

LISA L. SIEDLARZ

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*Enduring Freedom*

—for my brother Kevin

1. *They're sending me to Afghanistan*

I clench my hands when you tell me this,  
nails leaving slices of harvest moons  
in my palms. The urge to vomit hits me.  
October 2005 in New England, the first  
signs of change through trees,  
the raspiness of fallen leaves in your voice  
as you ask me to assume power of attorney.  
I nod because speech sticks like first frost  
on a windowpane. I have six months to practice  
saying: *Be safe, little brother.*

2. *It's what I signed up for*

Time is measured by the swinging pine  
of the cuckoo clock, each half-hour strike  
sharp as a scythe. Our family sits around  
the fireplace after Thanksgiving dinner.

You talk about

*a living will.*

I face you but see flames rise and fall.  
Heat dries my eyes. I refuse to blink for fear  
of missing something. I slide back  
to our summers of hide-n-seek, innocence amuck  
in backyards like bead mongers at Mardi Gras.  
You say:

*Cemetery*

I take deep breaths to stop from screaming  
*how can they keep you beyond your eight years?*

I know your answer.

3. *A copy of my orders.*

Iced fingers climb my spine like an old wooden ladder.  
Four days until Christmas but these papers fast-forward me  
to Ft. Bragg where you'll train for three months before deployment:  
*Presidential order of activation not to exceed 545 days.*

Tears come easier than breathing. Fingers, tissues,  
back of hand try to blot out *Hazardous Combat Pay*  
no mention of the:

dog you had to give away  
lost slot on the fire department waiting list  
no plumbing license after two years of school

Dreams crystallize like ice,  
a razor's blade scrapes them to powder.  
I cup my hands to keep hope from dripping.

4. *January 7<sup>th</sup>*

came faster than an M-16 round.  
I stand in New Haven's Armory, an American  
flag clenched in my hand. Chills  
from the ground, soldiers and civilians  
mingle, shift weight from left to right  
to left again, try to relieve the discomfort

of goodbye. Buses to Ft. Bragg are due  
at 3:00, yet my hope clings like a bad joke.  
Children wail. I grit my teeth.  
I don't want you to carry sadness.  
Nothing works

5. *Training in the field begins*

for you at four a.m., ends at *twenty-two hundred*.  
Wishing your weekly calls would not drip  
with exhaustion, we speak of superficials to avoid  
the heart of your 18-month isolation.

*Laundry - phone calls - PX. Sleep?*

6. *To sleep somewhere other than Hell.*

Your four-day visit home is a small gift  
before deployment. Over dinner, you say  
I'll understand the barrack's nickname  
when I come to see you off. The family  
gathers for a quasi-Thanksgiving wearing  
masks that crack like thin ice. Jabs  
and bickering, it is what we do best.  
Shards of words are weapons against fear.  
You hate it.

7. *I Love You*

Three days ago we were landlocked  
at Ft. Bragg. You pointed out training sites  
for airborne infantry, identified booms  
of the mortars you've been training with  
for the last three months. Now in Maryland,  
I watch Atlantic waves curl in a rush to Ocean  
City's shore. A rip tide cuts horizontal  
through white foam before gravity pulls back  
water and anything caught in its churn.

Saying goodbye was like wrapping my arms  
around these five foot swells  
that crest and break where land rises as sharply  
as the C-130s carrying you westward to Afghanistan.  
The sea heaves wall after wall of water,  
carrying sunlight across its curves before folding  
in on itself, hiding the sparkle in an undertow.  
I sit on this sand without the weight of Kevlar,  
not having to choose between

cotton or moisture-wick clothes that melt  
to skin from the heat transfer of bullets.  
I sit here all day, watch surf pound  
shore like the rounds of your M-120s.  
I want to sit here for 18 months, hold my breath  
between each call and correspondence.  
But there is beauty in danger. Angry waves  
can jerk out my legs, suck me into a dark place.  
Sharks hunt just off these shores.  
They are hungry.

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**LISA L. SIEDLARZ** is an MFA candidate at Western Connecticut State University, and the current editor of Connecticut River Review. Her honors include the 2007 Leo Connellan prize, the 2006 *John Holmes* Poetry Award, and a 2006 pushcart nomination. Her publications include: *Calyx*, *Louisiana Literature*, *Connecticut Review*, *Rattle*, *Main Street Rag*, *Poetry Southeast*, *The South Carolina Review*, *New Millennium Writings*, *CADUCEUS*, *Alimentum*, *Bent Pin Quarterly*, *Minnetonka Review*, and *The Anthology of New England Writers 2008*. Ms. Siedlarz is the loan administrator for Southern Connecticut State University. She lives in New Haven, Connecticut.