



POOR YORICK

A Journal of Rediscovery

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On Transformation

Letter From the Editor

The theme of this issue is transformation. Contributors were challenged to look within themselves and out into the world to question what that means. What calls us to transform? What is the worth of transformations, big and small? What are the consequences when we refuse or accept? Is transformation always a good thing?

In this edition, you will find poetry, fiction, and creative non-fiction from writers around the world. These pieces will invite you to step outside your own perspective and into the writer's eyes.

I'm extremely grateful to all the writers who decided to share their work. Thank you for trusting *Poor Yorick* to be a home for your writing. I'd also like to extend my thanks to the WCSU MFA faculty for their continued support of *Poor Yorick*. Thank you to the submission readers, Gita Hassin, Sara Sherman, and Shea Farrell, who help me sort through and hone in on my vision for this edition of *Poor Yorick*.

Sincerely,
Betsy Antedomenico
Poor Yorick Editor-in-Chief

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Last Call

Colin Keating

After the cities are flooded and the statues
rust over in mossy florets, after the ice
shelves release their stores of CO₂
and the polar bears swim to California,
after all the brick masonry collapses
in a dusty sigh, after the Pacific plate
subducts further and volcanoes spew
spume and ash, after the 0% APR
Financing signs crack and crumble
into microplastic confetti,

Betty
will still sit at the same slot machine
in her special velvet chair, a menthol
dangling from her fingers, and call out
to Benny (the floor manager, long dead)
for another cup of quarters, another
mojito, another pull. She's already seen
the end of the world, the spun numbers
stopped in random patterns, and today?
Well, today Betty feels a little lucky.

Muna

Naomi Onyeankwe

For years I had this recurring dream where I walked into my primary 5 class to see my teacher lying on the floor, alone and unconscious, a stream of blood running unto the floor from her tiny belly button planted on her enlarged stomach. With some sort of divine strength, I carry her like a fireman, shouting for help, shouting for Muna.

I always felt like it meant something that Muna wasn't there, after all it was both of us that day in real life. The day we raced each other to our school after it had closed because I forgot my homework book, and running into the classroom, we met Ms. Olaniyi crying. It was awkward, and we just stood there and watched, not knowing what to do or say, and when she saw us, she didn't wipe her eyes but instead said, "I had a dream that my baby came out with a mark across her face. It means I'm going to die after" and then went back to crying.

Muna took the homework book and dragged me out of the classroom. We had always thought the woman was a little crazy; talking and laughing to herself, always thinking she was teaching the kindergartners, telling her huge tummy, "if you disturb me, I'll beat you o," so we just snickered as we left school. The following week, in a bid to cover the awkward silence always present among my family, I told them about Ms. Olaniyi and the scarred dream child. It was meant to be a funny story, a "can you imagine" or "nawa for that your teacher o" or even "pregnant women sef" but my mum was furious, said that kind of behaviour was unacceptable with little children. Ms. Olaniyi never came back from her pregnancy leave, and by the way my mother asked me what the name of my new teacher was before I told her there was one, I knew I had to carry guilt for a little while. It would have been that, a little while, if she didn't die a few months later.

My theory about Muna's absence from that dream was that it was telling me that she was going to abandon me at some point. When I told her what I did after our teacher died, around the same time I started having the dream, she was so angry with me—even though I kept repeating that it wasn't my intention, that I just wanted a little laugh with my parents—that I started to wonder if our teacher was her aunt and I somehow forgot that. "You're wicked," she said, "you're very wicked. Don't you know that her husband is a drunkard?" I didn't know know that, nor did I know what it had to do with anything but I took it as part of the things I should be ashamed of when I prayed to God for forgiveness, and when I spent the entire night crying because I thought she would never speak to me again, because I was too wicked to be her friend. By the morning of the following day, before I went to school and she asked why I looked like a masquerade had flogged me on the way, I was already planning my next course of action if she really were to desert me. I would run away, I decided, or maybe just even strangle myself with my sister's long, fancy rope belt because to where did I even want to run?

Muna was my everything. Now I know that relationship was unhealthy for me, that emotional dependency, but I really had no one else. My parents were mostly quiet, and my sister barely spoke to me — the only time we conversed for more than two minutes was during the mandatory discussion of our Daily Manna prayer book before we went to bed in the room we shared. I thought we would grow close in the coming years when she started sneaking herself and her friends in and out of the house, smuggling alcohol and taking pictures of ungodly parts of her body. I thought we'd build camaraderie over my loyalty, my secrecy, the absence of judgement; but as always, I just wasn't there, and it was like that until I snapped and reported her just so she could acknowledge my presence.

The only time my family was gathered together was during morning devotions. Every time I tried to get us talking about something other than God—that film we watched yesterday,

what happened in school, why the rice that woman at the bus-stop sold looked yellow— I always got nothing more than a few words back, some days just a grunt. It made me feel like a silly child, but I knew that this was not what a family was supposed to be. This silence and minding of businesses. I had been at Muna's house a few times, and they were loud and they laughed and they fought and they said things that were maybe a bit horrible to each other at times. I wanted that sizzling energy, and she was the only place I could get it from, the only one who gave me something more than crumbs.

The first time Muna spoke to me was in primary when she came to my desk and banged it, getting in my face saying, “you, why are you always so quiet?” and became and remained my only friend. She explained Social Studies and Civic Education to me as a sort of payment for teaching her Maths and Bible Knowledge, and I let her even though I already did well in those subjects. She taught me other things too: how to talk to a boy I like and how to shed off one that I don't, how to touch myself in that way that makes you feel nice inside, how to steal my sister's drinks and clothes and make-up, how to kiss without showing I'm a novice, how to pretend I am having a good time at parties. “Why won't God forgive you, shebi when you pray to him, he forgives. Or are you doubting God?” My parents frowned every time they saw us together. I would have been glad about the reprehension if it meant something else to talk about, but even that was about God. “She will spoil your relationship with God if you keep associating with her.” “God frowns at wayward children”.

Ironically, Muna actually helped my relationship with God. She was someone who always liked to talk things out when there was a problem, always forced me to say what I was feeling, and soon, I started to find myself incorporating that in my prayers too, telling God what exactly it was I was feeling, what exactly it was I wanted, shedding shame. When, later in my life, I realized that my God and the relationship we shared was mine alone and so started to feel unbound by imaginary chains that I had kept

on me, I attributed it to Muna and her influence. I believed no one understood me like she did, no one loved me like she did, so when she finally realized my worst fear and moved to United States after secondary school to live with an uncle who had been there for years, I didn't respond to all the messages she sent to me through her family, because what was she looking for? What did she expect to become of me now that she had chosen to leave me all alone?

I never told Muna about the dream, for fear that she too would see what it meant that she wasn't there and I was calling for her, see that she was destined to leave. But after she left I thought that maybe I should have told her, maybe together we would have tried to fight destiny, she would have known to be by my side always, she would have known better than to go to another country thinking we could still remain.

I never tried to reach out, all the times that she was the one person I wanted to talk to, all the times I needed her to tell me what to do; when I spent years at home taking and re-taking the UTME looking for Medicine until I finally just settled for Nursing, when I finally wanted to have sex for the first time, when the man who would later become my husband said he hoped I was a virgin, when on our one year anniversary of dating he cheated on me with my roommate, when he said he needed a break after I birthed our first child, when he came back, when the little girl still sucked her fingers at six years old, when I saw her as “people you may know” on Facebook and hurriedly scrolled past, my heart beating like a person being chased by a masquerade with a cane. It wasn't anger that stopped me from reaching out, it was shame. I had realized that I was the one who abandoned her, abandoning myself as well. I was the cause of this hole in my heart and maybe, just maybe, a matching one in hers. I didn't want to have to face it, have to say it. But when I dreamed of a baby with a mark across the face and woke up with a chest as heavy as my belly below, I knew there was only one person I could talk to, only one person I needed to see before I left this world.

Cajun Words

Quinn Champagne

When my great-grandmother was in school,
they beat her for speaking French

And my grandfather only learned the words
that his mother didn't know were French

My mother learned all the French words
that her father knew

But me, I never learned any French words from my mother
Because she didn't know that they were important

Braille's Hands

Paul Hostovsky

When Braille died, braille
hadn't caught on yet. The blind students
at *L'Institut des Jeunes Aveugles* in Paris
loved it, but the teachers and administrators,
most of whom were sighted,
didn't. Because they couldn't read it.
“Our blind charges will be taught embossed print,
not braille,” they said. Actually, they didn't say that,
because braille wasn't called braille back then.
It was called “Method for Writing Words, Music, and Plainsong
by Means of Dots.” At least that's what Braille called it,
in French, after he'd perfected it. So maybe they said,
“Our blind charges will be taught embossed print,
not those pesky dots that Braille came up with.”
He was a student at the school. And later a teacher.
The dots were a kind of contraband
passed from hand to hand clandestinely
among the students. They didn't start calling it braille
until long after his death, when the dots spread
like wildfire, to blind hands all over the world.
That's when the bigwigs came down from Paris
to the village of Coupvray, where Braille was born,
and where he was buried. They wanted to disinter him,
transfer him up to Paris, re-bury him,
with honors reserved for the greatest French minds,
in *Le Panthéon*. But the village elders
would have none of it. *Il reste ici!* Back off, bigwigs!
Back and forth went the tug of war over Braille's remains.

Finally, a compromise: His hands would remain in the village of Coupvray, because, after all, it's the hands of the blind that read braille. (Leave it to the French to cut off the hands of Louis Braille!) The 27 bones of his hands are buried in the village of Coupvray, where blind people from all over the world make pilgrimages to honor him to this day, while the rest of him is buried in Le Panthéon in Paris sans hands.

Heirloom Morph

Topher Shields

Tūhoe taonga—
a carved pounamu twist,
once my grandmother's grip
through famine, through weather.

Now it opens at the flaw:
green veins under strain,
the stone turning inward,
learning its own pressure,
taking its tail into its mouth.

My hand holds it—
Pākehā-trained,
lettered, sorted,
taught the weight of keeping.

It hesitates.

Heat climbs the pad of my thumb,
settles at the first joint,
as if the stone is listening
for where I will give.

Whakapapa loosens—
not cleanly, not by consent—
a double spiral worrying open
what I mistook for lineage.

It works me toward another use:
The pounamu pulses.

Asks nothing.
not heir, but hau—
breath returned,
pulled saltward,
caught in the long draw
of Tūranganui-a-Kiwa.

I want flaw as damage.
I want repair to mean return.
I want the stone to lie still
and call that care.

But the flaw keeps heat.

It keeps moving.
It is not a break.
It is a mouth.

I twist it back—
not to restore,
but to stop it setting—
a queer kaiwhakahaere,
holding what keeps
slipping sideways.

In the polish,
a hairline flash—
not green exactly,
more river-dark,
as if light has learned to bruise.

My grandmother does not bless it.

She looks at my hands.

She says, almost to herself:

Na reira.

And lets go.

Winterheart

Morgan G. Cairns

And as surely as October
bled to January,
I became something cold
and biting.

War Songs

Angela Laurio

What's your going to war song?

I think Red was the one who asked the question, because the day before we left Kuwait all the officers drove down to the port to check on the team of soldiers loading our vehicles and equipment on the container ship for the three-week trip to the U.S., and as we passed through the gate on our way back to the company area “Drift Away” by Uncle Kracker came on the radio and Red said, “This is it, this is our going home song!” Everyone started yelling at him for jinxing us because we should have been on a plane heading home at that very moment, but our flight had been delayed by a day.

Why do we need a going home song? I wondered. *What makes this moment so special?* I didn’t like the song, and it seemed stupid to anoint this moment as worth remembering, so I tried to mentally reject it – that timestamp, that snapshot – but that’s not how memory works. Even now when I hear that song, every time I’ve heard that song over the last 22 years that’s the moment I’ve thought of. It’s not a memory that makes me smile. It just is. We weren’t joking around, we were genuinely annoyed with Red when he said that. It wasn’t him so much as the months of forced togetherness, wanting to go home, and being so close to leaving but still feeling unsure, the specter of being reassigned in theater, sent to Baghdad, our deployment being extended for another six to nine months hung over us. The memory exists in its intrusive way, popping up randomly as if songs on the radio were chosen like lottery numbers, their titles painted on ping pong balls sucked up through a clear plastic tube one at a time.

So, it had to be Red who asked, “what’s your going to war song?” And it had to have been at Fort Bragg when it was just us officers together. It’s hard to imagine him asking the question in

Kuwait, where the war became real. Where shortly after we landed the Scud missile alerts started. It was the sort of question someone asked before they had been in a combat zone, before they knew what it really felt like to be there, how gravity was just teeny bit stronger than back in the real world, how situations stretched, twisted, and elongated in strange directions like a funhouse mirror, how it made you wonder afterwards, what was more real, the combat zone or home? But Red had deployed to Kosovo, so that excited, naïve anticipation would not have been the source of his question. All I could think was, *why do I need a going to war song?*

I remember the CO saying “Never Surrender” by Cheap Trick and I thought that was a weird choice. The title, okay, sure, but the rest of the lyrics and the overall style didn’t exactly project a warrior ethos, but the CO had deployed to Saudi Arabia during the First Gulf War, so maybe there was an irony to his pick that I missed. Someone said, “Welcome to the Jungle” by Guns N’ Roses. A little on the nose, maybe, but a solid pick. For some reason the song “Hit Me With Your Best Shot” by Pat Benetar always comes to mind when I think about this conversation, but I more strongly associate that song with some of our soldiers working out using improvised weights, like full 5-gallon water cans hanging from either end of a pole, behind our building at the destroyed tank factory in Diwaniyah, though it was probably me listening to the song and not them. As a going to war song, it’s a little girlie. Putting a notch in your lipstick case isn’t exactly the stuff of war movie legends.

I don’t remember if Captain America gave an answer. Maybe he’s the one who said, “Welcome to the Jungle,” or maybe he seconded it because I remember thinking I liked “Sweet Child O’ Mine” way more, but not as a going to war song. He was probably the one who originally said, “Welcome to the Jungle.” He was more of an instigator than a seconder. And who knows if that’s really what he thought of as his going to war song. It could

¹ Commanding Officer, our Company Commander, a Major

have been an inside joke between him and the CO. They had a lot of inside jokes.

I didn't give an answer. I thought it was silly and maybe bad luck to choose a song that somehow represented you as you went to war, and I didn't even know what it was supposed to represent – readiness for battle, mindset, eagerness, enthusiasm? I was neither eager to go to this war nor enthusiastic to participate, and the rest I wasn't sure of. But the day we drove across the berm from Kuwait into Iraq, as we passed the burning oil wells, charred tank hulls, and herds of camels, the song going through my mind was “Voodoo Child (Slight Return)” by Jimi Hendrix. The blues chords, heavy guitar strikes, psychedelic lyrics. The shaker that sounds like a rattlesnake and the relentless, driving beat. The guitar solo just on the verge of being out of control. This is what going to war was. Or what I thought it was. Maybe it's what I hoped I could be when the shit went down. And of course, the song was planted in my mind by the film version of *Blackhawk Down*, a story I clung to tightly because I knew people who had been there, and I think in the back of my mind I thought if they could live through that battle, meet up every year on the anniversary, and toast the fallen, maybe I could endure combat. But these are the thoughts, active or subliminal, of someone who had not yet been in a combat zone, who didn't know what it felt like to not have control over anything going on around her, who thought maybe Bosnia and Kosovo “counted.”

On October 6, 2003, I am finally home and alone. Alone is good and not good. My two-bedroom townhouse feels too big. There are too many windows to check, check twice, check three times every night before bed. The tiny backyard so dark. The sliding glass door so close to my bed.

I fly to Milwaukee to visit my mom and brother and pick up my car. Every morning, I read the newspaper and go on a tirade about Iraq, the growing insurgency, the shitty job the

media is doing reporting on the war, the number of casualties creeping up. One morning, I read that the Info Ops lieutenant colonel in Baghdad has been killed. I tell my mother, a newspaper editor, that she doesn't understand anything. But how can she when I haven't told her. So I stand in her kitchen and tell her everything I hadn't written in my emails: driving around to radio and TV stations in Humvees with plastic doors and windows, paying the media employees in Nasiriyah a fraction of what they were owed, the boy with the AK-47, the mob in Safwan, going to Baghdad and pulling security, the suicide, the stalker, staying behind at Camp Babylon by myself. During parts of it I yell, during other parts I cry, and by the end I am shaking. When I am done, she gets up and walks out of the room, unable to process and respond to everything I have just told her.

My grandmother flies in from Iowa, and we all meet my aunt, uncle, and cousins from Chicago at a restaurant around the halfway point between their house and my mom's for dinner. Immediately I start drinking wine as a defense mechanism, but no one asks me about Iraq. I drink more anyway. My uncle says he is glad I was never in harm's way and then my brother starts drinking too. On the way home my brother throws up at a gas station and my grandmother said she thinks he drinks too much, but she knows he rarely drinks, ever.

A few days later my grandmother and I drive to Iowa and that night I fall asleep on the floor in her TV room and when she tries to get me up to go to bed I won't move and I pretend I am asleep because I don't want to sleep on her pull out couch, or on her big couch in the wide open living room, or with her like my only girl-cousin does when she visits, and I feel safe curled up on the rug with a blanket in the small den. The next morning, I hear her call my mother and say, "There's something wrong with Angela."

I drive to Arizona, pick up my friend, Annie, and we go to Las Vegas for Halloween. We dress up as murdered beauty

pageant contestants and go to a party at a casino where we stand around drinking and looking at all the costumes. I drink until I throw up.

I return to work November 17th. Most of my co-workers at Northrop Grumman are retired or former military. Several deployed to Saudi Arabia during the First Gulf War. I brace myself for a barrage of questions, but all my boss says is, "Welcome home," which is fine. He seems genuinely glad to see me.

Halfway through my first day back at the office, a co-worker who is also in the Army Reserves approaches me.

"Did you shoot anybody?" he sounds so hopeful.

"No," I say.

"What the hell kind of war was that?" He asks, serious.

I don't have an answer.

During my first meeting, I am dumbfounded by the meaningless minutiae under discussion. This can't possibly be what really matters. It is so unimportant and trivial, and I am not sure I can stand hearing about it for much longer. Afterwards, my team leader, a retired Army master sergeant who ran counterintelligence operations in Vietnam, puts his arm around me as we walk out of the conference room.

"Glad you're back, kiddo. Sucked, didn't it." he says.

It is a statement not a question, and though I nod in response I am sure my war hadn't sucked in the same ways his had. I want to understand why I feel so different, and if he felt different after returning from Vietnam, but I don't know how to ask. I'm not sure if soldiers talk to each other about these things.

It is easiest to be around members of my Reserve unit, because the only deployment experiences we talk about are the terrible living conditions and the food, and we can laugh about those.

I wish I could talk to my stepdad, Larry, about it now, but he passed away in 2021. We had not been in touch since he and my mother divorced during my first year in college, but I sense that he would have had, if not advice, some wisdom. I never knew the pre-Vietnam Larry, only the post-Vietnam Larry. When I was in High School Larry me told me one of the leaders in his unit – I can't remember if it was a platoon leader or a company commander or first sergeant – stepped on a mine or a booby trap and was killed right in front of him. I remember thinking how awful that must have been. After that when his unit went on patrol they were told to shoot "anything that moved." Larry said he had taken the order literally. This was the same man who told me to check into ROTC when I got to college. It seems to me he had been able to reconcile or at least learn to live with the contradictions of the Army, that after going through some of the worst experiences in Vietnam, there was still something worth recommending, some good or benefit to be had by serving. Maybe he thought if I did join, I'd only stay in for a few years, and even if I stayed longer than that I'd never be deployed to a combat zone.

Just before Larry and my mom divorced, she told me they had gone to a music club where a man she used to date happened to be playing piano in the band. Larry was drunk, and when my mom talked to the piano player after the set, Larry got mad and accused the man of flirting with her. According to my mom, Larry yelled at the man, "I've killed before, and I can do it again."

When I was yelling in my mom's kitchen, I wonder who she saw, Larry or me?

No one else at work ever asked me about Iraq. I was content to let them construct their own narratives about what they thought I had experienced during my deployment, but I realize now it's likely they never thought about it at all. At the time I assumed everyone thought about Iraq as much as I did, which was all the time.

A lot of soldiers bought motorcycles or sports cars after deployment. I bought a sailboat.

When I first arrived at Reagan National Airport after a week of out-processing at Fort Bragg, I took a wrong turn exiting the car rental lot and ended up across the river at the Washington, D.C., waterfront. I pulled over to the curb and stared at the boats bobbing in the marina. I had been there before, just before I deployed.

Two days later, I went back.

There were two pictures I looked at nearly every day while I was in Iraq. I had them taped to back of the green notebook I always carried with me. They weren't actually pictures of her, though they could have been, as I had first seen her in January before we were mobilized. When I first saw her on that cold, dreary day I thought *Second Wind* was as perfect as a little sailboat could get, but I didn't buy her then because it seemed certain that my unit would be mobilized and deploy to Iraq.

One of the two pictures I carried was cut out from a magazine and showed a sailboat at night anchored in calm water with small white lights strung through the rigging and up the mast, making the boat look like a floating Christmas tree. I don't remember what the ad was for, but it wasn't sailboats. The other picture was one I had taken myself when I was sailing a boat nearly identical to *Second Wind*. It was a windy day on Lake Superior in 1998, and I was at the helm. The small, chartered sailboat was well heeled over to starboard, and as the muscles in my left arm strained to hold the wheel, I snapped the picture with my right hand, trying to show the severe angle of the deck and mast in relationship to the shoreline. I loved looking at those pictures because what they represented was the antithesis of Iraq.

I walked toward the dock where *Second Wind* was moored thinking there was no way she could possibly still be for sale, but as I got closer, I saw the white brokerage sign on the front rail. Three weeks later she was mine.

I spent most of November cleaning and fixing her up. She

was in good shape, just a little neglected since her previous owner moved to Phoenix. The more I worked on the boat the happier I was, so on New Year's Eve I moved aboard.

A twenty-eight-foot sailboat does not have a lot of interior space, about 180 square feet, but it was just the amount I needed. I could see pretty much every nook and cranny no matter where I sat. If I awoke suddenly in the middle of the night, thinking the man who stalked me in Iraq had somehow found me, somehow gotten in and was rifling through my clothing, lightly touching my thigh, my stomach, I could quickly look around the boat and see all was secure, and didn't need to get up and physically check every room, every window. I could look up and see the padlock on the door was in place. The boat had a little galley kitchen with a two-burner stove, a bathroom, and electricity. I bought a tiny fridge and TV at Sharper Image. Though basic, these living conditions were far superior to what I experienced in Iraq. Post-deployment, the bar was set low.

The marina, though it was in the middle of downtown Washington, D.C., was still somehow remote. The only people who knew I lived there were the few people I wanted to know. There were no property taxes or tax records that fixed me geographically. My mail was delivered to a Post Office box in Alexandria, Virginia. I was off the grid in the middle of half a million people.

The marina had a security guard at the main entrance 24 hours a day, and both entrances required a key card to open the tall, wrought iron gates. When I was restless and couldn't fall asleep at night – thinking that by avoiding sleep I could avoid memories of the stalker – I walked up and down the docks looking at the other boats and saying hello to late-night dog walkers, shielded from the outside world by the tall fence separating the marina from the waterfront. There, on the water, I found ways I could start to regain a sense of control over my life. Living on the sailboat was one of those ways.

In December, I take command of my Reserve unit, the 312th PSYOP Company. In January our Battalion Commander deploys to Iraq, and I take command of the 11th PSYOP Battalion too. I go from having responsibility for five soldiers to nearly 200, some of whom, I am told, will deploy to Iraq in 2005.

When I went to Iraq, I wanted my detachment to like me, to think I was competent and clever, and for everyone to bond and become a tight-knit team. It never happened, and it didn't matter anymore. I have to let that go, because in taking command I see a way to set things right, to positively impact the experience the next group of soldiers will have, through training and preparation. I care deeply about my soldiers and their welfare, but I don't care if they hate my guts, don't laugh at my jokes, or think I am just plain stupid as long as they feel prepared when they deploy.

We had 15 months until the next deployment, which sounds like a lot of time until you remember this is the Army Reserves, and we were on duty one weekend per month and another two-week block of time during the year. Often the two-week period was used for professional schools required for soldiers to get promoted. Sometimes soldiers used their two weeks to do work at the unit, straightening out records, submitting supply requisitions, doing inventory on equipment. The rest of the time they are living their lives, going to college, working as teachers, police officers, bankers, lawyers, IT professionals, being mothers and fathers, taking care of parents and grandparents. It's why Reservists are called citizen-soldiers.

My focus on training meant I constantly argued with the battalion staff and our group headquarters. Every task they assigned that had nothing to do with preparing for the next deployment I refused to do, and I didn't care what the consequences were. I kicked soldiers out of the Army for being overweight and not being able to pass a physical fitness test, even if they were good soldiers in other ways, even though battalion and group staff say I can't do it. We did field exercises almost every month, even though battalion and group staff say

it will make soldiers want to leave the unit. But my actions are not arbitrary. Being able to shoot and move wearing a flak vest and carrying a weapon in 115-degree heat is necessary to survive Iraq. Knowing how to use a GPS, and the radio, and the loudspeaker, and change the tire on a Humvee, and start the generator, and load different fonts on the laptop so you can print in Arabic. These were not arbitrary standards, they were requirements.

The soldiers loved the constant training. They didn't want to sit in classrooms every drill weekend listening to PowerPoint presentations. That wasn't why they joined. Soon we had more soldiers who wanted to join our company than we had positions available.

In April 2005, 30 soldiers from the 312th deployed to Iraq; only a few of them had deployed in 2003. It was a strange feeling watching them leave, being a stay-behind. By the time they returned a year later, I was gone.

Being a commander, I finally understood what it meant to be responsible for other people. For two years I worked harder at being a company commander than anything I have ever done, and it gave me a level of personal satisfaction I never felt before, and would rarely feel afterwards.

At some point during my deployment to Iraq my attitude shifted, and I became less concerned with the Iraqis as people and wanting to help them and more concerned with just getting through the rest of the deployment and going home. It was around the time we had a "girl's night" in one of the IMEF office trailers in late June or early July. A few female Marine officers and I watched a rom-com and a couple of the girls painted their toenails, but I didn't. There was no point, no one ever saw your feet in Iraq. I wasn't able to say, "what the heck, why not?" I couldn't be silly or frivolous, couldn't let go and relax, or do something just because it was fun. This was the point things changed for me.

After that girl's night, I could only focus on one day at a

time. Even the division chief of staff said one night in the briefing we just had to kick the can down the road until coalition troops showed up. So that's what I tried to do, because imagining my life beyond the next 24 hours meant imagining myself still in Iraq.

Sometimes I think about why I wanted to join the Army in the first place. Having family members who served and being drawn in by that first Adventure Training course in college seem like reasons that only skim the surface.

Like many others who join, I yearned for the intangible effects of serving: self-respect, honor, and discipline.² That's what I saw in my family members who had served and that's what I saw in popular entertainment. Even the tragic heroes of *Platoon* and *Apocalypse Now* held a certain doomed, romantic honor for me. And honor wasn't something to scoff at, for wasn't it honor that prevented draftees in earlier wars from fleeing to Canada, and allowed others to return home from war and fight for veterans and civil rights? What could it mean for a woman to have honor, to have this kind of honor previously reserved for men?

It means nothing because women are invisible veterans. Women are often overlooked as veterans and sometimes don't even identify as veterans. It's so common that the Department of Veterans Affairs ran a campaign promoting the service and stories of women veterans called I Am Not Invisible in 2021 and 2022.

When I sat down to write this for the first time, in August 2006, the first thing I did was put the e-mails I had written to my mom from Iraq, which she printed out and mailed to my 90-year-old grandmother, into chronological order. When I read those letters, I was struck by how little I told my family.

² In *American War Stories*, Myra Mendible talks about these intangibles from military service and its impact on Black soldiers' reenlistment rates during the Vietnam war.

Next, I watched a DVD I bought in 2003 after I returned but had never watched before called CNN Presents, the Road to Baghdad. I had been afraid I wouldn't be able to watch it without feeling sick or starting to cry. I didn't want to watch it because I didn't want to feel the feelings all over again.

I was glad I watched it. I saw news reports I hadn't seen before, and excerpts of political speeches leading up to the war that I missed while we were in training at Fort Bragg, news coverage of the invasion itself, and Jessica Lynch's rescue. And I laughed out loud when the camera kept returning to the cover of a binder sitting on a desk in the headquarters in Kuwait labeled "Operation Iraqi Freedom- SECRET." I guess CNN found the plan we all were looking for.

Seeing the soldiers, sailors, Marines, and airmen who worked in the Headquarters in Kuwait, I was struck by how incredibly *clean* they looked. I remember being so dirty, feeling sand in my hair, seeing patches of salt on my uniform, being able to smell myself.

Afterward, though, I sat down and wrote the thoughts, feelings, and experiences I had carried for three years. Words flowed like the sweat that stained my clothes and once they started there was no stopping them.

When I was on active duty in Germany during the first Gulf War, I volunteered to deploy with a support battalion whose main function was mortuary affairs – the recovery, and identification of soldiers who were killed. My request to deploy was denied. I was so disappointed. I was eager to go to war then. For some reason I needed that experience, I had to have it, like some kind of addict, and it had nothing to do with a moral argument justifying war. I can see now this desire went beyond honor and was more like hubris.

When you have a negative experience, you think no one understands what you've been through. It can be isolating. You isolate yourself. But others can try to understand if you help

them. They can empathize. Because trauma is trauma. Loss is loss. Grief is grief. Your suffering is unique to you but to suffer is universally human.

I was not eager to deploy to Iraq, but I would do it again. I would subject myself to the suffering, even knowing what I know now. Because I learned from the experience. I'm not sure I would have been a good commander had I not just deployed to Iraq. I became more empathetic and am less willing to accept violence as a solution to differences. I am better able to hold the contradictions of life side by side, allowing them to exist, together.

I would like to say I am a better person now, but I'm not sure that is a destination but rather a lifelong journey. I can say I am different. This is the most definitive statement I can make and also the truest. But I also recognize that I might not be done thinking about this. My thinking may continue to evolve. My feelings may change and that's OK. If I had to go through everything I've gone through to be where I am now, then that is the benefit of the suffering. Clawing my way out of the rabbit hole to a point of acceptance. Acceptance that I can't change the past and I couldn't see that acceptance was what I needed while I was still railing against it, still taking the hard way.

So Sad

Deborah Doolittle

All these years, I've been crying real
crocodile tears. No one told me
how genuinely phony they
were, so like Hong Kong shelly pearls
and Indian cinnamon beads.

It hardly mattered to me that
once they hardened, they glistened
like real tear drops sliding down real
rosy cheeks of little children.

Somewhere between snowflakes and peas
in the proverbial pod, no
two alike, in size or shape or
luster, I strung them together,
made charm bracelets and good-luck

pendants, amulets to protect
against hexes. Made a tidy,
gift-wrapped fortune. These days, I sit
at my workbench, prick my fingers,

stab the fleshy parts of my arms
and legs, slice onions, anything
to stimulate a simulation of
crying. I'd be lying. It's not
gotten easier to hide that
crocodile smile on the inside.

Shipwreck

Michelle Visser

My father was Buddhist
for almost exactly fifty years.
Then my mother died.
Unexpectedly
and in the unpretty way
that sometimes happens.
My father cupped her cheek
in his hand and quietly chanted
Tibetan prayers into her ear
as she lay neatly in the hospital bed.
He did not want us to cry, not
near her body, the body that carried us.
The nurses gave us six hours,
just until dawn, to sit vigil.
Crying was for the lobby.
A nurse finishing her shift
wrapped a warmed blanket around me
when she found me weeping
in a fetal position on a vinyl sofa.
The nurses wheeled a cart
with potato chips and soda
just outside her door.
As sustenance or apology,
I will never know.
She was not supposed to have died.

The Tibetan teacher was called
and a funeral was arranged
for the next morning.
On such short notice,

it was only my father, my sister,
the Tibetan teacher, and a roomful
of my father's sangha members
(none of whom I had met).
Because they had just finished
a class on Buddhist teachings on death,
they asked if they could film the ceremony
(for educational purposes).
My father said yes.
My sister and I supported him.
They had been married
for almost 60 years.
They had met at 14.
Married at 18.
Our grief parted for his,
though neither of us likes being filmed
and my mother was not Buddhist.

In the beginning, my father's Buddhism
widened rifts with extended family
and nearly led to divorce.
Beer glasses were thrown at windows.
Dinners were missed.
Feelings were hurt.
Money went to Buddhist teachers
rather than groceries.
Time was spent
in meditation and retreat
rather than with daughters,
rather than at home. Later
they found an equilibrium,
a peace with one another,
a balance between support,
spiritual understanding,
and loneliness.

Tibetan Buddhism called
for a witnessed cremation
within three days of her death.
It was a holiday weekend,
so it took longer.
A witnessed cremation
is exactly what it sounds like.
My mother's basket casket
(that is truly what they called it)
was fed into the flames
of the cremation chamber
and the door was closed.
We were allowed to stand there,
just for a bit.
The woman who monitored the flames
wore all black with black stockings
and black velvet ballet flats
decorated with fireworks.
I suppose her job
requires some way of coping.
My father tried to separate himself,
I think, to stand as close as possible
to my mother, to see her off
on this last journey alone, by himself.
So I stood a little behind,
but refused to let go of his hand,
refused to untether him
from the living.
Before the Tibetan teacher left
he chanted the final prayers in Tibetan
and smiled at us and said
that the only difference
between him and ourselves
was that he was pure of heart.

Sometimes we spend
our whole lives
being mistaken
about what holds our center.

Later, my father slept.
He got Covid.
He isolated himself.
He stopped gardening.
Within the year,
he gave up Buddhism.
I wanted to say,
You can't do that.
We all gave up
so much
for so long.
You can't do that.

Instead, thrown off center
to the edge of the known world
on the map where it is written
here be monsters
and the waves are high
and colored by the hand
that fears them,
he set out on a new journey
with no sextant and only
a compass that spun
without finding north.

When first he became Quaker,
I went with him
to the meeting house
where we sat in silence together.
When he explored Jainism,
I encouraged him to not forego food.
When he became Eastern Orthodox,
we studied icons together.
When he turned to Catholicism
I bought him a rosary
from the Basilica of St. Anthony,
the patron saint of lost souls
and protector against shipwreck.

Xylophagous

Saint-Rowan Tackitt

Hollow words poured
into hallowed heart-
wood cannot fill holes
left by a lover's rot.

Emily's House

Elizabeth Schmermund

It is mid-summer when I find myself at Emily's house, which is built into a hill on the gold coast of Long Island and has stairs that lead in seemingly every direction. I hold onto my four-year-old son with one hand and, if I remember correctly, an offering of something sweet in the other. I never like to visit friends without bringing an offering of food.

Emily opens the front door with a warm smile, a black lab brushing against her thighs. Soon we are sitting on the floor of the split's lower level, where our two sons, who are about a year apart in age, play without too many complaints. There is a sensory swing dangling from the ceiling joists next to us and a small climbing area on the wall. These kinds of movements help children's limbic systems. I don't know much about this but Emily does, and yet when she explains this she is never pedantic. She is just Emily—a young mother, a writer, and a teacher. I, too, am a writer—or I like to think I am. Although I'm not doing much reading, or writing, or even socializing since my life was blown apart three months ago.

Emily is in her early thirties and I am just a few years younger. This is her first house, bought shortly after marrying her husband, who is a robotics engineer. Behind a curtain in the basement she shows me one of his robots, which is constructed to automatize factory work. I am amazed. Emily doesn't talk about this that much because she has an innate sense of conversation. She knows how to dialogue, how to listen. This is partly why I am with her on this summer day. There are few places I feel safe in, or people I feel safe talking to lately. This has culminated in me missing heaps of important events and, perhaps, destroying relationships forever. I've enumerated these absences to Emily and she has listened: my sister's bachelorette party, baby showers, birthdays, and soon a

wedding I am expected to be the matron of honor in. And yet here, just her and me and our sons, I feel a sense of peace. She brings me upstairs where a pizza has just been delivered and shows how she cuts it into bite-sized morsels for her toddler son using kitchen shears. I help set the table. This is the first of several meals we'll eat together here. The first of many meet-ups that we have that summer, just us and our boys, the black lab, and a cat that darts up and down the stairs when anyone approaches.

I like to joke, somewhat tritely, that my brain is a sieve. Some important chunks settle in the metal basket of my mind, and the rest flows out so fast I can't even recall what it is I lost. I am now forty and I remember the names of some of my elementary school teachers, although far from the majority of them. I remember that one of them was tall and lanky and liked to throw the unorganized desks of students across the room. Another one was chunky with short black hair and an affinity for the Village People. Mr. Cleary, my elementary principal, liked to golf and wore pastel-colored collared shirts. One day he told me that I was very creative, and for years I took this as not just a small nicety for a kid, but as a fact that would define my future. But if you ask me to remember more than these little chunks of time, there is nothing there.

My daughter asked me several weeks ago what it felt like to be a kid in the nineties, what I did after school. Those average days have faded from me, leaving only moments that are etched into my being: the night I stood on the hallway landing outside of my parents' bedroom and overheard that my grandmother had cancer, the night I lay under my covers and saw sparks emerge from the sheets like little electrostatic fairies. I worry that seconds pass through me like neutrinos, the so-called ghost particles that bombard our bodies constantly and leave no trace behind. I worry that my brain doesn't function right, that it never has. A close friend of mine has said, matter-of-factly, that I possess a "poet's mind," meaning that I collect feelings

and forget to lock the door or can't tell what color shirt I put on my child that morning. This makes me feel slightly less pathological, like when Mr. Cleary stopped me in the elementary halls all those years ago.

There is a reason, of course, why I don't feel safe with many people that summer besides Emily, why I spend hours in my bed while my son is in pre-school. Why my sister feels I am being selfish for missing out on the happiest moments of her life as she is getting ready to marry her high-school sweetheart. Several months ago, just as the cherry blossoms at Sagamore Hill began to bloom, my newborn son died. He died without taking a breath on his own. He died while I was still sedated from an emergency c-section. He died on the night he was supposed to be born, the date I repeated each time I was asked my due date at my doctor's office. He died on the night I rode to the hospital feeling the pulsing of pain and thinking, joyfully, that everything would be changing. These memories, once the subjects of flashbacks that left me sweat-drenched and trembling, are engraved on me. The green meconium that spilled all over the labor bed when my midwife placed an internal heart monitor into his scalp, the look of terror in her eyes as she rushed me into the OR, the kind eyes of the anesthesiologist who stared down at me, but did not respond, when I spoke the last words I would say before transforming into something unrecognizable upon awaking: *Is my baby going to be ok?*

That summer, Emily admitted to me that she wanted another child but that her husband was not on board. There was grief in her eyes as she spoke. This was also why her home was safe to me. Emily was no stranger to grief—her father had died suddenly when she was still a teenager—and she wasn't pregnant or trying to conceive any time soon. I still hadn't been able to see the baby of a family member with whom I had shared my pregnancy, and whose son was born just weeks after mine

had died. My husband fielded all calls that could contain a painful revelation that could leave me gasping for air in panic—the most joyous moment of another young couple’s lives. Emily understood this without placing the onus on me to explain. She, too, had a “poet’s mind”—she absorbed the emotions of those around her, imprinted them on herself. And, yet, she was sharper than me, a more capable person, a more patient mother.

That summer didn’t last forever, although I thought it would at the time. I survived my sister’s wedding, being around people I hadn’t been around since my son’s death, in the church where he was buried. A happy moment in the church where a plaque hung with his name, his birthdate and death date, which are the same. My husband and I had realized that summer that we could no longer live where we had been living. Each room seemed to be a wormhole that brought me back to the moments before he died and, in the alternate reality in which I now existed, no longer were filled with anticipation but with pain. Toward the end of that summer, we put a deposit on a house before we even saw it in person. We drove by each week, praying it would one day be ours. And, that November, we signed the papers and were given the keys. It was our first house together and it did not hold the pain of the past. As we completed some renovations before moving in, I signed my two sons’ names in the cement that led to the drain in our new backyard. Only then did the house feel like home.

Emily was one of the first people I invited over. That night we decorated gingerbread houses together with our boys and laughed. It was a small house, and essentially unfurnished, not as impressive as the house she had been in for several years already, the house that had been my safe space throughout that past summer. I remember enjoying her company and saying goodbye—that we would see each other again after the holidays, when things settled down. As they walked down the front steps from our deck, her son took a tumble on the icy wood planks. I followed after them, perhaps too solicitous: Could I get him ice?

Did he need anything? Could they come back inside so I could help? But Emily assured me he was fine, gave me one last hug, and soon they were gone.

The house wasn't the only thing we had been trying to bring to life. Since my son's death, I had desperately wanted another child. That fall we tried to no avail. When I finally did get pregnant, shortly after the New Year, my first blood tests showed that my numbers were low and decreasing. It would be an early miscarriage, lost before I could even hear its heart beat.

The depth of my sorrow that winter is hard to quantify except to say that I did survive—although I don't remember wanting to. I spent hours pouring over my medical records from that night, needing to quantify every moment. I had my own memory of every minute in that hospital room where my son's heart began to fail, until the moment they pumped anesthesia into my veins in the neighboring OR. But that wasn't enough—I needed to know each quantifiable fact, every bodily sign and symbol, each heart deceleration. I memorized the time the medical team discovered he was in distress, the time he was born, the amount of time he was worked on, the time he was declared dead. I read every report, collected my son's tissue samples from one hospital to send them to another, read the autopsy that described his brain in a formaldehyde solution. It was the first time I understood the cruelty of living in the face of death.

After I received news that I would be miscarrying, that my hormone numbers were decreasing and would do so until they returned to zero, Emily called me. I was happy to hear her voice. I had missed her and I knew that she would know exactly the right thing to say, as she always did. But her voice was unsure on the phone. It had only been a few weeks since I had last seen her, the whirlwind of the holiday season that was all wrong without my youngest son beside me. She told me, in a trembling voice, that she was pregnant and that she needed to tell me before we saw each other again, but that she didn't know how to

break the news to me. I was incensed. I don't know if I said it because I needed to or because I wanted her to hurt, but I told her that I was currently having a miscarriage.

"Oh," she replied. "That makes me feel awful."

I think I probably tried to convince her that it was all right and that I was happy for her but I'm sure the rawness of my voice gave me away. The friend that had been a safe space for me was moving on. I was blind with envy, and with rage. Not at Emily, but at this lot I had been dealt. This would be the last time we would talk.

The year unspooled. I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer that spring and spent the next months fighting to live or, rather, to survive. In my mind's eye is the face of a doctor who, annoyed with my questions about when I could start trying to have a baby again in the face of various treatments, responded that it would be hard to have a baby if I was dead. It was too painful to think of Emily and her growing belly—what I wanted so desperately—and so I didn't. Perhaps fearful of my response to her happy situation, she stayed away. I logged off social media, whittled down my list of friends even further, and was finally convinced to go on the anti-depressants I had spent years avoiding.

And then, before the second surgery to root out cancer from my body, I found out that I was pregnant unexpectedly. The surgery would have to be delayed and I would be considered high-risk. That winter, on Valentine's Day, a phone call I received while at work in my basement office revealed that it was a girl and that she looked healthy in her scans. I collapsed in both grief and gratitude. She was born that summer and my life started anew. I'm sure I received a note from Emily, but I don't remember and haven't been able to find any from that time, despite my searches. In our contemporary world, where so much living is online, our communication remains ephemeral despite our attempts at documentation. Maybe she sent me a picture of her own baby or maybe not. I changed devices and lost what hadn't been backed up. Her daughter had been born the year before.

Over the next few years, during a global pandemic and the chaos of returning to work with young children, Emily and I would chat occasionally, send birthday messages, and hope to meet up again. But nothing much more than that. And then I saw a post on social media, which I had only recently rejoined. She was in the hospital once, and then again. I began to watch for her posts, some deep part of me understanding that something was very wrong. The heady moments of grief and fear receded from my memory. And instead of reaching back in time and repairing a friendship that had slipped through my fingers, I saw an announcement: Emily had a very rare form of lymphoma that was present only in her brain. The prognosis was good, but it would be a long haul of treatments.

I spied on her then. I wrote her messages that she didn't respond to—messages of concern, of love, of a desire to help. It was too late. I already felt the guilt gnawing at me. And now there was nothing else to do. She was in the city during arduous treatments of chemo several days a week. She was hospitalized in the ICU on a ventilator. Her brain function faltered. It was hard for her to write or form words some days, and so her husband reached out to friends for her. And then, messages of hope appeared. It looked like she had beaten this.

Years ago now, my husband and I got married in our local town hall. I wore a champagne cocktail dress I bought at a department store and a few close friends and family came to witness our vows and bring us to lunch. I was only twenty-four and the future unfurled before us like a race to be won. I was writing a novel that I would finish that year, and I was sure it would be published, although it never was. Ambition is akin to common sense to the young and so I started another novel. This novel was about friends and ghosts and memories that ripped people apart.

Soon after my marriage, I would meet Emily as part of a writing group we both joined. She, too, would be married that year, in a wedding that was simple and small like mine. She was

writing a novel in verse about a girl who takes up photography in the face of her family's collapse and the destruction of her sense of security. It was a good novel, a heartbreaking one. Maybe we were writing about some things we knew or we were writing about images that were just forming on our horizon. Or maybe we were just performing tragedy and struggle. We had our future ahead of us and we were running toward it. One night, several years later, I sat down at the cafe table where we met each week to talk about our writing. Emily's face formed a smile as she told me that she was pregnant. I was in the fourth trimester, with my first child snuggled next to me. She told me what his name would be. I will hold that memory of her joy for her as-yet-unborn children until the moment it is taken from me. I hope that moment is a long way away, although I know I can't hold it forever.

The remission doesn't last long. Emily returns home to her husband and two young children in that same house that I remember so well, the house that was filled with her graciousness and love for me that summer. It is spring and it is full of possibilities. My spring, years earlier, had been full of possibilities too and I was left gawking at the goslings that traversed the street with their parents, alive when my own baby was not. One day that spring, Emily walks downstairs after a night's sleep and can't remember her children's names. She goes to the hospital. Soon, her husband writes to her friends to say that the doctors believe there is nothing left to do.

But there is one last thing I can do: I need to give her a hug and tell her goodbye. I reach out to our group of writer friends. A group that grew up together, and then grew apart, although we don't know how to exist as a group without Emily now. We decide to meet each other in the front lobby so that we are not alone. We recognize that this journey will be hard and that we will be changed when we leave.

At the rehab center, we hug one another and take the elevator up silently. Arriving at her room, we find it is empty.

Photos are displayed on the wall of her young son and daughter. A family album sits near her bed with the names of her children printed next to their small faces to help her remember. A nurse finds us and says that Emily is eating lunch in the dining room just down the hall. As she accompanies us, I see the bobbing of white heads, of wheelchairs, and frail arms that struggle to lift spoons to their mouths. It is a nursing home, I realize. Here she is, the nurse tells us and I don't understand at first. I don't think any of us do. Her hair is still shorn and growing in from the chemo that had given her so much hope. Her face is round from the steroids. It looks like she has aged fifty years. But her eyes are the most jarring. She stares at us blankly. I hear a gasp from behind me. We pause, not knowing what to say. It feels interminable.

And then I say, "Emily, we are your friends who love you very much. You wrote novels and plays and even won a few well-deserved awards."

Emily apologizes for not remembering. She apologizes over and over again, a small seed of a memory being pushed out, a fear deep inside that she has lost something invaluable, irreplaceable.

"Emily," we say. "It doesn't matter if you don't remember. We hold your memories for you. We love you and we admire you and we have learned so much from you."

"Emily," I say, even if the next words are silent. "I will hold onto your memories. And one day, when I can no longer hold them, they will return to you, and we will all return to one another."

It's Alive

Theo Sterling

Tight,
a rough bandage
tethers itself
to my ankle,
cocooning me
in grey fabric;

when I emerge,
my breath
will be sour,
like the morning—
my wings creased.

I'll unfold
into this new body;
refreshed and rejuvenated,
the sun a reminder
of childhood innocence,
and flowers.

But instead,
I arise—
not even my creator
wanted this.

What Remains

Hannah Brading

When the scaffolds corrode into elegy,
and littoral tides reclaim their ancestral corridors,
when chlorophyll infiltrates the fissures
of our brutalist cathedrals and glass-mouthed towers,

what residual trace will remain of us?

Not our names, not the flags fraying above ministries,
not the monuments we taught stone to suffer into men.
Only the small inheritors will come forward:
lichen softening the statue's throat, fernlight flooding the
subway,
roots patiently stitching the elevators shut.

I do not long to witness apocalypse,
but succession—the deliberate choreography
by which mycelium supplants concrete,
by which the air unlearns our combustion.

How gently the world will erase us
once we stop insisting on being remembered.

There existed, once, an ontology of beauty
uncorrupted by extraction or empire:
before the forest became acreage,
before the mountain was translated into yield,
before the river was forced to carry our profit downstream.

I grieve for it—not from memory,
but from intuition, from the ache of a world
that dreamt in bioluminescence
before it was mapped into ownership.

Let the cyclones write their palimpsests.
Let the wind unspool our dominion
into sediment and salt. Let rain enter the archives.
Let moss open the locked rooms of empire.

What vestige persists when the bequeathed world
is rendered untranslatable,
when rivers become archives
of what we chose to ignore?

What survives us will not be mercy.
It will be return.

May this earth—wounded, sovereign—
outlast the parasites of appetite.
May she cultivate, in our absence,
an ecology of silence, root, spore, and rain.

And after the last satellite falls
through its own abandoned signal,
after the last factory goes quiet
as a god without worshippers,

there will be no witness
to the first flower lifting its face
through the floor of the stock exchange.

No hymn. No camera. No human mouth
to call it beautiful.

Only light, touching it anyway.

Open Eyes

Syeda Mansur

Perhaps my life is a black box of unopened dreams. Perhaps, I am too bold for my circle to perceive. You see, I never liked the idea of circles. Why are we supposed to be cramped like crabs in a cylindrical bucket? Why are we expected to be inside a sacred periphery when we can venture into the forbidden unknown? They say I would get lost, but they do not realize that I could actually be found. Found by the spirits of the universe to take me to the places my circle forbids as nightmares. Of course, these places may not be nightmares but unrecalled sweet dreams that I always want to grasp, but my reality shuts me inside a dome made of the bones of centuries-old customs and culture.

Reality is a strange concept in my circle. They say it only deals with what happens within the circle. They say outside there's reality camouflaged by the revolutionary reality raiders. They fear them as much as they fear the dream-instillers. The last time a dream-instiller was found, the circle maintainers in ebony robes caught her from her home while she was whispering the tales of dreams into the eyes of her two-year-old daughter. We never heard of her again, never saw her again, and the daughter's eyes have since become vacant. Perhaps fear made her eyes stop dreaming.

Dreams are only allowed in my circle when our eyes are closed, and the buttons of our minds are paused from reality. You cannot ever make the mistake of dreaming with open eyes here. There are people we call the dream spies, they walk, talk, and become good friends with you, but in reality, they try to find the slightest blink of a dream in the open eyes to condemn those eyes shut forever. They are seekers of treasured dreams that live in the open eyes.

Last month, my friend got caught in the act of dreaming with open eyes. Her dreams to me seemed too innocent, just human yearning for a better life. She dreamt of living in a circle outside ours, where there were towers that looked like upright needles stuck on the ground. Faces with inflated sparkling eyes gallivanting everywhere. She dreamt of walking up to her own space in a maze of dream livers and making a living for herself. She dreamt of escaping her day and night shift from room to room inside the same tainted walls. Her husband caught her with dream-filled eyes. And even though she plucked the dream from her iris and showed that he was on it too, without any pity, he reported it. Of course, he doesn't care because now he is too busy with arrangements. Next week, he is marrying once again.

You see, here in my circle, you must open your eyes for the first time and close your eyes for the last within this sphere. There cannot be any interval to venture out of its frontiers to pursue your dreams. It is the most sacrilegious crime. I dream too, I dream with open eyes, and sometimes I dream in front of the dream spies.

My dreams are of jumping off from the last end of the earth, touching the mellow clouds with my bare skin, and letting the northern gales unbraid my hair. My dreams are of swimming in the middle of rainbow corals with kaleidoscopic fishes glimmering in the unbridled sunlight, traveling to untrodden paths, meeting unknown people, living with them, and learning their way of dreaming. My dream is to find dreamers like me and take them out of the barbed-wired circles.

I am delusional, says the rare ones who are dreamers in my circle. They say my dreams are impossible to touch. They say just because the dream spies cannot see the dreams in my open eyes doesn't mean I can make my dreams alive. Perhaps they are right, but the shining brightness of my mother's dream-filled eyes and the euphoric whispers of her dreams of freedom beat deep inside my heart like a hidden soul. Maybe she hid a part of her soul inside mine when they took her body for her crime.

The Child I Keep Meeting

Khayelihle Benghu

Time does not pass the way we imagine.
It circles,
checking what we've neglected.

The child I was still waits
inside certain songs,
certain smells of dust and rain.

I meet her sometimes
not to rescue,
but to agree.

We nod to each other.
Neither of us needs fixing.
We are only learning
how to stand in the same moment.

Choking Up

Kevin Bain

Trying my hardest not to shake, I stepped up to home plate and clutched the bat between my tiny fists. They shook anyway. I was pretty sure by now that I knew how to hold this stupid thing in such a way that I could swing at the ball this time, instead of the high-speed bunt my poor coordination normally produced. I was pretty sure I had this by now. I adjusted my ball cap and with it my ears, then a call came.

“Choke up,” called my Uncle Bill, who wasn’t really my Uncle, smiling behind his mustache from the improvised pitcher’s mound on our lawn. The smile was one I’d seen before. I was doing something wrong and Uncle Bill was trying his hardest not to laugh. I could almost see his eyes crinkling up past the reflection of his wrap around Oakleys. Eager to finally learn this dumb game and fit in, I put that aside and requested more information.

“What?” I called.

“Choke up! You’re too low,” Bill replied.

That was when I noticed the eyes of my brother Kyle, and Bill’s kids, my play-cousins Chris and Brian. All of them were fixed on me. All of them doing a much worse job hiding their anticipation than Uncle Bill was. Yeah. I was definitely about to do something wrong.

In times like this, two choices always present themselves to me, equal and opposite in their potential for humiliation: First, I could ask what he meant by “You’re too low.” Or by “Choke up,” for that matter. As rational as this may sound, admitting to such a thing in 1980s suburbia, in my family’s social circles, was machismic suicide. And it was, naturally to the casually-bigoted thinking of the time, met with homophobic slurs, to me, at six years old. I was afraid to ask what those slurs meant too, but I knew that every time somebody laughed and pointed and called

me a “homo,” they probably weren’t being nice.

Having finally come to the understanding that Uncle Bill would not clarify further, I chose my second option: bluff. This way I stood some remote chance of saving face. It was only a one percent chance, at most, but that’s WAY better than zero. I may not have been a mathematician but I could play Hi/Lo like a champ.

So I hazarded a guess as to what Uncle Bill meant by “Choke up...”

And I stretched my neck out as far as it could go. Thereby, in my six-year-old mind, “choking up.” It made perfect sense to me. In retrospect, I should have asked.

Nothing can prepare you for a chorus of laughter resulting from nothing more than your best guess. And it didn’t stop them from calling me a “homo,” either. To his credit, Uncle Bill laughed along at first but didn’t tolerate this nastier mockery, chastising the other boys with a sharp “Hey!”

Then, keeping it together, he educated me: “Hold higher on the bat, Kevin,” came his reply through a broad grin. I followed his advice, raised my grip on the bat, and it did the trick. I finally created a fulcrum with which I could actually swing the damn bat. I couldn’t have been more proud of myself than if I had waited for Uncle Bill to throw a pitch for me to swing at. I hit my own hip, resounding with that awful aluminum ting off the bone. I whimpered and the laughter resumed.

Calling it a day, I put down the bat and trudged inside. Baseball, I realized, was going to be hard. What I didn’t know then was that Dad had been watching silently from our garage, assessing me, and having the same realization. This was the moment, he would later tell me, that he knew he would have to coach me himself.

And he resolved to try, somehow, to make his one-eyed son a great baseball player.

I failed as one might expect of a one-eyed baseball player. I’d lost use of it as a toddler, after a congenital cataract fogged over my left eye. The resulting surgery left me fully blind in the

left eye. Light and dark will sometimes illuminate the odd splotch of color, but otherwise its sight is all wobbling and mirage. The final problem this would create RE America's pastime is my extreme sensitivity to ultraviolet lights, which I hadn't yet realized included the sun among its sources. Not until I tried to catch pop flies and wound up shrieking like a newborn from the blazing brightness. Difficulties were predictable from the get go.

In the first few weeks of practice, those lead-up nights to my first-ever game, I saw it coming. Most parents learned how likely their tyke was or wasn't to go professional on opening night. Dad figured it out when I tried to put my mitt on the wrong hand, and backwards. There wasn't much pitching yet since we were so little, and that was a grace. Pitches and I had a somewhat colliding relationship. I also got hit on defense, by batters' line drives or pop-flies. And also by ground balls. I think I hit myself a couple times as well, and I'm still not sure how.

I sucked every day for an entire spring and summer that year, cushioned by the low expectations of pee-wee ball parents, and still found ways to disappoint. I sucked, out loud and in public. So naturally, Dad invited me to do it again the next year and I agreed. Contrary to the nature of experience, I sucked just as badly this time. Nary a hit nor an out to my name, out of easily thirty games per year.

What we didn't realize is that I would never get any better. My poor depth perception would hinder me far too much to be of any use in a game of baseball. I'd swing, I'd miss, I'd try to pretend to judge a ball coming my way and wind up with strikes. Even on the odds, I should have gotten a single hit in my life. One time, in five years playing little league, one might assume I'd eventually get one single hit and avoid the embarrassment of yet another enumerated detriment to my team. Yet my batting average, from start to finish, remained a morbidly impressive zero. Not a single hit in five years.

And in those years, Dad's smile had slowly but surely stopped reaching up to his eyes the way they used to. His half-a-

grin became a frequent precursor to subject-changes that would inevitably lead to non-athletic milestones. Even today, I want to pretend it wasn't there. And even today, I'd be lying to myself.

Without perspective to articulate these emotions to myself at the time, I turned my anger inward. Was I simply fated to suck, by circumstances beyond my control, with no way out? My brother Kyle made it look so easy. So did my old play-cousins, with Chris hitting singles and Brian clearing some real home runs I still couldn't hit today. Kyle played actual bases, not the outfield or the bench like I did. They were aspirational. They knew what the ring of leather would feel like off the sweet spot on a bat. The only sweet spot the ball would hit in relation to me would be a temple or a jawbone.

We made do with what I had, which admittedly wasn't much. Getting hit by pitches became part of Dad's coaching strategy, until I aged out of rag balls and into hard leather. He even convinced the league to get me a special helmet with a black plastic face cage. I looked, in those outings, like a baseball-themed supervillain. I was not made for this, and the entire league knew it. But still, a base taken via cranial violence is a base taken. And so it went for yet another year in little league.

Dad would sometimes attempt inspiration. He'd select a baseball star he thought I might identify with, and then tell me to pretend I was them instead of myself. That visualization of success, he thought, would eventually lead to my body following through. But when Dad told me to "Be Mark Maguire," he did not believe that Mark Maguire would then ignore a pop-fly to scope out the contents of a McDonald's bag that flew into right field. When he told me to pretend I was Bo Jackson, he did not realize Bo Jackson was the kind of guy to get bored halfway through an inning and simply leave 3rd base to find snacks. And when he told me that I was to be legendary Cubs first Baseman Marc Grace, Marc Grace had not yet missed an at-bat by accidentally locking himself into a porta-potty.

And as the years went by, the nice friendly family atmosphere of tee-ball started hardening into spiky suburban

politics, complete with HOA presidents and school board candidates. The sympathetic chuckles and encouraging claps slowed, then stopped. Rolled eyes got bloodier with each incident. And by this time, now 11, when they called me a “homo” some of them knew it was hateful. I didn’t just suck anymore, I was a joke that everybody was in on. Even Chris and Brian would make snarky comments now. This wasn’t just name-calling, it was a loser’s identity.

And it was beginning to rub off on Dad and Kyle, in the eyes and hushed giggles of teammates’ adult families. Even the phrase “Choke up” had become shorthand for reference to my inadequacies, not just in baseball but in daily life, and sometimes from kids and parents who weren’t even there to see my younger blunder happen. Even my loved ones were done with me.

I wanted to quit. But it was overridden by desire to like what Dad liked, to really love it and connect. He watched baseball on television without ever falling asleep, the maniac. I’ve grown to understand that Dad, too, captured himself in a position where he had to continue coaching me. If he admitted he’s come up short in making me successful after five years of little league, the tacit implication would be that I had also failed. It was the first true effort I had to make, it took most of my waking life... and I simply sucked by virtue of medical fate.

It was a kind of bizarre and emotionally-incapable masculine standstill. I failed, ergo he failed, ergo I failed, ad nauseum. And since neither of us wanted the other to feel that brunt, so it went for years longer than it should have. Every weekend of every year, both of us felt worse and worse, not only as players but as father and son failing one another. It was shared compassion that motivated our masochistic cruelty. And every year it was worse.

Fortunately, Mom stepped in before anyone could hurl homophobic slurs to our faces instead of behind our backs. Mom had a plan.

“Bartlett Buddies” was a little league program run in a

neighboring town with an amazing mission statement: Help disabled kids play baseball, like everyone else. Every "beneficiary" in the program whose disability made them struggle with baseball would be paired up with a "normal kid," as Mom put it. The Normals would help Beneficiaries through games that they, in varying states of disability, would otherwise never experience.

I finally saw a little light at the end of the tunnel, and for once not the painful ultraviolet kind. Somebody would finally be there to help me figure out how to see the ball at-bat, or how to tell how far a ball was from my face when somebody threw it. Maybe I'd learn how to switch-hit or become a pitcher, so I could get a designated hitter in my stead. I was going to get real help. Not that Dad wasn't trying, but it obviously hadn't worked. For the first time in my little athletic career, excitement gripped me.

"I'll try it," I said, making a great effort to contain myself.

Mom must have mistaken this for apprehension, because this began her pitch,

"These kids are SO messed up, honey," she said by way of persuasion, "that even you will look like Sammy frickin' Sosa compared to them!"

It was now that the tunnel's light dimmed.

Tightness hit my chest with realization: Mom didn't mean for me to be a Beneficiary. She wanted me to be a Normal!

Mom wasn't without logic. The standards for Beneficiary kids, Mom reasoned, were certainly lower than even my dismal performances. She specified that most of the people who volunteer to help these kids have never played a single little league game at all. Even my participation trophies, discarded and dusty after I looked up the word "participation," in our Webster's dictionary, would be an achievement in their view.

Mom also reasoned that I would also feel better about myself after seeing just how bad the "real disabled" kids had it. And with that combined self-esteem boost and a much-needed dose of disabled perspective, I would finally feel "normal" and

everyone would be happy! It was a bit Rube-Goldbergian but none of us were in any position to question her. We'd tried everything, were ready to give it up, and Mom provided an off-ramp that salvaged the wounded egos of both her husband and son. This wasn't misguided or morally-grey to us, at least not at the time. It was, to our self-centered thinking, a win-win.

And like that, Dad and I were off the hook. After five rough years, we finally had a new plan.

It was a few weeks until my first volunteer day. Dad dropped me off at Bartlett Buddies along with Kyle, who I learned was on his second such volunteering session. I smirked to myself, assuming it was punishment in his case. Dad explained en route that he would sit out this time and see how I liked this before signing away any more of his weekends. This felt better than before, knowing that Kyle would be there. I hoped he'd defy type, if nothing else than for the sake of the Beneficiary kids. His abandonment, split-second from the moment he leapt from Dad's car, should have given me pause.

Having no idea of where to go or who to speak to, I hastily abandoned my stranger-danger training and approached the first grownup I saw. Smiling adult faces eventually guided me to a middle-aged man with a clipboard, gull-nosed with a broad neck and Oakley wraparounds. He told me a number of things I forgot right away. Seeing the confusion on my face, Mister Oakleys pointed me to a field, and to a wheelchair I was surprised to recognize.

Emily had down's syndrome and cerebral palsy, comorbid. She was the sister of an older boy in my neighborhood, a kid I'd barely remember if not for Emily. Wheelchair-bound and non-verbal, Emily was frequently on the sidelines at little league tournaments. She was probably the first severely disabled person I ever encountered, and it was almost-certainly Emily on Mom's mind when she compared me to kids with "real disabilities."

And I, an eleven year-old monoclops with five years of failure and no care training, was to be her coach for the day.

For the sake of narrative structure, it would be nice to report that there was some kind of developed bond. Or a common goal that we overcame obstacles to meet. There might be a montage of us figuring out how to work together, swinging a bat, getting better at rounding bases, cheering, hugging. Smiles or something. But none of that happened.

Instead, I waved, smiled, and waited for a reciprocation that would not (read, could not) come. Then I approached earnestly, a sense of elbow grease and sticktoitiveness about my brow, and touched her hand to put her mitt on. This, the touch of an unwitting but well-meaning stranger boy, pushed Emily into a full-blown panic attack.

I wasn't alarmed by the utterances and rocking that demarked Emily's episodes, I'd seen them before at league functions. I just never saw it this close, with the chestnut-brown hair whipping back and forth. I never noticed her eyes were bright blue until now either, but here they were, wide and afraid. Afraid of me.

Thankfully her longtime caretaker had only been away for a moment, and was at Emily's side in no time to shoo away the clumsy little boy who just caused all this chaos. I explained to her caretaker, a middle-aged woman with a dark bob and pleasant moon-face, that Mister Oakleys had sent me to be her coach for the day. Her pleasant moon-face drifted quickly into just a regular moon-face, and I felt the weight of mere tolerance in her eyes.

"Just help her run the bases," she said with the energy of a retail worker repeating something for the millionth time, and pushed Emily away to grant her reprieve from my unwitting intrusion.

I really should have told somebody about my eye.

I didn't make it past her first at-bat, not an hour later, before my poor depth perception made its limits known. Emily's caretaker wheeled her, now pacified and ready to play in her navy-blue cap, to home plate. Emily didn't need my help to hold a bat, she and the league worked hard so she could wield it

without much assistance. They even let players pitch rag balls to her, so she could swing the bat like any other batter. I'd be lying to say I didn't feel a little inspired. Maybe Mom was onto something.

Emily readied herself for the incoming ball, and the Beneficiary kid on the pitcher's mound threw with the surety of practice...

It's at this point that my left eye's limitations made themselves known to a whole new circle of parents and kids.

The ball slapped Emily on the shoulder, hard and flat, with a WHAP that I didn't expect to hear from something as soft as a ragball. She cried out again. This was twice now, because of me, in one day.

The umpire made a gesture I knew all too well, and I began wheeling Emily to take her base. I wouldn't make it more than a few feet from my starting position before her Caretaker arrived to rescue Emily away from the irresponsible little shit who just let her take one for the team. At least I no longer felt like a failure, not compared to stomach-churning guilt.

My day didn't end there, as Kyle was still volunteering without issue. I did eventually approach Mister Oakleys and asked if there was anything I could do. With the energy of a man disposing of a tissue, he reassigned me to another kid whose "Normal" didn't show—Randy.

Randy was easily six feet tall at 12 years old, a hulking ginger kid with aviator glasses and Down's Syndrome. But Randy's most striking feature, by far, was the laser-focus he had on the game of baseball. I tried to help him but it became apparent why his coach didn't feel the need to be there. He knew where the ball was going to be, he knew how to hit it where he wanted, he knew players and stats that your average Major League announcer has trouble with. Randy did not need some one-eyed kid slowing him down with good intentions. But he got one anyway.

I spent the remainder of the day encouraging Randy, who ignored me, as he pitched himself balls that he could hit with

precision I would never achieve. I naively believed Randy was just my next assignment, an earnest designation of "Normal" to "Beneficiary." But I was no "Normal" to him. Nor did he benefit from my presence. Nor did Emily. Nor did anybody, now that I thought of it. Randy wasn't an assignment or a new beginning. He was being used as a final indication that I was neither wanted, needed, nor even capable. Meeting Randy wasn't a new beginning, it was the defining symptom of my final outing.

Dad pulled up his midnight Chevy Nova into the parking lot some time later that day, where Kyle and I hopped in to return to weekend cartoons and chores. By now I was good at faking a good time, and laid it on as thick as possible. I told him about Randy, things I learned from watching him practice. I lined my clouds with every cheap bit of silver tinsel I could muster.

Kyle, thankfully in retrospect, spilled my beans.

"Kevin got Emily hit by a pitch. They kicked him off the team."

Dad shot around to me with an intensity I'd never seen before or since.

"I didn't see it coming," came my sheepish reply. Kyle slapped a palm to his forehead.

Frustration finally spilling over, Dad's body turned from the front seat to better confront me.

"Did you learn anything from any of this?" he finally asked me, probably years after the question first occurred to him.

"Yes," I said, by way of indignance, "I know what choke-up means."

It would be, thank any pertinent deities, the last time any of the Bain men would raise the possibility of my playing baseball ever again.

Ageing

Rohan Buettel

Parts of me are slipping away,
characteristic honesty disappearing
as I seek to avoid the fallout
from mistakes, stupidity
and increasing impulsivity,
preoccupation or inattention,
not wanting the grief
of explaining, causing worry,
the hardship of thought,
the long-standing tiredness,
not up to trying to decipher
why I'm falling apart.

Author Biographies

Colin Keating is a writer, musician, and artist from Portland, OR. He's written the poetry collections *Smoking at Disneyland*, *Dog Tao*, several chapbooks, and *Red Medicine*, a collection of sonnets based on Fugazi songs. He appreciates small, well-crafted things (like poems) that rearrange the furniture in your head. He also loves loud music, porch hangs, and the regal platypus.

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Angela Laurio is a multi-genre writer based in Connecticut. She is a contributing author on several peer-reviewed health sciences journal articles. In April 2026 "Lily in the Eye of a Hurricane," a new musical based on Angela's poem of the same name, had its world premiere at the University of Miami. She is currently working on a memoir about her experiences as an Army officer and her deployment to Iraq in 2003. Angela earned an MFA in Creative and Professional Writing from Western Connecticut State University. She can be found on Substack at the Women Veterans Book Club (@wvbc).

Deborah Doolittle has lived in lots of different places, but now calls North Carolina home. An AWP Intro Award winner and Pushcart Prize nominee, she is the author of *Floribunda*, *No Crazy Notions*, *That Echo*, and *Bogbound*. When not writing or reading or editing *BRILLIG*: a micro lit mag, she's training for running road races, or practicing yoga, all while sharing a house with her husband, five housecats, and a backyard full of birds.

Michelle Visser is a poet and former special collections librarian who lives in Bassano del Grappa, Italy with her husband and a phantom lemon tree. She is convinced that poetry is our only true homeland. Her work is published or forthcoming in *Rattle*, *EcoTheo Review*, and the *Atlanta Review*, among others. She was a winner of the 2025 Poetry Archive Now (PAN) Worldview.

Saint-Rowan Tackitt (he/they) is a Chicago-based writer and founding editor of *POTTAGE Literary Magazine*. His work has previously appeared in *FLARE: the Flagler Review* and is scheduled for publication in *The Bookends Review*. You can find him at srltackitt.com and pottagemag.com.

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Theodora "Theo" Sterling (she/her) is a queer writer from Alberta, Canada, who always carries a fountain pen and journal everywhere she goes. Her work has appeared in WestWord Magazine, Funicular, FEELS Zine, and elsewhere. Occasionally, she posts her words (and cat photos) on Instagram @CupsOfSilver.

Hannah Brading is a poet and author from California whose work has appeared in The Argyle Literary Magazine, FLARE: The Flagler Review, and Paper Dragon among others. She earned her degree in English with Honors from the University of California, Berkeley. When she hasn't got pen to paper, Hannah spends her free time listening to David Bowie and drinking copious amounts of tea.

Born and raised in the beautiful landscapes of Bangladesh, Syeda Anika Mansur finds solace in poetry, storytelling, and painting. Her work draws inspiration from nature, people, diverse cultures and places, and in-between moments of emotional turmoil. Cats are her forever companions. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Barzakh Magazine, The Bookends Review, The Passionfruit Review, BarBar Literary Magazine, and elsewhere. She shares her creative journey on Instagram @hearthacker_anika.

Khayelihle Benghu is a South African writer whose work explores memory, identity, grief, and the quiet strangeness of human connection. Her fiction and poetry often blend the lyrical with the surreal. Some of her work have appeared in *Person of Interest*, *Ake Review* and *Metphrastics*

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Rohan Buettel lives in Canberra, Australia. His haiku appear in Australian and international journals (including *Presence*, *Cattails* and *The Heron's Nest*). His longer poetry appears in various journals, including *Rattle*, *Touchstone*, *Meanjin*, *Meniscus* and *Quadrant*.