

# I DREAM MY BROTHER PLAYS BASEBALL

Lisa L. Siedlarz



COMMENTARY BY SONJA PASQUANTONIO

---

## I Dream My Brother Plays Baseball

by Lisa Siedlarz

Clemson University Digital Press, 2009

**T**HE TITLE OF THIS POETRY COLLECTION CONJURES IMAGES of lazy summer afternoons, hotdogs, and squealing children. I stared at the title, trying to flesh out any innuendo. Three pages later, I exhaled, still reeling from a below-the-belt sucker punch. I'd been meticulously set up.

Read Lisa Siedlarz and you'll swear she's the conduit for every airman, soldier, sailor and marine who ever spent time in the dust-bowl of "Ass-Crack-istan" driving through minefields or waking to the "shit lagoon" while

dressed in pounds: helmet, seven:  
ceramic body armor, twenty-two;  
load-bearing vest packed with batteries, bullets and grenades, thirty.  
We are walking bombs with elephant grace.

Her lines embrace a litany of combat minutiae that channels authors such as Tim O'Brien in *The Things They Carried*, or Brian Turner's *Here Bullet*. The evocative poetry allows Siedlarz to bare herself and the burden she carries for her brother, Kevin, who served fifteen months as an infantryman and volunteer medic with the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 102<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Brigade in Afghanistan.

Her book is a backstage pass to both "theaters": the war and the homefront. It's a seminal collection of insights about how she and her brother respond to lingering

effects of combat. Siedlarz' first poem, "Enduring Freedom," exposes the long-standing Iraq/Afghanistan missions by blurring the lines of depersonalization and outlining the singularity of Kevin's experiences. I devoured the exquisite images, sucked into an emotional vortex primarily recognized by war veterans, but applicable to anyone with representative knowledge of war. Like many of us faced with deployments, Siedlarz buried her true emotions, pretending to be positive and upbeat, thus shaping Kevin's combat experience by illustrating how war simultaneously destroys and cultivates our human experience. But the façade is cracking. Inwardly Siedlarz admits, "I take deep breaths to stop from screaming."

The book is broken into three chapters, "Sister Speaks," "Brother Speaks" and "Pictures Speak," each possessing a fundamentally different tone and focus. You can sense the tonal shift in "Brother Speaks," where readers join Kevin as he switches between infantryman and medic. We are embedded, watching his journey, choking on the sand-filled dust, feeling the crunch of camel spiders under booted foot and gulping *Khoshgovar* from a spit-cleaned glass. Together, we navigate the emotional vicissitudes that is this thing called life—and war.

From the section, "Sister Speaks," the poem "Memorial Day," merges two worlds and three lives—boys unaffected by war, Kevin and Siedlarz—on a collision course:

Morning sun is criminally bright.  
The boys secure and hoist the flag  
over the newly installed plaque  
In memory of the twenty year old pfc.  
*Yes, he writes, its one hundred degrees*

*dusty as hell, and I played waffle ball.  
They even gave us a special treat  
Get a load of the picture I've attached*

On screen my brother, red faced  
and smiling, holds two lobster tails.  
Beside him a whole case on ice,  
lined up in rows, a mass grave.

She describes the embodiment of restful civilian life. Small boys accomplish the mundane task of hoisting their country's flag: another soldier is dead.

Siedlarz told me that she had no initial plan to separate sections. When her brother returned from Afghanistan, Siedlarz found a niche in which she began writing persona and ekphrastic poems. Kevin “told stories that were so contradictory to the media. He showed the human side of war...[and I] felt compelled to tell war’s untold stories, to try to make real those things that are not talked about, and to preserve a significant period of our history.” Kevin’s conversations were pivotal to focusing Siedlarz’ creativity and personified the moment in which a woman “outside the wire”, understood the stories behind her brother’s experiences. It was her opportunity to “capture the compassion that gets lost in the destruction.”

Through a concentrated observation of language, Siedlarz began to incorporate her brother’s vernacular so she could create “Brother Speaks” in what she hoped was “an authentic soldier’s voice.” At first, her brother talked “freely” about combat. But as time passed, he was less receptive to dialogue. Siedlarz, who helped raise her brother and maintains a strong attachment, was forced to “judge his mood...if I asked a question and he responded angrily, I knew today wasn’t a good day...Now he doesn’t want to talk about it at all.”

By capturing an American soldier’s voice, she creates a character and personality that is poignant, human, and strong. Audiences contemplate Kevin’s varied social experiences while Siedlarz forces us to face an ugly truth: people die in armed conflict—good soldiers, and bad terrorists. What she sculpts through her poetry is a toolkit that allows readers to navigate war’s contradiction, its lethality, and its oft-overlooked capacity for *sometimes* producing good.

Siedlarz senses the need for war poetry, partly in fear of how swiftly returning service members are absorbed into mainstream society—while their sacrifices and service contributions are overlooked—and partially to “keep this subject alive in the national consciousness.” Most importantly, she offers a prompt for us to consider the sanctity of the individual. Veterans are real people, and while they are expected to transition back to “normal” life following deployments, the reality is, “the impact of war is never forgotten, by them or their families.”

Siedlarz introduces the ongoing inconsistency between war and peace in the poems “Junkie” and “Teething.” In “Junkie,” she uses a staccato, precise, scientific, matter-of-fact military and medical idiom. Activity centers on the here-and-now. When triage is over, consciousness shifts to the next battle, and how Q-tips will function to clean a rifle.

down from the clavicle. Pin hole collapses  
lung. Flutter valve plugs bullet hole,

blocks air, allows seepage of fluids.  
Then there's the exit wound.

"They were talking about chest needle decompressions," Siedlarz said to me on the phone, "and it was like they were talking about changing a light bulb." Kevin's actions are the epitome of a soldier: functional, unemotional, non-emotive, detached, and precise in a situation where the pace is frantic and human lives are at stake. Her refined listening skills and their shared conversations heavily influence her poetry, which makes her adept at producing such graphic images as:

I've seen his E.R. photos: An Afghan soldier took a sniper  
bullet to the anus so he is butterflied. A civilian met an IED  
foot and calf held together by Achilles flayed like flank steak

In stark contrast is "Teething," a narrative poem about Kevin's new puppy. The same person, who functions under extreme combat pressure, panics when confronted by his puppy's loose tooth. Frantic, he turns to Siedlarz, who extracts the bicuspid. The roles reverse. Suddenly, Siedlarz is the medic and Kevin is no longer "Army Strong"; he is a boy, who, after dealing with the rigors of hostile fire, emergency medical procedures, combat stress and death, loves something so much he rushes to the only person he trusts to make everything better.

The opening poem in the "Brother Speaks" section, "First Night, Watchtower" employs a visible tonal shift; it's impersonal and quick: a "ra-ta-tat" catalogue of death and destruction: human and animal. But it's my favorite poem, "Tea with Elders," where we see what society fails to recognize: why we're *really* there. As Kevin treats a local villager, they:

(...) peel off (...) armor and sit on the floor.

.....  
The old man takes my arm, *How to show*  
*my love?* I take his hand in mine, place mine  
on his shoulder, tell him *thank you*.

The moment conveys an interior perspective of our nation's good deeds, the ones often ignored. Oddly touching, it humanizes the soldiers, who remove their fifty-plus pounds of "battle rattle" and sit "naked" to converse with villagers. Despite

sharing a common language, the human touch speaks. Likewise, in “Two Men Carry an Afghani Into the Aid Station, A Bullet in His Leg,” Americans cradle an injured Afghan as one would a baby, “draped so casually around their necks.” Both poems are precursors to an informed moral consciousness: invested in the human condition, Americans and Afghans work together, attempting to bridge the cultural divide.

One of Siedlarz’ emails explained why it was important to write both points of view, to see that war, although depersonalizing has a human element. Through centuries of battles, readers relied upon the annihilation of individuals. In the theater of operations, “it’s all about war, never the men and women. You get to think about it as a big giant machine and not as individual people whose lives are severely changed from this experience.” Siedlarz wanted to remind readers that war always squanders humans.

In “Leave,” readers glimpse the fractured psyche of an American soldier. Kevin returns for Christmas leave, a time to take pleasure from the peace and joy of family; but all he can think of is the anonymous Casualty Notification Officer who bears the news of his sergeant’s death. A uniformed officer anesthetized by the growing numbers of dead tells Sgt Phaneuf’s wife and kids of Phaneuf’s death two weeks before Christmas: his sorrow is clichéd. To him, Phaneuf is just another “grunt”. Gift-wrapped in red, white, and blue, his coffin is the family’s enduring Christmas gift. Conceivably, Kevin should be home, enjoying the New England weather he adores, yet every naturalscape is a reminder of how “Afghanistan came back with [Phaneuf’s] gathered limbs.” Driving to the funeral, “I turn around, / go back to my final days at home.”

Likewise, we see Kevin, too, is not immune to war’s psychological fallout in “Don’t Paint in Camels,” a conversational piece that reflects on battle images and memories that refuse to fade. Even the most therapeutic remedies, “paintbrush and canvas, a good bottle of wine,” fail to mask the infinite imprint of war: things are not the same and man’s innocence is lost. The ocean’s spray on rocks reminds Kevin of arterial spray while palate colors are an exploding oil well and lost souls. Kevin’s life resonates trauma. We realize he is another lost soul, buried with his comrades in the sand that “Drinks blood as if it were water.” But, he says he’s “fine now.” The lie is functional: we understand he’s not.

Similar to her brother, Siedlarz is implicated, “I may not have fought in the war, but I am affected by it nonetheless...I know what it is like to try to pretend everything is normal when it is as far from normal as can be.” This problematic reintegration, the return from combat, is probably best expressed in her poem

“What We Don’t See,” her only visual poem—formed in the shape of a pistol—that describes how even veterans returning without *physical* damage are wounded:

She must announce herself to him before  
walking into a room must close doors  
so there is not even the tiniest trigger click

This psychological after effect, the precise reason Siedlarz writes war poetry.

Siedlarz, who received her MFA from Western Connecticut State University, is the Editor of *Connecticut River Review* and Managing Editor for *Connecticut Review*. After analyzing her brother’s stories, she worked with Vietnam veterans at her local VA hospital, ran a sixteen-week poetry workshop and edited their final poetry collection, *The Season of Now*. In a continued effort to reach returning Operation Iraqi and Enduring Freedom veterans, she appears on “Sandbox Chronicles,” a television outreach program designed to show how returning vets can find outlets for their pain and locate people who care about their psychological wellbeing.

In our emotionally stunted world, where it’s easier to flip through the catalog of war dead in search of primetime comedy, it was a gut-check to feel the insurgence—some nefarious entity called emotion—that swirled around her words. But that’s her intent. Siedlarz wants us to think. She drives us to remember, and, more importantly, she challenges us to reawaken long-buried feelings and face the ugliness—and beauty—of war.

Ultimately, Siedlarz hopes to stem war’s sterilization, pushing away detachment and disinterest and instead witnessing the power of words and images. Walt Whitman’s quoted, “I was the man, I suffered, I was there,” is an inevitable fascia of war poetry: men have a tale to tell which often, only close masculine contact and nearness to war affords. In this case, Kevin’s experiences and his corporeal body are privileged; but it’s Siedlarz’ interpretation of his stories, experiences, conversations, emotions and the understanding of her brother as a person that conveys one real war experience. I’m emotionally battered after reading her poetry, but I understand—and appreciate—Siedlarz’s title choice. A substitute for her brother’s catharsis, she is the guide for our own vicarious war experience.

---

**CAPTAIN SONJA PASQUANTONIO** teaches literature and writing at the United States Air Force Academy.