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# How are veterans perceived today?

PHILLIPS, R.

2020

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# ‘My teeth don’t chew on shrapnel’

## an anthology of poetry by military veterans

Oxford Brookes Poetry Centre

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For more details, visit:
https://www.brookes.ac.uk/poetry-centre/veterans--poetry-workshops/

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A participant works on a piece during the workshop using crayons and text.

# 1

# Introduction: 'Speaking for the Legion'

## Introduction: ‘Speaking for the Legion’

Niall Munro

This anthology includes poetry by military veterans written in response to three workshops run by the Poetry Centre at Oxford Brookes University during 2019-20. But who exactly do we mean when we talk about ‘a veteran’?

### Who is a veteran?

According to the UK’s Armed Forces Covenant, set up in 2011 to support members of the Armed Forces community and their families, a veteran is ‘anyone who has served for at least one day in Her Majesty’s Armed Forces (Regular or Reserve) or Merchant Mariners who have seen duty on legally defined military operations.’ Federal regulations in the US state that a veteran is ‘a person who served in the active military, naval, or air service and who was discharged or released under conditions other than dishonorable.’

There are of course plenty of other important distinctions to be made between different kinds of veterans, especially when it comes to deciding who qualifies for health and other benefits. Most veterans went through some kind of basic training and many have served for a certain qualifying period of time to be eligible for veteran status or benefits, but we shouldn’t expect that all of them have seen combat.

I imagine that these definitions are more capacious than many civilians would expect – they certainly surprised me. And yet that is exactly one of the goals of this anthology: to surprise and challenge people’s assumptions of who veterans are and what they are like. In fact, the word ‘veteran’ is even contested by people we might regard as veterans. As one of our workshop participants, Jo Young, explained, in her view ‘[t]he term “veteran” is a masculine word, it’s a word about old people, it’s a word [...] that describes you of a certain campaign or conflict – it doesn’t work for someone who has been to lots of different war zones.’ Young much prefers the term ‘ex-service person’ to describe herself.

And she isn’t being disparaging here about older people who happen to be veterans. Literally, Young is right – the word veteran does come from the Latin word *vetus*, meaning old, and it’s certainly true that when we think about veterans today, we probably think of older men and women who took part in the First or Second World Wars or the Vietnam War (a perception that

psychologist Rita Phillips addresses in her piece in this anthology, as well as other stereotypes such as the injured or psychologically-damaged veteran). These are the people who we often remember or honour when we commemorate military conflicts. But since the vast majority of poets represented in our anthology served in operations and conflicts from the 1990s to today, is our understanding of the veteran itself now just old and outdated? As Jane Potter notes in her essay here, how we classify 'war poetry' and who can legitimately call themselves a 'war poet' are other issues we should reconsider. Alongside the publication of poetry by veteran writers like Yusef Komunyakaa, Bruce Weigl, Brian Turner, Kevin Powers, Benjamin Hertwig, Hugh Martin, and Karen Skolfield, we have seen in recent years a significant number of new poetry collections by military spouses, such as Jehanne Dubrow, Elyse Fenton, Shara Lessley, Amalie Flynn and Kate Gaskin; by mothers of military personnel, such as Bryony Doran and Isabel Palmer; as well as work by poets connected to the military in some other way, such as Philip Metres or Nomi Stone. The landscape is changing, and with half of this anthology devoted to writing by women veterans, we hope that this collection goes some way towards affirming a need for that recognition and change.

**Why write? Why read?**

But why – if you are a veteran – should you write about your experiences and why – whether you are or aren't a veteran – should you read about them? In one of the interviews that I conducted with the participants (excerpted here but available in full on our website), Jo Young puts it well when she points out how important it is that 'the small army we have represents [...] and is understood by our society because this army belongs to society.' Whatever we might think of the military interventions in recent years in Iraq or Afghanistan (or elsewhere), it's important to recognise that military personnel (whether currently active or now veterans) are crucial members of our societies – they represent us not just in times of war but in times of peace too.

And yet they remain poorly understood by the societies they represent. Rita Phillips's research here shows how people in the US and UK often think about veterans as either heroes or victims. If we consider some of the major military charities or events, such as Help for Heroes or the Invictus Games, members of the public and veterans too are invited to think about themselves as 'heroes', 'unconquered' (the meaning of 'invictus'), or 'wounded warriors'. Whilst these organisations are clearly laudable and can be hugely important to those who benefit from them, the language they use encourages us to think of them as existing for people who are very different from civilians – people who have

overcome great odds and continue to struggle against challenges that are difficult if not impossible for members of the general public to understand. Is this how we would like to think of our veterans – as incomprehensible, always fighting, distinctly other?

**The 'incommunicable experience of war'**

The US Supreme Court Judge Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., himself a veteran of the American Civil War, once said that he and his colleagues had 'shared the incommunicable experience of war'. Yet the poems in this anthology challenge the idea that war (whether that means simply being a member of the military or being in conflict) can't be shared – they don't shut you out, they invite you in. Indeed, a number of the poets see themselves as having a responsibility to represent veterans, or, as John Thampi observes, 'speaking for the "we", we as the legion or we as a people'. In this way these writers are 'giving a voice to people who wouldn't otherwise ever put pen to paper' and the poems offer civilians in particular a fresh way of thinking about who we remember, commemorate, or think about on those rare occasions when we come together to do so. Throughout all these poems there's a real sense that the writer is someone who has borne witness to and experienced things that perhaps others have not. As Kate McLoughlin has written in her book *Veteran Poetics*, veterans

> are figures at the heart of historical events, active agents in the processes of change. To meet a veteran [...] is to be confronted by the fact and face of armed conflict – a living synecdoche; de-anonymized and re-individualized former members of the military, each one brings war home in very human terms.

Some of these veterans – modest as they are – could consider themselves as 'active agents in the processes of change'. Some of the poems they have produced (such as those by Andrew Fassett and Maggs Vibo) interrogate what change really looks like and whether it is in fact possible. And of course, a number of them show clearly through their work that the military is far more than just 'armed conflict' – not all of those who serve have 'teeth [that] chew on shrapnel', as Claire Hughes puts it. But all of them would surely agree that being a veteran means you yourself have been profoundly changed. A number of the poems, and a number of the interviews too, discuss the camaraderie and joys of military life – the extraordinary friendships that are built up through being thrown together in heightened situations. They celebrate the values and traditions that were instilled in them as soldiers, often through humour, and they try to get to grips with what it meant to leave the military and become

veterans. In their interviews with me, a number of the participants, such as Tom Laaser, spoke of needing to 'demilitarize' themselves when they left the service. Claire Hughes meanwhile recalled how family members admitted that during her time in the British Army they had seen her fundamentally change; so much, in fact, that she had become someone they no longer fully recognized.

## Reclaiming a place

These kinds of issues may be grounded in military life, but it doesn't mean they are restricted to it. Often participants wrote poems that were intended to speak to a much wider community through which they could – as Jo Young says – 'reclaim their place' (for her 'in a wider sisterhood') and reintegrate themselves into society. And if the military is in some ways a microcosm of that society (albeit one that isn't as representative of it as it might be), it stands to reason that some of the darker and more damaging elements of society will exist there too, perhaps even in more exaggerated forms.

Although we tended to focus on veterans whose time in the military overlapped with more recent conflicts (with Noel Harrower's work in this anthology an important exception), we aimed to be as inclusive as we could be in our recruitment of participants. One of our workshops was a women-only event because we felt that women veterans are a community that hasn't always been served by poetry workshops, especially in the UK (and the question of whether women veterans have a writing tradition on which they can draw is eloquently explored by Jane Potter in her piece). That workshop created a space where some difficult topics could be explored in discussion and writing, such as sexism in the military and Military Sexual Trauma (MST – a term used by the US military). Jamie Broady's work and interview casts light on some of those darker subjects as she explains that her extensive experience working with female veterans has shown that 'every woman has a story and that falls on a spectrum somewhere probably, but every woman I've spoken to has a story of MST [...] at some level.' We have all heard about the trauma associated with war, from First World War 'shell shock' to PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). But sexual trauma (whether for women or men), does not receive the same attention, even in the era of the international #MeToo movement, which was intended to highlight instances of sexual harassment and assault against women. Hopefully this is because such offences are now less common (though a 2018 Ministry of Defence report about sexual harassment suggests otherwise), but whether such offences are recent or historical there is evidence that writing can be of benefit to people working through some of those experiences. For Jamie Broady, writing can help to 'transpose that trauma and to transcend it and to find the

complicated bits in it'. Poet Susie Campbell, who facilitated much of the workshop and subsequently offered generous feedback to the poets on their writings, mentions in her piece that we did not intend (or feel qualified) to conduct a workshop that would be healing, but if catharsis was a by-product of the sessions, then it was a welcome one.

## The capacity of poetry

For me, poetry has the capacity to crystallise experience in a way that allows us to concentrate, even for a few moments, intensely and absolutely. Reading a poem or listening to it being read (and each of the poets can be heard reading their work in this digital anthology) can allow us to step outside ourselves for a short time and become close to another person in a manner that is especially rare in our time. Perhaps, in these poems, that intimacy can draw us closer to experiences that we have never had and allow us to understand, even slightly, a little more about what these poets have seen and heard. If you are a veteran, perhaps you will recognise in their words something that seems familiar. If you are a civilian, perhaps you too will sense a spark of recognition in what our veteran poets have described.

## The anthology

This anthology is free to download and free to share, and we encourage you to share it widely. If you are part of a military organization, you might like to use some of the poems or reflections at some of your own events or commemorations, or you might simply want to read the poems on your own. At the end of the anthology Susie Campbell has provided a set of useful writing prompts for those readers who are also writers, and you might use those individually or in a group.

Please note that this is an enhanced anthology which includes audio recordings of each piece embedded within it, including excerpts from the interviews and the poets reading their work. To hear the audio, please click on the link at the top of the first page of each piece.

Whatever you choose to do with the anthology and however you respond to the work in it, we would love to hear your thoughts and we would be very grateful for your feedback. Please e-mail me directly: niall.munro@brookes.ac.uk or fill out this short online survey: https://forms.gle/TSEPWrjNYTmddNpW9

**Niall Munro** is Senior Lecturer in American Literature at Oxford Brookes University, where he is also Director of the Oxford Brookes Poetry Centre and of the Centre's pamphlet press, **ignition**press. He is the author of *Hart Crane's Queer Modernist Aesthetic* (2015) and is currently working on a book about the way in which modernist writers 'remembered' and commemorated the American Civil War.

Three participants work on pieces individually during a session of writing time as part of a workshop.

# II

# The Workshop

## The Workshop
## Susie Campbell

The aim of the poetry workshop project was to explore the value of poetry to military veterans in reflecting on their experience of war, and to introduce them to a range of practical strategies and poetic forms they might find useful in their own work. Our participants all had some previous experience of writing poetry, although the amount of their experience was quite varied across the different groups. However, they all shared a keen interest in poetry, and they were open to trying something different and to participate in the various creative activities we offered them.

Our focus was primarily on the artistic challenges and opportunities of writing poetry rather than on the therapeutic or cathartic uses of writing. Of course, the intense concentration required by poetry can be therapeutic in itself, but this was neither our primary focus, and nor did it fit within the particular skill set of the workshop facilitators. In the words of American poet and veteran Bruce Weigl, our efforts were directed towards making the writing of poetry about war 'a literary and artistic problem rather than an emotional problem'.

We organised the writing sessions to enable the participants to work with some big, overarching themes: their experience of war and of being a veteran, their memories of conflict, and their attitudes to more formal or public commemoration. We had the benefit of working with a military veteran in the design of these sessions. Through a series of warm-up activities, writing prompts and creative experiments, the participants wrote a number of short poems and worked towards longer pieces. We were not expecting finished or polished pieces of work but hoped that our participants would produce some initial drafts that would inspire them to go away and continue working on them.

The warm-up suggestions and writing prompts included at the end of this anthology give a flavour of what we did in these workshops. We would like to extend the invitation to you to use the prompts to produce your own work, individually or in a group. The activities were designed to help the participants focus on the language of their poems and to explore how they might activate the visual and aural potential of their poetry.

As the poet invited to facilitate these poetry writing sessions, I found it a great pleasure not only to get to know such a diverse and interesting group of people but also to work alongside them as we tried out these different writing activities. One of the highlights of the workshops for me was the willingness of our participants to take creative risks and to try out approaches that were new to them.

I particularly enjoyed one session which focused on exploring jargon, slang and military terminology (see some of the writing prompts later on in the anthology for further details). I gave the participants a list of the jargon and terminology I use in my own work environment (Local Authority education services) and asked them to try to work out what job I do. There was much guessing, sleuth-work and even attempts at bribery, but in the end, the language itself gave away all the important hierarchies and priorities that are part of my job. The writing task I then set our participants was to write their own poems, drawing on the slang and terminology of military life, and there are several examples in the poems that follow where the poets have grappled with some of that very particular language.

Another highlight was inviting the participants to put away all their writing implements and to choose drawing implements from a range of coloured chalks, inks, paints, crayons and charcoal. Their challenge was to design their own marks or illustrations to use as the starting point for a new poem. Although some of the participants found this activity took them out of their poetry comfort zone, for many it generated creative energy and unleashed some new ideas.

But perhaps the most significant moment was when participants were invited to share some of their work in the final session of the weekend. As this anthology demonstrates, many of the participants took these prompts and writing activities and turned them into powerful, vivid poems.

These workshops were a learning experience for us all, facilitators and participants. Some of the important learning for me was that the idea of commemoration landed differently with our US and UK participants, mainly because of their very different national contexts and experiences of public commemoration. However, an interest in poetic form, story, memory and language was shared by all the participants. Another learning point was that although, at the time, some of the participants felt rather challenged by some of our more experimental sessions, many of them returned to these newer approaches in later poems – as is evident from a number of the poems that

follow. Clearly, workshop facilitators need to be prepared to take a few risks alongside their participants, as it seems that challenging activities can sometimes end up being the most generative. I would qualify this, however, by stressing the importance of all the activities being voluntary and of providing a range of options for participants to construct their own creative journeys. We also wanted to be mindful that, by inviting participants to think and write about difficult past experiences, we might be taking them into some potentially upsetting or disturbing territory, another reason for making all activities voluntary.

A few of the participants initially found it a challenge to find a position from which to write about their military experience, perhaps because they were having to reconcile conflicting views or because they felt uncomfortable about writing about things that, at times, felt disloyal. Again, we can see some of those tensions represented in a number of the final poems in the anthology. Workshop sessions that encouraged them to explore strategies such as organising fragments of language into a poem, using visual techniques, or drawing on childhood experiences as a way of managing these difficulties seemed to have been productive ways of addressing these issues.

The selection of poems in this anthology is testimony to the creative energy, skills and imagination of the participants. It was a great privilege to work alongside them.

Susie Campbell is currently studying for a practice-based poetry PhD at Oxford Brookes, focusing on prose poetry, spatial form and the work of Gertrude Stein. Her poetry has appeared in many UK and international magazines including *Shearsman*, *Long Poem Magazine*, *Perverse*, *Tentacular*, *3:AM*, *Axon* (Aus) and *Cordite* (Aus). She has published three pamphlets: *The Bitters* (Dancing Girl Press, 2014), *The Frock Enquiry* (Annexe, 2015), and *I return to you* (Sampson Low, 2019). Her latest title *Tenter* is forthcoming from Guillemot Press in 2020.

# III

# Women's war poetry: a hidden tradition?

**Women’s War Poetry: A Hidden Tradition?**
**Jane Potter**

Women have always participated in war. They may not (until recently) have been front-line soldiers, but they have been far from passive observers of conflict. Women’s roles in wartime have been myriad: nurses, doctors, ambulance drivers, canteen, office, and munitions workers. They have volunteered and been enlisted for the government and aid agencies such as the Red Cross and they have organised local and international relief efforts. Women have endured air-raids and bereavement, and kept the civilian front going while men were engaged in combat. On soldiers’ return, women maintained homes and families often in circumstances that were as difficult as any experienced during wartime. Despite this, women’s roles and engagement in war have been seen as secondary to those held by men.

Such privileging of the male experience of war extends to poetry. ‘Men wage war, men write about war’, observed W.D. Ehrhart, and each successive generation of male soldiers has had an array of war poetry upon which to draw, engage with or subvert for their own literary representations of conflict. But for women, their tradition remains largely hidden. This is not because women did not write or publish war poetry. Rather, they faced two key barriers. The first is what James Campbell has called ‘combat gnosticism’, that is the privileging of battlefield experience as *the* criterion for war poetry. If ‘war’ = ‘men’, then ‘war poetry’ = ‘soldier poetry’. If one has not been a soldier, one’s poetry cannot be classified as ‘war poetry’. This informs the second barrier, namely, the selectivity of print. While women were often included in anthologies published during wartime, they were largely neglected in post-war canons. Not until the early 1980s did the search for a female war poetry tradition really take hold. Today’s female veterans *do* have a tradition to draw upon, but some ‘digging’ is necessary to find it. The surest route is via the anthologies dedicated to recovering women’s war poetry from the First and Second World Wars and the Vietnam War, including, but not limited to, Catherine Reilly’s *Scars Upon My Heart*: *Women’s Poetry and Verse of the First World War* (first published in 1981, a new edition appeared in 2006) and *Chaos of the Night: Women's Poetry and Verse of the Second World War* (1984) and Lynda Van Devanter and Joan A. Furey’s *Visions of War, Dreams of Peace: Writings of Women in the Vietnam War* (1991).

The wars of the twentieth century did produce female veterans: thousands of women were on some form of active service—such as was available to them. During the First World War, for instance, May Wedderburn Cannan served in the Voluntary Aid Detachment and in the Intelligence Service. Her poem 'Rouen' records a day in the life of the town which has been so taken over by the military, and is packed with the concrete images of 'the little piles of Woodbines', 'the long sun-blistered coaches of the khaki Red Cross train', 'the Drafts just out from England', and 'the distant call of bugles', the accumulation of these images heightened by the insistent use of 'And'.

Nurses were the most 'active' of active service women and have been embedded in the cultural memory of conflict since Florence Nightingale. Carola Oman served as a nurse with the British Red Cross on the Western Front from 1916-1919 and recorded her experiences in sharply-focussed poems such as 'Unloading Ambulance Train', while Vera Brittain, perhaps the most famous woman of the Great War, served in the Voluntary Aid Detachment in France and Malta, producing poems such as 'Lament of the Demobilized' (in addition to her memoir *Testament of Youth*) that chronicled the anguish of loss and alienation in the wake of the Armistice. Cannan's 'Women Demobilized' and 'The Armistice: In an Office in Paris', with its stark assertion, 'peace could not give back her Dead' highlight how for many women, the celebrations that accompanied the end of war rang hollow. But it is Mary Borden who provides the most experimental as well as the most graphic and uncompromising poetic renderings of wartime nursing. Her memoir *The Forbidden Zone* (1929) is a model of hybrid writing—prose memoir and poetry mixed together. As *directrice* of a French military hospital, close to the front line she was a first-hand witness to and participant in the suffering of war. In 'Song of the Mud', Borden is unsparing in her graphic rendering of 'the obscene, the filthy, the putrid,/The vast liquid grave of our armies' that has 'drowned our men./Its undigested belly reeks with the undigested dead.' Wilfred Owen is thus not the only poet to communicate the sickening horror of the battlefield.

Van Devanter and Furey remind us that while women's war writing has been not been deemed 'important enough' to warrant the same attention as soldier poetry, the experience of female veterans in war

> irrevocably changed them. They can never forget. They have felt the impact of war. They have written about it. [....] But their writings have rarely seen the light of day. Usually they lie resting in an old shoe box, in the bottom drawer of the basement desk, on the highest shelf of the bookcase, or tucked away in the farthest reaches of the dresser drawer.

Our Veterans' Poetry Workshop has tried to provide a space for these writings to 'see the light of day', to facilitate contemporary female veterans in writing their wars, and in doing so connect with and continue the tradition of women's war poetry.

Jane Potter is Reader in Arts and teaches on the BA and MA Publishing courses in the School of Arts at Oxford Brookes University. Her research focuses on the literature of the First World War and book history. Her publications include *Boys in Khaki, Girls in Print: Women's Literary Responses to the Great War, 1914-1918* (2005), *Wilfred Owen: An Illustrated Life* (2014), and, with Carol Acton, *Working in a World of Hurt: Trauma and Resilience in the Narratives of Medical Personnel in War Zones* (2015). She is currently editing a new edition of *The Selected Letters of Wilfred Owen* for Oxford University Press and for Cambridge University Press, *A Cambridge History of World War One Poetry*.

During the all-female workshop, five participants and a workshop leader work individually to develop written pieces.

# IV

# How are veterans perceived today?

## How are veterans perceived today?
## Rita Phillips

There is always a considerable debate in the UK and the US about the health of military veterans. Data from representative opinion polls and surveys conducted in the last three decades highlight a persistent set of beliefs about military veterans, held by members of UK and US societies. The majority of British and American respondents think that veterans are more likely to experience disability, ill mental-health, unemployment and homelessness than members of the civilian population. Some of these negative perceptions are accurate for US veterans, since, compared to civilians, they are statistically more likely to struggle with physical and mental health issues and be homeless. However, such perceptions are erroneous for the majority of British veterans.

These partially incorrect and negative beliefs can have problematic consequences for the veterans' reintegration into civilian life. For example, veterans returning home who encountered in the public a lack of respect and pride in their work were found to have greater problems in adapting to civilian life and were more at risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and suicidal thoughts than veterans who perceived that they were appreciated. In fact, the level of support for returning veterans was a stronger predictor of PTSD and suicidal thoughts than deployment or combat exposure itself. In addition, the public belief that veterans are necessarily suffering from mental health illnesses may increase levels of stigmatisation. As mental disability labels include numerous negative stereotypes such as being dangerous, unpredictable, dirty, worthless, weak and ignorant, veterans may face covert discrimination, hiding behind overt expressions of gratitude for their service.

My recent research aimed to understand where these partially erroneous and negative perceptions of veterans originate and why it seems the majority of the UK and US public holds these beliefs. I conducted a series of comparative, quantitative and qualitative studies.

As a first step I examined the way in which beliefs about veterans were constructed. 234 UK and 259 US participants who varied in how much contact they had with veterans or were veterans themselves completed a word association task, writing down three initial thoughts about the word 'veteran'. Participants were then asked to evaluate these three initial thoughts according

to how important each thought was in describing veterans. The statistical analysis revealed that UK and US perceptions of veterans are similarly structured, that is to say veterans are generally understood in two different ways: either as victims (manipulated by the government into killing people) or as heroes (characterised by inherently heroic personality traits). Those people who thought that veterans were victims also thought that they suffered from ill-health and their assumptions were based on de-individuated, war-related descriptors. In contrast, those who thought that veterans were heroes based their conclusions on what they thought were personality traits of veterans.

To understand why these victim and hero beliefs are so prevalent, I recruited 29 UK and 29 US participants who took part in a semi-structured interview study. The findings from this study suggested that individuals from both the UK and US understand the 'damaged' veteran as being the normal result of a military career. Essentially, hero and victim beliefs about veterans were based on socially-formed and culturally-communicated legacies of a veteran's moral superiority. Participants remembered brave and altruistic veterans from previous wars (particularly the First and Second World Wars) who fought resolutely for freedom, human rights and democracy. Therefore, deployment and combat-experience were understood as essential elements in what it means to be a veteran. However, these particular kind of narratives of deployment and combat-experiences also elicited in participants recollections of atrocities, casualties and bloody battlefields that veterans were expected to have seen. In this context veterans were conceptualised as physically damaged, traumatised, neglected and pitiful individuals who suffer from job loss and homelessness.

In conclusion, these findings suggest that it may be necessary to improve civilian-military relationships by clarifying social misconceptions about military service and deployments. Essentially, members of the public in both the UK and the US need to be able to distinguish modern warfare with a professional all-volunteer force from historical 'horrific' warfare (the 'horrors of the trenches') with a conscripted force. Therefore, initiatives that bridge the civilian-military gap by improving civilian knowledge about what it means to be a soldier are recommended.

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Rita Phillips is a lecturer in Psychology and completed her PhD at Oxford Brookes University. As part of her research, she examines perceptions of veterans in UK society, and as part of a British Psychological Society grant, perceptions of veterans in US society. Rita has worked as a Fellow at the University of Oxford as part of the Mellon-Sawyer Seminar Series 'Post-War: Commemoration, Reconstruction, Reconciliation', and at Oxford Brookes University as part of the Veterans' Poetry Workshop. At conferences, her research has been distinguished with awards such as the Military Section Paper Award (Eastern Sociological Society, Boston) and the Emerging Scholar Award (University of California at Berkeley).

Five workshop participants and a workshop leader take part in one of the sessions about visual prompts for writing.

# V

# Poems by veterans

## Jo Young

Jo Young joined the British Army directly after leaving university. She trained at Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and served in Afghanistan as an adjutant before being promoted to the rank of Major. After leaving the Army in 2015, she joined the Army Reserve. She is in the final stages of a PhD at the University of Glasgow and has published a pamphlet of poetry based on her military experiences called *Firing Pins* (2019), which was the joint winner of the 2017 Ink Sweat & Tears/Café Writers Pamphlet Commission Competition: http://www.inksweatandtears.co.uk/pages/?page_id=5711

'I've had people come up to me [after reading my poetry] and say: "I didn't know you could be a mum in the army" and it's been twenty-five years since that rule was changed. It's quite important to me [...] that the small army we have represents our society and is understood by our society because this army belongs to society.'

'I don't want to be an ambassador for the British Army – I'm very proud of the British Army, I would happily talk to people about why it's a good career or the joyfulness of being a soldier but I certainly don't want to be an ambassador or a bitter critic because I don't feel like that either. [...] And I've tried to take out any hyperbole or anything overt [in my writing], so there's no ranting or the pity of war stuff. This has been a very interesting job that has been very fulfilling and at times very boring, at times stressful and on very few occasions for me a bit frightening, but it is what it is. [...] But specifically for women, we have boyfriends or girlfriends and we diet and we fall out with each other and we forget to ring our mums on a Sunday and it's [important to show how this is] part of womanhood [more generally] as well as part of the soldiering fraternity. And that was important for me – reclaiming my place in a wider sisterhood.'

**Flaking**

like a desk-top memo pad,
peeling away my kind regards,
my thoughts for the day,
my pub dogs of Glasgow.

I’m incontinent with it -
sheets of me floating through
market towns, whipping over
rifle ranges, beyond red flags.

Falling in love
with falling power stations,
pleated concrete, air traffic towers,
coltsfoot and cow parsley

beneath iron fire escapes,
blue-tac pressing
National Trust notelets
to asbestos walls.

South and untethered
among too-early Springs
and too-late Autumns
skinned raw, spreading

dermatitis sheddings
across a workshop floor
and gathering everything back
like soft apples at night.

I’ve reached a point of undress
where I’ll make a coat
from any easily grabbed vegetation,
thorns and decay and stings -

(and that’s where friends come in,
with their chasing behind,
picking up litter and post-it clues
flinging out fire blankets and old clothes).

It’s no good stopping to unreel
with each halting jerk
of the black-jack wheel. Unfurl
fresh geography to sow the past on,

shed one more reluctant layer, head north
then put paper under strict ration.

## Modes of Warfare

You went to war
through sea-water, striding ashore.
Gunfire speckled around you
a suspension of it all,
dense as the pigment drift
in your watercolour jars.

Your training was over high
hills in tides of snow,
on smooth, wooden skis.
You should have glided,
and weaved to war – whistling
through the downhill bits,
using your Lyke-Wake stride
for the rest.

Your Yorkshire humour
was content to make
a life-long joke of this contradiction.
At times I think (I think)
you found it wore quite thin.

**The Mandolin of Φώτη Πίττα**
να μεν σε λάμν' η έννοια — na men se lámn' i énnoia

a motif, a care-held banner,
strung by its silence.
Descendants breathe below
and hear δάσκαλος and hero — daskalos
in the same chord, know
the dense patience of siege,
and rest in a dormitory of
το αληθινό πρόσωπο της Κύπρου, — to alithinó prósopo tis Kýprou

where a father picked up the gun
of his hunt-dead son and hung
the mandolin in the sorrow
of a one-room museum.

Frenaros, Cyprus 2019

## Tom Laaser

Tom Laaser enlisted in the US Army in 2011 as a Field Artillery Cannoneer and was initially based at Fort Drum, New York with the 10th Mountain Division. He deployed with 4th Battalion 25th Field Artillery Regiment in 2013-14 to Camp Clark, Khost Province in Afghanistan on the Pakistan border. Whilst there he trained as a Dari interpreter, shot artillery, guarded an Afghan base, and trained Afghan soldiers as they transitioned into leading the war. After he returned home, he suffered from PTSD and after a year and a half of treatment, he was medically retired in 2016. Tom runs a veteran writers' workshop in Salem, MA and facilitates veterans' writing events in the local area such as a Veteran Playwriting Festival.

'When I was applying to the university [Salem State University, Massachusetts], I met somebody who said there is three types of veterans you will meet: those that are all about being a veteran and it's all they've got in terms of identity; those who want nothing to do with veterans – they won't go to the VA [US Department of Veterans Affairs], they won't get any of the benefits that are deserving of them, they won't even tell you about their military service; and the third one – and he said it's the hardest, but it's the most healthy – is those that have integrated their past experiences with the creation of what they are becoming.'

'I think the writing community you find has its quirks, it has its own culture, its own lingo, and just like the military with different branches - you have your poets as you have your marines, your army as you have your fiction writers.'

**Cannon Fodder**

The first round makes hydraulics crackle.

A bang.

A fizzle and a thud,

The howitzer bucking back,

Whinnying into the ground.

My heart inches from the warming steel.

Smoke retching outward as we slam in another round.

“Fire for Effect!” they call!

And ten rounds are prepared.

Heavy cylinders lined up,

Olive drab paint chipping along their edges,

Fuze turned tight,

One is lifted into position,

I turn the switch,

The pipe shakes alive and sends the round in

Seated tight, precisely machined to fit together.

The round waiting to fulfill its god given purpose.

A halo of smoke rolls from the breech

Blackening its metal skin.

Tingeing the air with a mixture of gunpowder

And grease.

And me! A soldier and a poet!

Man-made purpose of mine to

Shoot. To make this horse buck. To live.

They slam a round in - perfect.
Hydraulics hiss –
Hinge swing, chamber sealed.
We point the tube at heaven,
Greased gears grind against sand
Blown around us
Caking the edges of my eyes.

A moment of union
With each round.

And I live.
God damn it, how I live.

As I make others die.

**Violent Seasons**

There is no violence
to an Autumn evening.

I arrived in November,
Autumn unstained.
Kept in New England
with you.

Winter contaminated by mortars.
Summer by fire.
Spring by the roses
Sprinkled with sand.

There was no violence
in those roses,
large and plush,
soft details of petals and stems --
A solitary bush
    exploding out of gravel.

They kept the bush to remind them that beauty is everywhere,
even war.

Autumn set aside,
We'd walked through the orchard.

Leaves turned –

Ageless trees side by side.

I left the biting cold

When the warmth of your hand in mine grew.

Autumn set aside,

I pass the rose bush daily.

Untamed leaves, buds, thorns and shadows,

Pressing against the chipping paint along the wall I follow.

I take out my knife

and sever

a rose head.

Death cools the softness

of its petals

pressed in a book.

A catch –

“Ah”

A blush of blood, pulled by a thorn.

Seeping into the pages.

I mailed the rose to you.

Maybe this would get a reply.

You set aside.

I walk by
left looking at the headless stalk,
a scar
against the eruption of petals.

They understood why
I'd done it.

They understood why
I was there.
And they hated it.
There was no violence in those roses.

The breeze had brought the smell of cider,
Crunching apples underfoot

We'd walked side by side.
Autumn set aside.

The heat withers the bush,
My hand runs along the wall, chipping paint onto the warming ground. Dried blood along boot edge, stained.

There is no violence to an Autumn evening
set aside.

The autumn leaf fell,

I only noticed when your hand pulled away from me.

## Claire Hughes

After leaving school, Claire Hughes joined the Royal Army Medical Corps as an ODP (Operating Department Practitioner). She was posted to Portsmouth, working in a civilian hospital before transferring to a field hospital. She spent five years in the Army before being medically discharged. Claire completed an MA in Creative Writing at Lancaster University in 2019.

‘My sergeant and my warrant officer didn’t like women being in the Army; they were very much: “it’s a man’s world and only men should be doing it.” There were a lot of comments like: “you run like a girl, you do this like a girl”, and wanting you to be more masculine. If you showed any sort of femininity it was a weakness.’

‘So I finally got to the mental health team and I just kept going: “I’m fine, there’s nothing wrong with me, just send me back to work, it’s fine” – so they were like: “you need to write about it. If you’re not going to talk to us will you write it down?” So I did. And I was like: “right, well I’m going to write poetically and then you won’t understand what I’m saying.”’

‘You can hide behind [poetry] – you can write what you want to say but people will interpret it in different ways and people will look at it and relate it to their own experience. So you can stand back and have a bit of a guard with poetry I think, in a way that you don’t get with prose.’

**At Home**

I ask my mom for scoff
Because I can't get rid
Of the taste of
Biscuit browns
From the rat packs.

As she cooks
She asks if I want
Tea or coffee
So I shout for a
Julie Andrews,
Then we sit and I tell her
About how our block is
Redders
And we're all
Thredders
With so and so because
She's always on the biff.

At the pub my mates ask
What is it you do again?
Well I'm an ODP
In the RAMC
So I pass the ET tube
And refill the O2
But over at 33
I sort out the tentage
The clic clac flooring
Count the
Cannulas
Syringes
Oxygen masks
and scalpels,
Make sure they don't disappear.

5, 4, 3, 2, 1,
They've all gone
When I come home
Two weekends later.

**Paper Dragon**

I am wounded,
Not by bullets
Or explosions
My teeth don’t chew
on shrapnel,
But my paper skin
Is burnt and scalded
By fingerprints.

Fingerprints of the baby
Born with no face
Of the teenager splintered
And broken and stitched back up
The mother who now won’t be
A mother
The new father
Who won’t see Christmas
The double amputee
Who can’t understand why
You can’t stop the pain in their phantom leg.

I am no dragon,
I didn’t inherit the hide
From my mother,
I hide in dark rooms
Try to layer over the cracks, but
My skin is still paper.

**Basic Training**

The O/C delivers his orders and says
March out is 0500 hours.

That's five in the morning to you, Wingnut,
Troop Sergeant says,
And make sure you're there
Five minutes before
So we can leave bang on.

Corporal says,
Make sure you're there
Five minutes before that
So I can check your kit
I don't want to get in the shit.

Then Scouse says,
I reckon we should do
Five minutes before that
Because Payne always dicks about

And Titch says to go
Five minutes before that
Because Sicknote is bound to be limping

No, says Taf,
Sicknote's bedded down but
Five minutes before is a good call
Because Ginge is a right
Jack bastard and
We'll get beasted if we're late.

So go five minutes before
The five minutes before
And the one before that,
Yeah?

Right,
Let's hurry up,
So we can
Wait.

## Noel Harrower

Noel Harrower was born on 18th January 1932. His father was a land agent working for Manchester City Council. In those days, M.C.C. owned the land around its reservoirs in Thirlmere and Haweswater to ensure that the farms were let to responsible people who maintained the fences so that animals did not pollute the drinking water. A local bailiff made regular checks, but Noel's father had to choose new tenants, and inspected the area several times a year.

Noel wrote a children's novel about adventures at sea when he was 13, calling it *The Risky Quest*. It was published by Harrap. At 18, his National Service was done in the Royal Army Service Corps. He worked in the Suez Canal Zone, leaving on the day King Farouk was overthrown and the Suez Crisis started. Noel graduated in English Literature and History at Manchester University, trained as a Careers Advisory Officer, working first in Solihull and later as Principal Careers Officer for Nottingham City Council. He has published two historical novels: one about events in Nottinghamshire during the English Civil War and the other a family saga about sustainable living in future times. Noel has been a keen actor in two Little Theatres, and is married to the poet, Jenny Johnson.

**The Blitz (in retrospect)**

We grew used to the scream of the sirens
in those shortening days.
It usually wailed soon after the darkness fell.
My brother and I slept in the old coal-house
under the stairs. Strengthened by an outer wall,
it was turned into a snug shelter, with
sleeping bags on the floor, and stools for Mum and Dad
in the old pantry. A wall had been demolished, and
two different functional areas performed a new task.

There was no point in trying to sleep in our bedrooms.
It was icy cold up there anyway, so we bunked in the shelter.
We grew used to it, after the first few nights.
It was an adventure we half enjoyed, until the bombing started.
We said our prayers, and trusted they made us safe.

The night I'll never forget was just before Christmas.
It had gone quiet, and Mum slipped out to get drinks.
We heard the shriek of a falling bomb, and Dad leaped up
to pull her back under cover. A neighbour's house collapsed
and we held our breath as the crash made our shelter vibrate.
We heard the smash of glass, and wondered "is our home gone?"
We stared at each other, waiting, and then – in the quiet – Dad
opened the pantry door to see that a disordered kitchen was still intact.

After a pause, he explored further (we still had dining room windows),
and then he crept towards the front and shouted "Oh, Elsie, come and look!"
We followed him into a room suddenly illuminated by a deep red sky.
At eight years old, I did not recognise the significance. It was so beautiful.
"Is this dawn?" I asked, awestruck.
"No," Dad told me, "It's Manchester burning!"

Our house was quite unspoiled.
After the All Clear sounded, we tried to rest again, but sleep eluded us.
It was Saturday morning
so, after breakfast, Roy and I went out to look at the damage.
We'd never seen anything like it before.
A neighbouring home had lost its front.
"It looks like a doll's house," I said in amazement,

peering at a bed, suspended on a tilting floor
in an upstairs room. We marvelled, and picked up shrapnel
that we knew we could take it to school for swops.
We had adjusted very quickly to a new way of life,
but it was much harder for the grown-ups.

## John Thampi

John Thampi was a Captain in the US Military Police Corps who deployed twice to Iraq and once to Afghanistan. He left the military in 2012. He has been a member of the NYU Veterans Writing Workshop and his writing has appeared in *9 Lines*, *The Rialto* and *Newtown Literary*.

'Most people you deal with are civilians and aren't familiar with the military and don't have a background in the military so it's hard for them to relate. So you either have to play the victim or the hero – truthfully, you do – I'd far better prefer to be the hero, so I do things subtly like listing my award. They don't know the difference between whether it's a heroic award or if it's just for service but still I list it, and maybe I'm complicit in this whole process as well, but if you don't in some ways define yourself, unless you're willing to fit the mould initially you're never able to break out of it.'

'Initially when I wrote I wrote still as something that's cathartic, something that I can really put down into words what I was going through and what I went through, but now that I realize – even at my workplace – I think I'm speaking for, I hate to say "we", but I am speaking for the "we", we as the legion or we as a people. So I think I am in some ways giving a voice to people who wouldn't otherwise ever put pen to paper.'

**Signal to Fight**

The duffle bags are packed light as with heavenly bodies
green and sand and wafer gray
fatigued & yearning for the journey
in a corkscrew C one thirty
I am in the black
bag we all carry
armored turtle hearts
roaring over white dunes and slick black tar
and I always lean to my left
check the last stretch
check the gunner resting in a cradle
check to see grinning with all that American White Cheese Bread
I knew I was in trouble when the cook was my guard, the doctor my driver
and Michael ricocheting volleys like it was
sunday racketball
the heat rising for this is all star kitchen
the chef shouting out orders
and the customers carrying out what remains
but we left minstrels in the hallway
wailing grasping at our hands
our children breaking older
and well wishers who turn away at the terminals
as if they were greeting
sweet specters
*Where are you going?*
Back back where else but back?
and the raucous cries like
shattered tambourines
holding on to my gunner
flooding my day dreams with their songs
and Michael in the Apache still hovering overhead
checking me before I black
fatigues packed
lean right
roar from above
is the signal
to fight.

**The Desert Life**
After Tracy K. Smith

When people talk about war
they speak as if it were a wayward son
Who demanded half your house and lost it
in a game of pitch and toss and it takes
me to a tent, the years I lived
on locusts in ready to eat packets
baptizing and burning
all the time
patrolling with shades
cast by ziggurats and gold plated towers
Straining
like a father in the labor ward
to separate the sound of flags folding
from the cries of joy's embrace. So
I go
on even while I remain
still,
a long way away.

**The MSR is a river**
*After Yusef Komunyakaa*

We draped flags over our chests.
We marked our years by each other's faces
watching the tall grasses
and stars of the Tigris,

specks of steel clung to our hearts
churned in black ponds and Gehenna's fire pits,
ourselves glowing in the desert heat, radiating
the MSR lined with siege machines and shadows.

We stomped down pedals & carved
a path through wilderness like jackals
carrying armored plates to dinner
at mountain villages

from Al-Naisiryah to Sulaymaniyah
with children left to grow in frames
receding from our shores.
We tore down gods of old.

Along the way our bodies
picked up speed and *Shukrans*
greased by lamb's fire burning
the road outside the base at sunset. Dust

blinds our dreams, sighing with the muezzin
cry over our bread and ladders
worn down to their legs. Wrestling
till the dawn broke in us

till our hips gave way.
The MSR is a headwater
returning to a garden, it is in Havilah
where there is gold

worn by those who carry in their chests
Urim & Thummim. We guarded
through night vision watches. Mothers

with infants rest under our wings.
We held breath

ready to rise with six rotary wings
eyes all around, praising
the MSR, a river, restoring
our homes like the dwellings
of the great city.

## Jamie Broady

Jamie Broady joined the US Army National Guard when she was 19. Her unit deployed to Germany in 1996/1997 in support of Operation Joint Endeavor, a NATO-led peacekeeping mission in Bosnia. She earned an MFA in writing (Nonfiction) in 2016 from Pacific University, and she serves part-time as the adjunct writing instructor for Pacific University's MSW program in Eugene, Oregon. In collaboration with Portland-based Returning Veterans Project, Jamie facilitates free writing workshops for veterans. She also works full-time as an advocate with one of Oregon's nine federally recognized Tribes in a circles of healing program for DVSA (domestic violence and sexual assault) survivors. She is currently finishing up writing a memoir & hybrid collection of poetry and lyric essay, and developing a program with the nonprofit, Our Forest, to help address veteran homelessness in Oregon. In her free time, she loves reading, nature hikes, trail runs, yoga, and spending time near the ocean.

'I deployed in 96/97 and it was probably 2010 when I went into the VA [US Department of Veterans Affairs] with a friend of mine who asked me to come with her as a sort of moral support to talk to the MST (Military Sexual Trauma) counselor. [...] And so I went along with her and then that counselor turned to me and said: 'well, what's your story?' And I was kind of taken aback by that and first responded with: 'what do you mean? I didn't go through anything like that.' [...] And she just said: 'well, I want to hear your story, what's your story? You have a story too.' And I think she knew then what I've learned since in working with many other women veterans through writing workshops and just talking with other women veterans over the years: that every woman has a story and that falls on a spectrum somewhere probably, but every woman I've talked to has a story of MST, experiencing MST in the military at some level.'

'[Writing] helps to transpose that trauma and to transcend it and to find the complicated bits in it – it's not all black and white. I had a sense of complicity even, in my own experiences, at least part of them, and to just parse that out and examine that a little bit, it helps to process it and bring it out from just holding it in my body, which can really exacerbate stress. [G]etting it out onto the page allows and encourages other people to do the same, I think.'

‘I know that when I first started using the VA system, which was right after I redeployed [...] I was pretty young – I was 21 – and I didn’t look like a veteran to people: I had long hair, I just looked like a girl, and I remember when I was waiting for an appointment at the VA and I was surrounded by these male veterans, a lot of them older too. [They asked:] ‘well, who are you waiting for?’ and ‘why are you here?’, ‘you’re too young to be a veteran!’

**My Body is**

In line at the mess hall at Hanau
the lead line cook, a slim grizzled man says,
*I've a message for you: meet me out back after dinner.*
On my plate: a mound of boiled yellow potatoes, soft splayed vegetables, a bit of salt and fruit.
My belly, once ready, is coiled, nervous, refusing this heaped mash.

I wonder not at the Bosnian war, another religious faction war,
but at the mysterious message this cook carries
and whether I'll receive it--
he is not my chain of command;
I need not meet him.

Behind the mess hall he says:
*Meet the officer at midnight.*
The sky is already darkening behind him:
the silhouette of two hawks circling.
I stand near the metal doors only he can return through.
*He drove past you, he liked your smile.*

The officer is kind and becomes like a friend;
he drives a motorcycle and gives me a ride
and remembers to warn me about the muffler.
When he's deployed downrange, he becomes a pen-pal;
later: a refracted image on a television screen
talking to Oprah about leadership.
He seems kind still, this war-torn veteran.

His friend the lieutenant though,
he raped me in Hanau while I was sleeping.
This was unexpected.
A scattered group of us sleeping it off
after a party in an officer's apartment.
He too seemed kind and he had a fiancée back home.
That's what I was thinking: *but I thought he had a fiancée back home.*
There is a man, one arm against the wall,
peeing onto a suitcase beneath the window.

I wrap my hand around my wrist

to remember when I was a child:
my body is
my body is.

My body is mine.

**Weekend off Base**

Winter 1997.

5 of us pile in a rusted Maroon red sedan<br>
My army duffle packed<br>
                              too full--<br>
put it back, the driver says.<br>
                            I might need<br>
all of it, I say.           Just let her in, they say.<br>
And off we go<br>
                              to Dachau.

Winter frigid air bare trees double socks pinched toes<br>
                              cold with numb.<br>
We stop for pizza along the way<br>
I order Margherita, my favorite:<br>
                              I am too full.<br>
Jason is mean to his wife<br>
He calls                  her names.<br>
We look at him:<br>
you idiot.

In Dachau we stand          apart<br>
in the museum:<br>
large b and w photographs of men<br>
standing in rows<br>
perfectly               still<br>
at attention for hours<br>
                              in rumpled white issue shirts draped over hollow stone<br>
bones.

We tour the gas chambers<br>
never used             the guide says.<br>
The pits where bodies were thrown heaped;<br>
the prison and long low dirt hall--a prison<br>
                                                within a prison.<br>
We crouched to get through<br>
the rusted metal bare bunks<br>
where they slept<br>
and prayed

and traded crusts of bread: bits of life
for contraband: a trinket
                    a pill
                    a pen
                    a swath of hair.

I used to eat cream of wheat in my barracks--
comfort food mixed with brown sugar and baby soy formula from the PX;
I ate it when I was sad or full of rage--      I was too full

I always come back to this:
these men standing
at attention for hours,
days, years
and                    still they stand.

## *from* Basic Training

Weeks 4-6: White Phase: *Living Army Values. Dig in deep and find your personal courage in order to complete the mission.*

The room is too bright—
garish fluorescent light makes everything look pale, washed out.
The others, five of them, watch me as I walk in, then look back down at themselves.
One picks furiously at the skin around her nails;
another twists the thin gold band around her left ring finger.
Their eyes are swollen, rimmed with red.
Sgt. Jones tells me *Sit,*
but I stay standing.
She says *Each of you have been named.*
There are six of us.
Flickering fluorescent lights overhead make me dizzy.
Jones says: *File an MP report or be dishonorably discharged.*
And *You too are complicit.*
One young woman sobs. She has a baby back home.
She has to be eighteen, but she looks fifteen, the girl with the baby.
Sgt. Jones stands with her back straight, rigid. Her hands resting lightly on the table,
curled in like brown leaves.
Another girl sits slouched in her chair, arms folded tightly against her small chest.
Jones asks if Sgt. Davis ever came by my bunk at night during head count.
*Did he ever touch you under the blanket while you were sleeping, or not sleeping*,
she asks. Heat pricks its way up my chest, my neck and jaw.
This image turns in my mind and then a heavy ache like I imagine labor to be,
a sudden pulling in my lower abdomen and bowels.
*No*, I say. *He never did that.*
The young mother recruit starts to cry again.
Another laughs.
Sgt. Jones' voice is no longer gentle. *Sergeant Davis abused his power, but he is a married man. And you too have participated in adultery, which is against the military law.*
Her hands press on the table as if she's trying to hold it down.

*You have a responsibility to tell the truth. And it's your only chance.*
I wish I knew what she means by *your only chance:*
Whatever she means, she is wrong. We will have so many chances, too many.
But most of us will turn away every time,
pretending that everything is fine.

I am a part of this group of women: his wife from the photo, with her ebony skin and bright smile and hopeful eyes, that girl there—an elfin female, petite and fragile looking,
and that one athletic and thick with muscle and boyish with her short hair,
and that one, and that one. And me, the curvy one with the strange accent and dark eyes,
who is always, always asked: *Where are you from?*
He doesn't have a type. Together, we make the perfect woman, a goddess. An object, still.
I am just a part of the sum of the whole, a fraction.
I am ashamed. I am ashamed of my reduced status. I am ashamed of my shame.
We, together, are more than a sum of our parts.
There is a difference, subtle as it may be, between not lying and telling the truth.
From the truth you know and the truth you tell.
Between your complicity and his abuse of power.
I live, for a long time, in the landscape of that difference.

I gulp in the crisp fall air and startle at the jagged, almost violent,
lines of the burnt orange and red leaves of the trees against the still blue of the sky.
The trees are startling in their unfamiliarity,
like old friends who have changed so much since you've last seen them.

## Andrew Fassett

Andrew Fassett was an officer in the US Marine Corps for nearly seven years. He served first in Okinawa, Japan and deployed as a platoon commander to Helmand Province, Afghanistan with the 9th Engineer Support Battalion. He went on to serve as an instructor at The Basic School, teaching the next generation of Marine Corps Officers. He left active duty in 2016 and moved to Boston, Massachusetts. He has recently joined the Massachusetts Army National Guard as a chaplain.

‘For me [poetry] is a way of expressing an experience or a feeling that is more than just a narrative. I’m particularly interested in not just expressing things for myself in an exploratory way but to connect with other people whether it be around an idea or an experience [...]. Anyone can make a poem so in that sense there is a collective experience.’

‘As I become a Reserve chaplain I would love to not wait until people are veterans to write – if people are going through an experience maybe providing [them] with workshops in that capacity I think would definitely be within the role and I think it could help people process their experiences better closer to the point of impact. If [you can] discover writing as part of a healing process wouldn’t it be better to have the tools more immediately present for those for whom particularly [writing] serves as a restorative outlet?’

**Shut Up and Color**

Alright class

grab your green crayon

pull out your paper

with the Eagle, Globe, and Anchor

forget the reason

why

because it won't be enough

to fill the picture in

just put it away

grab your green crayon

Shut up and color

**Sandcastles**

I have always loved castles.
I spent my childhood wishing I was born
before. In an age when castles walls were the difference
between life or death.
I think that's why I always loved going to ocean beaches
and making sandcastles.
Tightly packing sand
into premade molds of towers and battlements.
Using my hands to smooth off rough edges
and raise ramparts.
Architect of a new Camelot
rising from the sandy abyss.
Always imagining
my castle brought safety and security to the surrounding people.

But we all know
the real threats to my
sand kingdom,
marauding kids
and the rising tide.
Kids who love to kick
or can't help
but stumble into something
so beautifully crafted.
Fortunately, as long as I'm around,
it is easy to rebuild.
The rising tide poses
an even greater threat.
I can build barriers of sand
or in desperation, throw
my body down as a wall,
but if I built too close,
there is no stopping
the destruction.

I liked to leave the beach while my sandcastle was
still intact
or destroy it

myself. If I did leave it intact,
I left firmly knowing
it wouldn't be there
when I return.
Because I would be a fool
to think it would be.

As I got older, I moved on
to bigger projects.
Using heavy equipment and not my hands
to push up walls of sand. Not
on the beach,
but in the Afghan desert.
Pouring sand into premade cells of HESCO
to create guard towers.
To keep the Afghan people safe.
Their threat was real
and not imaginary.
I threw myself into months
of building, demolishing, adjusting, fixing, and crafting
sandcastles.
I began to believe
castles still mattered in this world.
That maybe
I hadn't been born
too late after all.
And then,
I left,
with what I had built still intact.

Only later
I find out other people
have taken down many of my walls.
Even worse,
I read about how the tide of battle
has changed
and my sandcastles have been consumed by the rising tide.
Engulfed by the Taliban
with no tidal recession even speculated.
I hadn't yet understood that walls don't resist an attack.
The people inside them do.

Abandoned castles
are a tourist attraction.
Now I am left feeling impotent and disappointed.
I made the mistake
of thinking castles still mattered.
And that when I left my sandcastles behind
they would make a difference.

### The Nothing We Left Behind

A desperate stampede,

bare skin on jagged wire.

Hands red with fresh surprise.

Fingers grasp anything

to improve their lives.

For hours I watch them

scrounge. Departing

with prizes.

The nothing we left behind.

A little cash for

a hole.

More to place

a package inside.

No surprise

buried there.

Another country,

a different war,

they might have been *friend*.

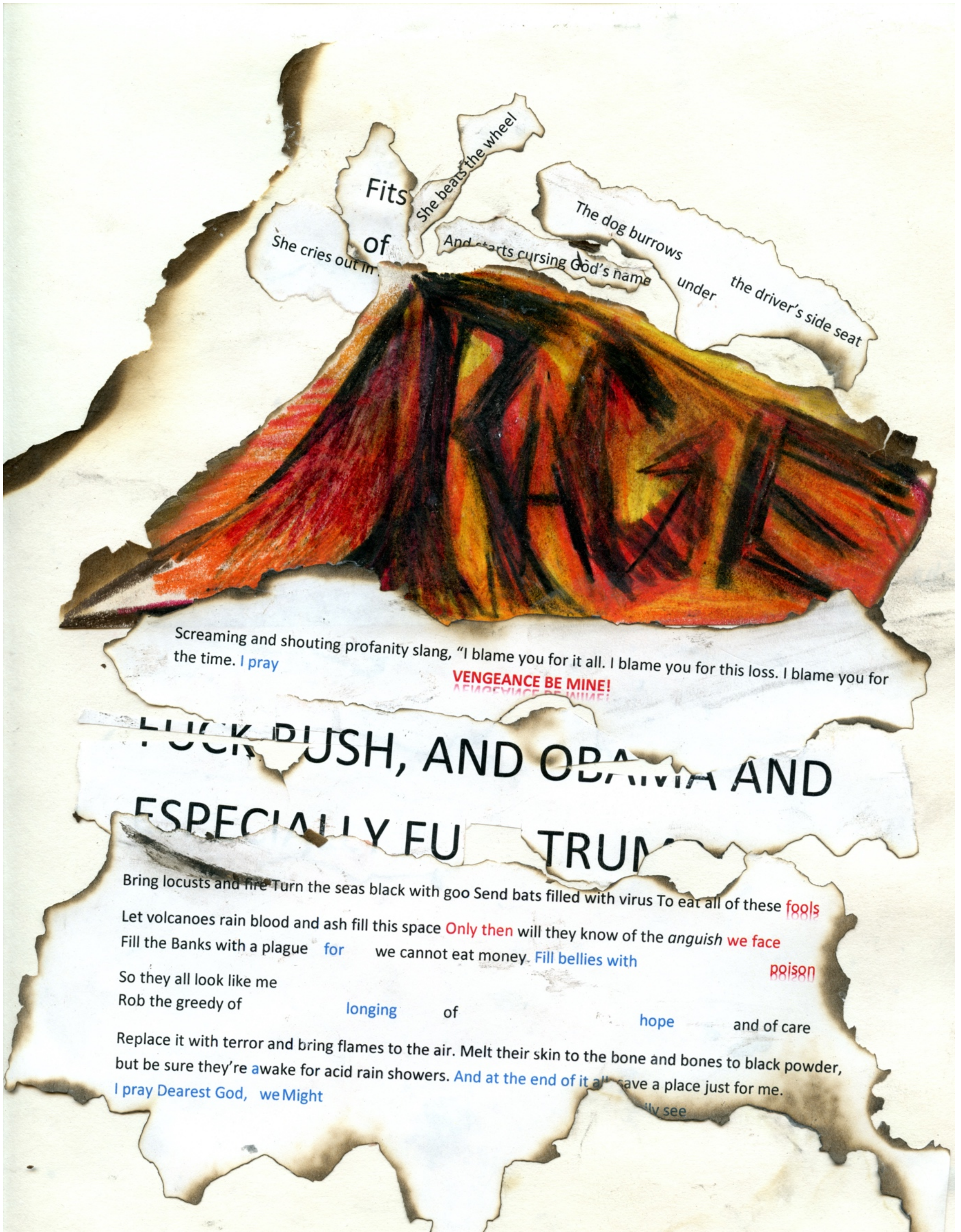
## Maggs Vibo

Maggs Vibo served as a sergeant at Tallil Air Base in Iraq while attached to the US XVIII Airborne Corps in 2003. She earned her MA in Liberal Studies in 2011. In the past, she created educational programs for online learning environments, museums, and as a Park Ranger for the National Park Service where she worked as a Civil War Battlefield Interpretive Guide. Her published poetry is archived at *O-Dark-Thirty*, 4.2 (Winter 2016); 4.3 (Spring 2016); and 5.3 Anthology (Spring 2017) available here:
https://odarkthirtydotorg.files.wordpress.com/2017/05/odt_5-3_final_for_print-1.pdf

'[A] lot of conversations [with people who criticize women in the military] that are always frustrating revolve around very feminine things that happen in the field and I always wonder: "well, this is happening to astronauts, why aren't you asking the female astronauts?" You deal with things, you take care of things, and I did exactly the same thing, and for me I feel like it made me stronger, so if you think it makes me weaker, let me challenge you on that and let's have a conversation. So in this way writing has been able to open up this idea where I can talk to them and go: "I don't know if I see things the way you do."'

'I feel that the best interpreters for a battlefield are the people who have gone to war. [...] There are books that explain it but I would hope that because you have *lived it* and you have walked in those boots and you have shuffled your feet and you have fallen down because you're so tired and stumbled and gone through that feeling of "am I going to be infertile because they just gave me the shot? Is dealing with this mound of trash that's burning, is that going to ruin my chance for having a family later on?" Those kind of worries that maybe necessarily someone who hasn't gone through it - maybe they're not going to be able to interpret it as well - whereas I look at someone who has been through, say, the Overland Campaign [during the American Civil War] and they've gone through the Wilderness and they're talking about the smell of things and I'm very in tune with that. I go: "I know a way to interpret this, I know what that feeling of dread or despair really is like", and I want to make sure that when someone is with me and I'm giving them a tour, they feel that and they walk away going: "I learned something and I can take that with me and 155 years ago doesn't seem that long ago."'

## Rage



## To Our Fallen

Rows upon rows of the white, the grey,

...And the crumbling lay
...And rush to the cliffs
...And sink in the seas
...And dash No Man's Land

Crushing shadows over sands,
Fertilizing grasses,
Filling trenches (with mud and bones),
Littering jungles (with blood and stones),

In places many can't pronounce,
Won't touch and certainly (never plan to),
Whisper in reverence to:
They Don't Respect You

Even when the signs
(Stomped into hallowed grounds) ask you to:

The tapping feet (of the elite) guard at the

of The Unknowns
W a triune of nurses cries out
(to ask: Why?)

And ghosts of the forgotten,
Flank a Wall (nearby)

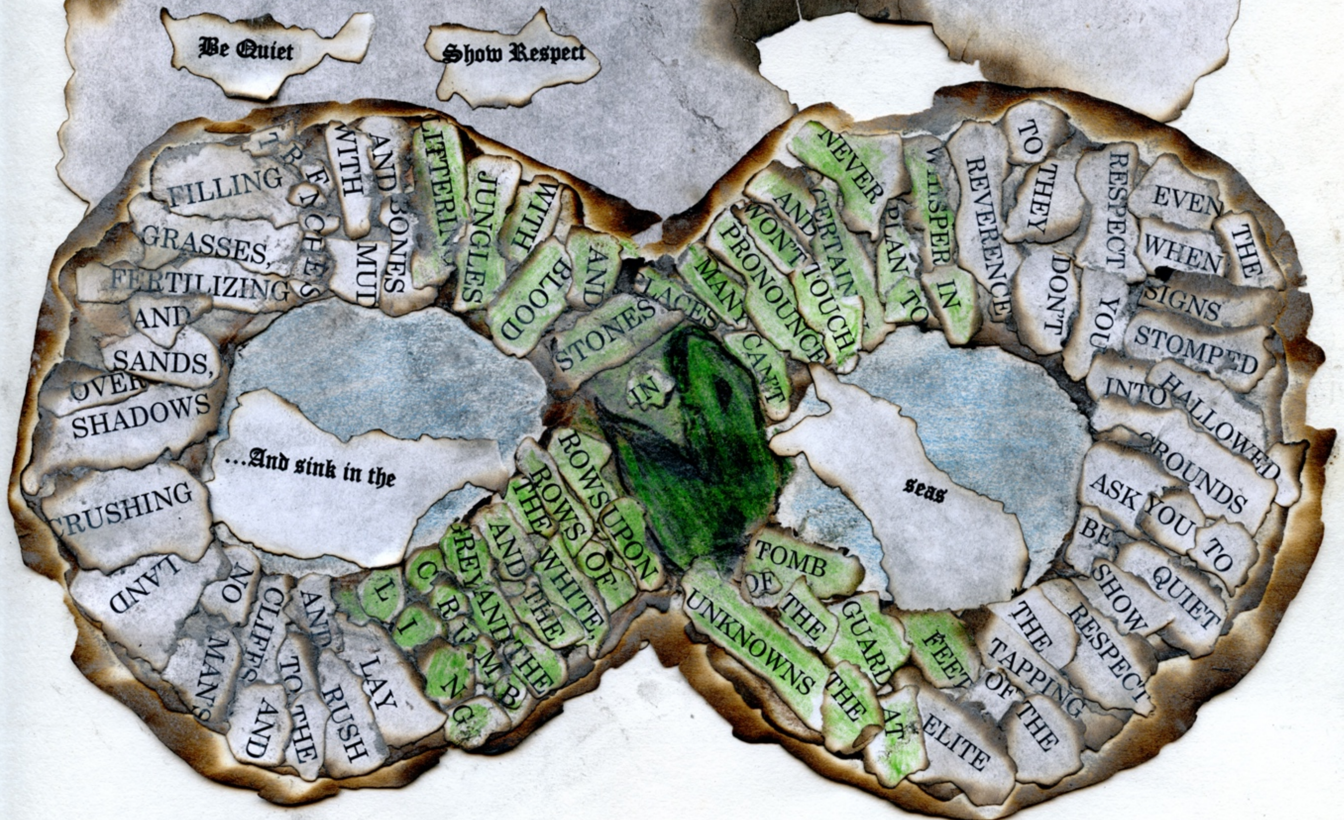
Fewer of the few will (bravely) ask: Why?

And fewer still, will even walk by to

Show a moment of reflection
(With a helpful guide),

As she interprets the impact of a woman
Found wearing Imposition and Injustice

To Our Fallen



# VI

# Writing prompts

## Writing prompts
## Susie Campbell

You might like to use the poems in this anthology as a springboard for your own writing. Here are some 'warm-up' activities and prompts that could help you to get started.

### Writing Warm-Ups

It sometimes helps to do a short writing activity before you embark on something more focused. Here are some 'warm-up' prompts to help get you into a creative frame of mind.

1. **'Timed' free writing**

   Use the timer on your phone to give yourself a very short time to write freely in response to the following prompts.

   a) Give yourself thirty seconds to write about **the Moon** or any other heavenly body.

   b) Give yourself sixty seconds to write about **'Spring'** or one of the other seasons.

   c) Choose **any ordinary object** in your house. Give yourself three minutes to write about it.

   Make sure that you set the timer on your phone and stop the minute the alarm goes off. Put these pieces of writing to one side. You may find there are ideas, words or phrases you might want to use later.

2. **Making your mark**

   Using crayons, paints, chalks or other any other medium that is not a pen, pencil or keyboard, **create one or a series of *apotropaic* marks**. An *apotropaic* mark is a mark made to protect you from something or to ward off evil. In the past, people scratched or drew marks on doorways and window sills to ward off evil spirits.

Decide what you want your mark (or marks) to protect you from and draw your own unique sign. An alternative option is to design a mark to attract a blessing or encourage something lucky or good to happen to you. Put your designs to one side for later use.

### 3. Experimenting with fragments

a) **Write a very short poem on a piece of paper**. Try combining some of the ideas or images from your first warm up exercises to make one short poem. Read the poem out aloud to yourself.

b) Now **tear the paper into three pieces**. Don't think about it, just tear! You should now have three pieces of paper in your hand. Choose one of them to throw away. Recombine the two pieces you have left (without adding any new words). Read it out aloud again. Which is the more interesting version of your poem?

## Writing Prompts

Give yourself a bit longer to work on these. You might find it easiest to start with a very rough draft. You can then return to it as often as you like to work it into a finished poem. Do go back to some of the ideas and images that came out of the writing warm-up activities. There are suggestions for which poems in the anthology might inspire you to respond to these prompts.

1. Several of the poems in this anthology use **slang or jargon** to suggest a military setting or to convey the experience of being in a particular environment.

   a) Start by making a list of the slang, jargon or acronyms that you use when involved in a particular activity. You might want to think about your job, a favourite sport or creative activity you enjoy. List all the slang and jargon you use in that situation.

   b) Once you have made your list, use it to write a poem incorporating three or more examples from your list. Don't explain what they mean – part of the 'magic' of these words is the way they create the sense of a different 'world' for the reader.

c) You might want to look at the following poem/s in the anthology (please note many of the poems use more than one of the approaches referred to here): 'At Home' (Claire Hughes).

2. The use of **technical language** is part of the military experience as many of the poems in this anthology demonstrate. Technical language is different from slang or jargon because it suggests the kinds of specialist equipment and skills required by a particular occupation or activity.

   a) Write a poem that incorporates one or more examples of technical language.

   b) You might want to look at the following poem/s in the anthology: 'Signal to Fight' (John Thampi), 'Cannon Fodder' (Tom Laaser).

3. Some of the poems in the anthology use **a strong visual element** to increase their impact. Use the mark/s you created in the warm-up activity or take a photograph as the starting point for a poem. You may want to incorporate this mark or photograph in the finished poem.

   a) You might want to look at the following poem/s in the anthology: 'Shut Up and Color' (Andrew Fassett), 'Rage' (Maggs Vibo), 'To Our Fallen' (Maggs Vibo).

4. Many of the poems in this anthology incorporate **things that people have actually said** as a way of bringing the poem to life. Write a poem that includes two or more examples of dialogue or phrases people have said (you can of course make these up if you can't remember the exact words).

   a) You might want to look at the following poem/s in the anthology: 'Basic Training' (Claire Hughes), 'Basic Training' (Jamie Broady), 'The Blitz' (Noel Harrower).

5. **Making a journey or travelling to a different country** is a key theme for many of the poems in this anthology. Write a poem that traces a journey that you have made. It might be a real journey or an imagined journey. You might want to consider writing about a commemorative journey you have made (examples of commemorative journeys might include going back to a place that is important to you, visiting the

birthplace of a significant person or making a trip to a graveyard, memorial or battlefield).

a) You might want to look at the following poem/s in the anthology: 'Sandcastles' (Andrew Fassett), 'The Desert Life' (John Thampi), 'Violent Seasons' (Tom Laaser).

6. Some of these poems write about **very painful experiences**. Some of them express that pain through broken lines or scattering words across the page. Write a poem that experiments with fragmenting language as a way of describing a violent or painful experience.

    a) You might want to look at the following poem/s in the anthology: 'Weekend off Base' (Jamie Broady).

7. One of the warm-up activities involved you writing about an ordinary, domestic object. Write a poem that takes this or another **ordinary object** as the starting point for an extended piece of writing.

    a) You might want to look at the following poem in the anthology: 'Flaking' (Jo Young).

8. **Choose any one of the poems** that particularly engages you and write your own poem in response to it.

During the all-female workshop, four participants and a workshop leader work on their written pieces or reflections.

# VII

# About the Oxford Brookes Veterans' Poetry Workshop

## About the Oxford Brookes Veterans' Poetry Workshop

Established in 2019, the Oxford Brookes Veterans' Poetry Workshop is run by Oxford Brookes Poetry Centre.

The Centre is based in the Department of English and Modern Languages at Oxford Brookes University in Oxford, where colleagues associated with the Poetry Centre write, research and teach a wide variety of poetry. The Centre acts as an advocate for the role of poetry in today's society by organizing poetry readings, running an international poetry competition (with Open and English as an Additional Language categories), and publishing poetry through its poetry pamphlet press, **ignition**press.

The Veterans' Poetry Workshop is led by Dr Niall Munro and Susie Campbell, with contributions from Dr Jane Potter, Dr Rita Phillips, Alex Donnelly, and Dr Hester Bradley. The idea for the workshop emerged from an international seminar series, 'Post-War: Commemoration, Reconstruction, Reconciliation', which was run jointly by Oxford Brookes University and the University of Oxford and co-convened by Professor Kate McLoughlin, Dr Catherine Gilbert, and Dr Niall Munro.

The Workshop has been funded by Oxford Brookes University and supported by Blesma, the Limbless Veterans (https://blesma.org), the NYU Veterans Writing Workshop, and the William Joiner Institute for the Study of War and Social Consequences based at the University of Massachusetts Boston (https://www.umb.edu/joinerinstitute). The Poetry Centre would particularly like to thank Dr Katharine Craik, Professor Gary Browning, Mitch Manning, Zachary Sussman, and Jerri Bell for their help in making the workshops happen.

The anthology's title page and section pages use the font Mermaid, created by Scott Simpson. We are very grateful indeed to Scott for generously allowing us to use his font. You can find more of Scott's work here: https://www.dafont.com/scott-simpson.d3985

For more information about the veterans' workshop and the Poetry Centre, please visit our website, where you can find full audio of the interviews with the

participants and transcripts of those interviews: https://www.brookes.ac.uk/poetry-centre/veterans--poetry-workshops/ On the site you can also sign up for our Weekly Poem to receive a contemporary poem in your inbox each week. This mailing also doubles as our newsletter so you can find out about our latest activities. We are also active on social media: find us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram at @brookespoetry

**We would warmly welcome your thoughts about the poems and other writings in this anthology. Please send them to Niall Munro (niall.munro@brookes.ac.uk) or follow this link to fill out a short feedback form:** https://forms.gle/TSEPWrjNYTmddNpW9

Five participants experiment with watercolours, crayons, chalk, charcoal and other media to present their writing and thoughts in different ways to just text.