Nicole Oquendo

War

My father would say he was on the front page of a newspaper liberating Elian Gonzales while flying planes in Kosovo and also a passenger on a private jet—he'd tell me I went too and don't remember. In those moments I would watch him with a child's eyes marching around our house in old marine fatigues—holy armor—and look into his dark face, darker still with a thick coat of black paint—paint that, certainly, had seen the jungle, seen Charlie's slanted eyes full of stereotypes, mutilated him, wore his body as charms, paint that had traveled in helicopters whose bolts crumbled on lifting off, smoked the best red rock heroin in town, and could kill a man seventeen ways out of basic training. I knew then the only thing greater than my father, swinging a knife that didn't come from our kitchen, with a gun at his hip ready to take life, was the lie, disguised, tired, that any of this was real.

To this day he swears my memories are false, would tear these pages if he read them. Eventually I stopped trying, full of tears, to convince him that there isn't a boulder big enough to hide time under, and that truth isn't theoretical. We both shove things down, far into our stomachs, and neither of us want to remember. I inherited lies from my father, and we digest them, along with truth, in pieces.

In New York he wore a shirt buttoned to the top, with a nice tie and starched pants, to high school every day. I don't know the name of the school; can't confirm or deny the fights he participated in; can't differentiate his truth from his lies. In the same breath he told me about saving my mother by pulling a man out of his car window, stretching him out, and beating him into the road—my father was also a third degree black belt. She wouldn't assure me that it was true, but he has martial arts certificates on his walls that say so. I'm sure he owned a mechanic shop sometime after returning from Vietnam; I speculate that he was the best.

I know for sure that he was on the roof of a building (not sure

how tall, it gets bigger every time I hear it—last I checked it was 40 stories), and fell, landing on his feet, his back becoming an accordion, ruining his bones. He has surgeries, still, and I don't know if he's making up his pain—he works construction, and in his 60s, builds houses. My father is tough, a marine, but I believe he is selling his medication. I also think he fell on purpose.

He throws his knife near me around midnight, pulls it out of the wall, and throws it back again over and over while he calls my mother a coward for holding me in front of her. He must have been aiming at the wall, though—he had told me before about his years of training in knife throwing; that he could hit our mailbox from the living room if he wanted, the same story always. He has as much of a habit of covering these knife holes as he does making them, just as I have as habit of touching their ghosts after he patches them, sore from hiding the truth, letting my fingertips trail the memorial over and over, wondering when my father became an enemy in a war I didn't understand, that was never officially declared.

My father is the riverbank where I gather dirty water; the only thing we share is silt (a lie—we are artists; I know he hides his paintings in the safe, next to the medals, so many from battles I can't remember studying in school). He was shot, though, that I know. Four times, he says, but I haven't yet been able to count the number of purple hearts or years of unrealized potential he stored away so no one else could find out for sure.

In Vietnam, his enemies took him and thrust bamboo shoots under his fingernails, separating them from the bones at the roots, dripped water on his head in the same spot until the bruise spread across his whole face (his paint had probably come off by now), shot him in the knees, chest, and arm until he was found months later. America gave him those medals (he has so many medals I know for sure he was shot). The only way I can think of to justify his problem, his need to hurt other men, is to imagine them killing him, which in some ways they did.

Outside of the safe he keeps a collection of guns and knives, and I was raised to believe that they were left over from his war. When he builds houses with Peter, as they strain their bodies and our relationships, he rests, throws one of these knives into the soft

earth around him, leans over, picks it up, throws it again. Over and over. Peter never complains; he does a lot of lifting for my father, the main benefit being the stories we get to tell each other at home about the lies my father told that day, usually having to do with present-day military actions. But Peter never calls him by his name—always your father.

All animals deserve to be called something.

He leads my mother from the room, and there is no sound as he creeps behind her, his small gun sticking out of the back of his pants, until she screams at his silhouette. I don't know what she did to deserve it, but he swears there is a reason. He leaves her on the floor and disappears into the other side of the house.

I sneak out into the hall, recon style. My mother is hyperventilating, flopping with flailing gills, washed up on a strange shore. I think of honor, and my brother hiding in his room, as I crawl through our jungle over trunks of broken things.

She cries out, Tell your father, chokes.

Tell your father, as if he could undo it. I don't understand my father's need to hurt, nor do I understand my mother's ancient yet familiar need to need him.

I stand up and brush off my nightgown; I am small, hair matted with tears. He is alone in the kitchen. He could have been drinking, knifing, anything, but he was standing next to the cabinet where the bags were like a guardian at his post.

Mommy is dying, I say. She says she needs a paper bag.

He gave them to me, cold, and asked questions I couldn't hear. I wonder if he thought my mother was dying too, but had to pretend that she wasn't because he'd killed enough people already.

My father parks his truck in the garage. He steps out, kisses me hello, walks heavy past me through the dining room to the kitchen cabinet, gets some things, and leaves again. In the next moment his truck is exploding through the dining room wall, our entire collection of dusty figurines and memorabilia thrust forward over our table, glass everywhere. I watch him as he reverses the car through the new hole, creeping backwards like a bear into its cave, hesitant, fearful, afraid to make any sudden movements lest he drive through

again, crushing me under his tires.

After he doesn't come out, I breathe, and I walk slowly in my night clothes out of the dining room through the regular door, not the cave door. He sitting in the truck, crying, holding a small silver gun, which frightens me more than he frightens me.

He looks up at me, loading that gun, and holds it to his head, still crying, maybe now more from the embarrassment of being caught. I open his car door, always so heavy for my small hands, and cold. We don't hug, and I don't hold him.

You—

He cries harder, almost incoherent now, words flying out as he shakes into a father's weeping.

You want me to die, don't you, he says.

How could I tell him my silent answer: Yes, please kill yourself, please, because if you don't do it, I'll do it (the murder or the suicide—I don't think I decided).

Maybe I should just kill myself now, he says.

And how could I tell him, too, that I needed him alive in a way that was purely financial, that he had forced our relationship into this corner by paying the mortgage, that we would be homeless without him, and what would I do with all of his things—no one would want the medals unless his name wasn't on them, and I don't remember if it was or not.

He asks me to give him a reason not to do it. I may have told him I loved him.

Not all animals deserve to have names.

I wake up curled around my mother and tap her arm lightly from the bed. Her paper bags still rest next to her, casualties crumpled on the carpet. Then, the sound of a combat boot crushing my wooden bed frame, the loudest noise I've ever heard—suppressive fire to my tiny ears—and as my mother screams again I look into my father's face. He is black against the red streaking sunrise in the window behind him, an eclipse in a wicker chair, watching us. He kicked the bed when he saw us moving. He has to sleep with his eyes open for real, I think to myself after it goes quiet again.

He walks into the living room, a shadow again, and my mother follows him while I worry. Where is my medal for saving my

mother, I wonder.

We had escaped the night before to a shelter while my father sat in a jail cell. There is a playground for my brother and me, but while he is outside on the swings with the other kids, I sit inside with my mother. We eat broccoli and cheese soup.

Do you miss him? I'm going to let you decide what you want us do, she says.

Like my father, we didn't get a homecoming parade.

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