Fall 12-2008

# Homefront

Stacy Elaine Pratt
*University of Southern Mississippi*

The University of Southern Mississippi

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Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Studies Office
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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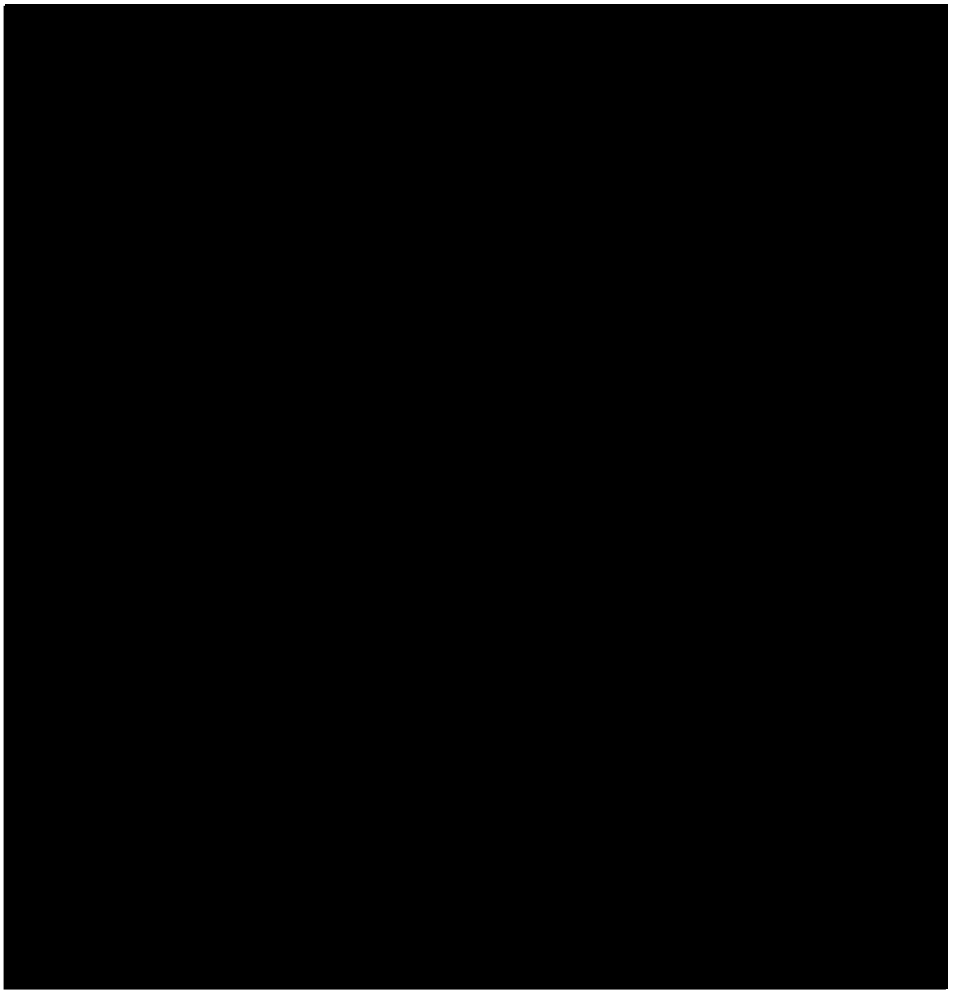

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ABSTRACT

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This collection of poetry and essays explores the nature of marriage, time, and human experience. Many of the pieces center on the author's experience as the wife of a soldier deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. Others use scientific and mathematical imagery to illustrate spiritual concepts.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

# PREFACE

Muscogee (Creek) medicine makers are born with the ability to hear the songs with which they heal people. Often, the medicine maker will sing the words, then blow them through a hollow reed into water which is used in making medicine. Our Christian tribal members also have a way of using words to heal. The women of the church pray over the communion bread, and their prayers go into the people who eat it. For all of us raised in this community, the idea that words can confer sacredness is so familiar as to be an assumption. In an interview for *The Portland Oregonian*, Muscogee poet Joy Harjo said, "I believe in the power of words to create the world. I have a poem that will turn hatred into love. And one to release me from fear" (Wright). In Muscogee culture, words are that powerful, and that much of a responsibility.

On the other side of my family are people from Cumberland Gap and the Ozarks. It seems cinematic, but it is true that they go about their daily lives singing folk songs and old hymns. My elderly aunts could recite Longfellow's long narrative poems, and my grandfather, and his father before him, specialized in animal tales apparently made up on the spot. My grandmother taught me which verse in the Bible can be recited to stop the flow of blood, and she, along with our other Sunday school teachers, taught us to use other verses to fortify ourselves in times of trouble. My father used his literary upbringing in his formal education, becoming a musician, English teacher and superintendent. By his own example he taught his daughters that poetry belongs to everyday speech, not just school work. I learned the social value of wit, and that deliberate words have a function beyond artistry.

I would not suggest that my writing is sacred in the way that medicine or communion bread is sacred, but that it comes from a similar impulse to shape words into talismans that console, protect, heal and strengthen. In addition to the informal influence of my home communities, I have been influenced by my the study of writers whose words have functioned as talismans for me, including the World War I poets, especially Siegfried Sassoon, Creek writers Joy Harjo, Louis Littlecoon Oliver, Alexander Posey and Craig S. Womack, and the humorous travel writer Bill Bryson. These influences, the subject matter that I address in my writing, and the different language systems that I employ all combine to form my ever-developing writing style. I most often write poetry, but my recent entrance into the genre of nonfiction has opened new avenues.

In every genre, I write to create something that *I* want to read. I write to make myself laugh or to record the most intense or insightful moments of my experience in the belief that they will find the people who need to be reminded or reassured. I begin with the details of my own experience, whittling them down to their most universal core. The first draft is my imperfect translation of the experience that was its impetus. It is part of the experience itself. It is in revision that I am a writer, for that is when I must consider the best and most beautiful way to transfer the mystery to an audience, including the audience of my ancestors and descendants, with whom I am always speaking at some level.

In the last few years, much of my writing has centered around my experience as the wife of a soldier deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq. More recently, I have become interested in scientific and mathematic concepts as metaphors for human experience. Although this collection includes some pieces about Creek and rural Oklahoma culture, I

do not write directly about those subjects very often. Their influence on my writing has more to do with form and perspective.

I am often asked why I don't write more about Muscogee culture and rural Oklahoma. The answer used to be that I was so ensconced in that culture that it seemed boring to write about it. Now, after years away from my family and community, the answer is that I fear distancing myself from what I now realize is an unusual way of life. But that is not to say that I don't consider myself an Oklahoma Creek writer.

That has not always been the case. My early poetry style might best be described as "anti-Creek writers." From the time I began to write, well-meaning relatives thrust the work of Creek writers Alexander Posey, Louis Oliver and Joy Harjo into my hands. Oliver went to boarding school with my grandfather, and Harjo went with my aunt and mother. I was a teenager, and they were friends of *my parents*. I couldn't even give them a chance. Posey fared better because he wrote poetry in the perfect meter of my beloved Romantic poets, but I had no interest in being funny, as he was in the Fus Fixico letters. I liked reading them, but like other people my age, I believed the world was Dead Serious. Also, with the exception of my father's small extended family and a few teachers, everyone I knew was either Creek or Cherokee. I didn't want to read about the people and places that I already knew; I wanted to read and write about foreign lives in unknown places.

But even as I was rebelling against them, the Creek writers were having an influence on my own style. Also, our common influences – the rhythms of our traditional stompground and church songs, of our speakers and preachers, of our enormous families telling stories at tables and softball games – were so entangled in my voice that it was

impossible to avoid them without a great deal of effort. Although both Posey and Oliver wrote poetry, I have been more influenced by the humor of their prose. Harjo's poetry has influenced both the subject matter and the form of my poetry.

Although Harjo's work deals almost exclusively with Native American (not just Creek) subject matter, it uses Native imagery and narrative to express universal human experiences such as love, birth and mourning. Her poetry is imbued with a sense of time and human connection that is familiar to me as a Muscogee person and writer. Most of all, I am influenced by the unabashed autobiographical quality of her writing.

For example, in the poem "The Place the Musician Became a Bear," Harjo begins with organic, traditionally Creek imagery to describe the Creek saxophonist Jim Pepper, for whom the poem is written: "I think of the lush stillness of the end of a world, sung into place by singers and the rattle of turtle shells in the dark morning." (In traditional Creek culture, turtle shells are made into rattles that are worn around the calves of women during ceremonial dancing.) Later, the poem encompasses modern, urban imagery:

> I'm talking about an early morning in Brooklyn, the streets the color of ashes, do you see the connection?...
>
> The wings of the Milky Way lead back to the singers. And there's the saxophone again.
>
> It's about rearranging the song to include the subway hiss under your feet in Brooklyn.
>
> And the laugh of a bear who thought he was human (51).

In this poem, as in others, Harjo portrays a life and a moment as simultaneously present and eternal. She also includes the reader in the relationship being described. The poem appears in *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky*, and like all of the poems in that collection, it is followed by an autobiographical note, this one telling how Harjo met Jim

Pepper and that the poem is a response to news of his death. The autobiographical notes root the poems in a lived reality, reflecting the equal "reality" that the inner spiritual and outer physical lives are afforded in Muscogee culture.

Like Harjo's, my poems fold contemporary imagery into a Creek conception of time as omnipresent rather than linear. For example, in "Missing Christmas in Camisano," traditionally Italian images such as a *precepe* (an elaborate Nativity scene) meet with "American / Christmas songs jingl[ing] from the municipal building," and the echo of modern warfare meets with "pointy-thin women / carrying small dogs in Gucci purses.../ stalls of Chinese scarves / the bird-seller, the cheese cart, the *Roma* / woman with her child, singing." I present these disparate images to express the surreal experience of finding myself in the colorful and chaotic setting of a Christmas market in Italy while my husband was away at war. I hope to convey the timelessness of longing for a military spouse during deployment as well as how these several layers of exile make each sensory detail stand out.

Writing about the war experience from the wife's point of view is dangerous for many reasons, not the least of which is the possibility of slipping into sentimentality. Like writing about Native American subjects, writing about war also carries political responsibility. Even when political statement is not the goal of ethnic or war poems, they are often read as political. The greatest challenge for me as a writer has been to write about war, and to a lesser extent Creek culture, in a way that conveys the experience without distancing the reader by drawing their focus to the political issues inherent in either subject. I have attempted to keep the reader focused on the emotional or sensory experience by writing, especially about war, as a lover writing for a beloved rather than

as a commentator. My position as the wife of a soldier makes this perspective easy for me to work with, but it also carries stereotypes and assumptions with which I must contend.

Although several contemporary poets have written about war, World War I poets such as Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen have been more of an influence on my own war writing. Of the war poetry that I have read, I find the poems of this era most moving because of their focus on soldiers as individuals. Also, I admire the World War I poets because the soldiers I know continue to carry copies of their poems in helmet liners and rucksacks. Both Owen and Sassoon wrote for political reasons, but their poems are respected by soldiers because of their exact, graphic detail and refusal to acquiesce to the myths and clichés of war – or anti-war -- propaganda. These poets bear witness to the horrors of combat in a way that forces the reader to focus on the humanity of the soldiers involved. In their poetry, flesh and blood *people* rather than uniformed soldiers fight and die, or fight and survive as half-destroyed souls.

In one of Sassoon's most famous poems, "Dreamers," he writes of the human response to combat:

> Soldiers are dreamers; when the guns begin
> They think of firelit homes, clean beds, and wives...
>
> I see them in foul dug-outs, gnawed by rats,
> And in the ruined trenches, lashed with rain,
> Dreaming of things they did with balls and bats,
> And mocked by hopeless longing to regain
> Bank-holidays, and picture shows, and spats,
> And going to the office in the train.

This poem illustrates the contrast between the simple, orderly pleasures of everyday life and the chaotic, unrelenting horrors of trench warfare. It details the agony

of war by pointing out how it makes the mundane details of daily life appear distinct and precious. In this poem, the wives are more or less a detail, like "bank holidays, and picture shows, and spats." In World War I poetry, wives and mothers are often assumed to be swayed by propaganda or at the very least oblivious to the dangerous realities of war and the effects of it on soldiers who have returned home. Sassoon's "Glory of Women" most directly illustrates this stereotype of the women in soldiers' lives:

Glory of Women

You love us when we're heroes, home on leave,
Or wounded in a mentionable place.
You worship decorations; you believe
That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace.
You make us shells. You listen with delight,
By tales of dirt and danger fondly thrilled.
You crown our distant ardours while we fight,
And mourn our laurelled memories when we're killed.
You can't believe that British troops 'retire'
When hell's last horror breaks them, and they run,
Trampling the terrible corpses – blind with blood.
O German mother dreaming by the fire,
While you are knitting socks to send your son
His face is trodden deeper in the mud (97).

One of the things I want to do is redraw the image of soldiers' wives to better represent the balance of wisdom and worry that our part in the war entails. Most of all, however, I want to express the sharp focus that the war's constant risks and sacrifices bring to my perception of love and mortality.

In "Something Other Than War," I recall Sassoon's rhythm and imagery to answer for the wives that Sassoon's soldiers see in their visions of home: "In the flat cold hour when sun abandons them, / they remember other things, I think – / me, and everyone else still sleeping." My poem attempts to convey the struggle to turn off the persistent worry that threatens to overwhelm a military wife during a deployment by

listing things that she could think about instead, but it finally ends, in the last stanza, on the image that we are most counseled not to consider.

> There must be something I'm forgetting:
> jellyfish splayed along the coast,
> American rose gardens, crouched stray cats,
> broken milk-glass in mosaic,
> the clean fingerbones of saints in bell jars,
> something whose image doesn't touch
> his blistered feet and careful voice,
> the frantic laughter of 18-year-old riflemen,
> the blank space that could so suddenly be ours.

This poem is aware of the history of war poetry and wives' place in it. In form, it is an attempt to describe the difficulty of reversing intrusive thoughts. I wrote this poem after an American helicopter crashed in Afghanistan near where my husband was on duty. I had been trying to write about anything besides the war because I was asked to broaden my horizons in our writing workshop, but the news of the crash consumed me. I just *felt* that it involved soldiers we knew, if not my husband, and I hoped that I was being paranoid instead of intuitive. Finally, he called to tell me that it wasn't his helicopter that had crashed, but that he had the terrible duty of cleaning up after it. This helicopter crash was in no way the most dangerous thing that happened to him during the war, but for some reason it seemed to me like the last straw.

His description of the dead soldiers' belongings strewn around the field, of what was left of their bodies, of the looks on his own young soldiers' faces as they cleared the area of debris made me write this poem because, at the moment, it felt like there was *nothing* besides the war. The poem attempts to describe the simultaneous futility and necessity of turning one's thoughts away from tragedy when a loved one is away at war. The things listed in the final stanza represent the variety of experience that one might

miss if she doesn't learn to turn off the intrusive thoughts, but the last line illustrates how war can blot out all of the effort. In this and other war poems, I try to portray the intense awareness of time, mortality and human connection experienced during, and even after, deployment.

I do not believe that war is the only way to experience or describe that awareness, however. As a graduate assistant for the McNair Scholars Program, I assisted college students with research in many areas, but working with math and science majors had the greatest impact on my writing. In order to help my scholars, I had to learn the basics of subjects as varied as polymer science and microbiology. Through my scholars' enthusiasm, I found a wealth of metaphors for complex emotional and spiritual experiences.

Generally, I am against T.S. Eliot's dictum that poetry should be difficult, but I want my science- and math-based poems to be closely tied to the language of those disciplines, mostly because I want the scientists and mathematicians to be their main audience. I continue to experiment (so far unsuccessfully) with the forms of geometric proofs and other structures as poetry. The use of military jargon and acronyms in war poetry can place readers in different relationships to the poem depending on their familiarity with the language system being used. I hope that the sense of belonging or distancing that occurs further personalizes the poem's meaning for an individual reader. In a similar way, scientific words and symbols can distance readers – even those familiar with the terminology -- in a way that reveals the limits of sensory, and even intellectual, experience.

For example, in "Prayer of the Faithful," I use the metaphor of the sparse matrix – a mathematical structure commonly used in computer programming – to describe the longing for my soul to be purified to its divine core upon death. The final stanza of the poem includes the terminology for the reflexive property:

> Reveal the numbers in my parentheses
> to prove finally your reflexive property
> so I may know, before I'm equated,
> the holy A=A.

As the daughter of an English teacher, I grew up reading the always-anthologized religious poetry of John Donne, George Herbert and William Blake, all of whom used non-religious language and scenarios to express the enormity or subtlety of religious experience. Blake famously uses the language and imagery of children's verses to contemplate the nature of God in "Songs of Innocence and Experience," while Donne uses the language of battle, rape and pillage to describe a spiritual experience in the sonnet "Batter my heart, three-personed God." As a person raised Southern Baptist, I have always been familiar with the use of metaphor to describe religious experience. I understood what sheaves were being brought in, and what roll was being called up yonder. Like military, sexual, and agricultural imagery, scientific and mathematical imagery can reveal unexpected moments of clarity in which lie the subtleties of faith.

In prose as well as poetry, I attempt to express the subtlety of emotional and spiritual experience, but for some reason in prose I am led to do this with humor. Although I have written what would best be called "sketches" for many years, I am new to creative nonfiction as it is currently defined. While I most often write poetry with a serious tone, when I write prose, I cannot seem to help but try to be funny, sometimes to the detriment of the piece.

I'm not sure why I don't write humorous poetry or serious prose, but thus far, it is as if I play two totally different instruments. In re-reading Creek writers for this preface, I came to the realization that my writing of serious poetry and humorous prose is not without precedent among the writers of my tribe. Louis Oliver and Alexander Posey write mostly serious poetry (although Oliver has some that is humorous), and both also write humorous prose, most notably Posey's Fus Fixico letters. Even now, humor plays an important part in the social interaction of our tribal communities, as Creek scholar/writer Craig S. Womack has noted. Womack's controversial book, *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*, is a scholarly work which includes humorous prefaces to each chapter in which Creek characters tell stories, make jokes and discuss Creek storytelling, literature and culture. Even within the more traditional scholarly chapters, Womack often writes with a witty tone. He writes in the introduction to the book that he was attempting to write a Creek scholarly work rather than a scholarly work about Creeks, and that it could not be done in other than a humorous tone. In introducing the characters, Womack writes, "They felt that as Creek critics, or just Creeks who talk a lot, if they abandoned their role as storytellers, something very significant would be missing from their criticism. They didn't want merely to write a book *about* Creek literature; they wanted to write a Creek book" (21).

Louis Oliver also recognizes the importance of humor in Creek culture and communication. His book *Chasers of the Sun: Creek Indian Thoughts* includes a section titled "Creek Indian Humor," in which he translates or retells several humorous Creek stories. The section begins with the essay "Native American Wit and Humor," which

discusses the part that humor plays in Creek culture. The essay ends with the following paragraph:

> So where ever the Creeks meet, whether in twos, fours or a crowd, there will be chuckles, laughter and at times roaring laughter. There may be an old stonefaced Creek leaning on his cane as people pass by. Be assured that he is smiling inwardly of something funny that he saw. When he tells it to his friends, there will be, in unison, a thunderous roar of laughter (54).

It was true in 1984 when he wrote it, and it is true now. That is the culture into which I was born. After many years of trying to edit humor out of my academic and creative writing, I have found the genre of creative nonfiction the perfect medium through which to express it. Of our tribe, Oliver writes, "They cannot discuss any serious matters without allowing humor to intervene" (54). I may be able to discuss them in poetry without pointing out the funny parts, but for some reason when I write prose I find myself writing to that audience of two or four or a crowd of Creeks waiting for the punch line.

Creek humor, as Oliver and Womack note, seldom translates well. Even Creek humor in English is often puzzling to people outside the tribe, as I have discovered in my own writing. By the time you finish explaining why it's funny, it's not funny anymore. Oliver recounts a story about Creeks playing baseball with an old ball whose covering was worn out. Here is the end of that story, which most Creeks would consider funny:

> There had been some boasting by the pitcher that he would 'fan' every one out there, and he had, until old Pokonafka stepped in to bat. He was a big heavyset beer bellied Indian with a smirk on his face always. He let two strikes go by, but on the third pitch he hit that ball so hard that while it was high over center field the covering came off and began to float down. The center fielder picked the covering up and acted like he was going to throw it to home plate. The ball itself was never found (63).

I have not discovered the way to make that kind of humor funny to people outside my community. But some things that are funny in Creek stories also occur in mainstream humor, including recognizable characters, the drawing out of minor incidents as if they are very dramatic, and a "moral of the story" that is unexpected. I want to use those techniques and others to remind all readers, Creek and non-Creek, of the odd and strange, the moments when you notice the depth and breadth of your own foibles, how very *weird* are so many things we take for granted. When I write prose, I want to let those things loose in hopes that the reader will laugh, for when we laugh, we want to keep listening. As a reader, I turn again and again to writers that make me laugh, and because of the relationship I have with them, I trust them when they write about serious matters. I hope to build that trust with readers also.

The humorous writer who has had the most influence on my prose is Bill Bryson. His curiosity and ability to see the absurd and wondrous in common things are qualities that I hope to emulate. The way he builds an incident, accumulating more and more descriptions, asides and exaggerations is almost unbearably funny to me, as in this excerpt from his book on England, *Notes from a Small Island*:

> The more I plunged on, the less defined did the footpaths become. By mid-afternoon, I found myself increasingly crawling under barbed wire, fording streams with my pack on my head, wrenching my leg from bear traps, falling down, and longing to be elsewhere. Occasionally, I would pause to rest and try to identify some small point of congruence between my map and the surrounding landscape. Eventually, I would rise, peel a cow pat from my seat, purse my lips, and strike off in an entirely new direction. By such means did I find myself, late in the afternoon and somewhat to my surprise, arriving footsore, travel soiled, and decorated about the extremities with interesting rivulets of dried blood, in Corfe Castle (96).

In this excerpt, Bryson condenses a day's walking into a humorously dramatic adventure in which he mocks himself as the anti-woodsman. He writes entire books in this manner, so that when he does briefly let up on the humor and comment on such serious matters as environmental issues, the import sinks in because the message is delivered by a voice the reader has come to enjoy accompanying on the journey.

I attempt a similar accumulation of humorous details in a paragraph from the essay "Playing House," in which I compare my housecleaning abilities to those of my Aunt Carole by describing her:

> Carole is known in the art world as a painter and quiltmaker. She is known among our family as the aunt who eats ice cream for breakfast and sends letters she has been working on for so long that the postage rate has changed by the time she gets around to mailing them. She once ironed half a basket of clothes using Sprite instead of water. She is my only aunt who doesn't like to cook (although she makes a spectacular Italian cream cake). She likes to mow the yard; she hates to dust. She will walk away from a sinkful of dirty dishes to start a quilt she is suddenly inspired to design. She once dreamed that Jabba the Hut had been living in her house for months and she only noticed when she finally did the laundry and found his giant pair of jeans. I fit right in at her house.

The essay is ultimately about the dilemma of choosing between competing desires for a career or a full-time role as a housewife. At first, I just wanted to write about how surprised I was to find myself even *wanting* to be a housewife, but the essay developed into a chronicle of my relationship with housecleaning and how it represents the difficult choices that women face as they make decisions about their adult lives. The description of Carole is an attempt to explain how her relationship to housework influenced me by providing a non-traditional example. I had to make it funny because Carole *is* funny, and I want readers to understand that aspect of my relationship with her and with housework.

In my essays, I want to explore complicated emotional situations and recount moments of insight in a way that is first of all entertaining. I want the insights to come to the reader as they came to me – that is, intellectually unbidden, even though I obviously later shape them into meaning through writing the essay. When writing prose, I find that humor comes most naturally to me as a way of performing that feat of communication.

This collection of writing chronicles five years of intense changes in both my life and my writing. Throughout all of the changes, I have tried to maintain my connection with whatever gives me the curiosity to seek mystery in the commonplace and try to explain it. In every decision we make, Creek people constantly consider our ancestors and descendants. For us, the dead and the not-yet-born, are always with us. My goal in writing, as in living, is to use my abilities to honor the lives who came before me and leave the best of myself to those who will come after so they will realize that I knew they were coming and wanted to tell them what I learned when it was my turn.

POEMS

# FOUR DAYS OUT

*March 2003*

It has been four days
since he met me at Marco Polo
International with orange flowers
meant to be *rossa*,
but he gets flustered in Italian.

Every morning he's fed me
*caprese normale* and Perugian chocolates
at the kitchen table, the flowers
in a blue plastic cup
wrapped with yellow netting.

He can't tell me where they're going,
but one night he walked me
through a combat jump
out the bedroom door,
his body armor swinging around me
like a bell.

# NIGHT JUMP, NORTHERN IRAQ

The news replayed
the image for a week,
between the falling statues
and the bombs. We sat
too close to the television
each time, hoping
we'd see him go by.

Through the green
haze of night-vision
cameras each man
moved crazily
like those old film reels
of the Charleston,
where people's legs
fly out from under them
as if they will break off
at the knee.

# FIRST PHOTO FROM KIRKUK

Your face in the lower right-hand corner
is the size of my thumb. The hot sky isn't quite blue
behind you. The trees lean over, blowing into the ground.
There is no grass. Black smoke rises over the power lines.

There are concrete buildings, a man stepping out of a car,
a woman in black with children huddled down
by another car, orange and old, with a crooked bumper.
Two barrels, one blue and one white. One man standing, looking.

And a man with his shirt tucked in wearing a hat. His buttons are white.
He holds a red plunger in one hand. He is so dignified.
And he is waving. I hope you turned around to look at him.
I hope it was safe to wave back.

# EFFECTS

He keeps my brown braid
coiled in his helmet,
and a picture of me
holding bachelor buttons
before I cut my hair.

That embarrassing sonnet
I wrote using the letters
of his name as an acronym
is in a map bag
in his right cargo pocket.

I try not to imagine him
a dead body dragged behind rocks,
his eyes erased of ever knowing me,
try not to wonder if I would feel
strange hands on my hair,
the unfolding of our private words,
and know.

# WHILE HE'S GONE

I shave my legs with his razor,
when I shave them at all. He left
it beneath the bathroom sink,
along with his dental floss, hair gel,
two kinds of toothpaste, and his shampoo
which I'm boycotting
because the commercials offend me.

He also left the rest of the Raisin Bran,
which I keep eating even though
it turns to mulch in the bowl
and raisins make me sick in the eyebrows.
Other than that, I only eat things
that can be held in a paper towel,
and I never sit at the table.

Some nights I wear his Black Flag
t-shirt to bed even though it makes me sweat
and I end up wrestling it off at 3 a.m.,
cursing Henry Rollins. And I wear
cotton panties they sell fifteen
to a bag instead of those flimsy
things you find on round tables
in stores that smell like perfume.

Sometimes I don't do the laundry,
and it piles up. Wet washcloths
hang over the side of the basket
and dry into sculpture. So I use napkins
to wash my face and end up with pastel
confetti along my hairline.

I hope he's happy.
I hope he knows he'll have no dental floss
left by the time he gets back. He better
not say a word about the marginal notes
I've left in his war novels, or think
that just because I'm marrying him
I will use shampoo that invalidates women.

I dare him to come home right now
and change me. If I could talk to him,
that's what I'd say: You want me to cook
real food and act civilized? Get over here
and make me. I wish you would
come home this instant

and make me

# TIME ZONES

My pillow wears his t-shirt
but when I wake at night,

I don't pretend it's him
lying there, headless and legless,
his sleeves empty.

I add ten hours to the clock,

picture him dusty and thin,
eyes like mercury,
reading my latest letter
in the safehouse
in Kirkuk,
wishing

he could pace the floor
on patrol around my kitchen
until his absence
woke me.

*I CAMPANELLI*
April 2, 2005

The bells of San Nicolo rang
the death of *Il Papa*
the morning Chosen Company left
for Kandahar.

Chiara wept at the curb
while buses rounded
the traffic circle
toward Aviano.

Sgt. Cav's Russian girlfriend
sat between his gray cats
eating cinnamon mints
until her tongue was raw.

The hot water went out
that afternoon. The bedroom
lightbulb burst. The laundry room
flooded four inches

and we all got voice messages
from the city government asking us, *per favore*,
not to come to Rome
for the funeral.

# MISSING CHRISTMAS IN CAMISANO

San Nicolo's *precepe* is laid out before
Our Lady, back in the corner
where we usually sit with the old rosary women
who wear fur coats to Mass.
Don Giuseppe's homily mentions Dolce
& Gabbana, and giving, and humility.

The Alpini sell panettone on market day,
American Christmas songs jingle
from the municipal building, mothers
buy candy for Santa Lucia and *La Befana.*
The honey man is lining up his jars.

If you were not at the war, I would weave
between the pointy-thin women carrying small dogs
in Gucci purses, pass by the stalls of Chinese scarves,
the bird-seller, the cheese cart, the *Roma*
woman with her child, singing.

Early this cold morning, I would go
lumpily among them in my ugly brown coat
to bring you *porchetta* and a blue cotton
tablecloth printed with snowflakes.

OUR FIRST POMEGRANATE
*To SSG Michael Schafer*
*KIA July 25, 2005*

For dessert we broke open
a pomegranate, none of us
certain how to begin. You said
it looked like a compound fracture,
mining the seeds with reddening fingertips.

I said I'd always have pomegranates
when you came to dinner,
to trap you into staying longer,
to laugh at your conservative self
eating my hippie food, but

my husband called at 3:15 to say
he'd reach Dover on Thursday,
bringing your body home
from Afghanistan.

The coffin will be closed
to hide what could not be fixed,
and they will bury you near sawgrass
where pink amaryllis blooms
all year round.

# SOMETHING OTHER THAN WAR

Of course, there must be something
besides Chinook crashes and five soldiers
dead in Deh Chopan, besides the squad
dispatched to clean them up, holding their breath,
dreaming themselves standing guard at the door
of the Oval Office instead of on a perimeter
where only dust crosses the imaginary line.

Of course, there must be something
besides these soldiers, mine (*inshallah*)
among them, jabbing each other later, like fourth-grade
boys in the back of the classroom.
When sun slides cold and flat behind the foothills,
they try not to imagine women sleeping
the first blue hours of morning
while chaplains double-check names,
straighten themselves, turn on headlights.

There must be something I'm forgetting:
jellyfish splayed along the coast,
American rose gardens, crouched stray cats,
broken milk-glass in mosaic,
the clean fingerbones of saints in bell jars,
something whose image doesn't touch
his blistered feet and careful voice,
the frantic laughter of 18-year-old riflemen,
the blank space that could so suddenly be ours.

# THE HERO OF MERMAIDS

He worked the evening shift
at America's last mermaid show
all through high school, driving
his fast car the half-mile
from his mother's pink house on Spring Hill Drive.

Seven years later, I watch girls
trail careful fingers
down red stripes
on the flag over his casket.

Not so long ago, they sang
trebling songs behind glass
in a garden of anemone and glittering sand dollars.
How dare he never tell me this?

I found out from his wife, who rocking
like a tethered boat
about to break its mooring
allowed me to hold her hand

while we tried to smile,
talking about her husband,
proclaimed the hero of mermaids
on the billboard leading into Weeki-Watchi.

# CONTEMPLATING SELFISHNESS

I.

I wish I belonged
to the angle
he holds a gun,

that I was slung
across his chest
without thinking.

I belong instead
to pearl-handled
knives and unloaded
pistols zipped in cases
beneath the winter clothes.

II.

His voice writes letters on my body,
apologizing for holidays and funerals.
I am so covered
he cannot find a place to sign.

III.

We have twenty minutes
to say the last words
we may ever hear.
We both want to be the one listening.

# NIGHTS AFTER WAR

I keep one hand
on the fault line
of sleep, catch

cities sliding,
hillsides crumbling,
whisper over

his body,
my breath lifting papers
among debris.

# VALHALLA

I know you'll march from heaven every few months
to fight with St. Michael against the souls of the same
men you killed, or who killed you, back in this life.

For you, there is no paradise without weapons, strategy,
long patrols to the edge of dawn, no desire for an immortal
body that never leans back on a rucksack to sleep.

I'm not sure how to avoid becoming so bitter about all this
that my soul spends your leave in Purgatory every year,
looking up at you and your men
toasting eternal battlefields with angels on your knees
like nothing's missing.

SUPERHERO
*for Brady and Damon*

No matter what stranger
stands outside your screen door
in a pillowcase and black suit
waiting for you to turn around
so he can disappear,
there will always be a contingent
of uncles and grandfathers
in the house with you,
in your blood with you,
in your eyes when you force yourself
to look. Never fear, boys:
there are always more heroes than monsters,
and even if all you can do is whisper,
it will be enough.

## THURSDAY NIGHT

Beneath the cypress by the propane tank,
the three of us in rusty folding chairs,
Grandpa's yellow-handled Case, his hands,
carving little forks and knives for me.

Bob White flying tree to tree behind us,
repeating his name, the high note at the end.
Grandma nodding her head to rustling
guineas, the white one, Shadrach,
straggling through our circle.

Curls of pine drop on points of grass.
They hardly bend. Meshach, Abednego
gurgle, scratch. The air is trees
and Herefords, jarflies, low-water bridge
and Avon powder.

# PRAYER OF THE FAITHFUL

Make of my life a sparse matrix,
zeros in ever row and column,
only here and there a seven or three
and imaginary numbers.

I hope to be easily compressed
when the time comes to multiply
myself by myself and divide
into the common denominator.

Reveal the numbers in my parentheses
to prove finally your reflexive property
so I may know, before I'm equated,
the holy A=A.

# THE EASE OF INFIDELITY

A polymer is a giant molecule
formed when double-bonds break,
leaving reactive ends
eager to connect,

one right after the other,
like the teeth
of a zipper
coming together,
he explained.

They could go on
forever, breaking
and connecting,
in theory.

And it's the easiest
thing in the world
to break a double-bond,
often requiring

only heat
and the careful
insertion
of chemicals.

LINE

to always have somewhere to go, to go there in both directions, to go

with arrows on both sides, no center,

no theorem to plug into the equation

except faith that the going does not end: a succession,

points begetting each other,

the one certain Forever, the pencil tip expiring, all the measuring tapes

in the world laid end to end come up short,

the feet die before they finish walking,

the calculations disintegrate even on archival paper, the points

keep on lining up, too small to see, a number for which the word is so long

it takes up all the breath of all the people who ever lived or will live and still needs more

*P. ABYSSI*

To stay here and not burn
all the way up is scientifically
impossible – an infinitesimal "yet"

repairing itself over and over
with what indestructible molecule,
what secret and obvious method?

It is different with every injury
to the pattern of yourself,
what you do to survive

eras and generations, symbiotic
with deadly heat, two hundred
atmospheres of pressure,

things that can't happen
in places nobody can live.

## VANDALIZING THE HERMITAGE
*for Andrew Jackson*

I came to your mansion to vandalize you,
to plant kudzu all over your property, to scuff
my heels in your lawn, to write my name
on your bathroom wall with "For a good time,
call the Muscogee (Creek) Nation."
I came to make your memory slightly uglier than before.

But you could not be uglier.

I went on your tour and walked your grounds,
dragged your mud into the house, put your pinecones
in my pockets, broke your little sticks
with my bootheels, laughing.

The guides who tell your story are proud
you gave your slaves the same fancy graves
as your family. They are proud you raised
a Creek boy "as a son." Where is his grave?
They did not know...but here is the real family,
together in this plot.

I asked how you finally died, and if it was painful.
Yes, very. Ignoble too,
for such a conqueror and statesman.

When I finally took the path to your tomb,
I meant to curse you, spit and hiss,
meant to be witty, toss back my hair,
and turn on my heel, showering you with gravel.

I meant to be brave and angry.

But when I got there, you were a dead man
who loved his wife, whose stomach hurt
right before he died. You were nothing
but dust inside marble.

*In 2001, Dr. Bryan Sykes hypothesized that approximately 36 ancestral mothers are responsible for all the mitochondrial DNA of the world population.*

AMERICAN MOTHERS

***I. Ursula***
*Duluth, Minnesota 1876*

Cold is to her bones
a mitochondrial shiver. Beneath black wool,
her left hand slides along the clothesline stretched
from house to barn to keep her from wandering
into the blank world. Splashes of milk become part of the ice erasing her tracks.
Behind eyelids scoured by sleet,
she pictures something like a memory:

Mt. Parnassus in the spring,
Neanderthals slipping between trees, her right hand
curled not around this banging pail,
but red deer antler for digging.

***II. Xenia***
*Stilwell, Oklahoma 1998*

I'm in the waiting room of Wilma P. Mankiller
Dental Clinic, crocheting a sweater

for my daughter's second,
due any day. She will be born

into hard winter like me,
that year we had no electricity,

no wood, so we burned mammoth
bone. *He-la*! Did it stink!

Sickening, like your own teeth
when the drill begins.

***III. Helena***
*World Youth Day: Denver, Colorado 1993*

I met these girls – Mary from Connecticut,
Anne-Marie from Kansas, Therese from Ohio –
while we were waiting for Pope John Paul's
procession. We exchanged pilgrimage scarves,
saint's medals and addresses,

grabbed each other's hands
so we could walk together
through the crowd without getting lost
from each other in all the people.

It was like a family gathering,
long-lost cousins surging in the streets
toward the body and blood,
then to silver buses chuffing
in the parking lot.

We promised to meet next spring break
somewhere like Corpus Christi
where it's warm, and we'll bring
pelts and carved stones, berry bowls,
and new ideas for using plants
uncovered by thaw.

***IV. Velda***
*Auburn, California 1977*

All the brushes are rinsed and drying on the windowsill.
On the canvas, bison, deer, people flow together
as if the ice had melted. I paint winter
over and over with bright blue sunlight sifting
between branches. Cave walls dull most color,
the line of glacier, dark constellations,
glint of broken ice. It's all I can do to follow
my own hands, like the eyes they go with aren't quite mine,
like the sun is warming someone else's skin who is always cold:
a woman also watching paint
as if it might tell her what comes next.

***V. Tara***
*New York Harbor, 1908*

My two daughters, my big son, the baby
and me. Land the color of flint and rain,

our faces no color at all. Once
I sat in a log canoe, blue

all the way to the sky, in a land so green
my eyes could taste each transforming cell.

And I wore shells around my neck on the beach
at Livorno, lace at my throat in Ireland –

the first whose marram strand decayed,
the second which unraveled. Now my only ornament,

this child clings with such force,
with such eyes, seeing what I see.

***VI. Katrine***
*New Orleans, Louisiana 2005*

We knew another
ocean that broke
like this,

so we sit here,
me and Good
Dog, on this shingled

island remembering
what floated by
and came back.

At night,
when things
are creaking,

he howls as he did
across the shallow Adriatic.
The steep eternal

Alps echo. The pack
stops moving.
Good Dog turns

three times
and curls
beside me.

***VII. Jasmine***
*Cumberland Gap, Kentucky 1920*

I plant by the moon,
peonies and stringbeans,
tomatoes and squash,
chickpeas and wild wheat.

Dirty of knee and hand,
my dress torn and mended,
patched and torn again,
I stand a moment

before starting supper.
I feel tired as the earth,
always keeping everything alive.
I need winter, a fallow season,

dirt to cover me from the sun,
time to finish growing,
something shady to sit beneath
and hear what's swept along the wild Euphrates.

# LEAVING MISSISSIPPI

The moss roses rode from Oklahoma
in the backseat of my Mustang
on a tarp. They'd survived
neglect in July, hail in August,
and me for most of their lives.

I put them on a plant stand
on the balcony of my grad school
barracks, and they couldn't keep up
with their own blooming.

I tried to help by picking off
the dried-out pods, then changing
the position of the pots,
but flowers kept spilling out
so violently the stems couldn't hold them.

Now I must go away from here
and leave them with poets and biology majors
who know their Latin name.
Flowers, at least, should be allowed to stay
where they can't help themselves,
where the very air makes them burst apart.

# ESSAYS

# PLAYING HOUSE

*Exotic sandalwood twines through the yeasty aroma of baking bread while Bob Dylan's "Mr. Tambourine Man" jingles quietly through the hall. In the kitchen, I wipe the last of the flour from the dark wood counter and straighten the canisters of rice, beans and grains before untying my hand-embroidered apron and hanging it on small bird-shaped hook near the sink. The tea kettle whistles, and I pour chamomile into a delicate pink teacup, which I place on a flowery saucer on which rest two thin almond cookies. It is ten in the morning, and I sit down to plan the rest of my peaceful day.*

Right.

Actually, my life is nothing like this. That paragraph is a writing exercise from one of the "ladies'" magazines which now occasionally find their way onto the plastic stepstool I put beside the tub while I luxuriate in the lukewarm water afforded me by our 1970s plumbing. This particular article suggests writing out my vision of perfect homemaking, the better to make the dream come true. As you can see, my vision is somewhere between hippie and Little House on the Prairie with a pinch of Jane Austen to taste, as my heart-healthy cookbook would put it.

I've become intensely familiar with the language of cookbooks in the last few years. I've become intensely familiar with many things I thought surely I would shun in favor of an academic career: *Ladies' Home Journal*, fruit and vegetable vendors, the horrible effects of long hair and soap scum on a poorly-designed drain...and I think I have found my true calling, although I'm not very good at it: I have become a housewife.

Most of my friends insist they did not play house when they were growing up. "I was a tomboy," they proclaim proudly. I wasn't. My favorite thing to play was full-on,

baby-doll-tending, toy-dishes-washing "House." Fortunately, I grew up with two younger sisters and a heap of girl cousins who were similarly enamored of this game -- although they were more likely than me to follow "House" with something less embarrassing to admit to in later years, such as "tag."

Oh sure, I loved playing "school," once I had experienced my first year of that fascinating place. And, seeing how we lived in the woods, we were also fond of "pioneer" (which is ironic, considering that we were traditionally-raised Native American children). When one of our aunts majored in geology at college, we collected rocks which we dusted with paintbrushes, pretending to search for fossils. I went through a phase of wanting to be an astronomer, then a neurologist (when one of my classmates developed epilepsy), and we also spent quite a bit of time playing, if you can imagine, tag agent, pretending to renew our dogs' license plates using Hello Kitty stickers. But all of these paled next to "House."

The funny thing is that our way of playing house bore little resemblance to how our mother kept our own home. She was a painter and fashion designer in those days, which means she was at home all day long, most of the time. I don't remember seeing her clean house, but our house was always clean -- no small feat, when you consider the amount of pottery and beads (it was the late '70s) to keep dust-free. I just remember her painting on the back porch, or sewing in "the shop," which was a small building next to our house, during the daytime. At some point, she would arrive in our bedroom or call us in from outside to eat lunch, somehow sensing that we were hungry even though we didn't know it ourselves until we bit into the grilled cheese sandwiches.

When the sky started to turn pink, she would stop what she was doing, and from the treehouse -- actually a deer stand -- we would see the kitchen windows light up orange. As the first stars appeared, her voice sounded off the back porch: "Girls, it's time to come inside." Rather than helping her with dinner, we retired to our bedroom, where we would pretend to cook supper with the sounds of sizzling catfish or the springy metallic bounce of the oven door in the background.

Our father watched the news, and when it ended, we were called to the table. Shelley, my youngest sister, sat in a high chair at one corner. Yahnah sat on one side of the table with my mother, with my father at the head and me at the other end. Behind me was a sliding glass door leading to the back porch. The cats milled around out there, but we weren't allowed to look at them while we ate dinner, which I found maddening.

When supper ended, we did not help clear the table. Generally, we tore onto the back porch to play with the oh-so-tempting cats and the moths and june-bugs that arrived in clouds when we turned on the yellow porchlight. Right inside, Mama cleared the table, washed the dishes, and cleaned the counters while Daddy returned to the living room with a book, or sat outside under the pine trees with his guitar and a cigarette.

I don't know when my mother rested. I never witnessed it.

I am now heartily ashamed that I was such a thoughtlessly unhelpful daughter. What makes it worse is that I have told you the story of my saintly mother mostly to illustrate why I later found myself aghast at the things I do not know how to do around the house.

Because all the women I knew cooked and cleaned, I assumed I would know how to do these things when I grew up. I labored under what I believe is still a common

misconception: That housework is just common sense. After all, you don't have to take classes to run a household. You don't need a degree to be a housewife. You don't even need a high school diploma! Obviously, any woman could do it. I did not even consider a man doing it. All the men I knew had jobs, and the only men I knew who didn't were those who wandered the dirt roads, drunk -- but even they occasionally hauled wood or dug ditches.

My parents got a divorce when I was 14, and my sisters and I moved to a slightly larger town with our mother. She promptly disappeared into a doctoral program for the next five years, arriving home only to complain about the dirty house and issue housework orders which we hardly ever followed.

If I had been a character in one of my beloved Victorian novels, I would have seen how my mother was striving to improve her life. I would have sacrificed to care for my sisters, to make dinner, to help. In real life, I let my sisters, the youngest only six years old, fend for themselves most evenings and spent all my time holed up in my room, learning to play Metallica songs on the guitar and writing poetry full of words like "dusk" and "despair." Fortunately, my aunt Robin was willing to make the sacrifices I wasn't, and came over whenever she could to stay with us until our mother got home. On the weekends, we stayed with our father, who didn't even pretend to keep house, but hired a maid for cleaning and fed us grilled steak at his house, or fried catfish at restaurants, every week. I wasn't sure where I fit into all of this, and I felt like I was in the way. I couldn't wait to escape to college.

Unfortunately, college requires money and diligence in filling out applications, neither of which we had. I ended up attending the regional university where my mother

taught instead of one of the East Coast colleges I favored, where she insisted I would have been converted to Republicanism if I wasn't found dead in a ditch first. I'm not sure whether she was being generous and open-minded or just practicing survival, but she allowed me to move out of her house and live across town with my cousin, Cinda, who was also starting college that year. Cinda is the daughter of my Aunt Mary, a woman who for years worked in a bank yet kept a spotless house with a kitchen full of delectable, homemade things to eat. Unlike me, Cinda was raised with regular chores and consequences for not doing them, and the older she got, the more she was expected to do. By the time she came to college, she knew how to fry chicken and clean mirrors without leaving streaks. By the time I came to college, I didn't even know that mirrors needed cleaning.

Besides, I was in college to delve into the world of English literature, which I was just certain had been waiting since 1066 for the likes of me to come and deliver it from stagnation. I couldn't wait to learn the secret language of literary theory, to read obscure Anglo-Saxon poetry from the original manuscript, to hang around on the porch of the ivory tower until someone invited me in. I wanted to be an editor who worked on the fourteenth floor of a building in downtown Manhattan, or a tweed-wearing English professor with an office full of books. And of course I was in college to escape my mother, who unfairly demanded that I load the dishwasher every night instead of composing poetry that would reach the unwashed masses and start a revolution for glory among my countrymen.

Poor Cinda.

Because she was a Scorpio firecracker who didn't mask her distaste for my lack of household management, I helped -- a little. But I didn't understand how the dishes I had just washed magically appeared the next day, dirty. I was beginning to think we had Reverse Brownies: Instead of coming in at night to clean our house, like the Good Brownies of English folktales, the Reverse Brownies arrived while we slept to eat off our dishes and sprinkle dust all over everything. They also wore my clothes, then tossed them, dirty, on the bathroom floor. They even wore my shoes into the living room and left them on the floor in front of the couch for people Cinda to trip over in the morning.

Fortunately for Cinda, after a year I was able to switch from our regional university to the University of Oklahoma, where I could take Creek, our tribal language, and feel superior to the people in smaller colleges. Fortunately for me, Cinda and I were raised by a village, so she had no choice but to continue loving me despite the squalor I had subjected her to for her first stressful year of college. Conveniently, our Aunt Carole lives minutes away from OU, and she invited me to live with her while I went to school there.

Among the village that raised us are eight aunts, two grandmothers, and assorted other female relatives we just call "Aunt" to make it easier. Instead of growing up to be like our mothers, the girls in my family grow up to be combinations of all these women -- you might get Sharon's fry-bread making skills, Sandy's puzzle-wizardry, and Grandma Carmen's singing voice. In my case, I ended up with so many of Carole's traits that when I lived with her, people assumed I was her daughter.

Carole is known in the art world as a painter and quiltmaker. She is known among our family as the aunt who eats ice cream for breakfast and sends letters she has

been working on for so long that the postage rate has changed by the time she gets around to mailing them. She once ironed half a basket of clothes using Sprite instead of water. She is my only aunt who doesn't like to cook (although she makes a spectacular Italian cream cake). She likes to mow the yard; she hates to dust. She will walk away from a sinkful of dirty dishes to start a quilt she is suddenly inspired to design. She once dreamed that Jabba the Hut had been living in her house for months and she only noticed when she finally did the laundry and found his giant pair of jeans. I fit right in at her house.

My mother asked at least twice a week if I was helping with the housework, and I always told her that I was since I did the dishes occasionally and made sure the constantly-multiplying feral cats outside were fed. And that my hamster wasn't *usually* loose in the house. Here are the things I learned about housework from Carole: If you've been working on a project all day long and it's not working out, don't try to make dinner. Go out to eat, and you will magically gain perspective. If this is not possible, black walnut ice cream will sometimes help...and it only makes one bowl and one spoon dirty. If none of that works, mow.

At any rate, she was relieved of me when it turned out a major university also means a major amount of work. A year later I returned to my small college with, I swear, much less hair than when I left, mine having fallen out piece by piece from stress during the five-hour biology class I had to take as a general requirement at OU. Besides, I had a boyfriend back home, and like many girls before me, I made the mistake of moving in with him, and eventually, several of his neo-hippie friends.

This was a big mistake, but it was fun, most of the time. We decorated with Christmas lights and Goodwill furniture. Had a mysterious rectangle of brighter-red carpet in the center of the living room which we called The Portal. Washed all our multi-colored tie-dye clothes together on cold using the cheapest soap we could buy. One night, we relabeled our canned food with slogans like "Magic" and "Eat me!" in International Phonetic Alphabet, as a few of us were taking linguistics that semester.

Our parents did not visit us. Ever.

I married that poor boy after I graduated. By then, he had dropped out of college to pursue pot-smoking. We moved to Arkansas, where I worked on my master's degree and not much else. I have one thing to say for pot-smokers: They cook. This one even cleaned. I'm sorry to admit this, but I let him. Half my master's thesis rightfully belongs to him because I would have starved had he not been there, living his parallel life in our moldy little apartment. When I looked up from my fancy new robes and freshman-composition job right back at the college we started from, I knew I'd made a mistake...although I am certain that he'd made a larger one. We got a divorce, and it was civil, polite, heartbreaking. For a few years, I taught my classes and kept my house clean by lying on the couch and not moving. I'm not sure what I ate when I wasn't at my mother's house, which was seldom.

Once I had put myself mostly back together, I fell in love with an old friend, Joseph. We got engaged, and then got married sooner than we'd planned when Joseph was injured during an ambush while he was deployed to Iraq. His injuries required him to come home just long enough get wedding cake on his dress uniform. He returned to Iraq after the wedding. Several months later, he came home for real, to northern Italy,

where he was stationed with the 173rd Airborne Brigade. I took a leave of absence from my doctoral program to come to him, full of ignorance and a newfound desire to be a modern version of the dreaded "Angel in the House."

When Joseph was dressing in the morning, I wanted socks and underwear to magically appear in his drawers. When he was hungry, I wanted him to go into the kitchen and find just what he'd like to eat in the cupboards and refrigerator. I wanted him to be so comfortable when he was at home that he didn't even think about it most days. Fortunately for me, he's an infantryman, so home will always be more comfortable than wherever he has been. My family thought my sudden interest in housekeeping was a temporary symptom of my newlywed status, but as it has lasted for five years now, I fear it is something much worse: Thanks to the financial security provided by Joseph's military career, for the first time I have no economic need to strive for recognition or success outside my home. Now that professional success does not seem necessary, I'm not sure how much I want it.

It's true that I returned to my doctoral program the minute Joseph deployed again, and that I plan to finish my degree this fall, but when people ask what I'm going to do with it, I feel like I'm lying when I say, "I'd like to teach at a university. And write, of course." What I mean is, "I might teach adjunct, but really I'd like to spend the majority of my time writing poetry and essays about Christmas and puppies in between loads of laundry and menu-planning. And in the evenings, I'll read literary criticism and write nothing in response to it." I want a doctorate for pride's sake, and for my family's contentment. And because I want the option of a place in the academic community in case someday I miss it, or need it. And because I started and might as well finish.

I try to summon shame, or at least regret, for my drastically diminished ambition, but the main emotions I feel are ambivalence and relief. I'm more concerned about what people will say than I am about what I might be missing. I do feel guilty when I think about the people who wish they had my opportunities but don't. The guilt is even stronger because I know I've done nothing to deserve this freedom. And I feel guilty when I think of the women before me who fought discrimination and their own social conditioning to give me the opportunity to be something other than a housewife. But none of this guilt is strong enough to make me give up my homemaking vision.

Joseph is almost afraid to be supportive, in case I change my mind. He married a bun-wearing college English instructor with a secret rock-star life, fully expecting to live among her scraps of paper and Ramen noodle wrappers. He is not sure what to think of this sudden transformation. He likes the food and clean clothes, but, being a conscientious post-1990s man, constantly assures me that he doesn't expect them. I worry that he secretly wishes I wanted to make money, but he claims, with many apologies, that he doesn't mind my staying at home.

When we were first married and living in Italy, he kept asking if I was bored, if he should be helping. I told him I liked the challenge of running the house, and he tried to find a way to convince himself that I meant it. I told him it was an experiment, and he did believe that, since there has never been a more apt description of a person's housecleaning style. Everything I did, from sweeping the floor to making the bed, was new to me. Even if I'd done it before, I was new to the idea of doing it "right." I kept finding pockets of ignorance in the most surprising places, much like I found dust where I never, ever thought to look, like on top of the ceiling fan blades.

Of course, even if we had lived in America, I wouldn't have known how to clean the tub without leaving spots of dried Comet on the faucets, so I'm not sure which challenges sprung from ignorance and which were part of living in a foreign country. And I'm not even talking about questions like what kind of towel should be hung above a bidet and how often it should be changed. (Speaking of bidets, they make fine mop buckets and are also a handy place to clean combat boots.) Our apartment would have been a foreign country to me even if it had been in America, because until I married Joseph, I had never looked at a place where I lived as anything more than a container for my intellectual and artistic pursuits.

Now, I want to know how to always have eggs and flour, and what to do with them. I want to know how to make a bed so it looks like a wrapped gift, how to keep ahead of bathtub rings and expired milk. There are books to help me, but I know from my academic studies that there is no replacement for classroom guidance and internship. In the discipline of housework, I spent most of my education skipping class, sleeping, and writing poems to the boy in the next row instead of taking advantage of my teachers' experience – something I would never have done at school.

So I am back to doll-playing, trying to make our house more than floors and windows, trying to make it a haven for Joseph to heal from the war, a place I feel both inspired and rested in -- a home. I mop the floors badly, wait for the laundry to dry (hoping it doesn't include a pocketful of ink pens), put up the dishes, wash the dishes, put up the dishes...and somehow feel I am fulfilling a childhood dream that at some point I had given up on attaining.

# CLIMBING MONTE PASUBIO

When I was a child, my family lived at the top of a hill in rural Oklahoma. It was full of copperheads, fiddleback spiders, tarantulas, sharp rocks, and occasionally, escaped criminals. My sister and I, usually accompanied by that year's stray dog, would go down the hill in the afternoon and emerge back over the top just as the sky passed beyond the pretty part of sunset. We were not hiking. We were playing in the yard. The yard just happened to be a steep incline of wilderness.

Fifteen years later, I found myself having the following conversation with my husband, Joseph, a soldier who had spirited me away to live with him in northern Italy, where he was stationed with the 173rd Airborne Brigade:

"Do you want to come hiking with us [a bunch of fit young soldiers] to Monte Pasubio this weekend?"

"I have never been hiking," I countered. "And isn't Pasubio difficult?"

"No! It's easy," he insisted. "It's mostly flat roads all the way, with just a few steep places."

"I'm out of shape," I reminded him. "I'll slow you down and get on the other guys' nerves. It doesn't sound like a trip for wives."

"Danielle's coming," he said. "She's not a hiker either."

Danielle was the wife of Joseph's best friend, Mike Schafer. The two men were as close as brothers and known for hatching mutually beneficial plans. So I called to confer with Danielle who, it turned out, had agreed to go because she had been told I was going. Once again, the men were caught in a lie, but we decided that one more day with our husbands, even trudging up a mountain, would be worth it since they would be

deploying to Afghanistan in a few months.

"We can whine up the mountain together," she said.

So it was settled.

Located in the pre-Dolomites of northern Italy, Monte Pasubio is a mountain into which the Alpini (soldiers of the Veneto region of Italy) carved tunnels from which to fight the Austrians during World War I. The 52 tunnels are now part of well-maintained hiking trails, each of which is named in honor of an Alpino who died in the war.

I had first heard of Monte Pasubio the last time Joseph had hiked it, pre-marriage, when he waxed poetic about saint medallions embedded in rock, shaggy wild donkeys, the glory of Alpini history and the goulash served in Rifugio Achille Papa, the lodge on top of the mountain. Now, as he surveyed my meager selection of hiking-ish clothes, he continued in this vein, with greater emphasis on the flatness of the roads and my ability to do anything, which I see now for what it was: flattery designed to confuse me so I wouldn't think to ask pertinent questions like, "How high is Monte Pasubio?" (around 7,000 feet) or "Just how long are these tunnels?" (the longest around 1,000 feet, pitch dark, and sometimes quite vertical).

After he had cobbled together an appropriate (as opposed to stylish) outfit from our combined closets, I participated in a one-on-one course in trail mix making, complete with a lecture about the importance of body chemistry to a successful hiking experience. That night, as we were falling asleep, he said, "Soon, you will be reading hiking magazines and buying expensive gear."

Not likely, I thought, feeling my first inkling of dread as I realized that in less than ten hours I would be standing at the foot of a huge mountain with a group of soldiers

expecting me to climb it. Well, I thought, at least Danielle will be there. I won't be the only slow one.

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The next morning found us in an SUV winding up precarious mountain roads to a small parking area where elderly Germans were casually buckling on daypacks and pulling trekking poles from their cars. They looked like a Patagonia ad. I looked like I'd just rolled out of bed in my ratty t-shirt and exercise pants, a clashing red zipper jacket tied around my waist. But, I thought, a hiking trail is not a high school hallway. The key is comfort, not fashion. I was pretty comfortable, and I managed not to complain about the brisk mountain air that felt more cold than fresh to me after the warmth of the crowded car.

The guys whipped out GPS's and made notes about training possibilities while Danielle and I joked about the cold, trying not to look at the impossibly tall and far away mountaintop that was our destination. Finally, we set off up an innocent-looking little trail through the grass and rocks at the base of the mountain. No more than twenty steps in, my lungs started to protest. It was like walking up a flight of poorly-designed stairs -- and far as I could see, it wasn't going to get any better! I would never make it. It was like that moment when the roller coaster starts up with a jerk and you realize you cannot change your mind and get off, no matter how desperately you want to. All I could do was plod along, praying to the saints for strength to keep from griping. Ahead of me, Danielle appeared to be skipping up the hill, laughing and talking with the soldiers, the vision of a healthy American girl taking in the great outdoors.

How was she doing this?

Joseph, hearing my footsteps grow slower and slower, turned around.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, trying to smile. "Just slow."

"Do you hate me for this?"

"Of course not."

It would become our mantra all the way up the mountain, for I hadn't oxygen to spare for anything resembling what I really felt like saying.

Finally, the trail widened somewhat.

"See?" Joseph said. "It flattens out here, and it stays like this for awhile."

Obviously, our definitions of "flat" were not the same. To my eyes, the trail was only slightly less steep than before, certainly still pointed uphill rather than horizontal. I tried not to glare. Up the flat trail we walked. My heart was pounding. My head started to ache. We came to the first of the tunnels, and everyone stopped to admire it. My husband turned and said, "Sometimes it amazes me what lengths men will go to in order to kill each other."

At that moment, it didn't amaze me at all.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "Make sure you drink water."

Make sure you don't stand too close to the edge because I may push you off.

"Yes, I'm fine," I said. "Just slow."

"Do you hate me for this?"

"Of course not."

***

I am Native American, a citizen of the Muscogee Nation of Oklahoma. In the

mid-1830s, my ancestors were marched from their lush home in Alabama to a new home in the seed tick-and-tornado-ridden part of Oklahoma. I can always tell when I am in a dire situation because I start to think of those ancestors and remind myself that I come from people who lived through it. Growing ever more sullen, I now called them to mind, wondering what they would think of their descendant walking up a mountain with ten American soldiers *for fun*. But I placed one foot somehow in front of the other, determined to remain both upright and moving, no matter how slow.

And I was slow. Slow like Christmas. Slow like the three-toed sloth.

My good, patient husband stayed behind with me while the other soldiers and Danielle forged ahead. Every time we caught up with them, they seemed to be at the end of a break. Consequently, our breaks were half as long as theirs. But did I complain? Only with my eyes.

Finally, they stopped to take pictures, including one of me in which I am smiling with Danielle as if I, too, enjoyed treading uphill with twenty pounds of water and rain gear on my back. At that break we actually sat down on the rocks, to my relief. Joseph encouraged me to eat trail mix. I did as he told me, stealthily scooping up a great deal of the M&Ms before passing the bag along.

As we sat there fortifying ourselves for the rest of the journey, some of the soldiers climbed up the rocks to perch in precarious positions and take pictures. Trying not to be nagging wives, Danielle and I averted our eyes and tried not to mention how slippery rocks can be. It was hard for me, but Danielle, having lived for six years with a daredevil, was used to it and knew very well that acting worried would only inspire them.

As we began to talk of moving on, cursing broke out from the men on the rocks.

We jerked our heads around just in time to see someone's black backpack bounce off the rocks and down the mountainside. Danielle and I exchanged a split-second look of exasperation while we decided how to react. I chose to give in to half-hysterical laughter, so glad was I that nobody would have to be airlifted from the side of the mountain in a stretcher. Danielle chose to vent her relief in a sudden burst of commentary that began with how she knew this would happen and ended with how we'd never get up this mountain *now*, and she was starving. By the time she finished I'd recovered from my laughing fit enough to wish I dared throw my arms around her in solidarity, realizing she wasn't having as good a time as I'd thought.

But I didn't dare. She stood there smoldering, and everything else seemed very still. At first the single soldiers looked at each other from the corners of their eyes, afraid to move their heads, like mice who had just been spotted by a hawk. But one by one, they joined Mike and Joseph, who stood at the edge of the trail surveying the backpack, which was now only a black speck among the stones.

The men only got as far as, "I think we could get to it by…" before Mike began clambering down the mountain. I mentally began trying to translate, "We need a medical evacuation" into Italian. Danielle sighed in resignation, leaned against a rock, and watched her husband crawl, skid and slide among the rocks. I passed her the bag of trail mix, shaking it so the M&Ms would rise to the top.

Farther and farther down the mountain he went. Finally a big rock hid him from view for a few seconds, and then he emerged from behind it, holding the backpack aloft for a second before strapping it on his back and starting his ascent. Watching him go down was scary, but watching him come up was even worse. He didn't even have the

decency to act scared, but instead swung himself up on the rocks and crawled over the grassy parts with a determined look on his face. I wanted to turn away lest I witness the moment his foothold failed, but I couldn't. He seemed so comfortable in his stocky, muscular body, racing up the mountain on this unforeseen mission as if he were playing his favorite game.

Danielle, used to this kind of display, sighed again as he reached the trail and dumped the backpack at her feet. She was still half-mad, but she was married to the hero of the day, and she knew it. Danielle headed out with the lead group, and Mike followed, watching with admiration as she charged up the trail.

***

After that long break my head stopped hurting, and I started to sweat from the uphill slant of the flat trail. The increasingly-long, dark and perilous tunnels became havens of cool, damp respite from the clear, sunny day outside. I was surprisingly comfortable feeling my way along the ground, Joseph's headlamp lighting the path ahead of us. I looked forward to the startling drips of freezing-cold water that landed on my face and shoulders. And when light appeared at the end of each tunnel, I slowed my steps to avoid returning to the well-worn path with its spectacular (and militarily advantageous) vistas and cunningly arranged clumps of wildflowers.

Secretly, I started to enjoy myself. Irrationally, I continued to scowl.

Finally, the trail began to change from a path along treacherous drop-offs with postcard views to more grass, more flowers, and only large rocks here and there. We turned a corner and there, at last, was the goulash restaurant in the distance, and near the restaurant some kind of large, gray-colored rocks…that moved: Sheep.

They appeared to be cropping grass in a parallel universe in which we did not exist. They did not so much as look up when we came by, nor turn their heads when we spoke to them. But as tempting as it was to sit on a rock and sing their praises, it was more tempting to get inside the restaurant, where Danielle and I would be able to avail ourselves of facilities considerably more private than a tight space behind a rock with a baggie for carrying out used toilet paper.

I don't know how the cooks and waiters arrive to work everyday nor who herds the sheep. I would have asked, but there were more people in the tiny, wood-paneled restaurant than I expected, and I was suddenly too tired to have a real conversation in Italian, which I speak poorly. Surprisingly, I was not hungry at all. Anyway, the thought of going back down the mountain on a full stomach was not appealing. I ate my pasta with marinara, while the guys partook of the fabled goulash and red wine in white plastic cups. When we came out of the restaurant, the sheep had drifted up closer to the trail. Inches away from it, they stood in silent groups, eating the grass in little sheep bites.

The rest of the group went on toward the car way, way down at the bottom of the mountain. My saintly husband stayed with me while I stopped to admire the sheep. I didn't try to pet them, but I don't think they would have run away. Again they didn't acknowledge our existence. I took some pictures, but in them the sheep blend in so much that they look like the rocks we thought they were when we first saw them.

***

The rest of the group was so far ahead that we didn't see them again until we reached the car. All of us, we found out later, had avoided the switchbacks favored by mountain bikers and gone down the steep, wooded trails between them. I had always

wondered why hikers carry titanium poles. They certainly would have come in handy as we practically skiied down the mountain, grasping at trees and skinning our hands on boulders, laughing all the way.

In between bouts of skidding, we talked like we used to that summer before he left for the Army and I started college. We talked about the Oklahoma hills where we grew up, and the imaginary scenarios we lived in them. We talked about Daniel Boone and the tea my grandmother made from tree bark. We talked about what we'd done and what we would do, about the house we'd have someday and the cook-outs we'd have there with all these soldiers, who would then be veterans. For the moment, I dismissed the possibility that the upcoming deployment could change the whole picture. I'd have plenty of time to imagine that once they'd gone.

The last little incline was, as they say back home, a doozy. We came crashing through the trees, but by that time I was getting used to, even enjoying, the rhythm. We heard a car, then a voice I recognized calling, "Are you okay?" Our companions, assuming my weakness was the cause of our delay, had driven to the very bottom of the path to wait for us. Mike was standing at the edge of the forest, peering in to see if we needed rescue.

Although I emerged laughing from the trees, jumping the ditch at the end, he expressed concern for my well-being -- and politely tried to hide from me the pitying look he gave my husband -- for *his* wife was the indomitable Danielle, who had led the way down the mountain gracefully as a wood nymph, I imagine. I assured him I was fine, but he didn't seem to believe me.

***

I wish I could say I was almost sorry to be leaving the mountain, that I gazed wistfully back at it as it stood there majestically in the setting sun. In reality, I sank down into the front seat of the warm Jeep and dreamt of the bathtub and bed awaiting me as we hurtled down the highway toward home. I was not glad I'd risen to the challenge. I did not have a new respect for nature. I had not learned to love my husband more or worry about his soldiering less. I had neither reclaimed my childhood nor spoken with my ancestors. I had not even discovered my true calling as a sheep herder.

But the next day, sore in muscles I hadn't realized I'd used, I found myself reading stories about cabins in the wilderness and wondering if the mountains I saw on my morning walk had trails going up them. A few weeks later, the guys went to Germany to jump out of airplanes and practice sleeping outside in the cold before deploying. When Joseph called to report on their progress, he said he'd had a hard landing, but was finished jumping and would be home soon.

"Well," I said, "Are you okay?"

"Yes," he said. "Are you?"

"Yes." Pause. "I went hiking without you."

"Really?," he asked, his voice almost squeaking with astonishment.

"Do you hate me?" I asked.

"Of course not."

It is a testament to the goodness of this man that at this opportune moment he did not say, "I told you so." He just promised, with no hint of smugness, to buy me hiking gear for my next birthday. And he did: boots, a fleece jacket and a red poncho rolled up in a little waterproof bag. And that's not all: Mike and Danielle bought me a

subscription to *Backpacker* magazine. I thought all three of them were being funny, since I'd been such a terrible hiking companion. They were, but over the next few months, I found myself having serious hiking conversations with Mike, my fellow morning person, when he rode to work with Joseph at dawn.

It's not that we hadn't been friends before, but until then we'd never really moved beyond the goodwill of two people who love someone in common. I'd always been Joseph's wife to him, and he'd always been Joseph's best friend to me. I'd felt an instant kinship with Danielle, but Mike, with his exuberant enthusiasm for pushing limits, was almost my polar opposite and frankly, a little overwhelming. Now I was getting to know him as a generous, loyal friend who believed that I, the whiny and overcautious girly-girl of the Pasubio hike, could do anything.

***

For the next six months, I'd think of Mike every time my *Backpacker* magazine arrived in the mail. I'd read the gear reviews and make lists of places I wanted to go someday. When Joseph called, he'd ask if I'd been hiking since the last time we talked. I kept the issue featuring scenic cabins by my bed and imagined us spending the weekend with Mike and Danielle somewhere in the Smoky Mountains, where I would prove that Mike's faith in me was justified by not complaining the entire time. Danielle, who was spending the deployment in Virginia while the adoption of her and Mike's son Devin was being finalized, said we should get together and hike while the guys were gone, giving them the shock of their lives.

But about mid-way through the deployment, Mike was killed by small arms fire while clearing a room in Afghanistan. He was posthumously awarded the Silver Star for

pushing other soldiers out of the line of fire. Joseph accompanied his body home, and both of us met Danielle in Florida, where Mike would be buried.

There are things I remember from that time -- Joseph shaking hands with Mike's father; holding Danielle while she cried so hard I felt like my arms were the only thing keeping her body together; Joseph sweltering in his dress uniform as he helped the undertakers lower Mike's coffin into the ground. I remember how small Danielle looked standing in the yard as we drove away, and how impossible it seemed to leave her. I remember there was such a bad storm the day Joseph flew back to Afghanistan that the lights in the airport flickered off and the woman at the gate checked his ticket by flashlight.

***

It sounds like something that would only happen in a bad ghost story, but after Mike died my *Backpacker* magazines stopped coming. I e-mailed their customer service people a few times and even called once, but despite their assurances that the problem had been fixed, I never got another one.

It's been almost four years now. Joseph and I live near our families in Oklahoma, where Joseph teaches basic trainees how to throw hand grenades. Danielle lives in Virginia where she is moving slowly into a relationship with one of Mike and Joseph's close friends from the 173rd, another Joseph who is called Joe. Because he loved Mike too, he is able to share some of Danielle's grief, and he is able to tell Devin stories about his brave and funny father. When the three of them came to visit us this spring, we took them to the top of Mt. Scott in the Wichita Mountains. Devin, who is now six years old, wanted desperately to leap from rock to perilous rock. I saw a familiar look of resigned

exasperation cross Danielle's face when she told him again to stop jumping as he bent his knees to do just that, almost as if he couldn't help himself.

The men joined Devin in the rocks, and we could hear them instructing him in proper climbing techniques. Pretty soon Joseph came walking up the trail to where Danielle and I were sitting on a large rock trying to contain our hair, which was whipping around in the Oklahoma wind. He sat with us and we watched Devin, now focused on the lesson at hand, climb from rock to rock, only occasionally forgetting in his excitement to keep one hand on a rock at all times. Joe moved along beside him, pointing out good toeholds and praising him for getting across a particularly difficult part.

"Now can I jump?" I heard Devin ask.

"Not now, but sometime I'll teach you how," Joe said.

"I'm not scared," Devin said.

"I know, but you have to learn to climb first."

I'm not scared either, I thought. I learned to climb from the best of teachers: Men who climb mountains for fun even though they've just returned from other mountains where armed adversaries are hiding in the rocks. A man who believed the risk of falling was always worth the thrill of seeing things from the top. A girl so unafraid of falling that her courageous love propelled her up mountains then allowed her to find almost invisible handholds after the ground was pulled out from under her. A man who believes I am worth waiting for, even when I am slow and don't know yet what I'm missing.

# RECLAIMING MARDI GRAS

I've lived 65 miles from the coast of Mississippi off and on for the last four years, but this is the first time I've been here in the spring. It's Ash Wednesday, and I'm recovering from Mardi Gras. You might think that's a nice way to say, "I'm hung over," but I don't drink so it just means I have glitter in my hair and sore earlobes from wearing clip-on crawfish earrings for nine hours.

My husband, Joseph, arrived in Mississippi from Venice, Italy in the wee hours of Monday morning on his way to our next duty station in Oklahoma. He'd been home from a year-long deployment to Afghanistan for almost nine months, and we'd been apart for two of them because I came back to America early to finish my last semester of doctoral coursework. All deployments are hard, but the year of Afghanistan had been a particularly painful one. We'd lost eight relatives to unexpected heart attacks and more-expected final stages of illness, and I'd been in Hurricane Katrina a little less than two weeks after Joseph returned to Afghanistan from escorting his best friend's body home to Florida for burial.

Then, a few weeks after Joseph's unit returned to Italy for good, he and his squadmates hydroplaned off a narrow Italian road in our Jeep, leaving several of them with broken bones. His hand ended up requiring surgery, which led to an infection requiring more hospitalization. He was just starting to recover when I left Italy. By the time he arrived in Mississippi that spring, it had been awhile since we'd done much more than get through our days. We longed for a good time – nothing beautiful, or moving, or grand. Something fun that wouldn't require healing, gratitude, or any other abstraction.

So while he slept off jet-lag I put the finishing touches on Mardi Gras outfits, hoping he would wake up in the mood to wear one. Like most soldiers, Joseph goes through a period of readjustment after every deployment, and some of the effects linger longer than others. By Mardi Gras, he no longer leapt awake at night, searching for his weapon. He no longer slept through whole weekends. He didn't spend as many hours listening to Johnny Cash, looking through red-rimmed eyes at loops of deployment picture slideshows. But he still woke up some days feeling like staying home, and crowds still caused him almost unbearable irritability and hypervigilance. And here I was with my hot-glue gun, making costumes for a celebration known for crazy crowds and shiny objects flying through the air at your head.

My costume was a green, purple and gold glittered top hat festooned with sparkling plastic crawfish and green beads, and a red t-shirt upon which was written in purple fabric paint, "Svk-co love (represented by a large green heart) Moonpies" surrounded by more crawfish. ("Svk-co" means "crawfish" in Muscogee, my tribal language.) His was a green t-shirt reading "Moonpies = Svk-co Bait" and a sombrero covered with sparkling crawfish. I sewed and hot-glued a plastic lobster onto the back of his t-shirt, its claws on his shoulders, its tail at his waistband.

He'd been out of the country for six years listening to Army-approved media proclaim New Orleans a hotbed of stabbers and random gunfire, and he said he'd sooner return to Afghanistan. So we had compromised with plans for the Mobile, Alabama celebration. But when he woke up on Tuesday morning, he looked so travel-weary that I couldn't bear the thought of all those people crushing around him, smashing the lobster on his back and activating all his post-traumatic defenses. So I suggested Biloxi,

Mississippi -- an hour away, and a much smaller affair, especially now that so much of that city is brand-new, still recovering from the hurricane. Like us, Biloxi was ready to celebrate again but still getting to know its new relationship with exuberance. A city whose streets weren't all opened yet, many of whose treasures were in disarray or wiped away entirely, seemed an appropriate setting for our careful return to fun after almost two years of fear and grieving.

As good Catholic converts we are aware of the religious origins of Mardi Gras, and we are devoted, if cranky, Lenten fasters, so we started our day with a breakfast meant to highlight the "Fat" in Fat Tuesday – three kinds of pork, pancakes and biscuits designed to maximize butter transfer, eggs scrambled and fried, maple syrup, two kinds of jam. This part of the celebration at least, Joseph had no problem enjoying. As we finished our final biscuits with jam, I was relieved to find him cracking jokes and asking what I'd do for some beads. I had practiced my game face and prepared a "Who cares about Mardi Gras, anyway?" speech in case he suddenly changed his mind, but he seemed to be having a good day, so we double-checked the stability of the crawfish on our t-shirts, hot-glued a few more to our hats, and headed south down Highway 49. Small dark clouds passed back and forth across the sun. I held my seatbelt away from my t-shirt the whole way so it wouldn't rub off the fabric paint.

I'd been down there several times since the hurricane so to me the dead trees and missing landmarks, while sad, were familiar. Things looked so much less dire than they had a year ago that I could point out pelicans and new houses without commenting much on what had been lost. Joseph hadn't been there since the middle of his Afghanistan

deployment, when we'd sat on the beach silently mourning our friend amid flashing casino lights and tropical-colored souvenir shops.

We drove along the coast, and he kept saying, "Isn't this where Beauvoir should be? I can't tell where we are." But soon we began to see carts of feather boas, giant furry hats and rebel flags trundling down the street pushed by men wearing Mardi Gras colors. Biloxi police officers on motorcycles wove through people, people everywhere wearing their most comfortable clothes, unfolding lawn chairs along the street, running barefoot through the sand after Frisbees behind the "Beach Closed: Do Not Enter" sign. Seagulls hopped around in the abundant trash, not sure what to eat first.

We used our military IDs to park inside Keesler Air Force Base, where our crawfish costumes stood out among the uniformed airmen going about their business as if there was no party going on right outside their gates. We walked past a cemetery, along the railroad track, up a street suffused with the smell of Cajun-spiced hamburgers cooking on grills set up in the backs of trucks parked tailgate-out along the parade route. We walked all the way to the highway edging the beach and sat down on the curb beside the Biloxi Lighthouse.

Across the street, a man sat in a lawn chair balanced on top of his pick-up cab. He was waving a large Confederate flag in the center of which was printed an Indian wearing a feathered headdress. In the bed of the truck next to his, a group of women wearing green and purple fishnet hose under cut-off denim shorts cooked hot dogs on a grill. The flag-waver refereed a major game of Keep Away being played by an ever-changing group of children who, when they were not lunging for the small green football, danced to "They All Asked for You," which played repeatedly from the stereo of the hot-

dog women. A group of Goth kids passed back and forth several times, one of the boys wearing neon-yellow pants and sporting, incongruously, both a mohawk and a mustache.

A boy in roller skates zipped around, calling, "Girl Scout cookies! Three dollars!" We handed him a $20 bill, and he went rolling back to his mother, who was so far down the road we couldn't see her. A few minutes later, he came zipping between the gathering police officers, who were moving people behind barricades. He slid to a dramatic stop, breathing hard, handed us our change and a box of chocolate-covered peanut butter cookies, said, "Happy Mardi Gras!" and whirled away from us and down the street toward the rest of his customers.

Soon, motorcycle police rode into view, beeping their sirens in rhythm, followed by the sound of a marching band playing a cadence. As the band came into view, I burst into laughter and fumbled for my camera: All the band members, including the drum majors and the people carrying the banner, wore red marching uniforms and white feathered headdresses. My husband, having waited a split second to make sure I wasn't offended, joined in. We took about ten pictures to prove to our families in Oklahoma that we weren't making it up. Back home, my family's alma mater was undergoing a controversial mascot change from "Redmen" to "Riverhawks." Here, the Biloxi High School Marching Indians, surrounded by cheering crowds, belted out their fight song as they led a string of bead-throwing Mardi Gras floats through the middle of town, apparently without a flicker of self-consciousness. Tomorrow I might be offended. Today, I thought it must be fun to march down the street in a headdress.

The floats were not as fanciful as those I'd seen at earlier Coast parades, and they were spaced just far enough apart that the crowd's energy and dancing began to wane

between them, but the beads were unusual, and our Moonpie shirts garnered four of those delicacies as well as appreciative pointing by the people on the floats. (Not to mention opportunities for spreading the Muscogee language, as people looked at our shirts and asked, not even attempting pronunciation, "What does that mean?") I am proud to report that I danced hard enough and yelled, "Panties! Panties!" loudly enough at the people in one float, who were wearing them on their heads, to have thrown specially to me a set of large white beads with a pair of green lacy "Happy Mardi Gras!" string bikinis attached.

Joseph's giant sombrero caught several strands of beads that he didn't even know about, and he proved surprisingly adept at grabbing plastic cups and "Krewe of Neptune" coins out of the blindingly sunny sky. We were so consumed by the mob-rule of bead catching that he barely acknowledged the constant mental beepings of his threat continuum, and I hardly remembered to worry whether or not he was having a good time. I just cheered for his successes and occasionally grabbed his hands to dance. And he danced boisterously, as if he wasn't in a crowd of strangers with both his hands occupied and no weapon even if they weren't.

When the last float passed by, and the two lines of people moved one lane over for the floats' return trip back through the route, we headed for the car. I had on so many beads my neck was starting to ache. More beads were wound almost to my elbows. I had panties on my head. Joseph carried more beads, cups, coins and Moonpies in the canvas bookbag we'd brought for that purpose. The plastic crawdad on his back was starting to scratch him with every movement. Everywhere we turned, we smelled food. Everything we smelled, we wanted.

"What are we going to do with all these beads?" he asked.

"You can't ask that!" I answered. "If you question it, the whole thing falls apart!"

I don't really know what we'll end up doing with them.

It's Ash Wednesday, and they are hanging in a tangled mass from the post at the bottom of my stair railing. We will take them off tonight, and for forty days, we won't do things like dance in the streets or go around wearing sparkly plastic. We will stand-sit-kneel-chant at Stations of the Cross on Friday nights. We will long for all the food from which we are fasting and try to make theologically sound excuses to eat it. We will think about the fried crawfish we ate on the way home from Mardi Gras. He will go to our Oklahoma duty station, and I will stay in Mississippi and finish graduate school. We will put one strand of beads in a box on our home altar, whose pictures of family and saints will be covered with purple cloth, just like the statues at church are covered.

Mardi Gras is one more good time before the contemplative period of Lent, when we remind ourselves that failures of faith need not be permanent. It prepares us for Easter, the return of hope after a time of despair. Our Mardi Gras marked the transition between war and home, separation and togetherness, mourning and careful easing back into life. It reminded us that no matter where we are in spring, even if it is the worst possible place, somewhere costumed krewes are throwing beads and panties and things made of sugar at people they don't even know. It reminded us that faith sometimes means silencing constant prayer and gratitude in order to dance in the streets as if the world has never been anything but good.

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