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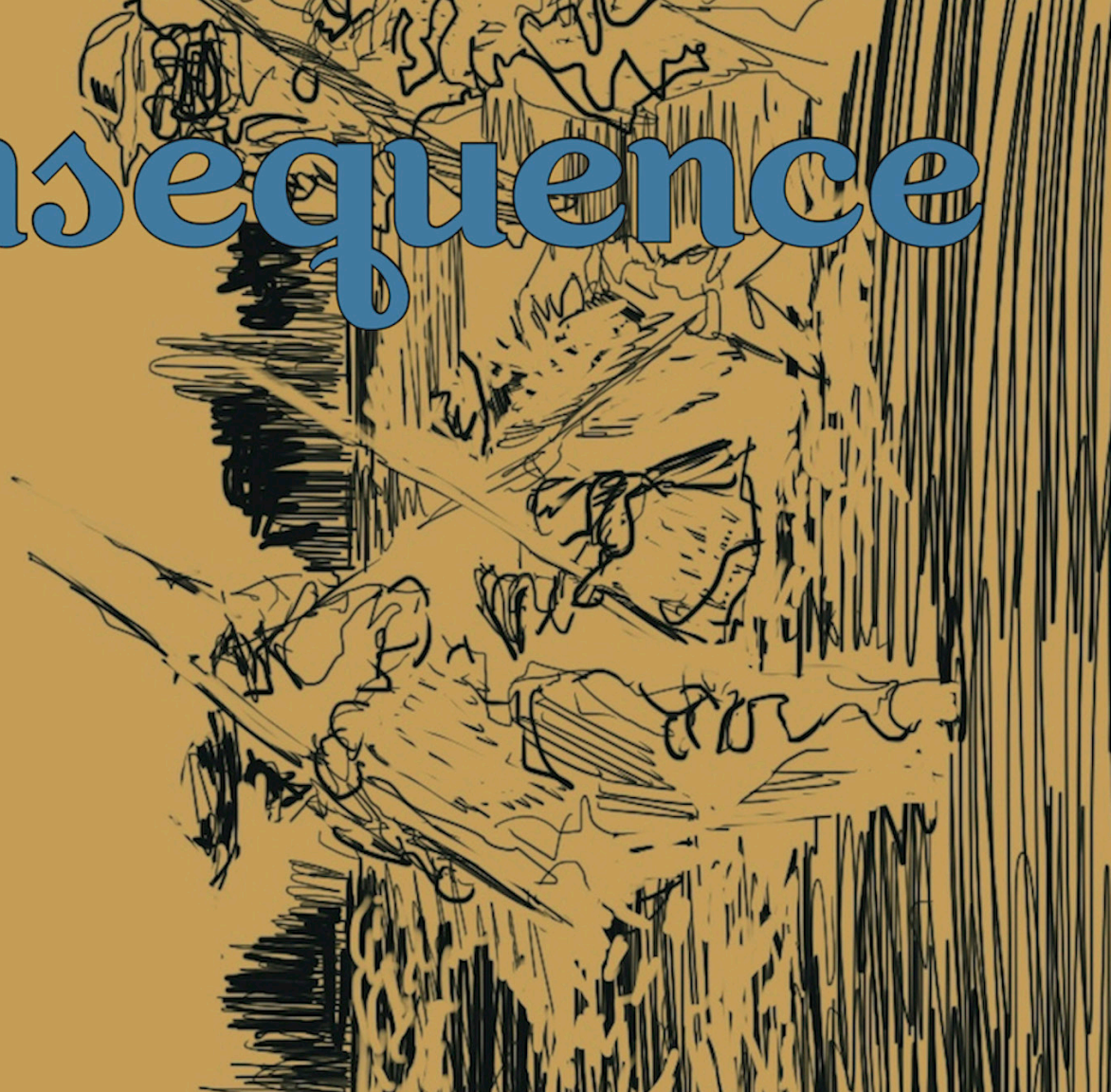

Consequence

A literary journal addressing the
human consequences, experiences,
and realities of war and geopolitical violence

Spring 2025

Volume 17.1

Founded by George Kovach

Friends of Consequence

(January 1, 2024 - December 31, 2024)

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Consequence

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info@consequenceforum.org | © 2025 *Consequence* ISSN 2151-0725

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Letter from the Editors

Dear Readers,

As the wars in Ukraine, the Middle East, Myanmar, Sudan, and a half dozen other places become further snarled and entrenched, one can feel like there's nothing they can do to affect any difference. These conflicts are simply too massive.

While this perspective can be true, we found that as we edited this issue, a theme emerged reminding us how distorted it can be. The theme was this: affecting a difference when it comes to the realities of war doesn't only have to happen on a global scale—it can and absolutely should include the more local ones. So many pieces in this volume convey how taking action within your city, neighborhood, or family can have a meaningful and lasting impact on those involved in war or geopolitical violence.

We see this in "A Trip to Kosovo" where a doctor returns to the war-torn country to navigate its broken bureaucracy in hopes of getting his nephew immediate cancer treatment (a piece that pointedly ends with: *If the world can be saved, it will be by small acts of kindness*). It appears in "Withdrawal" with the narrator always answering his phone in case it's a fellow soldier or a refugee in dire need. It's there in "The Lucky Ones" as a director for an adoption agency in Korea reveals to women the tricks necessary to help their babies find safe homes.

Maybe the most conspicuous example of this theme, though, is in the Translations Feature, which consists of works written in Arabic and centering on the Palestinian experience. Translations Editors Parisa Saranj and Fathima M. frame all ten pieces of the feature by stating, *What else can we do but bear witness to the pain of our fellow human beings? Literature has been the first recordkeeper of what humans are capable of doing to and for each other.*

We couldn't agree more. Through literature or art concerned with conflict, any one of us can bear witness to the war-related experiences and realities of others. By doing so, we give ourselves the chance to engage with consequences that may be unknown to us and thus develop a more nuanced understanding of them. After all, affecting difference doesn't only have to be an external act. It can and absolutely should be an internal one too.

Sincerely,
The Editors

Michael Lauchlan

IMAGINE HEARING US

along with our machines, of course,
one chewing a mountain in West Virginia,
a million rolling past on I-70,

and bombs leveling towns at fairly
regular intervals while gunfire
pops in most unlikely places.

In the clouds, do the whole notes
of whales blend with roars

from a Barcelona stadium? Think
of a concert in Central Park, soloists
climbing beyond trees and offices.

Even a weakened voice: a young man
getting a diagnosis, finds breath
and tries to thank a nurse.

Too often unquiet, I've sent out
syllables suited to a swamp's

loud chorus. When we're quite
gone, will the earth offer up
its storms, earthquakes, and volcanoes

along with the cries of elephants?
Perhaps the melody will linger while

a brilliant traveler hovers to press
an ear against the stratosphere,
imagining a vast, absent harmony.

Evel Economakis

Nonfiction

WHAT AN AIRPORT HAS TO SAY

Gazing at the stream of humanity passing before my luggage-wrapping machine at Athens International Airport, I remind myself how lucky I was to land the job. It only pays minimum wage, about seven hundred euros a month, but I can't afford to lose it. It helped, of course, that I showed up at the interview with an exaggerated spring in my step and my motorcycle helmet on my elbow.

"You're sixty-three," the company's head of personnel said, looking me over. "We're not ageists, but the work's physically demanding, and you'll be lifting heavy bags."

"I'm as fit as a horse," I told him, and lied about playing football three times a week with my eighteen-year-old son and his friends. The last time I did that was five years ago.

Some days are busier than others, but I break a sweat at least once a shift. This happens when I've wrapped more than four bags in a row without a breather. My shirt, a beige, short-sleeved Polo with the company's logo on it, turns dark gray. At first, I was ashamed to be dripping sweat onto the floor in front of the customers. It wasn't long, though, before I realized that the picture of someone my age sweating while performing physical work correlates decently with tips. I stopped being so self-conscious of my sudor.

"Why would anyone wrap their bags?" a man says in a Scouse accent to the woman he's walking past with.

"Your guess is as good as mine," she replies in the same Merseyside English, shaking her head.

I've got no clue either. I've all but mastered the skill of operating the wrapping machine, but I still don't understand the popularity of the commodity I produce. This made me feel like an imposter, until I discovered that none of my workmates knew either. Petros, a lanky twenty-year-old introvert who plays chess games on his phone when there's a break in wrapping, thinks that most people who have their bags wrapped in nylon are fools who enjoy being separated from their money. He says there are

only two legitimate reasons for wrapping your luggage. The first is if your bag is about to split open or fall apart, and the second is when your destination isn't safe. A wrapped bag won't stop a determined thief from opening it, but it will make their project a little more challenging.

A woman in a Burberry scarf parks her luggage trolley by the wrapping post's coin-operated bag scale. Tossing me an impatient look, she indicates her large Samsonite with a flip of the chin, and says to me in Greek, "Put it on the scale."

"Do it yourself, madam," I say in the politest tone I can muster. "I'm not your servant."

The lady blushes. "I'm sorry, Sir. I'm having a stressful day."

"Don't worry about it," I say. "I understand."

The bag scale is a fountainhead of misunderstanding and embarrassment. It costs one euro to operate and only works for a few seconds, so you can't weigh more than one bag at a time. A can of Coke costs as much at a kiosk. I don't know how many airports around the world have pay-to-weigh scales. Never mind that there's a free airport scale twenty yards away, by the entrance to the boarding gates. Expecting the scale to be free, people place their bags on it and are confused when nothing happens. I always look away or pretend to be studying my phone when they notice the little sign on it that says it costs money to use.

"This is capitalism," I once joked to a group of passengers from Kazakhstan who asked me about the scale. "Over there," I said, and pointed down the terminal toward the free scale: "That's communism." They all cracked up.

I've never understood why some travelers want to wrap suitcases that already have a special cover with openings for the handles and wheels. They're spending money to protect the cover that protects their bags. This kind of reasoning can lead to an infinite repetition of foolishness. Why not have the bags wrapped twice in nylon, to protect the first wrap? Or three times, to preserve the integrity of the first two?

Another thing that flies over my head is why passengers with designer bags would have them wrapped in nylon in the first place. And yet they do. Sure, there's less chance they'll be scratched, scraped, or soiled. But didn't they buy the expensive

bags as status symbols to be shown off? Wrapped bags are as recognizable as a Ferrari under a tarp.

They say that in our lives most of us exchange a word or two with about eighty thousand people. When you work at a large airport like Athens International, the figure is closer to eight million. People stop and ask me questions all the time. If I had ten cents for each time I told someone where the bathroom, VAT refund office, or check-in counter is, I'd be rich.

I don't know what it is about the airport, but children prance around happily, and dogs aren't afraid of the expansive marble floor. For a dog, this is no visit to the vet. I've noticed that most of my customers visibly relax, smile, and engage in carefree conversation while I wrap their bags. I feel like a chef at a teppanyaki restaurant sometimes. The briskly rotating machine, the stepdance I do around the bag as I press the levers for acceleration, deceleration, and vertical movement, my use of scissors to cut out the handles and wheels—this can all seem like a performance.

"How much does it cost to wrap my bag?" a svelte, chestnut-haired woman asks me.

"It's fourteen euros with tracking and insurance, and ten euros without," I say.

"Okay, fourteen," she says.

"Where are you flying?" I ask her, lifting her leather-and-suede Louis Vuitton onto the machine's platform.

"Oslo," she says. A beat later, she adds, "It always rains when I come home."

"Do you carry a cloud around with you?" I joke.

She laughs and I get to work. Wrapping a bag against the rain seems an intuitive reason to do so, I suppose. But I'm still mystified.

I was surprised when I cottoned on that the people who wrap their bags the most are unskilled migrant laborers from Pakistan and Bangladesh. They tell me in pidgin Greek that their bags aren't safe at Karachi, Islamabad, or Lahore international airports. Unseen hands swipe things from them. Their suitcases are always enormous and made of canvas so they can take full advantage of the thirty-two-kilo limit and stuff them with gifts for their relatives and friends back home. When the first Desi

customer has their bag wrapped, they all line up at my post to do the same. They've got their own style and always say something like, "Friend, make sure you wrap it extra well." If I'm in a good mood and want a laugh, I might say, "Sorry, man, but I only wrap terribly." Usually, I just nod and say, "Yes, of course."

Passengers on flights to South Africa are also regular customers. A woman speaking a blend of English and Afrikaans told me that the last time she flew into Johannesburg, someone opened her suitcase before it reached the baggage claim area and stole her bra, of all things. She described the airport as a "free supermarket."

People sometimes ask to borrow Scotch tape so they can patch up cracks, tears, and holes in their luggage. They often say thanks with a euro or two. I try to keep an extra roll of tape on hand.

On a few occasions, I've run into former students of mine. They're always amazed to see me working at the airport. "Sir, what are you doing here? What happened?" I tell them that I lost my job during the pandemic and couldn't find work teaching IB history at another high school. They shake their heads and wish me luck.

"Three million euros!" calls out Kostas, one of the airport's four regular lottery vendors, making his rounds. "Who wants three million euros? All numbers are lucky, but today is the eighth of the month. That's a sign! Don't forget that number eight is a diamond of a number. We're all going to buy lottery tickets today! Drawing tomorrow!"

Two men in their mid-thirties ask me in decent English how much the wrapping costs. I recognize the Russian accent and ask them how they can travel in Greece, a European Union country. They tell me they both have Cypriot passports. One of them offers his two cents on Vladimir Putin and his war in Ukraine. He calls him a thief, a gangster, a psychopath, and a cold-blooded murderer. He says he started the war to prop up his failing ratings and distract the Russian people from a tanking economy. He believes Putin destroyed Russia's future by pillaging the state's coffers, appropriating resources for himself and his cronies, allowing industry to rot, and transforming the country into a "gigantic gas station," as he put it. I won't forget his parting phrase: "If communism for Lenin was electrification

plus soviets, Putinism is two pipelines—one for oil, one for natural gas—and the mental and moral debilitation of the entire country."

All my workmates rue the absence of the Russians, mostly because they tip well. Americans and Canadians are large with their tips too, but they rarely wrap their bags. I thought the reason was that North Americans are more environmentally conscious than others, but a more plausible explanation for their low bag-wrapping rates is that airport security in the United States and Canada is quite rigorous. Travelers with wrapped bags are almost always instructed to remove the nylon and open them for inspection.

The high-pitched bark of a small dog fills the terminal. It's a Yorkshire terrier, I see. The stupid thing won't stop. It ruins Procol Harum's "A Whiter Shade of Pale" playing on the PA system, annoying me. The young man holding the leash—I guess he's an Australian or a New Zealander—keeps telling it to be quiet, with no result. When the toy dog reaches my post, I frown and shake my finger at it. "I'll wrap you if you don't shut up!" I warn it. The animal completely ignores me, but its human friend laughs. Some people don't take kindly to jokes, of course. The other day, a woman from Belgium gave me a death stare for offering to wrap her poodle for free.

A good day passes quickly with no mishaps. A good day is a boring day. Working too fast with the scissors, I once cut a small slice (*feta*, in Greek) off my right index finger. Hiding the painful event from the customer, who didn't notice, I squeezed my finger into my clenched fist and managed to stop the bleeding. Then, fumbling with the scissors in my left hand, I completed the job.

You never know what a shift will bring. The strangest thing I've wrapped in the ten months I've been doing this work is a large burlap sack that three African women rolled up on a trolley. The sack contained dozens of dark-grey, rock-hard dried fish with ghoulish faces.

Unpleasant interactions with cretinous or crazy individuals don't happen often, thank goodness. A woman once tried to snatch the scissors from my hand while I was cutting out her suitcase's side handle. I was doing it all wrong, she insisted, and kept reaching aggressively for them. Seeing red, I put the

scissors in my back pocket, yanked her bag off the stand, and told her to take a hike. Probably fearing I'd call security, and seeing an opportunity not to pay for work that was 90 percent finished, she grabbed her bag and left in nothing flat.

A group of Hasidic Jews ankle past with their black coats, black fedoras, and white tzitzit strings hanging out of their shirts. A few minutes later, a gaggle of Arabs, probably from Kuwait or Qatar, walk by. Ironically, the El Al and Israir check-in counters are right next to the ones for Qatar, Emirates, and EgyptAir. Somewhat counterintuitively, since October 7, 2023, there have been absolutely no unpleasant incidents between Israeli or diaspora Jewish passengers on the one hand, and Arab or Muslim passengers on the other. The rare rowdy drunk excepted, everyone is on their best behavior.

Looking again at the passengers lining up to check in for the 9:55 a.m. flight to Tel Aviv and those next to them doing the same for the 10 a.m. flight to Cairo, I think to myself that most people around the world aren't galvanized either way by what is happening in the Middle East, or Eastern Europe for that matter. None of the airport's employees have said anything to me about the wars in Israel and Ukraine—other than to rue their existence. Inflation is rampant and the price of everything has gone up. They know that nothing good will follow if these conflicts balloon into regional wars and send the price of oil shooting above $150 a barrel. Those who do take sides tend to belong to the establishment and to the political right and left. But the "left" nowadays is a house no longer inhabited by its traditional core, the working class. Much of the left today is as much a part of the system as the right. Everyone knows this in Greece. Just ask a working person what they think of the political parties and trade unions.

I think to myself that the worst calamities visit simple folk during periods of enforced national unity in time of war. Along with people who side with Ukraine against Vladimir Putin's autocratic and complex-ridden Russia, those who support the idea of statehood for Palestine are drawn to the cause as one of "national liberation." They forget that the bourgeois revolutions ended in the mid-nineteenth century. Although some new nations did emerge in the twentieth century, their significance was no

longer a struggle against a pre-capitalist mode of production. Every "national liberation" movement since the early 1920s has been harsh on all autonomous democratic groups. Moreover, "liberation from imperialism" has always meant subjugation to the imperialism of another superpower. In today's world, that's the United States on the one hand, and China, Russia, and Iran on the other.

Watching the steady flow of people passing in front of my post, it occurs to me that every airport is the center of the world. Athens International certainly feels this way. Nations, I muse, aren't born "good" or "bad," "brave" or "cowardly." Times change, and we change with time. Any talk of "collective responsibility," any attempt to pigeonhole an entire people, community, or nation, is misplaced, misleading, and wrong. What was the guilt of a German worker in the munitions factories of Adolph Hitler's Third Reich? They were compelled to work long hours for little pay, and this was the only way they could support their family. How can we speak of collective responsibility when the German people feared repression from a cruel and all-powerful state that controlled them in the sphere of production and organized their leisure time? By the same token, how can we blame all Israelis, Palestinians, Russians, and Ukrainians for the horrible things happening today?

The thought jolts me like a revelation: The ancient Greeks would not have considered any modern nation to be democratic. The existence in ancient Athens of the assembly of the collective *polis*, an assembly that had real power, led to a major decrease in the alienation and atomization of the individual from society. The Greeks didn't say, "Athens and Sparta have reached an agreement." Instead, they said, "The Athenians and the Spartans have reached an agreement." The collective *polis* itself decided its own fate. Those who participated in this process thus had some control over their lives. Their successes, but also their mistakes and errors, were theirs and theirs alone. Only in such a situation can we speak of collective responsibility. This isn't possible in our modern world, with its political parties and professional politicians and labor leaders.

One day the world will be a better place—like an airport. This is the future, not the foxholes and trenches of Ukraine and the bombed-out ruins of Gaza. But it will only become a reality after a long, hard battle for real democracy and the ouster of corrupt monster regimes everywhere. I somehow doubt, though, that the airports of the future will offer bag-wrapping services.

Alice Stephens

Fiction

THE LUCKY ONES

She is late.

My staff know to ask the women to come on Wednesdays when I am certain to be here, and Caseworker Kim assured me that she would be here today. But so far, only one camptown woman has made the trip—and with a five-year-old, no less. Why these women hold on to their mixed-blood children so long is beyond me; they are only making their children less adoptable, as white people, quite rightly so, prefer babies. Once children learn to walk and talk, their minds have been molded, some might say contaminated, and they are harder to parent than a tabula rasa infant. The five-year-old will be almost impossible to place. But what can we do? At Korea Social Service, Inc.—or KSS, as the foreigners call it—we do not turn any child away. However, these children cost money to feed and clothe, and we must rely upon the newborns to help keep us all alive.

Thus, here I am, the afternoon monsoon rain already come and gone, waiting for this woman and her baby even as my driver waits to take me to my new property up in the hills, where the August heat is not so oppressive. The paperwork that I am attending to—so much paperwork in this business!—makes me drowsy, the cloying heat, the languorous clang of the cicadas, and the soft sound of crying babies drifting down from the second-story nursery almost lulling me to sleep.

Maybe she will not come. It would not be the first time a camptown woman has disappointed me. Women are foolish and think only they know what is best for their child, that love is all one needs. Some are lonely and crave the companionship, while others hold the child hostage to a father who will never pay the ransom. In my years working with them, not one man has ever returned to claim his child.

Of course, some of these women are just slatternly and think nothing of breaking an appointment: It is in their nature. Maybe they have an opportunity to make some money they could not pass up. Or they have a few too many drinks and lose their will to make their lives better. Or they are lazy and cannot be bothered to make the trip.

They do not know how fortunate they are to have me.

I hear Caseworker Kim's peculiar, slapping gait approaching down the hall, and call out to him. He enters my office, blotting at his sweaty temples with a rumpled handkerchief.

"Yes, Director Han?" He has the reedy voice and plump face of a schoolboy, not the best countenance for gaining respect from other men, but with an eager guilelessness that comforts and soothes women, making them more inclined to trust him. He puts the handkerchief into the jacket pocket of his secondhand suit, two sizes too big for him.

"Have you checked to see that the mother isn't being made to wait in the reception area?" Some of the House Mothers feel it is only proper that the women be made to wait to see me so that they understand what an important person I am. I have told the House Mothers many times not to do this, but tradition is a hard thing to overcome.

"Yes, Director Han," Caseworker Kim answers.

"Remind me how you found her."

Though he has told me several times before, he displays no impatience. An astute man, he can perhaps rise to my position one day, if my son decides not to follow his father into the family business. "I first met Miss Kim just before the new year, during one of my regular visits to the Uijeongbu camptown. She was at the Red, White, and Blue Beauty Salon, and she listened attentively when I introduced myself. One of her friends volunteered that Miss Kim was pregnant, and I gave her my card. After she left, the beauty salon owner told me she was in a common-law marriage with an American soldier—"

"And you are sure the father is white?" I interrupt.

"Yes, Director Han."

He waits to see if I have more questions, but I gesture for him to continue. "Something told me that she wasn't one of those stubborn women who would cling to their baby even after its father has disappeared. She's no newcomer. I'd say she's in her thirties."

This is new information. "That old? Do you think she has given up a baby before?"

"I don't know. She said no when I asked her, but you know how they are. I did check our records though, and she wasn't there."

I nod at him to go on.

"The beauty salon owner gave me her address, and the next time I went to Uijeongbu, I paid her a visit. Whereas last time she looked svelte, now it was apparent that she was expecting. The father had just returned to America.He wanted to marry her, she insisted, but he didn't get permission from his superiors. He had promised to send for her, and she was waiting for his letter."

We share a smile at her credulity.

"My last visit was a few weeks ago. Her belly was so large she could barely bend to put her shoes on, and I knew it would be a healthy baby. Though she has had no word from her American, he left her enough money to take care of herself for a few months, and she hadn't wasted it on drink or gambled it away. But the money was almost gone, she confessed, and her letters to the father went unanswered. I told her to telephone when the baby arrived and gave her some money to come to Seoul. She called on Monday, and I asked her to come today so that you could see for yourself the woman and her baby."

"And you asked her whether she had entered the child in the family registry?"

"Yes, Director Han. She said she had not."

Glancing at my watch, I wonder aloud, "Do you think you could have been wrong about her? It is getting late."

Implacable, Caseworker Kim replied, "It is a long way from Uijeongbu, and she is unfamiliar with Seoul. But please do not inconvenience yourself for her."

I dismiss him with a wave of a hand. He means that I am not needed for this transaction, and am free to go if I wish. I do wish, but I also want to see this baby. A newborn is a precious commodity, and if it is as healthy as Caseworker Kim expects, it will be a part of my experimental program of placing a few select infants in House Mother Hong's home. Many children arrive riddled with communicable diseases, and I have lost highly adoptable infants to everything from measles to whooping cough, contracted here in the orphanage. If this baby is as healthy as Caseworker Kim expects, it will be kept safe from these maladies in foster care. It doesn't know how lucky it is.

Fearing that I might fall asleep at my desk, I walk upstairs to the nursery, attracting children to me like flecks of metal to a

magnet, faces turned up as each one vies for my attention. I half-heartedly scold them for ignoring their work, patting the yellow hair of one sturdy boy, stroking a bright-eyed girl's dirt-streaked cheek. Still, they keep coming, child after child, all clamoring for me, until I can barely lift an arm, they are hemming me in so. Given up too late by their selfish mothers, these children are my special burden, needing food, shelter, and clothing as I struggle to find parents willing to take them in. Two weeks ago, the adoption of an eight-year-old Black boy who had been with our agency since its inception in 1964 was finalized, but that is a rare success story. And in the meantime, more and more children are left here. When I first opened KSS a mere three years ago, I knew the name of every child in our care, but now that there are too many of them, I don't even attempt to learn their names. Clapping my hands, I say sternly, "Back to work, my children." They scatter, except for the blonde boy and the bright-eyed girl, who tag along as I walk among the rows of cribs. Each crib holds an infant tightly wrapped and placed on its side, sucking on a bottle propped up on a foam cushion.The industrious ones are pulling hard at the rubber nipples, but the weaker ones have lost their bottles: Their mouths continue to work, sucking in nothing but air, until they burst into pitiful sobs or slip into silent resignation.

A House Mother is changing a diaper, and I bark out at her the numbers of the cribs whose babies have lost their bottles. Behind me, the blonde boy strains to reach into a crib, attempting to direct a bottle into an inert mouth, his filthy fingers smudging the nipple. The girl tries to copy in an adjacent crib, but she is too small.

Last year, there were more than seventy thousand children in orphanages. More and more, they are not like the blonde-haired boy or bright-eyed girl. They are, as these cribs show, pure-blooded Koreans. Row after row of black-haired, brown-eyed, yellow-skinned babies. We thought that white people would not want these babies, but we were wrong. The barrier was broken by mixed-race babies, and now the big-hearted people of America, Denmark, the Netherlands, and elsewhere are ready to open their hearts to Korean children. Too bad so many of them come to us malnourished and sickly. Some days, it seems, we bury as many babies as we adopt out.

I am startled from my contemplation by a breathless announcement: "Director Han! The woman has come with her baby."

The boy and girl follow me to the door of the nursery but know not to go any farther, as they are on duty. It is a privilege to work in the nursery, much preferable to the laundry, garden, or housekeeping. The only assignment more desirable than the nursery is kitchen duty, with the chance to get food scraps.

Caseworker Kim waits for me to be seated behind my desk before ushering the woman in. Clasping her baby to her chest, she bows before sitting. Though I am eager to see the baby and note that the bundle in her arm has heft, I study her while Caseworker Kim introduces us. She does not become flustered or defiant under my gaze as some women do; instead, she lets me have a good look. Her face is tastefully made up, glowing like those clever fake pearls from Japan, and she's wearing a gaudy version of our national costume, with a shiny, white nylon jeogori and a gauzy skirt embroidered with flowers. It is a good sign she has dressed up for me.

A House Mother brings in barley tea and rice crackers.

As Caseworker Kim prepares to record our conversation in a notebook, I fan myself and make small talk with the woman about the weather. Her accent and diction confirm that she is an unsophisticated country girl. When I ask her about herself, she maintains an open and friendly expression, speaking with a cheerful candor and cradling the infant with graceful ease. I am startled when she reveals that she is thirty-five years old, as it is a hard life these women live; they often look older than they are, but she still has a little bit of freshness about her. Though it would be interesting to know—I am a social worker after all, trained in the United States—I do not inquire if this is her first relinquished child. No need to upset her unnecessarily, and it is not germane to the moment. Her story is a familiar one: brutal violence at home, a desperate escape, a constant struggle for survival in a country with too little food and too many people.

I do not judge these women as others do; they are as much a casualty of history in this nation blighted by the Japanese and civil war as the men missing limbs begging in the streets.

Occasionally, when she comes to a dramatic point in her story, she gently shakes the baby for emphasis. The baby, a girl who the woman says she has named Kim Sook, moves about in her mother's arms but does not cry. I strain for a glimpse of her, a sign of her healthiness. There is the occasional gurgle, but whether it is a sign of sickness or of contentment, I cannot ascertain.

After she comes to the end of her sad tale, I ask about the baby's father. Her brow creases for the first time as she tells me that his tour of duty ended when she was six months along. Promising to send for her, he had even left an address. She had been sure he would honor his vow as he had been good to her in the thirteen months of their common-law marriage, never once laying a hand on her, always paying the rent on time, giving her a generous allowance, and surprising her with thoughtful gifts. Nothing like the last one who would regularly leave her black and blue and barely gave her enough money to live off.

"The father of this baby, what did he look like?" I redirect her because she's wandering from the subject. Once these women think you are a sympathetic audience, they can talk your ear off.

He was sturdy built, like an ox, with thick, brown hair, and when it got a little wavy, she knew it was time to give him a haircut. His eyes were dark brown, and he needed glasses, though he didn't always like to wear them, so he squinted a lot. With evident pride, she claims he held the rank of SP/4. I breathe a sigh of relief when she says he would burn red in the Korean sun. In answer to my inquiry, she assures me the child has not been entered in the national family registry.

Now that we have collected all the background information, I ask, "May I see the baby?"

She draws the baby even closer to her. In contrast to her yokel ways, her hands are very elegant and gracefully formed. I imagine the rest of her body is that way too, and wonder how she looks in western dress. She asks me to tell her what will happen to her baby if she leaves her with our agency.

"We will find her a good family in America," I tell her, my voice reassuring, "with a big house, a car, and a color TV. She will live just like in the American movies." I do not tell her we also send children to Denmark and the Netherlands.

She probably has never heard of those countries, and best not to confuse her. She says she has heard from other women that the babies do not go at once to America but stay here in Korea for a long time.

"It may take up to a year for all the paperwork to be completed before the child can leave for America," I agree.

Slightly jogging her baby, she asks hopefully if Sook could stay with her until it is time to go to a new family.

I lay my forearms on my desk and lean forward like our president does when he must deliver tough news to the people, my voice dropping to a commanding tone. "I am afraid not. In order for your child to be eligible for adoption in America, she must be put under my guardianship and left to live under my care."

She asks what "put under my guardianship" means.

I have explained this hundreds of times before and deliver the explanation as if it is as logical as 1+1=2: "In order to make your child attractive to Americans, they must think that she has no parents, that she is an orphan. They do not want to start a long process only to find at the end that the mother has decided to keep the child. The first step, what we will do here today, is for the mother to give up her rights to the child and make me the child's legal guardian."

She murmurs the phrases "give up my rights" and "legal guardian," bouncing her child though there is no need, the baby is not making a fuss.

"Once you sign our documents, you will no longer have any legal claim on the child. We will enter the child under her own family registry, stating that her parents are unknown. Then, I will become her legal guardian, her state-recognized parent for the time that she is in Korea. When she arrives in her American home, she will be officially entered in her new family's registry over there." That is not exactly the way it happens, but I have to explain it so that she can understand.

She nods slowly. Though she is not sophisticated, neither is she stupid. She knows the world works in mysterious ways. She asks if the children she saw outside hanging up the laundry were all under my guardianship.

"Yes," I say. "I am father to them all."

She recoils at that, but I can see her mind working. The cicadas fill the long silence until she asks what her baby will eat when in my care.

"She will be given the exact same powdered milk that babies in America are given. Children grow quickly on this milk, which has been scientifically produced, and which doctors recommend as best for an infant."

Clasping the child close against her breast, she questions if the milk can be better even than a mother's milk.

"Much, much better. You see how big and strong the Americans are. It is all because of this magic milk." I take a sip of barley tea and notice that it has cooled. Trying to keep the impatience from my voice, I request again, "Please show me your baby."

Her fingers widen the opening to the baby's swaddling, and she stares down at its face. She asks if she can still visit her daughter even if she does not have any legal right to her anymore.

"First, show me the baby," I command, standing up and coming out from behind my desk to indicate I will not be put off anymore. What is she trying to hide? I suddenly fear that there is something wrong with the child, and all this time has been for naught.

She tilts the baby so I can get a good look. Yes, she is pale, paler than a Korean. Her eyes are closed, so I cannot see their shape. Thick, brown hair frames her plump face. But what is hidden beneath the cotton wrapper? I must see. I begin to pull at the cloth. For a moment, the mother looks shocked at my forthrightness, and she instinctively pulls the child away. But then she realizes that this is all inevitable, and undoes the swaddling herself, revealing a plump, perfect specimen. Still, I have to hold her to believe her. "May I?" I ask, reaching out my arms.

After delivering a kiss to her cheek, she holds the child out to me. The movement startles the child awake. I note with satisfaction that her eyes are large. "She is beautiful," I exclaim. "What a cap of hair!"

The child looks into my eyes and starts to cry with the weak bleating of a newborn, harmonizing with the buzzing cicadas.

She can see. Can she hear? I whistle loudly and her cries hitch for a moment before escalating, fists balled up in rage, face reddening, legs kicking. She has the vigor of a healthy baby. Bouncing her, I estimate her weight to be seven pounds. My fingers encircle a chunky calf. Of course, sometimes there are hidden maladies, but on the surface, this child is worth the wait. I nod to Caseworker Kim who gets up for a look at the child before uncapping a pen to complete the forms.

"Your child is very lucky," I tell the woman as I hand the bawling baby back to her outstretched arms, "and will be looked after by a foster mother in her own home. Other orphanages cannot offer such good care, but here at KSS, we can. There will be a room for your baby"—I do not tell her that there will be other babies there as well—"with good light and well-ventilated. She will be attentively cared for by a woman I chose for her calm, patient, and warm manner."

She persists with her inquiry as to whether she can visit the baby, who is once again quiet in her arms.

"It is up to you. Personally, I do not advise it. It is better to think of her as passed onto Heaven when you leave today, because that is how far the airplane will take her from here."

But she disregards my advice and again requests to be able to visit the child at the foster home. Fraternizing with the Americans has made her a bold negotiator.

"Yes," I finally concede.

She wants me to promise.

Her impertinence is galling, but I need her. I want her to tell her camptown girlfriends that KSS will take good care of their newborns while treating the mothers with respect. Let Holt and the other orphanages get the old and the sick. Here at KSS, we are doing a service to the children by encouraging their mothers to relinquish them before they become corrupted by disease and the social environment they are made to live in. To express my displeasure without having to raise my voice, I crack open my fan, making her jump, a trick I learned from my Japanese professor that miserable year in medical school before I dropped out.

"I promise," I growl, waving the fan at Caseworker Kim to bring over the relinquishment documents. "Can you read?" I

inquire as he leaves the room to fetch a House Mother to witness the signing.

She affirms that she can.

I place the transparent piece of paper on a blotter in front of her. "Please read this. Take your time."

The cicadas clamor as her finger marks her progress through the short document. She comes to the end and reads it over again, then, eyes glazed with tears, looks at me. I ask if she has any questions.

She nods, a tear skimming down her cheek to spatter on her baby's forehead, and wants to know where the foster mother lives.

Women like her have been deceived and disappointed by many men, so I do not chide her for her forthrightness. "Now, Mrs. Kim, I cannot tell you that until you sign the document."

She glances at Caseworker Kim and the House Mother as they enter the room, and brushes at her cheeks self-consciously. She requests that I at least tell her if the foster mother lives in Seoul so that she can know if she is able to visit or not.

Alarmed that her tears may ruin the fragile paper, Caseworker Kim moves the document to the center of the desk.

"She lives in Seoul," I concede. I indicate the House Mother. "This is Mrs. Kang. She will be the witness." I pick up the document and place it on the blotter in front of her with a tin of vermilion ink. "All you need to do is put your fingerprint there, for our records."

The House Mother offers to take the baby, but the woman refuses, crooking her close to her side with one arm while pressing her finger in the ink and then to the paper.

"And this copy too, for the Americans." Caseworker Kim whisks away the first document and presents an identical form in front of her, his hand covering half the page to keep the flimsy paper in place while she presses her inked index finger against it. When she finishes, she asks where her own copy is.

This woman, with her endless demands! Well, it does not concern me anymore—the deed has been done. As the forms say, both the one with her real name and address, and the one with a slightly altered name and an address missing an important digit, the document is irrevocable.

Handing the documents to the House Mother to witness, Caseworker Kim explains, "According to the law, we only make two copies, one for our records and one for the Americans. As for you, since your baby was never entered in a family registry, it will be as if she never existed."

I stand up, my shadow reaching halfway across the room. Now is the best time to be up there on the hillside, with the golden late afternoon light, the breeze tickling the sweat off my skin while the city below shimmers with heat, my wife bringing me a cold beer and some dried squid to snack on as I watch the sun set. "Now, Mrs. Kim, please let the House Mother take your baby."

Her eyes get watery again, her face flushing under the makeup. The House Mother holds out her arms. Caseworker Kim looks away, but I cannot.

She demands the foster mother's address.

If I were another kind of man, I would have struck this woman already. Instead, I scribble down Mrs. Hong's address. Folding the paper, I say, "Your hands are full right now. Let me give this to you after they are free."

Tears coursing down her face, she coos to the child about going to America, where she can meet her father. She laments that she can do nothing for the baby but let her go. Closing her eyes, she inhales deeply of the child's scent, then rubs her wet cheek against the child's tiny face so that naturally, the child too begins to cry. Now that she has thoroughly upset the child, she gives it a kiss before thrusting it at the House Mother, who quickly snatches it up before the woman can change her mind, and hurries from the room.

Face marked by agony, the woman reaches a trembling hand toward the folded up piece of paper in my hand. I pull it back slightly and say, "Will you recommend KSS to your friends? Tell them that we take special care of our children?"

Sobs gushing from her throat, she nods violently.

"Yes?" I prompt.

She gurgles her assent. I give her the piece of paper, nod goodbye to Caseworker Kim, and make my exit. If my driver is fast enough, I should be at my country retreat in time to enjoy the last blush of sunset. If not, at least I can enjoy the flickering dance of the fireflies.

Carl Palmer

HURRY UP AND WAIT

Sir, permission to speak, major sir. Go ahead, private.
Sir, what time is the 10 o'clock inspection, major sir?
You mean the ten hundred hours inspection, private?

Sir, yes sir, I mean ten hundred hours inspection, sir.
The inspection will be at ten hundred hours, private.
Sir, yes sir, however we've been standing here since

ten hundred hours for thirty minutes now, major sir.
It will be ten hundred hours when I say it is, private,
as he checks his watch, waits for the colonel to arrive.

Will I ever get the military out of my mind, must each
situation become another army wrinkle in time? While
I wait thirty minutes past my 10 o'clock appointment,

ponder if I should be the private, ask the receptionist
how much longer until my 10 o'clock job interview or
take the role of major and wait for the colonel to arrive.

Jamie Wendt

SWINGING INTO CLOUDS

2023

Late in November, we gaze up
at a dozen pigeons lining the roof's edge

of an auburn apartment building.
You share your thoughts of their scheming,

their flight plans, their persistent coo.
We stand, holding hands, and watch their steadiness

until, all at once, the pigeons thrash and beat
their way down, a collective, slapping

right into our legs and faces, unafraid of closeness.
We hasten away. You ask me again

about the people who died in the war,
if the pigeons can see them up there,

if pigeons can watch over them
from that high distance into the blue-gray sky.

I remember a time when life was as simple
as a play kitchen where nothing burned.

I see the twisted dead behind my eyes,
the cold earth tucked around their battered bodies.

I see them there in brightly lit lampposts shining
on the street mural, painted children swinging into clouds.

Ask me again about the lingering of the dead.
Ask me if they can fly.

Clive Collins

Nonfiction

WALKING WOUNDED

According to the card presented to my father, together with his silver War Badge in 1918, he stood five feet three inches, had a dark complexion, brown eyes, and dark hair. He had enlisted as a private soldier in the 10th battalion of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers on April 3, 1916, and at the time of his discharge on April 1, 1918, was entitled to wear one gold braid wound distinction stripe. At the bottom of the card, there is a section designated "Marks or scars whether on face or other parts of the body." Under this is written, "Scar on right side of head. Scar on chest and left hip. Left leg short."

I was my parents' late, last child. My mother was forty-six years old when I was born, my father fifty-two. They had three children living—all girls—and had lost another child, a boy they had named Peter. My own birth was so entirely unexpected that my mother sometimes spoke of it in terms that were all but biblical, as if, in retrospect, it would not have surprised her had the insurance agent, who called once but was never seen again, been revealed as an annunciating angel.

We children were all born in England but called our parents "Mammy" and "Daddy" in the Irish manner, until, for my sisters, age and embarrassment shortened these familiar forms to "Mam" and "Dad." In my case, my mammy became my mother, but I always called my father "Daddy." We were not together long enough for me to call him anything else. I was two weeks a twelve-year-old when I came home from the grammar school to which I had not long before gained admission to be told by my mother that he was dead. I remember the numbness I felt at that moment and the disbelief when I was taken into our front parlor, which was his sickroom, to see him.

He did not look dead. He lay propped up on his pillows, his eyes closed, his reading glasses slipped halfway down the hook of his nose; his hands were half-curled upon the counterpane, and the book I had brought home for him from our local library lay open close by them. He seemed only asleep. But it was not sleep,

and, after I was taken from the room, I never saw him again except in a few photographs and my betraying memory. It is to photographs and memories I turn when I want him with me now.

I have a photograph of him with his mother, Mary. It was taken in 1898, two years after his birth. She is slim, pretty, dressed in a white blouse and a full skirt I imagine trailing the floors of the rooms the family lived in and the Dublin pavements she walked upon. My father's hair is long, uncut from the day of his birth. He wears a dress. Still, the face is my father's face. My grandmother, whom I never knew, looks adoringly upon her firstborn child.

There are no other photographs of my father then, until he appears with my mother. The years in between are imageless, and I have never been able to understand why. I know that his own mother died after the birth of her third child, another boy, and that my grandfather remarried. His second wife, a widow with four daughters, gave birth to a son within a year of her remarriage. My father grew to manhood in a crowded house. The census record for 1911 reveals that the family, all ten of them, occupied a four-room terraced house in the North Strand area of Dublin and supplemented my grandfather's earnings as a postal clerk by taking in two single men as lodgers.

But where are the photographs of him during that time of growing? I have never seen any. Nor did I hear stories from him of that time. He spoke little of his life in Dublin. I remember only a tale of him walking barefoot to the sea on a Sunday with a ball of twine, a few fishhooks, and some fish heads, then walking home again with his hooks and twine and enough crabs in the bucket to feed the family a decent dinner. But where are the stories of his school and his leaving of that school, the jobs he did, the girls he courted; where, more than any of the others, is the story, the reason why he took it into his head to join the British Army on April 3, 1916? And, once he was a soldier, where are the photographs of him in his uniform?

My mother, after he was dead, said that he and his younger brother had been plied with drink by soldiers in a pub and then taken to the recruiting sergeant. My grandfather went to the barracks looking for them. He was able to bring my uncle home because he was not of an age to enlist. My father was and so

remained in the barracks. It makes for a good story, but is—I think—untrue. My father was a moderate drinker and, our annual seaside holidays aside, I never knew him to enter a public house. His stepsister Sarah, called Sally, told me a story about him from after the war, but never spoke of anything before or during it and my father seldom spoke of the war himself or of what went on before and followed after. He told me only about the weight of the kit he carried and the trouble he had keeping his puttees in proper order. Sometimes, he would sigh out his regret as I played with my toy soldiers or played the soldier myself. Then he would say, "Don't, son, don't," or some such other gentle admonishment.

It is documents that speak. I have the notice delivered to my grandfather in 1917 in which my father is listed as missing. The boxes against the words "killed" and "wounded" are left unchecked. Next to them, someone with a fine hand has written in blue ink, "Not known." According to my mother, those words went unamplified for weeks before news reached the family that my father was alive but gravely ill from his wounds. Somehow, he survived: "Scar on right side of head. Scar on chest and left hip. Left leg short."

In the earliest photographs I have of him, he appears a handsome, dapper man. Most often, he is with my mother, and they make a pretty couple. But I never knew him young, or her either. My earliest memories of my mother are those of her white hair and solid figure and delivery men asking was my grandma at home if they came to the house and found me playing out on the front step. Of my father, I remember the sticks he walked with, the boots he wore, the left with a huge cork sole and heel to balance him ("Left leg short"), the fedora hat he wore pulled low over his eyes ("Scar on right side of head"), and the wound on his hip that never would heal but continue to fester, opening itself from time to time to expel shards of dark metal. "Shrapnel," my mother told me once when we were on holiday and the wound opened. I remember the ragged splinters that had come out of him against the stained white dressing she had in her hand.

My father had other wounds his War Badge certificate left unlisted. Some were physical: a collapsed lung that, together with the Woodbine cigarettes he could not manage without,

lighting the next from the one he was just finishing, meant that even to draw a normal breath required the greatest of efforts. There were others. He could not sleep; he was frightened of the dark. I grew up in a house that stank of paraffin oil. Small lamps were filled each night and left burning upon the stairs and along the upstairs corridor of our house. I lived in terror of the shifting shadows the lamps cast, the ghostly drifts of cigarette smoke that came from my parents' bedroom. If I woke in the night and managed the short, desperate run from my room to that of my parents, I knew my father would be awake to care for me, waiting out the night beside my mother, sitting up against his bank of pillows or perched on the side of the mattress with his feet on the floor because he never slept for more than a few minutes at a time. When I came through the door, he would help me into the bed and then, depending upon the hour, get in after me or else make his way downstairs.

He slept best in daylight or lamplight in his chair downstairs next to the fire, an hour or so every evening, longer on Saturday afternoons. What he feared in the darkness was never spoken of, as with so much else in his life. Only his wounds were eloquent.

My father's life, as I recall it now, recall it from my memories and those of others, seems a procession of pain and small humiliations. One of the great confusions of my childhood had to do with his naming. My mother called him John. His stepsisters called him John-Jo. His parents, my mother said, referred to him most often as JJ. The men with whom he worked—the Englishmen with whom he worked—called him Paddy.

Traveling with my mother on a bus one day just after the outbreak of World War II, he was handed a white feather by an English woman. When my mother remonstrated, both she and my father were put off the bus, although in the act of standing, my father's condition must have been evident to the conductor and the rest of the baying passengers. Not long after Italy entered the war, my father and his brother were taken for Italians ("dark complexion, brown eyes, and dark hair") and set upon by English toughs. They broke the sticks he walked with, tore his silver War Badge from the lapel of his jacket, and tossed it in the gutter. Only one person, a female Salvation Army officer, intervened to cry shame upon the perpetrators and those

who stood watching. My father bought new sticks and thereafter would not pass a Salvation Army collector without donating. His War Badge was put into my mother's button box and never worn again. He never again purchased an Armistice Day poppy. These things my mother told me.

She also said that my father's wounds had been received from a shell burst when he was in the line in France and that his fear of the darkness was because he had been buried alive for three days, another of the biblical notes she seemed to delight in sounding. The explosion, she said, opened his chest and blew away his left hip and the top of his thighbone.

Some years ago, wanting to fill out the narrative of the part of my father's life that condemned him and those he loved and would come to love, I employed an archivist to search for my father's military records. The documents I received copies of have the same flat tone and neat hand as the "Not known" on the notice sent to my grandfather in1917. "G.S.W. Chest and buttocks" is written on the sheet detailing my father's wounds that was filled out at a dressing station. Later documents attest more to the seriousness of the wounds. My father's condition by the time he reaches a field hospital in France is given as "dangerously ill." Later, this is amended to "So-so," but then in parentheses and a different hand, "condition unchanged." It is only after several weeks that a note is added to say he has been "removed from the danger list."

Equally terse observations record later surgeries to repair his chest and buttocks, but there is no mention of the wound to his head that left him scarred for the rest of his life or why he had a collapsed lung and a left leg that was three inches shorter than his right leg or the wound that never healed where his left hip should have been. There is no mention at all of the wounds inside that left him more frightened of the dark than his timid son, unable to sleep in his bed at night and all but voiceless beyond the most common exchanges of family life. He could walk with the aid of sticks and built-up boots, but his mind, his memory, when I think of them, are like the old men I remember making such slow progress along the streets of my boyhood in chain-driven invalid carriages.

I spent little enough time alone with my father, but it happened that I was on my own with him the day he had his first heart attack.

He had been feeling more poorly than usual for some time and, finally, had been signed off sick from his work. It was morning. We were at home, so perhaps it was a Saturday or else a weekday during the school holidays. I was on the hearthrug, reading. Although I do not recall whether there was a fire burning in the grate, I can remember the book that had me entranced. It was an old copy of Captain Marryat's *The Settlers in Canada* I had fetched out of the cupboard we called the Glory Hole.

My father came down the stairs, passing by me on his way to the kitchen. I remember him stopping to lean against a chair. I remember him saying the words "Sweet Jesus" for no reason I was aware of, and then the sound of his bowels opening. He stood with one hand holding his chest, the other balancing himself on the single stick he used to get about the house. He seemed to shrink before me as he stood there, and it was only when the stench of what had come from him spread across the room to meet me that I was able to move.

I remember his eyes filling with tears but also with pity. Even at so young an age, I knew the pity was for me, not himself. He asked me to fetch my mother, who was busy in the backyard with some task or other. When I returned with her, she led my father into the kitchen, which also served as our bathroom, to wash him. I was shut in the living room on my own.

He lived for little more than a year after that. My bed was brought downstairs and put into our seldom-used front parlor. Much against my will, I slept in a bed borrowed from the Red Cross. The bedhead and foot rail were made of metal painted hospital cream. For weeks I went to sleep in terror of the people I thought must have died in that bed.

We were suddenly even poorer than we had been before, and my mother's temper was shorter than ever. She began the long process of humiliation by officials of the British welfare state that reached its peak after my father died. Our house became a sequence of silences in which huddled, conspiratorial conversations took place between my mother and my sisters, my mother and our doctor, and sudden loud outbursts of rage. I understood only that my father was ill. I did not know, because I was not allowed to know, that he was dying.

I helped as best I could, taking in his evening meal on a tray and, later, when I changed schools and began to have homework, I would stay with him whilst I completed whatever tasks I had been set. On Saturdays, I returned his library books and brought home new ones. My mother had written to our local library, explaining the situation at home and asking leave for me to borrow books with my father's tickets. He wanted to read about war, especially what was for him *the* war, the war that had wounded him.

On the last day of my father's life, I was with him in his room before going to school. It was December; there was a fire burning in the grate. His bedside lamp was on because the morning was dark. I do not know why or how—I was excited perhaps because I was to read at my school's end-of-term Christmas service—but I managed to anger my father enough that morning to have him damn me as a "cheeky young whelp."

The last words I ever had from him, they went like bullets to my brain and lodge there still, festering, sometimes giving up small shards of sadness, fragments of regret.

Logan Markko

Fiction

DOWN IN THE PIT

Thirteen-year-old Clem Erickson started going up to the roof of his parents' farmhouse shortly after the US military shipped his older brother David back from Korea in a flag-draped casket. It was the spring of 1953, and thirty thousand American soldiers had been killed in Korea, but to Clem the fatalities were just numbers in a newspaper. David was different.

From the roof, Clem heard the distant rumble of an airplane flying forty thousand feet above his head. He squinted into the sky, but the air was thick with fog and the plane passed over him like a great, invisible beast. He turned his attention to Papa, digging in the yard beneath him. Since the spring thaw, Papa had made a habit of waking early each morning to work on the bunker. He dug from dawn to dusk, stopping only for a cigarette or to relieve himself in the bushes near the barn where Clem and David used to play on hot summer days, stepping over patches of stinging nettles to cool their feet in the mud.

As if sensing his son's eyes on his back, Papa set down his shovel and climbed up from the pit. He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pants pocket and motioned for his son to come join him in the yard.

Clem crawled back into the house through his bedroom window. He washed his pimpled face in the bathroom sink and gathered up his schoolbooks. In the kitchen, he buttered two pieces of toast, one for himself and one for Mama, which he left on a glass plate outside her bedroom door. "She just needs time," Papa always said, but it had been nearly five months since David's fighter jet was shot down off the coast of Korea, and still, it was rare for Clem to see his mother in the light of day.

"A spring fog means a humid summer," Papa said as Clem rode up to the pit on his bicycle. "I'll need your help this afternoon. The sooner we get this dug, the sooner we can lay the bricks." He lit a cigarette and scratched his grizzled beard. "You know,

your brother was one of the lucky ones. There's no telling how long the rest of us will have to wait."

Spiritual matters confounded Clem. At church on Sunday mornings, he strained to make sense of Pastor Darby's words. They needed to prepare themselves for the Second Coming, the pastor proclaimed. There were many signs that they were living in the end times, but Clem didn't know what scared him more: the paranoid thought that at any moment he could be snatched into the sky and raptured away or the fear of Christ never returning at all.

"How long do you think we have?" he asked.

Papa smiled. "No man can know the heart of God." He pointed in the direction of town. "Even so, the Lord still has time for school. Learn your best."

Clem nodded and pedaled away. The Ericksons lived at the bottom of a dead-end road, a few miles outside the small town of Granier, Wisconsin, a modest farming village located along the Kickapoo River some thirty-five miles east of the Minnesota border. The ride to school was one of Clem's favorite parts of the day, feeling the early-morning sun on his face as he pedaled down the winding dirt roads that led into town. He'd lived on the farm all his life, and though he sometimes felt the desire to move to a bigger city like La Crosse or Eau Claire when he grew older, he knew the rolling hills of rural Wisconsin would always pull at his heart. Then again, if the things his father said in the backyard were true, maybe there was no future. Maybe today was all they had.

§

For first-period English, Clem had Mr. Jennings, a tall, thin man who wore a perpetual scowl on his angular face. One by one, Mr. Jennings directed his students to stand and read, watching from his desk, where he took notes in a little black book he carried with him at all times. The girls, with their plaited hair and clean fingernails, volunteered to read first, while the boys bowed their heads and pretended to scribble in their composition journals. Clem hated to raise his hand, afraid that his teacher would

discover what an imbecile he was if he ever opened his mouth. But there was no escaping Mr. Jennings, and when Clem's turn came to read, he did so with quiet resignation, trudging to the front of the classroom like a criminal headed to the gallows.

The poem was called "Ozymandias," and it seemed to Clem that it was written in Greek or Latin or some other incomprehensible language. He read the words on the page quickly, failing to understand a single syllable that fell from his mouth.

"Again," Mr. Jennings said. "This time slower. Pause at the end of each line so we have time to digest what we're reading."

Clem cleared his throat. "'I met a traveler from an antique land . . .'" He hesitated and glanced up from his paper. Mr. Jennings sat perched on the corner of his desk, studying him from across the room.

"'Two vast and trunkless legs of stone / Stand in the desert . . . Near them, on the sand / Half shrunk a shattered visage lies . . .'"

"Thank you," Mr. Jennings said when Clem was finished, gesturing for him to return to his seat. He stood to address the rest of the class. "So, who is this Ozymandias Shelley writes of, and what does his tragic story symbolize for the modern reader?" He waited for volunteers, and when no one raised their hand, he returned to Clem. "Mr. Erickson, would you like to enlighten the class with your opinions?"

Clem's mouth went dry with the chalky taste of nervous spittle. He swallowed, ready to say the first thing that came into his head, when the frantic noise of the emergency warning siren came screaming over the school speakers, alerting the students that they needed to duck under their desks and cover their heads.

The drills had started as part of President Truman's Civil Defense program, and though they seemed harmless enough, they were meant to induce a sort of organized panic in American schoolchildren. Clem remembered the videos his teachers had shown of Bert the Turtle hiding in his shell from a stick of dynamite. Starting in elementary school, he'd been taught to look for immediate shelter when the warning siren sounded, to hide his face and cover his ears in case the drill was real, because one day it might be.

Crouched under his desk, Clem remembered the bitter winter morning when he'd opened the front door of the farmhouse to a pair of stony-faced marines. He'd been alone in the kitchen when he heard the knock, struggling with his algebra homework at the table while his father milked the cows in the barn and his mother canned vegetables in the cellar. For a moment, the marines stood before him in silence, but even before they opened their mouths to tell him that David was dead, Clem knew they were here to confirm the fears he'd been carrying in his heart ever since his brother left them. He felt a tightening inside himself, then a strange quiet. He thanked the soldiers for their time, then followed them out the front door to tell his parents that everything they knew was over.

Above his head, the siren stuttered, then wound itself down to a gentle buzz before stopping altogether. Mr. Jennings gave the all-clear signal, and Clem and his classmates came crawling out from under their desks.

"It was just a drill," Mr. Jennings said, sitting down in the swivel chair behind his desk. "I'm sure we'll have another one soon." He paged through his book, then looked up for a moment as if trying to remember an important point. "Where were we?" he asked, allowing the question to hang like chalk dust in the stale classroom air.

"Ozymandias," he said, answering his own question. "What does the poem symbolize?" The teacher nodded at one of the girls and leaned back in his chair as she walked to the front of the classroom and started writing the word *communism* on the chalkboard in large cursive letters that curled beautifully against the black slate.

§

When he returned home from school in the afternoon, Clem went to the kitchen and poured himself a glass of milk from the refrigerator. He gulped the milk in two quick swallows, placing the empty bottle in the sink when he was finished. On his way up the stairs to change his clothes, he heard voices coming from his parents' bedroom. He pressed his ear against the heavy oak

door and listened to the actors and actresses laughing with one another on the expensive new TV set, thinking maybe he heard his mother laughing along with the characters on the show.

He changed into jeans and a flannel shirt and went to check on the cows. For years, the Ericksons had run a steady operation. Now the coops and pens lay vacant, the garden was overgrown with weeds, and the house needed a fresh coat of white paint. Most of the animals had been sold, but there were still three remaining Holstein milkers: Ona, Marija, and Teta, and a bull named Jurgis, all named after characters from *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair, which Papa said reminded him of his Lithuanian aunts and uncles back in Chicago.

As he approached the large sliding door of the barn, Clem heard the Holsteins bawling. Although Papa had sold the calves in the spring, their mothers were still producing and needed to be regularly milked. Papa took pride in his care of the Holsteins, but with the pit growing in the backyard, his time was divided. Some days he remembered to milk the cows, others he didn't.

It was Clem's job to muck the stalls. Teta mooed when she saw him. He rubbed the loose skin on her neck before moving on to his chores. He shoveled the manure into a wheelbarrow and pitched a bed of straw onto the floor. When the stall was clean, he drew Teta a fresh bucket of water, then cleaned Ona and Marija's stalls before opening the barn doors to the back pasture so the cows could graze freely. He was almost out of the barn when he remembered Jurgis. The bull's stall was empty, and he wasn't in the pasture.

In the backyard, Clem found Papa working on the bunker, his head floating above the lip of the pit like the headless horseman. A truckload of bricks was stacked nearby.

When he saw his son, Papa set down his shovel and climbed up from the pit. Noticing Clem's confusion, he gestured toward the pile of bricks. "Sold the bull," he said, lighting a cigarette. "The man gave me a fair deal."

Clem opened his mouth in protest, but when he saw the exhaustion on Papa's face, he decided not to question him. Instead, he told his father about the bomb drill they'd had at school and how worried his classmates and teachers had seemed.

"Remember your faith, son," Papa said when Clem was finished. "The Lord always protects those who trust Him."

The image of a giant mushroom cloud hanging over a map of the United States pushed its way into Clem's thoughts. It wasn't in his nature to second-guess his father, but the fear of the unknown continued to gnaw at him. "If God is responsible for keeping us safe, is he also responsible for the people who die?"

Clem's father extinguished his cigarette under the heel of his boot. "God's ways are not our ways, son. If you show faith, He will do the rest. That's all we need to know."

This still didn't make sense to Clem, but when Papa asked him if he understood, Clem nodded and climbed down into the bunker to help his father shovel.

They worked with quiet efficiency until night fell and both of them were standing well beneath the surface of the earth. When they were finished for the day, Clem dug his shoes into the dirt wall, scraping and kicking his way out from the pit. He lay on his stomach, breathing hard from the effort, every muscle in his body sore from shoveling. His palms were splintered and bloody, but the day's work was over, and for that, he was grateful.

He awoke sometime in the middle of the night to his father standing in the doorway, sipping from a coffee cup as he watched his son sleep. A light shone in the hallway behind Papa's silhouette. Clem wiped his sleepy eyes and sat up in bed. "What time is it?" he asked. "Do we need to leave?"

Papa shook his head. "Soon," he said. "But now you need your rest." He flipped off the light in the hallway and closed the door gently behind him. Clem shut his eyes, and when he awoke in the morning, it was still dark.

§

Summer came. Clem took his final exams and said goodbye to his teachers and classmates until August. As the days grew longer, Clem spent them working alongside Papa in the backyard. They finished digging the pit in early July and began insulating the foundation and interior walls with brick. They developed a system where Clem spread a mortar of sand and cement while

Papa wedged the bricks into place. After the brick was leveled, Clem scraped off the excess mortar with a trowel, then they moved on to the next brick without missing a beat. This routine took about a minute, allowing them to lay sixty bricks an hour if they didn't stop for breaks.

Occasionally, Mama's shadowy figure would appear at her bedroom window. She'd watch them work for a few minutes before disappearing from view, only to reappear hours later for another brief moment. Each time she came to the window, Papa stopped working to look up at his wife, then pushed them even harder after she left.

A month into their labors, the sun disappeared behind angry black clouds. The sky darkened and broke with rain, flooding the pit and loosening the brick walls before they were fully set. Papa ran to the barn and emerged with two metal feed buckets. He thrust one of the buckets into his son's hands, jumped into the bunker, and began scooping water out of the pit like a drowning sailor bailing out a sinking vessel. It rained throughout the night and into the morning, and when they came out to the bunker at sunrise it was filled nearly to the brim with muddy rainwater.

They stared into the pit for what felt like a long while as the rain fell gently on their heads. Papa lit a cigarette. He smoked two more in rapid succession, flicking the butts into the pit when he was finished. "We'll sell another cow," he said at last. "Use the money to rent a tractor and start again."

Later that day, Clem helped his father bring Ona in from the back pasture. Her hips were bony, and the skin hung loosely from her ribs, but she was as stubborn as ever, and it took much prodding to get the cow into the barn.

The man who delivered the tractor was a farmer from Westby who said the money was in meat cows, not dairy. He had ugly, yellow teeth and looked almost as malnourished as Ona.

"I'll give you a good price for the boy," he said after they loaded Ona onto the trailer. The farmer pointed a crooked finger at Clem. A wolfish grin tugged at the corners of his mouth, and he let loose a crazy cackle. Clem hesitated, unsure of the humor in the joke, but Papa snorted, and together the three of them finished unloading the tractor.

§

Most mornings, Clem awoke to stillness inside the farmhouse. He'd lay in his bed, trying not to move against the stiff sheets that covered his body until eventually, when he could no longer stand the silence, he'd climb through the bedroom window and up to the roof where he'd lie on his back, staring at the clouds in the sky and listening to the birds chirping in the trees.

One Sunday, when the bunker was almost finished and Marija had also been sold, leaving Teta as the only remaining animal on the property, Clem found his mother sitting at the kitchen table, her hair neatly washed and combed, wearing one of her frilly Sunday dresses. She wore red lipstick and blush on her cheeks, and when Clem looked at her from across the table, he wondered if she'd simply woken up that day without the memory of David crushing down upon her head.

"Hungry?" his mother asked. Clem nodded despite the knot in his stomach. He allowed her to spoon eggs onto his plate, shoveling the runny yolks and egg whites into his mouth without tasting them.

"Beautiful day, isn't it?" Papa said. He wore a starched white shirt and a tie buttoned to his throat. His hair lay slicked flat against his scalp, and the smell of aftershave and clean sweat followed him as he walked through the small kitchen. He kissed his wife on the cheek, dropped the Sunday newspaper on the table, and lit himself a cigarette. He noticed Clem watching him smoke and slid the pack of cigarettes across the table. "I was no more than a boy when the old man let me spark up for the first time. Might as well offer you the same."

Clem took a cigarette and held it to his lips, the loose tobacco breaking off and sticking between his teeth. His father lit the cigarette, and Clem drew a deep breath, holding the smoke in his lungs until he felt fire burning inside him. He coughed until tears came to his eyes.

"Beautiful day," Papa repeated. He pointed at the newspaper lying on the table. The front-page headline announced an armistice had been signed between the United States, China, and Korea, officially concluding the war. "Means we're getting closer to the end," Clem's father said. "Just a matter of time now."

§

The Granier Free Will Baptist Church rested on a foundation of red brick, rising to a pointed steeple with a cross at the top. Large stained-glass windows manipulated the sunlight into a kaleidoscopic stream of blue, green, and red hues that played against the shadows inside the church. The parishioners sat sweating in their wooden pews, the mothers clutching their children tight to their chests to keep them from fussing, the fathers holding the family Bibles open for all to see.

A skinny teenage girl led the congregation in song. The parishioners rose to their feet, singing the hymns in loud, clear voices that echoed through the church.

When they were finished singing, Pastor Darby took his position in the pulpit. He was a round, thick-waisted man with a ruddy face that turned redder as he preached. Clem had a hazy memory of the pastor baptizing him in the Kickapoo River. He'd uttered a few words about sin, then plunged Clem under the cold water, holding him there for what felt like an eternity, before Clem came sputtering to the surface and the pastor declared the boy saved.

Pastor Darby cleared his throat. "Dear brothers and sisters," he began. "We are gathered here today to celebrate the imminent return of our Lord. The Bible tells us that He will come suddenly, like a thief in the night. Soon, the day will be upon us when the Lord will return with his Heavenly army to rebuild his temple and wage war against the Devil!"

The crowd murmured in agreement. Clem felt his cotton shirt sticking to his sweaty back. Beside him, Papa nodded along to the pastor's sermon while Mama stared at the floor and fiddled with her hands.

"Mankind is a corrupt species, intent on destroying itself," Pastor Darby continued. "There is no telling how long the Lord will continue to be patient with his people. Soon, He may well decide that He has had enough of our wicked ways."

Pastor Darby looked down on his congregation. "Some of us have a great deal of atoning to do. The Lord commands us to throw down our pride and show Him our faith. To prove we're ready for His return!"

The parishioners clapped their hands and stomped their feet. A baby began to cry. Its mother whispered to it soothingly, rocking the child in her arms.

"Let us pray," Pastor Darby said, bowing his head. "Some of us have lost loved ones fighting to protect our country, yet we must continue to show faith, for everything that happens in this world happens because the Lord has willed it to be so. Even the precious loss of human life is part of His magnificent plan."

"Amen!" the congregation echoed.

Clem flinched. There was a rustling sound beside him. When he opened his eyes, he saw his mother moving quickly down the aisle toward the doors of the church.

Papa remained fixed to his seat, waiting until his wife was gone from the church before he stood and shuffled down the aisle after her. Clem stood to follow his parents as Pastor Darby was replaced in the pulpit by the teenage choir leader, who led the parishioners through the closing hymns as the offering plates were passed around the room.

§

They drove the first few miles home in silence. The Packard jumped along the dirt roads, winding away from Granier, jostling Clem in the backseat. He closed his eyes and pretended to sleep, waiting for his mother to cry out in anguish or for his father to scream with righteous fury. Instead, his parents just stared through the bug-splattered windshield at the green countryside passing by on either side of the road.

When they returned home, Clem went to his room and climbed up through his window to his usual spot on the roof. Inside the farmhouse, he heard his parents talking, then the sound of the volume on the TV rising until it reached a level where he could no longer hear his father's voice. The door to his parents' bedroom slammed shut, and he heard Papa calling for him to help with the bunker.

Clem stood and walked cautiously toward the edge of the roof. It was a twenty-foot drop to the ground, high enough to break his neck if he went headfirst. He thought of what Pastor Darby had said about faith and how the Lord could return at any

moment and pictured himself falling through the air, his body transforming into a mangled mess of blood and bone once it hit the ground. He wondered if the Lord would take him before it came to that. Maybe once his body met the empty air, it would disappear from the earth, and a pile of his clothes would be the only thing left of him when they reached the ground. With one foot, he tested the space just beyond the precipice of the roof. The emptiness was sudden and complete, and Clem recoiled back from the edge in shame.

The distant groan of a jet engine filled the air. Clem looked up to see a long white streak cutting through the pale blue sky. He realized that it had been a plane just like this one that had killed his older brother somewhere halfway across the world. Of course, he knew it was impossible to rearrange fate and change the past, but he closed his eyes against the dead summer heat and whispered a prayer anyway. It was better, he thought, to believe in the hope of something than the promise of nothing.

He came down from the roof and changed out of his church clothes. As always, the door to his parents' bedroom was closed, but instead of passing by, Clem felt an impulse to stop and open the door. He turned the knob slowly, flinching at the sharp squeak of metal under his hand.

His mother sat on the edge of the bed, watching the TV. She was wearing her nightgown, hands folded across her lap, her bare feet rooted to the floor. On the screen, a game show host joked with contestants as the audience laughed along.

"Mama," Clem whispered, but she continued to stare at the TV. "Mama," he repeated, this time a little louder. "It's me, Clem."

She turned and looked at him with blank, uncomprehending eyes. After a moment, she shivered and pulled her arms tight around her small body before returning her attention to the TV.

Clem walked across the room to his mother. He draped a blanket across her shoulders, then closed the bedroom door behind him.

In the backyard, Papa stood at the edge of the pit, puffing on a cigarette. A pickax lay at his feet next to the bunker's discarded trap door, which had been pulled off its hinges and reduced to

a pile of splintered wood. "We need to rip the bricks out," Papa said, nodding at the hole. "That way, we can dig another ten feet on either side for maximum protection. Maybe more, if we have to."

The pit was already ten feet deep and twenty feet wide. They'd insulated the insides with multiple layers of brick and returned the tractor to the farmer from Westby. School was starting in a couple of weeks, and summer was coming to an end.

Papa didn't wait for an answer. He hopped back into the pit and continued to dig, the sweat falling off his face in big wet drops as he pushed his shovel deeper into the earth.

Clem turned away from the pit and walked past the empty chicken coops and pig pens to the barn where he found Teta standing in her stall, chewing her cud. She looked at him with large glassy eyes as he pulled up a stool to milk her, flinching at his touch, her heavy udders swollen and sensitive to his fingers. He pulled gently on her teats, expressing the milk into a bucket he held between his feet. The bucket filled with a pink, frothy liquid, and when he was finished milking the cow, Clem turned Teta out to pasture and lugged the bucket up to the farmhouse where he emptied it in the kitchen sink, filling the room with the sour smell of milk and blood.

Ayòdéjì Israel

WE SURVIVED FIREWORKS AGAIN

we walked against villages and everyone said we were mad.
soon, the sun shone its most dangerous eye on our foreheads.
i grabbed my sister's head and placed it in a cap. everything
nuclear must be feared. we saw houses that had been dilapidated.
a man neatened his black mat and placed it on the ground;
another man, in a white garment, rushed towards our bodies
and gave us a handbill, perhaps, to quench the fierce thirst
on our eyelids. we walked as legends. everything a boy goes
through makes him a legend. we are the legends of our world,
& i am a legend of this country. soon, fire became the sky's guest
and fell on the man on the mat. my mother said Heaven would
be glad to receive him—he had died in religion, like her father.
another one dropped on the man that gave us the handbill.
i watched as he rolled on the ground and yelled Jesus's name
in more than a thousand ways. we ran as if we were wolves.
nowhere was safe. no one was safe. the sky, in its dumbness
and deafness, became proud, and was closer than it had ever been.
look at me, i have an eye because i looked at the sky during a rain
of fire. when the fire escaped, we walked past people that glanced
at me as if it was God that shattered my right eye from Heaven.
nobody asked why i looked like an angry devil, but fire kept on
coming for days. my mother said Heaven also has fires, and
i asked her if it falls like rainfall; if it falls like this, too.

Gunilla T. Kester

COLANDER FRAGMENT 1

She thinks she can fool me
that old woman in the kitchen
with her knives and strong hands
as if she too isn't full of holes.

I know something about holes
how we plug them and drill them
open with toothpicks or flood
them in a deluge worthy of Noah.

I hear her mutter about her mother-in-
law who said *her* view out the window
was better than her daughter-in-law's
even as they looked out the same

window and maybe she was right
seeing her mother died in the camps?
Thunder wakes roots and they begin
to march down the street again. Rain

widows the view. I hear her tell
her daughter: *be a Viking, ʊturdy*
like the colander, and let the rain
drain through. Daughter out there

running, blinded. Boys on bicycles.
Rain widows the window. Don't
keep anything. Let birds beak
your memory. Raindrops like

holes. Colander solidly uncertain.
High-blooming pregnant daughter
loves the scent of dirt, wants
to inhale it. Mother and daughter

go back and forth exchanging one
chair for another. Like writing a word
and crossing it out. Write yourself
into a corner and fight yourself

out. Silence of thunder she thinks
she doesn't hear. Whatever she places
in me for safekeeping, I'll store. I know
that what she wants, wants her too

all those lost people. Her work resembles
mine as she wrestles with words rinsing
them at her sinking desk. Writes them
trusting they will recover the whole.

Raphael Badagliacca

Nonfiction

A TRIP TO KOSOVO

The armed conflict between the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Kosovo Liberation Army raged from the end of February 1998 through the middle of June 1999. Spurred by longstanding ethnic tensions, it was marked by untold destruction and charges of genocide. Thousands fled from Kosovo to Albania. It ended when NATO intervened with air strikes.

It was not unusual for the phone to ring at 5 a.m. in the Gashi house. Matt Gashi, an internist with a growing practice, received his share of emergency phone calls. It took a moment for him to recognize the voice of his older brother speaking Albanian. His last conversation before going to bed had been with his two sons on the subject of keeping the language alive in the home, something they resisted with passion. Now, in a semi-dream state, he thought his brother was joining the debate in his defense.

But his brother had a more pressing concern. His son had cancer. Details were sketchy. It might be lymphoma or testicular cancer. Now seventeen years old, the boy held a special place in the family's affections, reserved for the first grandson. When Dr. Gashi had last seen his nephew, the boy was only four years old.

He had been misdiagnosed several times since feeling pain in his lower back more than a year ago. The local doctors thought he had suffered back strain and prescribed rest. Now he had a great bulge across his midriff. He could no longer stand or raise his arms. He could only sit in one position with arms folded, leaning forward. His father had been told that without special attention his son would die.

The year was 2000. Matt Gashi had not been back to his native land for thirteen years. Since the arrival of NATO forces, there were rumors of kidnappings and lingering sniper activity. The confusion and unpredictability of the conflict had ignited an explosion of paperwork and uncertainty as to what actually constituted an official document. Even if he made the trip with the intention of bringing back his nephew, requirements for

passage out of Kosovo and to the United States were unclear, even for those in a position to make decisions.

As he listened, Dr. Gashi tried to summon up options. Could he send medication? Could he get his nephew to Italy or Turkey? The Red Cross would have to be involved, or the local church organization. The paperwork would be difficult to arrange. He waited two days for the outcome of a planned biopsy. Then word reached him that it could not be performed because the hospital's scanning equipment had been deliberately destroyed in the war's final rampage.

The violent actions on the hospital grounds as NATO forces approached were a concentrated expression of ten years of destruction visited upon the Kosovar medical infrastructure. During those years, many Albanian doctors had been killed.

His nephew needed a CT-guided biopsy. Without the scanning equipment, that was impossible. The blood work pointed to testicular cancer, but without the biopsy, he could not tell whether the cells indicated seminoma or non-seminoma. The former was highly treatable, with an 80 percent chance of a complete cure, while the latter did not have the same prognosis.

The boy had been a refugee surrounded by war since the age of seven. He had traveled on foot through endless military checkpoints. Once, he was held for ten hours by a "paramilitary" band that separated the young boys. Luckily, one of his captors found a few bills in his pocket, and let him go. Any thug with a weapon could terrorize or kill without fear of reprisal. Mass graves continued to be uncovered.

Ironically, his chances of survival were greater today, despite the cancer. But doubly ironic, with his country at cautious peace, the inability to get the right treatment would mean his certain death. Days later, as the plane descended, Dr. Gashi saw military personnel and materiel everywhere. Russian officers met the passengers on the tarmac. The Russian flag flew prominently.

NATO policemen and vehicles peppered the Russian presence. Beyond the barbed wire fence, which separated the airport from the main road, burned-out houses lined the road. A sign in several languages demanded that airport occupants declare their weapons; the obvious assumption—that everyone will be carrying a weapon.

A UN policeman from Bangladesh reviewed Dr. Gashi's passport. "Are you traveling on business or pleasure," he wanted to know. Matt Gashi had no answer to this question.

He saw his mother's brother approaching. They exchanged warm greetings. He had not seen his uncle since his own wedding day. This man had been CEO of a major construction company with more than a thousand employees. He was well educated, with a master's degree in architecture. He had built roads and bridges in Kosovo before the conflict sent him into hiding. Now, he was back at the head of his company, looking healthy and expansive. He had his son with him. The boy wore a ponytail. In all of his years in Kosovo, Dr. Gashi had never seen a "respectable" young man with a ponytail, and everything he knew about this uncle contradicted such tolerance.

Out came the inevitable Davidoff cigarette, a greeting offered in the first few minutes of every conversation those days. The intense activity on streets familiar to him was entirely foreign to the doctor's image of his homeland. Restaurants were everywhere—people eating, drinking, smoking. Where was all the money coming from? His uncle commented on how the number of cars had increased before traffic regulations to accommodate them. Many died in the chaos on the roads, casualties of the sudden peace.

As their car wound its way through the pedestrians, Dr. Gashi drew a quick conclusion. Everyone was in a rush to make up for lost time. The war had taken away so much. The smoking, the drinking, the loud music, the new restaurants, the astonishing number of cars all against the backdrop of burned-out buildings.

"It's not like this in the countryside," his uncle assured him. "There, you will see the effects of the war." But wasn't all of this also an effect of the war?

Four Russian soldiers passed in front of the car, and his uncle took on the professional tone of a builder. "The Russians are living in tents," he said, "but the Americans are setting up structures for themselves made out of cement and steel. The people notice the difference, and it makes them happy. They feel like the Americans are building for the long term."

"The Russian soldiers," he went on, "have twelve-month stays. Many of them remain in Kosovo when their tours are over. The opportunity is greater here than at home."

Dr. Gashi's cousin was waiting at the Café Bistro, typical of the new class of upscale restaurants in Kosovo. As NATO forces arrived to secure the region, he had returned to Pristina with countless others, every one of them intent upon rebuilding. More than a thousand nonprofit organizations had arrived to help the effort. With impeccable timing, he had set up shop as a tiny version of Home Depot, providing building supplies to anyone who sought them; he had become a rich man.

Dr. Gashi stared at the red snapper on his plate. "We get fresh fish daily," the restaurateur said. The nearest ocean was three hundred miles away; before the conflict, no one ate red snapper in Kosovo. The lunch cost three hundred dollars—a monthly salary for a physician in Kosovo.

The farther behind the car left the city, the greater the proportion of unreconstructed buildings. The effects of fire were everywhere. Chimneys stood by themselves, sometimes with part of the back wall of a structure, attesting to torching from the ground. Kosovo was traditionally a country rich in agriculture. Dr. Gashi remembered golden fields of wheat. Corn and potatoes were plentiful. But now he saw only weeds and the neglect of war.

Everyone in Kosovo had a cell phone now. His uncle punched out the number of Dr. Gashi's oldest brother. They would plan a point of rendezvous, where Matt Gashi would move to his brother's car, and then on to see his nephew.

His brother was forty-eight years old, a high school geography teacher, with a strong attachment to his town, his students, and his country. With four children, he was the only member of the family who had not fled the homeland during the communist years. Once he had made it as far as Austria, but then returned for reasons he could not quite articulate. He believed in nonviolence.

During the war, he had been declared missing. Twice, they had burned his house, reducing a three-story dwelling to a single-story shell. Separated from his family, he hid in the woods for three months with a band of men who survived on berries and whatever else they could find. In tears, he had watched his wife and children marched off toward the south through a long corridor of Serbian militia, spaced fifty yards apart, holding machine guns.

At great danger to himself, he returned to stand in front of his ruined house after darkness. Something moved. It was the family dog. She paused to look at her owner, seemingly without recognition, and made an unforgettable, un-dog-like sound, full of sorrow. She disappeared into the darkness, never to be seen again.

Ten times they would try to escape from the forest, but hostile forces were just too plentiful and unpredictable. Lacking food and suffering from exposure, the men reached the conclusion that they would die in the woods.

His brother seemed older than he had expected. In the first few moments, they embraced but said nothing. He was grateful to his younger brother for coming. Dr. Gashi braced for the underlying feelings (not sure whether they came from his brother or himself) that accused him of using his education to escape the circumstances of his homeland, but they did not come this time.

"How is he?" he asked.

His brother shrugged and gave an expression that said in the most serious way: "You tell me?"

He lived with his family in a small farm community. Many residents had returned to rebuild their homes, to make them bigger than before, acts of defiance. They left the burned-out shells of their former houses standing next to their newer creations as proof of what they had overcome.

Understandably, his brother was more interested in talking about the reclamation than the conflict. The first wave of trucks, he explained, brought back the refugees. The second wave brought furniture of every type. The third wave brought electronics.

Then his brother mentioned something he had already noticed—the wild proliferation of gas stations with big commercial names: Chevron, Texaco, BP. For some stretches, there seemed to be another gas station every mile. The franchises, or at least the signage, must be easy to come by.

Despite the occasional new house, scenes of ruined farms predominated, fields left fallow by conflict. "It's quicker and easier to build houses and import computer systems," his brother—the teacher—pointed out, "than revive an agriculture like we once had."

They arrived at the house in the late afternoon.

His nephew was watching television in a darkened room. He could not stand up to greet his uncle. The usual comments about how different you are and how tall you've grown and how long it has been were impossible in these circumstances.

At six-foot-two-inches tall, he was barely one hundred and twenty pounds. The doctor's first instinct was to discover what he could by feeling. He found a mass about eight inches in size around the umbilical area. The boy did not make a sound out of respect for his uncle, the doctor, but he was in great pain. He was in great pain all the time. His nineteen-year-old sister, a nurse, had been giving him regular injections of a drug Dr. Gashi had never heard of, probably a form of morphine, prescribed by a local doctor.

His pulse was rapid from dehydration and the pain. He had no freedom to urinate. He could not eat. The boy retold the story of how he had felt pain in his testicles more than a year ago. As he listened, Dr. Gashi could not help but consider how different this experience was from the routine of his office. In ten years of practice, he had never seen a patient who had not first filled out a form. In a sense, this was the ultimate house call.

A rush of thoughts crowded the doctor's mind. What if the cancer had reached the lungs? What if it had reached the adrenal gland? What if it had reached the brain? Most diagnoses of testicular cancer were six months late because of the insidious nature of the illness, which often presents itself as lower back pain. But this diagnosis was more than fourteen months late. How much later would treatment be delayed if the passage could not be arranged?

He was not in the habit of giving false hope, but this time he heard himself assuring everyone that everything would be all right. There was something familiar in the room—but without the usual neutralizing factors built into the very structure and look of medical offices and hospitals—and possibly because this was his nephew, Dr. Gashi could let himself feel it in all of its depth and strength: It was fear.

In the morning, his eighty-seven-year-old aunt came by to see Dr. Gashi. She was severely bent under the effects of osteoporosis. She walked with a cane and had not been able to

look up for more than twenty-five years. He remembered her this way, dressed exactly as she was now—all in black with a bandanna on her head. Somehow, she too had made the two-hundred-mile walk to Albania.

"Whenever I see an American soldier," she said, "I blow him a kiss."

Dr. Gashi went to express his condolences to another uncle who had lost his daughter, her husband, and their two children to a NATO bomb. He was in poor health and looked exceedingly unhappy. He explained to his nephew that though he felt a pain every day that would never go away, he felt no resentment, only sadness he was sure would never end.

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Dr. Gashi made his way back to Pristina. He visited the International Office of Migration to attempt to secure some kind of traveling document for his nephew. He was told that there was a three-month wait. When he explained the urgency of the situation, the official responded that there were thousands of children in severe circumstances requiring medical attention—from cancer to lost limbs to blindness from fire.

He did not deliver this piece of information in a matter-of-fact way, but as a simple reality that burdened him too. Dr. Gashi identified with the official. How often were doctors everywhere forced to find a way to look into imploring faces and get across that there are some realities that even the doctor can't change, no matter how much you have trusted him up until this point? Nevertheless, the official proceeded to ask a few details, stamp a piece of paper, and hand it back to the doctor.

He approached a thick, bullet-proof glass at the American Center. "I am an American physician from New Jersey of Kosovar birth," he explained.

"Then you are at home twice here at the American Center," the official behind the glass replied, as if representing the local chamber of commerce.

"My nephew has testicular cancer, and unless I help him, he is going to die," Dr. Gashi continued. The words came out of his mouth in a rush, but they seemed to reach the official slowly, one

by one, like coins dropped into a vending machine. He thought the man winced slightly at the mention of "testicular cancer," but he couldn't be sure.

Dr. Gashi brought out a collection of letters from medical colleagues in the United States promising care for his nephew at no charge. He knew that the necessary approvals would not be granted if there seemed to be a chance that the boy would become a financial burden. It was another irony of history that while the country was under communist rule, passage to the United States was easily granted; but now that the country had been liberated, even the best of reasons might not be sufficient.

After some hesitation, the official announced that Skopje, in Macedonia, was the nearest spot from which a visa might be issued. "But if you go there," he explained, "you very likely will not return alive."

The fighting continued to rage in Macedonia. There were travel restrictions for Americans. For whatever reason, the official announced that the Center would take care of getting the request to Skopje.

"We're not sure how long it will take," he said.

From the American Center, Dr. Gashi went to the university hospital.

"How disturbed are you that my nephew went undiagnosed?" he asked the one doctor, a former classmate, who had finally pinpointed the seriousness of the situation.

"Two years ago," he responded, "we were refugees hiding in the hills, and now you're surprised that our health system doesn't meet your expectations. Come back in a hundred years."

The doctor invited him to tour the emergency room. He pointed to spots where vital equipment used every day before the conflict was now missing.

"If you have a heart attack here," the doctor explained, "you won't live." Many doctors had returned, but they were without devices you would find in any modern hospital. Drugs were expensive. The average person could not afford them. And often, the patients did not survive the waiting time for test results.

"Plus, there are new factors," his colleague reported. Prior to the war, Kosovo had experienced exactly three cases of AIDS;

now there were thousands. Before, there was virtually no drug addiction; now there are drug clinics.

Dr. Gashi left the hospital in the harsh light of the early afternoon. In conversations with his colleague, he had confirmed his own feelings—that at this late stage, there was no hope for his nephew unless he could get him out of the country.

He also felt the pervasiveness of the war's effects. There had been so much dying. The feeling that if you did not die of this, then you would die of something else, and that all deaths were equal. Maybe that was the truth of the matter everywhere, a fact that modern medicine battled to shield us from every day, even the doctors.

He went into a local store to purchase some Albanian music as a souvenir of the trip. The proprietor told him that he no longer carried Albanian music. He had Eminem and any rap artist from America that you might want. He also had British groups.

He left the store empty-handed and set out to look for an art gallery he remembered from his school days. He was disappointed to find it had been turned into a supermarket.

Four days passed. Each day, he checked with the American Center only to find that the visa had not yet arrived. Finally, Dr. Gashi was forced to return to the United States and his own patients without knowing if or when his nephew would be allowed to leave the country. As he prepared for departure, he resolved to come back in a week or ten days.

He had six hours before the plane would leave. He stopped at a fruit stand to select a few oranges and apples.

"Haven't seen you around here," said the owner of the stand.

"I am a doctor from the United States," Dr. Gashi responded. "I'm trying to help my nephew—he has serious cancer."

The owner disappeared for a moment behind the fruit and came up holding a sheaf of papers.

"Please, Doctor," he said, holding out the papers, "my wife is upstairs dying. Can you help her?"

The writing was in German, a language Dr. Gashi did not speak. He could not bring himself to say that in a few hours he would be on a plane heading . . . He could not bring himself to say the word "home."

"I was advised to take her to Austria," the man said. "I knew we couldn't get the papers they would ask for at the airport, so we drove the entire way—nineteen hours." That alone, Dr. Gashi thought, probably compromised the patient. Knowing that there was nothing he could do for the woman in these circumstances, Dr. Gashi still followed the husband up the dark, narrow stairway.

"I spent fifty thousand marks," he stopped and turned around to say. "When my money was gone, they discharged her."

Propped against two pillows, almost expressionless with her eyes wide open, she lay there, a twenty-nine-year-old woman in an advanced stage of cervical cancer. She was very pale—hopelessly resigned, attractive despite her illness—in the failing light, which stupidly made it all seem even more tragic.

Dr. Gashi took her pulse and felt her forehead, and did a few other useless things as if he were an actor who had been drawn out of the audience to play the part of a doctor. He told the husband he should inquire about oxygen and a blood transfusion, two near impossibilities in Kosovo, and then something manageable—fluids, his wife should have plenty of fluids.

He reached out to shake the man's hand but ended up holding it.

For lunch, he went to the Hotel California, housed in a large pink building. It had been recommended to him as a spot where Americans liked to gather. The formula was simple: French fries, burgers, and American music.

After lunch, he drove ten miles to the Adem Jashari Compound. Upon hearing that tanks were on their way to his village, Adem Jashari had returned to his home with his entire family. Rather than flee, he fought, setting an example of Kosovar resistance that quickly transformed into myth. Every member of the family died in the battle that followed, including a two-month-old infant. The house has been preserved as a museum, complete with bullet holes in the walls.

Dr. Gashi signed the guest book with these words: *Me mire me vdek se sa te jetosh ne roberi*, which means "Give me liberty or give me death."

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Epilogue

Armend Gashi got the liberty he needed. His visa came through within days of his uncle's departure. He made the trip to America safely on his own. Under the direction of Dr. Gashi and his colleagues, he underwent chemotherapy at Clara Maass Hospital in New Jersey. While success was not assured, his prognosis improved considerably.

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Two Years Earlier

During the two-hundred-mile trek into Albania, sometimes clouds hung low in the leaden sky; other times the sun shined against a bright blue background, mocking the mood of the refugees. They walked through the countryside; they walked on the roads, some of which dated back to their Roman engineers; in simpler times, it was rumored that artifacts had been found lying in the weeds from a disputed Illyrian past.

They had been walking for days. Some had died along the way.

Twenty people stood and sat, leaning over each other on the wheeled attachment to a tractor moving at a few kilometers per hour. A woman carrying a baby and holding the hand of her three-year-old who held the hand of her six-year-old turned at the sound of the approaching vehicle, first with fear and then a gesture—arm extended, hand palm upward.

The tractor slowed to a stop, eliciting violent sounds of protest from the people on the vehicle.

There's no room for anyone else! There's not an inch to spare! We're already moving too slowly! The enemy is not far behind. Come to your senses!

The driver stepped down from the tractor. He looked at the woman and her children and announced to the passengers: *Whoever doesn't want to let these people on can get off here.* They found room.

This part of the story was told by the woman herself, years later. She identified the driver of the tractor as Armend, Dr. Gashi's nephew, who was then fifteen years old, two years before he was diagnosed with cancer

If the world can be saved, it will be by small acts of kindness.

CP Nwankwo

THE ORACLE OF DEAD THINGS

In this city —
we plug into god, breath by breath, splitting libation, for the uniquity
of things unalive. even the bullet has held more hands in worship,
more songs in dispersal, like roads jeered with vestiges of warfare.
point to the quietude scrawled in scraps of grief, & in haggard graffiti —
bones cleaved from flesh, & flesh sated with death. hewn by time,
we bade the gravesides in half-throated hymns, stripped our teeth
of jubilees, & scurried elegies like the shovel that shoves the dead.
but in war, who salves the woes? we rattle our blood –baited or
unbaited– something to pelt at god. & to riffle our souls. at least,
there's reawakening with whatever wets us awake. but sanity only
thrives inside a dreamscape. aren't we enthralled by dawn? I mean —
at dawn, gun sprouts again, bearing unforgiveness. we lean unto
freedom like sleep mounted on one eye. bet we know nothing
of roses, 'cause nectar merges with silence. & the streets arched
with ashes, the isarithms of spectral enclaves. bet no poem defines
the weighted hour of muffled voices. we wear this old town of
howitzers, & the creases of crank airstrikes, ranking our homes by
a penury of bravery. but if tomorrow comes, let it be a naked
emblem — fetching God, & facing war with clean amity.

Vantages Of god Rocking Muscles In The Regime End Of Country & Bones

> "over 18 million Sudanese now face acute hunger, with 5 million on the brink of famine" —*The Cable*, April 15, 2024

to begin a life as something backhanded, silence dotted, draped in acute hunger—

the news hawked its gaze again on our aching souls. the shape of bowls shrieking in emptiness. there's death for everyone with a blue smile. the land thwacks hard with music in a dark cavern. we danced pyrrhic, dressed in satin white, our legs chasing bullets. whiteness veins blue. a boy with ultra-violence in his blood. his bowl lacked the stamina to hold hope beneath a rattling sun. once a rosemary before ruin, chlorophyll still sketching—a home lit by the experiment of light. history is a mirth in wartime, the light that preps a satin girl to wear glory & burn out too fast. pistol is a small vigil behind one eye. graveling a gaping hole beside a fetor grave. our breaths have broken amen a thousand times. this is life. the undercurrent. the underside. the hysteria eating deep in the Jazz made of guns. vantages of god rocking muscles in the regime end of country & bones. before the talons gripped us like bitter grenades mid-phlegmatic run. our deaths have long prowled mischief in the mouth of our minds. look what harvests here: *lilac bodies on scrawny podiums. citrus blood thrumming in gangrenes. flaky skins dried like the crumbs of an agege bread*. survival is a mishmash of souls trailing the curse of a horizon. like edema suppressing reality & reality failing to droop pollens on our scars. this penury sharpens knives like the gusto of a slaughterhouse. killing everything with the intent to travel with breath. our salivas have savoured the tastebuds to initiate a meal. to dance tethered with the agony snapping fingers in death rows. of what kind of bloom gather bellies in disarray? somehow, a bullet satisfies hunger faster, just to escape the grief in lanky burning. here, little bones cruft into demeanours meant for elders, dyeing innocence with the portraiture of a raving blackout. god's boutades lingering in bloodshed. but if peonies of salvation ever bloom in this country, let it garden the remnants left in abysmal fractions.

Robert René Galván

KINDLING

I was torn between two feelings,
laughter and bitterness.
—Mahmoud al-Jabri

The poet found his own book for sale as kindling
in the outdoor thieves' market in Gaza
where people are compelled to buy back
their own looted belongings:

Pots, pans, and toilets,
shoes and poetry—

When he walked away in disgust,
the vendor chased him down
and offered to lower the price
from 5 shekels*,

But he declined and abandoned
his words to search for bread
in the rubble.

*5 shekels = $1

J.M. Munn

Fiction

THE LAST GIFT

The red headscarf poked from the rubble, waving in the breeze like a burned hand. Buildings reared to either side of the broken, bleached ribcage within which Yasmine watched, poised, recounting stories of sleeping giants that fed on children.

She waved back at the headscarf from behind a concrete blockade. It had been snatched from her. The ghost of its soft chiffon and golden embroidery between her fingers set them to tickling. It was beautiful, this last gift from Father. People would gasp at her beauty whenever she wore it—a Syrian princess out of legend, they'd say.

"*Hira*," Father had said. "It's cut from the tapestry within God's Kingdom, Hira. For as long as you wear this, He'll keep you safe from harm."

She estimated the distance across the square in footsteps, tallying on soot-blackened fingers, recalling how, just hours before, when she had crossed the square with Mother and Ibrahim, time had become one long, indrawn breath.

Her ears still rang from the mine blast they'd triggered. From her brother's screams as he clutched at the stump of his leg. Now, a deceptive silence lay upon Martyr's Square that only made the noises echo louder in her head, an inescapable roaring she ground her teeth against, wondering if it would ever stop.

The headscarf could still save Ibrahim as it had saved her. She'd watched it whip away amidst the black smoke of the aftermath, like the kites they'd once flown here with Father. Yet, somehow, there it lay, returned.

"*Qaḍar*," she whispered. Divine providence. If she were quick, perhaps no one would notice her disappearance. Perhaps Ibrahim . . .

Yasmine swallowed. It was said that Homs was a city that didn't tolerate hope. She took a tentative step out into the daylight, foot crunching on powdered rubble and discarded bullet casings. The breeze tousled her dark hair, still damp with Mother's tears.

"Hira," it seemed to sigh.

She moved faster. The prayers stitched into the hem rippled, beckoning.

So close, Father, I'm so close.

Her fingers brushed the delicate fabric even as a red bead of light appeared, shaking on the back of her hand.

She started, then was seized around the waist. A retort shattered the air, resounding through the square like departing thunder.

There was falling. And dust. Atop her in a half embrace was a man she recognized.

"Bashir?"

His eyes were hooded. Empty. Blood dripped from his forehead onto hers. She blinked, turned to look at the headscarf gripped in her trembling fist.

Phantom-like shouts and the scuffle of boots, obscured in a haze of exchanged gunfire. The resistance, risen out of the tunnels beneath Homs's streets. Come for her, perhaps.

The headscarf felt sticky-wet. But it was *hers* again. Yasmine freed her arms enough to wrap it around her head, its vermilion now stained a deep burgundy. It didn't matter anymore. It was perfect. It would *always* be perfect.

"Qadar," she whispered into the storm of bodies and bullets.

She'd never let it go again.

Lisa Mullenneaux

ALEPPO

Inside its reddish hull
the sweet green meat
of a ripe pistachio.

He was a beetle scurrying
under the lemon boughs,
gathering the lush pink petals

of the Damask roses
so that teta could make her attar
and feel clean in mind and body.

Now teta's garden whispers
in twenty tongues of green,
fervid in memory

as he floats out to sleep
like an unmoored dinghy
or when he drinks

his morning coffee
in a London flat hunched
next to the propane heater.

He had not noticed teta's tears
as she watched his beetle games
and now he cannot ask.

He hugs the hot mug
to warm his hands
as he hugged the bollard

on the German rescue ship,
bringing him to a country
he would never call home.

Tedde Morrison

Nonfiction

WITHDRAWAL

A 3 a.m. call from someone you served with. You steel yourself for the worst, ready to talk some poor fuck out of killing themselves, trying to remember how much gas is in the car if you need to drive across the country to get the guns out of the house while you find them some mental healthcare. Nine times out of ten, it's drunk nostalgia, but it's not worth ignoring the call in case this time it's the big sad. The sleep-funeral tradeoff isn't a deal worth taking.

"Morrison, what languages do you speak?"

What? You've heard this question a thousand times before—from neighbors who can't communicate with day laborers, during first dates, in job interviews, from men trying to catch a woman in a lie. Anyway, your friend probably wants to show off to some girl, wants to ask you how to call her beautiful because she's Lebanese, and he thinks saying it in Arabic will win her over.

You rattle off the few phrases you know just enough of to get by.

"Hold on." *What's going on? It doesn't sound like a bar in the background.*

"Yeah, okay, yeah, Arabic will work."

Suddenly a different voice is on the phone, saying, "Okay, we have an unaccompanied feather, two chargers [a female with two children] who need to get to KHIA." He tells your friend to text you something, before continuing, "Mark's sending you the map. She needs to get to Glory Gate. Download WhatsApp and call her at 093-xx-yyyyyyy."

Your friend's back on the phone. "Hey, thanks for picking up. She's my terp's wife. He just wants to make sure they're safe."

Three weeks prior, Congress approved the ALLIES act, a bill that would grant Special Immigrant Visas—SIVs—to Afghan interpreters who had worked for the United States during our twenty years in their country. They would be allowed to bring their families and work into the United States after being vetted. In the meantime, they'd be airlifted out of Afghanistan to a

processing facility. From everything you'd seen on the news, it was a shit show.

So, you call this woman, not knowing her name, and you talk to each other in broken Arabic. It was clear she only knew the language from hearing the Quran recited, so you try to remember your most biblical vocabulary words. She didn't want to speak to a *mahram*, a man she's not related to, more than necessary, so making sure you get this right is crucial. Getting her past the growing number of Taliban checkpoints is the least you can do for a family who risked their lives in service of this bullshit neo-imperialist nation-building experiment.

You're off the phone but texting with this woman using Google Translate. She's terrified. You're more awake than you've been since your last deployment, checking Twitter, checking Snapchat Maps, checking terrorist channels on Telegram, making sure whatever information you're giving her is as up to date as possible. By the time you get the message that she made it to the airport, you're relieved only long enough to get back to the handful of other women you're now trying to guide.

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It seems like it happened that way for everyone, a single phone call or Facebook message from an old colleague or an interpreter you worked with on deployment, and suddenly you're all in. Maybe it's the thrill of a mission without knee pain, maybe it's penance, maybe it's just because you're a human being on this earth, and what do we have if we don't have each other.

In any case, you spend the next two weeks frantically updating maps, tracking the Taliban's movements across growing swaths of the country, talking to women who don't know where to go, yelling at lance corporals who can barely hear you over the crowd to *please, let this one in*. You have an Afghan phone number now because you know the Taliban checks phones for American country codes at their checkpoints, and you're not going to be the reason somebody gets shot.

You spend your days, nights in Afghanistan, calling and emailing every politician you can think of. A friend's mom knows the Secretary of Agriculture. Good enough. He seems empathetic

on the phone call, but you know there's not much he can do. You email all 535 members of Congress and only hear back from a staffer for Elizabeth Warren.

You'd sleep if there was time, but whenever you try to, you think of the photo of the girl with the burns on her face, the one her mother sent you to explain why they'd turned back to go home instead of pressing forward to the airport, and you open your computer to see if there's something else you can do. You get a corpsman to agree to see the little girl if they make it to the airport. A plastic surgeon stateside offers to treat her for free if she makes it here. You use these two slivers of hope to try to convince her mom to try again because you know they only have a few days before there's no chance of this girl ever going to school or having the opportunities you had because of the freak happenstance of your birthplace. Is this patriotism? No, probably not. In the end, they don't make it out of the country. This will probably weigh on you later.

The weight of all of it, all these women and children who, if they do manage to sneak past the Taliban checkpoints, don't have water or food.

The weight of the crying babies and the worn-down shoes.

The weight of these people carrying everything they'll own for the foreseeable future on their backs.

It all compresses into anger.

You're angry at the Taliban for not letting the girls read, angry that they're the only option for thousands of young men in the country. You're angry at every senator and congressional rep, and you're angry at Joe Biden and Jake Sullivan and Anthony Blinken, and you're really, really fucking angry at Trump, the architect of this whole terrible plan.

But there's no room for this anger when you're trying to be reassuring and calming for people running for their lives. You're surprised by how many of them are US citizens. At this point, only citizens and green card holders are allowed on the flights. There's no signage at the gate letting people know this. A friend mocks some up, and you have them translated into every language you think might be relevant. You send them to the Marine detachment at the airport, but they're still not up. You

know they're busy, but you also know their jobs might be a little bit easier if they'd just hang your signs.

You start hearing from the families who made it inside the gate that they've been sitting on hot tarmac for hours with no water. You know a Marine in supply. He's probably high ranking enough by now to make a difference. He helps you find somebody downrange, or maybe somebody at one of the bases the flights are going back and forth between, and they get some pallets of water in. Hey, you finally made a difference. They might die at the hands of the Taliban or hanging off an airplane, but they're not going to die of dehydration—not today.

One of the women who did make it out is in Qatar, in one of the buildings that's been turned into a bay that you imagine like something between boot camp and the Red Cross evacuation shelter where you volunteered during hurricanes.

"Something's wrong with her," a voice you've never heard before says in English. "She needs a doctor, and we can't find one."

You remember somebody you worked with as a civilian moved to Doha, and you call her. She knows somebody on base. You call them, and they know somebody who works in the medical center. Eventually, after enough calls, you get a doctor. You describe the woman's symptoms and where exactly she is. You hear later that she needed emergency surgery, and you're grateful to your friend in Doha.

When the last plane departs Kabul on August 30, you feel a new combination of fury and worry and exhaustion. There are still so many people. You see their faces in the videos the people left behind send you. You don't know what to tell them. Maybe a civilian flight will come. Maybe, if they still have internet, they can send you their immigration paperwork, and you'll try to get it filed for them. You don't know how they'll get out of the country. You can't think about it. You need a shower and some food and a nap. You'll probably sleep for a thousand years.

In the meantime, you and everyone else tell each other, "We tried our best" and "The work isn't over." Both feel like lies.

You keep track of everyone you can, so you know they're safe. It lasts for a few days or weeks or months, and you can't hold onto that new phone number forever. Eventually they all fade away

along with the memory that any of this was even real. You won't remember most of it until you go through some old messages to try to write something up. You don't want to remember a lot of what you do. Vicarious trauma will fill you with guilt for feeling bad about something that didn't happen to you. You're grateful for the religious charities doing so much for the resettlement efforts. You keep telling yourself you'll help, but you get busy. So, so many people need help.

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A couple of years later, you move into a new house and meet the neighbors. They're from Afghanistan. They left during the withdrawal. You want to gather them into your arms and never let them go because they're here and they're safe and *at least this family made it*, but you're not a weirdo, so you say it's nice to meet them. Your dad, elderly and disabled, has moved in with you, and the father of this family comes over to watch cricket with him when Afghanistan plays. You talk to his wife and find out that they still don't have green cards. They're still here temporarily.

So, you take the LSAT and start going to school because it's only three years and their next immigration appointment isn't for four. Why does it take so long? You don't tell the family this is why you're studying immigration law.

The wife comes over when there are tornado sirens, and she's scared. Her children are at school, and her husband is at work. The kids' English is almost better than yours by now. You worry about her husband who works at a meat packing plant that's notorious for abusing refugees, so you remember to sign up for Labor & Employment Law next semester. In the meantime, you share a pot of tea with the wife, and you remember that we didn't do enough. We continue to not do enough.

There's that weight again.

Maybe Elizabeth Warren's staffer will get back to you when you email her about the Afghan Adjustment Act. It's the least we can do—if not for them, then so the veterans who tell themselves they tried their best can get some sleep.

Parisa Saranj and Fatima M.

INTRODUCTION: IT'S ABOUT HOPE

The Israeli occupation of Palestine is nothing new. Neither is the systemic erasure of the Palestinian people since the declaration of the state of Israel in 1948. But having seen the genocide of the Palestinian people reach its height in the time since October 2023, and after witnessing the widespread global protests against the atrocities, only to see the atrocities continue unabated, this translation feature seems futile. At the same time, a question gnaws at our consciousness: What else can we do but bear witness to the pain of our fellow human beings? Literature has been the first recordkeeper of what humans are capable of doing to and for each other.

The following pieces were originally written by Palestinians who were either born under Israeli apartheid or who witnessed their land being occupied. Their pain, captured in words, illuminates resilience as the only way forward—a determination to exist, to resist, and to retain their humanity in the face of unimaginable suffering.

Translation, in this context, becomes an act of solidarity. It is the only way to wield language as a tool for echoing the voice of the voiceless, ensuring their stories are heard, shared, and remembered beyond the borders of their silenced existence. These pages stand as a testament to that enduring spirit of many who are, in the words of Mona Al-Msaddar, "nameless."

We wish for the reader to take away three things. First, an understanding of the immense resilience of a people whose voices refuse to be silenced. Second, a recognition that literature has the power to transcend borders, to offer a glimpse into lives marked by struggle but also by profound humanity. For example, Sana Abu Sharar's flash fiction piece "A Moment of Truth" is an unassuming portrait of a man aware of his mortality. In truth, the unpredictability of life under apartheid, where death feels ever-present, is ungraspable for us. Finally, a poem like "Bury Your Dead and Rise" by Tawfiq Zayyad must be a reminder that bearing witness through reading, translating, and sharing these stories is not a passive act—it is an essential step toward fostering empathy and demanding justice. These pages are an invitation to engage with the truth and stand in solidarity with those who endure and, above all, to have hope.

Mona Al-Msaddar

I AM NAMELESS

Translated from Arabic by Khalid Dader

I am nameless
In the news, they call me a "bag of body remains,"
and on the journalists' social media pages,
I am "every 70 kilograms of a martyr."

I am nameless
but the neighborhood I was scattered in was called Al-Daraj—
and the staircase's purpose is simple: to lead you up and down
I ascended it with a hundred others!

I am nameless
not even an ID was found
The bag was white, packed with charred flesh.
It was my flesh and others': a metaphysical hug.
Far beyond any horror drama on Netflix
It was a button press in a Bantustan

I am nameless
No place for Nuzuh I truly know
I graduated with honors in divine displacement.
Yet I couldn't cross the "safe corridor" lined with sensors,
that slay us for the tremor of our hearts,
and legitimize raping us

I am nameless
but you all know the resonance of my scream
which may haunt those who pressed the bomb's trigger,
but will not haunt those who gave the orders
It might intrude upon neighbors and medics like a nightmare,
Or visual stimuli for trauma,
but will not haunt those who claimed genocide
a legitimate right of self-defense in Congress
while everyone applauded

Another arms deal passed
that put me in a white bag with others.
The same bag that you buy vegetables in
in a parallel world.
I fit in the bag, nameless
With no title,
not even an ID but my Palestinianness.
It was enough to be Palestinian,
so, slaying me while displaced becomes
legitimate
with no name or facial features.
It was enough for gangsters to kill my dream
and chop off my charred flesh.
And then the "world" advances condemnations
and denunciation!

I am nameless
with not a single grave marker.
Like water, my blood evaporated
but it did not seep into the Mediterranean.
It settled in our groundwater!

I am nameless
but my Palestinianness alone
is reason enough to be shattered and put in a plastic bag,
weighed with the remains of others
to at least form a normal human weight of 70 kg
in an ethnic genocide!

I am nameless
But I am Palestinian from Gaza
And my scream will haunt your sleep

Translator's Note: Al-Msaddar often uses the meanings of words in her poetry to refer to events and cultural significance of her Palestinian experience. For example, Al-Daraj, which is an Arabic word meaning staircase, refers to the events of August 2024, when Israel struck the Al-Tabaeen school located in the eastern Gaza City neighborhood of Al-Daraj, where displaced Palestinians were seeking shelter. Another example is the word Nuzuh, meaning forced displacement, which has been repeated and uttered many times by Gazans during the ongoing genocide.

Omar Hammash

Translations Feature Section

I WAS THERE

Translated from Arabic by Ibrahim Fawzy

I was there.

Was I real, or a dream treading on clouds? Was I flesh and blood, or an illusion—a mirage?

I stepped on a cotton fleece; crowds upon crowds flocked, their hands thick as forests, tearing at a screaming loaf of bread.

I descended, watching, or perhaps the clouds lowered me, into the dense and crippled hunger. I escaped, only to soar again. I noticed the pilots' awe, though they paid me no heed. I heard passing laughter and the screech of iron close by; below me stood rubble, ceilings barely elevated, only to plummet, letting loose infernal boxes.

I fell, or almost did. The crowd crumbled, the shreds of bread dipped in blood. I saw how dreams are torn apart before death, how a corpse's final act is to blossom—then wither, releasing its hold, so the dream takes flight.

I once thought dreams could breathe, and it came true. I beheld them as doves before they assumed their dove-like features, dreams that trampled the very legs of those who dreamed them.

I was there, uncertain if it was me, or my wandering dream.

Eman Masrweh

Translations Feature Section

IN SOULS, THERE ARE QUESTIONS WITH WINGS

Translated from Arabic by Dima Al-Basha and Jennifer Jean

Between your patience & a true life, there is: an epic,

the tattoo of a satisfied whip,

tears that clear the fog of nomads who left home
on the day of solidity.
My soul abandons me a bit
when I am shards—
it comes back to me a bit after
with an awakening slap
that almost takes off the right cheek.

In the coffins of a passing dream
that doesn't soften
except to stand, long & proud—

damn the life
under a sheep herder's rule! How humiliated it is!

Hashim Al-Rifa'i

Translations Feature Section

REFUGEE'S WILL

Translated from Arabic by Saed A. J. Abolebda

Tomorrow, my son, I will be covered in dusk,
Only a trace of life will be left.
Heartbroken and weighed down by anxiety.
One day, the lamp shone and burned,
His hopes dried up until he choked
Once you have buried me and shook the dust of my grave from your hand,
And you continued looking for your way to the future,
Remember the will of a father who was buried.
They stripped him of his hopes of old age and youth.

Our tragedy is a tale of innocent people,
A story whose lines boil with misery.
Carried to the horizon, the scent of blood.
I never hurt you, nor did I spare you from hurting,
But revenge is rooted in between our ribs here
I made it my sole desire
And I dyed my dreams with it upon the highlands.
I was thirsty all my life, then died longing for a drop.

We had a home, and we had a homeland,
Thrown into misery by the hands of betrayal.
We gave our all to hold it, the dearest of our wealth.
With my own hands, I buried your brother,
Shrouded only in blood and the weakness that overcame me.
If you never shed tears, it's because I bore the weight of both losses.
Two wounds in my side: grief and displacement,
A lost child and a town in torment.

Those fields over there knew you as a child,
Gathering dew and blossoms as you roamed the field.
Its gardens showered you with water and shade.
Today,
Your green meadows bow down in disgrace.
They've driven you out, so return to those who drove you out.
For there is a land your father once tilled,
And you've tasted the sweet honey of its fruits.

So why leave it now?
For the tongues of swords?

Haifa grieves. Have you not heard her moan?
And smelled the scent of lemons in summer from afar?
She weeps if she glimpses a phantom beyond the horizon.
She asks when and how the day of salvation will come.
She doesn't want you to live life as a guest.
Behind you is the land that nourishes your youth.
She wishes to see you in your prime someday.
The horrors of calamity have not made her forget you.
She sighs, but her gaze is full of reproach.

If you come to her someday with a weapon in hand
And emerge among her hills like the morning,
Then call out loudly, let the hills and plains hear:
"I am the yesterday that healed the wounds."
"Here I am, O my dear, wounded homeland."
Do you not remember me, that boy?
Whose home they burned in the dead of night?
With flames of fire around which the wolves danced.
His youth was wrapped in smoke and fog.

They'll tell you, my child, of peace,
Don't listen to their words, please.
Like a child deceived by dreams to sleep.
No peace will come, no stain, and they'll wipe clean.
I trusted them once, and they gave me a tent,
Tomorrow, my food from the kind intent
Of those who give to the hungry refugees,
Their peace is deceit, their safety a mirage.
They've spread ruin and destruction in our land.

Weep not, for the eyes of the wicked have never wept.
It is the tale of tyranny from the dawn of life.
Return to the land whose sands were treasure.
I had hoped to die upon its soil.
A hope that withered, for I had no other.
Once you have buried me and shook the dust of my grave from your hand,
And you continued searching for your way to tomorrow.
Remember the will of a father who was buried in the soil,
Whose hopes for youth and old age were stolen.

Samud Mohammed

A PASSIONATE REFUGEE

Translated from Arabic by Essam M. Al-Jassim

Before you occupied my world, I was a different woman: pampered and sumptuous. I had a thousand wings. When you invaded and your army bombed my country, I accepted you as an occupier. I handed you my home. I removed my garments of dignity and wealth. Then, I wore some provincial dress you wove for me as a dowry for accepting your settlement. I undid my lovely hairstyle and let it hang loose on my back, swaying in dancing rituals because that's the way you liked it.

Your breath permeated the ambiance of my home, in which I have become a refugee. Your soldiers wreaked havoc on my country. My wings began to break until there was only one left. I held the cane of memories and waddled feebly through an arid desert, accompanied by the agonizing past and a more painful present and a future no less barren than the desert.

I threw my cane and what had been left when my last wing was broken. I crawled heavily through my pain until I reached a country I didn't recognize. And it does not remember me either. I declared myself a passionate refugee, scented with a perfumed walking stick thrown in the middle of the desert.

Emad S. Abu Hatab

DINNER INVITATION

Translated from Arabic by Essam M. Al-Jassim

Alone, he sat by the window. It had been four months since he'd moved into this room, and still nobody knew him. The pain of loneliness overwhelmed his spirit.

An idea occurred to him: he would randomly choose twenty names from the phone book and invite them to come to dinner in two weeks. In the days that followed, he focused his efforts and attention on preparing for the party. When the time arrived, there was silence at the door. Half an hour later, however, the doorbell rang. Opening the door, he found four police officers coming to arrest him on the charge of calling for a secret anti-state meeting.

Sana Abu Sharar

A MOMENT OF TRUTH

Translated from Arabic by Essam M. Al-Jassim

"Don't wait up for me. Go to sleep," the husband said, stroking the furrowed lines across his forehead.

"Why don't you come to bed? It's so late, and you look tired," the wife replied.

"I have accounts to settle. Things I need to square up."

She glanced around the room. "But I don't see your accounting ledgers or any paperwork."

The man she had known for years looked through her as he spoke. "These accounts are not stored in computers or written on paper," he said, "They are etched in my heart and mind."

"I don't understand. What do you mean?" she asked, getting increasingly worried.

"Today, I turn fifty, and one thought consumes me. I must square up my accounts before I face my Creator. I must return to its rightful owner what does not belong to me. I need to redress the hurt I've inflicted upon people and ask forgiveness from those I've offended and wronged."

"But you're not very old. Why worry about it right now?"

"I'm also not very young! I need to assure myself a harmonious end and be prepared for my departure from this life—a departure that might come sooner rather than later."

Months later, when she bid farewell to her husband, his words returned to her as she stood before his body. Standing before Allah in this moment of truth, gooseflesh rippled across her skin as she finally understood all existence was insignificant.

Tawfiq Zayyad

Translations Feature Section

BEFORE THEY CAME

Translated from Arabic by Salma Harland

Roses bloomed
on my windowsill,
buds shooting forth.

Luxurious vines draped
a thousand verdant lattices.

My house stretched
on bundles of sunshine,
basking.

And I dreamt of bread
for everyone, I dreamt.

That was
before they came
on a bloodstained tank.

BURY YOUR DEAD AND RISE

Translated from Arabic by Salma Harland

… And we had to drink it,
our bitter hennaed cup,
to the last drop.

And we had to be butchered,
like cattle,
when history lost its mind.

And we had to flee,
a flock of chicken,
and feel the shame
seep to our bones.

But it's okay:
this flesh of ours
is a body for the salty sea,
for shores that never betrayed us
and that we never betrayed.
O soil laced with gold dust,
rubies, and ivory:
our love is stronger
than love itself
and richer.

So bury your dead and rise;
even if tomorrow loses its way
momentarily,
it won't fly away.

We aren't lost;
we've just been cast
anew.

Ahmed Bassiouny

WHEN I WALK IN GAZA, I PUT MY HANDS IN MY POCKETS

Translated from Arabic by Ibrahim Fawzy

I can't find an introduction that fits. I'm fed up with counting genocide days. The number of martyrs is high. My fingers ache. I feel as though the teeth of the dead are biting me, clutching at me; I'm a tomb for martyrs, and inside me are many, and the dunes in my heart are dry. I'm an autumn tree; my leaves fall one by one. The tomb is full. Get an axe to cut my fingers. I'm done with counting.

§

All Will Know

Strolling down the souq in al-Nuseirat, witnessing the destruction of homes and markets, I bump into our building's guard. We chitchat about the ongoing atrocities. He shares the heart-wrenching news that my house and my brother's have been bombarded. I say, "No problem. Money will come again. What really matters is souls." Material harm, rather than a dear one, as the Palestinian proverb goes in such times of destruction. "How are you and yours?" I ask.

"I'm still alive, and my wife and children are still with me," He says. "But the rest of my family has been martyred. My siblings and uncles are all gone. Our building was bombed. They exterminated us." His eyes are red.

I console him, ashamed. I share that my niece's son, along with my cousins' children, are all killed, and the fate of my niece's second son, who was kidnapped by the occupying forces, is unclear.

He consoles me. Pats my hand. I do the same, counting the number of martyrs on my hands.

"Where are you staying now?" he asks.

"Here in Az-Zawayda. Near the historical site. You?"

"I took shelter in a storehouse. The people there welcomed me in (may Allah compensate them.)" His voice wobbles.

"How do you buy what you need?"

My question seems to strike him. "I sold my phone for five hundred shekels," he replies. "And I'm spending it." I see the overburdened pride in him. "I need to feed my kids. I sold my phone. So what? Why should I keep it? Who would I call? My family's all gone. I don't want any more news. And if I became a martyr, everyone would know anyway."

§

Muhie/Mukhie

Today, Muhie is sick. A ten-person family was displaced along with us, and Muhie is their three-year-old son. He's in the very first stages of soaking up Arabic, pronouncing *ḥa* as *kha*, *ṯa* as *tha*. Arabic weeps when he speaks. We call him Mukhie, the Israeli, because the way he pronounces Arabic is like a settler learning it for the first time. Ironically, Mukhie is fair-skinned with blue eyes and blond hair. If Israeli soldiers saw him or heard him, they'd think he was a hostage.

Normally, Mukhie wakes up, greeting everyone with a cheerful "Mornin' awl," and then moves toward me, gives me a "Mornin'," too, and asks if there is any water, and Arabic weeps.

"Morning, Mukhie!" I say, smiling. "All the water is for you."

He has become the soul of the camp. He helps us chop and collect the logs. He plays with the children of the village and acts as their leader. Everyone surrounds him. But at the same time, they somehow steer clear.

Muhie's father is frightened for his children. He tries to shield their eyes from the panic and the fear. "When you see a tank, I'll let you drive it," he had once promised Muhie. And then Muhie had admonished his father. "We saw tanks and soldiers, but you didn't let me drive. You said, 'Not now.' I don't like people lying to me."

Except it didn't sound like that. Every word was mispronounced. Arabic wept. If I wrote it how he said it, you wouldn't understand.

But this is Muhie, and this is how he speaks. And the sixty of us on the farm have learned his language.

I ask Muhie's father about his promise and he says, "I don't want him to be traumatized by the tanks. So I told him I'll let him drive it if he behaves. This way, he'll think of the tank as nothing more than a car. Only when he grows up will he understand that it's the car of the dead."

But as I say, today, Muhie is sick, grappling with a stomach bug caused by contaminated water. He coughs as if a tank is marching over his chest. His lungs are hurt from the dust of the ongoing shelling. This is a child who thinks life is just a toy: He holds it, turns it over, loosens and tightens its screws, pulls at its rope, all so that he can understand its structure. The crucial point remains: Death isn't a core part of his life.

§

The Tale of Two Cancers

"A cup of coffee and some water, please. After that, I'll tell you everything." He is Abu Ali, a fifty-five-year-old man. He is new to the farm. He lost his wife and their only child after the occupation forces bombarded the house they were sheltering in for forty days. They had been martyred shortly after he was displaced.

Abu Ali had refused to leave Gaza. He had promised not to repeat his father's mistake, not to carry the stories of a third and a fourth migration on his back. So, he decided to stay in Gaza to witness the colonizer's violence. We don't like to hear about it, but we must, because collective memory is built on shared scenes, the accumulated narratives of the farmer and the land.

"As I prepare to go to bed," Abu Ali says, "I pray three prayers: the Isha Prayer, the Absentee Funeral Prayer for the martyrs, and the Night Vigil Prayer. Then I lie on my bed, and before sleep creeps over my eyelids, I place my ID in my shirt pocket and a piece of paper with my full name in my trouser pocket, just in case. If my house is bombed with me inside, and I'm torn to pieces, my name might then be found in my hand or

on foot. As death surrounded us, I took my pen and wrote my name on my hands, my feet, and my chest. I felt like a narcissist."

That night, Abu Ali's house was bombed. When the window fell onto him, thick pieces of concrete came with it and formed a pyramid over his body. So when the ceiling collapsed, the pyramid shielded him. "I don't know how I survived. What I did know was that I could no longer stay at home. I headed to al-Rantisi Hospital, where they care for children with cancer. It's become a refuge for children and families escaping two cancers: the disease and the occupation."

He continues, "When they controlled the area around al-Karama Street, and they set out from the roundabout separating al-Karama Street from al-Nasr Street, the quadcopters fired on every passerby. I don't know how I fell asleep at night. When I woke, it wasn't to the singer Fairouz's voice but the tank's muzzle hailing me at the window under which I slept. And at that moment, I realized that cancer had spread through the body of the city."

He says, "They ordered us to hold our IDs in our right hands and raise white flags in our left and exit the hospital one by one. They then directed us to walk in a straight line from al-Nasr toward al-Galaa Street until we reached the checkpoint on Salah al-Din Street, where we could pass to a safe area. I didn't comply. I veered off from al-Galaa Street toward al-Rimal to reach Shifa Hospital. As I was walking, I saw corpses thrown to the ground—men, women, children, and teens. Some had been hit by sniper fire more than once. Some had been shelled more than once."

He continues. "Here is a hand and a head. There, a foot and a toe. This is a shoulder. I didn't know who had once leaned against it. But it was lying on a long street today, with no one to carry it. This street was a cemetery with neither tombstones nor sand. Just corpses. Even the undertaker's corpse was lying on that street." He continues.

§

The Story Isn't a Story, Nor the Hero a Hero

I understand. I understand that we have grown accustomed to stories with happy endings or, at the very least, with a hero. Even

stories with sad endings have heroes. But here? Nothing. The story isn't a story. The hero is not a hero. Nor is Gaza the Gaza I know, the Gaza I used to tell others about.

Once, in Ramallah, a friend asked me, "Ahmad, tell me about Gaza. What color is it? How does it smell?"

"Gaza is a shelter for me and all Gazans," I replied. "The sea is ours; the streets are for us. When I walk in Gaza, I put my hands in my pockets. I know the streets. I never fear getting lost. I never expect an attack from a stranger. I stroll through Gaza in peace as though I were in my bedroom. I have wandered the streets of Cairo, Amman, Istanbul, Doha, and Ramallah with my hands in the air and nothing in my pockets except for my phone. My hands were ready for strangers. In all my life, in all my places, I have never felt safe anywhere except in Gaza."

Today, a year and a half after that answer, I say, "You might read, Ghadeer, that all the world is safer than Gaza. Today, my hands are in the air, crossed like Christ. Today, my pocket is a graveyard. When I put my hand in my pocket, my fingers embrace a martyr. Today, the stranger is here. The attack is a silent cancer. Today, I'm fed up with counting genocide days, and the tomb is full."

Margalit Katz

PANGAEA PROXIMA

You are a lost potsherd of me

a faded fossil deposit

interred & unearthed

washed up on some shore

dusted & carbon dated back to me.

You belong in no museum.

I ache to reverse time reassemble Pangaea

repair earth's first fracture

that split seam of empty aching

which left the corners of the world to curl under themselves, numb toes

on a cold day.

I want to collapse the Atlantic cave the waves back into mantle

seal the ocean floor with silt &

impel cooled pumice to ooze again

bring magma back to broil

compress caked debris

into mounds

make of tectonic plates mere slipped discs under hernia repair

& crust uncrumbled from rubble

retrograde eroded from pebble to stone

built back to boulder

ridges repaired

ask the ash of the anthill
to breathe itself back into flame
crisp & crackling
break the earth
to bring it back
to when
the land kissed.

ÁRBOL DE LA NOCHE ~~TRISTE~~ VICTORIOSA

In Popotla, a Montezuma cypress petrifies
in a wrought iron cage, smelted from *Hell* and
Purgatory, the old convent-turned-prison's solitary
confinements. Now the building is a school and
the gargoyle gnashes its teeth behind bars, howls back at arsonists.

Fossilized relic rot gone septic: orange ooze
unwashed in the causeway's drainage.
The neighbors claim that 1960
still saw foliage, until the city's mop
of tangled wires encircled it
in swords of flame.

More statue than stump, scabbed wounds
sink into the dry socket of the Earth
along the warped sidewalk, a carpet rippled in
the eager jaws of a dog. A humble plaque reads:
In the crook of this tree wept Hernán Cortés
upon defeat. 1520.

Aztec spoils molten into gold bars
sunk into the muck of the lakebed as he fled, the only
disappearance The Dirty War unearthed
from the parched phantom ensnared in the sinkhole.
The acrid tears contested. No DNA. No carbon dating
to the roots' last quench.

Crushed beer cans and cat food
litter the cracked foundation. From
small knots in the trunk ivy has crept.
Swaths cascade down the dorsal, eating away
at the horned beast of history's shadow.

Unholy drops of acid rain
poisoned the ahuehuete,
turned it diseased. The puppet president
christened it with a new name, but
couldn't quell the fungus festering
in the middle of the street.

Two men huddle at its feet,
huffing glue.
One fetal, he prostrates himself
on the horizontal axis
for the mercy of
some supposed god.

Robbie Gamble

Nonfiction

GUERNICA

Teosinte, El Salvador, August 1988

The children were delighted when I produced a set of colored pencils from my pack. They each grabbed a sheet of drawing paper and scattered to the corners of the clinic tent to find a firm surface to sketch on, sharing out the pencils as best they could. There is something nearly universal in the process by which a child transforms a blank page into the landscape of their world, beginning with the lower margin: undulating contours of browns and greens to establish the earth upon which they walk. Then a band of blue across the top to frame in the vault of the sky.

I circulated among these kids, watching their pictures evolve, helping them to swap out pencils. They filled in their world with trees and streams and squat adobe houses, then animals: cows and chickens tended by mothers and aunties, while their fathers and older brothers toiled with hoes and machetes in garden plots. When the young artists turned their attention to their sky margins, they drew a yellow-rayed sun in one corner and inverted W's for birds, as children do everywhere. But then they shifted into darker imagery, sketching ominous shark-like shapes with sharp angles and fins, which sprouted rotors and armament racks, and these helicopters began to spew streams of fire and bullets toward the ground.

The children drew terrible wounds on some of the animals and humans and added new figures lying dead on the ground or running away. They were proud of their finished pieces when they showed them to me and returned the pencils. They didn't seem at all awkward about sharing their visions of mayhem and gore, and they all ran out to join in a pickup soccer game on the muddy settlement plaza.

I realized these children, who had spent most of their young lives exiled in UN refugee camps just across the border in Honduras, had never seen a TV or a movie screen. They must have witnessed the scenes they drew, or heard stories of army atrocities firsthand from older relatives who had been violently

displaced in the brutal early campaigns of the Salvadoran Civil War. Now the remnants of the community returned as the war wound down, to rebuild bombed-out houses, clear overgrown land, plant a new season of corn and beans. The children were thrilled to be sprung outside of a perimeter of barbed wire, but they still carried the traumas of their journey within their young bodies.

Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid, February 2024

The children were awestruck as they sat in a tight cluster on the gallery floor, facing the expansive painting that dominated the room. No one was fidgeting, no one tried to distract a classmate; they hung on their teacher's every word and gesture as she pointed out significant features in Picasso's iconic artwork: the writhing horse, the broken sword, the agony of the wounded humans, the dumbfounded bull, the chaos of flames and tumbling walls. This was nothing like the cartoon violence they were used to watching on their screens at home; neon explosions and star-spangled *oofs* and *whams*; something to be snickered at and then set aside for breakfast or homework or a trip to the park. They were absolutely stunned by the traumatic weight of this looming monochrome slab, as I had been shaken thirty-five years earlier by a sheaf of kids' pencil drawings in a sweltering repatriation camp.

Picasso painted *Guernica* while living in exile in Paris, drawing his imagery from written eyewitness accounts of the bombing, and the painting now stands as one of the most powerful artistic antiwar statements in history. I might recognize *Guernica* as a familiar icon, a famous representation of an historic event, but not these kids. For them, the painting was something entirely new: a gut punch, an unequivocal message that death is real and terrible and chaotic, and it could visit from the sky at any moment, a sky drawn hostile by man-made weapons and cruel intent. Death had rained down on a Basque town in the formative years of the last century and was raining down right now on cities and families in war zones across the globe, and no well-meaning words of comfort or reason could keep this punch from reverberating through these children's empathetic bones.

Diana Davidson

Fiction

WAXWINGS AND WAR BRIDES

Emmy stands outside her farmhouse and looks up into a pink-gray afternoon light. The prairie sky feels so big. Maybe because there are no tall houses to clutter the view upwards. There are no planes with wings outstretched like storks, only clouds. Emmy walks to the end of the property and into the edge of forest. Her black-and-white cat she calls *Katje*, Dutch for "kitten," has followed her outside. The spruce trees are dressed in glittering silver hoarfrost while a few stubborn orange leaves hang like frozen flames on almost-naked poplar branches. In one tree, birds have built a nest with bundles of twigs, icy mud, and some blue string that her husband Peter uses to tie up hay bales in summer.

The packed snow squeaks under her boots.

People warned Emmy about winter in Canada: "Your eyelashes will freeze together," "Your breath will crystalize," "Your bones will ache." It is cold. But so what? What could be worse than the hunger winter? Those months before the Allies came, the canals in Amsterdam were frozen, electricity was unreliable, everything was rationed and embargoed, and the temperatures were frigid. People were so hungry they cooked tulip bulbs into a slimy broth and called it soup. People collapsed waiting in line for hunks of old bread. People starved to death in the middle of Amsterdam. Emmy survived because her parents owned a café on Dapperstraat. The Dutch National Socialist Party took it over as a meeting place and stocked the café with supplies. Mam skimmed what she could to feed her family and, sometimes, other people on the street. Mam did what had to be done.

Emmy crosses her arms around her stomach.

There is so much food here that Emmy feels guilty. Not that she has much appetite. She wakes up most mornings with a mouthful of bile and a fluttering in her belly. She worries the baby isn't growing because she can barely keep food down. Dr. Farnsworth assured her "everything is progressing as it should." She craves coffee and chocolate, but everything else makes her retch. She hasn't even been collecting eggs from the chicken coup because of the stench. She is thankful that during Christmas people invited Peter for dinner

and sent food home. People are nice here. They think she's shy, but even as her English improves, she keeps to herself. There is another Dutch girl down the road, Cora from Rotterdam, who also married a Canadian soldier. Emmy doubts they would be friends if they had both stayed in Amsterdam. Cora is generous and fun, but she is not a very serious person at times. She does not talk about the past or the future; she lives in the moment. Cora goes where the wind takes her and just happened to get swept away to Canada with her husband George. Still, Emmy is thankful Cora is here.

It starts to snow, and the flakes glimmer as they tumble.

She hopes the roads are okay. After lunch, Peter drove to town to cash his annual dividend check at the Co-op. He wanted her to come with him, said, "It would do you good," but just thinking about riding on the bumpy gravel for thirty miles makes her insides churn. She is surprised to still be sick this far into her pregnancy, but Dr. Farnsworth told her, "Some women just have bad luck that way." Peter's mother told Emmy that "girls make you sick, and boys make you glow," and Emmy tends to agree with her that it is likely the baby is a girl. She doesn't really care one way or the other: She just wants the baby to be healthy and plump. The child should arrive in May. It is late February, so only a few more months to wait. At home in Holland, tulip bulbs would be sprouting out of the dirt and it would feel like spring. There is so much snow here still, but at least it is warm enough to walk outside this afternoon.

Emmy takes in a deep breath and walks farther into the brush. It is quiet and still. She always imagined snow would look like a blank canvas, but even when it is fresh, it sparkles with tiny dots of color. And after a day or a night, snow holds tracks and footsteps, dirt and debris. She looks down and sees streaks of red on white. Panic flushes up her torso and across her cheeks. She tells herself: "I don't feel wet, the baby is fine. But whose blood is in the snow? Perhaps Katje killed a mouse here? Maybe an owl found a vole? Could be that a jackrabbit met its fate by a hungry coyote and this is what remains?" It is not her blood. She wishes she could stop worrying, stop thinking the worst. She needs to get control of her thoughts. She can hear Mam's voice in her head: "What do you have to worry about? You have a nice husband and your own house and more food than you can eat. You left us so you could have this life with your soldier in Canada."

A small white-and-gray bird with a yellow tuft on its head and red-tipped wings swoops into her peripheral. In Dutch, this bird is called *pestvogel*. The waxwing carries a branch of crimson berries in its beak. Two berries drop, and even though they are half-frozen, the berries burst red when they hit the compacted snow. Emmy sighs in relief.

Peter has told her that waxwings sometimes get drunk on the fermenting berries in late winter. He laughed when describing how they dip and dive in the sky without a care in the world. Emmy wonders if the bird who drops the berries is tipsy. Maybe the waxwing is careless, or maybe she is just in a hurry.

Emmy watches the bird fly away. The sun hangs lower in the sky and approaches the horizon. This is the liminal space between day and night, light and dark. A between time, like the baby moving in her belly. Katje appears, slinks around her legs, and meows. "Yes," she says, "Let's go back. We don't want to lose our way."

The falling snow gives off its own soft hum.

§

When Emmy reaches her house, she hangs up her coat, takes off her boots, and stokes the wood stove. It is safe and warm inside. This morning, she made a shepherd's pie for dinner and just needs to warm it up when Peter gets home from town. She hopes he gets home soon. It is not that she minds being alone, as even when Peter is home, there is much for him to do outside: The cows and chickens need to be fed, snow needs to be shoveled and ice chipped away, equipment needs to be tinkered with and repaired to be ready for seeding time. And she knows it is silly to worry about Peter's driving when he's survived bombs and bullets, the beaches of Normandy, frozen foxholes in the Reichswald Forest. Still, whenever he leaves their farm, she imagines the worst.

She lights an oil lamp and settles into her chair, with Katje curled up at her feet, and takes out her embroidery. Emmy is passing the deep winter days by stitching Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*. Her mother mailed her the pattern, thread, and linen as an uncharacteristically sentimental Christmas gift. It is an indulgent activity, as there is no utility in a cross-stitch of a painting, but there are only so many socks and booties she can knit. She works on *The*

Night Watch while there is daylight, after what cooking and cleaning she can manage, as there is no electricity in the farmhouse. The sun sets in the afternoon, even though Peter says the days are getting longer. Peter also says they will get electricity soon, maybe next year, running water too. She will be glad for both: Fetching water is something she is still getting used to, and it is hard on her eyes to read or embroider for more than a few hours without natural light. Working by oil lamp or candlelight reminds her of when the Nazis cut electricity in the city during the hunger winter.

Emmy is unsure what she will do with her copy of Amsterdam's most important painting. Her canvas is not nearly as big as the real *Night Watch*, but she worries it will still look ridiculous in her small house. It would be more practical to use the linen and thread for something else, but she started the work because it keeps her hands busy. Even though cigarettes still taste good, and she doesn't feel guilty about them like she does with food, she isn't smoking as much as usual because Dr. Farnsworth suggested cutting back. Emmy plans to finish embroidering *The Night Watch* before the baby arrives. It took Rembrandt two years to complete, and she thinks it will take at least two months to finish hers.

When Emmy was a girl, she loved to draw. She would decorate any scrap of paper she could find in her parents' café. She spent evenings sketching, laid out on the floor by her father's armchair while he smoked his pipe and read the newspaper with his cat Simone on his lap. When she was nine, Papa arranged for her to take art lessons. He said, "Meneer Schwarz makes his living painting and teaching. That is hard to do, so he must be a good artist. Your lessons will be on Tuesdays with Juliana and Klaas." Klaas and Juliana's parents, the Slagers, owned the butcher shop down the other end of Dapperstraat from the café.

Mam objected, "It would be better for Emmy to learn more about sewing. A girl will never make a living as a painter." Mam cleaned herring in the sink, and she dropped a bit of fish for the cat when she thought no one was watching.

"Not everything is about money, Saar," Emmy remembers Papa saying.

"As long as the café is doing well, I suppose it doesn't hurt anything."

Tuesdays became Emmy's favorite day. Emmy, Juliana, and Klaas met in Meneer Schwarz's apartment once a week to draw, paint, and learn about art. It was good that Papa took Emmy to the apartment, as Mam would never have let the lessons continue if she saw the state of Meneer Schwarz's rooms: tulips and apples in various states of decay, dishes full of crumbs left on the table, a chatty marmalade cat called Wilhelm of Orange who climbed on everything and everyone, piles of books and newspapers in every corner, easels with just-started and almost-finished paintings, and jars of paintbrushes in cloudy water. Meneer Schwarz often took the children out. When the weather was nice, they went to Vondelpark to draw trees, ducks, and people on benches. They went to Dam Square to sketch the towers of the Nieuwe Kerk or the balcony of the Royal Palace. One Tuesday, Meneer Schwarz took Emmy, Juliana, and Klaas to the Rijksmuseum to study *The Night Watch*.

Emmy had never seen a work of art as big as Rembrandt's painting. It filled a great hall, like the knave of a cathedral, and Emmy felt like a bride on her wedding day as she walked toward it. The two-dimensional adults in *The Night Watch* were as big as real people. The figures seemed to wear real clothes made from the finest fabrics like she and Mam might see at Dapperstraat's market stalls. Layers of yellow paint mimicked brocade on a gentleman's jacket. The main figure wore a huge hat and had a bright red sash around his waist. The only child in the painting, a little girl with blonde hair, dashed across the scene in a luxurious golden gown with a dead chicken hanging from her belt. The men shooting guns and gesturing to something outside the frame seemed to be moving, and the painting caught the light as if lit from within.

"Meneer Schwarz, why are we learning about this painting out of all the paintings in the museum?" Klaas had asked.

"The simple answer is because it shows men saving our city. Rembrandt received a commission to paint militiamen, *kloveniers*. The work celebrates their bravery and our independence," Meneer Schwarz answered.

Klaas poked at his sister with an imaginary sword until she squealed.

Their teacher continued, "Observe which figures are under light and which are in darkness. Rembrandt wants us to pay attention to the bright figures. They are important to the story. I want each

of you to pick a character. Study this character, make notes, do sketches right now. Work on a reproduction."

Klaas chose Captain Frans Banninck Cocq, the hero in black with his extravagant hat, red sash, and frilly collar. Klaas was ten and obsessed with soldiers. Seven-year-old Juliana liked drawing animals, so she chose the dog because she said it looked like their dachshund Elsie. Emmy chose the little girl to the left of the center with the golden gown and upside-down chicken hanging from her belt.

Every night that week, Emmy laid at Papa's feet and sketched. She wondered: "Who made the girl's dress of beautiful material and pretty ribbons? Why was there a chicken on her belt? Would her mother make stock out of the chicken? Were her curls natural, or did her mother set her blonde hair in pins at night? She looked a little like Julianna, come to think of it. Did she like dogs too? Did the girl have brothers and sisters? A brother like Klaas? Was she scared in that room full of men with muskets? Was one of the men her father?" Emmy wanted to know the bread and bones of the girl's life, what she dreamed about, what scared her. Whoever she was, she was so lucky to be immortalized by Rembrandt.

When Emmy showed her sketches to Meneer Schwarz the following Tuesday, he praised them. "Very good. You have captured the texture of her dress and the movement of her hair very well." He looked closer. "There is one area for improvement."

"Yes?"

"Her face. You have drawn the face of a young girl. But look"—he pointed to a glossy paper reproduction laid out on his cluttered table—"Master Rembrandt's girl does not have a young face."

Emmy sighed. The girl was one of her best efforts. But Meneer Schwarz was right: The girl's face was a middle-aged woman's, someone with jowls and tired eyes, like Mam after a long week. Emmy sketched the girl with none of this complexity.

"Why would he paint her face like this?"

"This girl-woman may be his beloved wife, Saskia, who died of tuberculosis while he was painting *The Night Watch* . . ." Meneer Schwarz paused. Emmy knew from eavesdropping on her parents' conversations that Meneer Schwarz's wife had died, along with a baby, years ago, before he moved to the neighborhood. He continued, "I think Master Rembrandt wanted us to know this little girl is out of place. After all, why would a child be with a company

of militiamen defending Amsterdam against invaders? A little girl would be at home, perhaps being tucked into bed by her mother. This girl is a symbol. And the chicken she carries, well, its claw is on the insignia of the company . . ."

"So, she isn't real?"

"It depends what you mean by that question. She may be inspired by Saskia. She may be a sketch of a little girl who played outside on the street in Master Rembrandt's neighborhood. She may be the imagined daughter he wished he had with Saskia. Even the commissions, the figures based on historical people, come to symbolize something other than who they were in that moment. A painting takes on a life of its own—both when someone such as Master Rembrandt creates it and with every pair of eyes that gazes upon it, even three hundred years later. There are layers of story in the layers of paint. There are symbols and secrets, sadness and love. Each time we are fortunate enough to look at this painting, we discover something."

"I should have chosen a different figure, someone less complicated."

"This little girl spoke to you—you picked her because she intrigued you, because you felt a connection with her," Meneer Schwarz said. "Fascinating little girls are fascinated by how the world sees them."

Years later, and a world away, stitch by stitch, Emmy becomes reacquainted with Captain Cocq, Lieutenant van Ruytenburch, and the mysterious girl with the chicken hanging from her belt. She punctures a threaded silver needle into linen to imitate brushstrokes on a canvas. The thread card is a poor imitation of a palette. But the rhythm of stitching reminds Emmy of drawing and painting. This morning, she completed stitching Captain Cocq, his sash the same blood red as the waxwing's berries in the snow. This late afternoon, she wants to finish the little golden girl to the left of the captain. It's easy to stitch her pretty yellow dress, the x's that make the shape of the chicken hanging from her belt, even the waves in her blond hair. Emmy thinks, for a moment, how lovely it would be to mother a daughter. Emmy could teach her to sew and make her a beautiful golden dress like the one in the painting. She smiles and then reminds herself that she just wants the baby to be healthy. Emmy returns to thinking of the little girl as Saskia, the wife that

Rembrandt loved and lost and immortalized in many paintings. If the girl is Saskia, then she is not so out of place.

Emmy understands that kind of love that Rembrandt and Saskia had now. She understands how someone can become your whole world. It is hard for her to think about the loss. She doesn't know how she would go on if something happened to Peter or if Peter stopped loving her. She would be all alone in this new place. Of course, she could go home, but she would never hear the end of it from Mam. And she would have a baby to care for. She sighs. Why do these terrible thoughts keep intruding? Peter loves her and the baby is fine. She will find her place here. She focuses on the rhythm of the needle and the thread. Even in this big piece of linen, the girl is too small in this scene to have much detail, and her face looks like a blob with two brown x's for eyes. Emmy can't help but smile.

What would Meneer Schwarz think about her cross-stitch Rembrandt? He was patient with her and the other children. He had more patience with them than their parents did, but, of course, he only saw them once a week. He loved teaching the history of a painting and encouraging his pupils. He never condescended or told them they were too young to understand something. Even in the years before the war, it was rare for adults to have so much faith in children. Perhaps his students became substitutes for the daughter or son he lost. Emmy knew Meneer Schwarz was Jewish but didn't think about it much. It was only when the art lessons had to stop that it mattered. It was only when she couldn't see him anymore that it mattered. It was only when she realized at the end of the war what likely happened to her beloved art teacher that Meneer Schwarz's Jewishness mattered.

Emmy stopped drawing and painting when she was fourteen. It was frivolous to pursue art during a war. Until liberation, Emmy clung to a hope that Meneer Schwarz had escaped the city before the Nazis began deportations. She realizes now it would be a miracle if Meneer Schwarz got out of Amsterdam before the registrations and yellow stars, before the borders closed, before Rembrandt's neighborhood was fenced into a ghetto, before Westerbork was built, before the transports started to Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. Maybe Meneer Schwarz waited out the war somewhere in hiding, in the dark, just like the painting waited out the war rolled up in a vault inside the Maastricht caves.

Emmy sometimes fantasizes that one day Peter will drive her to the post office at the Buffalo Lakes C&C corner store, and Thelma, the postmistress, will hand her a letter from Holland. In the letter, Mam will write that Meneer Schwarz walked into the café asking after Emmy. Mam will report that he is sad Emmy left Amsterdam but is happy she has found love and is building a wonderful life. Mam would write that Meneer Schwarz wants to tell her to keep up with her painting. But that letter has not arrived, and Emmy knows Meneer Schwarz is dead. She doesn't believe in God anymore, but Meneer Schwarz did. She hopes that wherever her art teacher is now there is beauty and there is light.

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It is nearing supper time, so Emmy puts the thread-and-linen *Night Watch* away. It may end up looking ridiculous hanging in her farmhouse, but Emmy has decided she will display it. Rembrandt's kloveniers and little girl will remind her of her city. Yes, this cross-stitch will help her focus her memories.

From her living room window, decorated in feathers of hoarfrost, Emmy watches truck headlights approach their farmhouse. She breathes a sigh of relief, and the baby moves. She worries about Peter driving on icy roads. She worries about Mam and Papa at home in Amsterdam. She worries she thinks too much about the past. She worries and worries and worries. She knows she is safe in Canada and that she is lucky. So why does she still feel dread?

Emmy wishes she didn't carry around this belief that if she is not careful, if she is not vigilant, if she is not always watching, something horrible will happen. She shared this with Peter once and he assured her, "What happened in Europe will never happen here." She knows that Mam and Papa never thought the war would happen the way it did. Holland was supposed to be neutral. No one who came to the café could believe that their neighbors would become Nazis. Or be forced to go to work camps. Or forced to wear yellow stars and report for deportations. No one believed any of that until it happened, and when it happened, there was nothing to be done about it but try to survive it. Emmy still wakes up in the night after dreaming about tulip soup and ration coupons, men in uniform coming to the door, lists of names, revolvers nestled against a man's

hip, having to say "yes" when everything inside her screams "no." On these nights, Peter will hold her close until she falls back asleep. She will feel bad for waking him when he has to get up early to tend to the cattle. She will feel bad because sometimes he has dreams of his own, and he shouldn't have to always reassure her.

Emmy makes her way to the veranda and puts on her coat. She takes her red lipstick from her pocket to refresh her face and fixes a curl in her hair. She exchanges slippers for boots, and as she bends over to tie the laces, the baby gives her a kick. The door creeks and cool air rushes inside the house as Emmy opens it to step outside. She forgets her gloves, and the screen door's metal handle is sticky cold.

Peter pulls into the driveway and steps out of the truck. "Sweetheart, what are you doing out here?"

Emmy makes her way to her husband. "How was your drive?" She brushes snow away from her eyelashes.

"It's really coming down. We're going to get a few inches tonight."

"It is so dark already," she says gently. "I was worried."

He takes her hand, leads her into the porch, and stomps snow from his boots. "I was just going to say every day is getting a little bit longer, a bit lighter. Please don't worry so much, Emmy. It isn't good for you or the baby."

Emmy nods.

Katje rubs against his legs and arches her body so he can pet her. He hangs up his wool coat. "Are you feeling better than this morning?"

"Yes." Emmy rests her hand on her belly.

"Did you eat today?" He takes off his cap. An image of him taking off his cap, dressed in his green fatigues, coming to visit her at the café during that wonderful summer, flashes across her memory like a movie.

"A little," she answers. She unties her boots and puts them back on a rack. A berry is crushed in the tread.

Peter reaches in his shirt pocket. "I brought you some chocolate. This baby's sure going to have a sweet tooth."

"Thank you." She smiles, remembering how he gave her chocolate when she ran out into the crowd on Dapperstraat. "Dinner will be ready soon."

He kisses her on the cheek. "Oh, good. Just let me wash up." As he plunges his hands into the basin in the porch, she feels bad she didn't heat it for him.

There are so many things Emmy wants to tell Peter about her day: the berries in the snow she thought were blood, her memory of the first time she saw *The Night Watch* with Meneer Schwarz, how she is thankful every day that Peter's regiment came to Amsterdam, how improbable and impossible and wonderful it is that they met in all that chaos and now are building a life together here, how grateful she is that he saved her and her city from darkness, and how she might need him to save her again.

But Emmy doesn't say any of this to her husband. Instead, she puts on her slippers and goes into the kitchen to get supper on the table. As she moves, the baby swirls and twirls inside her like a tipsy waxwing. She hears her art teacher's voice in her head: "Fascinating little girls are fascinated by how the world sees them." She gently puts her hand on her small belly. Emmy smiles as she imagines meeting her daughter in the spring.

The Night Watch | Rembrandt van Rijn | 1642 | 12' x 14.5'

Cindy King

INTENTION FOR ANSELM KIEFER

The painting wasn't meant to be representational,
that's why in what I thought was the sea,
I saw neither waves nor blue.
That's why, when a village is demolished
in an airstrike, the artist doesn't study
the shape of smoke, the color of flames,
but rather the snow,
for how it falls and accumulates,
for its ability to obliterate,
to render everything equally invisible.

Metanoia is a change in one's vision
of the world and self, and,
according to some,
the result of penitence, remorse,
and spiritual awakening.
In my change, I find a coin
with its image worn down,
the head of a leader,
a black silhouette,
facial features
completely erased.

There is no change
in the brutal war
between neighbors.
There are, however, people,
and piles on piles of rubble,
heaps upon heaps of ash.

Connie T. Braun

STARRY NIGHT, AND THE NIGHT GARDENER DESCRIBES THE MANNER IN WHICH CITRUS TREES DIE

—After *When We Cease to Understand the World* or *Un Verdor Terrible* by Benjamín Labutut and "Prussian blue: From the Great Wave to Starry Night, how a pigment changed the world" by Hugh Davies

I.
In *Starry Night*, Van Gogh
used Prussian blue.

&.
In a few of years
we would simply not be able to grasp

what being human really means,
the night gardener said.

II.
Born at castle Frankenstein, Johann Konrad Dippel
conducted experiments

on corpses.

From red pigments
contaminated with Dippel's oil,

distilled from bone,

the first synthetic pigment,
invented by Johann Jacob Diesbach,

was Prussian blue.

&.
In war, soldiers poured the oil
down wells to contaminate the water.

&.
When the Dutch traded with Japan, Hokusai painted

36 views of Mt. Fuji
in Prussian blue.

Mixed with deep red,

Prussian blue makes black.

&.
Karl Schwarzschild wrote to Einstein about

the black hole—

we have reached the highest point
of civilization.

All that is left is for us to decay
and fall.

III.
Schwarzschild wrote to Einstein from

the battlefield and later died,
possibly from exposure

to mustard gas.

&.
Fritz Haber won the Nobel prize in chemistry,

led the German gas warfare program,

invented Zyklon B. Prussian blue stains
left on chamber walls.

Göring crushed a cyanide capsule in his mouth,
the basis of cyanide, Prussian blue.

&.
A pill of Prussian blue swallowed
in radiation emergency
prevents the body from
absorbing radioactive cesium and thallium.

When Einstein wrote to Roosevelt
about the power of nuclear fission,

Little Boy and Fat Man
were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Hokusai's Prussian blue wave,
view of Mount Fuji on the cover

of Pearl S. Buck's novel, *The Big Wave,*
about catastrophe, written for children

after the war. *What is death? Kino asked,*

. . . his mind beginning to think again, will make him live . . .

IV.
Waves of Prussian blue
sky in *Starry Night*, Hokusai influenced Van Gogh

who painted *Lemons*
in a Bowl of Prussian blue,

Still Life With Oranges and Lemons
and Blue Gloves,

on a table beneath *(Still Life with) Lemons on a Plate*,
a Prussian blue shadow.

&.
Branches full, breaking under the weight of lemons,

it is a strange sight
to see such exuberance before death, the night gardener said,

beneath the lemon tree, decay,

abundance all at once,
falling.

David Blair

IN HOUSE-PAINTER YEARS, NOT THAT LONG AFTER THE WAR

1.

The light green powder room. The yellows
of the lemons in the wallpaper
and the greens in the kitchen carpet
that was a frenzy of bread-and-butter slices.
The white peonies. The ladder's four feet
in pachysandras, periwinkles,
unfurling fiddleheads in a row
landscaped under dormer window,
indoor work, or there is no house
and no painting in scrubby woods,
and outdoor work, no such thing
as a virgin forest says you,
says the anemone
not, says the lady's slipper. Your shins
once rubbed became blistered braille
from whenever you rubbed up
against the vine or bush or sapling.

2.

The ladder opens up as a series of scissored hinges
with blue and white lichens of dried paint and primer.

There are hulled cities like this along the working rivers
opening as ladders or shears open with the through lines

of highways and circular empty hands for your fingers.
In some different aspect or location or century or day,

the crummier towns have a new redness of bricks
for this century in the sun, against the clouds and blue.

Half the outlines of some clouds are open charcoal bounds.
It's lunchtime, and so the crew moves to places inside

and outside the house with deep lunch boxes
in early June. These days were like ropes, loops, tarps

that stand, older, dodgy, physically strung, nervous
and calm by turns and recognitions, standing ropes

and sitting coils. The anchored tattoos on their pop's forearms
settled down as greens and blues and red waters in hairs.

Business will thrive. There will be general contracting.
The boss peels an avocado with a bright folded knife

and salts the end that he quarters out. This is avocado,
he tells the large curious child, with his large kid belly.

He had his first avocado somewhere on the Pacific himself.
Lard ass kid, he thinks, this is an avocado. You're a prince.

There are rumors of cholesterol. Rumors about salt
considered the future. This teakwood dining room

with the tarps over the dark floor and high-backs.
The next thing the men do is open their small cans

of pineapple juice. Their mini-cans of piña colada.
They are still tough. Put a clean blob of paint

to mark the color on the lid for the future of use.

April Sunami

A DISCUSSION WITH JOHN BRUGGINK AND DANIEL BEAUDOIN

AS: Can you please share with us the position you held in the military?

JB: I joined the Army as an armor officer in 2002, out of college, following 9/11. I deployed twice to Iraq and once to Afghanistan and retired as a[n] LTC in 2023.

DB: For most of my military career, I served as a lieutenant colonel in the Israel Defense Forces and as the chief liaison officer to international development and aid agencies operating in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. My role involved acting as a bridge between the Israeli security-political apparatus and the international community, working to balance Israel's security needs with the development and humanitarian needs of the Palestinians.

What are some perspectives you gained from your military service that you live by today?

JB: There are a few perspectives that I return to when considering military service during the Global War on Terror. These thoughts do reflect in some way in my art and resulted in a wider retrospection of service and American warfare, back to the first World War. I think they are summarized as a distillation of the elements of war: man, mission, and machine.

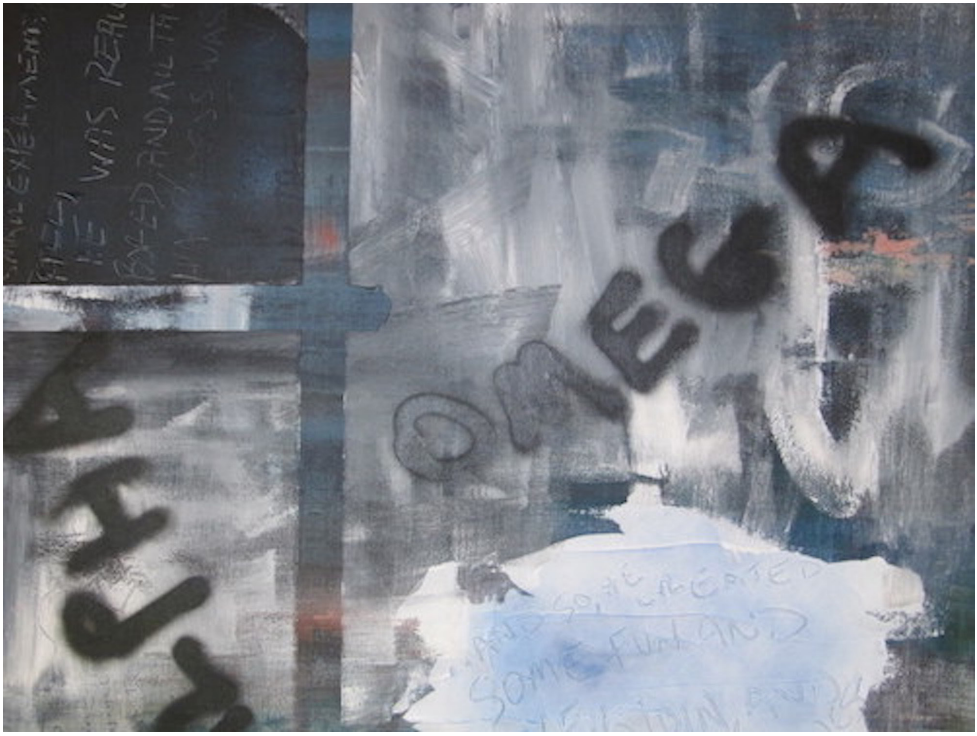
First, that the American soldier epitomizes the best traits of our nation: selflessness, willingness to die for loved ones, endurance, and courage. This human element remains the same throughout conflicts that our country has fought. Soldiers defending our country must frequently endure great hardships and face situations which challenge their understanding of the world, and [they] willingly will die to defend their nation.

Second, leaders have a responsibility to our soldiers to ensure that the mission of a conflict is clearly understood, achievable, and in our nation's best interests. If a conflict is justified, soldiers may be wounded and killed but find solace in knowing their actions protected their nation. There is a clear link between the mission executed and the mental and emotional state of those who return. The clearer the mission's validity, the stronger the state of health. When this element of war planning is not prioritized, there is an increase of veteran suicide and mental and emotional disconnection from the self and society, as we witness now related to Iraq and Afghanistan and previously in Vietnam.

Third are the machines, or weapons we use in war. When I started looking at art, I looked at the photos of World War I and noted the scale of the destruction that was an aspect of the development of new weaponry. It is evident that the greater the degree of mechanization and automation, the greater the potential for dehumanization. My interest was in the degree to which man is able to overcome or be overtaken by dehumanizing forces. At its most basic, warfare includes a man, a weapon, and an opponent. The weapons we use and their impact on ourselves, our society, and our opponent need reflection. They have changed remarkably since the birth of our nation, and their impact on how warfare is waged is almost too rapid to comprehend in medias res. We now see the development of weapons that have implications for our society that are truly sobering to the imagination. The impact of these weapons' use in the future may be hard to foresee clearly, but we can see what happened to the generation in the first World War and how it led to further conflict in the twentieth century.

DB: I learned the importance of responsibility and accountability—owning up to mistakes and addressing them honestly. Trust and honesty are the foundations of any relationship, whether personal or professional. While technical skills can be acquired, sincerity and the willingness to improve

John Bruggink
Gassed



Daniel Beaudoin
Alpha and Omega

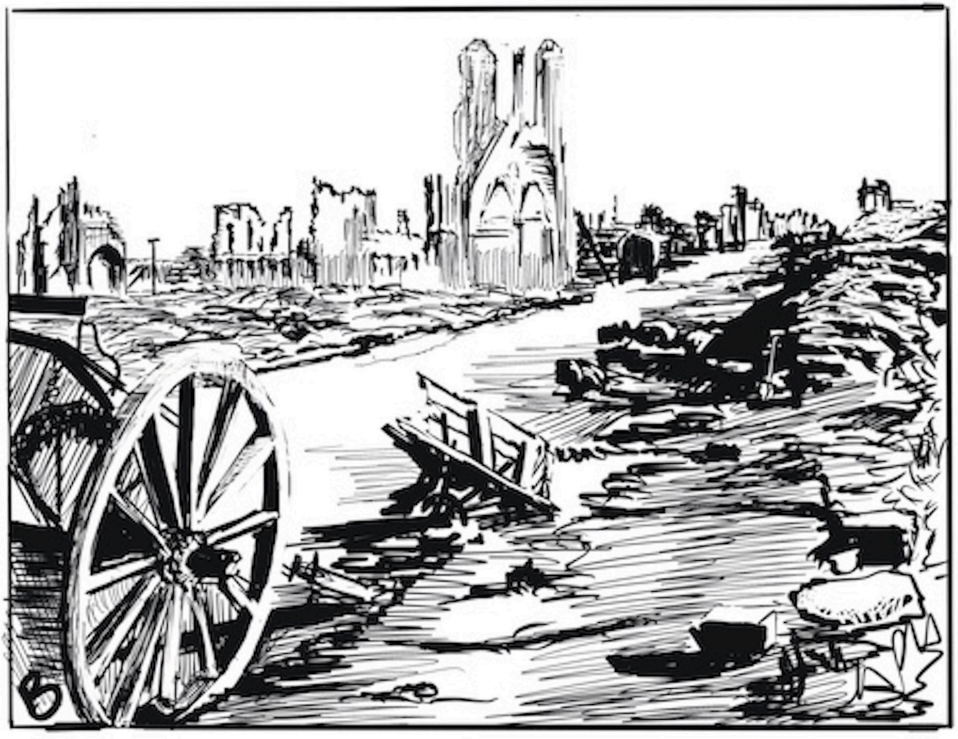
can foster forgiveness and growth, even when mistakes occur. Sincerity and honesty are also essential for building trust within a team, as mission success often depends on these qualities. In challenging situations, such as guarding an ammunition depot in the desert at 2 a.m., fatigue and stress can lead to lapses. Owning up to mistakes, like falling asleep, demonstrates integrity and builds credibility. Naturally, honesty comes with vulnerability and the potential for criticism or disciplinary action. However, facing the consequences with integrity earns the respect of comrades and superiors, regardless of the outcome. Resilience in the face of setbacks, combined with a "can-do" attitude, has been invaluable in both my military and civilian life.

Clear communication is another lesson I value deeply. My military experience taught me to be concise and direct in emails and presentations, avoiding unnecessary verbiage. This focus on clarity and efficiency is something I strive to maintain in all my endeavors, including my creative work. Finally, the military revealed that I am capable of far more than I had ever imagined. It also taught me the critical distinction between command and leadership, an insight that continues to shape my approach to work and relationships.

How do these perspectives show up in your work?

DB: It's hard to say whether my approach to art is shaped more by my military experience or by who I was before I served—perhaps it's both. In my creative work, I strive for clarity, precision, and authenticity to achieve emotional resonance. If a piece resonates with me emotionally—if I feel I've captured what I mean and feel to the best of my ability—then, for the moment, I am satisfied. Vladimir Nabokov, the author, once said he hoped his readers would feel a tingle in their spines; I hope my viewers and readers experience a similar reaction—a tingle or a pinch in their stomachs. Of course, it's impossible to know exactly what others feel, but if I sense emotional authenticity in my work, I trust it will connect with others.

JB: I turned to art for meaning, as well as healing toward the end of my career, seeking to reengage that inner spirit of creativity. I drew inspiration from the spirit of the men who fought in the Great War—their ability to overcome, the will to survive and endure, while facing the dehumanization of a conflict that was nearly overwhelming. My great grandfather fought in the trenches of France. His example met the

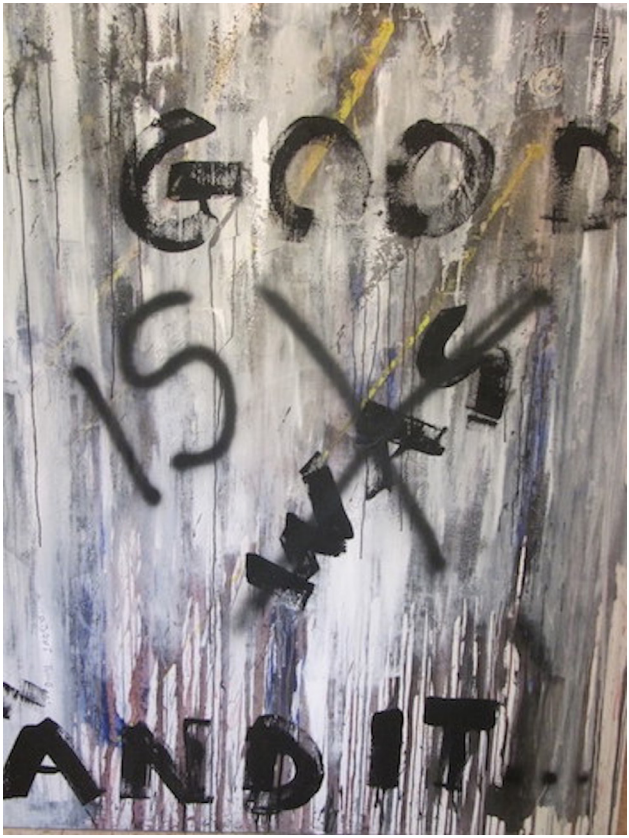


John Bruggink
Rubble

criteria mentioned above. I never met the man, but I mused on how he overcame much and his notable bravery in action that earned a DSC. Two of my grandfathers and one of my grandmothers also served in World War II, in the Pacific. My other grandmother and one of my grandfathers were captured by the Japanese and endured great suffering. All of their experiences provide inspiration, both for living and creating, as well as contemplation of the costs and sacrifices of war.

Please tell us about your creative process. What mediums do you work with and why? What themes do you usually explore in your work?

JB: When I started drawing, I used the iPad almost exclusively, but I am now expanding to learn more traditional techniques, such as ink drawing and oil painting. I change the medium based on the subject, and what works best. The iPad is great for not feeling constrained in the process, and I like oil for landscapes. As far as themes, my World War I drawings are an attempt to reflect on the human spirit confronting dreadful technologies arching toward greater lethality. Other World War II



Daniel Beaudoin
God Was Here

John Bruggink
Masked Up

drawings I've done focus more on the human elements of courage, endurance, and resilience. But, holistically, I don't limit myself to war depictions and try different subjects like landscapes, portraits, still life, and illustrative work—things that can celebrate life and beauty, and balance the intensity of combat subjects.

DB: I'm fascinated by the interplay of different materials, the magic of color, and the relationship between text and visuals. The creative process is full of surprises, where accidents can lead to unexpected and original outcomes. Starting with an empty canvas and finishing with something that feels like it represents the entire world is a remarkable revelation.

My work is highly experimental; I rarely begin with a finished product in mind. Curiosity drives my process: how a certain watercolor reacts to salt, what happens when I mix sand into acrylic paint, or how two photographs blend into a single digital image. I experiment with text, typography, and various combinations of elements, always hoping to surprise myself.

Unlike in my professional life, where deadlines and procedures dominate, my art allows me the freedom to make mistakes and be kind to myself as I navigate the emotional and intellectual journey of creation. It is a space where I can explore without constraints, letting curiosity and intuition guide me.

John Bruggink
Wasteland

Do you view art as a means of catharsis or emotional healing? If so, how does this take shape in your practice?

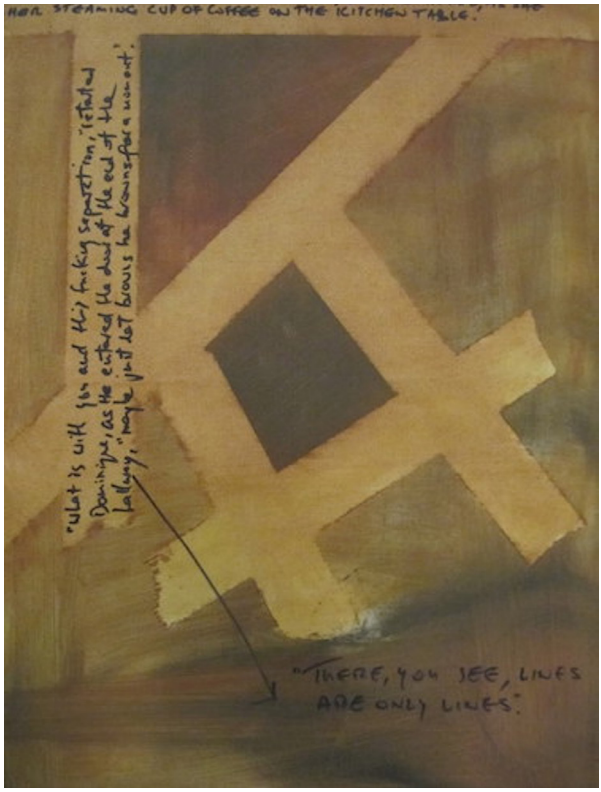
JB: Art is cathartic for me and provides purpose. I am proud to have served in the armed forces and view fighting for one's country as the highest calling. However, I've realized that that need for self-expression and artistic creativity were there for me but never given attention. I now feel driven by the need to create and make something of meaning and beauty. The act of creating is itself the healing.

DB: At certain periods of my life, my art was driven by anger, disillusionment, and frustration. I think this was particularly the case after I had left the military. On the one hand, I felt a very strong loyalty and identification with not only the necessity of military service in my country, but also with the positions that I filled. On the other hand, my service was also fraught with moral dilemmas, in which I tried to reconcile my actions with my moral compass, which did not always work. The work appearing here, for example, was certainly cathartic and an attempt to find expression outside of me, maybe even to shed some clarity on that period. This is evident in the large-sized canvases and the use of found objects that I took back with me from the field.

In the last five years or so, I see that my art has shifted in both size and content. Its physical dimensions are much smaller, and I am now also including photography and other visual mediums to address motives of remembering, the end of innocence, aesthetic nuances, emotive visual and textual engagement. In any event, art is a means for me to revel in the beauty and exhilaration of the creative process, joy in the aesthetic wonder of creation, and I believe that it will continue to help me grow emotionally and intellectually.

While art is often celebrated as a boundless space for freedom and self-expression, do you think the structure and discipline of military life have influenced you as an artist?

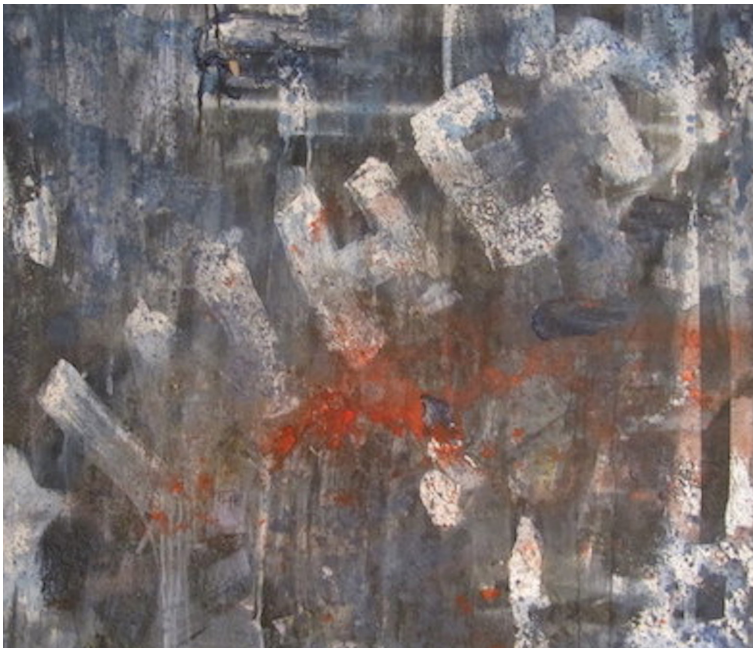
DB: It's true that military life is defined by order and restraint. Yet, I was fortunate to serve under commanders who granted me considerable freedom in making creative decisions and exercising operational autonomy in my mission command. The military can indeed be rigid, and it demands that you temper the more impulsive sides of your character—especially when operating under immense physical and



Daniel Beaudoin
Words and Boundaries

moral pressure. Exhaustion, fear, anger, and stress have a way of wreaking havoc on even the strongest moral compasses. This constant negotiation with moral ambiguity and tension has profoundly shaped not only my life, but also my art. It's in this space—where discipline meets chaos—that I've found a deeper well of creativity and expression.

JB: This is an interesting question and implies that creative self-expression is not fully compatible with military life. Whether this is true or not, I believed something like this while in the military and focused on career and athletics. I did not pick up any creative hobbies until recently, when it became a helpful way to deal with anxiety. Military success is typically associated with preparation, planning, determination, attention to detail, and a need to follow a checklist. It turns out, however, that these are beneficial traits as an artist. I have found—when faced with self-doubt, discouragement, and setbacks—that the persistence and planning learned in the military are helpful in staying the course. The only distinction I would make is that art requires an openness, a willingness to be surprised by random inspiration and to embrace free expression—traits which are typically not part of military planning. Nevertheless, I would venture that soldiers have made great impact on the battlefield when they retain an inner spark of innovation, a "muse in the moment," a firm conviction that leads to a surprising or unexpected result through a mixture of bravery and free thinking.



Daniel Beaudoin
When

Michael Mintrom

HOSPITAL FOR SOLDIERS

I come from a line of quiet men.
In a world of heroes

to reveal you'd been in the hospital for soldiers
because you couldn't face

daily life after the horrors of war
was to admit weakness.

For context, any domestic raising of voices
was met with shutting of windows and doors

so the neighbors wouldn't witness a scene.
All those decades

we lived with long silences and deadly looks
punctuated now and then by the man of the house

heading to the veggie patch
to cry his guts out.

Peter McKinney

Nonfiction

THE STORY NOBODY TELLS

I killed a man. The gray-green hue of the night vision goggles I wore disconnected my perception from reality. I was in an unnamed village in the middle of an endless deep of desert. He was close. When he showed his torso from the side of the building to fire at me, I could make out his rifle and his blurred face. I raised my rifle and pulled the trigger two times in rapid succession. I watched his body slink to the ground and blend into the shadows among the grayish sand.

When I moved toward him, I could hear myself breathing deeply. I felt the arteries in my neck pulse with my heartbeat. When I got to his body, he had two small hollows in his T-shirt. A dark spot of sand slowly grew from underneath his torso. When I removed my night vision to look at his face, I saw his mouth slightly agape as if frozen in speech. His eyelids hung in a state somewhere between awake and asleep. He was neither. As I left his lifeless body on the ground, I muttered to myself—*better him than me.*

§

I witnessed the result of a suicide bomber attack on the edge of a small city whose place on a map I could never recall. The smoke-colored tint of my glasses was not enough to hide the heat waves radiating from the pockmarked pavement. Everything appeared as though it were a mirage. While the aftermath was unquestionably real, my mind perceived it as artificial. It was just another grotesque scene from a fictional horror movie.

What I never expected was to find that the bomber was a child. An innocent victim coerced to deliver a death to himself and others that neither could have imagined. A death that no one should have had to imagine. As I carried out my duty, I detached from existence. I told myself—*none of this is real.*

§

I was struck by an improvised explosive device while inside a diesel-scented armored vehicle. I was riding as a passenger down a dirt road somewhere between hell and purgatory. When the explosive wave hit my vehicle, it thrust the fifteen-ton behemoth into a barrel roll through the air. Time suspended. As I peered through the windshield, the world around me tumbled. White noise filled my ears as the grains of sand inside the vehicle dispersed into zero gravity.

Time resumed as I came crashing back to the ground. Hazy fumes of cordite and ammonia singed my nostrils as I regained awareness. I stumbled out of the vehicle into the crater that took the place of the road. I checked my body, relieved to find my externals in one piece while my internals pulsated with the rhythm of my breath. I scanned the desolate horizon, hoping to find someone accountable. I found no one. Faceless. *Not today*—I said to the faceless nobody.

§

I gazed through salt crusted goggles as I walked down the street in a dust storm. The wind carried the grit to every crevice of my being. My shoulders ached with the tension of too much time spent in a heightened state of alert. This village was indistinguishable from any other. As my patrol moved through, the streets vacated. The market patrons hid from us behind closed doors, wanting no interaction with the camouflaged machine men. We stopped to survey the area, while one man looked on from behind his peddling post.

Neither the strengthening storm nor our sizable force deterred the man. I engaged the man with a stare through the swirling clouds of earth, curious as to why he remained. His eyes showed no fear, piercing my soul. He had already borne witness to more hardship than we could possibly give him. He was not selling his heart and mind to our cause. His voiceless judgement conveyed the mass of a thousand men. *We did not speak.*

§

I watched the protracted death of a compatriot through sweat-seared eyes peeking from under the brim of a Kevlar helmet. He was patrolling through a freshly plowed poppy field in a place only those

who were there will remember. His step found an improvised anti-personnel mine among the unseeded soil. When I came upon him, medics had already placed tourniquets on the tattered remains of his mangled legs.

His breathing was shallow. Minutes passed as he lay on the scorched ground with his would-be saviors attempting to steal back his final moments from the grips of a rapidly approaching end. As he coughed for air, blood sputtered from his mouth. His bloodshot eyes probed the nothingness, chasing a light that was slowly fading away. A helicopter landed nearby to deliver him to salvation. He did not make the trip. *I said nothing*.

§

I came home to lines of people welcoming my return. The eyes with which I watched them showed a distance that can only come from existing in a place where triumph is tragedy; where truth is trauma. They lined the corridor for what seemed like miles and miles.

I was paraded through their cheers as I returned to them a manufactured smile. They offered congratulations and thank-you's while waving their tiny stick flags. They asked *How does it feel to be home?* or said *Thank god for your return*. I could not muster a response.

§

Those stories have been told a thousand times.
Those stories have been lived a thousand lives.

What nobody tells is that the gray-green man still lies there, arrested in my thoughts. I see him staring back at me, eyes no longer in between a state of wake and sleep. I am standing over him as the spot beneath him grows into the darkened hues of eternity. I wonder how he feels. Wonder who he is. Wonder why I feel nothing. I wonder if a part of me died with him.

What nobody tells is that the bombing scene continues to appear like a wavering illusion rising and falling through my headspace. My hands still wear the blood-stained gloves sorting through the remains. The tinnitus in my ears still rings with the

cries of the bystanders. When I look in the mirror, I can see the child staring back from the other side, a face full of pain and fear. His tears have become the faucet with which I try to wash away the memory.

What nobody tells is that I relived the IED strike while driving my family home from dinner on a windy summer evening. As we passed under a row of power lines, they clashed together. The arc caused the transformer on the street side pole to burst. In an instant, I was teleported back to that dirt road. I could see the sand floating in the air. I could smell the ammonia. As my wife touched me on the shoulder, my white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel lessened. I remain on that road to purgatory.

What nobody tells is that I see the man from the market on every street corner. His eyes burn into my soul as the wind whips between us. Only he and I feel the storm, as the blowing sand tears the humanity from my body one grain at a time. I wonder how long I can withstand the pummeling. I wonder how much of my body I have left to give.

What nobody tells is that I still see my compatriot lying on the ground. I find myself lying next to him on the seared earth. He turns his head in my direction and our eyes connect as he struggles for breath. I want to speak. When I try to say something to him, the helicopter buries my words. I am still lying silent in the sand.

What nobody tells is that in the corridor lined with people, I do not see them waving tiny stick flags. Instead, I see them still, holding folded flags. They speak in whispers of *welcome home* and *how does it feel?* I offer no response. It is not for them to know that my soul is still captive in a charred and dusted landscape. It is not for them to know that I have no feeling left to give. I continue to walk the hallway lined with folded flags.

I am the gray-green man lying in the sand.
I am the child staring back through the mirror.
I am the faceless nobody.
I am the man weathering the storm.
I am the voice muffled by the helicopter.

I am the story that nobody tells.

A.N. Grace

purple sprouting broccoli

The Johnsons went to Córdoba and left us their vegetables. Swiss chard, kohlrabi, purslane and kale. They'll only spoil, Amy Johnson said, earthly promise, wet hair to her waist swinging as she waltzed down the path. Later, I find Maggie with her nose in the fridge like one of those cocaine dogs. *Where do they get this stuff from?* I look up for the gods I doubt, find nothing, another front opened, like the fridge door: wasting precious energy. Maggie catches the look on my face. When *The Troubles* were over, the suicide rate went up, she says . . . maybe peace is something to be theorized, not lived? I pick up a globe artichoke. It's hard and layered. Simple. Complex. For the moment it's all we have. Imagine eight billion people living on this, I say, cradling it gently in my hands. Maggie blinks slowly, waves me away with a flowering courgette. Amy wants us to know they're not like us, she says, our food budget for the entire week, given away on a whim. I dream of bitter melon, but who can afford it in *these* times? She lifts the delicate leaf of a shy, wilting Romaine as if she's defusing a bomb. Cut the blue wire? Or the red wire? Underneath a glowing daikon sleeps, nestled in its bed, almost as perfect as our newborn son. Maggie looks at me, takes my hand. *When the end comes, save what you can.*

Collier Nogues

HIBISCUS ODES

i.
Who thrives, who bends a blossom
each evening that bloomed only that morning,
who spins pink into a cup for ants
and caterpillars, whose petals close and melt
together, growing gray mold, softening
like cotton candy in a mouth,
whose mouth sends up another flower
but my father's?

ii.
Flowering plants love metal, they love
bone bits. Blooms the size of miracles
edge the former battlefield, the yard
of the exploded house. They volunteer
where no one plants them. The red ones
wick what's under the soil, the pink ones cast
the glow of health into the shade,
the yellow ones show the sun where to look,
the green leaves try to cover.

iii.
The future gradually appears in color
like petals wrapped around a pistil,
a flag furled, pink on the underside,
spiraling up to be wrung out.
I look for maps in everything.
Where new petals have been soaked with dew
they are like sow's ears, capillaries
surfacing like the telltale blooms
at either side of my father's nose, a mode
of divination he died too soon for me to read.

iv.
The orange one won't bloom,
puts leaves out but refuses buds
as its neighbors flourish.
Not every war is like the others.

v.
Also known as Rose of Sharon, though
not a rose, and found nowhere near
the Levant, land of the Song of Songs.
I am a flower of the field, a lily
of the valley. I am a daughter
among the daughters of his brother,
all of us cousins, all of our children
daughters, too, none of whom he ever knew.

vi.
"Compared to what?" he'd always ask
when someone asked him how he was.
Compared to a flower, a father
is long-lived. Compared to the future
he's over. Compared to a daughter
at least he's not lonely. He has
all the ghosts he needs.

DEAR DRINK IN MY GRANDFATHER'S HAND,

No one can answer for you, no one has to.
Dear homecoming after the war, dear
pair of sons, dear wife who managed on her own.
Dear Purple Heart he won, he told the older son,
chasing a rat out of a bathroom.
Dear story of the war. Dear drinking man
who stopped in time. Dear false rhyme
with my father's story, the younger son
who served not in a war but at a desk,
drunk, blurry.

Yasmine Mousa

Nonfiction

BRAIN ALARM

I stared into the mirror, brushing my teeth on autopilot, trying to hold onto normalcy. I hadn't looked at myself in weeks. The dark circles under my eyes, the gauntness of my face—these were things I had chosen to ignore. I told myself it was mascara and lack of makeup, not sleepless nights, scarce food, and a mind overwhelmed with worry. The tension in our house was palpable. My husband, usually so tidy and in control, was coming undone under the weight of uncertainty. He's a planner by nature, but no amount of planning could prepare us for this war.

I walked barefoot through the house; it wasn't as clean as I kept it. But in those moments, cleaning was a luxury we couldn't afford. Our house was no longer a home; it was a shelter, a place to hide from the bombs and the chaos outside.

We, the survivors, carry the burden of war—our flaws, nightmares, and broken memories follow us everywhere we go. It doesn't matter where we are, what we believe or who we are; we are all haunted by a relentless "brain alarm" that echoes through time, triggered by the most ordinary of things.

§

In 2003, the US invaded Iraq—my country. Every year since, life goes on and I'm reminded of the trauma that has become a part of me. Memories of war planes shelling my hometown, followed by the wailing air raid sirens mixing with the call to prayer, are imprinted on my brain. They haunt my waking moments; a living memory that disrupts any sense of calm I try to create. How can I forget when time itself has not! I can't.

When you're under siege, the most frightening thing is the sound of the bombers. Your whole body listens. Muscles tense. Breathing stops. Each second stretches into an eternity, an endless wait for the boom that will end it all. In those moments, you become selfish, consumed by the instinct to survive. We had

survived—but at what cost? Survivor's guilt followed close behind, but in those moments all that mattered was that we were still alive.

The airstrikes were even more intense at night. The darkness amplified the fear. My teenage daughter would shiver like a leaf in a storm, and I would hold her tight, hoping my arms could shield her from the chaos. One night she asked in a voice tired and scared, "Mama why are they doing this to us?" She was old enough to understand our hatred for the regime but still too young to understand the full extent of the horror. I said, "To get rid of Saddam." She thought for a moment, then said, "But Mama, wouldn't a bullet in his head do?" I didn't know how to answer. War had introduced a darkness into her life that no child should ever know.

My twelve-year-old son, on the other hand, started to dread the night. "Mama, I wish we could skip it! I'm so scared of it." His fear was visible, and it broke my heart to see him so scared.

On a sunny April afternoon in 2003, my husband rushed home with a look of terror on his face. He closed the curtains, shutting out the light, and whispered hoarsely, "They're here." I was teaching the children English at the dining table, a futile attempt to distract them—and myself—from the melee. My heart skipped a beat, and the pen fell from my hand. I knew exactly what he meant.

Since the airstrikes started, I had been having a recurring nightmare. In the dream, my father who was alone in his house—after my mother left to stay with her brother in Beirut—falls down the stairs of his house. There's no one to help him. He's left moaning in agony. This dream haunted me, and I would visit him with my children, but not as often as I should have. These visits were a point of contention with my husband, given the danger they posed.

On our last visit a few days before that terrible afternoon, we decided to defy the war and spend the day with my father at his house in Mansur. While I was there, I decided to visit a neighbor, an old family friend, out of politeness. After the usual small talk, she asked if we were staying at my father's house. I said we were only there for the day, and there was an awkward silence. Then she blurted out, "The American army is heading towards Baghdad."

Her words echoed like a death knell. We knew it was coming, but hearing it out loud was still a shock. I told my father right away, then begged him to leave his house and stay with us where it was safer. He refused; he would not leave his house. It was his haven, his refuge. I didn't know when I would see him again. We hugged and cried, begging each other to be safe before departing.

The nightmare started when we heard that US fighters had shelled al-Sa'aat restaurant in Mansur district on April 9. The excuse, as always, was that Saddam and his men were there. The explosives created a sixty-square-foot hole and brought down the roofs of the multi-story restaurant and the surrounding houses on top of their residents. We had no idea of the casualties, as all means of communication were down. The bombed area was not far from my father's house. There was no way to check on him.

I followed my husband to the kitchen after I told the children to write about their feelings. I have very few things from my old life, in Baghdad, not more than I can count on one hand. One of them is a few lines written by my son torn from a notebook. A sentence reads, "I hope I close my eyes for a moment and then open them and this war will be over." At the time it hurt me and his father a lot. We swore we would never put them in such a situation again. Years later, I found this piece, which I still treasure, hidden in my old red Webster dictionary. My husband used to joke, "The dictionary is glued to your hand," as it followed me everywhere.

When I entered the kitchen, my husband was sweating profusely, leaning his arms on the counter, trying not to fall. His once tall and strong body was now slouched and broken by the war. His bright green eyes, once full of life, were hollowed of hope. He had heard from the neighbors that the Americans had reached the outskirts of Baghdad. "They are not giving us a chance to catch our breath," he said. No, they weren't! We were terrified, sleep-deprived, and utterly exhausted, dragged into a war that had been stripped of any remaining shred of humanity.

We had moved out of our family home in Jaderiya a couple days earlier because of its proximity to Saddam's sons' palaces. Our new neighborhood closed some foreign embassies and companies. It was my husband's German company's office/house. In our naive minds, we thought it was a safe area; we believed

the palaces were the targets, and staying near them was a death wish. We had spent the previous weeks stockpiling supplies, piling the new house with sacks of rice, flour, potatoes, sugar, propane cylinders, furnace oil, crates of bottled water, and dried and tinned milk and food. A friend passed by that afternoon and joked that all houses "emulate Ali Baba's cave." Baghdadis had rehearsed this wicked yet necessary ritual of war-hoarding too many times to count.

The bombing was so intense it felt like it was happening right outside our door. We rushed down the stairs, my husband hysterically shouting, "Be careful, watch your step," as my son Ameen was jumping down three steps at a time. My eldest (almost eighteen) was grumbling sleepily, "How many times does one have to go through this in a lifetime?" He had already seen too much conflict at such a young age. The 1991 and 1998 bombings were still fresh in our minds. My husband was inattentive: "This is the last time, son, the last time." Maybe he really believed it would be.

We all headed to our makeshift shelter—a ground floor room with a small duct-taped window to escape from in case of emergency, a mattress, candles, torches, blankets, snacks and water that no one would ever touch, and a radio.

The first US air raid revealed to us that our new shelter was not a shelter after all. Some of the windows were broken. According to the news, US intelligence had received information that Saddam and his aides were meeting in some abandoned building by the Tigris River. Our house was barely a kilometer away from the site. Much later, we found out that US intelligence had tapped into the underground fiber-optic cables and mobile phones—mobile phones were a luxury in Baghdad at the time.

We loaded our cars with our supplies and headed to a house in Karrada, a nearby neighborhood—our plan B. The tenant of the house was a German mechanic who worked for the same company as my husband. Before he left, he handed my husband the keys to his house and said, "It may not be *de rigueur*, but don't hesitate to use it." On such gloomy days, any small gesture like that was a gift. The drive to Karrada was treacherous. A fifteen-minute drive took hours, which felt like an eternity. The bombs were nonstop; we had to duck down and take cover every few

minutes. To make things worse, a red sandstorm blocked the sun and turned a sunny March afternoon into pitch-black darkness. We were spitting sand, struggling to breathe and see. My husband was shouting at the sky: "Damn you!"

The Karrada house was not to our taste but would do. It had small windows and a double-volume ceiling entrance. No foliage inside or outside. Built in the '90s during the international embargo on Iraq. Our economy was reeling from wars of attrition and sanctions. People were broke. So, some of us started to feel delusional about our status. Elegance gave way to vulgarity. I scolded myself for even thinking that way in those times. A feeling of awkwardness followed; we were taking over a stranger's house without him being there. Nothing was ours.

In the Karrada house, sanity was our priority. Meals became therapy. Unlike during Operation Desert Storm in 1991, Saddam had promised that the food supply would not be interrupted. Truth be told, he tried to keep the electricity on, communication lines open, and the food and water supply moving, but had failed. The bombing cut everything off. Despite the insomnia—or maybe because of it—I kept preoccupied with household chores. Cooking became a leisure activity, though a short-lived one, as was sitting around the table for family dinner. The regime was crumbling, and the fresh food supply was running out. Everything was dwindling. We resorted to tinned food and homemade fries—which felt more like medicine than nourishment.

Months later, in Amman, Jordan, a friend who like us had recently fled Baghdad, agreed to meet me at a café in the busy Abdoun Circle. Known for her calm nature, she shrieked when she absentmindedly ordered a salade niçoise. The sight of the lumpy tuna brought back uninvited memories of those times. "Take it away," she told the waiter nervously. "I can't see it. We ate tinned food for months." The kind waiter took it away.

During the raids, our only source of news was the radio, but word of mouth was never dismissed. "Never underestimate the power of blabber" had become a mantra. The broadband channels were BBC, Monte Carlo, and Voice of America. One early morning, my anxious husband told me, "You're going to drive yourself crazy clinging to that radio all the time." We

were still scared to break the regime's satellite ban. Until a couple of months prior, people were jailed and tortured by Iraqi Intelligence for watching fashion shows on the Italian channel RAI UNO. Desperation made us take the risk and see what was happening in our backyard. It took us many attempts and lots of intra-family yelling to install the miracle device.

FOX News was the first channel we got. On the screen appeared a coiffed newscaster with pearl-like teeth. "Innocent people died in a farmer's market. Have the courtesy to wipe that smirk off your face," I told the screen.

The airstrikes were nonstop. I wondered if those up there had any idea what they were putting us through. People were an afterthought in this war—the mighty United States against an exhausted Iraq.

I stood next to my husband in the borrowed kitchen—my mind wouldn't let me say words of comfort or optimism, as usual. My husband was lamenting that I hadn't taken our two younger children to Amman before the war to get them out of harm's way. But I was adamant that we would stick together as a family. "We die or live together. None of our lives is more precious than the other," I told him on the eve of the war. We couldn't leave Baghdad together. The government was holding onto my eldest son's passport since he was of potential recruitment age. Not in my husband's book—he had to serve in the compulsory military for eight long years: "My two sons will never serve even one day in the military," he used to reiterate.

On April 8, 2003, an American tank slowly crossed Jumhuriya Bridge in central Baghdad. Occupation is hard for any nation. We both cried. The tyrant Saddam had checkmated the country; his destructive acts left nothing but ruins behind. We were wondering where our brave army, the Republican Guard, or the infamous Iraqi Intelligence had gone. Even the Intelligence had turned into ghosts in the night.

Soon came the dramatic footage of the fall of Saddam's statue in Ferdous Square. We weren't sad that Saddam was gone, we were sad that we were being commanded by an American soldier on our own land. A few hundred people gathered to watch the statue fall while the rest of the city's population were, like us, confused. To the world, it was the fall of a statue. To us, it was the fall of our world.

To make me feel better, my husband said, "Look on the bright side. We survived." But my brain was elsewhere. The plan wasn't going as planned. I found myself thinking of 2002, when I was at work, the drums of war getting louder and louder. Saddam was quoted in the state newspaper *Babel* saying, "They might win the battle, but they will never win the war. We will make them taste the bitter taste of defeat. We will make them fight on the streets for years!" Would that be us now?

A few hours after the bridge scene, I heard the sound of a vehicle. I peeked through the curtain to see an American Humvee. I asked my husband, "Why is an American soldier careening through this tiny alley in Karrada?!" He shrugged.

Saddam and all the rhetoric we were fed up with was gone. It was quiet. My husband and I went out. Our neighbors from the past few weeks were standing by their gate. The father, a big burly man in his sixties, forced a smile when he saw us and asked us to join them. We did.

His son-in-law Khalid was standing nearby—a tired looking twenty-eight-year-old, father of two, third-generation military officer from Mosul. His commander had ordered him to leave his post and go home. He was holding onto his military brass like a child holding onto a precious toy and asked, "What do I do? I betrayed my oath! I've been training to be a soldier all my life." His father-in-law consoled him: "Son, the Americans won't abandon you. Leave it to God." The wife was not her usual bubbly self. Then, as if seeking reassurance, she asked, "What will happen now?" Her husband replied, "Most likely a curfew will be imposed." My husband finished the sentence for the neighbor: "Then a new government will be declared." The wife dreamily said, "Destiny will unfold itself."

Once the bombing stopped, we went back to our house in Jaderiya for the first time since we left. My youngest said, "It looks like an old Western movie." He was right. Everything was light red, covered with iron dust from the desert. Then came the looting, which didn't surprise the Baghdadis. In the coming days, life as we knew it took a weird turn—no more solo ventures.

One time, my son was driving near our house. I was in the passenger seat. A stray bullet passed from my side of the window to the driver's side. We dodged the bullet. My son said, cynically,

"Mama thought it was a dragonfly." Unfortunately, that was our new reality. "Fate saved you," my neighbor said when I told her about the incident.

We were at the mercy of the day. The end didn't justify the means. The chaos it brought was paralyzing and smothering. There was no more safety. The one bandit we knew was replaced with a thousand unknown faces, eager for the most cruel and petty revenge and criminality. The strangers who came with the fall spoke our language but did not share our mentality. Overnight, Jordan became the haven for Iraqis. Our family was no different. We ran on a whim, thinking that breathing the motherland's air would always be an option. What a painful myth!

Some of the strange faces of 2003 were the survivors of previous atrocities. Maybe they came to reclaim the lives Saddam took from them decades ago. Back at my Jaderiya home in the summer of 2003, my neighbor, who is a practical person, asked the obvious, "What are they back for?" and then answered themselves rhetorically, "Are they back for vengeance?"

Not all came with the same intentions. Some left after the fall of the monarchy in 1958. Iraq was a developing country then. Maybe nostalgia had a say for a homeland that no longer existed. People change. Places change. Situations change. I lived my adult life through three brutal and exhausting wars and thirteen years of international sanctions, when basic things were scarce. Our innermost selves were either withered or haunted by years of destruction. Yet we were all surprised by the newcomers, who came with the Americans. Who were they? Who are we to them? What do they want? We soon found out: Iraq's upcoming powerbrokers. To this day, Iraq remains hostage to their ill-fated decisions.

After the fall, the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, Paul Bremer, was quick to disband the Iraqi army. This army was founded before Saddam was born. It was the nation's shield and pride. I used to wonder what happened to well-mannered Khalid and his family. He used to help my husband operate the diesel generator that kept the lights on when the city's electricity would shut down. The cuts were common and widespread.

As much as we feared and hated Saddam, the days that followed were hardly any less brutal. It started with the loss of a very dear uncle. He was my father's best friend. Then, his brother-in-law. Then the losses kept coming. Nonstop. On the eve of the 2003 invasion, I emailed my friend Susannah, an Italian diplomat stationed in the United States. I wrote, "The world is about to witness the execution of a nation." And it did. I never wanted to be more wrong.

We had imagined an Iraq without Saddam. Now we had outlived Saddam. Ironically, we could not live in his aftermath. We joined the millions of Iraqis in the global diaspora. We migrated. Eventually we settled in Toronto. We changed homes, countries, jobs, and even nationalities, but the scars of those days remain.

A lifetime has passed, but the events of those days still cast their shadow today. Fireworks, which used to be a symbol of celebration, now evoke memories that linger in the depths of our consciousness. Memories of long power cuts that would plunge us into literal darkness stir emotions that seem unnecessary but persist regardless. Simple war scenes on Netflix trigger disturbing recollections. In war zones like Mesopotamia, fate, destiny, and providence are feigned guises designed for numbing the masses to accept their harsh reality.

As I see images of the brutality inflicted on people of war, I ask myself, "Will the survivors bear the same scars we do? Will their psyches be haunted by flashbacks triggered by innocent sounds, scenes, or even tastes?"

No country should be a graveyard for its people, and no child should be robbed of a mother's love. Politicians will justify their actions while the people of war will be left to deal with irreparable losses. The "brain alarm" is still ringing, an unrelenting reminder of the trauma of twenty years since the last US bombing.

War survivors carry the weight of unfulfilled dreams and ambitions, plans cut short, and souls lost. Rulers may come and go, but the mark they leave behind remains for generations. The echoes of war imprinted on people's collective memory is unerasable proof of the human spirit's strength in the face of adversity.

We are survivors. The brain alarm is *our* proof.

Dev Pardes

Fiction

A PORTRAIT OF A MARRIAGE

Cut at it, cut at it, is the old impulse I already know, as if the feelings were trapped between the bone and skin and with a slice, a shot, I could out this fevered prisoner. I am floating above the room. I am looking down at us while we lie in bed. My husband shakes my body, and I am sucked back into the body—always the body, the shackle—and this, my soul, the chain.

My husband holds me down as I scream into the pillow. This is our nightly ritual. A good, strong fuck, until we perspire with exhaustion. He chokes me out, and I wane off to sleep as the Seattle rain washes up the side of our house. We are back, we are back inside our home, this empty house with a futon for a bed and no books upon the mantle. We live like squatting beggars. There are five rotting carrots in the pantry and always a six pack of beer inside the fridge. After formation breaks, we stumble to the nearest bar and lay waste on the dance floor. I plow my face with drink until I'm smiling, and in these brief moments we call "happy," I let him into my body and surrender a tenderness that does not exist by day.

When he answers the bell, it is always with a gun chambered behind the door. When he takes me to the store, a Beretta is tucked between the waistband of his pants. There is a gun in the glove compartment. There's a gun beside the bed. In this marriage there's him, me, and a gun. Outside, it's only the delivery boy with a box of pizza, but my husband takes precautions all the same.

Sometimes we walk the streets of Tacoma late at night, yearning for a fight, his jaw throttled with desperation, my breath ragged from the waiting.

A wandering john mistakes me for a whore and my husband unsheathes his firearm and aims it at the ready. The man goes wide-eyed and runs.

You crazy! You crazy, man!

Inside a hotel room, we unravel in each other's arms. He hasn't killed someone—yet. He kicks back some whiskey. That

night, the dreams return and he takes from my hands the knife that I've grabbed within my sleep.

Going to war was an excuse for what we already felt: the boredom, the loneliness of a small-town youth driving up and down a desolate highway in despair.

He joined the Army to kill something, but above all, to die, to die. When they asked him why he went off to war, he would look them in the eye with the fierceness of something terrible and say: *I wanted to kill someone.*

And this shut the old ladies up, this silenced the old men. He wouldn't let them believe he'd done it for something honorable, that he'd been a fool.

He was the officer, I the combat photographer. I met him there, somewhere amid the dust and ash, shooting not with scattered bullets but in images, capturing the ravagery of war, which is nothing other than a platoon of teenagers destroying something—anything or anyone—because they've got an itch to kill.

We have no photos of the wedding, which took place in a German courthouse. We have no memories magnetized to our fridge. I have one picture of him, standing atop a Stryker with his rifle, a rare grin upon his face. A smile I have not seen since.

When you marry another soldier, he is neither your lover nor your husband. He is your battle buddy, and you are responsible for him, you cannot leave him, even when marriage goes beyond the realm of bad. You have a duty, not to him, nor to yourself, but to the soldier. If he falls, you carry. When he's exposed, you fire. You follow him into the rubble, through the fields, along the sandy floor of a valley's bottom. When he rants, you listen. When you bleed, he wraps the wound. He sleeps beside you, a gun beneath the pillow, and you rest with the knowledge that he can use it too. When he says he wants to go back, you applaud his thirst to kill, because killing's what you're both trained to do.

Every night he spreads out the flak and Kevlar on the floor and counts magazines of ammunition. Every night he checks and rechecks the clips and racks the rifle for loose shells. But every night when darkness comes, so too the dreams. They glisten. I scream and scream and no amount of bullets can keep them away.

By chance he came home early and found me, in the bath, water red, head limp, hair marbled with soap and blood.

The shrink tells him, get rid of the guns, sell the bullets. *If she has another episode . . .*

The doctor's voice trails off into the inevitable. My husband's quiet, but I recognize the tightening around his jaw. The enemies were over *there*, outside the house, across an ocean, in the mountains or a desert. The enemy shouldn't be here, with us, *inside* one of us.

After my release, he locks up the weapons, hides the kitchen knives, and stores the ammunition. This changes nothing. He remains an officer who wants to score a kill. I, the soldier who cuts away the pain.

We're kids, we're only kids, but together we've lived a thousand lives. We die in our sleep only to resurrect from dreams. The war brought us together. The war will tear us apart. We are each other's duty, married to a loyalty far deeper than the memory of love. Without this marriage, we'd both be empty, empty as the hallways of this house. So we carry on, treading lightly across the carpet, careful not to disturb the graveyard of our hearts.

Kris Michałowicz

Nonfiction

RULE 1: GOOD MEN WILL DIE

A muddy pickup truck sits parked outside my building, the cross of the Armed Forces of Ukraine emblazoned on its windshield. Whether its driver is my neighbor or a visitor to a neighbor, I don't know. But what catches my eye about this pickup, almost identical as it is to all the other pixelated pickups that busy the uneven roads of Ukraine, is what's written on its back left door. Scratched in with black marker pen—a combination of long, willowy uppercase and stout lowercase characters like runes—is the following:

Rule 1: Good men will die
Rule 2: Doc can't save everyone
Rule 3: Doc will go through hell to break rules 1 & 2

Everything's Normal Until It Isn't

When I tell people back home in Britain that I live in L'viv, they often reply that I live in "the safe part of Ukraine." "Safe" is a relative term here, to put it mildly. There is, in fact, no such thing as a safe part of the country since Russia's unprovoked full-scale invasion in 2022, which was a continuation of a war Moscow started in 2014, a detail often omitted today by Western politicians and media. Rather than any safe place, there is only a lottery of murder. Every night, Ukrainians go to bed in anticipation of sirens, the unspoken question on their minds being who will be killed tonight and where.

It would be wrong of me to compare life as I have lived it in L'viv to the experiences of besieged civilians in frontline cities like Kharkiv or Kherson. Or to the Ukrainian men and women fighting and dying in the trenches. I'm certain the fear I have felt at night as the dull pop of air defense and the crash of Russian missiles falls over the city pales in comparison to the terror insinuated into the daily routines of Ukrainians living under occupation. Then there are the lives lost and broken in the Russian prison system, both in occupied Ukraine and Russia proper. A gulag archipelago for the new century, albeit one Solzhenitsyn would eagerly approve of.

I can't speak of these things from my own experience, which isn't to say I have the right not to speak out about them. But what I have begun to notice is even a city in the rear like L'viv has become mystified in the Western imagination, to the extent that perceptions of the place make it sound unrecognizable when relayed back to me by Brits. This essay then is an effort to dispel certain myths that have grown in the West about life in Ukraine. An attempt to describe how violence shapes and constrains the lives of Ukrainians in the everyday.

The most concise answer I've been able to give when people ask me what life is like in L'viv is "everything's normal until it isn't." What I mean by this is life goes on as normal until there is an attempted attack on the city. I've since come to understand what an inadequate reply that is. Normal according to who? Sirens, curfews, ubiquitous soldiers, men limping on prosthetic legs or their shirt sleeves hanging empty, raids and checkpoints by the much feared and hated Territorial Recruitment Office staff . . . all of these have become normal to me in the sense that I now expect and take them for granted. They are now part of the background. But if friends from the West were to visit me in L'viv, I'm sure all of these details would be highly conspicuous and extraordinary to them. So, what do I mean by "everything's normal until it isn't?"

Simply, that life endures in spite of death. I often find that when people in the West imagine the lives of Ukrainian civilians, they see something static. Lives frozen. Their only memes of war being images of wanton urban and ecological destruction as shown by a voyeuristic, bloodthirsty media reducing Ukrainians to figures without autonomy, encased in suffering, trapped in a violent present with no hope of a future to liberate them. After the Russians (who are never referred to as "Russians" in Ukrainian conversation, but always as *moskali*) fired rockets into a power station across the road from my flat one morning and the siren gave the all-clear, it wasn't long before I could see from my bedroom window people walking their dogs or chatting with neighbors out on the street, as the awful black smoke billowed up into the sky behind them. As I left my flat, a *babusia*, an old lady living in my building, told me off because I had come outside without a coat and hat and might catch a cold.

Someone back in Britain saw on the news L'viv had been attacked and wrote me to see if I was okay.

"What does everyone do now?" they asked.

"Go to work," I replied.

They were as shocked that people had jobs to go to as much as they were that people had the energy and strength to attend to them. Because in trivializing media narratives of war as observed from a place of peace, those who suffer are only known to suffer, and never to endure.

Amid the sirens and the drones, the rockets and the rubble, the dead and the maimed, people continue to work, to marry, to celebrate birthdays. They make plans for the future as much as they make plans for funerals. They carry their trauma. There is not a single city, town or village I have passed through in Ukraine without a cemetery plot for fallen defenders. There is no high street or city square without memorials to those killed by the invader. Their deaths permeate the lives of those who remember them. Even as people go about the business of the everyday, the dead are present in the most mundane of rituals. They watch on in the imagination as mute ghosts.

Birthdays and Castrations

I recently attended a birthday party for one of my Ukrainian in-laws. Because of conflicting shift patterns, the only time of the day we could all be free to meet and celebrate was in the morning. A breakfast was served of pizza, watermelon, ice cream, limoncello, and wine. Between toasts to good health and victory, the conversation weaved seamlessly between war and peace. Neighborhood gossip about parking space disputes and shotgun marriages sat comfortably alongside talk of who from the district has been killed on the frontline, who is missing, whose bodies have been retrieved and whose remains have been lost in no man's land to become a grim detail of the Ukrainian landscape. Local gossip intermingled with global paranoia, as fear of a Western betrayal looms large in the Ukrainian consciousness. Conspiracy theories abound, a hangover from years of Soviet occupation. As we ate, an in-law complained that Ukraine feeds its Russian prisoners-of-war and treats them humanely, while his friend who had just returned from Russian captivity had his nails ripped out and was castrated by his captors.

There is a certain assumption I have encountered, conceived in the luxury of peace, that an embattled people have no right to frivolous things like birthday parties or food. Surely it can't be that bad if people have the time and resources for such luxuries, goes the callous logic. This thinking is built on Russian fictions, narratives of disinformation that through social media have captured the imaginations of people across the globe. In 2022, a video circulated on Twitter (redubbed "X" by South African aspiring oligarch Elon Musk) of a wild, glamorous party thrown in a lavish nightclub. The clip was disseminated as being shot in Kyiv, prompting endless, identical comments about how the war can't be so bad if Ukrainians are partying in the capital. It would quickly emerge the clip was in fact shot in a club in Warsaw.

And this reveals the other meme of Ukraine that Westerners have to make sense of a war they have no understanding of. In contrast to helpless Ukrainians subjugated by an ashen hellscape of destruction, wretched peasants built for suffering, this meme downplays the war. It casts President Zelenskyy as a con artist, a tracksuit warlord profiteering from a naive West through a crisis of his own design. This is a fiction becoming all the more popular for its promotion by convicted felon Donald Trump, but it had already gained considerable traction before the 2024 US presidential elections. I think now of the Englishman who told me in a pub in London that Russia only occupies neighboring countries to defend itself from an insidious, serpentine NATO hellbent on destroying its statehood. He also told me he fervently supports Ukraine. In the warped house of mirrors that is Russian disinformation campaigns, two opposites can be equally true:

Ukrainians are unfree peasants; Ukrainians are partygoing hoodwinkers.

I support Ukraine; I support Russia's invasion of Ukraine because it's for Ukraine's own good.

L'viv, like all Ukrainian cities, stands broken and empty under Russian might; L'viv remains intact thanks to Russian mercy.

Both images are projected through Russian fictions. Neither are true.

Here to Help

With martial law imposing a curfew, I don't know of any swanky, Instagrammable club parties in L'viv. Then again, I rarely leave my neighborhood, a place Ukrainians call "a sleeping district." What I do know is there are plenty of foreigners who have come to Ukraine for a good time. War tourism, which often is the same thing as sex tourism, has bloated L'viv's beautiful city center with older men drabbed in any olive-green attire they can find, on a noble mission to score girls and free drinks by masquerading as soldiers. A friend in Kyiv tells me about a Texan he met there who is in Ukraine on the logic of "The US is helping Ukraine; ergo Ukrainian women owe sex to American men." Again, the assumption is Ukrainians are helpless and can only survive as part of a superior Western man's harem.

Perhaps this is why my Ukrainian spouse shrewdly noted that whenever she sees one of the UN's pristine white jeeps in L'viv, they're always parked close to a brothel. Last year, my spouse worked for an international humanitarian organization that opened and then just as quickly closed an office in L'viv. Much of the staff were Ukrainian and provided important resources to women and girls who had escaped Russian occupation. The management, however, was international. On my spouse's first day at their office, she was reprimanded for wearing a T-shirt with a patriotic Ukrainian slogan. All political sloganeering was banned in the office, because the organization took a neutral stance to the war. One manager explained to the Ukrainian staff that this war is a civil war, echoing Putin's lies between 2014–2022 that fighting in Donbas is an "internal matter." This is who had been sent to help Ukrainians in the ways they supposedly cannot help themselves.

My spouse left that job and joined another international organization. A senior manager on her team from Canada visited Kyiv last year because his girlfriend is from there. Seemingly, he visited during a relative lull of drone and missile attacks on a city that is typically under attack most days of the year. This convinced him the war is "not that bad," an opinion he shares readily with his Ukrainian employees. He accuses them of exaggeration, even during an online meeting a colleague attended as the Okhmatdyt children's hospital was bombed in proximity to her flat.

For the Canadian, the war is an embellishment. For the war tourists, it's an opportunity to access survival sex. The war is many things to many Westerners, except what it actually is: a failure of the entire world to prevent an imperial invasion hellbent on genocide and facilitated by the complacency of greedy men in the West who have never faced a threat larger than their own clumsiness. When the Ukrainian director Valentyn Vasyanovych screened *Atlantis*, his sublimely desolate masterpiece about Russia's war against Ukraine, he was confounded to find Italian journalists afterward asking him if the war depicted in his film was real, or had he just made it up for the purposes of the story? It makes me wonder if Hollywood produced a blockbuster about Ukraine's fight for freedom with a sympathetic script and household names in the main roles, would international audiences understand that the events depicted are real? Would they grasp that death isn't something that only happens to other people? Or would they come away thinking of Ukrainians as an exotic warrior tribe like the Fremen from *Dune*?

Don't Go to Hell Before Your Father

The above examples don't reflect on the many foreigners who do very brave and important work in Ukraine. Many of these foreigners come from places like Belarus, Georgia, and Chechnya, and fight in the hope a Ukrainian victory will lead to a liberation of their own occupied homelands. Chechen president and general Djokhar Dudayev said during Russia's invasion of his own newly independent country that all Chechens are generals, and that he was only one of a million. I could say something similar about Ukrainians and their allies, as everyone I know in Ukraine is a volunteer in some sense, whether they are in the military or not. Soldiers on the frontline are under-resourced and overwhelmed, so civilians in the rear are all fundraising for units in which their loved ones serve.

But what of the soldiers themselves? What do they say to civilians about the frontline in the rare precious moments they get to text or call them? They all say the same thing: "It's hell." For *New Statesman* contributor Philip Cunliffe, the war is a "postmodern theater," a hyperreal simulation. But for the men and women digging trenches into the guts of the earth and holding

the line, it's a real hell. There is nothing abstract in the pain and death they witness and do everything possible and impossible to stop. The pain is theirs, but it flows back in lines broken and frayed to the people who miss them back home. Entire streets of civilians will halt in the middle of their everyday business to stoop to a knee if a hearse carrying a fallen defender to their resting place passes by. Every region of Ukraine, no matter how far from the frontline, is shadowed by grief.

More about hell. A friend of mine left his home city of Mariupol after Russia invaded. He came to L'viv by himself and once he had found somewhere to live and a way to make income, he returned to bring his parents, siblings, and fiancée with him. His fiancée, having already survived the Russian invasion of Donetsk in 2014, was retraumatized. My friend planned then to enlist in the military and fight the invaders, but his father protested with the old Ukrainian adage, "Don't go to hell before your father." My friend yielded to his father's wishes, but only temporarily. He now serves as part of Ukraine's National Guard. When I first met him, he told me he considers himself lucky, because the Russians didn't kill any of his family. "The only thing they did to us was burn our house down," he said. "But even this I look at positively, because if everything in our home was destroyed, then the Russians could never have it for themselves." As I listened, I tried to imagine a life where the positive part is my childhood home being reduced to ruinous ashes.

Another acquaintance escaped her home city of Kherson while it was still occupied by the enemy. To leave, she and her family had to travel into Russia, into the lair of their occupiers, to reach Europe and circle back into western Ukraine. Before they left, she witnessed the Russians execute a man outside of her house. She told me the one thing she can't make people understand about living under occupation is "how meaningful every day is." The mission at every hour of the day is to survive, a task that imbues every moment and the most mundane of chores with a weight and significance unmatched by any notions of freedom she's encountered in the freedom of west Ukraine. Under occupation, the vernacular and ordinary became existential and defiant. The nation survives one person at a time.

What Does the West Get Wrong?

Westerners have asked me if drone and missile attacks are exciting to live through. I have had Westerners lecherously inquire about Ukrainian women. I've been told with great relish that I will die if I stay in L'viv. One lady asked me if Ukrainians resent Palestinians for "stealing all the attention." Men who have never had to fight for anything in their entire lives have condescendingly explained to me that a full liberation of Ukrainian territories is impossible against the martial invincibility of Russia, so the only solution is to trade land for peace. When they say this, they betray that they have given no thought to the Ukrainians who would be trapped under Russian jurisdiction in such an outcome and be subjected to a triumphalist genocide. Many people have asked or said the wrong things to me about the war, so I was relieved when during a work conference in London a researcher in Russian disinformation approached me and asked, "What does the West get wrong about the war?"

Let me count the ways. But brevity meant I could only pick one. The answer I chose was "That Russian soldiers are good boys stuck in a bad situation." This is another common misconception I have had patiently explained to me by Brits many times over. That Russians are also victims in this war. They don't know the truth; they can't protest the war, so they have no choice but to murder Ukrainians. I told the researcher that good boys in a bad situation do not take Viagra so as to ensure an erection for the purpose of gang-raping Ukrainian civilians. They do not calmly launch missiles at hospitals and shopping centers in Ukraine from afar before going home to their wives and children. They do not heed the advice of their wives back home in Russia who give them permission to rape Ukrainian women in occupied territories so long as they use a condom. Nor do they systematically torture, sexually assault, and castrate the prisoners they are tasked with supervising. Good boys would stay home and build a country for themselves worth living in. This is what Ukrainians are doing. Every single day, and in whatever way they can.

Stairwell

On September 4, 2024, Russia attacked L'viv with drones and hypersonic missiles. From our flat, the boom of the missiles was so loud I thought perhaps air defense had intercepted something directly overhead. I was mistaken. What I was listening to in that moment was the missiles falling on peaceable, civilian buildings in the next district over, murdering eight people in total. One family, the parents and three daughters, sat waiting on the stairwell of their building for the air alert to pass. The father went back into their flat to get water for his wife and daughter, just as the missile crashed into the building, crushing and killing his family but sparing him. Every day, for the rest of his life, he will live without his wife and children. Every day, their absence will determine the everyday. When I told my spouse I think I would want to die if that happened to me, she asked me to promise not to hurt myself if ever something happens to her in an attack, but I survive. I think that's the hardest conversation we've had since the summer before, when we had to discuss precautions and procedures should a nuclear disaster be triggered by Russia at the occupied Enerhodar nuclear power plant. In both conversations, we finished up and then got on with our days, sleep deprived and aching for the dead.

Rule 1: Good men will die. So will good women. And children. But Doc, the driver of that pickup, whoever he is, has vowed to go through hell in order to save as many lives as possible. Those few terse words written on the side of his truck convey to me the love and determination with which Ukrainians fight for their survival, as well as the senseless, unjust suffering they are subjected to. A love, a determination, a suffering that the world will continue to abstract and memeify from afar, in absence of any true resolve to listen to Ukrainian voices and end the war on Ukrainian terms. The everyday for Ukrainians is loaded with the threat of violent death, their voices snuffed out by the Russian war machine. Please take a moment from your own day to listen to those voices.

Larry Flynn

THE ART OF PONY

—for James Wright

You bow at bluegrass and bray
with mammoth docility.

To you, blood-red is no different
than grass-green, so show us

battlefields growing greener
with blood. Show us sheriff badges

blinding your sight of volcano-hoses
erupting from green fire trucks.

I used to walk past a troop of horses
black as pupils awaiting instruction

on global history, conquest, politics,
and poetry, so I taught *A Blessing*

to share all you have seen
with monocular vision—meaning,

you can't see ahead, but you can see
to your immediate left and right,

which is the pasture of us
incapable warriors, praise God,

searching for greenest green.

Rachel Betesh

ISRAELI MILITARY BASE, 1999

We were given shirts the color of olives,
the grey-green, the many pockets,
what soldiers call

fatigues like the absolute tiredness
of safe haven, homeland, hold this
gun, or guns,

since there were enough for each of us,
we came from leafy towns
and I mean maple, dogwood,

and gutters, and cut grass—but we were in a land
of cactus and oranges. Aren't I
remembering, or forgetting

some kind of detail, that the soldier hosting us
was named Lilach, which means lilac,
or even just the color purple

of bruised skin, the day after, harm.
Her hair was long and bright yellow,
braided down her olive green back.

At school we'd always learned that blond Jews
were easier to hide on farms or in villages
in Denmark, Holland, France—

we'd all dreamed unironically of the Gestapo,
of German boots, of running back
or towards; away

even among the maples, dogwoods, gutters
and cut grass—lilacs—anyway Lilach
led us to a shooting range

where we were shown how to lay on our
stomachs, the smooth organ of hunger
that turns

to see the paper cut-out, not just circles
but the shape of a man who may as well
have been among oranges,

still as a cactus, facing us, made only of
lines, like borders, without eyes;
if he'd had hair we would have

recognized it, thick and dark like what grew
from our heads, arms, legs, knuckles;
knowing not once

about the Nakba, never hearing the word
for that catastrophe. Here is the sound
and here is the silence—

I didn't shoot the gun, I couldn't,
I wouldn't, then as now trembling
and stubborn, so Lilach

gave me noise-canceling headphones,
sent me to sit and wait on a stone wall,
while one by one

the gunshots, the roar of not what we did
or didn't, but what we were
asked to do.

Noah Lederman

Nonfiction

AFTERNOON TEA WHERE POPPY SPILLED BLOOD

Before I was born, Poppy owned a butcher shop on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, around the corner from the Second Avenue Deli. My father had recalled few stories about his father's saw-dust-covered shop. He did remember how the owner of the Second Avenue Deli would come into Poppy's butcher shop most afternoons to purchase fat scraps. Poppy happily parted with the fat and then gave my father the skinny: "Never eat hamburgers outside of the house."

Dad's only other story about his father's butcher shop featured a robber who'd burst in, demanding cash.

"Poppy always said if a man came in with a gun, he'll get whatever he wants." That might have become true for Poppy in the 1960s, now that he was a father and lived in America. But it certainly hadn't been the case in the 1940s in Poland when Poppy was a teenager. In 1942, a Nazi had raided the barn where Poppy had been hiding. The German pointed a gun at my young grandfather and demanded his boots. Instead of complying, Poppy ran a pitchfork through the Nazi's throat, leaving him dead on the barn floor. During the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the Nazis had tanks and guns; Poppy responded with glass bottles filled with gasoline and stuffed with rags.

"But if he comes in with a knife," my father continued the story, suddenly adopting his father's voice, "I've got a bigger knife."

When the robber held the blade out and shouted something like, "Give me the money from the register!" Poppy, who'd survived five concentration camps, including Auschwitz and Majdanek, saw the thug's blade, smiled, grabbed one of the knives he used to hack through bone, and hopped the counter. He chased the schmuck down Tenth Street.

In 2017, my book about my grandparents' Holocaust stories and my efforts to uncover their hidden histories was published. I included these two butcher shop anecdotes because Dad couldn't

recall anything more about Poppy's store, which he'd owned in the late '60s and early '70s. But on a recent stroll through the city, my father passed his father's old shop and told me about it. I was shocked. I had just assumed that the building had been demolished or that my father had forgotten its location. After all, why wouldn't he have said something a decade ago, when I'd started my research and pressed Dad for stories?

I typed in the address and saw that the butcher shop now served fine teas. But I hadn't been very motivated to drop everything and visit. The idea of sipping fine teas and munching on little canapes where Poppy had spilt blood felt a bit rich. I doubted that the new owners would have stumbled upon decades-old, blood-stained invoices or drawers filled with ancient knives. So, I never made the visit a priority.

One afternoon, when I'd met my father in the city for lunch and we needed to occupy our time with more than just a meal, I suggested we walk over to the old butcher shop.

Outside, half a century ago, the shop would have delivered to passersby the metallic scent of blood. Today it offered a different welcoming: trellised pink and red roses overwhelmed by the exposed bowels of the block.

After the hostess gave us the welcoming spiel about credit card minimums and time limits for tables, and asked again if we still wanted a table, my father replied, "Fifty years ago, this used to be my father's butcher shop."

The hostess's eyes went big. Not with astonishment for our intended journey through our family's history, but with what looked like a fear that my father would recount all five decades in between and explain how nobody used credit cards then or talked about minimum payments. To stop him from continuing, perhaps, she said, "I have a table here or there."

"We'll take that one," I said, pointing to the one under a crystal chandelier.

After we sat, Dad kept glancing over his shoulder like he expected the long, bloodstained butcher counter, his father, and all the meats to reappear.

"I remember Poppy always sat at the window, looking out on the street, smoking cigarettes," Dad said. "There was a whorehouse across the street. A rabbi was their best customer. Whenever

Grandma visited the butcher shop, Poppy used to enjoy pointing to the rabbi with the whores and say to Grandma, 'Look, your rabbi.' It pissed her off."

"That Poppy pointed this out?" I asked.

"No, that the rabbi brought shame to the religion."

Poppy died when I was eighteen, on the second-to-last day of the twentieth century. Since his funeral, I'd visited his tombstone three times: once for his unveiling, again when Grandma died in 2010, and a third time for her stone's unveiling. But in the cemetery, I never felt a real connection to the earth that held his bones. But at the old butcher shop, where they now served petite macaroons, I scribbled furiously on a scrap of paper as my father's newly remembered stories brought Poppy cutting into dead flesh back to life.

"When we came back from California, after driving cross country, Harry, Mitch, and I pulled up in front of the butcher shop to see Poppy. He kissed us all hello. I remember the surprise on their faces. Their own fathers didn't even do that, and here was Poppy kissing my friends." Dad huffed out a little laugh. Like if a person tried picking up one sausage, Dad found story linked to story. "Oh, and there was this guy who came in all the time, whittling."

"Like whittling a piece of wood?"

"Yeah, but he didn't like when people stared at him." The whole neighborhood came to life where Oolong black had replaced brisket-for-eight. "Who's not going to stare at a guy whittling in a butcher shop? And when the guy bought meat, he complained about paying for the bone. Poppy said, 'So go buy meat somewhere else.' The whittler stopped complaining and paid for the bone. He'd just sit here, all day, whittling."

I smiled at the signs on each table reminding guests of their ninety minutes: to punch faster on their laptops, to whittle wood with more gusto. I realized my father whittled now, too. He took the excesses of the tea shop—removed the blue sofas, cut away the teapots festooned with floral paintings, trimmed back the dainty teacups, hacked at the dangling chandeliers—and revealed the butcher shop. He returned Grandma to the small kitchen at the back, where she cooked things up and chastised Ben, the delivery boy, for talking instead of sweeping.

"She'd yell, 'Shut up,' and Ben would say, 'You, shut up.' Poppy found their arguing funny," Dad said before reminding himself of his own role here: making bank deposits. With his long hair, Dad appeared to be a broke hippie waiting for the Fillmore East's doors to open; no one suspected a butcher's apprentice carrying all that meat money.

"The walls didn't look like this." Dad struggled to accept the changes fifty years could bring. Like how could the butcher shop suddenly have white brick walls with interior-designer-placed moss perfectly glued over a select number of cement lines? Moss then would have been bad for business. Stucco clouds hadn't floated above exposed brick. "The walk-in fridge is gone," my father said. "And the ceilings used to be sheet metal."

Back then, shelves never held trinkets. Ropes never dangled lights. There had only been kosher cuts of steak and chicken parts, not cheesecakes and crème brulée. The sawdust of then had been swept away. But the stories were like old blood in the veins of the place.

Patrick Cotter

OSSUARY

The mud-besmeared boys I knew, smirked at the agony of ants
and flies, ripped lacey veined wings, rolled-flat six-legged
dots under polythene sandal soles. Soon they graduated
to snails—smashed squadrons in their crisp, whorling

helmets, panzerfausted them to gummy bits. Mice and rats
they penknived. Furry bellies were defiled like beribboned
boxes. As men at the abattoir, they learnt to daydream
while carving hunks of fleshy ghost: cattle, pigs, goats.

Goats proffered no resistance, but wept timidly, spilling
their innards into moats of human unfeeling. Stews and ovens
rendered down all power to haunt. The men, so skilled, so
certain, sounded gaunt notes of strength, while reeking at week's

comfort-seeking end from the stench of the feeble. None
ever pondered if great battle cauldrons were coming: all-
the-more-vicious wars, after decades of sin-laundering easy
sleep, leading to the splitting and heaping of their own bones.

GOOD-WILL RECITAL—SONATA IN G MINOR

The young soldier who plays the cello is kitted
out for his leveling-of-civilization day-job.
A pixelated camouflage haversack beside him.

His chromed assault rifle almost wistful in its
leaning. After he has shown mastery of Chopin
he must leave to rubblize still-rollicking streets

where musical notation, the craft of lutherie
are yet nurtured. He sits and plays and fails to notice
loose linden leaves crushed beneath his buffed boots:

perfect practice for his hobnailed soles.
Their percussive potential as they crush, almost
an intended duet with a rifle's life-quenching sputter.

Olga Livshin

WAR. DAY 35

Back home, Ihor said,
people planted flowers
under bombardment.

Garden beds littered with rocket parts.
His favorite café, turned to sugar cubes
of concrete blocks piled on the lawn.
Still, Monday arrives like a tank.
Still, landscaping for the city is his work.
He lingers, smoking by his municipal services truck
full of bulbs glowing with greenhouse warmth.
If he plants them today, then on Tuesday,
his neighbors will be in the company of tulips.
And on Wednesday, in the company of tulips.
    If he survives,
there will be more flowers in the streets.
    If the tulips make it, and he—well,
he will be partly here.
If neither, then maybe it is enough,
on his maybe-last-day,
to shift the topography of the block
from blown-up brick, yawning clay
to a delicate orange scent.
He trembles, crushes his cigarette
and starts out towards the chill.

Contributors' Notes

Saed A. J. Abolebda (b. 2003) is a Palestinian translator. He studied at Al Azhar University of Gaza.

Dr. Emad S. Abu Hatab is a Palestinian physician, short story writer, and a former member of the Central Committee of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine and a leading member of the Palestinian Democratic Union (FIDA). He spent ten years as the editor-in-chief of *Al-Hurriya* magazine. Dr. Emad currently lives in Germany.

Sana Abu Sharar is a novelist, short story writer, and lawyer born in the city of Hebron, Palestine. She holds a PhD in Law and Sharia from the International Islamic University in Cairo. Sana is a member of the Palestinian Writers Union, the Egyptian Writers Union, and the Arab Literature Association. Her work has appeared in many Arab newspapers, such as *Al-Dustour*, *Al-Ghad*, and *Al-Arab Al-Yawm*. Sana currently lives in Amman, Jordan.

Dima Al-Basha is an entrepreneur and translator from Aleppo, Syria. Since coming to the United States, she has become a promoter of interfaith dialogue and intercultural understanding. She's given a TEDx talk titled "The Power of a Simple Step!" about bridging gaps between people of different cultures and perspectives.

Essam M. Al-Jassim is a Saudi writer and translator based in Jubail, Saudi Arabia. His writings and translations have been featured nationally and internationally in various Arabic and English-language literary journals. He is the translator and editor of the recently published anthology of flash fiction *Furtive Glimpses: Flash Fiction from The Arab World*.

Mona Al-Msaddar is a Doha-based Palestinian writer from Gaza. She has three collections of poetry: *I Count My Steps* (2018), *Memory Shadow* (2020), and the narrative(s) collection *Moments* (2021). She holds an MA in Comparative Literature. Her upcoming poetry collection, *Faces,* is forthcoming soon.

Hashim Al-Rifa'i (1935-1959) was an Egyptian poet who was assassinated at age 24. He studied at Dar Al-Ulum College and left 187 poems that dealt with issues in various Arab nations.

Raphael Badagliacca is the author of *Father's Day: Encounters with Everyday Life* and *The Yogi Poems and Other Celebrations of Local Baseball*. His full-length play *GPS: Where Are We Going?* ran earlier this year at Producers Club Theatre in NYC's theater district. He's won The Moth NYC StorySLAM and translated Sicilian and Italian into English subtitles for the film *Many Beautiful Things* (*Tanti Beddi Cosi*). He also writes stories and poetry.

Ahmed Bassiouny is a Palestinian writer. He holds an MA in Political Science and International Relations from the Doha Institute for Post-graduate

Studies. His work has appeared in various outlets, and he produced a number of documentaries for Alaraby TV.

Daniel Beaudoin describes the series featured in this issue as one attempt to carve out a modicum of clarity following his army service as an Israeli officer in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Rachel Betesh is a registered nurse, gardener, mother, and poet. Her poetry has appeared in *The New Yorker, Poetry Northwest,* and *Bennington Review*.

David Blair is the author of five books of poetry and a collection of essays. His latest book, *True Figures: Selected Shorter Poems and Prose Poems, 1998-2021*, is available from MadHat Press. He teaches poetry in the MFA Writing Program at the University of New Hampshire and lives in Somerville, Massachusetts, with his wife and daughter.

Connie T. Braun is a speaker, essayist, and poet living in Abbotsford, British Columbia. Her work has appeared in various publications, including *Room*, *december magazine*, *PRISM international*, *Ekstasis*, *Nimrod International Journal*, *Hamilton Arts & Letters*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Rhubarb*, *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, and *Equinox*, as well as several anthologies. Her poem "Following the Moonroad" was commissioned for music and choral composition by the DaCapo Choir in March 2019. In 2008, Connie's book, *The Steppes are the Colour of Sepia: A Mennonite Memoir*, was published by Ronsdale Press.

John Bruggink, a US Army veteran, discovered his passion for art in 2022 while transitioning from service. The works featured in this issue focus on the visceral nature of combat, the costs of conflict, and the indomitable human spirit. His work explores struggle against adversity, the beauty of nature, and grace of the human form.

Born in Leicester, England, **Clive Collins** has taught at universities in Northern Ireland, Sierra Leone, and Japan. He is the author of two novels, *The Foreign Husband* (Marion Boyars) and *Sachiko's Wedding* (Marion Boyars/ Penguin Books). *Misunderstandings*, a collection of short stories, was joint-winner of the Macmillan Silver PEN Award in 1994. Collins was a shortlisted finalist for the 2009 Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction. *Carried Away and Other Stories* is available now from Red Bird Chapbooks.

Patrick Cotter is a poet living in Ireland. He has published four chapbooks, a verse novella, and four full-length collections, including *Sonic White Poise* (Dedalus, Dublin 2021) and *Quality Control at the Miracle Factory* (Dedalus, 2025). As an underage teenager, he illegally served in the reserves of the Irish Defence Forces.

Khalid Dader is an emerging literary translator and academic researcher. He is a PhD fellow researcher at Tampere University, Finland. His research

interests include poetic (in)justice, political "literary" translation, human dignity (Karamah), masculinities, and homemaking within crisis-ridden spaces.

Diana Davidson lives and writes in Edmonton on Treaty Six land and in the homeland of the Metis Nation. Her novel *Pilgrimage* was a finalist for the 2014 Alberta Readers' Choice Awards, and her essay "Ahead of the Ice" (published in *Alberta Views*) won a Writers' Guild of Alberta prize. Davidson is working on a novel about Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* and World War II that is inspired by her Canadian grandfather meeting her Dutch grandmother on Liberation Day in Amsterdam.

Evel Economakis (PhD, History, Columbia University, 1994) was among the first Americans to work in Russian historical archives after the collapse of the USSR. Evel's articles and short stories have appeared in magazines, journals, and newspapers in the United States, Canada, Europe, and Russia. He lives with his family in Rafina, Greece, a small port town north of Athens.

Ibrahim Fawzy is an award-winning literary translator. His translations have appeared in various literary outlets. He is an editor at *Rowayat*, *Asymptote*, and *Minor Literatures*, as well as a podcaster at New Books Network (NBN).

Larry Flynn is an MFA candidate at UMass Amherst. His writing has been published in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *West Branch*, *New Letters*, *Greensboro Review*, *StoryQuarterly*, *The Normal School*, and others. He has received scholarships from the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, and UMass Amherst's School of Earth & Sustainability, and fellowships from the Juniper Summer Writing Institute and Columbia University's Teachers College; he has also attended workshops at Tin House and *The Kenyon Review*. His work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and selected as an Honorable Mention for the Cara Paravanni Memorial Award.

Robert René Galván, born in San Antonio of Indigenous/Mexican heritage, resides in New York City, where he works as a professional musician and poet. His collections of poems include *Meteors*, *Undesirable: Race and Remembrance* (Somos en Escrito Foundation Press), *Standing Stones* (Finishing Line Press), and *The Shadow of Time* (Adelaide Books).

Robbie Gamble is the author of the poetry collection *A Can of Pinto Beans* (Lily Poetry Review Press, 2022). His poems and essays have appeared in *Salamander*, *Pangyrus*, *Post Road*, *Tahoma Literary Review*, and *The Sun*. In 1988, he worked as a human rights observer during the civil war in El Salvador. He now divides his time between Boston and Vermont.

A.N. Grace lives in Liverpool, England. His poetry has been shortlisted for the Alpine Fellowship Award, and has appeared or is forthcoming in *Another Chicago*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, and *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*.

Omar Hammash (b. 1953) is a Palestinian writer. He received a Licentiate in Arabic language from Al-Quds Open University in 1990 and was one of the cofounders of the Palestinian Writers Union in 1984. Hammash contributed to establishing the Palestinian People's Party and was arrested several times by the Israeli forces.

Salma Harland is a British-Egyptian literary translator who works between Arabic and English. She was a 2022 Travel Fellow with the American Literary Translators Association (ALTA) and a recipient of one of the Dutch Foundation for Literature's 2023 Translation Grants. She was long-listed for the 2022–23 John Dryden Translation Competition. Her critical writings and translations have appeared in literary journals and magazines such as *The Massachusetts Review*, *ArabLit Quarterly*, *Modern Poetry in Translation*, and *Poetry London*, and in anthologies with the British National Centre for Writing, Outspoken Press, and Honna-Elles Feminist Publishing House. She tweets as @salmaharland.

Ayòdéjì Israel is a poet, writer, editor, and Pushcart Prize nominee. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Channel Magazine*, *Eunoia Review*, *Counterclock*, *Ake Review*, *Defunct Magazine*, *OneArtPoetry*, *Livina Press*, *The River*, *Nude Bruce Review*, *Whale Road Review*, *Sandy River Review*, *The Bitchin' Kitsch*, and elsewhere. You can find him on Twitter @Ayo_einstein.

Jennifer Jean's poetry collections include *VOZ*, *Object Lesson: A Guide to Writing Poetry*, and *The Fool*. She is also the editor *of Other Paths for Shahrazad: A Bilingual Anthology of Contemporary Poetry by Arab Women* (Tupelo Press 2026). Her poetry, prose, and co-translations appear in *POETRY*, *Rattle*, *The Common*, the *Los Angeles Review*, and *On the Seawall*. She co-wrote and co-translated the collaborative, bilingual collection *Where Do You Live?* with Iraqi poet Dr. Hanaa Ahmad Jabr.

Margalit Katz was raised on unceded Lenape territory and currently teaches English as a Fulbright fellow in Aguascalientes, Mexico, the ancestral homeland of the Caxcán people. They received their BA in Spanish and Anthropology from Wesleyan University, attended the 2023 Summer Graduate Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, and received a partial fellowship from Brooklyn Poets in 2024. Their work has been published or is forthcoming in *Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry*, *SLANT*, and *Stonecoast Review*.

Gunilla T. Kester is an award-winning poet and the author of *If I Were More Like Myself* (The Writer's Den, 2015) and two chapbooks, *Mysteries I-XXIII* (2011) and *Time of Sand and Teeth* (2009), with Finishing Line Press. Her work has or will be published in *On the Seawall*, *Cider Press*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Pendemics,* and *Atlanta Review*.

Cindy King is the author of *Zoonotic* (2022), *Easy Street* (2021), and *Lesser Birds of Paradise* (2022). Her latest manuscript won the 2023 C&R Poetry

Book Award. Her poems appear in *The Sun*, *Callaloo*, *The Threepenny Review*, *New England Review*, *North American Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Denver Quarterly*, *American Literary Review*, *Cincinnati Review*, and elsewhere. Cindy has received fellowships and scholarships from the Sewanee Writers' Workshop, the Fine Arts Work Center, Tin House, Colgate University, and other organizations. She is an associate professor of creative writing at Utah Tech University and is an editorial assistant for *Seneca Review* and *TriQuarterly*.

Michael Lauchlan has contributed to many publications, including *New England Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The North American Review*, *Louisville Review*, *Poet Lore*, and *Lake Effect*. His most recent collection is *Trumbull Ave.* (Wayne State University Press).

Noah Lederman's stories have been featured in the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Economist*, *The Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Surfer's Journal*, and dozens of other publications. He is the author of *A World Erased: A Grandson's Search for His Family's Holocaust Secrets*. He's at work on a book about his uncle and the Lincoln Battalion, the Americans who had illegally volunteered to fight in Spain against Franco and fascism.

Olga Livshin's work is recently published in *Poetry* magazine, *The New York Times*, *Ploughshares*, *The Rumpus*, and other journals. She is the author of the poetry collection *A Life Replaced: Poems with Translations from Anna Akhmatova and Vladimir Gandelsman* (2019). Livshin co-translated *Today is a Different War* by the Ukrainian poet Lyudmyla Khersonska (Arrowsmith Press, 2023) and *A Man Only Needs a Room* by Vladimir Gandelsman (New Meridian Arts, 2022). As a consulting poetry editor for *Mukoli: A Journal for Peace*, she reviews poetry from conflict-affected communities across the world, with a focus on Eastern Europe.

Logan Markko's stories have appeared in such places as *Chaotic Merge*, *Livina Press*, *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, and *Bright Flash Literary Review*. He lives in southeastern Michigan with his wonderful wife, their toddler son, and a hundred-pound American Bulldog named Sam.

Eman Masrweh is a Palestinian poet with more than twenty published collections of poetry. Some of her recent publications include *A Veil for Galilee Bride* (2018), *Flower of Poetical Sparkles* (2017), *Muhammadan Epic* (2014), *Here Is Home* (2013), and *Maiden Is My Language* (2011).

Pete McKinney lives and writes from the Appalachian Mountains of North Carolina. His work has appeared in *The Peel Literature and Arts Review* and *Miscellany Magazine*, as well as *Panorama Journal*. Find him @pkmckinney on Instagram or @petermckinney on Twitter/X.

Kris Michałowicz won the Creative Future bronze prize for fiction in 2019. In 2022, he was a writing resident with the Ukrainian Institute London. His work has been published in both the UK and Ukraine. He is currently

studying toward an MA in the politics of conflict and violence at the University of Leicester.

Michael Mintrom lives in Melbourne, Australia. He has recently published poetry in *Blue Mountain Review*, *Ekphrastic Review*, *London Grip*, *Midwest Zen*, *Shot Glass Journal*, and *Stone Poetry Quarterly*. He is a past winner of the University of Canterbury's MacMillan Brown Prize for Writers.

Samud Mohammed is a Palestinian short story writer who is a refugee living in Yarmouk Camp, Syria. She has published many of her stories and flash fiction in several leading Arabic literary journals and websites.

Tedde Morrison is a veteran of the United States Marine Corps. She lives in Omaha, Nebraska.

Yasmine Mousa has worked extensively with *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* since 2004 and has been published in both newspapers. She has received an award as a co-writer for a publication in *Education Week* titled "The Lost Years" from the Washington-based Education Writers Association. She covered significant periods in Iraq's modern history, including the fall of Saddam Hussein and the subsequent social upheaval in both English and Arabic.

Lisa Mullenneaux's poems and essays appear in literary journals in the UK and America. She specializes in the translation of modern French and Italian poets and authored the critical study *Naples' Little Women: The Fiction of Elena Ferrante*. She has taught research writing for the University of Maryland's Global Campus since 2015. Read more at lisamullenneaux.com.

J.M. Munn lives in a windy corner of rural UK with his wife and children. After a career in film that included appearing in *Harry Potter*, he transitioned into the youth and education sectors before eventually qualifying as an SEN English teacher, experiences that he channels through writing contemporary fiction. He continued his passion for film by becoming a film critic, most likely to help process being allowed to watch *Jaws* when he was five years old. Jake is an avid reader with a burgeoning bookcase of fantasy literature, and his works have been published in *Litro Magazine*, *Flux Magazine*, and *Literally Stories*.

Collier Nogues is Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Her books include the hybrid print/interactive *The Ground I Stand On Is Not My Ground* (Drunken Boat, 2015) and *On the Other Side, Blue* (Four Way, 2011). Her work has been supported by fellowships from the MacDowell Colony, the Ucross Foundation, and Vermont Studio Center, and her writing has appeared in *Jacket2*, *The Volta*, *At Length*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, the Academy of American Poets' Poem-A-Day Project, and elsewhere. She's a core collaborator in DOKYU, which gathers artists, writers, and historians to explore transdisciplinary approaches to archives.

CP Nwankwo, SWAN IV, writes from Uyo, Nigeria. He is of the Igbo descent. He is the poetry editor of *The Cloudscent Journal* and was recently shortlisted for the Kofi Awoonor Poetry Prize, 2024. He tweets @CP Nwankwo.

Carl Palmer of Old Mill Road in Ridgeway, Virginia, lives in University Place, Washington. He is retired from the military and Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and enjoys life as "Papa" to his grand descendants and as a Franciscan Hospice volunteer. Carl is president of Puget Sound Poetry Connection in Tacoma. PAPA's MOTTO: Long Weekends Forever!

Dev Pardes is a post-9/11 Marine Corps veteran. Her work has been featured in the *Stone Cutter's Union*, *Eugene Weekly*, and *Every Writer's Resource*. Her artwork, music, and writing focus on the commodification of sex workers and military personnel, in addition to documenting her struggle with homelessness and post-traumatic stress.

Author of the novel *Famous Adopted People* (Unnamed Press, 2018), **Alice Stephens** is also a book reviewer, essayist, and short story writer. Her work has appeared in *LitHub*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *The Margins*, *The Korea Times*, *The Washington Post*, and other publications, and has been anthologized in Volume IX of the DC Women Writers' Grace & Gravity series, *Furious Gravity* (2020) and *Writing the Virus* (Outpost19, 2020). She was featured in the 2024 *Frontline* documentary *South Korea's Adoption Reckoning*. Her historical novel of Imperial Japan, *The Twain*, is forthcoming from Regal House Publishing in 2027.

Jamie Wendt is the author of the poetry collection *Laughing in Yiddish* (Broadstone Books, 2025), which was a finalist for the 2022 Philip Levine Prize in Poetry. Her first book, *Fruit of the Earth* (Main Street Rag, 2018), won the 2019 National Federation of Press Women Book Award in Poetry. Her poems and essays have been published in various literary journals and anthologies, including *Feminine Rising*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Lilith, Jet Fuel Review*, *The Forward*, *Poetica Magazine*, *Catamaran*, and others. She contributes book reviews to the Jewish Book Council. She lives in Chicago.

Tawfiq Zayyad (1929-1994) was a Palestinian poet, writer, translator, communist activist, former mayor of Nazareth, and member of the Israeli Knesset. Between his political work and revolutionary poetry, Zayyad was committed to furthering his vision of Arab-Jewish brotherhood, challenging the Israeli government's far-right policies, and standing up for the Palestinian citizens of Israel. Zayyad was the target of several failed assassination attempts during his lifetime. Zayyad's prolific body of work includes nine poetry collections, including *I Clasp Your Hands* (1966), *Bury Your Dead and Rise* (1969), and *Songs of Anger and Revolt* (1969); several studies on Palestinian folklore, including *On Palestinian Folk Literature* (1970) and *Images from Palestinian Folk Literature* (1974); and translations from Russian and Turkish, including translations of Nâzım Hikmet's poetry.

Michael Lauchlan • Carl Palmer • Jamie Wendt • Ayòdéjì Israel • Gunilla T. Kester • CP Nwankwo • Robert René Galván • Lisa Mullenneaux • Margalit Katz • Cindy King • Connie T. Braun • David Blair • Michael Mintrom • Collier Nogues • Larry Flynn • Rachel Betesh • Patrick Cotter • Olga Livshin • Evel Economakis • Clive Collins • Raphael Badagliacca • Tedde Morrison • Robbie Gamble • Peter McKinney • Yasmine Mousa • Kris Michałowicz • Noah Lederman • Alice Stephens • Logan Markko • J.M. Munn • Diana Davidson • Dev Pardes • John Bruggink • Daniel Beaudoin • Mona Al-Msaddar • Khalid Dader • Omar Hammash • Ibrahim Fawzy • Eman Masrweh • Dima Al-Basha • Jennifer Jean • Hashim Al-Rifa'I • Saed A. Jarbolebda • Samud Mohammed • Essam M. Al-Jassim • Emad S. Abu Hatab • Sana Abu Sharar • Tawfiq Zayyad • Salma Harland • Ahmed Bassiouny