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LETTER TO MY SISTERS IN LOVE WITH SOLDIERS

By Shailja Patel

Author's note:

My thanks to my friend, Jeff Paterson, the first US Marine to refuse to serve in the Gulf, for his brave and enlightening work which was a key resource.

<http://www.jeffpaterson.com>

And to Stephen Funk, Aimee Allison, Camillo Mejia, Eren Watada, and hundreds of other members of the US military who have refused to maim, murder, rape and torture on the orders of their government.

Please visit: <http://www.shailja.com> for more

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I beg you
not to close your eyes.

Do not turn from the faces
of women raped, tortured
beaten, murdered by US soldiers
from Manila to Mombasa, from Baghdad
to Bangkok. Do not tell yourself
your man is different. Somehow
mysteriously absent
when they bomb
civilian cities, plough
living armies into highways of death.

Do not buy the deception
that he has no other options.
Post on your mirror, and his
websites and phone numbers
of Veterans For Peace, Conscientious Objectors
Books Not Bars, Refuse and Resist, ANSWER,
Not In Our Name, every army
battling for freedom and justice
right here.

Next to it, put a list
of what's available to your man,
that is not to a sixteen,
twenty-six, forty-six year old man
in Palestine,
Sierra Leone, East Timor,
Laos, Congo, Haiti.

One: A passport. Key to the world, an American
passport. Two: The right to reside.
To build a life that will, likelier than not,
endure. Three: Forty-eight contiguous states
that he can work in, cross borders freely,
no visas, checkpoints, barbed wire. Four: The right
to earn a living any way he chooses.
Five: Non-profits agencies, government agencies
billions of dollars of program funding.
Six: Libraries. Seven: Hospitals.
Eight: The internet.

What would he say now
about his lack of options
to a fourteen-year old soldier-in-training
in Gaza, a nine-year-old
Kalashnikov-toting orphan
in Liberia?

Spit out the myth
that you are guardian, safe
deposit box, for his humanity.

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Exercise your own humanity.
Remember Audre Lorde:
this eye is not for weeping
though tears are on my face
it must record
everything.

Tell him you would not
touch a man who shrapnelled
your sister, bombed
the clinic that treats
your mother's diabetes,
sliced open the water mains
to your neighborhood.
He cannot do these things
across the world, return
and reach for you with shaking hands.

Tell him you know
about R and R for troops.
Underage girls, barely-grown women
shipped in like crates of chilled
Budweisers; tell him you know
he will go out on Saturday nights
in Freetown, Seoul, Bogota,
with exact instructions
on how cheap to buy
a little brown or yellow
fucking machine
and what she will take –
everything.

How in church on Sunday
he will be hear
that families and girlfriends
back home cannot understand
the pressures he is under,
to defend and protect, so it's best
not to tell. How he will come
to believe it.

Make his eyes meet yours.

Tell him you have not spend years
learning to love your body, only to open it
to sperm laden with hidden minefields
of dioxins, alpha particles, untested
vaccines, waiting to explode
a patriotic rainbow
of tumors, malformations
into the organs, bones and blood
of your unborn children.
Read the Defense Department's
four-year study
on significantly higher rates
of heart and kidney defects
in children of Gulf War veterans. Factor
skin lesions, breathing problems, incipient
blindness, aka Gulf War Syndrome
into your dreams of a future.

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Memorize the names
of all two-hundred-and-fifty three
byproducts of depleted uranium,
their radioactive half-lives, the cancers
attributed to them. You will need
this information.

Imprint two words on your brain: Fort Bragg.
Four women killed by soldier husbands
in two weeks. Familiarize yourself
with figures
on violent assault of military wives
and girlfriends. Triple
the civilian rate. Know that calls
to violence hotlines spike
just before deployment,
right after men return.

Does he dream of heroism? Repeat aloud:
Iraqis living under Occupation
are heroes! War resisters
are heroes! The fictional rescue
of Jessica Lynch
is a joke.

Tell him you love him and love
is not unconditional support
for choices made from fear,
boredom, loneliness, weakness,
ignorance. Too many years of digesting
the label Worthless, stamped on him
by a state that tapes a rifle
to his right hand with dollar bills
while it rips
the scalpel, paintbrush, trombone
from his left. Decisions borne
of nightly terror
that he will live and die
unseen.

Tell him: You see him.

Remind yourself that the days
women were adjured
to be the heart for their men,
who had bigger work to do
out in the world
are over. Two hundred years
over. You need
all of your heart and he
needs all of his. Your hearts
have work to do.

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