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The Words. Or Holes. Or Both: Writing as an Integrative Methodology for Trauma

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This project seeks to identify methods authors have used to integrate their traumatic experiences. My work will analyze the genre of War Literature and specific authors like J.R.R. Tolkien and Kurt Vonnegut to explore the way writers describe the trauma of combat. Using insights from neuroscience and psychology, I will expand the field of Cognitive Literary Studies from a focus on the reader to a focus on the writer by linking neurological functions with narrative tools.

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The Words. Or Holes. Or Both:
Writing as an Integrative Methodology for Trauma

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Presented to

the Faculty of the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Daniel A. Castle

August 2023

Advisor: Billy J. Stratton

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Title: *The Words. Or Holes. Or Both: Writing as an Integrative Methodology for Trauma*

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This project seeks to identify methods authors have used to integrate their traumatic experiences. My work will analyze the genre of War Literature and specific authors like J.R.R. Tolkien and Kurt Vonnegut to explore the way writers describe the trauma of combat. Using insights from neuroscience and psychology, I will expand the field of Cognitive Literary Studies from a focus on the reader to a focus on the writer by linking neurological functions with narrative tools.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One	1
Chapter Two	15
Chapter Three.....	76
Chapter Four.....	138
Chapter Five.....	186
Chapter Six.....	239
Chapter Seven.....	307
Bibliography.....	319

CHAPTER ONE

The words. Or holes. Or both.

They say that PTSD is actually PTS, or TS or just plain D. But how it works is like this. You get in a firefight and your body gets ready to fire or fight. You see fireworks and your body gets ready to fire or fight.

I always liked fireworks.

Like taking a picture of the sun. And then your camera doesn't work because the sun is too bright and now it can't feel anything and your friend saw the flash that killed her husband and the navy named a boat after him and the picture was shit anyway. So it goes.

I used to do photography.

I should start when the words stopped. I'll start with a story.

When I was young, I was Dungeon Master for my friends. No, not Dungeon Master: *Story Master*. Dungeons weren't safe and Dragons were bad for us. Our parents didn't want us unduly influenced.

We were soldiers, once, and young. And our Blackhawks never went down. We fought terrorists with a roll of the dice. We were high school kids.

Noah got blown up in Iraq. I picked him up from jail and he told me a story about how the explosion blew the book out of his hands and he ran around

trying to pick the pages out of the sand with blood dripping from his ears. He tells it like a funny story.

My brother John can't run much cause his knees hurt. He wrote a killer story about an infantry captain responding to a couple of his vehicles getting blown up with his guys inside. The imagery is good, especially the bit about the broken glasses and the smell.

Eric invaded a country before his 19th birthday. He has hearing aids from the chopper's engine noise. Washing blood from the metal floor to reset for the next Jolly Green rescue mission took too much time to put in earplugs.

And then there's me. I learned how something breaks. I watched the smoke drift from the safety of 35,000 feet. The clouds were pretty.

A cool thing the Air Force has is a cockpit voice recorder. It survives a lot of crashes. You get to listen to what your friends did to figure out what not to do. They don't edit out the screams. I'd give it a solid 6.9/10.

I was telling a story about dice. The dice sit in a dusty corner of my dresser next to a worn diamond ring, a broken fishing pole, a Hunter's Safety card, and a scrap of paper with a few holes in it.

The words were there until I wished I got shot at. I mean, I can't prove I didn't. But I can't prove I did. Our plane never came back with holes. If there were holes, I

could poke my finger in them and say: *look, see, holes*. You can see them, you can touch them, you can believe them.

We did see the tracers in the night, or lasers, or the good kind of tracers. Or at least I want to remember that I did.

I remember going to war movies with my dad when he wasn't in the desert. He'd get jalapeño popcorn, not eat dinner, and cover my eyes at the parts with boobs.

Dad held a kid's legs as the doctors worked on him in a field tent and the kid cried for his mom. The kid was a little older than me and my brother. He doesn't know if the kid made it.

When my brother went through his records, Dad qualified for a Purple Heart from being blown up. He didn't get one because he didn't tell anybody. We never knew until my brother went through his records and found evidence of the hospital stay.

I don't remember when the words stopped. But when the words stopped, everything stopped. Every day I sat in a box in the sand and waited twelve hours to fly again. And again. And again. And then I woke up and flew away and rode bicycles in the rain at midnight in Maastricht.

And then I was home. And the words weren't. And nothing else was either.

So I wrote a word. I ran a mile. I read a page. And the next day I wrote another word.

The word became words became sentences became stories. I wrote about a character who paints and goes to war and can't paint anymore. I wrote about a character that works hard. I showed it to some people and they didn't think he was interesting. But they liked a character hiding in the shadows named Biern. She was haunted by something and the people wanted to know *by what* and I did too so I wrote her story.

Her name is like cairn.

I wrote her story of how the strongest character can break. I wrote how breaking was lots of things but the last thing was a system abusing her for its own greed.

At the end, Biern saw she'd become the very thing that destroyed her. And the story was beautiful. My brother said it was too sad.

He named his daughter Shiloh, after the battle, or hope, or both.

I made some changes to the story. Biern realizes she is better than what hurt her. In the end, she had strength. It was the strength she always had.

And then I was back in the box in the sand but now had twelve hours to write. Had twelve hours to make words about how I watched the fires burn south and how the F16 pilots wanted to do something. But they couldn't, and I couldn't. Because politics or congress was on a break or some people liked power more than other people. The fires burned and people died and we watched.

And then I left the box and met some old friends from old college teams and we raced in cross-country nationals. They told stories about how the biggest thing in their life was the next race and I didn't have the words.

*I wrote a story about two worlds separated by
clouds and about how you could look down and see
the world and how the people on the world never
looked up.*

They said I should try to be just an athlete and I said I hadn't raced in years but have run a lot of miles at three am when it wasn't too hot to collapse and I could only see the spotlights of watch towers lighting the circles on the sand next to the fence topped by razor wire.

I asked if that was good enough. They thought it might be.

And then I was home, and then I was in Korea, the nice one, and I was wearing a uniform that said USA and didn't look like sand.

I saw the USA and I tried to say something but didn't have words. It wasn't Olympics but as close as I'd ever get and I got to walk behind a flag and heard an entire stadium shouting USA, the good way, and I thought I knew what it meant.

Mostly I thought about boats.

I thought about boats and I wrote a story about how maybe it's not the big things like going to war that make the world better. It's the little things, like being nice and opening doors that make dark things alight.

I used to write about things that weren't real because I didn't have words.

Now words are there to talk about Noah, and John, and Eric. The words are there to talk about boats too. I've known a lot of boats. And bridges, and roads, and benches, and parks. So it goes.

Once you write a lot of words, the words start being there.

The words were there when I called my mom to tell her my wife's stomach hurt and we were going to the hospital and we hadn't bought a crib yet. She said my brother just called from Baghdad and said rockets were incoming but she said he should be fine because of the time difference.

In between the NICU alarms, I wrote a story about a little boy who could do more than barely fit in one of his father's hands. I wrote how his dad taught him to be kind and brave. I wrote how everything worked out in the end, how, after a couple months, the red marks from the tubes went away.

I realized how good stories have things called stakes, so I made some changes. I realized how maybe the best stories have hope, too.

So I made changes and traded my motorcycle for a car with holes. I bought the bike when I wasn't supposed to because we were training to fly in combat and motorcycles weren't safe. I traded the bike for the broken car, not because I know anything about cars, but because I think I can figure out how to put a broken thing back together again, if I have the words. Or holes. Or both.

“We are like those abandoned fields full of shell-holes in France, no less peaceful than the other ploughed lands about them, but in them are lying still the buried explosives—and until these shall have been dug out and cleared away, to plough will be a danger both to plougher and ploughed” (Remarque 242).

Writing does a thing.

Some *thing* happens when we translate our internal world of thoughts, memories, and experiences into external words on the page. Some *thing* happens when we tell our stories. This work explores what that *thing* might be as it relates to trauma and clinical mental health diagnosis such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

In my first semester of a PhD in Literary Studies in 2020, I was asked to write a literacy narrative. When I thought through my development as a writer, the only thing that showed up was absence. There were gaps in my life I couldn't put words to. I couldn't write about my friends who died.

This work is the story of how I found the words.

As I delved into my past, what broke through were small moments, flashes, fragments. Memories that came rapid fire. There was no chronology, no narrative flow, just everything all at once. What came was the first draft of *The words. Or holes. Or both*. As I remembered, I re-remembered. As I wrote words, holes knit. When I was done with that draft, I still couldn't talk about my friends, I could only talk about boats.

As I worked on *this* project, I found a method to talk about the holes.

Now, I can talk about boats.

I can talk about my friend Dave who was killed by an IED in Kabul Afghanistan on December 27, 2013. On August 11, 2014, the US Navy christened a vessel the MV

CAPT. David I. Lyon. His wife Dana broke the champagne over the bow. Dana was in Kabul and heard the blast from the explosion that killed Dave. She saw the smoke.

Dave was the captain of the track team before me. He was a thrower, a heavy. Three hundred pounds of solid muscle. I was a long-distance runner, a skinny, one hundred forty pounds of nothing. The heavies adopted the skinnies like big brothers. They liked to throw us up in the air. Now, I do that with my two-year-old son.

Dana was a national champion in the javelin. She was one of my good friends. Now she coaches at the academy. We have talked a bit over the years. Their story isn't unique to many of my friends. Some are gone. Some have changed. All have lost.

Now, I have the words to tell you about Dave, and Eric, and Noah, and John, and others. I can also tell you some of my stories and how I learned to tell them. As I remembered, I learned how to re-member, to put together fragments of memory, images, smells, sounds, and the emotions that spark through it all. For me, the key was parallel ways of knowing: placing disparate things close to each other. I placed my story next to theories from Cognitive Science and texts by authors who have written about their own trauma. This method of analysis found in Cognitive Literary Criticism isn't unique. It places literary criticism in parallel with the cognitive sciences to examine what happens in our brains when we read and write. Another crucial method of placing in parallel as a critical mode is found in Autotheory.

Autotheory sets autobiography next to literary theory and reads personal experience as its own text. In this work, I'm combining the methodologies from Cognitive Literary Criticism and Autotheory to place my time as a military pilot next to

other writers while holding both in parallel with the psychology and neuroscience of trauma. In many ways, this parallel rather than hierarchical way of knowing is how traumatic memory works. In trauma, the past isn't the past and the future isn't the future. The past intrudes into the present and disrupts the possibility of the future. A traumatic memory shows up in flashes and fragments. It is everything, all at once.

Within this work are flashes, fragments, *intrusions*, *connections*, and *echoes*. These page long sections place disparate perspectives in parallel with little framing. In them, we see statements from psychologists, neuroscientists, and literary scholars paired with the embodied experience of combat veterans. By joining these dissimilar encounters with trauma into the same conversation, we see they are not different after all.

When I was researching, I'd read about a theory or neurobiological process and sit back as another piece of the puzzle slipped into place in my story. I could look at my embodied experience and attach it to that theory or process. I discovered how trauma can disconnect the cognitive brain from sensory and hormonal input in the amygdala. The result is inexplicable anxiety and panic. I re-membered my hands shaking as I walked through San Francisco after returning from the Middle East. My cognitive mind knew the American city was safe. My unconscious mind read danger in its foreignness. My body was stuck in the middle, disconnected and dismembered from the parts of my mind that couldn't talk to each other.

I see such embodied experience as an additional source. I put that source in conversation with theories from the cognitive sciences and literary texts. Such a parallel way of knowing uncovers intersections. This method allows me to place Kurt Vonnegut's

laughter as a response to the firebombing of Dresden next to my flights above Iraq. It lets me situate both next to a theory from neuroscience that offers an explanation for such a response. The method lets me share how Tolkien and other WWI authors felt separated from those at home and center my time rotating between war and home every sixty days. Autotheory encourages me to insert myself into *this* introduction to think about how Vonnegut began to insert himself in the forwards to his own work until he developed the literacy to write *Slaughterhouse-Five*. This parallel way of knowing offers a critical mode that leads to greater insight than each individual approach found in Literary Criticism or Cognitive Science. As analyzing illuminates in one-way, embodying illuminates in another. Placing the personal alongside the critical and the scientific is the best way to understand how writing can be an integrative methodology for trauma.

In Chapter Two: “Tools of the Trade,” I construct a lens at the intersection of writing studies, neuroscience, and psychology to link narrative tools to neurological function and psychological principles. I explain the normal memory process, how that process becomes disrupted in trauma, and point to methods for integrating such trauma. Taking cues from a clinical method in the cognitive sciences, I craft the theory that the act of writing a story mimics a critical brain function impacted by stress. Because the normal integrative memory process is changed by trauma, in certain conditions, writing can act on the disordered context function of the hippocampus in a similar way to how external dialysis can replicate a disrupted internal process. Within Chapter Two are sections of *Her Name is Like Cairn*, the story that began my personal journey of

integration. Where the critical sections explain what is happening in the brain and body around trauma, the creative sections show how it might feel.

Chapter Three: “Something Breaks” analyzes War Literature to highlight the value of the genre in exploring trauma. Explicating narrative method common to diverse perspectives and time periods can connect those methodologies to cognate research into trauma theory and create a broader understanding of trauma regardless of origin. As we look at writers of War Literature, we will discover how their methods served as points of entry to engage with their time at war and how those same methods might help us access the space of our trauma. Borrowing technique from selected War Literature authors, I tell a compendium of my own war stories, *High School Kids*, by using some of the narrative tools I’ve analyzed. My approach in this chapter becomes the critical method of knowing by doing. Writing with the same tools as another leads to an intimate knowledge of how and why such methods were used.

I link the writing of J.R.R. Tolkien to his time as a signal officer in WWI through the letters to his son in Chapter Four: “Things Deepest Felt.” Tolkien began his first significant foray into his legendarium while in the hospital recovering from the Battle of the Somme. In this text, *The Fall of Gondolin*, Tolkien places imagery from WWI into the surreal to communicate his confrontation with the horrors of trench warfare. Building off the narrative techniques identified in Chapter Three, I’ll track Tolkien’s use of the surreal to create the distance and safety necessary to access his time in WWI. Exploring Tolkien’s education and training, I’ll point to how Tolkien used the literary methods most easily accessible to him as entry points to engage with the things he felt the deepest. I’ll

illustrate how Tolkien was able to communicate his biggest ideas via the written word to his work on the Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon*. I'll connect the psychological principle of safety to Tolkien's inclusion of WWI battlefield imagery in the sections of *The Lord of the Rings* he mailed in serial to his son, who was flying for the RAF in WWII. I'll respond in kind to Tolkien's correspondence in *Letters in the Sky*. Finally, I'll build off Tolkien's method of the safety found in shared knowledge to perform archival work on a decade of my writing across years and war zones in *Jax and Jarn, Brothers at War*.

Building off of Tolkien's use of the surreal to create the safety to write about the traumatic, I'll track Kurt Vonnegut's narrative development in Chapter Five: "The Way it Goes." In this chapter, I'll introduce the psychological concept of learned helplessness to show how a lack of control is a key factor in an event encoding as traumatic and how writing might serve as a methodology to increase control of past, uncontrollable events. As a prelude to Vonnegut, I'll place appraisal theory in parallel with the archival work of my embodied experience in *Hunter's Safety*. After our grounding in psychology and neuroscience, we'll read Vonnegut's oeuvre as a literacy narrative where he developed the words for his time as a POW in WWII. The cognitive sciences call such a method of broadly researching an individual's life over years a "case study." I call it looking at *The words. Or holes. Or both*. I'll read Vonnegut's novels leading up to *Slaughterhouse-Five* as the development of narrative techniques such as humor, genre, distance, agency, and self insertion. Then, I'll read *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a case study in traumatic memory. To introduce the brain/body connection and how the cognitive mind can be separated

from sensory and emotional input, I'll borrow from Vonnegut's method to tell a series of airplane emergencies in *Jinx and the no good, very bad day*.

Reading Vonnegut's oeuvre as a literacy narrative allows for Chapter Six: "A Learned Skill?" This chapter will examine both writers and non-writers, veterans and victims to compare the methods authors from different backgrounds employ. I'll track the amount of formal training with the common narrative techniques of each writer to reveal the low importance of "skill" when integrating trauma through writing. To track my own literacy development, I'll include *Reflections* on each of the creative sections of this work where I share my thoughts and embodied experience using the methods we've explored in the critical sections. I'll end the chapter with a surreal novella, *Alight*, which borrows from Tolkien's method of the mythic to tell the story of a man confronting his own metaphorical darkness.

Chapter Seven "Writing the Impossible" concludes this work by offering a path towards the future. In this chapter, I take my personal experience, theories from the cognitive sciences, and the analysis of selected authors to identify broad writing strategies that encourage individuals in the development of their own literacy around significant events. If the previous chapters laid the foundation of writing as an integrative methodology for trauma, this conclusion guides the first steps on that path.

The words. Or holes. Or both. places Literary Criticism in parallel with Autotheory, Cognitive Science, and one more parallel: *you*. The neuroscience of literature shows us that reading and writing are a joint construction. What begins in the mind of the writer comes to completion in the mind of the reader. I would invite you to join the

journey through the pages of this work. I would encourage you to place yourself next to these words and see if anything resonates. If a theory, method, mode, or text sparks something in you, take notice and maybe write it down. Because, as we will discover together, writing does a *thing*.

CHAPTER TWO

When we understand the holes, we can find the words.

As Ellenberg tells it in *How Not to Be Wrong: The Power of Mathematical Thinking*, during WWII, the Statistical Research Group used mathematics to solve problems for the Allies. The US Army Air Corps asked the group to help their strategic bombers survive Axis antiaircraft fire. The Air Corps brought data showing the spread of flak impacts on surviving airplanes and asked the group how much armor they should put on the greatest concentration of holes. The chief mathematician, Abraham Wald, told them their entire approach to the problem was wrong. The correct approach was to discover *why* some airplanes survived and others didn't.

The data the Air Corps brought was incomplete. They were missing the spread of holes on the airplanes that *didn't* return to base. The airplanes that were hit and survived didn't need armor. The armor needed to go where the holes *weren't*; the airplanes hit in those places didn't make it back. To increase the survivability of Allied bombers, they needed to understand the holes.

echoes.

From David Wood's *What Have We Done: The Moral Injury of Our Longest Wars* (8-9).

“It was 2006, a soft May evening in Iraq...

The symbolic cleansing of warriors after battle was an ancient ritual familiar to the Greeks, the Crusaders, Native Americans, and many others...Inside the small chapel, soldiers sat hunched on white plastic chairs, scrawling on the three-by-five index cards the chaplain had passed around. He had asked them to jot down a few words about their twelve months in combat, now coming to an end. When they were done, the chaplain had told them to bring the cards forward and place them in the baptismal font...one by one the soldiers approached, dropping in one, two, even three cards.

It had been a hard time for them all. The fighting there, just outside Falluja, had been brutal. Sniper shots and bomb explosions ripped through their ranks. Suicide bombers blasted their convoys, and rockets and mortars rained down on their camp, once spraying the stone-block chapel itself with shrapnel. Fifteen of their own soldiers, their closest friends, had gone home in flag-draped coffins. Many more were wounded, in body and spirit. They had fought back, killing or capturing when they could. Local civilians, women and children, had died in front of them by errant or careless gunshots or blast fragments. The soldiers had witnessed inexplicable hatreds among Iraqis: prisoners and innocents of the wrong sect tortured by insurgents and shot or beheaded, their gruesome remains left for the dogs.

None of it fit with the prior life experiences of this Pennsylvania National Guard battalion, men and women from pleasant, uneventful smalltown and suburban American life. They were still reeling from the recent deaths of five friends, killed when a convoy took a wrong turn and a Humvee rolled over a makeshift bomb, bursting into flames. The turret gunner was killed instantly, and the other soldiers tumbled out on fire, their dying screams seared into the souls of the living.

At the chaplain's request, the soldiers committed what they could of this to paper. Write down what you want to leave behind, he had told them in his soothing, sonorous voice. Things you have done or left undone... things you have seen. They wrote fast, words of sorrow and anger, regret, shame, guilt, grief. Words inadequate, perhaps, but still too poisonous to carry home. Write down, the chaplain said, what is troubling you.

As the soldiers stood, he struck a match. The pile of cards caught and flared. Wisps of smoke and red embers rose, and they watched in silence until it was all gone, and then they walked out into the night.”

The History of Writing as Therapy

“Narratives are the way in which individuals linguistically express their personal memories. Remembering the personal past is not a simple recollection of facts and observations. Rather, persons turn episodes in time into subjective, meaningful experiences. These memories shape self-identity, guide future behavior, and connect individuals to others” (Graci and Fivush 489).

The idea that writing does a thing as it relates to trauma isn't new. The use of writing as a therapeutic intervention was pioneered by Dr. Benjamin Rush in the 1800s. Often considered the father of American psychiatry, Rush wrote the first systemic textbook on mental diseases in America and published it in 1812. As Fred McKinney explains, Rush had his patients write down an account of their symptoms and realized they felt better for the writing itself (184). It wasn't until 1986 that the first documented study of the benefits of writing about trauma for long term mental health occurred at the University of Texas by psychologists James Pennebaker and Sandra Beall. Described in their 1986 article, Pennebaker and Beall asked the forty-six students in Pennebaker's introductory psychology class to write about a stressful or traumatic personal experience for fifteen minutes on four consecutive days. Dividing their class into three groups, Pennebaker and Beall asked the first group to write about their current lives, the second to write about the details of the traumatic event, and the third to write about the facts of the event, their feelings and emotions about it, and what impact the event had on their lives. While the undergraduates writing about trauma experienced higher blood pressure and negative moods immediately following their writing sessions, the subjects who wrote about the facts and emotions of their trauma had a fifty percent reduction in health center visits six months later. This preliminary study was based on the cathartic method

developed by Sigmund Freud's colleague Josef Breuer and published in their 1895 work *Studies on Hysteria*. Pennebaker and Beall's study paved the way for the next thirty years of research into narrative writing as a therapy for trauma. Since 1986, psychologists have conducted hundreds of studies on writing as a therapeutic intervention. Researchers have looked back at all these studies in recent meta-analysis to discover the efficacy of writing as therapy. I've summarized a few below:

A 2013 meta-analysis conducted by Arnold Van Emmerik et al., looked at six studies of 633 participants where half of those participants were assigned to narrative writing therapy. He found that writing therapy resulted in significant and substantial reductions of both Post Traumatic Stress and depressive symptoms and that the efficacy of narrative writing was robust across all studies.

In 2015, Denise Sloan, the Associate Director of Education for the National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), conducted a meta-analysis on different methodologies of narrative writing. In that analysis, she examines several specific narrative writing protocols and reviews the evidence of their effectiveness. The three therapeutic writing practices analyzed were structured writing, expressive writing, and narrative exposure therapy.

By examining several studies of each writing protocol for patients diagnosed with PTSD, Sloan proves that each writing therapy is effective for treating PTSD compared to a patient who has not received any therapy.

In their 2018 meta-analysis, Matthew Graci and Robyn Fivush analyzed 146 studies and found writing supports “positive effects on both psychological and physical health as a result of engaging in expressive writing” (489).

In another 2018 meta-analysis, Maren Reinhold et al. discuss how hundreds of controlled studies have been published that address the question of whether writing is beneficial for mental and physical health. Because writing as a therapy varies in effect for different populations, Reinhold et al. focused their meta-analysis the specific population of veterans with PTSD. Reinhold et al. conclude that certain writing methodologies can be effective tools for integrating traumatic experience.

Within these meta-analyses, there is significant variance on the writing protocols prescribed by therapists. In a 2018 continuation of her 2015 research, Sloan notes that the specific writing methodology is especially important to each individual study because of

how different protocols can create a different experience for the patient. Many of the studies examined are not consistent in number of sessions, length of session, and instructions for the writing itself—focusing on emotions, the truth of the event, placing the event within a larger autobiographical narrative, or repeatedly writing about the same event. Regardless of method, all of the studies agree that writing is effective as a therapeutic intervention for trauma. As summarized by Dr. Bessel van der Kolk in *The Body Keeps the Score*, experiments on writing from around the world with subjects differing in culture, gender, and age were universal in their conclusion of how “writing about upsetting events improves physical and mental health” (259). The US Department of Veteran’s Affairs has taken notice of the efficacy of writing as an intervention for trauma. In 2017, Written Exposure Therapy was included in the VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guidelines for the Management of PTSD. Since then, the one open trial found that subjects “displayed a significant reduction of PTSD symptoms and only 5% dropped out” (Sloan 2). Currently, Sloan, is conducting a four-year study on the specific efficacy of Written Exposure Therapy as compared to other treatments for PTSD.

If the history of writing as an integrative methodology for trauma shows us that writing does a thing in relation to trauma, neuroscience can show us how and why, while analyses of the methods of writers who have been exposed to significant events can point us towards optimized strategies for writing about trauma.

echoes.

What is trauma?

If one hundred people see combat, fifteen to twenty get PTSD.

If one hundred people jump off the same five-foot ledge onto concrete, all will have a different result. Some might have no ill effect, others might be sore, others sprain an ankle, and a few might break a bone. The result depends on the individual's biology, medical history, age, genetics, and many other factors.

If two soldiers return fire at a fourteen-year-old insurgent, one might not be changed by the insurgent's death. The other, who has a fourteen-year-old brother, might forever see the two faces mix in his memory.

What is trauma?

Defining Trauma

In 2015, Hymie Anisman estimated that 50-70% of those living in Western countries have experienced traumatic stressors, with 10% of the population experiencing trauma induced PTSD. While prevalent in all demographics, trauma occurs at a much higher concentration among military members who have been in combat. As noted by David Wood in *What Have We Done*, a 2013 analysis by the Armed Forces Health Surveillance Center found “the most frequent diagnosis for patients medically evacuated from Afghanistan for treatment between 2001 and 2012 was not traumatic amputation or blast injury but ‘adjustment reaction,’ a medical diagnostic code that includes anxiety, depression, and acute stress” (61). Trauma is relatively easy to identify but notoriously difficult to define. Is trauma the result of feeling intense fear, terror, or helplessness? Is trauma the result of exposure to possible death directly or indirectly?

After more than a decade of working with combat veterans coming back from war with “trauma,” Dr. Harold Kudler, a psychiatrist and chief mental health consultant at the VA concluded that he and his compatriots “do not know what trauma is” (Wood 74). They had been looking for trauma’s *cause* and concluded that trauma cannot be pinpointed to a universal cause. Multiple people can be exposed to the same “traumatic cause” but only a few will be changed. As it turns out, the cause of trauma doesn’t really matter when considering therapeutic interventions. Trauma is not a cause but a *result*.

Trauma is an effect.

Trauma is not *what happens* to a person.

Trauma is how what happens *changes* a person.

After getting to know his future wife Jen, Special Forces Operator Tom Satterly discovered they both had similar effects of trauma despite the disparity between their causes. In Satterly's memoir *All Secure*, he states "it doesn't matter how you get PTSD, when you've got it, you've got it. I always tell people that, if you broke your arm in Iraq or Iowa what does it matter? It's still a broken arm that needs to heal. She didn't know the hell of war, and I could never understand the trauma of rape" (299-300). Through his embodied experience, Satterly has reached the same conclusion as neuroscientists. In *The Biopsychology of Trauma and Memory*, Payne et al. push against the idea that trauma is a "static thing" but rather "dynamic processes associated with various physical and psychological responses that can differ in magnitude and expression" (78) which disturb an individual's homeostasis (79). Trauma is a result. When we stop looking for the cause of trauma, we can begin to understand the path towards integration.

One place to start is to change the story of the clinical diagnosis for "trauma:" PTSD.

I don't like the term PTSD. I don't like the story it tells. "PTSD" says you in particular are screwed up. There is something wrong with *you*. Everyone *else* who watches their friends die or gets shot or beat up or assaulted or whatever is ok, but not you, you couldn't handle it. *You* are not normal.

Let's write a different story.

Let's start by changing the words.

Post – **After**

Traumatic – **Significant**

Stress – **Event**

Disorder – **Change**

Or, putting it together: Change After a Significant Event (CASE).

That makes sense. That is what should happen. You *should* change after a significant event. If you sprain your ankle, you don't have Post Traumatic Fall Disorder, you have a sprained ankle. When you try to walk on it, your body flinches in pain until it is healed. Sometimes the ankle needs help to heal. It might need a cast or other support to keep the joint safe until it recovers enough strength to hold its weight. The flinching in pain isn't intentional or even controllable, it is the body's normal, natural reaction to prevent additional injury to the damaged area.

The same is true for the body's reaction to past trauma. In "Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self," Susan Brison describes her life following a sexual assault as "my hypervigilance, heightened startle response, insomnia, and other PTSD symptoms were not psychological, and no more under my control than were my heart rate and blood pressure" (42). Trauma acts as a stimulus that overwhelms neural functioning and typically presents as a cluster of symptoms including intrusive thoughts, avoidance, numbing, nightmares, arousal, irritability, and insomnia. Before we explore these symptoms and the way trauma changes the brain, it helps to track the story of the diagnostic nomenclature around trauma.

The Story of PTSD

After the Vietnam War, a common set of symptoms among veterans began to gain cultural awareness. In 1980, the American Psychological Association adopted the term PTSD to describe those symptoms. This official classification led psychologists to study ancient texts and look for descriptions of similar symptoms. Hymie Anisman argues one of the first accounts of PTSD is found in Herodotus' written accounts of the Greco-Persian Wars in 484-425 BCE. Walid Khalid Abdul-Hamid and James Hughes find similar documented cases of PTSD in other Greek writing and trace the first account of PTSD to Mesopotamian texts during the Assyrian dynasty in 1300-609 BCE. Marc-Antoine Crocq and Louis Crocq look to even older texts and find descriptions of soldiers with PTSD-like symptoms in the *Old Testament* of the Christian Bible and also *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. In *Achilles in Vietnam*, Jonathan Shay, a US Department of Defense Veterans Affairs psychiatrist, recognized that his patients suffered the same symptoms in Vietnam that could be found in Homer's *Iliad*. While researchers have tracked evidence of PTSD in Hippocrates, Lucretius, the Hundred Years' War, Shakespeare, the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, accounts of PTSD were relatively limited until the early 20th century. During and after WWI, many accounts of PTSD occur under the nomenclature of shell-shock or battle fatigue. Significantly, the trauma experienced by WWI soldiers was often attributed to a weakness or shortcoming of the individual. This myth persists today.

The story of the term **PTSD** is exquisitely tracked by Tom Roston in *The Writer's Crusade*. I've compressed it below.

The modern description of war trauma can be traced to the original meaning of the word **nostalgia**, originated in 1688 by Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer to describe soldiers with a longing to return home from war. *Nostris* comes from the Greek *homecoming* and *algos* from *pain*.

In the Napoleonic Wars, French soldiers who were terrified of the sound of artillery were said to have *vent du boulet* or **cannonball wind** syndrome.

In the American Civil War, military doctor Jacob Mendez Da Costa invented the term **irritable heart** to describe a common set of symptoms of Union soldiers such as breathlessness, heart palpitations, headaches, and difficulty sleeping.

In 1915, the term **shell-shock** was coined to describe the incapacitating effect of soldiers under artillery barrage. What confused doctors was how soldiers away from the concussive blast of shells developed the same symptoms as those nearby. The common symptoms included: trembling,

headaches, tinnitus, confusion, loss of memory, and sleep disorders.

In 1921 Sigmund Freud wrote the introduction to Sandor Ferenczi and Karl Abraham's study on trauma *Psychoanalysis and the War Neuroses* using the term **war neuroses** to describe common psychiatric symptoms of WWI soldiers.

In 1943, military psychologists Roy Grinker and John Spiegel introduced psychotherapeutic treatment for airmen. They administered sodium pentothal to introduce a dream state and encouraged their patients to reexperience their trauma in this safe space to give them control of their traumatic memories. They changed the story about breakdowns being a personal weakness and thought it better to ask "why the soldier does *not* succumb to anxiety, rather than why he does" (90). They believed *every* soldier had his breaking point, in their estimate it was between 100 and 365 days of combat.

In 1945, **war neuroses** was renamed **combat fatigue** or **battle fatigue**.

In 1950, 250 out of 1000 American soldiers in the Korean War were labeled as neuropsychiatric casualties. Military psychologists began to call this war trauma a **gross stress reaction**, which was added to the American Psychiatric Association's first manual of mental disorders.

In 1970, the US Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs convened a hearing to examine the psychological predicament of the Vietnam Veteran. Psychiatrist Robert Lifton testified to a **psychic numbing** that soldiers experienced in combat that didn't fade after returning home.

In 1972, the New York Times published an article by psychiatrist Chaim Shatan titled **Post-Vietnam Syndrome** to describe the trend of veterans unable to adapt to civilian life.

Shatan and Lifton helped create the diagnosis of **PTSD**, which was added to the third edition of the American

Psychological Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1980.

More than thirty percent of the 700,000 American troops who fought in the Persian Gulf War of 1990-1991 reported symptoms including headaches, insomnia, problems with memory, and cognitive impairment. **Gulf War Syndrome** was born.

PTSD came into wide cultural awareness as generations of American soldiers saw combat in the wake of September 11, 2001 and returned changed. There is a current push to remove the Disorder part of PTSD, and call it **Post Traumatic Stress**.

Because we are all impacted and changed by the events in our lives, I believe "trauma" is a universal human experience. **Change After Significant Event** is a more fitting story.

All of these terms generally apply to a cluster of symptoms including intrusive thoughts, avoidance, numbing, nightmares, arousal, irritability, and insomnia. Despite the cause, despite the name, trauma acts as a stimulus that overwhelms neuronal functioning,

changes many neural networks, and disrupts the normal memory process. Kurt Vonnegut puts it best in his description of the effect of being a POW during the allied firebombing of Dresden:

“I came home in 1945, started writing about it, and wrote about it, and wrote about it, and WROTE ABOUT IT. This thin book is about what it’s like to write a book about a thing like that. I couldn’t get much closer. I would head myself into my memory of it, the circuit breakers would kick out; I’d head in again, I’d back off. The book is a process of twenty years of this sort of living with Dresden and the aftermath. It’s like Heinrich Boll’s book, *Absent Without Leave*—stories about German soldiers with the war part missing. You see them leave and return, but there’s this terrible hole in the middle. That is like my memory of Dresden; actually there’s nothing there.” (qtd. in Bellamy 202-203).”

Vonnegut’s experience make sense when we consider how trauma neurologically changes the brain.

Recent developments in brain imaging systems in the last twenty years have allowed neuroscientists to theorize what happens to the brain during and after trauma. As of 1999, there were seven published studies using neuroimaging of patients with PTSD. Kolk describes these studies as laying the foundation for a modern understanding of PTSD and how it operates in the brain. Kolk describes the effect of trauma as the brain separating traumatic events from everyday consciousness and voluntary control. As we’ll see later, the memory of a traumatic event doesn’t exist in a narrative form, but instead, when accessed, occurs as a reenactment of the effect of the trauma, to include “intense emotional reactions, aggressive behavior, physical pain” (11). The memory of trauma acts like a foreign body and remains disconnected from the brain until accessed. Since those initial studies, researchers have continued to support the initial findings. In *Stress and your Health: From Vulnerability to Resilience*, Anisman discusses how the

hippocampus and the anterior cingulate cortex are diminished with individuals with PTSD; this leads to the inability of a traumatized brain to limit the reactivity of the amygdala. In plain English, the area of the brain in charge of memory, decision-making, and emotional responses becomes unregulated due to trauma. Such disruption generates severe responses from the limbic system when encountering stimuli both related and unrelated to the original event. The end result of trauma is that when a person encounters a similar stimulus and is “triggered,” they literally relive their trauma, including an identical physiological response. A soldier who has been in a firefight and is triggered by fireworks doesn’t simply remember being in the firefight, they are essentially transported back in time to that firefight. As Vonnegut might say, that soldier has become unstuck in time. To understand how that happens, it is important to have a baseline understanding of the brain and memory.

Thinking on the Brain

Because the human brain is so complex, I'll focus on the specific parts of the brain and neural networks that are impacted by trauma—primarily memory, language, and imagination. While generalizing a complex system simplifies, it also diminishes nuance. To understand the intersection of trauma and writing, I'll highlight a specific subbranch of neuroscience called neuropsychology which connects functions like reading, writing, remembering, and imagining to systems within the brain. In general, these systems are spread across brain regions and can be thought of like networks. Before we explore these networks, let's consider an overview of the brain.

Dr. Paul McLean, defines the brain as a “detecting, amplifying, and analyzing device for maintaining us in our internal and external environment” (qtd. in Kolk 13). The brain controls functions from oxygen and temperature regulation to information processing and complicated, long term decision making. The brain's purpose is to maximize an individual's chance at survival. In general, the brain changes or learns by strengthening the synaptic connections between neurons. In *Literature and the Brain*, Norman Holland states this process as: “neurons that fire together, wire together. Neurons that don't synch, don't link” (381). The brain stores information in the patterns of linkages between cells. Part of that learning is called Long Term Potential in which neurons activate (build connections). The other part of learning is called Long Term Depression, where neurons are inhibited (close connections). We can simplify this language and think of learning like turning a light switch **on** or turning it **off**.

In general, the brain can be thought of as two brains. Among other terms, these two brains can be referred to as the man brain and animal brain, or the conscious and unconscious brain. In general, the man brain is the slower, thinking, cognitive brain found in the pre-frontal cortex and the animal brain is the faster, reactionary, fight or flight brain centered around the amygdala. If we think about location, these become the forebrain and hindbrain. I conceptualize them as meeting in the middle and personally consider these “two brains” hierarchically as providing top down and bottom-up inputs that meld around the hippocampus.

The amygdala is a complex structure adjacent to the hippocampus that controls the limbic system and mediates emotional and physiological response to stimuli. In *The Memory Process: Neuroscientific and Humanistic Perspectives*, Suzanne Nalbantian describes how the amygdala and hippocampus generally operate together with internal connections that allow the amygdala “to integrate converging sensory and higher information, to process it internally within its networks, and then to generate outputs that affect behavioral and physiological responses in threatening situations” (155). In “Healing and the Brain,” Alice Brand agrees that this amygdala-hippocampus circuit “facilitates sensory integration, converting specific sensory input into feelings and behavior according to their emotional value, for example, fear that is learned through hearing” (208). In situations requiring an immediate physical response, the amygdala bypasses cognitive input and sends information “directly to the muscles and viscera for behavioral, autonomic, or humoral response, unmediated by the intellectual apparatus” (208). Practically, imagine you are walking through the forest and your senses perceive a

coiled object in shadow. Your amygdala screams “DANGER! SNAKE!” and your body, through the limbic system, is flooded with adrenaline and other hormones that prepare you to run away. A microsecond later, your cognitive mind provides context to the stimuli and says “that is just a stick, its ok” and the body begins to calm. However, you might have already taken a step away from the object before the cognitive brain can decipher the information and provide the necessary contextual data to the amygdala.

The amygdala develops before the hippocampus in childhood. If we think about how these neural networks interact with trauma, writing, and memory, it is important to note that our first memories tend to coincide with hippocampal development. As the ability to remember develops, so does our ability to imagine. Memory and imaginative play tend to develop jointly because, as we’ll explore in depth later, both memory and imagination operate on the same neural networks. Remembering is largely an act of imagining the past. Remembering the past helps us imagine the future. All of these systems are disrupted by trauma. Trauma can lead to these neural networks operating like a child whose amygdala is hyperactive and whose hippocampus hasn’t fully matured. In a sense, trauma can bring us back to our most vulnerable stages of life.

intrusions.

At an optometry appointment, I sat in the waiting area next to a twenty-seven-year-old Green Beret who needed to see a doctor because his eyes kept flashing: a symptom of traumatic brain injury from being repeatedly blown up. He was in the process of a medical retirement after serving for ten years. Within ten minutes he started telling me how sometimes when he is driving, he thinks he sees an IED and swerves. Sometimes men with guns appear sitting next to him but when he looks at them, no one is there. He tells me he won't go to mental health because he isn't a pussy.

Our separate appointments get called and we shake hands and part before I can tell him *why* that is happening to him. Before I can tell him how trauma changes our brains and how we can re-member. Before I can explain why trauma can be a survival response and why the same reaction that can save your life in some circumstances can disrupt it in others.

I wonder what the Green Beret feels. I wonder what she feels. I wonder if it's like a story. I think of Ernest Hemingway's *Big Two-Hearted River*.

I think of her. *Two Hart River*. Her name is like cairn

Re-membering Trauma

We are what we remember.

When we lose our memory, we lose who we are.

We are dis-membered.

To get back, we have to remember.

We have to re-member.

In *The Memory Process*, Suzanne Nalbantian explores the connection between the cognitive sciences and literary studies in the field of human memory. She argues how “modern autobiographical literature of the twentieth century can be used virtually as a laboratory for the study of the encoding, storage, and retrieval of episodic memory... [literature] provides evidence of the subjective experiences that some present-day neuroscientists are seeking to correlate with objective experimental findings” (255-256). The intersection of these disparate fields illuminates how memory works and how trauma disrupts it.

Normal memory consists of several different neural systems which interact to produce our subjective sense of remembering. The consensus among neuroscientists is that there are two broad classifications of memory: explicit and implicit. Payne et al. define explicit memory as the “memories of events in our lives and the knowledge of the world that we obtain from those events” and implicit memory as “memories for the skills, procedures, and habits we acquire through experience” (77). Within explicit memory are the categories of episodic and semantic memory. Episodic memory incorporates the specific context of an event, including time and place. Semantic memory can be

considered as knowledge without context. Episodic and semantic memory can be likened to the narrative techniques of scene and summary. Episodic memory is the memory function most disrupted by trauma.

What happens when I remember? Do I access it like a computer or play it like a movie in my mind? Do I take the gist of what happened in the past and construct it based on my present self so every time I remember, I reconstruct. Can I trust what I remember? Can I change what I remember?

In 1932, psychologist F. C. Bartlett proposed the theory that episodic memory was a constructed process in his book *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology*. Since then, the concept of memory as constructed rather than accessed has been consistently supported by research into the cognitive and neural basis of memory. In “Constructive Memory: Past and Future,” Daniel Schacter describes how eyewitness accounts of a 2005 shooting of an innocent man by London police varied wildly, even in basic facts. In the first one hundred cases of individuals exonerated by DNA evidence, seventy five percent of those had been convicted by eyewitness testimony. Based on controlled studies and observations by psychologists, Schacter states the current prevailing theory of episodic memory as “when we remember, we piece together fragments of stored information under the influence of our current knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs” (8). Memory as a constructed rather than accessed process has called into question the validity of both eyewitness testimony and the veracity of autobiographical narrative.

Within the brain, the hippocampus plays a key role in explicit memory. According to Nalbantian, the hippocampus receives “especially extensive input from wide areas of the brain” (10). The hippocampus takes input from our senses (what we perceive) the limbic system (how we feel) and contextualizes it into an episode with a beginning and an end. The hippocampus integrates these different types of input and stores them as a unique memory. As Nalbantian explains, when the hippocampus is damaged, episodic memories are impaired resulting in specific or complete amnesia while procedural memories are not affected (15). If someone’s hippocampus is damaged, they might lose the memory of a parent teaching them to ride a bike but still “remember” how to ride a bike. The normal context generating function of the hippocampus for episodic memory is disrupted in trauma.

As a simplified explanation of how this all works, in trauma, stress hormones cause sensory input to bypass the context generating function of the hippocampus and encode information directly into isolated neural networks. As Marian MacCurdy argues in “From Trauma to Writing,” the images and emotions of trauma “cannot be retrieved independent of each other” (164). Traumatic memory becomes image and emotion without context which resembles “the memory of young children whose amygdala has developed before the hippocampus” (166). The end result of the disruption of trauma is a system of disconnected emotional, sensory, and perceptual fragments rather than an organized narrative with a beginning and end. When unintegrated, fragmented sensory information from traumatic experience is accessed, the amygdala activates the limbic

system in the same manner as during the original trauma. The individual physiologically “relives” their trauma in a process defined as “triggering.”

Kolk names this process dissociation, where the traumatic event creates such a strong input that it overwhelms the brain’s normal memory process and “is split off and fragmented, so that the emotions, sounds, images, thoughts, and physical sensations related to the trauma take on a life of their own. The sensory fragments of memory intrude into the present, where they are literally relived” (79). Normally, when we remember something, the details fade over time and the emotions diminish in their potency. A traumatic memory lingers, intact and exquisitely detailed. In a traumatic memory, an individual’s disordered mind sends signals to their endocrine system as if the event were occurring NOW. Kolk provides a summary of the eternity of traumatic memory in his overview of the Grant Study of Adult Development. The study followed two hundred male Harvard students from 1939-44 to the present. The men were interviewed about their time in war in 1945/1946 and again in 1989/1990. After forty-five years, the majority told very different stories. For most, the passage of time had removed the intense horror of their accounts. For those who had subsequently developed PTSD, their memories were intact after all that time (193). Unless integrated, traumatic memory lingers.

Traumatic memories are not memories, they are relived experiences where a person has the same physiological responses as the original event. It can feel like time travel where a person doesn’t “remember” but is transported into the past. The past and the present are blurred as a person relives the trauma. The persistence of traumatic

memory presents in many individuals as symptoms of numbness to normal life stimuli. Brison describes the effect of trauma as an obliteration of “one’s former emotional repertoire, leaving one with only a kind of counterfactual, propositional knowledge of emotions” (43). The clinical result, according to Kolk, is an “emotional numbing, detachment, and emotional blunting...associated with an inability to experience joy and pleasure and with a general withdrawal from engagement with life” (9). For someone who survives trauma, they might be a shadow of their former self, only able to robotically pass through each day’s activity. They might feel nothing, regardless of their experience. Their ability to respond emotionally is degraded. To protect itself, the brain has dis-membered the trauma and dissociates it from both voluntary control and normal consciousness. The memory remains separated from normal episodic memory, or, the narrative of an individual’s life. The memories of trauma tend not to return as a story of what happened, rather they are unexpectedly re-enacted. Traumatic memories tend to have few narrative elements. Such a response to a significant event resists integration with the story of a life and disrupts identity because who we are is formed largely out of that story.

What has made the memories traumatic, according to Kolk, is the sensory and emotional input signals are so overwhelming that there is a “failure of the central nervous system to synthesize the sensations related to the traumatic memory into an integrated semantic memory” (16). When confronted by an overwhelming experience, the brain’s natural ability to integrate an event with the narrative flow of life breaks down. This leads to the events being dis-membered. In trauma, there is a breakdown of one’s temporal

being. As Primo Levi notes in *The Drowned and the Saved*, survivors of Auschwitz describe how they had “not only forgotten our country and our culture, but also our family, our past, the future we had imagined for ourselves” (75). As Brison puts it, the result of the persistence of traumatic memory is that “trauma undoes the self by breaking the ongoing narrative, severing the connections among remembered past, lived present, and anticipated future” (41). The trauma hides in the brain, a lingering time traveler that waits for the spark to light a past fire into the present.

I think of a camera sensor that has seen such a great flash
that it can no longer distinguish between day and night. All
is night.

I think of holes.

Trauma dismembers. To integrate trauma, we must re-
member. We must weave the past anew within the present.
We must put together, join, construct an integrated narrative
of our lives.

I think of words.

intrusions.

But what if she lost someone and the only way to see her again was to travel to the past, to light the fire again and feel its heat and pain. To *feel* for a moment, light. While flames burn and destroy, they also bring light. It's what fires do.

What Fires Do

Her name is like cairn.

Dis-member

Dis-connect

I don't

smoke

have

Why do my hands

burn

words

iron

tracer

shake?

All

Can't

blood

~~ok~~

think

Inexplicable anxiety.

Panic attacks.

I don't feel anything anymore.

Traumatic memory is weird. One of its hallmark symptoms is heightened emotional responses during triggering events. Another is the exact opposite: emotional blunting and feelings of numbness. Other effects of trauma are free floating anxiety and generalized feelings of anger, fear, or uneasiness. The similarity between the disparate

symptom sets is emotional dysregulation. One theory explored by Payne et al., is that trauma disconnects the top down and bottom-up systems in the brain.

Payne et al. argue that traumatic stress disrupts our cognitive mind in the Pre-Frontal Cortex. The physiological response to stress can lead to an impairment of the “cognitive but not emotional aspects of memory” (97) and “stress disconnects normal chains of communication among normally interacting hippocampal, amygdala, and cortical networks” (98). This makes sense because “disruption of the PFC should disrupt the subjective experience of emotionality” which leads to cognitive “emotional flattening with enhanced reactivity in the behavioral and physiological constellations” (102). If trauma disrupts the cognitive mind from the normal pathway to the amygdala, then the cognitive portion of emotion is cut off but the physiological symptoms still remain.

In trauma, the input signals from the bottom-up part of the brain are so strong that the connections in the mind “sever.” If the effect progresses by either repeated exposure to a lesser trauma or a singular, overwhelming trauma, the two parts of the brain can become completely disconnected. Thinking back to how humans learn, there isn’t a literal severing of neurons in the process of “disconnection.” Rather, the light switch has learned to turn off. In many cases of trauma, normal inputs cannot travel on the normal pathways to the cognitive brain while the amygdala networks still respond resulting in the body manifesting physiological symptoms. Your body is manifesting stress hormones while your cognitive brain cannot find the reason for the physiological responses. We call this experience something like: inexplicable panic attacks, general anxiety, or “why are

my hands shaking in San Francisco after coming back from the Middle East?”

Psychologists such as Freud name it the isolation of affect. Maybe we can call it holes.

How we

do

restore

connections

How

do we re-member?

Words?

Re-membering, an Imaginative Act

Why is there a compulsion for soldiers to return to the battlefield years later? Why do we revisit the location of a car accident? Why do we go back to the places of pain? Why do we return?

Does returning in different circumstances change our memory? Do we overlay the past traumatic place with the present safe place and that reduces the hurt of the past place?

Do we return to re-member?

Can we return in our imaginations?

As we've seen in Schacter's work, the same areas of the brain are activated when remembering the past and imagining the future. The recall of memories is not a perfect replaying of a past event in the movie player of our minds. Remembering is where our present self reconstructs our past self based on the gist of an event. Memory is an act of imagination. Payne et al. find that "emotion enhances episodic memory but in a way often limited to the central and thematic features of such experiences" (107). People tend to remember the "gist" of an event. When they actively recall that memory, their brain fills in the periphery details in a process called "narrative smoothing." As Jim Davies describes in *Imagination: The Science of Your Mind's Greatest Power*, narrative smoothing is an imaginative act where the gist of what happened is "reconstituted and filled in with information from other memories" (49). We can consider the act of remembering as similar to how writers imaginatively craft a story, whether real or fictive.

Describing the writing process for her memoir of domestic abuse, *In the Dream House*, Carmen Machado illustrates how writing autobiographical narrative can mimic the neuroscientific process of memory. For her, memoir is “an act of resurrection. Memoirists recreate the past, reconstruct dialog...they braid the clays of memory and essay and fact and perception together...They manipulate time; resuscitate the dead. They put themselves and others into necessary context” (14-15). By returning to the scene of past trauma in her memory/imagination, Machado is able to integrate years of abuse into the narrative flow of her life. She places fragments of highly emotive, sensory input into context. In the act of re-membering, Machado finds safety and distance from what happened and reduces the emotional impact of past significant events.

When we “return” to a past event in our memory, we can influence our emotional response. One method is the narrative technique of point of view. Neurologically, we can change the point of view when we remember. Davies discovered that in memory, and in writing, “the first-person point of view makes people focus on sensory qualities...the third person is a visual stepping back, but it’s also a metaphorical stepping back—people picturing scenes in this way are more reflective on the meaning of what they’re doing, and how it fits into their lives in general” (100). The first person also changes the emotional resonance of a memory. People typically remember emotional events in the first person. Forcing those memories into the third person can lessen the potency of a recalled episode. When writing autobiographical narrative, a different point of view changes the immediacy of the writer’s engagement with their memory. In her work with writing as a therapeutic intervention for trauma, Sloan found that “writing about

unpleasant life events using a distanced rather than an immersed perspective facilitates adaptive self-reflection and meaning making” (2). Not only is point of view a narrative tool, it is also a psychological principle that increases access to meaning making functions of autobiographical narrative.

In his work with Vietnam Veterans, medical doctor and clinical psychologist Jonathan Shay reasons that “when a survivor creates a fully realized narrative that brings together the shattered knowledge of what happened, the emotions that were aroused by the meanings of the events, and the bodily sensations that the physical events created, the survivor pieces back together the fragmentation of consciousness that trauma has caused” (188). Such a stitching together is integrative and reduces the triggering effect of past trauma. As a significant event is re-membered, it no longer dis-members. When we access trauma in a safe space and contextualize it in a coherent narrative, we form a network of cognitive, affective, and sensory memories that help us understand it. One way to describe this integrative process is developing a literacy narrative. It is a generative process to create the methodology to access past trauma and contextualize it via language.

Creating a literacy to fill the holes left by trauma is an extremely difficult process. Because of the way trauma disrupts the normal episodic memory process, it can be impossible to weave together an objectively true autobiographical narrative. Thinking through her own trauma in *The Art and Science of Trauma and the Autobiographical*, literary scholar Meg Jenson found when her therapists challenged her on the veracity of her narrative of childhood abuse, she couldn’t create a consistent timeline of events.

When her therapists focused on the “who, what, when, and where of what happened, all that mattered to me was the question that could not be answered. The ‘why’” (3). To understand the holes, Jenson turned away from memoir to fiction. Being able to concentrate on the subjective truth of what abuse felt like, she “negotiated a way of raising my dangerous memories from the deep. I invented a character (Bernadette) with a past like my own and imagined what would happen to her in the future. I wrote this story as fiction rather than fact because (as my therapy had shown) my grasp of the facts was unreliable” (3). Such an understanding allows an individual to potentially discover meaning in their trauma. Discovering meaning can lead towards integration.

In *Man’s Search for Meaning*, psychologist and Auschwitz survivor Victor Frankl describes a therapy session with a medical doctor whose wife died, leaving the man in “severe depression” (116). Rather than lecture the man, Frankl posed the question:

“‘What would have happened, Doctor, if you had died first, and your wife would have had to survive you?’

‘Oh,’ he said, ‘for her this would have been terrible; how she would have suffered!’

Whereupon I replied, ‘You see, Doctor, such a suffering has been spared her, and it was you who have spared her this suffering—to be sure, at the price that now you have to survive and mourn her.’ He said no word but shook my hand and calmly left my office. In some way, suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of a sacrifice” (116).

Frankl argues one must create meaning to find a life worth preserving in the face of trauma and the existential void. Rather than asking what the meaning of life is, Frankl poses an individual “must recognize that it is he who is asked” (113). As Frankl theorizes, we must answer for our own life where meaning varies from moment to moment and life to life. There is even meaning to be found in suffering. For the man

whose wife died, the meaning he constructed occurred at the nexus of memory and imagination. He remembered his wife, the deep knowledge of her heart he'd mined through their years together, and imagined how she would have felt if he had been the one to die first. It was this locus of memory/imagination that served as a tool to remember; to construct an imagined scenario based on past events. In a sense, the man wrote the story of what would have happened if his wife had survived him. In the creation of that story, the man understood that his suffering could serve as sacrifice. His loss now had purpose. His loss now had meaning. While nothing in his life circumstantially changed, he was profoundly different and never needed to return to therapy. By finding meaning through a construction of an imagined future, the man integrated the loss of his wife into the narrative of his life.

intrusions.

Maybe she could craft the story of what might have been.

Maybe that could help her.

Maybe she could remember

Maybe she could re-member.

Tree and Stone

Her name is like cairn.

Paved with Words

“I am my language” (Anzaldúa).

Those who have experienced trauma tend to have difficulty verbally expressing the narrative of what happened. Even if they find some language for the event, they often speak in flashes of sensory imagery or talk *about* emotions without *connecting* words to the emotions.

They can't talk about it.

They don't have the words.

It is indescribable.

When we consider the neuroscience of trauma, we can begin to understand. Trauma encodes nonverbally and becomes difficult to retrieve linguistically. When individuals speak of their trauma, they tend to describe sensory information such as images, sounds, and smells without narrative context. To integrate trauma, one must develop the literacy to speak about the unspeakable and write the impossible.

Citing experiments in 1990, 1993, 1994, and 2001, Payne et al. conclude that stress hormones created during trauma interfere with word recall and verbal-episodic memory: “Vietnam veterans, Desert Storm veterans, and victims of rape diagnosed with PTSD all have impaired verbal episodic memory in comparison to control subjects” (93). Kolk recounts early neuroscience research that placed voluntary subjects who had experienced traumatic events in a neural imaging machine and recorded their responses to neutral and traumatic scripts while recording the results. Despite intervening years, hearing the traumatic script “activated the same physiological responses” (54) that had

occurred during the original event. The most surprising finding from that early brain imaging was a common dysfunction in the left frontal lobe during trauma. This area, called “Broca’s area” is thought to be one of the speech centers of the brain and is often affected in stroke patients who lose blood supply to that region of the brain. As evidenced by those stroke patients who have difficulty with language, Kolk believes that “without a functioning Broca’s area, you cannot put your thoughts and feelings into words” (56). Trauma has the same disruptive effect. It causes dysfunction in this language center of the brain. Because of this disruption, a traumatic event literally becomes unspeakable. From her embodied experience of writing memoir, Machado states how “putting language to something for which you have no language is no easy feat” (151). The path towards repairing altered connections and integrating the fragments of traumatic memory is paved with words.

As a re-iteration of how generalizing and simplifying diminishes nuance, confining “language” to one area of the brain is disingenuous to the complex nature of neural networks. Language, reading, and writing occur across regions and hemispheres of the brain. In his summation of the brain in *Literature and the Brain*, Norman Holland concludes that “most humans deal with language primarily in the left hemisphere and non-verbal information in the right hemisphere. In infancy, our right hemispheres come online some years before the left. That is why it takes humans some years before we have memories that we can speak of” (376). Which makes sense when we consider the order of a human brain’s maturation. The amygdala develops before the hippocampus and PFC. According to Holland, generally “the left hemisphere deals with sequential and the right

with holistic information. By and large, the left hemisphere deals with logic and the right with emotion. By and large the left hemisphere generates positive emotions, and the right, negative emotions” (376). Language activates networks in both hemispheres.

In *How Literature Plays with Your Brain*, Paul Armstrong uses neural imaging to show how language and reading are “not confined to one location in the brain; rather, it brings into relation a complex assembly of visual and auditory processes that translate letters into sounds and sounds into letters and associate signs with meaning.” Included in the language process are semantic memory networks (33). What is important for us is that language, reading, and writing activate and build connections across wide areas of the brain. Armstrong reveals neuroimages showing “speakers with a command of two languages have more neuronal connections in areas of the brain associated with language use than do individuals who know only one language” (39). Involved in reading, writing, and language are areas of the brain that connect to memory, emotion, and even our muscles. Because of the array of neural networks that compose “language” in the brain, words are uniquely suited towards connecting sensory imagery into contextual narrative and integrating trauma.

connections.

“When we are experiencing literature, we turn brain systems on and off in ways that we do not in ordinary life” (Holland 334).

“I haven’t cried in years. I didn’t cry when my friends died.

Why am I crying when reading about this stupid character?”

US Green Beret

“Responding to imaginary worlds, we engage emotion systems while disengaging action systems” (Holland 328).

“Every time I rewrote a chapter, I’d cry”

US Special Forces Operator Tom Satterly, on

writing his memoir *All Secure*

“In life, emotions include impulses to act. But if we are transported in relation to a work of literature, we have turned off the relevant action systems. We therefore feel the emotions psychologically but the impulse to act is inhibited or simply not there. This is another reason we can feel real fear or disgust or anger or affection toward literary persons and situations even though (or because!) we know perfectly well that they are not “real” (Holland 348).

A Theory

Marty Seligman, told his student Angela Duckworth, “you don’t have a theory...stop reading so much and go think.” (Duckworth 9).

Duckworth, who studied why the most talented cadets at West Point failed out at a much higher rate than others, went on to develop a theory of achievement in her book *Grit*.

“A theory is an explanation. A theory takes a blizzard of facts and observations and explains, in the most basic terms, what the heck is going on. By necessity, a theory is incomplete. It oversimplifies. But in doing so, it helps us understand” (Duckworth 40).

A theory: writing replicates the context generating function of the hippocampus in episodic memory that is disrupted by trauma.

Dialysis is an external process that replicates a broken internal process. Maybe writing works like that.

Those who have survived trauma often describe a hole in their memory, an inability to imagine the future, losing who they are, and having difficulty dreaming. The brain’s hippocampus plays a role in memory, imagination, dreaming, and placing sensations, events, and emotions within the narrative flow of our lives. In 2018, Mark Logue et al. conducted meta-analyses of neuroimaging studies and began the largest PTSD neuroimaging study to date. Their meta-analyses revealed consistent findings of diminished hippocampal volume in individuals diagnosed with PTSD. Their study agreed with the meta-analyses. In conclusion, they “found evidence of lower hippocampal

volume in subjects with current PTSD” (248). Consistently over time, disruption in the hippocampus has been linked to trauma.

The hippocampus is a complex structure within the brain embedded in the temporal lobe. While the complete role of the hippocampus isn’t fully understood, Erin Wamsley describes how “recent work in the cognitive neurosciences has established that the hippocampus, in addition to being involved in the formation of memories is also part of a brain system that is involved in using memory to construct novel imagined scenarios and simulate possible future events” (1). The hippocampus is intricately connected to a number of different neural networks that are explained by neurologists Kuljeet Anand and Vikas Dhikav as having a significant role in learning, memory, imagination, spatial navigation, emotional behavior, regulation of hypothalamic functions, and particularly the encoding of short-term memory and sensory inputs into long term memory (239-240). As Anisman finds, because the hippocampus is entwined with the amygdala, together, they are likely “fundamental to the creation and maintenance of emotional memories” (182). An additional brain structure tied to the hippocampus and amygdala is the anterior cingulate cortex, which is involved in “various executive functions and decision making” (182). Significantly, the volume of the anterior cingulate cortex is “also diminished among individuals with PTSD, likely stemming from the trauma experience itself” (183). An impacted anterior cingulate cortex leads to stimuli both related and unrelated to a traumatic event causing severe responses from the entire limbic system. Thought to be composed primarily of the hypothalamus, the amygdala, the thalamus, and the hippocampus, the limbic system integrates the brain with the body and sends signals to

the endocrine system—which controls an individual’s hormonal response. In trauma, this entire system is dysregulated.

During stress, the body releases high levels of cortisol, which disrupts hippocampal function, impairing episodic and spatial memory. High levels of cortisol also facilitate amygdala functions. Payne et al. summarizes the biopsychology of trauma as:

“In the absence of an intact hippocampus-based memory system, the amygdala-based system stores emotional information unbound to the spatio-temporal context of the relevant events. This process results in a pool of emotional memories encoded without a coherent spatio-temporal frame to organize them. This pool is, essentially a population of sensory and perceptual fragments acquired during the traumatic event. By this model, traumatic events do not typically lead to a complete eradication of memory but rather to the storage of fragments lacking an organizing framework” (96).

The normal, coherent elements of a typical episodic memory are fragmented from the disruption of hippocampal contextual encoding in trauma. Writing can provide that contextual framework. If we take a cue from retired Special Forces Operator Tom Satterly and consider a firefight in Mogadishu, Somalia, we can better understand the process of how writing can be an integrative methodology for trauma. We can see my theory in action.

In a firefight, one might experience **smells** (heat-soaked sand, rotting garbage, burning fuel, cordite, the metallic tinge of blood, charred flesh), **sounds** (helicopter rotors, the whoosh of an RPG, the crack of rifle fire, the pop of grenades, the screams of the wounded), **sights** (friends bleeding out, an insurgent centered in the red dot of an M4 reticle, the flash of an explosion), **tactile feelings** (sweat slicked rubber of a grip, slipping

sand underfoot), **actions** (diving for cover, squeezing the trigger, packing a wound), and emotions (fear, anger). In a normal memory, each of these bits of sensory information would be input by its relevant neural network, sent to the hippocampus, bound into a contextualized narrative and sequenced in time and space. In a traumatic memory, each of those sensory notes bypass the hippocampus and sear into the brain to flash back when confronted by similar stimuli. If one were to write about a fire in Somalia, the narrative might include sensory imagery, actions, emotions, and an internal monologue. This narrative would be bound, contextualized, and sequenced in time and space on the page as a complete story. As this example shows, the function of composing narrative to integrate trauma closely mimics the function of the hippocampus which is bypassed during the encoding of traumatic memory. When a significant event is integrated in this way—either by the hippocampus or by writing—the trauma is connected to normal memory functions and the “reliving” when accessing fragmented sensory information is reduced.

It is important to note that “writing” in this context is specifically the act of composing autobiographical narrative and placing it onto an external medium—whether an electronic file, journal, or physical paper. It doesn’t matter if that writing is typed or handwritten. Because language can be verbal, vocally telling the story of one’s trauma can also be therapeutic. Autobiographical narrative writing does possess some unique advantages over verbal processing that make it a more effective treatment in many cases. Writing forces slowness, allowing space for the cognitive mind to create or discover words for the event. Writing is an individual act. When we speak to someone, part of our

mind takes in cues from our listener and edits our responses based on those cues. Writing allows freedom to create a literacy without an editor, which helps access trauma. Perhaps most importantly, writing holds space for the revision process. A patient can return to the record of their trauma, edit, change, add to, remove, and reconfigure a traumatic experience which drastically helps with integration: therapeutic outcome increases with repetition. In *Writing and Healing: Toward an Informed Practice*, Charles Anderson finds in his comparison of verbal and written languaging of trauma: “by writing about traumatic experiences, we discover and rediscover them, move them out of the ephemeral flow and space of talk onto the more permanent surface of the page, where they can be considered, reconsidered, left, and taken up again” (7). In writing, focusing on the thematic truth of an event while fictionalizing the details is remarkably similar to the normal episodic memory process.

Healing is finding the words

What is healing from trauma?

Healing isn't restoration.

Healing is integration.

Healing is acceptance.

Healing gives up hope for a better past.

Healing writes a better future.

Developing the literacy to access a significant event involves a shift from being the **object** of a narrative to being the **subject**, it is about gaining control. If you are driving 100 mph down a dirt road at night, it makes a difference if you are in the driver's seat or the passenger's seat. This shift towards agency is necessary in trauma that is often characterized by an individual's inability to act or to control events. Brison theorizes a way to create that shift is through a narration of memories to others which "empowers survivors to gain more control over the traces left by trauma" (40). Narrating such an experience can be difficult because of the way trauma disrupts the language center of the brain and untethers access to speech from the event. Trauma is isolated within the brain and connection to normal neural networks is changed. This process of disconnection is an injury prevention technique within the brain in a similar way to the body's response to a sprained ankle, an unconscious flinching away from putting weight on the injury to prevent further damage. Such a physical injury often requires a cast or other supportive structure that allows safe access to the injury yet prevents further damage to restore

normal function over time. This metaphor is similar to how trauma manifests within the brain.

To create a “cast,” the brain must rebuild connections to the traumatic memory in a safe way that doesn’t cause more harm. In “Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and the Nature of Trauma,” Kolk argues that based on the “apparently relative decrease in left hemisphere activation while reexperiencing the trauma suggests that it is important to help people with PTSD find a language in which they can come to understand and communicate their experience” (18-19). The goal of “healing” is for us to create a new literacy to narrate past trauma. When we find the words, the significant event becomes a part of our narrative rather than an isolated injury that reoccurs when triggered. A narrative defined in this way is simply a story placed in time, with a beginning, middle, and end. Creating such a narrative can rebuild connections that were previously severed and generate a method to integrate specific significant events into our life’s story. By crafting a beginning, middle, and end, the trauma now belongs to our integrated life narrative, rather than continuing to be isolated and damaging when triggered.

To find such a literacy, Kolk believes it crucial for individuals to “gain enough distance from their sensory imprints and trauma-related emotions so that they can observe and analyze these sensations and emotions without becoming hyperaroused or engaging in avoidance maneuvers” (18). Such a distance helps us reexperience the event without feeling helpless and gain a new understanding of the trauma. The distance isn’t the goal but the access point to the space of the trauma. As we’ve explored, due to the linkage between memory and imagination, by re-membering, those severed connections can be

rebuilt and serve to integrate trauma into a unified life narrative. As Satterly found, healing “is a process of decommissioning that muscle memory and changing it into something else and rebuilding those nerve endings in your brain and connecting different pathways” (2). When integrated, the trauma loses the power to be relived when accessed. It becomes closer to a normal, integrated episodic memory, which fades with time.

How then, do we find ways to integrate trauma? How do we develop the literacy to speak the unspeakable and write the impossible? Perhaps we can discover methods to integrate our own trauma by considering how others have done it. We can look to War Literature to discover how writers have found a way to communicate the truth of war. Their method can inform ours. Their literacies can help ours. As we explore how they wrote their impossibles, we can write ours.

We can start by looking at her.

Her name is like cairn.

Her Name is Like Cairn

I remember sitting with to a friend who survived the 2013 Boston Marathon Bombing.

She lost part of herself when the thing she'd loved for so many years turned into violence, death, and fear.

I had just returned from the Middle East.

We sat on wobbly aluminum bleachers in front of a rubberized track where we had spent many hours, miles, years, and dreams. We didn't talk. We sat and waited and watched the track sit empty. It would be forever different.

I wonder what she feels. I wonder what I feel.

I imagine it as a story. Maybe about a woman named Biern. Her name is like cairn.

I remember my friend.

I imagine Biern.

Two Hart River

What Fires Do

Tree and Stone

I re-member my friend.

Her Name is Like Cairn.

Two Hart River

Dusky air stretched under the clouds as far as she could see. The forest ended in a jagged edge of burnt timber. She left the forest without looking back. She didn't need to see the ash, smell the smoke. She knew what fires do. She walked onto the plain rolling to the smoky horizon, cut by the thin line of a dirty creek. Scrub leached from the water in green mold, pocking her view. Some stones of a forgotten road lingered by the water, chipped and split. In the distance, low dark hills flirted with clouds. She couldn't see them if she looked for them. If she half looked, they were there.

She walked on the memory of the road in the fog, a shadow in the wet. The water lapped against the earth. Small silver fish crept in the current. They changed course by some unseen wind in the clear water to find their place. Drops of dew or rain or cold grew on her hair, clothes, pack, unstrung bow. She'd slicked the bow against the moisture by a thin wrap of hide. Her pack was heavy. It was too heavy for what she needed. It hadn't seemed so at first. She adjusted the pack's harness and let it slip towards the ground so she could watch the fish without the weight of it clinging to her. It had been a long time since she had seen fish in running water. She didn't think. She had left the need for thinking behind. The fish swayed gently.

A soft flash up the creek caught her eye. A hart dipped its slender neck to drink from the water. Its eyes fidgeted across the plain as its tongue licked at the surface. It looked for movement. The hart didn't fear stillness. She felt the old feeling. She watched the hart drink. It was sooty black. Streaks of brown dripped from its sides. She wondered about it without thinking about it. It must have turned black from living in the burned

over wood. The fire must have swept through a year ago, but the hart was black now. She wondered how long it would stay that way.

“Go on,” she spoke for the first time, “run away somewhere.”

The ashen deer sprang away, startled by the croaking sound of her voice. In great leaping bounds, the hart vanished into the damp. The deer’s movements were curious. It would disappear, freeze in the air, then disappear into the waving brush.

She followed the hart, walking parallel to the stream. Walking through the charcoal stumps still shedding black into the water, long after the fire had faded to brilliance and night, utterly spent.

She kept her direction by the river. It couldn’t all be burned. As the hills loomed from grey to black, islands of trees rose from the plain. Scattered and small. The hart’s trail was long forgotten by the quick memory of the tall grass. She walked until things began to be alive again. She was tired, walking next to the river along the broken plain, the ground uneven as she wandered upstream. The mist thinned and long trunks rose on either side of the water. Some remnant of the old forest lingered. The branches were high above; linking needle leaf to needle leaf, interwoven, growing together and blanketing the ground in dry beds.

She stopped, placing her pack down, leaning against a straight trunk as the evening wore towards night. The last light faded and she fell asleep. She woke, cold and stiff in the slim light. But this light was growing.

Sore, hungry, still tired, she started walking again. The rain was gone. It left grey clouds that cast a dim glow on the forest. The stream grew into a deep icy pool, carrying

snowmelt from the mountains she could only see the roots of. She had walked long enough.

There were things to do. She made a list as she rested by the water that made no sound. She should find a better place to sleep. She should smooth the ground. She should split wood and hang a tent. Gather needles to cushion underneath a blanket for a bed. She should hunt. She should make food. It had been a hard walk. Now there were things to do.

A hind crept to the pool. It didn't see her. It looked around, questioning, searching, until it relaxed and lowered its head. It drank long and deep from the cold water. It was brown, it hadn't been to the burned forest, the ash and fire hadn't left their mark on it. It didn't know what fires do. It was beautiful.

She was hungry. She uncovered the bow and strung it. The hind nibbled at a clump of sweet fern by the edge of the water. Her arrow was sharp. Her arm ached as she bent the heavy bow. It had been a while since she'd shot an animal. It was different than shooting other things. She felt something like sadness. It felt cold. The arrow bounded forward. Movement and stillness. The arrow flew true, just above and behind the rounded end of the hind's front leg, where the heart was.

The hind sprang forward into the pool, swimming, sinking, not coming up again. A curtain of red bubbled up. She frowned at the hind. Why did it have to die in the cold water? She stood at the shore. The hind lay at the bottom of the pool. She sighed and walked towards her pack between the trees.

She gathered wood as she went. Sticks and dry branches and handfuls of needles. Between the trunks of two trees, she began to build a fire, placing thin sticks in neat rows. She took her time. At times, slower was faster. When the lattice was as high as her hand, she placed the dry needles in the center. She scraped her knife against a small flint until the sparks ignited the tinder. She blew on the flames until they lit the small sticks. She added a triangle of logs. She used a hatchet to strike logs from a stump and fed the logs in, leaving several. The fire was big and warm. It would last a while without her feeding it more.

She walked back to the pool. The hind hadn't moved. A thin curl of red spun through the water. Her father had said something about cold water. Strip if you have to. She did, leaving her boots to last. She stepped into the mud. The water sucked against her feet, fighting for control against the mud clutching at her bare soles.

The pool was smooth and clear. The water was a rising shock up her legs. Wading forward, the water went over her knees. The gravel on the bottom slipped under her feet. At least it was better than mud. The hind was in water past her head. She dove under the surface. All was cold and dark. Her fingers tightened around its neck. The warmth of its body had lost against the water. She moved it, slowly, the water soaking her into chills. It wasn't bad until close to the bank where the mud slipped under her feet and the water pulled at her and tried to tug the hind away. Her foot found purchase on a rock and she lifted the hind onto the bank, then scrambled out of the water.

The numbing cold set in. The hind could wait. Nothing mattered except being warm. It wasn't much. But it was enough. Her hands shook so she couldn't put clothes

on. She wiped some of the water away, stood into her unlaced boots, and carried her clothes to the fire.

The warmth of the fire licked out. Her hands stopped shaking and she put her clothes on. The fire was too hot. She walked away from the flames until the cold came back and the thoughts stopped. She didn't look into the fire. Didn't need to watch it. She knew what fires do.

The hind waited for her. She couldn't remember the way she prepared venison. She remembered an argument about it between her parents but couldn't remember who she'd agreed with. After gutting it, she sliced the back straps thinly, rubbing dried herbs into the tender strips and placing them over the fire. When the smell wafted up, she remembered now that was her father's way. She ate the meat, the meat her father's way. The herbs were bitter. She laughed. It made a good ending to the story. Her mind was starting to work again. She knew she could stop it because she was tired enough. She built a frame and set the rest of the meat to smoke. It began to smell. It was a good smell. The work distracted her. When she was done, she washed her hands and face in the pool and swallowed some of the icy water. "Fuck" she sputtered at the cold. Her voice sounded strange in the darkening light. She did not speak again.

She walked back to the fire and thought about her list. Some of the things were done. Some of the things she still had to do. The day had come and gone in the doing of the list. She had food, she could make camp. She could rest in the forest and stay away from the burned area. The water was clean. She wouldn't have to hunt for a long while. The night came. It was a quiet night. The fire faded, but she didn't watch it, she didn't

feed it. She could build another fire. She didn't have the heart for it now. There were plenty of days coming where she could build another fire.

What Fires Do

The fire did what fires do.

The log dissolved into smoke. She caught the flickering reflection in her glass. She didn't need to see it again. Didn't need to be surprised by the wood cracking to sparks that flashed and were gone.

The wine blotted out the reflection of the fire as she swirled it. It wasn't good. It burned. She closed her eyes as a grimace spread. For a moment that's all there was. Then it faded and she took another sip. Warmth spreading as the fire died away.

She watched the remnants dribble towards the dregs at the bottom of the glass. She counted them. It would pass the time. There were nine of them. Nine spots sticking outside the dark circle in the bottom. They clumped together and went away when she tilted the glass and the legs carried them off. The fire was still too hot, too alive.

The fire had been a tree once. She imagined it as it could have been. It would have lived in a wide forest, reaching up, soaking sun towards shade. Growing, changing, bud to leaf to branch in winter, covered in frost, cold but not dead. Alive, waiting for her. The log in the fire was dead. Tree. Log. Even the name was different.

She would give anything to watch the tree grow. To hold her daughter's hand again. To have a moment that was so insignificant it faded into the dash between the too short dates on the stone.

It was still too hot.

But she would give anything.

She smelled the smoke and the fire did what fires do. She was back there, back then, back now.

She was in the market. Espera held her hand, fingers small and warm and dragging towards the green cloth and the green flowers and the green cakes and the laughing and the green herbs and the ground shook as the smoke...the smoke did what smoke does, turning air you can breathe to air you can't.

She was back, back there, back then, back now. The room was cold. The embers of the fire a dusty red. Slowly, she put another log on the fire and brought it back to crackling life. She sat on the chair, closing her eyes and feeling the heat. Her hand was still warm from tiny fingers clutching them. She stared at the flames and willed it to happen again. To hold the hand again. To be with Espera again, for just a moment. For there, for then, for now, for ever.

She stared at the fire, captive in the stone hearth.

And the fire did what fires do.

Tree and Stone

The tree had grown. The stone had aged. Light green moss feathered the cairn under the shade of the tree. She stood in empty silence. Mist thickened in swirls as the grey clouds reached down wraithlike fingers of wet. In it, she saw life as it should have been. In the swirling grey, the past mingled with the tree and stone.

For a moment she heard the patter of tiny feet on soft grass.

For a moment she heard a tinkling laugh.

For a moment he was there, picking Espera up, holding her.

A phantom of herself condensed, grey upon grey upon grey, joining the memory.

An emptiness detached from behind her and the vision crept out of reach.

“I see it too.” The voice was flat, cold, empty.

She felt his approach by what was missing. A blackness echoing nothing to nothing. “I’m sorry.” Her voice muffled in the damp.

“I tread in the dark.” He was close enough to be a shadow.

“Can we forget what happened?” She asked. “Can we lie for a moment?”

He didn’t say anything.

She shifted her body into the old habit of his arms. She leaned against him. He stiffened.

His arms went around her. “For a moment.”

Though he was warm, there was no comfort in it. It was the same but not the same. It wasn’t home. “It is a bitter lie.” She said. Neither moved.

“I hated you for saving me at the market.” She needed him to understand. “She died and I should have.”

“She was already gone when I found you.” As he spoke, his memory knit in the fog. She saw his story. He knew what fires do. She saw his pain and grief weave through the tree and stone, the mist blending into fire and smoke, the past and the present. She saw his desperation wading through the choking black, pulling stone as it ripped his hands until he found two still bodies, two hearts in a river of smoke. His hands were sooty black, brown streaks of sweat dripped down his fingers as he felt for two pulses. There was only one. “You think the choice was easy?”

She remembered waking in coughing confusion, the world was dark. He strode out of the smoke, carrying a still form.

“Then you left. I lost the both of you. I planted the tree. I built the stone.”

“Alone.” She said.

“Alone.” The pain and anger slipped into his well-used empty place.

In the shadows, they saw what would have been if they had turned left instead of right. They saw the story of a life. Of first steps and first falls and first tears and first ‘I love you’s.’ A life without tree, without stone. Then the mist changed and they saw what would have happened if they had gone straight instead of right. What would have been if Espera had survived, if they hadn’t. If her firsts and lasts were alone. If there were two trees, two stones, and one lost little girl who knew what fires do.

They said nothing. Who knows what would have happened? Who knows what fires do?

They watched the cairn until the grey faded and tiny spots of bright filtered through the tree and stone.

CHAPTER THREE

“Billy...came slightly unstuck in time, saw the late movie backwards, then forwards again. It was a movie about American bombers in the Second World War and the gallant men who flew them. Seen backwards by Billy, the story went like this:

American planes, full of holes and wounded men and corpses took off backwards from an airfield in England. Over France, a few German fighter planes flew at them backwards, sucked bullets and shell fragments from some of the planes and crewmen. They did the same for wrecked American bombers on the ground, and those planes flew up backwards to join the formation.

The formation flew backwards over a German city that was in flames. The bombers opened their bomb bay doors, exerted a miraculous magnetism which shrunk the fires, gathered them into cylindrical steel containers, and lifted the containers into the bellies of the planes. The containers were stored neatly in racks. The Germans below had miraculous devices of their own, which were long steel tubes. They used them to suck more fragments from the crewmen and planes. But there were still a few wounded Americans though and some of the bombers were in bad repair. Over France though, German fighters came up again, made everything and everybody as good as new.

When the bombers got back to their base, the steel cylinders were taken from the racks and shipped back to the United States of America, where factories were operating night and day, dismantling the cylinders, separating the dangerous contents into minerals. Touchingly, it was mainly women who did this work. The minerals were then shipped to specialists in remote areas. It was their business to put them into the ground, to hide them cleverly, so they would never hurt anybody ever again.

The American fliers turned in their uniforms, became high school kids” (Vonnegut 93-95).

High School Kids: *Words in the Sand, Jolly Green, Something Breaks*

Why War Literature

War Literature is often trauma literature.

Our first step to developing a literacy for significant events is to find a method that facilitates access to the space of trauma. War Literature offers many such methods. This literary genre takes a commonly difficult to express, commonly traumatic event (war), and provides an array of methods engaging with it. Because War Literature can refer to a number of elements in an extensive cultural field to include historical documents, propaganda, strategy, film, and theory, this chapter considers War Literature as written narrative capturing a **personal** expression of war—whether factual or fictive from either an immediate or distanced viewpoint.

Writers of War Literature come from many backgrounds, cultures, and time periods but share the commonality of war. Even this similarity can be deceiving. A World War I (WWI) nurse will experience war differently than a Soviet sniper in World War II (WWII), a US Marine Lieutenant in the battle of Fallujah, a draftee in Vietnam, or a US Special Forces Operator.

Despite the objective differences in time, space, culture, and conflict, the subjective experience of war becomes similar when we explore a writer's distance from combat. In a broad overview of 20th and 21st century War Literature, common narrative methods emerge. When someone is affected by trauma, something breaks. As Tim O'Brien puts it in *The Things They Carried*, "stories can save us" (212).

This chapter explores how.

Words in the Sand

It was one of those “bring the girlfriend home” trips. The kind where you make sure everything checks before a big decision. The kind where you’ve explained how *small town* small town is but can’t convey how a town can come and go on a winding road in rolling woods without a stop sign to mark its presence.

I was on break from the Air Force Academy and still two years from the hope of war while Noah was already back from Iraq. He enlisted, went to war, came back, and got out before he had to salute me. We parked at one of the six houses in Forbes Missouri and walked into his parent’s house. He asked us to drive him up to the Oregon jail so he could pick up some books he left there. I asked him how long he’d been home. Two weeks.

We got in my car and headed east. She sat in the back so we could catch up. He told me to pull in front of the courthouse. It was where they kept the drunks and the teenagers too stupid to avoid the one cop in the county. I asked him which one he was. He halfway turned to both of us. “I was at a party and we were drinking. I told them not to bring any dope.” He shrugged. “I left. There was some construction and the cop pointed out the detour. I turned early and he thought I was running away. I blew a 0.082.” Noah laughed, so we laughed.

When we got back home, his mom was there. He asked if we wanted to go in the backyard and play with the dog. I looked at my girlfriend, she smiled and struck up a conversation with his mom.

We walked up the hill and he looked back twice before stooping to move a rock and take out a pack of cigarettes and lighter from a hollow next to the big tree we'd climbed when we were kids. Noah told me how he couldn't sleep as we walked further up the hill to his tarp covered 1973 Ford Thunderbird. A broken brick kept the plastic on. Three years ago, it was running.

On Saturday nights, we'd drive it the fifteen miles to Oregon. Whoever had 75 cents would spray the T-Bird with 45 seconds of water, enough to make the paint gleam like fresh wax under the flickering incandescent lights of the parking lot next to the Bredeaux pizza. We knew who was there by the cars outside. Then, the rust on the T-Bird was just beginning to creep around the low points of the fenders. Now, they are rusted through. Then, we would lean against the hood, nod at girls, and he would tell me how he would restore the T-Bird. Make it a real piece of art. It was numbers matching. Now, Noah talked past me about how he will fix it. Ashes snowed onto the tarp. I looked through the cracked windshield at moldy seats.

"I have to take sleeping pills because both my eardrums were ruptured and my sleep cycle is all fucked up." He opened his mouth and pointed with the cigarette. "When you know an explosion is coming, open your mouth so the back pressure doesn't blow your ears. When you don't know..." He shrugged. It was a good tip. I hadn't learned that yet, but I still had two years.

Halfway through his tour, al-Qaeda started using shaped charges. He explained it with his hands: if you use metal to funnel the explosion from an old Soviet artillery shell into a single point, it penetrates American vehicles. He made an inverted V with his

hands. “Another inch and I wouldn’t have legs.” He told it like a punchline. “Some stupid sergeant made me put the new armor on the HMMWV the week before. I cussed him out the whole time.” We both laughed.

He glanced back to the house before lighting another cigarette. I saw shapes outlined behind the curtains. “In the blast, the book I was reading got blown out of the HMMWV. A piece of shrapnel went right through it. I didn’t think. I just climbed out to get my book. It was really good, you know?”

I did, I’d recommended he read Tolkien years ago. He didn’t have the time until all the patrols.

“Smoke everywhere and I tried to pick up all the pages in the sand.” He mimed it for me, stooping and stumbling. I laughed.

“I couldn’t really hear anything. I finally realized somebody was yelling at me to get in another vehicle, but by that time, I’d almost gotten *all* of my book, so I grabbed the last few pages and headed back. Later, they shipped me off to Germany. The guy in the bed next to me had the same thing happen to him, but his explosion broke through the last inch of armor.”

He leaned close and whispered “legs” then pointed down. We both laughed. One of the shapes behind the curtains stopped in front of the window. In the gathering dark, Noah didn’t notice the orange end of his cigarette bouncing like a tracer. “I still have my book, inside.”

A voice from the window asked if I’d like a coke. I was good. Noah dropped his cigarette and ground it into the mud with his unlaced boots. We headed inside and he

started talking about underwater Phoenician archeology and the GI bill. I told him not to get kicked out of college again for emptying a fire extinguisher in the dorm basement in the middle of the night. That way he wouldn't have to enlist again. He laughed, leading me to his room and closing the door before putting lotion on the flaking inscription of John 3:16 on his shoulder. He rummaged through a drawer and pulled out a Ziploc with half a book in it. I smelled smoke as he opened it and gave me a page. It was little more than a scrap with holes between the words.

We heard dishes clank in the kitchen. He said his hearing was almost back, 96% there. His mom asked if we would stay for dinner. Of course we would. We didn't have anywhere else to be. Around the table, Noah talked about cars and movies and we all laughed. He'd perfected the ability to make anything a joke.

We left with promises to see him at Christmas. The next day we headed back towards Colorado. Somewhere across Kansas she looked up from the half sleep of endless plain. "Noah is funny," she said.

"He always was." I told her about the T-Bird and the Bredeaux pizza and sleeping on a trampoline under the stars. I didn't tell her about the words in the sand.

connections.

War is unknowable.

If you are close to it, war is unknowable.

If you are far from it, war is unknowable.

War is unknowable.

George Wilson, American Infantry, WWII

“Out of all this damned useless war I hope I am entitled to a few simple observations. The cost in grief and devastation, if it’s on the scene, is so immeasurably expensive that no one really wins. No human being disputes this fact of life, so why can’t human beings think of this before a war?” (246).

Ford Madox Ford, British Infantry, WWI

“I was going...to write a work that should have for its purpose the obviating of all future wars” (qtd in Saint Amour 270).

Vera Brittain, Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse, WWI

“It’s my job, now, to find out all about [war], and try to prevent it, in so far as one person can, from happening to other people in the days to come. Perhaps the careful study of man’s past will explain to me much that seems inexplicable in his disconcerting present” (526).

Tim O’Brien, American Infantry, Vietnam

“I would wish this book could take the form of a plea for everlasting peace, a plea from one who knows, from one who’s been there and come back, an old soldier looking back at a dying war” (31).

Soviet censor to Alexievich Svetlana on her stories of female Soviet soldiers in
WWII

“Who will go to fight after such books? ... You’ve read too much
Remarque” (34).

Erich Maria Remarque, German infantry, WWI

“You have seen the war after your fashion—with flying banners,
martial music, and with glamour. But you saw it only to the railway
station from which we set off. We do not mean to blame you. We,
too, thought as you did. But we have seen the other side since then,
and against that the heroics of 1914 soon wilted to nothing” (108-
109).

Knowing war?

War is hell.

It hurts to get shot.

Dead friends are heavy.

Knowing war.

The Method - Distance

Why do we write about war?

To make sense of the nonsensical?

To tell the truth to those who are distanced?

If we really understood war, maybe we wouldn't turn to it.

If we didn't have access to the contemporary clinical language of trauma, what words would we use for the inability to talk about war? In 1933, philosopher Walter Benjamin looked back on WWI and noticed many soldiers returning without much to say. In his mind, they were “not richer but poorer in communicable experience” (731). When commissioned to write an article about the Battle of the Somme, Ford Madox Ford could not find language for the trenches: “I have asked myself continually why I can write nothing—why I cannot even think anything that to myself seems worth thinking!... And why cannot I even evoke pictures of the Somme or the flat lands around Ploegsteert?” (qtd. in Deer 15). From the opposite side of the Somme and through a fictional character in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Erich Maria Remarque describes the same barrier: “a man cannot talk of such things; I would do it willingly, but it is too dangerous for me to put these things into words. I am afraid they might then become gigantic and I be no longer able to master them” (75). Both war and trauma have the same difficulty of expression. Without access to the language we have from Chapter Two, Remarque adds a few sentences later: “I have been startled a couple of times in the street by the screaming of the tramcars, which resembles the shriek of a shell coming straight for one” (75).

Which, as we know, can be reworded as being triggered from an auditory input comparable to the initial trauma.

Examining the archive of War Literature with the language, psychology, and neuroscience of trauma, we can explore the methods writers used and apply their techniques to our path of developing literacy. Perusing War Literature with the language of the cognitive sciences mimics the memory process of returning to our own significant events. As we'll see in this chapter, each method has its purpose; each narrative tool has its use as an entrance to the space of war and trauma. For War Literature, the methods largely center around a threading of proximity and distance to capture a holistic view of war that would be distorted in isolation. Common tools in such a mediation are perspective, authenticity, and fiction—from the real to the surreal. When we look at such tools, remember to take note if any resonate with you.

The incommunicable nature of trauma and war persists from before WWI to the present. Its inexpressibility creates a mystery about war which is heightened by the fact that, as historian Stephen Ambrose puts it in *Band of Brothers*, “those who have done [war] cannot put into words what it is like, how it feels, except that getting shot at and shooting to kill produce extraordinary emotional reactions” (21). War Literature uses various methods in its attempt to narrate the unnarratable by exploring the transition from war's proximity to its distance like a camera zooming in and out to focus. Clues to how the genre of War Literature manages this movement are found in the way individuals develop a literacy to enter the space of past trauma. When they cannot find the words, individuals construct and manage distance with the separation of time and the separation

from objective truth. As we think about the methods employed by writers of War Literature, it is useful to keep in mind the language of trauma from the cognitive sciences. By exploring methods of proximity and distance, these authors are mirroring what psychologist Denise Sloan finds in “Maximizing Outcomes Associated with Expressive Writing.” In the movement towards integrative writing, it helps to shift viewpoint from the immediate to the distanced. Sloan believes that, “writing about unpleasant life events using a distanced (e.g., “as you look back upon the event now”) rather than an immersed perspective (e.g., “imagine the event is happening right now”) facilitates adaptive self reflection and meaning making” (2). Sloan’s theory aligns with Jim Davies work on the neuroscience of memory in *Imagination*. As Davies argues, when we change the perspective of our past significant events from an immediate first-person point of view to the more distanced third person, we “reduce the emotional punch of a memory” (100) and promote meaning making and integration. We can borrow the language of psychology and define the finding of the necessary distance to engage with a significant event as “safety.” The purpose of such safety is to enter the space of trauma and engage with it in integrative ways.

The methods writers of War Literature employ to gain distance and safety are not always effective in constructing the necessary separation for understanding or meaning making. In *Places and Names*, Eliot Ackerman narrates his return to the Middle East as a journalist to observe the Syrian civil war (March 2011-present). A US Marine veteran of Fallujah, Ackerman is separated from his own war not by physical miles but by time as he winds through Iraq to the same concrete wall he sheltered behind ten years prior and

puts his fingers in the bullet holes that have remained unchanged in the intervening years. In observing Syria, Ackerman notes “the looks we take seem to be looks back—as if, watching the fight ahead of us, we might understand the one behind us” (15) to “consider how to move on from the wreckage of our experience” (16). As is often the case, those who have seen direct front-line combat are too close to “know” war. Yet, theirs are the narratives that are valued in War Literature. An infantry platoon leader in Fallujah can sell the story of how his friends died while a cook forward deployed to Baghdad can seldom sell his story. In the militaries of the twentieth century, there are far more cooks than there are infantry platoon leaders. I consider both equally valuable, yet the external weight placed on those who have been in combat creates a skewed lens within War Literature. While it is necessary for narratives of all kinds and distances to create a complete understanding of war, War Literature is disproportionately populated by the stories of those who know the intimacy of the front. This bias tends to discredit the stories of those with a close but not direct encounter with enemy fire and skews war to the unknowable by valuing the immediate. As we know from how trauma is relived, distance doesn’t always help those whose past intrudes into their present; there is often no separation large enough to discover meaning. Reflecting on his best friend who died saving him and whether it was worth it, Ackerman never finds an answer. A small measure of meaning comes from his wearing of a black steel bracelet with “Dan’s name on it, and the date November 10, 2004. I wear it for him, but for others too. Next to that bracelet is another, a plastic one threaded with pink hearts and blue stars that my three-year-old daughter made for me. If it weren’t for the steel bracelet, the plastic one

wouldn't exist" (77). While Dan's sacrifice personally resulted in Ackerman watching his daughter grow up, it didn't have any meaningful impact on the overall war in Iraq. As Ackerman realizes watching the Syrian Civil War years later, nothing has really changed in that area of the world. Ackerman's search for global understanding and meaning remains clouded.

The difficulty for Ackerman and those with an intimate knowledge of war lies in navigating the micro and the macro. Those who observe war from afar can provide an objective viewpoint such as: *this is the truth of what happened*. But in so doing, distance misses subjective truth. The truth of what war feels like is often told as fiction rather than fact. The facts of war from those who have immediate knowledge are platitudes like: war is hell; it hurts to get shot; dead friends are heavy. Those statements are relatively meaningless phrases without the breadth of knowledge that comes from being in combat. Blending fact and fiction is one way for an individual to construct the safety to find both words and meaning around war. In *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien believes that telling fictional stories increases safety because "you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself" (151) blending fact and fiction help to clarify and explain not only what happened but how it feels. Negotiation with the truth is necessary because, as O'Brien describes the chaos of war, "it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it seemed" (66-

67). The methods War Literature employs to manage distance from combat are found in the value it places on immediacy and how such immediacy is generated.

From the external, War Literature equates immediacy with authenticity: an individual who has been in combat can tell the “truth” about war. This approach favors the personal accounts of combat veterans and narrows an understanding of war to those who have been closest to it. This sort of thinking is also true of trauma narratives. Often, an outside perspective devalues an individual’s trauma and places the causes of trauma in a hierarchical structure. The cause of trauma isn’t important because trauma is an effect. To you and me, it doesn’t matter *what* caused the holes. When something breaks, something breaks.

In War Literature, the narratives from those who haven’t been in combat are often mediated with truth claims to verify their authenticity and deliver immediacy. In his history of Easy Company in WWII, Ambrose describes his days of interviewing and extensive correspondence with “nearly all living members of the company” (132). Ambrose cites copies of wartime letters, newspaper clippings, diaries, and includes photographs to claim the veracity of his narrative. He isn’t so much writing *about* the members of the 101st but claiming to speak *for* them. Pat Barker makes an analogous claim in her author’s note for her historical fiction novel *Regeneration*: “fact and fiction are so interwoven in this book that it may help the reader to know what is historical and what is not” (297). Those with immediate knowledge of war’s reality do not need to differentiate between fact and fiction in their recollection. In many ways, it is fiction that comes closest to capturing the subjective truth of war.

One narrative technique that bridges the factual and the fictive to generate immediacy is a “reading” of objective fact by inserting the subjective. In his utilization of this method, Ackerman returns to the archival record of his time in Fallujah and fills in the script of the decoration for his silver star by placing into it “the kinds of things that don’t make it into formal government documents, the personal reflections that fill in the lines between them” (206). Where his citation reads “his platoon took casualties without the slightest degradation of motivation, professionalism, or effectiveness,” Ackerman adds:

“‘I can’t take it anymore,’ one of the Marines tells me. We’re four days into the battle. His squad leader said he needed to talk to me. ‘I keep thinking about my daughter. Every time I go into a house, I think about her.’ He is crying and the other Marines are watching and I know that fear is contagious. ‘Do you want me to get you out of here?’ I ask. He keeps muttering that he can’t take it. Twenty minutes later I’m loading him into an amtrack that will drive him out of Fallujah alongside wounded Marines. He and Pratt are married to a set of sisters. Pratt says he’ll never speak to him again” (207).

It is the personal fragments of sensory imagery and emotion that can better translate the immediacy of war rather than the objective detailing of chronological facts.

The difference in war subjectivities is not a matter of time or technology but often proximity to combat. Those who do not have an immediate knowledge of an individual’s trauma have difficulty understanding it’s reality. In Vietnam, the few miles from the front to the headquarters creates a divide as equally wide as from the front to home. After a short helicopter ride from the “grunts” in the jungle, Michael Herr describes the military headquarters in Saigon as completely disconnected from the fighting even though they were close enough to hear the echo of artillery. Among the staff “was the half-hidden,

half-vaunted jealousy of every grunt who ever went out there and killed himself a gook, a furtive vicarious bloodthirsting behind 10,000 desks, a fantasy life rich with lurid war-comics adventure” (*Dispatches* 43). The separation from the front to the headquarters in Vietnam is akin to that in WWI. As Patrick Deer notes in *Culture in Camouflage*, headquarters “was like one of those pageants which used to be played in England before the war-picturesque, romantic, utterly unreal” (34). Distance from war changed a human life into a number. Proximity changed the number back into a person. As Herr tells it, back home “you got to a point where you could sit there in the evening and listen to the man say that American casualties for the week had reached a six-week low, only eighty GIs had died in combat, and you’d feel like you’d just gotten a bargain (217). In WWII, George Wilson describes how “in two days’ fighting, we had gained about eight hundred yards. In twenty-four hours, my company had lost 138 men of 150” (168). Losing one man for less than six yards has a different feeling if you are close enough to place your hand on your friend’s face and shut their eyes. As Ackerman puts it, the proximity of knowing names, faces, and stories doesn’t change how a soldier’s mission comes first, “but it comes at the price of your friends” (136). As their friends died, even the highly trained, elite soldiers of Easy Company wondered “if the people back home knew what it cost the soldiers to win the war” (Ambrose 93). Therein lies the divide: there is a different subjectivity between the personal, the immediate, and the impersonal, the distant. It is like trauma. The objective facts of a significant event belie the subjective effect. Observers without immediate knowledge of your experience have difficulty understanding the lingering effects. Sometimes, the distance is just too great.

Jolly Green

“It was Thanksgiving in the desert. It sprayed right in my mouth.” Eric pauses to laugh. “The helo was coming back from a medevac mission, so I ran out to meet it. They were finishing up a trauma amputation. Sawing through the bone as they landed. The blood sprayed right in my mouth.” He stops laughing.

We are both silent for a moment.

Perhaps to take another drink.

I can't see his end of the line. It is dark, and late. He'd been telling me stories of his dad who just died. The conversation meanders through our kids, getting his mother into a home. Stocks. How much money you get for full disability. Retirement. And maybe finally being able to spend more time at home. If he stays in the Air Force, he might miss his kids going through high school. I tell him how my dad deployed during high school and how I saw him once or twice a year for big track meets. I ask if my stories help his decision to retire next year.

He doesn't really answer.

He is a combat search and rescue helicopter pilot.

A Jolly Green.

He tells me he would come get me if my plane ever went down.

His job is to fly into active combat and pick up the dead, injured, or dying and airlift them to a field hospital. He tells me how it is the first minutes that count. He saved a lot of lives, and would save a lot more if he stayed in. Before commissioning as a

helicopter pilot and moving up front, he was an enlisted gunner in the back. He'd invaded a foreign country before his nineteenth birthday.

I've known him for years.

I'm safe.

The conversation turns, as it always does, to the real stories. Not the anecdotes or the jokes or the weekend, but the stories that never quite go out. The embers waiting to spark on calls in the dark.

"When the blood went in your mouth, did you throw up?" I ask.

"No." He scoffs. He isn't weak.

He tells me about the kid getting his leg cut off in the helo. "They were cousins." Two kids from the south. When their commanders found out. They did whatever they could to get the two kids together for the holiday. Which was really cool, until they hit the IED. The first one died on scene; the second ended up in my helo. I'm not sure what happened to him. If he made it."

He tells me how his helo came back with holes after almost every mission. Each hole has a story. The holes and the words spill out.

He was sleeping and a mortar landed in the next tent, killing a marine.

They filled sand bags to protect their tent after that. Before the bunkers. Before the fences, rocket defense, up armored Humvees that I had years later. We fought in the same war, but mine was safer. My plane didn't come back with holes.

I listen.

I'm safe.

He says his triggers are mostly smells.

I ask how he is doing. If he has processed any of it.

He says he drinks a lot and yells at his kids too much. He gives me a trick he learned in a seminar. Eye movement, track five blue things. He's been going to seminars. They help for a bit especially immediately after. Then things go back to normal. The normal nightmares, insomnia, broken back, hearing aids.

I ask if he's seen anybody, like a "therapist" anybody. He gets a little angry, but not at me. He went to mental health after his first deployment as an eighteen-year-old gunner with a checklist of every symptom for PTSD: severe anxiety, nightmares, flashbacks, uncontrollable thoughts. Mental health told him they were going to recommend him for a discharge from the Air Force.

"I went in and asked if they could give me some pills to take so I can go back to the desert and save more lives. They couldn't, so I told mental health I was fine, and never went back."

Something breaks. The words stop. The phone cuts off. He's lost service. It was bedtime anyway.

The Method – Proximity

Tracking an individual's journey from the distant to the immediate explains how war subjectivities can be constructed. As George Wilson bridged the physical gap between England and Normandy in WWII, he discovered the reality of war that comes from proximity. As a replacement mechanized infantry platoon leader, Wilson only went to France because the man who previously held his position had been killed. Following the trail of carnage left by D-Day and walking among the fresh graves on the way to the front, "the cruel realities of war came into vivid focus" (16). The journey from home to war can often be characterized as a movement from idealism to disillusionment. Told in *Testament of Youth*, Vera Brittain's passage from England to the front during WWI matches Wilson's in WWII. In 1915, Brittain volunteered to be a Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse because she "wanted very badly to be heroic – or at any rate to seem heroic to myself" (158). Despite initial reports of the war's horror, Brittain "took refuge in a consolatory rhetoric rooted in traditional values of patriotism, sacrifice and idealism of the kind espoused by the wartime propaganda of both Church and State, or the sonnets of Rupert Brooke" (21). Over the years, Brittain traveled closer and closer to war until she had her hands in the blood of dying soldiers under the thunder of artillery. War's intimacy changed her initial encounter with it as a distant thing, and "the early ideals of the War were all shattered, trampled into the mud which covered the bodies of those with whom I had shared them" (500). Literary scholar Santanu Das believes Brittain's changing understanding to be endemic as one traversed the distance to the front: "if the first world war is described as the end of illusion for a whole generation of young men,

mud can be said to be the beginning of that end. The process of disillusionment began at the daily intimate level, often in the attempt to find one's footing or one's boots" (42). In *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Erich Maria Remarque puts it best in describing what happens when one realizes the reality of war: "under the first bombardment, the world they taught us shattered into pieces" (10). A distanced subjectivity of war is often idealized. As one bridges the gap to the immediate, the fracture and the difference in subjectivity created by distance is most evident when the two collide in the "return."

Nowhere is the difference in subjectivities clearer than when the distance closes as a soldier comes back. As Deer notes, the split between those who have been in war and civilian perception "only heightened the alienating distance between the soldiers and home" (21). This separation is akin to that in trauma, as psychologist Bessel van der Kolk finds in *The Body Keeps the Score*: "after trauma, the world becomes sharply divided between those who know and those who don't. People who have not shared the traumatic experience cannot be trusted, because they can't understand it" (29). Someone who has encountered a significant event often feels alienated and disconnected from their community because the distance is too great for others to fully understand their experience. As Ackerman finds in his "enemy" Abu Hassar, there is a greater kinship in a shared knowledge of war than a shared culture. Back in the Middle East and while their translator is away, Ackerman and Abu Hassar write names of places and dates on a napkin map. Passing a pen back and forth, they chase each other around the map of Iraq, "mimicking the way we'd once chased each other around this country" (41-42). In their conversation, Hassar doesn't ask Ackerman if he killed anyone--the typical question

Ackerman gets from American civilians--he asks "when were you the most afraid?" (42). In answering, Ackerman and Hassar find rapport in a common understanding. Ackerman was most afraid of getting lost on patrol and while he never did so, in his words, "coming home from the wars, I've learned there are other ways to get lost" (44). WWI soldier-poet Ewart Alan Mackintosh describes this intimacy by claiming a stronger bond with his men than their own fathers in his poem *In Memoriam*:

More my sons than your fathers',
For they could only see
The little helpless babies
And the young men in their pride.
They could not see you dying,
And hold you while you died.

Happy and young and gallant,
They saw their first-born go,
But not the strong limbs broken
And the beautiful men brought low,
The piteous writhing bodies,
They screamed 'Don't leave me, sir',
For they were only your fathers
But I was your officer" (Walter 143-144).

No words can perfectly overcome the distance between an immediate and distant view of war. The gap constructs a void that transcends time, nationality, and conflict. Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time* describes the divide as "the world they were in was not the world he was in" (85). Brittain places home as a "different world from the one that I had known" (518). Remarque discovers home is "a foreign world" (76). Yet, the kinship of those who have intimate knowledge of war transcends language and "side." English WWI poet Robert Graves feels the disconnection of returning home in a corresponding way to German author Remarque: "England looked strange to us returned soldiers...the

civilians talked a foreign language” (201). Regardless of cause or temporality, there is a commonality of the immediacy of war that is inaccessible to those who have not mediated the distance to the front. Sometimes even adding autobiographical recollection isn’t enough to communicate the complete subjective truth, so War Literature employs the method of fiction—both real and surreal. The truth of what trauma or war feel like can be so disconnected from reality that the only way to describe the truth of it is by stretching that truth towards hyperbole.

Fiction, both the real and surreal, can massage objective fact to subjective truth to convey the immediacy of war or trauma. In *The Things They Carried*, Vietnam veteran Timothy O’Brien “wanted to heat up the truth, to make it burn so hot that you would feel exactly what he felt” (84). What it typically feels like to remember a significant event such as war is not recalling a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end, but a reliving of fragmented sensory and emotional information that has been flash burned into an individual’s brain. Kolk states how the “imprints of traumatic experiences are organized not as coherent logical narratives but in fragmented sensory and emotional traces: images, sounds, and physical sensations” (194). Kolk’s description matches the struggles of WWI authors Ford Madox Ford and Robert Graves. Ford’s unpublished essay “A Day of Battle” refuses to contextually narrate the battle of the Somme but “vividly conveys its fractured points of view” through “powerfully visualized and disturbing fragments of the modern battlefield, of soldiers vaporized, shell bursts, and soaring aeroplanes” (Deer 16). For those who *are* able to convey something resembling a coherent narrative, it is often a

list of moments lacking vivid imagery or emotion as Graves writes in *Good-bye to All*

That:

“My mouth was dry, my eyes out of focus, and my legs quaking under me I found a water-bottle full of rum and drank about half a pint, it quieted me, and my head remained clear. Samson lay groaning about twenty yards beyond the front trench. Several attempts were made to rescue him. He had been very badly hit. Three men got killed in these attempts, two officers and two men, wounded. In the end his own orderly managed to crawl out to him Samson waved him back, saying that he was riddled through and not-worth rescuing, he sent his apologies to the company for making such a noise (139-140).”

As is typical of trauma narratives, Graves’ fragments of sensory imagery are disconnected from meaning and emotion. As Sloan finds, “it is common for trauma survivors to provide a detailed account of the traumatic experience...but not to include the emotions they experienced” (3). It is the recall of fragmented sensory imagery without emotional or narrative context that resists meaning making and integration.

Distance is one method of entering the space of trauma to create meaning and integrate a past significant event. As psychologists Kross and Ayduk discover, a “self-immersed perspective would predispose people to focus narrowly on recounting the concrete details of their experience rather than on taking the big picture into account in order to make meaning out of their experience” (188) while creating distance “would allow people to focus on the broader context in order to re-construe their experience in ways that would reduce distress. Thus, self-distancing would facilitate adaptive self-reflection” (188). Kolk agrees in “PTSD and the Nature of Trauma” where he believes of those who are affected by trauma that “it is critical that they gain enough distance from their sensory imprints and trauma-related emotions so that they can observe and analyze

these sensations and emotions without becoming hyper-aroused or engaging in avoidance maneuvers” (18) because “in order to put the event in perspective, the victim needs to reexperience the event without feeling helpless” (19). Part of the approach that facilitates meaning making and leads to integration is distance, the other part is feeling a subjective sense of control or agency.

Meaning is one key to integrating trauma. In a 2021 study of veteran narrative processing, psychologists Peter Tappenden et al. argue that “PTSD may reflect a breakdown in an individual’s ability to integrate traumatic experiences into their sense of identity, and this breakdown may occur, in part, because they cannot create positive meanings out of their experiences” (292). Their research concludes how “it may be the meaning that people create in their narratives about their traumatic experiences that is crucial for mental health” (299). Developing a literacy to access the distance necessary to discover meaning is difficult. As Kali Tal finds in *Worlds of Hurt*, “the incredible effort demanded from the writer who merely wants to portray the war pales in comparison to the dedication and fortitude required of the writer who wishes to somehow explain the event. He must first invent a whole new mode of speaking in order to articulate his subject” (80-81). In other words, develop a literacy. Borrowing from writers of War Literature, part of that method is to employ fiction when reality isn’t big enough to contain the unbounded nature of the traumatic. When traditional narrative structures fail to convey the subjective truth of what war feels like, soldier-authors turn to narrative tools which allow exaggeration of objective truth to convey subjective truth. The idea

behind the method is that if reality is too dangerous, safety can be found in fiction. When even realistic fiction isn't enough to gain safety, writers sometimes turn to the surreal.

intrusions.

“A woman in her late sixties was narrating her Auschwitz experience to interviewers from the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale.

She was relating her memories as an eyewitness of the Auschwitz uprising; a sudden intensity, passion and color were infused into the narrative. She was fully there. ‘All of a sudden,’ she said, ‘we saw four chimneys going up in flames, exploding. The flames shot into the sky, people were running. It was unbelievable.’ There was a silence in the room, a fixed silence against which the woman’s words reverberated loudly, as though carrying along an echo of the jubilant sounds exploding from behind barbed wires, a stampede of people breaking loose, screams, shots, battle cries, explosions. It was no longer the deadly timelessness of Auschwitz. A dazzling, brilliant moment from the past swept through the frozen stillness of the muted, grave-like landscape with dashing meteoric speed, exploding it into a shower of sights and sounds. Yet the meteor from the past kept moving on. The woman fell silent and the tumults of the moment faded. She became subdued again and her voice resumed the uneventful, almost monotonous and lamenting tone. The gates of Auschwitz closed and the veil of obliteration and of silence, at once oppressive and repressive, descended once again. The comet of intensity and of aliveness, the explosion of vitality and of resistance faded and receded into the distance.

Many months later, a conference of historians, psychoanalysts, and artists...watched the videotaped testimony of the woman...The testimony was not accurate, historians claimed. The number of chimneys was misrepresented. Historically, only one chimney was blown up, not all four. Since the memory of the testifying woman turned out to be, in this way, fallible, one could not accept—nor give credence to—her whole account of the events. It was utterly important to remain accurate.

A psychoanalyst who had been one of the interviewers of this woman, profoundly disagreed. The woman was testifying, not to the number of the chimneys blown up, but to something else, more radical, more crucial: the reality of an unimaginable occurrence. One chimney blown up in Auschwitz was as incredible as four. The number mattered less than the fact of the occurrence. The event itself was almost inconceivable. The woman testified to an event that broke the all compelling frame of Auschwitz, where Jewish armed revolts just did not happen, and had no place. She testified to the breakage of a framework. That was historical truth” (Laub 59-60).

What makes a true story?

Carrying Cacciato

“I have to tell how it happened, so I invent a story and I almost believe it myself” (Remarque 82).

“Story-truth is truer sometimes than happening truth.” (O’Brien 170).

What makes a true story?

What makes a story true?

As trauma is defined by subjective effect, perhaps so is truth. The truth of felt experience can differ from the objective history of it. This disparity leads Dominick LaCapra to note in *Writing History Writing Trauma* that “several if not many historians affirm a decisive binary opposition between history and memory” (XIX). Applying more value to objective rather than subjective truth problematizes the weight of an individual acting as a witness to a traumatic event and providing testimony. Historians frequently ask: is their testimony factually accurate? A better question to ask as we encounter methods of entering the space of trauma is: does it matter?

As LaCapra argues, and as we know from the nature of memory, “all narratives ‘construct’ or shape, and some narratives more or less drastically distort their objects” (10). For many writers of War Literature, it is the method of fictionalizing their time in war that facilitates access to the subjective truth of their experience. LaCapra finds such translation “may be difficult to arrive at through restricted documentary methods” (13). When the method of a realistic, chronological accounting of trauma is inaccessible due to its neurological disruption of language, some writers turn to fiction to engage with their significant events. Meg Jenson describes this method as a “negotiation with the truth,

rather than its documentation” (2). Through her personal writing, Jenson was only able to enter the space of her trauma by the method of fiction. She created a fictional character with a past like her own and imagined a future for her fictional character. As Jenson puts it, “in fiction I could create my own answer to the unanswerable question (why)” (3). The method of fiction allowed Jenson a point of entry to engage with her trauma that led towards integration. On the other side of her literacy journey, Jenson states “writing the novel did not completely ‘cure’ me, it provided a ‘holding space’ on the page for my traumatic memories. By integrating those memories into a partially imagined story with a beginning middle and end, I was able to place those terrifying events in the past to some degree. As I understood it, my writing formed a barrier between my present-day life and the pain of my past” (4). For Jenson, the method of fiction provided the distance to safely process her past.

When the method of fiction isn’t safe enough, writers generate further distance through the method of the surreal. LaCapra discovers when art departs from ordinary reality, such departure “may uncannily provide indirect commentary or insight into that reality” (186). In *The Things They Carried*, Tim O’Brien agrees in his own engagement with his time in Vietnam:

“In any war story, but especially a true one, it’s difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way...The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it seemed” (69–70).

O’Brien’s Vietnam war novels *Going after Cacciato* and *The Things They Carried* are explorations of the nature of objective and subjective truth. In them, and much of his

other work, O'Brien works out his belief that fiction might have a better potential for translating the truth of combat than nonfiction.

O'Brien's writing can be characterized as realism interrupted by incongruous flights into the fantastic. O'Brien justifies this method because "war is a surrealistic experience" (qtd. in Herzog 22) and "our daydreams are real; our fantasies are real. They aren't construed as otherwise in any of my books" (qtd. in Herzog 80). *The Things They Carried*, a seeming autobiographical collection of short stories of infantry in Vietnam, is O'Brien's way of approaching the question of truth and fiction in the memory of war. Throughout *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien insists no narrative can capture the reality of war. Where *The Things They Carried* operates under the guise of truth, *Going after Cacciato* doesn't make such a claim. *Going after Cacciato* translates the non-linear nature of traumatic memory. The story takes place in one night where Paul Berlin spends a night in guard duty in a series of chapters titled "The Observation Post." The rest of the novel is Paul's remembering and imagining while on guard duty. Flashback chapters detail the remembering of the first months of his tour in Vietnam while "The Road to Paris" chapters detail his elaborate imagining of an overland trip where he and his squad leave Vietnam and walk all the way to Paris. In a sense, the flashbacks are Paul's war stories while "The Road to Paris" sections are Paul's departure from reality in an attempt to make sense of and find meaning in the war in Vietnam.

The crucial moment of *Going after Cacciato* occurs early in the novel after Cacciato goes Absent Without Leave (AWOL) to try and walk to Paris and Paul's squad chases him. The squad follows Cacciato up a mountain. In this moment, the story departs

from reality when Cacciato literally flies away. What we don't understand at that place in the story is the truth of what happened on the mountain. While it isn't explicitly stated, O'Brien points to Paul accidentally unloading his rifle and killing Cacciato. The "unloading of the rifle" scene happens at the end of the novel when Paul and the squad finally make it to Paris and confront Cacciato in the city. After Paul fires in Paris, O'Brien instantly returns us to the mountain in Vietnam where Paul repeats, "I didn't mean to...I was tense. I didn't mean it...It just happened" (180). Paul tries to sort through his memory of the incident and "he remembered the fear coming, but he did not remember why. Then the shaking feeling. The enormous noise, shaken by his own weapon, the way he'd squeezed to keep it from jerking away from him" (180). Paul checks his weapon to find the magazine empty and, "very carefully, he pushed the safety switch from automatic to safe" (180). When the squad walks down the mountain and returns to radio range, the lieutenant makes the call that Cacciato is Missing in Action (MIA). That night Paul accidentally falls asleep and wakes to find the lieutenant sitting with him. Together they finish the guard shift and the lieutenant refers to how Cacciato is MIA, "I guess it's better this way...there's worse things can happen. There's plenty of worse things" (182). The unspoken worse thing is the fratricide committed by Paul. The lieutenant sticks to the story that Cacciato escaped on his way to Paris and says, "who knows? He might make it. He might do all right." (182). The construction of the imagined scenario of Cacciato walking to Paris offers Paul an escape from the overwhelming truth of his actions. O'Brien points to how Paul didn't subjectively intend to kill Cacciato, but objectively did. We can speculate that it was the method of the

surreal and the crafting of the novel that helped O'Brien engage with his emotions of guilt and helplessness in Vietnam in ways *The Things They Carried* couldn't.

In dealing with trauma, imaginative acts are performed on the objective facts of history. The exploration of truth is an exploration of memory. The nature of traumatic memory brings the past into the present. In the words of O'Brien in *The Things They Carried*: "as I write about these things, the remembering is turned into a kind of rehashing. Kiowa yells at me. Curt Lemon steps from the shade into bright sunlight, his face brown and shining, and then he soars into a tree. The bad stuff never stops happening: it lives on in its own dimension, replaying itself over and over" (32). And yet, in the writing of the past, the loop can stop. In the words of O'Brien, that is the purpose of his writing: "stories are for joining the past to the future" (35). As T. R. Johnson argues in "Writing as Healing and the Rhetorical Tradition," "such war stories, fictional creations rooted in actual experiences of war, serve instead a healing purpose" (86) because "writing that heals is often writing in which the writer names, describes, and takes control of experiences in which the writer's powers of naming and controlling have been explicitly annihilated" (86). Another Vietnam author, Joe Haldeman takes it a step further in *None so Blind* where he describes the purpose of writing is to "try to make sense out of our lives and out of capital L Life in general" (5). In writing, we can develop the agency to enter the space of the traumatic and discover meaning when we gain the distance required to safely integrate the past. Perhaps it is both the real and surreal that help O'Brien engage with Vietnam.

O'Brien's work deconstructs the distinctions between memory, imagination, truth, fiction, and reality. Even with the insertion of the fantastic, *Going after Cacciato* may be closer to the subjective truth for O'Brien than *The Things They Carried*. As O'Brien discovers, the question of truth isn't as important as the act of telling the story. As Susana Onega finds in *Traumatic Memory and the Ethical, Political, and Transhistorical Functions of Literature*, "the artistic representations of the past are aimed at provoking an affective or empathetic response to imagined events that might have happened according to the laws of probability or verisimilitude, not historical truth" (7). The purpose of the story is to put the feeling into words. It is in the act of imagining and revising our past where we can assert some sense of control over significant events. The surreal is one method to acquire such agency.

echoes.

As told by Tim O'Brien in *The Things They Carried* (170-171).

“It’s time to be blunt.

I’m forty-three years old, true, and I’m a writer now, and a long time ago I walked through Quang Ngai Province as a foot soldier.

Almost everything else is invented.

But it’s not a game. It’s a form. Right here, now, as I invent myself, I’m thinking of all I want to tell you about why this book is written as it is. For instance, I want to tell you this: twenty years ago I watched a man die on a trail near the village of My Khe. I did not kill him. But I was present, you see, and my presence was guilt enough. I remember his face, which was not a pretty face, because his jaw was in his throat, and I remember feeling the burden of responsibility and grief. I blamed myself. And rightly so, because I was present.

But listen. Even *that* story is made up.

I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth.

Here is the happening-truth. I was once a soldier. There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and I was afraid to look. And now, twenty years later, I’m left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief.

Here is the story-truth. He was a slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty. He lay in the center of a red clay trail near the village of My Khe. His jaw was in his throat. His one eye was shut, the other eye was a star-shaped hole. I killed him.

What stories can do, I guess, is make things present.

I can look at things I never looked at. I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God. I can be brave. I can make myself feel again.

‘Daddy, tell the truth,’ Kathleen can say, ‘did you ever kill anybody?’ And I can say, honestly, ‘Of course not.’

Or I can say, honestly, ‘Yes.’”

connections.

In Joe Haldeman's words.

In the introduction to *None so Blind* (6).

“One reason writers' biographies are interesting is the opportunity to search through them for sources of the fictions. It occurred to me that that would be a useful way to tie together the stories in this book, using hindsight to recall, or try to figure out, which parts of each story are made up and which parts came from so-called real life. I put in those mullings as afterwards”

In the afterward of *Beachhead* (168).

“This story is almost completely made up; the only things that come from my actual combat experience are the smell of burning flesh and young soldiers' carelessness about weapons”

In the afterward of *The Hemingway Hoax* (148).

“Two of Baird's wounds are described from experience, the .51 machine gun bullet to the thigh and the rifle grenade that sprayed me, us, with shrapnel from the waist down. The missing foot is imagination, or nightmare, or maybe an alternate universe: after the first operation on the thigh wound, which was large, the doctor warned me he would probably have to amputate. He didn't”

In the afterward of *Graves* (203).

“The images of dead people in the jungle are from experience of course...we found the two bodies side by side, a lieutenant and private who had been killed instantly by a random artillery round...the blast that killed them had decapitated the lieutenant; his head had rolled a few yards away, empty sockets staring up at the jungle canopy. One of the boys sort of snapped, and gave the head a kick. Another one, giggling, kicked it hard, and in a couple of seconds they were all shuffling through the underbrush, hooting with hysterical laughter, kicking this poor guy's skull around in an impromptu macabre game of soccer...four months later all but one of them were dead. And I had trouble sleeping”

In the afterward of *DX* (232).

“It may have been the anniversary of my worst wounding—fifteen years after 17 September 1968—but if so, I don’t remember. I do remember a number of things I couldn’t fit into the poem. Crying: When I realized how many friends I’d lost, and how badly I was hurt, I started crying uncontrollably and asked my platoon sergeant for a towel. Until I mopped my face I hadn’t realized it was covered with blood. And then two hours later, after I was stabilized and flown to a hospital for surgery, the grey-haired woman who snipped away my dressings while they were asking my name and serial number and what happened burst into tears, too. At the time I thought it was a mark of distinction, that my wounds were so horrible they could make a hardened nurse cry. Now I know it was just the time and place. She had seen worse. But right at that moment, she had seen enough.”

The Forever War Year

“Science fiction is an interesting perspective for investigating this writing-and-experience business from two different angles. One is the rejection of experience completely: the value of imagining events to write about rather than remembering them. And the other is the creative interplay between imagination and experience: I’ve never fired a ray gun, but I have fired a pistol. I think in both cases you use both hands to steady the weapon; you spend an extra fraction of a second getting a good sight picture; you squeeze the trigger rather than jerk it, and so forth. Knowing the real world makes your imaginary world more believable.

What’s more important than those mechanical details, of course, is how well you can know or imagine the emotional state of the person who’s holding that ray gun and about to fire. If you do that honestly, you’re inventing truth” (Haldeman 4).

As we’ve seen in O’Brien’s work, the subjective truth of war can feel so far outside the bounds of the real that conveying its immediacy can only happen when unbounded by realism. Joe Haldeman tried both. To describe his tour in Vietnam, he wrote two novels, one mainstream, *War Year*, and one science fiction, *The Forever War*. It is the disparity between the two that we begin to understand the method of the surreal and how it allowed Haldeman to access his memories of Vietnam in a different way than the real. Perhaps for Haldeman, the realistic *War Year* allowed him to chronicle what happened in Vietnam while *The Forever War* helped him access what it felt like to go to war and return.

Haldeman began to write while in combat. His first story was destroyed by a North Vietnamese 122-millimeter rocket that hit his bunker while his squad was on an adjacent hill bitching about how they’d missed their chopper flight back to their bunker. His subsequent attempts were mostly in the form of letters he sent back to his wife. As Haldeman puts it in the introduction to *War Year*, “I wrote a lot the year I was in

Vietnam, roughly half in combat and half in hospitals...I would write home to my wife every day, each letter containing something like a diary entry, and she would keep them in chronological order, material for my eventual Vietnam novel” (4). The reality of war made an accurate recounting difficult. Haldeman “hadn’t written many letters before really horrible things started happening” (5). In his letters, he began editing the truth of combat in Vietnam. Even to the friends he’d promised to write the *complete* truth, Haldeman says he “couldn’t bring himself to follow up on it” (5) because a true recounting “didn’t really express how terrified and hopeless I felt” (5). Once back home, Haldeman took a cue from Hemingway and echoed some of his method. Summarizing Hemingway, Haldeman states “to make fiction work, you had to forget the things you had experienced, and then reinvent them to make them more real, with a reality that lasted longer than a simple recitation of facts could” (5). Writing with different methodologies allowed Haldeman to do just that.

War Year, based on Haldeman’s letters home, tells the story of a combat engineer, John Farmer, over the course of a year in Vietnam. This mostly autobiographical work is harshly realistic yet strangely detached. The narration is a cataloging of events without emotional resonance. The novel begins:

“I almost slept through that first enemy attack.

I’d been on KP all day, washing dishes, on my feet from dawn to dark. When it was over, I went to my bunk and just slept like a rock. So I didn’t hear the sirens when they went off. I woke up with this big guy shaking me.

‘Incoming, man, wake up! Goddammit, incoming!’ And he made for the door.

I didn’t know what ‘incoming’ meant, but he looked pretty shook” (8).

The same emotionless tone continues throughout the novel. The grounded nature of *War Year* allows for a more direct translation of the details of Haldeman's time as a combat engineer but is limited to an intimate scale. *War Year* is direct reportage. From the immediate, war is almost entirely physical. Haldeman describes the details of being wounded in *Study War No More*:

“Try to stand up and realize you can't feel your legs; look down to see a femoral artery pumping; try to staunch it with both hands; can't spare a hand to wipe the blood out of your eye; try wiping it on your shoulder, which doesn't help, it's like raw hamburger; holler for a medic and see that your medic is lying beside you with both legs blown off..[you are] the only one of the demolition team who lived” (3).

This description of being injured avoids its emotions. There is no mention of the fear of dying, the hope of living, the sadness of losing friends. Connecting emotions to events facilitates integration. As Sloan finds, “it is important to write about the details of the traumatic event, but it is also important to write about the thoughts and emotions that one experienced during the event” (2). Accessing those emotions is assisted by the movement from an immersed position to a distanced one. For Haldeman, the fantastic provided such a distance. Haldeman needed a laser to convey what holding an M16 in Vietnam felt like: “I had a magic wand that I could point at a life and make it a smoldering piece of half-raw meat” (*The Forever War* 20). Speaking at a Guest Panel at Escape Velocity in 2017, Haldeman describes how “my whole combat experience was completely ameliorated by my science fiction experience” (qtd. in Mahon 1). In many ways, the power of fiction is the power of control. As an author moves from the real to the surreal, they become unbounded by objective events and can exert greater control over the narrative, the world in their imagination, and the characters populating that world. The absence of control is

strongly correlated with trauma while regaining control is strongly correlated to integration.

In *Dealing in Futures*, Haldeman recounts the compulsion to write his return from Vietnam: “that was a story I felt I had to write, trying to deal with the hangover of pain and confusion that haunted most of us when we came back from Vietnam” (200). It was the surreal that provided the access to translate his subjective experience of coming home. In *War Year*, John Farmer doesn’t come home. In *The Forever War*, William Mandella does. We can speculate that it was the method of the surreal which allowed Haldeman to access the emotional truth of returning to a society that didn’t understand his time in Vietnam. In *The Forever War*, Haldeman explores the concept of relativity to show how foreign home can feel after returning from war. For Haldeman’s character Mandella, five years aboard faster than light spacecraft pass while thousands of years go by on earth. On Mandella’s first trip home after two subjective years, the twenty-one chronological years on earth have made it feel like a completely different world. Haldeman describes how language, culture, and society changed so much: “it was just too much foreignness to take in” (53), it was as if Mandella “hadn’t grown up in this world” (57). Eventually Mandella realizes he is so alienated from society that he leaves earth to return to the military. As Earth is no place for Mandella, home feels like no place for Haldeman after Vietnam. Haldeman could not effectively capture the immediacy of war without the method of the surreal to exaggerate the difference.

As Haldeman discovered, when the subjective experience is too big for the bounds of the real, the surreal offers a wide enough scope to engage with that subjective

experience. The method of the surreal serves as a tool to expand the scope of a significant event. A realistic portrayal of subjective experience can serve to limit both emotional engagement and integrative meaning making. It is *The Forever War* which allowed Haldeman the scope to paint a cultural portrait of a world that produced war and ultimately highlight the meaninglessness of his time in Vietnam: “the 1143-year long war had begun on false pretenses and only continued because the two races were unable to communicate. Once they could talk, the first question was ‘Why did you start this thing?’ and the answer was ‘Me?’ (99). As it turns out, the “forever war” was started by suspicious ex-military men who blasted the first alien ship they met and presented false evidence that it was they who had been attacked. As Haldeman puts it, “the fact was, Earth’s economy needed a war, and this one was ideal. It gave a nice hole to throw buckets of money into” (99). For Haldeman, the method of the surreal was what facilitated access to the subjective truth of Vietnam.

While both the real and surreal serve Haldeman in different ways, the method of fiction doesn’t fit every author. In *Worlds of Hurt*, Kali Tal describes how another Vietnam author, William D. Ehrhart, found the method of fictionalizing war as a barrier to engaging with it. According to Ehrhart, “I am not yet ready, literarily or emotionally, to treat Vietnam as fiction. I chose, therefore, to combine a narrative of my own direct experience with, to a limited degree, other information I had acquired into as readable and compelling a book as my abilities would allow” (qtd. in Tal 99). Not every method works for every individual or every attempt. Our goal is to find a method that helps us

enter the space a significant event. As we enter that space, we can translate an internal experience to the external page and facilitate integration.

intrusions.

From the poem, *DX*.

What if an angel of truth
had come to us and said
“Enjoy your last whole day
Tomorrow you’ll be dead.”
and pointing at me:
“Except for you.
You enjoy
your last day whole” (Haldeman).

Something Breaks

In *Places and Names*, Elliot Ackerman reads the documentation for the silver star he earned as an infantry platoon leader in Fallujah. Between the lines of official verbiage, Ackerman inserts what didn't make it into the decoration: how it felt to fight, kill, and watch friends die. There are a lot of words between the holes of a military medal.

One of my commendations reads:

“As an Aircraft Commander, Captain Castle identified and mitigated a critical hydraulic system failure during a combat sortie by executing 12 emergency procedure checklists. His actions saved a 52-million-dollar aircraft and three aircrew.”

Let me fill in some of the holes for you.

The phone rings in the dark. Pale blue vibrating in a dim echo of the air conditioner. The dehumidifier is blinking red. Full. Again. The sheets stick as I answer, winding and snaking half thrown off.

“This is your alert call, see you in an hour Captain Castle.” The voice says.

I mumble something intelligible enough to be construed as acknowledgement.

“Oh, and merry Christm...”

I click the phone off. I didn't mean to, neither of us were expecting a new tag to the same conversation we've had most mornings for the last month. I lay in the dark, listening to the AC. Watching the red LED of the dehumidifier cast mold splotches on the ceiling into a flashing Rorschach.

Merry fucking Christmas.

I'm three for three on spending Christmas in an 8x10 box in the desert.

Every day is the same. Alert call. Get ready. Preflight. Fly. Land. Eat. Call home. Sleep.

“Alert call Jinx?” Q’s voice drifts up from the bottom bunk. I get the top bunk. The privileges of rank.

I mumble something intelligible enough to be construed as acknowledgement.

“I’ll wake Boom.” I hear him bang into the one folding chair as he opens the door to let in the flickering fluorescent light of the hallway. I lay for a few more precious seconds. Blessed, blessed lieutenants. The sticky blankets are very welcome.

Q comes back and we begin the five-hour routine from box to takeoff. We stumble towards the bathroom a quarter mile away. The bathrooms are concrete, the trailer we live in was designed to last one year, back in 2003. Twelve years has been about as kind as you’d expect.

We put our hands against the glare of the sun reflecting off sand and slip into sand colored flight suits. We walk the half mile to the sand-colored dining facility, or DFAC. It’s Thursday, December 25th, 2014. Thursday means chicken, potatoes, broccoli for 24 hours until 24 hours of pasta on Friday. At least we know what to expect, they’ve kept the same seven meal rotation for at least three years. Except today is Christmas. We smell turkey and ham. We see stacks of pastries hidden behind a paper sign that says: “Christmas dinner 1100-2000.”

It won’t be 1100 for another two hours. Our land time is after 2000. Even the chicken, potatoes, and broccoli are gone. We get cereal from a shelf, milk from a cooler, and coffee from yesterday’s percolator.

We walk past white linen tablecloths to our scuffed sand colored table and sit in sand-colored chairs. I haven't seen anything green for a month, and won't for another month. I look at my crew. Spinning spoons in soggy cereal.

Something needs to break, or they will.

I close my eyes. Merry fucking Christmas.

I open them and smile. I reach into my backpack and put a Santa hat on my head.

“For you.” I give a sparkly snowflake headband to Q.

“Fucking hell Jinx.” But he laughs. He hasn't seen the fairy wand yet.

“Jesus.” Boom says, trying not to smile around his Lucky Charms.

“Fucking RUDOLPH!” Q says as I hand over a red LED nose and reindeer antlers.

Laughter erupts from the table. And my crew starts talking.

We see a smattering of Santa hats through ops, intel briefs, and secure equipment checkout. No other aircraft commander is led around by Rudolph and a magical snowflake. We win. I check our fragged refueling assignments, if we do everything just right, we'll make Christmas dinner. I tell the crew and have to tamp their excitement into the reality of how everything can change in the air. It doesn't work. The one thing we have left is hope for the smallest things.

We laugh and talk about Christmas past, present, and future. 70% of those are in the desert.

The driver plays Christmas music as we go past rows on rows on rows of airplanes. One takes off every minute. The B-1s make the crew van shake.

Our jet is indistinct save for slight variation on tail serial number. The number starts with a 63. It was manufactured in 1963. It is one of the newer ones.

Two sand-colored bodies lay sprawled on the ground in front of our airplane. Our enlisted crew chiefs, waiting for us, waiting for it all to be over, waiting for home. They look how I feel.

“Now Dasher! Now Prancer! Now Rudolph!” My Santa voice isn’t very good, but my crew laughs, trying to figure out who is Dasher and who is Prancer. I leave it ambiguous. Boom turns on his LED nose and leads the cacophony towards the jet.

The crew chiefs turn towards the noise. Slowly, they start to get up as Q gestures with his fairy wand. They aren’t smiling. Not yet.

They hand me the forms and I go over fifty years of broken and fixed bits. The tail of my hat bounces as I turn the pages. I hand the forms back and get my flashlight to look in engine cowlings, check for leaks, and make sure the plane won’t try to kill us. One of the crew chiefs walks around with me. Trailing like a sad shadow.

“Looks good.” I call climbing up the ladder. He nods.

When I get on comms, I start doing voices. I’m not good at voices.

The crew chief on headset smiles at my Schwarzenegger. Slowly the smile turns to a laugh, then he makes a joke. Got him. By the end of the three-hour preflight, both crew chiefs are laughing with us and passing the headset back and forth to hear my reenactment of Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd checking flight controls.

It is time. We are ready to taxi and takeoff and start our day. The crew chiefs are finishing theirs. From the ground, the crew chief motions to the headset.

“What’s up, chief?” Bugs is still leaking through.

“Captain. Thanks. Today was a shit day, we’d given up on life. Being here, on Christmas.” He laughs. “But then you fucking show up.” He trails off. “I’m going to tell my kids about this.”

“Merry Christmas chief. Save some pie for us.”

He unplugs the headset and snaps to attention, saluting. It’s the best salute I’ve ever gotten.

I salute back. Rudolph’s LED nose blinks behind me as we start taxiing.

On our way through the airspace of different countries, we get passed to different controllers. I do a different voice for each one. My crew giggles off hot mic. I set a Christmas dinner timer on the GPS clock to show how much time we still have before 2000.

When we enter the airspace above Iraq, things change. Our costumes go away, our chatter dies, I don’t do voices. Smoke drifts. Sand, smoke, fires, flashes, sharp voices cutting through the buzz of scrambled radio transmissions. We are at war.

I fly us to our first rendezvous with F-16s. They rejoin on us, wagging their wings in greeting. I can see the JDAMs all snug in their racks. The first Viper slips back for aerial refueling, directly behind us, ten feet away. Boom connects, now our planes are joined, tethered through a steel pipe pumping thousands of pounds of JP-8 a minute. A few minutes pass and the first Viper disconnects. The second connects. A few minutes later and they descend to their kill box. I put us in an orbit for the next forty minutes until our next pair of receivers.

That's how it goes. Sets of F16s every hour for six hours. We move through Iraq, they come up from their kill boxes, return, and we move on. I keep track of the Christmas dinner timer. We should make it. I point at the green numbers clicking down, Q grins.

“Turbo 44.”

Shit.

“Go for Turbo 44.” Q says.

“Turbo 44, this is Overlord...”

Double shit.

“I have a Viper with a fuel emergency, he needs a mother hen to make a divert.”

Triple shit.

I take over the radio. “Overlord, we can support.” Yesterday a Jordanian F-16 crashed and ISIS captured the pilot. Intel didn't know his status. I had a good guess: dead, now or later, probably horribly. A lot of my friends fly F-16s.

Q watches me turn off the Christmas dinner timer and nods. We get vectors and I push the throttles to mil thrust. We race across miles of empty sand as the smoke burns south. A pair of Vipers swoop around us, one goes for an immediate onload. He starts talking as soon as Boom connects, the direct line is secure. He had an internal fuel system problem and needs constant fuel coming in to stay airborne. We don't talk about the Jordanian pilot. We drag the Viper across Iraq until he can see the runway at Ali Al Salem in Kuwait.

“Merry Christmas fellas.” He disconnects and the pair of fighters blast toward the runway.

We did something. He gets to call home tonight.

“Nice work.” I say.

My crew collectively breathes again.

Q points at his watch and grins. He has a backup Christmas dinner timer going.

Lieutenants.

“Alright boys, looks like we might be able to make it after all.” I hear the echoed cheering from the boom compartment in the back of the airplane.

We leave Iraqi airspace and I put my Santa hat on for the journey home.

I look at my instruments in the same way I’ve done every two minutes since we took off. The right hydraulic system fluid gage shows empty. The left is full.

Both were full two minutes ago. I tap it a couple times. Fifty-year-old needles can stick sometimes. It isn’t stuck. Sudden hydraulic fluid loss. Fifty-year-old lines and valves and seals break sometimes. The KC-135 is a pretty robust airplane. Old enough they put ashtrays in it for the pilots. It was designed to withstand a nuclear blast while airborne. Crews used to carry a special helmet for the pilot and an eyepatch for the copilot. The helmet protects the pilot’s eyes from nuclear flash blindness and the eyepatch protects one of the copilot’s eyes. The copilot wears the eyepatch and flies. After the flash blindness, he switches the patch to the other eye. Lieutenants.

The KC-135 has backup systems for backup systems. In case of a hydraulic emergency, you simply pull a lever and power the failed system from the backup. The only problem is that you can’t use it with a sudden loss because then ALL the fluid drains out and you lose both systems. I’d just lost flaps, brakes, steering, boom, half of my

speed brakes, powered rudder, and a bunch of other things. I tap the gauge again, just in case. The needle doesn't even wiggle from empty.

“We just had a sudden loss of the right hydraulic system. I can't crossover.”

It is strangely quiet. Q looks at me.

“Boom, I need you to poke around and see if you can see any fluid leaking.” I toss him my flashlight. “Q, get out the checklist.”

The checklist used to be a binder with about 1,000 pages of all the things that can go wrong and how to try and fix them. Over the last fifty years, it has gotten bigger as planes crashed, crew died, and they added new things that can go wrong. But now, it is electronic, a searchable eBook on a way too expensive iPad. Progress.

“Jinx, I see some fluid.” Boom's voice is soft on the intercom.

“Overlord, Turbo 44.”

“Go for Overlord.”

“Turbo 44 is proceeding directly to home station.”

The radio is silent. You don't say 'emergency' in a war zone.

“Copy Turbo 44. Good luck.”

“Q, gimme something.”

He starts reading. There are about a dozen applicable checklists. I make sure he is reading all the steps, all the notes, all the warnings, all the cautions, all the ways we can fuck this up and die. I make sure he is reading over the intercom so the cockpit voice recorder hears us. I think of my friend Travis. After his 135 ripped itself apart on the way to Afghanistan, they gathered all the pilots into a theatre where we listened to the last ten

minutes of his life. We listened as he figured out exactly what went wrong but didn't hit the little switch that would have saved his life. Or maybe he hit it and it didn't work. There wasn't enough left at the crash site to figure out which. In the theatre, we listened to his copilot scream until the recorder stopped recording. She had a six-month-old little girl at home. Then, we all went into the simulators and practiced pushing the little switch.

I want us to sound good, just in case anyone would be listening.

We read a few hundred pages, complete checklist after checklist while orbiting above the Arabian Gulf. Boom is twenty. He is going to turn twenty-one in a few weeks. We were going to celebrate with our three beer tokens on an off day. Q is twenty-three. It is his first deployment. I am twenty-seven. It is my fifth.

They don't ask if we are going to be ok. They don't have the words. They run checklist after checklist.

Something needs to break, or they will.

“Alright, we are going to have one chance at this. Once we hand crank the flaps down, that's it. I'll touch down firm and short. There's enough residual pressure for three applications of the brakes. I don't have steering, so I'll take us onto the high speed with differential braking. It's my landing. Boom, when you're ready.”

He moves to the back. To hand crank the flaps down, you count revolutions of a four-foot breaker bar. Ten revolutions on the left side, ten on the right, then ten on the left, then ten on the right. If you mess up the count, the airplane becomes uncontrollable and you die. It is a lot of pressure on a twenty-year-old.

He starts counting, slow, uncertain over the intercom.

He finishes his first set and is about to start his second.

“Two. Five. Three. Eh, seven, doc.” Bugs Bunny tells him.

Laughter erupts from the intercom. “Fucking hell guys, you know if I mess this up...”

“You got this Boom.” I say.

Q grins as runway lights gleam out of miles of dark. “You got this Jinx.”

I do.

We meet the firetrucks at the end of the high-speed runway and are towed to our spot. On the post flight I see blood red hydraulic fluid dripping in lines down the airframe.

Once we finally get back to ops, I send my crew to the DFAC and stay to fill out all the paperwork, answer questions from senior pilots who made sure I did, in fact do everything right. Standing in front of them didn’t seem to be enough proof.

I take the lonely bus to the DFAC and walk under the harsh lights as workers clear up the last white tablecloth of Christmas dinner. Maybe next year.

“Jinx!” Two sweat stained kids in sand colored flight suits wave at me from our table. They’d waited for me. I sit down and they push a piece of pie in front of me.

“Those crew chiefs came through.” Q said.

They did. It was pretty good pie.

We finish up and I walk past rows of trailers to where someone had strung up a single strand of white lights on a pole. The lights only made it halfway down.

My phone starts buzzing with missed messages as I come into Wi-Fi range. I ignore them and close my eyes. I open them and call her.

“Hey.” I say. “Merry Christmas.”

She tells me how hard Christmas is. How hard it is for me to be gone. How hard being with family is. How hard...

Something breaks.

I click the phone off.

I walk on the sand towards my box. My phone buzzes until I’m out of Wi-Fi range. I check the time, eight hours until the next alert call. I walk into the dark next to the razor wire fence.

The next line reads:

The distinctive accomplishments of Captain Castle reflect great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

echoes.

Tracers in the Night

Home? I walk through the door, my boots leave faint outlines of powdered sand on the carpet, her carpet. I take them off. I walk past my bags on the floor. Only two this time. I pack less each time. You don't need a whole lot. Flight suit, gas mask, paperwork. Amazon ships there too.

She wears a sundress. "I don't know why I wore a sundress."

"You are beautiful."

This time is better than the others. There's no yelling. There's no crying. We are good at this revolving half-life. We've practiced. At least we don't have kids.

She turns to the stove, her stove. Her house, her couch, her table, her home. I wrap my arms around her. An eighth-grade dance. We sway for a moment before I let go.

A new CD from her favorite band rests on the counter. It is a gift for me. It is not wrapped. I haven't heard it yet. Music is digital now. We don't need CDs anymore. I don't say anything. I take a knife from the magnetic board next to the coffee grinder. I try each corner of the case, careful not to scratch the plastic. The knives are dull. I'll sharpen them tomorrow. I play it. The music fills some of the silence.

We talk about movies.

Tracers in the night.

She looks at me expectantly. She said something funny. I laugh.

"Do you want me to start dinner?"

I'm not hungry. "Sure."

She moves to the kitchen, telling me about my favorites as the dance of chopping, scooping, and stirring begins. Favorites?

“What can I do?”

I pick cilantro. She loves the flavor but hates plucking each individual leaf from the stem. I make a neat pile as she stirs something. She told me what it was. I look at the pot to see specialty ground beef. “Looks good.”

As I’m done with each cilantro stem, I line it up and form a perfect green latticework. She doesn’t have the patience for it.

I’m done. I take a shower. Hot water cascades down my back as my head rests against the wall. *Tracers in the night.*

What can I do?

I put on shorts and a soft shirt that isn’t the color of sand.

We have dinner. The plantain tostadas are burned. “They were too ripe; I didn’t think about their sugar content.” Her foot grazes mine but doesn’t linger. I get up to get the salt. It isn’t where it was. An empty jar sits in the cabinet. “It’s on the counter.”

Flames on the ground. A staticky voice cracks through my headset, straining through the last half of his transmission. “...hostiles engaging civilians.” He doesn’t have permission to drop. Not yet. More have to die. At least I never have to pull the trigger. At least I’m not on the ground. There’s always someone closer to danger, always someone else with

a valid reason why they can't sleep. I fly too high to get hurt.

I'm too far away. My jet doesn't come back with holes.

"What are you thinking?"

"Nothing."

The food disappears into metal boxes. More than enough for tomorrow.

I do the dishes. I always did the dishes. The water dribbles warm down my hands and into the disposal. I see eggshells through the black slit. She's talking about beans.

"They were dry so I had to rehydrate them. They turned out a little tough."

"They were perfect." I watch her red and gold curls pirouette as she puts the food in the refrigerator. As she turns to look at me, I stare at the sink. She doesn't see the tears banish before they climax.

I set the sponge down to clean out 62 days of accumulated grime in the recesses of the food processor. She takes my sponge to wash a fork.

Get the fuck out of my way.

I don't say it.

I finish the dishes. She's gone. I flip the switch and watch the eggshells clatter away. The water stops dripping.

I walk into the bedroom. Sex happens. She curls into me, clutching for my hand, fingers entwining between mine, legs spiderwebbing through my own. Her breathing slows.

"What are you thinking?" She murmurs.

Tracers in the night.

“I love you.” That is the thing to say.

A long breath and stillness. Fingers loosen their grip.

I watch the wall. Seven wedding pictures from two years and five deployments ago are clipped to three metal wires suspended on an open picture frame. We started the project three deployments ago. Half the frame is still empty. I watch our smiles fade in the gathering dark. I close my eyes.

Tracers.

I open my eyes. Blackness. It is strange to sleep while the sun is down. I haven't slept for 30 hours but I'm not tired. I watch the clock tick over to tomorrow. Sixty-two days until I leave again.

What They Defend

Writers of War Literature use different narrative techniques to mediate distance and communicate the truth of the subjective experience of war. We can use these methods as potential points of entry to the significant events of our lives. It is important to note that the complete truth of trauma or war often remains impossible to fully language despite the method. For many authors of War Literature, when the immediacy of war remains incommunicable, they often mediate the truth to prevent hurting those who cannot understand it. Learning to mitigate truth with compassion in letters describing how men under her care died, Brittain became “so weary of writing gruesome details to sorrowing relatives, that the number of officers who were instantaneously and painlessly shot through the head or the heart passed far beyond the bounds of probability” (496). In *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Remarque has Paul lie to his mother when she asks if the war was bad. Paul realizes that he could not answer truthfully because she “would not understand, you could never realize it. And you never shall realize it.” Paul shakes his head and tells his mother it was not so very bad. His mother insists and asks about the rumor of gas attacks. Paul desists because “she does not know what she is saying...should I tell her how we once found three enemy trenches with their garrison all stiff as though stricken with apoplexy? Against the parapet, in the dug-outs, just where they were, the men stood and lay about, with blue faces, dead” (73). When language fails to relate the intimate horrors of war, what remains for many authors of War Literature is an avoidance of words altogether. Where most of us diverge from the writers of War Literature is in our audience. War Literature has a largely external audience, while our

audience is largely internal. The primary goal in our work is to engage with the past in integrative ways. The goal of many writers of War Literature is to translate their war subjectivity to those distanced from it.

To find a way to write the impossible is the lingering tension within War Literature. War Literature continues to bridge the divide between the immediate and distant. If one cannot tell the truth of war, many writers of War Literature make the attempt because there is meaning in act of attempting. Rather than let the understanding of war be shaped by propaganda, they write to tell the truth of how they encountered war. As Deer observes, propaganda censors war's immediacy to "promote the heroic prospect of battle" (25). In WWI, combatant writers fought against this censorship to reveal the reality of war. Because propaganda uses distance to make martial glory, heroism, and valor possible, the immediacy of proximity pushes against those patriotic values. In *Dulce et Decorum Est*, Wilfred Owen uses vivid imagery of the front to uncover the censored version of the Somme given by the newspapers:

In all my dreams before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
Pro patria mori. (Walter 183).

In *The Unwomanly Face of War*, Alexievich Svetlana has the same desire as Owen in capturing an unfiltered view of war. She believed truth could be found by coaxing the stories of female Soviet soldiers from behind the censored newspapers which ennobled war through a grand, whitewashed narrative of heroism, sacrifice, and victory. Svetlana intersperses anecdotes from those women with conversations from a Soviet censor. The dialog between Svetlana and the censor illustrates the struggle of War Literature to overcome a distant, idealized knowledge of war. After reviewing the personal, immediate narratives in Svetlana's book, the censor states: "who will go to fight after such books?" (34). By bringing the immediacy of war to those who are distanced, War Literature attempts to communicate its horror. This approach doesn't serve the agenda of the propagandist. For the Soviet censor, by showing "the filth of the war. The underwear. You make our Victory terrible... You think the truth is what's there in life... the truth is what we dream about" (36). Because an uncensored narrative of war pushes against a narrative promoting war, it must be "a lie!... we don't need your little history, we need the big history. The history of the Victory" (38).

As J.R.R. Tolkien puts it, War Literature provides the little history telling how "the utter stupid waste of war, not only material but moral and spiritual, is so staggering to those who have to endure it. And always was (despite the poets), and always will be (despite the propagandists)" (*Letters* 75). The intent of War Literature is to bridge the immediate and distanced experiences of war. Through perspective, authenticity, and genre, War Literature attempts to convey the reality of war. War Literature fails in the same way individual soldiers fail to singlehandedly win their war. Despite full, intimate

knowledge of war, soldiers often volunteer to return to its horror. This return to war is another tension within War Literature because it uncovers the question of whether war is ever necessary. Even if the true horror of war can be communicated, are there things more terrible than war? There is something beyond a barrier of knowledge that drives a soldier to return to the front. For some, war is a horrible thing, but, when considering Dachau and Auschwitz, war isn't the most horrible of things. For some soldiers, the horrors of some wars are worth the cost. Writing to his son, an RAF pilot in WWII, Tolkien describes this tension as: "war must be, while we defend our lives against a destroyer who would devour all; but I do not love the bright sword for its sharpness, nor the arrow for its swiftness, nor the warrior for his glory. I love only that which they defend" (LOTR 672).

While this tension is important to note, when considering the methods of engaging with the significant events in our lives, a perfect translation of the truth of a subjective traumatic event isn't the goal. The meaning is in the method. As LaCapra puts it, "when the past becomes accessible to recall in memory, and when language functions to provide some measure of conscious control, critical distance, and perspective, one has begun the arduous process of working over and through the trauma" (90). It is in the doing of the words that we find the path out of the holes. This chapter shows us some of the methods writers of War Literature have employed to engage with their experience. If they resonate, we can use those methods on our own journeys towards literacy.

CHAPTER FOUR

“I shall never write any ordered biography—it is against my nature, which expresses itself about things deepest felt in tales and myths”

A letter from J.R.R Tolkien to his son Christopher in 1972 (420-421).

“Deep in his heart there was something that restrained him: he could not strike this thing lying in the dust, forlorn, ruinous, utterly wretched...unable to find peace or relief ever in life again. But Sam had no words to express what he felt”

J.R.R Tolkien, LOTR, 1955 (944).

In 1945, Professor J.R.R Tolkien wrote a series of letters to his son serving in the RAF during WWII. Accompanying these letters were sections of his unpublished work, *The Lord of the Rings*. In the sections sent in serial to his son, Tolkien puts the strongest imagery of the WWI battlefields he survived. It is in these parts of his epic that Tolkien places the character most like him, Faramir. As Frodo is about to enter the land of shadow, Faramir offers wisdom, encouragement, succor, and guidance, like a father would. I read these letters for the first time in a military aircraft above Afghanistan in 2014.

Letters in the Sky: *Back and Forth, Road 304*

Back and Forth

6 November 2014

Professor,

I don't know what we are doing in Afghanistan. Every day we fly above trackless wastes of sand. Outside of Kabul, I haven't seen a paved road. Miles of nothing, no lights in the dark. Scattered buildings here or there, a few herds. All we are doing is watching the nothing go by. We burn twelve thousand pounds of fuel an hour for what?

To Christopher Tolkien, 18 April 1944

Your accounts distressed but did not surprise me. How it reminds me of my own experience! I would not mind it, if you were happier or more usefully employed. How stupid everything is!, and war multiplies the stupidity by 3 and its power by itself: so one's precious days are ruled by $(3x)^2$ when x =normal human crassitude (and that's bad enough).

8 November 2014

Professor,

In the preflight intel brief, we learned that a special forces convoy hit an IED and a young captain died. His name was familiar. I think I met him at West Point when I visited my brother in his senior year.

When I landed, I had an email from John saying we had another name for a boat.

To Christopher Tolkien, 30 April 1944

The utter stupid waste of war, not only material but moral and spiritual, is so staggering to those who have to endure it. And always was (despite the poets), and always will be (despite the propagandists). But so short is human memory and so evanescent are its generations that in only about 30 years there will be few or no people with that direct experience which alone goes really to the heart. The burnt hand teaches most about fire.

I sometimes feel appalled at the thought of the sum total of human misery all over the world at the present moment. If anguish were visible, almost the whole of this benighted planet would be enveloped in a dense dark vapour, shrouded from the amazed vision of the heavens! But there is still some hope that things may be better for us.

Now we can only link with this flimsy bit of paper! I first began to write the 'History of the Gnomes' in army huts, crowded, filled with the noise of gramophones – and there you are in the same prison. May you, too, escape – strengthened. Take care of yourself, in soul and body, in all ways proper and possible.

12 November 2014

Professor,

We just found out we will be extended through Christmas. It wouldn't be so bad if we were actually doing something. But all we have are empty routine and empty flights. The food is even routine, seven meals, on repeat, for years and years. That isn't even the worst part. I was running at 0200, the only time the heat

doesn't kill you, and some idiot yelled at me for not wearing the proper reflective belt. Mine was yellow and it was supposed to be blue. There is no point to any of this. Why are my friends dying?

To Christopher Tolkien, 6 May 1944

Life in camp seems not to have changed at all, and what makes it so exasperating is the fact that all its worse features are unnecessary, and due to human stupidity which (as 'planners' refuse to see) is always magnified indefinitely by 'organization.' But England in 1917, 1918 was in a poor way, and it is a bit thicker that in a land of relative plenty, you should have such conditions. And the taxpayers would like to know where are all the millions going, if the pick of their sons are so treated. However it is, humans being what they are, quite inevitable, and the only cure is not to have wars. For we are attempting to conquer Sauron with the Ring. And we shall (it seems) succeed. But the penalty is, as you will know, to breed new Saurons, and slowly turn Men and Elves into Orcs. Not that in real life things are as clear cut as in a story, and we started out with a great many Orcs on our side. Well, there you are: a hobbit amongst the Urukhai. Keep up your hobbitry in heart, and think that all stories feel like that when you are in them. You are inside a very great story!

I think also that you are suffering from suppressed 'writing.' You have rather too much of me and my peculiar mode of thought and reaction. I think if you could begin to write, and find your own mode, or even (for a start) imitate mine, you would find it a great relief. I sense amongst all your pains the desire to

express your feeling about good, evil, fair, foul in some way: to rationalize it, and prevent it just festering. In my case it generated Morgoth and the History of the Gnomes. Lots of the early parts of which were done in grimy canteens, at lectures in cold fogs, in huts full of blasphemy and smut, or by candle light in bell tents, even some down in dugouts under shell fire.

18 November 2014

Professor,

All I can do is survive one moment at a time. All I can do is bring myself through each day. Each flight. For what? And to write? I don't have any words. I've started bringing a notebook to dawdle time away as we orbit miles of sand. But there is nothing. Just staring out the window and the empty page.

To Christopher Tolkien, 10 June 1944

As for what to try and write: I don't know. I tried a diary of portraits (some scathing some comic some commendatory) of persons and events seen; but I found it was not my line. So I took to 'escapism': or really transforming experience into another form and symbol with Morgoth and the Orcs and the Eldalie (representing beauty and grace of life and artefact) and so on; and it has stood me in good stead in many hard years since.

25 December 2014

Professor,

I think I found a word. Maybe just a few. We were flying underneath a cloud layer, watching fires and smoke drift. F16s dropping JDAMS. Tracers

arcing back and forth. It was so terrible; my mind couldn't make sense of it. Then, I pulled up and all faded in the grey mist of the clouds. Streams of sun wove through layers of dark and light. It was so beautiful; I couldn't make sense of it. All was alight.

Flying holds both horror and beauty at the same time. I cannot.

To Christopher Tolkien, 7 July 1944

That touches to the heart of things, doesn't it? There is the tragedy and despair of all machinery laid bare. Unlike art which is content to create a new secondary world in the mind, it attempts to actualize desire, and so to create power in this World. So we come inevitably from Daedalus and Icarus to the Giant Bomber. It is not an advance in wisdom! This terrible truth sticks out so plainly and is so horrifyingly exhibited in our time, with its even worse menace for the future.

30 January 2015

Professor,

We are headed home. Operations are winding down in Afghanistan. Iraq has been silent for long enough that I start to hope I'll never come back. There are too many craters in the sand. Too many holes.

To Christopher Tolkien, 30 January 1945

The first War of the Machines seems to be drawing to its final inconclusive chapter – leaving, alas, everyone the poorer, many bereaved or

maimed and millions dead, and only one thing triumphant: the Machines. As the servants of the Machines are becoming a privileged class, the Machines are going to be enormously more powerful. What's their next move?

All the love of your own father

The Shadow of War

“One has indeed personally to come under the shadow of war to feel fully its oppression; but as the years go by it seems now often forgotten that to be caught in youth by 1914 was no less hideous an experience than to be involved in 1939 and the following years. By 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead”

WWI signal officer and author J.R.R. Tolkien, 1965 in LOTR (xx).

When we explored different methodologies in Chapter Three, we didn't consider the impact of education or training on the narrative tools used by writers to enter the space of trauma. This chapter brings those concepts into the discussion of how familiarity facilitates engagement with the significant events in our lives. We'll use the intersection of J.R.R. Tolkien's life and writing to discover what methods we might employ to translate our deepest feelings onto the external page. In a sense, the adage of “to a hammer, every problem is a nail” accurately summarizes what we'll think about in this chapter. Tolkien's “hammer” was a subgenre of the surreal: tales and myth. It was in this particular flavor of the fantastic that he expressed his “things deepest felt;” not only his time in the trenches of WWI, but also his thoughts on war, religion, love, and loss.

When Tolkien published *The Lord of the Rings (LOTR)* in three volumes between 1954 and 1955, many readers and critics in North America and Europe saw the story as an allegory for the two world wars of the twentieth century and the mounting tension with the Soviet Union. While Tolkien constructed the epic in intervals between 1936-1949, he was adamant in denying that reading of his work. As Tolkien states in 1960, “I do not think that either war (and of course not the atomic bomb) had any influence upon either the plot or the manner of its unfolding” (*Letters* 303). If the plot were truly

allegorical to the development of nuclear weapons, it would have followed Tolkien's take on WWII in 1944: "we are attempting to conquer Sauron with the Ring" (*Letters* 78) rather than destroying it, as he writes in *LOTR*. Despite no direct allegory, the atmosphere of WWI permeates *LOTR*. Written under the shadow of war, the epic can be considered one of the last works of first world war literature. As Tolkien admitted in the foreword to *LOTR*, "an author cannot of course remain wholly unaffected by his experience, but the ways in which a story-germ uses the soil of experience are extremely complex, and attempts to define the process are at best guesses" (xx). While we can speculate, we can't know the exact nature of how war influenced Tolkien. It also isn't useful to use our access to the language of the cognitive sciences to diagnose either Tolkien or his characters with any clinical trauma disorders. What we can do is place Tolkien's life, writing, and letters next to each other and see what connections appear. From the junction of his life detailed in John Garth's *Tolkien and the Great War*, and Tolkien's oeuvre and letters, we know that serving as a signaling officer in the Battle of the Somme during WWI effected Tolkien.

In a 1910 debate at King Edward's School, Tolkien argued against an international court of arbitration to replace war. Summarized by Garth, an eighteen-year-old Tolkien insisted that "war was both a necessary and a productive aspect of human affairs" (21). In *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, just after he turned twenty-one and WWI flamed across Europe, Tolkien writes of "the collapse of all [his] world" (393). During the war, Tolkien "wrote" himself out of the trenches. In his letters, Tolkien describes the Somme as an "animal horror" (72) and states how, in such an environment, he "took to

escapism: or really transforming experience into another form and symbol with Morgoth and the Orcs and the Eldalie,” such an escape “has stood me in good stead in many hard years since” (85). He even advocated a similar method to his son Christopher during WWII, encouraging him to write to “express your feeling about good, evil, fair, foul in some way: to rationalize it, and prevent it just festering” (78). Tolkien continued to tell his son how it was WWI that “generated Morgoth and the History of the Gnomes. Lots of the early parts of which...were done in grimy canteens...even some down in dugouts under shell fire” (78). In 1955, Tolkien states how “the first real story of this imaginary world almost fully formed as it now appears was written in prose during sick-leave at the end of 1916: The Fall of Gondolin...I wrote a lot else in hospitals before the end of the First Great War” (215). *LOTR* was similarly constructed in large part during WWII with Book Four “written as a serial and sent out to my son serving in Africa in 1944” (216). The shadow of war permeates Tolkien’s work. When we encounter Tolkien’s life and method, we begin to understand how he translated the experience of two world wars into tales and myth and how the subjective truth of war is enhanced rather than diminished by his use of the surreal.

In the mythic, Tolkien found the space to engage with WWI. His method derives from his personal passion for language and an affinity for Arthurian Legend and the Andrew Lang’s Fairy Books he discovered as a small boy. As told by his biographer Humphrey Carpenter, young Tolkien found Sigurd and the Dragon “the best story he had ever read” (25). Tolkien first became enamored with the Welsh and Finnish languages when he was a student at Oxford. This interest started a lifelong study into Old English

and Germanic literatures up until the end of the 14th century. Tolkien studied the *Kalevala*, *Beowulf*, the *Poetic Edda*, and the Icelandic *Volsunga Saga* among many others. Most of his professional and personal work, including *LOTR*, retains elements of the epic Germanic, Old Norse, Icelandic, and Anglo-Saxon stories and mythologies which formed the basis of his scholarly study at Oxford where he taught for thirty-four years. Because the method of the mythic was easily accessible to Tolkien, it makes sense that he would employ that well-used tool in his engagement with WWI. Examining his background and training through his scholarly work provides an entryway into his larger works such as *LOTR* and *The Fall of Gondolin*. Using the mythic, Tolkien translated his experience in WWI and his thoughts on how an immediate perspective of war disrupts the concept of the heroic found in a poetic tradition.

To engage with the Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon*, Tolkien crafted “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son,” a one-act prose play which begins after *The Battle of Maldon* ends. The play was originally published in 1953 in volume six of the journal *Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association*. The play contains Tolkien’s criticism of the poem in the form of a return for the slain hero Byrhtnoth. The play also contains Tolkien’s analysis of heroism and war which are useful for charting how he engaged with those ideals in *LOTR*. Not only did Tolkien write a homecoming for *The Battle of Maldon*, but he also created one for *LOTR* in the chapter “The Scouring of the Shire.” Tolkien’s fascination with homecoming, that firmly links his thoughts on *The Battle of Maldon* with *LOTR*, indicates that Tolkien did not believe a story concluded with a final battle; but, as he had seen in WWI, the effects of war linger even after

soldiers return. If Tolkien had ended *LOTR* with the crowning of Aragorn as king and the defeat of the enemy, the tale would still cling to epic tradition in the face of modernity. If Sam and Frodo had gone out in a blaze of glory during their final battle like Beowulf and Byrhtnoth, Tolkien would remain part of the myth and legend he studied. Instead, Tolkien rises above the mythic by grounding the surreal into the reality of war's lingering effects.

The disconnection between the reality of war and its imagined state lies in the separation and safety of distance. In Tolkien's play "Homecoming," he uses perspective to bridge that gap and complicates the heroic representation of war found in *The Battle of Maldon*. Rather than use the viewpoint of the most significant and skilled warriors as *The Battle of Maldon* does, Tolkien uses two insignificant peasants to ground "Homecoming" and emphasize the importance of telling war narrative from those who have seen its dirt, blood, and trauma. Tolkien perfects this shift in perspective within *LOTR* by telling the epic through four diminutive Hobbits, sized little larger than children.

To understand how Tolkien stands in opposition to the glorified "poetic" representation of war in *The Battle of Maldon*, it is important to place the historic and literary context of both Tolkien and Maldon. In a 1944 letter to his son Christopher, Tolkien writes "the utter stupid waste of war...is so staggering to those who have to endure it. And always was (despite the poets)" (75). This statement isn't a wholesale rejection of the genre of poetry—Tolkien often meddled in the poetic throughout his life—rather, this is a rejection of the romanticized representation of war often found in the poetic narrative prior to WWI. When considering Tolkien's corpus of work before the

war, he largely wrote poetry and, after the Battle of the Somme, he largely wrote prose. Tolkien's biographers don't give us any examples of his prose before WWI. While those examples may exist, the amount lies in sharp contrast, especially when considering his work before and after the war. For whatever reason, it appears Tolkien did not or could not use the method of "poetry" to enter the space of the trenches.

It is useful to take a brief foray into the origins of Tolkien's legendarium to examine this genre shift, namely the character of Earendel that served as the inception of Tolkien's myth lore. The name and origin of Tolkien's Earendel comes from a poem by Cynewulf in *The Exeter Book*, Christ 1, Lyric 5, lines 104-105: *Eala earendel, engla beorhtast ofer middeneard monnum sended*, or as I translate: "Hail Earendel, brightest of angels, sent over middle-earth to all men." According to Garth, Tolkien penned the poem *The Voyage of Earendel the Evening Star* on September 24th 1914 (45). Tolkien returned to his story of Earendel during the Battle of the Somme and while some was composed in the trenches, it was largely written when he was recovering from Trench Fever in a hospital in England in 1916. Upon this "post Somme" return to his legendarium, Tolkien used prose rather than poetry to tell of the fall of a great city due in large part to a king's excessive pride. Now known as *The Fall of Gondolin*, Tolkien's tale is epic in proportion and borrows from the mood of Norse and Finnish mythology that filled Tolkien's head as a youth. Notably, *The Fall of Gondolin* strays from the perspective of kings and heroes to include those of women and children in its direct translation of the subjective reality of the Western Front. Tolkien's shift in character viewpoint transports the narrative from a romanticized epic tale of the heroic to the

reality of moments like a desperately thirsty child asking his father for water. The horror of combat is easy to dismiss because it is difficult to imagine. A point of view grounded in the shadow of war helps bridge that gap and delivers the immediacy of the front. It was Tolkien's time in WWI that influenced his use of perspective to complicate the idea of the heroic often found in poetic representations of war.

This shift in approach is clearly seen in Tolkien's response to *The Battle of Maldon*. The actual battle the poem describes occurred in 991 A.D. between Ealdorman Byrthnoth's forces and a group of Danish raiders. As told in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the raiders overran the country "and so to Maldon and Ealdorman Byrthnoth came against them there with his army and fought with them; and they killed the ealdorman there and had possession of the place of slaughter. And afterwards they made peace with them" (Swanson 126). The battle bears historic significance because the victory of the raiders led to the first tax paid to them. In Frank Stenton's *Anglo-Saxon England*, he describes how, to the raiders, "the battle of Maldon was merely an exciting incident in the course of a successful expedition" (377). For Byrthnoth's forces, it was an incredible defeat caused by the ealdorman's decision to yield the tactical advantage of holding a narrow causeway. Allowing the enemy to fight on equal footing led to Byrthnoth's death and the rout of his soldiers. This chivalric choice is attributed by the poet to Byrthnoth's *ofermod* or excessive pride. What gives the poem lasting significance is that after the causeway has been yielded and Byrthnoth dies, a group of his most loyal thanes deliberately continue the fight to avenge their fallen lord with full knowledge the battle is lost. This display of courage led to E. V. Gordon remarking in his 1937 translation of the

poem that Maldon stands as “the only purely heroic poem extant in Old English” (24) and the “poet of Maldon understood and emphasized the ascendancy of spirit over the weakness of the body required by this code” (27). Tolkien stands in direct opposition to Gordon’s assumption and in “Homecoming” says that those loyal retainers were “magnificent perhaps, but certainly wrong. Too foolish to be heroic” (24). The differing interpretations of the heroic between Gordon and Tolkien serve as the backdrop to Tolkien’s response to *The Battle of Maldon* in “Homecoming.” Tolkien and Gordon were friends and colleagues who collaborated not only on a 1925 translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* but also on *Pearl*. Their disagreement on the heroic could have originated in their different experiences of WWI. In *Tolkien the Medievalist*, Jane Chance notes how Gordon enlisted but was discharged as being medically unfit and spent the war working for the ministry of national service (16) while Tolkien saw the blood and dirt of the trenches.

To contextualize how Tolkien’s “Homecoming” responds to Gordon’s notion of the heroic in *The Battle of Maldon*, it is necessary to visit two key moments in the poem. The first occurs in lines 88-89 and describes the Ealdorman’s yielding of the causeway: *Ɔa se eorl ongan for his ofermode alyfan landes to fela laþere ðeode*, or as I translate, “then the earl (Byrthnoth) began, because of his excessive pride, to yield too much land to the hateful people.” The second moment takes place on lines 312-313 after Byrthnoth’s death and is a speech by the ealdorman’s longtime companion who exhorts the remaining warriors to continue the fight and avenge their lord: *Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre, mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlað* or, as Tolkien translates, “will shall be the

sterner, heart the bolder, spirit the greater as our strength lessens” (“Homecoming” 5). These two moments in the poem combine for Tolkien. In “Homecoming,” Tolkien summarizes the entirety of his play as an extended comment of those lines (21). Where *The Battle of Maldon* is told from the point of view of the most skilled and loyal soldiers, “Homecoming” describes the aftermath of the battle from the viewpoint of two insignificant peasants. While it fits within the poetic tradition for *The Battle of Maldon* to have grand speeches and epic moments of courage and heroism, it fits within Tolkien’s more realistic play to trouble those same notions.

“Homecoming” is a fictional expansion on a short passage of the *Liber Eliensis* which tells of the Abbot of Ely going to the battlefield at Maldon with a few monks to collect Byrthnoth’s body. In Tolkien’s play, the abbot sends two commoners to retrieve Beorhtnoth’s body from the battlefield. The play is largely a conversation between the two and a confrontation of their differing understandings of war. Totta is a youth whose “head is full of old lays concerning the heroes of northern antiquity” and Tida is a farmer “who had seen much fighting in the English defense-levies” (5). These two peasants stumble around in the dark searching through the carnage of the slaughter place to find the body of Beorhtnoth. As they wander in the muck, the youth recites lines from poetic canon and the old warrior recalls Totta to grim reality. When they find the body, Totta spouts a heroic eulogy for the Ealdorman and Tida responds that the eulogy isn’t fitting because they are not in one of the old poems. They bear Beorhtnoth “not Beowulf here; no pyres for him, nor piling of mounds, and the gold will be given to the good abbot”

(12). The contrast between their worldviews reaches a climax as the night closes in and Totta falls asleep.

In his dreams, the youth echoes the very lines originally given to the courageous old warrior in *The Battle of Maldon*: “Heart shall be bolder, harder be purpose, more proud the spirit as our power lessons! Mind shall not falter nor mood waver, though doom shall come and dark conquer” (20). There is a bump and Totta awakens and proclaims: “My bones are shaken, and my dream shattered. It’s dark and cold.” Instead of contradicting the youth as he has throughout the play, the old warrior agrees: “Aye...dark is over all, and dead is master. When morning comes, it’ll be much like others: more labour and loss till the land’s ruined; ever work and war till the world passes” (20). This passage summarizes Tolkien’s response to Gordon and *The Battle of Maldon*. Tolkien has likened the heroic representation of war found in the poetic tradition of his time to a dream that youths awaken from. The shift in perspective from loyal soldiers to insignificant peasants gave Tolkien the access to trouble the heroic nature of not just *The Battle of Maldon*, but the broader pre-war poetic tradition. It is this same metaphor of waking from the dream where reality asserts itself over the surreal elements in *LOTR*.

As his characters return from their war in *LOTR*, Tolkien seems to return to the real as the method to translate the lingering effects of WWI in “The Scouring of the Shire.” This chapter comes after the main quest is complete; the magic talisman, the Ring of Power, is destroyed on Mount Doom. The king has restored righteous rule and the land has begun to recover. Sauron has been defeated and many of the elements of a mythic tale have been met, yet the book does not conclude. The four Hobbits: Frodo, Sam,

Merry, and Pippin travel from the distant war to their home which they assume has been untouched by war. But this is not the case. All of their companions, the king, the great soldiers, even the wizard Gandalf are absent as the four Hobbits are left to face the evil infesting the Shire on their own. It is in the return where Tolkien departs from the surreal elements that have been a benchmark of the rest of the story and shifts to realism. Merry remarks that the four companions have “left all the rest behind, one after another. It seems almost like a dream that has slowly faded” (997). Where the awakening of Totta in Tolkien’s “Homecoming” is abrupt, in *LOTR*, it happens slowly. In this chapter, Tolkien dims the fantastic towards the real. The only surreal event comes at the chapter’s conclusion when the antagonist’s body magically dissolves and fades on a trace of wind. As the “dream” of their epic world spanning quest fades and they return to the Shire, the Hobbits are faced with the destruction of their home as they knew it. The fields and dales are replaced by factories churning smoke. The Shire is occupied by a wizard named Saruman who was “defeated” in *The Two Towers*. However, he and his band of ruffians are a far cry from the other, supernatural evils of the book: the fallen angel Sauron, the Witch King of Angmar, and the hordes of Orcs. In this chapter, even the enemy wizard’s magic has faded. In the words of Frodo, Saruman “has lost all power, save his voice that can still daunt you and deceive you, if you let it” (1019). This return to realism allows Tolkien to describe the alienation of a returning soldier and the lingering effects of war. In “The Scouring of the Shire” there is not an epic battle, but a series of small confrontations between Frodo, the other Hobbits, and a band of men. Throughout the chapter, Frodo is not the warrior-hero we would expect from mythic tradition. He is an

injured soldier who has seen the cost of war and been changed. Frodo's mantra is to "wish for no killing; not even of the ruffians, unless it must be done" (1010).

The reality that Frodo encounters in "The Scouring of the Shire" and the youth Totta experiences in "Homecoming" removes the imagination of the poetic and the dream of the heroic. What is left is the slaughter place. It wasn't just *The Battle of Maldon* that Tolkien is responding to in *LOTR* and "Homecoming," it was the culture of pre-war England where he, as a youth like Totta, had his head full of the heroic poetry of the past. And now, like Tida, as an old soldier who has seen too much of war, he can try to awaken new generations to the truth and reality of war. *The Battle of Maldon* isn't unique. In his introduction to the poem, Peter Baker places *The Battle of Maldon* in community with other poems that commemorate disaster including *The Song of Roland* and *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. Baker postulates that the purpose of such "poetry of defeat" as he refers to them can "in giving voice to a nation's grief, stir nationalist sentiment and rouse soldiers to deeds of valour" (228). That idea was put to use when, as Baker notes, *The Charge of the Light Brigade* was distributed in pamphlet form to soldiers in Crimea (228). It was his separation from Crimea that led to Tennyson's use of poetry in his heroic eulogy of the English cavalry that tells of an unmitigated disaster caused by miscommunication. Tolkien places Tennyson in the same poetic misrepresentation of war as *The Battle of Maldon*. In Tolkien's words, both poems glorify the soldiers whose sole role is to "endure and die, and not to question" (25). In Tolkien's mind, both poems are within the same outdated poetic tradition that glorify heroism at the expense of lives. Having survived WWI, Tolkien holds the tension of honoring individual sacrifice while

condemning a glorification of war and death: “It is the heroism of obedience and love not of pride or wilfulness that is the most heroic and the most moving; from Wiglaf under his kinsman’s shield, to Beorhtwold at Maldon, down to Balaclava, even if it is enshrined in verse no better than *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. Beorhtnoth was wrong, and he died for his folly” (“Homecoming” 25).

The continued cycle of war’s romanticized poetic tradition contributed to Byrthnoth’s decision to yield his tactical advantage of the narrow causeway, the ill-fated charge of English cavalry at the Battle of Balaclava, and the common English soldier in the trenches of World War I. The truth of war had been forgotten. Garth notes young men marched into battle in 1914 with “the *Iliad* in their backpacks and the names of Achilles and Hector engraved upon their hearts” (42). The poetic tradition glorifying war was a dream. The illusion persisted up to the opening engagements of WWI where the reality of war caused an abrupt awakening. As Garth narrates, the morning prior to the Battle of the Somme, “hope ran high. Behind the front line, a great cavalry stood like something out of the old picture books, ready to ride through the breach the infantry would make” (152). The infantry found only horrific death against modern technology and fixed machine gun emplacements. In *Terror from the Air*, Peter Sloterdijk states the reality WWI soldiers faced was a terrifying flight before chlorine gas attacks with their “tunics undone and weapons discarded, spitting blood and pleading for water” while their friends were “rolling around on the ground helplessly gasping for air” (11). It was this reality that Tolkien faced in the trenches. To escape from the nightmare, Tolkien used the method of the mythic. For Tolkien, the war he encountered was far removed from one where men

achieved fame and glory through battle and for most, their only immortalization came in the form of a non-descript white headstone. The legacy of the soldiers in WWI was not what they had achieved--as is the case with mythic heroes--but in their absence. Tolkien's generation is remembered in a place missing from the table; a wife without a husband, a mother without a son. War in the modern world is not glorious, but demeaning, ignominious and tragic.

It is the return to the real while holding the memory of the fantastic that helps Tolkien translate the alienation of the returning soldier. In *LOTR*, we follow Sam, Frodo, Merry, and Pippin on a twelve-hundred-page epic of highs and lows, pain, loss, death, terror, and horror. When they return to the Shire, we return with them. Our minds hold onto their journey when we meet those who have no knowledge or understanding of that same journey. Along with the Hobbits, we encounter Sam's father, an old gardener, who humorously but poignantly reveals the disparity between civilian expectations of warfare and a soldier's reality: "while you've been traipsing in foreign parts, chasing Black Men up mountains from what my Sam says, though for what he don't make clear, they've been and dug up Bagshot Row and ruined my taters!" (1014). Tolkien uses an old farmer distanced from the war to reduce the epic journey of Frodo and Sam to "traipsing in foreign parts." As we have accompanied those characters and become intimately familiar with their trauma, we feel the truth of Tolkien's personal disconnect in his return from WWI to the English countryside. In the words of Sam, to communicate their experience "needed a week's answer, or none" (1008). As is often the case for the returning soldier, the answer is none.

Tolkien doesn't end *LOTR* at the restoration of the Shire but lingers in the return of the Hobbits to narrate how the seen and unseen wounds of war also remain. Frodo found no praise, glory, or honor in his successful quest to destroy the Ring and save the world and his home; in fact, "few people knew or wanted to know about his deeds and adventures" (1025). Frodo fades from his people's minds and continues to weaken from the wounds he received during the war. Instead of wishing to be celebrated or remembered, "he simply wishes to be whole once more" (89). But Frodo can never be healed in Middle-Earth. Tolkien has Frodo, whose wounds have increased with time rather than diminished, depart Middle Earth on a ship which will take him to the undying lands in the west. Unlike Beowulf or Byrthnoth, there is no grand funeral or celebration for Frodo. He is not mourned by a whole people, only by three friends who went to war with him. It is Tolkien's dwelling on the aftereffects of war that directly translate its truth.

Lingering Wounds

“So desolate were those places and so deep the horror that lay on them that some of the host were unmanned, and they could neither walk nor ride further north.

Aragorn looked at them, and there was pity in his eyes rather than wrath; for these were young men from Rohan, from Westfold far away, or husbandmen from Lossarnach, and to them Mordor had been from childhood a name of evil, and yet unreal, a legend that had no part in their simple life; and now they walked like men in a hideous dream made true, and they understood not this war nor why fate should lead them to such a pass”

WWI signal officer and author J.R.R. Tolkien in *LOTR* (886).

Despite the surreal elements in *LOTR*, the reality of war comes through. A subjective understanding of war is largely dependent upon an individual’s viewpoint and proximity to combat. Even those soldiers within the same battle can have such variance that the singularity of one battle can be almost unrecognizable as the same event. Yet, in some strange, unfathomable way, the atmosphere of “war” appears to translate across time and space. Tolkien’s expression of war in *LOTR* parallels the lived experience of my friends and family who have fought in separate conflicts from WWII to the present. I imagine placing veterans from each separate conflict in the twentieth century together and asking, “been to war?” They would all nod and say no more. While the technology and landscape of their wars differ, the similarities within their conflicts creates an intimacy of shared knowledge.

Through the method of the surreal, Tolkien is able to translate the timeless experience of a soldier. After my brother returned from a year in Iraq, my niece didn’t understand why her father was so different than when he left. Her 11-year-old world had largely remained the same in his absence. Before he left, my brother had given her a copy

of *LOTR* and, perhaps spurred on by his recording of *The Hobbit* while in Iraq and sending audio chapters back home, she finished *LOTR* within a few months. She had read about Frodo's homecoming and how "one evening Sam came into the study and found his master looking very strange. He was very pale and his eyes seemed to see things far away," Sam asks what is wrong and Frodo answers, "I am wounded...it will never really heal" (1025). Sam asks if Frodo would enjoy the home he had saved and Frodo responds: "so I thought too, once. But I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. I must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: someone has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them" (1029). My niece closed the book, thought for a moment and remarked to her mother, "Now I understand dad." According to Garth, Tolkien's own children observed that WWI produced in their father a noticeable "lifelong sadness" (250). That mood translated into his writing and was transferred to a child fifty years and a completely different "war" later to accurately describe her own father. We begin to understand how Tolkien was able to use the surreal to narrate the subjective truth of war by examining the intersection of the Battle of the Somme and *The Fall of Gondolin*, the story he wrote in the hospital recovering from the battle. While in England and personally distant from the front, Tolkien continued corresponding with his friends in the trenches until the letters stopped, one by one.

In the opening day of the Battle of the Somme, the British army suffered almost 60,000 casualties in frontal assaults against nested machine guns. WWI brought a slew of new horrors with advancing technology including: poison gas, bolt action rifles, machine guns, rifled artillery, flame throwers, tanks, and even railroads which dramatically

increased the ability of an army to move soldiers and equipment. These new technologies greatly increased the lethality of warfare. It was now becoming possible to massacre a great number of people in a very short time. It wasn't solely a cognitive dissonance between expectation and reality that made modern war more closely resemble a slaughter place than a duel between men. Citing poison gas as an example, Sloterdijk argues that the nature of war had changed from targeting an individual body in classical warfare to "assaults on the environmental conditions of the enemy's life" (16). War became one waged on atmosphere itself. Instead of direct shots, one might envelop an opponent's position "within a noxious cloud" (18) which creates a transition from "classical warfare to terrorism" (16). For the individual soldier, this terrorism manifested as a monstrous yellow cloud springing out of the ground and floating towards them. The collective effect was a surreal and unimaginable evil. As Tolkien puts it, something "had gone crack" (qtd. in Garth 176). One of his closest friends, Rob Gilson, had been killed by a shell burst leading his platoon through no man's land during the opening day of the battle (156). Another dear friend, G.B. Smith, had survived the first days of the Somme and was some distance away from the front and "walking along the road when the air was split by the shriek of shells" (211). Two fragments hit Smith and he developed gas gangrene after two days and succumbed to his wounds.

Tolkien escaped from the shadow of war into the surreal. In the hospital, he used the method of the mythic to recount the Battle of the Somme in *The Fall of Gondolin*. Simply summarized, the story tells of the attack and destruction of the last bastion of the Gnomes. It is easy to draw parallels between WWI and the tale. The main character Tuor

is twenty-three when he sets out, the same age as Tolkien when he began military service. Tuor delights in naming the creatures around him and creates his own words, which echoes Tolkien's love of and career in philology. Where Tuor is tasked with bearing secret messages, so too was Tolkien in his duties as a signal officer. As WWI saw the change of warfare, so too did *The Fall of Gondolin*; all the traditional weapons of the enemy had no hope "to overthrow the walls and gates of Gondolin," so the antagonist, Melko, wrought metal and fire into "beasts like snakes and dragons of irresistible might" (52), these iron creations are eerily similar to the tanks introduced during the Battle of the Somme. The fantastic monsters "were all of iron so cunningly linked that they might flow like slow rivers of metal or coil themselves around and above all obstacles before them" (52). *The Fall of Gondolin* also sees the monstrosity of flamethrowers, with their destructive power taken from enemy soldiers and given to dragons: "flames gust from the jaws of that worm and folk wither before it" (63). Even the environment of the Somme and the plain of Gondolin bear eerie similarities, to include waters polluted with carcasses (65), fair places reduced to blackness (66), the trees and grasses scorched (61), "mists of scalding heat and blinding fogs" (67), men falling into shell-shock or a "terror unto death" (60), and the dead "piled in uncounted heaps" (62). While the details of *The Fall of Gondolin* and the Battle of the Somme bear tremendous similarity, the feeling of war draws even more parallels.

The Fall of Gondolin uses the method of the surreal to translate the subjective reality of WWI. The story describes the fall of the last bastion of light and hope in the idealized old world. The atmosphere of the Gondolin before its destruction mirrors the

pre-fall Garden of Eden in the Christian tradition—to include the tree of life or, in Tolkien’s myth lore, the city held shoots from the trees that literally lit heaven (41). In Tuor’s first sight of the city, “he fared as one in some dream of the Gods, for he deemed not such things were seen by men in the visions of their sleep, so great was his amaze at the glory of Gondolin” (40). The later horror of the city’s destruction is sharpened by the contrast of the idyllic atmosphere that opens the tale. Tuor is presented in a paradise where he delights in the naming of things, which also bears striking resemblance to Adam in Eden. Tolkien shows Tuor at play with music, which is often equated with creation in his legendarium: “Long times would Tuor sit and gaze at the splashing water and listen to its voice, and then he would rise and leap onward from stone to stone singing as he went; or as the stars came out in the narrow strip of heaven above the gully he would raise echoes to answer the fierce twanging of his harp” (31). Tolkien contrasts the idealized atmosphere of hope and life with the tragic destruction wrought both by personal betrayal and the folly of the wise.

Tolkien echoes the building tension of pre-war Europe by metaphorically coiling a spring of foreshadowing in *The Fall of Gondolin*. Tuor arrives at the city bearing a message to the king, Turgon, from the gods. The gods, through Tuor, advise Turgon to raise an army and sally forth against the enemy. The king refuses and Tuor prophesies that the enemy will possess “most of the mountains of the Earth and cease not to trouble both Elves and Men” (42). After Turgon’s refusal, Tuor dwells in the city, marries, and has a child. The whole time, Tolkien presents scenes of Melko building an army and

crafting new weapons. As the story progresses, it feels like watching the blade rise in a guillotine.

While *The Fall of Gondolin* sweeps through epic moments of heroism and destruction, Tolkien deepens the feeling of ruin and tragedy through glimpses of the personal. Early in the story, Tuor and his wife build a house where they “dwelt in joy in that house upon the walls that looked out south over Tumladen, and this was good to the hearts of all in the city” (46). During the battle, Tolkien brings us back to their home which “was cast down and the wreckage was as smoke; and thereat was Tuor bitterly wroth” (72). Tolkien weaves the destruction of the city through the lens of personal loss. Perhaps the most tragic moment comes when Tuor is leading a few survivors away from the flames and smoke that are the only remnants of Gondolin. During their flight, Tuor rallies his soldiers to rescue his captured son. Upon their reunion, the boy says “I am thirsty, father, for I have run far,” and Tuor “said nought, having no water” (75). In the midst of ruin, Tuor cannot provide the simplest salve for his child.

The translation of war’s intimacy through the immediate to contrast the collective is begun in Tolkien’s work in *The Fall of Gondolin* and perfected in *LOTR*. Tolkien’s characters Frodo and Sam resemble the same sorts of men with whom he served in the trenches: “my Sam Gamgee,” Tolkien wrote, “is indeed a reflection of the English soldier, of the privates and batmen I knew in the 1914 war, and recognized as so far superior to myself” (qtd. in Garth 43). In Frodo and Sam’s return to the Shire, their homecoming is reminiscent of soldiers who found alienation from their communities. As Garth notes, Frodo’s homecoming bore remarked resemblance to that endured by many

veterans: “disillusionment, confusion, and purposelessness. Fellowships were broken, while civilians could not comprehend the reality of the trenches and clung on to an antiquated idea of war” (51). It is the lingering wounds of characters in *LOTR* that echo those deepest felt by Tolkien in his own return to England.

Describing what we would language as a “trigger,” Tolkien’s character Pippin “never in after years could he hear a horn blown in the distance without tears starting in his eyes” (850). As Joe Haldeman crafts his poem *DX* on the anniversary of being wounded in Vietnam, so too are Tolkien’s characters reminded of their injuries. For Merry, “as if recalled by his mood of despair, the pain in his arm returned, and he felt weak and old, and the sunlight seemed thin” (883-884). On the same date as being stabbed at Weathertop, Frodo remarks:

“‘It is my shoulder. The wound aches, and the memory of darkness is heavy on me. It was a year ago today.’

‘Alas! there are some wounds that cannot be wholly cured,’ said Gandalf.

‘I fear it may be so with mine,’ said Frodo. ‘There is no real going back. Though I may come to the Shire, it will not seem the same; for I shall not be the same. I am wounded with knife, sting, and tooth, and a long burden. Where shall I find rest?’” (989).

What is left for Frodo echoes what is left for Tolkien. After the war, Frodo “took to a quiet life, writing a great deal” (1025). As war’s effects linger and we think about how healing from trauma isn’t a restoration but integration, there is no complete return to a previous state. Frodo finds his wounds “will never really heal” (1025). It is this presentation of the lingering wounds of the returning veteran within Tolkien’s imagined world that translate across time and space from WWI to a little girl watching her father struggle home from Iraq.

The Safety of Shared Knowledge

“It was during 1944 that, leaving the loose ends and perplexities of a war which it was my task to conduct, or at least to report, I forced myself to tackle the journey of Frodo to Mordor. These chapters, eventually to become Book Four, were written and sent out as a serial to my son, Christopher, then in South Africa with the RAF” (Tolkien xix).

While Tolkien recounted the Battle of the Somme in *The Fall of Gondolin*, he never published the work. While his son Christopher edited and published part of the story in *The Silmarillion* in 1977, four years after his father’s death, the complete work and the story of its origin weren’t published until 2018. Based on his letters, biographers, and the words of his children, we can assume that Tolkien kept *The Fall of Gondolin* and its inspiration largely private until 1944 at the earliest. In the preface to the 2018 work, Christopher describes how the first reference of his father to the construction of *The Fall of Gondolin* during WWI was “in a letter to me of 30 April 1944, commiserating with me on my experiences of that time (18). In the texts published during Tolkien’s lifetime, we find the clearest translation of WWI in Book Four of *LOTR*. In 1960, Tolkien states how “the Dead Marshes and the approaches to the Morannon owe something to Northern France after the Battle of the Somme” (*Letters* 303). Why is it in Book Four, sent in serial to his son during WWII, that we find the clearest imagery of WWI? While we can’t fully know, Holocaust survivor and psychologist Dori Laub’s concept of safety through shared knowledge points to how it might have been the intimacy of common experience that lent Tolkien the access to engage with the space of WWI years after he originally wrote *The Fall of Gondolin*.

First, let's take a look at this section of *LOTR*. Trauma often manifests as vivid sensory imagery. Book Four is mined with so many fragments of WWI that it belies Tolkien's reduction of that book "owing something" to France. As an example of the method of translating the real into the surreal, I've included a few samples of Tolkien's WWI imagery below.

The landscape of the Western Front

"The fens grew more wet, opening into wide stagnant meres, among which it grew more and more difficult to find the firmer places where feet could tread without sinking into gurgling mud" (627).

"Often they floundered, stepping or falling hands-first into waters as noisome as a cesspool, till they were slimed and fouled almost up to their necks and stank in one another's nostrils" (628).

"Frodo looked round in horror. Dreadful as the Dead Marshes had been, and the arid moors of the Noman-lands, more loathsome far was the country that the crawling day now slowly unveiled to his shrinking eyes. Even to the Mere of Dead Faces some haggard phantom of green spring would come; but here neither spring nor summer would ever come again. Here nothing lived, not even the leprous growths that feed on rottenness. The gasping pools were choked with ash and crawling muds, sickly white and grey, as if the mountains had vomited the filth of their entrails upon the lands about. High mounds of crushed and powdered rock, great cones of earth fire-blasted and poison-stained, stood like an obscene graveyard in endless rows, slowly revealed in the reluctant light" (631).

"They had come to the desolation that lay before Mordor... a land defiled, diseased beyond all healing – unless the Great Sea should enter in and wash it with oblivion. 'I feel sick,' said Sam. Frodo did not speak" (631-632).

"Frodo and Sam crawled after him until they came to a wide almost circular pit, high-banked upon the west. It was cold and dead, and a foul sump of oily many-coloured ooze lay at its bottom. In this evil hole they cowered" (632).

"The whole surface of the plains of Gorgoroth was pocked with great holes, as if, while it was still a waste of soft mud, it had been smitten with a shower of bolts and huge slingstones. The largest of these holes were rimmed with

ridges of broken rock, and broad fissures ran out from them in all directions” (934).

Artillery and shell-shock

“Then came a blast of savage wind, and with it, mingling with its roar, there came a high shrill shriek...Out here in the waste its terror was far greater: it pierced them with cold blades of horror and despair, stopping heart and breath. Sam fell flat on his face. Involuntarily Frodo loosed his hold and put his hands over his head and ears. He swayed, slipped, and slithered downwards with a wailing cry...he found he was shaking all over” (607).

“A deadly cry went away westward, outrunning the wind in its fell speed. They fell forward, groveling heedlessly on the cold earth. But the shadow of horror wheeled and returned, passing lower now, right above them, sweeping the fen-reek with its ghastly wings. And then it was gone, flying back to Mordor with the speed of the wrath of Sauron; and behind it the wind roared away, leaving the Dead Marshes bare and bleak” (629).

“Gollum lay on the ground as if he had been stunned. They roused him with difficulty, and for some time he would not lift his face, but knelt forward on his elbows, covering the back of his head with his large flat hands” (630).

“The earth groaned; and out of the city there came a cry. Mingled with harsh high voices as of birds of prey, and the shrill neighing of horses wild with rage and fear, there came a rending screech, shivering, rising swiftly to a piercing pitch beyond the range of hearing. The hobbits wheeled round towards it, and cast themselves down, holding their hands upon their ears” (706).

Flares

“Presently it grew altogether dark: the air itself seemed black and heavy to breathe. When lights appeared Sam rubbed his eyes: he thought his head was going queer. He first saw one with the corner of his left eye, a wisp of pale sheen that faded away; but others appeared soon after: some like dimly shining smoke, some like misty flames flickering slowly above unseen candles; here and there they twisted like ghostly sheets unfurled by hidden hands. But neither of his companions spoke a word” (627).

The feeling of war

“While the grey light lasted, they cowered under a black stone like worms, shrinking, lest the winged terror should pass and spy them with its cruel

eyes. The remainder of that journey was a shadow of growing fear in which memory could find nothing to rest upon” (631).

“For a while they stood there, like men on the edge of a sleep where nightmare lurks, holding it off, though they know that they can only come to morning through the shadows. The light broadened and hardened. The gasping pits and poisonous mounds grew hideously clear. The sun was up, walking among clouds and long flags of smoke, but even the sunlight was defiled. The hobbits had no welcome for that light; unfriendly it seemed, revealing them in their helplessness – little squeaking ghosts that wandered among the ash-heaps of the Dark Lord” (632).

“He looked up at the smoke-streaked sky and saw strange phantoms, dark riding shapes, and faces out of the past. He lost count of time, hovering between sleep and waking, until forgetfulness came over him” (632).

“It was Sam’s first view of a battle of Men against Men, and he did not like it much. He was glad that he could not see the dead face. He wondered what the man’s name was and where he came from; and if he was really evil of heart, or what lies or threats had led him on the long march from his home; and if he would not really rather have stayed there in peace” (661).

Corpses in No Man’s Land

“He fell and came heavily on his hands, which sank deep into sticky ooze, so that his face was brought close to the surface of the dark mere. There was a faint hiss, a noisome smell went up, the lights flickered and danced and swirled. For a moment the water below him looked like some window, glazed with grimy glass, through which he was peering. Wrenching his hands out of the bog, he sprang back with a cry. ‘There are dead things, dead faces in the water,’ he said with horror. ‘Dead faces!’” (627).

“But I have seen them too. In the pools when the candles were lit. They lie in all the pools, pale faces, deep deep under the dark water. I saw them: grim faces and evil, and noble faces and sad. Many faces proud and fair, and weeds in their silver hair. But all foul, all rotting, all dead. A fell light is in them.’ Frodo hid his eyes in his hands” (628).

Tolkien’s letter to Christopher in 1944, accompanying Book Four and telling his son of the origin of *The Fall of Gondolin*, bears repetition: “I have without you no one to speak my thought. I first began to write the ‘H. of the Gnomes’ in army huts, crowded, filled

with the noise of gramophones-and there you are in the same prison. May you, too, escape” (*Letters* 77). This letter clues us in to the safety of shared knowledge as a tool to engage with traumatic spaces.

The language of trauma studies provides insight to explicate Tolkien’s letter. In *Bearing Witness*, Laub details his method of generating safety with a patient. He refers to the idea as the creation of a mutual password allowing both psychologist and patient to enter into a conversation about a significant event. In his words, such safety is created when “we both share the knowledge of the trauma, the knowledge of what facing it and living in its shadow are really about” (64). Laub details how those moments happen only when he “was present enough to recognize and hear the password, could the door be opened and the hidden voice emerge and be released. I had to hear it first, acknowledge that I spoke its language, identify myself to it, acknowledge both to myself and to my patient, who I really was, so that it would be possible for him or her to really speak” (64). Laub’s idea of a mutual password layers new meaning onto Book Four of *LOTR*. Only Tolkien’s son Christopher had the password of shared knowledge from mutual subjective war experience and mutual love of myth. In a different 1944 letter, Tolkien tells Christopher how, “this book has come to be more and more addressed to you, so that your opinion matters more than any one else’s” (*Letters* 91) which echoes the April letter where Tolkien states: “I have without you no one to speak my thought” (*Letters* 77).

Book Four isn’t all trench imagery. In many respects, it is Tolkien’s way of having a conversation with his son through the imagined characters of Faramir and Frodo. In Tolkien’s words, “as far as any character is like me, it is Faramir” (*Letters* 232).

In Book Four, Faramir counsels Frodo, who is on his way to the bleakest part of his journey through lands that most closely resemble the No Man's Land of WWI. On 12 May 1944, Tolkien writes to Christopher: "Very much love to you, and all my thoughts and prayers. How much I wish to know! 'When you return to the lands of the living, and we re-tell our tales, sitting by a wall in the sun, laughing at old grief, you shall tell me then' (Faramir to Frodo)" (*Letters* 80). These words are slightly edited and remain in the published edition of *LOTR*.

Reading the conversations between Faramir and Frodo in Book Four takes on a different tone when we consider them as a conversation between J.R.R and his son under the shadow of war. Through Faramir, Tolkien laments to Christopher how:

"We are become Middle Men, of the Twilight, but with memory of other things. For as the Rohirrim do, we now love war and valour as things good in themselves, both a sport and an end; and though we still hold that a warrior should have more skills and knowledge than only the craft of weapons and slaying, we esteem a warrior, nonetheless, above men of other crafts. Such is the need of our days" (679).

Book Four also allows Tolkien to contemplate Frodo's death. While we can't know Tolkien's mind or state his intention in placing his son Christopher in the character of Frodo, we can speculate that he might have thought about his son dying. Tolkien's son Michael, an air defense gunner, had already been injured in a training accident in 1941 (*Letters* 47). When Frodo is poisoned and appears as one dead, Sam encounters the body and assumes the worst. For Sam, "black despair came down on him, and Sam bowed to the ground, and drew his grey hood over his head, and night came into his heart, and he knew no more" (731). Book Four was written under the shadow of war, under the threat of death. We can consider these sections of *LOTR* as an extended conversation between

Tolkien and his son. In the safety of shared knowledge, Tolkien shares of his own time at war, counsils his son, laments war's impact on society, and offers hope for peace and reunion. It was this safety that facilitated access for Tolkien to communicate the things he felt the deepest.

Road 304

As J.R.R. Tolkien wrote to his son, I write to mine.

My Son,

You are from me. You bear my name as I bear my father's.

My grandfather gave my father the name Allen to remember his brother who was killed when he and Allen wrestled over whether to put their father's gun back or not. The gun went off and Allen died in his brother's arms. My father passed that name to me and my brother. I did not pass that name to you. But that name is part of us. Your last name is part of us. It has a history. It has a story.

Listen.

If you go to a little town in northwest Missouri, skirt the river and drive until the pavement twists to dirt, you'll come to county Road 304. That road used to be called Castle Road, before modern medicine needed alphanumeric designators to help ambulance drivers get to places faster.

Roads, like stories, change.

If you follow Road 304, you'll come to a slice of land where a crumbling one room house watches weeds and blackberries re-wild the ordered rows of what once was a garden. This plot is bordered by a creek where my dad dumped the leftovers from his hunts and other people dumped trash. On the east is a forest that makes for some great hiding places in capture the flag. It is bordered everywhere else by land that once belonged to our family. It is where I learned to shoot at things that didn't move.

This small plot will soon pass out of our family. The story of it will stay.

The story of Road 304 starts in 1838 when Elizur Spelman Castle, his family, and his slaves built a 1000-acre farm and named it Runnymede. In 1215, the Magna Carta was signed at Runnymede, a meadow between Windsor and Staines. The Magna Carta is about the rights and freedoms of the individual. Elizur's eight slaves made the bricks of Runnymede by hand. Those same eight people built the house. Those same eight people farmed the land. Our family owned eight people. Eight people with eight stories. Though I do not know their names, I know they had dreams, hopes, fears, ambitions, goals, vices, loves, and losses.

Elizur freed his slaves. He helped them start new lives in Kansas. He fought in the Civil War on the side of the Union.

Those are things I know. What I don't know is whether he freed them because it was the right thing to do or because it made sense economically. I don't know if he fought because he believed that slavery was evil or because that's what people did.

I don't know what Major Elizur Spelman Castle believed.

But I know I believe.

I believe every human should be treated with dignity and respect. I believe no person should be oppressed.

Your grandfather believes that too. He spent over twenty years and two wars because of that belief.

Your uncle believes that too. He is part of a special unit whose motto means to free the oppressed.

I went to war because of that belief. When your country goes to war, you have a choice. I don't regret the choice I made. I regret that I had to make it. Sometimes our country gets it wrong. Sometimes our country gets it right. Sometimes you don't realize which until later.

I would make the choice again. I have made the choice again. As Tolkien says, not because I love the sword for its sharpness nor the arrow for its swiftness. I love only that which they defend. There is evil in this world and it hurts people. Sometimes, the only way to stop it is to fight.

My hope is peace. My profession is war.

My hope is to never pull the trigger. My choice is to be the one who does it.

When you grow up and I'm frequently gone, it is because of that choice.

If someday I don't come home, it is because of that choice.

In love and hope,

Your father

connections.

In Chapter Two, we saw how we can change our emotional experience of memories by imagining them from a more distanced perspective.

In Chapter Three, we explored how distance is one method of engaging with trauma.

In Chapter Four, we saw how Tolkien used distance and safety to communicate the things deepest felt.

Now, I mine my personal archive.

Jax and Jarn, Brothers at War

“Memory, I suggest, is to be found in the interstices, the silences, the half-said, the stories that are passed on, the markers of absence.”

M. NourbeSe Philip, *The Declension of History in the Key of If*

“I barely made it to the parking lot before I broke down.” He’s holding his youngest son. It is bedtime in his part of the world, it is morning in mine. He’d been to the doctor for a minor procedure and “they cauterized the wound. It was the smell. I was back there.” Back in Iraq. Back cleaning up a burned-out HMMWVs that hit an EFP with his soldiers in it.

“You should write about it. It helps. Writing does a thing.” I tell him.

He has, we have, we do, we will.

Growing up, we were always at war—whether role-playing soldiers in our Dungeons and Dragons clone, nerf battles in box forts spanning the whole yard, or with fists. We fought so much our parents enrolled us in martial arts where we learned how to do serious damage. We never fought each other again.

Our four-year age gap put us apart as college came and life diverged. Our imaginary worlds turned to shared Google docs where we kept the stories going. He’d write in red, I’d write in blue, and green meant we agreed. Over the years, as he graduated from West Point and I did from USAFA, I’d turn red to green, and he’d do the same with blue. As our proximity from war changed from distant to intimate, our stories changed. We were no longer role-playing but translating.

We developed a language. When a friend died and we didn't have the words, phrases would appear. Things like "I have a new name for a boat. I added it to the list."

The list grew, grows.

My list started in 2009. I emailed my brother, in the middle of a year in Iraq as an infantry platoon leader, and tagged a post script "p.s. Just found out one of my friends just died in Iraq." It was morning for me. It was night for him. Later in my day, a response appeared.

"That sucks. I'm sorry to hear that. A few days ago, the MP platoon attached to our battalion got hit by an EFP in Bayji. It killed all three people in the vehicle and blew off the back doors and the turret. When they brought the wreck back to the FOB, I helped our support company commander pull all of the sensitive items out of the truck. It was a mess inside. I hope I never have to see or smell anything like that again. It sucks that it's always the good people that die."

There weren't the words to talk about it, but this appeared in our Google doc for our story, *The Music Makers*.

"It was not the first time he had seen death. He knew it would not be the last. David stood with a slight hunch to fit inside the back end of one of his unit's new HMMWVs, his right hand braced against the shattered ceiling, his headlamp illuminating the mess and reflecting off the broken smoke hazed windows. It was still in the ruined hulk, heavy with a deep silence that was more than the absence of sound.

He was still amazed that they had pulled anyone from the wreck alive. The EMTs had finished removing anything identifiably human. Now all that remained was the broken equipment tossed around in the roll-over. And the blood. It stained everything with a sticky layer of unidentifiable carnage that lingered past all efforts of eradication. The smell was the hardest to get over - a sweet metallic odor unique among scents: the smell of blood, of death, of shit and sweat and burning meat, melted plastic and the acrid stench of cordite - the smell of war.

Attracted by a bit of reflected light on the floor, David bent over. It was a set of eye-glasses. One of the lenses was intact, but the other side of the frame was shattered, bent and twisted, trailing off into a small pile of something that he didn't want to identify.

David felt a hand on his arm. He turned and locked eyes with Jack. "People aren't supposed to see this shit."

"No." Jack replied softly."

The Music Makers by Arthur O'Shaughnessy

*We are the music makers,
And we are the dreamers of dreams,
Wandering by lone sea-breakers,
And sitting by desolate streams*

The Music Makers is "dedicated to the better men with whom we had the privilege to serve beside."

Men like [David](#). Who stands in for many of them.

As with our list, our language grew, grows, and things begin to appear in the Google docs.

"[Jack sat alone](#) in the darkness of his room, his hands clasped against his face as if in prayer, his right thumb unconsciously tracing the jagged scar along the back of his jaw. The whiskey made the faces leave. They always came at night, in the stillness and quiet. They were faces he knew well, people he loved, and others with no names, no stories to him – just faces he had failed.

He took another pull at the bottle, alone in the dark. Except it wasn't really dark. Not for him. He could see as well in the dark as at noon. A man was dead. What before had been mysterious and abstractly dangerous, was now very serious and very real. He had failed him-for all his tools and abilities, Jack had been unable to save him."

[Blue](#) helps write David, who comes into the dark.

"[How do you do it?](#)" Jack asked earnestly. "How do you keep the memories from becoming overwhelming?"

"[I don't.](#)" [David said](#). "I just focus on different memories. I let the happy ones overwhelm me. My wife has kissed me four

thousand and sixty-eight times. The smell and sound of the ocean from the beach-front house we rented on our honeymoon carries me to sleep at night. **And I will forever perfectly carry my father's proud face when I graduated from the qualification course.**" David stood up and walked over to Jack's chair, his face growing momentarily serious. **"It only takes a little light to disrupt the darkness."** His smile returned as he grabbed Jack's arm and pulled him out of the chair and towards the sounds of the party filtering through the almost closed door."

Four years is a long time at that time in life. **Red** wrote more and **Blue** wrote less.

"A soldier's eyes, dark and lifeless, stared back at David from across the street. A wavering tendril of smoke drifted upward from the burning end of a final cigarette lingering between pale lips. His dirty blond hair danced coyly in the breeze, adding a mocking semblance of life to the slumped figure leaning against the wall.

At first glance he was any other tired soldier resting weary feet, taking a break from the fight with his helmet lying on the ground beside him. Only his eyes betrayed his secret. They were still – no longer moved by fear, or pain, or courage. His face was much too young for eyes like that, yet it would not grow into them. Eternal youth his reward for service. David thought how vulnerable the soldier looked sitting there midst the rubble, his broken rifle forever out of reach of fingers no longer his to command.

The cigarette burned itself out and dropped from David's lips as the eyes stared back at him from the mirrored glass of the broken storefront window across the ruined street."

Red learned how to write an accurate military gear inventory.

"Coat, cold weather, universal camouflage, size: small. NSN 684-01-4430. One." Joel stuffed the coat into a duffle bag as Jack finished annotating on the inventory sheet. "I think that's everything."

Jack nodded. "Let's get this other stuff cleaned up."

The two men walked towards a collection of bloodied clothes and equipment. Jack bent down and picked up a silver St. Christopher medal that David always wore. Dipping it briefly in a bucket he began rubbing his friend's blood off the metal.

"What about this?" Joel held up David's shirt. The back was shredded and dark reddish-brown with dried blood.

Jack looked up. "Throw it on the fire."

Joel walked over to the fire and laid it on the flames. In moments, the shirt caught and the heat surged as the evidence of David's death smoked and flared.

Another name to add to a wall in some small town; another face to stay eternally young, enshrined in the memories of those that lived on. Another friend gone. Too many now. He was tired of it, the weight that came with each new name. Tired of the reminders of mortality. Tired of the fact that good men die.

“Be thou at peace.” He softly spoke the words that left so much unsaid.

Then **Blue** caught up and our Google docs were accessed as we traded places and translated across years, time zones, and war zones. Our language grew, grows. We started writing about two brothers at war, **Jax** and **Jarn**. **Jax** is a Special Forces soldier. **Jarn** is a pilot.

Jarn sends a message to Jax:

“Hey. I hope you aren't somewhere stupid getting yourself shot.”

A few hours later in the Google doc,

“The projection lit with Jarn's thin face and his voice filled Jax's ear. Jarn's image smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. It wasn't going to be good news. Jax paused the message with a thought, freezing Jarn's fake smile. He'd listen to it later. Bad news was always better when you weren't alone in the dark.”

Blue writes about how after years of flying big airplanes, Jarn gets reassigned to a secret organization and tells Jax: **“You won't fucking believe it.”**

“Jarn cursed way too much. But perhaps no one could walk on the path of war and not come out tarnished. Jax's breath eased out into a smile. For now, Jarn was safe and far from the endless wars. Jax closed his eyes and prayed his brother would keep his innocence. Jax had enough blood on his hands for the both of them.”

After **Blue** had a hydraulic failure over Iraq, Jarn makes a forced landing in hostile territory. A few hours later in **Red**, Jax shows up and rescues his brother from militants.

Sometimes, Jarn looks down at the world below.

A pang of pity stuck in Jarn's heart and mind for the people. They were just people, regardless of who they fought for. Maybe they had brothers too.

"Those that I fight, I do not hate." Jax said.

"I love only that which we defend." Jarn finished,

He hadn't signed up for this. He just wanted to fly. It had been a lonely impulse that drove him towards his wings. Jarn remembered the day in a flash, watching the sky as two jets screeched past so close he could feel the vibrating power of them. He had seen them disappear through tiny child fingers from a hand reaching towards them. And he had done it. He had screamed towards space as the rest of the world became so small as he looked back. This killing though. **This death by his hands was the price of it. It was a weighty cost.**

In rare moments, neither **Blue** nor **Red** were in active war zones.

"Jax, why is it the good ones that go first?" Jarn said to the screen. It was night for both of them. Jarn sipped at a Dreamkiller as he waited for the delay of their signals to route through thirty damn secure servers. The amber liquid burned straight through the cold in his stomach, spreading a hollow lie of warmth.

Jax didn't answer the question. There wasn't an answer for that question. "I stopped feeling a friend's death a while ago." He raised his own glass to ping against the screen. "It just adds to the burden building over time. I don't remember the last time I really felt something. It all meshes together: the good, the bad. The highs and the lows feel the same, like..." Jax trailed off.

"When I was in training." Jarn started. "I left my sensors open on a sun skimming sortie. The intensity of the brightness burned them so badly they couldn't pick up normal everyday things like the lights of the landing pad calling me home."

Jax sort of smiled. "It's like that. I remember when I was a kid and got so excited over stupid things like ice cream and a surprise birthday party." He paused, taking another swallow. "I've seen the reunion of a child to a parent they thought dead. They were both crying tears of joy and I didn't feel anything."

"Why do we have to pay this price?" Jarn asked.

"People always think the price is paid by those who die." Jax leaned back, closing his eyes. "But it is those that survive that it really costs." In his mind he pictured the countless funerals he'd

attended, the countless trees he'd planted, the countless flags he'd handed over. "I hate how it has become so easy."

"Burying a friend should never be like a checklist." Jarn said. He raised his glass to the screen. "To Dave."

Jax raised his glass. "Another friend gone too soon."

While we leave war, it doesn't return the favor.

"It's easy to imagine yourself doing the right thing when you've had a few drinks and committed yourself to being a better person. But when push comes to shove and you're fighting against your body's physiological responses and you're mentally drained with exhausted willpower, the 'right thing' seems to drift into irrelevance. I wish it was easier and I pray that it will be for my future children, but so many times all I'm left with is the shattered guilt of the aftermath of failing to do what I know is right while watching myself do what I know is damaging to all I hold dear all the while cursing myself for my own weakness."

"That's good stuff. You should write that down. It would make a good poem or something. All I was going to say was that I don't know how to brew strong enough coffee."

"Extra dark roast with a splash of Irish cream. Don't forget the double pump of self-pity." Jax paused. "A little girl is dead tonight. Could I have done anything to stop it? No. But maybe, if I had been somewhere, doing something that mattered, I could've been the difference between a little girl being dead and a little girl being read a bedtime story at the end of a day. Maybe it's pure fantasy and vanity on my part, but just maybe there's a chance that I could make a real difference for the countless people who are not 'hypothetically' suffering and dying because no one was there to intervene. I may not ever know if I prevented suffering in the world, but I know for sure; I can't live with myself for not trying. Freeing the oppressed may be a false premise or a lost cause, but children still die when I do nothing, so it has to be worth a shot."

"How do you do it?" Jarn asked.

"Do what?" Jax answered.

"How do you get past losing friends?"

Jax was silent for a moment before speaking in a slightly chanting tone, recalling words long internalized. "Another name adorns a wall that's burdened by the weight of friends, their faces dimming now as darkness claims their memories - not sated by their lives. And one by one I see us fall as night seems lengthened without end. Yet peace is found in how, until day breaks and shadows flee,

dawn's hope consoles the grieved." Jax paused, his mouth pursing several times as if the right words eluded him.

As the years have grown and their effects linger, I sometimes don't have the words.

The pause between his words stretched towards silence before Jarn spoke again. "I'm glad I'm not alone."
"Me too." Jax said.

"To engage with history is to confront memory."

M. NourbeSe Philip, *The Declension of History in the Key of If*

CHAPTER FIVE

In Chapter Four, we thought about how Tolkien accessed WWI through familiar methods and the safety of shared knowledge. We saw some of his earliest work in *The Fall of Gondolin*, and some of his latest in *LOTR*. Because he published a small number of works and his writing “toolkit” was largely developed before WWI, we can’t really track the changes of Tolkien’s literacy around “trauma” through his oeuvre. We can do exactly that with Kurt Vonnegut. We can read Vonnegut’s novels as a literacy narrative where he attempted different methodologies to enter the space of being a POW in a German slaughterhouse during the firebombing of Dresden in 1945. Vonnegut summarizes this process in an interview with Joe Bellamy in 1974 where he talks about *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

“I came home in 1945, started writing about it, and wrote about it, and *wrote about it*, and WROTE ABOUT IT. This thin book is about what it’s like to write a book about a thing like that. I couldn’t get much closer. I would head myself into my memory of it, the circuit breakers would kick out; I’d head in again, I’d back off. The book is a process of twenty years of this sort of living with Dresden and the aftermath. It’s like Heinrich Boll’s book, *Absent Without Leave*—stories about German soldiers with the war part missing. You see them leave and return, but there’s this terrible hole in the middle. That is like my memory of Dresden; actually, there’s nothing there” (203-203).

In a small way, my journey of finding the words to write about my life mirrors Vonnegut’s twenty-year struggle to find a way to talk about Dresden. As we progress through *this* work,

you are seeing my literacy develop as I echo the methods of authors like Vonnegut and Tolkien.

The Way It Goes

Hunter's Safety

Jinx and the no good, very bad day

Learned Helplessness

As told by Angela Duckwoth in *Grit* (138).

“Let me wind back the clock to 1964. Two first-year psychology doctoral students named Marty Seligman and Steve Maier are in a windowless laboratory, watching a caged dog receive electric shocks to its back paws. The shocks come randomly and without warning. If the dog does nothing, the shock lasts five seconds, but if the dog pushes its nose against a panel at the front of the cage, the shock ends early. In a separate cage, another dog is receiving the same shocks at exactly the same intervals, but there’s no panel to push on. In other words, both dogs get the exact same dosage of shock at the exact same times, but only the first dog is in control of how long each shock lasts. After sixty-four shocks, both dogs go back to their home cages, and new dogs are brought in for the same procedure.

The next day, one by one, all the dogs are placed in a different cage called a shuttle box. In the middle, there’s a low wall, just high enough that the dogs can leap the barrier if they try. A high-pitched tone plays, heralding an impending shock, which comes through the floor of the half of the shuttle box where the dog is standing. Nearly all the dogs who had control over the shocks the previous day learn to leap the barrier. They hear the tone and jump over the wall to safety. In contrast, two-thirds of the dogs who had no control over the shocks the previous day just lie down whimpering, passively waiting for the punishments to stop.

This seminal experiment proved for the first time that it isn’t suffering that leads to hopelessness. It’s suffering you think you can’t control.”

connections.

Psychologist Angela Duckworth (151).

“The scientific research is very clear that experiencing trauma **without control** can be debilitating.”

Marine Lieutenant Elliot Ackerman (210).

“I catch the Marines stealing glances at me as I talk on the radio. They will do this constantly in the days and weeks to follow. They know that what is said over the radio—an order, a mission—can get them killed, but they have **little control** over these decisions. When we come home, one of the Marines in our platoon has to see the base psych, or “wizard,” for PTSD symptoms. When I tell him I understand what he went through, he tells me that I don’t. He says, ‘If you had to drive at a hundred fifty miles per hour down the freeway, what’s scarier—driving the car or riding shotgun?’”

Auschwitz Survivor and Psychologist Victor Frankl (75)

“We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—**to choose** one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

Literary Scholar T. R. Johnson (86).

“Writing that heals is often writing in which the writer names, describes, and **takes control** of experiences in which the writer’s powers of naming and controlling have been explicitly annihilated”

Control

Control is crucially linked to the disruptive effect of trauma. The lack of control over one's situation and circumstance is a key component of what makes an event "traumatic." We know one of the lingering effects of trauma is uncontrollable intrusive sensory fragments accompanied by emotions and the same physiological signals as the original event. In her 1996 work *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth, one of the pioneers of literary trauma studies, explains how trauma "reflects the direct imposition on the mind of the unavoidable reality of horrific events, the taking over of the mind, psychically and neurobiologically, by an event that it cannot control" (58). Suddenly and without warning, one is seemingly transported back in time to the space of the trauma to relive it again. Kurt Vonnegut words the same concept as: "Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time" (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 29). The disparate fields of literary studies, psychology, and neuroscience all point to the connection between control and trauma. If a lack of control links to trauma, finding control links to integration.

As summarized by psychologist Angela Duckworth in *Grit*, "in the decade following that 1964 experiment, additional experiments revealed that suffering without control reliably produces symptoms of clinical depression, including changes in appetite and physical activity, sleep problems, and poor concentration" (139). Neuroscientists agree. In the findings of Payne et al., "stress depends on whether an organism perceives that it has control over the stressful experience...perceived control can profoundly mitigate the experience of stress. This component reflects evidence from animal and human studies demonstrating that perceived control can profoundly mitigate the

experience of stress” (79). Victor Frankl found being a prisoner in Auschwitz mirrors the contemporary findings of the cognitive sciences. Those in concentration camps had no control over their external environment. Everything was stripped from their control except “the last of human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances” (75). Frankl found that regardless of a seeming lack of control, an individual always retains the agency of how they internally respond to the outside world: “even though conditions such as lack of sleep, insufficient food and various mental stresses may suggest that the inmates were bound to react in certain ways, in the final analysis it becomes clear that the sort of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision, and not the result of camp influences alone” (75). Frankl recounts that those who surrendered their last vestige of control often perished, while those who found some semblance of control lived. The common struggle to survive concentration camps was to find agency, meaning, and hope against the hopelessness of an indetermined internment: “former prisoners, when writing or relating their experiences, agree that the most depressing influence of all was that a prisoner could not know how long his term of imprisonment would be” (78). In other words, the struggle for the prisoners was to overcome suffering without control. They had no agency, no panel to press and stop the shock. And when one lost hope that there would ever be an end to the suffering, “he let himself decline and become subject to mental and physical decay” (82). In Frankl’s time in the camp hospital, he found the death rate spiked in the week between Christmas 1944 and New Year’s 1945. No external conditions changed, but “it was simply that the

majority of the prisoners had lived in the naïve hope that they would be home again by Christmas” (84). When that hope ran out, so did the prisoner’s power to carry on.

Kurt Vonnegut watched this exact scenario play out when he was taken prisoner at the Battle of the Bulge. Another soldier, Joe Crone couldn’t make sense of their sudden capture and lost all agency. As detailed in Vonnegut’s biography, Joe was sure he wouldn’t be allowed to starve, so he traded his food for cigarettes and stopped doing anything for himself. Vonnegut describes how Joe died of the thousand-yard stare wherein, “the person sits down on the floor with his back to the wall, will not talk, will not eat, and just stares into the space in front of him” (qtd. in Shields 102-103). Being hardly trained, sent to the front, and almost immediately captured during the largest German counteroffensive of the war was incomprehensible. Vonnegut states how life no longer made any sense to Joe, “and he was right. It wasn’t making any sense at all. So he didn’t want to pretend he understood it anymore, which is more than the rest of us did. We pretended we understood it” (qtd. in Shields 103). Vonnegut based Billy Pilgrim, the main character of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, on Joe Crone. As we’ll see later in this chapter, Billy Pilgrim wasn’t the only Vonnegut character to have a lack of agency; many of his characters suffer without control.

Vonnegut’s method of incorporating his life into fiction points us to how writing is uniquely suited to access the space of trauma in a safe way. When we find a way of working with the past, we begin to exert control over the uncontrollable and move towards integration. In writing, an author has more control over events than they do in real life. It is this control that is therapeutic. In a 2021 study linking veterans’ narrative

processing (writing) and trauma symptoms, Peter Tappenden et al. find that those veterans who narrate themselves as growing from (finding meaning) and exerting control (agency) over their most stressful military experiences may achieve better mental health and day to day functioning. As Tappenden et al. conclude, “growth and agency are particularly robust predictors of postdischarge functioning” (297). Neuroscience points us to how powerful control really is. In a 2017 study, Pierre Gagnepain et al. examine how individuals can control intrusive sensory fragments from past events. Specifically, they analyze how a top-down inhibitory control signal (a cognitive command from the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex) can downregulate the hippocampus and amygdala and suppress intrusive images. In their study, they had participants cognitively think on and not think on aversive or neutral scenes while in an fMRI machine. They found that repeatedly suppressing the retrieval of unwanted memories decreased its tendency to intrude and participant’s control over intrusive fragments could be a learned skill. They conclude that “suppressing unpleasant reminders not only disrupts memories supported by the hippocampus and parahippocampus, but also emotional traces that depend on the amygdala, and these parallel effects arise from a shared inhibitory mechanism mediated by the right dorsolateral prefrontal cortex” (6437). The authors found that suppressing (controlling) intrusive thoughts and memories can increase with repetition. Because learning to suppress negative scenes isn’t more difficult than neutral scenes, individuals can practice on the safer, neutral scenes. In other words, we can develop the methods to enter the space of trauma by practicing on safe events from our past. When we find a way to enter that space, we can begin the process of finding control over the seeming

uncontrollable. As trauma studies scholar Dominick LaCapra believes, “when the past becomes accessible to recall in memory, and when language functions to provide some measure of conscious control, critical distance, and perspective, one has begun the arduous process of working over” (90). It is the blending of distance, safety, and control that can make writing such an effective methodology for integrating trauma.

Hunter's Safety

Appraisal theory is a psychological theory where “emotions” are extracted from our evaluations of events that cause specific reactions in different people.

Color is safe. HMMWVs aren't safe. Turkeys aren't safe.

Nakedness isn't safe. Chaplains aren't safe. Going first isn't safe. Chambered rifles aren't safe. The truth isn't safe.

Batteries aren't safe. Looking away isn't safe. Flying is safe.

Color is safe?

When it was warm outside, my two-year-old son and I were playing with trucks on the sidewalk near our house. A car went by and he dropped his toy and put both hands on his head. Another car went by and he did it again. Every time a car went by, he put both hands on his head.

Later, when we were walking to a playground and I heard a car, I put my hand on his head to make sure he didn't suddenly run into the street.

When he heard a car, he felt safe if hands were on his head. It didn't matter whose. It didn't matter that his hands on his own head didn't keep him safe. He felt safe.

When I was eleven, I went hunting with my dad and brother.

“You can’t shoot unless you see color.” A father’s words to a boy fresh out of the Missouri Department of Conservation’s hunter’s safety course. He handed me a flashlight. I checked the handle for signs of leaking battery acid as he explained which tree stand I was going to.

We parked the truck a mile away from the furthest stand: to “not spook the bedded deer.” My stand was the one my dad got an eight-point buck out of last year. My brother, a fifteen-year-old veteran of two bucks, two does, and a button buck, started walking towards *his* stand. He’d claimed ownership over the dull platform of salvaged 2x4s twenty feet above a narrow line of trees overlooking timber, a wide grassy field, and a patch of tall prairie. Every year John got at least one deer from that stand. If my first stand was unlucky, he’d let me use his in the afternoon.

The frost-slicked grass splintered as I walked. I was wearing my dad’s old boots. The original laces were gone, replaced by white nylon cord dyed brown by mud and memory. A cloud of translucent frosty breath hovered over my head as we made our way towards the tree line. The stars formed a web in the sky above. I’d never seen so many. The Amish don’t use electric lights.

A bright trail of flame arced across the sky. I’d never seen a shooting star before. “Daniel, stop shuffling.” My father’s tone was gentle, the command firm. “Shuffling” is when you let your feet drag forwards instead of picking them up and toe-heeling them down. “Shuffling” makes too much noise; we’d practiced not doing that the night before. “Shuffling” is lazy people walking. “Shuffling” is not hunting, it’s walking through the woods with a rifle. I over emphasized the proper hunting walk, “stalking,” and quickly

fell behind. My father walked towards a stand overlooking the river and waved goodbye with his right hand.

When I was in high school, I saw a strange check in the mail from the US Army. My mom said it was my dad's disability check. On a training exercise when I was three, he had been riding in a HMMWV at night in the California desert. It was blackout conditions so headlights were not allowed. The driver hit a ditch and my dad was thrown. He landed on his elbow and pinched a nerve. He doesn't have any feeling in the last two fingers on his right hand.

John peeled off towards his stand. I was left alone to walk the last half mile to the stand. I entered the forest on the road to Kenny's cabin. The road is two deep, muddy gullies with broken grass on the plateau between them. The road is only accessible to four-wheel drive trucks and extremely determined Toyota Corollas. The trees blocked most of the moonlight, but there was still enough to see without a lit flashlight. As I walked into this shadowed grayscale world, the only sound was the crunching of leaves beneath my feet. A quarter mile from the stand I heard a shrill call and the rush of heavy wings behind me. I dropped my unlit flashlight and spun around, wishing I had silver bullets or a crucifix. The dark shape whooshed through the trees. It was a turkey.

I picked up my flashlight, turned it on, and kept walking. I was shuffling. The road ended. The flashlight's beam lit the long, double-decker ladder leading to a narrow ledge forty feet in the air, suspended by a few rusty nails. I shouldered my rifle around

my heavy backpack and climbed up. The only thing to sit on was an overturned five-gallon bucket. I looked at my watch. 5:30. The sun wouldn't rise until 6:41. I probably couldn't shoot for another 45 minutes. Dad said the best times to get a deer were early morning when they are getting up or afternoon when the sun is going down and they are getting sleepy. "It is important to be in the stand a good bit before the deer start waking up and moving around."

I unwrapped a packaged apple pie from the Little Debbie stash in the front part of my pack. My dad brought my brother and I to Wal-Mart a couple days before to help us pick out enough stuff to make us happy and justified it to my mom because it was part of the "hunting experience" which was "an important part of our education." She grudgingly acquiesced, and even let us out of "school" on Friday knowing she'd be our teacher again the following Monday.

Before we left, I asked her if I should make sure to get Bambi. She said I should make sure to get Bambi's mom.

I'd only just seen the movie at a friend's house. My parents didn't let us watch Bambi when we were in the "formative" stage of our development because it was anti-hunting.

When I was five, my dad brought us to the theatre to see *The Last of the Mohicans*. My dad covered my eyes with his right hand when Magua cut out the heart of Col Munro; he covered John's with his left. When I was ten and a racy SNL skit came on, my dad made me go upstairs.

I'm cold, I haven't moved in the last hour. I pull out the second coat from my bag and spread it over my legs. I sip hot chocolate from the thermos. I'm not old enough for coffee. I look at my orange vest draped over the second coat. It's orange! I can see color. I can shoot. I take my right glove off. Slowly I slide the jeweled steel bolt back from my .260 Remington Mountain Rifle. I'd bought it with years of birthday and Christmas money. I didn't have quite enough when dad took me to the gun store. He pitched in the rest. I slide the bolt forward, pushing a round into the chamber. I'd made the bullets a few weeks ago. Dad made sure I carefully scraped the burs from the neck of the nickel casing to properly seat the 120-grain bullet. Measuring out 45 grains of powder using his scales under his watch. Removing spent primer and replacing it with new. Polishing the bullets to make them pretty. I've made more bullets than I've ever shot. I put my glove back on, but instead of sliding my fingers into their sleeves, I keep my fist balled up, so it will be easier to take my hand out and shoot.

I'm getting sleepy. I eat a Twinkie to try and stay awake. The first year my brother went hunting, he got poison ivy so bad he had to get shots. He was so contagious, my mom got it when she washed his clothes. Drugged up and miserable, John fell asleep leaning against a hay bale. He didn't notice the 8-point buck walk within twenty feet of him. John's first year hunting I'd been at home, trying to concentrate on my mom's lessons instead of out in the woods with my dad; eating a cut up apple instead of licking the white frosting from a Hostess Cup Cake; dreaming about how I would have killed the buck instead of falling asleep. In Missouri, you can't hunt until you are 11. You can't

drive until you are 15. You can't consent until you are 17. You can't enlist until you are 18. You can't drink until you are 21.

Dad says the sound a deer makes crunching through fall leaves in the forest is unmistakable; it is a steady, rhythmic, tentative, light pattern. To me, squirrels made the same sound. There are a lot of squirrels in Missouri woods. I watched a squirrel scamper through the crosshairs of my scope. I didn't pull the trigger.

From the distance I started hearing gunshots. The staccato sound of distant booming punctuated the rest of the day.

9:26, I see a coyote. I watch him through my scope and don't pull the trigger. I'm hunting deer. I'm sitting on a bucket in the middle of the woods getting bored and freezing.

10:15. I hear the approach of human footsteps. My dad motions to me; it's time to go. He mimes unloading my rifle.

I take the clip from my rifle, pull the bolt back, catch the bullet, place it into the clip and the clip into the rifle. My dad almost died when he didn't remove the bullet from his rifle a few years ago. It slipped out of his hands as he was climbing down the tree stand and the rifle went off. When he checked, the safety was on. I packed my things and climbed down. I call out to my dad, but he puts his finger to his lips and motions me to come close. With his eyes constantly moving around and head turning, he whispers. We are going to stalk over to the river, meet John, and try to spook up some deer to the other hunters before heading to the truck.

I started to warm up as we walked along the creek. I took my gloves off. Dad and John kept walking until they were out of sight around a river bend. I tried to put my gloves in my bag and take a few steps. One of the gloves fell out. I stopped and walked back to it. As I reached for it, I heard a crash behind me. I turned and faced a doe less than twenty feet away. We locked eyes as I tried to figure out what to do. By the time my rifle reached my shoulder, she was already gone, up over the bank and into the woods. I ran up but couldn't see anything. I'd missed my chance at Bambi's mom. I got back to the creek and started shuffling after John and Dad.

“What happened?” Dad asked.

“I dropped my glove.”

We reach the truck and head into Spickard Missouri. Population in 1999: 327. Population in 2021: 219. Median income in 2020, \$23,021. We stop at Donna's Diner. It is the only restaurant in Spickard. The smells of bacon, mud, and hand sanitizer mixed as we sit down. A forty-five-year-old waitress with fading red hair mostly imprisoned in a black net took our order, her name tag read Donna.

As we waited, I listened to my dad talk about when he first joined the army. His unit was on a training mission at the Army's National Training Center in Ft. Irwin California, right next to Death Valley. My dad's infantry unit was supposed to take over a piece of territory controlled by another unit. Because he was a chaplain and it's against the Geneva Conventions, my dad was not allowed to carry any of the MILES weapons, but he could still get “shot” and taken out of the glorified laser-tag war game. While they

were heading towards their objective, “the rest of my unit was ambushed and taken out. I was the only one left.” Dad smiled.

“What did you do?” I spoke for the first time after ordering.

Dad paused as Donna delivered plates of the morning special: biscuits smothered in cream colored gravy for \$2.99. “I picked up an M16 and started hunting. At the end of the game, I was the only one left.” Dad’s unit awarded him the Army Achievement Medal for his actions. The story of when the chaplain single handedly won the war game became something of a legend.

After breakfast, we headed to the public hunting land where my brother got his first deer. He was eleven, standing on a bank on the other side of a field where the other hunters were walking to try and spook deer John’s way. A terrified deer broke out of the field and ran towards the safety of the creek. When deer are spooked in open ground, they can run up to 40 mph. With one shot, my brother cracked the deer’s spine, killing it instantly. An impossible shot. Most hunters aim for the heart/lungs area of a deer to bring it down quickly. After a deer is shot there, it can still run about a hundred yards. It hasn’t realized it’s already dead.

John went on to be a distinguished graduate from West Point in 2006 and a Green Beret in 2012. When I graduated from high school, he wanted me to come to West Point. He would be a senior while I was a freshman and could make sure I was safe from enthusiastic upperclassmen. I didn’t like oceanless sand and sleeping in mud puddles, so I decided to do something else. Following graduation, John went to airborne and ranger schools and, after a year in Iraq, got picked up to be in Special Forces. His assigned

language is Russian. He named his daughter Shiloh, which means “peace.” The Battle of Shiloh was one of the bloodiest of the Civil War. There were over 23,000 casualties in two days.

Since I was the new hunter, I was the one standing on the bank as the men tried to spook deer my way. I didn’t see anything move until my dad and brother walked through the fields. We were standing on the bank looking across a field of recently harvested broken corn stalks. The devastated field looked like a history book picture of WWI. We were about to go to the truck when I turned for one last look. A 12-point buck broke through the tree line over three hundred yards away and raced towards the creek. I pointed and shouted. We were lined up like a firing squad. Three of us, over thirty years of hunting experience. Two were shooting. I watched the deer through my scope. The biggest I’ve ever seen. Staccato patches of dirt poofed up around it as the men emptied their rifles. The buck disappeared into the woods. White-tailed deer are gorgeous creatures. I never pulled the trigger.

Disappointed, we returned to Kenny’s land for the afternoon hunt. I was stuck watching squirrels from John’s stand. With the sun out, I didn’t get quite so cold. I tried to make up stories in my head. I tried to sleep. I tried to pay attention. I tried to not shoot squirrels. I was only successful at the last one.

It started to get dark. I saw my brother coming down the road, his canted orange facemask bobbed towards me. I didn’t hear his footsteps until he was underneath the stand. I unchambered the rifle and headed down. My dad was on his way in the truck to come pick us up. We walked a little way back to the road and down it until we got to a

half-abandoned stand that had been on Kenny's land so long no one knew what to do with it except let the forest try to reclaim it. We called it Joe's Bow Stand. No one knew who "Joe" was. John decided we should wait there. He asked if I needed anything and if I was alright. I was shivering but said I was fine. John fished through his pack and gave me his extra coat. Then he leaned his rifle against a tree, put his pack on the ground, laid down next to it and used it as a pillow.

When I was thirteen and we moved back to Missouri, our house had eight one hundred-year-old oak trees. One of them made for a perfect zip line launch point over our above ground pool. My dad helped John and I build a landing platform on the other end of the yard. My mom came out to watch us test the zip line. I wanted to go first; it was safer because I was lighter. John said it would be better if he went first. Mom said we would use my dad's 40 lb. archery target instead. The target hit our deck and ripped. Ropes stretch under weight.

I decided I'd wait in Joe's Bow Stand, just in case I saw anything. I wasn't ready to give up on my first-time hunting. Climbing up the stand, one of the board steps pulled out and snapped. Holding on with my hands, I swung into the tree, the stock of my rifle taking the brunt of the impact.

Once safely on the five-gallon bucket I looked at the scarred stock of the rifle. A two-inch scrape ran up above the left side of the grip, scoring the walnut. Later, when dad

saw my rifle and asked what happened. I said I didn't know. I'd wanted to get the shiny silver and graphite .260 Remington which was impervious to dings, but dad thought a wooden stock would hold value better.

I heard the deer before I saw it. I'll never forget that sound: light feet stepping through a field of popcorn. A patch of brown bounded through the woods. The deer crossed the road and into the timber on the other side. I started fumbling with my rifle when I heard the crack of another rifle. I saw the deer fall. I looked down to see John standing, rifle set firmly against his shoulder, a wisp of smoke trailing from the barrel. The deer took off running again. I climbed down and tried to catch up to John as he sprinted after it.

We shouldn't have followed it. Proper hunting technique is to allow the deer to run away, feel safe, and die. If you chase a wounded deer, the adrenaline keeps it going much farther. You are supposed to come back later and track it.

When I was six and we lived in Arkansas, my dad recruited my brother and I to help him track a deer he had shot earlier that day. It was getting dark, so he wanted us to hold the floodlights so he could find it. We followed the blood trail until we got to the deer. It was still alive, but couldn't move. It looked at me. My dad had forgotten his handgun at home. He only had the knife he was going to use to gut the deer with. He reached down for the neck, holding the knife in his right hand. Then he realized we were watching. He told us

to turn around. John and I put the floodlights down and obeyed. I tried to hum. I hadn't learned how to whistle yet. When Dad was done, he retrieved the floodlights and handed me mine. The yellow plastic had streaks of red from where dad grabbed the handle. He told John to be careful because the 6v battery in his light was leaking acid. He explained how battery acid could hurt us as he dragged the deer back to the truck. The sulfuric acid in a battery can eat cotton cloth as you watch. The acid can blind you. The acid can melt skin.

The deer that John and I were chasing bounded up. John shot it as it took off running into the deepest part of the woods. It was running downhill. Which meant we were going to have to drag it uphill. The deer jumped up. John shot it again. It didn't move as we came up to it. It was still alive. It looked at me. John raised his rifle, then paused.

“Do you want to turn around?”

It looked at me. I shook my head no. I didn't turn; my eyes were not covered. John turned his head away and pressed the trigger. He missed its head and hit its neck. It started spasming. Soon it slowed; one leg was twitching; it stopped moving; its eyes were still open.

“Why didn't it just die on the first shot?” John looked at me.

I didn't have the words. We both stood there, looking at it. It was getting dark. John started dragging the deer uphill. It was heavy. John didn't need any help. He

couldn't get it out of a narrow ravine. "It will be lighter if I gut it." John said. He didn't need any help.

With effort, John was able to get the deer up the hill. After about twenty minutes, we saw headlights. When we got back to Joe's Bow Stand, Dad was waiting in the truck. He was proud of *both* of us for tracking, gutting, and getting the deer out. I looked over at John. He didn't say anything. I didn't say anything.

The next year I got my first deer. My dad helped me gut it. I had the blood smeared on my face like a football player with black paint. After that year, planes crashed into the World Trade Center and my dad was attached to Special Forces and deployed for the next four hunting seasons.

Before September 11th, we were high school kids.

John went to West Point and became a Green Beret

Noah enlisted in the Marines

Eric enlisted as a helicopter gunner

I went to the Air Force Academy and became a pilot.

Flying would keep me above all the smoke. I would never have to pull the trigger. After years of combat missions, my official records list how I was crucial to at least 36 enemy killed in action.

Reappraisal refers to changing the way that one thinks about events and their relationship to the self, which may then alter emotional reactions.

“When a man has seen so many dead, he cannot understand any longer why there should be so much anguish over a single individual”

(Remarque 135).

Dresden and Holes

“It is somehow easier for me to write than say how I feel.”

Kurt Vonnegut, *We Are What We Pretend to Be* (72).

“Unk tried to imagine the character and appearance of the writer. The writer was fearless. The writer was such a lover of truth that he would expose himself to any amount of pain in order to add to his store of truth...Unk had written the letter to himself before having his memory cleaned out. It was literature in its finest sense. Since it made Unk courageous, watchful, and secretly free. It made him his own hero in very trying times”

Kurt Vonnegut, *The Sirens of Titan* (64).

Vonnegut’s Novels in Publication Order up to 1969

(1952) *Player Piano*

(1959) *The Sirens of Titan*

(1961) *Mother Night*

(1963) *Cat’s Cradle*

(1965) *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, or Pearls Before Swine*

(1969) *Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children’s Crusade*

Writing was Kurt Vonnegut’s way of performing an imaginative act on the objective facts of his personal history and attempting to make sense of it. Throughout his career as an author, Vonnegut merged and rearranged the border between his life and writing in his journey of finding a literacy for witnessing the firebombing of Dresden in WWII. If we center Vonnegut’s oeuvre as *Slaughterhouse-Five*, we can explore his development of the methodology to language his horrific experience as a POW. The methods that reach their peak in *Slaughterhouse-Five* include the insertion of self, humor, genre, temporality, and absurdity. In this chapter, we’ll look at Vonnegut’s novels leading

up to *Slaughterhouse-Five* to highlight the evolution of those methods. We'll also connect his published interviews with his work to provide insight into his writing process.

In *A Man Without a Country*, Vonnegut gives a "reason not to talk about war is that it's unspeakable" (25). While not entirely true, Vonnegut did eventually "speak" about war, the inexpressibility of the greatest massacre in European history lent difficulty to putting words to Dresden. Vonnegut spent over twenty-years finding a method to access his time in WWII and was largely unsuccessful until *Slaughterhouse-Five*, published in 1969, twenty-four years after he returned from Germany. His fourth published novel, *Cat's Cradle* (1963), summarizes this struggle. *Cat's Cradle* is a book about unsuccessfully writing a book about a horrific event (the atomic bomb). The narrator, insisting he should be called Jonah, says his personal purpose "was the book I never finished, the book to be called *The Day the World Ended*" (5). Mirroring Vonnegut's "stuckness" on his "war novel," the narrator of *Cat's Cradle* accepts, "the book would probably never be done anyway" because he, "no longer had a clear idea of what it would or should mean" (51). In the introduction to *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut states he didn't think his war novel would ever be finished: "I must have written five thousand pages by now, and thrown them all away" (19). After the world of *Cat's Cradle* is destroyed, the narrator self referentially writes "this book"--*Cat's Cradle* (119). Vonnegut's difficulty in finding a way to put words to Dresden is common for those who have lived through a significant event.

As a reminder, trauma overwhelms the cognitive brain with too much input from sensory, emotional, and hormonal sources. The deluge of data bypasses the normal

integrative function of the brain's memory system, which takes information, places it in a context of space and time, and organizes it into an episode that fits within an individual's autobiographic memory. The trauma bypasses the brain's integrative function to cause sensory and emotional fragments to be scattered like sharp nails across an individual's mind. When that person encounters similar sensory information, they "step on the nail" and are "triggered." These non-integrated fragments remain stable over time and may return suddenly and uncontrollably. In *Fates Worse than Death*, Vonnegut's war buddy and fellow POW Bernard O'Hare described how, on their trip back to Dresden in 1967, "both of us agreed that we could still smell the smoke" (214). As we've seen in the neuroscience of memory and trauma, past trauma isn't remembered, it is relived. When accessing a fragment, the individual is transported from the present to the "past," and then back again. It feels like being unstuck in time. Another component of trauma's effect is its impact on the language center of the brain. In several interviews, Vonnegut echoes this result of trauma and how writing can do a thing. In 1973, when asked if his books have been therapeutic for him, Vonnegut responds: "sure. That's well known. Writers get a nice break in one way, at least: they can treat their mental illnesses every day" (qtd. in Allen 109). If the language to speak the unspeakable or write the impossible doesn't exist, it must be created. It took Vonnegut over two decades to find the right words and develop the literacy to access his time in WWII. When he finally did so in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the result was some semblance of integration. Looking back on his life and career in 1997, Vonnegut says "when I wrote [*Slaughterhouse-Five*], I experienced catharsis" ("Bureaucracy and War" 00:54:45).

To see the specific methods realized in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, it is important to situate how Vonnegut approached writing. As psychologists Matthew Graci and Robyn Fivush explain, “narratives are the way in which individuals linguistically express their personal memories. Remembering the personal past is not a simple recollection of facts and observations. Rather, persons turn episodes in time into subjective, meaningful experiences” (489). Writing was Vonnegut’s expression of his life, his thoughts, and what was important to him. In 1972, he details how he has “always rigged my stories so as to include myself” (*Pity the Reader* 299). He put himself into his work because he felt “an inner urgency” (qtd. in Bellamy 205). Writing about the self is evident in Vonnegut’s teaching philosophy: “when I teach writing, I can only teach the student to become himself; there is nothing else to teach” (qtd. in Allen 43). Vonnegut’s autobiographical insertion into his work was the foundation of the method he developed to language Dresden. Self insertion was his point of entry to generating the necessary distance and safety to speak his unspeakable. The fictitious self allowed Vonnegut to approach catastrophe from a safe distance. As Vonnegut scholar Jerome Klinkowitz puts it, “if there are no words to speak about a massacre, the author would have to talk about something else—namely himself” (80). In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut does something he only hints at in his previous novels: he writes the first chapter detailing the autobiographic process of the creation of the novel. He inserts his real self directly into the narrative. This is a far cry from his first novel, *Player Piano*, where his real self is completely absent and the only integration between his real life and the novel is its inspiration: “when I started to write, I was living in Schenectady, working as a public

relations man, surrounded by scientists and machinery. So, I wrote my first book, *Player Piano*, about Schenectady” (qtd. in Bellamy 195-196). Between *Player Piano*’s 1952 debut and *Slaughterhouse-Five*’s publication in 1969 were four other novels where he developed the method of placing his real self into his writing.

The development of self insertion wasn’t linear; there isn’t an increase in how much Vonnegut put himself in each novel between *Player Piano* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, rather, he experimented with a number of different techniques in *The Sirens of Titan*, *Mother Night*, *Cat’s Cradle*, and *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. The fantastic war in *The Sirens of Titan* happens largely outside the narrative. The point of view characters avoid direct combat, which echo Vonnegut’s personal experience in the Battle of the Bulge. *Mother Night* strays from the speculative to the real in its portrayal of WWII. In 1966, Vonnegut wrote a new introduction to *Mother Night* where he fully inserts himself in the text and describes his experience in both WWII and Dresden for the first time: “we didn’t get to see the fire storm. We were in a cool meat-locker under a slaughterhouse... everything was gone but the cellars where 135,000 Hansels and Gretels had been baked like gingerbread men” (5). In the original text of *Mother Night*, “Vonnegut as self” is absent. He does include elements of himself in the fictional author Howard W. Campbell Jr., who can no longer write because he has witnessed too many unspeakable horrors. Vonnegut notably uses the first person in channeling Campbell. All Campbell has seen and been through, “makes it damn nearly impossible for me to say anything” (53). The inability of an author to write about atrocity is repeated in *Cat’s Cradle*. Vonnegut returns to Dresden in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* but in a manner similar to *Mother*

Night, through a character. Eliot Rosewater is a WWII veteran diagnosed with combat fatigue who believes art has failed him, “which is a very fair thing for a man who has bayoneted a fourteen-year-old boy in the line of duty” (63). Vonnegut, through Rosewater, has a vision of Indianapolis “being consumed by a fire-storm” (193) and encounters the “description of the fire-storms in Dresden” in a text that he “read over and over again, his features blank, his palms sweating” (194). In the midst of the vision, Rosewater’s world goes black and he wakes to the sound of a bird singing poo-tee-weet. The image of the firestorm left Rosewater with a “little gap in my memory” (208) that lingers until a bird sings poo-tee-weet and “the memory of all that had happened in the blackness came crashing back” (209). At this point in his life, Vonnegut cannot yet write the blank space of Dresden in both his and Rosewater’s memory. He does so in *Slaughterhouse-Five* where the missing narrative is bracketed by a bird singing poo-tee-weet.

Vonnegut’s experiments with method were not attempts to advance art or push the boundaries of literary expression, they were a creation of literacy to integrate the significant events of his life and find words for the unspeakable. His biographer, Charles Shields, believes: “for Vonnegut to describe his feelings of shock and confusion as a young army private—feelings that later took shape as nightmare...what he needed to communicate was the delirium created by his sense of chaos. And he could do it by playing havoc with time” (314). As we’ve seen in the neuroscience of traumatic memory, sensory fragments intrude from outside of time and space: there is no coherent narrative, there is no beginning, middle, and end. Trauma can leave a person trapped in a constant

uncertainty like Billy Pilgrim who, “never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next” (29). The limitation of the temporal and the spatial in conventional narrative forms makes the horror of Dresden so difficult to put words to. For Vonnegut, remembering Dresden didn’t feel like a distinct event, it felt like watching everything, everywhere, all at once. Traumatic memory is how Vonnegut and his aliens, the Tralfamadorians, create books, as described in *Slaughterhouse-Five*:

“Each clump of symbols is a brief, urgent message—describing a situation, a scene. We Tralfamadorians read them all at once, not one after the other. There isn’t any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at one time, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time (112).”

Before Billy Pilgrim could become unstuck in time and encounter the fragmentation of trauma as intrusive memory shattering the past, present, and future, Vonnegut has to develop the method of nonlinear storytelling. Linearity forces impossible demands on both reader and writer of trauma.

The unique time structure of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is tried out in both *Sirens of Titan* and *Mother Night*. While *Mother Night* has about as many temporal shifts as *Slaughterhouse-Five*, it explores a different aspect of chronology than *Sirens of Titan*. In *Sirens of Titan*, Vonnegut tries out time as a way to process the existential void. In *Mother Night*, Vonnegut experiments with the temporality of a printed text. *Mother Night* shows how the reading of texts is complicated by non-linearity. The meaning of each text within *Mother Night* is determined by who reads it and when. Like Billy Pilgrim, the reader of *Mother Night* doesn’t know when and where he will slip as Vonnegut shifts

time and space within and between each short chapter. In *Sirens of Titan*, while the story is told linearly, one of its characters has become unstuck in time. Vonnegut invents a surreal device called a “chrono-synclastic infundibulum” to deconstruct linear narrative structure. The “infundibulum” allows Vonnegut, through the character of Winston Niles Rumfoord, to jump through space and time and create a macro point of view to process his character’s individual trauma and come to an understanding of any meaning behind atrocity. Rumfoord and his dog are dispersed throughout the universe where they appear in different places for one hour every fifty-nine days. They maintain a relatively permanent existence on Titan, the largest of Saturn’s moon. The infundibulum has given Rumfoord the universal perspective to observe his wife Beatrice get abducted and raped, another character, Malachi Constant be forced to murder his best friend, and a horrific war between earth and mars. While the infundibulum gives Rumfoord the ability to see the past and the future, it highlights his lack of agency and mirrors many of Vonnegut’s characters who suffer without control. Rumfoord within surreal fiction and Vonnegut in WWII are both powerless to change the script of great events playing through the universe. As crafted by Vonnegut in *The Sirens of Titan*, Tralfamadorians have manipulated the entirety of human history in their quest to deliver a spare part to one of their spaceships marooned on Titan. The Tralfamadorian stuck on Titan is tasked with delivering a message to another alien species. The message that comes at the cost of incredible individual and communal suffering is: “greetings” (142). Unlike Victor Frankl, Vonnegut believes suffering has no meaning. However, Vonnegut’s development of different methods to explore time enables a reconfiguration of death in *Slaughterhouse-*

Five. Death is not an ending; it is one moment in the kaleidoscope of life. When a Tralfamadorian encounters death: “all he thinks is that the dead person is in a bad condition in that particular moment, but that the same person is just fine in plenty of other moments. Now when I [Vonnegut’s insertion of self] hear that somebody is dead, I simply shrug and say what the Tralfamadorians say about dead people, which is ‘So it goes’” (34).

While this understanding of death might be considered absurd, Vonnegut doesn’t employ absurdity for shock value. Instead, he uses the absurd as a method of structuring his narratives. Vonnegut finds the same surprise inherent in absurdity, uncontrollable suffering, and a joke. In a well-crafted joke, information is not presented in a linear manner; poignant data that is meaningless in itself accumulates until the punchline, where everything snaps into meaning all at once and ignites an emotional response. For Vonnegut, “laughing or crying is what a human being does when there’s nothing else he can do” (*Wampeters* 232). Rather than tears, Vonnegut often turned to laughter in the face of helplessness: “joking was my response to misery I couldn’t do anything about” (*Wampeters* 142). In *A Man Without a Country*, Vonnegut looks back on his life and finds humor to be his “way of holding off how awful life can be, to protect yourself” (80). It was his personal response to massacre:

“I saw the destruction of Dresden. I saw the city before and then came out of an air-raid shelter and saw it afterward, and certainly one response was laughter. God knows, that’s the soul seeking some relief. Any subject is subject to laughter, and I suppose there was laughter of a very ghastly kind by victims in Auschwitz” (20).

The unexpected, uncontrollable nature of trauma is how he structured *The Sirens of Titan*. The punchline of the novel is the absolute meaninglessness of individual and communal suffering. Vonnegut even hints at the joke in his introduction where the real earth is “a nightmare of meaninglessness without end” (8). Through the voice of Constant, Vonnegut says he hasn’t “understood a single thing that’s happened to me since I reached Earth” (124). As each fragmented scene comes together to form the punchline, Vonnegut reveals that while it was all so sad, “it was all so beautiful too” (145), just like a Tralfamadorian novel.

Humor was a method easily accessible to Vonnegut. In *A Man Without a Country*, Vonnegut recounts how, as a youngest child, he found an entrance to the adult conversation of his parents and older siblings through making them laugh (17). Vonnegut learned he could be heard if he was surprising and employed that method in his writing by structuring his novels like a mousetrap—building towards an unexpected snap. He describes the process of this narrative structure as his novels having “very short chapters. Each one of them represents one day’s work, and each one is a joke” (80). The “joke” in *Player Piano* is how people will destroy the world they hate just to rebuild it exactly the same, having learned nothing. The “joke” in *The Sirens of Titan* is that the entirety of human endeavor was a way for aliens to pass along shipping notifications. In *Mother Night*, Vonnegut shows how intentions don’t matter: “we are what we pretend to be” (5). *Cat’s Cradle*’s “joke” is in its title; the scientists who create world ending devices don’t realize the implications of what they are doing but are like children playing games. *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* shows how loving people without getting anything in return is

like casting pearls before swine. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut shows the only response to helplessly observing atrocity is absurdity: “what do the birds say? All there is to say about a massacre, things like ‘Poo-tee-weet?’” (24). Poo-tee-weet makes about as much sense as how the word laughter is imbedded in the word slaughter.

It is unexpected suffering without control which makes an argument for the meaningless nature of life. Vonnegut’s personal history was filled with it. The Wall Street Crash of 1929 destroyed not only his parent’s wealth, but their identity and place in the world. On a three-day pass before leaving for WWII, Vonnegut’s mother committed suicide on the eve of Mother’s Day. Trained on heavy artillery, Vonnegut was instead sent as an infantry scout with the 423rd regiment which just happened to be on the most exposed salient of the American front in the Ardennes Forest a few days before the German’s launched their largest offensive after Normandy. Shortly after arriving at the front, Vonnegut was captured and sent via train further into Germany. On the way, allied bombers attacked the train, killing hundreds of prisoners. At a POW camp, the Germans randomly selected 150 POWs for a work detail at Dresden. Later in life, Vonnegut’s brother-in-law drowned in a train derailing into Newark Bay and his sister Alice died of cancer less than twenty-four hours later leaving their four sons to be adopted by Kurt and Jane Vonnegut. The absurd coincidences Vonnegut projects into his writing come from the uncontrollable suffering in his life. Vonnegut processed his personal lack of agency through his characters. As we’ve briefly seen, Vonnegut modeled the powerless Billy Pilgrim on fellow soldier Joe Crone: “Joe didn’t understand the war and of course there was nothing to understand. The world had gone completely mad” (qtd. in Shields 89). In

Slaughterhouse-Five, Billy Pilgrim and Eliot Rosewater, “both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in war” (128). The path to confronting uncontrollable suffering is highlighted in Vonnegut’s use of the method of the surreal.

Mother Night is fully realistic while *The Sirens of Titan* is fully fantastic. The methods blend in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Rosewater tells Billy, after reading a book that wasn’t science fiction, “everything there was to know about life was in *The Brothers Karamazov*...but that isn’t *enough* anymore” (129). After encountering uncontrollable horror in WWII, Rosewater, Billy, and Vonnegut “were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe. Science fiction was a big help” (128). Looking back on his career in 1983, Vonnegut states his use of the method of the surreal as: “I experimented with the science fiction idea, using it for relief, is to get some distance from an atrocity of this sort to see how much it really matters in the long view and the science fiction thing seemed to work” (“Interview on his Life and Career” 00:21:40). The narrative tool of Tralfamadorian time travel gave voice to the way Vonnegut felt the unpredictable chaos of traumatic memory’s intrusion on the present. In the surreal, Vonnegut found a method to communicate the truth of his fragmented recall of Dresden: “people whose mental diseases couldn’t be treated because the causes of the diseases were all in the fourth dimension, and three-dimensional Earthling doctors couldn’t see those causes at all, or even imagine them” (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 132). The surreal was but one of the methods that allowed Kurt Vonnegut to develop the literacy to write the impossible. If “healing” trauma comes from shaping scattered sensory fragments into narrative, then that is what happens when Vonnegut is finally able to

insert his real self into *Slaughterhouse-Five* and aspects of himself in the fictional characters Billy Pilgrim and Kilgore Trout. For Vonnegut, writing *Slaughterhouse Five* acted as a therapeutic process that integrated Dresden with the rest of his life's narrative. The use of time travel to put language to the phenomena of traumatic memory intrusion was critical to his ability to language the unspeakable horrors he experienced in a slaughterhouse during the firebombing of Dresden. We'll examine this method more in the next section. The creation of literacy Vonnegut employed in *Slaughterhouse-Five* abreacted the affect of his trauma and allowed association of the unlanguageable horrors that dismembered Vonnegut's ability to access memories of his time in WWII. Such languaging into narrative shows how different methods can serve as effective entry points to the space of trauma.

The result of Vonnegut's development of the literacy to access his time in WWII was relief. In his next novel, *Breakfast of Champions*, which was originally part of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut gives "characters I've used over and over again their freedom. I tell them I won't be needing them anymore. They can pursue their own destinies. I guess that means I'm free to pursue my destiny, too. I don't have to take care of them anymore" (qtd. in Allen 109). For Vonnegut, completing his war novel was the end of some sort of career: "at the end of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, I had the feeling that I had produced this blossom. So, I had a shutting-off feeling, you know, that I had done what I was supposed to do and everything was OK. And that was the end of it. I could figure out my missions for myself after that" (qtd. in Allen 107). Vonnegut also said goodbye to the methods that served him to access Dresden because they weren't needed anymore.

Speaking of work after *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut states there will not “be anybody escaping through hallucination or through time travel or anything like that. I don’t think there’ll be any veering off to Tralfamadore, which has meant, you know, in the midst of a tragic situation just deciding to laugh, and the hell with it, to turn the whole subject off” (qtd. in Allen 145). Vonnegut’s assertion in 1974 remains true in the rest of his published novels. It took Vonnegut over twenty years to develop the literacy to access his trauma. But, once he did, he was able to integrate Dresden into his life’s narrative. Integration doesn’t erase the past. It doesn’t make sense out of uncontrollable suffering. It isn’t an answer. Integration is a process that connects a fragmented past to a future that was previously impossible.

connections.

Kurt Vonnegut, *God Bless you, Dr. Kevorkian* (77-78)

“One last question,” I begged. “To what do you attribute your incredible productivity?” Isaac Asimov replied with but a single word: “Escape.”

Nanette Vonnegut, on watching her father struggle to write about Dresden

“It was like living with an elephant for 15 years that was trying to give birth to something twice its size... He was writing to save his own life and in doing it I think he has saved a lot of lives” (qtd in Jack).

NYT Journalist Malcolm Jack on the 50th anniversary of *Slaughterhouse-Five*

“In 1969, when the novel was published, PTSD was a concept as alien as the four-dimensional beings who kidnap Pilgrim to the planet Tralfamadore... Whether he knew it or not, Vonnegut was improvising a self-help manual for psychic pain at a time when many young Americans needed it most”

Literary Scholar Tom Roston (104).

“It is uncanny how closely Billy Pilgrim’s time travel, mental dysfunction, and social withdrawal mirror the PTSD diagnosis”

Dr. Harold Kudler, the chief consultant for mental health for the VA from 2014-2018

“*Slaughterhouse-Five* is the ultimate PTSD novel. It is a fully rendered metaphorical exploration of what it means to be ripped out of your own person, relationships, place and time written by a man who had actually experienced this” (qtd in Roston 28).

Dr. Robert Lifton, who helped develop the term PTSD, on Vonnegut and

Slaughterhouse-Five

“It had so much to say obliquely and indirectly about trauma and massive killing, and that sort of subject is very difficult to write about. His method was this oblique exploration of unreality which nonetheless is a source of

truth...His hard-won knowledge of death that both defines and plagues him tends to be fragmentary at best and half-articulate yet that knowledge is precious in the extreme. It takes shape from the survivor's struggle to grasp his experience and render it significant, his struggle to formulate his death immersion. Only by coming to such knowledge can the survivor cease to be immobilized" (qtd in Roston 100).

Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (219).

"I put everything that happens to me in books"

Slaughterhouse-Five and Words

It took Kurt Vonnegut over twenty years and five published novels to develop the literacy to access his time as a POW in Dresden. His biographer agrees. Shields describes *Slaughterhouse-Five* as “the culmination of Vonnegut’s experiments with technique in the five preceding novels” (291). One of Vonnegut’s key entry points to the space of Dresden was the method of the surreal to engage with the intrusion of traumatic memory. Vonnegut employed alien time travel to explain the subjective truth of how a sensory fragment can be triggered and relived. While time travel isn’t objectively true, Vonnegut shows the subjective truth of intrusive memory to such a degree that *Slaughterhouse-Five* connects to both soldiers with diagnosed PTSD and the psychologists who treat them. From our knowledge of how traumatic memory works, we can see how closely its depiction matches Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The critical movement for Vonnegut and Pilgrim is when Billy *doesn’t* slip through time. Toward the end of the novel, Billy remembers a moment from Dresden rather than traveling to the moment. This re-membering points us to how narrative methodologies can facilitate access to the space of trauma and lead towards integration.

During WWII, Vonnegut was a POW in Dresden before, during, and after the firebombing. He, along with other prisoners, were ordered to recover the bodies of civilians who died in the attack. In Vonnegut’s biography, Shields recounts this task as: “finding the remains of residents smothered in basements by the firestorms. Superheated tornadoes had sucked out the oxygen and turned hiding places into tombs. Basements, [Vonnegut] said, ‘looked like a streetcar full of people who’d simultaneously had heart

failure. Just people sitting there in their chairs, all dead” (86). For Vonnegut, Dresden resisted safe access and manifested as a blank space in his mind due to trauma’s disruption of the normal episodic memory process. In the introduction to *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut narrates the attempt to remember the firebombing: “when I got home from the Second World War twenty-three years ago, I thought it would be easy for me to write about the destruction of Dresden, since all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen. But not many words about Dresden came from my mind then—not enough of them to make a book, anyway. And not many words come now” (2-3). Struggling to find words after trauma is not unique to Vonnegut. He asks a friend and fellow POW to help him remember the war, but for Charlie O’Hare, he couldn’t remember much either. Even when Vonnegut and O’Hare got together to put language to their common experience, “we would chuckle or grin sometimes, as though war stories were coming back, but neither one of us could remember anything good” (17). Eventually, they “gave up on remembering” (19).

Time travel proved to be the important method for Vonnegut to access the space of Dresden. Billy slips through time in a similar manner to someone suffering from traumatic memory intrusion. Billy doesn’t go from present, to past, to future; he goes from present to present with few narrative elements. As we know, this is exactly how traumatic memory appears in flashes of isolated sensory and emotional imprints untethered to the linear chronology of a normal episodic memory. Because memory can be considered a sensemaking tool in the way it organizes and structures events to provide an individual with a consistent sense of temporality, Vonnegut’s use of time travel to

language intrusive traumatic memory explains his description of *Slaughterhouse-Five* as, “all this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true” (1). The temporal distortion Billy encounters in *Slaughterhouse-Five* matches Vonnegut’s real-life after WWII. Relating a return to Dresden many years after the war, Vonnegut says: “time would not pass. Somebody was playing with the clocks, and not only with the electric clocks, but the wind-up kind, too. The second hand on my watch would twitch once, and a year would pass, and then it would twitch again. There was nothing I could do about it. As an Earthling, I had to believe whatever clocks said—and calendars” (26). To process his shaky temporality, Vonnegut details the book he brought with him, a war story about “a brave French soldier in the First World War—until his skull was cracked. After that, he couldn’t sleep, and there were noises in his head.” Vonnegut continues to narrate how Celine wrote novels all night and “time obsessed him” (26-27). Vonnegut puts this feeling into *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Billy, who, after being unconscious for two days, “dreamed millions of things, some of them true. The true things were time-travel” (200). Billy spends most of the novel slipping through time and even has “powerful psychosomatic responses” (220) when accessing his trauma, which is a common symptom in a clinical PTSD diagnosis. When hearing a barbershop quartet play at his eighteenth wedding anniversary, Billy is unexpectedly disturbed and, “his mouth filled with the taste of lemonade, and his face became grotesque” (220). The other guests at the party say he looks awful. While Billy insists he is fine, “he could find no explanation for why the song had affected him so grotesquely. He had supposed for years that he had no secrets from himself. Here was proof that he had a great big secret somewhere inside, and

he could not imagine what it was” (221). Kilgore Trout makes a guess that Billy has seen “through a time window” (221) which is suddenly seeing “the past or the future” (222). Notably in this moment, Billy doesn’t slip through time.

After being “emotionally wracked” and “pulled apart inside,” Billy realizes his disruption was “definitely associated with those four men” (224). When thinking about the effect the quartet had on him, Billy “found an association with an experience he had had long ago. He did not travel in time to the experience. He remembered it shimmeringly—as follows: he was down in the meat locker on the night that Dresden was destroyed” (226). Once it became safe to come out of their improvised shelter the next day, the American POWs and their four guards witnessed the devastation first hand: “the guards drew together instinctively, rolled their eyes. They experimented with one expression and then another, said nothing, though their mouths were often open. They looked like a silent film of a barbershop quartet” (227). It is at this moment that Billy slips through time to Tralfamador where Montana Wildhack asks Billy to tell her a story. The story Billy tells is how, “‘Dresden was destroyed on the night of February 13, 1945. We came out of our shelter the next day.’ He told Montana about the four guards who, in their astonishment and grief, resembled a barbershop quartet” (228). What is significant about this section of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is that it shows Billy, and perhaps Vonnegut, is finally able to re-member, to access his time in Dresden without uncontrolled, intrusive sensory fragments. It is this re-membling that points to Billy’s and Vonnegut’s movement towards integrating Dresden. On the third iteration of writing his war novel, Vonnegut is successful with *Slaughterhouse-Five*. As Shields puts it, after two previous

attempts, finally: “Vonnegut begins to speak in his own voice, but it is autobiographical. He has been a novelist for so long, he explains, that he is unable to tell the difference between what has really happened in his life and what hasn’t” (283). The device of time travel to language the intrusion of traumatic memory allowed Vonnegut to re-member the firebombing of Dresden.

The blending of memory with imagination and temporal shifts in *Slaughterhouse-Five* served as an integrative method for Vonnegut. In a 1971 interview, Vonnegut describes writing the novel as being “a therapeutic thing. I’m a different sort of person now. I got rid of a lot of crap” (qtd. in Allen 32). The completion of the story was a burden lifted for Vonnegut. Before finishing his war novel, he felt compelled to tell the story but was unable to find the words. After *Slaughterhouse-Five*, that feeling changed: “I felt after I finished *Slaughterhouse-Five* that I didn’t have to write at all anymore if I didn’t want to.” Vonnegut recounts that he “had a shutting-off feeling” that he had “done what I was supposed to do and everything was OK” (qtd. in Allen 107). After years of honing methodologies and developing a literacy to access his time in the firebombing of Dresden, Vonnegut employs the method of the surreal to make sense of intrusive memory. Putting language to his own experience of traumatic memory in the story of Billy Pilgrim, Vonnegut is able to integrate WWII with the rest of his life’s narrative.

Jinx and the no good, very bad day

Or, how we train and don't untrain

“If nothing is on fire and nobody's dying, it's just not that big of a deal.”

~US Special Forces Operator

Okay, okay. So, how much practice do you have with almost dying? I have a lot. There's a phrase for it. Practice makes...practice makes...practice does a thing.

After this guy rear ended me in a work van, he was crying and calling his wife and freaking out. I was talking to the cop about his new GT350 Mustang. You know, the one with the flat plane crank that sounds like a Ferrari F430. I wouldn't object if someone gave me one.

I was talking about the car and the work van guy had to sit down.

Shit man, we are already on the ground, that's like the 99% solution to all things that can kill you while flying. Wait, wait. I'm getting ahead of myself.

Let me back up.

It's been a long day. I'm still in my flight suit. It's dark. I'm stuck in traffic. Her car was at the dealer for an oil change so they gave me a brand new, top of the line SUV as a loaner. I guess they wanted me to buy it. I do my own oil changes now.

I'm stuck in traffic. Not moving. There's a van with dingy yellow lights approaching in the rearview. Like, really approaching. Like, he is going way to fast. Like, he is going to hit me. There are cars in front of me. I don't have room on the shoulder. There is nothing I can do. He is going to hit me.

Step one. Maintain aircraft control.

I'm stopped. I can't do anything else.

Step two. Analyze the situation.

He is going to hit me.

Step three. Take appropriate action.

I put my foot on the brake. I lean against the seat. I close my eyes.

Step four. Land as soon as conditions permit.

I'm already landed, so at least I have that going for me.

How many times have I done this? Both in real life and simulators and in front of my friends and instructor pilots waiting for me to screw up. A lot.

Tires screech.

Impact.

It's like the first time. The first time I felt something. The tenth? Nothing. You get used to it. Practice does a thing. Wait, let me back up.

Airplanes and I don't agree. Supposedly, I'm jinxed. The thing is, if you look at the bright side, I have a lot of practice.

Ok, the first time. The first time I was flying solo in a T-38, aka lawn dart, aka death trap. This thing was designed in the 1950s. They strapped thin sheets of metal to two one-time use Howler missile engines, sent it supersonic, and hoped for the best. Supersonic is cool, the needles jump and the world gets quiet.

The T-38 tries to kill you in a lot of ways. It has so little lift that turning to land puts you in a stall. It has the second fastest landing speed of any aircraft. The fastest is the

space shuttle. The third is the KC-135. I'm two for three. The entire FAA under ten thousand rules are designed around the T-38. It is so fast that radar can't keep up. The blip of the 38 slips in between sweeps. Did I mention the engines were designed for one time use and we've been flying it for like fifty years? Remember the cars from the 1950s?

Ok, so because the T-38 is only good at going in a straight line, it takes ten thousand feet of altitude to do a loop. At four Gs. That is four times the force of gravity as the needles spiral out of control and the world spins and suddenly all the lights go out and the emergency tones blare and you are alone in the jet and you have nine hours in it and you are twenty-three years old and you have been trained for this. You've been trained for this.

Step zero. Don't freak out, take a deep breath, and you'll live through this.

Step one. Maintain aircraft control.

Pull slowly out of the loop and return to wings level, reduce the throttle.

Step two. Analyze the situation.

It is just a generator. There are two. The other one picks up the load and the klaxon stops.

Step three. Take appropriate action.

Try to read a checklist with one hand and fly with one hand and don't drop anything because you are strapped into your ejection seat.

Step four. Land as soon as conditions permit.

Come on the radio and declare an emergency and listen as the world goes quiet. Normal flights use the Tiger callsign, Solos use the Kitty callsign. Kitty comes on the radio saying shit's broke and everyone knows Castle is probably dead. But it's ok, because he is trained for this. Fly as slowly/quickly as possible directly back to base and land. Meet the firetrucks and the nice Vikings with silver armor and crash axes. Don't worry, you'll get to know them very well.

So that was the first time, it was kinda freaky. The second? I don't remember the second. The third through tenth blur together. It got to the point where no instructor would fly with me.

Finally, Big Shot, an F-15C pilot decided he'd fly with the jinx. Big Shot was like if your fighter pilot had a fighter pilot. He didn't even need to wear two pairs of sunglasses. The sun dimmed around him.

Big Shot was Big Shot and I was jinxed. Everything went well until we were going to land. I went to land and the jet wouldn't land. We just skipped down the runway like that thing with a kid's rock and a quiet pond.

I looked at the RPMs. One engine was in idle, the other in MAX AFTERBURNER. I jockeyed with the throttles and nothing, one engine just decided to Leeroy Jenkins until we ran out of fuel in like four minutes. Yeah, tiny plane, tiny fuel tanks, afterburner designed in the 1950s where they just threw more explosions at any problem. The problem was the T-38 goes like .9 Mach and it takes lots of nozzles spewing gas behind the engine to ignite and explode and make the needles jump.

So, there we were. Three minutes of fuel left.

Step one. Maintain aircraft control.

I pulled into a short landing pattern while Big Shot shut the engine down and I landed single engine with about one minute of fuel left. We coasted and had to wait for the firetrucks. Big Shot climbed out of the jet and kissed the ground. He had to sit down. Like the guy in the van. I just talked about cars with my favorite Vikings.

I thought it would be different when I had a crew.

It wasn't. They were really good about freaking out over Iraq when our hydraulics pissed out. For them it was their first time. I'd lost count.

Later, I'd gotten so much practice that when a distinguished three-star general wanted to learn how we flew tiny white airplanes, they sent him with me. He had a couple thousand hours in things like T-38s and F-16s. Which are very different from tiny little two hundred horsepower prop jobs that glide forever. If the T-38 has the second fastest landing speed, the T-53 has like the slowest. But airplanes being airplanes, they still try to kill you.

Before I get into flying with the three star, you need to understand something. It is important to know what a "go-around" is. It means: when you are trying to land and fuck it up and are going to crash and die, you try again. You pass go, you collect the two hundred dollars in imminent danger pay, and get another chance at landing/life. It is very important for you to understand that when you perform a go around, your throttle goes

forward and your stick goes back. That way, you fly safely away from the ground. What you **absolutely do not do under any circumstances** is the opposite of that. (obviously).

Here is another important thing for you to know. In the T-38 and F-16, the throttle is in your left hand and the stick is in your right hand. In the T-53 student position, the stick is in your left hand and the throttle is in your right hand. Confusing? Yeah.

Now, storytime with Jinx.

So, I was flying with the three star who had lots of practice. He had been trained very, very well.

He had thousands of flights and years of experience. I demonstrated a landing and then it was his turn. His approach was alright, but we were too fast and unstable so I called a “go around.”

He didn’t question it, didn’t argue, even though I was a captain and he was a captain before I was born. His reaction was impeccable. His training took over. He **did the thing**.

Left hand forward, right hand back.

If we were in a T-38, everything would have been perfect. But we weren’t. He’d trained, but not untrained. His throttle went to idle and he nosed us directly into the dirt.

Step one. Maintain aircraft control.

Take over on the controls and reverse what he just did as we careen towards the ground. I flare us into the stall warning horn and we hit, bounce, hit, and slowly, safely climb away.

Step two. Analyze the situation.

Glance down at my clipboard where I'm recording how many landings we have done as tiny hash marks. Slowly turn to the three-star general, "You want me to count that as two?"

He doesn't laugh. Turns out, he is too busy to fly and never comes back.

A few years and more practice later, my pregnant wife has stomach pain and we go to the hospital. We hadn't even started our classes or bought a crib yet. It wasn't time, but it was time for a little two-pound guy to enter the world.

People often describe the birth of a child as the most emotional experience you can have. Looking into the eyes of a brand-new human that is of you and filled to overflowing. Some people say they have to sit down.

For me, it was **Step one**.

echoes.

On seeing.

Psychologist Bessel van der Kolk

“In response to the trauma itself, and in coping with the dread that persisted long afterward, these patients had learned to shut down the brain areas that transmit the visceral feelings and emotions that accompany and define terror. Yet in everyday life, those same brain areas are responsible for registering the entire range of emotions and sensations that form the foundation of our self-awareness, our sense of who we are. What we witnessed here was a tragic adaptation: In an effort to shut off terrifying sensations, they also deadened their capacity to feel fully alive” (107).

It is like coming into a dark room from a sunny day. I cannot distinguish the shape of things because my sight is calibrated for a more intense signal.

Professor of Cognitive Psychology Keith Oatley

“In the ordinary world we don’t always experience our emotions because sometimes they happen at the wrong aesthetic distance...Fiction, with characteristics that are more controlled than those of everyday life, enables us to re-experience such emotions at...an optimal aesthetic distance” (125).

If the natural dilation process of the eye is broken, I can manually calibrate my vision by writing stories with emotional nuance.

Literary Scholar Kali Tal, on Vietnam Veteran and poet W.D. Ehrhart

“The emotional scars a survivor bears are the deaths of others...Consonant with this denial is an identification with the dead, an inability or refusal to distinguish between life and death that is reinforced by the suppression of human emotion. Ehrhart’s poetry of this later period reflects the breakdown of these coping mechanisms, and his ability to once again fully experience the range of human emotion” (98).

Vietnam infantryman and author Tim O’Brien

“What stories can do, I guess, is make things present. I can look at things I never looked at. I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God. I can be brave. I can make myself feel again” (171).

What once was dark, now is *Alight*

CHAPTER SIX

The writers we've looked at so far have been professionals. They are highly trained, highly skilled authors whose work has been through a revising, editing, and publishing process. We have analyzed writers whose ability comes from a mix of education, talent, and practice. We are left with the question: does skill matter? And, if someone who is a professional writer struggles to access the space of trauma, is there any hope for someone who struggles to write?

We'll explore the answers to those questions in this chapter, but let me briefly say: when it comes to the end goal of integration, writing "skill" doesn't really matter. It will always be difficult to enter the space of trauma. More tools may help access that space but the most important thing is to find *any* method that facilitates such access.

In 2017, psychologists Michele Bedard-Gilligan et al. studied narratives from seventy-seven individuals with chronic PTSD and found: "changes in narrative quality may be less crucial than changes in the individual's emotional experiencing in response to the narrative" (221). The psychologists defined narrative "quality" as increased cohesion and decreased fragmentation. While we might define "quality" differently, their observations point to change in the narratives subjects wrote pre and post treatment. Notably, it wasn't the narrative change or "improvement" that linked to therapeutic benefits but the internal change in the writer as they spent time in the space of past significant events.

Our goal is not necessarily to use the methodologies we've looked at to become better writers. Our goal is to find the doorway to our past and translate our internal worlds into external words. As we journey towards integration and use methods that facilitate safety, distance, and meaning making, we will most likely become better writers. We can notice the change in both our lives and our writing as we look back and reflect on our journeys.

Reflections

Alight

The Writers

Tom Satterly, *All Secure*

After high school, Satterly enlisted in the army where he spent over twenty years as an Operator in the US military's most secretive and elite Special Operations "Unit." Written with a co-author, his memoir narrates prominent missions from his career, the development of PTSD, and the road to recovery.

Erik Mirandette, *The Only Road North*

At the time of its publication in 2007, Mirandette had a Bachelor's of Science in English from the United States Air Force Academy. In this memoir, Mirandette narrates his survival and the death of his brother in a 2005 suicide bombing in Cairo.

Carmen Machado, *In the Dream House*

Carmen Machado employs a breadth of narrative tools from her training as a professional writer educated in the Iowa Writer's Workshop to tell her memoir of domestic abuse.

Meg Jenson, *The Art and Science of Trauma and the Autobiographical*

Dr. Meg Jenson centers her experience writing about childhood abuse within her work in literary studies as a Professor of Literature and Creative Writing at the Kingston School of Art.

intrusions.

I was a sophomore at the United States Air Force Academy when I first met Erik Mirandette. It was January, when the locker room the Cross-Country team exclusively populates is turned into a space for the *entire* men's Track and Field team. As we made room for the vaulters, jumpers, and throwers we knew, we also made room for those upperclassmen coming back from years away on voluntary humanitarian work.

I was about to head to the track for practice when one of the pole-vaulters took off his shirt before tossing on a grey dry-fit. I stared.

It looked like he had passed through a wood chipper. His body was riddled with scars. His left triceps was half gone. Large patches of pink from skin grafts covered his legs. He smiled at me before trotting off. As I ran that day, I imagined the story that would explain Erik's injuries: fire, barfight, car crash, or even a car crash into a barfight that started a fire.

My limited life experience couldn't hold the possibility of the homemade bomb filled with nails that made Erik's body into a living monument to sudden, uncontrolled horror.

A Learned Skill?

Many of the standard treatments for trauma are based around “talk therapy” or verbally telling personal stories. Before we explore each of our selected author’s autobiographical narrative writing, let’s broadly consider the differences between verbally telling a story and writing it down. Writing requires more slowness than talking, allowing space for the cognitive mind to create or discover the language for an event. In its creation, writing is individual rather than communal. When we speak with an audience, part of our mind takes cues from that audience and edits our responses based on that information. If our audience reacts with boredom, nervousness, anxiety, or other emotions, we unconsciously diminish our story. Writing allows freedom to create a literacy without an immediate audience, which helps access the entire space of trauma. Perhaps more importantly, writing creates room for a delayed revision process. An individual can revisit the narrative of their trauma, edit, change, add to, remove, and reconfigure it, which facilitates integration as they repeatedly access the same event. Often, when verbally telling the same story, an audience will fixate on changing factual details and miss the subjective truth of an event. Writing also provides the more permanent space of a page when compared to the ephemeral flow of conversation. Writing isn’t necessarily “better” than talk therapy and vice versa. They are just different. Each might be more or less effective depending on different stages of an individual’s path towards integration. For our selected writers, the act of writing about their past was difficult but accessible despite vastly different stories and training. Even from varied backgrounds, each author struggled to find the words to tell their story and found a

measure of integration when they succeeded. While all four writers use the broad method of autobiographical narrative writing, that is about where their method and “skill” diverges.

Chapter Two showed us how creating a literacy to fill the holes left by trauma is a difficult process due to its disruption of language. It also pointed us to how writing can be integrative as it mimics the role of the hippocampus in the contextual encoding of episodic memory fragmented by trauma. Without the neuroscientific language we have access to, Machado echoes the same idea: memoir is “an act of resurrection. Memoirists recreate the past, reconstruct dialog...they braid the clays of memory and essay and fact and perception together...They manipulate time; resuscitate the dead. They put themselves and others into necessary context” (14-15). Remembering is, in many ways, an act of generating fiction. Writers typically struggle with the blending of fact and fiction inherent in all memory. The past, as we remember it, may differ from objective truth. This struggle comes out in a writer’s insistence on the truth of their work. Machado states, “the Dream House is real. It is as real as the book you are holding in your hands, though significantly less terrifying” (17). Mirandette also gives us a similar claim. His narrative “is real. I have given up trying to make sense of it; rather I will tell it as only I can, as I experienced it” (8). To grapple with the veracity of memory, both Mirandette and Satterly include pictures from the parts of their lives recounted in their memoirs. Regardless of objective or subjective truth, the generative act of turning memory to narrative carries therapeutic impact. Satterly didn’t tell anyone about his struggles with trauma for over twenty years due to the fear of being kicked out of the Unit for mental

instability. When he finally gave voice to his story for the first time, “it was like lancing a wound and draining an evil black fluid from my soul” (299).

The writing that coincides with therapeutic results often mimics neurological function. The method of time jumps or chaotic interruptions is a hallmark of traumatic memoir and resembles the felt experience of traumatic memory during a triggering event. Machado places the site of her trauma, the Dream House, as both a setting and character, and centers her narrative on multifaceted, fractured approaches to her trauma. The memoir itself is fragmented, split into short chapters, vivid images, and flash scenes as if she were demonstrating the way traumatic memory manifests when accessed. In the afterword, Machado describes what it felt like to write the memoir as, “pinning down fragments of history with well-aimed throws of a knife before they could shift or melt away” (266). Machado’s narrative is not linear; it is an overlay of the past, the present, and the future where past events burst into the present and the chronological future is lost. Scenes of trauma are written in the present tense while the chronological “present” is difficult to identify. The future and past make abrupt entrances leading to an overall sense of narrative confusion: as it feels when one’s past trauma intrudes on the present and destroys any possibility of the future. Mirandette and Satterly also employ non-chronological temporalities in their narratives. Mirandette begins his memoir in the present tense, in the act of writing about what happened in Cairo from a distant beach in Hawaii: “I sit lost on an island somewhere in the Pacific, the rain pattering on the tin roof overhead, the surf crashing in the distance” (8). The rest of the memoir is written in the past tense with intruding contextualization of the bombing: “if I had known the results of

the horrors that lay ahead, would I have shut my ears to the voice inside me wishing me on?” (13). Chaotic moments from the attack are inserted in the otherwise chronological narrative: “a flash. Pain. The sun explodes and I’m airborne. But then I land, twenty feet away, and I realize the earth is still intact. I can’t move” (43). Satterly similarly frames his memoir as a return to the past in an attempt to place disparate events in a meaningful order. The narrative begins in the “present” before jumping to his childhood and proceeding chronologically to the date Satterly decides to write the memoir.

Besides a non-linear temporality, each of these four writers employ point of view to different effect. As we have seen, the first person effects the emotions of a memory; shifting a recalled event into the third person can lessen its emotional potency. Jenson used third person in her creation of Bernadette to separate herself from the narrative and discover meaning behind being abused. Machado blends first and second person to not only describe the gist of feeling like two separate people: “you were not always just a You. I was a whole—a symbiotic relationship between my best and worst parts—and then, in one sense of the definition, I was cleaved” (22) but also to invite the reader into the story, to live it out and experience the events the way she did. The selection of the immediate, first-person perspective matches Machado’s purpose in “helping queer folks understand what their experiences mean” (156). Mirandette’s use of a similar method traps him so close to the reliving of his trauma that he fails to make any sort of meaning out of the bombing and death of his brother. In his memoir, Mirandette uses the immediacy of first person to bridge the narrative distance and give us a detailed, horrific glimpse into his experience. We are transported into a world where glass shards are still

raining down, where we begin to be covered by the light red haze of blood misting the air. We see the events unfold as Mirandette saw them. Through his eyes, we enter the terrorist act itself; made all the more intimate for its reality and the memoir's claim to factual truth. Our emotion builds through the story as fragmented sensory images of the attack unexpectedly intrude. Mirandette's narrative is limited in scope; we are thrust into the same confusion as he was when the events were occurring. We do not learn that his brother Alex is dead until his parents tell Mirandette in a hospital in Germany. By withholding information, we are drawn so much closer to the moment as lived by Mirandette. The immediacy of the method of a first-person perspective fosters emotional resonance while leaving us too close to the events to discover meaning.

The first-person leaves Mirandette with “no resolution and no ending” (9) and “a lot of unanswered questions” (256). In his repeated remembering of the event, Mirandette replays the random decision that took him into the path of a suicide bomber and echoes the moment his brother dies, the moment his “soul dies” (235). In a phone conversation with his parents, he pleads to them that he, “did the best I could. We weren't anywhere we shouldn't have been. I was watching. I never even saw it coming. He came from nowhere. I did everything I could” (236). The fragment of meaning he wrests out of the immediacy of the first person is a question: “in the grand scheme of things, is being alive for eighty years really any longer than eighteen years?” (257). Satterly also uses the first-person to tell his story, but his choice of perspective enables the meaning he found in the act of writing his memoir: preventing more of his friends from killing themselves. By writing in the first person, Satterly is showing that if he “was willing to admit to needing

help—a former Tier One operator with the Unit—other veterans suffering from PTS would see it was okay to seek help” (324). For each of these writers, their narrative point of view influences their ability to navigate the distance of their past trauma and enables meaning making.

While the origins of each of these writer’s trauma is different, the results are markedly similar. Because trauma is a result not a cause, there isn’t much difference between Satterly’s combat experience, Mirandette’s suicide bombing, Jenson’s childhood abuse, and Machado’s domestic violence. All four had similar effects of trauma despite the disparity of their causes. Each writer also utilizes different methods to integrate their fragmented past. Satterly, a high school educated non-writer who worked with a co-author, doesn’t have access to many of Machado’s extensive narrative tools. His narrative comes across flat despite the harrowing nature of his life-or-death anecdotes. Satterly’s narrative reads like a chronology, devoid of vivid imagery, metaphor, and temporality despite the initial framing. He tells us what happens and occasional names his emotions but doesn’t connect those emotions to events or sensory imagery. In keeping the narrative distant, Satterly also keeps himself distanced from his memory which weakens the integrative effect of the act of writing his story. In Satterly’s narrative, the reader doesn’t feel what he felt. Machado’s *In the Dream House* employs tense, temporal interruption, fragmented point of view, vivid imagery, metaphor, and even a choose-your-own-adventure section to effectively communicate her subjective experience. Satterly communicates the objective truth of war while Machado reveals the subjective truth of her emotional journey. Despite wide variance in skill, the act of writing is the common

integrative methodology for our four authors. While each of these writers use different methods to access the space of their trauma, each found a similar result:

Tom Satterly in “Former Delta Force Operator, Tom Satterly Reveals All in his New Book, All Secure.”

“It was completely cathartic. Every time I rewrote a chapter, I’d cry. Every time I reread the book, I’d cry. Reading it aloud (for the audiobook), I cried. It was always just letting something out and accepting it as part of who I am, and not something horrible to keep hidden. Let it out and talk about it and get over it”

Erik Mirandette in “Tillman Tuesday: A Journey Through Africa Inspired Mirandette’s Path of Service.”

“Initially, I didn’t think it would ever be a book but wrote as a means of catharsis. It was in the quiet moments when I would just sit and write everything down I remembered. To see it written down... it was like I didn’t have to carry it if I wrote it down”

Meg Jenson

“Although writing the novel did not completely “cure” me, it provided a “holding space” on the page for my traumatic memories. By integrating those memories into a partially imagined story with a beginning middle and end, I was able to place those terrifying events in the past to some degree. As I understood it, my writing formed a barrier between my present-day life and the pain of my past” (4).

Carmen Machado in “Why Carmen Maria Machado Wrote a Memoir of Queer Domestic Abuse”

“I wrote a book because I wanted to take something that had happened to me and turn it into something beautiful and interesting and a piece of art. Which is what I did... I do feel like I’ve unclogged a really terrible drain. I feel like I pulled a big mass of hairy gunk out of the pipes and now I’m thinking a lot about writing fiction again. I’ve missed fiction, I love fiction, and I’m super excited to return to fiction. I did this book to move some stuff along for sure.”

Such a disparity in training and “skill” between our four writers point to how skill doesn’t really matter for an end goal of integration. The number of tools available, or one’s experience with them, isn’t as important as the work of engaging with past significant events. As Mirandette puts what is true for so many impacted by trauma, “there is no escaping my story. Everywhere I go it burns inside. I can’t suppress it any longer. It needs to be told. My only hope is to get it out before it consumes every thought and emotion.” (7). The goal for those wanting to integrate trauma is to find a method that helps translate their internal worlds into external words.

Reflections

Lauren Fournier, in *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing and*

Criticism

“In performative writing, the writer’s memory of their lived experience is one material among others, like the theory and the artworks and the literary texts they reference...Autotheory is theory and performance, autobiography and philosophy, research and creation, knowledge that emerges from lived experience” (28 and 40).

I imagine sitting across from you. Mugs steam memories of warm nights and snow peaking in the window. Music lingers just out of reach to fill the space between our words and cast a rhythm to the cadence of our voices. A fire flicks the echoes of how I wrote the words that become the stories you imagine.

You ask me to tell you about them.

Reflections – *The words. Or holes. Or both.*

In 2013, I was sitting in a tiny room in a moldy trailer in the middle of the desert and wondering why my friends were dying. I was halfway through my first deployment as a USAF KC-135 co-pilot flying daily missions over Afghanistan and wondering what my life had become. As a kid, I believed in big things like helping people, making the world a better place and freeing the oppressed. Those values sustained me through basic training, four years at the Air Force Academy, a master's degree in twelve months, pilot training, advanced flight school, and mission qualification training. Here I was, at the end of a twelve-year journey in a hole in the sand.

I wasn't helping people, or making the world a better place, or freeing the oppressed. I was flying in endless circles over a sea of sand. When you fly over a country for hundreds of hours, you get to know it. You start to wonder how a country could be responsible for "terrorism" when the only paved roads are in one or two cities. The rest is empty, sandy grazing land for scattered herds. My friends were dying for it. I couldn't reconcile what I believed and what I was doing.

I learned that something breaks.

Every day became a struggle. In the mess of it, I started to write. Writing had always been a thing in the back of my mind since I was a little kid making up stories about firetrucks. In an ocean of *can't*, I found a tiny *could*. I could write a single word. And I could let that be all for a day. Five seconds of danger, then back to numbing. As Tolkien did in the trenches of WWI, I wrote to escape and finished some fractured fairy tales I'd started in college. On later deployments, as I watched ISIS sweep south through

Iraq, I wrote surreal fiction about a world above the clouds where people looked down on a burning world. I couldn't access the real world in my writing. It wasn't safe, I wasn't distanced (all the things I know NOW).

In 2020, with the help of some supportive teachers and prescient writing prompts, I drafted elements of what would become *The words. Or holes. Or both.* It took another three years before I could write the actual events/names/places I could only allude to in that work. Now, at the end of this very long journey, after experimenting with and practicing many different methods, I have access to write about *any* past events.

For me, writing did a thing.

Reflections – Chapter Two

Her Name is Like Cairn

The main character in *Her Name is Like Cairn* comes from a longer work that I wrote in 2016/2017. Biern is a conglomeration of a friend who survived the Boston Marathon bombing and myself. In 2015-2016, I had significant emotional numbing. I couldn't "feel" anything. At that time, I had no knowledge of the neuroscientific and psychological basis for the way trauma impacts the brain. I also had no language for why and how writing can re-member disconnections. I was personally drawn to writing and, unintentionally, began to engage with the past in integrative ways. I meandered through a story where I took a really strong character and broke her. The moment Biern finally broke, I felt something.

The sections of her story appearing here are new. There are a few fragments I've borrowed from the longer work. I wanted to include echoes of her story due to its significance on my own.

Two Hart River

Two Hart River borrows method from Ernest Hemingway's *Big Two Hearted River*. I tried to channel both the style of his syntax and the motif of a character going through rote actions under the shadow of the past. A character focusing on tasks to avoid remembering is similar to my embodied experience. Writing in Hemingway's style was both a challenge and a delight. I think I understand what he was doing now. The short, simple sentences cement a character within the physical world. It is a purposeful avoidance of entering the mind of a character to let the reader complete the inner world of

that character. It is a method of joint construction where Hemingway provides the physical details and the reader fills in the rest.

Growing up, I remember my father telling me about hunting in Alaska and shooting a moose that died in an icy river. That anecdote always stuck with me, so I wanted to honor the inheritance of his stories. He is the kind of dad I want to be.

What Fires Do

If *What Fires Do* has a “message,” it is that something is lost in integration. Even if it is useful to lessen the intrusion of fragmented sensory inputs from past trauma, they are still gone. With their absence is the loss of the ability to travel to the past. I wanted to show a character make meaning out of the intrusions of traumatic memory by willingly triggering herself to relive a trauma, and also relive the last moments with someone she loved. I wanted to honor the loss that comes with integration. Our past selves went through something difficult and it is important to acknowledge their strength.

This scene of Biern staring into a fire was in my head for about two years before I wrote it down. For whatever reason, I couldn’t enter the space to actually write the story and translate it from my mind to the page. Instead, I wrote it over and over and over again every night before I fell asleep. I was the one staring into the fire for years. I finally just made myself write the scene. That night, it was out of my head and the scene has been gone since.

Tree and Stone

Tree and Stone isn’t a happy ending. Which points us to how integration, or “healing” from trauma isn’t a happy ending. It doesn’t erase the past; it gives up hope for

a better past. Integration is acceptance. It acknowledges trauma and incorporates it into our stories but doesn't remove it. Biern's "ending" is just a marker along her continued journey.

Reflections – Chapter Three

High School Kids

The stories in this chapter are my attempt at writing “War Literature” by borrowing some of the method from the writers I’ve analyzed. These stories are what happened to kids from small towns in the Midwest. We didn’t know any better, wanted to do the right thing, and ended up as characters in war stories.

Words in the Sand

I wrote the initial draft of a story called “Fluttering Pages” shortly after I came back from break at USAFA and couldn’t get my time with Noah out of my head. Looking back at my personal writing archive, I found the story fits this work and expanded it into *Words in the Sand*. What stuck with me then, and is still with me fifteen years later, is how that encounter with Noah marked the end of my childhood. You grow up with someone, create imaginary worlds and have grand adventures in the formative years of your life with them and then high school ends and things change. I didn’t understand how much things can change until I came back home and met up with Noah. Him telling me the story of the IED was the first time I knew he’d been blown up. We were in the same yard where we’d stayed up and watched the stars. We were next to the same trampoline we’d played so many games on. Everything was the same but us. We stood in our childhood and found our feet were too big.

Jolly Green

I crafted this story to leave you unsatisfied (sorry). I wanted it to just stop rather than end. I wanted you to feel like I do when I have so many of these conversations with my friends. There is no ending, no resolution, no finality, no period

Something Breaks

This story borrows method from Elliot Ackerman, Kurt Vonnegut, Joe Haldeman and Tim O'Brien. O'Brien talks about heating up the truth so the reader feels the same thing as the writer. A direct translation of events doesn't carry the same effect as an edited one. Trust me, I've tried. A chronology of events DOESN'T work as a story. For a reader to feel the same thing as the writer, they would either have to go through the same thing or have the events massaged in such a way that reading it mimics the feeling the writer wants to elicit.

For example, the startup procedure of the KC-135 takes over two hours to do. You don't want to read through that, much less go through it over and over and over again in a plane in the desert where the temperature in the cockpit is around 150 degrees Fahrenheit and your fingers burn touching the buttons through flight gloves. In *Something Breaks*, I wanted to convey how it feels to have days, months, years blend together into numbing exhaustion until a person breaks. I wanted you to understand me, to understand that I did break and I'm so sorry that I did.

I want you to know some part of what it took.

I took three notable missions/days out of hundreds, and combined them with a few altered details into one story of a day that is just one thing after another. That is what it felt like to fly on a rotating schedule of ~60 days home and ~60 days at war where the

home parts were often spent flying all around the world on non-combat missions. Hopefully that feeling translated as you read *Something Breaks*. Some of the things that didn't make it in were things like: breaking my shoulder on an emergency boom hoist (it still hurts sometimes), getting lazed time and time again over Baghdad, risking my career to save a couple of my crew who made bad choices in England, barely avoiding an international incident due to transposed GPS coordinates, the time we got a sealed mission packet and couldn't open it to find out what we were doing or where we were going until we'd locked the plane, not seeing anything green for months at a time, running at three am in English fog, having your own room for the first time in months, flying over a thunderstorm at close to the max service ceiling and hitting the line between air and space and seeing the curvature of the earth, flying through the northern lights over Greenland, the day I woke up at war in the desert and ended by riding a bicycle through a light rain in the Netherlands, flying for fourteen days in a row and losing all ability to distinguish the past from the present, trying to watch a movie four times and getting called in off alert EVERY time; on the fifth time, my nav replicated the alert call and, after some cussing, we laughed and finally watched our movie, and more. Each day had at least one good story.

Tracers in the Night

The "truth" is that the vast majority of my combat flight hours were spent watching the clouds and waiting for something that never happened. I cannot prove the crews I led were ever shot at; some part of me wanted to be. If your plane was one of the very few that came back with holes, it was instant validation for the unseen damage that

is difficult to claim without direct engagement; like a flash of light just on the edge of my vision that disappears when I look for it or my heart racing at the first bar of a raised voice. While I saw plenty of tracer rounds cutting through the dark, I cannot prove that *we* were ever purposefully targeted. We *were* repeatedly hit by high-powered lasers requiring trips to the flight doc to check for corneal burns but lasers don't leave visible holes.

After a 30-hour day that started in the desert and ended in an apartment in Kansas, I tried to translate what it feels like to return. *Tracers in the Night* was the only “real” piece I worked on between 2010 and 2020. I wrote it in a flash at two in the morning after coming home and still being on the opposite time zone. I shared it with some friends in the aviation community and their general consensus was: “Holy fuck, that’s exactly what it feels like.”

Reflections – Chapter Four

Back and Forth

On my first deployment in 2013, I brought *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* and read it in between receivers while I was manning the radios and the other pilot was flying us on autopilot over Afghanistan. The letters Tolkien wrote to his son, who was flying in Africa in WWII, felt like they were written to *me*. So many of the events Tolkien mentions had happened to me. Military culture has apparently remained unchanged over the last seventy years. There are the same gripes, complaints, and small nuisances of bad leadership and stupid tasks. More than the details, I felt the heart of what he was telling his son. I too, was a kid away from home caught up in big events.

My responses written here were written recently, long after I initially read Tolkien's letters. But in reading Tolkien's letters again, I was transported back ten years to a cockpit above the desert. The responses are what I would have written those years ago, because, in many ways, I am unchanged. In the writing of these responses, I was finally able to enter that decade old space and find a measure of peace. Tolkien encourages his son to write about war and I can tell you that it is good advice.

Road 304

There is something about writing for an audience of one. The method of a letter focuses the idea of a singular audience. I was able to write and say things to my son that I couldn't using any other method. Writing to and for someone you trust facilitates access to deeper things. We see this in Tolkien writing to his son. We see this in Vonnegut. In many interviews and his own reflections, Vonnegut repeatedly states he writes for his

older sister Alice. Growing up, Alice was his safe person, the one who shared his sense of humor and jokes. He even kept writing *for* her after her sudden death from cancer.

The last thing I'll add is: thank you to all the teachers who open up space for students to write the things that are important to them.

Jax and Jarn, Brothers at War

This story is the one that means the most to me.

Writing it was its own act of re-membering. Going through over ten years of scattered writing cemented the emotions of the time and place each bit was created. It felt like archival work within my embodied experience. Selecting each section for inclusion in this story was an act of integrating fragmented thoughts, sentences, imagery, and placing them in the context of my life's narrative. It mimics the process I'm advocating for in using writing as an integrative methodology for trauma.

Looking back on my past writing with the language of neuroscience and psychology, I was able to place what my brother and I were unintentionally doing. I think that is often the case. Looking at many different writers for this whole work, I see many of those authors arriving at the same methods that are informed by cognitive science. Using a fictional character to say the things that are hard to say makes sense considering distance/safety but also makes sense looking back. My brother and I were able to have the conversations through our writing that we couldn't in real life.

Reflections – Chapter Five

Hunter's Safety

I had written parts of this story years ago. It wasn't until my son mimicked what I was doing when a car drove by that I began to think of appraisal theory and how we as humans learn by evaluating events in our lives. Looking back at both previous writing and my own embodied experience, I employed a similar method to the archival work I used in *Jax and Jarn*. Digging into my past significant memories, I traced change and tied it to events. During the writing process, I held the question of how I learned things like safety, sadness, and fear. I also held a statement Tom Satterly makes in *All Secure*. After hundreds of combat missions, Tom describes how he began to feel the calmest when he was going into combat. Which doesn't make any sense because we would think that going into combat would be an anxiety and fear inducing event. It is, until you do it so much that your appraisal changes. Essentially, you've rewired your brain.

Tom's perspective matches my embodied experience from when I was a collegiate and professional runner. On the day of a big meet, I'd be nervous, anxious, and my legs would shake uncontrollably ALL day until one hour before the race when I started my warmup. As soon as I started the exact same chain of events I'd done hundreds of times before, I felt calm and began to get excited. The brain is weird.

Jinx and the no good, very bad day

This story borrows the most from Vonnegut. It is structured as a Vonnegut-style "joke" where the punchline is supposed to snap the whole story together and reveal the setup while commenting on a bigger idea (we train but don't untrain). Hopefully it works.

Also, there is a WHOLE genre of “military pilot story.” It harkens to sharing a drink after a day of flying and telling stories with the squadron. All the stories have a similar tone, shared elements, etc. I actually used a lot of the stories found here when I taught emergency procedures to student pilots. For you, I hope you felt like we were sitting next to each other and laughing as we told stories. The only thing I couldn’t quite fit into the text were excessive hand motions and poorly executed engine sounds.

Reflections – *Alight*

You are about to read something that is very different from the rest of this work in both theme, tone, and voice. *Alight* is a surreal novella borrowing the method of the mythic from J.R.R. Tolkien. It is my attempt at understanding how and why he wrote the way he did. This performative writing is a critical mode where I'm engaging with the idea of the surreal holding space for things that are too big for the real. I'm also trying to do all that in thirty pages rather than the twelve hundred of *LOTR*. *Alight* is a story roughly modeled after *LOTR* (characters on a quest) that borrows elements and a scene from Tolkien's *The Children of Húrin*. My novella is also structured on *Beowulf*'s looping of threes. Sidenote, I would have totally been a medievalist in another life.

I wrote *Alight*. And I GET IT NOW. When a subjective event is too big for the bounds of the real, the surreal offers a wide enough scope to engage with it. Research from the cognitive sciences informs the interplay between safety and distance. In order to enter the space of a significant event, we need the requisite amount of safety. Part of that safety comes from distance—whether the distance of time or perspective. A self-distanced perspective facilitates access to meaning making and integration. There are many methods of self-distancing. Within literary method, third person is more distanced than first person. Fiction is more distanced than fact. The surreal is more distanced than the real. The surreal can also offer a greater stage to hold larger ideas.

We see this in Vonnegut. His realistic *Mother Night* focuses on the individual while his science fiction *The Sirens of Titan* engages with bigger ideas like fate, chance, and the existential void.

We see this in O'Brien. The realistic *The Things They Carried* focuses on smaller ideas of fact, fiction, memory and storytelling. The surreal *Going After Cacciato* contains themes of fratricide, identity, and fear.

We see this in Joe Haldeman. His realistic *War Year* chronicles the details of a year in Vietnam while his science fiction *The Forever War* holds the space for the alienation of a returning veteran and the geopolitics of Vietnam.

We see this in Tolkien. For him, it is the method of the surreal that allows for a translation of "things deepest felt."

For me, the surreal offers the space to hold my hopes, fears, struggles, and personify them. By giving them a narrative identity, I was able to engage with them in a way I couldn't in writing memoir or realistic fiction. For me, the real wasn't safe enough and couldn't contain the subjective truth of my experience. *Alight* is about how I'm afraid of confronting my past because I fear its intrusion into the present.

One other note bears mention. Tolkien was a devout Catholic and you cannot separate his work from his beliefs. *Alight* is my attempt at honoring his values while holding room for the harm caused by religious institutions. While I employed *Beowulf's* structure of looping threes, my loops come from the Apostle Paul's framing of the three things that remain: faith, hope and love where "the greatest of these is love" (1st Corinthians 13:13 NIV). I took the idea of "faith" defined in the Christian New Testament as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen"

(Hebrews 11:1, NASB) and constructed my vision of opposites for each of those: doubt, fear, and hate. Based on the idea in Hebrews 11, I matched hope with fear and argue that *both* are the assurance of something not seen. I match *both* faith and doubt as belief without proof, just from opposing viewpoints. I connect love and hate as the *same* choice.

I'm no theologian, so my concept of faith/doubt, hope/fear, and love/hate is only how it works in *my* made-up world. It is the separation from reality and my control over the rules of an imagined world that opens the space for me to explore both big ideas and my own journey. I found that it is the small daily choices that bring light to our darkest places (even here, I fade into metaphor).

connections.

WWI signal officer and author J.R.R. Tolkien, in a letter to his son during WWII

“If anguish were visible, almost the whole of this benighted planet would be enveloped in a dense dark vapour, shrouded from the amazed vision of the heavens!” (76).

US. Marine veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan Jake Wood in *Among You: The*

Extraordinary True Story of a Soldier Broken by War

“There is no feeling any more, because to feel any emotion would also be to beckon the overwhelming blackness from you. My mind has now locked all this down. And without any control of this self-defense mechanism my subconscious has operated. I do not feel any more.”

Literary Scholar Susana Onega

“For all the versatility of literature, the new forms created to represent trauma do not necessarily achieve the psychoanalytic goal of transforming traumatic memories into logically and spatiotemporally organized narrative memories... such indirect strategies may be found in the highly troped language of trauma fiction, in generic hybridisation and parodic, comedic or avant-garde provocation, as well as in the displacement of trauma’s contents and affects onto specific genres, like folklore, fantasy and science-fiction” (8-9).

Alight, a novella

I did not comprehend the dimming until all was dark.

I didn't see the shadow until it closed around me.

I waited too long in the dying of the Light.

I have no choice but to face it.

All is dark. Hope is lost.

I'm doomed to fail.

Still I go.

To die.

~Scrawled inscription found in the ruins of the Cathedral of Light.

ONE

When I was young, I laughed at the shadow; for it was small and we were many, and bright. The darkness grew and extinguished a Light. Still I laughed, for he was but one of us, and he was old, and dim. I did nothing, for there were others that were stronger, brighter, and unafraid of the spreading night. But the darkness grew and the Lights fell. The shadow lengthened and the years passed and I was no longer young.

When I was afraid, there were others to wage war against the dark. I could hide my Light, for I was one wick in a sea of flames. I could watch the sun and ignore the night while others fought the shadow.

When the years passed, I heard the darkness laugh; for I am old, and dim. And there are none left to save me.

~Lightbringer Elucidas Adtoneri. In a journal left for his daughter.

TWO

The old man was leaving. He had meditated at the Altar of Light before, but this time he had a sword. Aurel never saw him wear one. She crept out of the shadows and almost made it across the lonely entrance hall of rainbow glass before he noticed the tempo of her footfalls.

“Lightbringer Adtoneri, where are you going?” Aurel left the golden steps of the Cathedral of Light to rest her hand against Spero’s flank, twining her fingers through the old stallion’s white mane.

“Just Father Lucis.” Elucidas Adtoneri said for the thousandth time.

Aurel ignored his prompt, for the thousandth time. “Lightbringer Adtoneri, where are you going?”

For a moment, Lucis almost continued the rhythm of their bout. Then he did something he’d never done before; he answered her question. “To die.”

Aurel didn’t believe him. She laughed, the sound of her joy echoing among the beams of multicolored light streaming through the grand hall behind her. The laughter reached to the tips of the slender buttresses holding the Lightwoven glass roof in place but did not reach Lucis. He had no answering laugh or sympathetic smile. His gray eyes were frozen in a mirthless gaze towards the darkness in the valley below.

Aurel’s laughter faltered as the darkness seemed to spread toward her. “Then I’m going with you.” Aurel’s hand tightened on Spero’s harness.

If there was an argument, it didn’t make it past the shadow sweeping across his face. “Not all the way.”

Lucis whistled, long and low. A gentle rhythmic clop echoed out of the stables and Hisak broke into a canter at sight of her. The black mare nuzzled against Aurel, drawing a smile as the mare rooted for sugar cubes in Aurel's pockets.

"She's already packed?" Aurel opened the saddlebags, rummaging through enough supplies for a week.

Lucis was already walking Spero out of the columned approach to the cathedral. Aurel mounted Hisak and urged her into a trot to catch up. The gilt doors slipped shut behind her. A trace of wind set the cathedral into song. The vanes and wells resounded in harmonies that were never quite the same no matter how many times she'd heard them. Aurel raised her voice to join the song as she followed Lucis up the winding path to the mountain's distant peak.

They reached the Altar of Light as the sun crested its zenith. The cathedral twinkled beneath them, a diamond set into grey spires of rock and swathes of green. Lucis dismounted, grunting at the impact. He reached a hand to Spero to keep his balance. It only took a moment for Aurel to spring to his side. "Forty years isn't that old, Aurel."

"You could have fooled me, *Father Adtoneri*." Aurel couldn't quite keep the smirk from her face as she began to mimic his voice. "Age is not a number; it is the weight of burden."

"So that makes you what, five?" The hint of a smile played in Lucis' eyes.

Aurel's voice shifted to its normal lightness. "Fifteen, but if you measure the burden of caring for you, I'm at least fifty." Aurel proffered her arm. "*Father Adtoneri*."

Lucis sighed and took her arm. They walked up the bleached stones to the crystal spire at the top of the little hill peaking the mountaintop. So great was the altar's reflection of the distant sun that it seemed to shine with its own light. The way the dappled hues shifted inside the stacked crystal mesmerized her. Aurel felt as if she were snuggled in blankets on a winter morning, the warmth holding off the hint of frost. She reached a tentative finger to graze against the altar. Closing her eyes, she could still see the afterimage of the blazing crystal. Aurel willed Light into her, as she had so many times before. She failed, as she had so many times before.

“What are the three gifts of Light?” Lucis' question broke her concentration.

“The three gifts are: Aia, Eia, and Arah. The spoken, the felt, and the known. The brightest of these is Arah, the known.” As Aurel repeated the mantra, she moved her hands through the Lightweaver patterns over her mouth, heart, and mind.

“And the three shadows?”

“The three shadows, Lightbringer?” Aurel asked.

“Look past the altar.”

It took effort for Aurel to tear her gaze from the crystal. As she did, the feeling of warmth faded; lingering like stones heated by a long dead fire. The sight snatched her breath away. Halfway up the mountain was a moving, roiling bank of shadow suffocating the land beyond the range of her vision. “It grew again.” She could still remember the last time she'd watched the darkness from the altar's vantage. The shadow had been at the base of the mountain then. There were still villages, roads, people living above it. Now, the shadow covered all save for the Cathedral of Light.

“The three shadows are Ina, Ena, and Narah. The spoken, the felt, and the known.” Lucis rested a hand on her shoulder. “Now you see why I must face it.”

The cathedral was a drop of bright against a sea of dark. Sudden fear tremored through Aurel, rising in timber until it flecked into her voice. “How can you? How can you succeed when all the other Lightbringers failed?” The warmth from the altar was a dwindling memory.

“Fear not. Darkness is but the absence of Light.” Lucis placed both hands on the altar. The thin rays of the sun glowed into the crystal and into Lucis. He was alight, power smoking from his skin in curling wisps. He let go, the echo of his hands left golden outlines on the crystal’s surface. Lucis’ eyes gleamed so brightly Aurel almost turned away. But the light began to dim until only a hint of it brightened the corners of his gaze.

“Come.” Lucis’ words matched the vibrato of the cathedral far below. “We have far to go before night.”

The waning light of day followed their long, weary path down the mountain. They passed the now silent cathedral. Aurel turned to watch the glass building catch the last light of the sun and light up in magnificence. For a moment, the sun struck the top of the cathedral and joyfully ran through the panes and pillars until all was alight. Before she had to shut her eyes against the dazzling brilliance, a cloud obscured the sun and the cathedral mellowed into dark as Lucis led them down the road.

There was just enough light left to see the almost solid wall of shadow seething below them. Lucis led Spero into it without pause. The darkness parted around him for a moment, then sprang to cover him, wrapping him in fog.

Hisak snorted as Aurel stopped the mare at the bank of dark, her hooves barely touching it. While it didn't seem to harm Hisak, Aurel felt the fear rise. She had no Light of her own, nothing to keep the shadow at bay. A sudden beam of Light split the night. The dark sprang away, leaving a clear path to Lucis. He smiled and her fear fled. Aurel led the mare through the breach until the two horses walked the path abreast.

Lucis' Light left as abruptly as it appeared. The shadow rushed into its absence and swallowed Aurel. The fear began to return until Lucis' hand found hers. Their horses plodded on, unaware of her struggle.

Now that Aurel's eyes adjusted to it, the darkness wasn't as overwhelming as she'd thought. It wasn't really darkness at all. She could see the same world. The same path. The same dry trees bordering the road to claw their stickly way towards the far-off sun. But the colors were different, all normal hues muted into subdued gray.

They continued through the foggy silence until Aurel's stomach began to gurgle a reminder that she hadn't eaten anything since breakfast. Lucis led her off the road to the empty space between a copse of trees. Aurel watched him begin to make camp. She watched him stop to stretch. She watched him grimace at old pains when he thought she wasn't looking. She watched him gather wood for a fire.

Lucis struck the edge of his knife against the flint. A sad handful of sparks rained onto the kindling and vanished. Aurel stretched her hand towards the wood, willing Light

to leave her body and ignite the logs. She moved her fingers in the same intricate dance Lucis used. Nothing happened. She had no Light to give.

Lucis struck the flint and the kindling didn't catch, again.

"Why don't you do it the easy way?" Aurel's fingers moved in the Lightweaver patterns one last time before she gave up.

"Light must be conserved. There isn't much left." Lucis said.

"Then why did you use some to light my way to you?" Aurel asked.

Lucis shrugged. "You were afraid." He struck sparks again. This time they caught. The fire spread onto the wood and lit a haloed ring around them. But Light wasn't in it. It was heat, it cast some shadows aside, but it didn't make the colors right. It didn't fill Aurel with warmth. It didn't throw the fear away. Lucis did that. He did it in the humming as he boiled water and began to make soup. He did it in the quiet word of thanks he offered as she put up their tents. He did it by simply being there. He did it in the exact way her father hadn't.

"I hate him." Aurel said.

"Your father?" Lucis asked.

Aurel nodded.

Lucis handed her a wooden bowl steaming with soup. "You do not know him."

Aurel took a bite, immediately blowing over the spiced heat on her tongue. She swallowed and the soup burned down her throat. "I don't have to know someone to hate them."

Lucis poked the fire into a warmer blaze, then settled against his pack. Just at the edge of the fire's ring, the horses knelt against each other. "If you hold Light, hate for what sullies it arises, but it comes out of the love of the Light, like a shadow. You cannot hold Light while clutching hate."

Aurel nodded, unconvinced. "I snuck out of the cathedral the night mother brought me." Aurel stared into the flames. "It had only been a few hours, but by the time I got back, the cough had taken her."

"And if your father hadn't abandoned you, she would still be alive?" Lucis gave voice to her unspoken question.

"No. But I wouldn't be alone."

Lucis smiled at her.

"Yes, I'm not alone with you here. It's different. You're not my father."

"If I was, I'd want a daughter exactly like you."

"Exactly how?" Aurel asked.

"You're brave, you're strong, you're clever. You care for an old man for no gain of your own, only because you are kind."

"Forty years isn't old." Aurel parroted his words from earlier.

Lucis laughed, letting the conversation drift away as he poked the fire into a warmer blaze.

Despite herself, Aurel smiled. She leaned back and tried to look at the stars. They were covered by the roiling shadow. All was dark save for Lucis. In the deepening night, Light lingered at his edges, wreathing him in almost visible translucent lines. He wasn't

glowing, wasn't using power, wasn't casting the darkness back. The shadow simply wasn't, where he was.

THREE

How could he succeed when the other Lightbringers failed? Aurel's question echoed into the hollow pit of fear trying to spread within him. Lucis remembered the grand procession from the cathedral those many years ago, his father leading the column of Lightbringers on a silver charger. They were shrouded in Light: a great white spear piercing the darkness in the valley.

He'd watched it from the Altar of Light; watched as the Light diminished until there was only one mote left. One single star in the deep watches of the night. The darkness eventually swallowed that too. None returned. The cathedral became quiet and dark with only his meager Light to tend it. He wondered if any of them were still out there. If his father were somewhere, lost in the dark. Lucis could still see his father, sometimes, in his dreams. Wandering the wilds, cloaked in darkness, black pits of shadow where his eyes used to be. Chanting in fear shackled madness: *keep the Light safe, hide it, take it away, hide it, keep it. Don't let him get it.* Lucis had tried to keep the Light safe. But now he had no choice. Now he was doomed to fail.

How could he succeed, when brighter, stronger, better Lightbringers hadn't? Perhaps because it was his darkness. Maybe that was the key. Lucis hadn't created Calgala, but he also hadn't banished him. How could he defeat the shadow with only a small bit of Light left? His father had told him darkness was simply the absence of light, and he had enough Light left. He just couldn't use any more. He'd wasted enough banishing the shadow around Aurel. But his daughter had been afraid.

Lucis was going to tell her before they left the cathedral. He was going to tell Aurel for years. He'd been going to do a lot of things. There were always reasons he hadn't. He hadn't known about Aurel until it was too late. Her mother wasn't a child of the Light. He would have had to leave the cathedral to be with her. And the heir of Light couldn't leave the cathedral. Those weren't reasons, they were excuses. What stopped him then was the same stopping him now: fear. Then, he would have been abandoned by everyone and everything he knew. Now, if he told Aurel, she would leave him the way he had abandoned her. The thought loomed over him as the world gradually grew lighter in the land covered by perpetual shadow. He'd tell her tomorrow. Maybe.

FOUR

The ancient man huddled in the dark. It wasn't true dark. It was much, much worse. Shadow and fear flew around him in a torrent of terror. He tried to stand but stumbled to the hard rocks, their edges cutting another line of red into the mess of his hands. Somewhere deep inside, a glittering remnant of strength rose into choking gasps of slurred, broken speech "keep the Light safe, hide it, take it away, hide it, keep it. Don't let him get it."

"Don't let me get what?" The rasping power of the voice shoved the hint of strength aside and the old man crumpled. The wind picked up, blurring the veil of shadow into a form darker than night. "Speak up Adtoneri." As the old man struggled for words, the shadow laughed. Black whips of dark solidified and lashed the old man's wrists, pulling him up to hang limply between them, mere inches from the face of the shadow. He recoiled from it. "Look." The shadow said, then laughed at the black pits where the old man's eyes used to be. "I'll help." Power gathered around Calgala. "See." It was a command. Dark orbs filled the empty spaces in the old man's face and lit with red. "With my eyes you will see, and with my ears you will hear."

Calgala's clawed hand gripped the old man's face and lifted it towards the distant mountains. Mile after mile of darkness roiled over the land like deep cloud, not with the steady peace of cloud, but alive and gasping with malice. A tiny point of Light clung to the peak of a distant mountain, a glittering speck of rainbow magnified the Light and threw back the dark. It was losing. Calgala stretched his hand and the shadow leapt up the mountain. A sudden brilliance scattered the dark. Two figures, not more than black

specks, moved into the dark and cast it aside. Calgala stepped away from it, then raised his other hand. The Light went out and the darkness spread over the figures, covering them.

Calgala laughed. “They are coming. He is bringing her to me. She who holds the seed of light, or dark.”

Calgala’s grip on the old man smoked into mist and he fell. “No.” The old man whimpered.

“Yes.” The shadow said. “He’s already wasted some of the Light. He will waste more and more, until he comes to me empty, powerless, already defeated.”

Calgala lifted his hands and power gathered and condensed to thick, damp fog. There was no moisture in it, just heaviness. Three claw-like birds whipped around, circling the shadow’s head. “Ina.” The first bird turned and sped towards the distant Cathedral of Light. “Ena.” The second bird sprang away with a screeching cry. “Narah.” The last bird dove and disappeared into the roiling black.

His voice a bare whisper, the old man pleaded to the distant remnant of Light. “Keep the Light safe, hide it, take it away, hide it, keep it. Don’t let him get it.”

FIVE

Lucis thought. The horses walked along the ancient road. Aurel sang, oblivious to the fear, the knowledge, and the hurt the knowledge would bring. Lucis tried to speak, tried to tell her the truth. She was his daughter and he had abandoned her, and her mother. The fear stopped him each time.

The road stretched in front of them, shadows coalescing into deeper shades of buildings. Dim, smoky torches threw flickering echoes of true Light around the fringes of the town's wall. Lucis couldn't remember the name of it. He should have known it. Should have known these people; should have shared the Light with them when he had the chance. Now there wasn't enough left. He had to hide it. He had to protect it. He must keep the Light safe.

The sound of a voice shouted louder as they approached the town. Aurel's song stopped when she began to hear words, then phrases, then a liturgy similar to that spoken by a Lightbringer.

"Believe in the darkness, for it has defeated the Light. The Light is a lie, crafted by stingy old men to keep you from the truth. Where was the Light when disease swept through the land? Where was the Light when war ravaged us? Now, there is peace." A crowd gathered around a man clad in black. His was the distilled voice of the collecting shadow churning above the heads of the people. Something like black wings rose and fell behind him as he spoke.

"Come Aurel." Lucis rode past the growing crowd. Aurel didn't come. She watched the man in black. Lucis saw the doubt swim toward her on thin tendrils, clawed

fingers wrapping around her head, caressing her. Ina, the first shadow, reaching for her, taking her, claiming her.

The man cloaked in dark was right. Where was the Light when her mother died, abandoned and alone? Where was it when the wheezing cough wracked her in pain until the strength finally fled and the fear took her? Where was the Light when her father abandoned her? There was no Light when she cried herself to sleep in a hollow room of cold rainbow glass.

Where was the Light when all the world fell into shadow?

“Let there be Light.” Lucis didn’t shout, his voice was just above a whisper.

A great flash almost blinded her in its brightness. Aurel shielded her eyes from it. When the afterglow faded, a miniature sun hung in the air above the town. She couldn’t even look at it, but felt the warmth of it. The colors rushed back with the coming of the Light; green boughs sheltered the warm faces of the people; the brilliant orange and yellow of the fire, unafraid and crackling. The colors shone everywhere the Light touched, but faded to muted grey where the shadow fought against it. Aia, the spoken.

Belief swelled through her. Tears welled in her eyes. Lucis smiled at her. Out of all the people, he only looked at her. She wasn’t alone. She wasn’t abandoned. The Light had been there. It had brought her to him. It had eased her mother’s pain. The memory came back to her now. Her mother hadn’t died alone. Through the crack in the window, she had seen Lucis sitting by her bed. He’d held her mother’s hand, wreathing her in Light. She’d left the world on the wings of a smile.

“Lies. It’s a trick with a torch.” In one instant, and with one phrase, the man in black undid Lucis’ sacrifice of Light. The crowd turned back to the man and the seed of doubt he’d planted. It was all he had been looking for to cast aside the Light before their eyes. “Liar.” The man pointed at Lucis and the crowd turned on him. The people stared, the anger of a thousand slights from Lightbringers past sharpened onto him. Rage, now focused, wielded with great effect, regardless of truth. Two men took steps towards Aurel.

The Light flashed into blinding brightness, and the crowd cowered from it. The Light winked out. In the sudden dark, Lucis grabbed Hisak’s reigns and led her in a gallop. He led them by feel until the town was far away. He led them until the shadowed sky deepened and began to condense into a freezing drizzle.

The rain solidified and splattered against them. Lucis led them towards a hollow, shattered building. Great spiderweb structures of Lightwoven glass lay in heaps of split rods. Impossibly thin columns and arches hung in fractured points, swaying silently in the cold wind.

“That’s what we get for building with glass.” Lucis laughed in the dark. In the cold. In the rain. And Aurel laughed with him. One Lightwoven wall still stood. It was enough to keep some of the wind and most of the wet from their clothes. The horses nibbled oats from their saddlebags and drank clear water from a cracked basin.

After much trouble, Lucis convinced a small pile of kindling to light a larger, wetter log. It was a dismal, smoking fire. Not hot enough to dry the wood before catching it alight, but the timid flames hung on. Not enough to boil water, but enough for Lucis to

attempt it. The result was a tepid liquid that reminded Aurel of the rumor of tea as she forced it down. It was slightly warmer than the cold rain, and that was enough.

“Why didn’t they believe you? They saw the Light with their own eyes.” Aurel asked.

Lucis gave up on the fire and began to construct his tent, enclosing the glass wall in damp fabric. “Accepting the one instance of Light would force them to believe in all of it. It would cause them to call on the Father of Light and live out the three gifts of Light. It is a heavy burden. It is easier to disbelieve one moment than change one’s life.”

“I don’t understand.” Aurel said. “It is a burden, but it is a better life.”

The rain began to come in force, beading on the fabric and running down to puddle on the floor. Lucis leaned against the wall, wincing as he stretched his legs out. “Ina. The first shadow, that which is spoken. To hear and yet doubt.”

“Aia. To not hear, yet still believe.” Aurel countered.

Lucis smiled. “You begin to understand. The darkness cannot create, it simply twists the Light.”

“And so, it can be defeated.” Aurel said the words almost as a question.

“Yes, it can be defeated.” Lucis turned his face away so she didn’t see his own doubt. He’d used more of his thin reserves of Light. What else could he have done? Let the darkness take her, claiming her as he watched and did nothing. No. It had been worth it. He could keep the rest of it safe. He still had enough Light left. He closed his eyes and chose to believe.

SIX

Where are we going Lightbringer Adtoneri?" Aurel asked. "The shadow surrounds us. How do we confront..." Aurel waved her hands through the dimmed, colorless air. "All of this? It's like fighting the night."

"We go to where it began." Lucis didn't speak the rest. They were going to the cave where he had started it. It was such a little thing for a child, being small and afraid of the dark. Why should he, the heir of Light, be terrified of an ancient voice masked in shadow? But he was. He'd spoken it. He'd felt it. He'd known it. And now, a lifetime later, Calgala's power smothered the world. It was his fault. And now, finally he would face it. Face it and die. "There is a place where the source of the shadow lies. We go there, and hope he lingers still."

"He?" Aurel asked.

"Yes." Lucis said.

And so, they continued along the scrubby road, with unasked questions and unspoken answers. Each in thought. Each willing the other to break the silence. Neither risking it. It took muffled whimpering off the side of the road to do that.

Aurel was the first to dismount, scrambling through the thorny briars guarding the forest beyond the road. Lucis followed, the horses content to watch him yelp as a thorn snagged through his clothes and lodged in his skin.

"It's a child." Aurel said as Lucis finally untangled his cloak and the arm beneath from the briars.

They followed the sounds of fear to the far side of an upturned log. Nestled in the hollow, guarded by the rotting trunk, lay a small boy curled into a ball. Aurel spoke soothing words, but they were useless. He cowered further into the wet dirt. Aurel touched him and he flinched.

The boy looked up with wild eyes brimming with desperation. "It's out there." Aurel's head snapped up, eyes dilating, body tensing for action against the monster in the gathering dark.

There was nothing out there, hovering in the fringes. No beast, claws, or fangs waited in the dark. Nothing but the fear of its wings. It crashed through the underbrush in every snapping twig. It whispered terror through the leaves, rustled doubt from the wind. The fear of it crept towards them on rumor amplified in their thoughts. Lucis was full of Light. The dark didn't scare him, anymore.

"We have to go." Aurel's hand clutched the knife at her belt. Her fingers trembled against the hilt. The normal sounds of the forest echoed around them and Aurel twitched at each one. "We have to go. It's out there." She spoke it. She felt it. The dark solidified in a veil around her, wrapping her in Ena. Out of her fear, a creature began to take shape in the night. It fed on the pulsing tendrils of shadow flitting around Aurel's head. A great, dark thing giving winged form to the nightmares of a lonely child.

The fear was so real to her. Lucis could see it. Her fear gave it shape, gave it substance until it smothered her. He just needed a little Light. A tiny bit. He could spare a trifling amount. He could keep the rest of it safe. Lucis carefully loosened the child's clenched hands, his own giving warmth to the boy's freezing fingers. He traced the

patterns of Eia on the boy's palm and began to Lightweave. "You never know when a miracle might happen. Like sudden Light in the dark." A brilliant orb of pure white Light materialized from the tips of Lucis' fingers and grew until it filled the boy's hands. Even his clenching fists couldn't contain the Light, it spilled out to banish the dark.

The creature of shadow screamed away to cower past the reaching circle of Light, then dissolved into creeping mist as Aurel laughed. Her sparkling voice danced in the bright as color returned to her face, leaving a blushing imprint on her cheeks. "Like sudden Light in the dark? A touch dramatic, wasn't it Lucis?" The color swam to his cheeks, it was the first time she'd used his nickname. Aurel laughed again at Lucis' face. The child laughed too. He didn't grasp their words, but understood there was nothing left to fear.

"Let's get you home." Aurel picked the boy up. The child carried the Light, illuminating the tangled path to the road.

Lucis. She had finally called him that. The warmth of it filled him more than the Light the child held. Lucis followed them until the brambles caught him worse on the exit than they had the entry.

SEVEN

The child still held the Light as they reached a lone cottage cradled by trees in a branching forest path off of the main road. The Light had begun to fade, but its effects lingered. The sick sound of coughing trembled out of the windows of the cottage as they approached. It was close to the death rattle Lucis had heard too many times.

Fear and tears choked the boy's voice. He could only manage one word, "mother?" The boy looked at Aurel.

Aurel paused, waiting for Lucis, the boy still in her arms. The woman coughed again. Aurel winced in harmony with the woman's pain.

"Mother?" This time the boy's eyes found Lucis. The Light in his hands snapped away, bathing them all in darkness. The boy scabbled down, running towards the door and creaking it open. A weak voice called out to him.

Lucis hesitated to follow. There was nothing in that place but death. Aurel didn't pause; she ran on the heels of the boy, only stopping at the door to glance back at Lucis. The concern in her eyes drug him from the saddle and pulled his heavy steps towards the door. They entered the cottage together.

A black wick stubbornly hung to life on a roughhewn table. Untended coals lingered behind wisps of smoke licking at a half empty pot on the hearth, blackened with a thousand happier meals. The woman lay beneath a messed heap of scrap cloth. Her dull eyes flickered open, fever red and watery. They rested on the boy and a thin hand reached for him. He clung to it.

“Will she live?” Aurel asked, hope ringing at the edge of her voice. She knew the answer.

Lucis knew the answer too. He wasn't a healer. The only thing he could do for her was wrap her in Light. Whatever happened after, happened. Sometimes the Light healed. Sometimes it didn't. His wasn't the will that made the choice. There wasn't enough Light left. Lucis felt the hollow of its emptiness. He'd already used too much, just traces of power crept through the vault of his heart and mind. He wouldn't have enough to banish the darkness of Calgala. He'd still have some, but not enough. There wasn't even enough time to return to the altar for more. The shadow would already have covered the cathedral. He had failed. He'd failed his father. He'd failed Aurel. He hadn't kept the Light safe. What had he told the boy? You never know when a miracle might happen.

Aurel watched the woman cough without even the strength to clear her lungs. She saw through the haze of memory as her mother coughed. The memory and the real world collided as Lucis took the woman's hand just as he had taken her mother's hand. He met Aurel's eyes and saw the pain and the memory trickling down her cheeks. The scene shifted between past and present and Aurel stood somewhere between the two, transfixed. Lucis bowed his head, resigned and weary.

Light danced behind his closed lids, intensifying until they were solid golden orbs banishing the shadow from every nook and cranny of the house. The imprint of his fingertips on the woman's hand began to glow in radiating circles that shimmered across her skin until the light cloaked the woman deeper and warmer than the richest blanket. The only sound in the room was the surprised gasp from the little boy. Something like a

great black clawed thing fled from the woman's body, chased out by the Light to shriek into the night.

The effect was immediate. The woman took a deep breath, free and clear like the first whisper of sun after a winter night's snow. She smiled and fell into deep sleep, Light diffusing off her in waves.

"Will she be ok?" The boy asked, holding his mother's still glowing hand.

"Yes." Lucis began to rise, leaning on the bed to pull himself to his feet. His knees clicked as his legs straightened. The Light faded from him, seemingly sucked to the woman on the bed.

Aurel watched. Disbelief, pain, joy, and grief warring within. "Why her?"

"And not your mother." Lucis gave voice to the other half of her thought.

Aurel could only nod.

"I know not." Lucis said. "I only know the Father of Light is good. That is enough for me." Lucis placed a hand on her shoulder, the warmth clinging there as he walked outside. He returned, depositing the last of his provisions on the table, humming as he began to turn the dried meat and vegetables into a stew on the hearth. He coaxed the fire into a warm blaze that bubbled the smell into the still lit room. The boy didn't leave his mother's side. Lucis carried a pitcher of cold water and a steaming bowl of stew to the bed. "When she wakes, give her as much as she wants." He placed the bowl into the boy's hands. "You need to keep your strength up too."

Lucis had to peel the boy's hands from his mother's. The afterglow of Light echoed on his hands. Slowly, the boy began to eat. "I'm sorry we don't have more to give." Lucis said. "That which we have, we give freely."

Lucis tousled the boy's hair. "Come Aurel, we still have far to go this night."

Aurel allowed herself to be led away from the cottage.

EIGHT

They'd left the road hours before to continue on damp single track paths through an increasingly dense forest. The trees were now so close they suffocated Aurel in their shadowy boughs. The weight of distant mountains loomed through gaps in the branches. Lucis had hummed through the gradual lightening of morning under the shadow. He had hummed and she had not sung. Aurel still thought of the woman. The woman and her mother: one saved by the Light, the other abandoned by it. She was happy the boy had his mother. Or at least she tried to convince herself of it.

Lucis had said the Father of Light was good, all she saw was darkness. She saw her mother fading from the world. She saw the Lightbringers fail in their last battle. But then she'd seen Lucis. She'd watched him banish her fear again and again. She'd seen him fight the people's doubt given voice by the man clad in black. She'd seen the smile on the child's face as Lucis created sudden Light from the dark. She'd seen him hold the hand of the woman and bring her from the brink of death. Aurel didn't know the Father of Light. She knew Lucis, and if they were similar, that was enough.

Her song began softly, tentatively searching for the spaces in Lucis' harmony. His tune shifted to give her room and she wove between the threads of it. The horses walked, Lucis hummed, she sang, and for a moment, they forgot the shadow creeping through the trees and masking the sun.

Lucis stopped at a small break in the trees, just wide enough for Aurel to bring Hisak next to Spero. He dismounted and spent a quiet moment whispering to Spero. The

stallion lifted his head and snorted. Aurel dismounted and stood between him and the path wandering deeper into the forest.

Lucis smiled. “When I was a child, I begged my father to give me Light. He refused. He said it was a heavy burden that he didn’t wish for me to carry. But I begged and pleaded and cried and fought until he relented. He was right. It was a heavy burden.” Lucis slipped the slender sword from Spero’s saddle and belted it on. That was all he took from the saddlebags. “I told you that you could go with me, but not all the way. This is where your journey ends.”

Aurel began to object. Lucis cut her off, power sparkling behind his words. “I’ve been afraid for too long. I’ve chosen the coward’s path and tread it well.” His eyes searched past her, then focused on her face. He held her shoulders in clenched hands. “I cannot rewrite your childhood: your pain, your loss, your abandonment. I can only ask that you give up hope for a better past, let go of hate, and forgive me.”

“What are you saying?” A thousand cacophonous thoughts fought through Aurel’s mind. Hope and fear interwove their messy way to tighten her throat.

“I only have a tiny bit of Light left. But what I have, I give to you freely if you will have it. I love you Aurel. I love you, daughter.” Lucis let go, hands falling limply to his sides.

Wind moved through the forest. All else was silence. Daughter?

Hisak nudged her. Aurel remained motionless. Her mind whirled through the past, linking previously unconnected memories together. Why would it have been Lucis and not another Lightbringer with her mother at the end?

Lucis sighed and turned. Aurel watched. Why would he have abandoned her? Why would he have left her mother? She hated her father for it. No, she hated *him* for it.

Lucis walked towards the dark path, limbs like fangs closing around him. Aurel remained motionless. She hated her father. She loved Lucis. She loved the way he had taken care of her. She loved the way he had given his Light to the boy, the woman, and the crowd. He had done it all for her. She loved the way he had tried to get her to call him Lucis and how she had resisted, clinging to protocol because it annoyed him. Aurel loved the smiles, the words, the way he saw the best in her, even when she couldn't.

Lucis was almost out of sight behind the shadow of the forest. He spared her one last look. Aurel stood still as love and hate battled within.

Lucis began to follow the dark path in front of him.

He didn't see the tears patter the damp leaves.

He didn't see the small hand lift and reach for him.

Aurel watched the empty forest. "Father." She whispered.

A sudden beam of Light split the dark, breaching the way to him. Aurel ran to Lucis, clung to him, wept years of pain into his chest. He held her, wrapped her in Light, and all shadow fled.

When Aurel could speak, she said what she felt, what she knew deeper than anything else. "I love you." In that was forgiveness, it was a release of the questions she'd asked her mother, the words she'd screamed into her pillow alone in the dark.

“I love you.” Lucis said. The Light surrounded them, color springing to the moss, the trees, splitting the clouds so a narrow window of sun beamed onto them. There was beauty in the forest, hidden for so long, revealed in the Light.

“I love you.” Lucis repeated. “Which is why I have to confront the darkness. Why I have to leave you.”

Aurel nodded. This was different. This she understood. This Aurel accepted, though she didn’t want it. “But I only just got you.”

Lucis nodded. “You must return to the Cathedral of Light. You must share the Light as I, as we should have done.”

“Share the Light?”

“It is not for keeping, it is for giving.” Lucis said. “I see that now.” Lucis pressed her hands. “If I fail, you must continue. You must find a way through the shadow and back to the Cathedral.”

“You won’t fail.” Belief flooded through her and slipped out to dazzle on her cheeks.

“No. I won’t fail.” Lucis’ smile was almost big enough to make himself believe it. “I am whole.” He hugged her again. “Now go.”

She let him release her. She let him go, treading down the dark path towards the mountains. He stopped and faced her.

“Aurel.” Lucis’ fingers moved in intricate, delicate patterns. He blew softly and a Lightwoven butterfly fluttered towards her. It danced around her head before settling on her cheek and popping into a warm fizz. When the Light cleared, Lucis was gone. But the

touch of his Light lingered. It radiated through her before centering in her core. It stayed there, warm and safe, banishing all fear, all doubt, all hate. He had given her Light and she could finally hold it. She was a daughter of Light.

NINE

Lucis walked the shadowed path hoping for a miracle; believing in a sudden Light in the dark. He had none of his own left. He had given all that remained to Aurel. She had been worth any price he could pay. Long fractured, long afraid, now Elucidas Adtoneri was whole. He had faced his fear of losing Aurel and she hadn't abandoned him as he had abandoned her. She had not hated him as he hated himself.

She loved him and that was enough.

The path ended, as all paths do. The gaping maw of a cave opened like a black wound in the mountainside. It had been bright sun the last time he was here. He had been afraid then, he wasn't now. Lucis straightened his bent back. There was strength in him still. "Calgala." He named his fear. "Come forth."

The shadow oozing out of the cave swirled into Stygian darkness, boiling into a form he could almost make out in the shifting black. "Little Lucis, you have come at last." The voice was a myriad of twisting nightmares, whispered in the dark. "I have waited long for this. But I am patient."

Lucis cast aside his cloak and drew his sword. The echo of his Light lit the Lightwoven crystal blade, shining forth in a sudden blaze. The shadow shrank, the form darkening to a shape, large and terrible. The murmurs of a thousand fears flitted through the wisping tendrils clothing Calgala. Lucis could almost hear each one before the distinct voices fled into the cacophony.

A sound like the fall of distant rock rumbled out in a landslide of laughter. "I didn't think you'd actually use all of it. I thought you'd keep some power to face me."

The darkness swelled towards Lucis, halting at the thin ring of Light enshrined in the sword. “From the moment you entered the shadow, I watched you bring the girl to me. I sent my voice to the village to trap you. And you fell for it. I sent the fear to the boy. I sent the plague. You are even more of a fool than I could have hoped for. You’ve always been that, little Lucis. You brought the girl. She holds the seed of light or dark.”

Lucis faltered, disbelief shrinking the ring of his Light. “What?”

Calgala laughed. “And you didn’t even know. I’ll finish you and then claim her.”

“No, you will not.” Lucis took a step forward, stretching his hand out, the fingers moving in their intricate patterns. “I do not fear you.” There was no Light left. Lucis had been hoping for a miracle, a sudden beam of Light to shine forth from only his faith. “I do not fear you.” This time he spoke to himself, willing power that wasn’t there to materialize.

“You should.” Calgala ripped through the fabric of night in front of him. His sword of deep black void crashed towards Lucis.

Lucis raised his sword, gripping it with both hands as the weight of Calgala’s strike dropped him to his knees. The tip of the blade slid towards him. Lucis fought to keep his sword up as his old arms weakened. The crystal cracked. Light began to leak out, but there was no power in it. The dark void of Calgala was so vast that no amount of Light could ever fill. Calgala lifted a hand, dark within dark within dark. Wisps of dark fingers sucked at the Light, slurping the thin rays until no hint of hope remained. The Lightwoven sword shattered, cutting Lucis with a hundred splinters.

He cried out one last time, weaponless before Calgala’s darkness.

Calgala loomed over him. “What were you hoping for? A miracle? A sudden Light in the dark, Lucis.” He used Aurel’s voice twisting it into something terrible. He used Aurel’s words. Calgala’s blade dropped from his hand, disappearing in a puff of acrid smoke. “She is far more powerful than you would ever be. And you brought her to me.” Calgala’s claws pierced through Lucis’ raised hands, talons finding purchase in Lucis’ skin.

Calgala lifted him as warmth and strength bled from him. The shadow swarmed up the mountain, lifting Lucis to the edge of the cliff above the forest. “I’ll claim her.”

All Lucis could see was darkness. “No.” He spoke against it. “Darkness is but the absence of Light. You shall not have her.” He tried to raise a hand, but Calgala flicked it aside. Shadows swirled through the valley, blotting out even the hope of the sun. Far in the distance, one tiny prick of Light still stood. The Altar of Light cast a rainbow reflection against the cathedral below. Rainbow reflections beamed out. Then a rush of darkness swept over the altar and all was dark.

“You think the drop of Light you gave her will protect her from me? She is already mine.” Calgala raised a hand, a swath of deep black rushed out. “This is my world now, little Lucis.” Calgala dropped him into a crumpled heap.

Lucis didn’t have the strength to rise. All was dark.

TEN

Aurel led the horses down the dark path, hand to her heart, guarding the treasure warming there. Her father’s gift of Light was sacred. His trust was sacred. She had to keep the small bit of Light safe for his return. She’d just reached the ancient road when

an old man stumbled out of the dark to collapse on the stones. One hand waved in front of his face to ward the shadow away. It buzzed around his head like three clawing hawks.

Aurel ran to him. He was old, older than Lucis, an ancient tatter of bones wrapped in little more than scraps that had once been rich. The flash of gold thread still poked out of the dirt. His hair and beard were patches of tangles, long and thin. The worst was his face. Where his eyes should be were two black holes wreathed in broiling shadow, lit with red.

“All is dark.” His voice a croaking whisper. “All is lost.”

She knew him. His ruined face was similar to that of her father’s, but much older. His was the portrait hanging in the hall of Light. His was the body that had led the last charge those many years ago. How was he still alive? “Lightfather Adtoneri? Grandfather?”

His warding hand paused and stretched towards her. The hand was little more than frozen bones as she grasped it. The face turned to hers. “I know your voice. Aurel?”

Her fingers began to work the patterns of Lightweaving on his scabbly skin. She could banish the darkness there. She could save what was left of him.

His other hand clutched her with surprising strength. His voice took on a harsh command. “No. Keep the Light safe, hide it, take it away, hide it, keep it. Don’t let him get it.” One hand relaxed and went to his belt. He pressed his scarred hand into hers. “You must keep it safe.”

Suddenly the strength fled from him and his hands slipped to the ground, broken fingernails scraping. Only his voice remained unwavering. “Keep it safe.”

Another voice rose out of her memory, so like the man on the cobbles before her. Lucis' voice was similar, yet so different: *share the Light as I should have done*. "That which I have, I give freely." Aurel's words matched the cadence of her father's voice.

"No." Came the whisper from the old man, but he lacked the strength to stop her.

Aurel's fingers moved, the Light brimming up, needing an outlet, desperate to burst forth, using the tracing pathways of her hands as a conduit. It broke out, throwing the shadowed birds of prey aside, wrapping the old Lightbringer.

Lucis' gift. What he'd entrusted to her, already used up so soon. But it wasn't. There, deep inside of her, it echoed still. The seed of it had even grown. Aurel smiled, clutching the hand of the old man.

A wry smile touched his wrinkled face. The red lights where his eyes used to be went out. The orbs of shadow puffed away, leaving empty holes. Two tears twinkled out of the places his eyes used to be. "I see." The old man's hand went limp in hers.

The boy wandered the paths of the dark forest. His mother still lacked the strength to leave the house, but her cough was gone. The new day brought new strength. He knelt beside an upturned log and smiled at the spongy white mushrooms growing there. He'd only gathered a handful when he heard a noise behind him. It was just a breaking stick. Then he heard another noise. Footsteps in the dark. It was a monster. He could almost see the talons reaching for him, the gaping maw coming to claim him. He almost gave voice to the fear, then the boy stopped and remembered. He remembered the warmth in his hands from the strange man. He remembered the sound of laughter in the woods. "I am

not afraid.” Something lit within him as he said the words. A tiny speck of Light rested on his finger and cast the shadow away, wreathing him in Light, warmth, and color.

The man clad in black assumed his repetitive litany in the town square. A load of tired platitudes about how the Light was defeated and other nonsense. Erah ignored the words as he continued unloading the wagon. He’d seen the strange man summon the Light in an instant. The brightness of the Light had almost blinded him. The knowledge glowed in him warmly. A trick with a torch? Torches didn’t blind those watching them. Torchlight didn’t get sucked into you and reside there. Erah could feel the spark of it, even now.

“The Light is a lie.” The man in black said.

“The Light is a lie.” The crowd chanted.

Erah didn’t want trouble. He just wanted to unload the wagon and drive the long road home before it got too dark and his father started to worry.

“You by the wagon.” The man in black said.

Erah looked up; everyone was staring at him. The man in black was pointing at him. “The Light is a lie. We all agree. Say it with us. Join us.”

“Join us.” The crowd echoed.

It wasn’t a lie. He’d seen it. He didn’t want trouble, but here was trouble anyway.

“The Light is a lie.” The man in black prompted.

It burned within him, a hot fire rising. He had seen it. “No, it isn’t. I’ve seen it.” Erah said.

“The Light is a lie.” The man in black stalked towards him, dark wings clouding behind him.

Erah tried to back away, but the wagon stopped him.

The man got closer. “The Light is a lie.”

“I told you.” Erah stood. “I saw it.” Erah pointed. “Right there.” A tiny spot of white fire so brilliant it turned the world to color exploded in the air where Erah pointed. The Light struck the man, enveloping him in fragments of bright. The man crumpled into something like a clawed bird before vanishing in a puff of smoke. The town square emptied as people raced away, fear chasing them from the sparks of white Light floating like snow through the air. Erah watched the Light fall and began to smile. “I told you it wasn’t a lie.”

ELEVEN

Small beams of Light split the dark in the valley below. It wasn't one, but many tiny seeds lighting up spots of color in a field of black. The darkness fled before their growing strength. The shadow still covered the land, still choked the Cathedral, but rings of Light marred the spotless black surface. Calgala staggered from the cliff's edge. "The world is mine." There was a tremor of fear in his voice.

Lucis summoned his last bit of strength to give voice to the Aia, Eia, Arah rising within him: the spoken, the felt, the known. "Day shall come again." As the last rays of life fled and Lucis' eyes closed, he saw no darkness. All was alight.

CHAPTER SEVEN

In Chapter Two, we examined how writing can be an integrative methodology for trauma by replicating the context function of the hippocampus in episodic memory that is disrupted in trauma.

In Chapter Three, we used the genre of War Literature to think about how writers with different backgrounds used various methods to access and communicate war.

In Chapter Four, we looked at how J.R.R. Tolkien used the method of the surreal to enter the space of WWI as he wrote sections of *LOTR* in serial and mailed them to his son during WWII.

In Chapter Five, we traced Kurt Vonnegut's development of a literacy to language the firebombing of Dresden.

In Chapter Six, we analyzed writers with disparate training to realize that when it comes to integration, skill is less important than finding a method that facilitates access to significant events.

In Chapter Seven, we will explore ideas for a writing practice informed by the cognitive sciences as a path towards writing the impossible.

Throughout this work, you have followed my literacy narrative as I've echoed the methods of various authors on my journey of finding words for the holes of my embodied experience.

Writing the Impossible

“The ultimate design needed to isolate fragmentation as a unique mechanism for the development and therapeutic recovery of PTSD would generate narratives that were and were not fragmented, link this fragmentation to persistent PTSD-like symptoms, and then systematically reduce fragmentation, showing that this reduced fragmentation is related to a reduction in PTSD-like symptoms” (Gilligan 222).

Writing does a thing. We would be disingenuous to think writing is the only thing that does a thing. When we consider why writing works, we are pointed towards alternatives that might be more accessible depending on our individual life experience. Simply put, significant events create disconnection and writing creates connection. Often what is disconnected is: sensory information, emotions, memory, language, and the brain from the body. Any thing that brings connection to what is disconnected by translating an internal event onto an external context does the same *thing* writing does. We could look no further than Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* to consider art as an effective method of integration. There are many more methods that we might consider. I’ve known Special Forces Operators who have found painting therapeutic. Music, dance, woodworking, or coding games are some of the many other methods that might integrate trauma. The key for us is to find a balance between what is easily accessible and the utility of the method. Most importantly, for those who are affected by trauma, *any* thing is better than *no* thing.

Personally, I believe writing is an ideal integrative methodology for trauma both in its nature and the ease at which it can be a learned skill. But it is also *my* thing. To a hammer, every problem is a nail. I would be remiss to not comment on my formal educational training. Literary Studies tends to find a lens and look at disparate questions through that one lens. The Cognitive Sciences usually tries to find the lens most suited for

a given question. Each field can learn something from the other. Neither method is better or worse, above or below in a hierarchy, but different. So, as we keep all the possible methods for integrating trauma in mind, let us consider ways we might approach the significant events in our lives in specific ways. While I'll point us to writing practices that connect to neurological function, these ideas might also translate to *other* things.

We have seen a lot of methods in this work. In the introduction, I asked you to take note of those that seemed to resonate with you. Part of why I did that is due to the neurological nature of reading. Let me show you how this works. At the beginning of my *Reflections*, I told you how I imagined us sitting across from each other. I mentioned a window, snow, music, a fire, and mugs steaming between us. What was in the mugs? Don't look yet. What do you remember? Take a moment and think.

When you have your answer, go to the next page.

What was in the mugs? Coffee, tea, chai, water, something else?

Did you re-member?

Chances are you did. Go back and look at that page.

As you know now, I didn't tell you what was in our mugs. When you thought back, your imagination filled in the holes of your memory. This neurological function happens unconsciously. When I write, I don't give you all of the information. Reading and writing are a process of joint construction between the reader and the writer that closely mirror memory. I give you clues and your imagination fills in the rest; like gist memory and narrative smoothing. When we remember, we often re-member. Our minds take clues and our imaginations fill in the rest. In a sense, we created these pages together: me with my clues and you with your wonderful imagination. Thank you for filling in the holes between my words.

The other part of why I asked you to take note of methods that resonated with you is because those methods are a great place to start in crafting your own writing practice. Over the next few pages, I'll point to some detailed ideas to guide the development of your literacy around trauma. This brief list is by no means exhaustive or specific. These are not guided, tailored writing prompts, they are broad methods to explore in your own practice. If the previous chapters took you to the entrance of past trauma, this one encourages your first tentative steps.

Safety

What my presented research and embodied experience reveal is that writing methods can be practiced on safe events. Once skill is developed, those same methods can be more easily enacted on significant events.

Taking cues from the psychological principle of learned helplessness, control is paramount to safe engagement with a difficult past. Before you begin any writing practice, here are a couple of ideas for how to increase safety.

1. **Set a timer.** Maybe for something like fifteen minutes. Know that whatever happens when you start engaging with the past, there is an end. When the timer goes off, stop.
2. **Community.** Consider writing in the presence of a trusted friend, family member, or professional. If that doesn't make you feel safe, that's ok. You might feel safer with headphones on, music playing, at a public place, or some combination of all of those.

The guiding principle of these ideas is to point you towards the combination of elements that helps you feel safe. You can try out these or other methods with insignificant memories.

Sensory Imagery

We know that trauma often reappears as intrusive, uncontrolled sensory imagery. An integrative writing practice will develop the skills to access sensory imagery. Here are a few things you can try on a safe, insignificant event before progressing to a significant one when you are ready.

1. **Make lists of sensory imagery.** Think of a memory that feels safe and make lists of sensory imagery with a few words, phrases, or one sentence. If you get stuck for more than about thirty seconds, move on to the next sense. Come back when you can.

- a. In the memory, what do you **see**?
- b. What do you **smell**?
- c. What sounds do you **hear**?
- d. What physical sensations do you **feel**?

2. **Contextualize.** Place those sensory flashes in a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end. Feel free to use yourself as a character in first or third person, or even try out second person. Also feel free to make up a fictional character.

Distance

From our work together, we know that finding the right distance from a significant event facilitates access to that event. Here are a few ideas to incorporate distance into a writing practice.

1. **Perspective.** We know that a change in point of view can reduce the emotional resonance of a memory, so here is one writing prompt that might be useful. Write about a pleasant memory in the first person. Then write about that same memory in the third person. Include as much vivid sensory information as you can, maybe even in a list. What do you notice about the difference between the two stories?

2. **Fiction.** Imagine a fictional character and write their experience of a real event from your past. I'd encourage you to write about a pleasant or neutral event a few times before you write about a significant one.

3. **The Surreal.** Imagine a world very different from our own. You have complete control over this world. Place a character into that world and explore. If you have trouble coming up with your own world, try putting yourself or a made-up character into one of your favorite imaginary worlds from books, TV, or film.

Once you feel practiced in each of these elements, think about using the same method or combination of methods to write about a significant event from your life.

Emotions

Because fragmented sensory intrusions often come with overwhelming emotions, it is important to find a way to ground those emotions in your physical body. Also, trauma often disrupts access to the full spectrum of human emotions. Here are a few ideas to incorporate into your writing practice that are informed by both of those concepts.

1. **Developing emotional intelligence.** Think of an emotion or notice when you are feeling something.

a. Make a list of the physical sensations of that emotion in a few words or phrases on each line.

2. **Learning emotions through appraisals.** Watch a movie or read a story and notice what emotions you feel and what emotions you see in the characters.

a. For the emotions you feel, write down a short list of their physical sensations.

b. For the emotions you recognize, name the emotion you are seeing and write down the series of events leading up to that emotion.

3. **Emotional transference.** Once you feel practiced in writing emotions, try out giving a character an emotion. Feel free to use yourself as a character, or, if it feels safer, imagine one. Pair an emotion with how it feels in the body in both first and third-person. For example, how would a character who is nervous feel? What sensations could you provide to show a character is nervous without telling the reader the exact emotion the character feels? What series of events might lead to a character feeling nervous?

Control/Agency

Now we will begin to move on to bigger ideas. If you don't feel ready to start incorporating these into your writing practice, that's ok! These concepts will be waiting whenever you feel ready.

1. **Agency.** Write a scene where a character has no agency. Things happen to the character that they cannot control. Now, write the same scene and give the character agency. Notice the differences.
2. **Control.** Were there any times in your life where you felt something happen beyond your control? Write down whatever comes to mind when you think of the event. Write down sensory imagery, emotions, moments. Lists help! Don't worry about putting the event in an ordered timeline, just write down whatever pops up and then take a break.
3. **Contextualize.** When you are ready, organize the elements from the previous idea into a chronology. Connect moments with imagery and emotion. Make sure to ground those emotions in the physical body!
4. **Re-member.** Read the previous story and write what might have happened if you had control. Feel free to stray into fiction or the surreal if you need to!

Meaning

Ah, the big one: meaning. As we've seen, making meaning out of past events encourages integration. This is perhaps the most difficult idea to effectively incorporate into a writing practice. I'll give you some methods that might help.

1. **Audience.** Imagine someone you love and write for them. They are “your person.” The method of a letter might be useful.
2. **Remember.** Imagine a past event, you can pick a pleasant memory to practice on if you need to. You can write from the first or third person, or even as a fictional character writing to another fictional character.
3. **Contextualize.** Write the moments that happened, the sensory imagery, and the emotions you felt. Place those into a narrative structure with a beginning, middle, and end.
4. **Integrate.** Write to your person and explain how the event changed you. How did that event impact your life's story? How do you imagine the future with that event in mind? What advice or encouragement would you give to “your person” if something similar happened to them?

Conclusion

The ideas for a writing practice listed in the previous pages are only a start. They are an entry way for *your* journey of writing *your* impossible. If you have resonated with one of the methods in this work, either the practices I've highlighted in this chapter or methods from the writers in previous chapters, I would encourage you to echo those methods in your own practice.

In the beginning of this chapter, we saw psychologist Michele Bedard-Gilligan advocating for an ideal writing therapy for trauma that generates “narratives that were and were not fragmented, link this fragmentation to persistent PTSD-like symptoms, and then systematically reduce fragmentation” (222). As someone who is not a psychologist but has done a lot of writing, I have a few thoughts. Writing is messy. Trauma is messy. Once you enter the space of a significant event and begin to write in whatever way you can, a thing happens. Sometimes what comes out is clear, sometimes it is a jumbled, incoherent mess. The goal isn't to clinically or systematically write narratives with reduced fragmentation, the intent is to translate the past in whatever fragments show up onto the page. The result of a lengthy engagement with intrusive sensory imagery isn't necessarily reduced fragmentation, it is integration. We aren't trying to unfragment the past but to incorporate all of its messiness into the stories of our lives.

I would offer another way. For you, I would describe my personal writing method as a summary of this entire work and something of a benediction as we continue on our journeys:

Write about boats until you can put a name to them.

echoes.

As I've been working on this text, I've been rebuilding a 2000 Toyota MR2. It started when I traded my motorcycle for a car in pieces. With the help of some friends, some cursing, and a few bloody knuckles, I finally got it running.

Today, after I finished putting the last piece on the car, I crawled out from beneath it and came in from the garage. My almost three-year-old lay under his neon green and white plastic scooter with a toy screwdriver to "fix it."

I put my hand on his head and hoped I could keep showing him how to put broken things back together. And maybe, he will pick up on the words and not the holes.

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