent registered mail!" Zhiyuan never did any of that. He always knocked gently on our door, and as soon as I opened it, he would blush and say, "Your dad's on the telephone!"

Zhiyuan sat on his father's broken bench and read every day. Nothing could disturb him from his reading. When people walked by, he only lifted his eyes from the book a slight inch and could tell who had passed just by glancing at their feet. Sometimes when he saw a large group of feet clad in faux army boots, stomping into the gates of the Writers' Association, raking up dirt and dust, he would quickly lower his eyes. It was only when the yellow clouds had cleared that he would glance up to see their backs, the backs of those wearing fake military uniforms storming out, and the backs of those being dragged behind them.

Wei Zhiyuan also knew my pair of shoes, with the worn edges and tattered soles. Without having to look up, he said, "Suizi. The day your father got dragged away, you didn't collect any milk for your family."

I looked down at him dotingly, saw the half-moon of his forehead resting atop his eyes, fixated on the words, not on my face, and asked, "What's that book you're reading?"

He flashed me the front of his book.

I noticed that there was no cover, let alone a spine. His books were always without a title. I always thought books were supposed to be named, for as soon as they had their title, people could identify what they were: bourgeoisie or feudalist, anti-Party or Communist. Without a title, you meant nothing, and the people didn't know what to do with you.

"Look at this, Zhiyuan," I said to him, and watched him slowly lift his eyes from his book to my red checkered trousers. I watched him take in the colorful chilblains on my hands, the piece of rice porridge glistening on the chest of my coat, and finally my hair, which I had trimmed all by myself.

We were so close that I could read the words in his book. The sheer number of words made me nauseous, and the only words I saw were *evil, evil, evil, big, big, and granary*.

I sighed deeply. As it turned out, he also liked operas sung by Aunt Zhu.

Every time Aunt Zhu was dragged out, Zhiyuan would stand up respectfully and move to the side of his bench, as if offering his seat. He just stood there, watching her legs flail around while they tried to tug her away, not knowing who he ought to help. I understood his dilemma. Aunt Zhu had always been revered for her magnificence on the stage, and no one in our neighborhood had truly wanted to see her hurt, only her title. Just like no one had wanted to see my dad dragged away into the cowshed. The man they were dragging away was not “Lao Qiu” but Qiu Zhen—the one who wrote Zhu Yijin’s script.

The sky darkened, and Zhiyuan returned to his book. As usual, an old man came in with a rope over his shoulders, and a flatbed cart attached to that rope. There was always a lot of waste paper at our place, because writers from all over the province lived here. In the past, they wrote books and plays, but now they wrote confessions, self-criticisms, and denunciations, so a lot of paper ended up floating around. Young revolutionaries in their uniforms would also come by to paste slogans on our walls. Then, when another batch of teenagers arrived, the previous batch of big-character posters became the new waste paper; no matter how fresh the paste smelt, fresher paste would cover it up, and by the time the old man arrived, it would have become waste paper again. Our building used to be made of red bricks. Now, not a single red brick could be seen. When the wind blew, the whole building rattled; when it rained, ink dripped all over the walls.

If it weren’t for this old man, we would have drowned in all that white paper. Luckily for us, the old man had a passion for tearing the papers down, and every time he ripped at the sheets, the sound crisp and clear, he hummed pleasantly. He soon pulled a cart full of white paper out the gate, and made his way into the bamboo grove.

Aunt Zhu used to live behind the dead bamboo grove, and it was there that she cut off her long hair. She did it early so that no one would cut it off for her. Once, my father brought me to the Spring Festival Gala, and it was there that I saw Aunt Zhu. Her abundant hair was gathered at the back of her head, styled into a delicate honeycomb, and she had a cigarette in her hand, held it daintily, exactly how I imagined a famous actress would. When she smiled, she showed two long rows of white teeth, and when she talked, she flicked her water sleeves around lightly, as if about to throw it in someone’s face. Everyone used to look at her hypnotic sleeves and blink happily.

When she came up to us, she looked at me first and said mistily, “Lao Qiu, your daughter is so sweet! Oh, look at her pretty, round face...” Then she tossed one of her signature sleeves at father. Both of us were stunned by her beauty, her audacity, and in that moment, I knew we were thinking the same thing. That Aunt Zhu was like a nymph. She walked away with her water sleeves still fluttering. She walked as if there was no ground at all; as if she were gliding through on a boat.

The next time I saw Aunt Zhu, she was on a compact stage. There was no opera to be heard, yet a crowd still gathered before the show. The temporary stage set was tiny, and the critics had to take turns to go up.

“Why are you squeezing in?” snapped a young general, shoving me back.

Still, I kept pushing, parting through the crowd. I squeezed through the line of tall hats squatting beneath the stage, waiting for their turn to be slandered and doused in ink. It was hard to spot Aunt Zhu among all the downcast faces, the shaved heads beneath the flimsy paper hats.

The young general caught me and snatched me up by the back of my jacket. “Hey you! Stop causing trouble!”

It was then that I spotted Aunt Zhu. Her face was barely visible under the tall hat. She rested one inky hand on her chin, while the other hand was raised in the air, holding a cigarette.

“Screw you!” I shouted at the boy.

Aunt Zhu looked up and found my voice among the throngs of people. The young general yelled back, a look of menace spreading across his face, “Say that again!”

“Your momma’s a bitch!” I said, spitting in his face, then I looked back at Aunt Zhu triumphantly, letting her see just how much I had achieved.

Aunt Zhu sat dazed for a while, then suddenly started laughing. Covering her mouth with an ink-splotched hand, she laughed almost operatically. It was probably because of her hearty laugh that Aunt Zhu had to be criticized separately. Her tall hat was made taller than all the others, and an even heavier string of shoes were placed around her neck.

Aunt Zhu had an accident last night, according to her Guangdong nanny. It took a lot of effort for everyone to hear through that Guangdong accent and understand that Zhu Yijin “took poison.”

“What poison?” everyone asked.

“Sleeping pills!” cried the nanny, “One hundred of them!”

“Oh,” someone said.

“That would take a long time to eat, right?” another asked.

The door of Aunt Zhu’s house was sealed, and the nanny was forcibly released from service. Young revolutionaries came to their yard and told the nanny many times, “You’ve been liberated! You can go back to your hometown now!” The nanny just thanked them and said, “Then can you buy me a train ticket?”

It was six o’clock in the evening when I went to the hospital to see Aunt Zhu. The hospital was having dinner, and the sound of enamel basins echoed throughout the entire building. I didn’t know her bed number, so I searched floor by floor. A nurse touched my shoulder and asked who I was looking for. *What’s the illness?* She asked. *No illness*, I replied. *It was suicide*. The nurse quickly withdrew her hand and told me they didn’t have a suicide department in their hospital.

Later I found out that they did have a “suicide department.” All the beds stuffed in the corridors had little signs on them, and in the box of “cause” it read “suicide in fear of criminalization.” The patients had all been found halfway through suicide; some had botched their attempt, others grew afraid as they were dying, choosing instead to let the revolutionaries arrest them. Auntie Zhu had just filled her stomach with pills when the two young men sent to interrogate her arrived, and the two pill bottles were still rolling gently on the table as they grabbed her feet and hauled her away.

On the sixth floor, I saw many people eating in the corridors. Several of them were on crutches and had difficulty standing. I didn't know how these people with crutches could climb six floors, unless they were that desperate to see Aunt Zhu. I squeezed through the throng of people and saw a bed opposite the women's toilets, and on the bed was Aunt Zhu, stripped entirely of her clothes, with only a pearl necklace around her neck.

The nurse working on Aunt Zhu was not much older than me. She gave Aunt Zhu an injection, but there was no blood. She gave it another try, and still, no blood. The doctor coaxed her by saying, "Don't panic, take your time. Didn't you always practice on rubber in nursing school? Just treat her like she's the rubber."

Aunt Zhu had lost all control of her body by then, and obeyed whoever was manipulating her body. Her eyes open, staring into the cobwebs on the ceiling. No matter how the needle pierced her flesh, she didn't blink.

After the nurse and doctor finished their work, they covered Aunt Zhu's white body with a thin sheet. As if a curtain had been drawn, the onlookers shrank their necks, smacked their lips, and filed out slowly.

I barged into the nurse's duty room, where an old nurse was knitting.

"Hey!" I shouted, "Why don't you give people quilts?"

"Where did you come from, kid? Get out," she said, her lack of interest fiercer than anger.

"It's cold without a quilt! And why won't you give people clothes?"

The old nurse continued to stitch, "What clothes does she need? She's just a cheap Chinese cabbage. She won't find it cold, she doesn't feel shame!"

"Chinese cabbages also know how to be cold!" I screamed, "They also know what it's like to feel ashamed!"

The doctor came out at this moment and looked at us, his hands full of soap bubbles. He was washing them after he touched Aunt Zhu's skin, as if only large amounts of soap could get them clean. He smiled at me coyly and said, "Is she your mother?"

"She's your mother!" I fired back.

That finally annoyed them, so they threw me a quilt.

I wrapped Aunt Zhu tightly, then sat on the edge of her bed and dozed off. When I woke from my nap, I discovered the quilt had been pulled aside. Aunt Zhu was once again lying open and exposed in the net of rubber tubes.

I went home and told all this to Zhiyuan. He listened with his head bowed, and I could only see the bluish-white hair on the top of his head. The round swirl was so white that it seemed blue, and I couldn't help but want to reach out and touch it.

“Wei Zhiyuan, are you listening?”

He said nothing. So, I spoke up again, “They said Aunt Zhu might wake up in a few days. A young revolutionary said that once she wakes up, they'll lock her up with the others and she won't ever take sleeping pills again.”

He still ignored me. In fact, he'd never paid much attention to me, or anyone else. Someone mentioned before that in the early twilight before dawn, they could hear singing in the men's bathroom. The rumor was that it was some ghost of an opera singer. I wasn't scared of ghosts. So the next day, I barged in and saw that the opera singer was Zhiyuan. He was squatting on the latrine, singing so touchingly that his eyes were rimmed with red.

He must have liked Aunt Zhu's operas as much as I did. Once, he brought a stack of paper to my house to seek advice from my dad, saying that it was a play he had written for Aunt Zhu. After he left, Dad stuffed the pile of papers under his bed. All the manuscripts he owned were stuffed under his bed, and the new ones were stuffed in before the mice finished nibbling the old ones.

A week later, Zhiyuan came to knock again. I asked him if there were any calls for us, and he shook his head. “Registered mail?” Dad asked. But Zhiyuan only smiled and delivered his new manuscript into Dad's hands, saying, “This is another version, if you could look at it as well...”

Dad had no time for Zhiyuan or for reading, so he grabbed the paper and feigned looking through it, saying, “Oh... I'm seeing something wonderful! How about next week? I'll talk to you, alright?”

Zhiyuan still didn't leave. He asked what time.

“Anytime,” Dad replied, full of impatience.

Zhiyuan came again the following week. Hearing his “tack-tat-tat” knock on the door, Dad hurriedly put on my mother's dirty coal-handling gloves, and as soon as the door opened, he said, “Oh look, we're moving some coal cakes!...” When Zhiyuan remained silent, Dad said to him, “How about next week? I'm tired today.”

Zhiyuan came knocking on our door every week after that. Later, the Cultural Revolution also came and saved my dad.

Aunt Zhu had been in the hospital for three days now, with no sign of getting better. I brought in a small folding chair from home and set it down beside her bed. Everyone came to ogle at her body, and when they saw me sitting there, glaring back, some walked away. I seldom went to the bathroom, because every time I came back from the toilet, Aunt Zhu's bright body would be exposed again. I also tried not to sleep, except that was hard. Once I grew sleepy and saw an electrician come towards the bed. He saw my head drooping and my eyelids half-closed, so he pretended to relax his mouth and dropped his cigarette butt onto Aunt Zhu's quilt. As if a cigarette butt would set Aunt Zhu on

fire, he patted down her body and the edges of the quilt. But no matter how he shook his arms up and down, the quilt still wouldn't budge. At last, he simply grabbed the quilt and lifted it.

As soon as his eyes fell on Aunt Zhu, his hand froze. Aunt Zhu's beauty had long fled from her body. Her chest was shrinking and drying day by day, and her two water sleeve arms were starting to wrinkle. Aunt Zhu looked like a stuffed white butterfly, nailed here before she died, so that spectators could all watch her slowly fade away.

The electrician whipped around when he heard a noise from my side, and slowly backed away when he saw angry tears glistening on my face.

On New Year's Eve, my mother came to the hospital to take me back home.

"Your dad's been released from the cowshed for the New Year! You need to come back home." She was angry but was too afraid to raise her voice with all the people around.

I said that I couldn't come. I was guarding Aunt Zhu, and since there were so many people who couldn't keep their hands off her quilt, I had to be here watching over her.

Ma took in my dirty and stubborn face, and shook her head at me. "When Aunt Zhu gets better, and she's back to being famous on the stage, she'll never even remember you!"

I thought that when Aunt Zhu woke up, the first thing I would tell her was to not go back to that stage again.

When she saw that I didn't plan to leave, Ma seized me by the arm. Her fingers were cold, and the scent of beauty cream flowed from her, familiar and dear. When I looked back at Aunt Zhu, still lying miserably under the dirty quilt, I suddenly grabbed onto my mother's hand tightly—the only hand in the world that smelt like this cream; the only hand that felt clean and safe.

Dad was just another old farmer now. At dinner, he slurped down the sticky porridge Ma made, his neck bent so low that his chin scraped against the table. After guarding Aunt Zhu for five days, I became even quieter. No matter how Dad tried to talk to me, I didn't speak. I spooned the porridge into my mouth one bite at a time, wincing as it scalded my newly sprouted tooth. There was only one person I would be willing to talk to, but he was no longer sitting at his bench.

When I returned after New Year's Eve, I found Aunt Zhu's bed was empty. Her oxygen cylinder was still lying there, and the bunch of tubes that used to go in and out of her body were cast on the floor in a tangle.

I barged through the door of the nurse's duty room. This time it was a young nurse who was also knitting. I berated her with questions, asking where Aunt Zhu had gone.

Her eyes widened at first, then narrowed into slits. The look on her face told me everything: the hospital was short-staffed on New Year's Eve, and all the patients were made to go home. In the midst of all this, someone must have pulled out Aunt Zhu's oxygen tube, along with all the other tubes that kept her alive.

I walked back down the empty hallway to the stairs. There was no longer a gathering of people. Not a single audience. The show was over. No more Aunt Zhu. No more frail nudity to gawk at.

In the early hours of the morning, I set out to find Zhiyuan. His bench was still empty, so I treaded through the dead bamboo grove to knock on his door.

When he cracked open the door, I told him frantically that someone had killed Aunt Zhu. His gaze roamed around, resting on a spot in the distance. I felt it was odd that he didn't emanate the warmth of someone who had just been awakened. His face was completely sober, cheeks pale and lips white.

I told him it was freezing outside and that I wanted to be let in. He didn't budge. When I asked again, he told me to get the hell out and shut the door.

Dissatisfied with his response, I ran around to his back window, which he had covered from the inside with fresh newspapers. When I leaned in to examine the print, I discovered that they were dated as yesterday's. There was a sliver of light coming through the top where the newspaper did not cover, so I stood on tiptoes and squinted through the slit.

My eyes combed every corner of the room, and saw that Zhiyuan sat in the middle of his room, tearing books. Books were stacked in great piles around him, all coverless and bare, and he fed them slowly, page by page, into a small stove. I could only see him, yet I had a gnawing feeling that someone else was present.

That was when I saw his bed, and the string of shadowy pearls arranged neatly in its center. At the hospital, those pearls always nestled so sweetly, cuddling up to Aunt Zhu's flesh. I thought it must have been her favorite jewelry, for she donned them before taking her bottle of pills.

Zhiyuan never looked up or noticed me. He only kept stuffing his books into the stove, burning page after page. I watched him burn a few more, before making my way home. I walked back along the grove, listening to the dead bamboo leaves crunch beneath my feet. When I was almost out of the grove, I turned back.

I could no longer see Zhiyuan's house, since the untrimmed bamboos were taller than my eyes, but I saw gray paper ash flying out from the iron chimney. Some chunks were big, and some were small, but they all turned over and over in the windy sky, an ashy snowfall.

When Wei Zhiyuan resigned and went back to the countryside, I took up his place on the bench. Gradually, I also learned to recognize people by their feet as they passed by.

I was nineteen when I stopped reacting to the sound of 'Suizi.' I'd lost half my hearing trying to blast down the abandoned cowshed where they once tormented Dad. Like with Aunt Zhu's hair, I cut off my own so that no one else could. Now, Dad really does converse with himself. And when I think no one can hear me, I find myself a spot in the bamboo grove and sing Aunt Zhu's songs. I sing the parts that I can remember. I sing them loud. But the wind always carries them away.

“The fictional events and perspective of the young protagonist within this work were deeply influenced by the experiences of a former literature teacher of mine, shaped

by the overwhelming sense of compassion for people and for humanity I have observed in her, in spite of the challenges she has faced.” —Yuhan Tang

Yuhan Tang is an emerging writer and artist based in Sydney, Australia. She is fascinated by ambiguous narratives that allow one to enter a subjectivity, and suspend judgement. Her fiction has previously appeared in *Fterota Logia*, and is forthcoming in *TeenWritersProject*.

V I S U A L A R T S F E A T U R E

INTERVIEW WITH AMBER ZORA VISUAL ARTIST

How long would you say you've been creating art (in any medium, since you practice in many)?

I asked my parents for a camera in 2001, when I was in high school. They purchased a 35mm Minolta Maxxum 5 with a 28-80mm lens for my birthday. I took photographs of friends and what I felt was artsy. I still have this camera and brought it on my 2023 residency to the Arctic circle.

How did you end up joining the military? And how did you bring art with you?



After high school, I went to college for a year to study art education because I couldn't really imagine what other careers were out there for artists. I thought maybe one day I would be a K-12 art teacher. I grew up in a rural area; I did not have access to viewing contemporary art in a gallery or a real understanding about what jobs were available in the art field. I didn't know anyone who was an artist. It's interesting because now I actually contract with public

schools to teach watercolor courses.

I joined the military the summer after my first year of school because I was worried about student loan debt. But joining the military in 2005 put going to school on hold for a while; I deployed to Iraq in 2006-2007. I didn't make work explicitly about the military while in the service. I needed a pause between my service and creating work about it—time to process and reflect on what happened.

Before the military, I created work that other young art students often create: I drew copies of master's studies or pop culture references and took moody photos. While in the military, I would sketch in a journal whatever was around me, like my boots, a landscape, or a crumpled up water bottle. Sketching helped me feel a bit less lonely during deployment. Sketching was also an easy medium to take on the go. And I always had a camera on me, but I didn't consider these exercises artistic work. I was simply taking photos with friends who were also in the military or documenting us at our job. Later, some of these works would find their way into my thesis exhibition, [*entrenched*](#).

It wasn't until after my deployment that I knew I would only spend time on something I truly loved or cared about. I went back to school, and even though I floundered on what degree I wanted to pursue and switched colleges a few times, I ended up focusing on (and earning) a BA in studio art from the University of Alabama in Birmingham in 2012. None of this represented a direct path, of course, but I then decided I wanted to get an MFA to continue with fine art.



What did your 2006-2007 deployment cost in terms of your art and ability to create? What did it leave you with?

One of my high school friends died from an IED explosion, and the Global Warrior on Terror has left me in a state of perpetual ennui. Sure, my deployment may have given me some kind of global perspective that has shed light on issues I maybe wouldn't have approached as a civilian, but it's taken far more light away from my world.

I was 20 years old when I was deployed and had not really built an art practice yet, or style. There is not much to compare my art practice to, in terms of how my deployment disrupted my work. But my deployment did give me a perspective shift. After I came back and grounded myself, I knew I couldn't just do any kind of work; life is short and I wanted to spend the rest of the time I had on this earth doing something I could get behind. I wanted to push that practice as far as I could. So I went to undergrad and graduate school for art. If it wasn't for the GI Bill, I would not have considered going to grad school.

Plus, after becoming involved with other like-minded veteran artists, I realized that I wasn't alone in my thoughts about the military, and around peace and justice. My veteran art community has really helped me stay active in continuing to make work.

How *did* you find your veteran art community?

I took a few chances to find a veteran community. I heard about a papermaking class being offered by veterans a distance away from where I was living. I wanted to learn that craft, so I drove 5 hours away and got an Airbnb for a week to learn and meet people. To someone trying to find their veteran community, I would say, start locally, and if that community is not there, look at ways you can be connected nationally.

Do you create in multiple mediums simultaneously, or do you tend to focus on one at a time?

Currently, I've been working in monotype, photography, and watercolor. I work simultaneously in these three mediums.

Photography will always be my first love; film photography is magical. I remember learning darkroom photography and being totally in love with the process of seeing images emerge. In the *entrenched* series, I use film and digital images. Some images in this series are from disposable cameras that I had during training or deployment, some are from digital shoots (which were pretty limiting in the early days of digital), and some photographs were taken during grad school while responding to my stories and time in the service. I presented [those] images with audio stories as well.



I've been using monotype for the series [Welcome to Rocketown](#), about [the pyramid of North Dakota](#). Three of these pyramids were to be built in the U.S. but only one was built before the program dissolved. Monotype seemed appropriate. My great grandfather worked at the pyramid and painted the inside of missile sites in North Dakota. So this work and other works have been about my family's dependence on the military economy.

And, because so much is screen-based (photo editing, updating websites, even checking/writing emails) I got into watercolor to have an artistic medium that was a bit more tactile and something I could carry with me.

In your experience, what role does rural America's dependence on the military economy play in the United States' artistic history? And in women's history? I see the work in *entrenched* and *Shelterbelt* as a kind of visual response to this question, but I wondered what your words would be.

I would say that rural America has been left out of US artistic histories in general, as well as nonbinary people and women. Non-cis men are also left out of a lot of histories (in general, around the world) and most money doesn't make it to rural areas, where people are focused on the bread



and not the roses, if you are familiar with the [“Bread and Roses” slogan](#).

U.S. nationalism and militarism is delivered to [rural areas] through Hollywood and other media; it’s a huge industry that is sewn into our everyday lives that we honestly do not see until we do, then it’s everywhere. It’s humming right along at sporting events, holiday commercials, military-sponsored video games. The military is relying on these messages to recruit people from all walks of life, but especially rural

and poor areas. It’s a kind of feedback loop.

Veteran artists are generally pushing back against the status quo of the above described campaign.

The stories you recorded left me dumbstruck, particularly the final lines of a couple (“Trays” and “Stool”, for two examples). Are these meant to be connected to particular pieces in *entrenched*?

When I created *entrenched*, the intention was to provide audio stories in conjunction with the photographs and allow for slippage between the audio and the images—to let the viewer build connections on their own. (For instance, I imagine the viewer hearing one of the stories that involves a red car and connecting that story to a close up photograph of a dented red car.)

However, there are photographs that are not explained in the audio and audio stories with no related image. My hope is that the viewer understands that the stories and images contain poetic relationships and that the work is both revealing and withholding clues. The viewer is bringing their own interpretation to both the stories and photographs. I imagine the viewer on a journey with me.



For this particular project, I thought a lot about the target audience

member being a 20 year old woman in the military. My deployment was a pretty lonely experience and there were a lot of things I did not know how to navigate. There were only four women in my unit, and when we deployed, we were all lower enlisted, so there wasn't a female leader to help advocate for us and to let us know what was okay ("this is just what war is") and what was not okay.

Could you talk about the relationship between sexism within the military and beyond it? (This is a sort of nebulous question, I know; I'm thinking, in particular, of all the times I've been told lately that "the army is changing," as in *sexism is no longer a problem.*)

I'm skeptical of the notion that sexism has been fixed in the military because there is sexism in our culture. How would that even be possible? In any male-dominated field where machismo is the norm and rewarded, you are going to find more sexism. There are the same problems in the military that exist in civilian workplaces, but they tend to be magnified [in the military].



Is it possible that sexism in the military in some ways may be getting better? Maybe, but compared to what? Vanessa Guillén was murdered on Ft. Hood by another soldier in 2020. Before her murder, she expressed not feeling comfortable or safe on base, but nothing changed, and she is one of many who spoke up. This is a very real issue that still needs to be dealt with.

Almost every woman I've served with has experienced some kind of military sexual trauma or sexual harassment. My military experiences included inappropriate comments, jokes, attention and touch. That kind of dehumanization can whittle you down over time. I believe my gender also affected my promotions, and I had to work harder to prove that I was capable of doing my job. Everyone's experiences in the military are so different.

What do you do when your practice gets stuck or stalled?

After I completed *entrenched*, I felt a bit stuck with my photo practice. I had told all the "big" stories of my military journey, and I didn't know if I wanted to keep making work about the military.

That was about the time I started doing ink drawings about the Cold War and became interested in my role as an ammunition specialist. (Also side note: I realized my experiences in this world go beyond the 8 years I was in the military. [I didn't want] to be constantly looking to the past but looking forward as well, to a future in work that isn't so depressing or only about me. Curating and working on group projects is helpful to combat these moments of feeling that I really don't want to be the center of my work anymore.)

Can you tell us more about your Cold Coast series?

The Cold War work is what sent me to the Arctic circle for the [Cold Coast series](#). The Arctic was an area of interest during the Cold War because it was thought that, if the USSR was going to attack, they would go over the arctic circle. This is why the DEW line (Distant Early Warning system) is in Canada. Currently, the Arctic is a DEW system for climate change, and the U.S. military is the largest user of fossil fuels and energy in the US government.



The series is of two separate spaces: the Pyramid of North Dakota, and [Svalbard, Norway](#). I'm actually going back to the Arctic [in 2024]. I feel like I'm still at the beginning of the Cold Coast project. I started taking images at the Pyramid because my great grandfather worked there as a civilian; he painted the inside of missile silos in North Dakota as a general laborer and he was really proud to have the job. The more I looked into the Pyramid, the more interested I became in the military's impact on the town and neighboring farms from an economic and environmental standpoint.



The town was excited to have this new industry that would bring in jobs and opportunity. From my perspective, though, the military came in, used it up, and left. The facility was not open very long. Some people say it was only fully operational for a day, some say a few months, some people look at the building and development of the cluster of facilities around Langdon as a part of the bigger project. There is a [whole groundwater incident](#) I won't go into, but

the Department of Health had to step in.

When I went to Svalbard, I was thinking about the Pyramid, the DEW Line, and watching the Arctic sky—how these secluded areas that one would not necessarily associate with war are still touched by militarism. Svalbard is a demilitarized zone, but during WWII, Nazis had weather stations there. This also led me to questions around demilitarized land: is land inherently militarized if it is not deemed demilitarized?

It wasn't until I was in the Arctic that I started to think about how the Arctic itself is functioning as a DEW system for climate change, as it was a warning system during the Cold War. When you are in such a remote place thinking about an apocalypse, you can kind of imagine the apocalypse has already happened. And to be in communion with glaciers, I would sway between the utter sadness of how humans are allowing this to happen to the planet, how the U.S. military is this huge contributor to climate change, and my smallness in front of such old ice and the landscape. How can the Arctic be so brutal, beautiful, and fragile at the same time? I'm not sure if I can sum the feeling up about how the massive landscape has a psychological effect; [you] walk for miles and miles and seem to not move at all. And that the brutality of the place, like most of nature, feels somewhat impersonal.



There's a point in your initial responses when you touch on the idea of not wanting to be the center of your art anymore. How does one maneuver through/around/away from her art?

My art will always be about my experiences in this world and the people around me. What are we if not a mix of all the information we are constantly taking in?

After my thesis exhibition, which included military photos, civilian photos, and self portraits, alongside my audio stories, I thought, "Well that's it, those are all the best stories and the best photographs. Now what do I make work about?" and I also thought, "Do I have to make work about myself or the military forever?"

It's important to remember that we all contain multitudes and have interests outside of ourselves. I get a lot of ideas about new work to create from reading nonfiction and looking at the work of political artists and veteran artists from the past and present.

What *are* you reading?

The last couple years I've read books that are part of the anti-war canon, like Kurt Vonnegut and Tim O'Brien—the common titles that I somehow missed in high school. Right now I'm reading a George Saunders book, *Lincoln in the Bardo*. I also love Rebecca Solnit's work, and science fiction. When I'm reading for leisure, I'm attracted to literature that poses complex questions about the world we live in but also leaves room for some suspension from reality and humor.

I read books and catalogs as a part of my studio practice as well. Some of the books include artists' responses to the war, like *Kill for Peace* by Matthew Israel, *A Different War* by Lucy Lippard and the MoMA PS1 *Theater of Operations* catalog.

You also mention being comfortable with the descriptor of “veteran artist” but unsure about seeing your work limited to military-connected projects and exhibitions. We’ve noticed this limitation too, especially as it affects veteran artists; they are often siloed within the wider artistic community as an isolated collective the general public can choose (or choose not) to engage. I wondered if you could talk more about that.

Knowing an artist is a veteran when looking at their work allows the audience to locate and contextualize the artist and their experiences historically. In that sense, the label of being a veteran artist is pertinent, particularly if the artist is making work about global conflict.



From my experience, however, sometimes audience members and media become more interested in the veteran artist's narrative and personal story than the themes within the work presented, and in that case, the veteran title can be distracting. You can imagine, as an artist, if you want to have a discussion about your work [beyond military service] and the conversation keeps turning back toward that singular identity, themes you are not presenting and parts of yourself you didn't plan on sharing, that it could become frustrating.

Also, veteran artists are often asked to talk about their healing publicly, which I think is inappropriate. Veterans can provide perspectives that need to be shared with the public to gain understanding about wars and US conflict; we've seen this activism and truth telling play out in the Winter Soldier Investigation of 1971 with Vietnam veterans sharing their experiences and the Winter

Soldier: Iraq & Afghanistan in 2008. But veterans tend to be [seen only] within the healing arts—and I don't want to knock that because it's important for veterans to get what they need—but when you look at an artist as a person to be studied—and their practice as a healing journey—you tend to lose focus on the fact that they are making artwork at all.

Within the veteran art field there are the healing arts, the MFA artists, the self-taught who have a serious practice, the political, the non-political, etc. And within these categories, the works are not doing the same thing. I keep seeing veterans thrown into a show together because they share the single experience of being a veteran. I think this is lazy curation, and it silos or typecasts artists that could occupy other arenas. I would urge curators to think about the goals of their



veteran exhibition and the other ways artists are tied together. (I'm okay with being called a "veteran artist", but am I okay with only being in veteran exhibitions? It prompts the question: do people connect with my work, or are they including me to complete a grant that "serves veterans"?)

Veterans are also not the only ones that experience war. Combatants and civilians on the ground have the most direct bodily experiences with war, but military family members also experience the pain of not having their loved ones around and the possibility of them never returning. War is not a singular experience.

We've read a couple bios/articles online that feature you and your work; from that, we know that you've taught throughout the pandemic. Are you currently teaching, and if so, where?

During the pandemic, I taught a few one-off classes online through [Frontline Paper](#), [Warrior Writers](#) and the [Wisconsin Veteran Museum](#). I work for the [DEMIL Art Fund](#) and teach through the [South Dakota Art Councils Artists in Schools & Communities](#) program. These are generally one- or two-week gigs teaching in public schools, after school programs, or community centers. I've taken on contracts from nonprofits to curate exhibitions or help with programming since leaving full time salary work. And the [Surviving the Long Wars program in Chicago](#) was a huge event/exhibition/program.

What are you working on now, and what do you have planned?

I'm still working on the photo series [Shelterbelt](#). I feel like it might be Part II to the [entrenched](#) series. I was in North Dakota reading a family history document that my grandmother had written out, and



there was a lot within this account about my maternal history and what women in my family endured to either keep their independence & freedom...and if [those] were not available to them, how they kept their families together the best they could or stole moments for themselves. (It also wasn't lost on me that, as I was reading this document, several of my female friends were making really tough decisions for themselves and their families around safety and security.)

that my family is from is incredibly rural and isolating, so many of them had to look inward for solutions to problems. Some moments included my grandmother patching holes in the walls with ripped up sheets and wheat paste, swapping homes with another family to get away from an abusive second husband, and one surprising bit (because my family is so religious) is my great grandmother having friends over to read their cups/futures.

The area in North Dakota

At the end of August 2023, I went to Frontline Paper in New Jersey to do a week-long printmaking residency and to expand on my *Welcome to Rocketown* series. And I'm doing work that addresses women, the military, [the question] 'what is life after military service when you are a woman?', and the quietness of returning home & creating a home.



For now, I'm at [Monson Arts in Maine](#), working on images around the Cold War, the Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) strategy, and moments that feel a bit cataclysmic. I suppose this work is kind of like what I was talking about when I mentioned not making work specifically about myself. It's informed by my experiences as an ammunition specialist and the questions I have, like how many bombs are enough? How much military is the right amount?

I've been thinking about [this mushroom cloud cake](#) and have been revisiting the image a lot. It's a

