

2005 Eugene England Memorial Personal Essay Contest First Place Winner

SONATA: A WOMAN'S SONG OF WAR

By Lisa Torcasso Downing

MOVEMENT I

I SPENT THE WINTER OF 1989 staring out the window of a lonely government house in Fort Duchesne, Utah, at the snow-dust ghosts which the wind whipped along my otherwise uninhabited street. My sudden residence on the Uintah and Ouray Indian Reservation was a shock to me, a girl whose only previous native connection had been to sunny, southern California. But my playground existence ended when the birth of my firstborn—a son we named William—swung me from newlywed to new mother. Parenthood served as the impetus my freshly graduated husband needed to accept a commission from the United States Public Health Service and an assignment to the “Res.”

Each morning I watched as he pulled high the collar of his coat and ventured out into the never-ending wind and gray snow, leaving Will and me alone, the sole humans—a young, white woman and a baby—in a government ghost town on an Indian Reservation. We had no telephone, no television, no radio, just a mattress on the floor, some blankets, a couch, and the parade of Ft. Duchesne’s long-ago infantry regiments marching to the breath of the wind.

I saw them, I did. I saw them down to their brass buttons and scruffy necks. I saw their women lining the street, babes in their arms and children behind their skirts, cheering the show



of power manifested by the U.S. infantry and hailing its threatening reminder to the Utes that insurrection would mean battle, defeat, and very likely death. A death—I chilled at the transparent evidence before me—that these families of old Ft. Duchesne had met regardless.

I knew why I stared but not why I pondered, not why I was haunted with visions from a century dead and

buried. The Indians had long been conquered, the infantry succeeded by health practitioners with noble intent. And yet there they were, these wispy, wind-whipped soldiers of Fort Duchesne, who vanished when nature held her breath.

I was afraid on the Reservation. Certainly not of the modern Utes who paid me and my son little notice. And not of the ghosts—not exactly. Of something they represented, of death. I had become a creator of life. He was blond and blue-eyed and was just learning to pull himself up by pulling on my fingers. The thought of losing this little boy to a formless world, the thought of seeing him only in my imagination, only in my memories, stung my eyes like the wind. And I felt helpless, utterly and completely dependent, not upon the surety of my own breath, but of his.

I saw the news last night. What they say may have been a rocket-launched attack they also say may have been a suicide bombing. All that really matters, the nuts and bolts of it, is twenty-two are dead, fourteen American boys whose cheeks are no longer warm against the kiss of fourteen American mothers, of American wives, of American children. All that really matters, the nuts and bolts of it, is twenty-two are dead, Fourteen American boys are now ghosts outside my window. This they became for me.



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MOVEMENT II

TODAY MY SIGHT streams along the soft bend of his cheek, and I give in and kiss him again. His small hand bats my face away for he is watching *Winnie the Pooh* and I am interrupting. I have forgotten my place. A throne is to remain inanimate and ought never to pucker and certainly not to kiss. But in this fairy tale life of ours, it seems normal to me that a throne should breathe and love and squeeze the little king whose padded derriere rests upon it. My fingers find their way into the locks that grace the back of his neck, and he cringes, raising his juice box like a scepter, and turns on me, a scowl creasing his doll-like features. From the corner of my eye, I see him raise his other hand. He brings it close to his face, right between his blue eyes, which cross, and I don't need to see the plastic khaki figure to know it's there, a soldier in this king's army. His lips gather into a pinch, and I hear the gun fire and feel the spray of his saliva strike my nose. I've been shot. I drop my head onto the back of the sofa; my tongue lolls out. Three more times he fires for good measure.

I am now the mother of two sons. One hugs my neck, the other my knees. The eldest rides a video world of terrorists with flicks of his thumbs; the youngest wears a Spiderman costume and soars through the kitchen. Throughout the years, each has shot me innumerable times, shot me with toy guns and finger guns and sticks they've found at the park. I have been captured and conquered and kissed by two of the most ferocious warriors of these latter days.

Through one eye, I watch my second son, David, turn his back to me and trade his juice box for a melon cereal bit chosen carefully from his bowl of dry Trix cereal. Recognizing this as a cue to return from the nether regions, I lift my head. He snuggles against my breast, the toy soldier, one of several hundred which litter our home, still held tightly in his fist, and he pronounces more than says, "I'm a hero."

I breathe deeply—"Yes, you are"—and feel his little body rise and fall with the rhythm of my life. As *Winnie the Pooh* wanders the Hundred Acre Wood, I wonder at how destitute my life might have felt had I not been able to return life in kind. I hope with a hope that feels wrong that neither my

David, my "lastspring," nor his teenage brother truly become heroes.

And with this hope lacing through my heart, I think of Christine. I think of her little home, a one-story house just off the base at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. I do not know, but I imagine she used the telephone in her kitchen to make the call to her husband Joe, an Army Sergeant Major, at his makeshift base in the desert. Though his arms could not reach from Iraq to home, I'm sure she felt them, felt them in his exhale as she lay down the burden that heaven had emptied her womb of the babe who would have been their firstborn. Though it was some time ago and I am thousands of miles away, I somehow can see him. I see him as her heart likely sees him, falling upon his knees at the wound. He raises the receiver higher upon his ear, pushing the brim of his helmet forward, downward, and I

hear the crack of his voice as, through hidden tears, he murmurs, "I love you, baby," and then, softer still, "I love you, Christine." Little more is spoken, little more can be, and when Joe hangs up, he hangs his head and prays he lives these words and didn't simply breathe them out.

"I kill bad guys."

David's sudden boast snaps me back to the here and now, and I marvel at his innocent understanding of death. But I shouldn't. Although much of my early life passed with me sitting on my mother's lap, a Dr. Seuss book open before us, the background noise of my childhood was the gunfire of Viet Nam. Never once did I take a good look through the twelve-inch black-and-white window my mother kept in a corner of the kitchen. The war was distant and boring, and the boys who sacrificed there meant nothing to me. Such was my child's heart.

I rest my hand on David's shoulder and reply, "But I'm not a bad guy, and you kill me."

He says nothing; he is engrossed with Tigger's trouble. Under the tension created in the world of Disney, his shoulders press harder against my chest, and I feel an old, familiar ache within.

In Fort Duchesne, my baby Will and I had one regular visitor, a mangy coyote who came daily to stare at us through the picture window which overlooked the nothingness of the



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Reservation. The beast was so thin that his weight, distributed atop his four legs, was insufficient to drop him more than a fraction of an inch into the drifts of mounting snow. Though the icy wind ruffled its fur, it never flinched, never missed a day at our fence, never forgot the white woman and the morsel she cradled in her arms. Snow storm by snow storm, I watched as the yellow eyes of the coyote rose higher and higher, came nearer and nearer the top of the chain link fence which separated him from my civilized world. I longed for drapes, longed to block out the unblinking, relentless eyes of this disheveled creature whose ancestors, I felt certain, had feasted, had gnawed upon the bones of my soldier-ghosts.

It is strange, the way time changes us. Before David was born, had you asked me what "Karbala" meant, I would've guessed an eastern religion. But after the sky exploded and as the days of war piled up like bodies in a mass grave, I came to realize that time itself never changes. I see that David, my David, this second of my sons, the one who nursed as the towers fell, so closely resembles the blond boy I bundled up against the savage winds on the reservation that some days I worry the present is past.

MOVEMENT III

The TV still on, the images clear, five little soldiers in their nineteenth year.

Sloshing through rice paddies, clouds overhead, five little soldiers who soon will be dead

SOME WEEKEND NIGHTS, what ran through his veins was likely more spirit than blood, but Tom was no ghost. When he spent those weekend nights with us in the restaurant where I worked during college, his drink of preference was beer, and he'd line up his empty mugs like my future sons would someday line up their toy soldiers. I could predict the degree of glaze I would meet in his eyes by counting the number of drained glasses before him. His evenings at the restaurant were a dance really, a tap dance so to speak, between Tom and the manager who threatened to cut him off but only once (that I saw) refused to pour. Tom had survived Viet Nam. Twice.

*I held up my knee socks with red rubber bands.
I combed through my hair 'til it hung in straight strands.
I skipped through the kitchen and heard Mother cry, and never, not once, did I ask her why.*

Tom had loved Viet Nam, loved the brotherhood, loved the way the men had depended on him, and he would ramble on and on to people who had long since walked away about how he could still make Special Forces if it weren't for the age restrictions. Though the war had been surrendered more than ten years past, Tom fought on, a hero still.

Like Joe, Christine's Joe.

Tom had a friend named Mark who became my friend.

Mark, also a Viet Nam vet and a volunteer soldier, would hobble into the restaurant in the Frankenstein prosthetics he wore where his feet had once been. Whether you asked or not, Tom would tell you that Mark had lost his feet to a land mine, and they'd laugh out loud if you believed it.

Mark was a lonely sort of man, a gentleman who had learned the value of life through taking it. Sadly, I suspect these lessons of war may have left him unaware of the worth of his own existence. Mark was more than a decade older than I, but we hung out. He sent me flowers on my birthday.

From Karbala; from the streets of Karbala.

When his diabetes laid him in the ground a few years later, some shook their heads at him for dying that way, for losing a winnable war. His mother, a woman with whom I had spent many evenings, wrote me of his passing and begged me to hold on to my children, to hug them every day, and to remember that no matter how hard you try to stare them down, those terrible tomorrows that you pretend will never come, or that you think you have escaped, somehow become today.

The bouquet of flowers Joe sent Christine for her birthday arrived from Karbala on such a tomorrow, one week to the day after she had slammed the door. Slammed it suddenly and hard in the faces of an Army Sergeant Major she did not know and of an Army chaplain. The flowers from Joe arrived one week after that, after the scream had begun inside her, that silent, soul-rending shriek which stuck in her throat before sinking to her heart, before sinking her to her knees. She had slammed the door, would slam it again and again in her mind. She would not hear their words—only Joe's, only Joe's.

The words she now held in her hand, written on a little card, received from a ghost, from Karbala. . . .

"I love you, Christine," now an echo in her mind.

"I love you, Christine," only a whisper in the wind.

"I love you . . ." A sentence in another woman's hand.

Don't, don't do it. Don't ask Christine the meaning of Karbala.

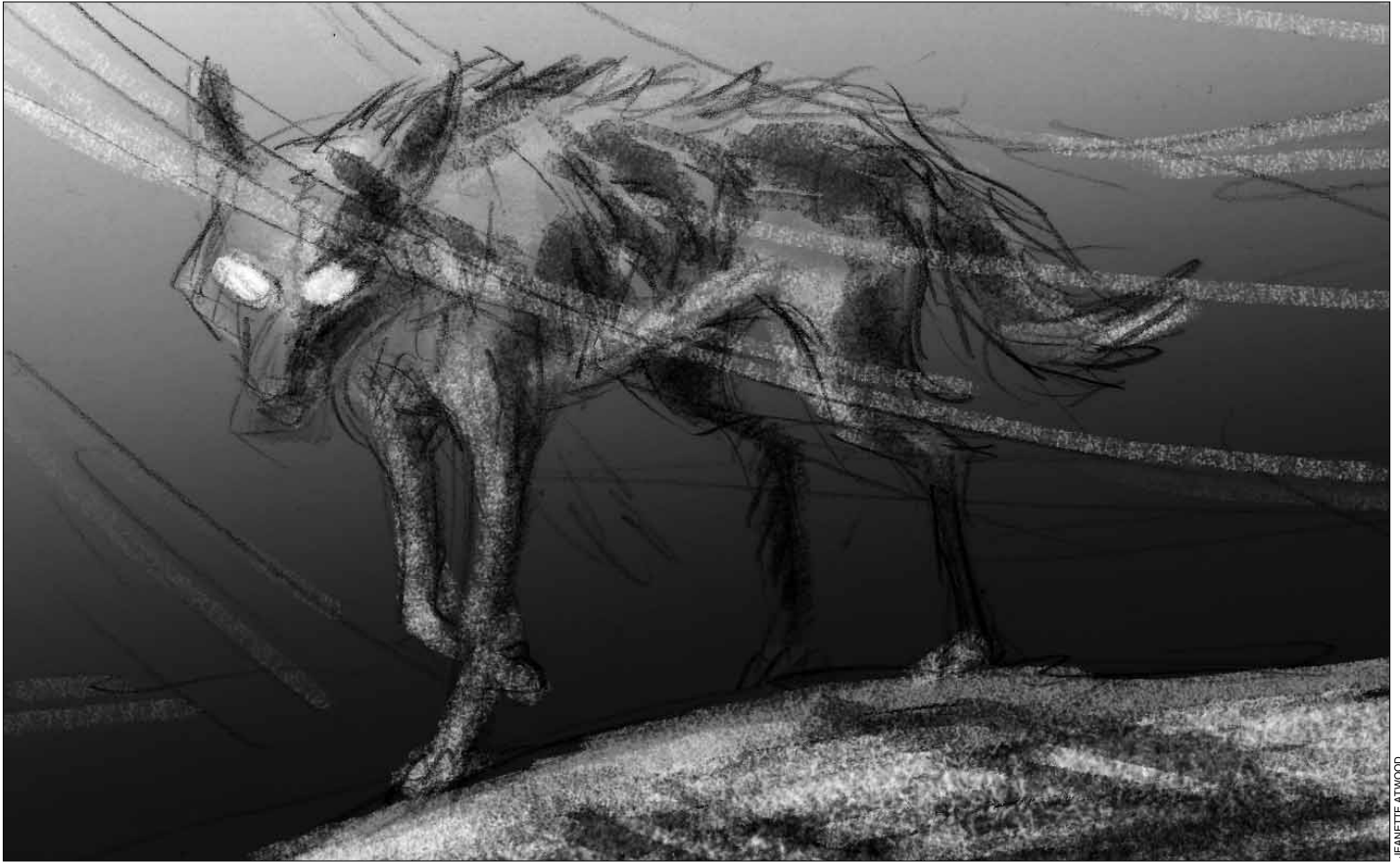
As I stared through shocked eyes at the letter Mark's mother had sent explaining his unexpected death, I let the tears fall and felt all that would not be.

A swish of wind along my legs, and I looked up as my then five-year-old son Will ran through the house, my old purple maternity shirt buttoned around his neck like the cape of a forgettable, goof ball cartoon hero who meant the world to him then. As he rounded the corner again, he looked at me and stopped.

"What's wrong, Mommy?"

I bit my lip and beckoned for him. As he came closer, I grabbed him up. He said, "Don't cry, Mom. I'll take care of you." He pulled back. "I'm Dark Wing Duck!" He punched the air, then was gone.

I do not know, but I imagine that Christine used the telephone in her kitchen to make the call to his mother, to the mother of her husband, to Joe's mother, the mother of an Army



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Sergeant Major, a career soldier, a hero still in the streets of Karbala. The mother of the boy.

I close my eyes against it, against all of them, all of those tomorrows which threaten to stack themselves up against my sons. I close my eyes against anger and hatred and foolishness and loss, against my fear

I breathe deeply, I hold my breath, and I find that here in the darkness behind my eyelids, I see too much, still, too many ghosts: snow-dust ghosts, ghosts made of ash, war-torn, lost and lonely ghosts. And I want to scream, scream with Christine, scream. . . .

REFRAIN

I HAVE SEEN night fall as often as I've seen the sun rise. I have changed bed sheets damp with urine and tied quilts for homeless children. I have treated losing teams to cookies and punch and applied ice packs like medals of honor.

I have watched my mother bend under the weight of her age. I have held my father's hand in the ICU, kissed his swollen face, and prayed for the miracle no physician saw coming.

I have looked a coyote square in the eye. I have banged pots, banged windows, made an awful noise, even charged the beast, but still he stayed.

I have watched steel towers burst into flame and fall.

I have watched through distant eyes the wars in Viet Nam, Grenada, Kuwait, Afghanistan, and Iraq. I have seen the

draped coffins, the crying mothers, fathers, wives, and children. I have seen people sicken from breathing the dust of the dead whose bodies were blown as ash along the streets.

I have watched my boys fight invisible villains. I have wiped ketchup off toy soldiers and spooned it out of the sandbox. I have bought toy pistols, toy rifles, plastic swords, and grenades. I have gifted them Davy Crockett hats, Superman, Spiderman, and Batman costumes. I have bought games like *Risk* and *Stratego*. I have replaced outdated game systems with the newest and the best. I have told my boys stories of the Stripling Warriors, of Mormon, and of Ammon. I have cheered their little boy bravery and kissed their skinned knees.

I have been handcuffed. I have been the rescued.

Yet I remain the damsel in distress: My eyes remain on the distant battlefields, on the little heroes of other women who are marching across my screen. And I think, How can I thank her? And then I stop thinking, can't bear to think, of what tomorrow may ask of this mother.

I throw open the blinds, bring in the sunshine, and rush, barefooted, through a mother's day. I cook, I clean, I hold their hands, I push. Still everywhere I turn in my house, I step on these damned toy soldiers, I find these small khaki men, their weapons raised. And I have had enough.

"Put them away," I order. "Put them away!" I shout. And my boys scurry to please me.

I want us to live in the sunlight. I want us to live in the light.