

# EXIST OTHERWISE



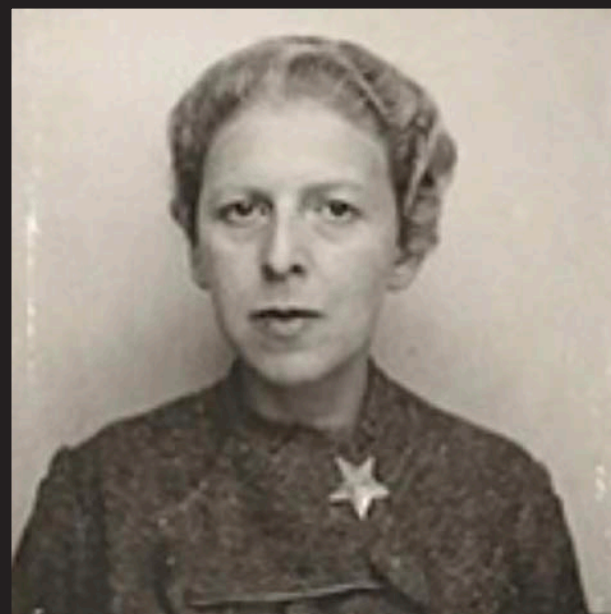
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Dennis Maulsby

soldier  
without  
a  
name



Cover Image, Claude Cahun, by Marcel Moore

Claude Cahun and her partner, Marcel Moore, were imprisoned and sentenced to death by the Nazis for their anti-fascist activism. They escaped that fate when the war ended.

# Civilians of Collapse

Tanisha Bose

We punch clocks with trembling hands.  
Buy milk. Forget names.  
Sleep beside lovers who speak in foreign dreams.  
We do not wear camouflage,  
but our griefs are patterned,  
uniform in their quiet devastations.

There is no battlefield,  
only the breakroom.  
Only the kitchen floor,  
where a child's spilled cereal  
becomes the landmine of the day.

You ask what war.  
I say: **this one**,  
the war of waking.  
Of pretending.  
Of enduring the news,  
the mirror,  
the inbox full of ghosts.

We are the soldiers of sighs,  
the medics of our own bleeding.  
We walk around with shrapnel in our smiles.  
And no one gives us a medal  
for surviving a Monday.



**Tanisha (she/her)** is a 14 year old poet from India exploring the intricacies of human interaction and society. Her works includes themes like revolution, society, emotions, society, loss etc and have been previously published in *The Brussels Review*, *Blue Marble Magazine*, *Macrame Literary Journal* and many more. When not writing she can be found sketching, reading or baking.

# Winter Thunder

Paul Kremsreiter

He must be a neighbor, the stranger you watch from your upstairs bedroom window at 3 AM as he walks, almost marches, down the sidewalk, the streetlight revealing a thick bathrobe though it's July, and as he completes his next circuit 'round the block you wonder if he, like you, is a war insomniac and so give yourself orders to abandon the building and get out there to provide some emotional back-up but, halt, it could startle him if you show up beside him like it's an ambush, and he might carry a gun like you would because it's night, so the next time he passes you yank up the window and give a heads-up, "Hey, I'll be right down!" which sounds like a damn threat, causing him to run before even looking up, giving you a second reason to reach him—to apologize, so you throw on your robe, rumble down stairs, whip the front door open, and find yourself bare-footing it down the sidewalk, night-patrolling, searching forward, glancing back, and looking up at second story windows for him, and as you near a full circuit and approach your house, your occupancy in the night feels displaced, chaotic like a winter thunderstorm, sheets of lightning, raising the fear you'll look up and see yourself in your bedroom window, and as you chatter how that's impossible, it strikes you that it was a mistake to bring the loaded gun nestled in your robe's pocket, because if you see yourself up there you'll desperately want to fire.



**Paul (he/him)** has been writing for many years, but only recently discovered the single-sentence hybrid form. He encourages others to experiment with it. He writes from the margins and lives between Milwaukee and St. Louis.

# Heads-Up Dream for Peace



I resent when beheading videos go viral and zombie apocalypses top viewer entertainment lists as it makes it much too easy for them to ignore the walking dead sharing a subway ride on way to a final destination that proves being heads up simply exposes one as too easy a target regardless of the helmet I first wear in boot camp when angry drill sergeants scream at me during squadron maneuvers to pull my head out of my ass so I don't kill my buddies because of a lack of concentration though I was concentrating real hard when Happy Jack took two shots to the head that exploded his Chicago style ghetto humor all over my face and flak jacket dripping down inside sand coated combat boots that allow me to walk away and proclaim heads you lose but tales you win if you're alive and able to speak of them to a passenger audience who bury their heads in smart phone images and sounds to avoid their neighbor's headless pain of surrender seated alone across the aisle where no one else sits to coax a face from my torn and stained civilian clothes while the train chugs to the South Ferry final stop where a whiff of rusty river replaces my body odor and signals a free boat ride that promises freedom when midway to Staten Island it glides past the Statue of Liberty and I plunge towards the crowned Lady who will read my DD214 safely wrapped in protective plastic and pinned to my pants pocket along with instructing letter that will guide me towards my very own plot of land in lovely Virginia where I can sleep with silent brothers and sisters and share a peace my grateful government will mark and preserve with a uniformly crafted and informative headstone...

# Heads Up Dream for Peace (previous page)

## Mark Blickley



**Mark Blickley (he/him)** grew up within walking distance of New York's Bronx Zoo. He is a proud member of the Dramatists Guild, PEN American Center, and Veterans For Responsible Leadership. His latest book is the flash fiction collection 'Hunger Pains' (Buttonhook Press).

# to all student protestors a year ago

anaum sajanlal

they say love is healing, but oh  
you know how it hurts

to keep this being soft  
when the world insists  
on its vast horrors  
unrelenting  
and the love can't stop  
anything

i wish i could say it gets better  
it has only gotten worse  
i watched a graduation speech  
and burst into tears

i am desperate  
for the hope  
i felt in your time

yesterday, the UN said fourteen  
thousand babies would  
starve to death  
in the next 48 hours

tonight, the world is ending  
fourteen thousand times  
and i am in bed

cont'd



**Anaum (they/she)** is a genderqueer femme lesbian whose work centers queerness, survivorship, colonialism, and resistance. They are a settler on Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee and Mississauga lands, from lands colonially named India and Pakistan. Their work is published or forthcoming in the *Hart House Review*, *BrainScramble Magazine*, and *League of Canadian Poets' Poetry Pause*. She can be found in Tkaronto playing with their niece/ nephew pets, or on Instagram at titus.christ.has.risen. [Link Tree](#)

# to all student protestors a year ago cont'd

anaum sajanlal

sobbing and writing  
because last year  
i gave everything

i want to write like i did back then  
all fast and fire and action

but i see a white woman  
at a podium again  
*recognize our frustration*  
as though it were a florist to thank  
not our desperate proof of humanity

and we are dying a slow, painful,  
humiliating death

i have been a ghost for 10 months  
and what line can a spectre hold?

you will survive  
you will go crazy  
you will survive that too  
you will fall in love, and then out  
you will experience a dozen routine tragedies  
and witness a dozen horrific ones  
and you will survive it all

and in a year you will think  
*oh, everything my body gave*  
as if it could ever be enough

because your clenching, stuttering  
heart must still, a year later  
dedicate its bruises to tiny body bags  
and beloved reporters  
*younger than you*  
assassinated

and you will think  
*how easy it would be to stop feeling*  
but love is too fucking stubborn

and *love* is too pretty a word  
for a feeling this nauseous and  
reeling and screaming  
that rips lives up  
leaving throats raw  
friendships shattered  
people traumatized

and still  
continues



# Trans-Illumination



# Melissa Ann Argay



**Melissa Ann Argay (she/her)** earned a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Albany and a master's degree in Pastoral Studies from St. Bernard's School of Theology Ministry in Rochester, New York. Additionally, she is a published photographer, and an author of *A Day in the Life of Francis* children's books. Melissa Ann occasionally works in Television and has worked as background on the *Gilded Age* on HBO for 3 consecutive seasons.  
[Writing](#), [Photography](#)

# History Never Known

# Stephanie Luevano-Powell

I was a person once  
Who had dreams and made mistakes  
But the roaring maw of war devours  
And takes, and takes, and takes.

Left upon a battlefield  
My body began to rot  
And attract the love of carrion  
Who stripped me down to naught

Eons passed, the world still spun  
Nature overtook the field  
All of me it left behind  
Was shining bone and steel

I settled in to darkness  
My bed of dirt and grass  
My body rested peacefully  
With fellows all en masse

*cont'd*



**Stephanie Luevano-Powell (she/her)** fell in love with stories as soon as she learned how to read at five years old, and has never stopped bringing them to life in as many ways as possible. She loves books, movies, TV shows, podcasts, and playing Dungeons and Dragons with her friends every weekend. In addition to reading, writing, and narrating, she loves to craft and spend time with her wife, Megan, and their two cats, Castiel and Jarlaxle, who bring joy and inspiration to her life.

One day my rest was taken  
As people came to view  
The casualties of hungry war  
Brought forth for their purview

The first one who discovered me  
Decided I was man.  
But another called me woman too  
So the bickering began.

The sword and shield at my side  
Showed I was part of fighting  
“This proves a man lay at our feet!”  
The first droned on, reciting.

The second pointed at my bones  
Said my hips are far too wide  
“This person bore a child once.”  
The second one replied.

The argument continued on  
Neither side would concede  
Who knew that my brittle bones  
Would lead to such misread.

Why does it matter oh so much  
If man or woman was I?  
All was left was tired bones  
And a shield by my side.

They wouldn't know who I was then  
Or really how I died  
They would never know my name  
Or the leader we defied

They wouldn't know that both were right  
Woman born was I  
But I took the mantle of a man  
And so a man I died

# Experiential Ecotone: Hashimoto's Disease & Gestational Diabetes Court Harler

1. Something (un)natural happened. After almost twenty long years, I still want answers.
2. I think I spent the first decade in denial. The first decade I spent raising other children.
3. But around 2013, when I first moved to Las Vegas, I wanted to remember. I wanted to remember better, and more. I wanted to have more than just a postmortem photograph.
4. My mind is a memory, a movie, a way of moving through the world without my body. My body betrayed me. My body let my baby's body die. My body does not belong to me.
5. My son's body is ash, scattered at sea. His father took him, carried him, as I had done for ten months of gestation, to his final destination. His destination should've been my arms.
6. For years I turned away from my husband in bed so I could wrap my own arms around my own body, pretending my son was cradled within. I didn't want my husband to know.
7. That cradle was my heart, my home; his heart, his home. We lived there, unbeknownst.
8. No one knew him, except me. I knew him, inside of me. He moved, and then he didn't. Others didn't know, until I asked them to bring their stethoscopes, their belly monitors. The prickly slide of velcro, the slick smear of ultrasound gel—his heart barely beating.
9. No one could touch him, except me.
10. I touched my boy and his ten toes brought me the best and worst kind of joy—the kind that couldn't last beyond a stolen moment. His fingers would not wrap around my own.
11. I remember: Blue skin, purple lips, burgundy umbilical cord. Blue hospital nightgown. Because there had been no time to pack his own clothes.
12. I tried to cry and the nurse said, "Are you crying?" I couldn't cry. Because I couldn't cry.
13. We declined the autopsy and opted for quick cremation. We had a service at the church, but no reception. We wanted to be alone in our little red-brick house on the military base.

cont'd



**Court Harler (she/her)** is a queer writer, editor, and educator based in Northern Kentucky. She holds an MA and an MFA. She's owner of Harler Literary LLC, founder and editor of *Flash the Court*, and former editor in chief of *CRAFT Literary Magazine*. Her award-winning, multigenre work has been published around the world. Learn more at harlerliterary.llc or flashthecourt.com. Find her on Instagram @CourtneyHarler. [Flash the Court](#)

14. But now I must wonder: Was it gestational diabetes? Was it untreated hypothyroidism?
15. Should I have known? Should I have trusted modern medicine, and not the cult-based practices of my family? Was I raised to be willfully ignorant of the miracle of science?
16. My father said take kelp tablets, take iodine, take iodized salt—take anything, anything, except synthetic hormone pills produced and promoted by the medical establishment.
17. Except synthetic thyroid hormone (aka Synthroid) is much more stable than that which can be gleaned from pigs or cows. I did not want to become part pig or part cow. I was barely human, and I needed to hold on to my humanity.
18. But maybe I backtrack. Maybe I backtrack back to the farm, where I learned my cultism. Where I learned to milk goats and ride horses, and the idyllic nature of my fauna friends lulled me into a type of (un)happiness that could not be questioned. I was there to obey.
19. And so when, even in my early twenties, my father said to never take Synthroid, I didn't.
20. I trusted. Essentially, I did nothing. I pretended I didn't have an autoimmune disorder.
21. And that's on me, no matter what my father said to do or not to do. That's all—on me.
22. And plus, it could've been undetected/undiagnosed gestational diabetes instead. Later, when my urine revealed elevated protein levels during my third and final pregnancy:
23. I told my mother. She said, "Oh yeah, I had that with all four of you." Meaning, diabetes. And she'd never told me. Nowhere had such appeared in my formal medical histories. Now when had I known my mother had "high-risk" or "difficult" pregnancies with us.
24. What I want to say is—if you think it's your fault, it's your fault. That won't change.
25. I add this last line, looking to the further future. Looking five years beyond my baby boy's would-be age of twenty. In that year, he could have rented a car to come visit me. He could've driven across the desert, post-college and early-career, to see his mother.

# The Boxing Match

## *Round 1.*

The crowd's silence slithers into my ear the way that maggot writhes through the side of a skull and out of a hollow eye-socket, trying to reach scraps of rotting sinew near the skeleton's jaw. This one is missing a left leg, and I recognise the bones of my wheelchair-bound English teacher from second grade.

"I want a clean fight," a bird with too many eyes and too little horns says. A few feathers spring loose from its wings. It steps backwards, leaving a trail of slick, black oil. "Touch gloves, and then back to your corners, alright?" We nod. It's rare we agree on something.

The cry of a newborn is our boxing bell. I bump my plastic glove against my opponent's; theirs is made of leather so fresh it moos. It is the corpse of a cow I saw on a Japanese farm during my fifth Christmas. We part as soon as we make contact and begin to circle like the vultures flying above us.

In the face-off, I stood tall before flashing lights, pride coursing through my blood and smiling with the pointed teeth of a bear trap. They are not pointed now. The crowd does not gasp as I fail to dodge a left hook. A crimson shard of pain digs into my lip as I see my baby teeth scatter on the floor of the ring – they are as brown

*cont'd*

## Mia Cheng

**Mia Cheng (she/her)** is a final-year university student at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Although she works and studies in London, UK, she is originally from Hong Kong. Her fiction has appeared in *Witcraft*.

and round as popcorn kernels at the bottom of a cardboard box with red and white stripes. I think Finding Nemo is playing in the background. I should have brushed my teeth more and eaten sugar less and packed my mouth guard last night. 'I told you so' is the end of the world.

My opponent is trying to stick their finger in the wound they have found. Their gloves have grown to the size of a shadow's hands, searching for the gap in my gums. I am tired after soccer practice but I lay awake, ribs pried apart and eyelids peeled back as I watch the shadow roil and shift across my walls. It gurgles and heaves, swallowing cracked paint a shade of green I was obsessed with at twelve years old. When I finally sleep, the shadow is warded off by my blanket. I wake the next morning feeling young and stupid.

I am backed into a corner. There, I find all the stuffed toys gifted to me on all my birthdays.

They are stacked upon adolescent bedsheets that smell like wilted lavender. I forgot to hide them before the sleepover; the ropes scraping against my back are the jeers of my friend Sam. I cannot let him tell our classmates.

My fanged fist strikes. He is on the floor. I am sorry that he is crying. I am not sorry that he does not say a word to anyone. The bell rings.

*Round 2.*

I get the jump on them this time.

My opponent stumbles, like a tree about to be uprooted by a typhoon. Whenever the lady in pink on the television reported these storms, I would grin at the rain hammer the pavement through my living room window. Now, I embody the elements, my punches like lashing winds.

A simmering, sticky wetness drips between my fingers but I pay my bleeding knuckles no mind. I have turned into a machine with only one looping algorithm: *left, right, right, jab. Left, right, right, jab.* I will be here until the skeletal crowd sees one of their own in the ring.

When I had braces, I used to think there was more after this. I would be a painter, a writer, a rockstar, an actor. But the gold bleeding from my opponent's face reflects my own until all I can see are the victories I am yet to cinch, the praise I am yet to hear.

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I am blinded by the ichor. My opponent socks the hollow cavern of my stomach. I stumble backwards into earth-shattering fury masquerading as love. The floor is a carpet the color of trust and hope and my opponent grabs the fraying corners, pulling in one practiced move like a malicious magician.

The crowd is on their feet, skeleton heels clicking together like Dorothy's shoes. My opponent is on me before my back hits the ground. I recognise clinical white marble and grey scuff marks from the wheels of a hospital gurney. A punch to my jaw. Another to my temple.

The cold cradling the back of my head keeps the white-hot pain from scorching me, refusing to let me rest even as the imprint of my opponent's rings are branded into my skin.

Behind my eyelids, I stare down into a frothing river beneath a bridge. I hear a dripping tap, its metal reflecting a blossoming crimson bath. I have not been through enough, but I think I will give up.

I do not know whether I am glad my anger refuses.

Red and blue surge through my feet and out my arm. It is the shame and spite that propelled my fists all those years ago, leaving

diamond-shaped scars between my fingers. I strike my opponent in the face and I do what fury demands. I have always been very good at that. The roar I let loose is the drunken scream of a friend, fighting someone who called him something he has tried not to be his entire life.

"Haymaker!" My brother shouts from the stands. A skeleton's jaw clicks. "Throw a haymaker!" Now they are on the floor, shrouded in my shadow. I grab them by their shoulders, rough sand of a beach beneath my fingers. It is the one I visited with my parents last summer. The sun shines brighter when you have tried to open death's door, only to find it locked.

Wind, howling from the top of a mountain my mother always meant to climb, blows the sand away before I can speak.

There will be a rematch.





The message was loud and clear that snow showers were in store for us tonight. I acknowledged the message and hung up with a smile. The next sound from my perch above the runway was a pair of F4 Phantoms screaming down the runway, destined for the Mekong River aviators called the Fence. It separated eastern Thailand from the western banks of Laos.

With the mid-shift over, it was time for twenty-four hours off from the grind and pressures of war pushing into its eighth year. The half-mile trek to the barracks or hooch was located a quarter of a mile from the base perimeter of barbed wire, trip flares, and jungle. The locals, ranging from older men and women to young boys and girls, scurried about laundering clothes, shining boots, and general housekeeping. An outdoor shower and a fresh set of civvies were all that was needed to propel us to our rendezvous with the impending snow.

The departure from Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base, better known as NKP or Naked Fanny, deposited us into a world of a shockingly bleak shanty village across the main highway of compressed stone and gravel. The cardboard village was surrounded by rice paddies and stilted huts that housed families who tended the land. This would be the scene repeated in either direction.

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**Dan Nicholas'** fiction genres (literary, dystopian, fantasy, and science fiction) have appeared in *360tomorrows* and *Down in the Dirt* online magazines, and he has received an invitation to post his work with the Brooklyn Film and Arts Festival for his accounts on growing up in Brooklyn. A United States Air Force veteran, Dan has drawn on his military experiences, early love for science fiction, and other life experiences to create a diverse catalog, utilizing his vivid sense of place, realism, and imagination in his writing.

Options for travel were by bus or the ever-present Baht truck. The bus was held together (literally) by duct tape, crude metal patches, and planks of wood while grinding gears propelled it along the makeshift highway. The Baht truck was usually a Japanese pickup truck with two padded seats running parallel to the length of the cargo area, with decorative wrought iron supports for the cab's ornate roof. This was the go-to travel in these parts. The passenger list could include a toothless mama-son drooling beetle-nut from her smiling face, a small family with food from the market, or a farmer with his prize poultry. When traveling in the back of the vehicle, the low sun would cascade over the geometric patterns of the rice paddies, creating reflective pools of light and color. The fragrant scent of smoke that lingered in the air completed the euphoric moment; any signs of conflict were far away.

Slapping the side of the pickup signaled the driver to drop us off at a small village called Nong Yat. It was pure National Geographic with primitive dirt roads flanked by stilted huts, curious villagers, and chickens that patrolled erratically in all directions. A common sight would be partially clothed children guiding one-thousand-pound water buffalos as we would walk a dog back in the States. We lived

in two worlds: one grounded in a regional conflict and the other in a tranquil, simple world amplified by the intoxicants we ingested.

The infamous Golden Triangle, which included Thailand, Burma, and Laos, was the source of the euphoria and escape we were seeking- it fed the cravings of our culture. We would seek out an old man with stringy facial hair and glassy eyes who would gleefully supply us with small quantities of the devil dust. The cost of a vial of heroin was pocket change, as were the bundles of powerful Thai sticks that were readily available in this little village or NKP city, a few clicks to the east.

A bamboo bong with a mahogany bowl made by the locals was the paraphernalia of choice. The Thai stick would be ground and packed loosely into the bowl with a sprinkle of heroin on top; hence, snow showers. The drug cocktail offered different effects. The Thai stick smoke would explode in the lungs while the subtlety of the powder would take its toll on its victim over time, like a slow death. Those who were new to this activity were treated to projectile vomit as it was the body's way of rejecting its presence. Over time, the Asian powder cajoles the body; it then steals the mind and releases the

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soul. But the horror of this practice would take others to a new low in this shattered part of the world. The use of needles was non-existent due to the cost and availability. The alternative was not pretty but grotesquely effective. A razor blade was used to slice the skin of arms, hands, and legs, as the powder was packed into the open breach. Scars from slice marks took the place of needle marks found in the West. But sullen eyes and emaciated bodies remained a constant.

As time moved on, the effect of drugs and alcohol took their toll on our bodies and our minds. One morning, when shaving in the outdoor latrine, my image looked back at me with a question, "What are you doing?" It was my Van Halen moment about looking over the edge- a place where you lose friends and life. Was it my conscience or divine intervention? In my heart of hearts, I knew the answer.

That day changed my life, while others were not so lucky.

Watching friends continue down this path was difficult. With clear eyes, I watched as their bodies and minds continued to decline with binge alcohol as the only means to escape the enslavement; sadly, only for the moment.

Perched above the runway, the warm, humid night gave way to spotlights that bathed the area like a cozy blanket. I felt a new calm with the thoughts of going back to the world on the horizon.

Like every night, the jungle teemed with nocturnal noises of things that crawl and fly. But tonight, it was different. The ever-present flying hordes filled the light with their fierce dance. As I sat mesmerized by the sight, it reminded me of ...snow.



# Someone Else's Daughter

Caitlin Cacciatore

I once fashioned a father out of clay.  
wrote him into the story that is caged  
in my ribs.

gave him a name. I did not intend  
for him to play the part of the villain so  
splendidly.

he received a standing ovation.  
my role in the story was  
a simple one.

a minor part in a major key. I refused  
to play it. I did not take my leave, break  
apart, fall away,

call off the dogs of war set  
upon me. that did not stop anyone  
from carving their names

in what was supposed to be my coffin.  
I did not leave in a shroud, nor a cloud  
of mist.

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**Caitlin Cacciatore** (she/her) is a queer poet, writer, and essayist based on the outskirts of New York City. She believes that literature has the power to change minds and start movements. Her poetry has appeared in *Bacopa Literary Review*, *Sunlight Press*, and *The Good Life Review*. Caitlin has been nominated for a *Pushcart Prize* and a *Best of the Net* anthology award, and was long-listed for the international *erbacce-prize* in 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2025. Additionally, she has two essays slated for release in forthcoming anthologies set to be published in the Autumn of 2025. [Website](#)

I left like a hurricane leaves land.  
I do not regret the scorched earth,  
nor trial by fire.

the razed fields where my wildflowers  
used to be, nor the bent branches  
of uprooted trees.

like an insect in amber, I became entangled  
trapped in that no man's land few dare enter.  
none leave.

I got lost in a single moment. he had an ace  
of hearts and played it. I went home and heard  
the world's smallest violin

weeping in the corner. listen I was a pawn  
but so was he. the fates drew near the world  
was ending. for years I woke screaming

until the day I awoke to the gossamer sound of glass  
and realized being broken doesn't protect anyone  
from shattering.

he played a major part in a minor war. I said a prayer  
for the mountain I thought was a molehill, sang  
a dirge for the molehill

I mistook for a mountain. tested every means  
of forgetting known to man. remembered  
belatedly I was someone else's daughter.

“Soldier, where’d you get that scar?  
Who made you black and blue?  
Why do you wither yellow?  
And why’s your cup half empty?  
you’ve  
Got a dollar to your name  
Money’s all you seem to dream of  
But it’s cherry blossom season  
Would you care to watch them fall?”  
:  
He’s a man in uniform  
But he doesn’t seem to fit in  
When the whole town’s gone out dancing  
He sits down like a stone.  
  
He’s like an open book  
After a storm has finished raging:  
You can read all of the pages  
And almost make it out.  
::



**Abigail Redlitch (she/her)** is a writer, performer, and creative in Brooklyn, New York. Poems of hers have been published in *Wingless Dreamer*, *Quibble Lit*, *Art on the Trails (in MA)*, and *Dyke Bait Zine*. [Website](#)

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The d-evil's on his mug- shot  
 But just be- low the sur- face  
 there's a p- ink soul, worn and ti- red,  
 that needs a lit- tle sun

in a fl- pen- sive with his s- word  
 he'll leave you wit- h ash, and on the run  
 ju- st one of his word- s you read  
 st- ill s- tuck in your he- art.

∴

“Madam, where'd you get that scar?  
 Who made you black and blue?  
 Why do you wither yellow?  
 And why's your cup half empty?  
 you've  
 Got a poem to your name  
 Nothing left you seem to dream of  
 But it's cherry blossom season  
 Would you dare to watch them fall?”



# I Saw Dead Children Way Before The Sixth Sense

Courtney Roberts

**Dead children.** Blubbery baby bodies. Once warm, now cold. Still.  
Not ghosts, dead souls.

**Forests.** Rot. Lungs filled with mud. Children. Children with rifles,  
wearing the camouflage uniform of death. Death's uniform clinging to  
their baby skin, glued with last night's rain. I fill the slide with bullets  
and guilt. They're too small. Too small for war. Too small for their  
boots. Too small for death. Just too big for innocence.

**Women.** None in site, just lingering in my mind. America's daughters  
are home. Rosie the Riveter has no place here. "Miss. Miss Miss." I  
don't know which women or Miss, mistress even, they're calling out  
for until they manage to "hit"

Miss. Miss. Miss. Hit. Miss. Hit. Hit Hit. Hit. Dead. Dead. Dead. The guy  
next to me. Dead. My soul. Dead. My cigarette. Dead. Non existent,  
my tears. No time.

**Rivers.** Roads. Roaring leaves. Thunder Bee's. Thunder T's. And kids,  
always kids. Kids now in the forest aiming their guns at younger kids.  
Boys. Metal cans clutched to their chests like stuffed animals. Could  
be chemicals. Could be juice. Could be Agent Orange. Could be hell.  
Could be heaven. Who knows. Not them, they're children. Children  
unraveled. Children unmade. Not soldiers.

*cont'd*



**Courtney Roberts (she/her)**  
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writing, Courtney explores social  
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things that keep her up at night. She  
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free time, you can find her sipping on  
coffee, puzzling, or rocking out with  
her 3 year old cat, Luna Lou. [TikTok](#)

**Children.** They've assaulted the children and turned them into assault rifles. Pulled from recess and into permanent rest. I want to know whose idea it was to pluck these children. Who is this cruel, efficient genius?

**War.** It's not just here. It's in us. Planted in our skulls like blooming flowers, every memory a landmine. No good memories on the front line, just tucked in the back. Memories of my kids.

**My Kids.** They're home with pillow forts. Watching a dancing sailboat Mickey. Pretending the floor is lava while I'm stuck in lava mud. That's who I'm fighting for. Them. Or it was, anyways. At the beginning. Now I fight for someone named survival. I'm fighting this boy. This boy who should be in love, getting married in a decade. Laughing on the playground. Anything other than this.

**Ten.** What was I doing at ten? Dancing? Daring? Dreaming? Drumming? Not dying. Not falling like dominoes with every bullet. Not becoming a tiny red firework. If I died at ten, I would have had a funeral. They have no funeral. No grave. Just mud. Dirt. Earth.

**Lost.** Not this war, but the one in my mind. The soldier up there bled out quickly and quietly with regret. It was a reason of weakness. I survived. He didn't.

**Forget the kids.** They're enemies. Targets. Silhouettes in a training manual. Anything that makes sleep come a little easier.

**Married.** I was married to the war, but one day I woke up divorced. It left me, or I left it. On a plane. Divorced, but in a custody battle of my mind. It's strong perfume still clinging to my skin.

**The past?** Gone. Burned up in a field I'd die to forget. Others. Brothers. Stayed behind, now ash. Eternal ash.

**Land.** No parades. No welcome. No banners. Just the shouts.

"Criminal!"

"Enemy!"

"Murderer!"

"Coward!"

"Child Killer!"

*cont'd*

# I Saw Dead Children Way Before The Sixth Sense cont'd

Courtney Roberts

**America's daughters.** The ones I was sent to protect. The ones who sent me. I thought they were wrong, that I was on the right side. Until my children run into my arms, soft innocent baby skin.

**Enemy. Villain.** Synonymous with me. The war followed me home. It hid, bundled up in the murky muddy swamp in my chest. I've helped sneak over an illegal.

I thought it would outgrow this place in my chest, but we don't outgrow war. War outgrows us.

# Shiva: The Wild Dance in the Cruel Winter

Yucheng Tao

*“The gate opened. Lord Shiva released beasts upon the winter of Nanjing,  
and he dances wildly through 1937, uncaring for human suffering.”*

Soft soil / scattered with bones  
submerges beneath the ice pillars  
poured by time.

Young girls elude fresh tombs  
painting their faces / with mud,  
disguising themselves / as trembling men  
with short-haired / accompanying the enemy's  
violent laughter / dodging the Type-38 bayonets  
whirling like Shiva's dance / hunting their wombs.

Elders wisely modify mazes / in tunnels,  
emerge like pangolins / at secret communication points,  
craft telegrams / into riddles.

Arms and fingers / break on the ground,  
like full stops /  
assimilating mottled darkness / into the weeds.

*cont'd*



**Yucheng Tao** is a Chinese poet based in Los Angeles, currently pursuing a B.A. in Songwriting at the Musicians Institute. His work has appeared in over 30 journals internationally, including *Wild Court* (King's College London), *NonBinary Review*, *Apocalypse Confidential*, *The Arcanist*, *Red Ogre Review*, *Cathexis Northwest Press*, *SHINE: International Poetry*, *In Parentheses*, and more. He was a semifinalist for the *Winds of Asia Award*. His debut chapbook, titled *April No Longer Comes*, will be published by *Alien Buddha Press* in August 2025 [x.com](https://www.x.com)

# Under the Winter Sky of Nanjing, Shiva Danced cont'd

Yucheng Tao

I struggle to crawl out / from the mass grave,  
searching for my own breath,  
searching for the only warmth / left in the soil.  
Only the burst blood of the dead.

In this cruel winter,  
only Shiva — the puppeteer of death / remains expressionless.

In the pit of death / what can one do?  
The invading army destroys / our homes  
as if carrying out an evil command.

I, as a human /  
cry in this moment / wondering how to  
mourn the dead.

The rain leaves us ripe & waiting.  
orange bright, as boiled persimmon displayed on the slab,  
thriving under a swelled rot— the size of our grief.  
the way the greengrocer gropes the fruit,  
crushes the kaki how a colonist ruins our sleep by feet: a thumping on our shutter.  
I'm trying not to mistake vitamin for violence,  
I'm trying not to lose my tooth to the malnourishment.  
the grocer shoves the fruit into a cellophane, & my hands still joy-wet,  
unburdens it on Mariam's head like the load that it was.  
this child too, a burden earned from the sameness between harassment & haram.  
I spoon-fed the term rape to Mariam till she came of age,  
held the word by its letter like a live bait  
& we nurture the suffering: the pink weakness of a wound. an inner bleeding.  
Mariam's dress flinches, and a hemorrhage accosts us.  
her room, still foul-scented with the scuffling of a strong man.  
& while we argued the cramp away on the long queue,  
I dissect parts of her body that ends with a syllable— ache wet & fractured  
with blood: thighs, tongue & swollen thighs.  
a Caucasian pushes from behind, & all our harsh consonant pours to the ground.  
this too, a sin to be mopped.  
Mariam parboils the persimmon with love.  
a citrus greening, diseased on the plate.  
she dresses the fuming starch,  
& I treat my tongue to the plague afflicting my lips, like the Caucasian at the mall.



**Nnadi Samuel** (he/him/his) holds a B.A in English & literature from the University of Benin. Author of *Nature Knows A Little About Slave Trade* (Sundress Publication, 2022). His works have been previously published/ forthcoming in *Suburban Review*, *Seventh Wave Magazine*, *NativeSkin lit Magazine*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Quarterly West*, *Common Wealth Writers* & elsewhere. Winner of the *Canadian Open Drawer* contest 2020, & the *International Human Right Arts Festival Award (IHRAF)* New York 2021. He got an honorable mention for the 2022 *Stephen A. DiBiase Poetry Contest*.

# On Death, A Seventy-Nine-Year Perspective

Dennis Maulsby

It was the Asian flu year,  
that pandemic year  
of bleached empty school desks,  
chalk dust suspended in stale air,  
of acrid antiseptic stink in marble corridors,  
crowded beds sheeted with hospital corners.  
White smocks, black bibles.

Death sat in the overstuffed chair, muddy feet up on the hassock, tired and impatient, rustling the pages of *The Wall Street Journal*. I lay on the couch, alternately shivering, swaddled in blankets, and soaked in sweat, covers thrown off. As a sixteen-year-old, I came closer to meeting the Dark Angel than anyone should. My illness reached its crisis. The fever must break by morning or.... As its shadow darkened the room and the soap operas on TV blended one into the other, I grasped the mortality of my body for the first time. Then came anger. It was too early and unfair. I was still a virgin. In 1957, the Asian flu killed two million people.

As I grew older, Death would show up not only when anticipated but also during the most everyday moments. On the run back from the playground, a tornado caught me in the open. At high speed, my sports car duked it out with a beer truck on an icy Minnesota interstate. Such irony, if killed by my favorite beverage.

*cont'd*



**Dennis Maulsby's** poems and stories have appeared in numerous journals and on National Public Radio. His award-winning books include *Near Death/Near Life*, *Free Fire Zone*, *Winterset*, *Heart Songs*, and *House de Gracie*. Maulsby is a member of the *Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America*, the *Science Fiction Poetry Association*, the *League of Minnesota Poets*, and the *Military Writers Society of America*. [DennisMaulsby.com](http://DennisMaulsby.com)

# On Death, A Seventy-Nine-Year Perspective cont'd

Dennis Maulsby

Almost worse was the sight of white foam pulsing out the back and sides of the jack-knifed semi to fertilize the frozen ground. The wind out of the northwest became thick with the feathered scent of malt.

On two occasions, in Chicago and Orlando, I experienced emergency landings on crash-truck-ringed runways when flying in passenger planes. Yet all these events seemed few and tame after a year in Vietnam.

In a combat zone, Death rides your shoulders—waiting. The constant tension builds to the point you feel relief when the fighting begins.

A machine gun creates a rooster tail of dirt at my pumping heels before a dive into a foxhole. The red dust raised sours my tongue and blends with sweat to form bloody terracotta on my hands and face.

Crawling through elephant grass protected only by the thickness of a GI shirt, mortar rounds walk over me. The explosions, so close, lift and drop my body to their rhythmic drumbeat. The fermented brandy fragrance of wounded earth mixes with the smells of hot iron and nitrates.

A roll out of bed at 0300, my flesh smacks the concrete floor as 120-millimeter rockets shred the motor pool. The garage's sheet metal sides turned into a cheese grater of intricate shrapnel lacework.

Our jeep departs through the supply depot gate three minutes before the base is overrun. Thick fingers of Monson rain blind us, slick down hair on heads and arms, and invade our private parts. In kindness, it masks us from Viet Cong eyes until we rumble out of the kill zone.

We are not meant to buddy up to Death so often. Our brains become permanently re-wired in undesirable ways by near-death experiences. The frequency of suicide and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in veterans, past and present, offers proof of the infection. In my case, the first six months back were filled with hellish, violent, untreatable dreams until I discovered the healing power of creativity, which allowed me to cope. Even fifty-some years later, the memories of war remain fresh, detailed, and in full color, a source of writing material not yet exhausted.

Now, almost every month brings news of friends, relatives, and peers passing for various reasons. I have come full circle, immersed in a

*cont'd*



# On Death, A Seventy-Nine-Year Perspective cont'd

Dennis Maulsby

second deadly pandemic. This one is the most virulent among the aging. And me at seventy-nine years with a heart condition.

I hope for another ten years of cogent, physically active life. Yet, there will come a time when the compelling primate fascination for transient fads, the taste of food, and physical pleasure will wane. When all that remains to sustain me for a little while longer is love of family.

Inevitably, those last moments will come when the mind releases its burdens and the body begins to shut down its weary functions. Then the Dark Angel will arrive, as the old comrade it has always been, to take me the way I choose.

Old Buffalo — scarred muzzle,  
age-ragged hump, broken horn.  
At the night's edge,  
stalking hollow eyes

reflect the lone bull's silhouette.  
His heart beats faster,  
head lowers, nostrils snort,  
eager for this last battle.



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