

LYNN MARIE HOUSTON

My Father Sends Me a Card that Says You Are So Loved

By the time he had been in-country six months, my father stopped calling them helicopters, referred to them instead as birds: *Yesterday, I flew out on a bird with the Captain*, one of his letters reads.

Stateside, my father rode the blade and wing of war into our living room. Once, when we played hide-and-seek, I lost him somewhere in the house. When I finally called out, he emerged from the place I'd looked first. *A little trick I learned in Vietnam*, he said. *You hide where the enemy has already searched.*

But I didn't want to play the enemy. I wore his camouflage shirts into the woods, tails tied in a knot around my waist, cuffs rolled, the head of an eagle drooping near my elbow. I spoke to him over an imaginary radio, *Got your six. How copy?* I sighted targets with a bent thumb behind a rigid pointer finger. Is it true that we can love only what we fully understand? *Roger that. I read you loud and clear.*

On his first Christmas after being drafted, my father writes,
*I have adjusted from being a civilian and have accepted that I am
in Vietnam and will do my best, even though it hardly seems possible.*
The Army spent months training him to become a soldier
in an Airmobile unit—he learned to fire an M-60, rappel
from 50-feet off the ground, and set up a perimeter with trip flares.
But no one ever trained him to become a civilian again.

I've scoured my father's scrapbook of photos, read and re-read his letters,
but I've failed to understand what it means to have been born
in the shadow of this war, what it means to be loved by a man
who still calls a helicopter a bird, who still opens a trunk of green
fatigues and stares, jaw hardening, into a box full of medals.

Lynn Marie Houston holds a Ph.D. in English from Arizona State University and an MFA from Southern Connecticut State University. She is the winner of the 2018 Able Muse Poetry Contest, a recipient of an Artist Fellowship from the Connecticut Office of the Arts, and the author of three books of poetry: *The Clever Dream of Man* (winner of the Connecticut Press Club Award for Creative Work), *Unguarded* (winner of the Heartland Review Press Chapbook Contest), and *The Mauled Keeper* (winner of the National Federation of Press Women's Award for Creative Work, runner-up for the Eric Hoffman Award in Poetry, runner-up in the Cathy Smith Bowers Contest, runner-up for the New England Book Award in Poetry, and a finalist for the Montaigne Medal). She has a book of poems about helicopters and Vietnam forthcoming from Middle West Press in late 2019. For more information, please visit: lynnmhouston.com.