

THE LOOKOUT



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THE LOOKOUT

A Journal of Literature and the Arts

by the students of
Texas A&M University-Central Texas

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Editor's Note

On behalf of the College of Arts and Sciences at Texas A&M University-Central Texas, I am thrilled to present the third volume of *The Lookout: A Journal of Literature and the Arts*. This year's issue showcases new poems, short stories, photography, and art, all by current undergraduate and graduate students at TAMUCT.

Once again, this volume of *The Lookout* covers a lot of ground, both artistically and thematically. Full of memories, visions, and sublime imagery of both real and imagined worlds, these creative works exhibit art's ability to wrestle with the complexities of life and death, raise awareness of the moment, protest past and present injustices, and participate in the healing process for readers and writers alike.

I hope this new collection not only makes you think, see, and feel in new ways, but also might serve as a source of inspiration for your own artistic endeavors.

Ryan Bayless

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Texas A&M University-Central Texas

THE LOOKOUT

Volume 3

SHARON INCLE

Lonely Star

I transpose myself onto you.
I see you saddened by elements
of nature that
remove your ability to shine.
Your longing for brightness is
within me.

Your craving for
movement: you beg the
clouds to move so you can
tell a story. A story unlike
any other. A personal expression
of your dreams. You aspire
to be truer than a figment
of human imagination.

You tell the world you're real.
You show others your glory,
for your ability to shine
does not diminish due to
earth's tilt.

Looking
down is not your only stance.
For I am sure you see more
than I can dream of. Your
beauty is relative:
a dog finds beauty
in a bone because he is hungry.

BETTY LATHAM

Bernice

Her hands are translucent,
the skin so thin, it seems hardly a thread could hold it.
She feels a loose strand in the coverlet
and worries it with her picking.
She strains forward to glance
out of the lace covered window.
Familiar forms stoop to pick.
Quietly she hums their refrain.

Her fingers feel the roundness
of the pearls around her neck.
They trace the tender hollow
where her babies grew and fed.
Again, she stares out of the lace covered window
where familiar forms
are measuring
the fraying fringes of her life.

TIM DEOCARIZA

In Grey Manila

A mother clothed in purple passes through the
doors of an unsteeped house of God.
She meditates alone among unseated pews,
her only company, a nailed man:

It is the first crust of evening in brown Texas,
first light in grey Manila
where I cry.
Why, I do not know—

My sister is a new artist, just married
to an officer graduating in a few days—

I should be happy.

Mother and daughter drive east for the ceremony
sharing their souls on hours of road.
They know their first pure joy
before they windmill into Louisiana elm.

Mother's neck is sideways, her head on her left shoulder,
ribs clothed in purple. She passed through a crumpled
door into the house of God,
leaving her only company, an unwounded daughter:

It is the evening before Easter in green Louisiana,
the dead of Easter morning in grey Manila.
I go outside, swollen-eyed, under a street lamp
to look high into the night.

A shooting star rockets and bursts.

The phone call comes at lunch just before Mass.
I forget how to cry.

CHAD PETTIT

The Mourning, After

They sat in defeat on the concrete island
after the victory,
feet semi-flat, covering broken asphalt
and semi-automatic shells.
Brass and pebble steamed in early morning heat.

Headless helmets wobbled beneath them,
rocking between trembling ankles.
Blood-stained fingers raised unsmoked cigarettes
to trembling lips.
Embers burned the night into memory.

Necks cracked as the soldiers turned to watch
scarred index-fingered “civilians” marching past them;
costumed policemen hiding bruised right shoulders.

The soldiers looked away, smoke stinging their eyes.

No one spoke, too busy not smoking.
They inhaled the morning and exhaled the night
at the end of smoldering embers.
Half a cigarette length of ashes fell away.

Where Was I?

Ben slammed his fists upward with all of his strength. The bright, plastic ceiling above him was unyielding but echoed the boom of his fists in protest.

“Oh God,” he whispered through short breaths. “Someone help me.”

The machine that had him trapped was relentless in its assault of his ears and body, ignoring every scream. He was pushing a button the nurses had placed into his hands in case he needed to come out of the machine. The device made sounds like semi-automatic gun fire, shaking and vibrating as if someone was banging on the outside of its walls.

“Get me out of here!”

His screams went unanswered, and that made the trap feel tighter. They would never hear him over the sounds of the machine. No matter how many times he banged on the roof of it, they didn’t notice. The panic button on the cord they had placed in his right hand was worthless. The face mask they had buttoned over his head and called an antenna was constantly making his eyes shift in and out of focus between it and the plastic ceiling. The constant shifting in and out of focus was giving him a headache, more so than the ear plugs shoved in his ears or the deafening sounds of the machine as it scanned his brain.

As he felt his shaking breaths going in and out in uncontrollable bursts, he wondered if anyone heard him screaming for help. If no one came, there would be no calming down. It happened this way every time, like clockwork. First was a thought, triggered by a sound or a

smell, or just a word. Then the memories took over. The heart beat became so fast and hard that it was as if it was going to explode from his chest. It was over when it got to that point.

“Shut this thing down!”

No response, except for the rifling of the machine.

It jerked, but with a different sensation than the scanners. His arms bumped against the machine as he moved out toward the end of the plastic tunnel. Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes and felt the feigned calm he'd perfected wash over him. It was quiet now, and he was moving steadily through the plastic tunnel. A few moments passed before the view changed from translucent plastic to bright, fluorescent lights above his head. The lights were so bright that he squeezed his eyelids together. The roller bed he was lying on came to a gentle stop as he licked his lips and let his arms sag.

The deep voice of a man above and to his left interrupted his thoughts. “Mr. Martin?”

“Yeah?” He drew the word out as if it was a question, not sure of what to say.

“You pressed the button. Everything okay?” The voice was even, neither judgmental nor understanding.

“Did I hit the button?” He tried to lift his head up and look for the voice, but gentle hands from both sides pressed him back down onto the bed.

“Don't try to sit up just yet sir; you've got some things fastened in place.” This time the voice was from the right, a woman's.

“I'm sorry. I guess I hit it by accident, but nah, I'm good.” He tried to smooth his breathing and suppress a snuffle.

“That's okay,” the man said; “that's what it's for. Are you gonna be able to finish the test? We've got about five more minutes.”

“Oh I'm good.” Ben's voice trembled as he said the

words, rising higher than he wanted. "Y'all do what you gotta do."

"Alright buddy, we're gonna get started again, but if you need to come out you just press that button again. It's not a problem, okay? Won't bother us a bit."

"Sure, but really, I'm good."

"I know. Just saying."

He felt hands on both sides of him, adjusting the towel wrapped around the back and sides of his head. As the hands did their work, the voices assured him that he was fine, and that they were almost done. He felt something rub against his face, like tissue or a soft towel, under his eye. Something was wiped away, something moist. The hands left and the voices grew distant. He felt the rollers of the bed jerking with the same motion as before, and he was moving back into the machine. He felt his cheek wet again in the same place that had just been dried.

The rollers stopped, and he took a deep breath to steady himself, making sure that he was comfortable enough that he wouldn't move. He had been told that he needed to be as still as possible. He felt his thumb rubbing the button in his left hand and quickly moved it away, pinning it over his forefinger. Just as he had settled in, the machine started up again.

It began with a series of ticking sounds that rode along an electronic pulse. The contraption vibrated with each tick and continued to the point that he had to take deeper breaths to remain calm. He drowned out the ticking noise and felt normal, as if he was lying comfortably in his own bed. But then the ticking stopped, and new noises started, rocking the entire apparatus with their force. The intensity of the vibrations grew rapidly. These new blasts were like the ones from before, like automatic gunfire but not at the same decibel level as real weapons discharging. He told himself this reality even as he felt his teeth clench, tried to breathe in through his nose and out of his mouth

slowly, but old, fresh memories flashed through his mind as rapidly as the artificial gunfire.

“Back blast area clear!”

A loud and sudden bang shook the machine. He clenched his eyes shut to block out the explosion. He recovered quickly; checked for his weapon. Not there. Another explosion, this one coming from the other side of a familiar street, came in and forced him to duck behind an armored vehicle. The radio on his shoulder was squelching on and off, filled with a cacophony of voices talking over each other in confused sentence fragments.

“Blue One, Red Six. Sitrep, over.”

Sergeant Martin squeezed the talk button on the shoulder mounted radio and tilted his head to the right to talk into it.

“This is Blue One. RPG fire from the north east has disabled the tires of my last vehicle. Zero casualties, ammunition status nearly amber, over.”

“Roger One; what do you need?”

He stared beyond the plastic and spoke through clenched teeth. “I need you to stop asking me what I need, so I can fight.”

The gunner in the turret of the armored truck above him fired down range in the direction of where the rocket had been launched, sending a stream of hot, fifty-caliber rounds into a dirt mound. Shells bounced off the truck and fell all around him. He ducked his head but quickly regretted the action. One of the hot shell casings fell between his exposed neck and body armor, wedging itself. The pain from the heat caused him to jerk his head back, further pinning the casing and burning his neck worse. He let out a yell, which was drowned out by the machine gun fire as he reached up and tried to jerk the casing out. It burned his fingers through his gloves, but he gritted his teeth and finally shook the casing loose.

“Blue One, Red Six.” He took a deep breath, wondering why they weren’t just getting him out of there. Why were they asking him what he needed? Couldn’t they see the battle going on from where they were?

“Blue One.”

“Roger, understand you are requesting to fall back and re-engage.”

“Roger Six.”

“Roger, stand-by for cover fire over your left flank.”

“Wilco.”

“Wilson, Campbell, load ‘em up.” Sergeant Martin jerked his arm over his head in a circle, and then pointed across the bridge they had crossed twenty minutes ago. He pulled his hand back quickly, reeling from pain. He had hit something hard, but only dark sky and bright bursts of muzzle blasts and tracers flying were above his head. He kept screaming at Wilson and Campbell to get the soldiers into the trucks, but they didn’t respond. He looked around in every direction and panicked because he couldn’t see them anymore.

Someone grabbed him from behind and pushed him into the front passenger seat of the truck he had been huddled against. He tried to fight against the invisible hands that were pushing him into the truck, tried to argue with the voices telling him it was alright. He told them he wouldn’t leave until he knew his men were safe, but the hands kept pushing and the voices above him ignored him, talking over his pleas.

“Everything is fine Mr. Martin.” It was the man’s voice.

“Just take some deep breaths. It’s alright.” He heard the woman’s voice, softer than earlier.

Ben opened his eyes and was instantly blinded by bright fluorescent lights overhead. Hands came down

over him, grabbed the face mask antenna and yanked it off. He bolted upright, throwing the panic cord to the ground and sucking in heavy gulps of air. His entire body was trembling uncontrollably, and hands gripped his shoulders.

“That MRI machine can be tough on anybody,” the man’s voice was saying; “don’t sweat it.”

Ben swallowed hard. He felt around his right leg, searching for his weapon. Not there, wouldn’t be there. He felt the plastic of the machine instead and remembered the test. It couldn’t be finished already, could it?

“Are we done?” He turned to his left as he asked the question and met the gaze of a middle-aged man with large, black plastic glasses. The man was big, obviously in great shape.

“Yeah we’re all set buddy.” The big man smiled. He was wearing blue scrubs. It was plain except for the label on the left breast that read: CHARLES GEORGE VA MEDICAL CENTER.

“You want us to help you up Mr. Martin?” It was the woman, asking him from the other side. He didn’t look at her while she spoke. “That test can make you pretty dizzy.”

“Um, no. I think I’m good.” Ben shook his head and let out a rough sigh as they removed the rolled up pillow from beneath his knees. He casually swung his legs over the table and gingerly set his feet on the ground. He stood slowly, helped by the man in the scrubs. After a short pause to adjust his eyes to the lights, he nodded to the man that it was fine for him to let go.

“Okay, so I just wait to hear from my clinic about the test?”

“Yes sir. It should be a day or two.” The man nodded.

“Alright, good deal.”

“Alright buddy, just follow the red arrows to that locker where you put your stuff. Then you can go through those double doors to the main hospital. You know where to go from there right?”

He nodded. He wanted to say yes but couldn’t get any words out. He hung his head a little and started walking toward the door, following the red tape arrows marking the cold, tile floor. He felt his body trembling, and he was short of breath, but didn’t know why. His vision was clear, but it was as if he was seeing through a thick fog. He shook his head to clear it. As he got to the entrance way for the MRI room he stopped and turned to face the nurses.

“Hey can I ask you something?”

“Sure.” The woman sounded as if she was trying not to cry. She bit her bottom lip.

“Y’all ever have anyone freak out in there?”

The nurses were silent at first, and then the woman nodded rapidly. “Sometimes.”

He nodded as well, slowly. “Well, I gotta admit it is a little rough in there. I’m glad I held it together.”

“You did just fine buddy,” the big man said and then pressed his lips together.

Ben and the man exchanged a single dip of the head, and Ben saw the man holding his forearm out to the side. On his wrist, he wore a black bracelet with an inscription on it. Ben recognized it immediately as a memorial bracelet soldiers wore when they lost someone in their unit.

He gave the man another slow, purposeful nod, and they held one another’s gaze.

“Alright then, y’all have a good one,” Ben said, and then smiled.

“Okay, take care, brother,” the man said.

As he exited toward the locker room to retrieve his belongings, Ben heard the woman sniffing. He

imagined it was a pretty bad day for her if she was upset enough to cry in front of her coworker and a patient like that. He shoved his wallet and keys into his pockets before gently closing the door of the tiny red locker. He tried not to pay attention to her murmuring about some “poor guy” that had broken down during an MRI scan as he left the room and entered the hallway to the main hospital. He shook his head as he walked, feeling sorry for those people that couldn’t seem to control their emotions.

Ben shoved his hands into his front pockets and picked up his pace, walking as quickly as he could toward the exit.

REBECCA BRADEN

Desolation

It taps upon the aura's rim.
Just keeps on tapping,
tap...tap...tap.
Pushed out of the red beating vessel,
pumping emotions
cautiously to the conscious.
The vessel barely viable,
nicked and scarred and fearful
of Its return.
A buzz from a gnat
that can't be snatched,
can't be swatted,
Buzz...Tap...Buzz.
Just keeps on tapping,
Tap...Tap...Tap.
Its cascading shadow
blocks the sun's warmth,
the hope of tomorrow,
the calm of yesterday.

It will break through,
eventually.
TAP...TAP...TAP.

RACHEL HART

Birthday Party - Oahu, March 1945

Black hair flowing down young backs flashes in the firelight.
A pig roasts in the imu¹. Its scent fills the clearing.
Mango's sweet, firm flesh fills her mouth, ambrosia.
Hi'aika² watches the dancers, blessing their nimble hands and feet.
Swirling ti leaves let off an earthy scent.
Red hibiscus and white plumeria decorate the girls,
a living, loving bouquet.

One set of eyes fills with joy.
This spectacle is all for her.
Aloha au ia'oe³ her friends scream in their hula.
The lapping sea mixes with the steady beat of the pahu⁴.
Plumeria behind her ear fills her nose with perfume,
a memory of her special day.

Sixteen finally, the girl blossoms into womanhood,
a rival of any native flower.
Almond eyes, deep brown, mark her heritage.
Her young, brown body gives testament to her island.
A dream childhood, but paradise isn't always perfect.

Hands stained red by the dirt of the pineapple fields.
The feast tonight a luxury compared to the daily rice.
War reaches here, takes men, brothers, daily.
The planes screaming overhead, bombs lighting up the bay.
Death's scent clings to the base, the hospitals.
Tonight, all the bad is left behind for a celebration,
a birthday, a snapshot of youth.

1 A pit in the ground filled with hot coals that is used to roast meat.

2 Hawaiian goddess of hula and dance

3 Hawaiian phrase that means "I love you"

4 A drum traditionally used when performing hula

Sixteen doesn't last. The old eyes open slowly.
Gray hair and wrinkles look out from the mirror.
The girl is buried beneath signs of age.
She closes the album, locks the memory away.
The young girl, preserved forever in her lei by the fire,
her young eyes dance with living flames.
The island flows through her veins.

For my grandmother, Barbara Jean Reeves





MIKAYLA MERCER

Poseidon's Pacific

MIKAYLA MERCER

In the Presence of the Divine

On the Atlantic coast, every morning is a divine rising.

In the darkness, the ocean murmurs messages
encrypted in the hush and rush of waves
as they turn under, roll over,
and creep slowly up the shore.

A heavy haze, a most immeasurable fog,
sweeps over the sea and sand,
while Jupiter stretches his muscles,
newly awakened from an age-old sleep.

Diana's moon exerts its last pull
as another star overwhelms the atmosphere—
for a mere moment in time
Sol and Apollo are united by light.

Colors break and burst on the horizon
and Venus and Minerva share a quick meeting
to revel in both the beauty and the wisdom
of a watercolor-splashed sky.

Quickly forth,
Mercury flies on fluttering metal wings,
following along the jagged coastline,
as the nymph Chloris, the goddess Flora,
breathes life and growth into the landscape.

It would seem that Neptune comes alive and thrives
in the wee hours of the morn
when liquid meets solid
and water gives way to land.

On the Atlantic coast, rebirth is a cyclic phenomenon.

MICHAEL HERMANN

Little Girl

Little girl,
Dark hair, beautiful grin.
Little girl,
Twirling in the wind.
Where'd she go?

Terrified, alone and not,
Blinded and restrained.
Prickly pain in her arm is hot,
Forced into traffic down the fast lane.
There she go.

Innocence raped...
Raped.
The window once shined the sun,
Now sinfully draped.
She don't know.

Brainwashed...evolved?
Track marks pepper her arms.
The rubber hose, now in her teeth,
Independent, self-inflicted harm.
Time to go.

Freedom's lost its sense,
An oblivious slave.
Institutionalized,
That last trick was her grave.
15, a city dump.

Little girl,
Twirling in the wind.
Little girl,
Life gone before it could begin.
Where is your little girl?

DWIGHT A. GRAY

Villanelle for Charleston

We're waiting for the bells to ring at nine.
A crowd has gathered at the chapel door
to mark these lives, or curse the dark divine.

These strangers give a wary look, benign
but tense. No one feels safe here anymore.
We're waiting for the bells to ring at nine.

Of all the cares we thought we'd left behind
we thought this place was safe but, pacing floors,
we're marking lives, we're cursing the divine.

Here someone reads the news; the day's headline –
the lone gunman lies – it chills us to the core
while waiting for the bells to ring at nine.

Perhaps a scripture'll help. I wrack my mind –
but nothing helps, not silent prayers nor
us marking lives, or cursing the divine.

We're standing here outside; a growing line
surrounds the limestone steps, this chapel where
we're marking lives, not cursing the divine.
We're waiting while the bells still ring for nine.

TAMMI SUMMERS

Moving Forward

We are a product of the past
of our fathers.
Molded in the image of our creator who bore sons
and daughters.
A chosen people selected for our strength, love
and ability to forgive.

We're moving forward.

Our creator foreknew our ability
to rise above
slavery and segregation's hate.
To possess our freedom with humility and grace.

We're moving forward.

A dark distant past
ever tempting to cast shadows on our memories.
We choose
to look forward
to progress and take
a stand for our nation's unity.

We're moving forward.

You are my brother. You are my sister.
We know
it's deeper than skin color.
The creator birthed in us the ability
to see and seek,
to nourish and challenge
the inner soul and light of a man.

We're moving forward.

I am my brother's keeper. You are my neighbor.
We are no longer a people looking behind us
searching for a sympathetic and apologetic pity
towards our people.
We're looking forward
to an empathetic and diabolic understanding
that We Are One people.

We're moving forward.

We are one nation with one past.
One people with one hope.
We move forward with hope.
We live and die for hope.
Hope that you see me as I see you.
You respect me as I respect you.
You love me as I love you.

We're moving forward.
Are You?



JOY BEILER-REAVIS

Red Leaf

Waiting Room

We keep our appointment at lunchtime. Minutes ago Specialist Reid knocked on my door, a sign to tuck what paperwork I had to do into my drawer (I can't even remember what the paperwork was) and take him across post. Everyone else in uniform performs the normal tasks of returning: unloading equipment, cleaning personal gear, turning in body armor, cleaning weapons, cleaning offices abandoned for a year. These are the jobs soldiers can do in their sleep without our help. When you've seen what Reid saw, the world will have to go on without you for a few hours a week.

We arrive at the Fort Hood R&R Center (which now stands for the Resilience and Restoration center). This clinic was created as the first soldiers returned from wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to meet a growing number of needs. Returning soldiers who self-medicated, who swung their arms wildly in their dreams, who exiled themselves to the sofa, afraid that wild swinging would hurt someone, and those who never made it to the sofa in time. It takes a few minutes of circling the parking lot to find an open space. Finally a car, another First Sergeant leaving, a soldier in his passenger seat.

This yellow brick building on the corner was once the office building for a signal company, full of storage rooms and communications equipment. As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan progressed, each building within walking distance of Carl R. Darnall Army Medical Center began to be repurposed. Drywall, cheap metal studs and drop ceilings perform the miraculous transformation. Suddenly, office space becomes a bigger place to make prosthetic limbs; sleeping quarters become a place to transition warriors to civilian life; warehouse becomes psychiatric care. Everything

is malleable.

We have been back in country for two months. Much of the post seems locked in a mundane cycle of busy work. Three soldiers sit on picnic table beside the sidewalk. They're smoking, with Army Combat Uniform (ACU) tops folded on the ground; a mower and weed-eaters sit beside the table. It is March in Texas, 78 degrees and the yellow grass looks like it hasn't grown since November. No matter, they're following orders.

I look toward Reid who looks down at something miles away. He hasn't talked much more than the minimum since returning but at least he agreed to see a counselor without being made to go. His silence stands in awkward contrast to the Reid I used to catch clowning at the barracks before deployment, once bringing me in at midnight because his errant water balloon knocked the beret off a Military Police (MP) officer's head. Luckily the cop had a sense of humor. I remember pulling into the barracks parking lot to see three patrol cars all with their lights flashing. The first person I saw was Sergeant Scott, an MP with a still wet beret who had a slight grin on his face. He caught up to me while I scanned the parking lot for Reid, and said, "Top, it's not that bad. But your guys need to know not to do crazy shit while cops are running around with guns drawn. This time it was training. Next time it might not be."

I tried to drum up the outrage from within, to explain the consequences of not knowing where he was and what could happen with an itchy-fingered cop. Reid was sitting on the sidewalk in his PT shorts, no shirt, no shoes.

"Reid, get over here!"

He jogged to me, stood with head down, hands crossed behind his back.

"Do you know what could have happened? What if

that cop didn't recognize it as a water balloon and just turned and fired at the person who threw it? Then I'd be calling your parents and setting up a memorial service . . . over a fucking water balloon."

"It won't happen again." He never looked up, kind of like today.

It was hard to keep a straight face, after years of responding to alcohol fueled fights, or worse, spouse abuse. My first time to disrupt a water balloon fight.

Not much is funny now.

Last time he went to a clinic like this is the reason we're here today. Eight months ago Reid made an appointment with a combat stress clinic in Baghdad, on Victory Base. The clinic was two blocks from the warehouse where he worked procuring supplies for the base camp. Most of the former buildings once belonged to the old Iraqi army and this was no exception. A cinder block building on a poured slab, now with sandbags lining the outside like most buildings in theater, altered slightly to fit their new role.

Six months into our tour, Reid suffered from a minor case of depression. Though we were busy, soldiers often experienced a sense of futility triggered by missions that changed rapidly with little explanation. If work was going fine, there was the absence of familiar faces from home, or the barrage of issues on the home front we could do little about. Reid began to experience trouble sleeping and looking distant while on duty. His problems, on the surface, seemed to be the problems all of us were having. A pair of sympathetic ears, maybe a prescription for the Ambien clinics handed out like candy, and he'd be on his way.

Check that. A month before we'd lost a soldier. Not the prescribed narrative of the six o'clock news. Specialist Donaldson, on an early mid-tour leave, decided to drive his

pickup truck a hundred ten miles an hour on the outskirts of his hometown of Abilene, Texas. He had alcohol in his system though we didn't ask how much. We got the news from our rear detachment not long after it happened, then checked the news stories. We didn't know why. We did know the truck flipped six times. That weighed over everyone. Leaders wondered what more they could have said in the counseling. His buddies wondered what they didn't pick up on.

The day Reid went to the Combat Stress Clinic was the day a soldier, a sergeant, left the clinic after his own appointment, stole a gun from his escort, returned an opened fire on his fellow soldiers in the waiting area. The soldier killed five American soldiers before being subdued. A soldier who had access inside the crime scene later said he couldn't get the sight of five red splatters out of his mind, or the way they turned brown as they collected dust and dried.

No one ever expects a fellow soldier to open fire on his own, especially in a psychiatric clinic. Even the soldiers who go outside the wire let their guard down. The emotional toll of a violent act grows when it happens in a place you thought was safe, like when your mind equates danger with outside the wire, safety with inside the wire, and you've walked in 112 degree heat to an air conditioned oasis, placed your weapon in the rack, dropped body armor to the floor and begun to let muscles unwind in a cushioned chair.

Back in the present. A tinted glass door greets visitors to the R&R Center, giving the appearance that the clinic is closed even in the middle of the day. Inside the door, a reception desk sits strategically between entrance and waiting room. It is impossible to slip in to check on a soldier, or to slip out and skip an appointment without being seen. Ms. Honeycutt occupies the seat behind the desk. Her head barely rises above the wooden barrier erected, I suspect, to keep prying eyes from reading the patient information that sits before

her.

The walls around her have been painted an innocuous pale blue, perhaps to soothe those who enter the clinic. I'm never sure whether color has the desired effect on its target. What I do know is the room is dark, with every fluorescent light turned on, and I'm getting agitated.

"Have you been here before?" It takes me a minute. The second time I realize Ms. Honeycutt is speaking to us.

I look at Reid who says, "No Ma'am."

Then you'll need to fill these out." She hands him a clipboard with about eight sheets of paper. Mostly Privacy Act statements and questionnaires about previous medical conditions, from what I can make out over his shoulder.

Within two minutes he hands the paperwork back, signed.

"You all can go into the waiting room. And Top, he'll have to go back to his appointment by himself. If the doctor wants you, he will call you."

"Roger that." And we stop at the doorway when we realize there are no empty seats.

There are four rows of eight chairs each, a wall-mounted television and a magazine rack with a combination of *Army Times* and *Sports Illustrated*, maybe a couple of other titles.

This might be the point where one expects a description of sullen, quiet bodies. The truth is, there was some of that. There are just as many texting, playing on their PSP's, reading, whispering dirty jokes. No one exactly fits the cookie cutter mold intended to give identity to a redeploying soldier.

Opposite the television is a long hallway where a medic wearing whites and Sergeant stripes walks up and down, appearing every few minutes to call the next patient. Since we have an appointment, Reid's is the next name called. Then another name, and a seat opens up. I find myself sitting on the front row, in front of the television. The staff has turned the channel to the Cartoon Network where Coyote

and Roadrunner are renewing their 60 year struggle.

The desert scene vaguely reminds me of Tikrit, or Tallil, one of the dustier bases where our soldiers were scattered. Replace the grey bluffs with buildings and it becomes a cityscape. And now Coyote is burying a trap in the desert floor. I wonder if anyone pays attention to what is showing but, fortunately, no one seems to be fazed.

Beside me sits a soldier who's staring at the screen, or through the screen. Roughly the same age as Reid, the same look. He seems to be alone, no First Sergeant, no buddy present. I want to turn and ask him how he's doing but I let the moment pass. Though everyone shares a common geography and a familiarity with trauma, each grief is individual. Even the soldiers behind us, who seem to know us, who snicker between whispers at the story of last night's drunken escapade, camouflage the personal. The one beside me has his arms crossed covering his name tag. He's intently watching Coyote bait a trap, even cracking a smile.

Reid's been in the office five minutes.

The last time he didn't make it past the waiting room. Members of Sergeant Russell's unit would later describe him as a lone wolf, someone who kept to himself while others talked openly. The lone wolf let the tension build from within. That's one of the reasons I kept looking for signs of changes in our troops as I grew into this new responsibility.

I was not the First Sergeant when the shooting happened. The old First Sergeant was removed four months later for being in an inappropriate relationship with a junior soldier. I was the next highest ranking enlisted soldier and had to both learn the ropes and establish a new relationship with each soldier in the middle of a war zone. From the calls I would later get, I can imagine how news of the shooting came

down. “Guidons, guidons, guidons, report your status” would have sounded over the radio. Guidons, officially a flag with the unit colors, was the term for the First Sergeant of each company – the person who reported back with the following information: number of soldiers assigned, number out of country, in the hospital, and present.

Our unit would have to call eight base camps from our office in Balad, about one hour north of Baghdad – we were scattered across the country – to give a complete report. I am sure that higher headquarters asked if we had any soldiers at the combat stress tent and I hope that when the news came down, someone from our company caught a standby flight to Baghdad just to listen to how our own people were coping with the trauma. It’s a simple rule that a little give-a-damn goes a long way.

When I did take over, Reid and I held an uneasy peace. I made the trip to Baghdad a first priority. With the fragmentation of people and events, combined with the fact we had lost a soldier in this conflict, trust would be difficult. Where I had traveled before as a junior leader and sat with them on stolen lawn chairs and talked about anything while watching camel spiders crawl sideways beneath the trailers where they slept, now we communicated in gestures, body languages, short choppy sentences where the answer to everything was “O.K.” We’re O.K. The mission’s O.K. O.K., I’ll do it. Just don’t make me really say it, ok?

The definition of O.K. takes on whatever definition the speaker gives it. It may mean “thumbs up” on the surface and “leave me alone” a few levels down.

I would find myself talking to fill the silence, seeing head nods as signs of progress, wondering what variables we could control. I realize now, after some time has passed, the worst part of losing a soldier is forgetting temporarily that there are 119 still waiting for direction. That comes through in the silence – “What are you going to do now, Sergeant?”

But this is Reid’s story, not mine.

That damn cartoon. It has only been ten minutes. No one has called for me and I hope Reid is opening up. I don't have much faith having seen the tendency to annotate and medicate, but it's the overwhelmed system we have of full waiting rooms and appointments booked weeks in advance.

The medic returns and calls a name. And our drama on the screen begins to unfold. The bird dances on the trap, pecks at the bowl of seed, and zips down the road. Coyote follows in disbelief. The medic returns and calls a name. The trap snaps shut. A few of us, knowing the ending, jump anyway. The medic calls a name. The third time I hear the medic say "Hall" a little louder. I look left and ask, "Is that you?" and as if waking he says, "Yes it is." Private Hall rises and disappears down the corridor. Another soldier takes his place.

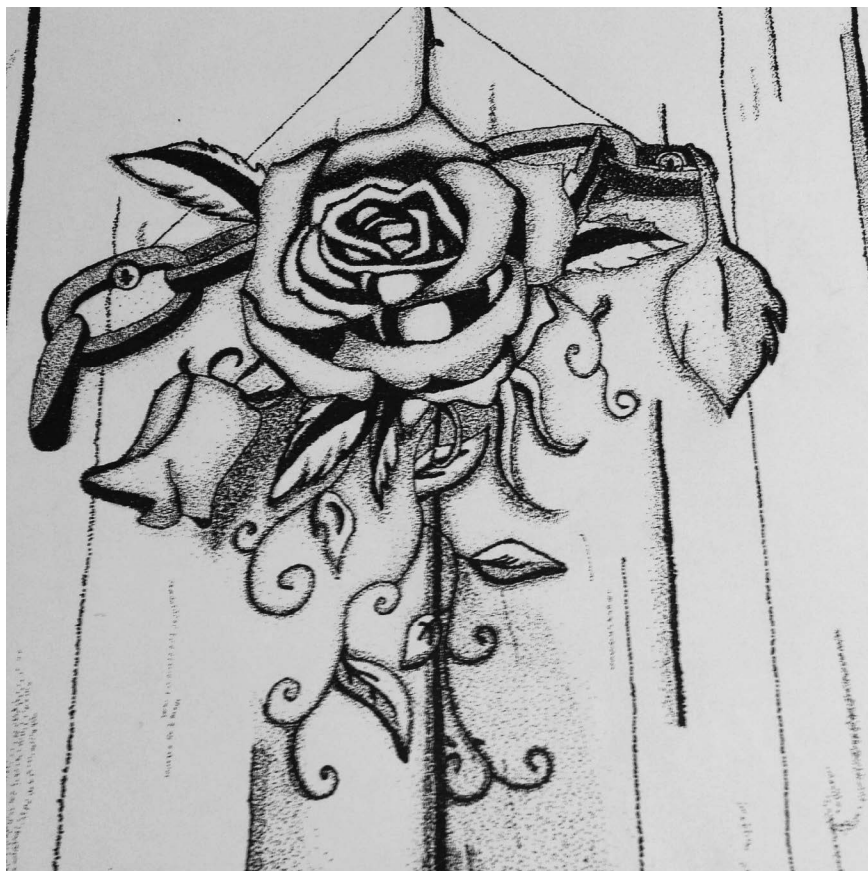
In ten more minutes Reid will appear carrying an appointment slip. In two months he will be clowning around, without water balloons I hope. The sight of five red turned brown Rorschach's on the wall may never disappear and may always serve as his own self-assessment of whether he is living in the present or some repurposed memory. In a year he'll be out and going back to school and in another year I'll follow.

When the door at the end of the corridor opens up I'll look for some clue, whether he's looking up or down. I'll take his follow up date and post it on the Big Board. Maybe we'll grab a burger, maybe we'll talk about anything but the Army, maybe the future, or cars. Or maybe we'll eat in silence. And after that – maybe tomorrow – if the schedule's clear – I'll make my own appointment. I'm sure there will be time tomorrow.

WILLIAM HODGES

In Heideggerian Time

Falling fast and falling faster,
Throughout the day, throughout the night.
There is no way to stop disaster.
Foregone delay, without foresight.
Inherit vice and lamentation,
Along a function, negative.
Our future is detrimentation.
Our Being-There, concern to give.
Truth we leave at the horizon.
Truth we gain, concernful care.
Truth-in-Being when the lie's gone.
Truth projected, Being-There.



SAMANTHA STOCKMAN

Citizen Kane

AMBER CELESTE MCENTIRE

Blood Moon

A tear escapes my eye as I find myself asking why?
Whatever it was, it is gone too soon,
but we'll always have the night of the Blood Moon.

The wind blew both warm and cold air,
such a beautiful sight, the way it moved your hair.
Looking up at the galaxies and stars,
it seemed like it was all ours.
It was just gone too soon,
left only with the memory of the Blood Moon.

It felt like we had so much room to grow,
so many emotions to find and show.
In those brief, silent moments our eyes said things
our mouths wouldn't.
I knew I felt something my mind said I shouldn't.
Whatever it was, it was gone too soon.
We'll always have the night of the Blood Moon.

I let down a few walls and showed you my scars.
The night of the Blood Moon will always be ours.
Our bodies, imprisoned, but that night our souls were free.
Wouldn't you agree?
Whatever it was, it's gone too soon.
Tell me you'll never forget the night of the Blood Moon.

HEATHER CHANDLER

Southern Comfort

Magnolias wafting through the breeze,
 mixin' with sweet iced tea.
Porch swingin' and guitars strummin',
 playin' cards strewn on the table.
A Remington rifle hangs above the door,
 next to a nice ten point buck;
 air so thick you're breathin' water.
There is nothin' quite like a little Southern Comfort.

Kneelin' hydrangeas beg the hinting rain,
 bright flashes reach over the waiting hill.
Drunk and dirty, mud caked on his boots,
the screen door moans as he stumbles into the room.
Gumbo and peach bourbon shiver on a crimson table;
 the burn of liquor blazes in his cold eyes.
There is nothin' quite like a little Southern Comfort.

Dishes dissolve into shards.
Piercin' screams mingle with small pleas,
 as strange gurgles escape her throat.
Tangled ghostly branches torn between submission and glory.
 The willows whisper to each other.
But the moon never reveals what he sees.
In the mornin' he tenderly holds her
 as she scrubs crusted red stains from her mouth.
There is nothin' quite like a little Southern Comfort.

Bright yellow daisies bowing in his hand,
 he'll mention he's sorry— again.
She's waitin' on the porch—rifle off its hooks,
 brimming with madness, magic, and macabre.
The whispering willows weep and the moon hides,
 as she resurrects courage with fear.
Small yellow petals swirl, adorning the freshly turned earth,
 and the sky graces them all with baptism and rebirth.
There is nothin' quite like a little Southern Comfort.



ROBIE ROBITAILLE

Willie & Trigger

RICHARD BARRETT

The Human Fulcrum

There are many who balance on that top.
Their lives are delicately traced before their eyes.
The cosmos screams, "Stop spinning!"
Their hearts are turned towards fables and lies.

They mistrust all, and love only those who follow blindly.
They abandon principles for the sake of principle.
They leave their mothers in distress to weep.
They care not for what is human, but care only for power.

Their glory and greed will be forgotten.
They balance their deceit with vice.
They give proof from scriptures man has dubbed holy.
They are filled with hypocrisy, uncaring and intolerant.

Craving they sit, wondering and pondering their schemes.
Their lies affect those who do not know, nor understand.
Those who will soon realize
That they are spinning out of control.

For compassion comes through peace,
Peace through love, love through understanding,
Understanding through knowledge, knowledge through learning,
Learning through tolerance, and finally tolerance through kindness.

ANNA TOBAR

The Symphony of a Child

There is an organic trust between parent and child.
They say hold on tight, it only lasts a short while.
Savor the love, and remember the sweet smiles.
There's no greater experience than the symphony of a child.

Have you touched a newborn's wrinkled skin?
Kissed a boo-boo to make it all better again?
Washed soapsuds from a toddler's eyes?
Or maybe kissed a teenager a sweet goodbye?
Then you may know the symphony of a child.

Have you seen the beauty of a brand new mother?
Perhaps the glow of bringing home a sweet baby brother?
Have you ever watched a Senior cross the stage?
Or seen a teenager bring home minimum wage?
Then you know the symphony of a child.

Have you ever wondered where a smell comes from
Only to look at a child and see their cheeks flush plum?
Have you ever sniffed freshly washed children's hair?
Or snuggled their blanket, in hopes they know you care?
Then you know the symphony of a child.

Have you forced yourself to eat pureed peas
Just to watch a precious child squeal with glee?
Maybe you've tasted a delectable cookie
Created by a child you had thought was a rookie?
Then you know the symphony of a child.

Have you whispered those words every child needs to hear,
"I love you sweet baby," and held back the tears?
Only to be rocked right to your core
When they whisper back "I love you so much more"?
Then you know the symphony of a child.

Whether you're an aunt, an uncle, a sister, or brother,
And you've had the opportunity to be close to a doting mother,
Or you've seen a father's heart burn wild,
Then you know there's no sweeter song than the symphony of a child.

HOPE ESSELTINE

Sunflowers

To you, they're just a weed.
To me, they're a promise of life.
To God, they're his promise to us.

Yellow like the summer's sun.
They fade with the falling sun.
They open again as the morning rises.

They come and go with the season.
They always come back just like us.
Sunflowers are the beauty of life.



HOPE ESSELTINE

Summer Sunflower

CAITLYN GALLENGSTEIN

I'll Meet You by the River

Drifting down
a narrow road,
ponytail and
fishing pole.
I'll meet you there.

Trees bend
under smiling sun,
small hands
lie gentle in
wiser ones.
Feet bare,
I'll meet you there.

Water shimmers
with warm laughter.
Come back I pray,
over and over.
In sweet
ageless day,
I'll meet you there.

JONNATHAN MOLINA

The Call

Poets, it's never too late.
Let your end-stopped verses and
enjambéd lines unearth
sweet, deep history of divine disappointments.
Sequester yourselves in your rented dens—your lonely hide-outs.
Spread out your words like starlight over ocean-drunk horizons.
Expose your imagination's tender flesh to the scalpel of inward vision.
Lay out your guts like a map over the great, green globe.
Be brave for the faithful diggers.
Be strong for the burdened searchers.
Be there for anyone who wakes in the night,
screaming for the truth.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Submission Guidelines

The Lookout is published annually by the College of Arts and Sciences at Texas A&M University – Central Texas and features poetry, short fiction, creative non-fiction, photography, and visual art submitted by current students and recent alumni of TAMUCT. Any student currently enrolled in classes at TAMUCT (or recent graduates) may submit their previously unpublished creative writing, photography, and/or art work for possible publication in the spring.

To submit your work, save your complete and polished manuscripts in Microsoft Word and send as an attachment to Professor Ryan Bayless at ryanbayless@tamuct.edu.

Poetry: submit 1 to 3 poems

Prose: submit 1 short story or creative non-fiction essay

Photography and Art: submit 1-3 works

(attach photos as JPEG files; black-and-white images preferred, but color photography and art will be considered for the cover)

-Please use the body of your email as a cover letter that includes the titles of your submitted works, contact information (email, physical address, and phone number) as well as a brief bio that indicates your class (Junior, Senior, etc.), your major (or degree), and a list of any previous publications in the arts.

-Also, please write “LOOKOUT SUBMISSION” in the subject line of the email.

Submissions accepted October 1st - March 1st each year



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